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Contemporary Arab States in the MENA Region: From Survival Imperatives to Modernization

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Abstract. The macro-region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has become a deeply divided region with increasingly polarized interests of states. Following the Arab Spring, some Arab countries, primarily Gulf monarchies, which had maintained internal political stability, embarked on accelerated modernization and economic diversification, ultimately needing long-lasting peace, while other states, like Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria have plunged into domestic crises on the brink of collapse. Earlier, Iraq and Libya became victims of US military interventions, leading to the destruction of their ruling regimes and civil wars. The heterogeneity of the MENA became reflected in both the 2020 Abraham Accords on the normalization of Israel's relations with the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, concluded with Washington's diplomatic assistance and the October 2025 "peace agreement" between Israel and Hamas mediated by the USA and Qatar, ignoring the two-state formula of the Palestinian-Israeli settlement. The chaotic escalation in MENA poses a threat to the national security of the Russian Federation, therefore, requiring an adequate assessment, which explains the relevance of this study, while, the task to predict future scenarios determines its practical significance. The author aims to prove the acknowledgment that, despite the ephemeral unity, shown at Arab summits on the Palestinian issue or Syria and the existence of formats like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Arab countries remain divided into two groups, focused respectfully on sustainable development and survival. Facing irreconcilable and intractable contradictions in their ultimate priorities, they are not able to share integration. Not perceiving counterparties as equal partners, the countries of the first category are guided in politics by the paradigm of realism, if necessary, "forgetting" about sovereignty and pan-Arab problems under Western pressure. Since Russian and foreign studies devoted to conflicts and modernization of Arab countries apparently lack a review of the *survival—sustainable development* dichotomy, the author intends to fill this gap by using the methods of comparative and cross-event analyses. This constitutes the novelty of this research.

Key words: macro-region of the Middle East and North Africa, MENA, deeply divided region, Arab Spring, Palestinian-Israeli conflict, economic modernization, diversification of economy, survival—sustainable development dichotomy

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Современные арабские страны Ближнего Востока и Северной Африки: от императивов выживания до модернизации

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Аннотация. Пространство Ближнего Востока и Северной Африки (БВСА), разобщенное с точки зрения интересов государств, превращается в глубоко разделенный регион. Если после «арабской весны» ряд стран, прежде всего аравийские монархии, сумев сохранить внутреннюю стабильность, взяли курс на ускоренную модернизацию и диверсификацию экономик, во что бы то ни стало нуждаясь в прочном мире, то Йемен, Ливан и Сирия погрузились в кризисы, оказавшись на грани распада. Еще раньше Ирак и Ливия стали жертвами военных интервенций США, что привело к падению правящих режимов и спровоцировало гражданские войны. Свидетельством неоднородности БВСА стали «соглашения Авраама» 2020 г. о нормализации отношений Израиля с Объединенными Арабскими Эмиратами, Бахрейном и Марокко, заключенные при дипломатическом содействии Вашингтона, и «мирное соглашение» Израиля и ХАМАС, достигнутое в октябре 2025 г. благодаря посредничеству США и Катара при игнорировании «формулы двух государств» для урегулирования палестино-израильского конфликта. Хаотичная эскалация на Ближнем Востоке, представляющая угрозу для национальной безопасности Российской Федерации, требует адекватной оценки, чем объясняется актуальность данного исследования. Большое значение имеет прогнозирование сценариев, обусловливающее ее практическую значимость. Цель — обоснование тезиса о разделении арабских государств на две группы, ориентированные на устойчивое развитие или выживание, несмотря на эфемерную солидарность — будь то по палестинской проблеме или сирийскому конфликту, демонстрируемую на саммитах Лиги арабских государств (ЛАГ), и наличие объединений типа Совета сотрудничества арабских государств Персидского залива (ССАГПЗ). Имея непримиримые и трудноразрешимые противоречия в абсолютных приоритетах, они не в состоянии участвовать в общих интеграционных процессах. Страны из первой категории не воспринимают контрагентов из второй группы как равных партнеров, руководствуясь парадигмой реализма и, если необходимо, «забывая» о своем суверенитете и общеарабских проблемах под давлением Запада. Поскольку в российских и зарубежных научных трудах, посвященных конфликтам и модернизации в арабских странах, не уделяется достаточно внимания анализу дихотомии «выживание — устойчивое развитие», автор, используя методы сравнительного и матричного анализа, восполнил данный пробел.

Ключевые слова: макрорегион Ближнего Востока и Северной Африки, БВСА, глубоко разделенный регион, арабская весна, палестино-израильский конфликт, экономическая модернизация, диверсификация экономики, дихотомия выживание — устойчивое развитие

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

Faced with alarming media reports about armed clashes and internal crises, alongside the accounts of economic and technological successes across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Arab countries[1] have been increasingly diverging from each other. The polarization of the Arab world has intensified sharply, following two waves of turbulence that had affected almost the entire Arab world, first in the form of mass protests of the Arab Spring (2011–2012), and subsequently

[1] In this article, the notion "Arab countries" refers to the member states of the League of Arab States which are geographically located in North Africa and Western Asia, including the partially recognized State of Palestine and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (which is not a LAS member), while excluding the non-Arab East African LAS members, such as Djibouti, the Comoros, and Somalia.

through numerous country-specific and regional conflicts with a high degree of internationalization (2012–2018) (Truevtsev, 2020, pp. 9–10). Unlike the bipolar order of 1945–1991, which was characterized by an ideological rift and the political alignment of Arab nations with either the USA or the USSR, in the era of globalization, the primary criteria and markers of division in the post-bipolar MENA became constituted by the levels of socio-economic development and quality of life, as well as the obviousness of signs of deeply divided society and individual states' ties to the outside world, whether they are subject to Western sanctions or not.

All the above-mentioned circumstances have shaped the behavior of Arab countries and, in particular, the radical shifts in their stances towards concrete regional issues. These include non-recognition or rapprochement with Israel, improved relations with Iran, a pragmatic approach to the Palestinian issue, the rivalry for influence between Qatar and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, and the standoff between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Yemen, which require systemic research. Given the traditionally high conflict potential in MENA region, the cyclical escalation in the regional situation, posing a threat to both the national security and the political and economic interests of the Russian Federation also require analysis. This explains the relevance of the present study.

Examining the logic of the actions of individual countries or groups of countries together with the challenges and threats in the MENA region through the lens of a deeply divided region characterized by irresolvable or intractable contradictions apparently, makes it possible to assess and hedge political and business risks. This is particularly relevant for forecasting the stances of the League of Arab States (LAS) members towards Russia amid the Western sanctions, making the analysis valuable not only for the academic community but also diplomats and Russian business entities. This underscores the theoretical and practical significance of the study.

The object of analysis is the set of relations within the MENA region during the 2010s and 2020s, i.e. in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the historical transition from the unipolarity to multipolarity. At the same time, the subject of the research comprises the irresolvable or intractable contradictions among Arab countries' interests, which stem from the vital imperatives for modernization versus the imperatives of survival and statehood preservation.

Hence, the aim of the study is to investigate the hypothesis regarding the pivotal significance of the survival vs. sustainable development dichotomy as a determinant of state behavioral patterns in the regional arena, which in fact makes MENA deeply divided.

In this context, the author addresses the following tasks:

– to compare the logics of actions of LAS countries during the Cold War (bipolarity) and the era of globalization (unipolarity and emerging multipolarity),

– to analyze key consequences of the Arab Spring for the MENA macro-region, categorizing Arab countries in accordance with their new national priorities,

– to describe the hierarchy of national interests of Arab countries after the Arab Spring, focusing on survival, preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as resolution of internal armed conflicts, or alternatively on ensuring accelerated economic modernization and peaceful sustainable development,

– to outline the distinctive features of MENA as deeply divided region.

Materials and Research Methods

A number of aspects related to the subject of the article have been addressed in the works of Russian and foreign authors. For instance, A.V. Demchenko (2010, p. 153) and V.N. Panin (2024, pp. 40–41) describe the domestic and geopolitical factors shaping the foreign policy of Arab East countries. Meanwhile, H. al-Alkim

(2012), an Emirati expert outlines the set of external and internal factors, which includes security dependence on the West, along with economic backwardness, and ethnic and social divisions, that influence the shaping of Arab countries' foreign policy during the Arab Spring. The impact of globalization on the Arab world is both theoretically and practically examined by K.M. Truevtsev (2020, p. 7), in a collective monograph edited by B. Korany and A. Dessouki (Korany & Dessouki, 2008, pp. 45–66), and many other works.

A substantial body of scientific research addresses the issues of economic modernization in Arab countries. This includes a monograph by L.N. Rudenko, which analyzes economic reforms as a trigger for mass political protests and armed conflicts starting in the Arab world in 2011, together with their economic consequences (Rudenko, 2017, p. 6), as well as an article by the US expert M. Abduljaber, who examines how social and economic transformations in Arab societies have influenced the populations in MENA countries to view the West and Israel more favorably (Abduljaber, 2018, p. 161).

Although some scholarly and expert studies published in Russia and abroad interpret the *survival* of Arab countries as encompassing a very broad spectrum of tasks, ranging from leveraging foreign policy to ensure the secure existence of ruling regimes[2] to the energy transition, climate crisis response, and economic transformation and diversification (Filonik & Baturina, 2022, p. 154), this approach may not fully consider the contemporary realities of MENA. Thus, if one compares the imperatives of sustainable development under normal circumstances, on the one hand, with the tasks of preserving statehood, territorial integrity, and sovereignty amidst the adverse conditions of internal conflicts and external pressure (i.e. the challenges for Arab states), on the other, the notion of survival in its classical sense[3] looks more appropriate for the latter category of cases.

The fundamental concept of a *deeply divided society*, as described by the British sociologist A. Guelke (2012, p. vi) is examined in the context of Middle Eastern countries by the Russian academician V.V. Naumkin (2015, p. 67). A similar approach regarding MENA, recognized as a *deeply divided region*, is developed by I.A. Matveev (2025, p. 465).

The combined use of comparative analysis, matrix analysis, and data visualization method in this study, involving the linear comparison of country cases and the cross-comparison of events, phenomena, and processes, makes it possible to identify and tabulate certain distinctive features of the contemporary MENA macro-region. This ultimately creates the opportunity to classify the results under the survival vs. sustainable development dichotomy, which correlates with the event study that examine complex political, economic, and social processes, as well as sequences of event data in a dynamic context, thereby enabling the identification of key development trends and the impact of one event on another (Kovaleva & Remarchuk, 2022, p. 2).

By making necessary chronological overviews in line with the historical method, the author demonstrates that, in certain instances and despite the challenges, the imperatives of state survival under conflicts and deeply divided societies do not remove the goal of sustainable development from the agenda, covering, for example, the IT sector. This is evident in the case of Iraq (Ahmed, 2023, pp. 19–20; Mzedavi & Mingaleva, 2023, pp. 40, 45), Lebanon,[4] and the Palestinian

[2] Späth J., Minh Vo C., Günay C. Survival Strategies in the Middle East: Foreign Policy in the Service of Regime Security. The Cases of Egypt and UAE. Austrian Institute of International Affairs Policy Analysis. 2024 (January). No. 1. URL: https://www.oiip.ac.at/cms/media/policy-analysis-survival-strategies-in-the-middle-east-2.pdf (accessed: 22.01.2026).

[3] To Survive // Gramota.ru. (In Russian). URL: https://gramota.ru/poisk?query=%D0%B2%D1%8B%D0%B6%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%8C&mode=slovari&dicts[]=42 (accessed: 23.01.2026).

[4] Our Work on the Sustainable Development Goals in Lebanon // United Nations. Lebanon. URL: https://lebanon.un.org/en/sdgs (accessed: 24.01.2026).

territories of the West Bank.[5] However, in extreme conditions of longtime internal conflicts, external interference, and sanctions, like in Yemen, Libya, and Syria (Filonik, 2015, pp. 143, 156–157), Sudan (Anas, 2024, pp. 285, 287), and the Gaza Strip,[6] peacetime economic goals and objectives recede into the background, giving way to absolute survival priorities, such as short-term financial survival.[7]

The absolute imperatives of economic modernization and diversification in countries currently free from open conflict (the GCC monarchies and to varying degrees Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia) often clash with the interests of the survival of states grappling with the hot phase of crises. Remarkably, both Russian and international oriental studies rationally describe such contradictions as a conflict between the "haves"[8] and the "have-nots" (Abalian, 2013, p. 72). The method of analogy makes it possible to draw a substantive parallel between this conflict and the radical divisions of deeply divided societies, when taken together, are named by Adrian Guelke a "fault line" causing political polarization and establishing a force field (Guelke, 2012, p. vi). This, in turn, allows us to speak about the transformation of MENA into a deeply divided region (Matveev, 2025, p. 449).

Research Results

In the bipolar world, the entire Arab world faced largely similar goals and challenges, related to ensuring internal stability, industrialization, capital accumulation, and overcoming backwardness and poverty. Both the states aligned with the USA and the West, as well as those with socialist orientation, backed by the USSR,[9] experienced construction of large-scale industrial and infrastructure projects, along with the rise of population literacy, thanks to the Western or Soviet aid. Not by chance, in the bipolar era and subsequently in the post-bipolar period, Libya and Syria, which were considered countries with socialist orientation, were ranked by Russian and foreign experts among the region's most dynamically developing economies. Thus, as B.V. Dolgov noted, in many respects, the situation in Syria had differed favorably from Tunisia and Egypt subsequently embraced by the Arab Spring protest movements (Dolgov, 2021, p. 2): according to World Bank data, the GDP growth in Libya and Syria in 2010 stood at 5.0 and 5.2%, respectively, against the MENA regional average of 4.8%.[10]

Although, during the era of bipolarity, a country could shift from one camp to another, upon gaining state independence (Algeria), as a result of military coups (Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser, Iraq, Libya, and Sudan), or by decision of the top leadership (Egypt under Anwar Sadat), the absolute priorities and strategic goals

[5] State of Palestine's Commitments to Accelerate the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 // United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs—Sustainable Development. URL: https://sdgs.un.org/national-commitments-sdg-transformation/22439 (accessed: 24.01.2026).

[6] Gaza War: Expected Socioeconomic Impacts on the State of Palestine—Update (May 2024) // UNDP—ESCWA, 2024. P. 1, 9. URL: https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/gaza-war-socioeconomic-impacts-palestine-english.pdf (accessed: 24.01.2026).

[7] The Impact of the Conflict in Syria: A Devastated Economy, Pervasive Poverty, and a Challenging Road Ahead to Social and Economic Recovery // United Nations Development Programme in Syria. February 19, 2025. P. 24. URL: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/impact-conflict-syria-devastated-economy-pervasive-poverty-and-challenging-road-ahead-social-and-economic-recovery-enar (accessed: 24.01.2026).

[8] Citing a monograph of an Israeli historian Ofra Bengio (1998, p. 183), A.I. Abalian classifies the six GCC monarchies as "haves" among Arab countries, whereas the remaining LAS members—including Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia—are categorized as "have-nots." However, Bengio's book was published in the 1990s, i.e. before the post-bipolar Middle East experienced the Arab Spring becoming a deeply divided region; besides, at that time, a civil war was still going in Algeria.

[9] The list of West-allied states still includes the GCC monarchies, Jordan, and Morocco, while countries with socialist orientation—an informal term used in Soviet political commentary, historiography, and Oriental studies since the late 1960s (Valkenier, 1988, p. 24)—included the republics that cooperated with the USSR: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, South Yemen (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen), Syria, and Sudan (Democratic Republic of the Sudan).

[10] GDP Growth (Annual %)—Arab World // World Bank Group. 2026. URL: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=1A (accessed: 21.02.2026).

of the national agenda remained unchanged. Similarly, affiliation with the Non-Aligned Movement, which precluded membership in the Western and Eastern blocs, thereby allowing countries to "milk two cows,"[11] neither altered the hierarchy of priorities nor rendered these states inherently antagonistic, regardless of their hostile ideologies and opposite stances on many international issues.

It was no coincidence that, despite the bloc-based rivalries of the 1960s, the ideas of Arab unionism widely spread among the Arabs, with the popular slogan of the Ba'athists of Iraq and Syria "A single Arab nation with an eternal mission" (Arabic: *Umma Arabiyya wahida, dhat risala khalida*, الأمة العربية واحدة، ذات رسالة خالدة).[12] In the 1970s, this was followed by the doctrine of "Arab solidarity" (*al-tadamun al-arabi*, التضامن العربي), which meant establishing inter-Arab coordination and cooperation in political, economic, military, and cultural spheres (Barakat, 1997, pp. 30, 40).

Remarkably, at that time, Arab countries, despite sometimes strained relations among themselves, were able to adopt a unified stance on the Palestinian issue. For instance, following the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War, the 4th LAS summit in Khartoum (August 29, 1967) adopted three pan-Arab principles regarding Israel (the "Three Nos"): "No peace with Israel," "No recognition of Israel," and "No negotiations with Israel" (Melnikova, 2020, p. 31). During the 1973 October Arab-Israeli War, Arab oil-producing states took coordinated action to trigger a global oil crisis, which advisors to US President Richard Nixon named an "energy Pearl Harbor" (Makarov & Chupilkin, 2021, p. 43). At the 7th LAS summit in Rabat (September 29, 1974), Arab countries collectively recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people (1974)[13]. It was noteworthy that during the bipolar order only Egypt recognized Israel, concluding a peace treaty with it in 1979 and withdrawing its support for the Palestinians,[14] an act for which Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was accused of treason and assassinated in 1981, while Egypt's membership in the LAS was suspended until 1989.[15]

The post-bipolar Middle East has become increasingly fragmented, with a hierarchy of state interests taking on a more complex character. The ideological vacuum and crisis of leftist ideas precipitated by the collapse of the global socialist system led to the politicization of Islam, undermining internal stability in the countries of socialist orientation. Western intervention has also had a negative impact: initially, in 1990–1991, the USA with allies punished Iraq by force for the invasion of Kuwait, imposing sanctions on Saddam Hussein's regime. The 1990 unification of North and South Yemen didn't lead to peace; in 1992, a civil war known as the Black Decade broke out in Algeria (Vasilenko, 2019, p. 177). Despite the participation of Syrian troops in the 1991 "Desert Storm" operation against Iraq, peace negotiations with Israel mediated by US President Bill Clinton,[16] and Damascus's dialogue with the European Union (EU) in the 2000s within the framework of the Barcelona Process,[17] the Assad

[11] Non-Aligned Movement // The Great Russian Encyclopedia 2004–2017. (In Russian). URL: https://old.bigenc.ru/world_history/text/1942374 (accessed: 17.01.2026).

[12] Alnizam aldaakhiliu lihizb albaeth alearabii aliashtirakii [Charter of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party]. Damascus : National Command of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, 1980. P. 3. (In Arabic). Ba'athists are supporters of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party.

[13] Text of Arab Resolution at Rabat // The New York Times. October 30, 1974. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/1974/10/30/archives/text-of-arab-resolution-at-rabat.html (accessed: 28.01.2026).

[14] Vasiliev, A. M. Tsunami of Revolutions // Russian Council on International Affairs. March 20, 2011. (In Russian). URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/tsunami-revolyutsiy/ (accessed: 17.01.2026).

[15] League of Arab States (General Information) // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. June 10, 2009. (In Russian). URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_organizations/organizacia-islamskogo-sotrudnicestva-ois-/1749936/ (accessed: 25.01.2026).

[16] Rabinovich I. The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations // The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. September 24, 1998. URL: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/brink-peace-israeli-syrian-negotiations (accessed: 19.01.2026).

[17] Syria Returns to UfM Ministerial Meeting on 30th Anniversary of Barcelona Process // Ministry of Foreign

regime failed to court the West. The fact that Hafez al-Assad, considered an ally of the USSR by the West,[18] was succeeded in 2000 by his son Bashar, who had studied as a doctor in London, did not change the situation. The Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi also failed to reconcile with Western powers.[19] Finally, both Gaddafi and al-Assad were overthrown—Gaddafi by direct intervention, while al-Assad under the pressure of Western sanctions.

Despite the persistence of a certain post-bipolar inertia in the 1990s, whereas Arab nations were still united by the overriding imperative of maintaining internal stability amid new historical conditions, the USA and Israel started vigorous efforts to reshape the MENA macro-region under their own pattern. A desirable vision of its structure was stipulated in 1993, by Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres using the formula: Persian Gulf oil + Egyptian labor + Turkish water + Arab capitals + Israeli brains = the so-called "New Middle East."[20] Following the Western interpretation of globalization, the emphasis was made not on equitable relations with Arabs and a just resolution to the Palestinian issue (the 1994 Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO established the Palestinian National Authority instead of a full-fledged state), but rather on promoting Western values and high standards of living. Not by chance, while addressing the Haifa City Council in May 1995, Shimon Peres, surprisingly for the audience, noted that "a chain of hotels creates a defense no worse than a chain of armored divisions."[21] In 1995, i.e. 16.5 years after Egypt, Jordan became the second Arab country (and the first country after the collapse of the bipolar world) to sign a peace treaty with Israel, brokered by US President Bill Clinton; it enabled Jordan to strengthen its economic status through attracting foreign investment and the presence of international capital,[22] fitting perfectly within the paradigm of the "New Middle East."

With the dawn of the new millennium, the process of political and economic polarization of MENA accelerated. In 2003, in Iraq, the regime of Saddam Hussein became the first casualty of US aggression. The Arab Spring marked a historic turning point; prior to this, as K.M. Truevtsev rightly noted the Middle East (and above all, its Arab part) had been the world's largest and most consolidated bastion of autocracy (Truevtsev, 2021, p. 60). A wave of public protests toppled from above the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, while civil wars broke out in Yemen, Libya, and Syria, fueled by Western interventions and sanctions.[23] In Sudan, the Arab Spring served as an indirect cause of both the 2019 change of power and the 2023 outbreak of the third civil war, still in place.[24]

In contrast, the traditional pro-Western regimes in the GCC monarchies, Jordan, and Morocco managed to survive. Having got through

Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic. November 30, 2025. URL: https://mofaex.gov.sy/en/news/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83-%D8%A8%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%A-F-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7 (accessed: 17.01.2026).

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[23] El-Kalyoubi R. Arab Spring: Everything You Need to Know about the Arab Spring // PostNauka. March 10, 2016. (In Russian). URL: https://postnauka.org/faq/61168 (accessed: 19.01.2026).

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the stress caused by the tragedies of the "have-not" nations, as well as their own internal upheavals, such as the uprising in Bahrain, national elites chose accelerated economic modernization, while maintaining the inviolability of power. In other words, they became ready for economic change, but not political reform.[25] Between 2008 and 2020, all GCC countries implemented national economic diversification and development programs, among them Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030,"[26] Bahrain's "Economic Vision 2030,"[27] Qatar's "National Vision 2030,"[28] "Kuwait 2035" or "New Kuwait,"[29] and Oman's "Vision 2040."[30] Sustainable development programs were also launched in the UAE, both at the national level (the "We the UAE 2031" program[31]) and in emirates, for instance, the "Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030."[32]

The Palestinian issue remains a litmus test for the contradictions of the survival vs. sustainable development dichotomy. In 2020, prioritizing national economic interests over the two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,[33] the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco agreed to normalize relations with Israel by signing the Abraham Accords with Washington's assistance. Furthermore, for the first time in history, Saudi Arabia began investing in the Israeli economy through a fund managed by Jared Kushner, Donald Trump's son-in-law (Kostenko & Morozov, 2024, p. 38).

In an attempt to reshape the Middle East according to their own pattern, the Americans and Israelis have been seeking to further fracture the Arab world, using a "carrot and stick" approach towards the countries that face the challenge of survival, aiming to cut off support for Palestinian radicals and integrate Israel into the MENA macro-region. For instance, in 2021, Sudan was removed from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism in exchange for its willingness to join the Abraham Accords,[34] although the "Israeli issue" subsequently receded into the background because of the civil war (Kostenko & Morozov, 2024, pp. 44–45). The signing on December 26, 2025, of a joint recognition declaration between Israel and Somaliland, a move condemned by certain LAS members, namely, Somalia and Egypt, was portrayed by the Israelis as an extension of the Abraham Accords.[35] "Coincidentally," it had been preceded by some media leaks about US President Donald Trump's intention to relocate Palestinians from Gaza to Somaliland.[36]

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[25] This acknowledgment is supported by the author's conversations with Emirati parliamentarians, diplomats, and academic scholars in 2024–2025, in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

[26] Saudi Vision 2030: A Story of Transformation 2026. URL: https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en (accessed: 07.02.2026).

[27] Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 // Ministry of Finance and National Economy of the Kingdom of Bahrain. URL: https://www.mofne.gov.bh/en/project-initiatives/bahrain-economic-vision-2030/ (accessed: 20.01.2026).

[28] Qatar National Vision 2030 // National Planning Council of the State of Qatar. URL: https://www.npc.qa/en/QNV/pages/default.aspx (accessed: 20.01.2026).

[29] Agarwal S. Kuwait Vision 2035: Ambitions, Challenges, and the Road Ahead // The 197 Initiative. June 23, 2025. URL: https://www.the197initiative.org/post/kuwait-vision-2035-ambitions-challenges-and-the-road-ahead (accessed: 20.01.2026).

[30] Oman Vision // Information Portal of Sultanate of Oman. (In Russian). URL: https://www.omaninfo.om/ru/pages/205/show/764 (accessed: 20.01.2026).

[31] 'We the UAE 2021' Vision // Government of the United Arab Emirates. URL: https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/innovation-and-future-shaping/we-the-uae-2031-vision (accessed: 20.01.2026).

[32] Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030 // Government of the United Arab Emirates. URL: https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/finance-and-economy/abu-dhabi-economic-vision-2030 (accessed: 20.01.2026).

[33] Popov V. UN Will Promote the "Two States for Two Peoples" Concept // Russian International Affairs Council. January 27, 2025. (In Russian). URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/oon-budet-prodvigat-kontseptsiyu-dva-gosudarstva-dlya-dvukh-narodov/ (accessed: 28.01.2026).

[34] US Removes Sudan From State Sponsors of Terrorism List // Interfax. December 14, 2020. (In Russian). URL: https://www.interfax.ru/world/741178 (accessed: 29.01.2026).

[35] Kopyttsev I. Somaliland: First Recognition. A Standalone Precedent or a Harbinger of Inevitable Changes? // New Eastern Outlook. December 29, 2025. (In Russian). URL: https://journal-neo.su/ru/2025/12/29/somalilend-pervoe-priznanie-otdelnyj-preczedent-ili-predvestnik-neotvratimyh-peremen/ (accessed: 28.01.2026).

[36] Under Trump's Plan, Palestinians from Gaza Must Move to Africa: Somalia and Morocco // Voennoye Obozreniye. February 6, 2025. (In Russian). URL: https://topwar.ru/258877-po-planu-trampa-palestincy-gazy-dolzhny-pereselitsja-v-afriku-somali-i-marokko.html (accessed: 30.01.2026).

By launching a surprise attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and deliberately creating a *casus belli* for an IDF invasion of the Gaza Strip, Hamas, in its bid to secure its political future and popularity at the "Arab street," disregarded the interests of MENA states in peace and sustainable development. The author agrees with Western experts that, in doing so and despite its marginalization, Hamas successfully portrayed the attack as a military achievement by shattering the myth of Israel's "invincibility." Never before had Palestinians seized territory within the 1948 borders and military bases, killed so many Israelis, or taken so many hostages.[37] Driven by merely populist considerations, a high-ranking Hamas official, Ali Barakeh, named the capture of Israeli hostages as the goal of the attack, aimed at subsequent bargaining to secure the release of the Palestinians held in Israel and the United States.[38]

At the same time, in the context of foreign policy, it is important to consider the opinion of Chinese experts, who attribute *Hamas*'s actions to a desire to thwart both the reconciliation between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the implementation of the US strategy in the Middle East.[39] Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the Arab signatories to the Abraham Accords, having limited themselves to formal condemnations of Israel at the extraordinary summits of the LAS and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), held in Riyadh in 2023 and 2024,[40] did not sever diplomatic relations (although Bahrain and Jordan did downgrade them[41]), let alone resort to trade embargoes or the "oil weapon" as it was done in 1973. In turn, despite the absence of the two-state formula Saudi Arabia welcomed the October 9, 2025, ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, expressing only hope that the deal would ultimately lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders.[42]

The war in Gaza and the domino regional destabilization linked to the US-led Western military Prosperity Guardian operation against the Houthis in Yemen,[43] aligned IDF strikes on *Hezbollah* (another member of Iran's "Axis of Resistance") in Lebanon,[44] and, culminating in the 12-day Iran-Israel war of June 2025, halted the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative[45] and the India—Middle East—Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).[46]

The threat of a renewed armed conflict between Iran and the US, hiding the possibilities of Iranian retaliatory attacks and Israeli strikes,

[37] Will Hamas Turn From War to Politics? // The Economist. August 1, 2024. URL: https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/08/01/will-hamas-turn-from-war-to-politics (accessed: 21.02.2026).

[38] Mingazov S. Hamas Representative Named the Goal and Reasons for the Attack on Israel // Forbes. October 10, 2023. (In Russian). URL: https://www.forbes.ru/society/498121-predstavitel-hamas-nazval-cel-i-priciny-napadenia-na-izrail (accessed: 21.02.2026).

[39] Experts Believe Hamas Could Hinder Israel—Saudi Arabia Rapprochement // TASS. October 9, 2023. (In Russian). URL: https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/18946039 (accessed: 30.01.2026).

[40] Kalmykov A. The Second Extraordinary LAS — OIC Summit Took Place // Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. November 13, 2024. (In Russian). URL: https://kazpravda.kz/n/sostoyalsya-vtoroy-vneocherednoy-sammit-lag-ois/ (accessed: 28.01.2026).

[41] "In Support of the Palestinian Cause:" Arab Countries Continue to Break Relations with Israel // Voennoye Obozreniye. November 2, 2023. (In Russian). URL: https://topwar.ru/229432-v-podderzhku-palestinskogo-dela-arabskie-strany-prodolzhajut-razryvat-otnoshenija-s-izrailem.html (accessed: 28.01.2026).

[42] Saudi Arabia Welcomed the Agreement Between Hamas and Israel // TASS. October 9, 2025. (In Russian). URL: https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/25295923 (accessed: 28.01.2026).

[43] Stewart P., Davison J. US Launches Red Sea Force as Ships Reroute to Avoid Attacks // Reuters. December 19, 2023. URL: https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-launches-new-multinational-operation-safeguard-red-sea-commerce-2023-12-18/ (accessed: 30.01.2026).

[44] Israel Launched Strikes on Military Sites in Lebanon // RBC. January 9, 2026. (In Russian). URL: https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/69611e4a9a7947080feba0ef (accessed: 30.01.2026).

[45] See: "One Belt, One Road" // China Academy of Translation & Translators Association of China: Understanding China Through Keywords. September 8, 2025. (In Russian). URL: http://russian.china.org.cn/china/China_Key_Words/2015-09/08/content_36587632.htm (accessed: 26.01.2026); Yurganov D. The Middle East Crisis Is a US Blow to China's Interests // Zavtra.ru. January 16, 2024. (In Russian). URL: https://zavtra.ru/events/blizhnevostochnij_krizis_-_eto_udar_ssha_po_interesam_kitaya (accessed: 26.01.2026).

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Contradictions of the Survival vs. Sustainable Development Dichotomy

Imperatives of survival	Imperatives of development		
	Implementation of national economic diversification plans by GCC states	**GCC states' aspiration to become a bridge between East and West**	**The need of Arab countries for access to advanced technologies**
Iran's attempts to preserve national sovereignty and the right to conduct a nuclear program amidst a harsh military confrontation with Israel and the United States	Diversion of GCC states' resources to defense needs; potential damage from Iranian retaliatory strikes on US facilities	Disruption of global logistics routes; suspension of the Belt and Road Initiative and IMEC	Western restrictions on technology exports due to concerns about leakage, as well as high investment risks to the modernization of GCC economies
Hamas's interest in retaining its role as the primary champion of the Palestinian cause	Rising risks to the implementation of GCC states' economic plans due to the Gaza war	Escalation in the Red Sea: the standoff between the Yemeni Houthis and Israel / the West	Suspension of rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia
Syria's unmet need for post-conflict economic reconstruction	The reluctance of GCC monarchies to antagonize the West: refusal to provide economic aid to Syria under Bashar al-Assad; a cautious approach to funding the reconstruction of post-Assad Syria before the lifting of sanctions	The persistence of instability and terrorist threat in Syria— a barrier to the country's participation as a transit hub in the implementation of the Belt and Road and IMEC projects	The likelihood of a scenario involving a large-scale Israeli military intervention in Syria, with US assistance in maintaining Israel's technological superiority over the Arabs

Source: compiled by I.A. Matveev.

has turned into a dangerous challenge for the economic plans of the GCC states (on June 23, 2025, Iran attacked the Al Udeid US Air Base in Qatar;[47] on September 9, 2025, Israel targeted the Hamas leadership in Doha[48]).

The situation is complicated by the uncertainty of future scenarios, despite the successful attempts of the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman to persuade Donald Trump to refrain from further strikes on Iran.[49] These efforts align with the consistent approach taken by the GCC states, led by Saudi Arabia, to mitigate the negative impact of the confrontation with Iran on their sustainable development agendas. A prime example of this is the China-brokered agreement between Riyadh and Tehran to normalize relations (following the 2016 severing) and reopen diplomatic missions; it was announced on March 10, 2023, in Beijing.[50]

Using the matrix analysis, which illustrates the interplay of factors and events in the Middle East, the table illustrates certain contradictions applicable to the survival vs. sustainable development dichotomy.

Conclusion

The study revealed significant differences in the logic behind the behavior of Arab countries on the regional stage in the bipolar and post-bipolar

[47] Pentagon Says Iranian Strike on Qatar Base Caused No Casualties // RBC. June 23, 2025. (In Russian). URL: https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/685998369a7947d3808135d8 (accessed: 26.01.2026).

[48] Israel Explains the Purpose of the Strike on Qatar's Capital // RBC. September 9, 2025. (In Russian). URL: https://www.rbc.ru/politics/09/09/2025/68c0368f9a7947863f853e24 (accessed: 28.01.2026).

[49] Balasyan L. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman Convinced Trump Not to Attack Iran // Kommersant. January 15, 2026. (In Russian). URL: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/8342235 (accessed: 26.01.2026).

[50] Kogalov Yu. Iran and Saudi Arabia Agreed on Normalization of Relations. What Is the Reaction of the Countries of the Region // Rossiyskaya Gazeta. March 12, 2023. (In Russian). URL: https://rg.ru/2023/03/12/iran-i-saudovskaia-araviia-dogovorilis-o-normalizacii-otnoshenij-kakova-reakciia-stran-regiona.html?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2F (accessed: 21.02.2026).

periods. While during the Cold War those nations supported either the Western or Eastern blocs or balanced between them, trying to solve fundamentally similar tasks of socio-economic development, such as industrialization, overcoming backwardness and colonial dependency, as well as modernization. The new millennium and the Arab Spring have accelerated the polarization of the core priorities of states apparently categorized as the "haves" and the "have-nots." This split has resulted in the "inconsistency" of actions taken by Arab countries during the current historical transition from the unipolar world to multipolarity, together with the growing fragmentation of MENA characterized by a division between the zones of relative stability, such as the GCC monarchies and the zones of instability and the marginalization of pan-Arab issues, including the Palestinian issue.

In practice, this means that the objective process of sovereignization of politics of the LAS countries often intersects and alternates with the voluntary maintenance of their dependence on Western powers led by the United States, particularly given the unpredictability of Donald Trump. At Washington's prompting, on Israel's initiative, and regardless of the tragedy of the Gaza war, the Abraham Accords have been gaining fresh momentum: the mutual recognition between Israel and Somaliland could be followed by similar moves, while the Israeli-Saudi dialogue on rapprochement is expected to continue. The situation around Iran remains uncertain; the December 2025—January 2026 massive public protests, stopped by the authorities only with difficulty could erupt again if the US reanimated effective military strikes against key decision-making centers, potentially triggering an unprecedented wave of destabilization that could escalate into civil war. At the same time, Tehran appears rather capable of conducting painful retaliatory strikes against the infrastructure of the US GCC allies. The outcome of the conflicts in Yemen and Syria also remains unclear, putting at risk the implementation of global transport and logistics projects.

Two opposite hierarchies of national interests are rapidly taking shape across MENA, turning it into a deeply divided region. At stake are the survival imperatives of several countries grappling with internal conflicts. These conflicts inflict economic damage on neighboring states and beyond, like the Syrian crisis affects Lebanon and Jordan or the Gaza war affects Egypt, Jordan, and the Red Sea sub-region. The situation is further aggravated by state-level rivalries. For instance, the ongoing confrontation between Israel and the USA on one side, and Iran, which seeks to survive without compromising its national sovereignty, on the other, contains the risk of large-scale military conflict.

In turn, despite the historical narratives of unity, the Arab nations have focused on sustainable development, which actually needs a lasting peace at any cost. If necessary, they seem to "forget" about the needs of their Arab "brothers" (whether the Palestinians or Syria under Bashar al-Assad), aligning themselves with Western policy. The relations between Arab countries and Iran serve as an example: during Iran's air attack on Israel in April 2024, Jordan was shooting down Iranian drones flying over its territory,[51] to court the United States. Meanwhile, the US-allied GCC monarchies, as already mentioned before fearing Iranian retaliatory strikes, repeatedly asked Donald Trump to refrain from attacking Iran,[52] all for the sake of the absolute imperatives of ensuring own security and prosperity.

In light of the foregoing, for implementing the current 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, Russia actually needs to take into account the factor of fragmentation of MENA, avoiding inflated expectations related to the trend of sovereignization

[51] Jordan Began Shooting Down Iranian Drones Flying to Israel // Radio RBC. April 14, 2024. (In Russian). URL: https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/04/2024/661b14c39a79471eefaad5fe?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2F (accessed: 07.08.2026).

[52] Pietromarchi V. Gulf Countries Gear Up Diplomacy to Stave off US-Iran Escalation // Aljazeera. January 16, 2026. URL: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/16/gulf-countries-gear-up-diplomacy-to-stave-off-us-iran-escalation (accessed: 07.02.2026).

among Arab nations, as well as not discounting the unfavorable scenarios of strengthening their partnerships with Western powers and joining the anti-Russian sanctions. As a countermeasure aimed at adopting common principles for LAS states and other Global South nations, which bring together the MENA macro-region, it is advisable to support the new paradigm of "South—South" relationship actively promoted by China, which implies existing key platforms of coordination, such as BRICS.

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