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Articles by Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky

POLITICS

The Remaking of Middle East Politics Post-7 October

 Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky  2026

The "second-order effects" of 7 October redrew the map of the Middle East and, with it, the region's political constellation.

FEB



The October 7 attacks were the “opening break” in a high-stakes game of regional power play. Credit: Google Gemini

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Introduction

The 7 October attacks did more than trigger another devastating chapter in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; they sent shockwaves far beyond Gaza, setting off a chain reaction that is quietly reshaping the Middle East's political order.

Like the opening strike in a game of billiards, the initial impact was concentrated, but the collisions that followed altered trajectories across the entire table.

What we are witnessing today is a series of second-order effects of 7 October that are redrawing regional alignments in ways few anticipated.

In the immediate aftermath of Hamas' attack, many analysts assumed that Israel's overwhelming military response had forged a new regional consensus. Non-state armed groups – Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and others – were increasingly framed as destabilising forces that needed to be **decisively neutralised**. This reading seemed to explain the notably restrained reactions of neighbouring states as Israel expanded its campaign beyond Gaza.

What went largely unnoticed, however, was how this effort to confront non-state actors unsettled long-standing power arrangements and opened unexpected political space. The real story of 7 October lies not only in Gaza or southern Lebanon, but in the quieter shifts unfolding across Syria, Iran, Turkey and the Gulf.

Syria: The First Crack

For more than a decade, Hezbollah had been one of the Assad regime's most reliable pillars. When the Syrian government was on the brink of collapse in 2015, it was the combination of Iranian-backed militias – chief among them Hezbollah – and Russian airpower that turned the tide.

By 2017, Assad had recaptured much of the territory he had lost, relying heavily on Hezbollah's experienced fighters to hold the ground.

That arrangement came at a cost. Assad effectively anchored his survival to the sustained deployment of external militant forces. As Israeli pressure on Hezbollah intensified after 7 October, the group was forced to pull fighters and resources back toward Lebanon to cover up its own defences.

The consequences were immediate. Deprived of one of its most effective military supports, the Assad regime found its grip weakening. Political and military space reopened inside Syria, setting in motion dynamics that culminated in Assad's fall in December 2024, just over a year after 7 October.

Iran: The Limits of Regional Reach

Syria's sudden vulnerability exposed a deeper fault line: the limits of Iran's regional power.

For years, Tehran's influence rested on a carefully constructed so-called "axis of resistance" stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Syria was the centre of gravity of the axis, enabling the flow of weapons, fighters and logistics to Hezbollah. Without it, Iran's regional reach was sharply curtailed—7 October brought this reality into focus.

Tehran was pushed onto the defensive, its ambitions compressed back toward its borders. Symbolically, as well as materially, Iran no longer looked like an ascendant power shaping the region but a constrained actor struggling to hold its ground.

Turkey: From Isolation to Assertive Actor

This weakening of Iran reshaped the strategic environment for another major regional player: Turkey.

For more than a decade, Ankara had felt encircled by overlapping threats. Iranian-backed militias helped entrench the Assad regime, fuelling a war that sent millions of refugees into Turkey.

At the same time, Damascus ceded control of northeastern Syria to Kurdish forces backed by the United States—forces Ankara viewed as a direct security threat. By 2017, Turkey's regional ambitions had narrowed to managing crises along its borders.

The post-7 October landscape altered that equation. As Iran's position eroded and Syria's internal balance shifted, Turkey found new room to manoeuvre. A different power configuration began to take shape in Damascus, one in which Ankara could exert influence rather than merely contain threats.

This marked a quiet but consequential reinvention of Turkey's regional role: after decades largely focusing inward, Turkey re-emerged as an assertive regional actor. This outcome makes little sense without understanding the cascading effects set in motion by 7 October.

The Gulf: Rivalries Reawakened

The shockwaves were felt just as clearly in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have long pursued competing agendas in Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Somalia. For years, they managed these differences through careful coordination and restraint.

Recently, that balance has become difficult to maintain. Tensions between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have resurfaced, no longer easily contained behind closed doors.

This renewed rivalry is not unfolding in isolation. As Iran's influence waned and Israel's regional standing surged after 7 October, the United Arab Emirates moved with new confidence across multiple theatres. Its activism in Yemen, Libya and Sudan grew more pronounced, projecting ambition, and strategic assertiveness. In Riyadh, these moves increasingly looked less like partnership and more like **encroachment**.

Crucially, Emirati confidence cannot be separated from its close strategic relationship with Israel. Abu Dhabi's posture has been emboldened by Israel's expanded freedom of action, embedding Emirati ambitions within a broader regional realignment.

Yet, in tracing the chain of second-order effects of 7 October, one additional dimension warrants reflection: how Israel itself perceives and seeks to shape these evolving dynamics.

Israel and the Return of Counterweights

In the months following 7 October, many observers concluded that Israel had emerged as the principal beneficiary of a shifting regional order. Israeli jets operated with remarkable freedom across the Middle East, striking targets in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Yemen and even Qatar.

Yet this perception of hegemony proved fragile. What Israel did not fully anticipate was the re-emergence of self-restrained yet capable regional actors, most notably Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Their renewed assertiveness, particularly in Syria and Yemen, introduced political and strategic constraints that complicated Israel's vision of a fragmented and manageable regional environment.

Nowhere is this shift more evident than in Syria. In the immediate aftermath of Assad's fall, Israel moved quickly to support non-state actors as a means of keeping the central government weak and divided. However, as regional dynamics evolved, with the emergence of what has been termed an "axis of stabilisation" comprising Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt, this strategy became increasingly untenable.

Faced with changing power balances, long-term security considerations and the prospect of a more coordinated regional order, Israel has shown greater readiness to engage pragmatically with Damascus rather than continue investing in non-state proxies.

Thus, the post-7 October order, it turns out, is not one of uncontested dominance but of emerging counterweights.

Trump Effect

There is an elephant in the room behind all of these shifts: the United States under Trump. More specifically, the "Trump effect" looms heavily over the region's evolving dynamics. Trump's volatile foreign-policy instincts do not merely respond to change; they actively shape it, often in unexpectedly stabilising ways.

To be sure, Trump has been an unwavering supporter of Israel and of Benjamin Netanyahu's broader agenda, openly backing pressure on Iran and embracing Israel's hardline security posture. Yet this support has not really translated into strategic alignment. Trump has proved a frustrating partner, one whose impulses have frequently diverged from Netanyahu's vision after 7 October.

Nowhere was this clearer than in Syria and Turkey. Israel did not anticipate a US president so willing to recalibrate America's role in Syria or to accommodate Ankara in ways that unsettled Israeli assumptions.

In the end, Trump's Middle East policy has strengthened Israel tactically while complicating its strategic horizon, a contradiction that continues to reverberate across the region.

All in all, 7 October is likely to be remembered less as a decisive rupture than as a catalytic moment that laid bare the fragility of the Middle East's existing regional arrangements.

As shown above, its most lasting consequences lie in the second-order effects it unleashed, effects that redistributed power, revived dormant rivalries, and opened space for actors long constrained by stalemate and overextension.

Taken together, these shifts suggest that the post-7 October Middle East is moving toward a more crowded, negotiated and conditional order through alignment, constraint, and strategic adaptation.

Crucially, these emerging alignments do not appear to be temporary displays of frustration or short-term reactions to recent regional developments. Rather, they reflect a deeper process of regional recalibration, as newly assertive actors seek to shape a revised order and redefine their long-term stakes in the future Middle East.

Through Southeast Asian Eyes

From the standpoint of Southeast Asian Muslim-majority states, recent developments in Syria may be viewed pragmatically. A more stable and consolidated central authority could reduce prolonged instability, curb and limit new

economic and political ties with multiple Middle Eastern partners. Escalating competition risks forcing difficult diplomatic balancing acts and complicating their neutral foreign policy posture.

Overall, the renewed strategic engagement of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, particularly if it contributes to balancing Israel and de-escalating regional tensions, may be viewed as a constructive development by Southeast Asian Muslim-majority countries.

Such recalibration could widen diplomatic space for these states, many of which aspire to position themselves as credible brokers of peace in the Middle East, extending beyond Gaza. In this regard, Indonesia's reported invitation to participate in the Trump-led Board of Peace reflects both the growing recognition of Southeast Asia's diplomatic relevance and its ambition to play a more proactive mediating role in wider Middle Eastern affairs. Such shifts could also provide them modest leverage in shaping how external powers, especially the United States, engage with the broader Muslim world.

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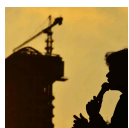
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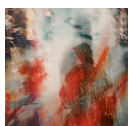
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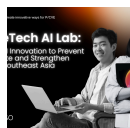


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