



Guest Editor's Corner

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By Joshua S. Krasna

This special Spring 2023 issue of *Orbis* is a product of the long-standing, close collaboration between the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Israel Office, and the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. Specifically, it is an outgrowth of our joint Hiwar Forum for Intra-Regional Dialogue. This virtual forum brings together Israeli researchers and members of civil society, academia, and government from throughout the Middle East and Africa to discuss important contemporary political, social, economic, and cultural issues. The forum works in the spirit of the Chatham House Rule in order to encourage an open discussion and frank exchange of ideas. The purpose of these discussions is to build relationships and to increase our knowledge by introducing a diversity of perspectives that challenge our assumptions on contemporary issues that are of mutual interest in the region.



This volume reflects the spirit and goals of the forum. It brings together researchers from peace partners within the region—Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco and Israel—as well as from the US. and Europe, crucial external actors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. These scholars examine the contours and challenges of the new strategic architecture or regime developing

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in MENA. This evolution occurs in the wake of momentous, historic events and processes that have convulsed the region in the past decade. These episodes include the waves of popular uprisings, which in their two phases (2010-2011 and 2018-2019) toppled six regimes that had ruled for decades, but also created multiple cockpits of regional competition, violence and suffering. They also included the Abraham Accords, which made decisive progress towards ending the Arab-Israeli conflict, but left the Israeli-Palestinian conflict still smoldering; the COVID-19 pandemic; and increased Russian and Chinese influence in the region. A central dynamic influencing the strategic architecture of the region is, of course, the re-orientation of American policy and power from MENA to other regions and interest, after two (or three) decades where the greater Middle East region was the center of American foreign and national security policy, and of intensive military effort.

The contributions in this issue reflect a diversity of approaches and viewpoints on regional strategic dynamics. Brandon Friedman discusses the tension between Saudi Arabia's aspirations for leadership in the region, and the necessity for it to act in concert with other regional actors to achieve its objectives, due to its vulnerability and military weakness. Omar Al-Ubaydli highlights the underdevelopment and reduced quality of pertinent scholarly strategic analysis and research originating in the region, and the reasons for this phenomenon. The lack of home-grown research constitutes an obstacle to critical thinking and analysis about, as well as formulation of, a sustainable and effective Middle East security architecture. Farah Bdour analyzes Jordan's reservations regarding the regional processes emanating from the Abraham Accords. She argues that Jordan is well positioned to play a central role in the transformation of the Abraham Accords' regional integration initiatives to a regional security architecture that brings prosperity and security to all its members—including the Palestinians. Mohamed Chtatou discusses the centuries-old special relationship between Muslims and Jews in Morocco, and the importance of these unique cultural and interfaith ties for the evolving bilateral relationship between Morocco and Israel today. Cinzia Bianco and Corrado Cok analyze Europe's interests in MENA's stability, to prevent threats to economic and energy interests, as well as new refugee flows. Yet, they also address its limited capacity and leverage to significantly influence the directions of the new strategic structures in the region, away from strategic and defense competition and rivalries and towards cooperation and connectivity. Hadar Lasry's and my own article points to Israel's changing perception of itself as an integral part of its region, not a "villa in the jungle" separate from it, and its increasing appetite for issue-specific alliances and collective security arrangements, while attempting to insulate the wider web of regional strategic relations from the Palestinian issue. Lindsay Benstead writes that the potential for the Abraham Accords to create new conditions that support movement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be

understated; however, she notes that due to political authoritarianism in the region, the Accords may fall short of their potential if economic gains fail to reach marginalized populations.

Our hope is that this will be only the first of many joint efforts by scholars from throughout the region, designed to help break “silos” of analytical endeavor and enable a more integrative view of the region’s challenges and problems, but also of potential solutions.



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