



# The Russia–Ukraine conflict and the changing geopolitical landscape in the Middle East

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Received: 21 February 2023 / Accepted: 15 May 2023 / Published online: 4 June 2023  
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## Abstract

Middle East countries have taken a relatively neutral position on the Russia–Ukraine conflict and have not joined US sanctions or the camp against Russia. Instead, they have made choices based on their own national interests, reflecting their strategic autonomy. Meanwhile, due to the intensification of the strategic game between the US and Russia surrounding Ukraine, the strategic ability and willingness of both sides to influence the Middle East has been limited by the conflict. Major powers have thus taken a measured and balanced approach in attempting to influence the Middle East, and the strategic game of global powers in the Middle East is deepening. At the regional level, international relations in the Middle East have shown signs of smoothing and easing. As a result, many Middle East countries have decided to pursue development and transformation. However, there are still many hidden dangers, regarding international affairs in the region, which cannot be ignored.

**Keywords** Russia–Ukraine conflict · Middle East regional pattern · Great powers' game · Development and transformation

## 1 Introduction

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has not only profoundly affected the international system, the world order, and global geopolitics, but also has had a profound spillover on the reorganization of political blocs. This is because the conflict goes beyond political violence between Russia and Ukraine to encompass a complex struggle and game between Russia, the US, and Europe. Specifically, as the US strives to consolidate, adjust, and reorganize its global ally system through the Russia–Ukraine conflict,

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it is also turning the conflict into a special platform for repairing and maintaining American hegemony. Other countries have shown a range of reactions toward the US and Russia with regard to the Russia–Ukraine conflict. US allies in the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and other developing countries and regions neither followed the lead of the US, nor chose sides between the US and Russia, which to a large extent reflects a relative decline of the US and the West in world politics.

For a long time, the Middle East has been characterized by dependence and conflict, with Middle East countries relying heavily on the outside world, especially the West, to support their development. Long-term conflicts triggered by external intervention and internal contradictions have led to a tumultuous environment that does not support regional development or cooperation. As a result, long-term vicious cycles of security and development have formed, perpetuating the Middle East's substantial deficits in global security, development, and governance. Since the so-called “Arab Spring” began in 2011, and especially over the past 2 years, the Middle East has seen a shift in power dynamics, even though its key characteristics of conflict and dependency have not completely changed. The influence of major powers outside the region on the Middle East is now more diversified and balanced, and countries in the region are becoming more autonomous, which has led to positive changes for the Middle East region as a whole (Liu 2022a).

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has not had a subversive effect on regional dynamics in the Middle East region. On the contrary, international relations in the Middle East have rarely witnessed an increasingly independent development. Middle East countries have generally remained neutral (Zhang 2022; She 2022; Yang 2022; Wu 2022) with regard to the game between the US and Russia and have not chosen sides. This is related to the declining influence of traditional powers, such as the US, Russia, and Europe on the Middle East, especially given that the US has backed away strategically from the Middle East to focus on big power competition. Nevertheless, the impact of the Russia–Ukraine conflict on the Middle East has been significant. The rise in energy prices and the food crisis triggered by the Russia–Ukraine conflict have had a profound effect on the Middle East and have tested the internal governance and development efforts of Middle East countries. In particular, countries now experiencing food insecurity almost coincide with the countries that broke out two waves of “Arab Spring” before, which makes it one of the focuses that whether the Middle East will have a third wave of “Arab Spring” due to the butterfly effect of the Russia–Ukraine conflict (Liu 2022b).

## 2 Reaction of Middle East countries to the Russia–Ukraine conflict

Middle East countries generally remain neutral to the game between the US and Russia surrounding the Russia–Ukraine conflict. They strive to maintain a balanced position between the two powers and make policy choices according to their own interests. They even dared to reject some of the requests of the US, the essence of which is that the influence of foreign powers on the Middle East has been increasingly balanced.

## 2.1 Reaction of Arab countries to the Russia–Ukraine conflict

At the beginning of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Middle East countries that strongly supported or opposed Russia were rare. Most countries in the region maintained a neutral position, despite their different responses on the surface. The only countries that took strong positions on Russia were Syria, which Russia has supported and protected in recent years, and Kuwait, which opposed Russia's military action against Ukraine. The influence Syria and Kuwait wielded was very limited, however. With the evolution of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are US allies, are under increasing pressure from the US—both direct pressure to participate in confrontation and sanctions against Russia, as well as indirect pressure to cooperate with sanctions against Russia in the energy field. However, Arab countries and even US allies did not blindly join in US sanctions against Russia, and balancing the interests of the US and Russia has become the main feature of Arab countries' foreign policy choices. Some countries have engaged in strategic games with the US based on their own interests, as exemplified by the refusal of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to meet US requirements for increasing oil production. Since the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the US has repeatedly asked Saudi Arabia to significantly increase oil production to curb the rapid rise of global oil prices, but Saudi Arabia insisted on adhering to previous production agreements with Russia and other major oil-producing countries.

In dealing with the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Arab countries have generally adopted a neutral policy and have avoided siding with either party, with two main characteristics: First, Arab countries have strengthened interactions with all parties and cooperated with relevant countries on different issues to achieve strategic hedging. Second, Arab countries strengthened intra-regional consultation and mutual assistance, reduced the potential harm and spread of external risks, and increased collective advantage, which is in sharp contrast to the behavior of Arab countries with regard to the US or Russia (Soviet Union) in the Cold War and post-Cold War periods.

## 2.2 Reaction of Turkey to the Russia–Ukraine conflict

In the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Turkey, stemming from its national interests and identity, adopted a policy of balancing Russia and Ukraine, Russia and the US, and Russia and Europe. As a US ally with NATO membership, Turkey essentially launched a diplomatic offensive in accordance with its own interests, including by orchestrating high-profile diplomatic mediation for Russia and Ukraine, and balancing the interests of Russia and Ukraine, as well as the US and Russia, setting obstacles in the way of Finland's and Sweden's access to NATO, and requiring the West to fulfill Turkey's interests on Kurdish issues. Overall, this approach embodies its diplomatic autonomy and orientation toward its own national interests. As a member of NATO, a candidate for EU membership, and a coastal country of the Black Sea, Turkey has implemented a balanced foreign policy between Russia and Ukraine,

Russia and the US (NATO), and Russia and Europe, which has greatly enhanced its strategic autonomy in the game of major powers between the US, Russia, and Europe. Turkey took advantage of the crisis to actively mediate among all parties, especially in food transport, the safety of the Black Sea waterway, and other issues, to demonstrate its influence as a major power in Eurasia. Turkey's balanced diplomacy is based on the need to safeguard national interests and its understanding of the complex historical causes of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. It is the result of balancing political forces among various factions in the country, of seeking strategic autonomy, and of Turkey's own diversified and complex identity (Yang 2022).

### 2.3 Reaction of Iran to the Russia–Ukraine conflict

One of Iran's biggest demands has been to achieve consensus on the Iran nuclear agreement, so that Iran can eliminate sanctions to ease its increasingly severe economic predicament. However, the Russia–Ukraine conflict has negatively affected negotiations on the Iran nuclear agreement, mainly due to shifting attitudes on the part of the US. On one hand, the US emphasizes decoupling sanctions against Russia due to the Ukraine issue from the Iran nuclear issue, but on the other hand, it delays the Iran nuclear negotiations under various pretexts. As both Iran and Russia are facing severe Western sanctions, the Russia–Ukraine conflict has incentivized the development of a Russia–Iran alliance. In the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Iran not only did not participate in the sanctions against Russia, but also further strengthened its strategic cooperation with Russia. Since the beginning of the conflict, Russia–Iran cooperation in the political, diplomatic, military, economic, financial, energy, transportation, and other spheres has consistently grown. The two sides signed an energy cooperation agreement worth about \$40 billion, and they are still negotiating a long-term cooperation agreement. In July 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Iran, highlighting the importance Russia attaches to Iran (Tang 2022).

### 2.4 Reaction of Israel to the Russia–Ukraine conflict

Israel's reaction to the Russia–Ukraine conflict is best described as cautious. Based on comprehensive consideration of various factors, Israel mediated the conflict, while not offending the conflicting parties and safeguarding their own interests. Israel has been cautious in its wording, avoiding direct criticism of Russia. It has also been reluctant to participate in severe Western sanctions against Russia, and has been reserved in opposing Russia in international settings, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council. Meanwhile, Israel has provided abundant humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, but refused a request for assistance with offensive weapons. Israel also expressed concern about the situation in Ukraine on various diplomatic occasions and tried to meet the demands of Ukraine for political support (Wu 2022).

Considering the special relationships between the US and Israel, between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the US, Israel has taken an overall neutral

position—despite its leaning toward Ukraine and the US—to avoid offending either side, and especially provoking Russia. Israel seeks to protect its own national interests, including maintaining its cooperation with Russia on the Iranian nuclear issue and the Syrian issue involving Israel's security interests. Israel coordinates closely with Russia in economics, trade, energy, and security. Israel also has significant economic interests in Ukraine, which is an important trade partner and scientific and technological partner of Israel. In addition, to maintain the safety of the diaspora Jews, Israel needs to coordinate with Russia and Ukraine.

Ukraine is one of the major Jewish countries in the world. There are between 200,000 and 400,000 Jews in Ukraine, mostly living in Kiev, Dnipro, Kharkov, Odessa, and other cities (Dashefsky and Shekin 2022). To protect the safety of diaspora Jews, the Israeli government has repeatedly communicated and coordinated with Russia on protecting the safety of Ukrainian Jewish communities in the process of mediating the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Under great pressure by the US and the West, Israel has had to adjust some of its policies, such as joining the Western sanctions against Russia and providing Ukraine with defensive weapons and equipment (Wu 2022).

In summary, since the Russia–Ukraine conflict began, as the US has engaged in condemnation, containment, and sanctions against Russia, Middle East countries have adopted relatively neutral positions and policies, despite great variations in their responses and policy choices, and have not joined US sanctions and the camp against Russia. In particular, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, and other US allies did not blindly support or adhere to the requirements of the US, but instead made rational choices based on their own national interests, all of which reflected the strategic autonomy of Middle East countries.

### **3 Forces of major powers outside the region that influence the Middle East pattern are becoming increasingly diversified and balanced**

Between the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, the influence of foreign powers on Middle East regional dynamics is isomorphic with the US unipolar international system; that is, the US is the absolute leader in Middle East affairs. However, since the Arab Spring, the influence of foreign powers on the Middle East has undergone profound and positive changes, characterized by a shift from US dominance to a multi-polar trend. The fundamental reason for this change is that the US foreign and security policy has shifted to attach increased importance to the competition between major powers (Ulbertson et al. 2022). For this, the US has made a strategic retraction from the Middle East, while Russia, China, India, and other emerging economies have worked toward growing their influence in the region. Since the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, due to the intensification of the strategic game between the US and Russia surrounding Ukraine, each side's strategic ability and willingness to influence the Middle East has been limited, and will further promote the development of the forces of

major extraterritorial powers affecting the Middle East in the direction of pluralistic balance.

First, the ability and willingness of the US to influence the Middle East have declined. Between the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of the 2008 global financial crisis, the influence of foreign powers on Middle East regional dynamics is isomorphic with the US unipolar international system, that is, the US is the absolute leader in Middle East affairs. After the 2008 financial crisis, the US realized that the war against terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq had weakened its national strength and the transfer of international power had challenged the US (Haass et al. 2008). Therefore, the US global strategy has gradually shifted from anti-terrorism in the Middle East to coping with the strategic competition of major countries and has sought a retraction from the Middle East. This is a consistent strategic adjustment from the Obama administration to the Trump and Biden administrations, although there are obvious differences in their specific practices.

While the US is seeking a strategic retraction from the Middle East, the Middle East has witnessed the Arab Spring, which has lasted for more than a decade. Great changes in the political landscape of the Middle East require the US to increase its strategic investment, which is an objective trend. There is tension between this trend and the subjective pursuit by the US of shrinking from its previous Middle East strategy. Since the beginning of the Biden administration, the US has not issued a grand Middle East strategy but has continued to reduce its strategic investment in the region. Its Middle East policy has mainly included policy adjustments to reduce strategic constraints from the Middle East, such as launching negotiations about returning to Vienna on the Iran Nuclear Agreement, cooling down hot issues such as the Yemeni civil war, reducing military support for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other allies, once again proposing the “two state solution” to solve the Palestine problem, and withdrawing troops from Afghanistan in a disastrous manner regardless of consequences (Dong 2022). The US Middle East policy since the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict further reflects internal contradictions within the US Middle East strategy. The US has reduced its strategic investment in the Middle East to shift its major strategic resources to the strategic competition of major powers. However, the strategic game between the US and Russia around the Russia–Ukraine conflict requires the cooperation of Middle East countries, especially the energy-producing countries, in imposing sanctions on Russia. Middle East countries, especially US allies, have turned to strategic balance among major countries due to their declining confidence in the US. The reaction of Middle East countries in the Russia–Ukraine conflict is a response to this great-power-balance policy.

In July 2022, President Biden visited Israel, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia, and attended the Security and Development Summit in Saudi Arabia, which is attended by the leaders of six Gulf Cooperation Council member countries (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain), as well as the US, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq, with the fundamental purpose of seeking the support of Middle East countries for US sanctions and confrontation with Russia. However, Biden’s trip to the Middle East had very limited results. He not only failed to achieve the goal of obtaining support from Saudi Arabia and other allies on the conflict, but also failed to achieve the goal of establishing a regional alliance against Russia and Iran. In essence, the

declining authority of the US in the Middle East “is not primarily due to the shrinking of its absolute hard power, but more due to the lack of predictable policy direction and credible political commitment” (She 2022).

Second, Russia’s influence in the Middle East will be limited and weakened by the Russia–Ukraine conflict. After the end of the Cold War, Russia’s influence in the Middle East has declined considerably. However, since Putin came to power, and especially since the Arab Spring, Russia’s return to the Middle East has accelerated, its influence on the Middle East has risen, and its ability to use regional affairs to leverage and balance the US and the West has been growing. First, Russia has become the leading power of the Syrian crisis. Russia intervened in Syria by fighting against the Islamic State militarily, which not only safeguarded its own interests in Syria, but also prevented the US and the West from carrying out regime change in the Middle East. Second, the cooperation mechanism established by Russia, Turkey, and Iran on the Syrian issue not only has had an important impact on Syrian affairs, but also has become an important platform for Russia, Turkey, and Iran to balance the West. Finally, Russia’s close cooperation with many Middle East countries, including US allies, in the fields of energy, economy and trade, security, arms purchase, energy, anti-terrorism, and other fields has become an important lever for Russia in relations between Middle East countries and the West. This is exemplified by the impact of Turkey’s purchase of Russia’s S-400 missile defense system on the trilateral relations between the US, Turkey, and Russia (Liu 2022a).

Since the Russia–Ukraine conflict began, most Middle East countries have taken a neutral position (Bobkin 2022). Although they do not support Russia in taking military action and emphasize safeguarding Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, they are also unwilling to participate in sanctions against Russia, demonstrating that Russia has made remarkable achievements in managing the Middle East in recent years. Since the outbreak of the conflict, bilateral relations between Russia and Middle East countries have not been seriously affected. Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Qatar, Israel, and other major countries in the region expressed their willingness to continue cooperating with Russia in geopolitical, economic, technological, energy, and other fields. However, under the influence of the conflict, Russia’s influence in the Middle East will undoubtedly be weakened and constricted. First, Russia’s national strategic resources are limited by the Russia–Ukraine conflict, so Russia cannot increase its investment in the Middle East. Second, due to Western sanctions and the increasing pressure exerted by the US on Middle East countries, Russia will face many obstacles in its economic, trade, energy, military, and other cooperation with Middle East countries. Finally, although most Middle East countries do not want to choose sides, US Middle East allies will be undoubtedly under from the US, and their cooperation with Russia will be more cautious.

Third, China’s constructive role in Middle East affairs has been increasing. Politically, China has maintained friendly cooperation with Arab countries, as well as Iran, Turkey, and Israel, and has established various types of strategic partnership with more than ten Middle East countries. Economically, China adheres to the principles of joint consultation, joint construction, and sharing, and uses the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a guide for establishing practical cooperation with Middle

East countries in infrastructure construction, new energy, information technology, aerospace, and other development projects. In the social and cultural realms, China respects the paths and institutional choices of Middle East countries, respects the diversity of civilizations in the region, actively exchanges experience in governance with them, and carries out people-to-people cooperation in many fields, becoming a model of mutual learning among civilizations. With regard to security, China adheres to the common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable new security principles, adheres to the Chinese concept of promoting security through development, and actively safeguards Middle East security in peacekeeping, counterterrorism, anti-piracy, and other fields. On hotspot issues, China puts fairness and justice at the forefront, actively explores solutions to hotspots with Chinese characteristics, and promotes political solutions to these problems in the Middle East (Liu and Fan 2017).

Against the backdrop of intensifying strategic competition between China and the US, the US has been vigilant in hedging against China's rising influence in the Middle East and has exerted pressure on Middle East countries. Its practices have mainly included: pressuring Middle East countries and creating obstacles for cooperation between China and Middle East countries on the BRI; and requiring Middle East countries to cooperate with the US and the West to exert pressure on China on issues involving China's core interests. However, the policies of the Middle East countries, especially the Arab countries, toward China have not been adversely affected by the pressures exerted by the US. They not only firmly support China in safeguarding its sovereignty, security, and development interests, but also continue to strengthen comprehensive, practical cooperation with China. At a time of growing tension between China and the US, Middle East countries hope to maintain cooperative relations with both sides. After President Biden's visit to the Middle East, Saudi Foreign Minister Adelal-Jubeir said that Saudi Arabia's relations with the US and China are not mutually exclusive, and that the country will continue to strengthen its relations with China and the US (She 2022).

The influence of foreign powers in the Middle East is increasingly diverse and balanced, which is conducive to the changing situation in the region, in which a few powers dominate the Middle East through power politics and hegemonism, and is more conducive to enhancing the autonomy of countries in the Middle East. However, because the US still needs the Middle East region, especially its allies, to cooperate in its strategic competition with Russia and China, the US has a prominent ambivalent mentality while conducting strategic retraction from the Middle East. The US is worried that Russia and China will fill the so-called "power vacuum" after its withdrawal, which may lead to further strategic competition between the US, Russia, and China in the Middle East (Wasser et al. 2022).

#### **4 Outcomes and challenges amid shifting Middle East dynamics**

With the shift in global strategic focus of the US to power competition and its strategic retraction from the Middle East, and in particular since the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, some Middle Eastern countries have been under increasing pressure



to accelerate development and transformation. Since the Russia–Ukraine conflict began, the focus of the strategic game between the US and Russia has shifted from the Middle East to Ukraine, prompting countries in the Middle East to make strategic adjustments. In this context, international relations in the Middle East have shown signs of positive easing. The pursuit of development and transformation has become a common goal or aspiration among many Middle East countries. However, as the US has played a more destructive role in the Middle East, the easing of relations between major powers in the region remains fragile, and hotspots in the Middle East have been increasingly marginalized and locked in a stalemate. The Russia–Ukraine conflict has deepened the economic and social crisis in many Middle East countries, resulting in many hidden dangers lurking within the current regional dynamics.

#### 4.1 Rare relaxation in regional international relations and hidden worries

Since the Arab Spring started in 2011, confrontation and zero-sum games have become hallmarks of international relations in the Middle East, especially in regional relationships among the major Middle East countries. Typical identity politics characteristics of increasing development trend toward battle camp, ideologization and proxies, forming the regional group confrontation with ethnic and sectarian contradictions. Contradictions in the Middle East region include the confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites centering on Saudi Arabia and Iran (Byman 2014), and the confrontation between the “pro-Muslim Brotherhood camp” and the “anti-pro-Muslim Brotherhood camp,” led by Turkey and Saudi Arabia, respectively (Liu and Zhao 2018). Regional power confrontation has manifested in a variety of ways in the Middle East, including the diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2016, the diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in 2017, the long-term game between Turkey and Saudi Arabia around supporting or opposing the Muslim Brotherhood, and the proxy game between regional powers in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria.

In the past 2 years, a host of complex internal and external factors have coalesced to intensify the strategic strain on regional powers. Many tensions arising from the Arab Spring are now more subdued, leading to a smoothing of relations between major countries in the region. The relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab countries, the relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Arab countries, the internal relations of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the relations between Arab countries and Syria have all witnessed positive interactions, increased dialogue, and a relaxation of earlier tensions.

First, the Saudi camp and the Iranian camp moved from a state of confrontation to one of relaxation. Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the ethnic and sectarian conflicts and geopolitical confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been intensifying (Bakhash 1984). Since the Arab Spring in 2011, bilateral relations have remained tense. Until the two sides broke off diplomatic ties in 2016, the two sides competed by proxy in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen (Chen and Shen 2021). However, since 2021, the two sides have held several

rounds of dialogue in Iraq and are expected to resume diplomatic relations. The confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran has long affected the stability of the Gulf and the Middle East. The improvement in bilateral relations is undoubtedly of great strategic significance and has directly led to the easing of relations between Iran and the Arab world, as well as the easing of internal relations within the Arab world.

Second, relations between the “pro-Muslim Brotherhood camp” and the “anti-Muslim Brotherhood camp” led by Turkey and Saudi Arabia, respectively, are less tense overall. The conflict between the two sides generally revolves around the struggle for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Between 2012 and 2014, from the time that the Muslim Brotherhood briefly took power in Egypt to the time when Sisi led the military to depose the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey and Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE opposed the Muslim Brotherhood. This became a contributing factor in the Saudi–Qatar diplomatic crisis in 2017. Qatar followed Turkey to support the Muslim Brotherhood, which helped drive Saudi Arabia to break off diplomatic relations with Qatar and impose sanctions on it (Liu and Zhao 2018). However, since 2021, Turkey’s relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt have improved across the board. Especially since 2022, leaders of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have frequently exchanged high-level visits and signed a series of cooperation agreements, signaling that the conflict between the “pro-Muslim Brotherhood camp” and the “anti-Muslim Brotherhood camp” has been basically resolved.

After a long period of turbulence and conflict, the easing of international relations is spreading across the Middle East. However, there are still many hidden risks: First, the destructive role of the US in the Middle East remains. Despite the strategic retraction of the US from the Middle East, the US continues to instigate tensions in the region by urging countries to confront Iran, cobbling together a military alliance system, and irresponsibly withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, which has negatively affected internal efforts to restructure Middle East diplomatic patterns. Second, regional international relations are still fragile. The structural contradictions between the US, Israel, and Iran are still sharp, and there are still many obstacles hindering the relaxation of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Profound contradictions remain among regional powers around hot-button issues in the Middle East, such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq issue, all of which negatively affect the easing of international relations in the Middle East. Finally, the marginalization of the Palestinian issue as the core issue in the Middle East, and the frequent occurrence of Palestinian–Israeli conflicts, are difficult problems affecting the reconstruction of regional dynamics in the Middle East. The US is less willing or able to promote Palestinian–Israeli peace talks and has been more biased toward Israel. Additionally, Israel bypassed the Palestinian issue to normalize relations with Arab countries (from 2020 to 2021, Israeli diplomatic relations have been established with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan through the so-called Abraham Agreement), further marginalizing the Palestinian issue (Liu 2022a).

## 4.2 Opportunities and challenges coexist in the development and transformation of Middle East countries

Countries in the Middle East have explored various paths to economic development as a means to achieve national rejuvenation and prosperity. From capitalism to socialism, from nationalism to Islamic revivalism, Middle East countries have made many attempts. However, most countries have encountered serious setbacks in their development efforts, and there are few successful development models. At the same time, a vicious cycle of conflict and backslides in development has formed, making the combination of peace and development a luxury that many people in the Middle East long for have been unable to realize. In essence, the Arab Spring was another attempt by the people of Arab countries to fight for political rights and promote economic reform and development. However, due to complex internal and external factors, the wave of popular protest not only failed to realize its political and economic goals, but also led to the collapse of some Arab countries' regimes or created new turmoil and conflict, as well as intensified inherent contradictions within the Middle East countries.

In recent years, after a long period of difficult exploration and setbacks, Middle East countries have selected development and transformation as strategic priorities and have formulated and implemented various development visions. There are significant differences and imbalances in the levels of development and transformation among Middle East countries. The outbreak and stalemate of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, especially its effects on the global energy market and food security, have created important new opportunities—and severe challenges—for Middle East countries.

## 4.3 Development as the common choice of Middle East countries

Although there are great differences among the countries that make up the Middle East region, the pursuit of economic development is one common factor. If political stability and certain factors related to economic development are used as evaluative indicators, today's Middle East countries can be roughly divided into four types. The first type are those countries that actively promote and pursue transformation and development, with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia) as typical representatives. These countries are traditional energy countries with strong economic foundations, and most of them have monarchical political systems. Influenced by the Arab Spring, the Gulf countries have put forward the “post-oil era” development vision and actively promote economic and social reforms, like Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Centennial 2071, Oman's Vision 2040, Kuwait's Vision 2035, and Qatar's Vision 2030. The second type is Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries that achieved peaceful transition during the Arab Spring. The political and economic reconstruction in these countries has been basically on track, improving stability and people's livelihoods. The third group includes Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and other countries that were affected by the second wave of the Arab Spring, from 2018 to 2019. These countries are still in

the transition period and are experiencing heavy transformation pressure, but their demands for development and transformation are very strong. The last type includes the countries that have fallen into serious conflict and turbulence under the influence of the Arab Spring and long-term external intervention, such as in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq. They all face the multiple tasks of post-war reconstruction, and national transformation, but they also are experiencing strong internal demand for independent development and stability (Liu 2022c).

#### **4.4 The Russia–Ukraine conflict brings both opportunities and challenges to development in the Middle East**

Rising energy prices have had both positive and negative effects on the Middle East (Liu 2022b), but these effects vary country by country. On the positive side, rising prices have led to increased revenue and higher international status for energy-producing countries. However, the same circumstance might negatively affect medium- and long-term economic diversification in those countries. Since the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, international oil and gas prices have been rising, helping Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries increase their oil and gas revenues (Cui and Maghyreh 2023), improve their financial situation, and enhance their position in the global energy market and even the world economy (Tang 2022). However, the rise in oil prices will undoubtedly affect the Gulf Arab countries' long-term development strategies, including their "post-oil era" development visions. Indeed, the impetus for the economic transformation of the Gulf countries was the continuous decline in oil prices and the dilemma of the traditional oil economy in the decade before the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Therefore, the rise in oil and gas prices brought about by the Russia–Ukraine conflict will undoubtedly reduce the financial pressure on the Gulf countries for a time, thereby weakening the impetus for their economic diversification. From a broader perspective, the rise in oil prices has inflicted greater pressure and economic difficulties on most energy-producing countries in Central and East Africa. On one hand, the rise in oil prices has made the burden on energy-consuming countries in the Middle East heavier and their difficult financial situations poorer. On the other hand, the increase in transport costs caused by the rise in energy prices will lead to high prices of grain and other commodities, which will further aggravate the food crisis.

Second, the risk of food crisis has increased sharply, testing the governance capacity of countries in transition, and the risk of a third wave of the Arab Spring has increased. According to a March 2022 report, the Arab world gets more than 50% of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine—34.4% from Russia and 15.9% from Ukraine. When the Russia–Ukraine conflict began, food security in the Arab world immediately became an urgent problem (Han 2022). Middle East countries that once faced the Arab Spring due to the abolition of food subsidies and inflation—in particular, Arab countries including Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, Sudan, and Lebanon that were impacted by the first two waves of the Arab Spring, as well as Iran, whose economic difficulties are worsening—face the risk of large-scale public protests due to the food crisis. Since 2022, a new round of rising food and energy prices has

triggered protests in many Middle East countries, leading to increased political and social instability (Tang 2022). In short, difficult transitions since the Arab Spring and the COVID-19 pandemic crisis overlapped, creating development difficulties for most Middle East countries. The food crisis, aggravated by the Russia–Ukraine conflict, further aggravated the economic and social crisis in the Middle East, especially in the transitional Arab countries, where it also increased political risks.

In conclusion, since the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the number of major powers outside the Middle East that wield influences in the region has grown, and the game between these major powers has intensified. Regional dynamics have trended toward declining confrontation among major regional forces, easing of international relations, and strengthening of regional countries' pursuit of autonomy and development transformation. The negative impact of the Russia–Ukraine conflict on the Middle East cannot be ignored, however. In particular, the deepening of the game between major countries, the impasse over regional hot-spots, and the increasing pressure on regional national governance are all serious challenges the Middle East continues to face.

**Funding** Not applicable.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that there is no competing interest regarding the publication of this article.

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