Second-Order Consequences in International Politics: The Ukraine War and Reverberations in the Middle East

Simon Mabon

Abstract: The war in Ukraine has had devastating repercussions for global politics. In this essay, I reflect on the ways in which the war impacts the Middle East, both directly and indirectly, with a specific focus on the *second-order* consequences for States, elites and people. I argue that the Middle East's position within the global capitalist system and its geopolitical importance mean that it is vulnerable to dramatic changes in international politics.

Keywords: Middle East; Ukraine; second-order consequences; food security.

Consequências de segunda-ordem em política internacional: a Guerra da Ucrânia e as reverberações no Oriente Médio

Resumo: A guerra na Ucrânia teve repercussões devastadoras para a política global. Neste ensaio, reflito sobre as maneiras pelas quais a guerra impacta o Oriente Médio, direta e indiretamente, com foco específico nas consequências de *segunda-ordem* para Estados, elites e pessoas. Argumento que a posição do Oriente Médio dentro do sistema capitalista global e sua importância geopolítica significam que ele é vulnerável a mudanças dramáticas na política internacional.

Palavras-chave: Oriente Médio; Ucrânia; consequências de segunda-ordem; segurança alimentar.

On February 24, 2022, I was driving through the streets of Nanded, India, listening to local radio playing Bollywood songs. At the top of the hour, a news bulletin reported that Russian troops had invaded Ukraine in an attempt to "demilitarize and denazify" Ukraine. Less than two weeks later, businesses in Nanded were bemoaning rising prices and a shortage of key products, viewed as a direct consequence of the war in Ukraine, over 5,000 miles away.

Over 30 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, viewed as "a genuine tragedy" by Russian President Vladimir Putin, global politics has been ordered by a form of neoliberal capitalist-powered globalization, seemingly ending the Westphalian order which privileged State sovereignty above all else. The long-standing inviolable principle of global politics – that of State sovereignty – was also eroded by the onset of the War on Terror and a normative move towards a responsibility to protect which sought to place individual lives above State sovereignty.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine calls into question much of what has become widely accepted in the past three decades. Those of us teaching International Relations courses had begun to move past the Realist account of global politics, given both the salience of globalization and a general reduction in military spending, particularly across Europe. While the past thirty years have been punctured by instances that call into question the dominant ordering paradigm of global politics, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brings with it a return to Cold War thinking, both politically and strategically. Whilst the attention of the world's leaders remains firmly on Ukraine, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, there are a number of serious consequences that the Russian invasion has caused which will be felt across global politics in the years to come. These range from the economic to the geopolitical, the legal to the normative, transcending the theater of war to reach into the furthest corners of the world, as my experience in Nanded demonstrates.

Of course, the invasion comes at a time when the world seeks to move beyond the devastation of COVID-19, which existentially affected politics within and between States. Aside from the catastrophic loss of life, the most serious repercussions were felt in the global economy, amidst contrasting domestic economic decisions about how best to address the pandemic's socioeconomic consequences. Simultaneously, a rising cost of living crisis in the West has been exacerbated by escalating oil and

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gas prices, in part stemming from Russia's position in OPEC+[1] and supply issues from the invasion of Ukraine. Global supply chains, already under a great deal of pressure due to COVID-19 and incidents such as the Evergreen crashing in the Suez Canal, took on additional stress.

Beyond the Western world, the reverberations of Moscow's actions in Ukraine are perhaps even more serious. The remainder of this essay focuses on the second-order consequences of the Russian invasion for States across the Middle East and the broader implications for global politics.

The idea of second-order consequences refers to the ways in which the consequences of a particular event affect a different subject. In particular, it focuses on two main areas: socioeconomics and geopolitics. The socioeconomic area evokes parallels with the lead up to the Arab Uprisings of 2011 and, thus, the third-order consequences of the Russian invasion include tensions between rulers and ruled. The geopolitical area is positioned within an evolving international political environment, but focuses on security, relations with the U.S., and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the international community's attempts to secure a nuclear agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ultimately, this essay seeks to demonstrate that the Russian invasion of Ukraine raises intersectional questions that, at times, are also existential issues for people across the Middle East. Without serious support from international actors, crises across the region – notably in Syria and Yemen – will dramatically deteriorate with a devastating human cost.

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The conflict in Ukraine has reverberated across international politics but, like other crises, has taken on an intersectional dimension. In many cases, this intersectionality disproportionately affects those in the Global South or in positions of socioeconomic weakness. For example, we see this play out in terms of food prices and,

1. Formed in 2016, with 11 countries non-members of OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries).

from this, a number of knock-on effects. In Yemen, a State beset by violent conflict over the past eight years, shifts in global food prices can have existential repercussions, affecting those already suffering from war and the intersectionality of climate change. Similar challenges play out in Syria, Gaza and Lebanon, all of whom have been ravaged by socioeconomic crises, violence and humanitarian disaster.

This article proceeds as follows: first, I offer an account of second-order effects, building upon philosophical debate about causation and the importance of understanding the broader regional environment within which States operate. Second, I offer an overview of the Middle Eastern political and socioeconomic climate at the start of 2022. Understanding this environment is essential in better understanding the ways in which reverberations from the invasion of Ukraine take hold. I then turn to the third section, which looks at the socioeconomic implications of the conflict, focusing in particular on food and aid. The fourth section of the paper looks at the security repercussions of the conflict, whilst the fifth and final part look at possible third-order consequences.

THE SECOND-ORDER EFFECTS

Before turning to the Middle East, let us consider the nature of consequence and the impact that events may have on the world around them. In the aftermath of the Cold War, international politics has become increasingly shaped by interconnectivity, a form of internationalism that is forged by the flows of capital, people and ideas across State borders. In such a climate, the inviolable principle of State sovereignty is eroded – both willingly and unwillingly – creating a new political environment replete with emerging threats and challenges. As the 9/11 attacks and COVID-19 pandemic have shown, in this environment events reverberate rapidly across the international realm, aided by the erosion of state sovereignty and prioritizing human security and basic needs (best seen in the doctrine of the "responsibility to protect"). As a result, what happens globally can resonate locally and vice versa. International Relations scholarship has long discussed the ability to move between levels of analysis, or between the general and the specific. Perhaps most obviously, this occurs via the Copenhagen School's work on the regional "security complex" approach (Buzan & Waever 2003) and the "second image reversed," both of which stress the interplay between domestic and regional politics. Yet, tracing the unintentional albeit causal relationship between events has largely been overlooked by these and other analysis models.

Inferring causation and relations between two (or more) events has been a line of scholarly inquiry for centuries. The British Empiricist David Hume wrote extensively on this topic, reflecting on the ability to observe billiard balls colliding into

one another. The interconnected nature of global politics means that such equivalent collisions can have serious repercussions beyond the initial coming together. The initial collision, viewed as a first-order event, can set in motion a causal chain of events, identified by order of distinction from the initial site. Those other sites of collision are viewed as second-order effects. Whilst ascertaining levels of causal inference weakens the further down the chain you go, there is a clear second-order consequence that can be identified and studied.

For the purposes of this essay, the initial event is the Russian invasion of Ukraine. From that, the second-order consequences of interest in this analysis are those events taking place in the Middle East that are directly affected by the Russian invasion. Whilst the Humeans may raise questions about causation, there are clear causal relationships that can be identified here: first, the impact of the invasion on wheat production and purchase, and, second, the impact of the invasion upon global politics.

Such claims about causal relationships are not new to the international relations of the Middle East. Indeed, scholars such as Raymond Hinnebusch (2003), Fred Halliday (2005) and others have all observed the engagement of international powers within actors from the region. Paul Noble, a leading figure of the international relations of the Middle East, referred to the region as a vast "sound chamber," whilst Raymond Hinnebusch observes the levels of penetration by global capital. Although driven by two different lines of inquiry, both Noble and Hinnebusch are correct to assert that the Middle East is prone to interference from global powers, which have played a prominent role in regional politics, from the Cold War to the invasion of Iraq. Contemporary politics in the Middle East is no different, with the U.S., Russia and China all taking a keen interest in events.

Acknowledging this goes some way in helping understand the ways in which global politics can impact the Middle East. Whilst the possible second-order repercussions of the invasion are potentially vast (precluding detailed analysis), they are also potentially unidentifiable, evoking memories of Donald Rumsfeld's famous "known unknowns" observation. There are, however, several areas where detailed analysis is possible, where the reverberations of conflict in Ukraine will have a marked impact on the lives of people across the Middle East, and elsewhere.

THE MIDDLE EASTERN CLIMATE

To understand the second-order impact of the invasion of Ukraine we must first identify the nature of regional politics in the Middle East. Ten years on from the Arab Uprisings – a series of events that shook the foundations of

relations between rulers and ruled and led to violent conflict in Syria, Libya and Yemen – political crises continue, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict in several States. Analysis of the root causes of the Arab Uprisings of 2011 typically points to the intersection of a number of themes: socioeconomic grievances; democratic failings; corruption; demographic change. A closer analysis of the events paints a dark picture, with endemic corruption, bloated bureaucracies and inefficient economies. An estimated US$1 trillion was lost in corruption in the half century leading up to the protests. United Nations reports, in the years leading up to the uprisings, observed profligate States and rampant discrimination along ethnic, religious, tribal and gender lines (Mabon 2020). When the uprisings began, wealthier Gulf States offered huge welfare packages to placate restless populations. Saudi Arabia, for example, provided citizens with a package worth US$120 billion. Those unable – or unwilling – to embark on such moves typically resorted to mechanisms of control in an effort to ensure their survival.

The decade that followed was shaped by conflict, displacement, anger, corruption, and inertia, punctured by acts of protest, resulting in a precarious regional environment, which left many facing serious challenges. In the months before the start of the pandemic, people across the Middle East were concerned about the conflict between the U.S. and Iran following the assassination of the leader of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, Qassim Soleimani. The early months of 2020 were defined by posturing and rising tensions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and its rivals.

As the pandemic hit, regimes deployed a range of strategies designed to ensure the health of their populations. Falling under the banner of biopolitics, these regulatory strategies sought to understand and regulate the movement of people, with the overarching aim of ensuring their survival. Across the Middle East, a range of strategies was deployed, ranging from lockdowns to the use of technology to trace (and, by extension, limit) the movement of people. In some cases, emergency legislation was deployed to legalize restrictions placed on freedoms. Socioeconomic challenges affected many, yet the scope for dissent had been reduced. Economic pressures which have prompted socioeconomic reform across a number of Gulf States may also prevent the larger moves taken to placate widespread anger. For example, in Saudi Arabia, a welfare package of close to US$100 billion was presented to the Kingdom's citizens in an attempt to secure their support in the face of the Arab Uprisings. Yet the economic cost of responding to COVID-19 has left even the wealthiest of States facing financial challenges.

SOCIOECONOMICS: FOOD AND AID

The significance of Ukraine and Russia to global agricultural markets is easily seen when looking at the Middle East. Wheat prices have gone up internationally by between 25 and 30% since the start of the conflict, affecting global supply chains, global demand, and consumers in the Global North and South alike (Trading Economics 2022). Of course, those in the Global South and in intersectionally precarious conditions are far more vulnerable to such fluctuations (Trading Economics 2022). For António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the conflict in Ukraine posed a serious challenge to human security across the world, risking tipping "tens of millions of people" into food insecurity (Farrer 2022). This, in turn, exacerbates intersectional issues relating to malnutrition, disease, structural violence and, ultimately, life.

As Human Rights Watch (2022) stresses, governments that import food will be vulnerable to changes in global politics and, without adequate social protection systems, people in those States will suffer, and basic needs will not be met. Such concerns increase with reports from organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (2022) at the UN observing commodity prices at an all-time high in March, with record-breaking levels remaining. As a result, Human Rights Watch (2022) has been vocal in its calls for governments to ensure that the Ukraine conflict does not worsen the food crisis. In a damning statement, UNICEF (2022) noted that only 36% of young children are receiving diets necessary for healthy growth, with nearly one in five children stunted. In Yemen, 45% of children are stunted and 86% have anemia, while in Lebanon 94% of young children do not receive the diets they need. In Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Sudan, over 9 million children under 5 are in need of nutrition assistance; in total, almost 14 million children and women require nutrition assistance. Of course, these issues are intersectional, having an adverse effect on the poor and those already suffering (Tisdall 2022).

The case of Yemen offers a stark reminder of the repercussions of such developments, leaving it firmly in the shadow of the conflict (Karasapan 2022). In a State devastated by conflict and described by the UN as the worst humanitarian disaster since the Second World War, millions of people are in food poverty or worse. Ukraine and Russia account for 30-40% of Yemen's wheat imports, with imports accounting for 95% of the country's wheat usage. The consequences of this in Yemen alone will be dire, leading to higher grain prices and, by extension, food prices. In 2021 food prices had doubled, whilst, according to the International Commission of the Red Cross, since the onset of conflict in Ukraine, food prices have increased a further 150% (Kelly 2022). In addition to food prices, fuel and fertilizer costs will also increase, whilst arable land available to farmers has

decreased due to fighting, along with the number of farmers, many of whom are fighting or displaced.

The humanitarian catastrophe brought about by the war in Ukraine will also shape the wider donor landscape, many of whom have begun to prioritize the European refugee crisis along with their own defense needs. The case of Germany illustrates this point, with a decrease in aid generally to allow for increased spending in defense and European refugees (Kinkartz 2022). As a result, when the Yemeni donors conference requested US$4.2 billion to help avert further tragedies, donors pledged only US$1.3 billion. With this funding shortfall, it is the sixth consecutive year that Yemen's Humanitarian Response Plan was not fully funded, and also comes as the World Food Programme cut food rations for eight million Yemenis (Middle East Eye 2022).

In Lebanon, a State shattered by economic crises, paralyzed by a sectarian power sharing system and endemic corruption, intersecting crises have hit hard. Here, more than 80% of the population have been plunged into multidimensional poverty. Whilst the country faced an array of existential challenges stemming from endemic corruption, nepotism, COVID-19 and the Beirut port explosion – which destroyed the capital's grain silos holding four months of reserves – the war in Ukraine has exacerbated these challenges (Reliefweb 2021).

In Egypt, which imports 80% of its grain from Russia and Ukraine and is the world's largest wheat importer, more than 70 million people rely on subsidized bread (Salem et al. 2021). Although the government declared that its stockpile of wheat is sufficient for nine months, a ban on the export of wheat, flour, fava beans, lentils, pasta and other staples was announced in early March (The National 2022). Egypt will also be disproportionately hit by the conflict in the tourism sector, with Russian and Ukrainian visitors accounting for an estimated one in three arrivals in Egypt (International Crisis Group 2022). In an effort to prevent the crisis from escalating, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has imposed a cap limiting the price of unsubsidized bread, albeit at a time of currency depreciation and rising interest rates. All the while, restrictions on opposition movements remain, much like in previous decades (Ardovini & Mabon 2020). The deeply unpopular Emergency Laws – which provoked widespread anger against Mubarak in 2011 – were repealed by Al Sisi in November 2021, albeit with emergency-like provisions incorporated into other laws preventing scope for protest (Human Rights Watch 2021).

As my colleague in Sectarianism, Proxies & De-sectarianisation (SEPAD) Ruba Ali al-Hassani observes, rising food prices limit dietary choices, with serious health repercussions. Moreover, the rising cost of grains could have implications

for traditional and cultural dishes: "There has been a growing sense of individualism and a move away from the collective culture in which the region prides itself. This is becoming more of a problem as people switch to survival mode in light of increasing cost of living and political issues in each corresponding country" (Maher 2022). In Syria, the distribution of bread has become an additional means of discrimination, forcing millions to go hungry (Human Rights Watch 2022). The food crisis in Syria is exacerbated due to the decade of conflict and ensuing economic and institutional crises, leading to severe wheat shortages. At the end of 2021, the Syrian and Russian governments reached an agreement for Damascus to import one million metric tons of wheat across 2022, financed by a loan from the Kremlin. Yet with the onset of the conflict, the deal was suspended, prompting rationing.

Whilst affecting States in the Global South and those on – or beneath – the poverty line dramatically, middle-income countries are also poorly equipped to address food insecurity. According to a report by Verisk Maplecroft into emerging markets, middle-income countries face a serious challenge from the Ukraine invasion, coming swiftly on the heels of the pandemic: "Unlike low-income countries, they were rich enough to offer social protection during the pandemic, but now struggle to maintain high social spending that is vital to the living standards of large sections of their populations" (Kinnear &Blanco 2022).

GEOPOLITICS: SECURITY AND DIPLOMACY

Shifts in global politics emerging from the invasion of Ukraine can have a serious impact on security and diplomacy in the Middle East, both in the region and how States engage with the region. Of particular interest for our analysis is the impact of the war on the negotiations aimed at reviving the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (permanent members of the UN Security Council, and Germany), along with the broader alignment of regional security. Since former U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement and embark on a campaign of "maximum pressure" against Iran, other members of the international community have sought to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis. Ongoing dialogue between Iran and other States found traction with the election of Joe Biden to the office of President in 2020, and while talks initially made headway – with some declaring that an agreement was close – the onset of conflict in Ukraine has caused a number of challenges, notably with regard to Russian trade links with Iran and the belief that Biden is a "lame duck" President unable to forge a lasting agreement.

Russia's role in the Middle East has increased since the onset of the Arab Uprisings, predominantly through the Kremlin's actions in Syria in support of Bashar

al-Assad. More broadly, the Kremlin has cultivated relations with other members of the so-called "Axis of Resistance," a collective comprised of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, albeit more nuanced than *prima fascia* observations would suggest. Discussions with Russian officials and their Iranian counterparts acknowledge that while strategic goals may overlap, these do not always coalesce in the longer term. Indeed, while Moscow and Tehran's stance on developments in Syria are in sync, there is a general acknowledgment that such divergence is easily envisaged in the medium to long term. In the short term, however, its actions towards Iran are perhaps more reflective of Moscow's concerns about the imposition of a sanctions program by members of the international community since the invasion of Ukraine. As a member of the UN Security Council, Russia has been involved in the Iran nuclear negotiations since their inception, acting in support of the broader aim of non-proliferation, yet alongside a working relationship with Iran.

The intersection of two distinct global crises poses a serious challenge to actors seeking to resolve both the Iranian nuclear program and the war in Ukraine. While an agreement over the nuclear deal would be hugely important in preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, allowing Iranian money to flow into Russia would go against the international pressure put on Russia to end the conflict in Ukraine.

Economic sanctions and a boycott of Russian gas have put a strain on the Kremlin's coffers, prompting a demand that any nuclear agreement allows Iran to trade with Russia regardless of the sanctions regime. Here, the intersection of two distinct global crises poses a serious challenge to actors seeking to resolve both the Iranian nuclear program and the war in Ukraine. While an agreement over the nuclear deal would be hugely important in preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, allowing Iranian money to flow into Russia would go against the international pressure put on Russia to end the conflict in Ukraine.

Several months into the conflict in Ukraine, with little hope of a breakthrough in talks to revive the nuclear deal, Iran removed tamper-proof surveillance cameras installed by the International Atomic Energy Agency to monitor Tehran's nuclear

activity, leaving the talks (England et al. 2022). Emboldened by an increasingly strong stance from the Kremlin, the talks appear at a crucial phase once more. Yet the conflict also exacerbates challenges in an already complex regional security climate, deepening divisions between polarized camps.

Unsurprisingly, support for Russia maps broadly onto political alliances in the Middle East. In Iraq, the Hashd al-Shaabii (the popular mobilization forces) regularly engage with Moscow on counter-terrorism issues, reflecting growing ties between the Kremlin and Iranian-aligned militia groups in Iraq (Ramani 2021). Militia leaders such as Moqtada al-Sadr – the leader of the Sadrist movement which won the most seats in the October 2021 elections – proclaimed that war broke out as a consequence of "American policy there" (NRT 2022). This view was also represented on the streets of Baghdad, with billboards and posters expressing support for Russia, which, much like al-Sadr, reflects anger at the U.S. position. The Secretary-General of Kataib Hezbollah, Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi, declared that it is "in the interest of the nation and the axis of resistance that the West loses this war in order to ward off their evil from the region […] the Russians had to make a thousand calculations before they took this step, after the Americans forced them to go with this option" (Kittleson 2022).

Such comments are not limited to Iraq. Mohammad Ali al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthis, urged Russia to re-open its embassy in Sana'a and asked Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to visit Yemen. Mohammad Raad, the leader of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc in Lebanon, met Lavrov in Moscow to discuss the Kremlin's commitment to supporting the Assad regime in Syria (The Associated Press 2021). Russian investment in Iraq currently stands at an estimated US$14 billion, mostly concentrated in oil and gas (Ali 2022), yet Iraq faces growing pressure from European and American companies to divest from Russia (Ramani 2022). A stark difference emerges between those with oil and those without. Importers face growing unrest and pressure to soften the blow of rising costs. In contrast, oil exporters will benefit from the energy price windfall, with Saudi Arabia's projected growth up to 7.6% since January 2022 as a consequence of higher oil production, prices growth, and sanctions and embargoes on Russia (Parasiliti & Hagedorn 2022).

Concern over the future of the U.S. engagement in the region is seen in the Arab Gulf States' engagement with the crisis. Rather than following Washington's lead and condemning the invasion, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi called for a political settlement, while an Arab League statement on Russia did not assign responsibility, instead expressing hope that "each party will bear its responsibility" (Zaid 2022). Later, the leaders of Saudi and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) reportedly snubbed a call with President Biden (Nissenbaum et al. 2022), instead speaking with Chinese

President Xi Jinping (English News CN 2022). Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Washington all later sought to defuse tensions: the UAE and Saudi Arabia later voted with the U.S. in favor of a UN General Assembly resolution, and U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, met with Mohammad bin Zayed and pledged support for Emirati efforts to stop Houthi attacks (Pamuk 2022). President Biden also met with Mohammad bin Salman in Riyadh in an effort to improve U.S.-Saudi relations, which had been under increasing pressure during recent years.

Such developments point to a broader recalibration of relations between Washington and its Gulf allies. Alongside concern at the U.S. long-term commitment to the Middle East, best seen in the perception that security needs have been overlooked (Feierstein et al. 2022), Gulf States have also been frustrated by ongoing calls for political and humanitarian reform.[2] Much to Washington's chagrin, China stands to gain from these developments, capitalizing on existing investments as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, but also through a growing security presence in the Gulf (Borger 2021).

In the eleven years of conflict, Russian engagement in Syria helped ensure the survival of Bashar al-Assad through the provision of military support. Some have viewed Russian engagement in Syria as a testing ground for the Kremlin's military tactics and weaponry. In early 2017, the Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu boasted of testing "162 types of contemporary and modernized weapons in Syria" (Kittleson 2022), with tactics initially used in support of Bashar al-Assad later used in Ukraine (Euromaidan Press 2022). As the conflict in Ukraine progressed, the Kremlin took steps to lower the Russian military involvement in Syria, opening up space for the reworking of the conflict in Syria.

A Western retreat from aid commitments will create opportunities for other States to fill the gap. China's Belt and Road Initiative is an attractive alternative to what is often viewed as "tied" aid commitments and, with Western inertia or reluctance, States with a desire to provide aid (tied or untied) have the ability to increase their influence on the world stage (The Observer 2022). Similarly, India's engagement with the region looks set to increase, albeit with the caveat that rising Islamophobia in India has provoked outrage across Muslim majority States.

A doubling down of Chinese engagement in the Gulf, coupled with Russia's involvement and question marks over the U.S. position, point to a precarious multi-polar regional security environment that risks becoming increasingly unstable, as actors seek to position themselves in this fluid landscape. As some have observed, the complex interaction of regions means that the shifting dynamics of one will

2. Interview with former Bahraini politician (Syrian Prime Ministry 2022).

affect developments in others. For example, the penetration of the Horn of Africa by States from the Persian Gulf – often competing with one another – means that change in the Persian Gulf region can affect developments in the Horn, pointing to a precarious political landscape.

THE FUTURE: THIRD-ORDER CONSEQUENCES?

As this essay has shown, the people of the Middle East face a precarious future, on the brink of starvation and humanitarian crises. Over a decade earlier, in the months leading up to the Arab Uprisings, people across the Middle East faced an array of political, social and economic crises. With little scope for political reform and with little hope, people took to the streets, inspired by the self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazzizi, a Tunisian street vendor. Many analysts bemoaned the failure of Middle East Studies to predict the uprisings (rightly or wrongly), yet the conditions that people face today are perhaps worse. The rising cost of living coupled with the failure to resolve issues from eleven years ago point to a coming crisis. Whilst many States were able to circumvent serious challenges to the social contract, the twin crises of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have placed huge pressures on budgets across the world. With States across the region facing increasingly uncertain futures, questions will be raised about the long-term strategies of the U.S., EU, UK and other actors in the Middle East.

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Here the balance between realpolitik and normative questions about democracy and human rights come to the fore once more. Although the U.S. has sought to put Gulf States under pressure with regard to democracy and human rights, rulers across the Gulf are acutely aware of their importance to Washington, both as an ally on the world stage and also in the broader U.S.-China dynamic. As a result, it is likely that States across the Gulf will reject any pressure from Washington aimed at political or human rights reform. In return, however, the U.S. would expect a harder stance against Russia and China. It may also require acquiescence over a possible Iran nuclear deal. When the first incarnation of the deal was signed, it was widely accepted that the U.S. secured Saudi support by giving Mohammed bin Salman the green light to engage in military activity in Yemen. It remains to be seen what type of concessions would be needed this time.

As the world faces consecutive challenges and intersectional problems are exacerbated, there is little doubt that the poorest will suffer the most. Whilst the wealthiest – typically found in the Global North – may be insulated, the second- and third-order consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine will move swiftly up the global food chain, often in complex ways, albeit affecting those in precarious conditions the most.

As history has shown us, such challenges and precarious political and socio-economic conditions often lead to a surge in unrest, crises and instability, within and between States. It would come as no surprise that the "food apocalypse" emerging from the Ukraine crisis will exacerbate existing tensions and cause new issues across a hungry world. A closer examination at current events supports such a thesis. In Sri Lanka, petrol shortages, electricity blackouts, inflation, a shortage of medicine, a political crisis that toppled a Prime Minister, and an economic crisis so severe that it eventually defaulted on its debt have created a precarious environment for those living on the island (Perera 2022). It would be no surprise to see the escalation of crises across the Middle East in the coming months. Violent unrest has become increasingly common, seen in Iraq, Lebanon, and across Iran, exacerbating latent social and communal divisions in the process, reflecting the fractured nature of political, social life and the precarious conditions that many face. The emergence of intra- and interstate violent conflict risks further exposing people to a devastating range of human security challenges whilst emboldening violent groups able to offer protection that many States are unable to provide.

The reverberations from the war in Ukraine will continue to be felt across the Middle East, disproportionately affecting those already suffering. This plays out in several ways, from food to economic issues, to healthcare, also playing out across security calculations. Even if a ceasefire is achieved, the impact of the war will continue to be felt until broader economic and humanitarian issues have been addressed. All the while, the specter of nuclear proliferation looms large amidst a stalemate in the nuclear negotiations. The complexity of international politics means that events will cause others, creating a complex environment in which the people of the region pay the heaviest price.

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