



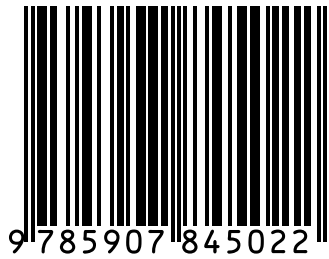
# Gaza. Yemen. Epicentres of Pain Feelings, Myths, and Memories in the Middle East

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Many developments that significantly impacted the destinies of the regional players, non-regional actors, and many people around the world have unfolded during the year that followed the publication of our paper titled “The Middle East and the Future of Polycentric World” (February 2023).<sup>1</sup> Many of these developments appeared to continue the positive trends that we saw a year or two earlier. Saudi Arabia – Iran relations were officially normalised. Syria’s membership in the Arab League was reinstated. Egypt, Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia joined BRICS. Tensions continued to de-escalate in Yemen, with official visits exchanged between Sanaa and Riyadh in April and September 2023. The maritime and aerial blockade eased up, commercial activities at Yemeni ports picked up pace, and air service with Sanaa was partially restored.

However, the situation had drastically changed by the end of the year. The long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict re-emerged on the regional and global agenda and became the focal point of all regional conflicts in a matter of days. This fact shouldn’t have come as a surprise to analysts, because the conditions for this have always been there. Nevertheless, only some of them, including the authors of this paper, argued in recent years that this knot of contradictions held a central place in the inventory of Middle East regional conflicts.

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## Epicentres of Pain

### The new role of the Gaza Strip

In the emerging multipolar world order which we wrote about a year ago, the re-emergence of the conflict that was somewhat forgotten by the global and even many regional leaders as a major event did not come as a shock to international politics. However, the fact that Gaza became the focal point of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exacerbated by high levels of violence, a horrifying human death toll and destruction, and a full-scale humanitarian disaster caught the world off guard. Even the most insightful Western analysts acknowledge the fact that since Israel had subjected this densely populated enclave, with 2.3 million people, to air, sea, and land blockade for two decades, it was considered almost a non-entity in the regional balance of power, and the Islamic Resistance

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<sup>1</sup> Naumkin V., Kuznetsov V. The Middle East and the Future of Polycentric World. Valdai Discussion Club Report 20.02.2023. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/the-middle-east-and-the-future-of-polycentric-worl/>

Movement ( Hamas), which was in a feud with the Fatah movement ruling the West Bank, was seen as a relatively insignificant Islamist force.

The war has drastically changed the perception of the situation. The events following Hamas's attack on Israel showed the volatility of the countries' positions, sympathies, and antipathies under the influence of changing circumstances. On October 7, 2023, and in the first few days that followed the invasion, Hamas's unprecedented cruelty, which included killings and hostage-taking of civilians, caused not only indignation in Israel as well as in friendly states but also condemnation from some in the Arab countries. However, since the beginning of Israel's retaliatory and significantly more cruel punitive military operation, support shifted in favour of the Palestinians.

To cite an example, we can look at changes in opinions and sympathies towards the countries in the region as well as global powers, from among the people of Tunisia which is a relatively neutral Arab country. According to surveys conducted by the Arab Barometer pollster and its local partner *One to One for Research and Polling*, before October 7, only 24 percent of respondents considered the efforts to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the most important aspect of US foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa. At the height of the hostilities in Gaza, this figure rose to 59 percent. Before October 7, 40 percent of Tunisians thought positively about the United States, while 56 percent held an unfavourable opinion about it. With hostilities underway in Gaza, the number of the people holding unfavourable views grew to 87 percent, with only 10 percent holding a positive view of the United States.

Responding to a question about preferred ways of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before October 7, 66 percent of surveyed Tunisians spoke in favour of the two-state solution within the borders of June 4, 1967; 18 percent supported the creation of a single state or a confederation with equal rights for all; and 6 percent favoured other alternatives, most of which implied armed resistance to Israeli occupation (including the possible elimination of the state of Israel).

During the height of the military operation in Gaza, only 50 percent of Tunisians supported a two-state solution, 11 percent favoured a single

MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES

Manpower (thousand)

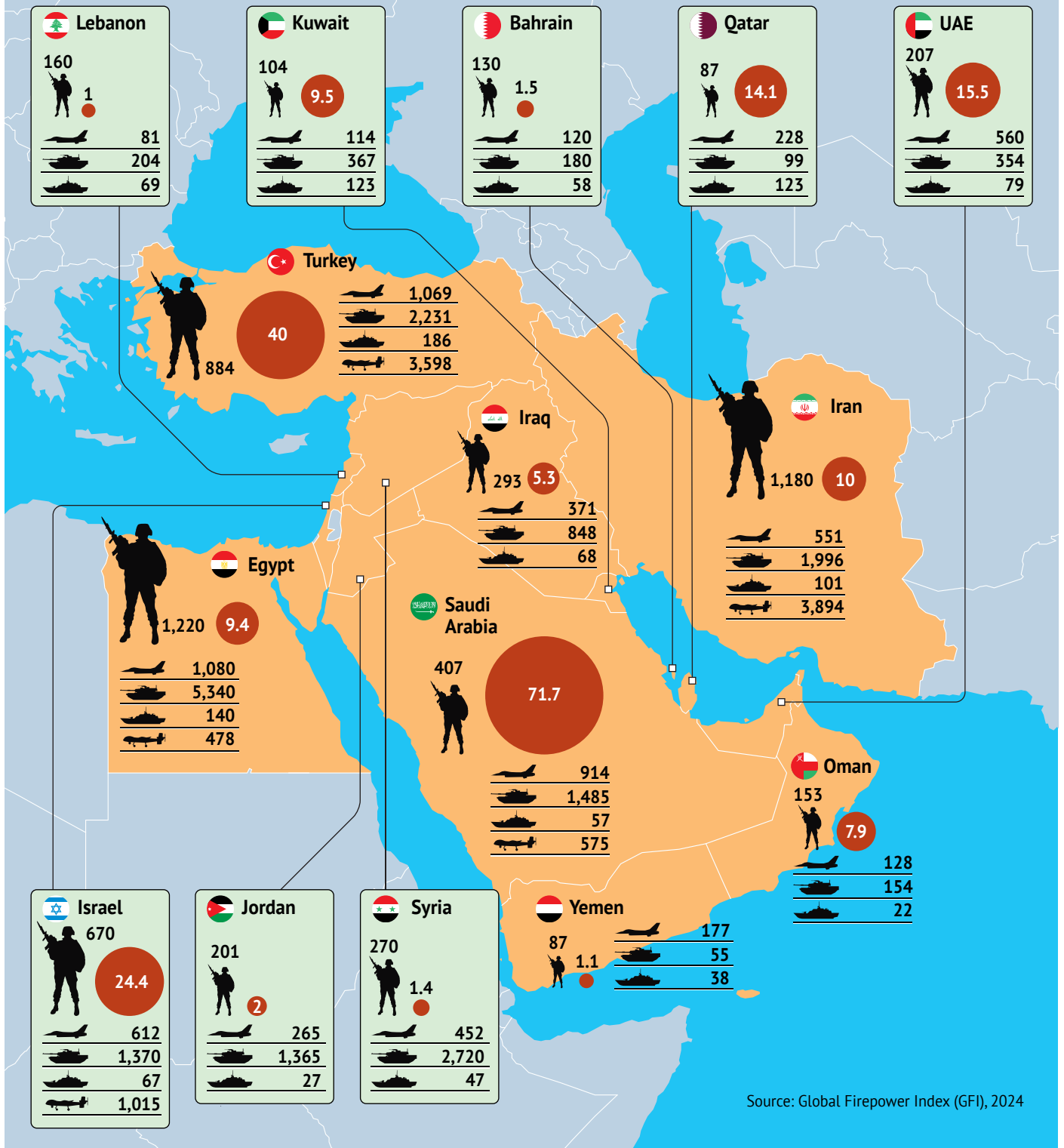
Defence budget (bln \$)

Airpower

Tanks

Naval forces

Drone force (Total units)



Source: Global Firepower Index (GFI), 2024

state or a confederation, while 36 percent supported other alternatives, with the majority favouring armed resistance against Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, if the Tunisians hold these views, the sentiments among Arabs in countries with large populations of Palestinian refugees are much more radical, and changes are more dramatic as well. The overwhelming hatred among Arabs, however, does not necessarily mean that the ruling elites are willing to risk peace and prosperity in their countries by siding with Hamas and joining the fight. The leaders are well aware of the potential consequences. (The Yemeni movement Ansarallah, or the Houthis, is an exception; see below.) The traditionally unfavourable attitude outside the “axis of resistance” towards Hamas, which is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>3</sup>, also plays a role. However, overall, the perception of them has improved, and a significant number of Arabs now view them as martyrs dying for a just cause.

By mid-January 2024, when this paper was written, the death toll from Israeli bombings in Gaza, according to the local Healthcare Ministry, had exceeded 24,000, and the number of injured reached 60,000, with the figures continuing to grow. According to Arab journalists, northern Gaza has become the world’s largest children’s graveyard.

Rejecting the UN Security Council’s agreed-upon resolution for a settlement through the creation of an independent Palestinian state (within the borders of June 4, 1967, and with the capital in East Jerusalem), which would coexist with Israel, the government led by Benjamin Netanyahu is pushing the problem into a dead end. Flooding Israel with US- and UK-made weapons is doing nothing but prolonging the bloodshed. The continuing attempts to resolve the Gaza conflict by force are detrimental to the coexistence of the two peoples going forward.

However, issues exist on the Palestinian side as well, with inadequate consolidation of political forces being one of the most significant problems.

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<sup>2</sup> Robbins M., Roche M., Jamal A.A., Al-Shami S., Tessler M. How the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza Is Changing Arab Views // Foreign Affairs. 14.12.2023. URL: <https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/how-the-israel-hamas-war-in-gaza-is-changing-arab-views-2023-12-14.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Banned in Russia.



Even the unity of Hamas is questionable: the diversity of players within the movement, the complexity of its historical background with its twists and turns, the dispersed distribution of leadership influenced by various countries and political forces – all contribute to a lack of cohesion within its ranks. The unity of the entire Palestinian resistance movement is out of the question. Attempts by Russia and Egypt to facilitate reconciliation between factions within the movement have failed due to the uncompromising positions of the various fronts and organisations, including Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.<sup>4</sup> During meetings in Moscow, their leaders continued to reject the project supported by the majority of Palestinians and the international community, including Russia, for the creation of an independent Palestinian state on a portion of Palestinian territory, which would imply recognition of the legitimacy of the state of Israel.

To understand the new role of the Gaza Strip in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one must take a closer look at the history of the enclave. For those who are familiar with the history of Palestine, the elevation of Gaza to the forefront of the Palestinian national movement's strategic plan, or the victory of Hamas in the 2006 elections, shouldn't have come as a surprise. Fierce strife between Hamas and Fatah, during which about a hundred people were killed, led to Hamas gaining control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. According to well-known French diplomat and researcher Jean-Pierre Filiu, "for a territory with a 4,000-year history, the last 16 years have been an anomaly; Gaza has almost always been a key part of the political dynamics in the region... Since the British mandate in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the territory has been at the centre of Palestinian nationalism." This is why, according to Filiu<sup>5</sup>, restoring Gaza after such a devastating war will be a challenge unless its strategic position is taken into account. The enclave is unlikely to ever be demilitarised without lifting the blockade and achieving successful economic development. The French analyst came up with one more unexpected conclusion: "The United States and its allies should recognise that Gaza must become a *central part* (italicised by the authors of this paper) of the solution to the Palestinian struggle."

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<sup>4</sup> Banned in Russia.

<sup>5</sup> Filiu J.-P. Why Gaza Matters // Foreign Affairs. January 1, 2024. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/why-gaza-matters>

## The memory

Without overloading this paper with a historical recountal, we will provide a few historical facts that define the identity of Gaza residents and, more broadly, all Palestinians. According to our Palestinian partners, of the 2.3 million people in the Gaza Strip, approximately 1.5 million are indigenous people, while the rest are Palestinian refugees who live in camps. In 1997, refugees and their offspring accounted for 51.8 percent of the population of that territory. In addition to Muslims, Gaza had a small, about 3,500 people, Christian community of various denominations, predominantly Orthodox Christians. Almost all of their ancient churches have been destroyed as a result of Israel's bombings.

In 2017, the largest Palestinian city of Gaza was home to 590,481 people. It had one of the world's highest population growth rates. By 2017, the population density was 9,982.69 people per square kilometre (compared to 10,725.4 people per square kilometre in New York City).

The people of Gaza take pride in their city being one of the oldest cities on Earth. The Canaanite settlement was founded around 3,000 B.C. and was under control of the ancient Egyptians. The city was located on a strategic route connecting Egypt with the Levant and was first mentioned in Egyptian sources in the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. It became one of the five well-known cities that formed the Philistine Pentapolis (five cities) in the 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C., alongside Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath that are now part of Israel. Constant conflicts between the Philistines and Jewish tribes were part of local life. Gaza attracted its neighbours with its advantageous geostrategic location, and was a flourishing oasis with a cool climate. It was often invaded by the Assyrians. At some point, it was ruled by Babylon and then fell into the hands of the Persians under King Cyrus the Great in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. It is mentioned several times in the Bible. The most famous mention is associated with Samson being placed in a Gaza prison after Delilah cut his miraculous hair off while he slept (Judges 16).

In 332 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered Gaza. The city surrendered after a hundred days of siege by his army that was headed to Egypt. As a punishment for the fierce resistance, Alexander, who had been wounded during the assault, killed almost all of the men and sold the women and

children into slavery. During this short war, both sides, just like Hamas today, fortified their positions by digging tunnels and passages in the soft soil beneath the city.

Christianity came to Gaza with Philip the Apostle and his sermons (see Acts 8:39). A bishopric was established, and the city became a major centre of not only intellectual and artistic life (renowned rhetoricians, philosophers, and poets worked there) but also religious life for all three Abrahamic religions. In 407 A.D., the Christian bishop of Gaza, Porphyrius, built a church on the ruins of the main pagan temple of Zeus, and in 508 A.D., a massive five-story synagogue was erected. Just a few years later, one of the ancestors of the Prophet Muhammad, Hashim ibn Abd al-Manaf, visited the city. He died there in 525 A.D. In memory of this, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when Muslim armies took the city, they began to call it Gaza Hashim, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Ottomans built the Hashim Mosque on the site of the mausoleum.

Gaza's golden age came during the rule of the Turkish Mamelukes. Many mosques, palaces, and libraries were built, and the city of Khan Yunis was built around the caravanserai in southern Gaza, which has been subjected to intense bombings in our time.

Notably, Gaza was conquered again in 1517, this time by the Ottoman Turks, who did not destroy anything, nor did they kill anyone. In 1799, Napoleon's army was there during its invasion of Egypt. Back then, economically thriving Gaza still enjoyed high standards of living. In 1906, a border was drawn through the city of Rafah between Palestine, which was part of the Ottoman Empire, and the Egyptian territory controlled by Britain. A free trade area was established in Rafah. In 1917, Gaza became part of Mandatory Palestine, which was transferred to Britain by the League of Nations.

After the State of Israel was created, the first waves of Palestinians arrived in Gaza, mostly from the Jaffa area. Under the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Egypt, signed on the island of Rhodes through the mediation of the UN on February 24, 1949, the Gaza Strip was created which was pushed into the desert and cut off from what used to be Palestine. In addition to the local population of 80,000 people, 200,000 refugees arrived

in the area for whom, according to Filiiu, the enclave became a kind of Noah's Ark. However, the local infrastructure was not enough to integrate and accommodate all newcomers. To solve the problem, the UN created eight camps for Palestinians in the enclave, including the largest of them, Jabalia, in northernmost Gaza. Fully cognisant of the role of the situation in Gaza for the country's security, the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, proposed at the Lausanne conference that Israel annex the sector and allow 100,000 Palestinians to return to their former homes in Israel. However, his plan was spurned in both Israel and Egypt.

This historical journey and a discussion of the still underestimated role of historical memory in the national identity of the Palestinians, where the cultural and civilisational importance of Gaza and the symbols associated with it constitute cornerstones, allow us to explore some previously used but still applicable theoretical tenets.

## Myths, political theory, and Yemen

These tenets include the theory of symbolic choice, or symbolic politics, which was first applied by the American sociologist Murray Edelman to study ethnic conflicts and wars.<sup>6</sup> It comes down to an assumption that people make choices in response to a symbol that evokes strong emotion.

Emerging from psychological approaches, the theory of symbolic choice opposes the widely held theory of rational choice. The latter views ethnic groups as coalitions that are formed to pursue rationally defined goals, such as possession of resources and goods, control over territory, and the like. However, from the perspective of the theory of symbolic choice, the decision made by an individual largely depends on *how* a particular idea is presented to them. Both theories primarily operate under the concept of ethnicity. They are easily applicable to actions related, on the one hand, to religious motivation, and on the other hand, the actions closely linked to political goals, such as actions of an ethnic nature.

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<sup>6</sup> Edelman M. *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*. New York: Academic Press, 1971.

Notably, the *myth-symbol* combination is central to understanding ethnicity as part of the symbolic choice theory. A myth is understood as a “*belief shared by a large group of people that gives events and actions a certain meaning,*” and a symbol is an “*emotionally charged reference to a myth.*” Stuart Kaufman, a professor of political science working within the paradigm of the theory of symbolic choice, contributed significantly to using it in researching specific ethnic conflicts, including in the post-Soviet space. He wrote<sup>7</sup> that the myth-symbol complex represents a “*network of myths and associated symbols,*” and people make choices by responding to the symbols presented to them.

The paradigm of the emergence of ethnic conflict looks like this: *fear* of the destruction of a group (or the destruction of its identity) leads to the emergence of animosity and then group violence. An atmosphere imbued with animosity and threats increases group solidarity and prompts people to view events through the lens of ethnicity or in ethno-religious terms. In any case, the fear of seeing Islamic civilisation and cultural identity disappear and, consequently, the loss of their position by the socio-political groups that base their legitimacy on it, can generate aggressive hostility and violence as much as the fear of the extinction of an ethnic group. One example is the consolidated reaction of Muslims worldwide to the caricatured depiction of sacred symbols in the media.

The weaknesses in identity and difficulties associated with conducting mobilisation policies can be overcome using the myth-symbol complex by way of fuelling hostility based on a variety of historical and religious mythological constructs. In turn, these myths are built on interpreting politics in ethnic or religious terms. Mythologising the events that took place in the early centuries of Islam through symbols can encourage people to view contemporary events through a religious lens. It is not about denying certain events or doubting the veracity of a modern interpretation, but about assigning symbolic meaning to them that incites political action. Ethnicity and religion are so closely intertwined that ethnic mobilisation can appeal to religious motivations and vice versa.

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<sup>7</sup> Kaufman S.J. *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*. Cornell University Press, 2001.

Saddam Hussein referred to the war against Iran as his Battle of al-Qadisiyyah of 636 A.D., in which Arabs defeated the Persians and later converted them to Islam. Ethnic and religious motives were combined, even though the Iran-Iraq War of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was fought by people of the same religion. However, the Qadisiyyah myth-symbol failed to make the Arab population of Iran side with Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

The above helps us understand the developments in Yemen and the Red Sea since early 2024 against the backdrop of the tragic events in Gaza. The Ansarallah's actions appear irrational if viewed solely from the perspective of political pragmatism.

As we know, from the outset of the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Sanaa authorities have consistently sided with Palestine. On October 19, 2023, they declared war on Israel and fired several cruise missiles into its territory. The missile attacks continued on October 27 and 31 and November 1, 8, 9, and 14. Concurrently, mass marches of solidarity with Palestine took place in all urban areas controlled by Ansarallah. Opposition to Israel, the United States, and the United Kingdom became a key theme of the Houthi leaders' speeches. In mid-November 2023, Sanaa authorities banned the passage of ships towards Israel and the passage of Israeli ships through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait following which they seized the *Galaxy Leader*, a vessel owned by an Israeli businessman. In early December, they began attacking commercial ships that ignored Yemeni border guards' demands to check ship cargo manifests. When the number of attacks exceeded 20, the United States, declaring on December 18 the start of the anti-Houthi Operation Prosperity Guardian sank three Yemeni border patrol boats from two army helicopters which the Sanaa authorities saw as an attack on a sovereign state. On January 3, 2024, the United States and its allies issued a final ultimatum to Sanaa, and on January 10, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2722 where it "affirms the exercise of navigational rights and freedoms by merchant and commercial vessels, in accordance with international law, must be respected, and takes note of the right of Member States, in accordance with international law, to defend their vessels from attacks, including those that undermine navigational rights and freedoms."

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<sup>8</sup> See also: Naumkin V. Civilizations and Identity Crisis // Russia in Global Affairs. 2014. №1. URL: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/civilizations-and-identity-crisis/>

Literally the next day, on January 12, the US and the UK launched strikes against Yemen. According to Russia's representative to the UN Vasily Nebenzya, these strikes violated international law and were not sanctioned by the above resolution. More attacks against Yemen followed. Considering the country's geography, these attacks cannot destroy Ansarallah, but will only worsen the already difficult humanitarian situation, on the one hand, and promote the international status of the Houthi movement, on the other hand.

To understand the logic behind Ansarallah's behaviour, it is necessary to take into account the movement's ideology which was formulated by its founder Hussein al-Houthi (1959–2004) in his lectures recorded in 2001–2003. According to Russian Houthi researcher, Timofey Bokov, the ideology is based on the "us vs. them" dichotomy. "Us" refers to Arab Muslims, with the best being Zaydis, and the best of Zaydis being Sayyids who are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. "Them" primarily represents the West and Israel, who humiliated and enslaved the Arabs, and took their place in the modern world. Other associated beliefs include the golden age of Islam (the time of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali ibn Abi Talib), the inseparability of Islam and politics (religious faith must be translated into political action), narratives of terrorism imposed by enemies to discredit Arab culture. There are also concerns about the enduring dangers of imperialism and colonialism.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the seemingly local nature of the Houthi phenomenon, the ideology that has allowed them to consolidate and mobilise significant masses of the Yemeni population for over two decades is not centred on the Yemeni agenda. Broader ideological issues are at its core. Israel, the United States, and Western countries that do what they do being thousands of kilometres away are declared enemies rather than rivals inside the country. The myths-symbols are presented in a very colourful manner, because the myth of an existential threat to Arab Muslims posed by enemies compels them to rally under the banners of the best of the best, namely, the Sayyids.

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<sup>9</sup> Боков Т.А. Политическая идеология хуситского движения (по материалам лекций Хусейна Ал-Хуси) // Ислам в современном мире. 2017. Т. 13. № 4. С. 95–112.

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# Lessons

## The region of myths

The tragedy in Gaza extends far beyond the territory of Palestine and even Israel. Formulas emphasising the importance of the Palestinian issue, which have been repeatedly expressed in various meetings, may have seemed ritualistic, but they are a very real motivating and mobilising factor for the political forces operating thousands of kilometres away from the Gaza Strip. A serious question arises: is the connection between Ansarallah and Palestine a random occurrence, or is it a system-forming feature of relations in that region?

We believe it's the latter.

Symbolic politics and historical memory in the region are not just tools used by the elite to manipulate public sentiment, but are real factors in political life. Numerous examples illustrate their impact. Here are a few examples.

Hamas mobilised its forces for Operation Al-Aqsa Flood (*Tofan Al-Aqsa*), taking seemingly suicidal actions in the name of the symbol of Palestinian independence which is located outside the Gaza Strip. When describing their enemies, radical Islamists invariably refer to the Crusades myth-symbol, directly equating Western countries with conquerors from ancient times. Syrian tribes, which opposed both ISIS<sup>10</sup> and the Western countries, linked the former to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Wahhabis and the latter to French colonisers during the mandate period. When drafting its national development strategy Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia focused primarily on reinterpreting national history and emphasising its deep pre-Islamic roots. Turkey's activity in the Middle East is often interpreted by both supporters and opponents through the lens of perceptions of the Ottoman Empire, while Iran is associated with the roots of the Persian Empire. Even in the Maghreb countries which are geographically distant from the Middle East, matters of historical memory, around which the myth-symbol complexes are built, become central. Morocco and

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<sup>10</sup> Banned in Russia.



Algeria compete for the right to be considered the homeland of the Sufi brotherhood of al-Tijaniyyah or engage in conflicts over traditional Zellij ornamentation.

Examples abound and include tragic and almost comical situations, but all of them show that continuity has always been there. Perhaps, this is partly related to the unfinished process of modernisation and the preservation of elements of tribal narratives characterised by an “epic” non-historicised worldview. Regardless of the time and place, the events in these narratives always follow the same patterns. This applies not only to the Arab and Muslim parts of Middle Eastern societies, but the Jewish part as well, as evidenced by the popular identification of Israel with David opposing Goliath or the memory of the tragedy of Masada.

Conflict resolution in the region cannot ignore the importance of a symbolic victory by one side or the other and respect for its *dignity* (Arabic: *karama*). Ideas of exchanging Palestinian territories for significant amounts of investment which were popular during Donald Trump’s administration are out of place precisely because of the demonstrative disrespect for the needs and aspirations of the Palestinian side and neglect for the dignity of the Palestinians.

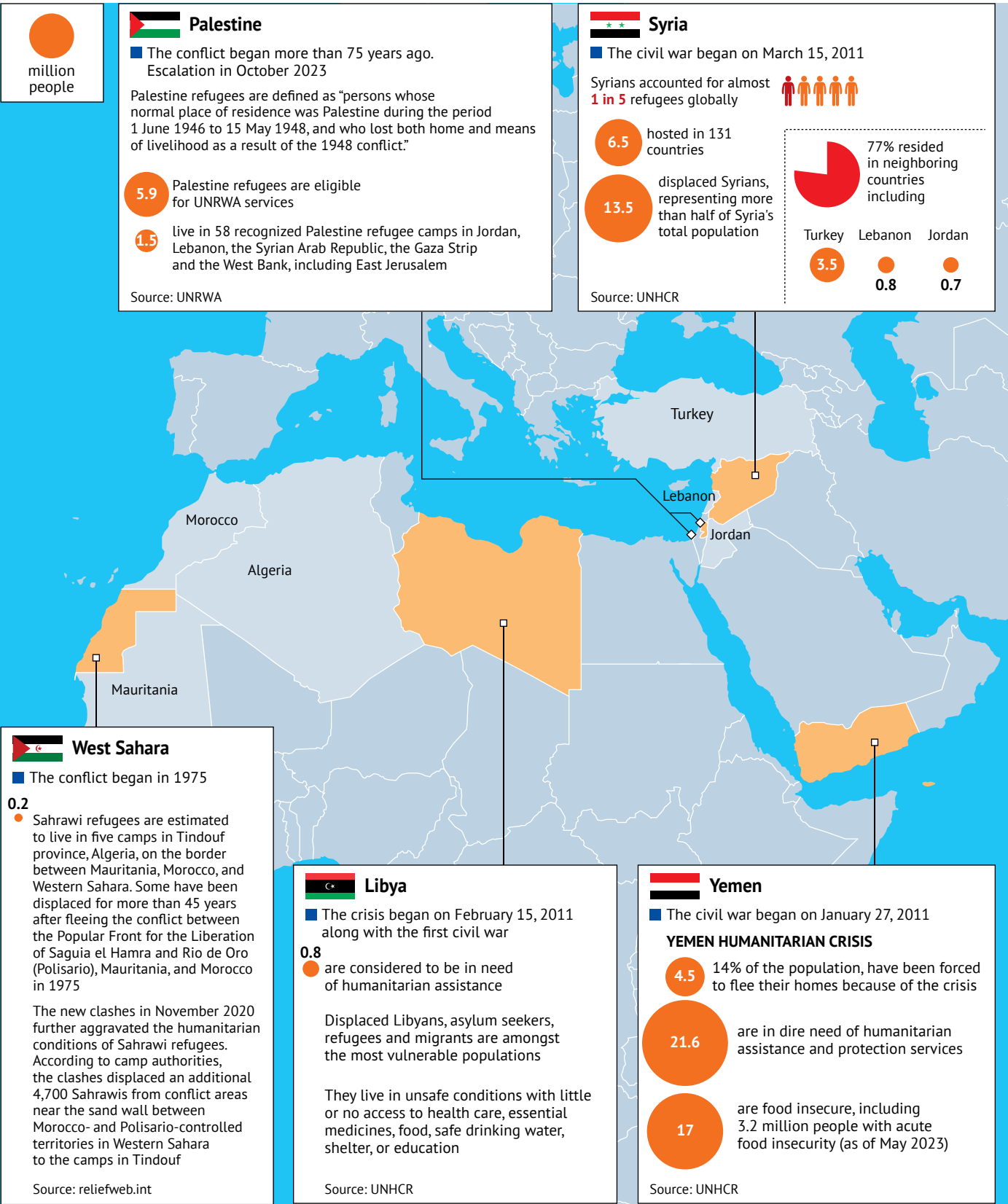
This includes other implications: victories and defeats in various battles in the Middle East should not be considered victories or defeats in wars. If history is endless, if the memory of these conflicts lasts for millennia, symbols do not lose their formidable allure, and myths are captivating, then the destruction of the enemy’s infrastructure, seizing its material assets, and the physical elimination of leaders will not lead to a final solution. The opposing side is in for the long haul, and by physically destroying it the opponent only creates new symbols of struggle and heroic myths.

## Myths and non-state actors

Another relevant matter concerns non-state actors and the future of statehood in the region.

Typically, the significant role of non-state actors is mentioned in this paper in connection with weak state institutions, whose functions these actors take on in part or in whole. So, Hamas, Hezbollah, Ansarallah,

MODERN CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



and numerous militias from Libya to Iraq gained public support primarily due to social activism and their ability to provide social support to the people, and more. In this sense, their ability to ensure security can be seen not as taking away its monopoly on lawful violence from the state, but as a continuation of the policy of replacing weak public institutions. This strategy, at least in three cases, Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon, and Ansarallah in Northern Yemen, has led to non-state actors becoming quasi-states controlling specific territories. Considering this, their ability to build relationships with other international forces should be seen as a step towards replacing the state or transforming non-state actors into public entities. The conflict between Ansarallah and Israel, the United States, or other Western powers is the next level that elevates the role of the movement in the international arena and, practically speaking, forces other actors to recognise it as an entity that is equal to a state.

However, this functional model does not allow one to fully grasp the meaning of the non-state actors' activities. Ultimately, if guided by pragmatic considerations, these organisations would be better off limiting themselves to their internal activities, rather than claiming the role of independent foreign policy actors. But this is impossible from the standpoint of the symbolic choice. Political actors must assert themselves in the external environment, proving to its own population the right to existence and affirming its political status. This is why Israel and the United States, rather than other Lebanese, Palestinian, or Yemeni political organisations, are the key adversaries of Hezbollah, Hamas, or Ansarallah. Opposing them legitimises their political activities in the eyes of the local people and gives meaning to their social activities.

This interpretation allows us to understand why none of these three movements can be considered Islamist in the full sense of the word. Indeed, they all advocate for organising socio-political life based on religious principles. They use religious symbols and rhetoric extensively and invoke the memory of religiously significant times and events. They all have something in common in the system of their activities and their articulated narrative, although they belong to three completely different (and often mutually hostile) Islamic currents: Twelver Shi'ism, Sunni, and Zaydi.

However, none of the three movements is attempting, first, to implement a global religious project; and second, the main enemies for all three organisations are forces that threaten the national dignity and sovereignty of Arab-Islamic states rather than the religious truth (materialists, communists, liberals, representatives of other religious groups). This is why anti-colonial rhetoric and the idea of resisting occupation are so important.

Provided this assessment is correct, we can assume something new about political Islam as such, making the perception of certain myths-symbols a crucial criterion when typologising various Islamist movements. This perception largely determines the relationship between the global and the national, the religious and the nationalist for the purpose of setting goals.

However, all this does not imply the disappearance of the question that is sacral for political Islam researchers about the possibility of the instrumental use of a national agenda by a particular group while maintaining a deep belief in the eschatologically predetermined victory of Islam.

## The transformative power of myths

The situation in Gaza and Yemen leads us to explore the architecture of the regional subsystem of relations in the Middle East and North Africa. Even in this issue that appears to be far from the emotional sphere, symbols and feelings are of critical importance.

In fact, what we see is two diametrically opposed interpretations of regional dynamics.

According to one, there has been a gradual process of transformation in the region over the past few years, during which: a) the Gulf area as the core of the regional subsystem became stronger; b) the nation states (and corresponding country nationalisms) became stronger, while various transnational unity projects (Arab, Islamic, and others) were marginalised; c) relations between Israel and several Arab states normalised based on pragmatic motivations.

The “sprawl” of the Middle East and North Africa and the formation of sub-regions were seen as a possible outcome. Under this scenario, each of them could continue to develop following its own logic: Maghreb as a bridge between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe; the Fertile Crescent as a territory of degraded states and an area of confrontation for external actors; and the Gulf and Israel (possibly Egypt, too) as the core of a new system incorporating countries whose claims go beyond a regional role. Under this scenario, which essentially predicts the disappearance of the Middle East and North Africa as a single regional space, the events in question seem remnants of a long-gone era, a distant echo. The Israeli government’s military move in Gaza is likely based on this approach.

Truth be told, this approach has its rationale. After all, no Arab state that signed the Abraham Accords has renounced them since October 7, 2023, and even Iran, which is strongly opposed to Israel, was reluctant to engage in the armed conflict. However, if it’s just an echo, why is it so loud?

An alternative interpretation of regional dynamics suggests that ongoing pragmatic transformations are being compensated for by emotional factors. Emotions, symbols, myths, and collective memory are the threads that tie the space together. The events surrounding the Al-Aqsa Mosque which is located outside the Gaza Strip motivate the residents of Gaza. The inhabitants of the mountainous regions of northern Yemen are motivated by the events in Palestine thousands of kilometres away. Israel and Iran are existential enemies even though they don’t have direct points of contact. After Morocco and Israel started moving towards each other, Algeria began to perceive Israel as a clear and direct threat and practically declared war on it in 2023. These events show that emotions are not just a real but a system-building factor in international relations.

The availability of unifying myths and symbols makes it possible to describe the Middle East as a unique region in the world. These myths and symbols offset the lack of intraregional economic ties and the divergent political aspirations of the regional elite. They also form the basis for building humanitarian ties across the space “from the Ocean to the Gulf” and further to the east.

Finally, they impact the intra-regional re-assembly processes. The sudden spotlight on the Red Sea not just as another conflict zone, but as a crossroads where the interests of many local, regional, and global players intersect is a striking example. In theory, it could claim its own security net.

In their entirety, these circumstances allow the Middle East and North Africa to maintain a partial impermeability to external influences despite the activities of non-regional actors there. Perhaps, due to its partial impermeability, this region, which has been connecting the West to the East and the south to the north for millennia and continuously absorbing, mixing, and reinterpreting all possible cultures, traditions, customs, and beliefs, still amazes the world with its unparalleled expressiveness.

Finally, let's dare to assume that the unique nature of the region and the profound bonds between the people who live there based on shared emotions, memories, myths, and symbols can guarantee its agency under any global arrangement better than anything else, including the economy, technology, or the political aspirations of the elite.

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