

Harvard Kennedy School Negotiation Project  
Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Israel (IDC)

# Negotiating Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa

*A System Analysis after the Arab Spring, the Iran Nuclear Deal, and the Rise of ISIS*

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The MENA Negotiation Report

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# PREFACE

This report invites the reader to reflect systematically upon the broad range of actors, interests, and narratives present in the ongoing, interlocking conflicts in the Middle East and in North Africa.

Our research initiative included scholars and students from Harvard University, IDC Herzliya, Tufts University, and Brandeis University. The final report contains a comprehensive mapping of the MENA conflict system. It identifies and analyzes the various conflicts, parties, issues, and relationships that shape the current political situation in the Middle East and North Africa. As such, this negotiation stakeholder analysis includes many actors, both state and non-state, that are involved in the interconnected conflicts in the MENA region and that have a significant impact on its future. It also aims to identify opportunities for peaceful intervention by means of negotiation.

We would like to thank our research assistants, research facilitators, and research contributors for their hard work and collaborative creativity that made this project possible.

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# HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

## *What are you interested in?*

## *You should look here:*

I am looking for in-depth information about one specific actor in the Middle East or North Africa (for example, an analysis of Iran).	Part Four of this report contains comprehensive assessments of a variety of state and non-state actors.
I am interested in a brief and concise overview of a party's interests (for example, a portrait of Israel.)	Part Three contains brief portraits of 59 parties that are active in the MENA region, including external powers and organizations.
I want to find out more about a specific conflict in the Middle East (for example, the war in Syria).	Check out Part Two (key findings), chapters II and III.
I want to learn about an issue that plays a role across the MENA region (for example, water).	Check out Part Two (key findings), chapter IV.
I want to know more about the people who created this report.	See Part Five.
I want to know more about project background, funding, and methodology.	See Part One.
I am interested in future developments and in what may happen next in the Middle East.	Several scenarios are mapped out in Part Two, Chapter VII.
What shall I read if I only have limited time, but I want to read more than just the Executive Summary?	We recommend starting with Part Two, Chapter I.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## *A changing region defies simple explanations*

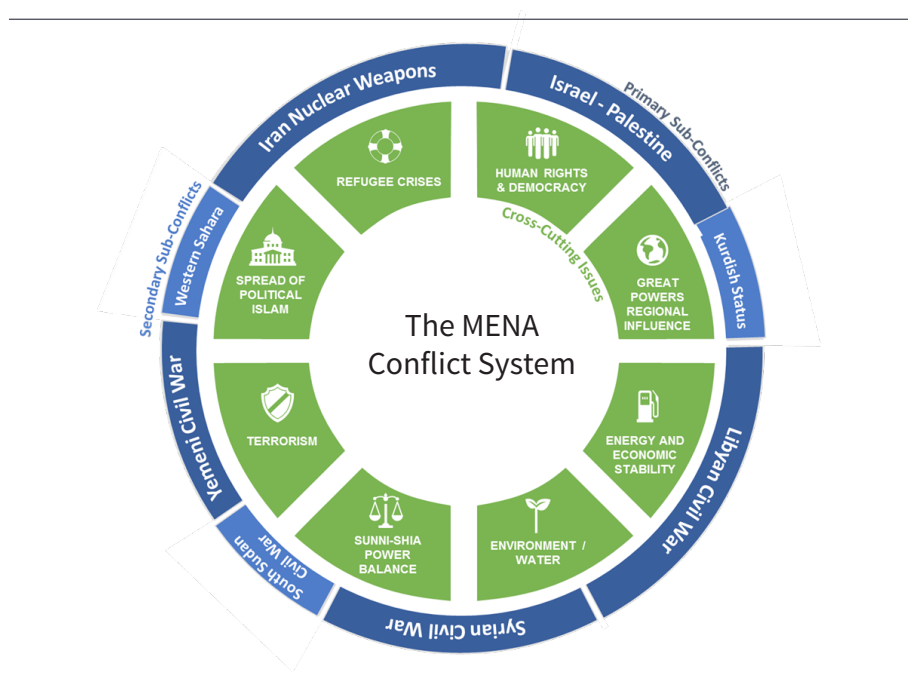
- The **Arab Spring**, the rise of **ISIS**, and the **Iran nuclear deal** have profoundly changed the Middle East and North Africa.
- Simplistic conflict narratives that focus on two opposing camps are **increasingly outdated**. The conflicts in the Middle East are about much more than just the Israeli-Palestinian or the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the relationships within and between these conflicts are changing. For example, Arab governments tend to realize that they share certain interests with Israel as a result of the new political reality.
- Future negotiation initiatives have to take these **new conflict narratives** and the **shifting balance of power in the region** into account or they will not be effective.

## *Strategic action requires in-depth analysis*

While regional initiatives in the Middle East are not a new idea, they lack analysis that deals with the regional repercussions, unintended consequences, and system effects of new political moves. While new alliances are emerging, the ripple effects of these power shifts across the region are difficult to predict. In this situation, an in-depth analysis of the MENA conflict system is both an important “conflict management database” as well as a strategic commodity for actors and third parties within and outside the region.

## *A complex conflict system needs a new approach*

Many observers assume that one specific conflict (for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) is the main source of instability in the Middle East. Instead of making such an assumption, this report treats all conflicts in the MENA region as **interconnected within a complex regional conflict system**:



***This interconnected way of looking at the MENA region can help answer questions such as:***

- *What are the practical implications of “regional” negotiation initiatives?*
- *Which parties care about which issues? How are these issues connected?*
- *If a specific regional issue is resolved, what are likely spillover effects?*
- *What are the connections between the conflicts, parties, and issues within the region?*

This reports provides the reader with a **systemic conflict mapping** of the Middle East and North Africa. It lets the reader discover the various interconnections across the region and allows for the experimentation with new, creative regional initiatives. It organizes complex data in an easily accessible way.

***The report identifies and analyses:***

- Five **primary sub-conflicts** within the MENA region that have a significant impact beyond their respective borders → [Part Two, Chapter II](#)
- Three **secondary sub-conflicts** with a more limited regional impact → [Part Two, Chapter III](#)
- Eight **cross-cutting issues** that impact the parties across the region → [Part Two, Chapter IV](#)

## *Selected Findings*

- The two sub-conflicts that are connected with the greatest number of other conflicts and issues in the region are the **War in Syria** and the **Israeli-Palestinian conflict**.
- The **spillover effects** of these two sub-conflicts have a significant impact on the MENA conflict system.
- The top issue that connects with the greatest number of other conflicts and issues in the region is **terrorism/violent extremism**, followed by regional **forced displacement** crises, **human rights and democracy** issues, and the **rivalry between great powers** for regional influence.

***Opportunities and Leverage Points***

- Relying on systemic stakeholder mapping, this report contains in-depth assessment of various conflicts and parties as well as summaries, overviews, and rankings of key conflict features.
- It contains portraits of **59 state and non-state actors**, including regional players and outside powers, and their conflict narratives, networks of relationships, and sources of leverage.
- The portraits are summaries geared towards **real-world applicability**. These summaries are based on longer, in-depth assessments available in a separate section. (**Party portraits:** → [Part Three](#), **In-depth assessments:** → [Part Four](#))

## CONFLICT SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT

Out of the 59 actors that are analyzed in this report, the following 10 parties have the **greatest conflict system involvement**, i.e. they have “the most at stake” in the entire MENA region (vs. other parties who may have isolated interests in selected sub-conflicts only):

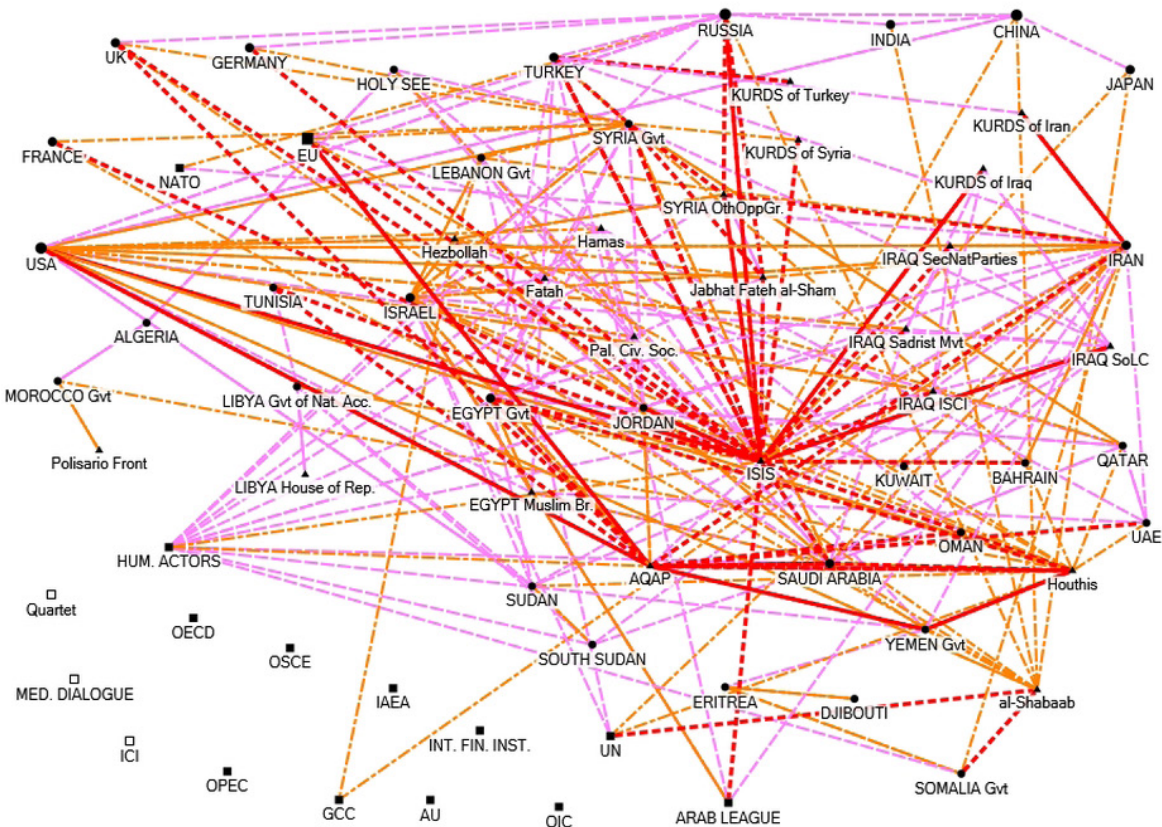
- States within the region: **Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Government, Turkey**
- Non-state actors: **Hezbollah, ISIS**
- External actors/organizations: **EU, UN, USA**

Note that “involvement” does not necessarily mean that a party has the capabilities to effectively pursue its interests. ([→ Part Two, Chapter V](#))

### Network of Relationships

The multi-faceted network of relationship in the MENA conflict system connects the parties as allies, partners, rivals, adversaries, active armed opponents, proxies, external sponsors, and aid donors/recipients.

Example: All negative relationships across the region



Key:

— Active Armed Opponents

— Adversaries

— Rivals



## Selected Findings

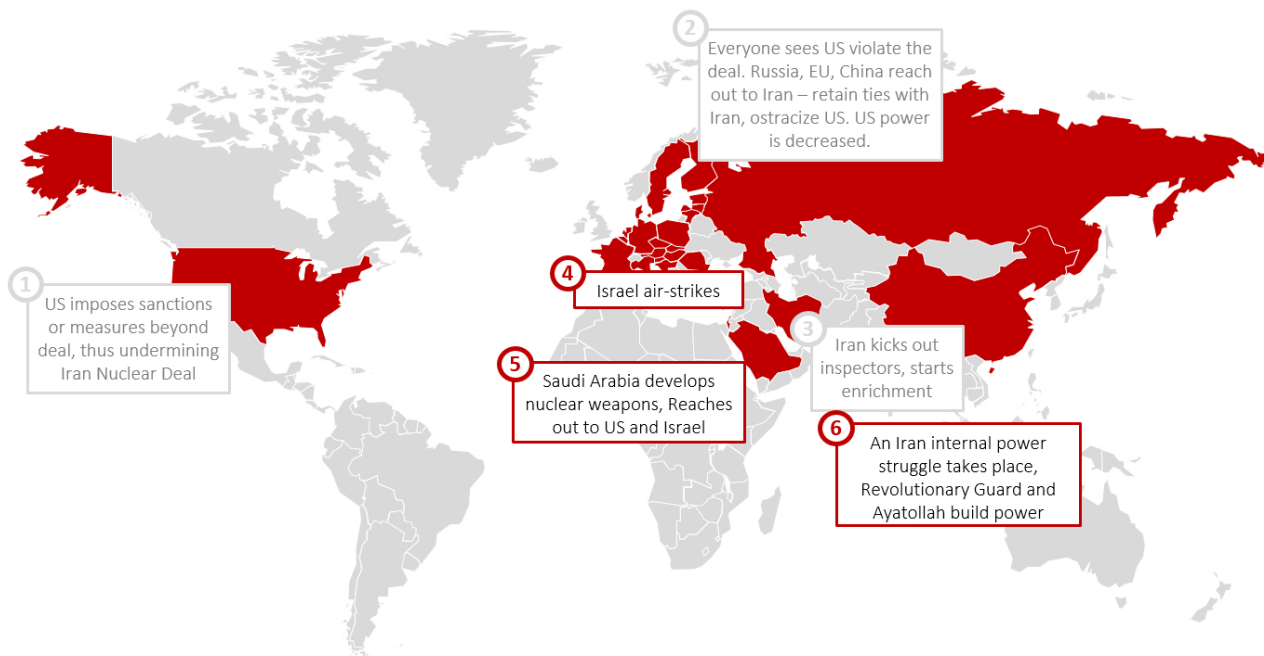
- **ISIS, Iran, and the Syrian government** are facing an especially high number of active armed opponents, adversaries, and rivals across the region.
- In the cases of **Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia**, the high number of their negative relationships significantly reduces their net relationship score, even though these three also have a substantial number of allies and partners.
- Vice versa, the especially high number of alliances and partnerships that the **United States** was able to build allows it to balance the high number of its negative relationships.

All network diagrams: [Part Two, Chapter VI](#)

### A tactical and strategic navigation tool

- This report is helpful for those interested in navigating the complex political landscape in the Middle East and North Africa.
- It can inform future negotiation initiatives that may move the region towards a more cooperative system.
- It allows the reader to “play out” new political moves by identifying the connections through which ripples effects will be relayed. It can hence serve as an “early warning system” and help classify ineffective or counterproductive moves with destabilizing consequences.

Sample scenario: the unraveling of the Iranian nuclear deal



Full scenarios: → [Part Two, Chapter VII](#)