

Russia-US Rivalry and Accelerated Geopolitical Change in the Middle East

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At present, the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East is undergoing a period of accelerated transformation, distinguished by a renewed great-power rivalry between Russia and the United States and supplemented by the contest between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As the Arab world is no longer under a framework of “dual leadership,” divisions among regional camps have become even more distinct, making regional cohesion further unlikely. Despite its outstanding regional influence, Saudi Arabia’s capabilities still fall short of its ambitions. Although the Kurdish independence movement suffered a major setback in some areas, it has still played an important role in the evolution of regional geopolitics.

Russia-US Rivalry: Primary Force for Middle East Transformation

Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, the United States, together with the European Union and NATO, have imposed economic sanctions on Russia and squeezed Russia’s strategic space on the Eurasian continent militarily. These efforts have seriously hampered Russian President Vladimir Putin’s strategic ambition to build a powerful nation, resulting in the deterioration of Russia’s neighboring security and cooperation environment. In order to meliorate this strategic disadvantage, Russia chose to assert itself more fully in Middle East affairs, a region where the US is confronted with the most problems. This policy shift has successfully relieved Russia’s strategic

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pressure on the Eurasian continent, and forced the US Middle East strategy into a corner. In recent years, in its competition with the United States in the Middle East, Russia has made a number of achievements and won strategic advantage to some degree.

Russia has established a permanent military presence in Syria and defeated the US attempt to overthrow the Bashar government through a proxy war. In January 2017, Russia and Syria reached an agreement on Russia's long-term use of the Tartus naval port and the Khmeimim air base. Meanwhile, Russia began to expand these two bases.¹ With the support of the Russian Aerospace Forces and Russian ground forces in Syria, the Bashar government regained more than 60% of its lost territory. Ultimately, Russia's strong military presence in Syria was the decisive factor in preventing Bashar's collapse. Neither the opposition forces supported by the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, nor the remnants of the ISIS terrorist group and the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (originally the Al-Nusra Front or Jabhat al-Nusra) were able to overthrow the Bashar government.

Russia formed a "temporary coalition of interests" with Iran and Turkey, which could not be divided by the US. Russia took advantage of the United States' disputes with Iran and Turkey and sought for common interests with the two nations by taking coordinated actions on issues such as fighting against ISIS and safeguarding the Iran nuclear deal. Although the interests based coalition of Russia, Turkey and Iran has not yet upgraded to an alliance, it has already posed a serious challenge to the de facto US-Saudi-Israel alliance. Russia, backed by the tripartite coalition and the Iran-led "Shia crescent," has acquired a geopolitical advantage in some areas of the Middle East.

Russia has made attempts to break into the US circle of friends in the Middle East, with much success. Due to low oil price and strategic

1 "Russia and Syria Sign Agreement on Long-Term Use of Tartus Base," *Xinhua*, January 21, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-01/21/c_1120356950.htm; "Russian Federation Council Approves Expansion of Naval Base in Syria," *Huanqiu*, December 26, 2017, <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2017-12/11477150.html>.

overdraft caused by excessive involvement in regional hotspots, in 2017, Saudi Arabia had to seek cooperation with Russia in stabilizing oil price. In October the same year, Saudi King Salman visited Russia and reached an agreement with Putin on restricting production to stabilize price. In addition, the two countries decided on Russia's sale of the S-400 SAM system to Saudi Arabia. It was the first time that Saudi Arabia purchased advanced weapons from Russia. During this visit, King Salman promised that he is willing to promote a political solution to the Syrian crisis, reflecting Saudi Arabia's inability to advance the cause of regime change in Syria. In December, Putin visited Egypt, during which time the two sides signed agreements that secured Russia's aid to Egypt's El Dabaa nuclear power plant and stipulated Egypt's future purchase of the MiG-29M jet fighter. The heads of state of the two countries agreed to jointly promote a political solution to the Syrian issue. After the outbreak of diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Russia seized the opportunity to promptly enhance its relations with Qatar, Oman and Kuwait, driving a wedge between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members.

Holding high the banner of anti-terrorism, political settlement of flashpoint issues, and safeguarding the UN Security Council's resolutions on Iran, Russia seized the moral high ground on Middle East issues. In order to eradicate terrorists outside its border, Russia did its utmost to support the Bashar government, consolidate the Russia-Turkey-Iran trio and fight against ISIS, becoming the key force that leads to collapse of ISIS on its main battlefield. Following the international anti-terrorism trend, Russia called for fighting against all forms of terrorism. With regard to the Palestine issue, Russia supported a series of UN resolutions and the "two-state solution," winning recognition from Arab countries and the whole Muslim world. In the face of regional turbulence, Russia advocated that the turmoil in Yemen and Libya should be resolved through negotiations, which moderately improved Russia's image in the Middle East. In addition, Russia was praised by the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency and most countries for

its coordinated efforts with France, Germany, the United Kingdom, China, and the European Union to ensure the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Iran nuclear deal, which helped maintain stability in the Middle East and the Gulf region.

Compared with Russia's initiative and landmark strategic gains in the Middle East, the US Middle East strategy under the Donald Trump administration has fallen into disarray.

The US has made no substantive progress in containing Iran. In May 2017, Trump paid his first overseas visit since taking office to the Middle East. In Saudi Arabia, Trump, in his speech at the Arab Islamic American Summit, outlined the framework for US strategy in the Middle East, the core of which was a stated goal of containing Iran under the banner of anti-terrorism. Trump accused Iran of breeding, supporting, sponsoring, covering and exporting terrorism, labeling Iran as “a terrorist nation like few others,” “the biggest destroyer of peace and stability in the Middle East,” “the root cause of all the turmoil and humanitarian disasters in the Middle East” and “the source of all evils.” He called on the US regional allies to make joint efforts to contain and topple Iran. However, Trump did not promise to invest resources in containing Iran. Instead, he asked the allies to “fight terrorism at their own expenses.” Throughout 2017, there were few substantial advances in the US containment of Iran. Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal was not only opposed by Russia, the UK, France, Germany, China and the EU, but was also widely questioned by the international community. Although Trump regarded the GCC as the primary force for containing Iran, the GCC was now divided. While Trump attempted to squeeze the “Shia crescent,” Iran's influence continued to extend to Yemen and Bahrain.

The Bashar government has withstood US-led attempts at regime change. To overthrow the Bashar regime is an important goal of Trump's Middle East strategy. In his speech in Saudi Arabia, Trump accused the Bashar government of supporting terrorism and cooperating with Iran to undermine stability in the Middle East. He called on Arab countries to

jointly overthrow the Bashar regime, promising that the US “was willing to provide support.” The US has been committed to overthrowing Bashar since the outbreak of Syrian chaos in 2011, but the Trump administration, unwilling to achieve the goal through direct involvement as seen in the Iraq War, hoped to succeed by waging a measured proxy war. However, situation on the battlefield showed that the opposition groups were unable to match the Bashar government. In addition, due to Russia’s strong military presence there and direct support for Bashar, the Syrian government regained large swaths of territory, which significantly enhanced its ability to control the situation and consolidate its rule.² On April 14, 2018, based on video materials provided by the Syrian opposition, which purportedly showed a chemical weapons assault on civilians perpetrated by the Bashar government, the US, joined by the UK and France, launched cruise missile attacks and air strikes against the scientific research and military facilities in Damascus and Homs. Assisted by Russia’s Aerospace Forces, the Syrian government troops successfully intercepted some cruise missiles and withstood the military strike. The battlefield situation, in favor of the Syrian government, remains unchanged.

The US regional alliance system has broken down. After decades of endeavors by successive US administrations, America has established a relatively stable alliance system in the Middle East. The system has the GCC as its core platform, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and Turkey as “pivotal countries” and the Arab League as its periphery. Its goal is to topple Iran and its partners and promote gradual peace between Israel and the Arab countries. Nevertheless, one year after Trump came to power, the US regional alliance system has been severely riven by divisions. These divisions are reflected in the collapse of the GCC as well as Saudi Arabia’s flawed relationships with Egypt, Turkey and Algeria, and Turkey’s escalated contradictions with the US and Israel. The system could no longer muster

2 “Syrian Government Forces Regains Strategic Border Post,” *People.cn*, November 21, 2017, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1121/c1002-29658108.html>; “Syrian Government Forces Retakes Deir ez-Zor,” *Xinhua*, September 9, 2017, http://m.xinhuanet.com/2017-09/09/c_1121637112.htm.

enough of a cohesively strong and unified force to contain and destroy Iran. At the end of 2017, Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and subsequent relocation of the US embassy in Israel to the city not only provoked anti-US sentiments among the people in the Muslim world, but also constrained efforts of Arab country governments to develop substantive relationships with Israel. At the end of January 2018, fierce armed conflicts broke out between the United Arab Emirates-backed separatist forces in southern Yemen and the Saudi Arabia-backed Hadi government. The fighting directly resulted in the deterioration of Saudi-UAE relationship, leaving Saudi Arabia the GCC leader in name only, as it now has only one follower, Bahrain, in the organization.³

Though its Middle East strategy has encountered consistent setbacks, the United States will not give up on the region. While the ability of the US to intervene in Middle East affairs has weakened, it still has not lost the dominant position and role. In order to stop Russia's expanding influence in the Middle East, the Trump administration may adjust and improve its Middle East strategy, devoting more efforts and resources into the region in an effort to increase its competitive advantage against Russia. In 2018, the rivalry between the US and Russia in the Middle East continues to escalate, becoming the primary force for accelerated evolution of regional geopolitics.

Geopolitical Contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran

The geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has long hinged on the question of who is most qualified leader of the Islam world and who should lead the future of the Middle East. In 2017, the characteristics of Saudi-Iran contest changed from being based primarily on the "Sunni

3 "Yemen Crisis: Separatists Seize Government Buildings in Aden," *BBC*, January 28, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42852285>; "Yemen's Government 'Prepares to Flee' as UAE-Backed Separatists Seize Control in Aden," *Telegraph*, January 30, 2018, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/30/yemens-government-prepares-flee-uae-backed-separatists-seize>.



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, from left to right, start talks on the Syrian conflict in Ankara, Turkey on April 4. This meeting is a follow-up to the previous trilateral summit in Russia's Sochi, November 2017.

alliance” and the “Shia crescent” to relying on the US and Russia respectively to defeat the other. Thus, the geopolitical contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran became a subordinate and a component of the US-Russia competition, making the division of regional camps more distinct.

In order to topple Iran, Saudi Arabia has taken a series of measures. On various occasions, the Saudi King, the Crown Prince and the Foreign Minister have vigorously spread the “Iran threat” rhetoric, which holds certain influence in the Arab world and the Middle East. At the same time, Saudi Arabia have been actively developing closer relationship with the US, demanding that the US invest more resources to contain Iran, including some heavy-hand measures. During Trump’s Saudi Arabia visit in 2017, the two countries signed an arms deal worth US\$100 billion. Saudi also promised to invest more than \$200 billion in the US within the next five years to stimulate the US economy and

employment. Saudi Arabia also persuaded the UAE and Bahrain to buy more US-made weapons and invest more in the United States. During his visit to the US earlier in March 2017, the Saudi Crown Prince also called on the US to increase regional military presence to strengthen deterrence against Iran. In late 2017 and early 2018, in response to Saudi Arabia's airstrikes, Yemen's Houthi forces launched several medium-range missiles at the Riyadh International Airport, which were all intercepted by the Saudi side.⁴ Convinced that the missiles were provided by Iran, Saudi Arabia coordinated closely with the US and asked for deliberation at the UN Security Council. Saudi Arabia emphasized that Iran has not only tried to develop nuclear weapons, but also vigorously expanded and exported the medium-range missile system. Iran has not only armed Lebanese Hezbollah, but also significantly upgraded the Houthis' ability to threaten Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. This enhanced strike capability has also endangered the US military and the pro-US countries in the Middle East. The primary goal of the Saudi actions is to push the US to abolish the Iran nuclear deal and take coordinated military measures with regional allies to destroy the medium-range missile systems of Iran, the Houthis and Lebanese Hezbollah. However, there exist serious disputes between the US government, Congress, and military on how to identify Iran's medium-range missile capacity and whether to employ military means to remedy the situation. The hawkish advocate decisive actions but only with valid justification. The US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley displayed images of the Houthis' missile wreckage at the UN headquarters, calling on Western allies and regional partners to have a common understanding and take coordinated actions.⁵ Notwithstanding, Trump himself remains indecisive.

4 "Missile Attack on Riyadh 'an Act of War' by Iran," *Arab News*, November 7, 2017, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1189476/saudi-arabia>.

5 "US Strongly Condemns Ballistic Missile Attack over Riyadh," *Financial Express*, December 20, 2017, <http://www.financialexpress.com/world-news/us-strongly-condemns-ballistic-missile-attack-over-riyadh/982433>.

In addition, Saudi Arabia has also tried to use Israel's influence on the United States to push the US to topple Iran. Due to lack of cohesiveness and inaction by the Saudi-led Sunni alliance in containing Iran, Saudi Arabia has placed higher value on its de facto alliance with the US and Israel, which is built primarily against Iran. This alliance will not disintegrate as long as the current Islamic fundamentalist regime exists in Iran. Saudi Arabia attaches great importance to the tremendous influence of both Jewish-American interest groups and the Israeli government on the US political circle, and has been lobbying through various relationships and channels. At the same time, Israel, who regards Iran as its greatest threat and is also dissatisfied with the Iran nuclear deal and the "indecisiveness" of the US government, has been constantly urging the US to make up its mind early.

Faced with the tripartite blockade led by Saudi Arabia together with the United States and Israel, Iran focused on seizing the moral high ground, steadily digesting outcomes of the geopolitical competition, and fighting back against Saudi Arabia's weaknesses and policy mistakes.

Iran has utilized Saudi Arabia's close cooperation with the United States and Israel as evidence of Saudi's "betrayal of the Islamic world," which arouses sympathy from Muslim countries.

During global live broadcasts of mosque sermons and the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Iranian political figures, like the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani, have pointed out the similarity of the crimes fabricated by Saudi Arabia against Iran to those by the US and Israel as evidence of Saudi's intimacy with the two countries and their "totally identical pursuits and interests." Saudi Arabia, as they accused, has reduced itself to a puppet of the US and Israel and is shamelessly betraying the whole Islam world. After Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Iran criticized Saudi Arabia's response as "too weak" and again accused Saudi Arabia of "flattering the US and Israel" and "betraying the Palestinian people." By contrast, Iran further declared that it supports the cause of Palestine and

consistently and firmly safeguards the interests and dignity of the Islamic world.⁶ Iran's criticism of Saudi Arabia has been recognized by more and more Muslim countries.

Iran has held high the “anti-terrorism” banner as means to secure military presence in Iraq and Syria and further strengthen the “Shia crescent.” In response to accusations by Saudi Arabia, the US and Israel of “breeding, supporting, sponsoring, covering and exporting terrorism,” Iran sent the Quds Force of its Revolutionary Guards to Iraq and Syria to fight against ISIS, and publicized its efforts to resolutely fight terrorism on various international occasions to promote its image. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on Tehran by ISIS in June 2017, the Iranian leader stated that the attacks, which is a kind of revenge by desperate terrorists exactly because of Iran's merciless fight against terrorism, proved Iran as a “counter-terrorism country” rather than a state “breeding, supporting, sponsoring, covering and exporting terrorism.” The Quds Force cooperated with Iraq's government forces in the recovery of Mosul in July the same year, marking a decisive victory against terrorism on the Iraqi battlefield. In response to the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's expression of gratitude for its contribution to the fight against terrorism, Iran stated that it would continue to cooperate with the Iraqi government to eliminate the ISIS remnants. In Syria, teaming up with Lebanese Hezbollah and supporting Syrian government forces, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards launched anti-terrorism military operations in the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo and Hama, which dealt ISIS, the Al-Nusra Front and other terrorist organizations a heavy blow and consolidated the advantage of the Syrian government forces on the battlefield. By actively participating in anti-terrorism campaigns in Iraq and Syria, Iran has “legitimized” its long-term military presence in the two countries.

6 “Iran Condemns US Veto of UNSC Resolution against Trump's Decision on Quds,” *Tasnim News*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/12/19/1605237/iran-condemns-us-veto-of-uns-c-resolution-against-trump-s-decision-on-quds>; “Iran Condemned Trump's Decision to Move the Embassy to Jerusalem,” *Voice of People Today*, December 7, 2017, <https://voiceofpeopletoday.com/iran-condemned-trumps-decision-move-embassy-jerusalem>.

Iran has squeezed the regional strategic space of Saudi Arabia with support of its interests-based coalition with Russia and Turkey. Since Turkey crushed an attempted coup in July 2016, Russia, Turkey and Iran have formed a coalition of interests. In 2017, Iran has benefited a lot with the growing influence of the coalition. First, Putin and the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan were invited to visit Iran.⁷ Both leaders expressed their willingness to strengthen strategic consultations with Iran, effectively manage the four “de-escalation zones” in Syria and deepen trade and investment cooperation. Second, in an attempt to dominate the political settlement process of the Syrian issue and safeguard the legitimacy of Bashar’s participation in the subsequent transition, Iran jointly launched the Astana talks with Russia and Turkey. Third, the Sochi meeting of leaders of the three countries declared mutual safeguard of each other’s interests in the Middle East, and sent a strong signal that they would uphold the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Iran nuclear deal. Fourth, when Saudi Arabia and Qatar cut off diplomatic relations, Iran took advantage of this and quickly boosted its relationship with Qatar. Russia, Turkey and Iran all provided Qatar with strong support in terms of economic aid, access to sea and air passages, and security assistance. Turkey’s expansion of military presence in Qatar challenged Saudi Arabia’s supremacy in the GCC, which is what Iran expects. Fifth, the three countries have all made use of the Saudi-UAE disputes on Yemen and pushed for GCC division from the outside.

“Dual Leadership” of the Arab World in Demise

Over the years, the Arab world has maintained a “dual leadership” pattern dominated by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. During the four Middle East wars,

7 “Russian President Putin Visits Iran: New Chess Game for the Middle East,” *Xinhua*, November 2, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-11/02/c_129730879.htm; “Enemy of Enemy Becomes a Friend? Why Turkish President Visits Iran with High Profile,” *Sina*, October 4, 2017, <http://news.sina.com.cn/w/2017-10-04/doc-ifymkwwk8439777.shtml>.

Egypt was even once the Arab world's indisputable top leader. However, Egypt was severely hit by the 2011 "Arab Spring" movement, which led to Saudi Arabia's ascension to its current leadership position.

There are numerous reasons for Saudi Arabia's acquisition of leadership position in the Arab world, including its immunity from the "Arab Spring," richness in financial resources, status as the "custodian of the two holy mosques," and image as the core country of the Islamic world and the OIC. There are several markers which place Saudi Arabia squarely as the leader of the Arab world. For example, it is the only G20 member in the Arab world, which Saudi Arabia can use to voice its opinion on global economic governance on behalf of the Arab world and lead the Arab world in economic globalization. Saudi is also basically able to dominate the agenda of the Arab League, including leading multiple Arab countries to intervene the situation of Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria.

In 2017, Saudi Arabia took advantage of its relative gains over Egypt in strength and influence in the Arab world to intensify intervention in regional hotspots. However, due to strategic overdraft caused by limited increases in oil price and uncontrolled expenditures of the royal family, Saudi Arabia failed to shape in its will the development of regional hotspots. Its relationships with some Arab countries worsened, causing deep division across the Arab world.

It has been the fourth such major division of the Arab world. The first division happened after the signing of the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel in September 1978, which resulted in the formation of the Steadfastness and Confrontation Front.⁸ Egypt was subsequently expelled from the Arab League. The second division took

8 The Steadfastness and Confrontation Front refers to a political union formed by some Arab countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Algeria, Sudan and South Yemen together with the Palestinian Liberation Organization after the Camp David Accords were signed. They strongly condemned the Egyptian President Sadat for "betraying the interests of the peoples of Palestine and Arab" and firmly rejected the Accords. Besides, they forced the Arab League to expel Egypt and moved the headquarters of the League from Cairo to Tunis.

place after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Some Arab countries sympathized with or supported the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, while others joined the US-led multinational forces to drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. The third division came after the Oslo Accords were signed between Israel and Palestine in September 1993. Most Arab countries supported the peace deal while a few opposed, but the split was deeper with a wider range and a greater impact, which generally weakened the strategic position, role and influence of the Arab world and hurt its overall solidarity and rejuvenation.

Multiple disputes exist in today's Arab world. One is within the GCC, between Saudi Arabia on one side, and Qatar and the UAE on the other side. Oman and Kuwait show sympathy for Qatar and the UAE, while Bahrain follows suit with Saudi Arabia. Outside the GCC, many Arab countries have conflicts with Syria. Saudi Arabia has been playing up the conflicts while Lebanon, the Palestinian National Authority, Hamas, the Houthi forces, Libya, Sudan and Iraq show support or sympathy for Syria. In addition, Saudi Arabia's contention with Egypt and Algeria have intensified while the Egypt-Sudan relationship grows increasingly tense.

At present, the disputes within the Arab world in multiple areas are reflected in five aspects. First, on the issue of Palestine, most Arab countries are dissatisfied with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. Specifically, when Trump declared Jerusalem the capital of Israel and relocated the US embassy, most Arab states believe that the three countries had secret deals with the US and thus responded weakly and betrayed the interests of Palestinians. Second, on the Syrian issue, some Arab countries advocate maintaining the unity and territorial integrity of Syria, and oppose the so-called "regime change" promoted by external forces or the intervention of Syria's domestic affairs by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. They argue that the future of Syria should be determined by the Syrian people. Third, on the attitude toward Iran, some Arab countries regard the United States and Israel, rather than Iran, as "the root cause of Middle East turmoil," and call

for solidarity of Muslim countries to resolve differences through dialogue. They oppose Saudi Arabia's cooperation with the US in destroying the Iranian regime. Fourth, on the issue of anti-terrorism, some Arab countries believe the connection of Saudi and Qatari plutocrats, governments and royal families with terrorism and extremism. The "anti-terrorism" rhetoric by the two countries is merely a pose and may even be like "a thief crying stop thief." Fifth, on the issue of Yemen, most Arab states object to Saudi Arabia's military intervention, and advocate negotiations between the various Yemini factions to resolve differences and achieve national reconciliation.

Kurdish Independence Movement Plays a Role despite Setbacks

The Kurds are an ancient ethnic group in the Middle East. Its written history can be dated back to the 3rd century BC. Since ancient times, the Kurds have mainly concentrated in the Kurdistan region, with a total area of 392,000 square kilometers spanning what is now Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian and Iranian territories. According to the most recent census data, the Kurdish population of these four countries totals about 30 million. The establishment of an independent Kurdish nation-state has been a historic pursuit of the Kurds since the Ottoman Empire, which has evolved from ideological movement to armed struggles.

In recent years, the effect of the Kurdish issue on the Middle East situation and even the regional geopolitical landscape has been more pronounced. First, it has become a key factor influencing the future of Syria. Second, it has become a hidden danger for the unification of Iraq. Third, it strongly restrains Turkey's ability to dominate the Middle East. Fourth, it has become the sought-after prize of both the US and Russia in their competition in the Middle East.

The independence referendum organized by Masoud Barzani, President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and head of the region's leading political force, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), on September

25, 2017 underestimated the Iraqi central government's determination to maintain national unity and ability to control the Kurdish region's situation. Nor did it sufficiently take into account the coordination of Turkey and Iran with the Iraqi government. Although the result of the referendum showed that 90% of voters supported independence, the Iraqi Supreme Court ruled the result illegal and invalid, and the Iraqi parliament authorized Prime Minister Abadi to take all necessary measures to restore constitutional order in the Kurdish region and maintain national unity. On October 16, the Iraqi government forces were ordered to enter the Kurdish region in large numbers and recover all the central government's administrative areas under the Kurdish armed forces' control, including the Kirkuk oilfield. The Iraqi government's military operations encountered no strong resistance, and were supported by the Iranian Quds Force. The Iranian and Turkish governments also issued statements that endorsed the actions. In addition, the central governments of the three countries took concerted steps to block the land and air passages that connect the Iraqi Kurdistan Region to the outside world. On November 14, the government of the Kurdistan Region accepted the Supreme Court's ruling, putting an end to the independence referendum in failure. This is the biggest setback for the Kurdish independence movement since the end of the Gulf War in 1991.

As a result of the referendum failure, the area actually controlled by the Kurds was reduced drastically. Losing control of the Kirkuk oilfield, which accounts for more than 60% of the oil resources under the Kurdish government, the Kurdistan Region slipped into a financial crisis, with a shortage of essential supplies coupled with skyrocketing prices. The resultant popular dissatisfaction with the KDP government severely weakened the party's ruling status and prestige, and Masoud Barzani was forced to take the blame and resign. The referendum failure deepened the contradiction between the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and severely damaged the cohesiveness of the Kurds in northern Iraq. The PUK-controlled Sulaymaniyah Province also witnessed crises in economy, finance

and people's livelihood, which also led to growing dissatisfaction with the PUK. On October 3, the PUK president Jalal Talabani died, triggering an internal power struggle.

However, judging from the momentum of Kurdish independence movement since the "Arab Spring," the failure of the referendum in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region was only partially frustrated. In stark contrast to the Iraqi Kurdish region, the Syrian Kurdish region took advantage of the chaos to establish a "state within a state," which is now rapidly emerging. In 2014, the Democratic Union Party, a variant of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, announced the establishment of the "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria" (DFNS). In the same year, it held an election, promulgated a constitution and other laws, formed a parliament and an autonomous government, designated Qamishli as its capital and expanded the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). The two forces have constituted the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and received support from the United States.

In 2017, the DFNS was further strengthened and expanded under the open support of the United States and the secret help of Israel. First, the financial situation of the autonomous government continued to improve due to a stable self-sufficient economy and economic assistance from the US and Israel. Second, its armed forces expanded rapidly. The main force of the YPG has more than 60,000 heavily-armed and well-munitioned members. This increased combat capacity made it possible to conquer Raqqa, the temporary "capital" of ISIS on October 14. Third, the territory under its control expanded, covering not only the entire Rojava⁹ but also parts of Aleppo, Al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor. Especially beneficial to its development was its occupation of the oilfields on the east bank of the Euphrates.

9 Rojava means "the West" in Kurdish, covering the areas of Afrin, Jazira, Kobani and Shahba of the current "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria." The major cities in the region include Qameshli, Afrin, Kobani, Manbij and Tal Rifat.

The rise of the DFNS and the PKK's emergence as the core leader in Kurdish independence thought and movement have aroused Turkey's fear and strategic alert. On January 20, 2018, Turkey launched a military operation against the DFNS, code-named "Operation Olive Branch," in an attempt to capture the Afrin Region and the strategic post of Manbij, seriously damage the YPG and create conditions for future destruction of the DFNS. Currently, the Turkey-supported Free Syrian Army attacks from the east wing of Afrin and the Turkish army offends from the west. They attempt to eliminate the roughly 10,000 Kurdish soldiers in the region. In spite of Turkish advantages in air superiority and ground firepower, Kurdish forces have gained strong combat capacity during their fight against ISIS, and they are familiar with the terrain and enjoy popular support, which enables them to deal with the Turkish army for a protracted period.

It must be pointed out that the Turkish military action in northern Syria to wipe out the Kurdish forces is directly against the US Syria policy. The United States would not sit idly by and let Turkey destroy the DFNS, but would surely continue to impose pressure on Turkey and force it to stop. In Syria, the US mainly depends on the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is mainly composed of Kurdish armed forces. The US had invested considerable economic and military resources on the SDF, trying to transform it into the backbone force in overthrowing the Bashar regime. Therefore, the US would not tolerate the Turkey's planned destruction of Kurdish forces. Currently, the US has confidence that the Kurdish forces in Afrin will exhaust the Turkish army, and is carefully witnessing the situation. Once the Kurdish forces in this region find themselves in a critical situation, the US would prevent any Turkish offensive attempt by imposing diplomatic and military pressures. Turkey threatened to take over Manbij, but with one airport and 12 bases of the US around Manbij, coupled with the US military's in-depth deployment to deter the Turkish army, Turkey does not have the strength to fight against the US. In addition, Manbij, as a main component of the DFNS, is defended by more than 50,000 of the

YPG's elite troops. With various conditions on the ground against its favor, the Turkish government is unable to put the elimination of the DFNS on the agenda.

The bravery of Kurds in northern Syria in contending with Turkey would encourage Kurds in southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq and northwestern Iran to strive for or maintain their controlled territories. Despite frustration of the Kurdish independence movement in northern Iraq, the Kurdish region is still a "state within a state." In addition, given the apparent spillover effect of the emerging Kurdish independence movement in northern Syria, the Kurdish issue would accelerate the evolution of regional structure mainly through Syria's chaos in the future.

Conclusion

The Middle East has always been a battleground for great powers. Out of their respective global strategic considerations, the United States and Russia fight fiercely in the Middle East. From the evident momentum created by the US-Russia competition in the region over the past two years, Russia can be said to have won at least partial strategic initiative. Saudi Arabia and Iran, together with their allies, rely on the US and Russia respectively, placing their geopolitical rivalry in the context of US-Russia contest with a clear division of camps. Therefore, the rivalry between the US and Russia would inevitably affect the contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran. At present, Saudi Arabia is caught in a stage of partial strategic difficulty, while Iran has won partial strategic advantage. However, the current situation created by great-power competition in the Middle East is temporary. Once the Trump administration decides to increase strategic input into the Middle East, the landscape in the Middle East would possibly become unfavorable for Russia and Iran. 