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[Guest essay] What's new about the "new Middle East"?

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So much of what we see today is a continuation of the past



US President Donald Trump and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi sign a document at the "peace summit" in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, on Oct. 13, 2025. (UPI/Yonhap)



By Siavash Saffari, professor of West Asian studies at Seoul National University

Ever since US President Donald Trump's return to the White House in January, the term the "new Middle East" has resurfaced as a favored buzzword in Washington. Political and think tank circles are conjuring up scenarios of what such a refurbished Middle East might look like. Trump himself has insinuated that the map of the region must change in order to make more room for Israel.

I seriously doubt Trump can identify even a single Middle Eastern country on the map. Unaware that the two countries do not share a land border, he once claimed one could "literally" walk "across a line" from Iran to Qatar. "You can walk it in one second. You go 'boom boom,' and now you're in Qatar."

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Ignorance is bliss, or so the saying goes. But it might also be rocket fuel for megalomania. In typical self-aggrandizing manner, Trump has credited himself with heralding "the historic dawn of a new Middle East." His Middle Eastern sojourn earlier this month was a dog and pony show meant to present a limited ceasefire and hostage exchange agreement between Israel and Hamas as a monumental peace accord.

To surmise, as Trump did in his Oct. 14 address at the Israeli Knesset, that a precarious truth would go down in history as the beginning of peace "for all eternity" is farcical. Perhaps there is merit to speculation about Captain MAGA dreaming dreams of winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Who can tell for certain? Besides, can we really blame the man for coveting the shiny medal that comes with the glamor and pageantry of European royalty?

Let's harbor no illusions about what a prize whose past recipients include Henry Kissinger and Menachem Begin actually represents. Kissinger stood accused of involvement in war crimes in Southeast Asia and human rights violations in Latin America. Begin led a terrorist organization named Irgun, and later, as Israel's prime minister, he was responsible for the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre. Let's also remember that the last US president who received the Nobel Peace Prize oversaw no less than 560 air strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. The strikes killed up to 800 civilians, and they earned Barack Obama the nickname the "drone president."

Nor should we fault Trump for fancying himself the architect of a new Middle East. Since the advent of European colonialism in West Asia and North Africa — an area which colonizers, in their Eurocentric imagination, called the Middle East — powerful Western countries have always tried to change the region in accordance with their own interests. In the early decades of the previous century, a series of agreements between European powers sliced the region into territories that were placed under various types of colonial arrangements.

The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement envisioned the division of Ottoman-ruled areas in West Asia into British and French zones of control. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres formalized this division, placing Syria under French, and Palestine and Mesopotamia under British colonial mandates. Each mandatory area was then split up into even smaller pieces. France carved out Greater Lebanon from post-Ottoman Syria. Britain severed Transjordan from Palestine, and designated the latter as a national homeland for European Jews. New borders were drawn to further slice up Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula — divide and conquer in its most literal sense.

The recent news about former British Prime Minister Tony Blair being considered as a potential ruler of Gaza was a throwback to the days when Lord Cromer lorded over Egypt, and Sir Herbert L. Samuel was the man in charge in Palestine. Blair himself was a chief instigator of the illegal and disastrous 2003 Iraq War, as a consequence of which an American diplomat by the name of Paul Bremer became Iraq's de facto leader.

Many of us still recall talk of a new Middle East during the George W. Bush years. Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice once described the ravages of war as "the birth pangs of a new Middle East."

"Let's stop mourning the old Middle East," she later told reporters. "It was not so great, and it was not going to survive anyway."

So, what's new about the new Middle East à la Trump? Thanks to unbridled US support even in the face of a genocide in Gaza, Israel appears more emboldened than ever before. Concerns about Israel's aggressive regional posture have moved Turkey, Qatar and Egypt —

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once seen as rivals — closer to one another. In Syria, the old regime of Bashar al-Assad has given place to a new regime headed by Ahmed al-Sharaa, a man who was at one point on the US terrorist list but now seems to enjoy US backing. Iran's regional allies have been weakened, although not decimated. There is no denying the regional balance of power has changed in important ways.

And yet, so much of what we see today is a continuation of the past. The ceasefire agreement does nothing to address the root cause of the conflict, namely Israel's occupation of Palestine. Across the Middle East, public opinion polls show a majority considers Israel and the US as the most serious threats to regional security and stability. Support for normalization of relations with Israel remains dismal among the populace, even in countries that joined the bandwagon of the Abraham Accords.

That the old must eventually give way to the new is an inescapable dictate of life itself. But whatever a "new Middle East" is going to look like will not be unilaterally decided in the White House or the corridors of Washington think tanks. The modern history of the region has been shaped by the same dynamic that colonialism set in motion in other parts of Asia and Africa: a struggle between exogenous designs for domination and control versus indigenous resistance for self-determination. Past struggles will inspire future struggles, and each generation will leave its own mark on the region's history.

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