

Traditional and New Forms of Regionalism in West Asia

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West Asia is a key strategic region, where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a potential trigger for great international crises – is taking place and where several oil-producing nations crucial to global energy security are concentrated. West Asia is also a region of great civilizational significance, home to the holy sites of the major religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, West Asia experienced the domination of European powers and began to call for decolonization. The ideological platform used at the time to challenge and rally against Western colonization was pan-Arabism.

The Arab League, based on Arab ethnic identity, was formed to advocate for regional solidarity in West Asia. However, the diversity of political and economic structures and lack of institutional cohesion among member states hindered the Arab League's role as a regional organization. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – formed in response to the common security crisis of the Iranian threat following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and featuring member states with common political, historical, and economic backgrounds – is considered to have had success in regional integration, but the organization was short-lived.

The Arab Spring, comprising a wave of anti-government protests that marked a historic turning point for the entire region in 2010, was a defining event that demonstrated the futility of regional cooperation in the face of individual state survival. In particular, the US strategic contraction in the Middle East and the escalation of the US-China conflict, which coincided with the Arab Spring, set the stage for countries in West Asia, led by the GCC, to pursue their respective paths for survival. The GCC's break with Qatar signaled the end of GCC-led regional cooperation in West Asia. Then, the unconventional 2020 normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states confirmed the collapse of

the ideological basis that had supported West Asian regionalism. The Israeli-Hamas war that erupted in October 2023 also saw West Asian states unite in condemning both Israel and Hamas simultaneously, but without the regional cohesion that had been evident in the past. Instead, it has been the non-state armed groups backed by Iran that have demonstrated strong cohesion in opposing Israel.

Today, a new form of regional cooperation, known as “minilateralism,” is emerging in the West Asian region, in which small-scale cooperation is occurring between states with common interests in pursuing their national interests across factional and geographic borders. Compared to other regions, West Asia, with its longstanding cultural and historical commonalities, has been expected to demonstrate a cohesive regionalism. However, amidst the ongoing crisis of state survival, regional cooperation has yet to find its footing. Rather, West Asian regionalism is now breaking the mold of traditional regionalism by expanding its scope beyond common ideological or geographical borders, as states pursue their strategies for survival.

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Fig. 1: Emblem featured on the flag of the Arab League and map of the member countries. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Raffanumber24 and reprinted under Creative Commons license.



Emerging Regionalism in Central Asia

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The five states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have continued to make efforts toward regional integration since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite this, Central Asian regionalism and cooperation remain stagnant, with regionalism in Central Asia being deemed a failure by researchers and the media alike. However, since the death of Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov and the inauguration of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016, the beginnings of a change in Central Asian regionalism have been observed.

Recent developments in the region since 2016 suggest that regionalization is on the rise. On the political front, there have been improvements in bilateral relations, including the demarcation of borders between Central Asian countries and the expansion of economic cooperation. Above all, the “Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian Heads of State,” held annually since 2018, has come to serve as an informal platform for dialogue, thereby promoting cooperation between the countries. Notably, all the countries in the region have continued to participate, including Turkmenistan, which had previously pursued a policy of isolation. Economically, trade between the Central Asian countries remains insignificant compared to trade with Russia, China, and Europe, but it is clearly on the rise. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have resumed energy trade, and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are seeking industrial cooperation along their border. In terms of people-to-people exchange, the countries

in Central Asia are moving toward visa-free agreements and more open border policies.

Despite these changes, however, the limitations that hindered regionalism and regionalization in Central Asia in the past continue into the present day. First, the Central Asian states remain highly conscious of external actors such as China and Russia and have continued with active attempts to make connections with these external actors. Since the “Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian Heads of State” also allows the Central Asian states to meet and connect with a variety of external actors, such as Russia, China, the EU, the Gulf states, and Turkey, it may in fact function as a centrifugal rather than centripetal force in terms of Central Asian regionalism. Furthermore, the “Consultative Meeting” remains limited in that it is an informal platform for dialogue and not an institutionalized formal regional organization. Second, economic interaction within the region is still limited compared to other countries and is unlikely to increase in the future. While the absolute volume of trade between the Central Asian countries has increased since 2016, it is still small compared to the volume of trade between the respective countries and China or Russia. The similar nature of the economic structures of the Central Asian countries means that the potential for greater intra-regional trade is low. Despite these limitations, changes in regionalism and regionalization in Central Asia have come to be observed in recent years, indicating that this phenomenon cannot be ignored. In Central Asia, informal dialogue platforms, such as the “Consultative Meeting,” have been more successful than pre-existing institutionalized regionalist bodies of a binding nature in contributing to regionalism and regionalization. This suggests that different forms of regional institutions can play a more effective role in regionalism depending on the specific context of the region.

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