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The Changing Power and Security Dynamics in The Middle East

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the shifting power and security dynamics in the Middle East, focusing on the period from the 9/11 attacks to the escalation that followed Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. Drawing on structural realism and neoclassical realism, the study argues critically that while global powers have historically exerted significant influence, regional actors-both state and non-state- have acquired increased agency in shaping security outcomes. The Arab Spring, the entrenchment of proxy wars, and the rise of identity-based mobilizations illustrate the interplay between domestic and external drivers. Using a composite index of hard and soft power, the analysis identifies Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran as regional pivotal players, with smaller states and non-state factions affecting patterns of conflict and cooperation. The findings emphasize that the Middle East functions as neither a purely subordinate subsystem nor one fully autonomous from international competition, but rather as a fluid arena where systemic and local pressures converge.

Keywords: Middle East, Power Dynamics, Security Architecture, Non-State Actors, Arab Spring, Hamas–Israel Conflict.

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Orta Doğu'da Değişen Güç ve Güvenlik Dinamikleri

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, 11 Eylül saldırılarından 7 Ekim 2023'te Hamas'ın İsrail'e gerçekleştirdiği saldırı sonrasındaki gelişmelere kadar uzanan süreçte Orta Doğu'daki değişen güç ve güvenlik dinamiklerini ele almaktadır. Eleştirel bir bakışla Yapısal realizm ve Neoklasik realizm yaklaşımını benimseyerek, tarihsel olarak küresel güçlerin belirgin etkisine karşın bölgesel aktörlerin-hem devlet hem de devlet dışı yapıların-güvenlik sonuçlarını şekillendirmede artan bir yetkinliğe sahip olduğunu savunmaktadır. Arap Baharı, vekâlet savaşlarının derinleşmesi ve kimlik temelli hareketlerin yükselişi, içsel ve dışsal sebepler arasındaki etkileşimi gözler önüne sermektedir. Hem sert hem de yumuşak güce dayanan bir bileşik endeks üzerinden yapılan analiz, Suudi Arabistan, İsrail, Türkiye ve İran'ı temel güç odakları olarak ortaya koyarken; küçük ölçekli devletler ile devlet dışı aktörlerin çatışma ve iş birliği örüntülerine kayda değer etkide bulunduğunu göstermektedir. Bulgular, Orta Doğu'nun ne tam olarak uluslararası rekabetten bağımsız bir alt sistem ne de bütünüyle dışa bağımlı bir yapı olduğunu, aksine sistemik ve yerel baskıların kesiştiği dinamik bir alan oluşturduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Orta Doğu, Güç Dinamikleri, Güvenlik Mimarisi, Devlet Dışı Aktörler, Arap Baharı, Hamas-İsrail Çatışması.

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INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has undergone profound shifts in its security structures, political alignments, and socioeconomic realities since the start of the twenty-first century. The years following the attacks of 11 September 2001 transformed how global powers, regional actors, and local populations perceived security threats and strategic opportunities (Khalidi 1995: 30). In addition, multiple events-from the Arab Spring of 2011 to the still-evolving conflict between Hamas and Israel after 7 October 2023-have reshaped relations among both states and non-state actors. Among these transformative moments, 9/11 stands out as an epicenter for the 'Global War on Terror', while the Arab Spring marked a critical juncture of public dissent. Today, the new escalation in the Palestine–Israel conflict after Hamas's 7 October attacks has introduced layers of uncertainty, entangling a wide array of international and regional forces (Al Talei et al. 2023).

Academics, policymakers, and practitioners have proposed multiple interpretations of this evolving situation, many of which connect local concerns about governance or popular legitimacy to broader dynamics of power politics (Gause 1999: 55). A foundational question is whether the contemporary Middle East can still be understood as a 'subordinate international system' shaped mostly by external powers, or whether it now constitutes a more autonomous subsystem whose state and non-state actors exercise formidable agency (Binder 1958 (2011): 425). Another important debate centers on how to reconcile theoretical perspectives derived from International Relations (IR) particularly, neo-clasical realism and neorealism, with the unique historical, cultural, and institutional attributes emphasized by Area Studies experts (Tetti 2007: 118).

This first part sets out to clarify the context of what some researchers call a dual 'systemic' and 'regional' approach (Sasley 2011: 454). It emphasizes how momentous these events 'especially 9/11, forced regime changes in Afganistan and Iraq, the Greater Middle Eastern Initiative' accelerated structural fragmentation and fueled sub-state identities based on sectarian, ethnic, or ideological affinities (Buzan & Wæver 2003: 462); later a decade Arap Springs up and down also fuelled the multiple level of fragilities in the region. Moreover, it will present an overview of the third major transformative event in the region, the Hamas attacks on

Israel on 7 October 2023, a shockwave that has already redirected Middle Eastern politics and complicated the ambitions of external actors wishing to mediate or exploit local fissures (Zanotti et al. 2023). Through an academic lens, this part aims to do three things. First, it explores how the aftermath of 9/11 redefined global and regional policy priorities, particularly regarding security cooperation, regime stability, and the surge of various jihadist groups (Bill 1996: 318). Second, it assesses the legacy of the Arab Spring, focusing on emergent rivalries, realignments, and state failures. Third, it underscores the significance of the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks as a watershed that not only altered Israeli Palestinian relations but also recast the broader architecture of Middle Eastern alliances, including renewed debates on alliances with or against Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other influential actors such as Hezbullah in Lebanon and Houtis in Yemen.

Taken together, these interconnected shifts underscore the urgency of synthesizing an Area Studies perspective attentive to culture, language, and local conditions with a systemic theoretical approach anchored in IR. The result, ideally, is a balanced analysis that can explain the intricacies of power, legitimacy, and both external and domestic constraints shaping the Middle East today (Binder 2011; Sasley 2011).

The Changing Security and Power Dynamics of The Middle East in The Process Extending From 9/11 To 10/7

Historical Shifts Prompted by 9/11

Before September 2001, American involvement in the Middle East had been substantial but guided more by strategic balances formed during and immediately after the Cold War. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, for instance, had already caused the USA to station troops in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, highlighting the region's geopolitical significance.

Nevertheless, it was the 9/11 attacks that provoked a deeper American-led redefinition of Middle Eastern security structures. Within weeks, the US overthrew the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (accused of harboring al-Qaeda) and launched a broader 'War on Terror,'calling for counterterrorism partnerships across the Middle East against the Rogue States (Weinbaum 2007: 17).

Even though Afghanistan is not strictly 'Middle East', a string of US decisions soon laid the groundwork for expanded confrontation in the region—most notably the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which ousted Saddam Hussein. From the vantage point of structural realism, the US decision to topple Hussein reconfigured the distribution of power, removing a critical regional

balancer against Iran and inadvertently intensifying the region's polarity (Walt 1990, Walt 2005; Mearsheimer 2001). Many Middle Eastern states (e.g., Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia) found themselves compelled to balance or bandwagon with the new American hegemony, at times clashing with the preferences of domestic citizens.

In effect, the post-9/11 US agenda accentuated challenges of terrorism, fostering complicated alliances with local regimes reliant on American support but facing the risk of delegitimization at home (Binder 2011: 410). This external impetus also catalyzed a wave of militarization. Saudi Arabia significantly upgraded its military hardware, while states like Iran sought nuclear and missile programs to deter what they perceived as existential threats. Simultaneously, non-state organizations -Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, (later, ISIS, Houtis in Yemen)- expanded their roles, capitalizing on the power vacuums left by the fracturing or overthrow of state structures (Halliday 2005).

Impact of the Arab Spring on Regional Fragmentation

If the years following 9/11 witnessed a surge in state militarization and an intensification of external power involvement, the Arab Spring unleashed energies of public mobilization that eroded old authoritarian bargains. In 2011, citizens across Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and beyond protested longstanding political repression, corruption, and socioeconomic stagnation. Initially, these events heralded a possible wave of democratization. A few months later, euphoria was tempered by civil wars, sectarian violence, and the expansion of radical Islamist factions (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami 2014: 36).

In academic terms, the Arab Spring challenged IR theories that place top priority on the unitary nature of states. Instead, domestic-level variables, the presence of youth bulges, high unemployment, and recalcitrant authoritarian regimes—shaped foreign policy decisions (Hudson & Day 2020: 270). Syria descended into a protracted civil war, inviting direct interventions by Iran, Russia, Turkey, and various jihadist elements. Libya, too, fell into chaos after NATO's intervention toppled Muammar Gaddafi, further destabilizing the region (Korany et al. 2012).

Meanwhile, the Gulf monarchies largely survived the upheavals by ramping up social spending and intensifying authoritarian measures. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for instance, expanded their alliances through economic largesse or direct military intervention (Cordesman et al. 2018). Qatar, with its massive gas resources and soft-power tool al-Jazeera, also emerged as an influential mediator, though it clashed with Saudi Arabia and the UAE over ties to the

Muslim Brotherhood (Jacobs 2023). Contradictory impulses of cooperation and rivalry took hold: the Gulf Cooperation Council tried to present a united front in some cases, yet internal blockades, as seen in the 2017 Qatar crisis, showed deep rifts (Darwish 2023).

One major result of the Arab Spring was the steep rise in "proxy wars" across subregions. Iran leveraged Shia militias, particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, to augment its influence, while Saudi Arabia led a coalition against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, framing them as Iranian proxies. In places like Lebanon, Hezbollah's ascendancy remained deeply entangled with Iranian support, fuelling Israel's concerns about existential threats on its northern border (Seeberg 2016). In parallel, the US and Russia found themselves contesting spheres of influence in Syria, reminiscent of the Cold War but complicated by the proliferation of local actors (Mearsheimer 2006).

Emergence of the 7 October 2023 Hamas Attacks

Into this landscape of competing powers, local revolutions, and multi-layered alliances, the Hamas surprise assault on Israel in October 2023 introduced a new dynamic. Over 1,000 Israelis—military and civilian—were killed, overshadowing earlier patterns in the conflict (Zanotti et al. 2023: 6). As an immediate Israeli retaliation followed in Gaza, diplomatic initiatives, including the potential Saudi Israeli normalization, came to a halt. Washington's effort to forge an 'Indo-Abrahamic Corridor' bridging India, the Gulf, and Europe was derailed as well, highlighting how quickly violent shocks can reorient the region's trajectory (Bateman 2023).

One crucial difference from past escalations is that the war in Gaza became, in short order, not just a local conflict but a wedge in global politics (Burke 2023). Countries in the so-called Global South denounced what they saw as Israel's disproportionate response and collectively criticized Western governments. South Africa's condemnation of Israel, and its referral to the International Court of Justice, was emblematic of new divisions among emerging global powers and Western states (Adams 2024). Meanwhile, over 800 officials in Western governments registered opposition to unconditional support for Israel's military operation, demonstrating an unusual domestic backlash (Bateman 2023).

Table: 1. Key Events Shaping the Middle East Since 9/11

Event	Date(s)	Primary Actors Involved	Main Consequences for Regional Security (Sources in parentheses)
9/11 Attacks & Aftermath	2001-2002	Al-Qaeda, United States, Regional Allies	Initiated US-led "War on Terror," escalation of military presence, fragmentation of alliances. (Weinbaum 2007)
US Invasion of Iraq	2003	United States, Coalition, Iraq Regime	Overthrow of Saddam Hussein, power vacuum, expansion of Iranian influence, rise of sectarian strife. (Walt 2005)
Greater Middle East Initiative	2004	(Morocco) G8-EU (Pakistan)	Democracy Promotions in the ME of Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine. (C. Wittes 2004)
Arab Spring Protests	2011	Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Yemen, etc.	Overthrow of some regimes, civil wars, intensification of sectarian conflicts, shift in external interventions. (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami 2014)
Rise and Fall of ISIS	2014-2017	ISIS, Iraq, Syria, Global Coalition	Territorial "caliphate," mass displacement, US-led coalition strikes, partial re-empowerment of Assad. (Lamrani 2020)
Qatar Blockade by Neighbors	2017-2021	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Qatar	Internal GCC fracture, intensification of Qatari Turkish ties, realignments of smaller states. (Jacobs 2023)
Abraham Accords	2020	Israel, UAE, Bahrain, US	Formal diplomatic ties between Israel & Gulf states, partial realignments vs. Iran, frustration of Palestinian leadership. (Rahman 2021)
Hamas Attack & Israel's War in Gaza	7 Oct 2023 onward	Hamas, Israel, Potentially Iran, Regional States	Large-scale escalation, disruption of Saudi–Israel normalization, new tensions between West and Global South. (Zanotti et al. 2023)

The table outlines major geopolitical events in the Middle East from 9/11 onward, linking them with key actors and regional consequences. It shows a clear pattern of military interventions, internal uprisings, regional rivalries, and diplomatic shifts, all reshaping the security and political landscape.

Evolving Patterns of Conflict and Cooperation

Observing the interconnectedness of these events, one sees those military interventions either by global powers or regional coalitions-often produced unintended outcomes that further destabilized states and created vacuums quickly filled by militias, terrorist networks, or transnational ideologies (Cordesman & Harrington 2018). In the post-2011 phase, countries like Egypt underwent cycles of upheaval, culminating in renewed authoritarian consolidation. Yet, the 1990s had largely been a battle among state elites (Buzan & Wæver 2003: 187), whereas the 2010s saw extensive sub-state activism in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, with non-state actors obtaining foreign sponsorship.

Hence, from a systems perspective, the Middle East remains overshadowed by anarchy in the sense that no central authority enforces stable norms. Power is distributed among a handful of major players—Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel—who lack a framework to resolve fundamental disagreements, including over proxies, nuclear ambitions, or ideological projects (Carlsom 2024). Adding to that, external actors such as the USA, Russia, and, increasingly, China, continue to shape the region's outcomes but are reluctant to bear the costs of policing it thoroughly (Chivvis et al. 2023; Tardy 2022).

In the aftermath of 7 October 2023, a 'nonpolar' or 'heteropolar' scenario has become a plausible depiction (Carlsom 2024). On the one hand, the Abraham Accords signaled a partial shift from the historically prominent Israeli Arab line of conflict to a more Iran-centric confrontation. On the other hand, the regional system exhibits persistent fragility, especially as recent events in Gaza reassert the centrality of the Israeli Palestinian dispute (Indyk 2024). In practical terms, this means that alliances remain fluid and short-lived. Saudi Arabia normalizing ties with Israel, for example, was not accompanied by major breakthroughs on the Palestinian question. Instead, the 2023 Hamas attacks compelled Riyadh to express solidarity with Palestinian civilians, effectively freezing the normalization track while compelling Tehran to recast itself as champion of Palestinian resistance (Ebrahim 2024).

Importance of Domestic Politics and Identity

From Tunisia to Saudi Arabia, domestic politics have emerged as key drivers that cannot be shoehorned into simplistic "state-as-actor" frameworks. The diffusion of popular resentment, whether sparked by corruption, youth unemployment, or human rights grievances-has multiple times pushed governments to adopt contradictory policies (Hudson & Day 2020: 125). This phenomenon surfaced when Arab regimes had to maneuver between official condemnation of extremist violence and widespread public sympathy for anti-imperialist or anti-Israeli discourses.

A striking illustration is Egypt's contradictory stance after 2013 under President al-Sisi. While Cairo harshly repressed the Muslim Brotherhood at home, it had to simultaneously rely on foreign assistance from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both these countries were eager to strengthen Egyptian leadership in the region against Iran, but only so long as Egypt kept in line with their strategic imperatives (Ghafar 2023). Despite being the largest Arab state, Egypt's economic challenges have constrained its capacity for independent foreign policy.

At the same time, the fragile mosaic of Syrian internal politics, with minority Alawites controlling the regime-allowed Iran and Russia to embed themselves militarily. The Houthi movement in Yemen, likewise, draws on a marginalized Zaydi Shia identity. Socio-economic collapse in Yemen opened the door for Iranian help, which in turn provoked Saudi-led interventions (Cordesman 2018). More recently, the infiltration of Hamas fighters into southern Israel revealed how identity-based militant groups remain able to exploit state vulnerabilities, making it nearly impossible to isolate the Palestinian issue from broader regional linkages (Zanotti et al. 2023).

Thus, any effort to interpret the Middle East from 2001 to 2023 must consider domestic drivers—legitimacy, sectarian divides, demographic transitions—alongside systemic forces such as US hegemony, Russian reassertion, and Chinese economic expansion. Area Studies frameworks highlight the depth of cultural, historical, and social intricacies, while IR theories clarify how states respond to or manipulate anarchical conditions for survival or dominance (Sasley 2011: 24).

The Convergence of Systemic and Regional Logics

The upshot is that the Middle East's transformation cannot be reduced to external designs alone. In many respects, the region's states and societies have outgrown the older 'subordinate' role. They now interact among themselves in ways that sometimes undermine or sideline external

powers. Qatar's success as a diplomatic go-between for Hamas, or Turkey's balancing acts between the USA and Russia, demonstrates how local agency shapes emergent patterns (Krasna 2023). Meanwhile, Russia's alignment with Iran in Syria and China's mediation of the Saudi–Iran agreement in 2023 which underscores the continuing presence of great-power competition. However, these external influences, though potent, rarely achieve uncontested dominance.

Hamas's unexpected assault in October 2023 further shows that local non-state players can disrupt major external powers' designs (Levitt 2023). Even if Iran or Qatar had partial knowledge, the actual planning and execution showed that Hamas had its own agenda. The immediate effect of this attack included halting the Biden administration's push for a 'reduced tension' strategy and complicating efforts by the US to create an 'Indo-Abrahamic Corridor' (Zanotti et al. 2023). It also forced Arab states that had tried to downplay the Palestinian issue to re-engage with it, as public outcry soared (Brown 2023).

Adding complexity, the conflict in Gaza triggered a strong reaction from the Global South, reflecting a worldwide reconfiguration of alliances. Many African and Asian countries, though not necessarily endorsing Hamas's ideology, objected to Western backing for Israel's military campaign in the strip (Daniel De Simone & Davies 2024). Arab regimes navigated a precarious path: publicly condemning Israel's siege and invasion while quietly seeking not to antagonize powerful Western partners or endanger ongoing economic initiatives. To illustrate:

- Saudi Arabia paused talks on normalizing relations with Israel but did not sever lines with Washington.

- Egypt was pressed to open the Rafah crossing for humanitarian needs yet remained apprehensive that mass displacement of Palestinians might shift the demographic and political landscape near its Sinai Peninsula (Cammack & Dunne 2018).

- Iran renewed calls for "regional resistance," but also avoided direct confrontation with Israel in a way that would provoke a major escalation (Levitt 2023).

In sum, the interplay among local insurgencies, national armies, and major power engagements has turned the Middle East into a "nonpolar, multi-centric, partially anarchic" environment (Carlsom 2024). Combined with the historical imprint of colonial borders and diverse domestic socio-political structures, the region's security is heavily fragmented. On the surface, new or revitalized alliances like the Negev Forum (Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Israel, the US) might promise cooperation on shared economic or technological interests (Rahman 2021). However, the sudden conflict in Gaza reemphasized that few alliances are

strong enough to transcend the fundamental fault lines regarding Iran, Israel–Palestine, or Sunni–Shia tensions (Sasley 2011: 470).

Prospects for a Regional Security Architecture

Over the last decade, multiple proposals for a collective security framework have emerged, particularly for the Gulf. Iran's "Hormuz Peace Endeavor" and Saudi Arabia's various calls for a "regional security dialogue" are illustrative but remain overshadowed by deep strategic mistrust (Azizi 2022). The bigger problem is that security, for many governments, is tied to regime survival-leading them to see adversaries in every sub-state mobilization or cross-border ideological network.

Moreover, the experiences after 2011 have taught regional players that external backing can shift unpredictably. The US partially withdrew from engagements in Syria and Afghanistan. Russia found itself overstretched after its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. China, while eager to secure energy routes, prefers to avoid open-ended military entanglements. The resulting vacuum in Middle Eastern security management fosters competition among mid-level powers with clashing aims:

- Turkey's overtures in Syria conflict with the interests of Iran or the Assad regime.
- Saudi Arabia's search for a stable perimeter in Yemen collides with Iranian ambitions.
- The UAE's quest to be a dynamic trade-finance hub leads it to sign accords with Israel, risking friction with pro-Palestinian constituencies.

In principle, the imperative for stable security arrangement is well recognized by many local actors (Tardy 2022). Plans to foster "regionalism" in the Middle East, reminiscent of the early hopes pinned on the Arab League or the short-lived attempts at joint defense pacts, consistently stumble on unresolved political rivalries. The 7 October conflict once again demonstrates that attempts to sideline or postpone the Palestinian question are ephemeral. Yet forging a consensus on how to handle it is extremely difficult, as the region's main Powers-Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Israel-are too divided in both ideology and threat perception (Gause 1999).

Middle East Studies and International Relations Theories on Regional Power and Security Dynamics

Middle East Studies and International Relations Theories

The scholarly study of the Middle East has long been divided between two primary fields: Area Studies and International Relations (IR). Area Studies scholars, including historians and anthropologists, focus on local languages, cultures, and social dynamics, while IR theorists apply systemic models emphasizing power distribution and state behavior (Tetti 2007: 120). Traditionally, these disciplines remained distinct, with Middle East specialists criticizing IR for neglecting regional specificities and IR scholars viewing area studies as insufficiently theoretical (Sasley 2011: 410). This divergence was influenced by Cold War-era priorities, where Middle East Studies emerged to serve policy needs, while IR developed from European diplomatic history (Lockman 2004).

In recent years, both fields have evolved in response to global transformations, especially after 9/11 process, neo-imperialist interventions with the regime changes and the export of democracy which all were in failures of building of a regional order led to the hegemonic crises, including the Arab Spring (2011), the rise-fall of ISIS, and the Hamas-Israel conflict (2023) were diverted by the tectonic confrontations of regional and global powers. These repetitive crises necessitate an integrated approach that merges universal IR theories with localized insights (Hinnebusch 2003). Some scholars maintain that the Middle East is uniquely shaped by cultural and historical factors, resisting standard IR frameworks (Tetti 2007). Others argue that regional states behave rationally within an anarchic system, aligning with neorealist assumptions (Waltz 1979). Constructivist perspectives highlight the role of identity politics and securitization in shaping alliances (Barnett 1998).

Recent scholarship promotes multi-theoretical approaches, combining structural realism for power distributions, constructivism for ideological blocks, and historical sociology for colonial legacies (Sasley 2011: 470). Scholars such as Hinnebusch, Barnett, and Ehteshami demonstrate how Middle Eastern actors blend realist power struggles with ideological and religious narratives, complicating classical models (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami 2002). A growing consensus acknowledges that systemic forces (e.g., balance of power, external intervention) and local variables (e.g., regime survival, sectarianism) interact dynamically (Rose 1998).

One challenge in integrating these perspectives is methodology. IR scholars favor global datasets and quantitative models, whereas area specialists rely on fieldwork and qualitative analysis. This gap complicates studies on issues such as tribal affiliations in Yemen or the Gulf's shifting power balances. Nevertheless, bridging these approaches provides a more nuanced understanding of Middle Eastern security dynamics (Sasley 2011: 450).

For example, the 2017 Saudi-led blockade of Qatar reflected both local ideological disputes (Qatar's perceived support for Brotherhood Islamists) and systemic power rivalries (Saudi Arabia's regional hegemony aspirations). Initially ambiguous U.S. positioning further highlights the interaction between domestic political legitimacy and international power balances (Jacobs 2023).

Objectives and Methodology for a Systemic Study

Middle Eastern states navigate both domestic constraints (e.g., economic discontent, identity conflicts) and systemic pressures (e.g., regional rivalries, global power shifts). This study seeks to analyze:

- The distribution of power among state and non-state actors since 9/11 and their influence on security agendas.
- The impact of regional transformations (e.g., Arab Spring, Hamas-Israel conflict, shifting alliances) on power dynamics.
- Whether the Middle East functions as a subordinate subsystem or retains regional autonomy despite global power competition (Binder 1958; Gause 1999).

This research adopts structural realism (Waltz 1979) to explain systemic constraints but incorporates neoclassical realism (Rose 1998) to account for domestic-level factors such as regime survival and ideological alignments betwen the ruling elites. Given the region's complex security environment, a state-centric approach alone is insufficient; therefore, the role of non-state actors (e.g., Hezbollah, Hamas, Kurdish factions, Houthis) is also considered (Seeberg 2016). The methodology combines quantitative and qualitative data. Key sources include:

- Global Firepower Index (military strength)
- IMF & World Bank (economic indicators)
- Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index (diplomatic influence)
- UN statistics (demographics and labor force trends)

However, the datum limitations persist due to state secrecy on military budgets and internal security matters. Where gaps exist, reports from institutions like SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) supplement the analysis (Tian et al. 2023).

A major challenge is the fluidity of balance of powers and Middle Eastern geopolitics. Shifts in leadership, such as Mohammed bin Salman's rise in Saudi Arabia or Iran's transitions

from Ahmadinejad to Raisi, significantly impact foreign policy orientations (Ghafar 2023). Likewise, non-state actors adapt rapidly-ISIS lost its territorial base in 2017, but continues clandestine operations, while Hamas retains strategic flexibility despite external pressures (Zanotti et al. 2023). To address these dynamics, a five-step methodology is employed:

- Constructing a Power and Influence Composite Index combining military, economic, demographic, and soft power indicators.
- Evaluating the capabilities of major states (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, UAE, Qatar, Egypt).
- Assessing non-state actors' influence, considering ideological appeal and external sponsorship.
- Mapping regional alliances and conflicts.
- Integrating unit-level variables (leaders' ideologies, domestic stability) into systemic outcomes (Rose 1998).

Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Gulf countries all have a stable counter bilateral and non-state sectarian alliances and close rival regimes. Morever, there are opposing blocks which all limit their regionwide opportonuties and interests rather than harmonisation of regional peaceful cooperations. Thus, the parties' lack of the domestic formal or informal elite concensus also leads to various conflicting systemic or subsystemic foreing policy outcomes which cripples the strategic capacity of the national states.

Defining the Middle Eastern System and Its Variables

Debates persist on whether the Middle East constitutes a distinct international system. Traditionally, scholars restricted the region to Arab states plus Israel, excluding Turkey and Iran (Gause 1999). A more functional definition includes states with central stakes in:

- The Israel–Palestine conflict
- Gulf security
- Pan-Arab or pan-Islamic political projects (Gause 1999)

Thus, Turkey and Iran are integral due to their strategic roles, whereas Afghanistan and Pakistan remain outside, despite occasional linkages. North Africa is peripheral, though connected through the Arab League and historical ties (Binder 1958).

From a regional security complex perspective (Buzan & Wæver 2003), the Levant (Israel, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt) and the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, Qatar, Iraq) function as sub-complexes. Events in one affect the other, with external powers often intervening.

Key systemic variables include:

- Geopolitical interdependence, border conflicts and regional disputes easily spill over (Buzan & Wæver 2003).
- Resource wealth-oil-driven economies exacerbate wealth disparities.
- External influence-the U.S., Russia, and China shape regional power balances (Chivvis et al. 2023).
- Identity and ideological divisions-Sunni-Shia rivalry, Islamism vs. secularism, and ethno-nationalist movements (Azizi 2022).

To accommodate those systemic affairs there needs also much theoretical surveys on political theory and international relations to further comparative foreign policy studies in multiple level of the regional priorities.

3.4. Domestic Instability and Non-State Actors

Domestic fragility affects foreign policy decisions. Many Middle Eastern regimes rely on authoritarian governance, patronage, or ideological legitimacy to sustain power. Saudi Arabia, for example, opposed the Muslim Brotherhood post-2011, fearing its model of Islamic republicanism (Jacobs 2023). Similarly, Iran supports Hezbollah and Houthis to extend its strategic reach (Azizi 2022).

Non-state actors play pivotal roles in the region. Groups like Hezbollah and Hamas operate as quasi-states, wielding military, financial, and political power (Roy 2008). The October 2023 Hamas attack exemplified how non-state actors can reshape regional alliances and global diplomatic efforts (Zanotti et al. 2023).

Conceptual And Regional Analysis of Power Dynamics and Security Strategies in The Middle East

Exploring Power in The Middle East

The concept of power in International Relations is notoriously elusive. Power can be understood in material terms-such as military strength and economic output-or more intangible ways that

include a country's diplomatic leverage, cultural prestige, and ability to shape ideological discourses (Berenskoetter 2007). In the Middle Eastern context, where states differ widely in population, wealth, military expenditures, and institutional development, measuring power involves balancing quantitative indicators with qualitative judgments about how these indicators translate into actual influence (Guzzini 2013).

States like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Israel exhibit robust dimensions of hard power-through large armies, advanced weapons, resource riches, or technological capabilities-but they also seek ways to translate these advantages into enduring alliances, favorable trade deals, or leadership roles in the region (Walt 1990). Elsewhere, smaller countries, notably the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, have harnessed extraordinary per capita income, foreign investments, and strategic diplomacy to expand their influence, despite limited demographic bases (Vakil & Quilliam 2023). Additionally, some countries with large populations, such as Egypt, struggle with internal socio-economic challenges that weaken their capacity to project power (Ghafar 2023).

Power measurement thus cannot rely on a single metric. Many analysts attempt composite indexes, typically aggregating variables like GDP, defense budgets, technological innovation, population size, natural resources, and diplomatic connections (Arak & Lewicki 2017). Others prefer a more specialized lens, such as the Global Firepower Index focusing on military parameters, or the Pareto Economics Global Power Index emphasizing global finance, trade centrality, and technology (Pareto Economics 2024). Soft-power measurements have also gained traction: Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index or the approach of Joseph Nye highlight 'co-optive' power-culture, tourism, education, or humanitarian outreach-which can augment or partially substitute for raw military or economic might (Nye 1990; Brand Finance 2023).

Yet indexes do not always capture the complexity of local instability or the agency of non-state actors. In places like Syria, Iraq or Yemen, the recognized governments may boast large armies on paper, but real authority is fractured among militias, insurgents, or foreign proxies (Seeberg 2016). A state's formal capabilities might appear impressive, but field performance could be hampered by corruption, weak institutions, or limited social cohesion. Some countries, including Saudi Arabia, lavishly invest in advanced weaponry, but questions linger about their operational effectiveness, as shown by difficulties in the Yemen war (Cordesman & Harrington 2018).

Determining ‘who is the most powerful in the Middle East’ thus necessitates combining statistical measures with careful assessment of how states convert capabilities into successful policies. This part proceeds by reviewing key quantitative indicators-population, natural resources, GDP, trade, and military strength-and then examining intangible factors like cultural resonance or diplomatic mediation roles. It also briefly highlights the destabilizing influence or potential synergy introduced by non-state groups. Finally, it presents a composite approach to weigh both hard and soft power elements, culminating in an integrated ranking of power and influence among Middle Eastern actors.

Hard-Power Factors and Their Distribution

Many studies begin by analyzing basic material resources, notably demographics and the endowment of oil and gas. These resources shape a country’s economic potential and its capacity to build and sustain strong armed forces. While demographics alone do not guarantee power-Egypt’s challenges illustrate that a large population can be wasted if the economy is not robust-population size can influence workforce availability, military recruitment, and labor markets (Fawcett 2018).

Population and Labor Force

United Nations projections indicate that the Middle East (when defined as the core countries from Morocco to Iran plus Turkey) will experience ongoing population growth into the mid-21st century (UN Department of Economic & Social Affairs 2024). However, not all states will grow at the same pace. Iran and Turkey are expected to witness a demographic plateau or even gradual declines, whereas countries like Iraq and Yemen will double or triple their populations by 2100 (Clawson 2022). Egypt will remain the most populous Arab nation, potentially exceeding 200 million people by the turn of the century (UN 2024).

High population can become a strategic advantage if managed properly, boosting productivity, fueling domestic markets, and sustaining large militaries. Yet rapid population growth also engenders burdens such as unemployment, scarce water resources, and infrastructural deficits (Cordesman 2018). In states like Yemen, the mismatch between population surges and feeble economic expansion aggravates fragility. Iraq, with around 44 million people in 2022, could surpass 110 million by 2100, overshadowing older paradigms that once placed Iran at the pinnacle. If Baghdad can stabilize and harness that workforce, it might reemerge as a major regional actor. But if governance remains dysfunctional, demographic growth could yield further chaos.

Table: 2. Population and Labor Force in Selected Middle Eastern Countries (2022 Data)

Country	Population (million)	Labor Force (million)	Labor Force Participation Rate (%)	Female Participation Rate (%)
Saudi Arabia	36.4	16.6	61.2	34
Iran	88.6	28.6	40.6	14
Egypt	111.0	32.6	43.0	16
Turkey	85.0	34.6	53.1	35
Iraq	44.5	11.3	39.7	11
Israel	9.6	4.5	63.3	61
UAE	9.4	6.6	76.8	54
Qatar	2.7	2.0	87.4	64
Bahrain	1.5	0.84	71.6	44
Kuwait	4.3	2.4	73.8	47
Jordan	11.3	3.0	38.7	14
Oman	4.6	2.3	66.6	31
Lebanon	5.5	1.8	48.9	27
Yemen	33.7	6.7	36.3	5
Syria	22.1	5.8	43.4	14

(Data compiled from World Bank 2024; IMF 2023)

The table underscores extremes in female participation rates, illustrating the region's underutilized labor potential. Countries such as Israel, the UAE, and Qatar approach or exceed global averages, whereas conservative societies in Yemen or Iraq record notably low female employment (World Bank 2024). Some argue that harnessing female labor could represent a significant boost to productivity and living standards, thereby shaping future economic power (Fawcett 2018).

Oil and Gas Abundance

Hydrocarbons have long underpinned power projection by enabling wealth accumulation, high military budgets, and international alliances. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE collectively hold nearly 40 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and significant shares of natural gas (EIA 2023). Historically, Saudi Arabia ranks among the top three global oil producers, pumping over 12 million barrels per day in 2022. Other producers (Iraq, the UAE, Iran, and Kuwait) occupy upper slots in OPEC. Natural gas reserves place Iran and Qatar near the top worldwide.

While resource wealth translates into capital for advanced militaries and strategic investments, it also brings vulnerabilities. Fluctuating energy prices can destabilize budgets, exemplified by the oil price collapse in 2015 that severely impacted Iran and Iraq (World Bank 2019). Countries dependent on a single commodity face the 'resource curse,' where rentier governance stifles diverse economic growth and fosters patronage. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have tried to diversify: the UAE's focus on tourism, real estate, and finance turned Dubai and Abu Dhabi into global business hubs. Saudi Arabia's 'Vision 2030' aims to reduce reliance on oil, expand local manufacturing, and develop futuristic megaprojects (Jacobs 2023).

Resource differentials also drive alliances and rivalries. Saudi Arabia and the UAE use oil and gas income to influence poorer Arab states (such as Egypt or Jordan), offering development grants or cheap energy as leverage. Iran, despite its own gas reserves, suffers from sanctions and difficulties exporting. Qatar wields liquefied natural gas exports to sustain per capita wealth that finances interventions abroad or soft-power assets like al-Jazeera (Noureddine 2023). The distribution of hydrocarbons thus underlies multiple layers of competition, from OPEC policy to shared gas fields.

Economic Output and Foreign Investment

Gross Domestic Product captures immediate economic performance. But GDP measured in nominal terms can be highly volatile for resource exporters. Per capita figures highlight wealth disparities between rentier Gulf states and poorer ones such as Yemen or Syria (MacQueen 2018). The IMF's datas for 2022 show that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran each surpass $ 1 trillion in nominal GDP, while the UAE ranks higher per capita. Israel stands out for high-tech innovation and logs over $564 billion in total GDP (IMF 2023). Egypt's economy has grown in absolute size, yet with a large population, its per capita income remains modest.

Investment flows exemplify how states integrate regionally and globally. The UAE, with its stable environment, advanced infrastructure, and business-friendly regulations, attracts large FDI inflows, around $23 billion in 2022. Saudi Arabia's net inflows are $105 billion, and she posted $28.06 billion in FDI that year, reflecting partial liberalization initiatives. Israel typically receives robust tech-related investments. Qatar, in turn, invests heavily abroad, building a portfolio of strategic assets. Turkey has drawn foreign capital into construction, manufacturing, and real estate but faces cyclical constraints from inflation and currency volatility.

While investment fosters economic modernization, it can produce external dependencies. States reliant on external capital must align with investor-friendly policies. Conversely, large investment outflows-like from Saudi Arabia or Qatar-let those states wield global financial leverage. So economic might, if harnessed wisely, builds partnerships and underpins regional leadership.

Military Capacity and Arms Expenditures

Military prowess is a traditional barometer of power. The region devotes a high proportion of GDP to defense. Saudi Arabia stands out, spending around $75 billion in 2022, among the top five globally (Tian et al. 2023). Israel invests $23 billion annually but also operates a sophisticated indigenous defense industry, nuclear ambiguity, and robust training. Iran, hampered by sanctions, allocates less in absolute dollar terms but supports ballistic missile projects, regional proxies, and possibly nuclear ambitions, making it a formidable adversary (Lamrani 2020). Turkey boasts NATO's second-largest standing force (after the US), invests in drone technology, and has an expanding domestic defense sector (Ülgen & Kasapoglu 2017). Turkey also developes prudently its defense industry and arms sale markets in multiple ranges.

Global indexes such as the Global Firepower Ranking place Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Israel near the top among Middle Eastern militaries (Global Firepower 2024). Yet high budgets do not always equal combat effectiveness. The Saudi-led coalition's struggles against Houthi insurgents in Yemen revealed operational limitations, despite Riyadh's advanced equipment (Cordesman & Harrington 2018). Conversely, Israel's 2023 intelligence lapse regarding Hamas infiltration displayed vulnerabilities, even for a state widely admired for technology and intelligence networks (Zanotti et al. 2023).

Table: 3. Selected Military Indicators (2023–2024 Estimates)

Country	Defense Budget (US$ Billion)	Active Military Manpower (Thousands)	Tank Fleet	Total Combat Aircraft	Navy Fleet Size
Saudi Arabia	71.0	257	1,200+	914	57
Iran	9.9	610	1,600+	551	101
Israel	24.4	170	1,650+	612	67
Turkey	40.0	355	2,800+	1,069	186
Egypt	9.4	440	4,000+	1,080	140
UAE	15.5	65	700+	560	79
Qatar	14.0	66.5	300+	228	123
Iraq	5.2	193	300+	371	68
Syria	1.4	170	2,400+	452	47
Kuwait	9.5	72	400+	114	123

(Data adapted from Global Firepower 2024; SIPRI 2023).

Given these numbers, Saudi Arabia ranks as a defense-budget powerhouse, while Iran compels caution through large standing forces and proxy networks. Egypt's historically large army also stands out, though it relies heavily on US military aid. Turkey invests in local production, including drones and armored vehicles, aspiring to strategic autonomy. Israel remains a technology leader, possessing reputed nuclear capabilities that deter major conventional assaults (Mearsheimer 2006).

Dimensions of Soft Power

Beyond capabilities, effective power depends on how states convert resources into influence (Guzzini 2013). Soft power pertains to the attractiveness of a country's culture, policy model, or values. In the Middle East, certain states have demonstrated remarkable success in capturing global attention or establishing themselves as cultural and diplomatic intermediaries, an attribute that can translate into tangible gains such as trade deals, alliances, or conflict mediation roles.

Diplomatic Initiatives and Conflict Mediation

Regional heavyweights like Qatar and Oman have earned reputations as mediators. Qatar's efforts to host talks between the US and the Taliban or to negotiate prisoner swaps with Iran highlight how small states leverage wealth, neutrality, and advanced diplomacy to assume an outsized diplomatic profile (Noureddine 2023). The UAE hosted or facilitated Israeli Palestinian backchannel communications before the Abraham Accords (Rahman 2021). Later Qatar hosted that war and captive diplomacy betwen Israel and Hamas. Morocco's ties to Israel, combined with a leading role in the Arab world, have also placed it in certain conciliatory positions.

Saudi Arabia, under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, moved from a hyperactive foreign policy to a more diplomatic posture, culminating in the 2023 normalization of ties with Iran (Chivvis et al. 2023). While that shift does not resolve deep strategic differences, it elevated the Kingdom's status as a potential peacemaker. Concurrently, Turkey's President Erdogan frequently offers to host peace summits or joint security dialogues, for instance during the Ukrainian grain export arrangement in 2022 (Smagin 2023).

Egypt's historical role in the Arab League, as well as its 1979 peace treaty with Israel, situates it for mediation in Israeli Palestinian escalations. However, domestic fragility and economic woes often limit Cairo's bandwidth. Meanwhile, countries like Iran or Israel typically do not mediate third-party disputes but influence the region's power balance via direct involvement with aligned groups. Although Tehran occasionally promotes "regional security dialogues," many neighbors distrust its motives (Azizi 2022).

Cultural and Academic Influence

Soft power flows partially from cultural production, media, sports, or education. Turkey's film and television industries, for example, garnered immense popularity across the Arab world and beyond, shaping perceptions of modern Turkey (Valbjørn 2004). The UAE's and Qatar's airline giants-Emirates and Qatar Airways-function as global brands that project national images of modernity and hospitality (Jacobs 2023). Al-Jazeera, based in Doha, has revolutionized the media landscape in Arabic and English, giving Qatar disproportionate influence.

Israel's robust universities and tech sector yield significant global prestige in innovation, cybersecurity, and water-management solutions (Nye 1990). Saudi Arabia funds major philanthropic efforts, invests in foreign universities and hospitals, and hosts events like 'Davos in the Desert' intended to brand the Kingdom as open for business. Countries that integrate well

into knowledge economies or attract international students and conferences can enhance global reputations, as seen with the UAE's successful hosting of Expo 2020 and COP28.

Humanitarian Aid and Philanthropy

Another dimension involves large-scale humanitarian or development aid. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have financed reconstruction or relief efforts, from Pakistan to North Africa (Nirmal 2024). Turkey is the one of the most outstanding generous states in the region that hosts millions of Syrian refugees, which, while imposing domestic burdens, also fosters a humanitarian image. Iran has extended aid packages to allies like Syria or Lebanon, though it remains overshadowed by Western sanctions.

The strategic deployment of aid can build alliances or improve public perceptions. Critics, however, call some of this 'chequebook diplomacy,' suspecting that funds can be used to influence the domestic politics of recipients. Regardless, philanthropic engagements, if sustained, may open diplomatic channels that augment a donor's standing.

Branding and Mega-events

The hosting of global events has risen to prominence as a tool of soft power. Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup broadcast the country's identity to billions (Ebrahim 2024). The UAE regularly convenes top-level summits and expositions. Saudi Arabia seeks to attract tourists and international business summits, recently winning a bid to host the 2023 World Economic Forum Special Meeting. These spectacles aim to recast the brand of a country in ways that can yield intangible gains in prestige and partnerships.

Non-State Actors and Their Significance

Discussing power in the Middle East would be incomplete without acknowledging militias, ideological networks, and armed factions that challenge or complement state power. Groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Gaza exercise not just armed force but also provide social services. They nurture cross-border ties: Hezbollah forms part of Iran's 'axis of resistance,' while Hamas has benefitted from Iranian support despite internal disagreements (Levitt 2023). The Houthis in Yemen similarly rely on Iranian assistance, although they exhibit their own goals.

Because these groups can disrupt or reconfigure alliances, they complicate the conventional notion that states monopolize violence. In some instances, states piggyback on their reach: Iran extends its influence into Lebanon or Syria via Hezbollah, circumventing direct

confrontation. Saudi Arabia, in turn, finances local proxies in Syria or invests in political actors across the region. Israel forms security relationships with Kurdish groups in 'certain contexts,' or quietly aligns with various tribes in Syria, though less systematically.

Hamas's 7 October 2023 attacks on Israel exemplify how a non-state entity can abruptly alter the regional order, derailing prospective Israeli Saudi normalization and forcing external powers like the US to respond militarily (Zanotti et al. 2023). For IR theory, the lesson is that sub-state actors not only shape national security dilemmas but also, at times, override or contradict the strategies of their sponsors. Iran, for instance, could not fully prevent Hamas from taking actions that triggered escalations. Prolonged conflicts then prompt re-alignments among states (Levitt 2023).

Composite Indexes and The Quest for An Integrated Ranking

Scholars and policy analysts rely on composite indexes to evaluate a state's overall power. While any single index may prove incomplete, cross-referencing multiple measures can yield a balanced view. The following approach merges essential "hard" and "soft" factors into a broad "Power and Influence Composite Index." Six variables are used for hard power:

1. Natural resources (oil, gas, strategic materials)
2. Human resources (population, labor force)
3. GDP per capita
4. Foreign Direct Investment (as sign of economic dynamism)
5. Military might (budgets, troop strength, advanced technology)
6. Geopolitical position (control of chokepoints, maritime routes, geographic centrality)

Six soft-power variables are included:

1. Diplomatic initiatives (mediation, conflict resolution)
2. Cultural and academic influence (media, education, brand image)
3. Historical or religious significance (holy sites, recognized cultural heritage)
4. Internal stability and governance (cohesion, regime legitimacy)
5. Regional alliances (memberships in institutions, strategic pacts)
6. Regional leadership (capacity to lead or shape norms)

Each variable is given a 1 to 5 score. The sum for each domain (hard or soft) is then added for a maximum score of 60. While approximately, it highlights relative standings (Pareto Economics 2024).

Table: 4. Power and Influence Composite Index (Illustrative)

Country	Hard Power Subtotal (max 30)	Soft Power Subtotal (max 30)	Overall Score (max 60)	Approx. Ranking
Saudi Arabia	23	24	47	1
Israel	18	26	44	2
Turkey	20	24	44	2
Iran	20	23	43	4
UAE	19	21	40	5
Qatar	19	21	40	5
Egypt	17	21	38	7
Bahrain	13	22	35	8
Kuwait	17	16	33	9
Oman	13	20	33	9
Jordan	10	20	30	11
Iraq	12	15	27	12
Lebanon	10	12	22	13
West Bank/Gaza	5	15	20	14
Yemen	8	9	17	15
Syria	8	9	17	15

(Zdanowski, J. (2024). *Middle East 2024: Decoding the complexities of a regional system*. AFM Publishing House)

In this illustrative table, Saudi Arabia edges out other states for top position, powered by its massive resource base, large budget, and growing diplomatic role. Israel and Turkey tie in second place, though with divergent distributions: Israel's technological edge and high soft-power brand offset a smaller population, while Turkey's geostrategic location and NATO membership weigh heavily. Iran's robust military and population are tempered by sanctions and domestic issues, placing it somewhat behind. The UAE and Qatar excel in GDP per capita, FDI, and cultural branding, though limited manpower constrains their overall ranking. Egypt's

large population and strong diplomatic legacy offset a weaker economy on a per capita basis. The remainder cluster lower, with countries in conflict (Yemen, Syria) or in partial meltdown (Lebanon) near the bottom.

Such a ranking is by nature approximate. Different weighting might reorder the standings—for instance, emphasizing cultural leadership might raise the UAE's or Qatar's scores further, while focusing on population and territory might boost Egypt or Iran. Additionally, real-world contingencies, from wars to leadership turnover, can temporarily record influence. But the table clarifies broad patterns: Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, Iran, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt form a leading cluster. Other states either remain with small rentier sheikhdoms, hamper themselves with fragile governance, or endure protracted conflict.

Implications of the Composite Index

Two observations stand out. First, the region's order is not purely "bipolar." Instead, it is marked fairly by four balanced major powers—Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran—plus two or three rising smaller powers. That fosters an environment with multiple fault lines and alliances. Second, variations in soft power confirm that intangible factors can compensate for certain weaknesses: the UAE and Qatar, for instance, outperform what their geographic or demographic size alone would suggest.

Because each pole has unique vulnerabilities, no single hegemon can impose stable order. Saudi Arabia depends on oil prices and US defense. Israel's existential concerns revolve around demographic trends and external hostility. Turkey deals with the PKK affiliated terror insurgencies and economic problems such as inflation, while Iran endures sanctions and domestic unrest. Their behaviors thus exhibit a mixture of alliance-building, proxy warfare, and diplomatic initiatives. The lesser states, from Jordan to Oman, carve niche roles in mediation or tourism but cannot match the big players in setting the regional agenda (Fawcett 2018). There is also systemic great pressure over regional Powers (Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel) because of the lack of the common security identity to have maintained the shifting regional and global interests and threat perceptions of the Great Powers within the dynamism of regional complexity.

Challenges To Power Projection

No matter how strong a state's resources look on paper, several factors can undermine attempts to translate them into genuine influence. First, authoritarian systems can breed corruption and hamper institutional performance. Some Middle Eastern armies, especially those of Iraq or

Libya in the past, collapsed quickly in the face of smaller but better-motivated adversaries. Similarly, high arms expenditures do not guarantee operational effectiveness, as seen with the Saudi-led coalition's difficulties. Institutional competence is crucial (Cordesman 2018).

Second, domestic opposition movements may tie the hands of leaders. In democracies like Israel, public backlash over protracted wars can constrain government strategies. In autocracies, fear of unrest can push rulers to clamp down on freedoms, risking further radicalization. Where a state is ethnically or religiously fragmented, forging a consistent foreign policy may prove elusive. Third, the presence of well-armed non-state groups complicates the region's security. Iran has capitalized on proxy networks, but so have other states, creating a labyrinth of alliances that can unexpectedly blow back. Governments sometimes do not fully control these proxies, resulting in wars that are not necessarily planned or desired by national decisionmakers.

Fourth, external powers remain relevant. The US presence, though partially reduced, retains a formidable infrastructure of bases and partnerships. Russia's and China's roles, if less comprehensive, nevertheless create alternate forums for arms deals or economic collaboration. States that attempt to defy the Western-led order, such as Iran or Syria, find themselves constrained by sanctions and international isolation (Chivvis et al. 2023). Fifth, the unsettled Israeli Palestinian conflict frequently recasts alliances. The events of 7 October 2023 show how quickly a crisis can arise, forcing states to realign or put planned normalization on hold. Public opinion in Arab societies also influences how far governments can collaborate openly with Israel. The West Bank and Gaza remain zones of permanent tension, shaping the region's broader stability (Al Talei et al. 2023).

The Shifting Landscape of Strategic Partnerships

At times, scholars have expected the region to polarize into pro-West and pro-Iran blocs. The pattern is more fluid. Saudi Arabia, Israel, and some Gulf states gravitate toward the US for security but also engage with China on trade and technology. Turkey, a NATO member, cooperates militarily with Russia in Syria and has purchased Russian missile systems. Iran draws closer to Russia and China yet has signaled it may talk to Western powers when that suits its economic aims (Pollack 2023). Qatar and Oman are friendlier to Iran than is typical for Gulf monarchies, each seeking a neutral posture to maintain distinct identities.

One can speak of multiple 'security cords.' The first involves the 'Axis of Resistance,' linking Iran with Assad's Syria, Hezbollah, and occasionally Hamas. The second includes

'moderate' or pro-West Arab states plus Israel, although internal differences remain among them (Darwish 2023). A third dimension emerges from the Turkey–Qatar alignment, shaped by affinity with political Islam but also by opportunistic trade. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia seeks smaller alignments like the Red Sea Council. The region therefore features overlapping networks rather than a single rivalry, which further complicates efforts to measure and rank the major powers (Fawcett 2018: 116). Saving skeptics, however there are multiple challenges and threats to the peace as distortions but there are many bilateral and multilateral partnerships and alliance projections such as 'developmental path' to search for prosperity in the regionwide.

Related Research

Studies in the field of International Relations that examine the power and security dynamics of the Middle East generally show that the region is a highly layered arena open to the influence of both global and regional powers (Gause 1999; Binder 1958; Khalidi 1995). It is noted that two main perspectives: structural realism and neoclassical realism—have been used in a complementary fashion, particularly from the 2000s onward (Rose 1998; Ripsman et al. 2016). Following the September 11, 2001, attacks, the counterterrorism policies led by the United States fundamentally altered the security strategies and threat perceptions of regional states (Weinbaum 2007; Bill 1996). In this context, the Arab Spring of 2011 deepened societal mobilization and made both non-state actors and identity-based groups more visible (Buzan & Wæver 2003; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami 2014).

Regarding Regional and Global Power Struggles, literature surveys by scholars such as Jacobs (2023) and Chivvis et al. (2023) point to the increasingly autonomous policies of regional powers—Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, and Turkey—and emphasize that the influence of global actors such as the United States and Russia is not always decisive. Similarly, Binder (1958-2011) and Gause (1999) highlight that the Middle East, rather than functioning as a fully dependent subsystem, has evolved into a partially autonomous structure. Moreover, Indyk (2024) and Carlsom (2024) underscore that China's economic involvement and Russia's military and diplomatic maneuvers may be creating a new distribution of power in the region. These emerging balances complicate the security architecture that has been described as 'heteropolar' or 'multi-centric' (Carlsom 2024).

With respect to the Israeli Palestinian Issue and the Conflict Analysis Approach, Zanotti et al. (2023) and Al Talei et al. (2023) assert that the Israeli Palestinian question remains one of the Middle East's central conflicts and that Hamas's surprise attack on Israel on October 7,

2023, has once again made this dispute a focal point of global diplomacy. This perspective aligns with studies employing conflict analysis methods. Researchers in conflict analysis focus on the historical background of the conflict, its underlying causes, the demands of various parties (state and non-state actors), and, ultimately, the capacity for peace (Bağcı 2013; Akyeşilmen 2015).

In this context, Daban (2024) approaches the Israeli Palestinian conflict using 'conflict analysis,' tracing the issue's historical background to Napoleon's Egyptian Campaign (1798) and examining it as an ongoing power struggle closely tied to the United Nations General Assembly resolutions of 1947. The author analyzes the roles played by non-state actors, such as Hamas and Fatah, in both internal political rivalries and crises with Israel, providing illustrative examples. Moreover, the work points out how shifts between right- and left-wing governments in Israel have influenced the peace capacity, while ambiguities in the international community's proposals for a two-state solution have further deepened the conflict (Daban 2024). Additionally, references to the limited applicability of UN General Assembly and UN Security Council resolutions suggest that the effectiveness of international law in the region has become questionable (United Nations 2024; Çetin 2023).

Regarding the Role of Non-State Actors and the Identity Factor, Cordesman (2018) and Seeberg (2016) likewise emphasize the growing impact of non-state actors in the region. Groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis appear to shape security dynamics by leveraging external support and local constituencies (Levitt 2023; Roy 2008). Daban (2024) also contends that these non-state entities increase the 'intensity of conflict' and undermine peace negotiations, while a significant segment of the Palestinian population sees them as representing 'legitimate resistance.' Similarly, the decision by many Arab states to interpret the Palestinian issue according to their own national interests -especially since Egypt's signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978- further restricts opportunities for negotiation between the parties (Best et al. 2012; Balcı 2016).

In a general sense, the studies above indicate that the power struggles and conflicts in the Middle East have turned the region into a 'partially autonomous' subsystem (Gause 1999; Binder 1958), while also noting the ongoing need for international intervention, particularly in the Israeli Palestinian dispute (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami 2002; Al Talei et al. 2023). Research centered on conflict analysis, such as Daban (2024), reveals that resolving the conflict on a permanent basis requires a holistic evaluation of historical causes and the roles of regional and global powers. Consequently, while the non-implementation of UN resolutions perpetuates a

'frozen conflict' (Shlaim 2002), the limited international consensus on a two-state solution perpetuates instability (Kattan 2021; Yıldırım 2021).

Hence, these studies, drawing on both structural and neoclassical realist approaches and on region-specific historical and sociological datum (Sultanzada 2021; Sağlam 2023: 73), contribute to a deeper understanding of power rivalries in the Middle East and the multifaceted nature of the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Evaluating the stances of both local and global actors is crucial for constructing a sustainable peace strategy (Jacobs 2023; Indyk 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the profound complexity and fluidity of power dynamics and security architectures in the Middle East from the post-9/11 era to the aftermath of the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks. While the region has historically been influenced by global and regional powers, local states and non-state actors have demonstrated increasing agency, reshaping alliances and challenging conventional assumptions of external dominance. The intricate interplay between systemic factors-such as the distribution of military and economic capabilities-and domestic variables-ranging from regime legitimacy to sub-state identities-continues to drive events on the ground.

From the perspective of structural realism, power vacuums and an absence of overarching authority fuel competitive strategies among major states-Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel-each seeking to consolidate its position through alliances, economic leverage, or proxy networks. At the same time, the rise of non-state actors, identity-based mobilizations, and regional rebellions highlights the limitations of purely state-centric analyses. The Arab Spring demonstrated how popular discontent can abruptly shift the internal and external orientations of governments, introducing unprecedented fragmentation and localized forms of competition.

The October 2023 events involving Hamas and Israel reaffirm that the Middle East is neither a rigidly bipolar nor a fully unified subsystem. Instead, it exhibits multiple poles of power, each with distinct vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the region's alignment with or against external powers-whether the United States, Russia, or China-remains conditional and selective, driven by cost-benefit calculations and, increasingly, by emergent public opinion pressures. The interplay between domestic political imperatives and global power shifts suggests that stability in the region will continue to be fragile, as new crises or local provocations can alter diplomatic tracks and defense partnerships with little warning. In theoretical terms, a combined

perspective-integrating insights from the Regional Area Studies on culture, identity, and local politics with IR frameworks on system-level forces-proves most comprehensive for decoding the Middle East's evolving security landscape. Applying multi-theoretical lenses, particularly neoclassical realism and constructivist approaches, can illuminate how power resources are perceived and converted into influence such as "complex realism" iniatives to analyze foreing and domestic politics of the region'states. Going forward, any meaningful regional security architecture will need to address core unresolved disputes-especially the Israeli Palestinian conflict- and find ways to incorporate non-state stakeholders as well as the region's diverse publics.

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Çıkar Çatışması:	Çalışmada kişiler veya kurumlar arası çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.	***Conflict of Interest:***	The authors declare that declare no conflict of interest.
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