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Malikova Z. (2025). The Middle East and Geopolitical Competition. *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi*, 12 (4), 265-278.

The Middle East and Geopolitical Competition

Abstract

The Middle East region retains traditionally important significance in world politics and economics. This is due to its geographical location, access to the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean, rich natural resources, and the potential for the transit of oil, gas, and other strategic goods from Asia to Europe. The Middle East is strategically situated along the trade routes that link Europe to the Far East and East Africa. This region boasts a rich historical background, having been the cradle of early human civilizations, the establishment of the first state institutions, and the emergence of monotheistic religions. In contemporary times, the Middle East has gained significant geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic relevance, transforming into a battleground for global powers vying for energy resources. This study aims to elucidate the geopolitical significance of the Middle East, alongside the economic, ideological, and political conflicts among global powers concerning energy in the area. As a result of the study, the author concludes that the Middle East will continue to hold a significant position in the geopolitical landscape for both global and regional stakeholders. The ongoing geopolitical developments within the region are poised to influence international politics and contribute to the emergence of a new geopolitical framework. As a new world order begins to take form, the influence of global and regional players in the area is growing, leading to the establishment of new power dynamics and the redefinition of borders.

Keywords: Middle East Region, Geopolitical Competition, Geopolitical Interests, Geostrategic Locations



Orta Doğu ve Jeopolitik Rekabet

Öz

Orta Doğu bölgesi, dünya siyasetinde ve ekonomisinde geleneksel olarak önemli bir yere sahiptir. Bu durum, bölgenin coğrafi konumu, Akdeniz ve Hint Okyanusu'na erişimi, zengin doğal kaynakları ve Asya'dan Avrupa'ya petrol, gaz ve diğer stratejik malların transit geçişi için sahip olduğu potansiyelden kaynaklanmaktadır. Orta Doğu, Avrupa'yı Uzak Doğu ve Doğu Afrika'ya bağlayan ticaret yolları üzerinde stratejik bir konuma sahiptir. Bu bölge, erken insan uygarlıklarının beşiği, ilk devlet kurumlarının kurulduğu yer ve tek tanrılı dinlerin ortaya çıktığı yer olması nedeniyle zengin bir tarihi geçmişse sahiptir. Günümüzde Orta Doğu, enerji kaynakları için rekabet eden küresel güçlerin savaş alanına haline gelerek önemli jeopolitik, jEOekonomik ve jEOstratejik öneme kavuşmuştur. Bu çalışma, Orta Doğu'nun jeopolitik önemini ve bölgedeki enerji kaynakları konusunda küresel güçler arasında yaşanan ekonomik, ideolojik ve siyasi çatışmaları aydınlatmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın sonucunda yazar, Orta Doğu'nun hem küresel hem de bölgesel paydaşlar için jeopolitik manzarada önemli bir konuma sahip olmaya devam edeceği sonucuna varmıştır. Bölgede devam eden jeopolitik gelişmeler, uluslararası siyaseti etkileyecik ve yeni bir jeopolitik çerçeveyin ortaya çıkmasına katkıda bulunacaktır. Yeni bir dünya düzeni şekillenmeye başladıkça, bölgedeki küresel ve bölgesel aktörlerin etkisi artmaka ve bu da yeni güç dinamiklerinin oluşmasına ve sınırların yeniden tanımlanmasına yol açmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Orta Doğu Bölgesi, Jeopolitik Rekabet, Jeopolitik Çıkarlar, JEOstratejik Konumlar

Introductio

In contemporary global politics and international relations, various regions within the Eurasian expanse hold significant importance, with the Middle East being the most prominent among them. This region has historically contributed to the advancement of humanity, influencing political, economic, cultural, and strategic dynamics not only in the present but throughout history. The Middle East serves as a crucial juncture between East and West, recognized as the birthplace of numerous civilizations. It has functioned not only as a conduit for natural resources and trade commodities but also as a meeting point for diverse beliefs, cultures, and civilizations, facilitating their exchange and transmission. The geopolitical significance, structural characteristics, and distinctiveness of the Middle East underscore its vital role and relevance in global politics. Strategically situated at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and Africa, the Middle East occupies a central and critical geographical position. The Cold War era saw a significant rise in the geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of the Middle East, intensifying international competition and conflict. During this time, global powers began to enhance their strategies

aimed at exerting control over the region. Following the Cold War, the Middle East's geopolitical relevance re-emerged, particularly concerning the management of international energy resources and transportation routes. The strategies employed by participants in the "New Great Game" to establish a foothold in the region have notably influenced the geopolitical landscape. The Middle East has consistently served as a theater for struggles over hegemony, geopolitical supremacy, and energy resource control, a characteristic that persists today. In contemporary times, the region remains a central focus for global actors, particularly in the foreign policy initiatives of the United States. In the early years of the 21st century, global interest in the Middle East surged to unprecedented heights across military, economic, and political dimensions. The geopolitical phenomenon known as the "Arab Spring" triggered significant geopolitical shifts, resulting in violent confrontations stemming from socio-political unrest, the onset of civil wars, and the emergence of new security threats, alongside foreign interventions. The most tragic chapter of the "Arab Spring" unfolded in Syria, where a series of dramatic events persisted for 13 years. What began as a civil war in Syria escalated the already precarious situation in the region to alarming levels. The rise of new security challenges in contemporary times, coupled with the efforts of global and regional powers to assert or enhance their positions within the evolving geopolitical landscape, has exacerbated competition in the area. The study employed several methodologies: 1. The historical-descriptive method was utilized to explore the primary factors driving the struggle for dominance in the Middle East and the underlying motives of the existing contradictions; 2. A comparative analysis was performed to examine the geopolitical interests of major powers vying for hegemony in the Middle East across various historical periods; 3. The research also involved an investigation and analysis of the foreign policies of the key players engaged in the geopolitical rivalry in the contemporary Middle East, focusing on the factors that fuel this competition, as well as the nature of the contradictions and conflicts, through observational systematic analysis and analytical-prognostic methods.

Numerous researchers have explored this subject. M. Harunoğulları investigated the geopolitics of the Middle East and the energy conflicts among major powers in a collaborative work titled "Middle East Geopolitics" (Orta Doğu Jeopolitiği- Middle East Geopolitics, 2022). This study analyzed the policies and strategies of Türkiye as well as those of global and non-regional actors. Additionally, Cohen, in his book "Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations", highlighted that the colonial strategies of major powers, along with intra-regional issues and the rivalry of non-regional entities, have undermined stability in the Middle East (Cohen, 2014). In contemporary times, the

dominance of the United States in the Middle East has been challenged by China's emergence in the geopolitical arena of the region. The early 21st century witnessed significant shifts in US foreign policy concerning the Middle East.

1. The geopolitical position and importance of the Middle East

Geopolitics seeks to establish geographical equilibria through political and diplomatic interactions, aiming to advance state interests within a given geographical context or to counteract competing powers. The geopolitical landscape is evaluated by considering the geographical positioning of both global and regional power centers, along with their capabilities and strengths (Özey, 2017). Shifts in the global geopolitical landscape influence regional and national geopolitical standings, thereby altering the overall geopolitical framework. The foreign policy initiatives and strategies employed by states to assert their national interests in specific regions may align with or oppose the interests of other nations. The political, economic, and various other conflicts among global and regional players foster geopolitical rivalry in those areas, leading to the development of geostrategies aimed at safeguarding geopolitical interests. Historically, the Middle East has been a focal point of intense geopolitical competition, consistently attracting the attention of major powers and retaining its significance in contemporary geopolitics.

The Middle East is characterized by various geographical boundaries and is commonly referred to as the Middle East region or Southwest Asia. Numerous studies analyze this region from both macro and micro perspectives. Historians typically include not only the Arab nations of Asia and North Africa but also Iran, Israel, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkey within the scope of the Middle East. This article focuses on the Middle East in its traditional context, specifically the geopolitical area that comprises Egypt, Türkiye, Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Arabian Peninsula. It will explore the historical and current dynamics of geopolitical rivalry in the region, which extends from Egypt and the Levant along the Mediterranean coast in the west, to the Red Sea in the north, Türkiye in the north, and Iran along with the western parts of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Peninsula in the east (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Middle East (<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/>).



The geographical closeness of Western Asia to Europe led British colonialists to initially refer to the area as the Near East, a designation that was later replaced by the term Middle East. The phrase “Middle East / Moyen Orient” was introduced into political discourse by US admiral, naval historian, and geostrategist Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1902 through his article “The Persian Gulf and International Relations,” published in the London-based journal “National Review” (Mahan, 2011). Mahan emphasized the strategic significance of the Levant, the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf in his writings. Following World War II, the term “Middle East” gained traction in academic and official contexts. In essence, the nomenclature of the region reflects a Eurocentric perspective. The geopolitical rivalry in the Middle East has roots that extend back to the region's inception. Serving as a crucial segment of the historical Silk Road, this area functioned not only as a conduit for trade between the Far East and Europe, as well as North Africa, but also as a crossroads for various sciences, military forces, ideologies, religions, and cultures. It facilitated the transfer of scientific advancements and innovations from the East to the West. Since antiquity, the significance of controlling the trade route linking Asia and Europe has been paramount, and the struggle for dominance in this region has persisted for centuries. Presently, the Middle East showcases remnants of ancient civilizations, diverse religions, and various ethnic groups, reflecting a remarkable historical and cultural richness. The Suez Canal, the Persian Gulf, and the Straits of Hormuz and Tiran are strategically important locations in global politics and international commerce, serving as key geostrategic gateways from Europe to Asia.

These points significantly shape the geostrategic landscape of the Middle East. Achieving dominance in the World Island (Eurasia) primarily hinges on sustaining political, economic, and military influence in the Middle East, along with control over these vital geostrategic routes.

2. The Energy Resources of the Middle East as a Key Factor in Geopolitical Competition in the Region

The vast majority of the world's oil reserves are situated in the Middle East, which has consequently linked the region closely with oil production. The existence of abundant oil fields has significantly enhanced the geoeconomic and geostrategic significance of this area, transforming previously desolate desert landscapes into valuable territories following the discovery of oil. This transformation has sparked intense geopolitical rivalry over energy resources. Beyond being the primary source of global oil, the Middle East also stands as a focal point for both regional and international tensions, contradictions, and conflicts. Historically, the competition for dominance over energy resources has been a principal catalyst for world wars, while in contemporary times, it has fueled regional disputes and civil wars. As it retains its geopolitical relevance, the Middle East has evolved into a battleground where global powers vie for control over energy resources in the present era.

The Middle East is home to approximately 60% of the world's oil reserves and 42% of its natural gas reserves, rendering it a crucial area for nations reliant on energy. In contrast, the European Union and Asia Pacific regions possess only limited reserves. Projections indicate that global dependence on Middle Eastern countries for energy resources will persist for at least the next 40 to 50 years. The primary consumers of oil from this region include China, Japan, India, and EU nations. OPEC countries play a significant role in the oil market, and currently, they, along with consumer nations and multinational oil corporations, are key players in the region, engaging in geopolitical competition. Recent trends have shown that oil exchanges have become increasingly influential in the market, particularly due to fluctuations in oil prices. The interplay between energy resources and global trade further elucidates the connection between energy and political dynamics in the Middle East.

3. The History of the Struggle for Supremacy in the Middle East

Despite the limited influence of non-regional actors prior to the 19th century, the decline of the Ottoman Empire, which had dominated the Middle East for four centuries, allowed global powers to begin exerting their strategies and policies in the area. A. Mehen's analysis of the heightened competition among major powers for the reallocation of colonial territories in the late 19th century highlights the struggle for dominance in the region among the German Empire, Great Britain, France, and Russia (Orta Doğu Jeopolitiği- Middle East Geopolitics, 2022). This competition underscored the Middle East's significance in a geostrategic framework, emphasizing the critical role of naval power and coastal regions in shaping future international relations. The prevailing notion emerged that a state or coalition of states possessing geopolitical dominance in this area could potentially govern the world at large. British geopolitician Halford Mackinder referred to the Middle East as a "marginal region," noting that the geopolitical, political, and military dynamics occurring there have substantial repercussions for adjacent regions. The Middle East regained its significant influence, which had diminished during the industrial revolution, following the discovery of oil and natural gas in the area. Global powers seeking dominance primarily focused on establishing control over this strategically important region.

The aforementioned clash of geopolitical interests among major powers resulted in global conflicts that brought about significant transformations, ultimately leading to the disintegration of empires and the establishment of a new geopolitical landscape in the Middle East. The region experienced pivotal wars throughout the 20th century, largely driven by the renewed interests of great powers following the discovery of oil reserves and the strategic significance of this resource. Following World War I, the Ottoman Empire fell, and its territories in the Middle East were placed under the administration of Great Britain and France through a mandate system. Within the framework of the Versailles-Washington system, these nations held geopolitical dominance in the region. Concurrently, Great Britain and France secured control over the strategically vital Suez Canal, which facilitated maritime passage from Europe to the Indian Ocean. However, the aftermath of World War II ushered in new geopolitical dynamics that profoundly affected the balance of power in the Middle East. The United States, previously a non-Eurasian entity with limited influence in the region, and the Soviet Union, which emerged stronger post-war, became dominant powers and engaged in a geopolitical contest within the area. Consequently, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to an expansion of both international and regional rivalries, shaping the

contemporary history and political boundaries of the Middle East. The modern borders of the region, long influenced by foreign powers, began to take form in the early 20th century.

Prior to the onset of the Second World War, Great Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union sought to assert their influence in the region and expand their respective spheres of power. Despite Egypt facing military defeat due to the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the subsequent tripartite invasion, it achieved a significant political victory by securing its rights over the canal. In the aftermath of the Suez Crisis, which diminished the geopolitical standing of Great Britain and France, the United States emerged as the leading power in the Middle East, allowing it to bolster its influence in the area. During the Cold War, the Middle East became a critical battleground for geopolitical rivalry between the USSR and Western nations, particularly the United States. Amidst this ideological conflict, the region's countries were effectively polarized into two factions: those aligned with the United States and its allies (including Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia) and those Middle Eastern nations (such as Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) that sought to challenge Western dominance through political, economic, and military support from the USSR.

During the Cold War, the geopolitical rivalry between the United States, which aimed to establish dominance in the region recognized as a battleground for global powers, and the USSR, which sought access to warm waters, laid the groundwork for various ideological, economic, political, and cultural conflicts. The United States' isolationist stance, supported by NATO, CENTO, and SEATO, clashed with the USSR's ambitions for maritime access. Following World War II, the withdrawal of Great Britain from its influence in the Middle East allowed the United States to assert its presence in the area. According to the Rimland theory proposed by American geopolitical scholar Nicholas John Spykman, the United States aimed to expand its geopolitical influence in the Middle East as a key component of its foreign policy, which included establishing military and naval bases in the surrounding countries. The geopolitical competition among global powers during the Cold War resulted in intra-regional conflicts, movements for regional integration and solidarity, and significant restructuring. Throughout this period, the United States developed a comprehensive network of military installations in the Middle East. Historically, the region has seen geopolitical dominance shift from the Ottoman Empire to Great Britain and France, and

subsequently to the USA and USSR following the Suez Crisis. The geopolitical landscape after the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union prompted global actors to formulate new strategies concerning the region.

The rise in terrorist activities and the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) following the events of September 11, 2001, have compelled global stakeholders to revise their perspectives on security. This shift has contributed to the internationalization of various conflicts and tensions between the Islamic and Western spheres in the post-Cold War era. Consequently, the geopolitical rivalry among global actors, which intensified their military and political engagements in the region after the Ottoman Empire's dissolution in the early 20th century, has given rise to a new phase of conflict that commenced with the “Arab Spring” in the second quarter of the 21st century.

4. US Involvement in Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East

The theoretical underpinnings of the United States' geopolitical interests in the Middle East were largely shaped by the concepts proposed by Alfred Thayer Mahan and Nicholas John Spykman, whose foreign policy strategies were influenced by their geopolitical theories. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Mahan's “Sea Power” theory served as a foundational reference for subsequent analyses. Spykman, a Yale University professor of international relations, highlighted the increasing geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of the Middle East, building upon Mahan's ideas. In 1940, he introduced the Rimland theory in his publication “Geography of Peace.” Unlike H. Mackinder's Heartland theory, Spykman argued that the coastal regions of Eurasia held critical strategic value for controlling the interior landmass. He posited that geopolitics involves the formulation of a nation's security policy with consideration of geographical elements. Spykman focused on the coastlines of countries or continents, particularly noting the densely populated western, southern, and eastern peripheries of the Eurasian landmass (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Spykman's Rimland (<https://library.fiveable.me/>)



The Rimland concept further divided Mackinder's "Inner or Marginal Crescent" into three distinct segments:

1. The coastal regions of Europe;
2. The desert areas of the Arabian-Middle Eastern region;
3. The monsoon-affected regions of Asia.

Spykman advocated for the unification of the Rimland nations to secure their existence during World War II. Following Germany's defeat and the increased geopolitical reach of the USSR, Spykman's concepts were integrated into the United States' strategy for containing communist expansion during the Cold War. Nevertheless, the varying levels of autonomy among the Rimland states, along with their diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, prevented any single power from exerting control over the region. Consequently, the Rimland emerged as a crucial area for the United States, significantly shaping its foreign policy approach in the region from the mid-20th century onward.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the United States positioned itself to benefit alongside Great Britain and France, thereby enhancing its influence in the region's economic and political landscape. While the British government sought to ensure that the United States would take direct control over certain areas, America's primary focus was on implementing an open policy regarding the former Ottoman territories. The US government's

endorsement of the British-French strategies outlined in the Sykes-Picot Agreements was a strategic move aimed at two key objectives: 1) to identify unoccupied land in the region for American enterprises; and 2) to establish a stable political environment, deemed crucial for economic growth and business interests. Consequently, the United States did not oppose Britain's commitments to grant the Arabs their own independent states and territories in return for military assistance against the Ottoman Empire during World War I (Alnasrawi, 1989). The Soviet Union sought opportunities to deploy military forces in the Middle East to safeguard its geopolitical interests. Economic factors were not a consideration in the USSR's involvement in the region, as Soviet vessels accounted for merely 1% of the traffic through the Suez Canal. Additionally, the Soviet Union had no intention of acquiring Middle Eastern oil, given that it was already an oil exporter. Instead, the primary focus was on political and geopolitical objectives. The USSR aimed to undermine Western influence by gaining control over the Suez Canal and the oil reserves in the Middle East, thereby establishing political dominance in the area and, if feasible, destabilizing Western presence there. In response, the United States had two main objectives: to assist in alleviating the economic challenges faced by regional countries and to communicate, both individually and collectively, the potential consequences of communist dominance, while also supporting these nations in their efforts to resist communism.

The Eisenhower Doctrine, particularly its provisions concerning the deployment of American military forces in the Middle East, sparked considerable debate within the US Congress. Nonetheless, the House of Representatives passed the Eisenhower Doctrine with a substantial majority on January 30, followed by the Senate's approval on March 5, thereby granting the president the authority he sought. Additionally, Congress allocated a budget of \$200 million annually for three years to support this initiative (Hahn, 2006). The significance of the Eisenhower Doctrine for US foreign policy is twofold. Firstly, it greatly broadened the extent of US engagement with the Middle East. While the Truman Doctrine initially indicated American interest in the region by providing military aid to Türkiye and Greece, it was limited in scope. In contrast, the Eisenhower Doctrine encompassed the entire Middle East and aimed to protect the nations within the region from the threat of communism through the deployment of American forces.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States supplanted Great Britain as the primary security guarantor for Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations in the Persian Gulf, with one of its key objectives being to secure a consistent supply of oil from the region (Cohen, 2014). The Gulf Cooperation

Council (GCC) became increasingly significant to the US, which had established its dominance over its principal geopolitical adversary in the area. Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former US National Security Advisor, highlighted in his work, “The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives,” that the GCC experienced a “political awakening” following the Cold War, reflecting the emergence of a multipolar global landscape. He referred to the Greater Middle East as the “Global Balkans,” emphasizing the region's geopolitical significance and asserting that control over it would confer hegemony over Eurasia (Brzezinski, 2016). Following the Cold War, the strategic significance of the Middle East re-emerged, particularly concerning the control of international energy resources and transportation routes. The dissolution of the USSR altered the geopolitical dynamics established during the Cold War, favoring Western interests. Russia, lacking a coherent strategy to address the new geopolitical landscape in the region, saw many of the military bases it inherited from the Soviet Union become inactive, as it was recognized as the legal successor to the USSR.

Conclusion

The Middle East continues to be one of the most important geopolitical and geoeconomic centers of the international system today, just as it has been throughout history. The region's unique location, its vast natural resources, and its rich cultural and spiritual heritage have consistently drawn the attention not only of regional actors but also of global powers. This strategic allure has turned the Middle East into a near-constant arena of competition, intervention, and conflict. The historical processes examined within the scope of this article clearly demonstrate that Western powers' interventions in the region, which began with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, are rooted not only in political motives but also in economic and military interests. Initially, Britain and France emerged as the primary actors shaping the region; however, especially after World War II, this role was increasingly taken over by the United States and the Soviet Union. The ideological and geostrategic rivalry between these two superpowers during the Cold War forced regional countries to align with one of the poles, which in turn deepened instability in the Middle East. As one of the most resource-rich areas in terms of energy, the Middle East became even more critical from the mid-20th century onward, with the rising global demand for oil and natural gas. The region has stood out not only as a supplier of energy but also as a transit hub for energy transportation

routes. As a result, energy security policies have become a core element of the foreign policies of major powers toward the region. Sociopolitical transformations such as the “Arab Spring” at the beginning of the 21st century further exacerbated the region’s fragility. The ensuing civil wars, terrorism, migration crises, and foreign interventions reshaped the geopolitical balance in the Middle East. In this process, not only the United States but also China, Russia, the European Union, and regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have developed various policies to expand their influence. This multi-actor structure has rendered the competition even more complex. The article demonstrates that classical geopolitical theories (Mahan, Spykman, Mackinder, etc.) remain relevant in understanding today’s Middle East. The fact that U.S. policies are directly related to these theories reveals how theoretical approaches in academic literature are reflected in practice. Spykman’s Rimland theory underpins the U.S. strategy of establishing military bases along coastal regions and encircling rival powers, while Mahan’s emphasis on sea power explains the control of strategic waterways such as the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Persian Gulf. In conclusion, the geopolitical struggle in the Middle East is not solely based on military and energy factors but also includes ideological, cultural, and economic dimensions. This struggle directly impacts the domestic politics of regional states, either making local actors dependent on global powers or pushing them into competition for regional leadership. In this sense, the Middle East is likely to remain one of the primary conflict zones not only of the past but also of the present and the foreseeable future. The transformation of the global system, changes in energy policies, the strengthening of multipolarity, and the emergence of new technological and cyber security dimensions will reshape the nature of geopolitical competition in the Middle East in the coming years. However, the fundamental reality remains that the region’s geopolitical significance stems not merely from its resources, but from the struggle to control those resources—turning the Middle East into a permanent geography of conflict within international politics.

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