

# CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

EDITOR

İ. Aytaç KADIOĞLU

 SAKARYA  
UNIVERSITY

PRESS

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İ. Aytacı Kadiođlu



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# Contemporary Issues in the Middle East

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*İ. Aytaç Kadiođlu*

Keywords

*1. Middle East 2. Conflict 3. Peace 4. Security 5. Authoritarianism*

Sustainable Development Goals



E- ISBN : 978-605-2238-82-0

DOI : 10.59537/saupress.2473

Sakarya University Publication No: 250

Published Online in November, 2025

1st Edition, November 2025

Layout Design : *Mustafa Kemal Kōse, Hūseyin Avni Yazıcı*

Language Editing : *Ayşegöl Yolcu, Funda Çankaya, and Muhammet Şibli Adalı*

Sakarya University Press

Address

Sakarya University, Scientific Publications Office, B2 Block, 54050 Serdivan, Sakarya/Türkiye

<https://sauyayinlari.sakarya.edu.tr>

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The full text of this book has been peer-reviewed to ensure high academic standards. For full review policies, [see](#).

Competing interests: The editors and authors have no competing interests to declare.

The cover image was produced using the DALL-E model developed by OpenAI.

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# CONTENTS

**PREFACE** .....vi

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Middle East in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis, Transformation, and “Chronic Chaos” .....ix

*İ. Aytaç Kadioğlu*

### **Chapter 1**

The Shia Crescent and Sectarianism: Iran’s Grand Strategy in the Middle East and its Regional Opponents.....1

*Oğuzhan Göksel*

### **Chapter 2**

Beyond Democratisation and Authoritarian Resilience: Change and Continuity in the Mena After the Arab Uprisings.....21

*Hatice Rumeysa Dursun*

### **Chapter 3**

From Collapse of Oslo Accords to Unprecedented Destruction in Gaza: Need For A Paradigm Shift for Palestine.....37

*Selim Sezer*

### **Chapter 4**

The Middle East in China’s Normative Strategy: Resistance or Realignment?.....56

*Hüsna Taş Yetim*

### **Chapter 5**

Strategic Energy Convergence: Us Policy and Saudi Arabia’s Transition in Critical Minerals and Civil Nuclear Cooperation.....81

*Umud Shokri*

### **Chapter 6**

Revisiting the Eastern Mediterranean: Neo-Imperialism and Geopolitics of Energy...102

*Tuğçe Kafdağlı Kuru, Ayşe Küçük*

**Chapter 7**

Non-State Armed Actors in the New Era: Resilience, Regionalisation, and Alliances..127

*Mustafa Yetim*

**Chapter 8**

State and Capitalism in the Middle East and North Africa: A Critical Political Economy Approach.....143

*Görkem Altınörs*

**Chapter 9**

From Alignment to Ambiguity: The Strategic Puzzle of Us–Egypt Relations.....162

*Tamer Kaşıkçı, Ishmael Adjei*

**Chapter 10**

Greenwashing Authoritarianism: Climate Diplomacy in the Middle East.....178

*Mustafa Onur Yalçın*

**Chapter 11**

Instability in Afghanistan in the Twenty-First Century: The Middle East and Afghanistan Crisis.....202

*Anisur Rahman*

**EDITOR AND AUTHORS..... 224**

**INDEX..... 231**

## PREFACE

The Middle East has long been portrayed in both media and academia as a region defined by its volatility—a geography of “chronic chaos” where stability is the exception and conflict is the rule. Focusing solely on the observable crises, without assessing the deep structural origins that generate them, results in a superficial narrative that ultimately conceals the region’s complex reality. This book, *Contemporary Issues in the Middle East*, was born out of a scholarly imperative to move beyond the mere cataloguing of crises. Instead, it seeks to dissect the structural metamorphosis of the region in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, a period marked by the collapse of traditional social contracts, the transformation of security architectures, and the emergence of a new, multipolar regional order.

This book argues that the established paradigms of International Relations—whether the balance of power theories of the twentieth century or the transition paradigms of the early 2000s—are no longer sufficient to capture the reality of the Middle East. The profound shifts we have witnessed, from the initial waves of the Arab Uprisings to the catastrophic humanitarian crisis in Gaza in 2023, and the historic conflict in Syria, require a new epistemological approach. This book argues that the phenomena often treated in silos—terrorism, immigration, climate change, and regional and great power competition—are, in fact, inextricably linked strands of a single, complex web of regional transformation.

As the editor, my primary motivation was to assemble a collection that refuses to simplify these dynamics. The contributors to this book, who represent a diverse array of disciplines from political science, international relations, public administration, economics, public administration to Middle Eastern studies, have a common goal to understand the underlying reasons for daily events. We have endeavoured to close the gap between “hard” security measures, such as proxy warfare and nuclear proliferation, and “soft” security issues, including identity politics, non-violent resolution methods, environmental degradation, and human security. This holistic approach is not merely an academic exercise; it is a necessity for understanding a region where the movement of refugees is as geopolitically significant as traditional military measures.

The structure of the book reflects this integrative philosophy. We begin by situating the region within its broader periphery, examining the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry, before moving to the democratisation-authoritarianism dilemma during the Arab uprisings. A critical examination of the material underpinnings of power follows, with chapters exploring the political economy of authoritarian resilience and the adaptive strategies of regimes that have survived the storms of the last decade.

Crucially, this book engages with the rising influence of non-Western powers and non-state actors. From China’s normative diplomacy to the complex alliance structures of non-state armed groups, we analyse how the regional powers and national actors in the region are being reshaped. We also tackle the often-overlooked but existential threat of climate change, exposing how greenwashing has become a tool for regime legitimacy. The other sections of the book turn to the enduring scars of the region: the devastating trajectory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict post-Oslo, instability in Afghanistan, geopolitics of Energy in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the adjustment of strategic partnerships, particularly the evolving US-Egypt and US-Saudi relationships in an era of energy transition.

Writing and editing this volume during the term of “chronic chaos” has been both a professional challenge and a profound responsibility. The events of recent years—the tragedy in Gaza and the groundbreaking political transition in Syria—serve as stark reminders that the Middle East is not a static subject of study but a dynamic arena where millions of people actively struggle for dignity, security, and order. This book is dedicated to that struggle. It is my sincere hope that *Contemporary Issues in the Middle East* will serve not only as a rigorous academic resource for students and researchers but also as a guide for policymakers seeking to navigate the complexities of this pivotal region with greater nuance and foresight.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the contributors for their rigorous scholarship and patience throughout the editorial process. Their willingness to engage with critical feedback and to update their analyses in real-time as events unfolded on the ground has been instrumental in ensuring the relevance of this work. I also would like to thank my PhD students, Neşhet Şavamreh and Ayşe Nur Külünk for their help and support during and during the preparation and editorial processes of this study.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my family for their unwavering support throughout this journey. Most importantly, I owe a special debt of thanks to my wife; her boundless patience, constant encouragement, and immense sacrifices were the foundation upon which this book was built.

**İ. Aytaç Kadioğlu**  
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*“To the innocent victims of the region’s turbulence and chaos, whose resilience remains the Middle East’s most enduring hope.”*

# INTRODUCTION

## THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: CRISIS, TRANSFORMATION, AND “CHRONIC CHAOS”

İ. Aytac Kadioğlu<sup>1</sup>

The Middle East, a region historically defined by its geopolitical centrality and cultural complexity, stands at a profound inflection point in the twenty-first century. The region has long served as a testing ground for theories of conflict, security, and state-building. The paradigms that explain the dynamics of the Middle East centred on the balance of power between nation-states or the hegemonic stability provided by external powers. However, these dynamics are increasingly proving insufficient to capture the multifaceted reality of the twenty-first century. *Contemporary Issues in the Middle East* emerges from a scholarly imperative to interrogate these shifting sands. It aims to explore the historical evolution, socio-political issues, ethno-nationalist conflicts between states and non-state armed groups and sectarian conflicts that currently engulf the Middle East. By bringing together a diverse group of scholars, this volume aims to answer a fundamental question: How can we understand the persistence of instability in the Middle East, and what are the emerging and contemporary issues that will determine its future? The primary purpose of this book is to frame these inquiries within a broader scholarly debate, setting the stage for a rigorous examination of specific case studies in the Middle East and North Africa and different disciplines including political economy, geopolitics, climate diplomacy, non-state armed groups and terrorism, normative strategy, resilience, instability, sectarianism, grand strategy, global and regional powers, and energy security.

The central research problem addressing this book is the evident gap between established theoretical frameworks and the chaotic empirical reality of the twenty-first century and post-2011 Middle East. The Arab uprising protests and the turbulent term aftermath initially challenged the resilience of the authoritarian state, yet the subsequent decade has witnessed a complex restoration of status quo powers alongside the proliferation of non-state actors and proxy warfare. This theoretical fragmentation is where this book seeks to make its most significant contribution. The existing literature often treats issues such as migration, terrorism, and great power competition in silos. In contrast, this book adopts a

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holistic approach, arguing that these phenomena are inextricably linked through the collapse of the traditional social contract and the transformation of the regional security complex. The problem is not merely one of ‘instability’ but of a structural metamorphosis in how power is exercised and contested. As noted in recent scholarship on conflict resolution, the interplay between local grievances and international interventions creates a conflict trap that defies simple diplomatic solutions (Kadioğlu, 2020a). This book addresses the scarcity of comprehensive studies that link the micro-level dynamics of societal integration, e.g., the refugee crisis, with the macro-level shifts in global geopolitics.

To navigate this complex terrain, the theoretical and conceptual framework of the book is anchored in a multidisciplinary perspective that bridges international relations theory, security studies, social movement, democratisation, rentier state, and political economy. While realism remains relevant for understanding the hard power balancing between regional hegemons like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye, it is insufficient for explaining the normative battles and identity politics that drive contemporary conflicts. Therefore, the chapters in this volume employ this multidisciplinary perspective to analyse the interdependence of security threats, the underlying reasons for political instabilities, and critical perspectives on political economy to unmask the material underpinnings of authoritarian resilience. The utilisation of concepts like hybrid warfare, normative diplomacy, and climate security allows for a more nuanced understanding of threats that are no longer purely military in nature. By integrating these diverse theoretical and conceptual strands, the book moves beyond a state-centric analysis to include the agency of non-state actors, the impact of environmental degradation, and the role of ideology. This conceptual diversity is crucial, as the region’s challenges are not monolithic but are shaped by the intersection of local agency and global structural forces.

Engaging with the broader literature, this volume situates itself in dialogue with the foundational works of scholars such as Fred Halliday and Raymond Hinnebusch, who have long emphasised the permeability of the Middle East state system. However, it updates these classic structuralist accounts by incorporating the latest scholarship on civil wars and conflict management. For instance, the literature on proxy warfare has expanded significantly, yet few studies have effectively synthesised the internal and external drivers of these conflicts as comprehensively as recent works on the Syrian civil war (Kadioğlu, 2020b). Furthermore, the book responds to the growing body of work on the ‘security-migration nexus’. As demonstrated in recent studies on the integration of Iraqi and Syrian refugees, the movement of people is not just a humanitarian issue but a central component of regional security dynamics (Kadioğlu & Aksoy, 2023). By engaging with these debates, the book acknowledges the intellectual heritage of Middle East studies while critiquing the Eurocentric biases that often permeate

the analysis of the region's politics. It argues for a more localised understanding of security, one that prioritises the human security of the region's populations over the strategic interests of external powers.

The methodological outlook of *Contemporary Issues of the Middle East* is predominantly qualitative, relying on detailed case studies, discourse analysis, and historical tracing to uncover the causal mechanisms behind political developments. The contributors employ a variety of methodological tools appropriate to their specific inquiries, from the analysis of diplomatic texts to the examination of socio-economic data. This methodological pluralism is intentional, which reflects the belief that no single method can capture the full complexity of the Middle East. On the one hand, understanding the normative diplomacy of rising powers requires a constructivist analysis of rhetoric and soft power. On the other hand, analysing the political economy of the state demands a structuralist approach to class and capital. The introduction of such varied methodological perspectives ensures that the findings presented in this book are robust and capable of withstanding critical scrutiny. The authors have been encouraged to look beyond the surface-level events and to interrogate the 'deep structures' of power and resistance, thereby providing an analysis that is both empirically rich and theoretically grounded.

### **The Arab Uprising Protests: Demonstrations, Revolutions and Civil Wars**

The most significant geopolitical development in the Middle East during the twenty-first century has been the series of pro-democracy uprisings popularly known as the "Arab Spring". The wave of unrest was ignited in Tunisia in December 2010, following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor protesting police corruption and economic hardship (Kadioğlu, 2020b). This act of desperation resonated deeply across the region, symbolizing the broken 'social contract' between authoritarian rulers and their populations. In Tunisia, mass demonstrations quickly overwhelmed the security apparatus, forcing President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee the country in January 2011, an event that shattered the belief of invincibility surrounding Arab dictators (Gelvin, 2015). This success produced a demonstration effect that triggered the voices calling for revolution in Egypt. Millions occupied Tahrir Square in Cairo, demanding the fall of Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptian army's decision not to fire on protesters was a decisive factor, leading to Mubarak's resignation in February 2011 and marking a high point of optimism for a democratic transition in the region (Lynch, 2012).

However, as the uprisings spread from Tunisia to other countries including Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Lebanon, the outcomes diverged sharply based on the cohesion of the military and the depth of external intervention. In some contexts, the protests remained largely peaceful movements seeking reform, while in others, they faced brutal state repression that precipitated armed conflict. For instance,

in Bahrain, the monarchy utilised the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) military support to suppress the uprising at the Pearl Roundabout, effectively preserving the status quo (Hinnebusch, 2015). Conversely, in Libya and Yemen, the fragmentation of the security forces and tribal divisions led to violent confrontations. In Libya, the intervention of NATO turned the uprising into a full-scale civil war that ended with the death of Muammar Gaddafi but left the country stateless and divided by militias. Similarly, in Yemen, although President Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to step down through a negotiated transition, the political vacuum eventually triggered a devastating civil war and humanitarian crisis (Bayat, 2017). Even in countries like Lebanon, which did not experience a regime change in 2011, the regional turmoil reignited sectarian tensions and sparked protests against the confessional political system, highlighting the universality of the demands for better governance.

Among these transformations, the Syrian Civil War stands out as the most protracted and destructive conflict, evolving from peaceful protests into a multi-layered international war. The conflict began in March 2011 with demonstrations in Daraa against the Baathist regime of Bashar al-Assad, whose security forces responded with disproportionate violence. Unlike the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries, the core of the Syrian army remained loyal to the regime, leading to a militarisation of the uprising and a sectarian polarisation that fractured the country. Historically, Syria had been a pivotal state in the Arab nationalist camp, but the civil war turned it into a theatre for a proxy warfare. As noted in my analysis of the conflict's structure, what began as a domestic uprising was rapidly internationalised, with regional and global powers intervening to support opposing sides (Kadıoğlu, 2018). The involvement of Iran and Hezbollah on the side of the regime, Türkiye supporting the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Gulf states supporting various opposition groups, the US-led coalition supporting the Democratic Union Party (PYD) / People's Defence Units (YPG), made the conflict more complicated where no single actor could achieve a decisive victory.

The war's complexity was further exacerbated by the rise of transnational terrorist organisations, most notably the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the PYD/YPG terrorist organisations. The power vacuum created by state collapse allowed ISIS to declare a "caliphate" in 2014, prompting the formation of a US-led international coalition to degrade the group. Concurrently, the PYD/YPG, the Syrian affiliate of the PKK terrorist organisation, exploited the chaos to establish autonomous zones in northern Syria, often with US tactical and political support (Phillips, 2020). This divergence in threat perception between NATO allies highlighted the fractured nature of the international response. Meanwhile, Russia's direct military intervention in 2015 decisively shifted the balance of power in favour of the Assad regime, preventing its collapse at that time. As I

have argued elsewhere, peace efforts such as the Geneva and Astana processes largely failed because external powers acted as conflict facilitators rather than genuine mediators, prioritising their geopolitical interests over conflict resolution (Kadioğlu, 2020a). The result was a fragmented country defined by competing zones of influence and a humanitarian catastrophe of historic proportions.

### **The Regional Landscape in Flux: Developments in 2023-2025**

A critical assessment of the Middle East cannot ignore the seismic shifts that have occurred in the last two to three years. The period from 2023 to 2025 has been characterised by a dramatic escalation of violence and a simultaneous, albeit fragile, reconfiguration of diplomatic alliances. The most defining event of this period has undoubtedly been the resurgence of large-scale conflict in the Levant, particularly the war in Gaza that erupted in October 2023. This conflict has not only resulted in a catastrophic humanitarian crisis but has also shattered the illusion that the Palestinian issue could be marginalised in favour of regional economic integration. This book assesses the contemporary developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that demonstrates the insights of this humanitarian crisis. The spillover effects have been felt across the region, from the Red Sea, where maritime security has been challenged by non-state actors, to the borders of Lebanon and Syria. This renewed violence has forced a re-evaluation of the “Abraham Accords” framework and highlighted the persistent volatility of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As scholars of terrorism and security have noted, the failure to address the root causes of such ethno-nationalist conflicts inevitably leads to cycles of violence that threaten international peace (Kadioğlu, 2021).

In a historic turn of events that has redefined the region’s political geography, the Syrian crisis reached a definitive turning point in late 2024 and early 2025. Following a renewed and unified offensive by opposition forces and the simultaneous withdrawal of critical external support for the regime, the Baathist government of Bashar al-Assad collapsed. This culminated in Assad fleeing the country, marking the end of over five decades of family rule. The vacuum was filled by a transitional governing body led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, who assumed power with a mandate to reconstruct the fractured state. This transition represents a profound “critical juncture” in Middle Eastern politics, comparable to the fall of Baghdad in 2003. The new administration faces the monumental task of drafting a new constitution, integrating millions of refugees, and navigating the treacherous waters of transitional justice (Kadioğlu & Aksoy, 2023).

The establishment of this new regime in Damascus has sent shockwaves through the regional alliance systems. The axis of resistance has been fundamentally weakened, forcing Iran to recalibrate its regional strategy, while Türkiye and the Gulf states have moved to engage the Sharaa administration to ensure stability

and counter the influence of radical elements. However, the path to stability remains fraught with challenges. Remnants of terrorist groups, including sleeper cells of ISIS and the entrenched structures of the PYD/YPG in the northeast, continue to pose significant security threats to the reconstruction of the Syrian state. Furthermore, the economic devastation left by years of war requires a massive international reconstruction effort, one that is likely to be conditioned on political reforms (World Bank, 2024). As the region moves through 2025, the consolidation of the new Syrian order stands as the central test for the durability of the post-Arab uprisings in the Middle East.

### **Structure of the Book and Chapter Overviews**

The structure of this volume is designed to guide the reader through a thematic and regional exploration of the contemporary Middle East, moving from macro-level systemic challenges to specific case studies of conflict, diplomacy, and political economy. The book is organised into eleven distinct chapters, each addressing a critical aspect of the region's evolving landscape.

The volume commences with focusing on the sectarian dimensions of regional rivalry, *The Shia Crescent and Sectarianism: Iran's Grand Strategy in the Middle East and Its Regional Opponents* offers a detailed strategic analysis of Iran's regional projection. The chapter deconstructs the concept of the 'Shia Crescent', arguing that it functions less as a religious crusade and more as a pragmatic instrument of Iranian geopolitics. By examining Tehran's support for proxy groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, the author assesses counter strategies employed by rival Sunni powers, providing a comprehensive view of the sectarian security dilemma.

In *Beyond Democratisation and Authoritarian Resilience: Change and Continuity in the MENA after the Arab Uprisings*, the volume addresses the debate on the durability of Arab regimes. This chapter critiques the 'transition paradigm' that dominated early analyses of the Arab uprising protests, offering instead a nuanced study of authoritarian resilience. By examining the mechanisms of co-optation, repression, and institutional adaptation employed by regimes in the post-2011 era, the author explains why the initial wave of democratisation failed to take root in many countries and how a new, more adaptive form of authoritarianism has emerged.

The third chapter, *From Collapse of Oslo Accords to Unprecedented Destruction in Gaza: Need For A Paradigm Shift for Palestine*, provides a critical and timely examination of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Written against the backdrop of the devastating war in Gaza, this chapter traces the failure of the Oslo peace process and the two-state solution paradigm. It argues that the current trajectory of violence necessitates a fundamental paradigm shift towards a rights-based approach that addresses the structural realities of occupation and settler-colonialism, rather than merely managing the conflict.

The rising influence of non-Western powers is explored in the fourth chapter, *The Middle East in China's Normative Strategy: Resistance or Realignment?* This contribution investigates Beijing's growing footprint in the region, moving beyond trade statistics to analyse China's normative diplomacy. The chapter argues that China is promoting an alternative model of international relations based on 'developmental peace' and non-interference, which resonates with regional autocracies. It assesses whether this strategy represents a fundamental realignment of the region away from the West or a pragmatic manoeuvring by local actors to diversify their alliances.

*Strategic Energy Convergence: US Policy and Saudi Arabia's Transition in Critical Minerals and Civil Nuclear Cooperation* chapter investigates the emerging frontiers of the US-Saudi relationship beyond traditional oil politics. It analyses the strategic convergence on critical minerals and civil nuclear energy as part of the global energy transition. The author argues that this new cooperation is driven by mutual geopolitical interests—countering Chinese influence and diversifying the Saudi economy—thereby redefining the classic 'security for oil' bargain for the twenty-first century.

Moving to the maritime and energy geopolitics of the Levant, the sixth chapter, *Revisiting the Eastern Mediterranean: Neo-Imperialism and Geopolitics of Energy*, critically examines the scramble for hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. The chapter employs a neo-imperialist framework to analyse how the discovery of natural gas has transformed the region into a zone of intense competition involving regional actors like Türkiye, Greece, Egypt, and Israel, as well as global powers. It elucidates how energy, rather than serving as a catalyst for peace, has been weaponised, exacerbating existing sovereignty disputes and leading to a militarisation of the maritime domain.

The seventh chapter, *Non-State Armed Actors in the New Era: Resilience, Regionalisation, and Alliances*, delves into the transformation of warfare in the region. It examines the evolution of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) from local insurgents to transnational actors with complex alliance structures. The author analyses the resilience of these groups in the face of state counter-insurgency campaigns, highlighting how they have adapted to the changing regional order by forming hybrid alliances with state sponsors and other non-state actors, thus becoming permanent fixtures in the regional security complex.

*State and Capitalism in the Middle East and North Africa: A Critical Political Economy Approach* shifts the focus to the material underpinnings of power. Adopting a critical political economy perspective, this chapter challenges the notion of the state as an autonomous entity, arguing instead that MENA states are deeply embedded in the structures of global capitalism. The author investigates the interplay between state elites and capital accumulation, demonstrating how

neoliberal economic reforms have often reinforced authoritarian structures and deepened social inequalities, which in turn fuel cyclical unrest and political instability.

In *From Alignment to Ambiguity: The Strategic Puzzle of US–Egypt Relations*, the volume analyses one of the region’s most enduring bilateral partnerships. This chapter explores the fluctuating dynamics of the Cairo–Washington axis, tracing the shift from the strategic alignment of the Cold War era to the ambiguity of the post-Arab Spring period. The author examines how diverging interests regarding human rights, regional security, and military aid have strained the relationship, forcing both capitals to reassess the value and parameters of their strategic cooperation.

Addressing a growing but critical field of study, *Greenwashing Authoritarianism: Climate Diplomacy in the Middle East* explores the intersection of environmental politics and regime survival. This chapter posits that authoritarian states in the region are increasingly utilising climate diplomacy and sustainability initiatives as tools for international legitimacy and reputation laundering—a practice termed ‘greenwashing’. The analysis reveals how high-profile climate commitments often mask persistent environmental degradation and are used to divert attention from human rights records, thereby securitising the environment for regime stability.

Finally, the book concludes with *Instability in Afghanistan in the Twenty-First Century: The Middle East and Afghanistan Crisis*, which situates the Afghan conflict within the broader security architecture of the Middle East. This chapter traces the historical trajectory of Afghanistan’s resistance to foreign domination, arguing that the failure of Western state-building projects was rooted in a lack of popular legitimacy and deep-seated corruption. By analysing the resurgence of the Taliban following the US withdrawal, the author demonstrates how instability in this peripheral state continues to radiate outwards, influencing regional jihadist movements and migration patterns, thereby serving as a cautionary tale for external interventionism.

### **Significance, Audience, and Motivation**

The significance of this study lies in its timeliness and its refusal to accept simplified narratives. At a time when the Middle East is often dismissed as a region of ‘chronic chaos’, this book provides the analytical tools to understand the logic behind the chaos. It fills a critical gap in the literature by combining the study of ‘hard’ security issues like terrorism and war with ‘soft’ security issues like identity, migration, and climate change. This holistic approach makes the volume an indispensable resource for a wide target audience, including university students, academic researchers, policy analysts, and diplomats who seek a deeper understanding of the region.

My motivation as the editor, and the collective authorial voice of this volume, stems from a deep professional and personal engagement with the politics of the Middle East. Having spent years researching peace processes, conflict resolution, and security dynamics (Kadioğlu, 2020a; 2020b), I have witnessed the immense human cost of political failure in this region. This book is written with a sense of urgency but also with an unwavering commitment to academic rigor. We aim to present a narrative that is critical yet constructive, avoiding the pitfalls of Orientalism while acknowledging the severe internal challenges the region faces. The tone and style of the book are intentionally academic to ensure precision, yet we have strived for a fluidity of expression that invites the reader into a complex conversation.

To guide the reader through this multifaceted analysis, the introduction and the subsequent chapters are driven by a set of guiding questions:

- What are the primary structural causes of the resilience of authoritarianism and conflict in the Middle East?
- How do non-state actors and external powers reshape the regional security architecture?
- In what ways are non-traditional threats, such as climate change and migration, redefining the concept of security in the region?
- Can the existing theoretical frameworks of international relations adequately explain the current shifts, or do we need new epistemologies?

This book seeks to answer these questions and the chronic chaos in the Middle East not with definitive dogmas, but with empirical evidence and theoretical innovation. It is an invitation to rethink the Middle East, not as a passive victim of history, but as a dynamic region where the struggle for dignity, security, and order is actively being waged every day. As the chapters that follow will demonstrate, the future of the Middle East is being written now, in the contested spaces between state and society, tradition and modernity, war and peace.

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## CHAPTER 1

# THE SHIA CRESCENT AND SECTARIANISM: IRAN'S GRAND STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND ITS REGIONAL OPPONENTS

Oğuzhan Göksel<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. Introduction

The phrase “Shia Crescent” has become one of the most controversial terms in Middle Eastern geopolitics since it first entered regional discourse in the mid-2000s. Originally coined by King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2004, the term was intended as a warning against the perceived expansion of Iranian influence across a crescent-shaped arc of predominantly Shia or Shia-aligned populations stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon (Matthews, 2004). Since then, the Shia Crescent has been widely invoked by analysts, policymakers, and regional actors—some using it to highlight Iran’s assertive regional strategy, others to critique what they see as the sectarianisation of Middle Eastern politics (Göksel, 2013; Haji-Yousefi, 2009; Mazur, 2009; Proctor, 2008). However, the concept is often used uncritically, conflating ideological, religious, and geopolitical elements, and obscuring the complex realities of Iran’s post-revolutionary foreign policy.

This chapter investigates the idea of the Shia Crescent as a strategic framework and evaluates whether it reflects a coherent Iranian grand strategy in the post-1979 period. It asks three interrelated questions: What is the nature of Iran’s grand strategy in the region? To what extent is sectarian identity instrumentalised in this strategy? And how have Israel and Sunni powers across the Middle East responded to Iran’s actions? Through a critical analysis of Iran’s regional conduct, ideological motivations, and institutional mechanisms, this chapter argues that the Shia Crescent is not simply a sectarian project. Rather, it is a hybrid geopolitical strategy that blends ideological commitments, strategic pragmatism, and identity politics, all of which serve to bolster Iran’s position in a fragmented and competitive regional order.

The Islamic Republic’s approach to the Middle East has evolved over the decades since 1979, yet certain core themes have remained consistent: resistance

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to Western (particularly the US) hegemony, the export of the revolution, and the cultivation of like-minded non-state actors as force multipliers. These goals have not been pursued solely through military or security means; instead, Iran has employed a wide array of instruments—from ideological narratives and religious institutions to soft power media and transnational Shia networks—to shape the region in line with its interests. This approach has led many outside observers to view Iranian regional policy as a coherent, if controversial, grand strategy (Göksel, 2013; Vasilenko, 2022).

The term “grand strategy” itself, however, raises important theoretical questions. Traditionally associated with the long-term coordination of military, diplomatic, economic, and ideological tools to achieve national objectives, grand strategy is often discussed in the context of great powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or China (Silove, 2018). But can revolutionary states in the Global South—particularly those with non-Western ideological foundations, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran—be said to possess grand strategies in the classical sense? And if so, how does Iran’s use of religious identity and sectarian mobilisation complicate or reinforce this strategic logic?

Answering these questions requires both conceptual clarity and empirical grounding. This chapter will first situate the debate by clarifying the meaning of the Shia Crescent and reviewing broader academic discussions on sectarianism and grand strategy in International Relations (IR). In doing so, it will assess competing views on whether Iran’s behaviour is best explained by Realist strategic calculations, ideological constructs rooted in political Islam and Shi’ism, or a synthesis of both. It will also address how the Shia Crescent label—despite being coined by Iran’s adversaries—has shaped regional perceptions and responses, particularly among Sunni Arab states.

Subsequent sections will trace the ideological and strategic roots of Iran’s regional policy, focusing on the political theology of Khomeinism and the operational role of key institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its elite Quds Force. This will be followed by an in-depth exploration of how Iran has cultivated a regional axis of allies and proxies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq, the Alawite regime in Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen. These case studies will demonstrate how Iran combines ideological alignment with pragmatic geopolitical calculation in pursuit of regional influence.

The chapter will then turn to the reactions of Israel and Sunni powers, who view Iran’s activities as a direct challenge to the regional status quo. These responses—ranging from Saudi Arabia’s sectarian counter-narrative to Türkiye’s strategic balancing and Israel’s most recent military intervention—reveal how the Shia Crescent has become both a security threat and a rhetorical device within Israeli national security and Sunni political discourse. At the same time, the Sunni

use of sectarianism for domestic legitimacy and geopolitical rivalry illustrates that sectarian politics is not a uniquely Iranian phenomenon, but rather a regional logic with multiple authors.

Finally, the chapter will provide a comparative analysis of key flashpoints—including Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—that have come to define the confrontation between Iran and its regional opponents. It will assess how these conflicts have been shaped by sectarian identities, strategic calculations, and evolving power balances, while also considering recent developments such as Iran-Saudi rapprochement talks, the normalisation of ties between Sunni Arab states and Israel, and the potential recalibration of Iranian strategy amid growing international pressures and the 2025 intense air bombardment campaign by Israel.

By integrating theoretical insights with empirical analysis, this chapter ultimately seeks to move beyond simplistic binaries of Shia versus Sunni or ideological versus pragmatic. It contends that Iran's post-1979 foreign policy—often encapsulated in the shorthand of the Shia Crescent—represents a flexible and multifaceted grand strategy, one that is deeply rooted in both the ideological DNA of the Islamic Republic and the shifting structural dynamics of the Middle East. Understanding this strategy, and the reactions it provokes, is essential not only for grasping the present contours of regional politics but also for anticipating its possible futures. This chapter draws upon a combination of primary and secondary sources to explore Iran's grand strategy and its reception by Sunni actors. These include official statements and speeches from Iranian leaders (e.g., Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and IRGC commanders) publications and media associated with Iran's ideological institutions (e.g., Al-Alam TV, Kayhan newspaper and IRGC-affiliated think tanks), and secondary literature including academic analyses, policy reports, and journalistic investigations.

## **1.2. Theoretical Framework: The Shia Crescent as Grand Strategy**

The phrase “Shia Crescent” emerged in regional and global discussions in 2004 when King Abdullah II of Jordan cautioned against an expanding arc of Shia influence extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. His remark followed the US invasion of Iraq and the emergence of Shia political supremacy in Baghdad, events that altered sectarian and geopolitical dynamics in the region. Initially meant as a caution, the phrase rapidly acquired popularity in policy discussions and the media as a concise reference to Iran's increasing assertiveness and its apparent utilisation of sectarian identity as a geopolitical tool (Kamel, 2018; Nasr, 2025).

The phrase is not neutral; it is ideologically charged and frequently employed by Sunni governments to characterize Iran's actions as disruptive, expansionist, and sectarian. The term “Shia Crescent,” despite its widespread usage, conceals more

than it elucidates. It implies a unified group of Shia players directed by Tehran, overlooking the internal variety of Shia Islam, the intricate motives of Iran's friends, and the amalgamation of theological, geopolitical, and material objectives that inform Iran's regional actions. Nonetheless, the idea retains analytical use when seen not as a literal depiction of a sectarian alliance but as a discursive and strategic construct that influences both Iranian behaviour and Sunni reactions.

Comprehending the dynamics of the Shia Crescent necessitates a critical examination of sectarianism in the Middle East. Scholars often examine sectarianism via two primary frameworks: primordialist and instrumentalist (or strategic) viewpoints. Primordialist perspectives regard sectarian identities—particularly the Sunni–Shia divide—as fundamentally entrenched and historically enduring divisions, sometimes resulting in the presumption that sectarian strife is unavoidable or inherent in the area (Nasr, 2025, pp. 13–31). This viewpoint has faced significant criticism for neglecting the political, social, and geographical factors that influence the activation, suppression, or transformation of sectarian identities (Haji-Yousefi, 2009; Vasilenko, 2022, pp. 226–233).

Conversely, instrumentalist, or strategic theories assert that sectarianism serves as a mobilisational weapon utilised by both state and non-state entities for certain political objectives. Accordingly, sectarianism frequently results from elite manipulation, efforts at regime preservation, or foreign interference, rather than being the root cause of conflict itself (Haji-Yousefi, 2009). Thus, the sectarian framework of Iran's regional policy is seen not as an unavoidable result of Shi'a identity politics but as a strategic reaction to regional rivalry, especially following the 2003 Iraq War and the 2011 Arab Spring.

Iran's stance on sectarianism is highly ambiguous. The Islamic Republic positions itself as a leader of the Muslim world, sometimes promoting pan-Islamic unity; nonetheless, it has unquestionably fostered Shia groups and networks that exacerbate sectarian divisions (Göksel, 2013). This conflict highlights the deliberate use of sectarian identity by Iran and its adversaries to achieve wider geopolitical aims.

To evaluate whether Iran's activities represent a grand strategy, it is essential to define the phrase accurately. In International Relations (IR), grand strategy often denotes the systematic application of military, diplomatic, economic, and ideological tools over an extended period to fulfil national goals. Scholars such as Barry Posen, Hal Brands and Patrick Porter assert that grand strategy encompasses more than just tactical reactions or improvised judgments; it embodies a state's comprehensive vision for its role within the international system (Brands & Porter, 2015; Posen, 2003, pp. 19–20). Grand strategy is frequently linked to major powers, especially within the Western tradition. Recent studies have broadened the notion to encompass revisionist, revolutionary, and non-Western

governments. Michael Swaine has demonstrated this in the context of China, while academics such as Raymond Hinnebusch and Fred Halliday have contended regarding the Middle East that non-Western players frequently devise grand plans while being hampered by scarce resources or regional volatility (Halliday, 2001; Hinnebusch, 2003; Swaine, 2011).

A burgeoning debate in the field of IR concerns whether ideologically motivated, institutionally fractured, and externally challenged regimes, such as post-1979 Iran, possess a cohesive grand strategy. Some scholars have argued that Iran's foreign policy is reactive and inconsistent, influenced more by tactical opportunism than by long-term strategy (Proctor, 2008). However, other scholars suggest that Iran has exhibited notable strategic coherence, especially in developing proxy networks, reconciling ideology with pragmatism, and ensuring regime security through regional influence (Hinnebusch, 2003). This chapter supports the latter viewpoint, interpreting Iran's post-revolutionary regional behaviour as a manifestation of a flexible grand strategy, anchored in a unique vision yet adaptable to structural changes. The Shia Crescent may be understood not just as a sectarian alignment but as an expression of Iran's extensive geopolitical objectives.

Iran's Middle Eastern foreign policy vision theoretically aligns with both neo-realist and constructivist paradigms in IR. From a neo-realist standpoint, Iran seeks regional dominance within a self-reliant framework, reacting to structural vulnerabilities, the presence of the US, Israel, and competing Sunni powers. It aims to enhance its strategic depth using asymmetric methods, including backing proxies and employing deterrent measures to circumvent conventional conflict with more powerful opponents. Iran's strategic framework—its focus on deterrence, denial, and influence projection—corresponds with neo-realist concepts of power dynamics and regional equilibrium. Nonetheless, a constructivist perspective on this debate is also vital. Iran's overarching approach is profoundly ideological, influenced by revolutionary narratives, anti-imperialist rhetoric, and a distinctive political theology rooted in Shia Islam and Khomeinist principles. The notion of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) extends beyond a national doctrine, encompassing ramifications for foreign policy and offering a religious rationale for Iran's assertion of global leadership (Salamey & Othman, 2011). This conceptual basis differentiates Iran's strategy from that of status quo powers and provides consistency to its long-term goals, despite changing alliances and material limitations. Furthermore, Iran's establishment of a transnational Shia identity—via religious education, cultural outreach, and symbolic politics—embodies a normative agenda aimed at redefining political legitimacy and religious authority across the Muslim world. These endeavours are both philosophically rooted and tactically effective, further illustrating the confluence of constructivist and realist components in Iran's strategy.

A further theoretical inquiry pertains to the ability of revolutionary regimes to devise and execute grand schemes. Historically, revolutionary regimes—such as Maoist China or Bolshevik Russia—have amalgamated ideological zeal with long-term strategic planning, frequently yielding hybrid foreign policies that merge messianic objectives with realpolitik (Brands & Porter, 2015). Iran conforms to this pattern. The Islamic Republic, originating from a populist, religious revolution that opposed Western imperialism and secular nationalism, has progressively established strategic institutions (particularly the IRGC), ideological doctrines, and foreign policy priorities that constitute the elements of a grand strategy. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Quds Force has served as the guardian of revolutionary doctrine and the implementer of Iran’s regional objectives. The IRGC’s orchestration of Iranian strategy in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen indicates a degree of strategic coherence that is atypical for revolutionary governments (Kamel, 2018, pp. 711–717). Although Iran’s strategy has undoubtedly transformed—especially with shifts in leadership from Khomeini to Khamenei—it has maintained a fundamental set of objectives: regime preservation, regional dominance, and ideological dissemination.

### 1.3. The Making of the Shia Crescent

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 signified a profound break from the Western-aligned monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s ascent to power initiated a novel ideological framework aimed at transforming Iran internally and reshaping the wider Islamic realm. At the core of this vision was the principle of *sudur-e enqelab* (exporting the revolution), based on the conviction that Iran bore a religious and moral obligation to assist oppressed Muslim communities and disseminate its revolutionary Islamic government model (Salamey & Othman, 2011). This objective was bolstered by an anti-imperialist discourse that saw the US and its regional partners, notably Israel and Saudi Arabia, as neo-colonial entities perpetuating injustice in the Muslim world (Salamey & Othman, 2011). This anti-imperialist character emerged as a fundamental element of Iran’s overarching foreign policy agenda. Tehran’s backing of non-state actors and opposition groups throughout the region, especially those marginalised or antagonistic towards pro-Western governments, was ideologically rationalised as an extension of the revolutionary mandate. Nonetheless, these doctrinal objectives coincided with Iran’s geopolitical requirements to escape regional isolation and mitigate risks from antagonistic neighbours and the US military presence.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), especially its elite Quds Force, has been a pivotal instrument for the implementation of Iran’s regional strategy, tasked with extraterritorial operations. The IRGC was created to safeguard the revolution from internal and external dangers, evolving into a

formidable hybrid entity that integrates military, intelligence, economic, and ideological roles. The Quds Force, led by commanders such as Qassem Soleimani, was instrumental in establishing and overseeing Iran's regional network of allies and proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (Alemzadeh, 2019). The Quds Force has functioned not just as a military entity but also as a strategic conduit between Iran and ideologically or sectarian-aligned groups. It has enabled the supply of armaments, training, and financial assistance while simultaneously cultivating ideological unity based on anti-Zionism, anti-Americanism, and a spirit of resistance. Through these initiatives, Iran established its influence beyond its borders, forging enduring ties with both state and non-state actors that corresponded with its revolutionary principles and strategic considerations.

The fundamental core of Iran's foreign policy is rooted in the political theology proposed by Ayatollah Khomeini: the theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist). This idea posits that a senior Islamic jurist should possess both spiritual and temporal power, uniting religious morality with political rule. This notion, originally aimed at Iran's internal political structure, was progressively externalised to justify Iran's regional operations, especially among Shia communities across the Middle East. Khomeinism amalgamated Shia eschatological concepts, anti-imperialism, and Third Worldist principles into a formidable ideological structure (Yazdi, 2016). The *Wilayat al-Faqih* did not consistently resonate throughout Shia communities, many of which adhered to traditional quietist perspectives; yet, it provided a political theology enabling Iran to assert moral leadership over the worldwide Shia community. It has allowed Tehran to present its activities not as sectarian but as integral to an international fight against injustice and oppression.

Notwithstanding its ideological fervour, Iran's foreign policy has generally demonstrated significant pragmatism. Tehran has exhibited the ability to forge tactical alliances with entities that do not coincide with its religious or ideological perspective, as seen in its collaboration with Sunni Hamas in Palestine and its strategic partnership with secular Arab nationalist regimes such as Bashar al-Assad's in Syria (Wastnidge, 2017). This adaptable strategy indicates that Iran's main goal is not the advancement of Shi'ism itself, but the attainment of strategic depth and regional deterrence via asymmetric methods. Ideological language is frequently employed to rationalise and validate strategic choices, but pragmatic assessments dictate the timing and manner of intervention. This hybrid strategy has enabled Tehran to sustain a resilient and flexible regional approach, frequently labelled the Shia Crescent by its opponents, but more precisely characterized as a grand strategy that merges ideological ambition with geopolitical imperatives.

#### **1.4. Instruments of the Shia Crescent: Iran's Regional Network**

The effective execution of Iran's Shia Crescent strategy depends on a varied

array of instruments, including military proxies, religious institutions, strategic relationships and soft power mechanisms. The Shia Crescent should be perceived as a malleable, adaptable network of relationships—geopolitical in purpose, sectarian in discourse and revolutionary in self-perception. This section examines five principal instruments utilised by Iran: proxy forces, political patronage, sectarian alignment, soft power and asymmetric military intervention, concentrating on crucial regional nodes within the network: Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and transnational religious-cultural organisations.

Hezbollah exemplifies Iran's effective proxy-development strategy. Founded in the early 1980s amid Israel's incursion into Lebanon, Hezbollah sprang from Iran's ambition to disseminate its revolutionary principles and to oppose Western and Israeli dominance. Supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah evolved into a disciplined paramilitary organisation, a formidable political entity, and an ideologically devoted extension of Iran's regional agenda (Husseini, 2010, pp. 806–811). Hezbollah's uniqueness lies not just in its military efficacy but also in its amalgamation of religious authority, community-based social services, and a narrative of resistance. The party officially emulates the Iranian revolutionary paradigm, professing loyalty to Iran's Supreme Leader and sustaining direct communication with Tehran about strategic choices (Husseini, 2010). Hezbollah has long offered Iran strategic depth against Israel and functioned as deterrence in the event of conflict. This embodies the complete actualisation of the Shia Crescent vision: a firmly entrenched, loyal and self-sufficient proxy adept at both safeguarding and advancing Iranian interests in the Levant.

Iraq is both the pinnacle and the most intricate obstacle under Iran's Shia Crescent framework. The 2003 US invasion dissolved the Sunni-dominated Ba'athist state and unintentionally facilitated Shia political strength. Iran capitalised on the US-generated void in Iraqi politics by fostering a diverse array of Shia political parties and militant factions. Prominent among these are the Badr Organisation—initially the military faction of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—and subsequently numerous groups of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF or al-Hashd al-Shaabi), many of which have strong affiliations with Tehran (Sari, 2021). Although some militias gained legitimacy via their involvement in the battle against ISIS, they remain intricately woven within Iraq's political framework, frequently functioning alongside or even above governmental authority. The dual structure—formal incorporation of PMF troops into state institutions while maintaining loyalty to external benefactors such as Iran—has entrenched Iran's influence in Iraq. Iran has politically endorsed Shia coalitions and used intra-Shia divisions to obstruct the rise of a nationalist administration that may threaten its influence over Baghdad. Iraq has functioned as both a client and a buffer state in Tehran's geostrategic considerations since the late 2000s (Sari, 2021).

Syria's involvement in the Shia Crescent has been pragmatic in nature. In contrast to Iraq and Lebanon, Syria does not have a Shia majority, and the recently overthrown Assad regime that ruled the country for decades was dominated by Alawites—a branch of Shia Islam whose theological validity is disputed even among Shia scholars (Husseini, 2010, pp. 806–812). Nonetheless, geopolitical alignment has superseded ideological disparities. Since the commencement of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Iran evaluated the anti-Assad uprising not as a democratic insurrection but as an element of a larger Western-Gulf-Israeli scheme to undermine the Iran-led “axis of resistance” in the region (Akbar, 2023). In response, Iran engaged decisively—initially via advisors and material assistance, and subsequently with IRGC officers and allied militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan (*Liwa Fatemiyoun*), and Pakistan (*Liwa Zainebiyoun*) (Haji-Yousefi, 2021). The militias provided the Assad government with the necessary troops to reclaim territory, while Tehran acquired military infrastructure, intelligence bases, and a land corridor extending from its borders to the Mediterranean. Until the Assad regime was finally defeated in late 2024, Syria provided Iran with strategic depth and territorial connectedness, a crucial aspect of the Crescent. The collapse of the Assad regime and its replacement by the Sunni militia-dominated administration of Ahmed al-Sharaa (former Emir of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham paramilitary organisation) in Damascus represents one of the greatest setbacks Iran's grand strategy has faced since 1979.

The Houthi movement in Yemen (*Ansar Allah*) constitutes the most contentious and asymmetrical element within Iran's network. Despite the Houthis being Zaydi Shias, a group distinct from Iran's Twelver Shi'ism, Iran has extended them varied levels of support, encompassing political endorsement, training, and allegedly sophisticated armaments (Juneau, 2024). The Houthis' capture of Sanaa in 2014 and the ensuing conflict with the Saudi-led coalition provided Iran with a strategic advantage: by backing the Houthis, Tehran could exert pressure on Saudi Arabia's exposed southern border while demonstrating its capacity to destabilise the area at minimal expense. Iran's association with the Houthis does not possess the ideological profundity and institutional cohesion evident in its connections with Hezbollah or the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). It demonstrates Tehran's pragmatic readiness to use sectarian affinity when it produces geostrategic benefits. Furthermore, Houthi missile and drone assaults against Saudi, Emirati and Israeli targets have enabled Iran to exert influence through proxies, sustain plausible deniability, and generate leverage for forthcoming diplomatic discussions (Juneau, 2024, pp. 287–291).

Although Iran's hard power strategies—armed proxies and military interventions—dominate discourse, its soft power initiatives are equally vital for maintaining the Shia Crescent. One of the most persistent instruments has been

its multinational religious framework. Iran is home to prominent Shia seminaries in Qom, where numerous clerics from Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, Nigeria, and other regions acquire theological education and are introduced to Iran's revolutionary interpretation of Shi'ism. These clerics frequently return to their countries of origin with increased credibility and nuanced pro-Iranian inclinations, enabling Tehran to influence religious discourse throughout the Shia world (Abdullah & Ahmed, 2022). Iran also manages Arabic-language media channels, including Al-Alam and Press TV, which propagate its ideological themes under the pretext of pan-Islamic cooperation. These channels fulfil dual roles of propaganda and counter-information, contesting Saudi and Western narratives while portraying Iran as the champion of the underprivileged. Moreover, pilgrimage diplomacy—facilitating access to Shia sacred places in Iran and Iraq—has allowed Tehran to enhance interpersonal relationships, cultivate transnational networks of devotion, and entrench its influence in the quotidian religious practices of Shia communities (Abdullah & Ahmed, 2022).

Iran employs a variety of context-specific instruments to further its Shia Crescent agenda. In Lebanon, it has cultivated a fully institutionalised ally; in Iraq, it has established a hybrid state within a state; in Syria, it had supported a regime via a war of attrition from 2011 to 2024; and in Yemen, it has bolstered a non-Twelve insurgency to undermine its Sunni adversaries. In all these instances, Iran has exhibited the capacity to integrate military assistance with ideological alignment, and religious legitimacy with political expediency. Significantly, Iran's plan demonstrates a realist approach disguised in sectarian rhetoric—not a fanatical campaign, but a deliberate endeavour to augment power through a combination of belief and pragmatism.

### **1.5. Sunni Reactions to the Shia Crescent**

The rise of the Shia Crescent as a geopolitical entity has elicited diverse reactions from Sunni-majority nations and groups throughout the Middle East. These reactions stem from ideological apprehensions and strategic considerations, particularly among Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, Egypt, and Türkiye. The response has encompassed counter-sectarian narratives, regional military interventions, soft power diplomacy, and assistance for Sunni Islamist factions, all intended to diminish Iranian dominance. Saudi Arabia has been the most outspoken and aggressive among Sunni powers in addressing the perceived threat of Iranian expansionism. The Saudi government has characterized the Shia Crescent as a manifestation of Persian imperialism and sectarian strife, while promoting a counter-narrative rooted in Sunni orthodoxy and pan-Islamic unity under Saudi hegemony. This intellectual framework, sometimes imbued with Wahhabi/Salafi nuances, depicts Iran as a disruptive entity intent on subverting Sunni Arab sovereignty and Islamic legitimacy (Ghoble, 2019). The Saudi Kingdom

has participated in proxy confrontations with Iran in several regions, including Syria, Iraq, and notably Yemen, where it initiated a comprehensive military operation in 2015 to halt Houthi progress. The operation has been rationalised as a defence of Yemen's legitimate government against Iranian aggression; however, it has also exposed the limitations of Riyadh's military capabilities.

Saudi Arabia has sought to garner Sunni and Western assistance through diplomatic channels, including the Arab League, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and collaborative military efforts such as the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition. Riyadh has significantly invested in public diplomacy and media to counteract Iran's ideological influence in the region, especially among marginalised Sunni communities (Ghoble, 2019, pp. 48–50). Other Gulf monarchies, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, have closely aligned with Saudi Arabia in their opposition to Iranian influence. Bahrain, characterized by a Shia majority and a Sunni governing class, is acutely attuned to suspected Iranian infiltration (Al-Rawi, 2015). The 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations in Bahrain, mostly spearheaded by Shia protestors, were brutally quashed with the aid of Saudi and Emirati security forces. Bahraini authorities have alleged that Tehran incited the unrest, seeing it as a component of a wider Shia insurrection (Al-Rawi, 2015).

The UAE, albeit somewhat pragmatic in its interactions with Iran, has nonetheless adopted a resolute position in Yemen, collaborating with Saudi Arabia to combat the Houthis. Emirati military and local proxies have been instrumental in the southern theatre of the conflict; nevertheless, increasing discord between Emirati and Saudi objectives has hampered this relationship (El-Dessouki & Mansour, 2023, pp. 396–404). The UAE has aligned with Riyadh in viewing the Shia Crescent as a catalyst for regional instability, especially regarding Iranian control over non-state actors. The GCC provides financial and ideological assistance to Sunni communities and religious organisations throughout the region, thereby supporting sectarian narratives that counter Iranian ideology. Media organisations such as Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia act as counterbalances to Iranian networks like Al-Alam and Press TV, promoting rival narratives on legitimacy, sectarian identity, and regional authority (Ghoble, 2019).

In contrast to the GCC governments, Egypt and Türkiye have adopted more prudent and, at times, ambiguous approaches regarding the Shia Crescent. Egypt's engagement with Iran and its Shia Crescent strategy is characterized by deep ideological suspicion but limited direct confrontation. Cairo views Iran's regional activism as both a sectarian threat and a challenge to the Arab state system, yet it rarely translates this perception into an overtly aggressive foreign policy. Since the 1979 Revolution, Egypt's political establishment — whether under Mubarak, Morsi, or Sisi — has regarded Iran's revolutionary Shia discourse as antithetical to Sunni

Arab nationalism and the legacy of Nasserism (Taflıođlu, 2019). The assassination of Anwar Sadat by an Islamist with alleged Iranian sympathies cemented a long-term mistrust. Egypt consistently frames Iran's actions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as foreign encroachments on Arab sovereignty, aligning ideologically with Saudi Arabia's stance. Under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's leadership in particular, Egypt has predominantly sided with Saudi Arabia in countering Iranian influence, particularly in Yemen and Syria. Nevertheless, Cairo's involvement has been constrained by internal objectives and a hesitance to become extensively involved in regional sectarian disputes. Egypt's conventional self-perception as a pan-Arab leader has also rendered it cautious of being viewed as a satellite state of Saudi Arabia (Taflıođlu, 2019). Cairo's principal concern does not appear to be Shia expansionism per se, but Iran's capacity to exploit state weakness in Arab countries to undermine traditional centres of Arab power. Overall, Egypt frames the Shia Crescent as a political project cloaked in religious legitimacy—one that must be contained through regional Arab coordination rather than unilateral aggressive confrontation—thus offering a softer approach compared to the Saudi stance on the issue.

Türkiye's stance towards Iran over the last two decades has been more intricate compared to that of Egypt. Türkiye, a Sunni-majority nation with supposed neo-Ottoman and/or pan-Islamic aspirations under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership, has frequently engaged in indirect rivalry with Iran (Haugom, 2019). Ankara strongly backed Sunni rebel factions in Syria and has maintained a robust military presence in northern Iraq. However, Türkiye has also sustained pragmatic diplomatic and commercial relations with Tehran, especially in energy commerce and regional diplomacy. Under President Erdoğan, Türkiye has aimed to establish itself as an autonomous Sunni entity that transcends sectarian divisions, notably through its endorsement of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements. In Syria and Iraq, Turkish and Iranian interests have often conflicted, notwithstanding instances of collaboration against Kurdish secession or in post-conflict reconstruction initiatives.

Even though Ankara has officially adopted a Sunni identity under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the Erdoğan administration has never fully supported the idea of a unified sectarian front led by Saudi Arabia against Iran. Instead, Türkiye has followed a multi-pronged foreign strategy that aims to restrict Iran's regional aspirations without sparking outright confrontation. Türkiye continues to rely heavily on Iran as a natural gas provider, and the two countries' trade has consistently shown resilience in the face of regional crises. Furthermore, the 2017 Qatar crisis and Türkiye's vocal opposition to US sanctions on Iran further demonstrated Ankara's preference for regional autonomy over sectarian alliance with the Gulf monarchies. Thus, Türkiye's approach toward the Shia Crescent is characterized by a combination of sectarian scepticism and

geopolitical adaptability. To strike a balance between Islamic identity politics and realist strategic objectives, Ankara regards Tehran as a rival to be managed and occasionally engaged with. This contrasts with the traditional Sunni approach of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which portrays Iran solely as an ideological adversary.

Sunni Islamist movements, from the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood to more militant Salafi-jihadist factions, have responded to the Shia Crescent in ideologically intense ways. The Muslim Brotherhood, while primarily dedicated to Sunni empowerment via political Islam, has occasionally sought to eschew explicit sectarianism in pursuit of wider Islamic unity. Nonetheless, Brotherhood-affiliated entities in Syria and elsewhere have contested Iran and its supporters, perceiving them as impediments to Sunni political revitalisation (Helfont, 2009). Conversely, Salafi-jihadist organisations like al-Qaeda and ISIS have established anti-Shia sectarianism as a fundamental principle of their ideology. These factions portray Iran and its allies as “heretics” and “justifiable targets of jihad”, and they have perpetrated severe violence against Shia people and institutions (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015). The emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria was largely a direct response to the perceived Shia hegemony—instigated by Iran—over the political landscape following 2003. The ideological mobilisation by various factions has complicated the regional dynamics, occasionally driving Sunni governments into precarious positions. Although nations such as Saudi Arabia have formally condemned extremist violence, they have also faced allegations of promoting the sectarian rhetoric that legitimises it (Ghoble, 2019, pp. 46–49). This has established a feedback cycle wherein both state and non-state Sunni actors simultaneously contest and reinforce the narrative of a zero-sum sectarian conflict.

A significant insight into current regional dynamics is the strategic employment of sectarianism by Sunni governments to influence foreign policy and enhance internal legitimacy. In countries such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, characterizing local dissent as an Iranian conspiracy serves to delegitimise opposition groups and rationalise repressive actions. Sectarian framing thus serves as a mechanism for authoritarian endurance. The phenomenon of the Shia Crescent has prompted Sunni regimes to establish new alliances, including implicit or explicit normalisation with Israel, driven by mutual apprehensions regarding Iranian expansionism. The Abraham Accords, which resulted in the normalisation of relations between the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel, can be largely seen as an anti-Iran coalition that transcends conventional Arab-Israeli animosities. This evolving dynamic highlights that the Sunni response to the Shia Crescent is not only defensive or ideological—it is strategic, instrumental, and influenced by fluctuating power dynamics. The rhetoric of sectarianism is frequently utilised to rationalise actions, although the fundamental objectives are based on national interest, regime security, and regional dominance.

## 1.6. Iran-Israel Conflict within the Context of the Shia Crescent

The so-called “Twelve-Day War” between Iran and Israel in June 2025 and the ongoing conflict between the two regimes have been deeply intertwined with Iran’s long-term Shia Crescent grand strategy. In fact, it can be seen as a direct test—and, arguably, a partial culmination—of that strategy’s strengths, vulnerabilities, and contradictions. Iran’s creation and nurturing of a transnational Shia alliance was never just about sectarian solidarity, as its central geopolitical objective has always been countering Israel, projecting power to its borders, and deterring Israeli or US attacks on Iranian soil or nuclear infrastructure (Mousavian & Chitsazian, 2020). Before the 2024 Revolution in Syria and the June 2025 War between Tehran and Tel Aviv, the geopolitical landscape seemed to reflect Iran’s supposed success in building a layered regional deterrent. Israel was not confronting Iran in isolation but was besieged by a “ring of fire” encircling it in the form of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Assad regime in Syria, and Shia militants in Iraq and Yemen.

Although Iran likely did not directly command Hamas’s October 7 attack in 2023, the broader “axis of resistance”—which includes Hamas, Hezbollah, PIJ, and Iran-backed militias—functioned as a flexible coalition. The Hamas-Israel war triggered the most overt regional activation of Iran’s allies in recent memory, including numerous Houthi missile and drone attacks on Israel, Hezbollah’s consistent escalation on the northern front, and Iraqi militias targeting US bases in Iraq and Syria (Garfinkle, 2025). These moves were coordinated and framed as part of a shared “resistance” to Israeli actions in Gaza—but beneath that ideological unity lay a clear strategic use of the Shia Crescent to constrain Israel and stretch its military bandwidth. For years, Iran and Israel were engaged in a “shadow war”—covert assassinations, cyberattacks, and airstrikes, especially in Syria. The Twelve-Day War of June 2025 pushed that dynamic into the open, with intense Israeli bombings of Iranian territory and retaliatory missile and drone strikes by Iranian armed forces.

Despite Iran’s retaliation, Tehran relied on visible warning and de-escalation signals—suggesting that the Shia Crescent remains primarily a defensive and asymmetric tool, not an engine for total war against Israel and the US. The 2025 War also exposed cracks in the Shia Crescent vision: Hezbollah is constrained by the need to avoid a full-blown war that would devastate Lebanon’s fragile economy and society; Iraqi Shia militias faced pushback from their own government and public; the Houthis’ attacks have invited broader international retaliation and affected Iran’s regional image; and Tehran’s emphasis on sectarian identity is increasingly out of step with rising anti-sectarian, nationalist, or protest-driven politics in Iraq and Lebanon (Harb, 2024). The largely passive stance of Iran’s militant network during the June 2025 War reveals that the Shia Crescent may

mobilise in times of external confrontation but faces domestic legitimacy issues when used as a total war device against the overwhelming military power of Israel.

Despite intense military blows by Israel and the US, political costs, and rising international pressure, Iran's Shia Crescent grand strategy remains remarkably resilient. Its deterrent logic is, of course, weakened after the fall of the Iran-aligned Assad regime in Syria, yet it still functions to some extent. The Israeli-US alliance must still consider Hezbollah and the Houthis before making further escalatory moves. The strategic depth of the Shia Crescent is weakened but endures—as several US bases in the area remain vulnerable due to PMF militias in Iraq. Its ideological and symbolic influence—as defender of Palestinian resistance and opponent of Western imperialism and Israeli war crimes—still holds weight among many Arab publics, despite sectarian differences (Salari & Thaher, 2025). Yet the 2025 War also shows that Iran's grand strategy is reactive as much as proactive. It has succeeded in building a network of deterrents but has limited capacity to control how and when these actors escalate. Overall, the recent Iran-Israel war should not be seen as a break from or turning point in the Shia Crescent grand strategy—it is merely the latest and most intense episode within it.

The Iran-Israel conflict, analysed through the framework of IR theory, exemplifies the interaction between neo-realist imperatives and asymmetric warfare methods in influencing the foreign policy actions of a revolutionary middle power such as Iran. Neo-realism, particularly Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, underscores the manner in which states function within an anarchic international system, striving to secure their safety by maximizing relative strength (Waltz, 2000). States are obligated to counter perceived threats, particularly when confronted with regional hegemons or the possibility of encirclement. As such, Iran's Shia Crescent grand strategy constitutes a regional balancing initiative in response to perceived threats from Israel, the US military presence, and pro-Western Arab states. Subsequent to the 1979 Revolution, Iran became isolated within a hostile regional framework. The Shia Crescent network, comprising Hezbollah, the former Assad government, Iraqi Shia militias and the Houthis, enabled it to counterbalance its conventional military disadvantages through stratified deterrence and geographic depth. In contrast, Israel has implemented a preventative approach to thwart Iran's regional dominance by attacking Iranian presence in Syria, assassinating IRGC leaders, and advocating internationally against Iran's nuclear program. The ongoing Iran-Israel conflict exemplifies neo-realist theory, since each party's actions to bolster its security—such as Iran equipping Hezbollah and Israel targeting Damascus—result in heightened fear for the other side, thereby perpetuating cycles of escalation.

According to the principles of offensive realism, as articulated by John Mearsheimer, great and aspiring powers do not merely pursue balance; they

endeavour to increase their strength whenever opportunities present themselves (Snyder, 2002). Iran's exploitation of crises—such as the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab upheavals in 2011, and the disintegration of Syria and Yemen—can be perceived as aggressive strategies to augment its sphere of influence. In Iraq, Iran sought to incorporate loyal militias into governmental institutions (PMF). In Syria, it reinforced its pro-Assad military presence in an attempt to secure control of vital passageways. In Lebanon and Yemen, it supported armed factions that enhance its capacity to exert influence beyond Israel's borders and the Red Sea. This offensive realist rationale elucidates the assertive character of Iran's Shia Crescent; although rationalised through ideological or defensive discourses, it has operated as a regional revisionist initiative, contesting the US-Saudi-Israeli security framework.

Constructivist IR theory would analyse Iran's approach not merely in material terms, but as influenced by its revolutionary identity, anti-Zionist ideology, and the historical narrative of Shia suffering and contemporary empowerment. These shapes Iran's justification for its regional actions (e.g., "defending the oppressed"). Iran characterizes its confrontation with Israel as a civilisational and religious struggle rather than solely a geopolitical one (Mousavian & Chitsazian, 2020). Constructivism elucidates the soft power instruments and ideological rhetoric that accompany Iran's realpolitik strategies. Hence, it can be concluded that the ongoing conflict highlights that Iran's grand strategy in the 21st century is not solely kinetic or conventional, but rather a complex amalgamation of structural necessity (security within an anarchic framework), strategic opportunity (power vacuums), ideological justification (resistance theology), and tactical pragmatism (hybrid warfare). Iran's Shia Crescent exemplifies how middle powers employ asymmetric methods to exert influence beyond their capacity while manoeuvring within a contentious regional framework. The Iran-Israel conflict of 2024–25 is not an exception but an expression of longstanding tensions in an area where neo-realist principles, asymmetric capabilities and ideological perspectives intersect, significantly impacting both regional and global order.

### **1.7. Conclusion**

The concept of the Shia Crescent has evolved into a central framework through which scholars and policymakers interpret Iran's regional strategy and its entanglement in Middle Eastern conflicts. This chapter has demonstrated that the Shia Crescent is not just a myth or an alarmist narrative; it is a dynamic configuration of alliances, ideologies, and instruments that has allowed Iran to exert significant influence in the Middle East, particularly in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the Arab uprisings of 2011. The analysis reveals that Iran's Shia Crescent is far from a monolithic expansionist project. It is shaped by local contexts, the agency of regional actors, and changing global conditions.

Hezbollah in Lebanon remains the model proxy and ideological ally, while Iraq represents both a success in terms of influence and a cautionary tale of overreach and backlash. In Syria, Iran seemingly managed to secure its strategic interests but at great cost in human and financial terms, only to lose all gains in the aftermath of the Sunni militia-led 2024 Revolution. Yemen's Houthi alliance demonstrates the extent of Iranian influence but also the limits of command-and-control in fragmented conflict zones.

The Shia Crescent has clearly not gone uncontested. Israel and Sunni-majority states, led by Saudi Arabia, have developed robust counter-strategies. These include the dissemination of a sectarian narrative that portrays Iran as a hegemonic threat, military interventions in Yemen and Bahrain, and the creation of new regional alliances such as the Saudi-Emirati-Israeli axis. Sunni Islamist movements, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to Salafi-jihadist groups, have also opposed Iran's influence, often intensifying sectarian divides in already fractured societies such as Iraq and Yemen. On the other hand, some Sunni-majority powers like Türkiye and Egypt have pursued ambiguous, balancing approaches, reflecting the complexity of intra-Sunni geopolitics.

Crucially, the instrumentalisation of sectarianism has been a hallmark of both Iranian and Sunni Gulf regimes' behaviour. Iran frames its actions as resistance and protection of the Shia, yet it also utilises sectarian mobilisation for strategic gain. Sunni powers, in turn, deploy anti-Shia rhetoric not only to undermine Iran but also to consolidate domestic legitimacy and discredit opposition groups. In Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, sectarianism has become both a cause and a consequence of domestic power struggles. The result is a deeply polarized region where identity politics are manipulated to serve regime survival.

Looking forward, the future of the Shia Crescent and its regional contestation remains uncertain. The 2023 restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, brokered by China, may herald a new phase of cautious *détente*. This development reflects not only regional fatigue from endless proxy wars but also global pressure to stabilise oil markets and prevent regional escalations. If sustained, such rapprochement could de-escalate tensions in flashpoints like Yemen and Iraq and open space for more pragmatic diplomacy. At the same time, structural factors—ideological mistrust, competing security doctrines, and unresolved conflicts—continue to sustain rivalries. While official diplomacy may resume, competition in third-party arenas like Syria and Lebanon may persist, albeit in less overt forms. Sectarian identities have been deeply politicized, and reversing this legacy will require more than state-level agreements. Popular protests in Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran itself have increasingly criticized not only corrupt local elites but also foreign intervention—whether from Tehran, Washington, or Riyadh. This rising civic nationalism and anti-

sectarian sentiment among younger populations may gradually erode the utility of sectarian mobilisation.

In conclusion, the Shia Crescent is best understood not as a fixed alliance or an ideological crusade, but as a multi-layered strategy of influence, protection, and deterrence, forged in the crucible of post-colonial geopolitics, religious solidarities, and regional insecurities. It reflects Iran's unique position as both a revolutionary power and a status quo actor. While its future will depend on both regional developments and global shifts, one thing remains clear: the Shia Crescent—and the sectarian dynamics it has provoked—will continue to shape the Middle East for the foreseeable future, either as a source of conflict or, potentially, as a catalyst for dialogue and recalibration.

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## CHAPTER 2

# BEYOND DEMOCRATISATION AND AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN THE MENA AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

Hatice Rumeysa Dursun<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. Introduction

How to explain the consequences of the Arab uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region more than a decade later? The main objective of this study is to contribute to debates that aim to go beyond democratisation and post-democratisation paradigms and assess the evolution of political structure in the MENA. In this vein, it is argued that the literature on state formation can help one to understand the dynamics that explain change and continuity in Arab politics. By adopting a historical sociology approach to state formation and state reformation, this study underlines that despite the departure of Ben Ali in Tunisia, one can observe a process that has accentuated the state's weakness after the uprisings.

An important body of literature has been developed on the causes and consequences of the popular protests that led to the regime changes in the MENA. More than a decade after the Uprisings, there is a common observation that the Arab Spring has transformed into an Arab Winter, considering the limits of democratisation in the post-uprising democratisation (Allinson, 2015; Hinnebusch 2015a; Saouli, 2015; Stacher, 2015; Valbjørn, 2015; Volpi & Stein, 2015). Tunisia was considered by scholars as an exception to this trend of states' failure following the Arab uprisings thanks to the facilitator role played by its trade union movement (Hinnebusch, 2015b). However, recent developments in Tunisia have marked a rupture in the literature focusing on the country's transformation after the Jasmine Revolution, with this reversal of democratic procedures being qualified as democratic backsliding (Souilmi, 2023). This study is divided into three sections. In the first section, it is argued that an understanding of the dynamics of the post-uprising process requires moving beyond democratisation

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and post-democratisation approaches. In the second section, it is shown why a historical sociology approach to state and state formation has advantages in analysing the impact of the Arab uprisings on the MENA states. The third section presents an empirical analysis of the impact of the Arab uprisings on Tunisian state formation.

## **2.2. Beyond Democratisation and Authoritarian Resilience: Analysing Change and Continuity in the MENA**

Studies on Arab politics focus on two broad questions in order to understand the ongoing transformations in the region. The first question aims to explain the absence of democracy, while the second concentrates on the resilience of the authoritarian regimes. Studies that aim to respond to the first question emerged in the 1990s and tried to understand the resistance of the Arab states to the 'third wave' of democratisation. This school of thought reflects the impact of modernisation theories of the 1950s and 1960s (Hinnebusch, 2006, pp. 373-395). This literature points out the absence of democracy in the MENA region and highlights the importance of a strong civil society, bourgeoisie, democratic political culture, and democratic mediators as the main prerequisites of democracy (Brynen et al, 1995; Salame, 1994; Waterbury, 1994). For example, Brunell classifies the factors that explain the failures of democratisation while he also addresses the conditions that facilitate democratic transitions (Burnell, 1998, p. 9). Some scholars also examined the conditions that explain the organisation and the execution of the political rule and regime survival in Arab countries (Bellin, 2004, p. 148; Scumberger, 2007, p. 6).

The democratisation paradigm focuses on the conditions of democratic transformation while the authoritarian resilience approach considers the region as an exception to democratisation's process. The post-democratisation approach examines the factors that explain the resilience of authoritarianism in the Arab world. From this perspective, scholars have paid attention to repression, co-optation, and patrimonial relations as political and economic instruments of authoritarian rule. For example, Bellin points out the importance of international support, a rentier economy, and weak institutionalisation of coercive apparatus that enable the persistence of authoritarianism (Bellin, 2012, pp. 128-129). Likewise, Ehteshami highlights the role of repressive power, ideology, and patrimonial relations for analysing the robustness of authoritarian regimes in the MENA region (Ehteshami, 2012, pp. 22-223). However, the main weakness of the post-democratisation perspective is its over concentrated on regime centred analysis and its omission of social dynamics that are crucial in comprehending political transformations (Valbjørn, 2014, p. 158). Both approaches present a dichotomic and reductionist analysis of the Arab uprisings as well as change and continuity in Arab politics. On the one hand, the democratisation theory has failed to explain "the modest democratic harvest" (Brownlee et al., 2013) of the post-

uprising process (Valbjørn, 2015). The over-focus on the absence of democracy has prevented scholars from developing methods, theories, and concepts that explain the real dynamics behind the politics (Anderson, 2006, p. 209). On the other hand, the authoritarian resilience paradigm could not anticipate the social mobilisations that lead to the regime changes. Therefore, some recent studies strove to remedy the weaknesses of the authoritarian resilience literature by underlining the role played by protests and social mobilisations (Aarts, van Dijke et al., 2012; Brynen, et al., 2012; Durac, 2015; Leenders, 2013; Tripp, 2014).

Considering the shortcomings of these approaches, some scholars turned to discuss meta-theoretical issues. For example, Cavatorta underlines the main factors that hinder the democratisation process and proposes two categories. The first category points out structure-led factors that concentrate on rentier economy, international factors, Islamic political culture, and the second category concerns agency-led factors that include Islamist movements and the ruling elite (Cavatorta, 2011, pp. 83-86). This categorisation establishes artificial limits between the structural and agential elements, both of which are quintessential in developing coherent explanatory frameworks. In the same line of thinking, Valbjørn and Bank criticise the reductionist approach of democratisation and post-democratisation paradigms due to their apparent weakness in explaining change and continuity by connecting the past with the present (Valbjørn, 2010, pp. 187-188).

What is clear is the fact that the Arab uprisings do not represent a complete rupture with previous political developments in the MENA region. Moving beyond the democratisation and the post-democratisation approaches requires examining Arab politics as a process of domination and resistance (Saouli, 2015: 318). In this context, it is essential to reconsider the definition of politics and the main actors and fields that determine politics (Cavatorta & Durac, 2010, p. 9; Hinnebusch, 2010, p. 214; Saouli, 2014, p. 3; Valbjørn, 2012, p. 31). The critical analysis of democratisation and post-democratisation approaches demonstrates that these two perspectives fell short of addressing the analytical objectives. In the following section, a historical sociology approach to state and state formation will be elaborated in order to assess the post-uprising period political change.

### **2.3. A Historical Sociology Approach to State Formation in the MENA**

What is historical sociology, and how can it help our understanding of the state and state formation in the MENA? To answer these questions, it is essential to begin with the definition and an analysis of its main pillars. Historical sociology, which can be defined as an interdisciplinary intellectual tradition that aims at comprehending the role of interests and ideas of social and political actors within social structures (Abrams, 1982; Skocpol, 1984; Smith, 1991). This intellectual tradition is composed of the following principles. First, historical sociology

emphasizes the impact of macro level transformations on state formation processes (Moore, 1966; Tilly, 1990). Second, historical sociology does not accept teleological assumptions of a democratic endpoint. It considers the state as a process and reflection of power struggles between oligarchic and democratic forces. Therefore, this tradition has advantages over democratisation and authoritarian resilience perspectives in assessing the post-uprising trajectories (Hinnebusch, 2018: p. 40). Third, historical sociology underlines the interaction of agency and structure. This agency can be represented by an individual, state, regime, or armed movement, and its interaction with the structural context produces specific outcomes (Saouli & Hinnebusch, 2022, p. 11).

Fourth, historical sociology strives to establish a dialogue between theory and empirical evidence by examining the state in accordance with path dependence. This concept seeks to understand how the past shapes the future and how some authority-building practices can be reproduced (Mahoney, 2000). This approach proposes to study the state in a specific historical process, and the state formation in the Arab world should be analysed by taking into account the region's specific history. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East did not pave the way to the emergence of unified nation-states, but social fields, which are the contexts where states can form, develop, and deform. From this perspective, the state can be defined as a process of state formation or deformation (Saouli, 2019: p.42). A social field is composed of three structural components. First, the material structure is constituted of geographical conditions and the socio-economic system. Second, the cultural structure involves ethnic, tribal, and linguistic characteristics. Third, the political structure is the field where political actors struggle for power over cultural values and economic structure. Therefore, social fields represent the main areas of opportunities and constraints for political actors who fight for domination over cultural or material structure (Saouli & Hinnebusch, 2022, pp. 12-13). Above the political structure, we can find institutions where the rules of interaction between powerful actors and less powerful actors are fixed and where the struggles for domination take place (Filgstein, 2001, p. 108).

Considering a social field as the structure through which state formation occurs, it is also essential to define the concept of "state." Weber provides a definition of the state, which is an ideal type. According to him, the state is "a compulsory political organisation whose administrative staff successfully uphold the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical forces in the enforcement of its order" (Weber, 1978, p. 54). Taking into account this definition, it is possible to conceptualise the process of state formation as the monopolisation of three spheres of social life: coercive, ideological, and socio-economic (Saouli, 2019, p. 44). It is possible to comprehend a regime as a coalition of actors that share

ideological, political, and economic interests that aims at monopolising power and domination in a social field (Saouli & Hinnebusch, 2022, p. 14). In this context, institutions serve to consolidate and reproduce the power of the regime, which is a dominant group that controls other actors in the early process of state building. The limited inclusion of different societal forces triggers resistance against the ruling elite. This type of resistance implies the political mobilisation of dissatisfied segments in society by invoking an alternative ideological or economic direction (Saouli & Hinnebusch, 2022, p. 15).

The weak incorporation of societal actors increases the vulnerability of the Arab state to political and social crises such as the Arab uprisings, but also external penetration (Saouli, 2015, p. 321). This struggle between the dominant ruling group and oppositional forces becomes more evident in periods of contentious politics (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 5). Despite the fact that the uprisings paved the way to political change, the achievement of this change depended on certain variables such as the political polarisation, economic and security problems in the post-uprisings period in Tunisia.

#### **2.4. State Formation in Tunisia Before the Arab Uprisings (1956-2011)**

The state formation process in Tunisia was initiated by Arab nationalist elites to achieve political independence, nation-building, and socio-economic development. These attempts led to regime erosion in 1987 (Ben Ali's coup d'état) and in 2011 (Arab uprisings and Ben Ali's departure). It is possible to attribute regime erosions to different factors that shaped the trajectory of the Tunisian regime. First, struggles between the ruling elite and oppositional forces for monopolisation of power excluded societal actors from the political field. Second, regime erosion is also a consequence of the use of ideological divisions within society, which serve to deepen the political domination of the ruling group. Third, the first two factors make regimes more vulnerable to different challenges and crises (such as the general strike and riots in January 1978, the bread riots of 1984, and the Arab uprisings).

It is important to examine the historical process of state formation in Tunisia to understand the origins of political repression of social forces (Islamists or leftists) and the increasing ideological (Secular-Islamist) division within society. A political struggle for power between Salah Ben Youssef and Habib Bourguiba emerged within the nationalist elites of the Neo-Destour Party before full independence. While Ben Youssef was the secretary-general, Bourguiba was the president of the party. This struggle ended with the victory of Bourguiba over Ben Youssef. Indeed, Bourguiba appeared as the central figure of the party by maintaining close relations with France and negotiating the Franco-Tunisian Autonomy Conventions, which led to the full independence of Tunisia (Willis, 2014, p. 38).

This struggle between Ben Youssef and Bourguiba was not only a personal conflict for power, but also an ideological conflict that represented different segments of the Tunisian population. Bourguiba was educated in law and political science at the Sorbonne in the 1920s and was deeply influenced by the Western ideals of positivism, development, and progress. Furthermore, he was mainly supported by the Sahel (middle coastal area) (Shahin, 1998, p. 37) and presented a moderate approach to the French (Willis, 2014, p. 39). On the other hand, Ben Youssef's supporters were generally from the southern parts of Tunisia and represented traditional and conservative segments (religious scholars, Zaytouni students) of Tunisian society (Shahin, 1998, p. 37). Therefore, this rivalry between Ben Youssef and Bourguiba can also be described as a "clash of constituencies" that reflects the local ideological divisions in Tunisia (Anderson, 1986, p. 233). Moreover, this conflict also negatively shaped the attitude of Bourguiba towards the religious establishment because of its support for Ben Youssef (Shahin, 1998, p. 38).

Having neutralised the challenge posed by Ben Youssef, Bourguiba concentrated power in his own hands and launched a programme of modernisation. He strove to impose his own vision of development and reformism in order to build a prosperous Tunisia (Willis, 2014, pp. 51-52). Moreover, he presented himself as a religious reformist leader and aimed at eliminating the prestige of the ulama and the religious establishment. Indeed, Bourguiba considered the religious scholars as an obstacle to his programme of modernisation (Shahin, 1998, pp. 35-37). In one of his speeches, Bourguiba denounced the incapacity of traditional religious leaders to adapt themselves to modern challenges:

*I have realised that the real secret behind the glory, strength and civilization which Islam achieved during its first phase was its ability to open the minds, break the chains, and liberate the human intellect, the secret behind the decline of Muslims in their dark ages lay at their rejection of reason, their conservative imitation, and submission to dubious leaders, fake religious characters conservative scholars, and Sufi orders that restricted reasoning and stagnated religion? (Speech of Bourguiba quoted in Shahin, 1998, pp. 35-36).*

Bourguiba sought to legitimise his reform programme by emphasizing reason and criticising the past record of conservative scholars and outdated interpretations of Islamic principles. Indeed, he advocated a positivist and Western-inspired model of progress for the post-independence period. At the institutional level, Bourguiba adopted radical reforms that sought to assert its control over the religious establishment. The state dismantled the public and religious *habous* (endowments) and integrated them into the state domain in 1956. Likewise, the new regime established a unified judicial system by replacing the Islamic sharia courts and French tribunals. At the level of education, the Ministry of National

took control of the traditional education system, which includes the Qur'anic schools, the Madrasas, and the Zaytouna College. What is also interesting is the fact that French continued to be the primary language of instruction in the Tunisian school system, and the curriculum was dominated by Western culture. Furthermore, the Zaytouna College, a traditional school of Arabic and Islamic education, was closed in 1957 (Shahin, 1998, p. 39). French was also the primary language of higher education, and graduates of religious schools largely lost their chance of attending the state university.

These radical reforms are directed to redesign the institutional framework in line with the new regime's positivist and secular ideology of progress and development. Also, this process illustrates the level of marginalisation of large segments of the Tunisian population (Shahin, 1998, p. 42). The dismantling of the religious establishment was motivated by the objective of eliminating a potential rival power to the new regime. At the economic level, Bourguiba adopted a socialist economic programme with the appointment of Ahmed Ben Salah in 1961 as Minister for Planning and Finance. The Neo-Destour party was renamed the Party Socialist Destourian (PSD) in 1964 as a reflection of this economic reorientation (Shahin, 1998, p. 65). This socialist economic programme was abandoned in 1969 because it had negative impacts, especially in the agricultural sector of the Tunisian economy. From 1970, a liberal economic policy was adopted, and the socio-economic conditions in the country continued to decline, triggering dissent and mobilisation against the regime in January 1978. A general strike was organised by the UGTT (*Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens*-Tunisian General Union of Worker) for the first time after the independence and the government responded violently to these riots of workers.

The increase of social dissent provided a fertile ground for the politicisation of Islamic movement which was confined to cultural activities until that time indeed, "not only the leadership of the Islamic group become more convinced of the religious imperative of social justice, but it also realised that the regime's suppression of the main sources of political dissent –the student and trade unions–left a political vacuum that they could fill" (Willis, 2016, p. 160). Two factors were critically important in understanding the deposition of Bourguiba by his prime minister, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, in November 1987. Indeed, during the 1980s, the budgetary crisis deepened, and two weeks of rioting across the country revealed the level of dissatisfaction and dissent in the society (Willis, 2014, p. 237). The struggle between the Islamists of MTI (*Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique*-Islamic Tendency Movement) became more intense during the 1980s as the movement established links with other groups such as the UGTT and dissidents within the PSD (Willis, 2014, pp. 164-165, 237). The Leadership of MTI was imprisoned in 1981, released in 1984, and imprisoned again in 1987. Bourguiba's

determination to eliminate the Islamist movement created an opportunity for the downfall of Bourguiba by his prime minister, Ben Ali, through a constitutional removal (Willis, 2014, p. 166).

Despite the fact that Ben Ali was perceived as a moderate leader towards the Islamists, this was only a perception and does not reflect the reality. Having considered the regime change an opportunity for political inclusion, MTI renamed itself as the An-Nahda (Renaissance) Party in early 1989 and decided to participate in multiparty elections to the National Assembly scheduled for April 1989. Independent candidates of An-Nahda officially recorded 15 per cent (probably it attracted nearly 30 per cent) of the popular vote. This achievement clearly demonstrated the political challenge by An-Nahda to Ben Ali. Therefore, the regime gradually adopted a much more repressive policy for dismantling the movement by restricting its activities, closing its newspaper, and arresting its supporters. After the announcement by the interior minister in May 1991 that a plot to overthrow the regime had been discovered, a massive campaign of arrests of An-Nahda activists was launched by the authorities.

As a result, an estimated 8000 party supporters were arrested within a year (Willis, 2014, p. 168). In this context, the government continued to use 'the Islamic threat' as a pretext for maintaining its monopoly over political power. The regime's intolerance was not only directed toward the Islamists of An-Nahda but also toward secular oppositional forces. For example, the Tunisian League for Human Rights was suppressed by the authorities in 1992, and its former head, Muncif al-Marzuqi, was arrested in 1994 after he attempted to challenge Ben Ali's candidacy in the 1994 presidential elections (Shahin, 1998, p. 103). These are concrete examples of how Ben Ali engineered a systematic political exclusion of its adversaries and strove to legitimise its rule on the basis of the so-called 'Islamic threat'.

To maintain its monopoly over coercion and prevent any re-activation of the An-Nahda and any potential challenge to his authoritarian rule, Ben Ali maintained a strong internal security apparatus and relied on the police and intelligence services. It is possible to understand this policy by looking at the increase in the budget for the police. In fact, the budget for the police grew fourfold between 1987 and 1999. This reflects a growth much faster than that accorded to the military (Willis, 2014, p. 104). At the socio-economic level, the economic liberalisation process initiated in the early 1980s was maintained under Ben Ali's rule. The regime avoided an erosion of its political power, ensuring successful domination of the economic sphere. This was made possible by the state's penetration of the private sector, which benefited largely from the liberal economic programme (Willis, 2014, p. 240).

Moreover, Ben Ali considered the support of the private sector as a potential power base for any societal challenge to his rule (Casserino, 2004, pp. 225-226).

He ensured the dependence of the private sector “through the appointment of senior businessmen to government positions and the selective application of laws and regulations” in a way that guaranteed the loyalty of this economic class (Willis, 2014, p. 241; Morphy, 1999, p. 224). According to King, this corporatist approach of the regime directed to economy and politics was based on the state rather than on society (King, 2003, pp. 138-139). The business class in Tunisia developed privileged relations with the family of Ben Ali’s wife. Leila Trabelsi’s relatives enjoyed monopolistic control over large sections of the Tunisian economy through the ownership of independent businesses (Camau & Geisser, 2003, p. 213). This process of shameless corruption severely undermined the legitimacy of the regime and exacerbated social dissent against it. The social and political exclusion during Ben Ali’s rule contributed to its collapse in 2011.

### **2.5. State Formation in Tunisia after the Arab Uprisings (2011-2021)**

The Arab uprisings opened a window of opportunity for change, including the political incorporation of oppositional forces and the amelioration of socio-economic conditions based on social justice. Therefore, how to explain the actual situation of democratic backsliding under the rule of President Kais Saied? Three factors, linked to the state formation process, shed light on the limits of political change and the reversal of democratic achievements in Tunisia after the Arab uprisings. First, the struggle and polarisation of politics between secularist and Islamist actors contributed to the division of society along secular and Islamic lines. Second, the state became vulnerable to terrorist threats, which aggravated security conditions in the post-uprisings period. Third, the polarisation undermined the credibility and capacity of political actors (Islamist or secular) to address effectively critical security and socio-economic problems (unemployment, corruption, poverty, COVID-19), which were at the origin of the Arab uprisings.

The fall of Ben Ali’s regime in 2011 marked a turning point in Tunisian political history, opening the way for political change toward the democratisation of the political system. Since then, Tunisia has been considered an exception in the MENA region for maintaining its democratisation. However, on 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, Kais Saied used the state of exception clause and announced the activation of Article 80 of the Constitution on the grounds of “imminent danger”. By declaring a state of emergency, Saied suspended parliament, announced the dismissal of the head of government, and took charge of the public prosecutor’s office. In this context, it is important to ask the following question: Why was the post-uprisings period reversed and ended in a “constitutional” coup d’état? In order to answer this question, it is quintessential to understand the political dynamics.

First of these dynamics was the political polarisation between Islamists and secularists, which prevented political actors from developing a common strategy

to address the country's imminent social, security, and political problems. With the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime on January 14, 2011, Rachid Ghannouchi's 22-year exile ended, and Ghannouchi returned to Tunisia. On March 1, 2011, the Ennahda Movement was recognised as a legal political party (Willis, 2014, p. 196). In the constituent parliamentary elections held on October 23, 2011, Ennahda won 89 of the 217 seats in the parliament. Meanwhile, Monsieur Marzouki's Congress for the Republic (CPR) won 29 seats in this election. The People's Demand (Al-Aridha) Party won 26 seats, while Ettakatol won 20. A Troika government, including Ennahda, Ettakatol, and the CPR, was formed (Anadolu Ajansı, 2011). During this period, the Ennahda Party faced accusations that it had concealed its "true" agenda (Perkins, 2014, p. 254). In April 2012, Beji Caid Essebsi, who served as a minister during Bourguiba's term, publicly announced the establishment of the Nidaa Tounes Party. Essebsi justified the establishment of Nidaa Tounes, emphasizing the failure of the Troika government to address the country's economic and security challenges, and accused Ennahda of supporting Salafi groups. Meanwhile, Nidaa Tounes presented itself as a secular, technocratic, and democratic party, attracting the support of intellectuals, secularists, leftists, and business people close to Sahelien milieu (Boubekeur, 2016, p. 116).

Second, Tunisia faced challenges that shook the national security and stability following the uprisings. A Salafi attack on an arts centre near the capital in June 2012 escalated tensions between Salafi and secular groups (Köktaş, 2015, p. 5). The escalation of Salafist violence following the Jasmine Revolution has led to criticism that Ennahda has failed to take effective measures to fight these radical groups. Similarly, the Salafist Ansar al-Sharia organisation was held responsible for the assassinations of leftist politician Choukri Belaid in February 2013 and leftist politician Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013 (Köktaş, 2015, p. 5). In response to these assassinations, secular groups have increasingly engaged in anti-Ennahda politics. The Union for Tunisia (UFT) coalition, formed by Essebsi after Brahmi's assassination, increased public pressure on Ennahda. This coalition, supported by many political parties, led protests in July 2013, known as 'Errahil' (Departure), demanding the dissolution of parliament and the resignation of the Troika government (Boubekeur, 2016, p. 117).

During this period, aid, particularly from Gulf countries, disturbed the secular segment of society. Aid deemed to be Islamic in nature was criticised on suspicion of supporting illegal structures. The assassinations of two secular and leftist political figures triggered a major political crisis in the country. This crisis also led to the suspension of the liberal legal framework implemented for civil society after the revolution. In this context, official authorities banned the Salafi-Jihadi Ansar al-Sharia movement and all associations affiliated with it (Merone et al., 2021). UGTT, the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts

(UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League, and the Tunisian Bar Association established in September 2013 the National Dialogue Quartet to overcome the political crisis in the country and facilitated the negotiations between Ennahda and Nida Tounes (Boubekeur, 2016, p. 117).

Following the attack on the Bardo Museum in March 2015, the attack on Sousse Beach in July 2015, and the terrorist attacks on Ben Guerdan on the Libyan border in March 2016, the Tunisian authorities declared that they were engaged in a 'war against terrorism' (Merone et al., 2021). Following these assassinations, intense pressure began on religiously oriented associations, which were viewed as a national security problem. In January 2014, the Ennahda Party was forced to accept the formation of a technocratic government to replace the current government (Sigillò, 2023, p. 88). Following the attack on the Bardo Museum in March 2015, the attack on Sousse Beach in July 2015, and the terrorist attacks on Ben Guerdan on the Libyan border in March 2016, the Tunisian authorities declared that they were engaged in a 'war against terrorism' (Merone, et al., 2021).

Third, Salafist-Jihadi movements emerged after the revolution as a radical opposition group close to the poorer segments of society and were instrumental in escalating secular-Islamist tensions. Ansar al-Sharia is known to be supported by marginalised segments of Tunisia (Merone, 2015). The Ennahda movement, which distanced itself from Ansar al-Sharia, which particularly attracted the attention of marginalised segments of society, officially declared it a terrorist organisation in August 2013. The political reconciliation between Ennahda and the secular Nidaa Tounes Party in 2014 was met negatively by marginalised segments of society (Marzouki, 2015). Problems such as social inequality and economic and political exclusion continued to affect the poorer segments of the country after the revolution. In January 2016, riots broke out in the city of Kaserine, and the people's demands for eliminating inequalities and creating jobs remained unmet due to political instability (Sigillò, 2023, p. 99).

Likewise, Beci Kaid Essebsi, who served as President between 2014 and 2019, exhibited a reluctance to implement reforms that could ensure social equality out of concern that they would harm the financial interests of those with whom he had personal connections. Therefore, it can be claimed that expectations for a genuine political transformation were not reached. One example illustrates this point nine: of the twelve governors appointed by Yusuf Shahid, Prime Minister of the National Unity Government established in August 2016, were former regime officials (Sigillò, 2023, pp. 94-95). Essentially, the discourses of stability, counter-terrorism, and reconciliation adopted during the Bourgiba and Ben Ali regimes did not lead to reforms that would encompass society as a whole. Steps taken with similar rhetoric after the revolution failed to serve any purpose other than protecting the interests of a small segment of society. Those excluded before the

revolution observed that their demands for social justice and equality were not met after the revolution. Indeed, the so-called 'reconciliation law' was considered as an instrument 'to revive the economy by offering amnesty to businessmen accused of corruption under the old regime in exchange for a closed-door confession and pay-backs' and harshly criticised by leftist activists in 2017 (Marzouki, 2016). All these dynamics played a significant role in Kais Saïd's election in the October 2019 presidential elections. As a jurist, retired constitutional professor, and anti-corruption figure, Kais Saïd, considered to have an alternative stance to the current politicians, has been a key figure in the reversal of Tunisia's democratic transition.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

This study aims to demonstrate that a historical sociology approach offers a more comprehensive perspective in order to assess the political change and continuity before and after the Arab uprisings. It is also underlined that dichotomic analyses of democratisation and authoritarian resilience paradigms could not allow to capture the complex dynamics that shape state formation trajectories in Tunisia and in the MENA region. Instead of focusing on agency, this perspective highlights the interaction of agency and structure in assessing post-uprising trajectories. It is against this background that one could find elements of change and continuity in the state formation processes of Tunisia. In this context, three lessons can be noted in order to comprehend the change and continuity in the Tunisian case before and after the Arab uprisings. First, it should be underlined that the division between secular-modernist-positivist and Islamist-traditional-conservative identities has a great impact on the political structure and culture of the country. This division originated from the political rivalry between Habib Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef, which dated to the pre-independence period. Also, one could see the negative impacts of this identity divide between secularist and Islamist polarisation in the post-uprisings transitional process.

Second, the neo-liberal economic policies adopted in the early 1980s have also affected the Tunisian economic structure by increasing social inequalities between the marginalised areas of the south and business people of the Sahel. This economic division is still present and helps one understand social dissent and dissatisfaction, which undermined the confidence of society in transitional political actors (secular or Islamist) during the post-uprisings economic, political, and security crisis. The ideological and political polarisation, together with the rise of the radical terrorist groups in Tunisia, explains the failure of the democratic transition. It also provided a fertile ground for the "constitutional" coup d'état engineered by Kais Saïd. Third, it is possible to highlight an element of continuity in Tunisian politics that can be observed before and after the Arab uprisings. The violent repression of workers during the events of 1978's black Thursday was a critical moment for

the rapprochement between Islamists and leftists. The solidarity and collaboration between the Islamists of an-Nahda and other leftist political groups after the Arab uprisings had deep roots in their struggle against the Bourguiba and Ben Ali's authoritarian regimes. The coalition of the members of the Troika government (An-Nahda, CPR, and Ettakatol) illustrates this tendency of solidarity between the Islamists and the leftists in the Tunisian social and political life.

It should also be underlined that an element of change can be observed after the Arab uprisings, and that is the rise of the Salafi extremist groups and their terrorist attacks. This new phenomenon emerged after the Arab uprisings in Tunisia and undermined the security and stability during the democratic transition process. This can be considered a relatively new phenomenon because there have never been so many terrorist attacks with this frequency in Tunisia. Moreover, compared to its neighbour Algeria, Tunisia had generally more peaceful oppositional groups to the existing rule. Indeed, Algeria experienced a violent civil war that continued during the black decade of the 1990s and that caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians. These elements of change and continuity demonstrate the fragile and dynamic nature of the post-uprisings process in Tunisia. Future research can concentrate its attention on the evolution of this dynamic process and on the elite-mass interactions.

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## CHAPTER 3

### FROM COLLAPSE OF OSLO ACCORDS TO UNPRECEDENTED DESTRUCTION IN GAZA: NEED FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT FOR PALESTINE

Selim Sezer<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1. Introduction

The Palestine issue is one of the fundamental subjects of contemporary Middle East politics, and it has been part of both academic and political debates for decades. The surprise attack carried out by Palestinian forces against Israel on October 7, 2023, and the unprecedentedly harsh response of the Israeli military that is tantamount to genocide, gave rise to further discussions concerning the nature of the conflict, its origins, and its possible outcomes in the future. This chapter is a contribution to these debates.

A thorough and holistic understanding of the Palestinian issue requires tracing back not only to 1967, but rather to the ethnic cleansing of 1948, known as Nakba, to the British mandate in Palestine, and even to the late Ottoman period. The ever-developing literature on Palestine history will help understand the issue in more appropriate manners. The present chapter will not deep delve into this long history, but an analysis of the current situation requires revisiting at least the last three decades, and the so-called Oslo Peace Accords can be considered as a starting point. In this context, the chapter starts by elaborating on the Oslo process, which would gradually collapse, the Second Intifada, and the new efforts to revive “peace” during the Intifada years. It is followed by a discussion on the siege on Gaza, unsuccessful efforts of moderation of Hamas, and finally the “Al-Aqsa Flood” and its consequences. Then we try to indicate various aspects of the Palestinian issue which are relatively less discussed in academic and political debates, including Jewish settlers in West Bank, Palestinian refugees dispersed to various parts of the region and the apartheid regime practiced by Israel, to underline that Palestinian issue is not confined to the situation in Gaza, even if quite understandably it is at the heart of all the debates, and to draw a larger picture that goes beyond the “1967 borders” and helps defining a real solution

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to the issue. We finally mention the need for a paradigm shift and assert that the quest for a two-state solution can be, and arguably should be, replaced by alternative paths.

### **3.2. The Oslo Accords**

On September 13, 1993, a “historical” photo was taken in the court of White House: Leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Yasser Arafat, shook hands with the then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Between the two figures appeared the US President Bill Clinton. Following months of direct negotiations carried out in Oslo, Norway, Israeli and Palestinian leadership had been brought together with the American intermediation to sign what would be called the Declaration of Principles, or Oslo I. It was a moment when a significant part of the international community believed that the decades-old “Israeli-Palestinian conflict” was finally coming to an end.

The agreement did not emerge in a vacuum. Instead, a series of milestone events finally led to the sealing of the Oslo I agreement. The starting point was the outbreak of the First Palestinian Intifada in the final days of 1987 in a spontaneous manner. It was followed by the declaration of the State of Palestine in November 1988 by the exiled PLO leadership in Algeria. Then, in 1991, Palestinian and Israeli representatives came together for indirect talks in Madrid, Spain, and finally the direct talks started in Oslo.

It can be argued that, within this chain of events, the one most linked with Oslo Accords was the declaration of independence. Living in exile and having no capacity to rule the occupied territories, the Palestinian leadership had in fact made a declaration of will. On the other hand, that declaration would lead to scepticism and criticism among Palestinians, or at least among one segment of the Palestinian community. The famous American-Palestinian scholar Edward Said had written in 1989 that the declaration had to be interpreted as “a distinct break with the past, as an assertion of the willingness to make sacrifices in the interests of peace, as a definitive statement of the Palestinian acceptance of the international consensus” (Said, 1989, p. 36). What had led Said to make this claim was the content of the declaration.

In effect, on that historical date, the Palestine National Council had declared, “in the name of God and in the name of the Palestinian Arab people”, “the establishment of the State of Palestine on our Palestinian territory with its capital holy Jerusalem” (Palestinian National Council, 1988). What was historically at least equally remarkable was the nature of this state. Indeed, the declaration of independence was accompanied by a call for a peace conference based on the United Nations Security Council’s resolutions 242 and 338, and for Israel’s withdrawal from the Palestinian and Arab territories occupied in 1967 (Tessler,

1994, p. 723). This means that the Palestinian leadership had abandoned the claim over all territories that were called Palestine until 1948, and that they accepted a two-state solution: one Palestinian state next to one Israeli state, separated from each other on the demarcation lines that existed until the Six Day War in June 1967. Thus, the predicted Palestinian state would cover Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Theoretically, the Declaration of Principles sealed in Washington in September 1993 had the potential to pave the way for such a state. But it can be more appropriate to say that the maximum benefit that the Palestinians could ever obtain through this agreement would be the formation of such a state which, in the period agreement was signed, was in fact no more than a wish. What the agreement actually brought was the formation of a Palestinian Authority that would initially assume the administrative responsibility for Gaza and Jericho. The Israeli army would withdraw from these areas in one year, and domestic security and public order would be assumed by a new Palestinian police force. The Palestinian Authority would expand its self-rule to other parts of the West Bank in five years (Tessler, 1994, pp. 760-761). The agreement had also another significant implication: PLO was recognized as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and PLO recognized the State of Israel. The agreement stipulated that the sides would “recognize their mutual legitimate and political rights and strive to live in peaceful coexistence and mutual dignity and security” (United Nations, 1993).

Two years later, in 1995, a second agreement known as Oslo II was signed in Taba, Egypt. Much longer and more detailed than the first one, the second agreement not only created a framework for the functioning of the Palestinian Authority but also redefined the existence of the Israeli military in Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), which were divided into three areas. Even if the text predicted an ultimate transfer of power to Palestinians, there was no concrete roadmap, and the agreement in fact consolidated the presence of the Israeli army with which the Palestinian Authority would coordinate. What’s more, Article 15 stipulated that Palestinian Authority’s jurisdiction would cover Gaza and West Bank “except the issues that would be part of later negotiations”, and in fact these were the most important and crucial issues: “Jerusalem, settlements, specified military locations, Palestinian refugees, borders, foreign relations and Israelis” (United Nations, 1995).

**Table 1**

*Map of occupied West Bank according to Oslo II agreement. As it is seen, more than half of the territories remain under Israeli control, and the Palestinian-controlled regions are totally fragmented.*

**Oslo II Map  
Outlining Areas A, B, and C**



*Note.* Kersel (2015, p. 28).

Thus, all the major issues that make up the core of the Palestinian issue and the conflict were thrown outside of a so-called peace agreement, and postponed to an uncertain future, which would in fact never come. A real and full military withdrawal did not occur either, and it was not clear if it would ever occur. What the accords brought for Palestinians were little more than the recognition of

PLO and a weak autonomous Palestinian Authority which would have limited power, and which would, as we mentioned above, cooperate with Israel in several fields, including security. In exchange, Palestinian side had recognized the State of Israel and abandoned most of their historical claims. Thirty years later, anti-Zionist Israeli activist and researcher Miko Peled would write: “Today I, along with many others, realise that the Oslo Accords were meant to deepen Israeli control of Palestine and its people while allowing Israel to look good.” (Peled, 2023) Similarly, for Ilan Pappé, “The insistence on partition and the exclusion of the refugee issue from the agenda rendered the Oslo process at best a military redeployment and a rearrangement of the Israeli control in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. At worst, it inaugurated a new system of control that made life for the Palestinians in the occupied territories far worse than it was before” (Pappé, 2024, p. 105).

Before concluding this part, it should be noted that the nature of Oslo Accords and their potential political repercussions could be noticed by some analysts and policymakers even in the initial period. In effect, Israeli political analyst Meron Benvenisti had written in Israeli daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* in December 1993 that the successful sealing of the agreement was possible only as a result of its “deliberate ambiguity”. While the two sides had agreed on the text, they had in fact, Benvenisti argues, two mutually exclusive visions and understandings concerning the agreement. For the PLO, the Declaration of Principles was “the first step” towards a real solution, as the steps required first a national authority in any area of liberated Palestine. In contrast, the agreement was part of the “functional compromise” strategy in the eyes of the Israeli government, through which Palestinians of the occupied territories were granted “administrative authority within municipal boundaries”, while the Israelis would keep a firm grip on all matters pertaining to security and the territories’ resources (Usher, 1999, p. 42). The course of the events would confirm the second vision, while it would be revealed that the first vision was overoptimistic.

### **3.3. Palestinian Objection and the Second Intifada**

The Oslo Accords also led to disagreement and strife within the Palestinian political community. Two Islamist movements, Islamic Jihad and Hamas – the former created in 1981 under the influence of Islamic Revolution in Iran and the latter created in late 1987 as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood – openly rejected the framework of Oslo and vowed for the destruction of Israel. Furthermore, PLO as an umbrella organisation did not have a full cohesion concerning the issue. The organisation was (and is) mostly controlled by Fatah movement which was under direction of Yasser Arafat until his death in 2004. Obviously, Fatah was in favour of the Oslo Accords. But another component of the organisation, the far-left People’s Front for Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)

rejected it. Another far-left (Maoist) component, Democratic Front for Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) would declare that it accepted Oslo framework and two-state solution in 1999. This led to the removal of DFLP from the foreign terrorist organisation list of the USA. (US Department of State, n.d.) As we will see in later parts, acceptance of the two-state solution would be one of the main conditions for Hamas to be accepted as a legitimate political force by Western countries one decade later. In other words, the demarcation line between being a terrorist organisation and a political party in the eyes of the West was not essentially the methods used, but the political aims.

It was under these circumstances that the Second Intifada erupted in September 2000. The provocative entrance of the far-right Israeli politician Ariel Sharon to the compound of Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem was in fact no more than a catalyst. It was the disappointment of the Palestinians that turned the reactions quickly into a wide-based popular uprising. This time the Intifada had a clearer political colour as Hamas became the leading force of the uprising. On the other hand, it was much bloodier than the first one. Not only did Palestinians resort to weapons and bombs, but also the occupation forces acted much more harshly. Even the refugee camps were not exempt from the bloody interventions, as it was the case in Jenin in 2002, where hundreds of Palestinians were killed. During the Intifada years, Israel targeted most of the Palestinian leaders: The founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmad Yasin was killed by a missile fired from an Israeli helicopter on March 22, 2004. Three weeks later, on April 17, 2004, the Chairman of Hamas Shura Council, Abdalaziz al-Rantisi was killed. The secretary-general of the PFLP, Abu Ali Mustafa was assassinated in August 2001. The following secretary-general, Ahmad Saadat was imprisoned in 2002 (and he's still in prison). Even the leader of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, was put under siege when his headquarters in Ramallah were surrounded in 2002. Israel wanted Arafat to "make a choice" between remaining loyal to the Oslo Accords or supporting the "terrorists". The siege ended only when Arafat was taken to France for treatment in October 2004 when he was gravely ill and died two weeks later.

It was almost clear that the Oslo Accords had collapsed in this period. Nevertheless, a number of Arab countries still believed that it was possible to bring a peaceful solution to the conflict. First, in February 2002, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud revealed to the American press that they had prepared a new roadmap for Palestine. Next month, on March 27, an Arab League Summit was convened in Beirut, Lebanon. The "Arab Peace Initiative", adopted unanimously in the summit, called for "full Israeli withdrawal from all territories occupied in June 1967 and Israel's acceptance of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, in return for the establishment of normal relations between the Arab states and Israel in the context

of comprehensive peace”, and a fair solution for Palestinian refugees’ issues on basis of United Nations Resolution 194 (Podeh, 2014, p. 588). While the initial response of the USA was rather positive, the Israeli government, which was now under the direction of Sharon, did not give any response and did its best to change the mind of American administration. The pretext was the ongoing attacks against the Israeli citizens. In April, Saudi crown prince visited US President George Bush to present a “friendlier” version of the plan that did not mention the refugee problem and did not mandate Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders, and Israel refused to negotiate even this version (Podeh, 2014, p. 591). Although there would be further efforts to revive the Arab Peace Initiative in later years, all these efforts would ultimately fail.

### **3.4. Gaza Strip: From Israeli Withdrawal to the Siege**

The Second Intifada ended in 2005 without any clear political result, but one important – and surprising – decision of Sharon’s government can be at least partially linked to the Intifada: in 2005, Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip. The twenty-one Israeli settlements in the region were dismantled, and 38 years of occupation in Gaza ended. On the other hand, the reasons of this surprise withdrawal have been controversial for a long time, and there’s a ground to think that one of the major motivations was to consolidate the occupation in West Bank. Additionally, as Ilan Pappé indicates, Sharon had used this withdrawal for other political aims as well: while the Israeli left was celebrating the withdrawal as a step towards peace, and likening it to the withdrawal of pieds noirs from Algeria, Sharon was asking for an American promise “not to pressure Israel in the future about progress in the peace process, and to exclude right of return from any future negotiations” in exchange for the withdrawal from Gaza Strip (Pappé, 2024, pp. 126-127).

On the other hand, the withdrawal was certainly linked with the demographic issue as well. As it is widely and clearly known, one of the core objectives of Zionism was (and is) to rule as large parts of Palestine as possible with as few native Arabs in it as possible. But ruling a region such as Gaza Strip brings a paradox: it means ruling a tiny region of 365 square kilometres with almost two million Palestinian Arabs and a very small Jewish settler minority. Thus, Gaza was dispensable, especially when the settlers were under a significant “security” risk; it was even more dispensable when a withdrawal had the potential to bring advantages and benefits in other fields. It should be kept in mind that same Sharon had prepared a plan in late 1970s when he was Minister of Agriculture, according to which only a small number of enclaves densely populated by Palestinians were not to come under Israeli sovereignty (Efrat, 2006, p. 28). The same logic was applied to Gaza three decades later.

In any case, Gaza Strip was “liberated” as of 2005, but the conditions would worsen soon. The starting point of the process that ended with siege, massive destruction, and ultimately genocide was the democratic elections held for the Palestinian Authority in 2006.

After the end of Second Intifada, new elections had to be held for the Palestinian Legislative Council that was formed as part of the Oslo Accords. When the elections were completed in January 2006, the winner was Hamas, which was now more popular than Fatah. Hamas got the majority in the Council with 72 seats out of 132. Thus, Hamas was expected to form a new government for the autonomous Palestinian Authority. But the new president who replaced Arafat after his death, Mahmoud Abbas issued several decrees that gave the key functions of the PA to the leader of Fatah, meaning himself. In February, Abbas appointed the Hamas representative Ismail Haniyya to form the government, on condition that they accept all the UN decisions and all existing agreements, including the Oslo Accords. Practically, this meant that Hamas had to accept the two-state solution, recognize the State of Israel, and give up armed activities.

On the other hand, Israel, the US, and European Union declared that they would not recognize a Palestinian government that included Hamas. And when Haniyya’s government that could finally be formed in late March 2006 refused to recognize Israel and lay down the weapons, the economic sanctions started. All foreign aids to Palestinian Authority were cut.

Under these conditions, the President of PA, Mahmoud Abbas did not cooperate with the Hamas government. Hamas also formed its own security force. On December 16, 2006, Mahmoud Abbas called for new elections. The next day, clashes between Fatah and Hamas forces began, leading to dozens of casualties. The efforts of reconciliation failed. In June 2007, Abbas declared that government is dissolved and all of Gaza Strip and West Bank would be ruled solely by PA. This led to further clashes.

Finally, Palestinian rule was divided into two. Fatah and Mahmoud Abbas secured the rule in West Bank, while Hamas started to rule Gaza Strip through its own government. The new situation brought restoration of the “normal” relations between international community and the PA rule in West Bank, but the Hamas government in Gaza Strip would not be recognized by most of the states of the world. Israel also declared that they would never accept a “terrorist government” in Gaza.

Israel actively worked to topple this government through various tools, and the first tool used was a siege. After this date, Israel prohibited both the entry to and exit from Gaza. A total land, sea, and air blockade was being implemented. Only a limited number of products could enter the Strip if Israel permitted.

While the proclaimed aim was to prevent the entry and production of rockets and other weapons, the real aim was to make the living conditions in Gaza unbearable and lead the residents to revolt against Hamas rule. On the other hand, the refusal of the residents to revolt against Hamas meant that collective punishment was legitimate and even necessary. It was the same logic and perspective that led to massive air raids and destructive “operations” against Gaza, the biggest of which (before October 2023) were carried out in late 2008-early 2009, in 2012, in 2014 and in 2021, resulting in more than 4000 deaths in addition to a large-scale destruction in the infrastructure and in civilian settlements.

**Table 2**

*Milestone Events Since Late 1980's, Compiled by the Author.*

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**TIMELINE (1987-2024)**

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December 9, 1987: Outbreak of First Intifada

November 15, 1988: Declaration of Independence by Palestinian National Council in Algeria

October 30, 1991: Madrid Conference

September 13, 1993: Signature of Oslo I

September 28, 1995: Signature of Oslo II

September 28, 2000: Outbreak of Second Intifada

November 11, 2004: Death of Yasser Arafat, to be replaced by Mahmoud Abbas

September 21, 2005: Completion of Israeli withdrawal from Gaza Strip

January 25, 2006: Palestinian national elections

June 2007: Division between Gaza Strip (Hamas) and West Bank (Fatah), imposition of siege on Gaza Strip by Israel

December 27, 2008-January 18, 2009: Israeli assault on Gaza, known as “Operation Cast Lead”

November 14-21, 2012: Israeli assault on Gaza, known as “Operation Pillar of Defence”

July 8 - August 26, 2014: Israeli assault on Gaza, known as “Operation Protective Edge”

May 1, 2017: Publication of Hamas’ new policy paper in Doha, Qatar

July 19, 2018: Adoption of Jewish nation-state law by Knesset

May 10-21, 2021: Israeli assault on Gaza, known as “Operation Guardian of the Walls”

October 7, 2023: Outbreak of Al-Aqsa Flood

January 26, 2024: Decision of International Court of Justice, stating that Israel is “plausibly” committing genocide in Gaza

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### 3.5. Contextualizing the 2017 Policy Paper of Hamas

During this period, Hamas faced serious challenges to keep ruling Gaza Strip. It is possible to claim that the new policy paper (or charter) of the movement published in 2017 was the result of these challenges and a quest for recognition as a legitimate political party. As Turkish scholar Talha İsmail Duman indicates in a recent work, “In essence, with the 2017 document, Hamas declared its intent to emphasize civilian politics while keeping the option of resistance in reserve, taking international public opinion into greater consideration, and showing a reluctance to engage in conflict with Israel in the absence of provocation” (Duman, 2025, p. 207). Similarly, Khaled Hroub points out that “While asserting the movement’s adherence to its founding principles, the document also exhibits flexibility by leaving grey areas, allowing Hamas political room for manoeuvre in the future” (Hroub, 2017, p. 100). To further clarify the shift and its significance, it can be useful to go into the details of the policy paper and to compare it with the first one published in 1988.

The movement’s first charter had a radical content. It was making plenty of references to Islam’s holy book, Quran, and it frequently used the term jihad (holy war). The charter was underlining that there was no possibility of achieving a fair solution through negotiations, and that jihad was the only way. It also included some expressions that are considered antisemitic by some people (such as “The Last Hour would not come until the Muslims fight against the Jews, and the Muslims would kill them”, which is in fact a hadith attributed to Prophet Mohammad). The declared aim was an Islamic state in all historic Palestine, with the destruction of Israel. The text was also defining the movement as the Palestinian branch of the international Muslim Brotherhood organisation (Maqdsi, 1993).

On the other hand, there was less reference to Islam and more reference to universal humanitarian principles and basic inalienable rights in the new charter of 2017. The text even used expressions such as “Palestine has always been and will always be a model of coexistence, tolerance and civilisational innovation”, and being against “all forms of religious, ethnic or sectarian extremism and bigotry”. Furthermore, instead of making references to fight against the “Jews”, the new charter underlined that “The Zionist project is a racist, aggressive, colonial and expansionist project based on seizing the properties of others; it is hostile to the Palestinian people and to their aspiration for freedom, liberation, return and self-determination”, and that “Hamas affirms that its conflict is with the Zionist project not with the Jews because of their religion. Hamas does not wage a struggle against the Jews because they are Jewish but wages a struggle against the Zionists who occupy Palestine”. The organisation also declared that they were not part of the Muslim Brotherhood anymore.

The most ambiguous part of the new charter was about the ultimate political aims. Article 20 of the charter says:

*Hamas believes that no part of the land of Palestine shall be compromised or conceded, irrespective of the causes, the circumstances and the pressures and no matter how long the occupation lasts. Hamas rejects any alternative to the full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea. However, without compromising its rejection of the Zionist entity and without relinquishing any Palestinian rights, Hamas considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus (Hamas Media Office, 2017).*

There's no doubt that the two policy papers significantly differ from each other, and this significance can be explained within several contexts. For example, cutting the ties with the Muslim Brotherhood can be linked to the new political conditions that emerged in Middle East after the coup d'état of 2013 in Egypt and the anti-MB policies adopted by Gulf countries. On the other hand, it is almost sure that there was a certain level of disagreement within the Political Bureau in terms of ultimate political aims, which seems the main reason for the "balance" and the ambiguity of Article 20 cited above. Overall, the policy paper can also be considered as a result of the quest for legitimacy in the Western world. But we can claim that the main motivation of the Hamas leadership to prepare such a moderate text was the state-building effort: Ruling Gaza Strip for more than one decade under heavy challenges, Hamas had the intention to give up its radicalism for an indefinite period of time and focalise on the urgent needs of forming a normal life in Gaza and turn its rule into a state-like entity which would be recognized not only by its political partners, but also by a wide range of actors in the international arena.

However, to cite Duman again, "this process of moderation, which highlighted Hamas's political evolution, did not prevent the October 7 Operation Al Aqsa Flood" (Duman, 2025, p. 207). It is also possible to draw a parallelism (at least partially) between the outbreak of the Second Intifada and the launching of Al Aqsa Flood: Palestinians believed that moderation did not work and there was no ground to build a state-like entity under the existing circumstances. On the other hand, this time it was the same organisation that first prioritized politics and then chose the war. Leaving aside the speculations as to whether the political leadership even knew the decision of the military wing's leadership to launch an unprecedented war or not, we can claim that October 2023 brought the definite end of the new period started in 2017 – during which Hamas refrained from entering in large-scale conflict and even did not much take part of the hostilities that erupted in 2021 between Israel and Islamic Jihad.

### 3.6. Al-Aqsa Flood and Revival of the Idea of the Two-State Solution

Although the leaders of Hamas did not openly make detailed explanations about the reasons that led them to surprisingly launch a war on October 7, we hypothetically claim that several factors can be mentioned as possible explanations:

- Gaza Strip had already become uninhabitable and the fragile political status quo that had existed since 2007 couldn't be maintained anymore. Hamas decided to create a new status quo.
- The number of Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli prisons had reached to a record high level, and there was no other way of liberating them than a prisoner exchange (this is why more than 250 Israelis were taken as hostage).
- After a break with Hezbollah and Iran during the first years of the Syrian War, Hamas had definitely returned to what is called "Axis of Resistance", and they believed that it was possible to enter a multi-front conflict with Israel, in which the other components of the axis would take place.
- The normalisation process between Arab regimes and Israel that started in 2020 had to be stopped, and the so-called "solutions" offered by Gulf countries (such as the "Deal of the Century", which was rather a joint US-Gulf project) without taking into consideration the will of the Palestinians had to be refused.
- The Palestine issue was almost forgotten for a long time, and it had to be reminded to the world that Palestinians do exist.

Whatever the main aims and motivations are, it is not easy at all to claim that the status quo and the general equation changed in favour of the Palestinians. As of the date this chapter was being written, more than 60 thousand Palestinians were killed in a ruthless military campaign which is considered a genocide by many actors. Even the International Court of Justice stated in January 2024, as result of the address of South Africa for application of Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in Gaza Strip, that the claims of genocide are "plausible", and that protection of the rights of Palestinians in Gaza Strip to be protected from crimes of genocide and related acts identified in Article III of Genocide Convention "are of such a nature that prejudice to them is capable of causing irreparable harm" (International Court of Justice, 2024). One year later than this initial decision, Israel began imposing even a stricter blockade which included a total cut of the entry of humanitarian aid, leading to famine, starvation, and death due to hunger and malnutrition. Furthermore, as of the summer of 2025, more than 80% of the Gaza Strip was re-occupied by Israel, and there were plans and efforts to "evacuate" the population, after US President Donald J. Trump called for it instead of reviving the ceasefire of January 19, 2025, where the US was the "guarantor".

The genocide and the unprecedented destruction pushed many governments to call for the immediate implementation of the two-state solution. Ireland, Norway, Spain, Slovenia, Armenia and Mexico were the first countries to recognize the State of Palestine during the genocide, and the number of the countries recognizing the State of Palestine reached 147 at this stage. What's more, when United Nations Security Council voted the recognition of Palestine on April 18, 2024, France voted in favour of the resolution. United Kingdom did not veto, and their representative said that their country is in favour of the two-state solution, but they abstained. For the UK, "Gaza must be part of a future Palestinian State. But Hamas is still in control of parts of it and Israeli hostages remain in captivity", and "ensuring Hamas is no longer in charge of Gaza and removing its capacity to attack Israel are unavoidable steps on the road to peace" (United Nations Security Council, 2024). Among the five permanent and ten non-permanent members of the Council, it was only USA that voted against the resolution. Finally, right before and during the United Nations General Assembly meeting in September 2025, Britain and France, in addition to Monaco, Belgium, Luxemburg, Malta, Canada, Australia and Portugal, declared that they recognize the State of Palestine.

Thus, a kind of consensus seems as emerging among the international community. But the Israeli rulers – and especially the hardline members of the government – explicitly and repeatedly underline that they will not accept any kind of Palestinian state (Güldoğan, 2023). Days before the aforementioned UN General Assembly meeting, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu once again stated in a public event in the Israeli settlement Maale Adumim: "We are going to fulfil our promise that there will be no Palestinian state. This place belongs to us" (Al Jazeera, 2025). And this is only one of the reasons that obstruct the possibility of the implementation of a Palestinian state on the pre-1967 borders.

In effect, the only "liberated" part of Palestine, which is Gaza Strip, is once again under threat of a long-lasting, if not permanent occupation. West Bank is not only under military occupation but also fragmented and it includes more than a hundred Israeli settlements, of which the very existence is a violation of the international law, as the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits settling the citizens of the occupying state in the occupied territories. The settlement activities had started in 1970's and constantly increased until today. Construction of Jewish-Israeli settlements was seen as vital for the "security" of the State of Israel, and in reality, this was the starting point of a long path, with the intention to hold what the Israelis call as "Judea and Samaria" forever. (Efrat, 2006, p. 28) While these settlements turn the West Bank "into an archipelago of disconnected compartments" (Lloyd, 2012, p. 73), there are also ongoing efforts to annex large parts of the region. Another occupied region, East Jerusalem was already annexed in 1981, and it is routinely subject to efforts of Judaisation of the land and

dispossession of Palestinian natives, as it was widely discussed during the forced evictions in Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in 2021 (Kingsley, 2021).

### **3.7. The Palestine Issue Beyond OPT: Refugees and Apartheid**

There are further dynamics to add to this list, and it is crucial to underline that Palestinians do not live only in Occupied Palestinian Territories, i.e., Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem. There are almost six million Palestinians refugees living in 58 registered refugee camps. These are the people expelled from their hometowns in 1948 and 1967 and their descendants. Even though United Nations had recognized the right of return of the Palestinians as early as in December 1948, Israel never allowed that return, and subsequent Israeli governments refrained from even discussing the right of return during any kind of negotiations. This has an “understandable” reason: in case of return of the Palestinian refugees, the Jews will lose the majority.

On the other hand, one-fifth of the Palestinians could manage to remain in their towns and villages during the 1948 Nakba, and they had become “Arab citizens of Israel”. Since that time, they never became equal citizens of the state, and in recent times, several international – and even some Israeli – human rights organisations defined the Israeli regime as an apartheid regime, underlining that the Palestinians living in both sides of the Green Line, i.e., both in OPT and in the internationally recognized territories of Israel are subject to an institutionalised segregation.

To cite some major points from those reports, the Human Rights Watch points out at the fact that that Israel exercises primary authority alongside limited Palestinian self-rule in Occupied Palestinian Territories. In these areas and inside the Israeli territories, “Israeli authorities methodically privilege Jewish Israelis and discriminate against Palestinians. Laws, policies, and statements by leading Israeli officials make plain that the objective of maintaining Jewish Israeli control over demographics, political power, and land has long guided government policy.” HRW’s report several examples of apartheid practices in the report, such as he nation-state law adopted by the Israeli parliament Knesset in 2018 that defines Israel as the nation-state of Jewish people and considers Jewish settlement as a national value; limitation of the Palestinian population seen as “demographic threat”, and Judaisation of areas having large Palestinian Arab population, such as Jerusalem, Galilee, and Negev; limitation of the ability of Palestinians to move to Israel from the OPT and from anywhere else to Israel or the OPT; as well as separation of West Bank and Gaza and prevention of the move of goods and people within OPT (Human Rights Watch, 2021). It should be underlined here that the mentioned law of “Nation-State of the Jewish People”, passed in 2018 and amended in 2022, defines the “Land of Israel” – which was called as Palestine until

1948 – as “the historical homeland of the Jewish people”, and more importantly, states that “the realisation of the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is exclusive to the Jewish People” (Knesset, 2022).

Underlining similar points, Amnesty International claims that Israel is an apartheid regime, too. The organisation’s report also indicates that since 1948, Palestinians have been confined to enclaves or refugee camps. This both undermines the social and political ties between Palestinian communities and helps to increase the control over them. Another point mentioned in the report is the large-scale confiscation of lands and properties, which are either taken by the state or given to the Israeli settlers. Indicating that Palestinians and Israeli Jews do not have the same economic and social rights, the report says that “Palestinians across all areas under Israel’s control have fewer opportunities to earn a living and engage in business than Jewish Israelis. They experience discriminatory limitations on access to and use of farmland, water, gas, and oil amongst other natural resources, as well as restrictions on the provision of health, education, and basic services” (Amnesty International, 2022).

Finally, the Israeli human rights organisation, B’Tselem claims that Israel imposes one and same regime in both its recognized territories and Occupied Palestinian Territories, and that it’s clearly an apartheid regime. The report defines four major methods the Israeli regime uses to advance Jewish supremacy. First, any Jew living in any part of the world can very easily immigrate to Israel and get citizenship, while the Palestinians are deprived of the right of return. Second, Palestinian lands are systematically taken for Jews and Palestinians are crowded in enclaves. Third, Palestinians’ freedom of movement is routinely and systematically restricted. Last, Palestinians are devoid of the right of political participation (B’Tselem, 2021).

### **3.8. Conclusion: Towards a Paradigm Shift**

In this chapter, we tried to carry out a holistic reading of Palestine issue through a historical perspective that covers three decades and by examining several aspects of the subject in various political, sociological, and geographical axes. By interlinking these aspects to produce an original contribution to the academic works in this field, we reached to a series of conclusions. First of all, the “Oslo Peace Accords” that gave rise to hopes for a permanent solution have totally collapsed, and similar initiatives did not – and arguably could not – become successful either. Secondly, the efforts of state-building, including the ones adopted by Hamas in Gaza faced to serious challenges, and ultimately failed. Thirdly, Israel seems keen to block any kind of Palestinian statehood. Fourthly, the very existence of the Palestinians in Gaza (and in a certain degree, in West Bank) is under danger. Finally, the Palestinian issue is not limited to Gaza and

West Bank, and both the Palestinian refugees and the Palestinian citizens of Israel, or the “1948 Palestinians” face grave political and social problems although they make up rather “forgotten” components of the Palestine issue.

All these facts bring us to a fundamental question: Does the idea of two states living next to each other on pre-1967 borders still have any significance? It is extremely difficult to answer positively for two reasons: First, collapse of all the previous efforts present an important lesson, and already it seems that there’s not much ground for the implementation of an independent Palestinian state in Gaza, West Bank, and East Jerusalem in a foreseeable future (although theoretically even a shift in the US position is not totally impossible). Secondly – and more importantly – the “Palestine issue” will remain even if such a state is formed anytime.

In recent times, the idea of “One Democratic State” has been more frequently pronounced in academic and political circles alike. Basically, this means the implementation of a single state throughout the territories that were called as Palestine until 1948. This will be a democratic state in which Jews and Arabs will have equal rights, or, citing the words of activist and scholar Jeff Halper, its key element will be “establishing a constitutional democracy over historical Palestine that offers citizenship and equal rights to all the country’s inhabitants” (Halper, 2025, p. 154). This also includes the return of the Palestinian refugees. On the other hand, this is certainly not an easy task, and it requires a total shift not only in the local and regional balances of power but also in the mentality of the Israeli society, as such a state can be formed only through a kind of revolution.

Certainly, this does not mean that the world should silently wait until the conditions for a democratic state are ripe. Indeed, any effort for any Palestinian statehood should be supported *on condition that it is not offered as the final solution*. A “lesser Palestinian state” can be the starting point of the decolonisation of the whole of Palestine if the move is carried out in this perspective. Secondly, civilian efforts to isolate and weaken Israel are worth supporting. In this context, the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign is one of the most effective tools. Inspired from the successful boycott campaigns that were implemented against apartheid South Africa from 1960’s to 1990’s, BDS asserts that Israel should be legally held accountable for all of its crimes and isolated until three main historical rights of the Palestinians are fulfilled: Ending the occupation and colonisation of all Arab lands and dismantling the separation wall built in 2000’s; recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194 (BDS Movement, n.d.). This seems to be a reasonable and legitimate ground on which not only people who support the Palestinian cause,

but all those who believe in justice, human rights and the right of peoples to self-determination can agree.

Finally, the needed paradigm shift also requires a shift in the perspectives and terminology of all the sides involved. Thus, it seems appropriate to conclude by once again referring to Ilan Pappé:

*In ancient times, the dead were buried with their beloved artifacts and belongings. This coming funeral will probably follow a similar ritual. The most important item to go six feet under is the dictionary of illusion and deception with its famous entries such as “the peace process”, “the only democracy in the Middle East”, “a peace-loving nation”, “parity and reciprocity”, and “a humane solution to the refugee problem”. A replacement dictionary has been in the making for many years, redefining Zionism as colonialism, Israel as an apartheid state, and the Nakbah as ethnic cleansing. It will be much easier to put it into common use once the two-state solution has been pronounced dead (Pappé, 2024, p. 143).*

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## CHAPTER 4

### THE MIDDLE EAST IN CHINA'S NORMATIVE STRATEGY: RESISTANCE OR REALIGNMENT?

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#### 4.1. Introduction

Until recently, China remained a peripheral actor in the Middle East, with limited strategic ambitions (Fulton, 2022, p. 1). During the Maoist era (1949–1976), China's engagement in the region was primarily ideological, focused on supporting revolutionary movements, promoting Third World solidarity, securing diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the United Nations, and strategically balancing against superpowers such as the United States and the Soviet Union. Following Mao's death, the onset of economic reform and opening-up under Deng Xiaoping in 1978 marked a paradigmatic shift in China's external posture. Prioritizing domestic development, Beijing adopted a prolonged strategy of restraint characterised by limited political involvement in the Middle East and an emphasis on economic modernisation. Throughout the 1980s, Chinese interactions with the Middle East remained episodic and transactional, mainly confined to arms sales and low-volume trade. A convergence of domestic reform priorities and minimal external threat perception contributed to the continuation of a restrained foreign policy (Moreland, 2024; Murphy, 2022, p. 26; Shambaugh, 2013, 2021).

This pattern shifted in the 1990s, as Beijing's foreign policy calculus increasingly incorporated the Middle East in response to growing energy demands, enhanced global trade integration, and evolving geopolitical interests. The launch of the "Going Out" strategy (走出去战略, zouchuqu zhanlüe) in 1999 marked a watershed moment in China's global ambitions. Aimed at facilitating outbound investment, promoting Chinese enterprise abroad, and safeguarding overseas assets, the strategy was bolstered by China's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001 (Shambaugh, 2013, pp. 174–175; Chaziza, 2021, p. 51; Murphy, 2022, pp. 26–27; Niblock, 2022, pp. 31–32). These developments

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catalysed China's deeper regional involvement through commercial diplomacy, investment, and institutional engagement.

Under Xi Jinping, since 2012, China's regional posture has undergone substantial intensification. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 significantly expanded China's presence in the Middle East, encompassing infrastructure development, trade partnerships, financial cooperation, and industrial integration (Bourekba, 2023; Garlick & Qin, 2024, pp. 985–986; Moreland, 2024; Taş Yetim & Hazar, 2025). Further, China has undertaken significant regional projects—including ports, energy infrastructure, industrial zones, and transportation networks—in countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan (Ehteshami, 2022, p. 52). Institutional platforms such as the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), established in 2004, have provided multilateral frameworks for dialogue and coordination with the 22 member states of the Arab League. China's “1+2+3” cooperation model—prioritizing energy (1), infrastructure and trade (2), and advanced technology (3)—has further expanded its regional outreach (Ehteshami & Horesh, 2019; Fulton, 2022, p. 5; Niblock, 2022, p. 31; Shambaugh, 2021). The 2016 release of China's first Arab Policy Paper during Xi Jinping's state visit to the region marked a formal articulation of its strategic ambitions in the Middle East (Zhang, 2025, p. 1).

Subsequently, Beijing's response to the COVID-19 pandemic—emphasizing vaccine diplomacy and digital connectivity under the Health and Digital Silk Road (HDSR) initiatives—further reinforced China's image as a benevolent and reliable partner (The Diplomat, 2021; Cabestan, 2022; Fulton, 2022, p. 8; Niblock, 2022). Moreover, China's recent role in mediating the Saudi-Iranian dispute has underscored its evolving position as a regional actor and mediator. China has also established strategic partnerships—albeit one tier below comprehensive strategic partnerships—with the UAE (2012), Saudi Arabia (2016), Iran (2016), Qatar (2014), Iraq (2015), Oman (2018), and Kuwait (2018). Of the seven global strategic partnerships China has formalised, four are with Gulf states: Oman, Qatar, Iraq, and Kuwait (Ehteshami et al., 2023, p. 2; Fulton, 2022, 2025). This trajectory epitomizes what Ehteshami (2022, p. 50) calls the “Asianisation” of the Middle East—shifting regional economies toward East Asia and China's economic orbit.

While extant analyses predominantly examine China's rise in the region through material tools—such as energy security, market penetration, and investment—this article foregrounds the normative dimension of Beijing's strategy (Garlick & Havlova, 2020; Fulton, 2022, 2025; Taş Yetim & Hazar, 2025). As Garlick and Qin (2024) argue, China has been actively pursuing a form of “normative diplomacy,” wherein ideational resources—rhetoric, narratives, and symbolic practices—are strategically deployed to cultivate legitimacy and reshape global norms.

This article examines the ideational architecture of China's Middle East strategy by interrogating how normative discourses are constructed, diffused, and received. Theoretically, the analysis is situated within the constructivist paradigm in international relations, which highlights the constitutive role of intersubjective meanings, identities, and norms in shaping state preferences and behaviour. From a constructivist perspective (Finnemore, 1996; Onuf, 2013; Wendt, 1992, 1999; Zürn, 2018), normative power denotes the ability to influence collective understandings of legitimate authority, appropriate behaviour, and global order through non-coercive means. In the case of China, norms are embedded in its domestic political structures, historical narratives, and civilisation discourse, representing an implicit challenge to liberal internationalist values (Asente, 2018; Chaziza & Goldman, 2014; Gries, 2014; Kavalski & Cho, 2018). Murphy (2022) emphasizes Beijing's dual strategy: resisting liberal norms that conflict with its strategic interests while maintaining those that enhance regime stability and geopolitical reach.

This perspective facilitates a departure from materialist paradigms and allows for a deeper investigation into how China deploys discursive instruments as tools of geopolitical statecraft. This study, covering the post-BRI period (2013–2024), longitudinally traces the evolution, institutionalisation, and regional reception of China's normative messaging. Employing triangulation—including official Chinese documents (State Council white papers, CCP reports, Foreign Ministry yearbooks, BRI policy texts), regional media outlets (e.g., Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, Ahram Online, Middle East Eye, Al Mayadeen English), and elite statements in the Gulf and Levant—the analysis unpacks how themes such as sovereignty, non-interference, developmentalism, win-win cooperation, mutual respect, anti-imperialism, and humanitarianism are leveraged in Beijing's normative diplomacy (Garlick & Qin, 2024, p. 989). The comparative focus on GCC versus Levantine responses sheds light on how domestic politics and ideological orientation mediate norm adoption, resistance, or appropriation.

The study unfolds in four sections: first, it develops a conceptual foundation for normative diplomacy via constructivist IR; second, it maps China's normative messaging across its diplomatic channels; third, it analyses regional reception, comparing GCC alignment and Levantine ambivalence; and finally, it synthesises theoretical and empirical findings to advance our understanding of China's symbolic and ideational strategy in reshaping global order.

## **4.2. Theoretical Framework**

Analysing China's engagement in the Middle East—particularly through a normative lens—necessitates a conceptual departure from the dominant realist and liberal paradigms, which emphasize material capabilities such as economic

and military tools and institutional design (Waltz, 1979). Instead, this study adopts a constructivist theoretical framework that foregrounds the ideational underpinnings of foreign policy behaviour and norm transmission.

Constructivism, as advanced by Alexander Wendt (1992, 1999), Martha Finnemore (1996), and Nicholas Onuf (2013), conceptualises the international system not as an objective realm governed by material forces, but as a socially constructed space constituted by intersubjective meanings, collective identities, and norm-based behaviour. Within this framework, state interests and identities are not pre-given or exogenously determined but emerge from continuous processes of social interaction. Norms—defined as shared expectations about appropriate behaviour—are thus not epiphenomenal to power but integral to the constitution of global order. They confer legitimacy, shape strategic preferences, and delineate the boundaries of acceptable conduct in international politics (Acharya, 2011; Crawford, 2002; Finnemore, 1996, 1999; Weiner, 2018; Zürn, 2018). As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, pp. 887-888) argue, norms structure state behaviour by embedding actors in networks of meaning, simultaneously enabling and constraining foreign policy choices. In this view, foreign policy is more about securing legitimacy and projecting identity than maximizing power or utility.

Central to this approach is the concept of normative power, articulated initially by Ian Manners (2002, pp. 235-258) in the context of the European Union. Manners contends that international actors can exert influence not solely through economic or military leverage but via the projection of normative values and ideational leadership. While the EU remains the archetypal case of normative power (Manners, 2006, 2008, 2021; Zürn & Checkel, 2005; Zürn, 2018), subsequent research (Acharya, 2004, 2011) has extended this framework to encompass rising powers—such as China—that offer alternative normative visions contesting the liberal international order (Foot & Walter, 2013; Clark, 2014).

The mechanics of normative influence are further explicated through the literature on norm diffusion (Crawford, 2002). According to Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) influential model, norm transmission unfolds in three stages: emergence, cascade, and internalisation. Successful diffusion hinges on the interaction between proactive norm entrepreneurs and receptive audiences. Crucially, this process is not linear or unidirectional. Norms are often contested, reinterpreted, and localised in ways that reflect specific domestic contexts. As Acharya (2004, 2011, 2018) argues, norm adoption is contingent upon the degree to which external norms resonate with indigenous values, institutional logics, and political imperatives.

To account for these dynamics, this study also incorporates insights from the literature on discursive statecraft—the strategic use of language, rhetoric, and

symbolic representation in the conduct of foreign policy (Hay, 1996; Milliken, 1999; Gill, 2000; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Discursive power functions not through coercion or inducement but through the production of meaning. It shapes how actors define problems, construct legitimacy, identify threats, and imagine solutions. Discourse becomes a modality of power in its own right, enabling states to legitimize specific policies while marginalizing others (Hay, 1996; Acharya, 2004; Zürn, 2018). From this perspective, foreign policy becomes a site of narrative construction and contestation, where actors compete over interpreting international norms and defining appropriate global conduct. Strategic narratives—such as calls for a more equitable world order, mutual development, or the rejection of hegemonic interference—are employed to establish moral authority, align interests, and legitimize influence. These narratives often invoke shared historical experiences, common grievances, and aspirational identities to foster normative resonance with target audiences (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Zürn, 2021).

A critical component of this framework is its emphasis on recipient agency. Constructivist scholarship increasingly challenges the simplistic sender–receiver model by emphasizing the co-construction of norms through social interaction (Towns, 2012; Wiener, 2018). Norm diffusion is thus better understood as a dialogical process involving adaptation, resistance, and reinterpretation rather than passive absorption (Acharya, 2004, 2011, 2018). In the context of the Middle East, where colonial legacies, contested sovereignties, and geopolitical fragmentation prevail, normative projects are particularly subject to localised contestation (Acharya, 2018). States across the region display varying degrees of receptivity to external normative frameworks. With centralised governance and a focus on regime preservation, Gulf monarchies tend to align with narratives emphasizing sovereignty, non-interference, and stability. In contrast, Levantine states—marked by political pluralism, identity fragmentation, and chronic external interventions—engage with external norms in more ambivalent, instrumental, or resistant ways (Acharya, 2004).

In sum, synthesizing normative power, norm diffusion, and discursive statecraft, this framework offers a multidimensional analytical lens. It enables a richer understanding of how ideational resources function in foreign policy—not merely as rhetorical ornamentation, but as strategic tools to build legitimacy, influence regional alignments, and reshape the normative contours of international order. Importantly, this framework foregrounds the contested and dialogical nature of norm transmission, accounting for both the articulation and the reception of external norms. This approach ultimately advances our understanding of how normative statecraft operates—through material means such as investment or diplomacy—and symbolic, rhetorical, and ideational strategies that reconfigure

regional and global political orders. In this respect, the framework supports a dual-level analysis of China's normative strategy in the Middle East: first, by unpacking the discursive mechanisms through which Chinese norms are constructed and projected; and second, by tracing how regional actors receive, appropriate, or contest these norms based on local political, ideological, and institutional contexts. The following sections focus on this analysis.

### **4.3. China's Normative Strategy in the Middle East**

This section examines China's normative strategy in the Middle East through a constructivist IR theory lens, analysing the discursive and ideational components that underpin its regional engagement. Drawing on diplomatic statements, policy documents, white papers, multilateral platforms (e.g., the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum [CASCF]), bilateral diplomacy, the BRI, and state-affiliated media, this section identifies a normative framework centred on sovereignty, non-interference, mutual respect, anti-imperialism, developmentalism, peaceful coexistence, equality, “win-win” cooperation, South–South solidarity, and the “Community with a Shared Future for Mankind” (dos Santos & Alves, 2023; Clark, 2014; Fulton, 2025; Garlick & Qin, 2024; Zhang, 2019). These concepts function as rhetorical devices and as integral components of a sustained effort to cultivate normative legitimacy and position China as a benevolent and responsible global actor. As a discursive signifier, each concept also encapsulates values that distinguish China's engagement model from liberal internationalism (Garlick & Qin, 2024; Zhang, 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that this strategy aligns closely with constructivist premises: that China seeks to shape meanings, norms, and identities through discourse, symbolism, and institutionalised rhetoric that resonate with the normative frameworks of regional actors.

#### **4.3.1. Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence**

China's normative posture is rooted in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, first codified in 1954 and later integrated into Deng Xiaoping's Independent and Peaceful Development Policy in the 1980s (Chaziza & Goldman, 2014; Murphy, 2022; Fulton, 2022). This policy, which includes basic principles such as mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in domestic affairs, mutual non-aggression, equality, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, forms the normative foundation of Chinese diplomacy. Official discourse presents these principles as universal values, consistent with the postcolonial ethos and the UN Charter (Clark, 2014; Fulton, 2022; Niblock, 2022, p. 8; Chaziza, 2023; dos Santos & Alves, 2023).

Among these, sovereignty remains the most enduring and central norm. In the Chinese lexicon, sovereignty entails territorial integrity and the legitimacy of autonomous governance (Garlick & Qin, 2024, p. 989; Niblock, 2022, p.

31). Notably, since the launch of the BRI in 2013, this concept has evolved into a cornerstone of China's alternative global vision, functioning both inwardly—to shield China from external critiques regarding Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang—and outwardly as a normative commitment extended to its partners. Given China's non-colonial history, this principle resonates with Global South states, who interpret it as affirming dignified statehood and resisting external domination (Chaziza, 2023; Garlick & Qin, 2024, p. 988). It does this by influencing many Middle Eastern countries' perceptions of what constitutes "normal" behaviour (Kavalski & Cho, 2018). Chinese policy documents—such as the 2016 Arab Policy White Paper—consistently reaffirm this stance, supporting Arab states' chosen development paths and sovereignty protections (China MFA, 2015). The Arab Policy White Paper declares, "China supports their efforts to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Furthermore, across multiple venues, including the 2017 BRI Forum and China's 2018 BRI White Paper, sovereignty is framed as a core value and strategic ethic, central to Beijing's engagement with the region (Belt and Road Forum, 2017; China State Council, 2018). At the 2024 CASCFS summit, President Xi Jinping's emphasis on Palestinian self-determination further illustrated sovereignty's normative centrality (CPPCC National Committee, 2024).

Non-interference, closely tied to sovereignty, is another core norm. It proscribes external involvement in domestic affairs and reassures partners that Chinese engagement is free from political conditionality. Garlick and Qin (2024, p. 987) observe that China promotes its norms incrementally through elite exposure and technical cooperation, unlike Western states that often attach political reforms to development aid. For example, loans provided by Chinese policy banks—such as the China Development Bank or the Export–Import Bank—typically lack the political conditions required by Western institutions like the IMF or World Bank. While Chinese aid may carry implicit expectations (e.g., non-recognition of Taiwan, abstention from supporting Tibetan or Uyghur separatism), these are framed as negative conditions rather than affirmative demands. Thus, they represent an alternative normative architecture to the liberal international order (Murphy, 2022; Garlick & Qin, 2024, pp. 988–989). In the Middle East, where memories of colonial subjugation and foreign-imposed regime change remain salient, this approach offers an attractive alternative: development unencumbered by political conditionalities.

China's non-intervention policy resonates strongly with many Middle Eastern states in a region shaped by colonial legacies and foreign-imposed regime changes. Far from being a mere diplomatic posture, non-interference is constructed in Chinese discourse as both a legal doctrine and a moral imperative,

forming a normative counterpoint to Western interventionist models (Moreland, 2024). Across key policy texts—including State Council white papers, Foreign Ministry yearbooks, and speeches by senior Chinese leaders—this principle is framed as integral to a just and multipolar global order (Garlick & Qin, 2024; Niblock, 2022; Murphy, 2022). At the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, President Xi articulated this ethos explicitly: “We are ready to share practices of development with other countries, but we have no intention to interfere in other countries’ internal affairs... or impose our own will on others” (BRI Forum, 2017). This rhetorical commitment is echoed in the 2018 BRI White Paper, which defines “mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity” as a core pillar of China’s global outreach (MFA China, 2018). Similarly, at the 2018 CASC summit, Xi reaffirmed China’s support for “development paths suited to national conditions”—a formulation that underscores Beijing’s rejection of ideological conditionality in favour of pragmatic, partner-driven cooperation (MFA China, 2018). Beyond rhetoric, China’s abstentions in UN Security Council votes on internal conflicts and its consistent endorsement of non-interference in CASC declarations provide empirical evidence of this normative orientation (Modern Diplomacy, 2024). Xi’s address to the 75th UN General Assembly in 2020 further codified this principle, denouncing hegemonic behaviour and asserting that “No country has the right to dominate global affairs, control the destiny of others, or monopolise development advantages” (SCIO China, 2020). As Chaziza (2021, 50) notes, China sees its strategy as the “legitimate way” to meddle in other nations’ domestic affairs without violating its traditional guiding principle of non-interference, and to promote or secure its national economic interests. By offering economic and technological cooperation without political strings, China seeks to cultivate trust-based partnerships that enhance its normative legitimacy while avoiding the reputational costs often associated with intrusive or paternalistic diplomacy. In this sense, non-interference becomes a normative asset—a central component of China’s appeal in a region sensitive to sovereignty and wary of external domination.

China’s normative appeal in the Middle East is significantly strengthened by its strategic deployment of anti-imperial and anti-colonial rhetoric, which resonates deeply with a region long marked by foreign domination and externally imposed political orders (Gause, 2014). Drawing on a shared history of colonial subjugation and resistance to dependency, China frames its engagement with Middle Eastern countries as part of a broader postcolonial solidarity aimed at dismantling neocolonial structures and affirming sovereign autonomy (Ehteshami, 2022, p. 48; Niblock, 2022, p. 36). Central to this narrative is the enduring memory of China’s own “century of humiliation,” beginning with the Opium Wars in 1839. This foundational discourse reaffirms sovereignty as both a moral and strategic necessity. China consistently emphasizes that its rise on the global stage has not

relied on military expansion or colonial extraction, but rather on a model of peaceful development (Garlick & Qin, 2024; Murphy, 2022). As Niblock (2022, p. 35) notes, “No blame attaches to China for the divided state of the Arab world”, giving Beijing a reputational advantage over Western actors historically implicated in the region’s fragmentation. This framing is routinely expressed in BRI forums, where Chinese and regional leaders invoke shared historical experiences and the “Silk Road spirit” as symbols of mutual resilience and non-coercive partnership (Xi, 2017, 2019). China’s 2016 Arab States Policy Paper also explicitly emphasizes support for autonomous development paths and rejection of foreign interference, presenting Beijing as a geopolitical ally in postcolonial state-building (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2016).

Aligned with this posture, humanitarianism and peace promotion form core tenets of China’s normative diplomacy. In a region where many regimes view Western democracy promotion and human rights agendas as existential threats to regime stability (Niblock, 2022, p. 37), China’s emphasis on non-politicised aid and non-intrusive peacebuilding has particular appeal. China’s Foreign Affairs yearbooks (2015–2024) document extensive humanitarian involvement—including COVID-19 vaccine distribution, medical aid, and post-conflict reconstruction in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, Chinese vaccine diplomacy in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco was consistently framed as mutual assistance among equals, further reinforcing the perception of China as a non-coercive and morally credible partner (Al Jazeera, 2021; Chatham House, 2021). At the 2018 CASCF meeting, Foreign Minister Wang Yi pledged nearly \$150 million for regional stabilisation, including \$90 million for Yemen, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon (Fulton, 2022, p. 5). Also announced in 2018 was a China-Arab Countries Interbank Association with \$3 billion in funding from the China Development Bank for interbank credits with local regional banks (Zhou, 2018). In his 2021 UNGA address, Xi Jinping reaffirmed these commitments by announcing \$100 million in aid for Palestine and support for broader reconstruction efforts across the region (Xi, 2025). Crucially, this humanitarian assistance is framed as an extension of China’s non-interference doctrine: aid is delivered at the behest of sovereign governments and without political preconditions, reinforcing China’s image as a non-hegemonic actor offering equitable development partnerships.

China’s brokering of the 2023 Saudi–Iran normalisation agreement exemplified this model of “Chinese-style mediation,” defined by non-coercive facilitation, ideological neutrality, and an emphasis on regional agency (Lons, 2024). This diplomatic success was widely lauded in both Chinese and regional media as an affirmation of China’s normative credibility and symbolic leadership (China Daily, 2023; CGTN, 2024). Unlike traditional great power mediation efforts,

China avoided imposing prescriptive outcomes, prioritizing mutual respect, incremental trust-building, and dialogical engagement (Garlick & Qin, 2024). Foreign Minister Wang Yi has described China's conflict mediation approach using three terms—persuading peace (劝和), promoting talks (促谈), and mediation (斡旋调停)—underscoring a consistent emphasis on facilitation over imposition (Yi, 2025).

The principle of peaceful coexistence further reinforces this non-hegemonic posture. It affirms that states with divergent governance models and development levels can coexist and cooperate without ideological convergence. This principle opposes bloc politics and promotes multipolar inclusivity, enabling China to engage a range of partners, from liberal democracies to monarchies (Murphy, 2022). CASCF communiqués and Chinese UN statements consistently invoke peaceful coexistence as a normative foundation for a multipolar, inclusive global order. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2015) emphasizes that China's vision aligns with the UN Charter's emphasis on sovereign equality, peaceful coexistence, and international cooperation. At the March 2023 National People's Congress, Xi reiterated China's intent to reform global governance structures and promote global security initiatives grounded in cooperative dialogue (AP News, 2023). Marks (2022) observes that this “creative involvement” model allows China to engage diplomatically without violating its longstanding commitment to non-intervention.

#### 4.3.2. Beyond Five Principles

Another core pillar of China's normative vocabulary is “win-win cooperation,” which rejects the zero-sum logic characteristic of traditional great power politics in favour of mutual benefit, reciprocal respect, and non-confrontation. This concept, embedded in China's broader vision of a “new type of international relations,” reimagines global engagement as cooperative rather than competitive. Rather than positioning itself as a revisionist challenger, China frames its role as a constructive participant offering an alternative framework for engagement—one rooted in dialogue, inclusivity, and developmental complementarity (Zhang, 2019, p. 8; Garlick & Qin, 2024). This discourse is particularly salient in the Middle East, where it has been institutionalised through joint communiqués, infrastructure agreements, and economic pledges, most notably within the BRI (Taş Yetim & Hazar, 2025). The BRI is a material embodiment of win-win cooperation: through energy corridors, transportation infrastructure, logistics platforms, and financial integration, China articulates a vision of shared prosperity. Chinese officials routinely present these partnerships not as geopolitical leverage but as mutually advantageous alliances designed to foster long-term development and regional integration (BRI Portal, 2017; Reuters, 2024).

Complementing this pragmatic framework is China's ideational construct of a "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind." This forward-facing narrative expands upon the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, articulating a normative vision for a multipolar and cooperative world order (MFA China, 2024). It emphasizes joint development, global equity, and collective security, situating China as both a moral and developmental actor advocating for reform in global governance and greater representation for the Global South. In the Middle East, this rhetoric allows China to frame its engagement not as geopolitical opportunism but as an expression of civilisational solidarity and postcolonial empathy (Murphy, 2022; Fulton, 2022). The 2024 CASCF summit served as a pivotal venue for projecting this identity (MFA China, 2024). President Xi Jinping's repeated invocation of a China–Arab community with a shared future reflects the strategic convergence of cultural diplomacy and geopolitical messaging (Central Committee of CPC, 2022). Such narratives directly contrast with Western actors' perceived partiality and interventionism, further enhancing the appeal of China's normatively pluralistic and non-hegemonic stance.

The developmentalism principle is closely intertwined with this discourse and forms another key pillar of China's normative statecraft (Medeiros & Majerowicz, 2022, pp. 208-228). Drawing on its modernisation experience, China emphasizes state-led growth, infrastructure investment, and technological advancement as the cornerstones of domestic and international legitimacy. Unlike liberal models that foreground democratisation and human rights, China's developmentalism prioritises state-led growth, infrastructure advancement, and material progress (Fei, 2017, pp. 825-850). This framework offers an attractive governance alternative for developing states, particularly in the Middle East, where many regimes prioritize economic diversification and post-oil transition strategies. China's engagement—delivered through infrastructure financing, trade cooperation, and digital connectivity—thus gains normative resonance by sidestepping political conditionality and respecting state sovereignty. Medeiros and Majerowicz (2022, p. 208) state that this power structure helped China persevere with its state-led national development strategy at a time when most national economies adhered to global neoliberalism, relinquishing such coordination in favour of an accumulation regime led by private corporations.

Integral to this developmentalist vision is South–South cooperation, which China frames as a more equitable alternative to hierarchical North–South aid paradigms. Presented as horizontal, reciprocal, and historically rooted in anti-colonial solidarity, South–South cooperation functions as a legitimating narrative for China's engagement across Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East (Asante, 2018, pp. 258-260; Fulton, 2022). China operationalises this principle through mechanisms such as the BRI, Health Silk Road, and CASCF by emphasizing mutual

development, knowledge exchange, and technological transfer (Murphy, 2022). China's Arab Policy Paper of 2016 explicitly framed these relations within South–South solidarity, emphasizing mutual development, technological exchange, and connectivity (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, January 2016). At the 2024 CASCFS summit, Xi reaffirmed South–South cooperation as the “engine of global justice” and linked it to the broader goal of constructing a shared future (MFA China, 2024). South–South cooperation thus legitimizes China's normative strategy, embedding its actions in a moral and historical narrative of decolonisation, development, and resistance to Western hegemony.

Overall, disseminated through an array of channels—including leadership speeches, policy white papers, summit communiqués, and multilateral institutions like CASCFS—China's normative discourse functions simultaneously as a critique of Western hegemonic practices and a proposition for post-Western global pluralism. Beyond formal diplomacy, state media and affiliated research institutions are critical in amplifying and institutionalizing these narratives. Prominent outlets such as *China Daily* (March 1, 2025), and CGTN (May 30, 2024) consistently emphasise Sino–Middle Eastern collaboration, portraying China as a reliable, respectful, and non-coercive partner whose engagement is based on parity rather than paternalism. Intellectual institutions such as the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) further consolidate these narratives by embedding them within broader Global South discourses that foreground postcolonial solidarity, developmental sovereignty, and strategic autonomy. In this context, China's discursive statecraft does not operate in isolation. Rather, it forms part of a networked and ideational ecosystem designed to shape regional actors' understanding of legitimacy, cooperation, and international engagement.

Importantly, China's normative strategy in the Middle East is neither ad hoc nor opportunistically instrumental. It reflects a deliberate and coherent campaign to establish Beijing as a morally resonant and ideationally legitimate actor in an increasingly contested global order. By promoting the aforementioned principles, China engages in what may be termed norm entrepreneurship, seeking to reconfigure the symbolic architecture of regional diplomacy. It significantly departs from traditional power politics by privileging discursive legitimacy and ideational alignment over coercive influence or alliance-building. The following section examines how Middle Eastern states—Gulf monarchies and Levantine republics—responded to China's normative overtures. It explores the extent, variation, and conditions under which these norms are appropriated, localised, contested, or rejected, shedding light on the interactive processes of norm diffusion in a region marked by geopolitical fragmentation and diverse domestic political configurations.

#### **4.4. Regional Responses**

Empirical analysis reveals that the reception of China's normative strategy in the Middle East is far from monolithic. Rather than universal acceptance or rejection, regional responses span a spectrum—from enthusiastic endorsement and cautious engagement to pragmatic adaptation and overt scepticism. In line with constructivist international relations theory, these responses underscore the importance of local context, political structure, and ideational environment in mediating norm diffusion. China's normative messages do not circulate in a normative vacuum; instead, they are localised, negotiated, and, at times, contested within diverse domestic frameworks.

##### **4.4.1. GCC Convergence**

Among the GCC states, China's normative strategy—anchored in sovereignty, non-interference, mutual respect, and development-oriented cooperation—has found substantial traction. These principles align closely with the governance frameworks of Gulf monarchies, which emphasize centralised authority, regime stability, and a strategic aversion to the liberal conditionalities often associated with Western aid and diplomacy (Murphy, 2022). As both Murphy (2022) and Chaziza (2023) observe, China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence have been actively incorporated into the diplomatic lexicon of numerous Arab states participating in the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), illustrating a growing discursive synergy between Chinese and Gulf statecraft (See also CIDCA 2024; OAPEC, 2022).

Independent analyses—such as those by the European Council on Foreign Relations and *Le Monde* (2024)—highlight Gulf states' strategic embrace of China's non-interventionist ethos and state capitalist model. These often reinforce regional narratives of sovereignty-driven modernisation, where economic development proceeds independently of democratisation or rights-based governance. Helmy (2023) similarly documents receptiveness to Chinese development and reconstruction assistance in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, frequently framed through the dual lenses of equitable partnership and respect for national autonomy.

High-level endorsements from regional leaders further illustrate this normative alignment. During a 2021 bilateral meeting, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia expressed explicit support for China's domestic positions and its rejection of external interference (CGTN, 2021). At the 2024 CASCF summit, Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan reaffirmed this stance, naming non-interference and sovereignty as essential norms for regional cooperation (Sayed, 2024; Ravid, 2022). Similar rhetoric has emerged from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where officials have described bilateral ties with

China as based on “equality, non-interference, and win-win cooperation” (UAE MFA, 2019).

Qatar, too, has adopted a comparably favourable posture. Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani has characterised Sino-Qatari relations as emblematic of a “new era of peace and development,” highlighting sovereignty and mutual respect as defining features (Qatar MFA, 2018; Belt and Road Portal, 2021). The 2023 Saudi–China–Iran Trilateral Statement further consolidated these principles by reaffirming shared commitments to “respect for the sovereignty of states and non-interference in internal affairs” (Chinese MFA, 2023). Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, speaking at the 2023 China–Arab Summit, echoed this discourse by praising China’s position on Palestine and advocating increased multilateral coordination within forums such as the UN and G77 (China Daily, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a critical juncture for deepening these normative alignments through the Health Silk Road (HSR) initiative (Cabestan, 2022; National Interest, 2022; Freidin, 2022). Between 2020 and 2022, China delivered over 100 million vaccine doses to GCC countries and formalised industrial partnerships, including the Sinopharm–G42 venture in Abu Dhabi, which now boasts a production capacity of 200 million doses annually (Gulf News, 2020; Axios, 2021; Chatham House, 2021). UAE officials consistently framed this partnership as a technological and sovereign achievement, affirming that it was rooted in mutual trust and unpoliticised cooperation.

Egypt followed a parallel path, establishing a co-production agreement for the Sinovac vaccine through a partnership between VACSERA and Chinese firms (Freidin, 2022). With a projected output of 40 to 60 million doses annually, this initiative was hailed by the Egyptian Ministry of Health as a milestone in sovereign health diplomacy (Egypt Today, 2021). Officials in the UAE and Bahrain repeatedly emphasised the absence of political conditions in Chinese assistance, framing it as an expression of shared development goals and mutual respect. UAE government spokesperson Omar Al Hammadi characterised China as a “trustworthy partner in public health”, while Bahrain’s Health Minister Faeqa bint Saeed Al Saleh endorsed deeper cooperation with China in the name of global health security (Al Arabiya, 2021; China Daily, 2020). These pandemic-era collaborations addressed short-term health crises and established durable industrial alliances. They significantly bolstered China’s image as a reliable normative and technological partner by emphasizing equal partnership over donor-recipient dynamics. More broadly, they reinforced Gulf states’ aspirations for autonomous, state-led development and deepened institutional familiarity with China’s non-coercive governance model. In this regard, China’s normative strategy—centred on sovereignty, non-interference, and pragmatic cooperation—has found fertile ground in the Gulf. It resonates with the political preferences of ruling elites and the region’s broader

developmental narratives. The convergence is not merely rhetorical; it is embedded in tangible economic, technological, and discursive practices, constituting a strategic realignment that complements existing governance paradigms while offering alternatives to liberal internationalist models.

China's normative credibility in the Gulf is further reinforced by its sustained self-characterisation as a neutral, non-threatening actor committed to partnerships rather than alliances. Chinese officials frequently emphasize that China is "everyone's trading partner but nobody's ally," (Xinhua, 2023) a refrain that highlights its strategic aversion to entangling security commitments or ideological blocs (Ravid, 2022). Official policy rhetoric stresses a preference for "partnership over alliance," requiring no political alignment or military entanglements. At a press briefing on March 14, 2023, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin reiterated this position, describing China's vision for global security as one grounded in dialogue over confrontation and win-win over zero-sum thinking (MFA China, 2023).

This discourse of strategic non-exclusivity resonates deeply with Gulf elites, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who seek to diversify their foreign policy portfolios amid growing uncertainty over U.S. regional commitments (Murphy, 2022; Fulton, 2022, 2025). For these actors, China's approach offers a "strategic complementarity" model—engagement that enhances diplomatic flexibility without requiring a break from existing Western alliances (Marks, 2022; Fulton, 2025).

China's mediation of the 2023 Saudi–Iran rapprochement further amplified its image as a neutral facilitator (Le Monde, 2024; Lons, 2024; Taş Yetim & Hazar, 2025). Following the diplomatic breakthrough, an official Chinese spokesperson declared that Beijing "pursues no selfish interest whatsoever" and does not seek to "fill so-called vacuums" or erect "exclusive blocs." Instead, China frames its involvement in regional affairs as an expression of dialogue-based diplomacy and support for sovereign agency (AP News, 2023). Regional media widely praised this effort as a hallmark of "Chinese-style mediation," grounded in mutual respect and non-coercive engagement (Al Jazeera, 2023; Ahram Online, 2023). The Joint Trilateral Statement—issued by China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran—reaffirmed key principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, drawing a sharp contrast with Western interventionist paradigms. As a Saudi columnist wrote: "China's diplomacy is based on respect, not coercion. It does not impose regimes or values. That is what made this mediation possible" (Xinhua News Agency, 2023).

#### **4.4.2. Levantine Ambivalence**

By contrast to GCC states, Levantine states—especially Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco—exhibit a more ambivalent orientation toward China's normative

project (Laadam, 2025; Zreik, 2022). While their governments have welcomed Chinese infrastructure investment and pandemic assistance, domestic actors—civil society groups, independent media, and opposition figures—have raised persistent concerns about transparency, governance, and human rights. In Lebanon and Morocco, for instance, Chinese engagement is often framed alongside anxieties over debt dependency, lack of contractual transparency, and the diffusion of authoritarian norms (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Official language reflects this ambivalence. Joint communiqués, such as those between China and Morocco, emphasize economic and technological cooperation while tactfully sidestepping ideological alignment (Middle East Institute, 2020). In Jordan, projects like the Shoubak Wind Farm and BRI-linked infrastructure investments have been met with public scrutiny over Chinese labour practices, opaque loan terms, and stalled projects such as the Attarat power plant. Reporting by *The New Arab* on August 2, 2023 highlighted that Jordan was “stuck in billions of dollars in debt to China,” citing legal disputes and unmet expectations as signs of friction in the relationship.

Additionally, Chinese health diplomacy during the COVID-19 crisis—though accepted by governments—was not normatively internalised (Middle East Institute, 2021; Middle East Eye, 2023; Modern Diplomacy, 2022). Jordanian officials, for instance, accepted vaccine donations and technical aid while refraining from adopting China's broader ideological framing. Media and civil society in Jordan and Lebanon have also raised concerns about surveillance technologies, data privacy, and China's human rights record, particularly regarding Xinjiang (Zreik, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2021). *Al Mayadeen English*, on September 17, 2024, also reported that Lebanese journalists and activists condemned the lack of transparency in Chinese-funded infrastructure projects, warning of surveillance risks and governance shortfalls. Similarly, studies of Chinese investments in Morocco (Laadam, 2025) have flagged limited local economic spillovers and insufficient technology transfer. A report by the Middle East Institute on June 9, 2020, framed China's BRI activities as potential instances of “debt-trap diplomacy”, where infrastructure investments are strategically leveraged under the guise of normative partnership. Human Rights Watch (2021) has also raised alarms about the export of Chinese surveillance systems, arguing that such technologies pose risks to civic accountability and can facilitate autocratic entrenchment.

These findings suggest that China's normative strategy in the Middle East is strategically calibrated rather than universally transformative. China has successfully fostered discursive alignment in the Gulf by tailoring its soft power instruments to local developmental narratives and political structures. These efforts are amplified through state-controlled media ecosystems, elite-driven

diplomatic channels, and a shared normative emphasis on stability, sovereignty, and non-conditional engagement.

Conversely, China's normative overtures encounter greater scrutiny and institutional resistance in more pluralistic societies such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Morocco. The presence of vibrant civil societies, autonomous media, and policy pluralism introduces what constructivist scholars call *normative gatekeepers*—actors who critically assess, reinterpret, and sometimes reject external ideational influences. This differentiated reception aligns with Amitav Acharya's (2004) theory of norm localisation, which holds that global norms are not passively internalised but are actively recontextualised through local ideational filters. As Doha-based analyst Amal al-Sayed (2023) notes, "Middle Eastern states navigate not passive adoption of China's norms but an active mosaic of normative references to maximize their strategic autonomy." This hybridisation process highlights the central role of domestic institutions in shaping the uptake—or resistance—of externally promoted normative frameworks.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

This study has examined the contours, transmission, and regional reception of China's normative strategy in the Middle East, situating its analysis within the constructivist paradigm of international relations. Unlike dominant realist and liberal frameworks prioritizing material power or institutional design, constructivism offers a lens to understand how norms, identities, and symbolic meanings shape global politics.

China's normative strategy in the Middle East represents a calculated and multidimensional effort to reconfigure its international image and expand its discursive influence in a region historically shaped by Western hegemony. By articulating a coherent set of principles—sovereignty, non-interference, mutual development, peaceful coexistence, and South–South solidarity—Beijing seeks to legitimize its regional engagement and present a compelling alternative to liberal internationalist paradigms. However, as the analysis demonstrates, the diffusion and reception of these norms are shaped not only by the sender's intentions but also by the normative terrain of the recipient.

The analysis demonstrates that China's normative messaging is most effective in political environments that share its core values—particularly the Gulf monarchies. Here, centralised governance structures, state-led development paradigms, and scepticism toward Western conditionalities foster a receptive climate for Beijing's discourse. Strategic health partnerships during the pandemic and China's mediation of regional disputes have further solidified its normative appeal. By portraying itself as a neutral and non-coercive actor, China aligns with regional aspirations for sovereignty, stability, and diversification of strategic partnerships.

However, the reception of China's norms is neither universally positive nor uncontested. In more pluralistic societies such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco, critical civil society actors, independent media, and intellectual elites have voiced scepticism regarding the implications of China's normative engagement. Issues surrounding debt sustainability, lack of transparency, labour rights, and the export of surveillance technologies complicate China's image as a benevolent partner. These cases illustrate that norm diffusion is contingent, shaped by domestic political cultures and ideational resistance. Local actors use norm filtering and localisation, adapting or resisting Chinese narratives to reflect existing institutional values and political pluralism. This demonstrates the non-linear nature of norm diffusion, where material incentives do not guarantee uptake.

Importantly, China has not demanded ideological conformity. Its normative strategy is marked by flexibility and ambiguity, allowing regional actors to interpret and selectively appropriate its discourse. This strategic ambiguity enhances China's appeal across diverse political contexts while minimizing the risks of normative overreach. China does not seek to construct rigid alliances or formalise ideological blocs; instead, it aims to reshape the ideational space of regional diplomacy by offering alternative frameworks that coexist with, rather than directly displace, existing norms. Symbolically, China's consistent invocation of themes such as fairness, justice, and mutual respect has begun to carve out a distinct normative identity in international fora and regional platforms like CASCF. This identity stands in implicit contrast to the interventionist legacies of Western powers, enhancing China's credibility as a non-hegemonic actor. Nevertheless, this identity remains under construction, and its legitimacy is continually negotiated in relation to China's domestic policies and global behaviour.

In sum, China's normative diplomacy in the Middle East reflects the strategic use of discursive statecraft—a form of influence that operates through persuasion, symbolic capital, and narrative resonance. While the outcomes are uneven and often contested, the effort marks a significant evolution in China's foreign policy toolkit. Rather than relying solely on economic inducements or hard power, China increasingly invests in producing meaning as a geopolitical asset.

The implications are far-reaching. As China continues to institutionalise its engagement with the Middle East, its normative vocabulary will likely become more embedded in the region's diplomatic lexicon. However, the ultimate impact will depend on ongoing local interpretation, adaptation, and resistance processes. In this dynamic interplay between global ambition and regional agency, China's normative strategy may succeed not by displacing Western norms but by coexisting with and subtly recalibrating them, contributing incrementally to the emergence of a more pluralistic and post-Western international order.

China's normative statecraft—while not hegemonic—is increasingly visible and influential. Its long-term impact will depend not only on the credibility and consistency of its messaging but also on how well it navigates the pluralities of regional politics, adapts to feedback, and maintains its narrative of non-hegemonic partnership. In a shifting global order marked by strategic multipolarity and ideological contestation, China's Middle Eastern strategy offers critical insights into how emerging powers seek to reshape global norms through symbolic, discursive, and developmental means.

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## CHAPTER 5

### STRATEGIC ENERGY CONVERGENCE: U.S. POLICY AND SAUDI ARABIA'S TRANSITION IN CRITICAL MINERALS AND CIVIL NUCLEAR COOPERATION

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#### 5.1. Introduction

An important turning point in global energy and economic cooperation, especially in the areas of vital minerals and civil nuclear technology, is the developing strategic partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia. The two countries' same goal of ensuring dependable, diverse energy sources while meeting the linked demands of geopolitical stability and economic modernisation is reflected in this convergence. Current discussions and recent agreements show a shared commitment to strengthening cooperation in support of the United States' efforts to lessen reliance on powerful international players, particularly China, in vital mineral supply chains and cutting-edge energy technologies, as well as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 (Anadolu Agency, 2024).

Saudi Arabia's increased emphasis on vital minerals like lithium, cobalt, copper, and rare earth elements—materials necessary for the world's transition to sustainable energy systems—is at the heart of this collaboration. The kingdom presents a strategic opportunity to restructure global supply chains and alleviate risks in the energy and technology sectors, with an estimated \$4 trillion in undiscovered mineral resources. Through joint ventures, sustainable mining methods, and integrated supply chains, the U.S.-Saudi collaboration seeks to maximize this potential in order to improve energy security and encourage long-term economic diversification for both nations (Farmonaut, 2025).

The two nations are progressing talks on civil nuclear energy, a complicated but essential part of Saudi Arabia's energy diversification strategy, concurrently with their key mineral cooperation. Formal agreements that would allow the kingdom to grow its commercial nuclear power sector under stringent non-proliferation criteria are the goal of ongoing negotiations. Sensitive topics including spent fuel management and uranium enrichment are addressed in this collaboration,

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highlighting the necessity of striking a balance between Saudi Arabia's local energy objectives and more general regional and international security considerations (U.S. Department of Energy, 2025).

These strategic projects show how both countries are taking a holistic approach to strengthening their energy and technology cooperation. In addition to advancing Saudi Arabia's overall economic growth under Vision 2030, the combined emphasis on vital minerals and civil nuclear energy advances American interests in securing, diversifying, and bolstering energy sources in a geopolitical environment that is changing quickly. The combination of these initiatives highlights how U.S.-Saudi relations have changed, establishing this alliance as a key tenet in determining regional and international energy policy in the ensuing decades (Saudi Gazette, 2025).

## **5.2. Historical Foundations of U.S.–Saudi Energy Relations**

The discovery and utilisation of Saudi oil in the 1930s is when U.S.-Saudi energy relations first began. This partnership was legally started by the 1933 oil concession deal, which resulted in the creation of joint ventures like the California Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC), which would eventually become Aramco. This partnership was further solidified in 1945 when King Abdulaziz and President Franklin D. Roosevelt met strategically aboard the USS Quincy, where the US agreed to secure Saudi Arabia in return for a steady supply of oil (Spalding, 2023).

This energy interdependence has impacted global energy security and moulded U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East over the years. Among the pivotal moments are the 1973 Arab-Israeli War oil embargo spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, which put the alliance's fortitude to the test and precipitated a significant energy crisis in the US. The Carter Doctrine and the United States' deployment of troops to defend Saudi oil infrastructure during the Gulf War in 1991 are two examples of how the United States responded by stepping up its military presence in the area (Spalding, 2023).

The strategic energy landscape has changed significantly in recent years due to the U.S. shale revolution. The United States is now far less dependent on Saudi crude thanks to developments in hydraulic fracturing and shale oil production, which gives Washington more leeway in Middle East politics. The United States' energy independence has been reinforced by this change, while Saudi Arabia, whose economy is still largely dependent on oil earnings, has faced new difficulties. The long-term viability of the "special relationship" between the United States and Saudi Arabia has been called into question by these developments (Zieff, 2023).

Under its Vision 2030 plan, Saudi Arabia has responded to these changes by implementing an ambitious diversification policy. The plan calls for expenditures

of around \$270 billion in renewable energy projects by 2030, including solar, wind, and green hydrogen, with the goal of lessening the kingdom's reliance on hydrocarbons. Saudi Arabia wants to become a global leader in sustainable energy and a diversified energy powerhouse, rather than just a major exporter of hydrocarbons. Deepening collaboration with foreign partners, particularly the US, in fields like clean energy technologies and essential minerals for developing industries is another aspect of this shift (Open Access Government, 2025).

### **5.3. U.S. Critical Minerals Policy**

The United States has created a critical minerals policy focused on boosting domestic production, expediting regulatory processes, and forging strategic foreign partnerships in order to solve supply chain vulnerabilities and strengthen national security. This all-encompassing strategy aims to facilitate the development of new technologies, lessen reliance on supply chains that are controlled by foreign entities, especially those controlled by China, and guarantee access to minerals that are necessary for both military and commercial uses (Longstaff et al., 2025).

The fact that the United States imports more than half of its essential minerals—many of which are restricted from export by nations like China—represents a significant vulnerability. Particularly for sectors linked to cutting-edge manufacturing and military technologies, this dependence presents hazards to the economy and national security. Several legal frameworks and governmental actions have been adopted in response to this. Federal agencies are directed by Executive Orders 14213 (February 2025) and 14241 (March 2025) to expedite the financing and permitting procedures for domestic mineral projects, improve interagency coordination through the National Energy Dominance Council (NEDC), and open public lands for mineral development. Additionally, by providing incentives for sustainable energy technologies that depend on mineral resources, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) indirectly improves mineral supply chains (The White House, 2025).

By forming international alliances with friends and like-minded countries, the United States is also aggressively diversifying its sources of mineral supplies. To guarantee safe, sustainable, and transparent supply chains, this involves cooperative investments, moral mining practices, and multilateral programs like the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP). These initiatives are a part of a larger plan to encourage ethical sourcing methods globally and lessen dependency on hostile regimes (Baskaran & Wood, 2025).

The United States' commitment to developing its seabed mineral resources, which are becoming increasingly important for clean energy and cutting-edge technology, is further evidenced by the 2025 Offshore Mineral Development Policy. Investment in cutting-edge extraction technology, strong regulatory

frameworks, and environmental protections are given top priority under this approach. Along with promoting global best practices, openness, and robust supply chains, it also places a strong emphasis on forming foreign alliances to challenge China's hegemony in offshore resource extraction. By doing this, the policy enhances national security and economic competitiveness in the face of escalating geopolitical competition and advances American leadership in responsible offshore resource development (The White House, 2025).

Effective cooperation between the public and private sectors is equally crucial. Throughout the mining, processing, and manufacturing phases of the mineral supply chain, the U.S. government is attempting to match industry capabilities with public policy goals. This includes more funding for R&D to spur innovation and regulatory changes to cut down on red tape while upholding safety and environmental regulations. To improve communication, exchange technical knowledge, and coordinate strategic planning, formal platforms like advisory councils, public-private partnerships, and collaborative forums have been established. The United States hopes to improve supply chain resilience, boost global market competitiveness, and fortify its domestic critical minerals ecosystem through this integrated approach (Department of Homeland Security, 2024).

#### **5.4. Saudi Arabia's Minerals Strategy**

The Kingdom's Minerals Strategy, a pillar of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, aims to move the country away from reliance on oil and toward leadership in mining and mineral processing worldwide. The creation of enormous local reserves of vital resources, including copper, gold, bauxite, lithium, zinc, phosphate, nickel, and rare earth elements—materials important to renewable energy, electric vehicles, and cutting-edge electronics—is at the heart of this ambition (Discovery Alert, 2025).

##### *Key elements of the strategy include:*

A recent increase in the anticipated value of Saudi Arabia's undeveloped natural resources—from \$1.3 trillion to between \$2.5 and \$4 trillion—based on thorough geological studies and new finds, especially in uncharted areas, has strengthened the plan. This revaluation strengthens the Kingdom's position in upcoming energy and technological markets and places it as a significant global centre to produce vital minerals, which is consistent with its goals for economic diversification (Saudi Market Research & Consulting, 2025).

Saudi Arabia is lowering its dependency on foreign supply chains, particularly those controlled by China, which now handles about 90% of the world's important mineral processing, and increasing its local mineral processing capabilities in order to realise this goal. Nearly \$160 billion has been set aside by the Kingdom for mineral development, of which about \$100 billion is designated for mining

projects, foreign collaborations, and infrastructure. About \$20 billion of this sum is currently in advanced phases of implementation, indicating observable advancements toward long-term strategic objectives (Farmonaut, 2025).

One of the top priorities is to make supply chains for rare earth materials and battery components more resilient. Close cooperation with significant domestic organisations like Ma'aden and Saudi Aramco is required for this endeavour, which makes use of their financial resources and industrial know-how. The creation of Manara, a joint venture between Ma'aden and the Public Investment Fund (PIF), is a historic move in this regard. Its goal is to diversify supply sources and lower exposure to geopolitical risks by purchasing worldwide mining assets. Saudi Arabia hopes to create a vertically integrated value chain that includes exploration, extraction, refinement, and exportation through these initiatives (Public Investment Fund [PIF], n.d.).

The Kingdom is presenting itself as a geopolitically neutral player that can work with both China and Western partners in order to promote these goals. This will increase its attractiveness as a dependable resource supplier in a fragmented global market. The strategy also places a strong emphasis on following environmental, social, and governance (ESG) guidelines, addressing issues with human rights and environmental protection, and adhering to sustainable and ethical mining methods (Al-Kinani, 2025).

Several of the Kingdom's landmark projects are also closely related to Saudi Arabia's minerals policy. Critical minerals are essential for building, technology deployment, and sustainable design in projects like NEOM and The Line, which concentrate on smart infrastructure and futuristic urban development. Furthermore, the Kingdom will host major international events like the FIFA World Cup 2034 and the World Expo 2030, which would increase demand for minerals in industries like digital infrastructure, transportation, and construction. Saudi Arabia hopes to develop its own mining industry, lessen reliance on imports, and secure the material basis for these game-changing projects by fortifying its mineral supply chains (Moore, 2025).

The ultimate goals of Saudi Arabia's Minerals Strategy are to change global mineral supply chains, draw significant foreign investment, and increase downstream processing capacity. By leveraging its extensive resource base, the Kingdom hopes to strengthen its economic resilience, lessen its need on China for essential minerals, and become a major force in the worldwide transition to modern technologies and renewable energy (Gulf International Forum, n.d.).

## **5.5. Saudi Nuclear Energy Ambitions**

A key element of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy, which aims to diversify the Kingdom's energy mix, lessen reliance on oil earnings, and improve its

standing in the world for sustainable development, is the country's pursuit of nuclear energy. In addition to helping the nation meet its increasing electrical needs, nuclear power is essential for sustaining extensive desalination projects that are necessary to guarantee water security in its dry environment. Saudi Arabia wants to generate almost half of its electricity from nuclear and renewable sources by 2030. Major projects like the National Atomic Energy Program, which was started in 2017 to create the legal, regulatory, and technical frameworks required for safe, efficient nuclear deployment, and the King Salman Renewable Energy Initiative, which speeds up renewable capacity, support this goal. When taken as a whole, these initiatives demonstrate the Kingdom's dedication to creating a resilient, diverse, and ecologically conscious energy future (Mansouri, 2020).

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 places a strong emphasis on ensuring energy security by broadening its energy sources, where nuclear power serves as a vital component. With the nation's expanding population and rising need for electricity, there's an urgent push to move away from overdependence on limited fossil fuels—mostly used at home—toward more enduring options. Nuclear energy is set to work alongside renewable sources to deliver reliable and affordable power, all while preserving precious oil and gas supplies for international sales. This shift is designed to cut down on carbon emissions, improve water availability via desalination efforts, and shield the economy from fluctuations in worldwide oil markets. Through partnering with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on its domestic nuclear initiative, the Kingdom is also committed to fostering local technical skills, generating premium employment opportunities, and emerging as a frontrunner in the region for sustainable energy advancements that meet global safety norms (Arabnews,2025).

### **5.5.1. Drivers of Saudi Nuclear Ambitions**

Saudi Arabia has several interconnected aims that drive its energy diversification policy. As the Kingdom looks to preserve crude oil for export, a vital source of national income, there is an urgent need to meet the skyrocketing domestic energy demand brought on by population increase, industrial expansion, and heavy home cooling. A dependable, low-emission baseload option that enhances sporadic renewable energy sources is nuclear energy (Islam & Ali, 2024).

One of the main drivers of nuclear adoption in the water-scarce Kingdom is desalination, which is necessary for water supply. For large-scale operations, nuclear-powered desalination provides scalable and economical freshwater production. (Aljohani & Abdul-Fattah, 2004) The nuclear program has geopolitical significance in addition to its technological and environmental justifications. Saudi Arabia is frequently described as a “nuclear hedger,” constructing the institutional capacity and technical infrastructure that could facilitate future weapons

development, especially in response to regional enemies like Iran, even though it upholds its declared commitment to peaceful nuclear energy under international supervision. However, the Kingdom has not pursued a nuclear weapons program and has instead concentrated on civilian development, and it now lacks uranium enrichment facilities (Kamrava, 2024).

### **5.5.2. Civil Nuclear Program Development and U.S. 123 Agreement Negotiations**

Through collaboration with China, Saudi Arabia has made significant strides toward building a strong civil nuclear program, including the construction of research reactors and the ability to harvest uranium yellowcake. The Kingdom has yet to sign a U.S. 123 Agreement, which is necessary for official civilian nuclear cooperation under the U.S. Atomic Energy Act, notwithstanding these developments. The scope of U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation will be restricted until such a contract is finalised since this arrangement requires extensive safeguards to guarantee that nuclear materials are not transferred to weapons projects (Yilmaz, 2025).

The renewed urgency of U.S.-Saudi conversations in recent months reflects shared interests in regional stability and peaceful nuclear energy development. The prospect of an accord that would permit Saudi Arabia to enrich uranium domestically under strict supervision and verification has been seen with excitement by U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright. Long-standing Saudi opposition to U.S. non-proliferation requirements, especially those pertaining to enrichment and reprocessing, as well as robust opposition within the U.S. Congress, which is still worried about proliferation risks and the wider ramifications of nuclear technology transfer in a volatile region, complicate these talks (Siciliano, 2025). A 123 Agreement is an essential tool for the US to maintain international non-proliferation norms, particularly in the Middle East. The pact is a diplomatic weapon linked to larger goals, such as possible rapprochement with Israel and altering regional alliances, in addition to being a technical need for Saudi Arabia. As a result, how these talks turn out will have a big impact on Saudi Arabia's strategic positioning in the Gulf as well as the future of its nuclear program (Wright, 2025).

### **5.5.3. Institutional Development and Global Engagement**

Saudi Arabia has shown a steady and methodical approach to building up its civil nuclear capability since 2010. The Kingdom has developed a national nuclear policy, carried out thorough site surveys, and established technical requirements for its initial reactors through collaborations with foreign specialists and technology companies. These initiatives are spearheaded by the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (KACARE), which cultivates bilateral partnerships with nations including Argentina, South Korea, China,

Russia, France, and the United States, each of which contributes specialised technological know-how (The New Arab, 2015).

The creation of the Nuclear Holding Company in 2022, which is responsible for managing nuclear development projects, has further strengthened institutional advancement. By moving from the IAEA's Small Quantities Protocol to a comprehensive safeguard's agreement, Saudi Arabia has further shown its adherence to international standards, improving transparency and conforming to international non-proliferation regimes (Asaba, n.d.).

#### **5.5.4. Engagement with Alternative Nuclear Partners**

Saudi Arabia has actively diversified its overseas alliances in an effort to reduce its reliance on any one source and pursue a flexible and resilient civil nuclear program. In addition to increasing technical proficiency, this tactic strengthens Riyadh's geopolitical influence. One noteworthy partnership with China is a memorandum of understanding that focuses on safety procedures, operational training, and the development of nuclear technology—laying the foundation for future cooperation in reactor management and construction (Hu, 2025).

With its state-owned company Rosatom involved in several deals with the Kingdom, Russia too has a significant influence. These cover a range of topics related to the building, operation, and fuel supply of reactors, giving Saudi Arabia more alternatives and boosting its negotiating position in continuing talks with Western nations. The development of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs), especially the SMART reactor, which is ideal for both desalination and energy generation, is the focus of South Korea's collaboration. Plans are in place to work with Saudi organisations to export and commercialise this technology (Al-Obaidy, 2023).

Through a joint venture called Invania, Argentina and Saudi Arabia are working together to create the CAREM compact reactor, which will focus on off-grid power and desalination. Agreements have also been signed by France and other Western countries, which offer regulatory knowledge, training, and technological support. These varied collaborations demonstrate Saudi Arabia's dedication to a flexible nuclear program, advancing technological developments and increasing diplomatic clout, especially when negotiating delicate topics with the US over full-cycle fuel capabilities and uranium enrichment (World Nuclear Association, n.d.).

Both international goals and internal priorities are the driving forces behind Saudi Arabia's nuclear aspirations. Long-term strategies for water security, economic diversification, and energy sustainability heavily rely on its civil nuclear program. The Kingdom has established itself as a major player in the nuclear arena with notable advancements both at home and abroad. The success of the program still depends on completing a 123 Agreement with the US and overseeing its

expanding network of nuclear allies, which includes China and Russia. Saudi Arabia's nuclear strategy and its larger involvement in regional and international energy governance will be shaped by how it manages these ties while upholding its non-proliferation pledges (Pekar, 2023).

### **5.5.5. Bilateral Cooperation Initiatives**

A major step toward deepening U.S.-Saudi strategic ties was taken in April 2025 when U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman Al Saud signed a comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on energy cooperation. The deal, which was finalised during Secretary Wright's well-publicised trip to Riyadh, is in line with Saudi Arabia's \$600 billion investment plan to modernize its energy industry and establish strong alliances with American businesses. The MOU supports Vision 2030 goals and creates opportunities for U.S. technology exports and joint ventures across a wide range of industries, including advanced energy infrastructure, petroleum refining, clean cooking technologies, electricity generation, trading in refined products, energy storage, and artificial intelligence integration (U.S. Department of Energy, 2025).

Civil nuclear energy cooperation, which includes clauses on nuclear safety, security, and conformity to international non-proliferation norms, is a fundamental component of the pact. With an emphasis on developing a skilled labour force for Saudi Arabia's nuclear industry, it highlights collaborative efforts in workforce development and vocational training. In keeping with its commitment to transparent and sustainable nuclear governance, the MOU also encourages collaboration on U.S. Generation III+ big reactors and small modular reactors (SMRs), as well as uranium exploration, mining, milling, spent fuel management, and nuclear waste disposal. The deal, which was made public during President Donald J. Trump's delegation's official visit to Saudi Arabia, highlights the larger geopolitical goal of strengthening bilateral collaboration in an area vital to regional balance, global influence, and energy security (Magid, 2025).

### **5.5.6. Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) on Critical Minerals**

In addition to the energy MOU, on May 13, 2025, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Industry and Mineral Resources, under the leadership of Minister Bandar Alkhorayef, and the U.S. Department of Energy signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) centered on strategic cooperation in essential minerals. In order to improve the security of the global supply chain and lessen reliance on China for essential commodities like rare earth elements, the MOC creates a framework for joint ventures and investments in infrastructure for mineral refinement and processing. The deal increases Saudi Arabia's industrial capacity in high-value industries while also advancing U.S.

goals in defence production, sustainable energy transition, and technological innovation (Shokri, 2025).

By connecting universities, technical institutions, and research centers in both nations to promote expertise in mineral exploration, extraction, and processing, the MOC places a strong emphasis on workforce development and research collaboration. The deal aims to take advantage of the Kingdom's enormous mineral reserves, which are believed to be worth over \$2.5 trillion and include resources like gold, phosphate, bauxite, lithium, and rare earth elements. It is in line with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 economic diversification policy. The MOC positions Saudi Arabia as a crucial partner in global resource security and represents a significant step for the United States in building a robust, transparent, and geopolitically balanced critical mineral supply chain (Onsat, 2025).

### **5.5.7. Prospective Mining Agreement**

Alongside the MOC, in May 2025, the Saudi cabinet gave Minister Alkhorayef permission to begin talks for a specific mining cooperation deal with the U.S. Department of Energy. The deal is anticipated to concentrate on strategic cooperation in the exploration, production, and processing of essential minerals; however, specifics are still being negotiated. It supports Saudi Arabia's long-term objective of economic transformation under Vision 2030 and is consistent with its aspirations to become a global centre for value-added sectors like battery manufacture and electric vehicle (EV) production (U.S. Department of Energy, 2025).

This strategy aligns with U.S. priorities to decrease strategic vulnerabilities resulting from an excessive dependence on Chinese supply chains and diversify sources of essential raw commodities. Recent discoveries of rare earth deposits and increased reserves of gold, phosphate, and bauxite have contributed to Saudi Arabia's most recent revision of its mineral valuation, which is currently over \$2.5 trillion, almost twice previous estimates. Industries from electronics and defence to agriculture and renewable energy depend on these resources. Saudi Arabia can become a significant supplier of vital minerals and to play a key role in initiatives to create robust, secure, and diverse global supply chains by strengthening its ties with the United States in this area (Zadeh, 2025).

### **5.5.8. Civil Nuclear Agreement Negotiations (2023–2024)**

In order to complete a civil nuclear cooperation agreement, referred to as a "123 Agreement" under the U.S. Atomic Energy Act, the United States and Saudi Arabia engaged in extensive negotiations between 2023 and 2024. This accord was viewed as an essential part of larger diplomatic initiatives that included sophisticated weaponry shipments, U.S. security guarantees, and advancements on Palestinian statehood, as well as possible Saudi-Israeli rapprochement (Einhorn, 2024).

The Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing conflict in Gaza halted initial progress, changing regional dynamics and briefly slowing down negotiations. Nonetheless, Washington and Riyadh remained determined to complete the deal, with work stepping up in anticipation of the 2024 U.S. presidential election to come to an agreement by the summer. The proposed agreement would advance U.S. efforts to lessen reliance on Russian-supplied enriched uranium, which currently makes up about 25% of U.S. reactor fuel, by allowing Saudi investment in U.S. uranium enrichment infrastructure and allowing U.S. companies to build and run nuclear reactors in Saudi Arabia. The proposed agreement calls for training programs for Saudi technicians in the manufacture of nuclear fuels and the establishment of a Saudi uranium conversion facility to produce uranium hexafluoride (UF<sub>6</sub>). The framework prohibits plutonium separation, requires the export of spent fuel, strictly regulates UF<sub>6</sub> stockpiles, imposes a 10-year moratorium on Saudi uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, and requires strong IAEA safeguards (including adherence to the Additional Protocol) in order to address proliferation concerns. To ensure strict adherence to international standards, the United States maintains consent rights over the reprocessing or enrichment of any materials of U.S. origin and the power to revoke them in the event of noncompliance (World Nuclear Industry Status Report, 2024).

## **5.6. Strategic Goals and Implications**

*The agreements and negotiations align with three strategic goals:*

China's near monopoly on rare earth processing has raised worries about supply chain vulnerabilities, which the MOC on essential minerals explicitly addresses. Supply diversification is still crucial even when domestic output in the United States rose from 14,000 metric tons in 2018 to almost 45,000 metric tons in 2024. The recently found reserves in Saudi Arabia provide a prompt remedy. The United States seeks to establish more secure, diverse, and geopolitically stable supply chains for sectors like sophisticated manufacturing, clean energy, and defence through joint ventures and refinery partnerships (Mills, 2025).

**Civil Nuclear Cooperation and Technical Exchange:** The energy MOU promotes cooperation and knowledge transfer on Generation III+ and SMR designs, enhancing Saudi Arabia's energy portfolio and furthering American nuclear innovation and non-proliferation objectives. The deal facilitates workforce development, encourages AI-driven energy innovation, and permits reciprocal investment in uranium enrichment facilities. These programs promote long-term strategic alignment between the two countries and improve energy security (Open Access Government, 2025).

**Regional Influence and Geopolitical Realignment:** These actions represent a realignment of U.S.-Saudi ties against the backdrop of changing Middle East alliances and escalating international competition with China. Regional unrest, especially in Gaza, changed diplomatic deadlines, even if the nuclear deal was first associated with broader rapprochement with Israel. However, the high-level interaction, represented by President Trump's trip to Riyadh in May 2025, highlights the long-lasting geopolitical significance of Saudi-American collaboration in key minerals and nuclear energy. These initiatives are intended to work together to resist Iran's nuclear aspirations, lessen Chinese influence, and strengthen both nations' strategic independence and energy security (Kateb, 2025).

### **5.7. Geopolitical Implications**

Wide-ranging geopolitical ramifications, including regional power dynamics, international strategic competition, and non-proliferation imperatives, are associated with the nuclear and vital mineral agreements between the United States and Saudi Arabia.

#### **5.7.1. Regional Impact: Countering Iran, Shifting Gulf Dynamics, and Israel Ties**

One important strategic countermeasure to limit Iran's nuclear ambitions and lower the risk of proliferation throughout the Gulf is the U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation pact (Henderson, 2025).

The agreement seeks to strengthen a stable regional security framework and confirms a commitment to peaceful nuclear development by providing Saudi Arabia with access to cutting-edge nuclear technology under stringent international safeguards. Strict non-proliferation measures are intended to deter other regional states from developing clandestine or parallel military nuclear programs, which lowers the possibility of a destabilizing arms race, in addition to keeping Saudi aspirations peaceful (Einhorn, 2025).

In addition, the Trump administration's Middle East strategy differs from earlier American strategies that required Saudi Arabia to normalise relations with Israel before pursuing further involvement with the country. The administration has pursued bilateral agreements centered on economic, energy, and defence concerns rather than requiring diplomatic recognition of Israel as a condition for strategic cooperation. Given the ongoing Israeli Palestinian conflict and Gulf realignments, this strategy reflects the increasingly complicated and fractured structure of regional politics. As the Middle East's dynamics change, Washington aims to preserve its geopolitical clout by distancing normalisation from more extensive strategic involvement (Al Jazeera, 2025).

### **5.7.2. Global Context: U.S.–China Rivalry and Critical Mineral Diplomacy**

Saudi Arabia is positioned to play a significant role in U.S. efforts to diversify global supply chains and lessen reliance on China, which currently controls about 90% of the world’s critical mineral processing, thanks to its enormous mineral wealth, which was recently revalued at about \$2.6 trillion due to new rare earth discoveries. Through joint endeavours in mining, uranium extraction, mineral processing, and civil nuclear development, the U.S.-Saudi collaboration aims to challenge this near-monopoly. (Nogimori, 2025). Beyond resource access, these agreements advance a more comprehensive strategic agenda that encompasses nuclear safety governance, sustainable energy infrastructure, and AI integration in energy systems. The U.S.-Saudi alliance aims to promote Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 modernisation aspirations while simultaneously enhancing American influence in the Middle East as China continues to extend its Belt and Road Initiative. Through the incorporation of supply chain integration and technology cooperation, Washington hopes to strengthen its position as a leader in mineral diplomacy and global energy security (Institute for Energy Research, 2025).

### **5.7.3. Balancing Economic Cooperation with Non-Proliferation Commitments**

The United States wants a “gold standard” 123 Agreement that prohibits domestic uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing in Saudi Arabia in order to respect non-proliferation standards. In order to ensure openness and compliance with international nuclear norms, the Kingdom would have to rely on imported fuel and submit to stringent international inspections. Such a framework strikes a balance between Washington’s commitment to preventing proliferation in a volatile region and Riyadh’s aspirations for civilian nuclear development (Al Helou, 2025).

At the same time, the United States is expanding its cooperation with Saudi Arabia beyond the nuclear sector through programs in technology transfers, mineral development, and energy diversification. These initiatives strengthen a nuclear order based on norms while advancing shared interests. The long-term enrichment rights of Saudi Arabia are still up for debate, though. A possible middle ground is provided by proposals for a 10-year enrichment ban, which would provide Riyadh some strategic leeway while appeasing proponents of non-proliferation and lowering threats to regional security (Einhorn, 2025).

### **5.7.4. Challenges and Risks**

The alliance has several interconnected political, regulatory, economic, and strategic obstacles that could make implementation and long-term sustainability more difficult, despite the prospect of more U.S.-Saudi cooperation.

### **5.7.5. U.S. Political Constraints and Non-Proliferation Tensions**

The conflict between Saudi Arabia's insistence on preserving its sovereign right to develop enrichment capabilities and the legal protections provided by the Atomic Energy Act in the United States is a significant barrier to furthering nuclear cooperation. The fundamental tenet of the 123 Agreement is that Saudi Arabia must give up dual-use technologies like domestic uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing. Riyadh contends, however, that it is entitled to peaceful enrichment under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). (Herrera, n.d.) Negotiations have stagnated because of this basic dispute because American authorities are still hesitant to provide Saudi Arabia access to sensitive nuclear technologies (Benny & Chaffee, n.d.).

Bipartisan resistance in Congress is fuelled by worries about the hazards of regional proliferation, particularly considering Iran's growing nuclear program. Lawmakers worry that a mistake would encourage the creation of secret weapons or start a regional arms race. Therefore, Washington must maintain strong protections against military diversion while simultaneously promoting civilian nuclear cooperation to help Saudi energy diversification (Nakano, n.d.).

### **5.7.6. Saudi Governance and Implementation Risks**

There are significant concerns over Saudi Arabia's potential to oversee a long-term nuclear program in accordance with international safety and non-proliferation norms because of the country's still-underdeveloped nuclear governance and institutional capacity. Although Riyadh has made a public commitment to peaceful nuclear development, fears about proliferation are heightened by its previous remarks about matching Iran's capabilities, possibly including nuclear weapons. Confidence is further damaged by the kingdom's unclear position on complete safeguard implementation and its unwillingness to accept the IAEA's Additional Protocol. U.S. authorities are concerned that American-built infrastructure, including enrichment facilities, may be exploited or nationalised in the case of geopolitical instability. Saudi Arabia also has significant technological implementation challenges. Long schedules, complex regulatory frameworks, and technical skills are needed to develop centrifuge plants and commercial-scale reactors. For instance, the Centrus centrifuge technology, which was developed in the United States, is still at the demonstration stage and will not be commercially viable for years. The technological and security issues required are highlighted by historical examples, including as the ten-year development period of URENCO and proliferation risks associated with the Khan network. Current estimates have been lowered to just two sizable units, despite ambitious ambitions to build 16 reactors by 2032. This is due to both institutional and practical limitations (Squassoni, 2023).

## 5.8. Market Volatility and Long-Term Strategic Uncertainty

The necessity to meet growing domestic energy demands while preserving oil for export—a vital source of income—is what motivates Saudi Arabia’s nuclear aspirations. Long-term nuclear energy’s strategic and economic worth is still up in the air, though. Rapid technology advancements, changing geopolitical alliances, and market volatility could change the situation and impact nuclear deployment’s political and economic viability. (Saba, 2025) Initial agreements may not guarantee long-term continuation, given the decades-long timetables needed for nuclear infrastructure, particularly if global energy prices shift, technology advance, or regional security deteriorates. The critical minerals industry is likewise characterised by volatility. Between 2020 and 2023, 93% of yttrium compounds and 70% of rare earth imports into the United States came from China. In reaction to U.S. tariffs, Beijing restricted exports of seven critical minerals in April 2025, causing long license delays for U.S. companies. These acts highlight how precarious the current supply systems are (Institute for Energy Research, n.d.).

In contrast, Saudi Arabia is spending more than \$100 billion on mineral development, including a \$20 billion project that is currently in its advanced phases. With intentions to start processing lithium by 2027, the Kingdom might pose a threat to China’s hegemony in a number of mineral markets. The United States can diversify its suppliers thanks to this, but there are also new risks involved, like becoming overly dependent on one supply, being vulnerable to changes in Saudi politics, and maybe facing economic competition. Things are made more difficult by the difficulties facing domestic production in the United States. After being closed owing to environmental issues and Chinese underpricing, the Californian Mountain Pass mine reopened in 2018 and produced 45,000 metric tons of rare earths in 2024, which was 221% more than in 2018 but still not enough to supply all domestic demand (Squassoni, 2023).

## 5.9. Saudi Governance and Implementation Risks:

Uncertainty is increased by the worldwide competition to acquire vital minerals and clean energy technology. De-risking investments in important minerals including cobalt, nickel, graphite, and rare earths is the goal of the U.S.-led Mineral Security Partnership, which also includes Australia, Japan, the EU, India, South Korea, and others. Building capacity outside of supply networks under Chinese control is still extremely difficult, though (Pekar, 2023). The complexity is increased by Saudi Arabia’s expanding collaboration with other nuclear suppliers, including China, Russia, France, and South Korea. These alliances have the potential to weaken American influence and lessen the force of US non-proliferation laws. Future demand for critical minerals, meanwhile, is largely dependent on changing regulations and

new technologies in areas like clean hydrogen, carbon capture, and battery development—many of which are extremely specialised and have not yet been demonstrated commercially (Bower, 2025).

### **5.10. Conclusion**

The 2023–2025 U.S.–Saudi agreements in mining and nuclear energy reflect a strategic partnership aimed at securing supply chains, facilitating technology exchange, and aligning geopolitical interests. The MOUs signed in May 2025, alongside ongoing negotiations for a civil nuclear deal, underscore a commitment to energy security and economic diversification. However, challenges such as proliferation risks, human rights concerns, and congressional hurdles highlight the complexity of these initiatives, requiring careful navigation to realise their full potential. The Saudi–U.S. nuclear and critical mineral deals reshape regional power balances by addressing Iran’s nuclear threat and recalibrating Gulf alliances, while advancing U.S. strategic interests in the global competition with China over critical minerals and energy resources. The partnership carefully balances economic cooperation and technological advancement with rigorous non-proliferation safeguards to prevent nuclear escalation in the Middle East.

The main challenges in U.S.–Saudi nuclear cooperation include U.S. political, and non-proliferation safeguards that Saudi Arabia resists, governance and regulatory readiness within Saudi Arabia, and uncertainties stemming from market dynamics and regional geopolitics. These factors create a complex environment requiring careful diplomatic and strategic management to achieve peaceful nuclear cooperation without exacerbating regional tensions. The evolving U.S. policy and Saudi Arabia’s transition in critical minerals and civil nuclear cooperation reflect a strategic partnership aimed at addressing mutual economic and security interests. Recent agreements, including MOUs signed during President Donald Trump’s 2025 visit to Riyadh, underscore a deepening alliance focused on energy innovation, critical mineral supply chains, and civil nuclear energy development. These initiatives align with Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 goals to diversify its economy beyond oil dependence and enhance its global competitiveness in mining and advanced energy sectors.

From the U.S. perspective, this cooperation is critical to reducing dependence on Chinese-controlled mineral supply chains, securing access to essential resources like lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements vital for emerging technologies and defence applications. The partnership also advances U.S. interests in promoting nuclear non-proliferation while supporting deployment of advanced nuclear technologies such as Generation III+ reactors and small modular reactors in Saudi Arabia. By combining Saudi Arabia’s vast mineral reserves and growing mining sector with U.S. technological expertise and investment, both countries aim to

foster innovation, economic growth, and energy security.

Saudi Arabia's transition involves not only expanding its mining capabilities but also developing robust governance, regulatory frameworks, and workforce skills necessary for sustainable growth in critical minerals and nuclear energy. The agreements emphasize vocational training, workforce development, and safe nuclear waste disposal, reflecting a comprehensive approach to building institutional capacity. This transition is pivotal for Saudi Arabia to meet rising domestic energy demand, support clean energy solutions, and position itself as a key player in global critical mineral markets, thereby enhancing its economic resilience and geopolitical influence.

U.S.–Saudi cooperation on critical minerals and civil nuclear energy represents a forward-looking partnership that balances economic diversification, energy security, and non-proliferation objectives. By leveraging complementary strengths, the two nations are setting a foundation for sustainable growth and technological leadership capable of withstanding market volatility and geopolitical uncertainties. This strategic alliance not only advances Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 ambitions but also strengthens global supply chains and energy infrastructure critical for the clean energy transition and long-term regional stability.

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## CHAPTER 6

### REVISITING THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: NEO-IMPERIALISM AND GEOPOLITICS OF ENERGY<sup>1</sup>

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#### 6.1. Introduction

Disputes over sovereignty, regional power struggles, conflicts, and crises have long been a feature of the Eastern Mediterranean. Since the 19th century, the Eastern Mediterranean region has faced significant challenges. These challenges have fuelled hegemonic conflicts among major powers. Many countries in the area were affected by imperialism and colonialism. For instance, Italy seized control of Tripoli in Libya in 1911, just before the outbreak of World War I. The United Kingdom (UK) formally took over Cyprus in 1914. After World War I, Jordan and Palestine came under British rule in 1919. Türkiye accepted Britain's annexation of Cyprus in 1923, and two years later, in 1925, Cyprus was made a crown colony. However, the process of decolonisation led to a long-running dispute between Türkiye and Greece over Cyprus, which has been ongoing since the mid-1950s. The discovery of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean is not a new development, dating back to the second half of the 20th century. However, the region's geopolitical importance has drawn greater regional focus since the late 1990s. It is surprising that international companies and coastal states only began showing interest in the Eastern Mediterranean's potential hydrocarbon resources around that time. Many studies concentrate on interstate dynamics from a state-centric perspective, but this approach often overlooks the transnational mechanisms that underpin these interactions (See Ediger et al., 2012; Grigoriadis, 2014; Özgür, 2017; Adamides, 2022). To move beyond this view, this research will adopt a neo-imperialist and neo-colonialist framework. The study focuses on the interactions among coastal

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<sup>1</sup> In this research, artificial intelligence has been employed to assist with the literature review process, generate figures and tables, and facilitate translation tasks. (OpenAI, ChatGPT GPT-5).

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countries, international and multinational corporations, and third countries regarding the existence, exploitation, and presentation of potential hydrocarbon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, within the context of their utilisation for international markets. It will be argued that this multi-layered relationship represents a contemporary example of neo-imperialism.

Neo-imperialism represents an evolution of traditional imperial power, characterised by indirect control via institutional, economic, and technological networks rather than overt military conquest. Building on Manuel Castells' concept of network imperialism, this study highlights that imperialism persists post-decolonisation in subtle, structural forms—termed neo-colonialism by Nkrumah. The study examines how multinational energy firms, investment banks, and capital actors influence regional politics through frameworks such as international law, trade, and security alliances, thereby shaping sovereignty within a global system of legal, financial, and geopolitical networks. Castells' theories of network society and economy are particularly pertinent. The analysis reveals that these actors sustain dominant influence over sovereignty and power, with energy companies and financial networks emerging as key players in the Eastern Mediterranean's geopolitical dynamics. Following this, the study will analyse conflicts among coastal states concerning Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), Continental Shelf Delimitation Agreements, the Eastern Mediterranean Natural Gas Pipeline, and the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). The focus will then shift to multinational energy companies operating in the Eastern Mediterranean and the capital networks that support them. These networks have a significant influence on the transnational flow of economic power, involving multinational energy corporations, investment banks, state-owned enterprises, and development banks. Often crossing national borders, these networks shape geopolitical alignments through investment, infrastructure, and control over resources.

It is argued here that the presence of potential resources in the Eastern Mediterranean is a separate subject of investigation; however, the processes of extracting, processing, and marketing these potential energy resources are far beyond the capacities of the coastal countries of the Eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, without the support and involvement of international companies and the states and consortia with which they have indirect or direct links, it is not possible to bring these resources to the market. From a neo-imperialist perspective, this deprivation provides a lucrative area of exploitation for such companies.

## **6.2. Neo-Imperialism and Neo-Colonialism**

In its most general sense, imperialism refers to 'the oppression and violence exerted by powerful countries on weaker countries' (Öztürk, 2006). Therefore, when considered conceptually, it relates to 'the relations between the imperialist

countries and the ‘subject’ countries’ and ‘the unequal relations between the imperialist countries themselves’ (Öztürk, 2006)<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, imperialism is considered a concept closely related to colonialism. In fact, the terms colonialism and imperialism are often used interchangeably in the literature because colonialism is seen as a broader and more inclusive term (Lienau, 2021)<sup>5</sup>. These conceptual distinctions are particularly relevant for understanding the Eastern Mediterranean, where resource competition and geopolitical rivalries echo both classical and neo-imperialist dynamics. A colony refers to a political structure dominated in a way that serves the interests of another entity. For this reason, in cases where colonialism is evident, it necessitates maintaining a geography under military control. In fact, from the end of the 19th century onward, capital has gradually become concentrated alongside states competing for colonies to develop the world market. Hence, as demand for raw materials grew, the rate at which natural resources were discovered and exploited also rose. During the same period, enhanced geological knowledge led to the identification of most mineral-rich regions around the world (Magdoff, 2005). This situation paved the way for intense international competition. It was driven by the needs of industrialised nations’ emerging industries and the pressures of resource demand (Magdoff, 2005).

Furthermore, imperialism has been linked to capitalism since the mid-19th century (Öztürk, 2006). Indeed, according to Lenin, imperialism is ‘the highest stage of capitalism’ (Lenin, 2003). According to Lenin’s analysis, finance capital merged with the capital of monopoly industrial groups. Consequently, a wave of colonialism spread across the world, extending to previously unoccupied areas and territories (Lenin, 2003).

Building on this historical understanding, the concept of neocolonialism shifts attention to the argument that although a country may be independent, the domination and dependence imposed by imperialism persist through indirect methods—that is, hidden colonialism—despite its independence (Gülalp, 1979). The reason why dependency persists is not due to genuine development but because of technological dominance. Since these entities are no longer colonies, they remain without being fully integrated into the metropolis. The network and influence of imperialist capital worldwide have addressed their conflicts with nation-states through collaborations, management agreements, operating

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<sup>4</sup> If ‘imperialism’ is used only to describe the relationship between imperialist nations and ‘subject’ countries, as is often the case, a crucial aspect—namely, the internal contradictions within the imperialist camp—will be ignored (Öztürk, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> In practice, however, the situation may be more flexible. From a colonial perspective, the core motive continues to be the pursuit of dominance. Controlling or subjugating a foreign land is both a means and an end. As a result, colonial authority extends beyond military means and can be achieved through political, economic, social, and cultural methods, or by combining these approaches. Direct control might be less visible, and imperial rule can fluctuate between direct and indirect forms, often involving coercion, whether deliberate or not (Lienau, 2021).

rights, patents, and treaties. The core foundation of the new relationship system established by neo-colonialism is also worth noting. This is the point where it is crucial to recognize that the primary goal of neo-colonialism is to retain control over resource markets. Neo-imperialism, lacking formal political authority, entails the development of a local economy that remains heavily influenced by private expatriate economic interests (Mandle, 1967).

The examination of imperialism has developed through several distinct phases, commonly referred to as ‘waves’. The initial wave was driven by scholars such as Lenin, Bukharin, Hilferding, and Luxemburg, who focused on great power rivalries and colonial expansion. Their research underscored the significance of finance capital, inter-imperial competition, and the colonial scramble as fundamental components of early 20th-century capitalism (Gökten, 2018; Satgar, 2020). The second wave predominantly emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, emphasizing the relationship between the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery,’ and illustrating how global capitalism fosters dependency. This phase particularly engaged with the concept of neocolonialism. Influential scholars such as Samir Amin and Kwame Nkrumah contended that imperialism manifests through political control and economic reliance (Öztürk, 2006). The third wave, which persists in contemporary discourse, perceives imperialism as an enduring and intrinsic aspect of capitalism. Prominent thinkers, including Harry Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and David Harvey, represent this viewpoint. Harvey emphasizes the spatial restructuring and geographical expansion of capital as central to modern imperialism (Gökten, 2018). Post-Marxist scholars, such as Manuel Castells, have moved the discussion beyond classical Marxist frameworks. They analyse capitalism through the concepts of network society and informationalism, drawing attention to the transformations driven by the information age.

Harvey (2019) identifies two forms of imperialism. The first is the domination of a geographical area as a state or empire, involving control over natural resources for political, economic, or military aims. Harvey refers to this as ‘capitalist imperialism’. The second type is a political and ‘economic movement’, representing the gradual, continuous spread of capital accumulation across time and space. The first definition describes strategies used by the state or a group of states with more stable geographies. The second highlights how economic influence extends through daily activities, including production, trade, capital flows, money transfers, labour migration, technology transfer, currency speculation, information sharing, and cultural exchanges.

According to Nkrumah (1966), even after achieving independence, post-colonial nations continue to face financial imperialism in their former colonies. This means that financial imperialism has not truly ended in these countries, particularly during activities such as geological surveys or when exploring or

developing new mineral regions. In areas requiring large capital investments, post-colonial states often need to seek support from former imperialist powers and international financial institutions. This suggests that interstate imperialism persists through various strategies and tools. As a result, former colonial nations remain involved indirectly, working through international agents such as financial consortia and aid organisations. Amin pointed out that today's capitalism maintains its global dominance through financialised monopolies, which are starting to override sovereignty and capital barriers to access lucrative regions (Amin, 2018). Amin describes this as 'collective imperialism' (Amin, 2018), where imperialist powers cooperate in exploitation to sustain their global dominance. The post-World War II order, comprising international bodies such as NATO, the EU, the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, is also part of this imperialist framework. Amin added that contemporary monopolies in imperialism now mainly control technology, finance, natural resources, mass communication, media, and weapons of mass destruction (Kurbanoglu, 2019).

Dirlik (2007) argues that the globalisation of capital reduces the boundaries between local, national, and international levels. As capital spreads globally, the focus shifts from national classes to global ones. Therefore, understanding how local, national, and international categories connect is essential for Analysing political struggles in their specific contexts and for examining the emphasis of post-colonialism on identity politics (Dirlik, 2007). Elements like transnational corporations, commodity chains, flows, diasporas, and cultural exchanges are key parts of the capital world, facilitating not only the movement of goods but also the movement of people and cultures (Dirlik, 2007). Although discussions on post-colonialism have increased since the 1980s, the link between post-colonialism and capitalism remains largely underrepresented (Dirlik, 2007). He contends that with the expansion of global capitalism, identifying a single global centre, region, or country is no longer feasible. This shift is driven by the new international division of labour, transnational activities, capital's fluidity, and the tendency to minimize intervention or maximize capital's benefits. The network is maintained through transnational corporatisation. This structure controls economic activity by dominating national markets. Multinational corporations, dominating nations, weaken the state's ability to regulate the economy internally, making international oversight and economic protection vital<sup>6</sup>. Harvey states that, from a capital accumulation viewpoint, imperialist policies depend on preserving and utilizing all asymmetrical and resource advantages that can be exploited with minimal state intervention (Harvey, 2019).

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<sup>6</sup> The transnationalisation of production has caused unprecedented fragmentation in capitalism's history, and with the transnationalisation of capital, the capitalist mode of production has become a globalised abstraction (Dirlik, 2007).

Magdoff states that foreign markets are accessed with state aid to sustain the high growth needed for significant capital investments. This approach to foreign market penetration is becoming increasingly prevalent, particularly among large corporations facing intense national competition. Foreign investments play a crucial role in acquiring and exploiting raw materials. In nations with competing multinational corporations, it is vital to pressure foreign investments to stay ahead in competition and achieve market dominance (Magdoff, 2005). The discovery of natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has led to both a geopolitical power struggle, benefiting neo-imperialism, and an economic competition. According to Wigell (2016), not only major powers but also regional powers are using neo-imperialism to create dependency (p. 142). As Wigell mentioned:

*Neo-imperialist geoeconomic strategies are essentially deployed by regional powers not only as a way to pursue economic objectives but also to create an 'informal' empire in the neighborhood. In contrast to traditional geopolitical strategies, it is not so much concerned with enlarging its territorial control, as with pursuing various forms of economic control, shaping the regional economic structure in such a way that makes weaker states dependent on the regional power. The means employed are economic, but the goal is geopolitical—creating neo-imperial relations with weaker neighbours and thus substantially limiting their sovereignty in relation to the regional power's interests (Wigell, 2016, p. 142).*

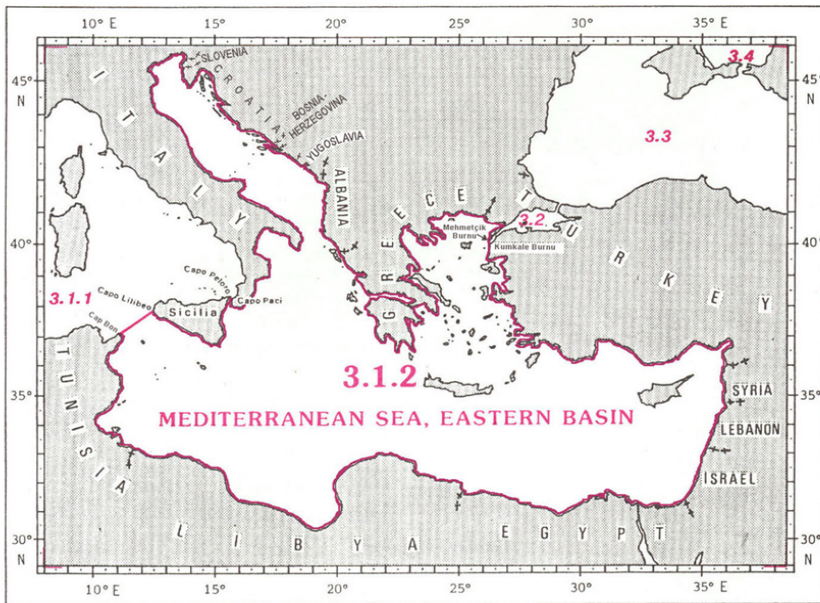
Understanding how states use energy companies to expand their influence in Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics is essential (Wigell, 2016). Castells (2005) states that the development of information and technology after the 1970s has driven the global transformation of capitalism. It is a network economy (Castells, 2005a). 'The network economy is a new, efficient form of organisation of production, distribution, and management [...]' (p. 8). He emphasizes that advancements in knowledge and communication technologies have structured political, social, and economic relations around a network framework. Consequently, complex, multi-layered, and multi-actor relationships have emerged beyond the nation-state (Castells, 2005a).

Additionally, Castells discusses both the concept of a network society and the presence of a network economy. Castells notes that productivity gains in production, distribution, and management have extended well beyond the United States (US), shaping global economic development (Castells, 2005a). When examining Castells' network economy approach alongside Wigell's conceptualisation of neo-imperialism, it is also essential to assess the capital networks of the companies involved in Eastern Mediterranean energy geopolitics. Due to skilled workforce, network-based collaborations, and technological capabilities, these firms are embedded in network relationships akin to capital, thus establishing economic dependency connections.

Castells argued that the development of information and technology after the 1970s has driven a global transformation of capitalism. He highlighted that developments in knowledge and communication technologies have structured political, social, and economic relations through networks. As a result, complex, multi-layered, multi-actor relationships have emerged beyond the nation-state (Castells, 2005a). He conceptualised that as a network society, which operates on a binary logic of inclusion and exclusion, with boundaries changing over time based on network programs and their performance conditions (Castells, 2009). In Castells' view, society is built around this 'space of flows' (Castells, 2005a). From this perspective, nation-states still exist (Castells, 2005b), but they operate within networks, effectively turning into network states. Decision-making in a network society encompasses both local and global issues, characterised by asymmetrical relationships within power blocks followed by states. Notably, multinational companies often prioritize supporting their home countries (Castells, 2005a). According to Castells, the economy is also a network economy, which is a more efficient system for organizing production, distribution, and management (Castells, 2005a, p. 8). Technological progress, particularly in communication, has steadily advanced over time. Networks now have the capacity to incorporate new participants and content without relying on traditional power centers (Castells, 2009). Gatekeepers play a crucial role, controlling access to resources and information, thus determining inclusion and exclusion within networks (Castells, 2009). Castells emphasised that not only the concept of a network society but also the significance of the network economy, noting that gains in productivity extend globally, influencing economic development beyond the US (Castells, 2005a). When Analysing Castells, network economy alongside Wigell's neo-imperialism, it is crucial to consider the capital networks of involved companies, especially in the context of Eastern Mediterranean energy geopolitics. Due to skilled labour, collaborations based on networks, and technological capabilities, these companies form relationships similar to capital networks, thereby creating economic dependencies.

### **6.3. Geopolitical Boundaries and Regional Actors in the Eastern Mediterranean**

The Eastern Mediterranean is the eastern sub-basin of the Mediterranean Sea, extending eastward from the line between Sicily and Tunisia to the coasts of Syria and Egypt (see Figure 1, Map of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea's Eastern Basin, IHO, 2002). The region is bordered geographically by the coasts of Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Greece, Türkiye, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia (see Figure 1, Map of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea's Eastern Basin, IHO, 2002). The Levant and Nile Basins are the primary focus of Eastern Mediterranean energy resources.

**Figure 1***Map of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea's Eastern Basin*

When we examine the coastal actors in the Eastern Mediterranean, the countries and territories that come into view include Türkiye, Greece, the Greek Cypriot Administration (GCA), the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Egypt, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Palestine. The Levant and Nile Basins are the primary focus of Eastern Mediterranean energy resources. Therefore, while the Eastern Mediterranean includes a vast geographical expanse, the main concentration of exploration activities, cooperative initiatives, and network formations appears to be in the Levant and Nile regions. Hence, the focus of this study will be primarily on these zones.

In this regard, the subsequent inquiry will analyse the dynamics between regional and external actors involved in energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean, while including the theoretical framework previously stated.

#### **6.4. The Reconfiguration of Energy Discoveries, Networks, and Power Relations in the Eastern Mediterranean**

The pursuit of energy reserves and related activities by actors in the Eastern Mediterranean is of relatively recent origin. To understand the energy-based network structure in the region, it is first necessary to examine the hydrocarbon discoveries and cooperation initiatives of the littoral states. Thus, that part will

first address the actors' initiatives of delimiting maritime jurisdiction areas, their hydrocarbon reserves exploration, energy cooperation attempts, and the interaction of capital-based corporations between states within these frameworks.

#### **6.4.1. The Exploration of Hydrocarbon Reserves**

The claims regarding energy reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean are relatively recent. At the beginning of the 2000s, with the emergence of news about hydrocarbon reserves in the region, coastal states' interest in the issue increased. The practice of some states extracting and utilizing their reserves dates back further. For example, Egypt made its initial attempts in its own territorial waters in the late 1960s and began processing by 1970 (Karbuz, 2017). However, the 2000s have been a period during which Egypt significantly increased its exploration efforts in the region. In this context, Egypt also signed bilateral Exclusive Economic Zone Agreements (EEZ) alongside reserve explorations. The EEZ delimitation agreements signed by Egypt were with the Greek Cypriot Administration in 2003 and Greece in 2020 (United Nations, 2003; United Nations, 2020a). A notable discovery of the reserves was made within the Zohr field, which belongs to Egypt, as a result of the efforts of the Italian company ENI.

Israel, one of the coastal states, signed the EEZ delimitation agreement with the Greek Cypriot Administration in 2010 and a maritime boundary agreement with Lebanon in 2022 (United Nations, 2010; United Nations, 2022). Although the treaty signed with Lebanon does not directly fall within the scope of EEZ delimitation, it resolved disputes concerning the announced license areas. With the agreement, Israel has clarified its rights in the Karish field on its side and its rights in the Qana field in Lebanon. Therefore, it has been confirmed that the entire Karish field is within Israel's EEZ (United Nations, 2022). However, Lebanon has agreed to give a share of the natural gas produced from this region to Israel because part of the Qana field falls on the Israeli side. The fact that the US acted as the mediator in this agreement is an essential indicator of America's attention to the region. Israel, a leading state in energy research and among those that process and utilise its reserves, has numerous fields. Although some fields remain undeveloped due to limited reserves, a significant portion has been developed and utilised. Consequently, it utilises these reserves both in the domestic market and for export. In addition to its commercial relations with Israel, Egypt, and Jordan, in June 2022, it signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation Related to Trade, Transport, and Export of Natural Gas to the European Union' (EU) with the EU and Egypt, thereby framing its energy cooperation (European Union, 2022). This cooperation involves transporting Israel's natural gas via pipeline to Egypt. The gas is then liquefied at the Idku and Damietta LNG facilities before being exported to the EU.

Lebanon, as another country bordering the Eastern Mediterranean, has begun activities in the region influenced by Israel's exploration efforts for reserves in the area. In 2007, it signed delimitation agreements with the Greek Cypriot Administration (Common Space Initiative, 2014). However, the Lebanese parliament has not ratified the agreements, and therefore, they never entered into force. In 2011, Lebanon identified its EEZ areas and communicated this to the UN (United Nations, 2011). In some of these regions, overlapping with Israeli territories has led to a dispute between the parties. However, as previously mentioned, the dispute was resolved through the signing of an agreement under the mediation of the US. It was noted that the reserves found in Block 4 during Lebanon's first drilling operation in 2020 do not have any commercial value (Azhari, 2020; Journal of Petroleum Technology, 2020). Although ENI and Total Energy are scheduled to conduct drilling operations in Block 9, the area where an agreement with Israel has been reached, as of 2023, no reserves have yet been recorded by 2025 (Journal of Petroleum Technology, 2020). The existence of political instability in Lebanon is also the biggest obstacle to conducting sustainable drilling and exploration activities in the region.

The Gaza Marine field, Palestine's sole offshore exploration area, had its first reserve discovered in 1999. The political instability caused by the Israel-Palestine conflict in the region is hindering the development of exploration and drilling activities. However, in 2021, an agreement was made between Egypt's EGAS company and Palestine to develop drilling activities in the region. At the beginning of the 2020s, the cooperation between Egypt and Israel in other areas extended to this region. Israel has opposed the processing of the reserve in the Gaza Marine area belonging to Palestine at Egypt's facilities on security grounds (Şengül, 2025). However, later statements indicated that Israel might permit it if Egypt guaranteed security, which is interpreted as Israel giving preliminary approval (Şengül, 2025). It is also necessary to consider the influence of the Forum. However, the ongoing Israel-Palestine war since October 2023 has halted all these processes.

The Greek Cypriot Administration signed Exclusive Economic Zone delimitation agreements with Egypt in 2002, Lebanon in 2007, and Israel in 2010 (Common Space Initiative, 2014; United Nations, 2002; United Nations, 2010). While signing these EEZ delimitation agreements, it also took unilateral actions by declaring hydrocarbon exploration areas around the island of Cyprus. As of 2011, licenses have been issued for some of the fields, and drilling activities have begun there. When considered within the framework of the Cyprus dispute, the declaration of license areas by the Greek Cypriot Administration and the drilling activities in these areas have created a new area of disagreement between the parties. In this context, Türkiye, the Greek Cypriot Administration, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus have experienced a crisis trigger, which

led to the GCA's actions and subsequently the TRNC and Türkiye declaring hydrocarbon license areas and conducting drilling activities as retaliatory measures. In this framework, the Agreement on the Delimitation of the Maritime Boundaries between Türkiye and the TRNC was signed in September 2011 (T.C. Resmi Gazete, 2011b). Following this agreement, the TRNC declared license areas around the island of Cyprus, some of which overlapped with the GCA's license areas, and in November 2011, granted exploration licenses in these areas to TPAO (Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı, n.d., a). Türkiye, following the signing of the EEZ delimitation agreement with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, continued its seismic surveys in the region using the ships Piri Reis and Barbaros between 2012 and 2017. As of 2018, Türkiye has added drilling ships named Fatih and Yavuz to its fleet, and in 2020, it also incorporated the seismic research vessel Oruç Reis. Türkiye conducts various activities in different areas of the region. Türkiye has two treaties that define its continental shelf. One of these was signed with the TRNC in 2011, and the other with Libya in 2019 (T.C. Resmi Gazete, 2012). Following these treaties, Türkiye declared its continental shelf in the Eastern Mediterranean by sending two separate letters to the UN in November 2019 and March 2020, which included detailed maps (United Nations, 2019; United Nations, 2020) Türkiye is conducting drilling activities around Cyprus in two license areas off the coast of Antalya, within its continental shelf, south of Meis Island<sup>7</sup>, based on the license granted by the Turkish Petroleum Corporation to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı [TPAO], n.d.-a).

The delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas and the exploration of offshore reserves have motivated actors in the region to develop various types of cooperation. These collaborations, initially developed throughout bilateral agreements, over time transformed into broader regional cooperations. The following section includes how these frameworks of cooperation emerged and how the relationship between states and capital has been shaped within these processes.

#### **6.4.2. Mapping Corporate Ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean**

With the emergence of hydrocarbon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, the regional states have issued licenses after their attempts to define their maritime jurisdiction areas. In these license zones, energy companies have begun exploration for reserves. In the successful drilling wells, energy has been extracted, processed, and even traded by some countries. These initiatives are carried out not only by states but also by energy companies, i.e., private capital. At this point, it

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<sup>7</sup> Drilling activities in the Dalit field, announced by Israel, started in 2009. These were conducted by Noble Energy (a US-based company), Mubadala Energy (UAE), Tamar Petroleum, Isramco, Tamar Investment, Dor Gas, and Everest Infrastructures based in Israel. It is estimated that the field contains natural gas reserves of 8 BCM. (Israel Ministry of Energy, n.d., a; Israel Ministry of Energy, n.d., b)

becomes vital to understand how the companies involved in energy collaborations are integrated into the process and the origin of the capital belonging to the companies, i.e., which country they are affiliated with. The establishment of the energy capital network in the Eastern Mediterranean can be traced through the license agreements made between states and companies. Therefore, this section will examine which companies the licenses granted by the states in their maritime jurisdiction areas are based on in terms of cooperation.

Israel's exploration efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean started in the early 2000s, focusing first on the Mari-B and Noa fields. In the region where Noble Energy, a US-based company, holds drilling licenses, approximately 25 BCM of natural gas has been produced since 2004 (Israel Ministry of Energy, n.d., a). However, production ceased in 2019, resulting in the closure of the facility (Israel Ministry of Energy, n.d., a). The most significant discoveries in Israel occurred in 2009 and 2010, at the Dalit, Tamar, and Leviathan fields. The leading energy company in the country, Delek Drilling—which rebranded as NewMed in 2020—holds a 45.3% stake. Noble Energy, acquired by Chevron in 2020 and operating as Chevron Mediterranean in the Eastern Mediterranean, owns a 39.7% stake. Israel-based Ratio Energy holds a 15% stake. These entities form a consortium that continues to oversee operations as the license holder for the Leviathan field (NewMed Energy, n.d.). Data suggest that the estimated natural gas production capacity of 500 BCM is adequate to meet the gas demands of Israel and its regional neighbours (Israel Ministry of Energy, n.d., a).

Discovered in 2009, the Tamar field was swiftly developed to address Israel's energy needs following the cessation of natural gas exports from Egypt. The license for the Tamar field is held by a consortium of partners, including Noble Energy (Chevron) from the US, Mubadala Energy from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Tamar Petroleum from Israel, as well as Isramco, Tamar Investment, Dor Gas, and Union Energy & Systems based in Malta (Israel Ministry of Energy, n.d. a). In 2025, Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR acquired a 10% stake in Union Energy in the region (Szymczak, 2025). The region's estimated reserves are indicated as 250 BCM (Israel Ministry of Energy, n.d., a).

Drilling activities in the Dalit field, announced by Israel, started in 2009. These were conducted by Noble Energy (a US-based company), Mubadala Energy (UAE), Tamar Petroleum, Isramco, Tamar Investment, Dor Gas, and Everest Infrastructures, based in Israel. It is estimated that the field contains natural gas reserves of 8 BCM. (Israel Ministry of Energy, n.d., a; Israel Ministry of Energy, n.d., b)

The two additional license areas they acquired are Aphrodite/Ishai and Shimshon. Investigations occurred in these regions in 2012, but drilling has been halted since then. The Aphrodite/Ishai license is significant because it overlaps with a zone designated by the Greek Cypriot Administration (GCA) as Aphrodite

and a zone designated by Israel as Ishai. Both parties assert rights to the reserves in the region. Although a framework agreement was established in 2021 to promote a commercial arrangement, a definitive sharing agreement has yet to be finalised (Arslan, 2021). The EEZ agreement between the two nations, along with Israeli companies' holdings in GCA-issued licenses, indicates a spirit of cooperation, with no significant conflicts reported in this sector. However, Türkiye and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus oppose the licenses granted by the GCA, which restrains exploration and drilling activities by third parties. Hydrocarbon reserves in Israel's Karish and Tanin licenses were discovered by Energean Oil & Gas during exploration conducted in 2012-2013, with reserves estimated at approximately 55 BCM (Israel Ministry of Energy, n.d., a). Israel continues active drilling operations primarily focused on the Leviathan, Tamar, and Karish licenses, supplying both domestic and export markets. The regional energy landscape is predominantly influenced by U.S.-based Chevron (formerly Noble Energy) and Israeli companies, including NewMed.

The licensing regions within Egypt, including Zohr, West Nile Delta/Giza-Fayoum-Raven, Atoll, Great Nooros, Baltim SW, and Burullus/WDDM, are managed by several prominent companies. These include BP, headquartered in the UK; ENI, based in Italy; the Egyptian state company EGAS; Shell, a multinational corporation of Dutch-British origin; and Petrobel, a joint venture between Egypt and Italy. In the Great Nooros area, exploration undertaken in 2020 involved a joint venture comprising ENI, BP, and Petrobel, which is reported to hold over 113 BCM of reserves in the region (ENI, 2020). The West Delta Deep Marine cluster encompasses multiple subsectors, where a consortium of Shell, KUFPEC, and EGAS has been active in exploration activities as of 2023 (Nikse, 2025). Additionally, exploration in the Baltim Southwest area was conducted by ENI, BP, and Petrobel in 2016, with production commencing in 2019 (ENI, 2019).

In the West Nile Delta of Egypt, including the Giza & Fayoum, as well as the Raven field, exploration activities were carried out in 2015 by a consortium led by BP, ENI, and EGAS. Gas production began in Giza & Fayoum in 2019 and in Raven in 2021 (BP, 2021; Journal of Petroleum Technology, 2021). The energy produced from these fields is supplied to the domestic market and exported. In the Atoll area, BP, ENI, and EGAS, which made a discovery in 2015 estimating reserves of 1.5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 31 million barrels of condensate, have been producing natural gas in the field since 2020 (BP, 2018). One of Egypt's most important fields, the Zohr field, was discovered by ENI and EGAS in 2015, and gas production began in 2017 (ENI, 2025). It is estimated that the region has 850 BCM reserves, and in 2018 and 2019, the companies increased their annual production capacities (Churchman, 2024; ENI, 2025). Increasing the reserve supply capacity has made the region more attractive and has positioned Egypt as a

significant player in the energy market. Although Lebanon does not produce oil or natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean, there are exploration activities underway. In 2017, the licenses for Block 4 and Block 9 were awarded through a tender to a consortium comprising France-based Total, Italy-based ENI, and Russia-based JSC Novatek (Lebanese Petroleum Administration, 2025a). Exploration activities initiated in Block 4, announced in 2020 that no commercially recoverable reserves had been discovered, and subsequently, the license holders returned their rights to the Lebanese State (Azhari, 2020; Journal of Petroleum Technology, 2020). Regarding Block 9, which overlaps with Israel's area and has been resolved through an agreement and is known as Qana, although no reserves of commercial value have been found, the Lebanese Ministry of Petroleum has stated that the results suggest the possibility of reserves in surrounding areas (Lebanese Petroleum Administration, 2025b).

**Table 1**

*Countries, Companies, and Their Countries of Origin in The Eastern Mediterranean*

<b>Country</b>	<b>Operating Company</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>
Egypt	ENI, BP, Shell, Chevron, TotalEnergies, Mubadala, EGAS	Italy, UK, Netherlands/UK, US, France, UAE, Egypt
Lebanon	TotalEnergies, ENI, QatarEnergy	France, Italy, Qatar
Israel	Chevron, NewMed Energy, Ratio Oil, Isramco, Dor Gas, Union Energy, Mubadala	US, Israel, Israel, Israel, Israel, Azerbaijan, UAE
Greece	ExxonMobil, Hellenic Petroleum	US, Greece
Greek Cypriot Administration	ExxonMobil, QatarEnergy, ENI, TotalEnergies, Chevron, NewMed Energy, BG (Shell)	US, Qatar, Italy, France, Israel, Netherlands/UK
Türkiye	TPAO	Türkiye
Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus	TPAO	Türkiye

*Note.* Prepared by the authors<sup>8</sup>

Analysing the licensing zones of the Greek Cypriot Administration in the Eastern Mediterranean reveals a phased licensing process over time. Noble Energy (Chevron) received the license for Block 12, called Aphrodite, in 2008 and began drilling activities in 2011 (GCA Ministry of Energy, Commerce and Industry, n.d.). In 2015, after an estimated reserve of around 4.5 Tcf was announced by

<sup>8</sup> All data are presented in the text with the corresponding references. The list mainly includes companies holding significant shares.

the drilling company, plans for production were formulated (GCA Ministry of Energy, Commerce and Industry, n.d.). Consequently, cooperation with Egypt was planned to process the gas at Egypt's LNG facilities. By 2023, the reserve estimate had increased to 5.6 Tcf (GCA Ministry of Energy, Commerce and Industry, n.d.). During the license renewal process, Chevron and the Newmed consortium have held the hydrocarbon operating license for Block 12 since November 2019. In 2021, a license for the Block 5 field was awarded to a consortium including ExxonMobil, Production Cyprus Limited, and Qatar Energy International. The license for the Block 6 field was granted in 2017 to a consortium of ENI and Total Energy (GCA Ministry of Energy, Commerce, and Industry, n.d.). Exploration activities have been carried out in some wells of Block 6, and production testing is underway in the Cronos-2 well.

It is estimated that approximately 3.1 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas reserves exist, according to the GCA Ministry of Energy, Commerce and Industry (n.d.). In 2017, French companies Total Energy and ENI became license holders in Block 8, and they acquired licenses in Block 7 in 2019 (GCA Ministry of Energy, Commerce and Industry, n.d.). ExxonMobil and Qatar Energy obtained licenses for Block 10 in 2017; however, during the drilling of the 'Delphyne-1' exploration well in 2018-2019, no commercially viable reserves were found. Nonetheless, they continue exploring other wells, and as of 2022, the 'Glacus' well is estimated to contain 3.7 tcf of reserves (GCA Ministry of Energy, Commerce, and Industry, n.d.). In Block 11, which was licensed to Total and ENI in 2013, no reserves were discovered during the 2017 drilling operations (GCA Ministry of Energy, Commerce, and Industry, n.d.). Regarding companies holding licenses in the Greek Cypriot region, Italian-based ENI, US-based Chevron (Noble Energy), and France-based Total have mainly participated in tenders and obtained licenses. The involvement of Israeli state company New Med, due to overlapping areas in the Aphrodite region, is noteworthy. Recently, Qatar Energy has shown active interest in the waters of the Greek Cypriot region, similar to other areas. Although ExxonMobil, Total, and Greek Hellenic Petroleum have agreed to study hydrocarbon reserves around Crete- a region disputed with Türkiye- Total withdrew, and the remaining two companies divided the shares equally (Reuters, 2022). While seismic studies are ongoing, Greece is seeking to conduct further work in another area near Crete. Greek officials have stated that US-based Chevron has also made efforts there, to which Greece has responded positively (Reuters, 2025).

The process of discovering hydrocarbon reserves and issuing drilling licenses in Türkiye and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is advancing differently compared to other regional countries. Türkiye is managing its activities off the coast of Antalya through TPAO. Additionally, TPAO has been granted licenses for the seven areas announced by the TRNC in 2011 (Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim

Ortaklığı, n.d., b). This approach, which involves conducting operations through a domestic company and excluding international energy firms, reflects Türkiye's security concerns regarding the issue. Meanwhile, unresolved disputes and conflicts cause the involved parties to remain in an unstable environment, leading them to avoid cooperation with the opposing side.

### **6.5. Capital Networks: States, Companies, and International Organisations**

The exploration and extraction of energy resources within the Eastern Mediterranean region have garnered considerable scholarly and strategic interest from both regional states and external actors. All nations within the area have engaged in various levels of hydrocarbon exploration and drilling activities. Additionally, third-party countries participate across different phases of the energy development process, including exploration, extraction, and processing. An analysis of the origins of entities involved in these activities shows that, in addition to regional actors, the main foreign participants are the US, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, more recent involvement from actors such as Qatar, Russia, and Azerbaijan—each contributing smaller shares—has been observed in the region's energy sector.

The interests of major powers within the region have historically manifested through various channels. The early 2000s marked a pivotal period characterised by the emergence of significant reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, which subsequently fostered enhanced cooperation between energy corporations and political authorities. Over time, these collaborations matured into formal international organisations, thereby transforming networks of state and corporate actors into recognised international entities. This evolution has introduced a novel dimension to the geopolitics of the region.

There are two principal frameworks governing the extraction, processing, and transportation of energy resources to third-party entities within the Eastern Mediterranean region. The first framework is the EastMed Pipeline Project, established through a trilateral agreement among Israel, Greece, and Cyprus (Berberakis, 2020). The second framework is the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), initiated in 2018 under Egyptian leadership as a platform for political dialogue focused on natural gas, and subsequently formalised as an institutional entity in 2020.

This scholarly overview emphasizes the intricate interactions among geopolitical, economic, and organisational factors that influence energy resource management in the Eastern Mediterranean region. At the trilateral summit held in Crete in October 2018, the participating states—namely Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus—expressed their intent to establish a forum to facilitate cooperation. Subsequently, in 2019, the founding member states—Egypt, the Greek Cypriot

Administration, Greece, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Italy—conducted their inaugural meeting and formalised the framework by signing their statutes in September 2020 (East Mediterranean Gas Forum, n.d., a). Evidence suggests that this regional initiative has garnered increasing attention from other major global powers (See Figure 2).

In the context of regional energy organisations, France advanced its engagement by becoming a full member of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in March 2021. Contrastingly, the US, the World Bank, and the EU have attained the status of permanent observer members (East Mediterranean Gas Forum, n.d., b). While the EMGF primarily concentrates on natural gas production and transportation within the East Mediterranean region, it evidently garners greater interest than the narrower EastMed initiative. This disparity largely arises from the geographic scope: the EastMed initiative is constrained to a limited area, with numerous disputes associated with the Cyprus issue, whereas the EMGF encompasses a broader geographic zone and integrates key regional powers. Nonetheless, Türkiye and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, despite their coastal locations and Türkiye's regional influence, are not members of these organisations. This exclusion is primarily attributable to Türkiye's objections to the actions of other regional actors, notably Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration, which Türkiye perceives as inconsistent with international law.

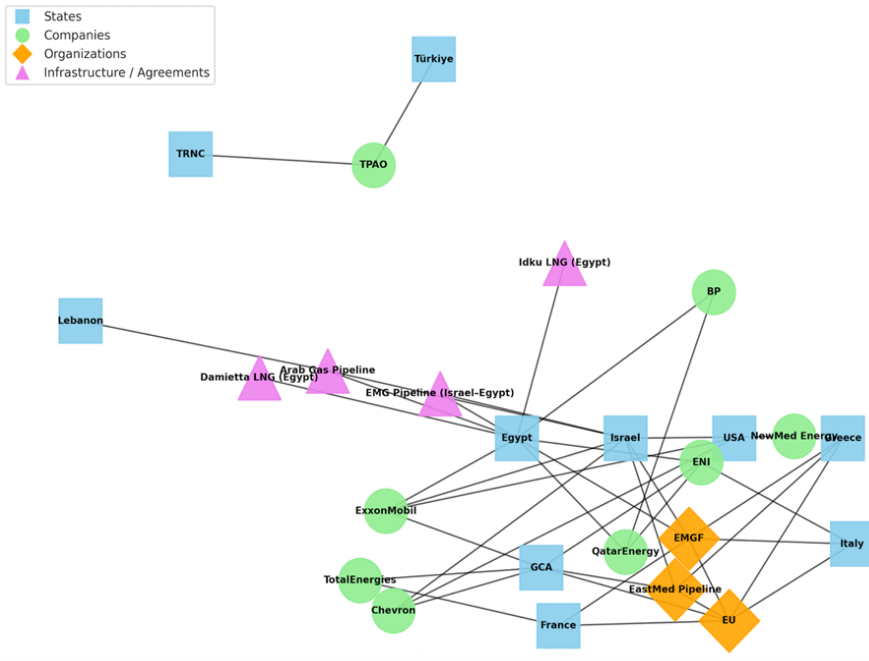
As illustrated in Figure 2, EMGF functions as a significant mechanism for regional cooperation among member states. The presence of Italy and France as permanent members outside the regional framework, along with the US and the EU serving as permanent observers, underscores the strategic interests of major global powers within the region. This dynamic reflects broader geopolitical considerations and the pursuit of direct benefits related to energy supply and economic cooperation. Analysing the origins of various companies operating in the region reveals that the US, Italy, and France are prominent non-regional actors, highlighting the interplay of national interests and private enterprise. From an international organisational perspective, this configuration can be viewed as a normalisation of state and capital cooperation. Given the region's history of conflicts, crises, and wars, the associated investment risks for companies are substantial. The cooperative framework among states thus functions as a security mechanism, fostering a safer environment for corporate investment. This cooperation enables states to implement their energy policies effectively through domestic companies, which in turn operate within the security provided by this multilateral framework.

A significant indicator highlighting EMGF's reinforcing role is its inclusion of the Global Investment Advisory Council, which comprises energy companies operating in the region and forms part of EMGF's institutional framework (East

Mediterranean Gas Forum, n.d., b). This also indicates the presence of state-capital cooperation within international organisations. States that indicate the existence of state-capital collaboration within international organisations. States not directly involved in the organisation show their presence through companies.

**Figure 2**

*Capital Networks: States, Companies, and International Organisations*



*Note.* Prepared by the authors with the support of artificial intelligence tools.

The intergovernmental collaborations, agreements between energy companies and states, as well as the establishment of international organisations, collectively exemplify that the energy structure in the Eastern Mediterranean conforms to Castells network theory. Specifically, this configuration replaces traditional hierarchical frameworks—dominated by states and managed by a single actor—with a network model characterised by interconnected interests, wherein capital and information circulate within the network. Participants within this network have access to information, resources, and power, whereas those excluded are denied participation, thereby limiting their access to vital resources, information, and influence. In energy exploration, drilling, and transportation, the requisite capital, technological expertise, and infrastructure are essential. The energy cooperation networks in the Eastern Mediterranean are predicated on these principles. In the absence of indigenous technological capacities, states tend to rely on external actors to obtain, adapt, or integrate advanced technologies. An

illustrative example is the collaboration between Israel and Egypt, operationalised through Israel's energy extraction and Egypt's LNG facilities for processing and export. This partnership fosters an interconnection that benefits both parties: Israel gains access to Egypt's LNG infrastructure for export. At the same time, Egypt derives economic advantages and enhances its geopolitical significance, reinforcing its role as a key regional energy hub. Moreover, Egypt seeks to position itself at the core of the energy-capital network as a pioneering member within the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF).

It is essential to analyse the activities of the US as a global power and its strategic positioning within the regional network. The US maintains its influence primarily through third-party entities and capital corporations, rather than direct involvement in regional processes. A considerable proportion of the operational companies in the area are based in the US. Although companies observed initial caution during the inaugural licensing auction conducted by the GCA amid the Cyprus dispute, Noble Energy, an American enterprise, was the first to acquire a license in the region (GCA Ministry of Energy, Commerce and Industry, n.d.). Additionally, the US' role as a mediator in resolving disputes over overlapping licensing areas between Israel and Lebanon demonstrates an engaged yet cautious regional strategy. This approach indicates a concerted effort by the US to mitigate political instability and facilitate energy development by private capital entities.

This interaction exemplifies a distinctive collaboration between capital interests and state policy, underscoring the nuanced nature of US engagement in the region. An essential actor within this network is the EU. Member states, such as Italy, France, Greece, and the Greek Cypriot Administration (comprising Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration), participate both as part of the EU and as autonomous entities within the network, reflecting the EU's multi-layered organisational identity. This occurs through its involvement in regional maritime jurisdiction issues as a third-party actor, as well as through its participation as an observer in various international collaborations. In the context of the marine delimitation disputes involving Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration, as well as Türkiye and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, the EU positions itself as a stakeholder aiming to influence the network. While the areas designated by the Greek Cypriot Administration and the related drilling activities are regarded by the GCA as a legitimate exercise of sovereign rights, Türkiye and the TRNC are viewed by the EU as violating these rights (Kafdağlı Kuru, 2020).

Türkiye and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which are outside collaborative efforts, are unable to attract investment from international companies and have been criticised by the EU for their policies in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result, they are excluded from the network established in the region. According to Castells, remaining outside the network means being cut off

from resources, knowledge, production, and consumption, leading to inequality among the involved parties (Castells, 2000).

It is clearly observed that while certain actors remain within the network, others are excluded from it. This situation explicitly reveals the neo-imperial structure within the framework of Castells network theory.

## 6.6. Conclusion

This article critically examines neo-imperialism and explores its relationship with colonialism, particularly through the theoretical frameworks of second and third-wave imperialism. The current geopolitical dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean are analysed using Manuel Castells network theory of capital. The central thesis posits that neo-imperialism endures through the operation of capital networks within the region. This analysis suggests that both corporate entities and sovereign states engage through these networks to advance their interests. The dominant analytical perspective has often been state-centric, which tends to marginalise the role of capital networks. However, it is imperative to recognize that non-state actors, such as gatekeepers, also exert substantial influence by controlling access to the region. The regional power hierarchy is generally identified as Egypt, Israel, Italy, and France, with the US exerting influence via corporate interventions as a global hegemon. Türkiye, meanwhile, remains outside these network structures, acting in cohesion with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Major multinational corporations operating in the region include Total, ExxonMobil, Chevron, ENI, BP, EGAS, Qatar Energy, and Islamco Newmed. Instruments such as the EASTMED and EMGF pipelines serve as strategic tools in the consolidation of these networks, thereby governing production and consumption, and effectively marginalizing alternative actors.

The article explores the concept of neo-imperialism and its relationship to neo-colonialism, particularly within the framework of second and third-wave imperialism theories. It examines the current geopolitical situation in the Eastern Mediterranean through Manuel Castells network society paradigm. The central thesis posits that neo-imperialism endures in this region via complex capital networks, which function as contemporary instruments of colonialism. This analysis suggests that both corporate and state actors operate through these networks, advancing interests that favor global capital.

The prevailing approach in the existing literature predominantly employs a state-centric perspective to analyse the conflicts within the Eastern Mediterranean region. Nonetheless, this paradigm overlooks the critical influence of transnational networks of capital, alongside the mechanisms underlying their proliferation and consolidation. In the context of the Eastern Mediterranean, non-state actors, particularly gatekeepers, assume a pivotal role within these networks.

These gatekeepers regulate access, determining inclusion or exclusion from the network. Specifically, Israel and Egypt function as internal gatekeepers, whereas supranational entities such as the US and the EU act as external gatekeepers. The emerging regional powers within this framework are identified as Egypt and Israel, respectively. Conversely, outside powers, including the US, Italy, and France, engage in regional activities primarily through American corporate entities. Figure 2 illustrates that some actors are positioned at the periphery of the network, while others are connected to it. Notably, Türkiye and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus are positioned outside the network. Key corporate actors within these networks include Total, ExxonMobil, Chevron, ENI, BP, EGAS, Qatar Energy, Islamco, and Newmed. Strategic initiatives, such as EASTMED and the East Mediterranean Gas Forum function, as instrumental tools in the creation and sustenance of these networks, exerting influence over resource production and consumption. Such mechanisms have effectively marginalised other regional and global actors.

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## CHAPTER 7

### NON-STATE ARMED ACTORS IN THE NEW ERA: RESILIENCE, REGIONALISATION, AND ALLIANCES

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#### 7.1. Introduction

The contemporary landscape of Middle Eastern politics reveals a growing transformation in the role of Non-State Armed Actors (NSAAs), which are no longer mere challengers to state authority but increasingly operate partially as influential regional agents. Therefore, although these actors were largely neglected or underestimated in regional studies throughout the 20th century, the early decades of the 21st century have witnessed a significant surge in scholarly interest, resulting in a rapidly expanding body of literature addressing their limited roles and impact, particularly in the domestic arena. Yet, while existing literature, especially after the 2011 Arab Uprisings, has focused on NSAAs in terms of their challenges to sovereignty, legitimacy, and the monopoly over the use of force, their inter-NSAA alliances and evolving agency within regional power configurations remain underexplored. This chapter aims to address this gap by examining the regional engagements and alliance-building capacity of selected NSAAs, highlighting their impact on the dynamics of regional politics. It provides a contextual background on the ideological, social, and historical evolution of these actors and investigates how they consolidate and project power beyond national borders. Two key case studies are employed to illustrate this regional agency. Hezbollah's evolution into a 'state-like' actor in Lebanon—particularly following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011—marks the starting point of this analysis. The group's military involvement in the Syrian conflict and its intensified confrontations with Israel in the aftermath of the October 7 events serve as our first case study. The second case focuses on the growing regional agency of the Houthi movement, particularly in the context of the escalating conflict between Israel and Hamas, another key NSAA in the region. By examining these two cases in depth, the study aims to demonstrate the extent to which these actors exert regional influence and shape the broader dynamics of international politics in the Middle East.

A fundamental distinction exists between non-state armed actors and liberal

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non-state actors that adopt peaceful strategies in both domestic and international settings. Liberal non-state actors, such as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Multinational Corporations (MNCs), and International Organisations (IOs), generally contribute to the promotion of stability, peace, democracy, human rights, and civil society, while now effectively shaping the foreign policy formation process, which questions the state-centric global order (Baumann & Stengel, 2014). These actors are often perceived as normative agents or “good guys” within the international system. In contrast, non-state armed actors pursue their objectives through the strategic use of violence, often disrupting the centrality and authority of alleged only units in international relations, that is, the states. Yet, non-state armed actors are hardly homogenous in their motivations, challenges, and related activities (Josselin & Wallace, 2001). Although they share the use of violence as a common method, their goals and justifications differ significantly. For instance, terrorist organisations employ violence as a primary tool to spread fear, disrupt societal order, and achieve political or ideological aims, often targeting civilians and undermining state authority. In this context, as Berti highlights, terrorism possesses several distinguishing characteristics, including the use of extra-normal violence for political objectives, the deliberate targeting of civilians, and the intention to instill fear and chaos beyond conventional military engagements. In pursuit of influence over a specific territory, these sub-state actors employ violence as a political instrument to seize power, establish control, and seek legitimacy, often through unconventional and, at times, brutal methods of warfare (Berti, 2016, pp. 3-5).

In contrast, private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group use organized violence for profit, resembling modern-day mercenaries or pirates. Insurgent and guerrilla groups, on the other hand, may frame their use of violence as part of a broader resistance movement either to overthrow an existing regime or to liberate their territory from foreign or occupying forces. Therefore, the purpose and context of violence are essential factors in categorizing non-state armed actors within international relations theory (Mulaj, 2010; Kardaş & Yeşiltaş, 2017). As aptly clarified by Clément, Geis, and Pfeifer, the term “armed non-state actors” (ANSAs) serves as an umbrella concept encompassing a wide array of groups with differing motivations and structures. A fundamental distinction is often drawn between those driven by political objectives and those whose actions are primarily motivated by economic gain, although, in practice, this dichotomy is always ambiguous. These armed groups can be roughly defined as distinctive organisations that (i) demonstrate both the willingness and capability to employ violence in pursuit of their aims; (ii) operate outside the framework of formal state institutions; and (iii) maintain a significant degree of autonomy in terms of political decision-making, military operations, resource management, and infrastructural control (Clément et al., 2021, pp. 11).

Beyond their definitional differences, non-state armed actors are not confined to a single geographical region. While the academic literature often focuses on the prevalence of such groups in the Global South, particularly in regions like the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, Europe has also witnessed its share of violent non-state actors. Notable examples include the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland and Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty/ETA) in Spain, which engaged in decades-long violent campaigns. More recently, the ongoing war in Ukraine has demonstrated the emergence of hybrid warfare and paramilitary formations, illustrating that violent non-state actors are not a phenomenon exclusive to unstable or developing regions. However, it is evident that non-state armed actors maintain a particularly strong and entrenched presence in certain regions where state capacity is weak and governance structures are fragmented. In parts of Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia, these actors have often filled the vacuum left by failing or fragile states. In such contexts, violent non-state actors have sometimes established parallel governance systems, controlling territory, collecting taxes, dispensing justice, and even providing social services. These autonomous structures pose serious challenges to fundamental principles of the Westphalian state system, such as territorial integrity, sovereignty, and centralised monopoly over the legitimate use of force (Josselin & Wallace, 2001; Aydinli, 2016).

For example, in Sudan, the ongoing power struggle between the central government and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (commonly known as Hemeti), reflects the persistent institutional fragility and contestation of authority. Similarly, in Ethiopia, the conflict between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has escalated into a civil war, undermining national unity, and demonstrating the limits of state sovereignty in the face of armed resistance. The Middle East provides perhaps the most vivid and historically continuous illustration of armed non-state actors. From anti-colonial resistance movements in the early 20th century, such as the Qassamites in Palestine and Egypt, and the Muslim Brotherhood (founded in 1928), to terrorist Zionist organisations like Irgun, Stern Gang, and Haganah that operated under the British Mandate in Palestine, the region has long been a fertile ground for armed non-state mobilisation. During the Cold War, nationalist and Marxist-Leninist armed groups such as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and various insurgent factions in Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq emerged with significant regional backing (Dalacoura, 2001, pp. 235-248; Yetim & Kaşıkçı, 2024, pp. 514-520; Brenner, 1965; Charters, 2007).

Toward the end of the Cold War and into the post-9/11 period, Islamist actors such as Sunni-based Hamas and Shia-based Hezbollah rose to prominence,

establishing themselves not only as armed actors but also as providers of welfare and quasi-state governance in Gaza and southern Lebanon, respectively. More recently, a wide array of non-state armed actors has emerged or consolidated power amid state collapse and civil war. These include the Houthis in Yemen, the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces) in Iraq, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which later evolved into Syrian National Army (SNA), the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Khalifa Haftar, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, which overthrew the long-ruled Assad regime and became the central 'state' now. The Syrian theatre, in particular, represents the most devastating paradigm of this phenomenon, standing as the most protracted and devastating phase of the Arab uprisings where the proliferation of non-state armed actors reached unprecedented levels. As the conflict metamorphosed from a domestic struggle for reform into a complex "proxy warfare", it created a vacuum that major global and regional powers exploited to settle scores through local surrogates rather than direct confrontation (Erlich, 2016; Kadioğlu, 2020a). This unique environment decimated the country's socio-political fabric and necessitated direct military interventions by neighbouring states, particularly Türkiye, to exercise the right of self-defence against the terror corridors formed by these non-state entities along border regions (Kadioğlu, 2019; 2020b). Ultimately, the resilience of these armed actors is inextricably linked to the paralysis of international diplomacy; the conflicting interests of external patrons have rendered peace efforts futile, cementing a legacy of inevitable failure where the initial democratic aspirations were buried under the fragmentation caused by these competing non-state forces (Kadioğlu, 2020c; 2025). In some cases, groups once labeled as "terrorist" have even managed to transition into the existing state authorities, as in the case of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021. Such developments challenge the traditional state-centric paradigm and long-established Westphalian notions of international relations, raising complex questions regarding legitimacy, governance, and the future of sovereignty. The persistence and growing capacity of violent non-state actors and their rebel governance, diplomacy, and recognition efforts signal a transformation in the nature of power, authority, and conflict in the 21st century. They also highlight the need for more nuanced theoretical and policy frameworks that can accommodate the diversity and evolving roles of non-state actors in global politics (Coggins, 2015; Duran & Yeşiltaş, 2019; Berti, 2016; Clément et al., 2021)

## **7.2. Increasing Agency of Non-State Forces Beyond the Inside**

When defining states which are recognized as the basic and sole actors according to the Westphalian, state-centric, or traditional approach to international relations, three essential features are commonly identified: legitimacy/influence, control/authority, and representation. In this context, producing legitimacy through

various instruments such as national symbols, education, law, and institutions becomes essential for expanding a state's authority over its population. Following the establishment of legitimacy, the state asserts itself as the sole representative of its people, entitled to exercise the legitimate use of force along with other non-violent mechanisms. The claim to represent the population is a foundational requirement for sustaining both domestic governance and international engagement. Hence, representation is inherently linked to control, as any state must possess both legal recognition and empirical authority to maintain its existence within the international system. When one of these three elements, legitimacy, control, or representation, is incomplete, such states are typically characterized as weak, failed, or collapsed, as they no longer meet the basic criteria necessary to function as effective state entities. In such contexts, power vacuums emerge, state hierarchies deteriorate, and ungoverned territories often fall under the influence of non-state actors, which begin constructing their own systems of legitimacy, representation, and control. Thus, it is evident that the majority of violent non-state actors arise within political orders where state formation is contested, or modern governance structures remain fragile. Therefore, it becomes evident that non-state groups fill the power vacuum by positioning themselves as alternative sources of representation, authority, and legitimacy, thereby establishing their own territories. In that sense, non-state actors have established partially autonomous and semi-structured socio-political and military-economic agencies within contested areas, both through their domestic struggles against incumbent regimes and through their external engagements. In other words, although their agency has long been overlooked in both domestic and international politics, their sustained presence, and long-standing trajectories in regions such as the Middle East increasingly demonstrate their undeniable status as actors (Josselin & Wallace, 2001; Mulaj, 2010).

Some scholars refer to this situation as 'hybrid sovereignty,' implying the presence of alternative governance structures. These actors not only pose a challenge to the fundamental principle of the state, namely, the monopoly over the legitimate use of force, but also weaken the state's internal or empirical sovereignty by establishing alternative systems of authority, legitimacy, and representation through the use of illegal violence. Particularly in fragile or weak states, such sub-state actors can contribute to the erosion of state capacity or even supplant state functions entirely. This phenomenon reflects the increasingly blurred boundaries between internal and external authority, clarified by the fact of partial sovereignty (Berti, 2016, pp. 3-5; Vinci, 2008). While internal dynamics such as structural inequalities, exclusionary politics, and governance failures contribute significantly to the emergence and empowerment of non-state contenders to the alleged only actors, that is, states, regional and international conditions can also play a decisive role in reinforcing their existence. The growing involvement of global actors and the deepening polarisation among regional powers may facilitate the resilience

and endurance of these groups. The “sponsorship-proxy” framework largely centers on such relationships, examining how external state actors support or manipulate non-state armed groups. However, by predominantly depicting these actors as tools of external powers, such literature often fails to acknowledge their autonomous agency and strategic decision-making capacity in the international arena (Tellidou, 2024).

Formed and shaped through these complex and interrelated dynamics, non-state armed actors primarily aim to secure resilient positions within the domestic context as well. Although their ideological orientations differ across regions, ranging from religious to nationalist or leftist narratives, their early mobilisation typically draws upon long-standing grievances experienced by marginalised, excluded, or oppressed local populations. These grievances, rooted in socio-political, economic, and cultural deprivations, serve as fertile ground for recruitment and local legitimacy. In these conditions, such actors gradually construct their identities, which remain flexible and contingent, shifting in response to evolving internal and external contexts. In this way, these groups do not possess a fixed or coherent ideological foundation; rather, ideology becomes an instrumental tool for mobilisation, adapted to their strategic needs (Halliday, 2001). It is possible to observe that in similar sociopolitical settings, non-state actors may exhibit different ideological alignments at different times, ranging from leftist or nationalist ideologies to religious orientations, depending on prevailing dynamics and support networks.

Once these actors establish control over a territory and gain sufficient military, political, and economic resources, they begin to challenge central authorities, competing with the state over governance. At this stage, they often operate as proto-state or quasi-state actors, investing in the reproduction of alternative systems of allegiance, citizenship, and order. They may create alternative structures marked by distinct flags, symbols, institutions, and mechanisms, alongside functional equivalents of military, economic, and political systems that contest the legitimacy and authority of the state. From media outlets and educational institutions to health services and daily administrative operations, these violent non-state actors gradually accumulate the capacity to construct their own governing order, which poses a direct challenge to the modern state paradigm. Upon consolidating their domestic foundations, they increasingly seek to engage externally, cultivating rebel-based diplomatic relations with several regional and global actors that share similar perceptual threats or ideological premises. These engagements signify that their activities extend beyond domestic arenas and into the international realm, with the intent to shape regional and global political developments, challenging “sponsorship-proxy” understanding (Darwich, 2021, pp. 33-5; Aydinli, 2015; Yetim, 2023).

Understanding complex interactions between non-state actors and allied countries may require a more nuanced concept of hierarchical alliance, which recognizes both dependency and autonomous agency within non-state-state alignments. Their strategic coordination with external actors should not be misinterpreted as total subordination; shared ideological visions, common threat perceptions, and aligned geopolitical objectives often encourage them to act in parallel with their state allies (Darwich, 2021). For example, Hezbollah, a principal member of Iran’s “Axis of Resistance (Mihwar al-Muqawamah)”, is not a mere secondary actor in this relation. Rather, it possesses significant domestic autonomy and partial regional influence, shaping Lebanese politics, engaging aggressively in the Syrian conflict, and playing an active role in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023, Israel’s brutal invasion of Gaza. Similar relationships exist in other contexts, such as the Türkiye–SNA, USA–Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and United Arab Emirates (UAE)–Southern Transitional Council (STC) alliances (Ghasemi, 2025; Saad, 2019; Yeşiltaş & Kardaş, 2022).

Importantly, non-state armed actors also form alliances among themselves, an underexplored but increasingly relevant phenomenon. These alliances, often overlooked by traditional alliance literature, are shaped by shared material interests, mutual threat perceptions, and, briefly, ontological motivations. Beyond intensive engagements with allied states, these horizontal alliances further reveal the evolving nature of conflict and diplomacy in contemporary geopolitics and their intentional efforts to consolidate their deterrence power in the face of possible threats (Valensi, 2021; Moghadam & Wyss, 2020). A striking example is the cooperation between Hamas and Hezbollah, who responded jointly to Israeli aggression post–October 7, reinforcing each other with both rhetorical solidarity and material support, particularly in Gaza and Southern Lebanon. Another compelling case is the Libyan civil war, where Khalifa Haftar’s forces collaborated with the Russian-backed Wagner Group, supported by Egypt and the UAE, against the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). Alongside these, Sudan-originated Janjaweed militias, backed by regional powers, emerged as yet another non-state military group. In the course of the fight against the DAESH group after 2014, alliance-based relations emerged between Iraq-based Shia groups. These inter-group alignments reflect the growing reality that violent non-state actors are not only forging relationships with states but also with each other, creating powerful blocs and deterrent capability with allied states. Especially in the Middle East and Africa, these realities present a direct challenge to traditional alliance theories, which often exclude non-state actors from their frameworks as reflected in the different types of non-state alliance strategies in the contexts of Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, as well as their regional alignments. Non-state armed actors, far from being isolated domestic insurgents, intensified their regionalisation through their effective alignment with both states and other

non-state forces, thus proving their capability on internal and external actorness. Therefore, their increasing relevance merits rethinking of alliance theory, emphasizing the multiplicity of actor composition, motivations, and forms of cooperation in international relations (Corradi, 2023; Schumacher & Schraeder, 2019; Lemke, 2009).

### **7.3. Hezbollah-Houthi Alliance: From Geopolitics to Ideology**

Hezbollah represents one of the most well-known non-state armed actors in the Middle East, originating in Lebanon and subsequently extending its influence to surrounding countries such as Syria and Iraq through its affiliations, including Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq and Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein in Syria. Similarly, the Houthi movement in Yemen evolved from a local Hashemite Zaydi (Shia) insurgency into a significant regional actor, especially after the Arab Uprisings and the ensuing Yemeni Civil War, which escalated following the 2014 confrontation between the Yemeni central government and various non-state actors. One of the primary similarities between Hezbollah and the Houthis lies in their emergence and growth within failed or fragmented states, Lebanon and Yemen, respectively. Both movements capitalised on the collapse of central authority to establish their legitimacy and territorial control. Moreover, the conflictual environment with neighbouring states further catalysed their empowerment. In Lebanon, the protracted conflict with Israel, and in Yemen, the strained relations with Saudi Arabia, significantly shaped the trajectories of these actors. Following their internal consolidation of power, Hezbollah and the Houthis sought to influence broader regional dynamics. The Houthis became part of this process much later than Hezbollah, whose agency activities had already begun in the early 1980s. Hezbollah's direct military involvement in the Syrian civil war, particularly after 2013, and the Houthis' discursive and military responses to Israel's invasion in the Gaza conflicts after 2023 and wider region illustrate their transition from domestic non-state groups to sub-regional actors via certain non-state and state-based alliance systems. Another significant commonality between them is their shared Shia identity, despite theological differences: Hezbollah adheres to Twelver Imam Shiism, whereas the Houthis are rooted in the Zaydi Shia tradition or Fiver Shiism, which historically maintains closer jurisprudential and doctrinal affinities with Sunni Islam rather than Shia Islam. Therefore, as a small minority in Shia traditions, Zaydis believe that Zayd, great-grandson of Ali, was the rightful fifth Imam, challenging the alleged rightful lineage of Twelver Shia tradition and their doctrinal arguments on Shia Imams (Ghasemi, 2025; Al-Aloosy, 2022; Carboni, 2025).

A further parallel between the two groups is their historical marginalisation and socio-political exclusion within their respective states. This exclusion catalysed their transformation into resistance movements representing the interests of disenfranchised Shia populations. Yet, there is another distinction between the

marginalisation experiences of the Houthis and the Lebanese Shia. In Yemen, Zaydi groups historically played a central role in the country's politics, particularly in North Yemen. This centrality was largely lost following the First Yemeni Civil War (1962–1970) and the subsequent deterioration of their relations with Saudi Arabia, which had previously been a key ally. Despite this strategic setback in domestic politics, other Zaydi actors continued to maintain a critical role in Yemeni political life, and afterwards, the Houthi group gradually gained a more central position in northern Yemen. In contrast, the political and social marginalisation of Lebanese Shia developed over a considerably longer historical process, and they started to gain effective political, military, and economic power, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Alongside their religious-ideological orientations, both actors exhibit an effective alignment with the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance,” defined by anti-Israeli, anti-American, and anti-Western stances. This alignment is manifest not only ideologically but also through strategic cooperation, including logistical and military support from Tehran. Additionally, both Hezbollah and the Houthi movement express solidarity with Hamas and the broader Palestinian resistance, providing material and rhetorical support to the Palestinian resistance. Notably, both movements adopt the title “Party of God”—Hezbollah in Arabic (حزب الله) and the Houthis' official name, Ansar Allah (أنصار الله), reflecting a divinely inspired political-religious identity. Despite these convergences, notable distinctions persist, though. Hezbollah's formation was directly shaped by Iran's post-1979 Islamic Revolution, as radicalised Shia factions in southern Lebanon disillusioned with the moderate trajectory of the once Islamist Amal Movement, sought inspiration from Ayatollah Khomeini's model of Islamic governance. Hezbollah, from its inception, was ideologically embedded in the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which grants Iran's Supreme Leader overarching authority. This ideological framework significantly shaped Hezbollah's domestic policies, military strategies, and regional interventions, particularly its pivotal role in defending the Ba'athist regime in Syria and confronting Israeli and American influence in the Levant (Sobelman, 2023; El Husseini, 2010; Rouhi, 2025).

In contrast, the emergence of the Houthi movement was shaped by a markedly different socio-political and historical context. Originating in the Saada region of northern Yemen, the movement initially began as a localised familial or tribal initiative driven by resistance to the perceived cultural and religious encroachment of Saudi-sponsored Wahhabism and Salafi ideology, particularly that promoted by al-Qaeda-affiliated actors. Identifying themselves as Hashemite Zaydis, alleged descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through Ali and Fatima, the movement's leadership asserted a noble lineage, which historically conferred both religious and political legitimacy within the Zaydi tradition (Kuznetsov, 2024). Under the Imamate system, which governed northern Yemen for centuries until its collapse

in the 1962 civil war, only Hashemites (sada, sayyid) were eligible to assume leadership and administrative authority. Consequently, the Hashemite Zaydi elite, once dominant in Yemen's political and religious spheres, experienced systematic marginalisation following the republican revolution (1962–1970), which was backed by Egyptian and Saudi influence and sought to dismantle the traditional Imamate-based hierarchy. This political sidelining, compounded by the growing influence of Saudi-backed Salafism and the weakening of Zaydi institutions, galvanized Zaydi revivalist sentiments within Yemen's northern highlands, where approximately 35% of the population adheres to Zaydi Shia Islam. In this context, the al-Houthi family, members of the upper stratum of the Zaydi community, initiated a mobilisation aimed at reviving Zaydi identity with their Hashemite lineage and resisting perceived Saudi hegemony (Carboni, 2025).

During the 1990s, Hussein al-Houthi, founder of the movement, established the 'Union of Believing Youth' in collaboration with other Zaydi clerics and elites, with the goal of promoting religious education, political representation, and cultural preservation. He subsequently joined the al-Haqq Party, a political vehicle formed to advocate for the interests of the Zaydi population in an increasingly hostile republican system. Between 2004 and 2010, six successive rounds of armed conflict broke out between the Houthi-led Believing Youth movement and the central Yemeni government, which received substantial support from Saudi Arabia. These clashes served as a crucible for the Houthis, enabling them to transform from a local insurgency into a resilient and organized non-state armed actor (Kuznetsov, 2024; Wilson Center, 2022; BBC, 2025). This transformation culminated in the formal establishment of Ansarullah, the official name of the Houthi movement, marking both the institutionalisation of its political-military structure and a reaffirmation of Hashemite origin as a core source of legitimacy. By capturing the capital Sana'a in 2014 and consolidating control over key strategic areas, including Hodeida, Aden, and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, the Houthis shifted from a peripheral tribal movement to a dominant non-state actor with de facto governance in Northern Yemen. During this period, Iran increased its material and ideological support to the Houthis, not based on deep-seated theological affinity as in the case of Hezbollah but rather due to converging geopolitical interests and shared opposition to Saudi Arabia, the United States (US), and Israel. This pragmatic alliance has since evolved into a robust strategic partnership, reinforcing the Houthis' more autonomous integration into the now-weakened Iranian-led regional axis. Indicating its earlier pragmatism and 'marriage of convenience' nature of the Houthi-Iran growing alliance, which complicates the sponsorship-proxy model as well, there were only limited contacts between Iran and Yemen prior to 2004. Despite earlier limited interaction between Houthi and Iranian leaders, the first important inflection point in the evolution of Iran's support for the Houthis came in 2009. At that time, the Houthis were engaged

in the sixth round of an increasingly violent conflict with the central government, and Iran's material and ideological support for the Houthi group intensified, which then turned into a stronger alliance following the Yemeni civil war (Juneau, 2024).

In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, both Hezbollah and the Houthis leveraged the regional turmoil to deepen their local entrenchment while simultaneously expanding their regional roles, aligning with Iran (Ghasemi, 2025). Iran, positioned as their principal patron, provided both ideological mentorship and advanced weaponry, thereby enabling these non-state actors to function as critical forces capable of influencing conflicts beyond their borders. Hezbollah, a long-standing ally of Hamas and other Palestinian factions, continued its military confrontations with Israel, albeit with diminishing capacity due to sustained Israeli counterstrikes, and internal Lebanese crises (Al-Jazeera, 2025; The New Arab, 2025). Conversely, the Houthis have demonstrated greater operational resilience, largely attributed to Yemen's geographical isolation from direct Israeli retaliation, relative indifference of major actors to Yemen, and their enhanced missile capabilities. Following the outbreak of the 2023 Gaza War, the Houthis periodically launched medium and long-range ballistic missiles allegedly supplied by Iran targeting Israeli and Western-aligned positions, further entrenching their role as a regional threat (Al-Deen, 2024; Knights, 2024). Unlike Hezbollah, whose operational capacities have been curbed by prolonged confrontation and internal weakening, the Houthi movement appears increasingly capable of challenging not only Israel but also Gulf monarchies and international maritime trade routes through strategic points such as the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait.

To put it differently, although Hezbollah and the Houthi movement emerged under distinct historical trajectories and ideological foundations, the shifting regional dynamics have drawn them into increasing strategic convergence. The growing alignment between the two has led some observers to refer to the Houthi movement as the "Southern Hezbollah," a label underscored by intensifying cooperation, including reciprocal visits, the training of Houthi fighters in Lebanon, the transfer of military equipment via Hezbollah, and the establishment of the pro-Houthi media outlet Al-Masirah in Lebanon with substantial support from Hezbollah. Al-Masirah maintains a close affiliation with Hezbollah's primary media platform, Al-Manar. Beyond Hezbollah, the Houthi movement has also deepened its engagement with other Iran-backed non-state actors, reflecting the consolidation of a broader network of Iranian surrogates. While originally shaped by localised grievances and context-specific geopolitical drivers, the Hezbollah-Houthi rapprochement has increasingly evolved around shared ideological tenets, including Islamist revivalism, resistance to Western influence, and incorporation into the Iranian strategic orbit (Sobelman 2023; Knights et al., 2021, 2022). This growing alignment signifies not only a material coalition against mutual adversaries

but also an emerging ideological coherence, positioning both movements as pivotal actors in the reconfiguration of the post-Arab Uprisings Middle East. In this regard, their partnership, facilitated and orchestrated by Iran, constitutes a significant transformation in the operational landscape of regional armed non-state actors and underscores their enhanced capacity to project influence well beyond national confines.

#### **7.4. Conclusion**

Non-state armed actors have recently transcended their traditional internal roles by formulating foreign policy orientations, establishing external alliance patterns, and engaging in recognition-seeking activities. In this context, not only the interactions between states but also those between states and non-state actors, and more notably, among non-state armed groups themselves, have become increasingly observable within contemporary international affairs. This evolving dynamic compels scholars of regional and international relations to pay closer analytical attention to such entities. Consequently, this undeniable transformation has reshaped the analytical, conceptual, and empirical foundations of foreign policy literature, while also challenging conventional assumptions about the principal actors of global politics. Put differently, present-day realities in global affairs, particularly pronounced in regions such as the Middle East and Africa, have fundamentally questioned the traditional paradigms of international relations and liberal hegemonic frameworks. Liberal circles, which have often portrayed NSAAs as the “bad actors” of global politics, now face a significant shift as these groups increasingly gain recognition and assert agency not only within domestic realms but also in the construction and execution of external relations. As they cross national boundaries, NSAAs are not only establishing strategic ties with sovereign states but also forming cooperative alliances with other non-state armed groups, thereby affirming their growing international agency.

Whereas earlier literature predominantly examined the domestic challenge posed by NSAAs to modern centralised states, focusing on their efforts to create alternative symbols of authority, legitimacy mechanisms, and governance practices in territories under their influence, contemporary academic discourse has increasingly shifted toward the external dimensions of their activity. This includes the study of their foreign policies, alliance-making behaviours, and diplomatic engagements, often referred to as “rebel diplomacy.” The Middle East, in particular, offers a rich empirical context to observe these transformations. Several influential NSAAs, such as the Khalifa Haftar-led Libyan National Army (LNA) in Libya, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, and the Houthi movement in Yemen, have not only contested the

modern state monopoly over legitimate violence and representation but have also demonstrated sophisticated diplomatic engagements with both regional and global powers.

For instance, the Taliban established significant diplomatic relations through Qatari mediation and engaged in formal negotiations with Western actors, including the US, well before regaining control of Afghanistan in 2021. Similarly, Khalifa Haftar's forces garnered political recognition and support from Egypt, the UAE, and Greece, despite lacking full international legitimacy. Hamas also maintains an effective 'outside leadership' that actively manages its foreign relations with countries such as Iran, Russia, and China, highlighting the international face of its struggle. In parallel to their diplomatic efforts, these groups have formed alliances with both state and non-state actors to further their strategic objectives. Hamas' alliance with Iran, the SNA's close coordination with Türkiye, and the Southern Transitional Council's (STC) cooperation with the UAE exemplify how such entities leverage external support for internal survival and broader influence. Hezbollah and the Houthi movement, despite their differing origins and ideological trajectories, have also developed mutual strategic alignments. While Hezbollah has long been regarded as an ideological and operational proxy of Iran with a relatively autonomous agency, the Houthi movement's connections with Iran were comparatively limited before the 21st century. These ties, however, intensified following the Arab Uprisings and the ensuing Yemeni Civil War.

Thus, rather than being shaped solely by shared ideology or organisational structure, the alliance between Iran and the Houthis was initially driven by geopolitical imperatives. Over time, this partnership evolved into a broader coalition involving other Iranian-aligned groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. The growing convergence between Hezbollah and the Houthis has become especially evident in their unified support for Hamas during the 2023 Gaza conflict, signalling deeper ideological and strategic alignment. These developments underscore the increasing regional agency of non-state forces beyond domestic boundaries. Their alliances with major state powers, which offer material and ideological resources, as well as with sub-state actors, reflect a calculated strategy to ensure survival, deterrence, and enhance influence and recognition in both domestic and international arenas. The trajectory of these armed groups demonstrates that non-state armed actors are no longer confined to the margins of internal politics; rather, they are now significant players shaping regional orders and international diplomatic landscapes.

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**CHAPTER 8**

**STATE AND CAPITALISM  
IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA:  
A CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY APPROACH**

Görkem Altınörs<sup>1</sup>

**8.1. Introduction: Recasting the Political Economy of MENA in the Global Capitalist Order**

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has long been interpreted through frameworks of exceptionality, whether as an oil-dependent periphery governed by entrenched authoritarian regimes, or as a cultural and civilisational anomaly resistant to democratic reform and economic liberalisation. Dominant analytical paradigms, including rentier state theory (Beblawi, 1987), models of authoritarian resilience (Halliday, 2005), and more recent typologies of “state capitalism” (Al-Sulayman, 2021; Sayigh, 2020), have contributed to a reified portrayal of MENA states as anomalous, self-contained, and structurally detached from the assumed trajectory of liberal capitalist development (Baumann & Roccu, 2023).

This chapter contests such accounts by re-embedding MENA within the historical and structural dynamics of global capitalism. Rather than conceiving of the region’s states as deviations from a liberal norm (Hinnebusch, 2006), it conceptualises them as historically specific articulations of capitalist state formation, shaped by imperial entanglements, transnational circuits of accumulation, and domestic class configurations. The Arab uprisings, the counter-revolutions that followed, and the subsequent reconsolidation of authoritarian rule demonstrate that the political economy of the region cannot be adequately understood through analytical approaches that abstract domestic state structures from the wider global context in which they are constituted.

Drawing upon a Gramscian historical materialist perspective (Bieler & Morton, 2018), the chapter theorises the state not as a neutral institutional container or a technocratic apparatus, but as a social relation: a historically situated condensation of class forces embedded in global processes of capital accumulation, crisis management, and ideological struggle. This approach departs

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from paradigms that reinforce the exceptionalism of the MENA region, instead positing it as a critical and contested site in the reproduction of global capitalism, characterised by uneven development, the interplay of coercion and consent, and shifting hegemonic configurations.

The chapter is animated by two central questions: how is the capitalist state constituted and transformed in the MENA region, and in what ways do transnational capital and domestic class dynamics shape contemporary configurations of state power? In addressing these questions, the chapter proceeds in five sections. The following section develops a theoretical framework informed by the work of Gramsci, Poulantzas, and critical approaches to international political economy. The third section examines the global restructuring processes that have transformed state forms in the region since the late twentieth century. The fourth section offers a comparative analysis of the reconfiguration of state-capital relations in selected cases, highlighting their differentiated but structurally embedded character. The fifth section explores the dynamics of crisis and resistance, focusing on the emergence and disciplining of popular mobilisations and counter-hegemonic struggles. The concluding section reflects on the implications of these dynamics for understanding the reproduction and transformation of capitalism in the global periphery. While Egypt is examined in greater empirical depth due to the relative accessibility of data, the subsequent analyses of Tunisia and the Gulf are expanded to achieve a more balanced and comparative treatment across cases.

## **8.2. Theoretical Framework: State as Social Relation in the Global Capitalist Order**

To analyse the political economy of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in a manner that transcends exceptionalist paradigms, this chapter adopts a theoretical framework rooted in historical materialism and critical political economy. At its centre lies the Gramscian conception of the integral state, a social relation that fuses coercive and consensual elements, rather than functioning as a merely administrative or juridical apparatus (Gramsci, 1971). This perspective offers a powerful analytic lens through which to comprehend the persistence and transformation of authoritarian rule in the region, not as the outcome of cultural predispositions or institutional legacies, but as a historically specific expression of class domination embedded within the global capitalist order.

Gramsci's theorisation of the state eschews reductionism, presenting it not simply as a set of formal institutions or instruments of repression. Instead, the state comprises both political society, the domain of organised coercion including the military, police, and judiciary, and civil society, the sphere of cultural institutions, religious authorities, education systems, and the media, where hegemony is constructed and consent is actively produced (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony, in this

conception, is not imposed unilaterally from above, but continually produced and reproduced through the shaping of “common sense”, the articulation of ideology, and the organisation of consent. As such, the state emerges as both an instrument of domination and a terrain of struggle, mediating contradictory pressures between dominant and subordinate social forces (Bieler & Morton, 2003). This framework is particularly valuable for interrogating the durability of authoritarian regimes in the MENA region. Such regimes cannot be adequately explained through reference to coercion or rentier redistribution alone; rather, they are sustained through multifaceted hegemonic strategies, including developmentalist narratives, religious legitimation, technocratic governance, and geopolitical alliances. The state should not be understood as a static or self-contained entity, but as a dynamic condensation of shifting social relations, shaped by crisis tendencies, popular mobilisation, and the pressures of global restructuring.

This relational and non-instrumentalist understanding of the state is further enriched by the contributions of Nicos Poulantzas, who theorised the capitalist state as a material condensation of the balance of class forces (1973). For Poulantzas (1978), the state constitutes an ensemble of social relations that, while relatively autonomous, is never external to class struggle. This conception enables a more nuanced understanding of how the state manages the contradictory demands of capital accumulation, social reproduction, and political legitimacy (Jessop, 2017). Such an approach is indispensable for the analysis of peripheral states such as those in the MENA region. Here, the form and function of the state are deeply conditioned by its integration into a global capitalist system marked by uneven development, imperial hierarchies, and structural dependence on financial and military alliances. Mengüslan (2022) demonstrates this in the Syrian context, showing how local authoritarian durability intersects with internationalised processes of war economy and neoliberal reconstruction, in line with an uneven and combined development framework. These states are not deficient versions of an ideal liberal model, but complex formations whose institutional architectures, accumulation strategies, and crises of legitimacy are shaped by their embeddedness in global circuits of trade, debt, investment, and militarised security governance.

This perspective also invites a critical re-evaluation of dominant typologies such as the ‘rentier state’ and ‘state capitalism’. While the rentier state framework highlights the political and fiscal significance of oil rents, it often adopts a functionalist and depoliticised logic (Richter, 2020), overlooking the class dynamics, labour regimes, and imperial entanglements that underpin the circulation and deployment of rent (Beinin et al., 2020). Likewise, typologies of state capitalism frequently reify institutional forms (Alami et al., 2022), failing to grasp how state-led accumulation strategies are embedded within broader geopolitical alignments, class coalitions, and technocratic ideologies (Altınörs,

2025). Whether in the Egyptian military’s expansive economic activities, Saudi Arabia’s deployment of sovereign wealth for developmental legitimation, or Algeria’s management of hydrocarbon rents through nationalist rhetoric, it is not the visibility of the state per se that is analytically decisive, but the social relations that constitute and contest its authority.

Against such static typologies, this chapter advances a historically grounded and relational theory of the state, one that foregrounds the articulation of coercion and consent, the contradictory role of the state in managing crises, and the imbrication of national institutions within global circuits of capital. This relational framework informs the comparative sections that follow, where the articulation of coercion and consent, and the mediation of accumulation and legitimacy, are examined across distinct national contexts. The following sections will operationalise this framework to explore how states across the MENA region have been restructured in response to neoliberal globalisation, sovereign debt regimes, and shifting imperial configurations.

**Table 1**

*Comparative Table of Theoretical Approaches to the MENA State*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Rentier State Theory</b>	<b>State Capitalism</b>	<b>Gramscian Historical Materialism</b>
<b>Core Premise</b>	Oil rents create autonomous, authoritarian, redistributive states	The state plays a direct role in capital accumulation through SOEs, investment, etc.	The state is a social relation shaped by class conflict and global capitalism
<b>Analytical Weakness</b>	Functionalist, depoliticised, ignores class and imperial dynamics	Institutionalist, static, often neglects ideology and coercion	Avoids reification; focuses on coercion, consent, crisis, and transnational circuits
<b>View of the State</b>	Rent-distributing machine, detached from productive economy	Economic actor and regulator, often nationally oriented	Condensation of class forces: mediating accumulation and hegemony
<b>Relation to Global Capitalism</b>	Often treated as exceptional or outside of global logics	Sometimes downplays external financial/imperial influences	Fully embedded in global hierarchies, financial regimes, and imperial networks
<b>Examples Reconsidered</b>	Gulf monarchies as passive rentiers	Egypt’s military economy as state capitalism	Egypt, Tunisia, and the Gulf as different expressions of authoritarian neoliberalism and imperial integration

### 8.3. Global Restructuring and the Remaking of the MENA State

The reconfiguration of state forms in the Middle East and North Africa must be situated within the broader trajectory of global capitalist restructuring. From the mid-1970s onwards, the crisis of Fordist accumulation and the collapse of post-war developmentalist models precipitated a transition towards neoliberalism as the dominant mode of governance. This was not merely an economic shift, but a comprehensive transformation in state-society relations, social reproduction, and imperial strategy, developments that reverberated throughout the global South, including the MENA region.

Neoliberalism in the MENA region did not emerge organically as a domestically driven process; rather, it was imposed, negotiated, and institutionalised through a combination of external conditionalities and elite strategies of adaptation and consolidation. Structural adjustment programmes administered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) during the 1980s and 1990s dismantled state-led developmental models. These programmes mandated privatisation, trade liberalisation, cuts to public subsidies, and the reorientation of policy towards attracting foreign direct investment (Roccu, 2013; King, 1999). The neoliberal state that emerged was not a “minimal” or retreating state, but a restructured one, centralised, disciplinary, and selectively interventionist in ways that prioritised capital accumulation and elite reproduction. This period also witnessed the entrenchment of authoritarian rule. Far from engendering democratisation, economic liberalisation exacerbated existing contradictions: rising unemployment, labour informality, declining social protection, and heightened popular discontent. In Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco, neoliberal restructuring became a vehicle for the consolidation of authoritarian governance, enabling ruling elites to recompose class alliances while fragmenting and depoliticising oppositional forces (Tansel, 2019). In the Gulf monarchies, the immense fiscal resources derived from hydrocarbon rents facilitated the orchestration of consent alongside coercion, with public sector employment and subsidised consumption operating as key mechanisms of social control (Hanieh, 2024).

Concurrently, MENA states became increasingly integrated into transnational circuits of finance, logistics, and militarised security governance. International financial institutions, sovereign debt markets, and bilateral donor agencies acquired considerable influence over domestic policymaking, constraining the space for redistributive or developmental alternatives. According to the IMF (2025), debt-to-GDP ratios remain elevated across much of the region: Egypt, 95 %; Tunisia, 85 %; and Saudi Arabia, 25 %. While Gulf monarchies sustain fiscal surpluses through hydrocarbon revenues, North African economies continue to face tightening external constraints and heavy debt-servicing burdens, underscoring

divergent trajectories of state–capital restructuring in the post-pandemic era. Military assistance and security partnerships with Western powers further reinforced a counter-revolutionary regional order in which regime stability was privileged over democratic transition. The restructuring of the MENA state must thus be understood as a product of both domestic class conflict and externally imposed financial and geopolitical imperatives emanating from the global core (Hanieh, 2013). The contradictions of this model became ever more visible in the 2000s. While macroeconomic indicators often suggested stabilisation or growth, frequently celebrated in international reports, social discontent continued to build. Labour movements, informal workers, unemployed graduates, and marginalised rural populations bore the brunt of neoliberal restructuring, confronting deepening precarity and political exclusion (Erol & Şahin, 2022). These tensions erupted most dramatically in the uprisings of 2010–2011, which exposed the limits of authoritarian neoliberalism and momentarily disrupted the prevailing order.

**Table 2**

*IMF (2025) Fiscal Indicators for Selected MENA Economies*

Country	General Government Gross Debt-to-GDP (2024 → 2025 proj.)	Fiscal Balance (% of GDP, 2025)	Source
<b>Egypt</b>	93 → 95 %	–7.8	<i>IMF (2025) World Economic Outlook, Table B19</i>
<b>Tunisia</b>	84 → 85 %	–6.2	<i>IMF (2025) World Economic Outlook, Table B19</i>
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	23 → 25 %	+1.7 (surplus)	<i>IMF (2025) World Economic Outlook, Tables B19 &amp; B8 (MENA)</i>

However, rather than inaugurating a structural rupture, the aftermath of the uprisings marked a phase of counter-revolutionary consolidation. In Egypt, the military’s reassertion of control following the 2013 coup was accompanied by an intensification of neoliberal reforms, including the currency devaluation, the removal of energy subsidies, and mega-project-driven accumulation, all supported by Gulf financing and IMF assistance. In Tunisia, the democratic transition was swiftly subordinated to fiscal austerity and debt servicing imperatives (Maryon, 2024a). In the Gulf, austerity measures and labour market reforms were implemented under the rubric of economic diversification, even as regimes simultaneously deepened their authoritarian control. The restructuring

of the MENA state, therefore, reflects not only class dynamics internal to the nation-state but also the disciplining forces of global finance and the strategic logics of imperial power. This imperial architecture is not confined to economic mechanisms; it is sustained through war, occupation, and a militarised regional security order underwritten by Western powers. Longstanding conflicts and occupations, in Iraq, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen, are not external disruptions but integral to the political economy of the region. They generate new opportunities for militarised accumulation, entrench the primacy of coercive state institutions, and reinforce a counter-revolutionary order intent on suppressing democratic alternatives. Military aid and security cooperation thus play a crucial role in the reproduction of authoritarian neoliberalism, revealing the mutually reinforcing logics of capitalism and imperialism.

In sum, the contemporary MENA state must be understood as a formation produced through global restructuring, mediated by domestic class relations, coercive capacities, and hegemonic projects. It is a state embedded in global capitalism, disciplined by financial markets, enabled by imperial alliances, and contested by subordinate social forces. The following section turns to comparative case studies to examine how these dynamics materialise in specific national contexts, revealing distinct trajectories that nonetheless reflect shared patterns of crisis management, class formation, and capitalist transformation.

#### **8.4. Comparative Configurations: State, Capital, and Crisis in Egypt, Tunisia, and the Gulf**

The trajectories of Egypt, Tunisia, and the Gulf monarchies exemplify distinct configurations of state-capital relations, yet each reflects a structurally embedded response to the contradictions of global capitalism. These cases should not be understood as manifestations of national idiosyncrasy, but as differentiated expressions of how authoritarian governance, accumulation strategies, and crisis management are organised within the context of peripheral integration and geopolitical subordination.

##### **8.4.1. Egypt: Militarised Neoliberalism and Authoritarian Restoration**

Egypt constitutes a paradigmatic instance of authoritarian neoliberalism, wherein military dominance, Gulf capital, and the conditionalities of international financial institutions have coalesced to produce a coercive and crisis-prone form of capitalist restructuring. The 2011 uprising marked a moment of rupture in the post-reform political economy, exposing deep structural contradictions within the neoliberal-authoritarian order that had been consolidated under the Mubarak regime. Egypt's post-2011 trajectory also reflects a broader pattern of peripheral capitalist restructuring, whereby the consolidation of authoritarian rule is accompanied by shifting growth strategies and elite coalitions (Güngen

& Akçay, 2024). However, this rupture was short-lived. The ensuing transition was rapidly overtaken by counter-revolutionary forces, culminating in the 2013 military coup led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. This counter-revolution can be interpreted, following Smet (2020), as a Gramscian 'passive revolution', a top-down reconfiguration of power that preserves the core social relations of neoliberal capitalism while repressing mass mobilisation. The coup reasserted authoritarian control while intensifying the neoliberal trajectory of the Egyptian state.

Under the Sisi regime, the Egyptian state has undergone a transformation not towards retrenchment, but towards reconfiguration. Far from retreating from the economic sphere, the state, particularly its military apparatus, has entrenched itself as a central actor in capital accumulation. This corresponds to Ayubi's (1995) earlier observation that Arab states often rule not through hegemony, but through coercive over-extension, a dynamic intensified under neoliberal restructuring. Through its expanding involvement in infrastructure projects, real estate, agriculture, and manufacturing, the military has effectively fused political authority with economic command. This entanglement is emblematic of a hybridised mode of state capitalism, wherein coercive power, nationalist legitimisation, and accumulation strategies converge in a mutually reinforcing configuration.

This expansive role of the state has been sustained by considerable external support. Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have injected vast sums into the Egyptian economy, viewing the Sisi regime as a bulwark against popular uprisings and political Islam. Simultaneously, Egypt's engagement with the International Monetary Fund has locked the country into a cycle of debt, austerity, and market-oriented reforms. Successive IMF agreements have required subsidy reductions, fiscal consolidation, currency devaluation, and labour market flexibilisation. These measures have exacerbated social inequalities, intensified precarity, and undermined the social fabric, while failing to deliver inclusive growth or sustainable development. Roccu (2013) has shown how such reforms in the Mubarak era already generated forms of exclusion, depoliticisation, and elite capture that set the stage for the post-2011 consolidation of authoritarian neoliberalism.

The Sisi regime has sought to legitimise these reforms through a discourse of national renewal and modernisation, embodied in large-scale infrastructural ventures such as the expansion of the Suez Canal and the construction of the new administrative capital. These projects function less as engines of redistribution than as vehicles of speculative accumulation and elite enrichment, often bypassing democratic oversight or public accountability. Simultaneously, consent is manufactured through securitised nationalism, the conflation of dissent with treason, and the suppression of civil society. The regime systematically criminalises

protest, curtails independent media, and deploys expansive surveillance infrastructures to pre-empt opposition. Coercion is institutionalised through arbitrary detention, torture, and the militarisation of public space, consolidating a repressive apparatus that undergirds the political economy of authoritarian neoliberalism. These dynamics are evident in Egypt's integration into global production chains under neoliberal governance. As Tastekin (2023) argues, agreements like the Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ) reflect how peripheral states are inserted into transnational accumulation processes through highly uneven and externally conditioned frameworks.

In sum, Egypt exemplifies a model in which authoritarian consolidation and neoliberal restructuring are not contradictory but complementary. The state's transformation under Sisi illustrates how coercive governance, financial dependency, and externally supported elite alliances can facilitate a reorganisation of accumulation in peripheral contexts, one that reproduces capitalist social relations while foreclosing democratic alternatives.

#### **8.4.2. Tunisia: Dependent Democratisation and the Limits of Reform**

Tunisia, frequently celebrated as the sole "success story" of the Arab uprisings, presents a case in which democratic transition has been subordinated to the imperatives of global finance and the structural constraints of peripheral capitalism. The overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in 2011 created an unprecedented opening for political pluralism and constitutional reform. However, this political transformation was not matched by a comparable shift in economic orientation. As Erol (2020) argues, the post-2011 transition in Tunisia represented less a break with Ben Ali-era neoliberalism than its repackaging through democratic legitimisation, preserving the structural logics of marketisation and external dependency. Rather, Tunisia's post-uprising trajectory has been marked by the entrenchment of neoliberal orthodoxy under the auspices of international financial institutions and donor-led development agendas. In the early post-revolutionary period, these agendas were often framed through reference to the so-called 'Turkish model', which was promoted by external actors and segments of the Tunisian elite as a template for reconciling Islam, neoliberalism, and electoral democracy (Göksel, 2014).

Successive Tunisian governments, irrespective of partisan composition, have implemented policy frameworks shaped by repeated engagements with the International Monetary Fund. These programmes have prescribed a familiar set of austerity measures, including reductions in energy and food subsidies, restraint in public sector wage growth, fiscal consolidation, and tax reforms aimed at enhancing investor confidence. Rather than addressing long-standing structural inequalities or promoting redistributive justice, these reforms have deepened social precarity

and reinforced Tunisia's insertion into global circuits of debt and dependency. Tunisian capitalism remains highly concentrated in the hands of a narrow elite, many of whom are closely linked to transnational capital, international donor institutions, and export-oriented sectors. This elite configuration continues to marginalise vast segments of the population, particularly in the country's interior and southern regions, where poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural neglect persist. Despite the post-2011 political opening, economic decision-making has remained largely technocratic, insulated from popular demands and shaped by a neoliberal common sense that constrains the horizon of alternatives.

Civil society organisations, trade unions, and particularly the powerful General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), have periodically mobilised against austerity measures, advocating for economic justice, labour rights, and inclusive development. However, these interventions have encountered significant structural and political limitations. As Sigillò (2023) argues, these limitations are not only structural but also ideological, as the transformation of political Islam, particularly in the case of Ennahda, has contributed to the depoliticisation of post-uprising contestation, reducing it to technocratic negotiation rather than systemic challenge. The fragmentation of the left, the dominance of technocratic governance, and the ideological hegemony of neoliberal developmentalism have together restricted the scope of systemic transformation.

The election of Kais Saied in 2019, initially framed as a populist break with political corruption and elite capture, has further complicated Tunisia's post-uprising trajectory. Saied's suspension of parliament and assumption of extraordinary powers in 2021, followed by the consolidation of presidential authority, marks a turn towards authoritarian consolidation. Yet this shift does not signify a rupture with neoliberalism. On the contrary, it represents the rearticulation of authoritarian rule as a mechanism for managing the contradictions and crises generated by neoliberal restructuring. As Musina (2023) demonstrates, even gender-related international agendas, such as the EU's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) framework, have been selectively mobilised within Tunisia's securitised governance model, reinforcing authoritarian state logics rather than subverting them. Saied's appeals to national sovereignty and constitutional order coexist with continued debt dependency, pro-market reforms, and engagement with the IMF. This consolidation has been supported not only through financial conditionalities but also via international security assistance frameworks that have prioritised stability over democratic accountability (Maryon, 2024b).

In this context, Tunisia exemplifies a form of post-uprising neoliberal authoritarianism, in which democratic aspirations have been hollowed out by financial discipline, elite continuity, and technocratic governance. The political form may have changed, but the underlying logic of accumulation and exclusion

remains intact. Tunisia's experience thus highlights the limits of democratisation in the absence of structural economic transformation and the enduring power of global capitalist constraints in shaping trajectories of political change.

#### **8.4.3. The Gulf: Financialised Rentierism and Post-Oil Logics of Rule**

The Gulf monarchies, most notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, represent a distinct model of authoritarian governance rooted in financialised rentierism. Historically, these states have relied on hydrocarbon revenues to sustain expansive systems of elite patronage, subsidisation, and the management of a highly stratified labour regime reliant on expatriate workers. These rentier arrangements underpinned relatively stable social contracts premised on wealth distribution and political quiescence, with monarchical legitimacy secured through a combination of economic provision and coercive control. However, the volatility in global oil prices since 2014, alongside longer-term anxieties regarding the sustainability of fossil fuel rents, has prompted a significant recalibration of accumulation strategies.

This recalibration, far from signalling a rupture with rentierism, entails its transformation into a more financialised and globally oriented form. Initiatives such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's diversification agendas are emblematic of this shift. Central to these strategies are Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs), which have emerged as the primary instruments for transforming oil-derived surpluses into assets deployed in global financial markets. These funds, such as Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) and Abu Dhabi's Mubadala and ADIA, have become key players in international finance, investing in real estate, private equity, technology, and logistics infrastructure across North America, Europe, and Asia. As Baumann (2019) argues, these mechanisms exemplify how the Gulf's rentierism has been financialised and reoriented towards the logics of global capital, creating new dependencies and vulnerabilities in the process.

Through this outward financial projection, Gulf states are embedding their political economies within the circuits and contradictions of global financial capitalism. The function of oil rents has been rearticulated, from a domestic redistributive mechanism to a globally mobile source of accumulation. This shift is accompanied by domestic restructuring efforts, including the reduction of public subsidies, fiscal consolidation, and labour market reforms aimed at "nationalising" employment, as seen in Saudisation policies. Public sector retrenchment, the promotion of private enterprise, and the increased precarity of migrant labour mark a departure from earlier welfare-oriented models of political management.

These reforms are often framed in the language of technocratic modernisation and global competitiveness, seeking to align Gulf economies with international investment norms while simultaneously enhancing regime legitimacy. As Altınörs

and Chrysogelos (2024) argue, contemporary authoritarian regimes increasingly reframe their legitimacy through ideologies of national-conservatism, technocratic rationality, and state-led modernisation, strategies evident in the symbolic reformism and performative nationalism of the Gulf monarchies. Measures such as the loosening of gender restrictions, the promotion of cultural and entertainment industries, and high-profile international events serve both as instruments of soft power and as mechanisms for rebranding authoritarian rule. For example, as Badran and Turnbull (2025) argue, feminist reforms have often been instrumentalised by authoritarian regimes not to advance gender equality but to legitimise their rule and contain broader demands for democratic transformation. However, these symbolic reforms coexist with intensified surveillance, the repression of dissent, and the criminalisation of political opposition.

Moreover, Gulf monarchies have not limited their authoritarian consolidation to domestic terrains. They have played a central role in shaping the post-2011 counter-revolutionary order across the region, deploying both financial and military power to support allied regimes and suppress democratic uprisings. Their interventions in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, and elsewhere underscore the geopolitical dimension of Gulf authoritarianism, which actively seeks to manage regional instability in ways that preserve monarchical dominance and capitalist continuity. In this context, Gulf states are not retreating from global capitalism but repositioning themselves as key logistical and financial nodes within it. Their political economies reflect a dual strategy: the outward projection of state capital through sovereign investment and soft power, and the inward consolidation of monarchical authority through repression and technocratic reform. This model exemplifies a financialised authoritarianism that is both globally integrated and regionally interventionist.

Taken together, the trajectories of Egypt, Tunisia, and the Gulf illustrate the differentiated yet structurally comparable ways in which MENA states have managed the contradictions of peripheral capitalist development. Each case, military capitalism in Egypt, technocratic dependency in Tunisia, and financialised authoritarianism in the Gulf, represents a distinct strategy for securing order amid crisis. In what follows, attention turns to the terrain of resistance, examining how these arrangements are contested, destabilised, and potentially reconfigured from below.

### **8.5. Crisis, Resistance, and the Limits of Authoritarian Neoliberalism**

Although authoritarian consolidation and neoliberal restructuring have shaped the post-2011 trajectories of most Middle East and North Africa (MENA) states, these configurations remain fundamentally unstable. The forms of hegemony constructed in Egypt, Tunisia, and the Gulf are not seamless or all-encompassing; rather, they are fragile, contested, and persistently exposed to crises of legitimacy,

reproduction, and control (Achcar, 2021). Beneath the apparent institutional durability lies a persistent dialectic of domination and resistance that continues to unsettle the regional order (Bayat, 2017).

A central contradiction of authoritarian neoliberalism in the region lies in the intensification of exclusion and dispossession under regimes that simultaneously project images of developmental success and modernisation. In Egypt, the military's domination of infrastructure, agribusiness, and urban megaprojects has produced patterns of speculative accumulation, mass displacement, and the systematic erosion of informal economies that sustain millions of livelihoods. In Tunisia, IMF-mandated austerity measures have hollowed out public services and entrenched longstanding spatial inequalities between coastal and interior regions. In the Gulf, the hyper-exploitation and periodic expulsion of migrant labour, combined with regressive fiscal reforms, have exacerbated social tensions and exposed the limits of rentier social contracts.

Resistance to these transformations has taken diverse and often fragmented forms: labour strikes, bread riots, neighbourhood protests, student mobilisations, online dissent, and symbolic occupations of public spaces. Yet the capacity of such movements to coalesce into coherent challenges to ruling blocs has been uneven. In Egypt, widespread repression, surveillance, and the atomisation of opposition following the 2013 coup have severely curtailed organised resistance. Tunisia's trade unions and civil society organisations have retained a measure of political agency, but their interventions are increasingly constrained by technocratic governance and juridical containment. In the Gulf monarchies, overt expressions of dissent are met with swift suppression; nonetheless, sporadic labour unrest and digital campaigns continue to reveal underlying fractures within the architecture of consent. In the Turkish context, Altınörs (2021) highlights how anti-capitalist Muslim movements articulated a religiously grounded critique of neoliberal capitalism, challenging both material inequality and hegemonic state-market alliances through an ethical-political discourse rooted in Islamic principles.

These limitations are not solely the result of state repression. They also reflect the ideological reach of neoliberal rationality, which has depoliticised structural crises and reframed collective resistance as irrational, destabilising, or regressive. The technocratic language of reform, efficiency, and modernisation has served to delegitimise redistributive and emancipatory demands. Simultaneously, international donors and development institutions have fostered a depoliticised civil society landscape through the proliferation of NGOs, accountability initiatives, and governance-focused interventions that fragment, co-opt, and pacify oppositional energies. This mirrors the Turkish case, where regime change emerged from crisis and was consolidated through an authoritarian-neoliberal synthesis involving state reconfiguration, elite recomposition, and intensified

repression (Altınörs & Akçay, 2022). Nonetheless, even fragmented and repressed forms of resistance must be understood as ruptures in the reproduction of the prevailing order. They render visible the structural contradictions of authoritarian neoliberalism and the incapacity of hegemonic blocs to resolve the crises of accumulation, legitimacy, and representation. From renewed labour militancy in Tunisia, to recurrent protests in Jordan and Lebanon, to dispersed acts of dissent in digital and diasporic spheres, the region continues to generate antagonisms that defy stabilisation. Recent mobilisations across the region, from Tunisia’s 2023 labour strikes to digital campaigns against wage suppression in the Gulf, and clandestine workers’ networks in Egypt, illustrate that resistance persists despite pervasive repression, revealing the incompleteness of neoliberal hegemony.

This chapter thus resists the assumption of authoritarian neoliberalism’s permanence. Hegemonic formations in MENA are contingent, incomplete, and vulnerable, subject to disruption by economic volatility, social contestation, and the uneven consequences of global integration. Resistance, in this light, is not merely reactive but generative: it signals the presence of alternative imaginaries, however inchoate, and gestures towards the potential for counter-hegemonic projects yet to be realised. The final section reflects on the broader theoretical and political implications of these dynamics for critical political economy, state theory, and the study of global capitalism.

**Table 3**  
*Comparative Table: State-Capital Configurations in Egypt, Tunisia, and the Gulf*

Category	Egypt	Tunisia	Gulf Monarchies (Saudi Arabia, UAE)
<b>Dominant Mode of Accumulation</b>	Militarised neoliberalism (mega-projects, real estate, infrastructure)	Export-oriented, donor-driven neoliberalism	Financialised rentierism via Sovereign Wealth Funds
<b>Form of Authoritarianism</b>	Coercive consolidation post-2013 coup; suppression of dissent	Post-uprising technocratic governance sliding into presidential authoritarianism	Monarchical rule with selective reforms and intense surveillance
<b>Role of External Actors</b>	IMF, UAE, and Saudi Arabia as financiers and guarantors of regime stability	IMF, EU, donor institutions shaping policy agendas	Global finance, Western alliances, arms trade, and geopolitical investment

<b>Civil Society / Resistance</b>	Severely repressed; criminalisation of dissent	Organised (UGTT), but constrained by austerity and technocracy	Fragmented, migrant-based, digital, and transient
<b>Discursive Legitimacy</b>	National renewal, security, development	Democratic legitimacy + economic necessity	Vision 2030, modernisation, soft power, performative reform
<b>Crisis Tendencies</b>	Debt dependency, inflation, and exclusion of the informal sectors	Regional inequality, social precarity, legitimacy crisis	Oil volatility, demographic tensions, migrant precarity

## 8.6. Conclusion: Rethinking the MENA State in Global Capitalism

This chapter has advanced a critical reconceptualisation of the state in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), positioning it not as an exceptional or deviant formation, but as a historically specific articulation of capitalist statehood embedded within global dynamics of accumulation, imperial restructuring, and class struggle. In contrast to dominant paradigms that portray MENA states as static, rentier, or culturally predetermined, the chapter has demonstrated how authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and the Gulf are active organisers in the reproduction of global capitalism. This occurs through the management of labour, the disciplining of dissent, and the deployment of accumulation strategies shaped by domestic class configurations and by transnational imperial imperatives.

The analytical framework elaborated here, drawing on the insights of Antonio Gramsci, Nicos Poulantzas, and critical global political economy, foregrounds the state as a social relation. This perspective rejects reified, institutionalist, or instrumentalist accounts of the state, instead highlighting its formation through historical struggles over coercion and consent, transnational capital and popular demands, hegemony, and its limits. Authoritarian neoliberalism, from this vantage point, is not an aberrant or transitional condition, but a strategic, and inherently unstable, resolution to crises of rule within the hierarchical structures of the global capitalist system. It represents an effort to restore or maintain accumulation under conditions of peripheral integration, financial dependency, and imperial subordination.

Through a comparative analysis of Egypt, Tunisia, and the Gulf monarchies, the chapter has shown that, despite divergent trajectories, these regimes share significant structural features: the transformation of state apparatuses in line with capital's imperatives; the entrenchment of global finance, sovereign debt regimes, and geopolitical patronage; the repression and flexibilisation of labour;

and the technocratic management of resistance. These commonalities underscore the necessity of abandoning methodological nationalism in favour of approaches that understand MENA states as integral to the global organisation of capitalism, rather than as anomalies outside its presumed norms. This aligns with Salem's (2017) critique of dominant approaches to the Arab revolutions, which often overlook the centrality of class conflict and capitalist restructuring in shaping both resistance and repression.

Importantly, the chapter has also foregrounded the limits and contradictions of authoritarian neoliberal rule. The accumulation of wealth without redistribution, political representation devoid of substantive participation, and technocratic modernisation without social justice continue to generate crises of legitimacy and episodic ruptures. Although resistance has thus far remained fragmented and frequently repressed, its persistence reveals the incompleteness of hegemonic projects and the latent potential for alternative political imaginaries. The incorporation of updated empirical evidence from Tunisia and the Gulf further demonstrates that these states, far from exceptions, constitute integral nodes in the reproduction of global capitalism. From labour unrest to digital dissent, from union mobilisations to symbolic occupations of space, such moments unsettle the reproduction of neoliberal authoritarianism and point to its contingent character.

For scholars of critical political economy and state theory, the MENA experience highlights the imperative of historicising state formation, examining its transnational entanglements, and resisting liberal teleologies of institutional development. It calls for a renewed focus on the uneven, crisis-prone, and contested character of capitalist reproduction in the global South. Ultimately, to study the political economy of the contemporary Middle East is to examine not a peripheral exception, but a constitutive arena of global capitalism, one in which the system is simultaneously stabilised and contested. The task of critical scholarship, therefore, is not only to analyse these processes but to expose the historical alternatives they obscure and foreclose.

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## CHAPTER 9

### FROM ALIGNMENT TO AMBIGUITY: THE STRATEGIC PUZZLE OF US–EGYPT RELATIONS

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#### 9.1. Introduction

The Middle East has historically been a region of strategic competition, both among regional powers and external actors, due to its vast energy resources and critical trade routes. Particularly, global powers in pursuit of geopolitical dominance have shown a persistent desire to maintain a strong presence in the region. Accordingly, for the US (US)—which has sought to exert global influence since the post–World War II period—the Middle East has consistently occupied a central place in its foreign policy agenda. However, US relations with Middle Eastern countries have always evolved under the shadow of various political obstacles. These include the regions deeply rooted anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiments, the strategic rivalry with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and, more broadly, the tension between the US’s liberal-democratic discourse and its pragmatic cooperation with authoritarian regimes. Despite championing liberal values on the global stage, the US has found itself compelled to work with autocratic governments in the region. This has created a persistent contradiction between strategic interests and normative commitments in US Middle East policy.

Nonetheless, the US has established strong partnerships and strategic alliances with many of these authoritarian regimes, using these relationships to sustain its influence in the region. Among the cornerstone states of this US-led security architecture is Egypt. Historically regarded as one of the leading actors in the region, Egypt’s foreign policy orientation shifted significantly in the 1970s. While President Nasser maintained close ties with the Soviet Union, his successor, Anwar Sadat, realigned Egypt toward the US. Since then, Egypt has become one of Washington’s most critical allies in the Middle East. During the Cold War, Egypt received substantial US military and economic assistance as part of a

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broader strategy to secure American influence in the region. Although democracy promotion was articulated as a core element of US foreign policy, Washington consistently prioritised regional stability—evident in its longstanding support for the authoritarian Mubarak regime, despite mounting domestic demands for political liberalisation. With the onset of the Arab Uprisings, however, US policy underwent a partial recalibration. While maintaining its emphasis on stability, Washington also began to engage with emerging political forces and adopted a more flexible discourse on democracy promotion.

These developments marked a significant transformation in the strategic partnership between the US and Egypt. This study seeks to examine the causes and consequences of this shift. It argues that the Arab Uprisings deepened the longstanding tension between the US's strategic interests and its normative commitments in the region, compelling successive US administrations to reassess their relationship with Egypt. Simultaneously, the Sisi administration, in response to mounting US pressure on human rights and Washington's gradual regional retrenchment, began to seek alternative partners in its foreign policy orientation. Based on these assumptions, the study further contends that although the strategic partnership between Egypt and the US has not been fully dissolved, the level of alignment and dependency observed during the Mubarak era has not been reestablished under the Sisi regime.

In line with these premises, the study will first provide an analytical overview of US-Egypt relations up to the Arab Uprisings, focusing on the political, security, and economic dimensions that have shaped their bilateral ties. The second section will examine US policy responses to the uprisings and how these policies were received by successive Egyptian governments. The final section will analyse how these shifts in US policy have led the Sisi administration to explore alternative alliances and reposition Egypt's foreign policy within a changing regional landscape.

## **9.2. Egypt in the US Middle East Policy: A Strategic Partner or a Dependent Client?**

With the advent of the Cold War, the US adopted a global hegemonic strategy in which the Middle East emerged as a persistent focal point of its foreign policy agenda. As clearly demonstrated by the existing literature, the primary drivers underlying US interest in the Middle East include the desire to control and secure the region's vast energy resources, ensure the security of Israel, safeguard key trade routes, and ultimately prevent the emergence of any regional or external actor capable of establishing hegemony in the region. (Kamel, 2018; Silverburg & Reich, 2015). In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, a fifth dimension—counterterrorism—was incorporated into this strategic framework.

Given the Middle East's role as a key locus for radical Islamist movements, the fight against terrorism became a central pillar of US regional policy. In this context, the US constructed a regional security architecture that included close cooperation with key allies such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Türkiye. Rather than being institutionalised through a formal multilateral mechanism akin to NATO, this security architecture was built primarily on bilateral relationships. Although frequently characterised as “strategic partnerships” by both the US and its regional counterparts, the pronounced asymmetry in capabilities and influence has often led analysts to interpret these relationships through the lens of patron–client dynamics.

Simultaneously, American foreign policy toward the region has also included a discourse on democracy and political reform. US administrations have promoted the development of civil society and encouraged political reforms in Middle Eastern regimes through institutional programs such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENAI), and the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) (Snider & Faris, 2011). While these initiatives are often criticised as merely symbolic or superficial, the US continues to position itself as a global leader in the promotion of democracy and human rights. The increasing strength of communication technologies and the growing ease of global access to information have facilitated the diffusion of this democracy discourse across the region. However, this creates a twofold dilemma—both political and ethical—for US policy in the Middle East. Politically, the security architecture that the US has constructed in the region largely rests upon authoritarian regimes. Efforts to promote democracy may, therefore, undermine these regimes, and by extension, the very architecture the US has established to protect its interests. Moreover, many opposition groups within these authoritarian states are often anti-Western, making the potential consequences of democratisation even more hazardous for US interests (Faris, 2013). Ethically, the US's collaboration with authoritarian regimes contradicts its pro-democracy rhetoric and raises serious questions about the sincerity of its commitment to democratic principles.

One of the most illustrative examples in the US Middle East policy is Egypt, which functions simultaneously as a pillar of the regional security architecture constructed by the US and as a central figure in the strategic interest/normative discourse dilemma. In fact, historically, North Africa has not been a primary focus of US foreign policy. Moreover, until the 1970s, Egypt pursued a policy of distancing itself from the US, acting both as the closest regional ally of the Soviet Union and as the leader of the anti-Israel bloc. However, following Egypt's peace negotiations with Israel in the 1970s and the subsequent weakening of its relations with the Soviet Union, it emerged as one of the US' most important regional

partners. After this date, Egypt became a significant actor in advancing the US' interests in the region, as outlined above. Firstly, with the termination of the state of war between the two countries through the Camp David Accords, the security of Israel's southeastern border was effectively guaranteed (Dunne, 2014). The second factor enhancing Egypt's strategic importance is its geographical control over crucial transit points in the region. Historically, the Suez Canal has been one of the principal arteries of trade between the East and the West. A stable and pro-American Egypt ensures both the security and the Western-oriented control of this vital trade route (Aftandilian, 2013). Thirdly, counterterrorism constitutes another major area of US-Egypt cooperation. The fact that some senior al-Qaeda leaders were Egyptian nationals further elevated Egypt's importance in the US-led global war on terror (Kamel, 2018; Selim, 2022). In addition, contemporary radical Islamist movements have historical links to the Muslim Brotherhood, which originated in Egypt. Containing the influence and expansion of this movement is seen as critical to US security interests in the region. Consequently, the presence of a pro-American regime in Egypt remains a vital component of the US counterterrorism strategy (Korany, 2012).

From Egypt's perspective, the primary motivation for nurturing close ties with the US has always been regime security. Egypt, with a deeply rooted historical legacy that stretches back to ancient times, has long been a central actor in the political order of the Middle East. Although it lacks the natural resource wealth of other regional powers that emerged after World War II, Egypt has nonetheless been viewed as a leading state in regional affairs. However, despite its strong state tradition, Egypt has lost much of its leadership role due to a range of internal and external challenges. One of the most significant issues affecting Egypt's regional influence is the unresolved Palestinian question. Although the Camp David Accords appeared to have ended the conflicts between the two countries, the ongoing instability caused by Israel's aggressive policies in Palestine has continued to affect Egypt, given its geographical proximity to the region. Compounding these challenges is the political turbulence in neighbouring states. Libya, under Muammar Gaddafi, pursued an ambitious regional leadership role, and his regime's collapse created a power vacuum. Similarly, Sudan has been mired in prolonged internal conflict. These developments have placed Egypt in a persistently unstable regional environment. Internally, the enduring conflict between the Egyptian state and the Muslim Brotherhood—an organisation with regional reach—continues to produce both political and societal instability. These factors have collectively hindered Egypt's ability to reclaim a leadership role in regional politics. Amid these instabilities, Egypt has long relied on its relationship with the US to ensure regime stability (Zimmermann, 2017). As one of the largest recipients of US aid in the region, Egypt has aligned its foreign policy closely with American strategic interests (Selim, 2022). Thus, both American and Egyptian regional policies have

laid the groundwork for a strong mutual relationship between the two nations. Under this relationship, the US guarantees security and provides economic support to Egypt, while Egypt, in turn, acknowledges US leadership in the region and aligns itself with its objectives.

The most salient dimensions of the close relationship between the two actors are security and economics. One of the key indicators of the security component is arms transfers between the two countries. Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) clearly illustrate the shifts in Egypt's alliance patterns over time (see Table I below). During the period from 1950 to 1977, when Egypt was aligned with the Soviet bloc, its primary arms supplier was the Soviet Union. From 1978 onward, the US assumed this role. Between 1978 and the onset of the Arab Uprisings in 2010, the US was the principal supplier of military equipment to Egypt (Silverburg & Reich, 2015). Additionally, joint military exercises underscore the US commitment to Egypt's security. By identifying Egypt as a key component of its regional security architecture, the US also offers security guarantees to Egypt against potential regional rivals such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, and other major actors within the same architecture. The economic dimension of this relation is most clearly reflected in bilateral trade data. Egypt is among the most significant economic partners of the US in the region. As shown in Table II below, in the early 2000s, the US was Egypt's most significant trade partner in terms of both imports and exports. Also, Egypt is the third-largest recipient of US foreign aid in the Middle East, following Israel and Jordan.

Accordingly, the data presented above clearly demonstrate the development of a robust bilateral relationship founded on security and economic considerations. From a political perspective, officially, both governments characterize this relation as a win-win strategic partnership that serves the mutual interests of both sides. As discussed above, each party does indeed derive considerable benefits from this relationship. However, the asymmetric power structure between the two actors—combined with Egypt's ongoing struggle with both economic and security instability—has led some to argue that the relationship more closely resembles a patron-client model rather than a balanced strategic alliance (Zimmermann, 2017). As shown above, since the era of President Anwar Sadat, Egypt has largely aligned its foreign policy with US preferences, while the US has consistently provided aid to stabilise Egypt's fragile economy. This enduring pattern suggests a deep-rooted patron-client dynamic between the two nations. For Egypt, the most significant domestic debate arising from this patron-client relationship concerns the tension between dependence and sovereignty. The perception that Egyptian governments formulate policies in accordance with US preferences—not only in foreign but also in domestic affairs—has fuelled criticism from opposition groups who argue that the country has sacrificed its independence (Korany, 2012).

Despite decades of American assistance, Egypt continues to struggle with profound economic challenges, reinforcing the perception that the relationship has not fostered sustainable development but rather deepened dependency. Furthermore, US support for authoritarian leaders in the name of regional stability is often seen as the greatest obstacle to Egypt's democratisation process.

Whether characterised as a politically strategic partnership or, from a more critical perspective, as a patron–client relationship, it is evident that a strong and well-established relationship existed between these two actors up until the Arab uprisings. Both countries have benefited from the advantages of this robust relationship in shaping their global as well as regional policies. However, this relationship between the two actors entered a significant phase of transformation in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, which profoundly disrupted the political and security architecture of the region. The ambiguity in the Obama administration's policy preferences in response to the uprisings targeting the Mubarak regime—long supported by successive US administrations—along with the uncertainty generated by the US policy of reducing its presence in the region, raised critical questions regarding the future of the existing bilateral relationship. In order to understand this process of transformation, the following sections will first examine the nature of relations between the two countries during the Arab uprisings and subsequently analyse the post-uprising period.

### **9.3. The Limits of Democratic Promotion: US Foreign Policy and Egypt's Post-Mubarak Trajectory**

The Arab uprisings represent one of the most immediate and profound examples of the enduring tension between strategic interests and normative discourse that has historically characterised US policy in the Middle East. These uprisings reignited debates over the democracy dilemma in US policy, compelling Washington to choose between supporting long-time authoritarian allies and endorsing popular movements that embodied its own declared democratic ideals (Faris, 2013). In doing so, the US faced criticism for appearing to side with authoritarianism. The Arab Uprisings also deepened the strategic dilemma in US policy. Supporting popular movements often resulted in the weakening of authoritarian regimes that were integral to the US-led security structure. Furthermore, it led to an erosion of trust among other regional allies who began to question Washington's reliability. Simultaneously, the rise of anti-American forces in the wake of regime changes posed new security threats. These developments illustrate how attempts to balance democratic discourse with strategic imperatives have repeatedly placed US policy in a contradictory and precarious position.

Among the various challenges posed by the Arab uprisings to US policy in the Middle East, these dilemmas were most prominently manifested in the case of Egypt. Public perception of the Mubarak regime as deeply corrupt—marked

by persistent economic hardship and inadequate security—prompted widespread demands for its removal. While Egypt witnessed large-scale protests in early 2011, the US initially viewed the Mubarak government as relatively stable, particularly in comparison to the unfolding events in Tunisia (Litsas, 2020). As protests intensified and gained widespread momentum, the US administration gradually came to recognize the necessity of political reform in Egypt, ultimately endorsing a transition via democratic elections (Dyer & Saleh, 2016). Although the US had historically supported the Mubarak regime, by that time, overt backing of his government had become increasingly untenable due to its domestic unpopularity. Continued US support for Mubarak risked undermining American foreign policy objectives in the broader Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. As mentioned above, this was largely attributable to growing anti-American sentiment, rooted in the perception that the US was complicit in sustaining authoritarian or repressive regimes (Litsas, 2020). Therefore, the popular demand for political reform in Egypt placed considerable pressure on US foreign policy, as supporting democratic aspirations risked destabilizing a key regional partner. The Obama administration, in particular, sought to navigate this complex dynamic by promoting human rights and democratic governance, while simultaneously safeguarding core strategic interests amid Egypt's political upheaval.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration was widely criticised for failing to provide the level of support demanded by the Egyptian people during the social mobilisation of the Arab Uprising. Although popular demands for reform were seen as legitimate and critical by large segments of the public, US foreign policy continued to prioritize national interests over democratic ideals (Litsas, 2020). Once again, and strongly, this perceived failure reflects the strategic interest and normative discourse dilemma. As Egyptian citizens sought international backing in the face of political repression, there was an expectation that the US would delegitimize authoritarian practices by partner governments lacking public legitimacy. However, the US simultaneously expressed rhetorical support for democratic change while continuing to engage with, and in some cases support, the existing regime. This dual approach raised critical questions regarding the authenticity of US commitments to democracy and social justice in Egypt (Collins & Rothe, 2012). At this point, it is important to emphasize that the Obama administration's dual approach was shaped, in part, by both the internal political divisions within Egyptian society and the divergent views of key actors within the US decision-making apparatus. Although there was a prevailing tendency and expectation within Egyptian society for regime change during the Arab uprisings, pro-Mubarak groups continued to believe that their long-standing leader could play a stabilizing role in the unfolding transition. Simultaneously, within the US administration, there were growing concerns over the extent to which a potential regime change in Egypt would serve American interests in the region (Litsas, 2020).

Amid the Obama administration's ambiguous policy stance, public demands for change culminated in the removal of the Mubarak regime through a democratic electoral process, resulting in the election of Mohamed Morsi, a candidate from the Muslim Brotherhood, as Egypt's first democratically elected president. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the Obama administration's withdrawal of support for the Mubarak regime paved the way for regime change in Egypt, thereby indicating that US influence played a facilitating role in this political transformation. As an indication of the facilitating role played by the US, the US government reportedly warned that it would suspend military aid to Egypt should the armed forces engage in the suppression of civilian demonstrations. This stance was intended to signal to the Egyptian military that the population had a legitimate right to protest against the Mubarak regime in the face of widespread dissatisfaction. Such a strategy of political signalling may be interpreted as a significant step in enabling citizens to voice their grievances and assert their demands for change (Atlas, 2012).

However, while US involvement in the Egyptian uprising was deemed significant for preserving regional stability—particularly in light of its strategic alliances and geopolitical interests in the Middle East—it lacked a coherent and comprehensive strategy to support a sustainable democratic transition. The absence of such a strategy highlights the need for the US to more effectively balance its geopolitical objectives with the promotion of social justice and democratic governance in allied states. Achieving meaningful political transformation in Egypt requires the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in decision-making processes, thereby fostering the development of a political system that genuinely reflects the aspirations of the majority (Hove & Ndawana, 2017). As demonstrated during the uprisings, the US was unable to support President Mubarak in the face of widespread public opposition, given his deep unpopularity at the time (Litsas, 2020; Dalacoura, 2012). Similarly, the Obama administration was criticised for lacking a comprehensive plan to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the uprisings, making it difficult to strike a balance between American strategic interests and the democratic demands of Arab societies (Dalacoura, 2012). The absence of strong conditionalities following Mubarak's ouster was perceived by some as evidence of the US and its Western allies' reluctance to fully commit to democratic reform in Egypt. In this context, Washington appeared to favor authoritarian stability over the empowerment of ordinary Egyptian citizens (Hove & Ndawana, 2017). A credible approach to promoting democracy would have required a combination of targeted foreign aid and deeper engagement with emerging political actors following Mubarak's departure (Pee, 2022). However, the momentum of democratic reform proved unsustainable, as Abdel Fattah el-Sisi returned to power through military means shortly after a brief experiment with electoral democracy. In this regard, the US ultimately failed to support a

genuine democratic revolution in Egypt—an outcome shaped by both internal Egyptian dynamics and the prioritisation of US regional interests (Hove & Ndawana, 2017).

During the brief period of Morsi's presidency, relations between the two actors progressed along a cautious trajectory. Despite Morsi's affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood—a movement generally characterised by an anti-Western orientation—his administration did not pursue a radical shift in its relations with the US. Conversely, although the US had traditionally maintained a distant stance toward the Muslim Brotherhood, under Obama's leadership, it opted to engage with a government that had come to power through democratic means (Atlas, 2012). The US policymakers adopted a cautious and pragmatic stance, opting for a calculated strategic engagement (BBC, 2012). For instance, in response to the 2012 protest in Cairo, during which demonstrators entered the premises of the US Embassy, the American administration engaged in diplomatic efforts and cooperation with the Morsi government. This cautious stance adopted by both actors toward one another has hindered the restoration of their formerly strong relationship. US policy during the Egyptian Arab Uprising was primarily shaped by strategic alliances and a pragmatic balancing of national interests (Tansey, 2016; Snider & Faris, 2011). The Obama administration made efforts to support Egypt's democratic transition, notably through a pledge of \$1 billion aimed at alleviating national debt and fostering employment. These initiatives, however, were not solely humanitarian in nature; rather, they were part of a broader strategy to maintain and recalibrate American influence in Egypt and the wider Middle East (Snider & Faris, 2011).

Despite these efforts to balance the promotion of democratic governance with US strategic interests, the military coup that ousted President Mohamed Morsi—Egypt's first democratically elected leader following Mubarak's fall—marked a significant turning point in the country's political trajectory. This event raised critical questions about the future of democratisation in Egypt. The coup ushered in a wave of repression, justified by the authorities as a counterterrorism measure, which culminated in severe human rights violations. One of the most tragic outcomes was the Rab'a al-Adawiyya and al-Nahda Square massacres on August 14, 2013, during which hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood supporters were killed (Mustonen, 2024). The aftermath of the coup not only undermined Egypt's democratic aspirations but also exposed the contradictions within US foreign policy. The prioritisation of geopolitical stability over democratic values and human rights revealed a *realpolitik* approach in which American interests were given precedence over meaningful democratic transformation in Egypt.

#### **9.4. From Dependency to Multipolarity: Egypt's Foreign Policy Diversification**

The ousting of the Morsi administration through a military coup further deepened the existing dilemmas in US–Egypt relations. At first glance, the emergence of a military-backed regime resembling that of Mubarak, coupled with the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power, created the impression of a favourable context for the reestablishment of the traditional relationship between the two states. However, the Obama administration's emphasis on democratic rhetoric constrained the US from openly endorsing the military regime. It is important to underscore that, following the ousting of President Morsi, the US suspended portions of its military assistance to Egypt. In response to the widespread human rights violations that occurred in the aftermath of the coup, the Obama administration also took measures to diplomatically distance itself from the Sisi government. However, with the advent of the Trump administration—keen on revitalizing the traditional US-led security architecture in the Middle East—Egypt, despite the authoritarian nature of the Sisi regime, once again emerged as one of the countries with which the US sought to cultivate closer ties in the region. Nevertheless, the fact that successive US administrations have, at times, been compelled to suspend aid to Egypt in response to human rights violations committed by the Sisi regime indicates that the previously established relationship could not be fully reestablished in this new era.

The restoration of bilateral relations to their former level has been impeded by significant developments. The first pertains to the US' gradual withdrawal from the region, which has occurred in parallel with the growing influence of emerging external actors seeking a more prominent role in the Middle East. In the post-9/11 era, Washington significantly expanded its military presence in the Middle East, thereby placing a substantial strain on its economy. As seen in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, the US has increasingly pursued a policy of reducing its direct footprint in the region. This partial retreat has opened space for other powers—most notably China and Russia—to expand their influence. While Russia is striving to improve its influence over Egypt by selling defence equipment, China, in particular, is leveraging its economic power to increase its political reach, not only globally but also within the Middle East. As a result, Egypt has been compelled to diversify its foreign policy to meet its security and economic needs. In recent years, Cairo has sought closer ties with alternative external actors, indicating a shift away from a strictly US-centered orientation (Selim, 2022). This trend reflects Egypt's attempt to pursue a more multipolar and autonomous foreign policy strategy in an increasingly complex and competitive geopolitical environment.

**Table 1**

*The Arms Transfer to Egypt from Various Actors (SIPRI Trend-Indicator Values (TIVs))*

	1950-1977	1978-1990	1991-2010	2011-2024	1950-2024
USA	192	7.955	13.610	2.628	24.385
Russia	22.259	0	1.092	4.040	27.391
France	957	2.007	3	3.909	6.876
Germany	0	94	378	2.077	2.549
Italy	94	349	0	1.273	1.716
China	88	2.241	570	44	2.943
Türkiye	--	0	0	12	12

*Note.* Data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Arms Transfers Database (n.d.). <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/>

In the face of US pressure on human rights issues, the unconditional support offered by actors such as China and Russia have become increasingly appealing to the Sisi government. Although the Trump administration sought to enhance US–Egypt relations under President Sisi’s leadership, Egypt simultaneously pursued strategic partnerships with alternative powers such as Russia and China. Despite the fact that the US had been Egypt’s primary arms supplier up until the Arab uprisings, as illustrated in Table I, this trend has shifted, with US arms transfers to Egypt gradually declining since 2015. At the same time, Russia has steadily reestablished military ties with Egypt, and countries such as France, Germany, and Italy have also moved to fill the vacuum left by the US. Notably, the 2014 arms agreement between Egypt and Russia—valued at \$3.5 billion—represented the most substantial defence cooperation between the two countries since the 1970s. This trend continued with Egypt’s sustained procurement of Russian military equipment, alongside a 2015 bilateral agreement aimed at reviving Egypt’s nuclear energy program, marking a significant deepening of their strategic ties (Selim, 2022).

**Table 2**

*Import and Export Shares of Egypt by Country (2000/2022 data)*

Country	2000		Country	2022	
	Import Partner	Export Partner		Import Partner	Export Partner
	Share (%)	Share (%)		Share (%)	Share (%)
US	14,96	8,52	China	15,35	3,56
Germany	8,84	2,63	Saudi Arabia	8,2	4,83
Saudi Arabia	7,4	2,98	US	7,23	4,41
Italy	6,66	16,3	South Asia	4,46	4,58

<b>China</b>	4,59	0,83	<b>Russian Federation</b>	4,44	1,15
<b>France</b>	4,14	5,94	<b>Germany</b>	4,28	1,84
<b>Australia</b>	3,38	0,06	<b>India</b>	4,25	3,87
<b>Japan</b>	3,06	2	<b>Türkiye</b>	3,97	7,6
<b>United Kingdom</b>	2,58	2,49	<b>Brazil</b>	3,88	0,84
<b>Netherlands</b>	2,46	6,38	<b>Italy</b>	3,75	6,49

*Note.* Data from World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), World Bank (2025). <https://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en>

A similar trend observed in the defence sector can also be seen in other areas of the economy. As previously noted, while the US had long been Egypt's most significant trading partner, this dynamic has shifted in recent years. As illustrated in Table II, the role of the US in Egypt's foreign trade gradually diminished by 2022; in terms of Egypt's import sources, the US fell to third place behind China and Saudi Arabia. Similarly, during the same period, the US lost its leading position in Egypt's export market to Türkiye. Concurrently, Egypt has strengthened its ties with China, as evidenced by its multifaceted engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative, which has facilitated increased development assistance and diversified Egypt's economic partnerships (Tiezzi, 2016).

These evolving relationships indicate that Egypt is no longer solely reliant on the US but is actively diversifying its foreign policy portfolio by engaging with other influential global actors. This diversification may be interpreted as a deliberate strategy to reduce vulnerability to potential US pressure or conditionalities. Given Egypt's strategic efforts under President Sisi to diversify its international partnerships, any political pressure exerted by the US in response to domestic unrest may incentivize Cairo to deepen its alignment with Gulf countries, as well as with global powers such as China and Russia. Egypt's accession to the BRICS bloc further underscores this shift, potentially serving as a diplomatic signal to Washington regarding Egypt's capacity to recalibrate its foreign policy orientation in the face of US pressure. Such alignment enhances Egypt's leverage and reinforces its position as a key actor in regional governance, particularly in matters involving American strategic interests in the Middle East (Achraimer, 2022). The US–Egypt relationship necessitates a more reciprocal and competitive framework—one that moves beyond traditional coercive tools, such as the threat of withholding military assistance, toward an approach rooted in shared interests and mutual respect (Arafat, 2017).

## 9.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, US-Egypt relations have evolved into a complex and unresolved puzzle for both parties. Despite ongoing criticisms of its cooperation

with authoritarian regimes, the US had developed close ties with Egypt and made significant “political investments” in the country. However, this “Egypt project” effectively collapsed with the onset of the Arab Uprisings. While the US had long supported the Mubarak regime in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, Egyptian society brought a Brotherhood-affiliated candidate to power in its first democratic election. The subsequent military coup and the rise of the Sisi regime, accompanied by widespread human rights violations, placed US administrations in an increasingly difficult position regarding the continuation of bilateral relations. Meanwhile, Egypt—despite having long relied on US aid—has failed to achieve economic stability and remains dependent on external assistance. At the same time, increasing US pressure and conditionality have prompted the Sisi government to reassess its relationship with Washington.

So far, these intertwined dilemmas have led to a persistent distance between the US and the Sisi regime. But nevertheless, there is little doubt that Egypt continues to represent a critical partner for the US in advancing its strategic interests in the Middle East. The nature and trajectory of this bilateral relationship are largely shaped by how the US positions itself in response to Egypt’s internal and regional dynamics. As mentioned above, although the relationship has become increasingly complex, pragmatic engagement has largely prevailed, with successive US administrations seeking to strike a balance between promoting democratic values and human rights and safeguarding core national interests. Given the persistent divergence between American democratic ideals and Egypt’s domestic political framework, it is imperative that the US formulate a more comprehensive and adaptable strategy—one that reconciles its normative commitments with the realities of engaging with strategically important but politically divergent partners.

As observed above, this dilemma has compelled Egypt to seek alternatives. In Egypt’s pursuit of alternative partnerships, countries such as Russia and China appear particularly eager to engage. Although Russia has been unable to deepen its ties with Egypt to the extent it desires—largely due to the ongoing war in Ukraine—China continues to pursue an ambitious policy aimed at expanding its political influence in the region by leveraging its economic power. This approach has not only attracted Egypt but has also garnered the attention of numerous other states in the region. As noted above, China’s economic activities in the region have also influenced Egypt’s commercial relations, and in this regard, it appears that China has replaced the US. Considering Egypt’s economic difficulties, the evolving relationship between Egypt and China is likely to result in Egypt’s gradual economic shift towards the Chinese sphere. However, the emergence of a profound strategic partnership between China and Egypt, similar to that between the US and Egypt, depends on the political preferences of both governments. In this context, there is, as yet, little evidence to suggest that either actor intends to

transform the relationship into a deeper alliance.

Therefore, it is evident that the bilateral relations between the two countries have shifted from the traditional framework that existed prior to the Arab uprisings. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain whether the US and Egypt are willing or able to restore their relationship to its previous state. Furthermore, the aforementioned challenges suggest that a return to the traditional level of engagement will be neither straightforward nor immediate. Within the increasingly volatile political landscape of the Middle East in recent years, the manner in which both actors position themselves in relation to one another will play a crucial role in shaping the emerging regional balance of power. This positioning, in turn, will largely depend on how effectively they address the strategic dilemmas currently confronting their bilateral relations.

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## CHAPTER 10

### GREENWASHING AUTHORITARIANISM: CLIMATE DIPLOMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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#### 10.1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has emerged as a surprisingly assertive region in global climate diplomacy. From Egypt's hosting of COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh to the United Arab Emirates' prominent presidency of COP28 in Dubai, regional states have stepped into the spotlight at major climate negotiations. In their official rhetoric, they present themselves as champions of sustainability, green transition, and net-zero commitments. In the Gulf in particular, leaders have begun framing climate change not only as an environmental or economic concern but also as a matter of national security. This growing alignment with "climate security" discourse signals a shift in how the region seeks to position itself internationally.

The language of climate security may seem a logical response to escalating environmental risks, yet in MENA's authoritarian regimes it often serves different ends. Climate change is framed not just as a policy issue but as a rationale for tightening state control and bolstering international legitimacy. By framing environmental decline as an existential threat, ruling elites position themselves as indispensable protectors, marginalise participatory politics, and legitimize exceptional measures that bypass public debate. Since the Paris Agreement, the global spotlight on climate action has made such discourse a valuable tool, projecting commitment abroad to attract investment and goodwill, while at home providing cover to restrict dissent, weaken civil society, and consolidate power. In this way, climate security rhetoric does not counter authoritarianism but gives it a more palatable façade. Although the link between climate change and security is well established in environmental and IR scholarship (Dalby, 2013; Trombetta, 2008), most research focuses on liberal democracies and international organisations, where securitisation faces institutional checks and public debate. Much less attention is given to authoritarian contexts, where concentrated executive power, limited civic space, and regime survival shape both how threats are framed and how they are

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managed. Although research on “authoritarian environmentalism” is expanding (Beeson, 2010; Gilley, 2012), it remains focused on East Asia, particularly China, while MENA is still understudied. Existing research on the region often stresses vulnerability, adaptation, or water disputes, but gives less attention to how climate narratives serve as instruments of political power. This article aims to address part of that gap by examining how climate change securitisation in MENA operates both as a governance tool and a means of legitimation. Here, climate security is less about measurable risks than about deploying a strategic narrative rooted in the logic of authoritarian rule. The study asks: how do authoritarian regimes in MENA strategically employ climate security discourse, and to what ends? Focusing on how risks are framed, narrated, and politicised in official discourse, the analysis highlights the performative dimensions of climate diplomacy, showing how security rhetoric can justify exceptional governance, marginalise civil society, and enhance international standing. By centring discourse rather than policy metrics, the article underscores the symbolic and legitimating roles of climate security in authoritarian contexts, contributing to debates on securitisation, norm diffusion, authoritarian legitimation, and the geopolitics of sustainability.

To explore these dynamics, the article uses a discourse analysis to understand how political actors construct and securitize climate change as an existential threat and what responses such framings authorize. Rather than a broad policy comparison, the study focuses on a small set of primary materials: high-level speeches at COP27 and COP28, and national development plans and climate strategies from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Treated as politically charged narratives rather than neutral policy texts, these sources define problems, assign blame, and assert authority. Thematic reading and close textual analysis reveal recurring tropes and silences, noting how leaders select referent objects (nation, economy, future generations) while excluding alternative perspectives. The narrow empirical scope enables a focused view of discourse as a form of power, not merely a reflection of material policy change. Understanding how MENA’s authoritarian regimes frame climate change as a security issue requires an approach that captures both the performative nature of political language and the structural asymmetries it reflects. Securitisation theory provides this foundation, but a fuller account also draws on scholarship on authoritarian environmentalism and the global politics of sustainability. The next section outlines these theoretical underpinnings.

## **10.2. Climate Security and Authoritarian Governance: Theoretical Framework**

Over the past two decades, the concept of climate security has gained momentum in academic and policy debates, marking a shift in how environmental risks are perceived and governed. No longer framed solely as ecological or developmental challenges, climate change is increasingly cast as a threat with potentially

destabilizing effects on national and international order. This reframing has brought new political rhetoric and institutional measures, often couched in the language of urgency and existential risk (Trombetta, 2008; McDonald, 2013). Within this evolving discourse, securitisation theory provides a useful lens for examining how issues are elevated to security threats, thereby justifying extraordinary political action (Buzan et al, 1998, p. 26). At the heart of securitisation theory lies the “speech act”. It is a performative move in which a political actor presents an issue as an existential threat to a valued referent object, legitimizing the suspension of normal politics in favour of exceptional measures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998, p. 26). This process relies on audience recognition, as the framing must be accepted for securitisation to succeed (Balzacq, 2005). In the climate context, securitisation might involve portraying rising temperatures, sea-level rise, or extreme weather as threats to national survival, economic stability, or geopolitical balance (Baysal & Karakaş, 2017, pp. 23-27).

The security logic is built on urgency, danger, and necessity, which can displace more participatory or developmental approaches to environmental governance (Barnett, 2003). In this sense, securitisation is inherently political, determining who defines threats, who responds, and which voices are excluded. Despite its value, securitisation theory has drawn criticism, particularly over its fit beyond liberal-democratic settings. Also, much early work assumes that securitisation depends on an audience capable of public deliberation, usually in open, pluralist societies (Stritzel, 2007, pp. 369-374; Salter, 2008, pp. 323-328). In authoritarian contexts, however, the “audience” may be a narrow set of elites, international partners, or state-controlled media spheres. This raises the question of whether securitisation requires genuine consent or merely the appearance of consensus within tightly managed communication channels (Floyd, 2011, pp. 431-433). Furthermore, the concept of securitisation, traditionally viewed as a process to elicit action by framing issues as critical, also carries the risk of exacerbating competition among states rather than fostering the necessary cooperation for global challenges like climate change (Maertens, 2021).

On the other hand, more recent inquiries have extended securitisation to authoritarian systems, where discursive acts are less about persuasion in a deliberative sense and more about enacting authority (Vuori, 2008, pp. 68-72). In such contexts, securitizing actors often monopolise the framing of threats and the design of responses. Climate change as a security issue thus becomes a top-down construct, embedded in broader strategies of regime legitimation and image management. The objective may be less about securing public endorsement than about signalling resolve, directing policy priorities, and cultivating an image of responsible global leadership. This adaptation is essential for analysing climate security discourse in the MENA region, where political structures decisively

shape how threats are framed and operationalised. Despite its analytical utility, securitisation theory has been criticised for its initial normative assumptions and limited applicability in non-democratic settings. The original formulation by the Copenhagen School posits the necessity of an audience capable of deliberation and contestation, conditions typically characteristic of liberal-democratic societies (Balzacq et al., 2015, pp. 502-504; Stritzel, 2007, pp. 362-364). In authoritarian contexts, where public discourse is tightly controlled and dissent is often criminalised, the notion of a “responsive audience” becomes problematic. Who counts as the audience when political speech is monopolised by state actors, and how is acceptance measured in the absence of open deliberation? To address these questions, the necessity of focusing on the non-democratic regimes has become more important. Some suggest that in such contexts, securitisation functions less as a dialogic process and more as a performance of authority directed at selective, strategically relevant audiences, such as ruling elites, international donors, or controlled media environments (Vuori, 2008; Floyd, 2011). In this view, the success of securitisation is not dependent on consent but on the ability of the state to silence opposition, dominate the narrative space, and institutionalise exceptionalism without contestation. Such adaptations are especially relevant in regimes where the distinction between “securitising actor” and “audience” is blurred, and where political power is embedded in discursive control.

Recent critiques have underscored the Eurocentric and civilisationist biases in securitisation theory, calling for context-sensitive approaches that account for how security discourse varies across political and cultural systems (Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2020; Ezeokafor & Kaunert, 2018). In MENA states, climate security rhetoric is less about rational threat management and more about authoritarian practices of image control, regime legitimation, and selective norm appropriation. This aligns closely with authoritarian environmentalism, a model, first applied to China, in which ecological goals are pursued through technocratic control, centralised decision-making, and the marginalisation of public participation (Beeson, 2010; Gilley, 2012; Eaton & Kostka, 2014; Guo et al., 2023). While often praised for its efficiency, critics note that it prioritizes state control over ecological justice, fostering repression, inequality, and silencing of affected communities (Li & Shapiro, 2020). Though research has focused on East Asia, the model is increasingly visible in the Middle East, where regimes advance top-down climate initiatives like Saudi Arabia’s Green Middle East Initiative or the UAE’s Masdar City, framed as visionary projects of enlightened rulers. Promoted as symbols of modernisation, these projects operate within restricted civic spaces where independent environmental activism is discouraged or criminalised, turning environmental governance into a tool for state legitimation, national branding, and elite consolidation.

Closely linked to authoritarian environmentalism is the strategic deployment of green diplomacy as a means of securing international legitimacy. Across regime types, climate governance has become a stage for signalling alignment with global priorities such as sustainability, resilience, and decarbonisation. For authoritarian regimes, this offers a way to engage in high-profile climate negotiations while recasting themselves as modern, forward-looking actors (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019; Hickmann et al., 2021). Participation in events like COP27 and COP28 allows these states to showcase climate strategies, attract investment, and deflect criticism over human rights or political repression. In MENA, green diplomacy is often folded into national branding efforts that serve to legitimise ruling elites, with initiatives such as the UAE's Net Zero 2050 pledge or Saudi Arabia's circular carbon economy promoted as evidence of leadership in the energy transition. Backed by sophisticated PR campaigns, international partnerships, and multilateral pledges, these narratives present regimes as cooperative global actors while obscuring centralised decision-making, opaque governance, and the exclusion of dissent. In this light, green diplomacy is less a neutral arena for cooperation than a curated discursive space where regimes engage in "normative mimicry" or "strategic conformism" (Sending & Neumann, 2006), adopting the language of climate leadership without embracing the reforms and accountability such leadership entails.

Critical researches have long challenged the normative assumptions of global environmental governance, noting how dominant climate discourses often reproduce Global North–South hierarchies by privileging Western epistemologies and institutional preferences (Mitchell, 2014). Concepts like "climate security" can reinforce these inequalities, casting states as either responsible stewards or potential threats depending on their alignment with Euro-American policy models. In the MENA region, this dynamic is shaped by the area's dual role as politically repressive yet strategically vital within global energy and security networks. Gulf regimes, for example, have positioned themselves as indispensable climate partners with hosting summits, funding initiatives, and adopting sustainability rhetoric. Such contradictions are rarely confronted in international climate forums, where policy pledges overshadow governance concerns or human rights. This selective engagement produces "climate silences" that marginalise environmental justice, civic participation, and indigenous knowledge in favour of technical, elite-driven solutions (Bond, 2012; Okereke, 2010). By foregrounding these silences, this study aligns with calls to decolonize climate governance and interrogate the political work embedded in ostensibly neutral environmental discourse.

Taken together, these perspectives offer a multidimensional framework for understanding how climate security discourse operates in authoritarian contexts. Securitisation focuses on the performative framing of climate risks as existential

threats and on the political consequences of such framings, while its adaptation to non-democratic settings shows how securitisation can occur without public deliberation, functioning instead as an assertion of executive authority. Authoritarian environmentalism highlights the top-down, technocratic character of environmental governance in such regimes, and green diplomacy reveals how international platforms like COP summits are used for symbolic legitimation. Postcolonial critiques add a further layer, exposing the structural exclusions and power asymmetries embedded in global climate discourse. Bringing these strands together, this article examines how Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia frame and instrumentalise climate security, focusing not on the material effectiveness of their actions but on the discourse itself — who speaks, what is said or omitted, and to what political ends. The analysis aims to reveal how these narratives both reflect and reinforce domestic power structures, while shaping the regimes' international positioning. In doing so, it situates MENA climate diplomacy within broader debates on authoritarian legitimation, norm diffusion, and the geopolitics of sustainability.

### **10.3. Methodology and Case Selection**

This study employs a qualitative discourse analysis to examine how climate security is framed and mobilised by authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. Rather than measuring the effectiveness of environmental policy implementation or emissions reduction outcomes, the focus is on how political language constructs climate change as a security issue, and what political purposes this construction serves. Discourse is treated not as a neutral medium but as a site where power is exercised, through the designation of threats, the elevation of certain actors, and the marginalisation of others. This approach aligns with securitisation theory's emphasis on the performative dimensions of security framing, while also drawing from critical discourse analysis traditions that foreground the relationship between language and political authority. The decision to adopt a discourse-centred approach stems from the study's interest in meaning-making, legitimation strategies, and the symbolic use of global norms. In authoritarian settings, where public deliberation is limited and institutions are tightly controlled, official discourse plays a crucial role in justifying governance practices and shaping international perceptions. By analysing a select group of state-authored documents, including national strategies and summit speeches, the study seeks to uncover how regimes construct climate-related narratives to consolidate power, demonstrate leadership, and manage external expectations. The methodological emphasis is thus not on the truth-value of these narratives, but on their political function and rhetorical structure.

For its cases, this study focuses on Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. These countries are chosen for their growing prominence in climate

diplomacy and their deliberate use of climate security discourse at national and global levels. Egypt hosted COP27 in 2022, the UAE presided over COP28 in 2023, and Saudi Arabia launched the Middle East Green Initiative. While the Gulf monarchies have the resources for large-scale green projects, Egypt uses climate visibility for geopolitical leverage. Despite these differences, all pursue centralised, top-down agendas that emphasize national prestige and stability over participatory governance, illustrating how climate security discourse functions across varied authoritarian contexts in the region.

In terms of data sources and selection criteria, the empirical foundation of this study is a focused corpus of official texts produced by the Egyptian, Emirati, and Saudi governments, including speeches by state leaders and senior officials at major climate summits (most notably COP27 and COP28) and national strategy documents such as Egypt Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, and the UAE's Net Zero 2050 Strategic Initiative. These texts were chosen not for their comprehensiveness but for their symbolic and discursive weight. As official articulations of national climate agendas, they reveal how regimes construct their image for both domestic and international audiences. This selection follows a tradition in critical discourse analysis that treats elite-authored, high-level documents as key sites of ideational production (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). In authoritarian contexts, where independent media and civil society are often curtailed, such state-authored texts play an outsized role in shaping public meaning and institutional direction (Mittiga, 2021; Shen, 2024). While the limited scope may constrain breadth, the aim is not generalisation but close textual interpretation. These sources enable a fine-grained analysis of how securitisation is enacted rhetorically — invoking existential risk, defining referent objects, and silencing alternative frames, while simultaneously performing responsibility, leadership, and control in line with broader regime objectives.

The documents were analysed using a qualitative, thematic discourse approach, focusing on the core elements of securitisation from the Copenhagen School: the securitizing actor, referent object, and invocation of exceptional measures or urgency (Balzacq, 2011; Floyd, 2016). Attention was also given to “discursive silences,” such as the omission of civil society, indigenous voices, or alternative epistemologies, drawing on critical and postcolonial security scholarship (Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2020). The aim was to interpret how rhetorical moves, like framing climate change as a “survival issue,” serve broader strategies of legitimation and image management, while noting differences in framing and tone across cases. The study's scope is intentionally narrowed down to three cases of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to prioritise depth over breadth. This enables close examination of the symbolic and political work of climate security narratives but leaves policy implementation and other dimensions outside its scope. The

absence of interviews or civil society perspectives reflects both methodological choice and resource constraints. The contribution lies in offering a theoretically informed reading of how global environmental norms are selectively adapted to serve regime-specific goals in authoritarian contexts. While the analysis relies primarily on official documents and elite statements, this methodological focus is deliberate. The exclusion of grassroots perspectives reflects the constraints typical of authoritarian environments, where state dominance over the public sphere turns silence itself into an object of inquiry.

#### **10.4. Securitising Climate in the Middle East**

The securitisation of climate change in authoritarian regimes is far from uniform, shaped by each state's political structure, discursive style, and international ambitions. Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia all weave climate security into their national and diplomatic narratives, but in ways that reflect distinct priorities and geopolitical goals. What they share is a top-down discourse that stresses urgency, resilience, and leadership while side-lining civic participation, environmental justice, and transparency. To explore these differences, the next section employs a case-based discourse analysis of selected summit speeches and strategic policy documents, asking how climate risks are framed, who performs securitisation, what referent objects are highlighted, and which perspectives are left out. Comparing these patterns shows that climate security discourse in the MENA region is not merely imported from global norms but actively refashioned to fit regime-specific agendas.

##### **10.4.1. The United Arab Emirates**

The United Arab Emirates has positioned itself as a leading actor in global climate governance, most visibly as the host of COP28 in 2023. Framing itself as a bridge between developed and developing nations, it advances initiatives like the UAE Net Zero by 2050 strategy and renewable energy projects such as Masdar City (Government of the UAE, 2021). Emirati officials present climate change as both a moral duty and a geopolitical opportunity requiring swift, security-oriented action. This makes the UAE a clear example of how authoritarian regimes can use sustainability and climate security language to project international legitimacy while retaining domestic control.

The securitisation of climate change in the UAE is performed primarily by high-ranking state officials and technocratic elites, most notably by Dr Sultan Al Jaber, the Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology and the COP28 President. In his keynote address at the opening of COP28, Al Jaber described climate change as “the defining challenge of our era” and called on world leaders to “act with the urgency of a system in crisis” (Al Jaber, 2023). Such language frames the climate issue not as a long-term developmental concern but as an

immediate, existential threat, typical of securitizing speech acts as theorised by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998). The referent object in this discourse is multifaceted: it includes future generations, national economic sustainability, and regional geopolitical stability. For example, Al Jaber stated that “failing to act now would be a betrayal of our children’s future,” a move that both moralises and securitizes the issue by linking inaction with intergenerational harm (Al Jaber, 2023). This framing is reinforced by the UAE’s Net Zero by 2050 Strategy, which presents climate change as a threat to national prosperity and long-term resilience. The document warns that rising global temperatures and resource stress “could jeopardize economic diversification goals,” thus positioning the country’s development agenda itself as something that must be defended (Government of the UAE, 2021). In both the speech and the strategy document, securitisation occurs through the fusion of climate urgency with national interest, where the state emerges as the sole capable actor protecting a vulnerable and abstract collective: the economy, the future, the region. This centralisation of agency is characteristic of securitisation in authoritarian contexts, where the legitimacy of exceptional action rests not on public debate but on elite performance and policy projection (Floyd, 2016; Vuori, 2008).

One of the defining features of securitisation in the UAE’s climate discourse is the normalisation of exceptionalism through a technocratic and depoliticised narrative. The language employed by Emirati officials consistently invokes urgency, crisis, and irreversible consequences, yet the proposed solutions remain narrowly confined to state-led innovation, private-sector partnerships, and large-scale infrastructure investments. For instance, in his COP28 speech, Al Jaber asserted that “this is a moment for transformational action, not incremental steps,” while simultaneously emphasizing the need to “unlock trillions in climate finance” and “scale up technological solutions” (AlJaber, 2023). These statements construct a logic of emergency that justifies accelerated policy action, but they also reinforce the notion that only elite-driven, capital-intensive interventions are viable, a hallmark of what Li (2007) terms the “rendering technical” political problems. At the same time, the discourse is marked by conspicuous silences. Nowhere in the UAE’s official climate narrative is there any substantial reference to environmental justice, labour conditions in green industries, or the role of civil society in shaping climate priorities (Al-Sarihi & Mason, 2020; Dougherty et al., 2019; Koch, 2022). This strategic omission is not accidental but deliberately functional. Because it enables the state to monopolise the climate agenda, avoiding contentious topics that could invite critique or call for broader participation. As Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2020) argue, securitisation in non-democratic regimes often works not only through what is said, but through what is systematically left unsaid. In the case of the UAE, the silence surrounding ecological accountability and distributive equity ensures that climate security becomes a domain of executive performance rather than democratic deliberation.

Beyond its domestic function, the UAE's climate security discourse plays a central role in the state's strategy of international image management. By adopting the language of urgency, responsibility, and inclusivity, the regime positions itself as a forward-thinking and cooperative actor in global climate governance. The COP28 presidency offered a prime opportunity for this projection, from the launch of the "UAE Consensus" to Al Jaber's repeated calls for "bridging the global divide," the Emirati leadership carefully curated a narrative of multilateral stewardship and pragmatic optimism (UNFCCC, 2023; COP28, 2023). This aligns with what Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2019) call "strategic norm engagement," wherein states embrace global norms not necessarily to internalise them, but to enhance their legitimacy in international arenas.

The UAE's climate diplomacy also shields it from criticism over human rights, surveillance, and migrant labour. Environmental initiatives foster ties with international institutions, corporations, and climate figures, projecting the country as a model of transition leadership. Yet this curated image conceals contradictions between its green ambitions and its hydrocarbon-dependent, elite-driven economy. Here, climate leadership is less about structural change than about symbolic positioning, illustrating how climate security discourse can serve both domestic legitimisation and transnational reputation-building under authoritarian rule. The UAE demonstrates how climate security can serve both as a narrative of urgency and a means of regime legitimisation. By casting climate change as a threat requiring decisive, centralised action, leaders present the state and its technocratic elites as indispensable while sidestepping issues like fossil fuel dependence or civic participation. This mix of securitisation, authoritarian environmentalism, and green diplomacy boosts both domestic authority and international standing. Similar dynamics are also seen in Saudi Arabia, the focus of the next section.

#### **10.4.2. Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia's climate security discourse balances its role as a major oil exporter with its bid to rebrand as a sustainable actor in a post-carbon world. Under Vision 2030 and the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI), the Kingdom promotes afforestation, clean energy, and carbon circularity as both development goals and security imperatives linked to economic diversification and social stability (Abdelraouf & Nagasawa, 2023). Leaders describe climate change as a "strategic challenge" demanding coordinated action, while insisting that the transition must not undermine energy security or sovereignty. This dual narrative of climate leadership and fossil fuel pragmatism illustrates how securitisation works within an authoritarian, rentier-state embedded in the global fossil economy.

In Saudi Arabia, climate securitisation is primarily articulated through royal and ministerial voices, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman serving as the

central securitizing actor. His public statements consistently frame environmental degradation as an urgent national concern tied directly to Saudi Arabia's long-term economic and geopolitical stability. For example, in announcing the launch of the Saudi Green Initiative, the Crown Prince declared that "we reject the false choice between preserving the economy and protecting the environment," positioning both as co-dependent referent objects (Thomas & Venema, 2022). Similarly, Vision 2030 frames environmental sustainability as essential to maintaining a "vibrant society, thriving economy, and ambitious nation", a national trinity frequently invoked in Saudi political discourse (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). This framing establishes a narrative in which the state itself, personified through the monarchy, is the sole actor capable of protecting the country from ecological risk. Climate change is presented not as a distant or diffuse phenomenon, but as a direct threat to development goals, food and water security, and national prosperity. In the Saudi Green Initiative's promotional language, the Kingdom is cast as "leading regional efforts" to combat desertification and emissions, implying that inaction would jeopardize both domestic welfare and regional stability (Chaaben et al., 2022). Through these rhetorical strategies, the regime solidifies its position as the ultimate protector of the environment and the central planner of its management. And simultaneously it is aligning with international climate action norms, albeit selectively and without implementing substantial political reforms.

As in other contexts, Saudi Arabia's climate discourse legitimizes exceptional state action by framing environmental challenges as technical crises requiring centralised, top-down solutions. This logic is especially evident in official SGI communications, which emphasize large-scale afforestation programs, carbon capture technologies, and renewable energy megaprojects such as NEOM (About NEOM, n.d.; Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2022). These initiatives are presented as "unprecedented steps" taken to "lead the Middle East into a green era," a formulation that normalises executive-led interventions without public consultation or legislative oversight. In this context, climate security becomes a domain of technocratic statecraft, administered by experts, sanctioned by the monarchy, and shielded from political contestation. The discourse also contains notable silences. As can be seen in the recent initiatives, Saudi climate strategy makes little mention of citizen participation, civil society, or the socio-environmental costs of its extractive economy. Absent are discussions of the environmental toll of oil production, water-intensive infrastructure, or the rights of communities affected by mega-projects. Even in international forums, references to climate justice remain abstract, framed in terms of "responsibility" and "collaboration" rather than equity or redistribution. In Saudi Arabia, securitisation thus entails not only making climate visible but rendering structural critique invisible.

Alongside its domestic narrative, Saudi Arabia's climate security discourse also

functions as a carefully calibrated tool of international image management. By hosting regional summits, issuing joint statements, and participating in global climate platforms, the Kingdom projects itself as a cooperative and responsible actor aligned with global sustainability norms. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's announcement of the Middle East Green Initiative in 2021, for instance, was framed as a regional leadership move, promising to plant 50 billion trees and reduce regional carbon emissions by more than 60%. This ambitious rhetoric signals environmental concern: However, it often coexists uneasily with the regime's ongoing investment in fossil fuel infrastructure and its resistance to binding international climate obligations. At events like COP28, Saudi representatives have simultaneously advocated for climate cooperation and pushed back against language phasing out fossil fuels, an ambivalence that reveals the limits of their commitment (Lo, 2024). By presenting itself as both a climate reformer and a custodian of global energy stability, the Kingdom acts along "strategic conformism" (Sending & Neumann, 2006). It means adopting the aesthetics and vocabulary of international norms without embracing their deeper political or institutional implications. In doing so, Saudi Arabia leverages the symbolic capital of climate security not only to deflect criticism but also to reassert sovereign control over the pace and terms of its environmental transition.

The Saudi case shows how climate security discourse is used to balance economic diversification, fossil fuel preservation, and international legitimacy. Through high-level speeches, policy initiatives, and symbolic green pledges, the Kingdom presents itself as both a victim of and a solution to climate risk, while tightly controlling debate and side-lining structural critique. This securitisation model serves regime durability as much as environmental protection. Similar dynamics appear in other MENA regimes, including Egypt, which has developed its own version of climate securitisation amid domestic repression and international scrutiny.

### **10.4.3. Egypt**

Egypt plays a central role in regional climate diplomacy, hosting COP27 in 2022 and presenting its climate agenda as both a sign of vulnerability and of leadership. Under Vision 2030 and the National Climate Change Strategy (NCCS) (Ministry of Environment, n.d.), climate change is framed as a threat to water security, food systems, and social stability, especially given Nile-dependent agriculture and fiscal pressures. Leaders such as Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry have used this framing to seek international solidarity while tightly limiting domestic participation. This blend of global visibility and restricted civic space illustrates how authoritarian regimes securitize environmental risk to project leadership abroad and maintain control at home.

In Egypt, climate securitisation is led predominantly by senior state officials, particularly the President and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During the lead-up

to and throughout COP27, Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry acted as the central securitizing actor, repeatedly framing climate change as an existential challenge for developing countries, since he was the COP27 president at that moment. In his opening address at the summit, Shoukry described climate change as a “present danger to human lives, livelihoods, and the foundations of peace,” asserting that failure to act would constitute a collective threat to national and global stability (UNFCCC, 2022). This framing draws on both moral and geopolitical claims. It casts Egypt and similar nations as frontline victims of a crisis they did not cause, while also positioning them as indispensable voices in shaping solutions. The referent object in Egyptian discourse is twofold. Domestically, it is the state’s capacity to provide essential services (particularly water and food security) in the face of growing climate-induced stress on the Nile River and agricultural productivity (UNFCCC, 2022). Internationally, it is the principle of global climate justice, especially equitable access to finance and technology. Egypt’s National Climate Change Strategy 2050 reflects this dual concern, emphasizing the need to protect national resilience while simultaneously demanding that “responsibility and support be equitably shared” (Ministry of Environment of Egypt, 2024). This dual framing reinforces the regime’s role as both protector of national survival and advocate for the Global South, even as it tightly regulates internal debate and civic engagement on environmental issues.

Egypt’s climate discourse is marked by a strong emphasis on exceptionalism, portraying the state as uniquely burdened and thus uniquely entitled to centralised control (Barnes, 2015). Government rhetoric routinely presents climate change as a compound crisis threatening water scarcity, food security, and social unrest. This framing not only justifies top-down state planning but also discourages broader societal engagement. For instance, in official climate strategy documents, there is repeated emphasis on “strengthening national institutions and emergency preparedness mechanisms,” with little discussion of civic participation or democratic accountability (Ministry of Environment of Egypt, 2022). The securitised tone implies that technical expertise and national unity, rather than pluralistic dialogue, are the most appropriate tools for managing climate risks. Conspicuously absent from the discourse are issues related to environmental justice, local knowledge, and the role of civil society. Even during COP27, a platform that typically allows for robust civil engagement, activist spaces were heavily restricted, and public demonstrations were virtually absent (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Topics such as pollution from mega-projects, forced relocations, or the environmental costs of infrastructure expansion are rarely addressed in state narratives. Instead, the discourse operates through a form of selective visibility: problems that align with regime stability are amplified, while those that might incite political criticism are marginalised.

Hosting COP27 offered Egypt a rare opportunity to project itself as a climate leader on the global stage. The summit was framed by Egyptian officials as “Africa’s COP,” with a strong emphasis on climate justice, loss and damage, and the needs of vulnerable states (UNFCCC, 2022; State Information Service, 2022). Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, acting as COP27 President, repeatedly called for “transformative action” and a “just implementation” agenda, phrases that echoed the demands of the Global South while positioning Egypt as a broker between North and South (UNFCCC, 2022). The state-controlled media reinforced this narrative, portraying Egypt not just as a victim of climate change but as a responsible power amplifying African voices in multilateral forums.

However, this performance of green diplomacy stood in stark contrast to domestic restrictions on civil society and environmental activism. Numerous reports documented the repression of local environmental NGOs, surveillance of international delegates, and the exclusion of grassroots actors from meaningful participation (Human Rights Watch, 2022). While Egypt advocated globally for climate justice, it offered few channels for domestic deliberation on environmental harms caused by its own development model like water mismanagement or desertification linked to mega-infrastructure projects. This duality reflects what Jasanoff and Martello (2004) term “civic epistemology mismatch”, the public performance of normative alignment with international values, without institutionalizing those norms at home. Egypt’s climate diplomacy thus functions less as a vehicle for structural change than as a strategy of reputational management, enabling the regime to accumulate symbolic capital while maintaining political control.

Egypt’s climate discourse balances global engagement with domestic control. Framing itself as a moral voice for the Global South (especially as COP27 host) the regime invokes vulnerability and climate justice while restricting scrutiny and side-lining civil society, thereby reinforcing a technocratic, securitised governance model. This mirrors a wider regional trend in which climate security serves both international legitimation and internal consolidation. With the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt now examined, the next section offers a comparative reflection, highlighting shared patterns such as exceptionalism, silencing dissent, and selective adoption of global norms and of course alongside differences shaped by political economies and foreign policy aims.

### **10.5. Comparative Reflections of Patterns and Divergences**

The climate security discourses of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt share a core structure: framing climate change as an existential threat, invoking national exceptionalism, and selectively adopting global norms. Yet important differences arise from their distinct political economies, international ambitions, and state–

society dynamics. The table below summarizes these patterns, capturing both the common strategies and the variations in emphasis across the three cases.

**Table 1**  
*Summary of Climate Securitisation Discourse in the Middle East*

Dimension	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Saudi Arabia	Egypt
<b>Securitising Actor(s)</b>	High-ranking state officials, COP28 leadership	Crown Prince, Ministry of Energy, SGI leadership	Foreign Minister (COP27 President), Presidential speeches
<b>Referent Object</b>	State stability, energy diversification, national progress	State resilience, economic diversification, energy dominance	National stability (food-water), Global South solidarity
<b>Speech Acts / Rhetoric</b>	“Existential threat,” “national responsibility,” “green transition”	“Unprecedented action,” “climate leadership,” “Middle East Green Initiative”	“Present danger,” “Africa’s COP,” “just implementation”
<b>Exceptionalism Indicators</b>	Justifies technocratic, top-down climate solutions	Centralised mega-projects as necessary state responses	Crisis framing to justify state monopoly over climate strategy
<b>Discursive Silences</b>	No civil society or labour voices, no discussion of carbon-intensive projects	Absence of critiques of fossil dependency, human rights, or displaced populations	Omission of pollution, forced displacement, repression of environmental NGOs
<b>Green Diplomacy &amp; Image</b>	Host of COP28, regional green finance hubs	Leader of SGI, climate cooperation discourse, simultaneous fossil expansion	COP27 host, voice of Africa, climate justice advocate, but with deep civic suppression
<b>Norm Appropriation Strategy</b>	Strategic adaptation of global norms to sustain soft power	Symbolic leadership while resisting binding obligations	Selective alignment with international values for reputational gain

The comparative matrix highlights how authoritarian environmentalism takes shape in practice. The UAE projects techno-optimism and market positioning, Saudi Arabia pairs symbolic leadership with energy realpolitik, and Egypt casts itself as a justice-oriented mediator for the Global South despite domestic repression. These differences reflect distinct approaches to legitimacy, state capacity, and regional ambition, yet all share a common logic: using securitisation to centralise authority, depoliticize debate, and manage international image under the guise of climate concern. Despite notable variations in regime type and economic structure, the climate security discourses of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt converge on a shared logic that frames environmental risk as a matter

of national survival and elite stewardship. In each case, exceptionalism serves to justify the centralisation of climate governance, presenting the state as uniquely positioned and solely capable of addressing the crisis. This framing constructs an atmosphere of urgency that delegitimizes dissent and limits deliberative space. For instance, generally the UAE promotes a narrative of enlightened technocracy, Saudi Arabia emphasizes visionary leadership under the Crown Prince (Krane, 2019), and Egypt invokes civilisational fragility linked to Nile water security (Barnes, 2015). Yet all three portray climate change as too complex or urgent for pluralistic politics.

This discursive architecture also facilitates depoliticisation. Climate change is largely narrated through a technical or managerial language, obscuring the role of power, inequality, and contested development models. Civil society actors are absent, muted, or co-opted across all three regimes (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Freedom House, 2023). Finally, each country strategically appropriates global environmental norms not to fully internalise them but rather to enhance international legitimacy. This selective adoption of sustainability rhetoric without structural reform mirrors what Morin and Orsini (2014) describe as “instrumental norm uptake”, where global discourses are filtered through domestic logics of regime durability. Thus, securitisation becomes less of a tool for urgent environmental protection than a means to govern risk in ways that consolidate political authority.

The rhetorical divergences observed among the three cases are not incidental but rooted in differing structures of political economy and legitimacy. The UAE’s discourse reflects a post-rentier ambition to construct a technocratic identity; Saudi Arabia’s narrative centers on preserving moral and economic leadership amid global transitions; and Egypt’s emphasis on justice and vulnerability stems from its dependency on external finance and international legitimacy. These underlying logics explain why each regime adopts a distinct tone while sustaining similar patterns of control and depoliticisation.

Beneath the shared logic of securitisation, the climate discourses of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are shaped by distinct political economies that generate varying interests and incentives. The UAE has positioned itself as a leader in green capitalism, using its oil wealth to finance renewable energy megaprojects like Masdar City and to host climate summits such as COP28. This enables the regime to rebrand itself as a forward-looking innovator while diversifying its economy away from fossil fuel dependency (Luomi, 2014). In contrast, Saudi Arabia’s discourse reflects a more cautious balancing act. The kingdom remains deeply tied to oil exports and has resisted binding climate commitments, even as it invests in carbon capture and afforestation programs under the Saudi Green Initiative (Krane, 2019; Aydin & Krane, 2021). The rhetoric of climate leadership is thus nested within a broader strategy to maintain energy hegemony under the guise of sustainability. On

the other hand, Egypt's position differs again. Unlike the Gulf monarchies, Egypt lacks the fiscal space to launch grand techno-green initiatives, but it compensates with diplomatic visibility and moral framing. These differing economic contexts produce not only different climate strategies but also different types of securitizing speech acts each reinforcing the regime's underlying political calculus.

All three regimes under study have engaged in highly visible performances of climate leadership on the international stage, using green diplomacy to bolster regime legitimacy and expand soft power. The UAE's climate diplomacy is embedded in a broader strategy of global branding. By hosting COP28 and positioning itself as a hub for green finance and innovation, the Emirati leadership seeks to cultivate an image of modernity and pragmatism that appeals to both Western allies and global investors (Koch, 2024). These efforts are not merely symbolic. They allow the regime to deflect criticism of its domestic constraints while attracting prestige and economic partnerships.

Saudi Arabia has followed a similar path, though with a distinct emphasis on regional leadership. The launch of the Saudi and Middle East Green Initiatives signalled the kingdom's intent to become a climate agenda-setter in the Arab world, even as it continues to prioritize fossil fuel revenues. These initiatives, frequently cited in international forums, serve dual purposes: they present the Crown Prince as a visionary reformer while shielding the regime from demands for systemic energy transitions (Aydin & Krane, 2021). Egypt, in turn, capitalised on its COP27 presidency to position itself as a moral voice for the Global South. By amplifying calls for climate justice, loss and damage financing, and equitable adaptation support, Egyptian officials sought to link national interests with broader normative claims.

While this study has focused on elite and institutional discourses, the exclusion of civil society perspectives is itself revealing. In many Middle Eastern authoritarian settings, environmental NGOs and grassroots initiatives operate under significant restrictions, which reproduces the very discursive silences analysed in this study. Future research could integrate these suppressed or informal narratives to reveal how policy implementation and everyday environmental struggles complicate official climate rhetoric. Such an approach would offer a more holistic view of how green authoritarianism functions in practice.

Taken together, the discursive strategies observed in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt illustrate how climate securitisation functions as a versatile tool for regime governance in the Middle East. While each case reflects its own political economy and rhetorical emphasis, they all converge on a common logic: framing climate change as a security issue enables the centralisation of authority, masks contested policy choices, and projects international responsibility without necessarily embracing transformative change. In doing so, these regimes construct

what might be termed “green authoritarian legitimacy”, a model that blends selective norm adoption with technocratic posturing and symbolic diplomacy. The final section turns to the broader implications of these findings, offering reflections on the risks and limits of securitised environmental governance in authoritarian contexts.

### **10.6. Conclusion**

This article has examined how Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia employ the discourse of climate security to advance domestic consolidation and international legitimation. Despite significant political, economic, and geographical differences, the analysis has demonstrated an interesting convergence: in all three cases, climate change is framed as an existential threat demanding centralised, exceptional responses. This securitised framing elevates the state as the sole legitimate actor, side-lines civil society, and positions environmental governance as a technocratic and depoliticised domain. By selectively adopting global climate norms while suppressing local contestation, these regimes construct what may be termed green authoritarianism which is a governance model that performs climate leadership outwardly while reinforcing hierarchical control at home.

Comparative analysis reveals both commonalities and divergences. The UAE projects itself as a hub of green capitalism, investing in megaprojects and branding itself as a bridge between North and South, while its discourse conspicuously omits labour rights, social equity, and fossil fuel dependency. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, balances its status as a fossil fuel giant with an ambition to lead regional green initiatives, presenting itself simultaneously as a climate pioneer and an energy hegemon. Its rhetoric of visionary leadership under the Crown Prince intertwines climate action with national pride and sovereignty, masking the structural contradictions of continued hydrocarbon dependence. Egypt, lacking the Gulf monarchies’ fiscal resources, compensates with diplomatic visibility and moral claims, particularly as host of COP27. By framing itself as a spokesperson for the Global South and climate justice, it secures reputational capital abroad even while severely restricting civic space at home. These variations underscore how securitisation adapts to distinct political economies and geopolitical ambitions, yet all operate within the same authoritarian logic of centralisation and controlled visibility.

At the regional level, these cases illustrate how climate discourse in the Middle East functions as both a domestic legitimation strategy and a diplomatic resource. Securitizing climate change allows regimes to claim urgency, mobilise financial flows, and showcase alignment with international norms, while avoiding deeper reforms that would empower civil society or challenge entrenched political economies. In this sense, the regional trajectory of climate diplomacy reflects not merely policy

choices but broader patterns of authoritarian governance: the state monopolises environmental narratives, frames itself as the protector against existential risk, and uses green diplomacy to buffer criticism over human rights or repression. The result is a politics of selective compliance and reputational management (what might be called a securitised green diplomacy) where climate urgency is leveraged more for regime survival than for transformative environmental outcomes.

Theoretically, these findings refine and extend securitisation theory. They show that in authoritarian contexts, the “audience” of securitisation is not a deliberative public but rather a constellation of elites, international actors, and controlled media spheres. Here, securitisation does not invite contestation but instead enacts authority, legitimizing exceptional measures and foreclosing alternative framings. The Middle Eastern cases highlight how securitisation loses emancipatory potential when it is embedded in authoritarian environmentalism: urgency becomes a tool of discipline, and existential framing justifies opaque, exclusionary governance. These dynamics underscore the need to re-examine the normative assumptions of securitisation theory and to consider how security language functions under non-democratic conditions.

For policymakers and international organisations, these findings underscore the importance of distinguishing genuine environmental reform from performative climate diplomacy. Supporting transparency mechanisms, fostering independent environmental research, and ensuring the participation of non-state actors are crucial for countering greenwashing tendencies. International cooperation in the region should move beyond financial or technological support to establish stronger accountability frameworks and inclusive monitoring mechanisms that prevent sustainability from being monopolised by state elites.

Ultimately, the discourse of climate security in the Middle East raises profound questions about the future of both environmental governance and authoritarian durability. While such narratives may generate short-term legitimacy and international visibility, they risk entrenching structural dependencies, marginalizing vulnerable communities, and undermining the long-term resilience needed to address ecological crises. High-profile declarations and green megaprojects mask continued fossil fuel dependence and limited domestic reform, amounting to state-led greenwashing (Koch, 2024). What appears as leadership on the global stage may amount domestically to state-led greenwashing, where symbolic pledges mask limited reform. Addressing the climate crisis in this region, therefore, requires not only technical or financial innovation but also greater attention to questions of participation, justice, and power. Future research should broaden the empirical scope to include other MENA states, trace the role of transnational civil society, and compare authoritarian and democratic securitisations of climate change. Such inquiries

would deepen our understanding of how global norms are strategically adapted and how security discourse can both stabilise and destabilise regimes. For now, the cases of Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia show that climate securitisation in the Middle East is less a pathway to transformative climate action than a mechanism of green authoritarian legitimacy which is a strategy that manages risks, maintains control, and projects leadership while leaving structural inequalities unresolved. As the climate crisis deepens, urgent calls risk being co-opted to entrench power under the guise of responsibility. Future research should expand to other regional cases, integrate civil society perspectives, and compare authoritarian and democratic securitisations to better understand how different regimes engage with risk, legitimacy, and environmental futures. Rethinking climate security will require not only policy innovation but also conceptual frameworks that address power, exclusion, and ecological justice together. Ultimately, engaging with climate governance in authoritarian contexts requires not only empirical scrutiny but also normative reflection on how sustainability can be advanced without reinforcing patterns of control.

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## CHAPTER 11

### INSTABILITY IN AFGHANISTAN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFGHANISTAN CRISIS

Anisur Rahman<sup>1</sup>

#### 11.1. Introduction

Historically, Afghanistan has resisted centralisation and foreign domination. From British imperial expeditions in the 19th century to Soviet intervention in the 20th and US-led involvement in the 21st century, the Afghan population has demonstrated a pattern of resisting foreign political orders, often couched in the language of jihad or national liberation. Following the 2001 US invasion and the subsequent fall of the Taliban regime, a Western-backed political order was constructed with aspirations of democracy, human rights, and modern governance. This state-building project faced persistent challenges, including corruption, weak institutions, lack of popular legitimacy, and continued insurgency. The eventual collapse of the Ashraf Ghani government in August 2021 and the rapid resurgence of the Taliban highlighted the failure of a two-decade-long international experiment in Afghanistan.

The return of the Taliban reasserted a different model of governance, one rooted in ideological, religious, and tribal traditions that conflict with the liberal norms embedded in the previous regime. The reconfiguration of Afghanistan's political reality following 2021 demands a deeper exploration of the reasons behind its chronic instability. Nonetheless, Afghanistan's enduring instability is deeply rooted in the convergence of two interlinked dynamics: its strategic geographic location and its deeply fragmented ethnolinguistic composition (Schetter, 2005). Most significantly, situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and in proximity to China and Russia, Afghanistan has historically been regarded as a geo-strategic pivot, inviting competition among regional and global powers. During the colonial period, it functioned as a buffer zone between British India and Tsarist Russia; in the Cold War, it became a theatre for Soviet and American rivalry (Nivi, 2017). In the post-9/11 era, the United States (US) re-entered the region not only to combat terrorism but to reassert influence in a zone critical for accessing Central Asian resources and countering the rise of China and Russia (Nichol, 2014).

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Yet, this global interest in Afghanistan has rarely translated into political stability; instead, it has often intensified internal contestations. The country's complex ethnic mosaic, comprising Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others, has historically lacked a cohesive national framework, resulting in political marginalisation, uneven development, and recurring cycles of violence (Leake, 2023). Ethnic divisions have been persistently instrumentalised by both domestic elites and foreign actors. External powers, in pursuit of their strategic objectives, have allied themselves with specific ethnic or tribal groups, thereby exacerbating internal fissures and weakening prospects for a unified central authority. This intersection between internal fragmentation and external manipulation has perpetuated a recursive cycle of instability, where foreign intervention fuels ethnic polarisation, which in turn invites further geo-political interference. Thus, Afghanistan has not simply been a failed state, but rather a contested geopolitical space—an arena where global and local interests collide, making state consolidation an elusive project.

This research aims to explore the factors behind the instability in Afghanistan by critically examining the interplay between domestic governance challenges and external geopolitical dynamics. At the internal level, the research focuses on structural weaknesses such as ethnic fragmentation, fragile state institutions, systemic corruption, and recurring insurgencies that undermine state legitimacy and social cohesion. At the external level, the study analyses the role of foreign military interventions, regional rivalries, and the geostrategic ambitions of global powers in shaping Afghanistan's political trajectory. By situating the Afghan crisis within broader theoretical debates on state fragility and post-conflict reconstruction, this research endeavours to offer a nuanced account of how the convergence of internal vulnerabilities and external pressures has perpetuated instability in Afghanistan. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to the academic discourse on conflict dynamics, order-building, and the challenges of sustainable peace in fragile states.

### **11.2. Afghanistan's Geo-Strategic Centrality and the 'Buffer State' Syndrome**

Afghanistan's historical trajectory as a centre of enduring political turmoil can be primarily understood through two interlinked lenses: its geo-strategic location and its deep-seated ethnic heterogeneity. These dual factors have persistently rendered the country vulnerable to both internal factionalism and external manipulation. Afghanistan occupies a critical position at the heart of Asia, acting as a land bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and East Asia. Bordered by major regional powers such as China, Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian Republics, being proximate to both Russia and India, Afghanistan sits at a vital geo-strategic nexus (Raja, 2025). Historically, this has drawn the

attention of competing global powers, especially during periods of hegemonic transition. In the 19th century, Afghanistan became the epicenter of the so-called 'Great Game' between the British and Russian Empires, both of which viewed the territory as a strategic buffer zone (Fuoli, 2018). This characterisation persisted through the Cold War, with the US and the Soviet Union viewing Afghanistan as a geopolitical prize in their struggle for global influence. More recently, post-9/11 American involvement in Afghanistan further reinforced its function as a geo-political chessboard, with US interests seeking to counter terrorism, gain influence in Central Asia's energy routes, and contain Chinese and Russian advances. However, the inability of external powers to transform military presence into lasting political stability has often exacerbated internal tensions.

Internally, Afghanistan is characterised by significant *ethnic and linguistic pluralism*. Major ethnic groups possess distinct cultural traditions, languages, and historical narratives of political marginalisation or dominance (Hanifi, 2011). This complex ethnic mosaic has been both a source of richness and a cause of chronic division. The absence of a strong, inclusive central state has often allowed ethnic identities to become politically salient, particularly during periods of foreign intervention or state collapse. Political elites have frequently mobilised ethnic loyalties to gain access to power and resources, while foreign actors have capitalised on these divisions to construct local alliances (Hussaini, 2025). For instance, during the Soviet-Afghan War, the USSR and the US both supported different mujahideen factions, many of which were drawn along ethnic lines. Similarly, during the post-2001 reconstruction, international support for warlords and factional leaders further entrenched ethnic clientelism. Ethnic marginalisation, particularly of Hazaras and Uzbeks in earlier regimes, fuelled grievances that translated into socio-political exclusion, violence, and even rebellion (Leake, 2023). Consequently, state-building efforts have continuously faltered due to the *absence of a unifying national identity and the lack of a social contract* binding these diverse groups together under a shared vision of Afghan nationhood.

Moreover, foreign powers have consistently exploited internal ethnic divisions to serve external geopolitical objectives. In many cases, marginalised groups have accepted external patronage in the hope of leveraging geo-political support to gain power or autonomy within Afghanistan. This dynamic creates a *recursive cycle of external interference and internal fragmentation*. External actors bolster ethnic militias or warlords, which weakens central authority, leading to a political vacuum and further intervention. As scholars like Antonio Farrell and Giustozzi have argued, this 'warlordisation' of Afghan politics, enabled by both domestic and international actors, has created a deeply entrenched system of localised power that resists centralised state formation (Farrell & Giustozzi, 2013). Therefore, Afghanistan's instability is rooted in the convergence of *external strategic interest*

*and internal societal segmentation.* These dynamics make Afghanistan less a failed state and more a contested space, an arena where global and local actors collide, each shaping and being shaped by the other.

### **11.3. Domestic Dynamics of Afghanistan's Instability**

As we have mentioned earlier, Afghanistan's persistent political instability is closely tied to its complex ethno-political landscape. Therefore, ethnic rivalry, rooted in uneven access to power and historical grievances, has been a central factor undermining national cohesion and state legitimacy. Pashtun dominance in the formation of the modern Afghan state under the Durrani dynasty institutionalised ethnic hierarchy, often marginalizing non-Pashtun groups (Ledvinka & Donovan, 2023). This imbalance intensified under the patronisation of the Afghan ruler, for example, Abdur Rahman Khan, who violently subjugated Hazaras and centralised authority through tribal patronage. This group also got privileges in the pro-American era (2001-2024). Despite this internal domestic political master, the foreign invader like the Soviet invasion (1979–1989), further fractured the country along ethnic lines, as resistance groups evolved into ethnic militias, transforming the anti-Soviet jihad into a fragmented civil conflict (Olumba, 2023; Bakhsh Rais, 1993).

Moreover, the post-Soviet era (1992–1996) witnessed the collapse of central authority and the eruption of intra-mujahideen ethnic warfare, particularly in Kabul. The emergence of the Taliban in 1996—a predominantly Pashtun movement—exacerbated these divisions by excluding and targeting non-Pashtun communities, provoking resistance from the Northern Alliance, composed largely of Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek factions (Hussaini, 2025). Therefore, the post-2001 US-led intervention, while aiming to create a representative government, inadvertently entrenched ethnic power-sharing without fostering national unity. Therefore, the Bonn Agreement empowered the Northern Alliance, leading to Pashtun marginalisation, which in turn facilitated the Taliban's resurgence (Ebrahim & Guhr, 2005). Electoral politics became increasingly ethnicised, with elite negotiations reinforcing communal divides rather than mitigating them. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has revived concerns of Pashtun exclusivism, as their regime has largely excluded other ethnic groups from meaningful political participation. In this context, ethnic identity remains a primary axis of political mobilisation and resistance.

The post-2001 period, while aiming to construct a representative democratic government, institutionalised ethnic rivalry rather than resolving it. Power-sharing was often managed through informal ethnic quotas and patronage networks. Political parties and electoral alliances were overwhelmingly ethnic in orientation, and national politics resembled a zero-sum contest among elites from competing

groups (Ibrahimi, 2023). Presidents *Hamid Karzai* and *Ashraf Ghani*-both Pashtuns-struggled to balance ethnic representation with central authority, often exacerbating inter-ethnic tensions. Despite this, ethnic rivalries were particularly visible during electoral disputes, such as the contested 2014 and 2019 elections, which resulted in power-sharing deals between Pashtun and non-Pashtun leaders. These arrangements were more about elite compromise than national unity and failed to address grassroots grievances. Moreover, ethnic militias were reactivated during periods of tension, undermining the authority of the central government and perpetuating insecurity.

The Taliban's resurgence and return to power in 2021 reopened the question of ethnic inclusion. Despite public statements promising an inclusive government, the Taliban's administration has remained heavily Pashtun-centric, with limited representation for Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, and this is mainly because of Pashtun dominance in the Taliban's politics since 1994 (Kristian Berg, 1999). This exclusion has provoked opposition in northern provinces and among diaspora communities, while raising fears of renewed ethnic suppression, particularly among Hazaras. The Taliban's attempt to project a unified Islamic emirate faces the same challenge that has plagued Afghanistan for centuries: a deeply divided society in which ethnic identity remains a primary axis of political loyalty and mobilisation. Without genuine inclusion and trust-building across ethnic lines, political stability remains elusive.

Moreover, since the Saur Revolution of 1978, Afghanistan's political elite have consistently struggled to establish effective governance and a welfare-oriented state. This persistent failure can be attributed to three key factors: ideological fragmentation, the instrumentalisation of religion in politics, and external interference that lacked cultural legitimacy. Firstly, the ideological trajectory of Afghan politics in the post-1970s period was significantly influenced by socialism (Dupree, 1992). The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) adopted a Marxist-Leninist orientation in Afghan political discourse that attempted radical socio-political transformations, including land redistribution, female emancipation, and secularisation of the legal system. However, these reforms were seen as foreign impositions by large sections of the traditionalist and religious rural population, triggering widespread resistance. The growing opposition culminated in the rise of Islamist insurgent groups, broadly referred to as the Mujahideen, who viewed the socialist project as antithetical to Islamic values and Afghan traditions (Rubin, 2002).

Secondly, the Mujahideen victory in the early 1990s, following the Soviet withdrawal and the fall of the Najibullah regime, did not lead to the formation of a stable and inclusive government. Instead, factional rivalries among various Islamist groups led to a brutal civil war, particularly in urban centers like

Kabul. The absence of a unifying vision and institutional coherence prevented the Mujahideen from establishing a centralised and functional state apparatus. The Taliban's subsequent rise in 1996 was driven by a desire to impose order through a strict interpretation of Islamic law, but their governance was marked by authoritarianism, gender-based repression, and international isolation (Barfield, 2010; Giustozzi, 2008). Secular and modernist Afghan elites, many of whom were in exile or marginalised within the country, rejected both the Mujahideen and the Taliban's religiously rigid governance as regressive and incompatible with modern state-building.

Thirdly, the post-2001 era, marked by the pro-American and Western-backed democratic government, also failed to produce sustainable governance. While billions of dollars were poured into Afghanistan for reconstruction and democratisation, the top-down model of liberal state-building did not resonate with Afghanistan's complex socio-political fabric. The Kabul-based government was often viewed as a client regime, lacking legitimacy among significant sections of the population, particularly in rural Pashtun areas where the Taliban reemerged as a formidable insurgent force (Suhrke, 2011). Corruption, political infighting, and the exclusion of key Islamist factions further delegitimised the state, paving the way for the Taliban's resurgence. By 2021, the Taliban capitalised on the failures of the pro-Western government, regaining control of the country with remarkable speed. However, the current Taliban regime appears to diverge in certain respects from its earlier incarnation in the 1990s. While present Taliban retains its ideological core, there have been indications-albeit limited-of a more pragmatic approach in areas such as diplomacy, governance, and engagement with humanitarian agencies and international recognition. Whether this revised posture will translate into effective governance remains to be seen, but the possibility of a more adaptive Taliban regime offers a critical juncture for Afghanistan's political future.

Afghanistan's persistent economic underdevelopment has long hindered the state's ability to ensure economic autonomy and prosperity for its population. Despite periodic efforts at modernisation, the Afghan government has historically struggled to create the structural conditions necessary for economic freedom. This vulnerability has been exacerbated by repeated foreign invasions and prolonged military interventions, which have not only disrupted local markets and livelihoods but have also contributed significantly to the impoverishment of the Afghan population. The post-2001 era, in particular, saw increased foreign presence under the guise of reconstruction and security, yet the economic benefits largely bypassed the broader Afghan society (Barakat et al., 2012 ; Goodhand, 2002). One of the most contentious issues surrounding Afghanistan's economic sovereignty is the exploitation of its vast mineral resources. Although the country is estimated to possess trillions of dollars' worth of untapped mineral wealth, including rare

earth elements, copper, lithium, and iron ore, these resources have remained under foreign control or subject to opaque agreements with multinational corporations. The absence of strong institutional frameworks and regulatory oversight has enabled external actors to dominate resource extraction, often with minimal reinvestment in local communities (States, 2020; Giustozzi, 2009).

In parallel, Afghanistan's economy remains heavily agrarian, with a significant portion of the rural population engaged in traditional subsistence farming. Agricultural practices have remained largely unmechanised and vulnerable to climatic shocks, pest infestations, and poor irrigation infrastructure. As a result, the rural economy has been unable to transition into a more productive or sustainable model capable of lifting communities out of poverty (Pain & Kantor, 2010). The lack of diversification in the rural sector has also made large segments of the population susceptible to economic shocks and dependent on foreign aid or illicit economies such as opium cultivation. This state of chronic economic distress has not merely been a symptom of Afghanistan's structural weakness but has also served as a fertile ground for political instability and armed resistance.

Therefore, political factionalism between Islamic-oriented and pro-Western leaders has emerged as a central obstacle to Afghanistan's political consolidation and stability. Islamic-oriented leaders, while drawing legitimacy from religious authority and traditional social structures (Wardak, 2017), often adhere to rigid interpretations of Islam that restrict women's emancipation and broader societal reforms, thereby alienating Western powers and international donors. Conversely, pro-Western leaders, despite receiving external recognition and support, face a domestic legitimacy deficit due to perceptions of cultural detachment and foreign dependency. This dual legitimacy crisis—where Islamic leaders lack external credibility and Western-oriented elites lack internal support—has perpetuated institutional paralysis, governance weakness, and social polarisation. As Pasarlay notes, Afghanistan's political system struggles to reconcile Islam's central role with liberal state-building imperatives, producing a hybrid and unstable constitutional order (Pasarlay, 2018). Similarly, Emadi underscores that modernisation efforts, particularly regarding women's rights, have repeatedly provoked resistance from religious factions, deepening ideological divides (Emadi, 1991). Thus, beyond ethnic rivalry, the persistent tension between religious conservatism and Western-inspired modernisation remains a structural impediment to Afghanistan's political advancement and societal cohesion.

#### **11.4. Looking Back to the Roots of Instability in Afghanistan**

The Monarchy regime in Afghanistan was changed with the Saur Revolution on April 27, 1978 (Rahman, 2015). The PDPA, backed by the Soviet Union, came to power and this party aimed to implement radical socialist reforms (Saikal,

2004). However, the socialist reforms were introduced rapidly and without sensitivity to Afghanistan's traditional, tribal, and Islamic social structure (Rubin, 2002). This led to widespread discontent, particularly in the rural and religiously conservative parts of the country. The PDPA itself was deeply divided between two rival factions-Khalq and Parcham-whose power struggles further weakened the government's legitimacy and administrative capacity (Dorransoro, 2005). As resistance intensified, the regime grew increasingly dependent on Soviet military and economic support to maintain its grip on power. By late 1979, with the PDPA on the verge of collapse, the Soviet Union intervened militarily under the pretext of defending the socialist revolution and stabilizing the region (Westad, 2005). On December 24, 1979, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan, orchestrated the assassination of President Hafizullah Amin, and installed Babrak Karmal of the Parcham faction as a more compliant leader (Grau & Gress, 2002).

This marked the beginning of an eleven-year Soviet occupation. The USSR's official justification was to assist a fellow socialist government under threat, but the broader geopolitical objective was to secure Soviet influence in the region during the height of the Cold War. However, the Soviet invasion ignited a fierce national and religious backlash. A decentralised resistance movement composed of Mujahideen fighters, tribal militias, and nationalist forces quickly gained momentum (Amin, 1984). These groups, often motivated by Islamic principles and a deep-rooted sense of Afghan independence, waged a determined guerrilla war against the occupying Soviet forces. With rugged terrain favoring local knowledge, and with substantial support from external actors, including the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and China, the Mujahideen inflicted significant casualties on the Soviet military (Coll, 2004; Roy, 1990). The Mujahideen insurgency inflicted severe losses on Soviet forces and eventually contributed to the Soviet Union's decision to withdraw in 1989, marking a significant defeat for Moscow and a turning point in the Cold War.

The USSR found itself mired in a conflict it could neither win militarily nor exit without political consequences. Despite its superior firepower, the Soviet army could never establish effective control over the entire country. Rural Afghanistan remained largely under Mujahideen influence, and urban centers were plagued by insecurity and insurgency. The war dragged on, draining Soviet resources, damaging its international image, and contributing to internal discontent within the USSR itself. By 1989, after nearly a decade of bloody conflict and with no decisive victory in sight, the Soviet Union withdrew its forces under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, acknowledging the futility of their intervention. The war left Afghanistan devastated, with hundreds of thousands of dead, millions displaced, and the country's infrastructure and institutions in ruins.

During the Cold War, Afghanistan became a critical theatre in the global power struggle between the US and the Soviet Union. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the US, along with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, actively supported the Afghan resistance movement—commonly referred to as the Mujahideen (Bakhsh Rais, 1993). This support was part of a broader strategy to constrain Soviet expansion and drain its resources through a prolonged insurgency. The Mujahideen received significant financial, military, and intelligence assistance, with Pakistan serving as the primary conduit through its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. Pakistan became a frontline state, serving as a conduit for US and Saudi support to the Afghan Mujahideen while pursuing its own regional ambitions and strategic depth against India. Saudi Arabia, motivated by its rivalry with Iran and its commitment to promoting a pan-Islamic identity, provided extensive financial aid to Islamist factions, thereby reinforcing religious militancy. In contrast, post-revolutionary Iran sought to expand its revolutionary ideology among Afghanistan's Shia communities, intensifying sectarian and ideological polarisation (Bakhsh Rais, 1993). Collectively, these regional involvements transformed Afghanistan into a battleground for competing geopolitical and ideological interests, deepening internal fragmentation and laying the groundwork for prolonged instability beyond the Cold War era.

Moreover, with the eventual withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989 and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Afghanistan descended into a civil war as different Mujahideen factions vied for control. Amid this chaos, a new Islamist movement emerged in the early 1990s—the Taliban, composed mainly of students from Deobandi madrassas in Pakistan and former Mujahideen fighters (Shahrani, 2000). Under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban rapidly gained ground by promising to restore order, implement Islamic law, and end the lawlessness that had plagued post-Soviet Afghanistan. By 1996, the Taliban had captured Kabul and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Basit, 2022). Although many of its members had once been part of the US-backed Mujahideen, the Taliban's ideology and governance approach diverged sharply from Western expectations. Their strict interpretation of Islamic law, harsh treatment of women, destruction of cultural heritage sites such as the Bamiyan Buddhas, and most notably, their harbouring of al-Qaeda, created serious tensions with the international community, particularly the US. Despite the Taliban's initial efforts to secure international recognition and diplomatic legitimacy, they were ultimately unsuccessful in forging substantive relations with major global powers. This diplomatic failure can be attributed largely to the Taliban's reluctance to align with US strategic objectives in the region, most notably their resistance to permitting Afghanistan's territory to be used as a transit corridor for American-backed energy pipelines originating in Central Asia and intended to reach the Indian Ocean, thereby circumventing Iran and

Russia. Furthermore, the Taliban's uncompromising ideological stance and their categorical rejection of US geopolitical ambitions in the region contributed to a deepening of bilateral tensions.

Consequently, the Taliban's regime began to be portrayed in Western narratives as emblematic of Islamic fundamentalism and a sanctuary for transnational terrorist networks, particularly following their continued harbouring of al-Qaeda operatives. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the US launched a full-scale military intervention in Afghanistan under the rubric of the 'Global War on Terror', aiming to dismantle terrorist infrastructure and remove the Taliban from power. The intervention was thus framed not only as a counterterrorism operation but also as a civilisational and ideological campaign against radical Islamic governance. This discursive shift served to legitimize US military objectives while simultaneously marginalizing the Taliban as international pariahs within the global order. Therefore, the Taliban's alignment with al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who was projected for orchestrating the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

In response to the attacks, the US launched 'Operation Enduring Freedom' in October 2001, with the objective of dismantling al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban regime that had given it sanctuary. The US-led invasion rapidly toppled the Taliban government, forcing its leaders into exile or hiding. In the aftermath, the USA and its allies supported the establishment of a pro-Western interim government led by Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun leader with connections to both Afghan tribal structures and the Western diplomatic community. Backed by extensive international aid and military presence, Karzai's government marked the beginning of a new era in Afghan politics—one characterised by efforts to build democratic institutions, modernize the state, and combat insurgency. However, despite initial successes, the new Afghan state struggled with deep-rooted challenges such as corruption, ethnic divisions, lack of infrastructure, and the re-emergence of the Taliban as a powerful insurgent force.

### **11.5. Global War on Terror: America's First Front in Afghanistan**

The Global War on Terror (GWOT), declared by the US in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks, has been widely critiqued as a geo-political project that reconfigured international norms around sovereignty, security, and intervention (Frank, 2018). At its core, the GWOT served not only as a response to transnational terrorism but also as a strategic framework through which the USA reasserted its global dominance, particularly in geo-strategically significant regions like Central and South Asia. Among its most consequential theatres was *Afghanistan*, which became the first target of US military operations under this rubric. The US-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 marked the beginning of what would become the longest war in American history. The initial

justification for the invasion of Afghanistan was framed around the objective of dismantling al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban regime that had provided it sanctuary. The *Authorisation for Use of Military Force (AUMF)* passed by the US Congress on September 14, 2001, gave the executive branch sweeping powers to target entities and states deemed responsible for the attacks (Congress, 2001). However, critical scholarship has pointed out that the war quickly evolved beyond a counter-terrorism operation into a broader state-building and geopolitical project (Chomsky, 2007; Mamdani, 2005; Rashid, 2002). The invasion allowed the US to establish a long-term military footprint in a region of high strategic value, particularly amid concerns about energy transit routes and regional power dynamics involving Russia, China, and Iran. Several scholars argue that the GWOT, and particularly the Afghan campaign, must be understood within a broader imperial framework. *David Harvey* (2003) conceptualises such interventions as part of the 'new imperialism', where military force and neoliberal restructuring are deployed to open up new markets and secure geopolitical interests (Harvey, 2003). In this context, Afghanistan was not only a battleground against terrorism but also a laboratory for political engineering, where the US and its allies attempted to construct a Western-style liberal democratic state from above. Therefore, *Neta Crawford* rightly pointed out how US strategic interests were deeply entangled with its public humanitarian justifications (Crawford, 2013). The narrative of 'liberating Afghan women' and 'building democracy' often masked the more structural objectives of asserting control over political regimes and regional security architecture. This aligns with *Talal Asad's* argument that humanitarian discourses frequently accompany and legitimize imperial violence in the modern era (Asad, 2007).

Therefore, the consequences of the US invasion were profound, both for Afghanistan and the global order. Domestically, Afghanistan experienced decades of instability, the entrenchment of 'warlordism', and widespread human suffering. The Taliban insurgency, initially quelled, resurged by the mid-2000s, drawing attention to the limitations of externally imposed state-building models (Giustozzi, 2007). Internationally, the war contributed to the erosion of norms regarding state sovereignty and the use of force. The principle of *preemptive self-defence* used to justify the invasion of Afghanistan (and later Iraq) effectively diluted the normative constraints of the *UN Charter*, which prohibits the use of force except in cases of self-defence or Security Council authorisation. The war also catalysed the expansion of the US security apparatus globally, including the proliferation of drone warfare, extraordinary rendition, and mass surveillance, often with scant oversight or accountability (Gregory, 2011). These developments reinforced a global security regime in which the US assumed the prerogative to define threats and intervene unilaterally. After two decades of military engagement, the abrupt withdrawal of US forces in August 2021 and the rapid collapse of the Western-

backed Afghan government exposed the fragility of the entire project. The return of the Taliban to power underscored the limits of military occupation and externally imposed liberal institutional frameworks in deeply fragmented societies.

Therefore, the post-9/11 US-led intervention in Afghanistan significantly altered the strategic landscape of South and Central Asia, prompting neighbouring states such as Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia to recalibrate their geopolitical interests in response to evolving regional dynamics and to the prolonged presence of Western forces and the evolving security vacuum. Initially, Pakistan emerged as a critical US ally in the 'War on Terror', leveraging its proximity and historical ties to the Taliban, yet simultaneously maintaining covert connections with various militant factions to secure its strategic depth against India (Fair, 2014). Iran, although ideologically opposed to the Taliban, viewed the US presence with increasing suspicion, particularly in light of the Bush administration's inclusion of Iran in the 'Axis of Evil', leading Tehran to adopt a pragmatic approach that included covert cooperation with Taliban elements to undermine US objectives (Byman, 2005). China, although maintaining a non-interventionist posture, became increasingly invested in Afghanistan's stability due to concerns over Uyghur militancy and the potential spillover of extremism into its Xinjiang region, later integrating Afghanistan into its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework (Zhao, 2016). Russia, having faced its own Islamist insurgencies in the North Caucasus, initially welcomed the US presence but grew wary of NATO's long-term military footprint in what it perceived as its strategic backyard, prompting Moscow to strengthen its influence in Central Asia through mechanisms like the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Anna, 2013; Cooley, 2012). Collectively, these regional powers responded to the post-9/11 intervention not merely as observers but as active participants seeking to shape Afghanistan's future in alignment with their broader security and geopolitical calculations.

### **11.6. The Middle East and Afghanistan Crisis**

Relations between Afghanistan and Middle East countries can be categorised into three main dimensions. Firstly, the Islamic legacy and shared cultural bonds. For centuries, Afghanistan has been bound to its Middle Eastern counterparts through a powerful Islamic legacy. As part of the broader Islamic civilisation, Afghan societies participated in shared religious discourses, spiritual institutions, and literary traditions, centered around Persianate, Arabic theological, and Sufi exchange, which transcended modern national borders. Secondly, the geo-strategic connectivity, crossroads and corridors. Afghanistan's geographic position as the 'heart of Asia' situates it at the interstices of South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East—a nexus point for trade, transit, and power politics. For millennia, it anchored the Silk Road and other critical east-west arteries. From a

geo-economic standpoint, Afghanistan offers the shortest and most cost-effective land routes for roadways, railways, and energy pipelines connecting Central Asian energy exporters to South Asian importers.

Modern connectivity initiatives reaffirm this. Projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)-linking India through Iran to Russia and Europe-plus China's Belt and Road (New Silk Road), and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) extension into Afghanistan, underscore the country's contemporary significance (Yuan & Jörg, 2017). For instance, in May 2025, a trilateral agreement between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan officially integrated Afghanistan into CPEC-a move aimed at fortifying regional integration yet also enhancing Beijing's strategic leverage. Thirdly, Superpower Shadows and Proxy Alignments of Afghan-Middle East relations.

Therefore, the political dynamics between Afghanistan and Middle Eastern countries can be heavily connected through the prism of great-power rivalry. During the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-89), key Middle East actors such as Saudi Arabia aligned with US and Pakistani efforts to funnel arms and funds to the mujahideen (Bakhsh Rais, 1993). Notably, private and charitable Islamic networks across the Gulf contributed even more than states themselves, with Saudi support-both public and private. Iran, however, took a divergent posture: while the Soviet Union backed the Kabul regime, Iran tended to support Shi'a factions-especially in Hazara-and developed a cautious alignment with the PDPA, viewing it as a counterbalance to rising Sunni militant groups fostered by Washington and Riyadh. Similarly, Middle Eastern capitals found their room for autonomous Afghan-policy manoeuvring curtailed during subsequent US interventions. Strong ties between the US and regional powers, especially Saudi Arabia, meant that when US forces invaded in 2001, many Gulf states were constrained in their ability to oppose the expedition-even if they harboured concerns about extremism-owing to broader strategic alignments. Thus, throughout the Cold War and into the post-9/11 era, the policy positions of Gulf and Middle Eastern nations towards Afghanistan were often shaped-or limited-by their alliances with superpowers. Their agency was frequently overshadowed by broader geopolitical imperatives governed by American or Russian strategic agendas.

In the contemporary time, with the withdrawal of US forces in 2021 and the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan's diplomatic engagement with Middle Eastern countries is at a critical juncture. States such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia are recalibrating their policies, balancing humanitarian concerns, security considerations, and geopolitical rivalries. Therefore, Iran's evolving approach toward Afghanistan-focused on border security, trade, and ethnic-religious linkages-underscores the complex layers of diplomacy in the region. In the wake of the US military withdrawal, Iran's strategic posture toward the Taliban-led Afghanistan

reflects both pragmatic engagement and concern for internal and regional security (Mohsen & Pargoo, 2022). Given the strategic importance of Afghanistan and the spillover threats posed by militant groups such as ISIS-Khorasan (IS-K) and al-Qaeda, Iran's stabilisation efforts showcase a nuanced strategy aimed at safeguarding its borders and protecting vulnerable Shia communities-particularly the Hazara-within Afghanistan (Lawson & Legrenzi, 2023).

Türkiye, unlike Iran, has pursued a *pragmatic engagement strategy* toward the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Ankara has sought to balance its geopolitical and security interests by expanding channels of humanitarian assistance, maintaining an active diplomatic presence in Kabul, and signalling readiness to cooperate on counterterrorism and border security. At the same time, Türkiye has refrained from extending formal recognition to the Taliban, adopting a cautious stance that mirrors the broader international community's reluctance to legitimize the new regime prematurely. This dual approach-deepening engagement while withholding recognition-allows Türkiye to secure its regional interests, maintain influence in Afghan affairs, and avoid international isolation, thereby positioning itself as both a humanitarian actor and a strategic stakeholder in post-American Afghanistan (Sabah, 2021).

Qatar kept a vital role in the US-Taliban peace process through the Doha Agreement. Beyond hosting negotiations, Qatar has actively sought to reshape the Taliban's image in the international arena by advocating constructive engagement over isolation. Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani emphasised this position during the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021, cautioning that 'boycotting them would only lead to polarisation and reactions, whereas dialogue could be fruitful' (Jazeera, 2021). This stance reflects Doha's broader soft power strategy: leveraging mediation to project itself as a neutral facilitator of dialogue while simultaneously managing the international narrative around contentious actors (Guardian, 2025). By urging the separation of humanitarian concerns from political differences, Qatar positions itself as both a guarantor of peace processes and an advocate for pragmatic diplomacy.

Therefore, within the broader context of shifting regional power dynamics and following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the regional political landscape has undergone a profound transformation, marked by the emergence of localised power configurations and strategic recalibrations among Middle Eastern actors. Qatar has consolidated its position as a diplomatic intermediary by facilitating negotiations between the Taliban and the international community. Iran has intensified its engagement with Afghanistan through border security arrangements, trade partnerships, and cultural diplomacy, reflecting its pragmatic approach to regional stability. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have pursued cautious diversification of their foreign policies, balancing their traditional Western

alignments with emerging relations with China and Russia. Türkiye, for its part, has expanded its influence through multidimensional engagement, combining humanitarian assistance, economic investment, and security cooperation. Collectively, these developments underscore a discernible shift from a Western-centric order toward a regionalised and multipolar configuration of power, wherein Middle Eastern states increasingly assert agency in shaping Afghanistan's trajectory and redefining inter-regional relations.

### **11.7. Afghan Resistance and the End of US Hegemony in Afghanistan**

The abrupt collapse of the US-backed Afghan government in August 2021 and the swift resurgence of the Taliban signified not only a monumental geopolitical shift in South-Central Asia but also marked the symbolic and material erosion of American hegemony in Afghanistan. This phenomenon, deeply rooted in Afghanistan's historical trajectory of resistance to foreign domination, reflects the enduring salience of indigenous political agency and the limitations of externally imposed state-building projects. The Taliban's return to power is not an isolated event but a culmination of persistent Afghan resistance shaped by local socio-political dynamics, religious ideology, and the failure of liberal internationalist interventions. Therefore, Afghanistan has long been characterised by its resistance to foreign occupation, often termed the 'graveyard of empires'. From British imperial incursions in the 19th century to Soviet intervention in the 20th century, and eventually American military occupation in the 21st, Afghanistan's political identity has been significantly shaped by resistance to external hegemons (Barfield, 2010). This resistance is not merely reactive but is deeply rooted in the tribal, religious, and nationalist consciousness of the Afghan population, where jihad has historically been framed as a moral and spiritual obligation to expel foreign forces (Saikal, 2004).

Following the US-led invasion in 2001, the Bonn Agreement laid the foundation for a new Afghan political order, which emphasised democratic governance, human rights, and economic liberalisation. However, this externally constructed liberal framework failed to gain organic legitimacy among vast segments of the Afghan population. The reliance on warlords, the marginalisation of traditional structures, widespread corruption, and the failure to deliver security or economic justice contributed to the erosion of trust in the Afghan state (Goodhand & Sedra, 2010). The US-NATO intervention, though initially welcomed by some segments of Afghan society, increasingly came to be viewed as an occupation—particularly as drone strikes, night raids, civilian casualties, and protracted militarisation continued. The Taliban, in contrast, effectively rebranded themselves not only as a religious force but also as a nationalist resistance movement fighting foreign occupation, thereby regaining traction among rural and marginalised communities (Giustozzi, 2018).

The Taliban's ability to endure and re-emerge as the dominant political force by 2021 was not solely based on ideological zealotry but rather on strategic adaptation and organisational resilience. Over the years, the Taliban transformed from a pariah insurgency into a sophisticated, decentralised network capable of negotiating diplomatically while maintaining military pressure. They exploited the governance vacuum left by Kabul in rural areas by providing informal justice systems, mediating local disputes, and maintaining a semblance of order—functions that the central government failed to perform. Moreover, the Taliban successfully leveraged regional geopolitics, maintaining tacit support or toleration from actors such as Pakistan, Iran, and even Russia and China, each of which viewed the US presence with varying degrees of scepticism. These alliances, combined with growing frustration over US foreign policy failures, created a conducive environment for the Taliban's political resurgence.

The fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, without significant resistance, epitomised the hollowness of the US-backed Afghan state. President Ashraf Ghani's flight and the disintegration of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) underscored the artificiality of an institution built primarily for external legitimacy rather than internal consolidation. This event symbolised not only the failure of two decades of US nation-building but also the symbolic end of America's hegemonic credibility in Afghanistan and, arguably, in broader regions of the Global South. From a theoretical standpoint, this decline in hegemony aligns with Robert Cox's assertion that hegemony is not merely about military or economic dominance but about the ability to shape ideas, institutions, and norms that become universalised (Cox, 1981). The US failed to embed its liberal values within Afghan society, rendering its hegemonic order unsustainable once the military withdrawal began. Moreover, the Taliban's return marks the reconfiguration of Afghan politics along more traditional, Islamic lines. While their rule remains contested—particularly regarding human rights, women's freedoms, and inclusivity—their political presence is undeniably indigenous. They derive legitimacy not from international recognition but from their perceived authenticity among segments of the Afghan populace, particularly in the Pashtun heartlands. This underscores the distinction between legitimacy derived from international mandates and that rooted in historical, religious, and communal structures. The case of Afghanistan calls for a re-evaluation of hegemonic order and resistance politics in the post-colonial world.

### **11.8. New Afghanistan Under Taliban: Prospects and Challenges**

The return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 is a significant shift in Afghanistan's political landscape, ending two decades of US-led intervention and ushering in an era fraught with uncertainty. While the Taliban's swift takeover surprised international observers, their ability to consolidate power has highlighted both the resilience of their ideological apparatus and the vacuum left by the

collapse of the US-backed regime. The new Taliban government, formally known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, now faces a multifaceted set of challenges that will define its legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. Therefore, the Taliban's military victory has enabled a degree of national unification under a single authority-albeit coercively-ending years of fragmented governance and competing warlordism. The Taliban leadership has emphasised a commitment to maintaining security, eradicating corruption, and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for transnational terrorist organisations-a key demand of the international community (Giustozzi, 2022). Furthermore, the Taliban's administration has sought to improve ties with neighbouring countries such as China, Pakistan, Iran, Qatar and Türkiye in hopes of attracting investment, particularly in mining and infrastructure projects (Kugelman, 2021). These efforts suggest an emerging pragmatism within the Taliban's foreign policy, aimed at securing economic lifelines and limited recognition.

Nevertheless, the Taliban regime faces profound challenges. Chief among them is the economic crisis precipitated by the suspension of international aid, which previously accounted for 75% of the government's budget (Bank, 2022). Afghanistan's GDP has contracted sharply, and over 90% of the population now lives below the poverty line. The regime's ideological rigidity, particularly regarding women's rights, education, and press freedom, has alienated both domestic civil society and foreign governments, impeding any path toward formal diplomatic recognition (International, 2023). Moreover, the reemergence of violent factions like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) signals that the Taliban's monopoly over violence is far from secure. The administrative capabilities of the Taliban are also under scrutiny. Their cadre, largely composed of fighters with limited bureaucratic experience, struggles with basic governance functions such as taxation, service delivery, and regulatory enforcement. Humanitarian organisations report ongoing restrictions on access, especially for female staff, further compounding the humanitarian crisis. Internally, ethnic and sectarian divisions-especially the marginalisation of Hazara Shia communities-pose risks to long-term cohesion and national reconciliation. Therefore, the Taliban's second emirate presents a paradox: a regime militarily ascendant but institutionally fragile. While their consolidation of control offers a semblance of stability, the lack of inclusivity, the deepening humanitarian crisis, and their pariah status in global diplomacy could jeopardize the very state they now rule. Whether the Taliban can transform from an insurgent movement into a governing authority capable of navigating complex domestic and international challenges remains an open question-one that will determine the fate of Afghanistan in the years to come.

## 11.9. Conclusion

The instability in Afghanistan in the 21st century represents a multifaceted crisis rooted in a complex interplay of internal and external dynamics. Internally, the enduring ethnic fragmentation, weak state institutions, and fragile political structures have consistently undermined efforts toward sustainable governance and national unity. The resurgence of the Taliban and the collapse of the US-backed Afghan government in 2021 reveal the deep-rooted legitimacy crisis within the Afghan state and the failure to establish an inclusive political framework capable of representing the country's diverse populations. Externally, Afghanistan has long been a geopolitical battleground for regional and global powers, from the post-9/11 US-led intervention to the shifting strategic interests of neighbouring states such as Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia. These external actors have often exacerbated domestic instability by supporting rival factions, pursuing divergent agendas, and instrumentalizing Afghanistan's internal divisions for broader regional leverage. Furthermore, the international community's inconsistent and at times contradictory policies, marked by military overreach, inadequate nation-building, and abrupt withdrawal, have deepened the crisis rather than resolved it. Ultimately, Afghanistan's instability cannot be understood in isolation. It is the outcome of layered historical grievances, socio-political fragilities, and competing external interventions. Addressing this instability requires a paradigm shift away from externally imposed solutions toward Afghan-led political reconciliation, regional cooperation based on mutual respect for sovereignty, and long-term commitments to institution-building and socio-economic development. Without tackling both the internal dysfunctions and the destabilizing impact of external interference, Afghanistan is likely to remain entrapped in a cycle of conflict, insecurity, and humanitarian distress.

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## INDEX

### A

Abraham accords xii, 13, 99  
Afghanistan v, vii, xv, 9, 130, 138, 139, 142, 171, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 225  
Agrarian 208  
Al-aqsa flood 37, 45, 48  
Al-qaeda 13, 135, 165, 210, 211, 214  
Anarchy 79, 142  
Anti-americanism 7, 20  
Apartheid 37, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54  
Arab league 11, 42, 57, 76  
Arab spring x, xv, xvii, 4, 11, 19, 21, 34, 36, 141, 159, 176, 177  
Arab uprisings iv, vi, xiii, xvii, 25, 29, 127, 134, 137, 138, 139, 163, 166, 167, 174  
Asymmetric warfare 15  
Authoritarianism iii, v, xv, 34, 156  
Authoritarian resilience iv, xiii, 22  
Autonomy 12, 63, 67, 68, 72, 128, 133, 204, 207  
Axis of resistance xii, 9, 14

### B

Bahrain x, xi, 11, 13, 17, 19, 69, 76, 154  
Balance of power vi, viii, xi, 175  
Ballistic missiles 137  
Bds 52, 53, 54

### C

Caliphate xi  
Capitalism v, xiv, 123, 146, 157  
Ceasefire 49  
Centralisation 186, 193, 194, 195, 202

China iv, vii, xiv, 2, 5, 6, 17, 20, 56, 57, 58, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 83, 84, 85, 87, 88, 89, 91, 92, 93, 95, 96, 99, 100, 139, 159, 171, 172, 173, 174, 177, 179, 181, 198, 199, 202, 203, 209, 212, 213, 214, 215, 217, 218, 219, 223, 225  
Climate diplomacy 178  
Clientelism 204  
Cold war xv, 20, 129, 162, 163, 202, 204, 209, 210, 214, 222  
Collective security 213  
Colonialism xiv, 53, 54, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 121, 221, 222  
Commodities 89, 90  
Conflict resolution ix, xii, xvi, 226  
Counter-insurgency xiv  
Counter-revolution 150, 161  
Counter-terrorism 31, 212, 227  
Coup d'état 25, 29, 32, 47  
Critical minerals xiv, 83, 89

### D

Decolonisation 52, 67, 102, 103  
De-escalation 14  
Democratisation vi, 34, 36, 66, 68, 160, 167, 170, 207  
Desalination 86, 88, 98  
Developmental peace xiv  
Diaspora 206  
Diplomacy vii, viii, ix, x, xiii, xiv, xv, 10, 11, 12, 17, 57, 58, 61, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 73, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 93, 100, 125, 130, 133, 138, 140, 178, 179, 182, 183, 187, 189, 191, 194, 195, 196, 207, 214, 215, 218, 221, 222,

223, 227

Drone warfare 212

## E

Eastern mediterranean 102

Economic sanctions 44

Egypt v, vii, x, xiv, xv, 10, 11, 12, 13, 17, 20, 34, 39, 47, 57, 64, 69, 76, 108, 109, 110, 111, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 129, 133, 139, 144, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 154, 155, 156, 157, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 183, 184, 185, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 197, 198, 199, 200

Energy security viii, 57, 81, 82, 86, 89, 92, 93, 96, 97, 187, 229

Environmental degradation vi, ix, xv, 188

European union 44, 59, 78, 110, 124, 227

Exclusive economic zone 110, 111

## F

Failed state 203, 204

Famine 48

Food security 190

Foreign direct investment 147

Free syrian army xi, 130, 138

Fundamentalism 211, 222

## G

Gas forum 103, 117, 118, 119, 120, 122

Gaza iv, vi, vii, xii, xiii, 14, 37, 39, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, 55, 76, 80, 91, 92, 99, 111, 125, 130, 133, 134, 137, 139, 140, 176

Gender 152, 154, 160, 207

Geopolitics vii, ix, xiii, xiv, 1, 17, 18, 96, 102, 107, 108, 117, 123, 133, 179, 183, 199, 217, 229

Global south 2, 62, 66, 67, 77, 79, 129, 159, 190, 191, 192, 194, 195, 217, 224, 225

Governance xi, 60, 62, 65, 66, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 80, 85, 89, 93, 94, 96, 97, 129, 130, 131, 132, 135, 136, 138, 145, 147, 149, 151, 152, 153, 155, 156, 159, 168, 169, 170, 173, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 187, 191, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 199, 200, 202, 203, 206, 207, 208, 210, 211, 216, 217, 218, 219, 227

Grand strategy viii, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 76

Great power competition vi, viii

Greenwashing v, xv, 178

Gulf cooperation council xi, 10

## H

Hamas 7, 14, 19, 37, 41, 42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 51, 54, 91, 127, 129, 133, 135, 137, 138, 139, 140

Hard power ix, 9, 73

Hegemony 2, 10, 13, 20, 67, 72, 84, 95, 125, 126, 136, 144, 146, 150, 152, 154, 156, 157, 160, 163, 193, 216, 217

Hezbollah xi, 2, 8, 9, 14, 15, 17, 19, 48, 127, 129, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 227

Human security vi, x

Hybrid warfare ix, 16, 129

Hydrocarbons 83, 123, 124, 125

## I

Imperialism iv, xiv, 103, 124, 125

Instability v, xv, 202, 205, 208

Intelligence xvii, 98, 210, 229

International monetary fund 147, 150, 151, 160

Intifada 37, 38, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 47, 55

Iran iv, vi, ix, xi, xii, xiii, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9,

10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 34, 41, 48, 57, 64, 69, 70, 75, 76, 78, 87, 92, 94, 96, 99, 133, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 203, 210, 212, 213, 214, 215, 217, 218, 219, 221, 229

Iraq xi, xiii, 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 57, 68, 129, 130, 133, 134, 141, 149, 171, 212

Israel xiv, 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 37, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 87, 91, 92, 98, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 117, 118, 120, 121, 122, 124, 126, 127, 133, 134, 136, 137, 142, 163, 164, 165, 166, 225

## J

Jasmine revolution 21, 30

Jerusalem 38, 39, 42, 47, 50, 52, 54

Jordan 1, 3, 20, 54, 64, 70, 71, 72, 73, 79, 102, 110, 118, 147, 156, 166

Judiciary 144

## K

Kuwait 57

## L

Labour migration 105

Lebanon x, xi, xii, xiii, 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 34, 42, 64, 68, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, 80, 108, 109, 110, 111, 115, 120, 123, 124, 126, 127, 129, 130, 133, 134, 135, 137, 138, 156, 227

Liberalisation 28, 143, 147

Liberation 46, 47, 202

Libya x, xi, 34, 102, 108, 109, 112, 125, 133, 138, 165

## M

Maghreb 36

Maritime xii, xiv, 110, 112, 113, 120, 123, 126, 137

Marxism 159

Mediation 64, 65, 70, 72, 78, 111, 139, 146, 215

Mercenaries 128

Middle powers 16

Migration viii, ix, xv, xvi, 105, 224

Militarisation xi, xiv, 151

Militias xi, 2, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16, 133, 204, 205, 206, 209

Mobilisation 25, 27, 145, 150

Modernisation 22, 26, 150, 153, 154, 155, 158

Monarchy xi, 6, 188

Multipolarity 171

Muslim brotherhood 12, 13, 17, 19, 41, 46, 47, 129, 165, 169, 170, 171, 174

## N

National security 217, 229

Nation-building 25, 217, 219

Nation-state 45, 50, 107, 108, 149, 221

Nato xi, 106, 164, 213, 216

Natural gas 103, 110

Neo-imperialism 102, 103, 105, 126

Neoliberalism 66, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 155, 156, 157, 159

Normative power 58, 59, 60, 77, 78, 227

Nuclear proliferation vi

Nuclear technology 81, 87, 88, 92, 101

## O

Occupation xiv, 42, 43, 47, 49, 52, 149, 209, 212, 216

Orientalism xvi

Oslo accords iv, xiii, 37, 38, 41, 42, 44  
Ottoman empire 24

## P

Palestine iv, xiii, 7, 37, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 46,  
47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, 55, 64, 69, 102, 109,  
111, 118, 125, 129, 138, 149, 165  
Palestinian vii, xii, xiii, 15, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41,  
42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54,  
55, 62, 80, 91, 92, 129, 135, 137, 142, 165  
Paramilitary 8, 9, 129  
Patronage 8, 153, 157, 204, 205  
Peacebuilding 64, 220, 221  
Peace process xiii, 43, 53, 215  
Peripheral states 145, 151  
Persian gulf 77  
Political economy v, xiv, 78, 143, 160, 161,  
224, 228  
Populism 159  
Post-colonialism 106  
Post-conflict reconstruction 12, 64, 203  
Power vacuum xi, 80, 131, 165  
Privatisation 147  
Propaganda 10  
Proxy warfare vi, viii, ix, xi, 130  
Public sphere 185

## Q

Qatar 12, 45, 57, 69, 75, 115, 116, 117, 121,  
122, 200, 214, 215, 218, 220, 222, 227  
Quartet 31

## R

Rapprochement 3, 17, 33, 70, 87, 91, 92, 137  
Realism ix, 15, 20, 220  
Rebellion 204  
Red sea xii, 16, 137  
Refugees ix, xii, 37, 39, 43, 47, 50, 52, 53, 226

Regime change xi, 28, 62, 155, 159, 168, 169  
Regime survival xv, 17, 22, 178, 196  
Regionalism 75  
Regional security complex ix, xiv  
Renewable 83, 84, 85, 86, 90, 185, 188, 193,  
229  
Renewable energy 83, 84, 85, 86, 90, 185, 188,  
193, 229  
Rentier state ix, 143, 145, 159, 160  
Repression x, xiii, 22, 25, 33, 144, 154, 155,  
156, 157, 158, 168, 170, 181, 182, 189, 191,  
192, 196, 207  
Resistance x, xii, xv, 1, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16, 17,  
22, 23, 25, 46, 58, 60, 63, 67, 72, 73, 94, 125,  
128, 129, 134, 135, 137, 141, 144, 154, 155,  
156, 158, 189, 205, 206, 208, 209, 210, 216,  
217, 220, 222  
Revolution xvii, 6, 8, 11, 14, 15, 17, 20, 21, 30,  
41, 135, 159, 206, 208, 220  
Russia xi, 6, 88, 89, 95, 100, 115, 117, 139,  
171, 172, 173, 174, 202, 203, 210, 212, 213,  
214, 215, 217, 219, 220, 225, 229

## S

Salafism 35, 136  
Sanctions 12, 44, 229  
Saudi arabia iv, vi, ix, xiv, 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12,  
13, 17, 19, 42, 57, 68, 70, 75, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85,  
86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98,  
99, 100, 101, 134, 135, 136, 146, 147, 148, 150,  
153, 156, 159, 164, 166, 172, 173, 179, 181,  
182, 183, 184, 185, 187, 188, 189, 191, 192,  
193, 194, 195, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 209,  
210, 214, 215  
Secession 12  
Sectarianism viii, 1, 2, 3, 4, 13, 17  
Securitisation 180, 181  
Security vi, vii, viii, ix, x, xi, xii, xiii, xiv, xv,

xvi, 2, 5, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 39, 41, 43, 44, 49, 57, 65, 66, 69, 70, 81, 82, 83, 84, 86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 103, 111, 117, 118, 123, 145, 147, 148, 149, 152, 157, 160, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 171, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 200, 207, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 218, 220, 221, 227, 229

Self-determination 46, 51, 53, 62

Settler colonialism 54

Shia crescent iv, xiii, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20

Social contract ix, x, 204

Social movements 34

Soft power x, 2, 8, 9, 10, 16, 19, 71, 154, 157, 192, 194, 215

Sovereignty xiv, 10, 12, 43, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 102, 103, 106, 107, 127, 129, 130, 131, 142, 152, 166, 187, 195, 207, 211, 212, 219

State capitalism 143, 145, 146, 150, 159, 160

Status quo viii, xi, 2, 5, 18, 48

Strategic ambiguity 73

Strategic autonomy 67, 72

Suez canal 150, 165

Surveillance 71, 73, 151, 154, 155, 156, 187, 191, 212

**T**

Tahrir square x

Taliban xv, 130, 138, 139, 202, 205, 206, 207, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 225

Terrorism vi, viii, xii, xv, 31, 128, 140, 164, 202, 204, 211, 212, 220, 227

Transitional justice xii

Tunisia x, 21, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35,

36, 108, 144, 146, 147, 148, 149, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 168

Türkiye iii, viii, ix, xi, xii, 1, 21, 37, 56, 102, 108, 109, 111, 112, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 120, 121, 122, 125, 126, 127, 130, 139, 143, 160, 162, 178, 225, 226

## U

United arab emirates 11, 19, 57, 68, 113, 133, 150, 153, 178, 179, 183, 185, 192, 195, 198, 200, 214

United nations iii, 38, 39, 43, 49, 50, 55, 56, 80, 110, 111, 112, 123, 126, 199, 201, 215, 220, 228

United states 2, 55, 56, 77, 81, 82, 83, 84, 88, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 99, 100, 101, 107, 136, 202, 222

Uranium enrichment 81, 87, 88, 91, 92, 93, 94

## V

Violence xi, xii, xiii, 13, 30, 103, 128, 131, 139, 203, 204, 212, 218, 221

Vision 2030 81, 82, 84, 86, 89, 90, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99, 153, 157, 184, 187, 188, 189, 200

## W

Wahhabism 135

War crimes 15

War on terror 165, 220

Water scarcity 190

Water security 86, 88, 188, 189, 193

Weapons of mass destruction 106

West bank 37, 39, 40, 41, 43, 44, 45, 49, 50, 52, 54, 55

## Y

Yemen x, xi, xiii, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19, 64, 129, 130, 133, 134, 135, 136,

137, 139, 140, 141, 142, 149, 154

## **Z**

Zionism 7, 43, 53



# CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

This book stands as a seminal contribution to the discipline, which address a critical gap in Middle Eastern Studies by moving beyond the reductionist narrative of “chronic chaos” to dissect the structural metamorphosis of the region in the twenty-first century. While existing literature often treats security, political economy, and social transformation in isolation, this book offers a holistic, multidisciplinary framework that bridges the divide between “hard” security concerns—such as proxy warfare and asymmetric conflicts—and “soft” security issues, including identity politics, ethno-nationalist dimensions, migration, and environmental degradation. By challenging established international relations paradigms that have failed to capture the post-2011 reality, the work provides an essential epistemological shift, offering scholars, policymakers, and readers of the field a rigorous lens through which to understand the collapse of traditional social contracts and the emergence of a multipolar regional order.

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E-ISBN 978-605-2238-82-0