Middle East 2024: Decoding the Complexities of a Regional System

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Introduction: Area Studies versus Systemic Approach[1]

1. Middle East: Transformative realities from 9/11 to 10/7

Three key events have significantly shaped the present-day Middle East: the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack in the United States, the Arab Spring of 2011, and the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023.

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attack in the United States had a profound and far-reaching impact on Middle Eastern politics. It influenced regional dynamics, prompted significant changes in US foreign policy, and had ripple effects throughout the broader international system. The US initiated military operations in Afghanistan to dismantle the Taliban regime, which had harboured al-Qaeda, the terrorist group responsible for the 9/11 attacks. The subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003, partly justified by concerns about weapons of mass destruction, led to the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. The US and its allies intensified efforts to combat terrorism globally, including in the

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Middle East. It had implications for the political landscape in the region, as states faced pressure to cooperate in counterterrorism efforts. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with the broader War on Terror, contributed to regional instability. The Middle East witnessed shifts in alliances and geopolitical dynamics. The US strengthened ties with some regional partners while relations with others became more strained. The invasion of Iraq, in particular, affected regional perceptions of US intentions and capabilities. The power vacuum in Iraq created fertile ground for the rise of extremist groups, including ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). These groups posed significant security challenges to the region and beyond.

Consequently, the US increased its military presence, establishing bases in various countries to monitor and respond to security threats. This military presence influenced the regional balance of power and sparked contention in some countries. The post-9/11 period also had implications for US–Iran relations. Despite periods of engagement, particularly in the early 2000s, tensions persisted, particularly regarding issues such as Iran's nuclear program.

The politics of the Middle East underwent significant changes after the Arab Spring in 2011. The Arab Spring, which began with widespread protests and uprisings across the region, marked a turning point in the political landscape of the Middle East. Protests and uprisings in several countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, led to the toppling of long-standing leaders and regimes. The political landscape witnessed shifts as new governments, often with different political orientations, took charge. The regional instability created by political transitions allowed non-state actors, including militant groups and militias, to gain prominence and reinforce their presence. The sectarian clashes fuelled proxy wars, especially in Syria and Yemen, with regional and global powers supporting opposing factions. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran intensified, contributing to conflicts and geopolitical tensions. Conflicts and political instability led to humanitarian crises, displacing millions and contributing to a significant refugee and migrant flow. The Syrian refugee crisis, in particular, had far-reaching regional and global implications.

Traditional alliances were reassessed as geopolitical dynamics shifted. Countries sought new partnerships based on shared interests and geopolitical considerations. The relationship between the US and some traditional allies, such as Egypt, changed. The focus on energy security and the Middle East's geopolitical importance prompted global powers' strategic shifts. Russia and China increased their involvement in the region, and the continued engagement of the US shaped the balance of power. Economic challenges, including fluctuations in oil prices, financial mismanagement, and the impact of conflicts, affected the economic stability of several Middle Eastern countries.

On 7 October 2023, the Palestinian armed resistance group Hamas attacked Israeli military installations and settlements, resulting in the deaths of approximately 1,200 Israelis. Israel responded by launching a war on Gaza.[2] The Hamas attack not only changed the course of the Palestine–Israel conflict but also altered the dynamics of the entire Middle East. It dealt a blow to the US strategy of reducing tension in the region through efforts to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel and de-escalate ties with Iran. Also called into question was President Biden's policy, which sought to create an economic corridor between India, the Middle East, and Europe over the past three years as a counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The new situation placed Arab states and Iran in a difficult position, as they had to take a clear stance on the Palestinian issue, which had been sidelined in regional relations in recent years.[3]

At the same time, the escalation of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and Israel's war in Gaza strained relations between the West and countries of the so-called Global South, which condemned Israel's actions in Gaza.[4] A manifestation of this confrontation was South Africa's referral to the International Court of Justice

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[2]   'Hamas's October 7 Attack: Visualizing the Data,' *CSIS*, 19 December 2023, Center for Strategic International Studies, https://www.csis.org/analysis/hamass-october-7-attack-visualizing-data (accessed 26 February 2024).

[3]   Ibid.

[4]   'What is South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the ICJ?' *BBC News*, 30 January 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67922346 (accessed 2 February 2024).

in the Hague of a complaint against Israel for genocide in Gaza. It was the first case in history when such an accusation was directed against Zionist ideology. Serious tensions arose among Western countries when over 800 serving officials in the US and Europe signed a statement warning that their own governments' policies could lead to "grave violations of international law."[5]

We will analyse the regional power dynamics in the Middle East in 2024, conditioned by the events presented above, through theories of international relations. Specifically, we intend to determine power distribution among actors in the Middle East, including states and non-state entities, identify influential players, and assess their roles in shaping regional politics.

2. Middle East Studies and theories of International Relations

Studying Middle Eastern international relations through International Relations theory has yet to be popular among Middle East scholars. Andrea Tetti, when writing about how Middle East studies and International Relations have been "historically unable to build interdisciplinary bridges,"[6] points out the reasons for this state of affairs. The most significant of these was the intellectual and political struggles between Middle East studies researchers and specialists in International Relations. These struggles, far from being a mere clash of theoretical standpoints, have profoundly impacted both disciplines, shaping their understanding of the Middle East region. If international relations treated the Middle East the same way as other regions, Middle East Studies would emphasize its complete distinctiveness. Tetti believes that the Middle East Studies position was typical of other Area Studies, and the distinctiveness of the Middle East was described

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5   Tom Bateman, 'Western officials in protest over Israel Gaza policy,' *BBC News*, 2 February 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68177357 (accessed 3 February 2024).

6   Andrea Tetti, 'Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies band the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy,' *European Journal of International Relations* 13, 1 (2007), 118.

using concepts such as the "Arab mind" and "Islamic civilization."[7] Morten Valbjørn writes that if International Relations as a discipline can be termed 'culture-blind,' then Middle East Studies can be called 'culture-bind.' In other words, while International Relations was "aiming for 'universal' knowledge despite cultural traits," Area Studies emphasized the cultural limits to generalization.[8]

The two disciplines, Middle East studies and International Relations, present contrasting approaches to the subject under study. Area Studies are descriptive, while International Relations theories adopt an explanatory approach. Both provide an answer to the question, "What is the Middle East?" albeit not to the same extent. The descriptive approach presents the region from the perspective of history, culture, economics, and politics, achieving this result through the analysis of similarities and differences among individual countries. In this way, common features can be identified to delineate the region. However, as James H. Lebovic writes, identifying the region based on similarities "can hide differences and, while the Middle East might appear to be homogenous, it has been torn by conflict related to differences within and between nations."[9] Additionally, descriptive studies do not explain or even examine foreign policy.

Those mentioned above, "intellectual and political struggles" between Middle East Studies and International Relations, refer to the origins of the emergence of Area Studies. They began to develop after World War II in connection with the Cold War and "merely served as a pool of data for testing theories developed on the Western experience. This disciplinary division of labour also constituted the hierarchy between area studies specialists and disciplinary generalists. It was based on this divide that led

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[7]   Ibid., 118–19.

[8]   Morten Valbjørn, 'Towards a "Mesopotamian Turn"? The Study of Middle Eastern International Relations within International Relations and Middle East Studies,' *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 14, 1/2 (2004), 47–76.

[9]   James H. Lebovic, 'The Middle East: The Region as a System,' *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations* 3, 22 (1986), 267–89, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03050628608434659.

students of world politics to think that the only worthwhile way of engaging with the politics and history of world regions is to the extent that they can be made to appear as particular instances of the universal stories told in and about the West."[10]

The end of the Cold War sparked a debate about the future of Middle East Studies, initiated by Rashid Khalidi in his presidential address to the annual convention of the Middle East Studies Association in 1994. Khalidi asked, "Is there a future for Middle East Studies?" and his answer was that for Middle East Studies to have a future, scholars "would need to reach beyond their own area of interest to other areas in the broader social science disciplines (such as political science and economics)."[11] Similarly, Robert Bates proposed that "area studies specialists should embrace the move towards a disciplinary-orientated view which would amount to scholars gaining new skills in the use of formal theory."[12]

As a result of this approach, the list of publications connecting Middle East Studies with theories of International Relations began to grow longer, and International Relations theorists, such as neorealist Stephen M. Walt and constructivist Michael Barnett, referred to elements of Middle Eastern reality in their theoretical deliberations.[13] Brent E. Sasley lists publications where authors pointed out the necessity of combining both approaches, as well as those where both approaches clashed radically.[14] Sasley

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[10] Timothy Mitchell, 'Deterritorialization and the Crisis of Modern Science,' in Ali Mirsepassi Amrita Basu and Frederick Weaver (eds.) *Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 167. See also Tetti.

[11] Rashid Khalidi, 'Is There a Future for Middle East Studies?' *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 29, 1 (July 1995), 1–6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23061200 (accessed 15 April 2024). See also Pinar Bilgin, 'Is the 'Orientalist' Past the Future of Middle East Studies?' *Third World Quarterly* 25, 2 (March 2004), 423–33.

[12] Robert Bates, 'Area Studies and the Discipline: A Useful Controversy?' *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30, 2 (1997), 169, https://doi.org/10.2307/420485.

[13] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[14] Sasley includes in the first group: Lisa Anderson, 'Scholarship, Policy, Debate, and Conflict: Why We Study the Middle East and Why It

mentions three texts in which research on the Middle East was successfully presented using approaches different from International Relations theory. "Fred Halliday adopts a historical-sociological framework, Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami construct a neorealist scaffold (though they also incorporate several other conceptual elements), and Hinnebusch later expands on this by creating a multi-theoretical explanation based on historical sociology, structuralism, constructivism, and neorealism."[15]

On the other hand, Sasley provides an example of the book *International Relations of the Middle East*, written by eminent specialists under the editorship of Louise Fawcett, which has become a standard textbook on international relations in the Middle East, presenting two longstanding problems in teaching International

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Matters,' *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 38, 1 (June 2004), http://fp.arizona.edu/mesassoc/bulletin/Prespercent20Addresses/Anderson.htm (accessed 16 March 2024); James A. Bill, 'The Study of Middle East Politics, 1946–1996: A Stocktaking,' *Middle East Journal* 50, 4 (Autumn 1996), 501–12; Mark Tessler, Jodi Nachtwey and Anne Banda, *Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). Sasley includes in the second group: Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001); Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See Brent E. Sasley, 'Studying Middle Eastern International Relations through IR Theories,' *Ortadoğu Etütleri* 2, 2 (January 2011), 11.

[15] Sasley, 15. These works include Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002); Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). The list of publications in which the Middle Eastern system was considered in purely theoretical discussions can be supplemented by John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Walt; Benjamin Miller, *When Opponents Cooperate: Great Power Conflict and Collaboration in World Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

Relations in this region. The first is the organization of material not according to specific theoretical approaches in International Relations but according to regional topics and issues. As a result, the material lacks an overall organizing theoretical framework. The second characteristic feature of this book is a tendency to "list extant IR theories or models, and then argue that they are inadequate for explaining regional issues."[16] Sasley calls for overcoming such dichotomous arguments; he wants "to teach how various IR theories can explain specific events or conditions in the region" and proposes a teaching method for International Relations in the Middle East through International Relations theories.[17]

Andrea Tetti has written about the 'reconciliation' of International Relations with Middle Eastern Studies. Tetti points out two possible paths of convergence between the two approaches. One is associated with a proposal that Timothy Mitchell described as "provincializing the Disciplines" [International Relations – J.Z.]. It involved many researchers assuming that European/Western historical experience is a kind of archetype that serves as a reference point for analysing of phenomena occurring anywhere else. With such a belief, the geographical conditions of the phenomenon under study are of little importance, and the study itself is limited to aspects of social development determined by the archetype. Overcoming such an approach could be facilitated by a new assumption that knowledge created by theory is a kind of 'area'-bound.

The approach presented by the theory of constructivism offers greater possibilities for convergence. In this case, it was about an epistemic standpoint upon which convergence can be born. An example of 'collaboration' between International Relations and Middle East Studies is the concept of the *rentier state*, which originated in Middle East Studies, as well as the *power politics* approach adopted by Middle East Studies from International Relations, or the concept of *dependency* developed in analyses of regional studies.[18]

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16   Sasley, 16.
17   Ibid., 17.
18   Tetti, 134–35.

3. Objectives and methodology

In international relations theories, scholars often categorize analysis into three distinct levels to clarify the intricacies of global affairs: (1) the local level, which focuses on actions within individual states; (2) the regional level, which examines how domestic and systemic factors shape a state's foreign policy objectives, strategies, and actions; and (3) the global level, which zooms out to study the broader structure and dynamics of international relations.[19]

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of power dynamics in the Middle East post-2001. Our investigation is centered on the regional level of international relations, with realism serving as our theoretical foundation. This approach allows us to delve deep into the complexities of power dynamics, providing a nuanced understanding of the region's geopolitical landscape.

Understanding a regional system entails considering various critical factors, including geographical proximity, historical and cultural ties, economic interdependence, shared interests, political will and leadership, security concerns, and the presence of an institutional framework composed of regional organizations, forums, and agreements. Additionally, external forces, such as the influence of major powers, play a pivotal role in either fostering integration or triggering disintegration within regional systems. These external actors pursue their own interests and strategic agendas, which may align with or oppose the interests of actors within a regional system.

Kenneth N. Waltz and John J. Mearsheimer, authors of the two most prominent realist explanations of International Relations, point out two key elements in the structure of International Relations – its anarchic nature and the distribution of power. The distribution of power in conditions of a system lacking centralised authority indicates how actors behave within the system and explains why International Relations are arranged as they are. Distribution of power is a key concept in explaining how

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[19]   See Stanley H. Hoffman, 'International Relations: The Long Road to Theory,' *World Politics* 11, 3 (Apr. 1959), 371–72.

the international system works.[20] This tradition stems from Hans Morgenthau, who believed that power is a consequence of the pursuit of dominance and is thus related to human nature.[21]

Richard J. Harknett and Hasan B. Yalcin write that structural realism seeks to understand actors' behaviour by analysing of the environments in which they find themselves. Structuralism is about "what we have," which is essential for understanding "who we are" and "what we want."[22] Therefore, an approach from the perspective of realism theory also allows us to analyse how the leading regional powers seek to enhance and consolidate their power within the region and how they may engage in power struggles or alliances to achieve their goals. Security concerns are at the centre of such analysis, allowing for examining security challenges in the region, including regional conflicts, terrorism, and weapons proliferation, as well as determining how states secure their national security in the anarchic international system. Realism theory assumes that states act in their self-interest to ensure access to vital resources and use proxies to extend their influence without directly engaging in conflict. It applies to global powers whose influence on regional affairs must be considered. The US, Europe, Russia, and China pursue their interests in the Middle East, and Middle Eastern countries respond strategically to these external influences.

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[20]   Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); Abramo F.K. Organski and Jack Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Jack S. Levy, 'Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War,' *World Politics* 40, 1 (1987), 82–107; Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Joseph M. Grieco, 'Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism,' *International Organization* 42, 3 (1988), 485–507; João Resende-Santos, *Neorealism, States, and the Modern Mass Army* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[21]   See Stefano Guzzini, *Power, Realism and Constructivism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 47.

[22]   See Richard J. Harknett and Hasan B. Yalcin, 'The Struggle for Autonomy: A Realist Structural Theory of International Relations', *International Studies Review* 14, 4 (December 2012), 500.

Kenneth N. Waltz has stressed that, in conditions of anarchy, understood as the lack of overarching authority or a central government to enforce rules, states, as unitary actors, respond primarily to power distribution. This variable is the most important in the international system. But how should power be understood? Felix Berenskoetter writes: "*Power* is an essentially contested concept, with different interpretations held together more by a family resemblance than a core meaning. And because the meaning we choose determines which relations we consider relevant and where we locate political spaces – in short, how we conceptualize 'world politics' – it is pertinent to be aware of the different ways."[23]

Waltz uses the term *power* interchangeably with the term *capabilities*. Behaviour and outcome vary, but their ordering principles endure, and their "structures vary through changes in the distribution of capabilities across states."[24] Waltz treats capabilities as the material (economic, technological, and military) and political potentials of states, which determine "their ability to act."[25] Stefano Guzzini writes that "Power, traditionally understood as resources or capabilities, has been used as an indicator of the strength of actors, or consequently of the capacity to affect or control events."[26] A state may possess these capabilities to varying degrees and must use combined capabilities to secure its interests because it functions in a self-help system.[27] The mere possession of capabilities in terms of resources to influence the system does not yet determine the state's place in the system. The ability to solve specific problems is necessary. Waltz points this out, writing that "the ability or inability of states to solve problems is said to raise or lower states' ranking."[28]

In 1973, Henry Kissinger, a proponent of a realist approach to international politics, made a significant observation about the

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[23] The review of the concept of power depending on various research approaches is included in Felix Berenskoetter, 'Thinking about Power,' in Felix Berenskoetter and Michael J. Williams, *Power in World Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 1–22.

[24] Waltz, 102, 124–25.

[25] Ibid., 130.

[26] Guzzini, 47–8.

[27] Waltz, 131.

[28] Ibid., 129.

evolving power dynamics. He noted that from the perspective of military capabilities, there were two superpowers in the world. However, from the perspective of economic capabilities, there could be said to be five main groups. The political perspective was even more complex, with the number of states increasing by over 80 years after World War II. This led to the conclusion that power was no longer as homogeneous as before. Kissinger described this new situation: "The most striking feature of the contemporary period, the feature that gives complexity as well as hope, is the radical transformation in the nature of power. Throughout history, power has generally been homogeneous. Military, economic, and political potential were closely related. To be powerful, a nation had to be strong in all categories. Today, the vocabulary of strength is more complex. Military muscle does not guarantee political influence. Economic giants can be militarily weak, and military strength may not be able to obscure economic weakness. Countries can exert political influence even when they have neither military nor economic strength."[29]

In neoclassical realism, power is conceptualized in a specific way, reflecting the systemic structure of the international system.[30] Stefano Guzzini stresses that "This type of analysis typically identifies the contenders, their diverging interests and intentions, the open or tacit clash of wills, and the prevailing outcome. It shows which of the means that have been employed have proved most efficient. This allows the power of actors to be assessed not only for the power confrontation in question but also for future ones."[31] This means that the distribution of power is the primary determinant of state behaviour. How capabilities are distributed dictates the structure of the International

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[29] The information cited in this analysis is sourced from Henry Kissinger's 'Address by Secretary of State,' published in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976*, Vol. XXXVIII, Part 1, Do. 19, *Foundation of Foreign Policy, 1973–1976* (Department of State, USA, October 29, 1973), page 90, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v38p1/d19 (accessed 20 January 2024).

[30] Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Stephen E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[31] Guzzini, 20.

Relations system.[32] Guzzini explains why the distribution approach is at the core of the analysis of the international system. He stresses that, since the international order or system is difficult to grasp at first sight, "the distribution of power would give us the basis indication of who was responsible for controlling that international system."[33]

While Waltz introduced the understanding of power as resources or capabilities into circulation, David A. Baldwin introduced the term "paradox of unrealized power." This concept referred to a situation when a major power of the world was unable to lay down the rule, with the example being the failure of the US in Vietnam.[34] The new term weakened the belief in the causal role of power, with which Guzzini disagreed, as, according to him, the mere possession of capabilities or resources influences and shapes the structure of the system.[35] This issue was raised earlier by Stephen D. Krasner, formulating the concept of an intervening or autonomous variable, understood as a set of institutions or regimes.[36]

A new perspective on the study of power was presented by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, writing that resources are in a way "translated" into influence and impact in political bargaining processes, so power measured by resources may differ from that expressed by influence and outcomes.[37] In this process, a set of principles, rules, norms, and decision-making procedures plays a fundamental role, guiding the participants in political games. This kind of analysis, known as regime analysis, did not negate power as a necessary or sufficient condition for cooperation and did not reject the causal approach in which the

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[32] Stephen D. Krasner, 'Regimes and the Limits of Realism: Regimes as Autonomous Variables', *International Organization* 35, 2 (1982), 499.

[33] Guzzini, 45.

[34] David A. Baldwin, 'Power Analysis and World Politics: New Trends versus Old Tendencies,' *World Politics* 31, 2 (1979), 163.

[35] Guzzini, 51.

[36] Stephen D. Krasner, 'Regimes and the Limits of Realism'; idem, 'Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables,' *International Organization* 36, 2 (1982), 185–205.

[37] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1977), 18 (original emphasis).

distribution of power remains the main independent variable for explaining international events but decreased "the causal explanatory value of power as the central link in the translation from resources to outcome."[38]

Finally, the discussion about the impact of power as possessing resources resulted in two positions. If Keohane emphasized the role of rationality and regimes in strategic interaction and decreased the causal explanatory value of power, Baldwin maintained a strong causal link between power as control over resources and as control over outcomes.[39]

Cheryl Christensen and Susan Strange, then, proposed a new perspective in the form of the concept of structural power, which considered the ability of powerful actors to shape and define the structures and rules of the international system in ways that favoured their interests.[40] Strange's research was significant for understanding the functioning of the system because it shed a different light on the motives of state activity on the international stage. Bilateral relations became less critical, and multilateralism and structural power came to the forefront.[41]

Strange additionally introduced a distinction between structural and relational power and anthropomorphized the international system. We read, "'power over' need not be confined to outcomes consciously or deliberately sought for. Power can be effectively exercised by 'being there,' without intending the creation or exploitation of privilege or the transfer of costs or risks from oneself to others."[42] Strange introduced the concept of

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[38]   Guzzini, 52.

[39]   Ibid., 53.

[40]   Cheryl Christensen, 'Structural Power and National Security,' in Klaus Knorr and Frank N. Trager (eds.), *Economic Issues and National Security* (Kansas: Regents Press for the National Security Education Program, 1977), 127–59; Susan Strange, 'International Political Economy: The Story So Far and the Way Ahead,' in W. Ladd Hollist and F. Lamond Tullis (eds.), *The International Political Economy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 15.

[41]   Ronen Palan, 'Susan Strange 1923–1998: A Great International Relations Theorist,' *Review of International Political Economy* 6, 2 (1999–07), 123, https://doi.org/10.1080/096922999347254.

[42]   Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 26.

unconscious power into the political economy from gender studies. Although male partners may not wish or intend to control the outcomes that affect their female partners, the social structures that frame the partnership prove that such power exists. "In relations with others, it is much harder to think of power being exercised by one party over another unconsciously, without deliberate intent. But when you think of power in terms of power over structures, it is easier to understand that relations existing within those structures are affected, even though it may be inadvertently."[43]

Similarly, Krasner distinguished relational power from meta-power. The former referred to the ability to influence the outcomes or behaviour of others within a given regime. Meta-power, on the other hand, spoke to the ability to change the game's rules.[44] In turn, Joseph Nye differentiated between command and soft or co-optive power. In *Bound to Lead*, Nye described these two types of power wielded by the US, using different terms this time. One was coercive or relational, and the other was indirect or structural. Nye believed that power stemming from structural ties was as crucial as that associated with the number of tanks, planes, and ships.[45]

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver underscore the longstanding undervaluation of the regional level in international relations studies. However, they note a significant shift since 1989, wherein "the regional level has become both more autonomous and more prominent in international politics" due to the diminished intrusion of superpower rivalry into all regions, allowing local powers more excellent manoeuvrability.[46]

Buzan and Wæver adopt a regionalist perspective, delineating the region as a distinct level within the international relations

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[43]   Ibid.
[44]   Stephen D. Krasner, 'Transforming International Regimes: What the Third World Wants and Why', *International Studies Quarterly* 25, 1, *World System Debates* (March 1981), 122, https://doi.org/10.2307/2600213.
[45]   Joseph Nye, 'Soft Power ', *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990), 166–68; Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
[46]   Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3; see also David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997), 6–7.

structure, positioned between the global and local levels (comprising states and non-state actors). It sets their approach apart from the neorealism and globalisation schools, which predominantly focus on two levels – the global and the local. According to Buzan and Wæver, "regions, almost however defined, must be composed of geographically clustered sets of such units, and these clusters must be embedded in a larger system, which has a structure of its own." Consequently, regions "have analytical, and even ontological, standing, but they do not have actor quality."[47]

The foundational structure of the regional system is composed of four key elements:

1. Boundary, delineating the region from its neighbouring areas.
2. Anarchic structure, indicating that the region consists of two or more autonomous units.
3. Polarity, encompassing the distribution of power among these units.
4. Social construction, encompassing the patterns of amity and enmity among the units.[48]

The anarchic structure and polarity within the regional system emerge from the uneven distribution of power and capabilities among its actors, resulting in a stratified environment characterized by *hierarchy*.[49] In this context, hierarchy denotes a system where there is significant differentiation in political, economic, and social status among the actors, despite their formal sovereign equality. "Hierarchy […] simply refers to the grading of states on the basis of relative capacity."[50]

Buzan and Wæver present a comprehensive framework comprising four dimensions for analysing the regional system:

1. The state dimension: This dimension delves into states' domestically generated vulnerabilities, emphasizing factors such as the strength or weakness of the state resulting from

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[47] Buzan and Wæver, 27.

[48] Ibid., 53; see also Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 9.

[49] David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 60.

[50] Gerry Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States: Unequal Sovereigns in the International Legal Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 65.

the stability of its domestic order and the alignment between state and nation.

2. The state-to-state dimension: Focusing on inter-state relations, this dimension explores the interactions between states within the region, which significantly shape the region's dynamics and identity.

3. The region's interaction with neighbouring regions: While considered relatively less significant, this dimension examines how the region interacts with its neighbouring areas, exploring potential influences and connections.

4. The region-to-world dimension highlights the role of global powers within the region, particularly the interplay between international and regional security structures. It scrutinises how global dynamics impact regional affairs and *vice versa*, shedding light on the broader geopolitical context.[51]

The involvement of global powers, including superpowers and great powers, in the international system is paramount as it prompts inquiries into their interactions with regions, particularly with regional powers. "The view of polarity cultivated during the Cold War assumed that the superpowers stood outside the regions and above them." However, in scenarios where multiple great powers exist within the system, it becomes challenging to maintain a clear distinction between the global and regional levels. "Some global level powers will be inside regions, while others […] will have considerable entanglements in neighbouring regions."[52]

To comprehend the dynamics of a regional system, conducting a comprehensive analysis of foreign policy within the context of its formulation and implementation is crucial.[53] This necessitates a close examination of domestic factors that influence actors' behaviour towards each other. These factors, such as political and economic ideologies, national character, leadership styles, and socioeconomic structures, are key determinants of an actor's internal stability. This internal stability, in turn, significantly influences their conduct within the system. By delving into these domestic

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[51] Buzan and Wæver, 51.

[52] Ibid.

[53] For a comprehensive understanding of neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy, see Gideon Rose's work, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,' *World Politics* 51, 1 (Oct., 1998), 147.

dynamics, a deeper understanding of the interactions and behaviour of actors within the regional landscape can be achieved.[54]

This book aims at understanding the causal relationships between different factors in the Middle Eastern system. We focus on the changes in the balance of power between Middle Eastern states after 2001 and investigate independent variables that contributed to these changes. Thus, we seek to develop explanations and predictions about the behaviour of states and non-state actors and the dynamics of the Middle Eastern system. We assume, a system's military, economic, and political capabilities are distributed among states and non-state actors. We also emphasize the importance of structural power as the ability to shape the system. Military power alone doesn't guarantee strategic success because, first, there are limitations on its use. Second, other factors influence the system, including soft power.[55]

To determine who is the most powerful and influential within the Middle East, we are going to examine the military, economic, and political capabilities of states, including factors such as GDP, population size, military strength, domestic factors, and soft power. In the case of the Middle East, the role of non-state actors in regional relations is significant, and we shall present their place in the Middle Eastern system.

This book formulates three main questions: (1) what is the Middle Eastern regional system? (2) how are power and capabilities distributed within this system? and (3) what are the likely results of a given distribution? While the first two questions relate to structure, the third relates to process.[56]

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54   About the role of domestic politics in foreign policy, see Valerie M. Hudson and Benjamin S. Day, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 209–12, 214–15.

55   See Joshi Shashank, 'How Israel Fights and Why Military Prowess Doesn't Guarantee Strategic Success,' review essay of Edward N. Luttwak and Eitan Shamir's book *The Art of Military Innovation: Lessons from the Israel Defense Forces*, Harvard University Press 2023 (*Foreign Affairs* 103, 2 (March/April 2024), 168–75).

56   Waltz, 130.

Chapter I
The Middle Eastern System and Its Variables

1. What is the Middle Eastern regional system?

Leonard Binder was one of the first to pose this question in 1958. Binder pointed out two tendencies in the then-current studies on international politics. The first tended towards the systematization of facts and their assessment from the perspective of a specific frame of reference. These systematizations were within the framework or modifications of balance-of-power theories, with an emphasis on power rather than balance.[57] The second tendency was expressed in the accumulation of knowledge about the specifics of national politics in a given region in a historical and social context, presenting an area studies approach.[58] Binder attempted to find a middle ground between these two approaches and formulated the hypothesis that "patterns of interrelationship

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[57] An example of such an approach was Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1948).

[58] Discussions on these two approaches can be found in, among others, Fred A. Sondermann, 'The Study of International Relations,' *World Politics* X, 1 (October 1957), 102–12; Kenneth W. Thompson, 'Toward a New Theory of International Relations,' *American Political Science Review* XLIX, 3 (September 1955), 733–46.

(sometimes called *system*) are a function of the distribution of power among states (sometimes called *structure*)."[59]

Before attempting to answer the question "What is the Middle Eastern system?" it is worth noting the term *region* and its relationship with the term *system*. In studies of international politics, the world is considered to consist of regions, most commonly understood as a set of neighbouring states. In common perception, region also constitutes a system, and these terms are often used interchangeably. Nonetheless, it must be emphasised that the use of the term *system*, assuming that there are different types of systems, may have "specific implications for regional change, order, and stability."[60]

Defining "the Middle Eastern system," Binder took into account criteria such as the existence of regional organizations or defence pacts, the interrelationship of domestic and international politics, conflicting intra-area policies, the existence of religious opposition to nationalism, government policies, historical and colonial experiences. Based on this, Binder writes that "the Middle East proper stretches from Libya to Iran, with fringe areas including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Maghreb, and the core area, including the Arab states and Israel."[61] The Middle East was thus broadly encompassed, with religion and colonial past serving as common elements linking individual components within the system. It was also important that the states constituting the Middle East emerged relatively recently after World War I and their borders were arbitrarily delineated by colonial authorities. It meant that, in many cases, borderlines were contested, and this factor could, according to Binder, lead to changes in the system. The possibility of change depended on the strength of the system's challengers, and the expression of strength was to be the activity of the challengers. From this point of view, Binder included strong

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[59] Leonard Binder, 'The Middle East as a Subordinate International System,' *World Politics* 10, 03 (April 1958), 408. About the terminology, see also William Reitzel, Morton A. Kaplan and Constance G. Coblenz, *United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1955* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1956), especially chapter xvi.

[60] Lebovic, 267.

[61] Binder, 415–16.

states like Iran and Turkey while also pointing out the weakness in this regard of states like Libya, Sudan, and Lebanon.[62]

Binder's proposal initiated a discussion that showed that views on which states constitute the Middle Eastern system were diverse. While there was agreement that the *system* is a space in which relations between states occur and that these relations have consequences for those states and exert a stronger or weaker influence on other states, the question of which states of the region make up this system was controversial. Theoretical scholars of international relations and specialists in Middle Eastern Studies expressed their opinions on this matter. While some accepted "Ottoman political culture" as the main criterion, excluding Morocco and Iran from the system, others focused on Israel, neighbouring Arab states, and extra-regional great powers, excluding Iran and Turkey, and Maghreb states. Yet another approach limited the system to Arab states, taking the element of Arab nationalism as its basis.[63]

Some studies emphasized that the system of Middle Eastern states evolved from the Arab system to the Middle Eastern system. Paul Noble wrote that, by the end of the 1960s, the Middle East was segmented into two sub-regional clusters of states (the inter-Arab and the Arab-Israeli). Then, in the 1970s, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf gained independence, creating a new subsystem. After the 1980s, another, northern subsystem began to take shape, encompassing Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Events in these states strongly impacted the situation in neighbouring states, leading to confrontation and stimulating

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[62] Ibid., 416.

[63] The delineation of the borders of the Middle Eastern system was not purely academic. It had a clear political undertone, as articulated primarily by participants in this discussion originating from the Middle East. The main concern was to ensure that the Middle Eastern system was not Israel-centric, which risked acknowledging Israel's dominance in the economic and institutional spheres and, in the longer term, the erosion of Arab national identity. This is discussed by F. Gregory Gause III, who also examines those above and other approaches to defining the Middle Eastern system: F. Gregory Gause III, 'Systemic Approaches to Middle East International Relations,' *International Studies Review* 1, 1 (Spring, 1999), 11–31, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3186364 (accessed 19 March 2024).

regional cooperation. Such effects were seen from the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, water scarcity, and the rise of new elites to power.[64]

In conclusion, the boundaries of the system are a function of the strengthening or weakening of the power of its participants. It occurs under the influence of the dynamics of domestic politics and the impact of external impulses. In the 1950s, the influence of Great Britain and France on the Middle Eastern system was much stronger than at the end of the 20th century. In this 21st century, France has practically ceased to play an important role.

2. Borders and actors

Depending on the criteria adopted, the system's boundaries can expand or contract subjectively. If we consider Islamist issues as the binding factor of the system, then the subject of analysis will encompass territory from Morocco to the Philippines. It makes the system too extensive to be analytically useful. It is necessary to agree with the authors who believe that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is crucial in explaining the behaviour of actors in the Middle Eastern political scene and the dynamics of international relations in the region. "Any definition of system membership that ignores important conflict dyads is simply not a useful basis upon which to proceed to more substantial analytical issues,"[65] writes F. Gregory Gause. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is an element of a common social-historical background that defines the system's boundaries, as does geography and self-identification. Each of these components is important insofar as "it leads to sustained, durable interest and involvement, expressed in tangible commitment of resources, to a common agenda of issues among the states concerned."[66]

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[64] Paul Noble, 'From Arab System to Middle Eastern System? Regional Pressures and Constraints,' in Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Desouki (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization* (Cairo, New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 98.

[65] Gause, 15.

[66] Ibid., 25.

Buzan and Wæver propose the identification of subcomplexes within a system, particularly in cases where the number of states within a regional system is relatively large. In the context of the Middle East, they suggest recognizing distinct subcomplexes in the Levant (comprising Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria) and the Gulf (encompassing Iraq, Iran, and GCC countries).[67]

However, Buzan and Wæver refrain from specifying specific criteria for distinguishing these subregions beyond geographic proximity. They acknowledge the considerable overlap and interplay between these subcomplexes, challenging their disentanglement. Furthermore, they assert that Turkey lies outside the Middle East, a perspective that may seem contentious given Turkey's significant political involvement in both the Levant and the Gulf.

Considering Turkey's active engagement in the politics of the Levant and the Gulf, its exclusion from the Middle East seems questionable. This stance prompts further consideration of Turkey's role within the broader regional dynamics of the Middle East.

For these reasons, one can agree with Gause that the Middle Eastern system should be geographically limited to those states whose foreign policy focuses on three issues: the Arab–Israeli conflict, Gulf security, and Arab unity plans.[68] Such an understanding of the Middle Eastern regional system makes the region a coherent unit in which interactions have significant importance for its participants. North Africa is outside this understood system; although it is focused on the three mentioned issues, its impact on these issues is not primary. Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Central Asian countries are also outside this system, and this seems justified because these countries have little influence on the issues binding the units of the Middle Eastern system. Turkey, on the other hand, is a country that, in the last 70 years, has increasingly influenced the issues integrating the Middle Eastern system and has become one of its main participants.

Non-state actors in the Middle East can wield significant power and influence, often challenging the authority and stability of state governments in the region. Among them, we can distinguish militant groups (ISIS, al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah,

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[67]   Buzan and Wæver, 51–2.
[68]   Ibid.

Hamas), paramilitary organizations (the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq), and political movements (Kurdish nationalist groups, Palestinian factions like Fatah and Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and others). Their power and influence vary depending on their resources, organizational capabilities, and ideological motivations.

3. Middle Eastern variables

The question of variables holds significant importance within international relations theories, especially concerning whether the factors influencing outcomes in regional systems can function independently within the global context. Gideon Rose points out that four approaches to understanding the factors influencing foreign policy have emerged in research. These are *Innenpolitik* theories, offensive and defensive realisms, and neoclassical realism. While *Innenpolitik* theories emphasize the dominant influence of domestic factors on foreign policy and treat specific domestic variables as independent, the other three perspectives recognize the predominant impact of the global system and systemic variables on regional dynamics. Rose criticizes both *Innenpolitik* theories and structural realism: the former for treating internal factors as independent, and the latter for considering systemic factors as the only significant ones. Rose himself considers both types of factors but treats only systemic factors as independent while labelling domestic variables as intervening variables.[69]

Neoclassical realism, with which Rose identifies, argues that regional independent variables "must be relegated to second place analytically because over the long run a state's foreign policy cannot transcend the limits and opportunities thrown up by the international environment."[70] Neoclassical realism's critique of *Innenpolitik* theories was supported by empirical evidence, revealing that actors at the regional level respond to signals from the global arena, with their leaders adapting to the international

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[69]   Gideon Rose, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,' *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Oct., 1998): 148–52.

[70]   Ibid., 151.

landscape. Thus, neoclassical realism outlines systemic independent variables, domestic-level intervening variables, and a range of dependent variables. Norrin M. Lipsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Stephen E. Lobell further clarify this framework by referring to systemic 'stimuli' that are "filtered through domestic-level intervening variables," highlighting four main groups: (1) leader images, (2) strategic culture, (3) domestic institutions, and (4) state-society relations.[71]

The influence of systemic factors is nuanced; as Rose aptly notes, "systemic pressures and incentives may shape the broad contours and general direction of foreign policy without being strong or precise enough to determine the specific details of state behaviour. It means that the influence of systemic factors may often be more apparent from a distance than from up close."[72] This complexity is acknowledged by neoclassical realism itself, as it recognises that: "(1) leaders do not always perceive systemic imperatives correctly, even when they are clear; (2) the international system itself does not always present clear signals about threats and opportunities; (3) decision-makers do not always respond rationally to systemic imperatives, even when they perceive these imperatives correctly; and (4) states are not always able to mobilize their available resources efficiently and effectively." [73]

In our analysis, we endeavour to elucidate power dynamics and foreign policy by delving into unit-level factors and concentrating on the interplay between variables within the regional system. However, we also acknowledge the significance of examining the interactions between systemic and domestic-level variables.

The dynamics of every system are linked to specific core issues, questions, and fundamental values for the system participants. These issues and values create the axis of political events; they result from many events and narratives about events and may have deep historical roots. From the perspective of the system's 'hard' components, these core issues may seem irrational and secondary. However, ignoring them can lead to a misunderstanding of the dynamics of the system's functioning and serious disruptions in that system.

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[71]   Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 11–3.
[72]   Rose, 147.
[73]   Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 12.

The issue of a system's core is the subject of geopolitical considerations and has been formulated as the *Heartland*.[74] Assuming that the issue of the Heartland is central to the international system, we can ask what and where the Heartland of the Middle East is. We believe that the Middle Eastern Heartland is Palestine and the Arab–Israeli conflict. This belief allows us to formulate specific variables and analyse their influence on the system. Claims to land and territory by both Israelis and Palestinians should be considered the primary independent variable. The extent to which it determines the occurrence of military confrontations, wars, terrorism, and clashes between Arabs and Israelis, as well as attempts at peace agreements such as the Camp David Accords or the Oslo Accords, remains a question.

Security concerns perceived as threats to national security and survival posed by neighbouring states and non-state actors, as well as political leaders' policies, strategies, and decisions, constitute the second group of independent variables. They provoke territorial disputes and the control of specific territories, such as the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem. Refugee issues, including resettlement, compensation, and the right of Palestinian refugees to return, can be considered dependent variables, as are the broader geopolitical dynamics and power struggles within the Middle East region, including rivalries between Arab states and Iran's and Turkey's influence.

The external alliances and partnerships of Israel and Arab states with regional and global actors such as the US, the European Union, Russia, China, and Iran can be considered important factors that determine the involvement of third-party actors in mediating or facilitating negotiations to solve the conflict, but also escalating tensions and wars. International law and norms, which create the legal frameworks governing the conduct of states and non-state actors in the context of the conflict, including UN

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[74] See Emil Reich, *Foundations of Modern Europe* (New York: The Chautauqua Press, 1908, 2nd edition), 220; Leonard Hochberg and Geoffrey Sloan, 'Mackinder's Geopolitical Perspective Revival,' *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (Fall, 2017), 6; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), XIV.

resolutions and international humanitarian law, are significant independent variables.

Economic interests, resources, and development opportunities, including access to water, trade routes, and natural resources, are independent variables that determine a country's position in the system and military potential. The military potential can also be considered an independent variable regarding a country's ability to form alliances and resolve disputed issues with other system participants. Demographic shifts and population dynamics within Israel, the Palestinian territories, and other Middle Eastern states, including issues related to immigration, population growth, and demographic diversity, form the broadest framework for the functioning of the system. They impact the grand strategy of ruling elites and the sentiments of the population of the Middle East towards the conflict and the region's future development.

Chapter II
Who Is the Most Powerful in the Middle East?

1. How to measure power?

There are various approaches to measuring the power of a state; however, there is no single universal metric. *Power* is treated interchangeably with terms such as *strength*, *might*, or *potential* in these approaches. One of the most common approaches is *The Composite Indicator of National Capability*, which measures hard power, understood as a combination of demographic, economic, and military potential. Power, understood as military force, is the basis of *The Global Firepower Index*. This index considers various factors related to military power such, as natural resources, logistics, financial capacity, and geographic conditions. In terms of military power, it considers the number and type of armaments and defence spending. This aspect is discussed by institutions such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and *The Global Militarization Index*. Other approaches to measuring power include scientific potential and soft power, as science is related to culture and influences the country's image. A new approach relates to emerging technologies and means of communication and the associated threats. The United Nations specifically considers a country's preparedness for cyber attacks and cyber warfare and proposes *The Global Cybersecurity Index*.[75]

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[75] 'Global Security Index and Cyberwellness,' *Profiles*, *ABIresearch*, April 2015, https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/str/D-STR-SECU-2015-PDF-E.pdf (accessed 1 March 2024).

Even the authors of the most detailed rankings acknowledge that they may have overlooked certain factors. Moreover, a lot of data regarding security, especially internal security, is classified and inaccessible. Piotr Arak and Grzegorz Lewicki, authors of *The Power Index 2017* from the Institute of Europe, proposed seven groups of indicators and sub-indicators, assigning a specific weight to each of them: (1) economic capital – 40 percent (size of GDP according to PPP – 80 percent, country rating – 10 percent, number of richest citizens – 10 percent); (2) militarization – 20 percent (military expenditure – 50 percent, arms production and sales – 30 percent, the number of uniformed officers – 10 percent military expenditure as a percentage of GDP – 5 percent, possession of nuclear weapons – 5 percent); (3) land – 10 percent (country's surface area – 100 percent); (4) human resources – 10 percent (population – 90 percent, demographic burden of people 65+ – 10 percent); (5) culture – 10 percent (number of universities in the Shanghai ranking – 100 percent); (6) natural resources – 5 percent (amount of energy produced in the country – 50 percent, energy independence – 50 percent); (7) diplomacy – 5 percent (membership in the UN Security Council – 60 percent, membership in the most important international organizations – 20 percent, leadership positions in international organizations – 20 percent).[76]

This approach demonstrates – as the authors of the index themselves noted – the strength of each country individually and the change in that strength over the period studied. The position of a country in the international system can be inferred by comparing the hard power of each participant in the system. This index also classified Middle Eastern countries – Saudi Arabia ranked 14th (mainly due to the natural resources index), Turkey 18th (mainly due to the capital index), Egypt 19th (primarily due to the population index), Israel 28th (mainly due to the high militarisation index), and the UAE 40th (primarily due to the natural resources index). Comparing this listing with later classifications is interesting because it shows the changes in the contribution of individual indicators to determining a country's strength. An example could be the UAE. Analysing the strength of this country

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[76]   'State Power Index 2017', *in.europa*, 2017, http://index.ineuropa.pl/en (accessed 1 March 2024).

according to the above indicators in 2022 would undoubtedly show an increase in the capital index and culture index.

One of the most influential indices in recent years is *The Global Power Index* prepared by Pareto Economics. It considers a country's power and capabilities in the context of the global economy and global policy-making decisions. This indicator considers six proprietary indices: Active Consumer Market, Military Balance, Technological Leadership, Geo-Strategic Positioning, Systemically Important Commodities, and Financial Strength.[77] According to this index, Middle Eastern countries ranked as follows in the world.

Pareto Economics *Global Power Index 2022*

Country	Rank in the world
Saudi Arabia	8
UAE	14
Qatar	18
Kuwait	26
Israel	29
Oman	30
Bahrain	32
Turkey	33
Iran	47
Egypt	53
Iraq	55
Jordan	63
Lebanon	85
Yemen	110
Syria	111
West Bank and Gaza	n.d.

Source: *Global Power Index 2022*, Pareto Economics, 2024, https://pareto-economics.com/global-power-index-2022 (accessed 1 March 2024).

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[77] *Global Power Index 2022*, Pareto Economics, 2024, https://pareto-economics.com/global-power-index-2022 (accessed 1 March 2024).

In *The Global Power Index*, Saudi Arabia was ranked the highest, followed by the UAE and Qatar. The remaining countries in the second group were placed further down in the world rankings. From a regional perspective, this classification indicates that the strongest countries in the second group were Kuwait, Israel, Oman, Bahrain, Turkey, and Iran – all among the 50 strongest countries in the world. The remaining countries in the region were outside this group, with Syria and Yemen being the weakest.

2. Human and natural resources

The possibilities for economic development depend to a large extent on natural resources, especially energy resources, mineral resources, and land and water resources. Economic strength is linked to the potential for applying and developing technological innovations, expressed in investments in scientific research and technological infrastructure, determining the economy's competitiveness in the global market. Equally important are human resources, which include both the size of the population and its age structure, as well as education and health status measured by life expectancy. Another indicator of state strength is military power. The size and capability of the armed forces, military technology, and defence spending will be indicated to determine this. Regarding the methodology for measuring state strength, we shall refer our study to some composite indices, such as *The Global Competivnes Index* and *The National Power Index*.

(a) Demographic trends

Demographic projections prepared as *The 2022 Revision of World Population Prospects* by the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat present population projections to 2100. They indicate significant demographic changes in the Middle East, which may influence the structure of Middle Eastern system.

Demographic trends in the Middle East up to 2100, population in thousand

Country	2022	2030	2050	2100
Bahrain	1,466	1,568	1,805	2,045
Egypt	110,133	124,268	159,574	205,119
Iran	88,257	92,705	98,945	80,145
Iraq	43,996	52,263	73,996	111,325
Israel	8,971	10,066	12,921	18,377
Jordan	11,256	11,870	14,943	17,634
Kuwait	4,248	4,547	5,153	4,895
Lebanon	5,554	4,735	4,932	4,757
Oman	4,543	5,064	6,298	7,831
Qatar	2,684	2,845	3,346	4,366
Saudi Arabia	36,137	40,223	48,236	50,496
Syria	21,590	29,464	38,169	43,501
Turkey	85,092	88,657	95,744	82,775
UAE	9,403	9,973	11,412	14,055
Palestine	5,190	6,193	8,800	12,793
Yemen	33,322	39,530	54,942	74,145
Middle East	**472,842**	**523,971**	**639,216**	**734,259**
World	**7,941,665**	**8,511,723**	**9,687,440**	**10,355,002**
USA	337,499	351,334	375,085	393,993
China	1,425,925	1,416,866	1,316,946	771,301
Russia	144,733	141,647	133,354	112,204
India	1,416,320	1,509,296	1,668,475	1,533,400

Source: The authors' analysis based on the medium variant of *The 2022 Revision* of *World Population Prospects,* UN, 2023, https://population.un.org/wpp (accessed 29 February 2024).

Serious changes in the demographic structure of the Middle East are visible even in the medium variant. The region's population will increase by 64 percent from 472,842 thousand in 2022 to 734,259 thousand by 2100, which means slightly slower growth than the world population (which will grow by 76 percent).

The population of two of the three currently most populous countries in the region, Iran and Turkey, will decrease to 80 million and 83 million, respectively, from 88 million and 85 million. In two countries – Yemen and Iraq – there will be a demographic explosion. The population of Yemen will increase from the current 33 million to 74 million in 2100, more than doubling. The population growth in Iraq will be even higher, increasing from about 44 million to over 111 million, almost tripling. Therefore, Iraq will have more people than neighbouring Iran and Turkey (although in 2022, the population of Iraq was about half that of Iran or Turkey). It is also significant that, if the population of Iraq constitutes about 75 percent of the population of the Gulf Cooperation Council (58 million), then, according to forecasts in 2100, the population of Iraq will exceed the population of the six GCC countries (111 million compared to 83 million). There will also be changes in population proportions in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, countries that have recently waged war. If currently about 36 million people live in Saudi Arabia and 36 million in Yemen, in 2100, the population of Yemen will exceed the population of Saudi Arabia by 25 percent.

Egypt will remain the most populous country in the region. With a high growth rate expected, so its population will almost double from the current 110 million to 205 million. There will be more people living in Egypt than in Iran and Turkey combined. Egypt will also dominate in terms of population potential in the Arab world. If one in four Arabs is currently an Egyptian, by 2100, it will be one in three.

The forecasts do not confirm the assumption that the ratio of the Palestinian population to the Israeli population will change significantly to the detriment of the latter. The population of Israel and Palestine (West Bank and Gaza) will increase at almost the same rate (from 9.2 to 18.4 million in Israel and from 5.2 to 12.8 million in Palestine). While Syria and Jordan will double their populations, in Lebanon, the population will decrease from 5.5 million to 4.7 million. In total, there will be 95 million people in the five Levant countries, more than in Turkey or Iran.

The power distribution between external actors in the Middle Eastern system, i.e., the USA, China, and Russia, also raises questions. The consequences of the rapid, almost halving of

the population of China are the most intriguing. Currently, USA population constitutes one-fourth of China's population, and in 2100 it will be half. The population potential of Russia will also decrease, to only 29.8 percent of the population of the USA. As for the countries surrounding the Middle Eastern system, the consequences of the demographic explosion in sub-Saharan Africa may be significant. If today 1.16 billion people live in this region, by 2100, this number will triple to 3.44 billion.[78]

(b) Labour force

The population of the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) grew rapidly in the 20th century. If in 1960, there were 149 million people in the region, by 2000, this number had risen to 321 million. The growth trend continued in the 21st century, and in 2022, there were 493.3 million people in the Middle East and North Africa, representing a natural increase of 1.5 percent. The population of individual countries in the Middle East in 2022 was as follows.

Country	Population in millions	Labour force in million	Labour force participation rate in percent (15+)	Labour force participation rate in percent, female (15+)
Bahrain	1.47	0.84	71.6	44
Egypt	110.99	32.6	43.0	16
Iran	88.55	28.64	40.6	14
Iraq	44.49	11.35	39.7	11
Israel	9.55	4.45	63.3	61
Jordan	11.28	3.0	38.7	14
Kuwait	4.26	2.42	73.8	47
Lebanon	5.48	1.81	48.9	27

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[78] See Patrick Clawson, 'Changing Population Patterns Will Reshape the Middle East,' *Policy Analysis*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 22 November 2022, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/changing-population-patterns-will-reshape-middle-east (accessed 29 February 2024).

Country	Population in millions	Labour force in million	Labour force participation rate in per-cent (15+)	Labour force participation rate in percent, female (15+)
Oman	4.57	2.26	66.6	31
Qatar	2.69	2.0	87.4	64
Saudi Arabia	36.40	16.61	61.2	34
Syria	22.12	5.81	43.4	14
Turkey	84.97	34.63	53.1	35
UAE	9.44	6.58	76.8	54
West Bank and Gaza	5.04	1.38	43.4	19
Yemen	33.69	6.66	36.3	5
Total	**474,99**	**131,70**	46.4 (MENA)	19 (MENA)

Source: The author's analysis based on 'Labor force, total – Middle East & North Africa,' The World Bank, 2024, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN?locations=ZQ (accessed 22 February 2024).

In the above table, there is a division into two groups of countries: those where a high percentage of the total population aged 15+ can work and those where only a limited proportion of the adult population is employed. There was also noticeably low participation of women in the labour market; in those countries where the average rate was low, the participation of women in the labour market was very low. This comparison shows the demographic potential and development opportunities regarding workforce employment. Countries in the region with lower *per capita* income have significant development potential in terms of labour force, which is not utilized due to lack of investment.

(c) Oil and gas

The most significant natural wealth of the Middle East is oil and gas. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, oil already satisfied 40 percent of the global energy demand. According to data from 2021, the proven oil reserves in the world at that time amounted to 1.703 trillion barrels. The resources of the Arab countries were estimated at approximately 58 percent of the

world's reserves and deposits of this material, with 17 percent belonging to Saudi Arabia alone. However, not all of the countries in the region have oil deposits. Those that do not are Jordan and Lebanon. Other countries – Egypt, Turkey, Bahrain, Yemen, Israel, and Syria have oil but cannot match up to Saudi Arabia or Iran in terms of amounts. Saudi Arabia had the second-largest proven oil reserves in the world, just after Venezuela.[79]

On the Syrian-Palestinian Upland, one can find salt, phosphates, and asphalt, as well as small deposits of iron ore and copper.

Proven oil resources, 2021

Country	billion barrels
Saudi Arabia	259
Iran	209
Iraq	145
Kuwait	102
UAE	98
Qatar	25
Oman	5.4
Egypt	3.3
Yemen	3
Syria	2.5
Turkey	0.4
Bahrain	0.2

Source: 'Petroleum and Other Liquids,' *eia. gov*, U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023, https://www.eia.gov/international/data/world/petroleum-and-other-liquids/annual-crude-and-lease-condensate-reserves? (accessed 2 February 2024).

The region's countries were among the world's leading oil producers. Five countries from the Middle East were among the top ten oil producers in 2022. The most significant was Saudi Arabia,

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[79]   'Petroleum and other liquids,' *eia.gov*, U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023, https://www.eia.gov/international/data/world/petroleum-and-other-liquids/annual-crude-and-lease-condensate-reserves? (accessed 27 February 2024).

which was the second-largest oil producer after the USA.
Oil production in 2022

Country	million barrels/day (share of world supply)
Saudi Arabia	12.1 (12.9 percent)
Iraq	4.5 (4.8 percent)
UAE	4 (4.3 percent)
Iran	3.8 (4.1 percent)
Kuwait	3 (3.2 percent)
Qatar	1.7 (1.9 percent)
Oman	1 (1.1 percent)
Egypt	0.6 (0.7 percent)
Syria	0.09 (0.1 percent)
Yemen	0.08 (0.05 percent)
Turkey	0.06 (0.1 percent)
Bahrain	0.01 (0.01 percent)

Source: Pallavi Rao, 'Charted: The World's Biggest Oil Producers,' *Energy*, September 21, 2023, https://www.visualcapitalist.com/charted-worlds-biggest-oil-producers-in-2022 (accessed 27 February 2024).

The Middle East also possessed the richest gas reserves in the world. In 2022, they were estimated at 82 trillion standard cubic metres. For comparison, Russia had 48 trillion standard cubic metres in the same year. As the total world reserves were estimated at 210 trillion at that time, the reserves of the Middle East accounted for approximately 40 percent of the world's reserves.[80] Iran had the largest reserves, followed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Proven gas resources, 2021

Country	billion standard cubic metres
Iran	1,201
Qatar	879
Saudi Arabia	294

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[80] 'Proved natural gas reserves worldwide in 1960 and 2022, by region,' *statista*, 2024, https://www.statista.com/statistics/263146/proved-natural-gas-reserves-by-region (accessed 27 February 2024); 'Natural Gas Data,' *ASB*, OPEC, 2024, https://asb.opec.org/ASB_Charts.html?chapter=1572 (accessed 27 February 2024).

Country	billion standard cubic metres
UAE	215
Iraq	111
Egypt	77
Kuwait	63
Oman	24
Yemen	16
Syria	8
Israel	7
Bahrain	3
Turkey	2

Source: 'Natural Gas Reserves by Country', *worldometer*, 2023, https://www.worldometers.info/gas/gas-reserves-by-country (accessed 27 February 2024).

Countries of the Middle East were also among the world's largest natural gas producers. In 2022, global gas production amounted to 4.09 trillion cubic metres. Iran was the third-largest global producer of this resource, with an extraction of 259 billion cubic metres. The second-largest producer in the region was Qatar, with 178 billion cubic metres, and the third was Saudi Arabia, with 120 billion cubic metres.[81]

Natural gas production, 2022

Country	billion cubic metres
Iran	260
Qatar	178
Saudi Arabia	120
Egypt	64.5
UAE	58
Turkey	51
Oman	42
Bahrain	17

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[81]   'Natural Gas by Country,' *World Population Review*, 2024, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/natural-gas-by-country (accessed 27 February 2024).

Country	billion cubic metres
Kuwait	13.4
Israel	11
Iraq	9.4
Syria	3.1
Yemen	0.1
Jordan	0.01

Source: 'Natural Gas Production,' *Enerdata*, 2024, https://yearbook.enerda-ta.net/natural-gas/world-natural-gas-production-statistics.html (accessed 27 February 2024); 'Natural Gas by Country,' *World Population Review*, 2024, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/natural-gas-by-country (accessed 27 February 2024).

From the point of view of natural and human resources, Middle Eastern countries are divided into three groups: (1) resource-poor countries with abundant labour resources; (2) countries rich in raw materials and labour; and (3) countries rich in raw materials but without sufficient workforce resources. The first group comprises Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Turkey; the second includes Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Yemen; and the third consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Countries in the third group have formed an association called the Gulf Cooperation Council, which accounts for around 40 percent of global oil reserves.

(d) Water

The Middle East is traditionally an agricultural region. People in the Middle East have been cultivating soil for millennia despite the unfavourable natural conditions in most of the area. Primarily, Middle Eastern countries suffer from a water shortage, as almost half of the region is covered by deserts, and approximately 75 percent of surface water loss due to evaporation is not compensated for by precipitation. Coastal areas have better conditions, primarily in terms of precipitation magnitude. Abundant rains occur in winter in the mountainous regions of Asia Minor, Zagros, and the Alborz Mountains in Iran, the mountains of Lebanon, Israel, and the West Bank. Heavy snowfall occurs in

Amman and Jerusalem and in the mountains where the Tigris and the Euphrates have their sources. In Izmir and Istanbul, precipitation amounts to about 600 mm per year; in Beirut and Jerusalem about 500 mm, but only 400 mm in Ankara. In Aleppo, Amman, and Tabriz, annual precipitation is about 300 mm, and in Tehran, Damascus, and Sana'a, it is about 200 mm. The further south, the less abundant the rainfall is. Alexandria receives about 200 mm of rainfall per year, which is five times less than Antalya, located about 320 km to the north. However, Cairo, located south of Alexandria, receives only 20 mm of precipitation per year.[82]

For centuries, water was acquired from rivers, streams, and natural rain or snowmelt pools. Moreover, the technique of obtaining fresh water from seawater was applied in the 1980s in Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. Today, in Bahrain, about 40 percent of the water used in agriculture is desalinated seawater. In Saudi Arabia, the Rabigh 3 Independent Water Plant produces 600,000 cubic metres of desalinated water per day, meeting the needs of about 1 million households.[83]

However, countries with high natural population growth and a relatively low GDP growth cannot afford expensive technologies. This last factor significantly reduces the possibility of investing in rational water resource usage. The primary source of water resources in the Arab world is its river networks, while a secondary source is wells and periodic rivers. In 2008, the available water resources in the Arab countries were estimated at 300 million cubic metres, mainly surface water resources. However, out of 277 million cubic metres of these water sources, only 43 percent originated in the Arab world, with the rest coming from sources in neighbouring countries. This meant that neighbours shared water from the region's main rivers. In the case of the Tigris and the Euphrates, these neighbours were Iraq, Syria, and Turkey; for the Orontes, they were Lebanon, Syria,

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[82] See Ian R. Manners, Barbara McKean Parmenter and Ryan King, 'A Geographic Preface,' in Jillian Schwedler (ed.), *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East* (London, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2020), 9–36.

[83] 'How Can the Middle East and North Africa Manage the Region's Water Crisis?' *World Economic Forum*, Davos, 6 January 2023, https://www. weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/middle-east-north-africa-mena-water-crisis-industry-leaders-solutions (accessed 27 February 2024).

Turkey, and Jordan; for the Yarmouk, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey; and the Nile, nine countries, of which only Egypt and Sudan were Arab countries. The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) made Egypt difficult, as 85 percent of its water resources depended on the Blue Nile, whose sources are in Ethiopia. The dam's commissioning increased tension in relations between Ethiopia and Egypt. The water shortage problem requires cooperation in the form of shared usage of these much-needed resources, but international agreements in this sphere are usually temporary and do not solve tensions and conflicts over water security that have arisen.[84]

The riparian system of the Tigris and Euphrates has dominated water politics in the eastern part of the Arab world. Originating in Turkey, the rivers flow through Western Anatolia, Syria, and Iraq and then into the Persian Gulf in Iraq. Both rivers form a unique ecosystem and are economically crucial for approximately 60 million people. Meanwhile, climate change has caused temperatures to rise in the Tigris and Euphrates basin twice as fast as the world average. Less rainfall in 2020–2021 resulted in a 29 percent reduction in the flow of the Tigris and a 73 percent reduction in the Euphrates. It is estimated that, due to climate change, the flows of the Euphrates and Tigris will decrease by 30 and 60 percent by the end of the current century. This already has a visible negative impact on harvests in Iraq. In 2022, wheat harvests in the country decreased by 40 percent due to insufficient water. As a result, the Iraqi government adopted a strategy of water diplomacy with upstream states and the construction of new dams. In Syria, the situation has become even more

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84   See *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries* (New York: UNDP, 2009), 55; Seleshi B. Awulachew, Vladimir Smakhtin, David Molden, Don Peden, *The Nile River Basin: Water, Agriculture, Governance and Livelihood* (London: Routledge, 2013); Sherif Mohy El Deen, 'Egypt's Water Policy after the Construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam,' Research Paper in Dossier entitled *Egypt Policy Dialogues* (Paris, France: Arab Reform Initiative, 30 March 2022), https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/egypts-water-policy-after-the-construction-of-the-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam (accessed 12 February 2024).

dramatic, as grain harvests in areas adjacent to the Euphrates have decreased by as much as 95 percent, contributing to a hunger crisis in Syria.[85]

Meanwhile, Turkey, seeking to exploit the energy resources of the Euphrates and revitalize eastern Anatolia economically, began building dams on the Euphrates as part of the Southeastern Anatolia Project in the 1970s. The Keban Dam operated in 1974, and the Karababa Dam in 1987. In the 1990s, two more dams were commissioned, and in 2007, the construction of the Ilisu Dam began; this last against the backdrop of Iraq's difficult internal situation, which was so weakened by events after 2003 that it could not effectively protest against Turkish plans.[86]

The political aspect of dam construction has manifested in relations between states involved in the conflict and the Kurds as a non-state actor. On the one hand, the Kurds had no means to oppose the plans of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey – states conducting water policy. On the other hand, the Kurds, as a weaker partner, engaged in the competition for water resources and, in Syria, took control of the Syrian Tabqa Dam and Tishrin Dam from the Islamic State, treating them as strategic assets in negotiations for their sovereignty. Similarly, the Kurds acted in Iraq, where their territories had abundant water, and they showcased control over these resources as bargaining chips in relations with Turkey, Iraq, and Iran concerning their sovereignty.[87]

According to many studies, during the early part of the 21st century, the Middle East was in the early stages of a crisis regarding its shrinking water resources. The Joint Arab Economic Report of 2001 estimated water resources to be around 265 billion cubic metres, translating to 1,000 cubic metres per inhabitant. This

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[85] Achref Chibani, 'Water Politics in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin,' Arab Center, Washington DC, 30 May 2023, https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/water-politics-in-the-tigris-euphrates-basin (accessed 27 February 2024).

[86] Ibid.

[87] 'Kurdistan Region Boosts Water Resources with 13 New Dams,' *GOV. KRD*, Kurdistan Regional Government, 12 October 2023, https://gov.krd/dmi-en/activities/news-and-press-releases/2023/october/kurdistan-region-boosts-water-resources-with-13-new-dams (accessed 27 February 2024).

represented a sevenfold deficit compared with the world average. The most vulnerable nations were Kuwait and the UAE, with Bahrain, Iraq, Palestine, Qatar, and Yemen not faring much better. The report underscored the anticipated resource decrease to 460 cubic metres *per capita* with the expected population increase, falling below minimum international standards. Additionally, most identified resources were located far from population centres, necessitating a water transport system and additional investment. The possibility of territorial water disputes between neighbours in the future cannot be excluded. However, it is also assumed that the need to secure water access will encourage neighbouring countries to collaborate.[88]

By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, the situation regarding access to water resources in the Middle East deteriorated. Iran and Iraq were in the best situation, with resources exceeding 2,000 cubic metres per person per year. All other countries fell below the water scarcity threshold of 1,000 cubic metres, with Oman, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, Jordan, Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait falling below the absolute water scarcity threshold of 500 cubic metres per person per year. The region's population grew from just over 100 million people in 1960 to over 450 million in 2018, with a medium forecast for 2050 estimated at over 720 million. This means that, with current resources, by 2030, all Middle Eastern countries will fall below the water scarcity threshold of 1,000 cubic metres per person per year, with most falling below the absolute water scarcity threshold.[89]

(e) Arable land and food

Another indicator of access to natural resources is the cultivated area, including arable land and permanent crops. In this regard, all the countries in the region face difficulties. Turkey had the

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[88] *Arab Human Development Report 2009*, 56.

[89] Dominick de Waal, Stuti Khemani, Andrea Barone and Edoardo Borgomeo, *The Economics of Water Scarcity in the Middle East and North Africa: Institutional Solutions* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2023), 14–15. In other regions of the world, in 2019, there were 7,000 cubic metres of water per person per year.

largest cultivated area in 2021 at 19.7 million hectares, followed by Iran with 17.5 million hectares. Iraq followed with 5 million hectares. In other countries, these resources were smaller, with the total arable land area in the Middle East being 374.5 million hectares (3.745 million square kilometres) in 2021, shrinking with the region's increasing population. As a result, the arable land *per capita* decreased from about 0.38 hectares in 1970 to 0.11 hectares in 2021. Syria and Iran had the best indicators at 0.22 and 0.18 hectares per person, respectively. In Iraq, this indicator was 0.11, in Israel and Yemen 0.04, in Egypt 0.03, in Oman 0.02, and the West Bank and Gaza, Qatar, and the UAE 0.01. The land resources of Bahrain and Kuwait were below 0.01 hectares per person.[90]

As a result of limited water and arable land resources, Middle Eastern countries experience food shortages, with 50–90 percent of the agricultural products they require being imported in the first decade of the 21st century. Middle Eastern countries are among the world's largest importers of cereals. Unfortunately, the situation did not improve in the early years of the second decade of the 21st century but worsened. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that in 2021, 222 million people worldwide, or 2.8 percent of the global population, were at risk of food insecurity, with 10 percent suffering from undernourishment. According to other UN sources, by 2030, 8 percent of the global population will experience hunger. The MENA region's population accounted for 6 percent of the world's population in 2021, yet undernourished people reached approximately 54.3 million, or 12.2 percent of the region's population. Given water scarcity and diminishing arable land resources, it can be expected that the percentage of hungry and malnourished individuals in the Middle East will increase. Up to 70 percent of

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[90]   'Turkey Arable Land 1961 – 2024,' *macrotrends*, 2024, https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/TUR/turkey/arable-land (accessed 27 February 2024); 'Arable land (hectares per person) – Middle East and North Africa,' *The World Bank*, 2024, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.ARBL.HA.PC?locations=ZQ (accessed 28 February 2024); 'Agricultural land (sq. km) – Middle East and North Africa,' *The World Bank*, 2024, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.AGRI.K2?locations=ZQ (accessed 28 February 2024).

women of reproductive age in the Middle East are anaemic as a result of malnutrition.[91]

Sub-regions within the MENA region experienced varying degrees of food shortages and malnutrition. The Persian Gulf Arab states were in the best position despite not producing their food because their financial resources allowed them to import all necessary agricultural goods. As a result, the UAE and Qatar ranked 26th and 27th out of 170 countries in terms of food security, while Syria and Yemen ranked 148th and 160th. These countries were also affected by ongoing wars, further complicating agricultural activities. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries began investing in arable land in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2018, the UAE allocated 2,500 hectares of land in Uganda for agricultural purposes.[92]

Middle Eastern and North African countries are heavily dependent on food imports, which amounted to approximately $5.4 billion in 2021, making the region, including Central Asia, second only to Europe in terms of food imports.[93] About 50 per-

[91] 'Population, total – Middle East & North Africa,' *The World Bank Group*, 2022, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=ZQ (accessed 28 February 2024); *Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Food Policy Monitoring in the Near East and North Africa region, 4th Quarter 2022 Bulletin* (Cairo, Egypt: FAO, 2022), 2, https://www.fao.org/3/cc3210en/cc3210en.pdf (accessed 28 February 2024); Hala Mohsen, Yonna Sacre, Lara Hanna-Wakim and Maha Hoteit, 'Nutrition and Food Literacy in the MENA Region: A Review to Inform Nutrition Research and Policy Makers,' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, 16 (August 2022), 2, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191610190.

[92] 'Global Food Security Q2 2022: Food Security Index,' *Deep Knowledge Analytics (DKA)*, 2023, https://www.dka.global/global-food-security-q2-2022 (accessed 28 February 2024); Charlie Mitchell, 'UAE and Uganda to Establish One of the World's First Agricultural Free Zones,' *The National*, 30 October 2018, https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/uae-and-uganda-to-establish-one-of-the-world-s-first-agricultural-free-zones.785734#:~:text=Thepercent20UAEpercent20signedpercent20apercent20deal,productionpercent20andpercent20developmentpercent20inpercent20Uganda (accessed 28 February 2024).

[93] Source 'Middle East & North Africa Food Products Imports by Country and Region in US$ Thousand 2021,' World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), 2022, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/

cent of agricultural products consumed in MENA countries were imported, with even higher rates in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Gulf countries. For example, in 2020, Lebanon imported 81 percent of its wheat needs from Ukraine and 15 percent from Russia. Egypt also imported 80 percent of its wheat needs from these two countries. Rising prices of agricultural products in the global market pose challenges for non-oil-producing countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. On the other hand, oil-producing countries do not feel the effects as strongly because they have financial surpluses from the sale of energy resources. Lebanon, in particular, faces a critical situation. In 2022, inflation in the country reached 400 percent, and food shortages coincided with fuel and medicine shortages. The economic crisis pushed 74 percent of the population below the poverty line, with 46 percent of Lebanese and 49 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon experiencing food insecurity.[94]

The Middle Eastern food market was one of the fastest-growing in the world. The combined value of food imports in 2009 for just six Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, and Oman) amounted to approximately $12 billion. This amount was estimated to increase to as much as $31 billion. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the most significant food importers in the region.[95]

MEA/Year/2021/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/all/Product/16-24_Food-Prod (accessed 28 February 2024).

[94] *Hunger Hotspots: FAO-WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity: June to September 2022 Outlook*, World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Report (Rome: WFP/FAO, 2022), 35; Nejla Ben Mimoune, Hana El Shehaby, 'Breaking the Cycle: How Can the MENA Region Tackle Food Insecurity,' *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, February 2023, https://mecouncil.org/publication/breaking-the-cycle-how-can-the-mena-region-tackle-food-insecurity (accessed 20 February 2024).

[95] 'The Middle East. Market Development and Access Strategy 2011/2012,' *State Government Victoria. Department of Primary Industries*, http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/agriculture/investment-trade/market-access-and-competitiveness/markets/middle-east (accessed 10 October 2022).

Middle East and North Africa Food Products Imports by country in US$ million in 2021

Country	Imports	Import Products Share (percent)
Bahrain	192	2.72
Egypt	805	9.17
Iran	69	5.25
Iraq	8	0.26
Israel	975.6	0.10
Jordan	260	9.49
Kuwait	156	3.88
Lebanon	124	7.40
Oman	291	5.09
Qatar	6	0.18
Saudi Arabia	1,056	4.50
Syria	85	12.09
Turkey	886	3.25
UAE	1,994	5.77
Yemen	33	5.72

Source: 'Middle East & North Africa Food Products Imports by Country and Region in US$ Thousand 2021,' *World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)*, 2022, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/MEA/Year/2021/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/all/Product/16-24_FoodProd (accessed 28 February 2024).

3. Hard Power

(a) Economic power

The economy of the entire MENA region is essentially (about 12 percent) dependent on oil and gas extraction. Oil and gas-exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait generate a significant portion of the region's GDP. The economies of these countries are even more reliant on resource extraction than the economy of the entire area, with dependency ranging from about 30 percent in the case of Saudi Arabia to about

40 percent in the case of Iraq.[96] This situation means that GDP is dependent on the level of commodity prices and is subject to fluctuations. The price drop in 2015 led to a halving of Iran's GDP. Oil-producing nations are trying to diversify their economies and invest in tourism, manufacturing, technology, and services.

GDP, current prices, in US$ billion

Country	2000	2011	2012	2015	2020	2022	2025 (est.)	2028 (est.)
Bahrain	9.06	28.78	30.75	31.05	34.62	**44.38**	49.14	55.72
Egypt	104.75	247.73	294.48	350.12	382.53	**475.23**	408.93	591.1
Iran	366.92	625.43	421.88	408.29	195.53	**346.48**	401.19	454.5
Iraq	25.86	185.75	218.03	177.63	181.4	**261.14**	281.79	310.35
Israel	136.03	266.79	262.91	302.72	411.73	**525.0**	569.04	661.41
Jordan	8.73	29.52	31.68	38.64	43.64	**47.52**	55.59	65.42
Kuwait	37.71	154.02	174.07	114.61	105.95	**175.4**	172.13	183.9
Lebanon	17.02	39.93	31.68	49.93	24.49	**21.78**	n.d.	n.d.
Oman	22.26	77.5	87.41	78.71	75.91	**114.67**	114.94	125.94
Qatar	18.09	167.78	186.83	161.74	144.41	**236.42**	258.77	294.97
Saudi Arabia	189.52	676.64	741.85	669.49	734.27	**1.11 th.**	1.15 th.	1.28 th.
Syria	19.86	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	**n.d.**	n.d.	n.d.
Turkey	274.32	838.51	880.14	864.07	720.16	**905.84**	1.14 th.	1.58 th.
UAE	102.99	360.83	384.61	370.28	349.47	**507.06**	561.16	651.44
W. Bank and Gaza	4.31	11.19	12.21	13.97	15.53	**n. d**	n.d.	n.d.
Yemen	9.68	32.73	35.4	45.78	42.54	**23.55**	25.19	33.75

Source: *GDP, Current Prices*, International Monetary Fund, 2023, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/SAU/QAT/KWT/ARE/BHR/DZA/EGY/IRN/IRQ/ISR/JOR/LBN/LBY/MAR/OMN/SYR/SDN/TUR/WBG/YEM/TUN (accessed 22 February 2024).

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[96] *Oil's Contribution to Middle Eastern Economies Has Fluctuated in Recent Years*, The World Bank, 12 September 2019, https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/stories/oils-contribution-to-middle-eastern-economies-has-fluctuated-in-recent-years.html (accessed 22 February 2024).

If we look at the dynamics of GDP growth over the past 22 years, we notice a change in the position of the largest economy in the region. In 2000, Iran held this position, followed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. However, over 22 years, the Iranian economy remained at the same level, or even contracted, while the Turkish economy tripled, and the Saudi Arabian economy almost sextupled. The Israeli economy experienced dynamic growth, with GDP in current prices nearly quintupling, similar to the Egyptian economy (almost quintupling GDP). The economy of the UAE expanded fivefold, and the economy of Bahrain quadrupled. Meanwhile, the most significant growth, measured by GDP in current prices, was recorded in the Iraqi economy, where GDP was $25.86 billion in 2000 and $261.14 billion in 2022, a tenfold increase.

However, when these increases are considered in relation to the population's size, the situation looks quite different.

Gross Domestic Product *per capita* in US$ thousand

Country	2000	2011	2012	2015	2020	2022	2025 (est.)	2028 (est.)
Bahrain	43.92	47.12	54.49	45.63	50.86	**58.43**	64.42	68.49
Egypt	6.5	10.53	12.28	12.61	13.53	**16.17**	18.69	22.01
Iran	11.22	18.65	17.04	14.33	15.83	**18.87**	21.32	23.22
Iraq	n.d.	12.22	14.84	10.49	10.35	**11.95**	12.46	13.47
Israel	21.22	29.47	32.1	35.43	41.54	**51.99**	58.66	65.52
Jordan	5.85	9.46	9.19	9.46	10.33	**12.06**	14.1	15.81
Kuwait	51.75	61.77	72.41	42.74	43.3	**51.24**	55.96	59.9
Lebanon	9.18	14.96	14.81	15.06	11.39	**11.79**	n.d.	n.d.
Oman	37.47	51.19	49.1	36.74	35.72	**38.7**	40.76	43.1
Qatar	96.57	145.6	169.7	97.85	91.57	**109.16**	124.39	146.61
Saudi Arabia	45.34	58.88	64.42	52.91	53.94	**66.84**	74.39	81.52
Syria	4.32	6.37	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	**n.d.**	n.d.	n.d.
Turkey	10.82	17.38	20.5	25.69	30.49	**39.31**	45.42	51.24
UAE	102.78	69.54	76.07	69.53	71.5	**84.66**	97.02	110.53
West Bank, Gaza	2.54	3.7	4.72	5.61	5.37	**6.36**	6.97	7.34
Yemen	2.8	3.95	3.31	2.44	1.89	**2.04**	2.24	2.64
MENA	17.7	26.4	22.3	22.3	22.6	**27.07**	30.27	33.44

Source: *GDP per capita, current prices*, International Monetary Fund, October 2023, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPPC@WEO/SAU/QAT/KWT/ARE/BHR (accessed 20 February 2024).

GDP *per capita* for the entire MENA region was $17,130 in 2000, $26,640 in 2011, $22,300 in 2015, $22,600 in 2020, and $27,070 in 2022. GDP *per capita* growth was slow; over 22 years, it did not even double. According to estimates, it was projected to reach $33,440 in 2028, indicating a twofold increase over 28 years. The entire region experienced a decrease or an increase in *per capita* income in 2011–2015, followed by gradual growth after 2015. The social disruptions in 2011, which led to economic destabilization in many parts of the region, were a contributing factor. Libya serves as an example, where income in 2022 remained the same as it had been 22 years earlier. The largest decrease was recorded in Qatar, where income was exceptionally high in 2012 at $169,700 and dropped to $97,850 in 2015. However, this decline was from a very high level of nearly $170,000 *per capita*. Similar declines were observed in other oil and gas-exporting countries due to fluctuations in energy prices, which are the main source of revenue for their budgets.

The greatest increases in GDP *per capita* were seen in Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and the West Bank and Gaza. However, each of these countries started from a different level, Israel having a much higher starting level than the other countries. In 2000, *per capita* income in Israel was over $20,000, while in the West Bank and Gaza, it was only $2,500. A similar discrepancy existed between Israel and the other Arab countries in the group that doubled GDP *per capita*. Therefore, Israel's doubling of GDP *per capita* deepened the disparity in living standards between the countries in this group.

Since 2000, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has significantly contributed to developing of many sectors in the Middle East and North Africa economies. Foreign capital invested mainly in industries such as oil and gas extraction, real estate, coal, chemical manufacturing, services (particularly tourism and hospitality), and renewable energy. Foreign capital mainly originated from the USA, France, the UK, Italy, China, Japan, India, Germany, and Austria.[97]

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[97] 'Supporting Economic Growth: Foreign Direct Investment in the MENA region,' *ICIEC*, 2024, https://iciec.isdb.org/insights/supporting-economic-growth-foreign-direct-investment-in-the-mena-region (accessed 27 February 2024).

The Middle East is an attractive destination for capital investment. It is one of the fastest-growing regions globally and has recently become the world's largest construction market. The geography of foreign investments shows that they are directed towards Israel and the countries of the Gulf. It is estimated that, by 2030, the UAE's construction value will reach $40 billion. Following a record year in 2007, when $108.31 billion flowed into the Middle East and North Africa, there was a decrease in investments due to the global financial crisis. In 2014, the total FDI directed to the MENA region amounted to only $30.83 billion. However, after 2014, there was a gradual increase, and in 2020, the area received $57.1 and, in 2022, 102.7 billion in FDI, with the majority directed in 2022 to three countries: Saudi Arabia ($28.05 billion), Israel ($23.03 billion) and the UAE ($22.73 billion). Other Middle Eastern countries followed: Turkey ($13.09), Egypt ($11.39), Oman ($5.47), Bahrain ($1.95), and Kuwait ($0.75 billion). Foreign investments in Iran amounted to $1.5 billion, and in Jordan to $1.17 billion. The inflow of FDI to other countries was much lower, with Iraq and Yemen experiencing negative FDI indicators.[98]

The dynamics of FDI growth were also significant. In Turkey, FDI increased from $7.7 billion in 2020 to $13.09 billion in 2022, and the country attracted around $240 billion of FDI during 2003–2021.[99] Saudi Arabia recorded a 72.3 percent increase in FDI between 2020 and 2022, and Dubai experienced a 62.5 percent increase over the same period. There was an unprecedented increase in FDI in Qatar due to the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Between 2020 and 2023, Qatar received twice as much

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[98]   'Investment Index: Top 5 Middle Eastern Countries by Foreign Direct Investment (FDI),' *ABIQ*, 2024, https://www.abiq.io/investment-index-top-5-middle-eastern-countries-by-foreign-direct-investment-fdi (accessed 25 February 2024); 'Foreign Direct Investments, Net Inflows (BoP, current US$) – Middle East and North Africa,' *The World Bank*, 2023, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?locations=ZQ (accessed 26 February 2024).

[99]   *FDI in Türkiye*, Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye. Investment Office, 2021, https://www.invest.gov.tr/en/whyturkey/pages/fdi-in-turkey.aspx (accessed 27 February 2024).

foreign capital as in the previous three years. In the UAE, FDI increased over the same period by 10 percent, reaching $22.7 billion. The UAE's economy was focused on modern technologies and began to function as a top tech hub in the region. More than 4,000 startups established their headquarters there, and the UAE became a significant player in the global capital market. In 2022, the UAE's FDI outflows increased by 10 percent compared to 2021, reaching $25 billion. On 23 February 2024, the Abu Dhabi sovereign wealth fund ADQ invested $35 billion in Egypt to develop a new city project, the highest FDI in the Middle East and Africa (MEA). In 2023, the UAE moved from 20th to 15th place globally in terms of the size of capital invested abroad.[100]

The poverty index cannot be overlooked either. The MENA region is considered the most unequal in the world and faces challenges such as high inequality, low growth, high youth and female unemployment, and rising poverty. In 2020, approximately 250 million out of 400 million people living in the Arab world, or two-thirds of the entire population, were classified as poor or at risk of poverty. Poverty in the Middle East is structural and inherited from generation to generation. The poorest countries faced the most difficult situations. In Yemen, between 2007 and 2029, over 48 percent of the population lived in extreme poverty, defined as less than $5.50 purchasing parity per day, while in Syria, it was over 35 percent, in Palestine over 29 percent, in Egypt 28 percent, in Iraq around 19 percent,

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[100]　Alex Irvin-Hunt, 'Middle East Countries Lead post-Covid Investment Rebound,' *Financial Times*, 10 May 2023, https://www.fdiintelligence. com/content/data-trends/middle-east-countries-lead-postcovid-investment-rebound-82470 (accessed 26 February 2024); Türkiye: 'Investing in Türkiye,' *Lloyds Bank*, 2023, https://www.lloydsbanktrade.com/ en/market-potential/turkiye/investment (accessed 25 February 2024); Anthon Garcia, 'UAE among Preferred Countries for Foreign Direct Investment,' *Middle Eadst Economy*, 26 July 2023, https://economymiddleeast.com/news/uae-among-preferred-countries-for-foreign-direct-investment (accessed 26 February 2024); Danielle Myles, 'Abu Dhabi SWF Gives Egypt $35bn FDI Bailout,' *FDI Intelligence*, 26 February 2024, https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/news/abu-dhabi-swf-gives-egypt-35bn-fdi-bailout-83531 (accessed 1 March 2024).

and in Jordan 14.4 percent.[101] Poverty limits developmental opportunities in all aspects: education, healthcare, scientific research, soft power promotion, and defence.[102]

(b) Military power

The Global Power Index is most commonly used to determine a country's military potential and strength. This index considers elements such as manpower, equipment, logistics, finance, and geography. Combining these elements allows the determination of the relative power of each nation's military forces. In this ranking at the end of 2022, Turkey was the highest-ranked country in the MENA region, ranking 11th globally, followed by Egypt at 14th, Iran at 17th, and Israel at 18th. Saudi Arabia occupied the 22nd position, while Iraq's military potential was ranked much lower, at 45th in the world, and the UAE at 56th; Syria was positioned at 64th, and Qatar at 65th. In the end of 2023 ranking, the situation changed slightly as Iran passed Egypt within the region. However, there were significant changes on a global scale. Turkey moved up to the 8th globally, and Israel was classified at 17th. Thus, the ranking of the military powers of the Middle East looked as follows:[103]

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[101] *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2019*, UNDP, 2019, 19. https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/mpi2019publication.pdf (accessed 20 March 2024).

[102] See *Second Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report*, United Nations and League of Arab States, 2023, https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/second-arab-multidimensional-poverty-report-english.pdf (accessed 20 March 2024); Shahrokh Fardoust, 'Challenges New and Old: The Myriad Economic Issues Affecting MENA Through the Lens of Public Opinion,' *mei.edu*, Middle East Institute, 28 February 2023, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2023-02/Challengespercent20newpercent20andpercent20old_percent20Thepercent20myriadpercent20economicpercent20issuespercent20affectingpercent20MENApercent20throughpercent20thepercent20lenspercent20ofpercent20publicpercent20opinion.pdf (accessed 21 March 2024).

[103] '2024 Military Strength Ranking,' *Global Fire Power*, 2024, https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php (accessed 23 February 2024).

Middle East Military Strength 2024

Country	Rank in the world	Total population in mln	Available manpower in mln	Active military manpower in th.	Reserve military manpower in th.
Turkey	8	83.5	42.7	355	378.7
Iran	14	87.5	49	610	350
Egypt	15	109.5	44	440	480
Israel	17	9	3.7	170	465
Saudi Arabia	23	35.9	18.6	257	n.d.
Iraq	45	41.2	17.3	193	n.d.
UAE	51	9.9	5.7	65	130
Syria	60	22.9	14.6	170	50
Qatar	63	2.5	0.6	66.5	15
Kuwait	77	3.1	1.7	72	24
Oman	78	3.8	1.4	42.6	100
Jordan	80	11	3.4	100	65
Yemen	81	31.5	12	67.7	n.d.
Bahrain	86	1.5	0.8	18.4	110
Lebanon	118	5.3	2	60	35

Source: The author's analysis based on '2024 Military Strength Ranking,' *Global Fire Power*, 2024, https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php (accessed 23 February 2024).

Military Equipment 2024

Country	Total combat aircraft	Fighters	Attack helicopters	Armoured fighting vehicles in th.	Towed artillery	Rocket launcher (MLRS)	Navy Fleet
Turkey	1,069	205	111	55.1	1,700	200	186
Iran	551	186	13	65.7	2,000	700	101
Egypt	1,080	238	100	77.5	1,500	1,100	140
Israel	612	241	48	43.4	300	100	67
Saudi Arabia	914	283	34	20.6	2,000	400	57
Iraq	371	26	40	39.8	1,400	400	68

Country	Total combat aircraft	Fighters	Attack helicopters	Armoured fighting vehicles in th.	Towed artillery	Rocket launcher (MLRS)	Navy Fleet
UAE	560	99	30	12.2	90	100	79
Syria	452	168	27	14.5	2,400	600	47
Qatar	228	92	24	5.5	10	20	123
Kuwait	114	36	16	4.4	0	20	123
Oman	128	29	0	5	100	0	22
Jordan	265	44	43	24.1	80	80	27
Yemen	177	53	14	4.8	20	10	38
Bahrain	120	18	28	n. d	20	10	58
Lebanon	81	0	0	n. d	400	30	69

Source: The authors' analysis based on '2024 Military Strenght Ranking,' *Global Fire Power*, 2024, https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php (accessed 23 February 2024).

Ranking by the *Business Inside* considers the amount of military equipment and troops, as well as financial standing, geography, available resources, and the sophistication of the country's equipment. As a result, among the 25 strongest military countries in the world, five countries from the MENA region were included: Turkey at 11th place, Egypt at 14th, Iran at 17th, Israel at 18th, and Saudi Arabia at 22nd. Turkey was ranked highest among the MENA countries due to its high arms expenditures and significant prospects for increasing its military potential. It was among the top ten countries regarding aircraft fleet strength, transport fleet strength, and helicopter strength. Turkey was one of the five NATO countries where US nuclear weapons were stationed. Egypt was classified as the strongest Arab country due to its total available military manpower, paramilitary force strength, and total available reserve manpower, as well as the strength of its aircraft fleet. The Egyptian Air Force had over 1,000 military aircraft and about 200,000 personnel considered part of the country's paramilitary forces. Egypt's armed forces were heavily dependent on US assistance, amounting to $320 million annually, provided by the US administration despite

protests from some US senators who believed human rights were being violated in Egypt.[104]

Israel's military potential was ranked high due to its total fighter/interceptor aircraft strength, total aircraft fleet strength, and total available reserve military manpower. In contrast, Iran's military potential was based on its total combat tank fleet strength, total self-propelled Multiple Launch Rocket Projector vehicle fleet strength, and its total available active military manpower. The Iranian army had about 575,000 soldiers, making it the seventh-largest army in the world by size. Iran has been striving for decades to develop nuclear weapons, which would significantly enhance its military potential. Analysts considered this aspect when evaluating the increase in arms expenditures in Saudi Arabia, whose military budget in 2023 was $46 billion, ranking it eighth in the world regarding arms expenditure. The main component of Saudi Arabia's military potential was its total aerial tanker aircraft fleet strength. With 22 units of this type, Saudi Arabia ranked second in the world in this regard.[105]

MENA countries ranked high in global rankings in terms of arms expenditure. In 2022, international arms expenditure increased by 3.7 percent compared with the previous year, reaching $2,240 billion. Nearly 63 percent of global spending were accounted for by five countries: the USA, China, Russia, India, and Saudi Arabia. In 2022, Saudi Arabia allocated $75 billion for arms expenditure, representing a 16 percent increase compared to the previous year and accounting for 7.4 percent of the country's GDP. The trend to such high arms expenditure compared to GDP emerged in Saudi Arabia as early as 2013, when military spending reached a record of 9.0 percent of GDP. In 2015, Saudi Arabia entered into a war with Yemen, further deepening this trend. Saudi Arabia's arms expenditure as a percentage of GDP in 2022 was the highest in the world after Ukraine.[106]

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[104] Sinéad Baker and Thibault Spirlet, 'The World's Most Powerful Militaries in 2023, ranked,' *Business Insider*, 18 December 2023, https://www.businessinsider.com/ranked-world-most-powerful-militaries-2023-firepower-us-china-russia-2023-5?IR=T (accessed 23 February 2024).

[105] Ibid.

[106] Nan Tian, Diego Lopes da Silva, Xiao Liang, Lorenzo Scarazzato, Lucie Béraud-Sudreau and Ana Assis, 'Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022.' *SIPRI Fact Sheet* (April 2023), 2, 5.

Overall, Middle Eastern countries allocated \$184 billion for arms expenditure in 2022, representing a 3.2 percent increase compared to the previous year. The increase was primarily due to the high growth in expenditure in Saudi Arabia (16 percent). Arms expenditure in Israel fell in 2022 for the first time since 2009. The sum of \$23.4 billion was 4.2 percent lower than in 2021 but was still 26 percent higher than the military budget in 2013. Although Israel's 2030 National Security Strategy anticipated annual growth in arms expenditure due to the tense situation in Syria and strained relations with the Palestinians, the government had to cut expenditures because of a budget deficit. Similarly, arms expenditure in Turkey in 2022 was lower than in the previous year, marking the third consecutive year of reduction in the military budget. The situation in Turkey was specific in that nominally in 2022 more funds were allocated for arms expenditure, but high inflation and a low Turkish lira exchange rate resulted in expenditure being 26 percent lower when converted to US dollars.[107]

In 2023, Saudi Arabia maintained arms expenditure at the same level as the previous year. The next MENA country on the list of countries with the highest expenditure in 2023 was Israel (15th place worldwide) with \$23.4 billion, followed by Qatar (20th and \$15.4 billion), Turkey (23rd and \$10.6 billion), Kuwait (30th and \$8.2 billion), and Iran (34th and \$6.8 billion). Arms expenditure accounted for over 7 percent of GDP in Saudi Arabia, 4.5 percent in Israel, 7 percent in Qatar, 1.2 percent in Turkey, 4.5 percent in Kuwait, and 2.6 percent in Iran.[108]

Defense budgets in 2024

Country	US\$ billion
Saudi Arabia	71
Turkey	40
Israel	24.4
UAE	15.5

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[107] Ibid., 2, 11.
[108] 'Military Spending by Country,' *Wisevoter*, 2024, https://wisevoter.com/country-rankings/military-spending-by-country (accessed 24 February 2024).

Country	US$ billion
Qatar	14
Iran	9.9
Egypt	9.4
Kuwait	9.5
Oman	7.8
Iraq	5.2
Jordan	2
Syria	1.4
Bahrain	1.5
Yemen	1
Lebanon	0.9

Source: 'Defense Budget by Country (2024),' *Global Fire Power*, 2024, https://www.globalfirepower.com/defense-spending-budget.php (accessed 24 February 2024).

So, which country's army in the region is the strongest? In answering this question, it should be noted that no ranking is perfect and completely objective. It reflects perception rather than the actual picture. Other authors emphasise that the data misses factors such as "a military's training and education, its intelligence chops, or the effectiveness of its command structure."[109] The general opinion is that Israel had the most capable military in the Middle East. However, it must be noted that the ability to conduct military operations depends on the type of conflict. If we analyse a classic nation-to-nation war, the history of the Middle East since 1948 confirms that the Israeli army was the best on the battlefield. However, when we think about an asymmetric or guerrilla type of conflict, the situation is unclear. The Israeli army failed to defeat Hezbollah and Hamas. It confirms the case of Turkey. Despite being one of the strongest countries in the world militarily and the second largest in NATO, Turkey has been waging a war against Kurdish guerrillas for decades and cannot end it.

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[109] Nan Tian, Diego Lopes da Silva, Xiao Liang, Lorenzo Scarazzato, Lucie Béraud-Sudreau and Ana Assis, 2, 11.

Much also depends on strategy in this regard. In the Middle East, military power primarily serves as a deterrent to potential aggressors. Israel's national security strategy, formulated in the mid-20th century under the first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, consists of four elements: deterrence, early warning, defence, and decisive victory. Deterrence was, therefore the primary function of military power, which was understandable in the situation of a small country surrounded by hostile countries with much larger human resources and larger armies.[110] In comparison, the Iranian military strategy in the Strait of Hormuz region, known as A2/AD (anti-access/area denial strategy)[111] and combining advanced technology with guerrilla tactics, aims to deny or delay foreign forces' access to the Persian Gulf and maintain freedom of navigation in the area. Ultimately, this strategy also boils down to deterring the enemy from attacking Iranian territory.

Iran's military position is the weakest and becoming dramatic. The economic situation caused by Western sanctions means that Iran cannot allocate as much money to armaments as the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. The difference in arms expenditure between Iran and Saudi Arabia is enormous and, over several years, will translate into a visible technological advantage of Saudi armed forces over Iranian ones. In this situation, Iran will refine its deterrence strategy and seek to obtain nuclear weapons as the best instrument in this strategy. Therefore, it should not be expected that the current Iranian regime will take steps to slow down the pace of work on nuclear weapons. The West faces the difficult question of whether to maintain sanctions against Iran, which only accelerate Iran's acquisition of atomic weapons, or try to integrate the country into the world system regardless of the country's oppressive political regime. The West's choice of strategy towards Iran is political rather than ethical-moral because the West already supports oppressive Arab regimes.

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[110] See Amos Yadlin and Udi Evental, 'Why Israel Slept: The War in Gaza and the Search for Security,' *Foreign Affairs* 103, 1 (January/February 2024), 20–9.

[111] See Luis Simon, 'Demystifying the A2/AS Buzz,' *War on Rocks*, 4 January 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/demystifying-the-a2ad-buzz (accessed 23 February 2024).

It is noteworthy that Turkey's military expenditure increased fourfold in 2024. It can be discussed in the context of President Erdoğan's announcement that Turkey will strive for strategic autonomy by expanding its military sector. The Turkish defence industry has been significantly expanded in recent years, and Turkish arms sales abroad amounted to $6 billion in 2023. Turkish arms exports are predicted to reach $11 billion in 2024. Turkey also intends to buy 40 Eurofighter Typhoon jets from Spain and the UK, requiring Germany's approval. The defence budget statement also expressed the intention to purchase US F-16 fighter jets. It should be noted that the actual value of defence expenditure in 2024, expressed in Turkish lira (1.133 trillion), will be lower than the nominal value due to rampant inflation in Turkey. In the last five years, the Turkish currency has lost about 80 percent of its value against the US dollar. Nonetheless, the predicted defence expenditure represents about 4 percent of GDP and will strengthen Turkey as a regional power, disrupting the balance in defence expenditure between Turkey and Greece.[112]

Although the strategies of Middle Eastern countries treat military power as a deterrent against aggression, military power has been repeatedly used for political purposes, leading to tensions, conflicts, and wars. An example is the Arab–Israeli conflict, which has been ongoing since 1948 and has led to the Arab–Israeli war of 1948, the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967, and the Yom Kippur War in 1973, which caused severe disturbances in the region and tensions in the world. Another example is the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1989). This extremely bloody military confrontation resulted in massive loss of life and material destruction. The war was fought on a long front and had the character of trench warfare, with both sides using chemical weapons and intensive artillery shelling from land and air. The war brought no

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[112] See Fabrice Wolf, 'Why Is the 150 Percent Increase in Turkey's Defence Budget so Worrying?' *Meta-Defense.fr*, 18 October 2023, https://meta-defense.fr/en/2023/10/18/turkish_defense_budget_2024 (accessed 24 February 2024); '2024 Defence Budget Passed: Turkey Plans Eurofighter Purchase Amid Regional Conflict Concerns,' *Medyanews*, 17 November 2023, https://medyanews.net/2024-defence-budget-passed-turkey-plans-eurofighter-purchase-amid-regional-conflict-concerns (accessed 24 February 2024).

benefits to anyone and did not produce a winner. It was initiated by the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, who wanted to exploit Iran's internal weakness caused by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 to weaken Iran.

From 1990 to 1991, another conflict occurred in the region caused by Iraq's aggression against Kuwait. In response, the USA formed a coalition of international forces and conducted a military operation that forced Iraqi forces to leave Kuwaiti territory. This war, known as the Gulf War, was decisive militarily but did not lead to political decisions, as Saddam Hussein remained in power. The Iraqi dictator was removed from power during the subsequent war known as the Iraq War, initiated by the US-led invasion of Iraq, which began a period of instability in the country that lasted until 2011. This war was conducted on a large scale using airpower and led to sectarian violence, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Equally bloody is the Syrian Civil War, which erupted in 2011 and continues to this day. The conflict led to the disintegration of the state and involved large-scale military operations, aerial bombings, sieges, and proxy warfare.

Also ongoing till the present day is the civil war in Yemen, which began in 2014 and has evolved into a regional conflict involving Saudi Arabia supported by the USA and their allies.

The two wars in Iraq, the war in Syria, and the war in Libya in 2011 marked the intervention of external powers in the region's affairs. They led to dramatic changes in the Middle Eastern system, as well as defining security dynamics and socio-economic development.

4. Soft power

Brand Finance prepares *The Global Soft Power Index*, which is regarded as the most comprehensive research study on the perception of national brands. It analyses all 193 UN member states and provides insights into their attractiveness, employment, education, and tourism. This index is created through opinion polling, and in the latest edition for 2022, the opinions of 170,000

respondents worldwide were taken into account.[113] *Soft power*, as defined by Brand Finance according to J. Nye, is "a nation's ability to influence the preferences and behaviours of various actors in the international arena (states, corporations, communities, publics etc.) through attraction or persuasion rather than coercion." Respondents' answers are weighted "across the three key performance indicators of Familiarity, Reputation, and Influence as well as 35 attributes grouped under 8 Soft Power Pillars."[114]

The Global Soft Power Index 2023 report of Brand Finance draws attention to the UAE's rise to become one of the top ten countries in the world, the first Middle Eastern country to achieve such a high position. In 2021, the UAE was ranked 17th in the soft power ranking. The significant factors contributing to its rise included the success of EXPO 2020 and the world's most high-profile climate conference COP 28, hosted by the UAE in 2023. Among other factors highlighted by respondents that influenced the perception of the UAE were the country's early mass vaccination efforts and reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic. The UAE also became a global trade hub thanks to EXPO 2020, ranking third worldwide for further trade development opportunities. Additionally, the UAE ranked third on the list of the world's most 'generous' nations due to its significant humanitarian aid contributions measured as a percentage of GDP.[115]

The UAE consistently climbed in the Education & Science pillar of the ranking. By specializing in a high-tech economy and specialized education, the UAE embarked on space exploration as part of the Emirates Mars Mission, which undoubtedly influenced respondents' perceptions. Other Middle Eastern countries that ranked high in the soft power ranking were Israel (23rd place in 2021) and Saudi Arabia (24th place).[116]

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[113] *Global Soft Power Index*, Brand Finance, 2024, https://brandirectory.com/softpower (accessed 1 March 2024).

[114] 'Gulf Nations on the Rise in Global Soft Power Index 2023: UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar Climb in New Rankings,' *Brand Finance*, 2 March 2023, https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/gulf-nations-on-the-rise-in-global-soft-power-index-2023-uae-saudi-arabia-qatar-climb-in-new-rankings (accessed 1 March 2024).

[115] Ibid.

[116] 'Global Soft Power Index 2022: USA bounces back better to top of nation brand ranking,' *Brand Finance*, 15 March 2022, https://brandfi-

5. Non-state actors

Hezbollah, which emerged after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 as part of a plan to destroy the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), became a significant actor in 2000 when it forced the Israeli army to withdraw from southern Lebanon beyond the occupied Shebaa Farms region. In 2006, Hezbollah's elite unit expanded its operations beyond Lebanese territory and inflicted serious losses on the Israeli army. As a result, the Israeli army did not conduct any ground operations in Lebanon after 2006. In 2022, Hezbollah leader Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah stated that his organization's forces numbered 100,000 soldiers, not including allied militia forces and special units known as the Radwan Forces. Hezbollah also possesses rockets and drones, estimated at up to 150,000 by the end of 2023. Some of them are Iranian precision-guided missiles that have a range of 300 km. After Israel's aggression against Gaza in October 2023, Hezbollah began shelling northern Israel, causing material damage and casualties among Israeli soldiers and civilians. Hezbollah itself claimed that its actions resulted in the deaths of over 2,000 Israeli soldiers and settlers. It is considered that, unlike Hamas, Hezbollah has the ability to strike Israel, including the Haifa and Tel Aviv regions, with similar force as Israeli attacks on Lebanon. Unlike Hamas, Hezbollah is a regional force and a force in Lebanese politics. Its political wing has representation in the Lebanese parliament, and it is practically autonomous, governed by the independent *shura* (council), which decides on the extent of Hezbollah's ties with Iran in religious, financial, and military matters.[117]

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nance.com/press-releases/global-soft-power-index-2022-usa-bounces-back-better-to-top-of-nation-brand-ranking (accessed 1 March 2024).

[117] Robert Inlakesh, 'How Powerful is Lebanese Hezbollah and Why Does It Exist?' *The Palestine Chronicle*, 8 January 2024, https://www.palestinechronicle.com/how-powerful-is-lebanese-hezbollah-and-why-does-it-exist (accessed 13 March 2024); Tamara Qiblawi, 'Hezbollah is far more powerful than Hamas. Will it join the fight against Israel?' *CNNWorld*, 13 October 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/israel-lebanon-border-fighters-quiet-intl/index.html (accessed 13 March 2024).

The forces and capabilities of Hamas are significantly more limited than those of Hezbollah. As it became known that to carry out an attack on Israel on October 7, Hamas had to involve Palestinian units from Gaza; it was estimated that Hamas's claims that its forces numbered around 30,000 or even 45,000 combat troops were exaggerated. The Institute for the Study of War, an influential and well-informed US think tank, assessed the forces of the Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, at 26 to 30 battalions, each with 400 to 1,000 men. The most likely data suggested that, before the war, Hamas's forces numbered at least 18,000 well-trained, disciplined, and ideologically highly motivated front-line soldiers.[118]

Another weakness of Hamas compared to Hezbollah is the structure of its leadership. Theoretically, it is governed by a *shura* elected by regional councils in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as its activists held in Israeli prisons. In reality, the organization is torn by leadership struggles between various factions and activists in Gaza, the West Bank, Turkey, Qatar, and Lebanon. As a result of the war in Gaza, Hamas lost a significant part of its combat value as the Israeli army destroyed its infrastructure and killed many fighters. Israeli sources and other experts have given a possibly overestimated figure of approximately 10,000 Hamas fighters killed in Gaza up to January 2024. However, the organization did not lose the ability to conduct further military operations, as its main leadership evacuated from Gaza at the beginning of the Israeli military operation. Despite the Israeli military occupation of Gaza, Hamas still has a significant influence on what happens in the enclave. Hamas is also popular in the West Bank, largely due to the Palestinian Authority's helplessness in addressing social issues and Jewish settler aggression. The Palestinian Authority's position suffered a severe blow due to the intensification of violence against the population of the West Bank by the Israeli army and settlers after 7 October 2023. As a result, from 7 October to 1 December 2023, 240 Palestinians were killed in the West Bank. Hamas's popularity further increased after the terrorist

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[118] Zoran Kusovac, 'Analysis: Has Israel weakened Hamas enough to win the war on Gaza?' *Aljazeera*, 30 December 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/12/30/analysis-has-israel-weakened-hamas-enough-to-win-the-war-on-gaza (accessed 13 March 2024).

attack on 30 November 2023 in East Jerusalem, which resulted in the deaths of three people. Hamas itself escalated its rhetoric and commented on the attack with a quotation from the Qur'an: "a jihad of victory or martyrdom," rhetoric not heard for some time.[119] This may herald a return to the tactic of suicide terrorist attacks within Israel.

Kurds constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the Middle East, with substantial populations residing in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran. Estimates place the total Kurdish population at 20–25 million. Kurdish sources even claim that they number 35 million. Kurds make up around 20 percent of Turkey's population. Their influence and capabilities encompass military, political, cultural, and demographic dimensions. Militarily, the Kurds maintain several armed groups, notably the Peshmerga in Iraq, the YPG (People's Protection Units), and YPJ (Women's Protection Units) in Syria, and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in Turkey. These factions have demonstrated military prowess, particularly evident in their efforts against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Kurdish forces, primarily the YPG and YPJ, successfully defended the city of Kobani in 2014–2015, which was a critical point in the battle against ISIS.[120]

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[119] Dan Sabbagh, 'Hamas Claims Responsibility for Deadly Jerusalem Bus Stop Shooting,' *The Guardian*, 1 December 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/30/jerusalem-bus-stop-shooting-attack-killed-injured (accessed 13 March 2024); Jason Burke, 'How Strong is Hamas and Could There be Another Ceasefire in Gaza?' *The Guardian*, 1 December 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/01/israel-palestine-how-strong-is-hamas-another-ceasefire-gaza (accessed 13 March 2024).

[120] Ruwayda Mustafah, 'Where Is a Strong Kurdistan?' *Rudaw*, 23 September 2023, https://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/23092023 (accessed 13 March 2024); Fabrice Balanche, 'Iraq and Syria: Kurdish Autonomous Regions Under Threat,' *groupe d'études géopolitiques*, 4 March 2023, https://geopolitique.eu/en/2023/03/04/iraq-and-syria-kurdish-autonomous-regions-under-threat (accessed 13 March 2024); Ayça Alemdaroğlu and Fatma Müge Göçek (eds.), *Kurds in Dark Times: New Perspectives on Violence and Resistance in Turkey. A fresh approach to the study of Kurds in Turkey* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2023).

However, their military strength varies depending on the context and external support. Politically, Kurds in Iraq have established semi-autonomous regions such as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, commonly known as Rojava. Despite their significant political roles in regional dynamics, their influence is sometimes hampered by both regional and international factors and they face notable challenges, including internal divisions among various Kurdish factions, opposition from neighbouring states, limited international recognition of their aspirations, and obstacles related to governance and economic development within their regions. An example may be the adoption of the Iraqi budget for 2023. Internal Kurdish divisions helped Shia and Sunni factions in the Iraqi Parliament to weaken the Kurdistan Region's financial independence, effectively bringing the KRG under federal authority.[121]

Iranian Kurds comprise about 10 percent of the total Iranian population and live in five western provinces of Iran. Since 1979, relations between the Kurds and the Iranian authorities have been tense, and Tehran has been trying to suppress Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. Tehran strongly protested in September 2017 against the establishment of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq for fear that it may become a model for Iranian Kurds. Several groups of Iranian Kurds have found refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan and demand the autonomy of Iranian Kurdistan. Tehran, in turn, insists that the Iraqi authorities, dominated by Shiites after 2003, disarm these groups. However, authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq oppose this. Iranian-Kurdish opposition parties based in Iraqi Kurdistan are the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KŞZK), the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), the Organization of Iranian Kurdistan Struggle (Khabat), the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), and the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK). The issue of the Iranian Kurds' aspirations for autonomy is an essential problem in regional policy.[122]

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[121] Yerevan Saeed, 'In Iraq, the Kurds Are Their Own Worst Enemy', *Fikra Forum*, 17 June 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraq-kurds-are-their-own-worst-enemy (accessed 13 March 2024).

[122] 'Iranian-Kurdish Opposition Parties,' *Amwaj.media*, 2020, https://amwaj.media/data/country/iran/politics/organizations/iranian-kurd-

The Houthis have become non-state actors who have taken on the world's most powerful militaries. The Houthis are a Yemeni minority inhabiting the northwestern mountainous part of the country and belonging to the Zaidi branch of Shia Islam. Their name comes from the founder of the movement, Hussein al-Houthi. This minority was active in the 2000s when they fought against the Yemeni authorities. In 2014, the Houthis advanced on the capital Sana'a and seized it. There, they forced the ousted President Ali Abd Allah Saleh to place the Republican Guard under their command, after which they killed him. In this way, they gained control over 80 percent of Yemen's population. The activity of the Houthis led to a civil war and catastrophic consequences. Yemen was already one of the poorest countries in the world, but the civil war led the state to collapse and the population to the brink of poverty and famine. It is estimated that since 2014, around 150,000 people have died in the fighting. The Houthis proved to be strong enough to resist international intervention led by Saudi Arabia from 2015 to 2022, which sought to restore power to the Yemeni government, which was recognized by the international community. Since mid-November 2023, the Houthis have begun shelling ships passing through the Red Sea in the strategic Bab al-Mandeb Strait with rockets and drones, describing their actions as a form of assistance to Hamas and announced that they would attack ships with Israeli links until Israel stopped attacking Gaza. When Western countries sent warships to the Red Sea, the Houthis attacked them.[123]

The Houthis are very militant and very challenging negotiating partners, and war is a source of income and livelihood for them and their families. Destroying their infrastructure is very difficult, given the inaccessibility of the areas that serve as their

ish-opposition-parties (accessed 14 April 2024); Mohammad Salami, 'Iran's Goals and Strategy for Expelling Kurdish Opposition Groups in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq,' *CFRI*, Centre Français de Recherche sur Iraq, 13 September 2023, https://cfri-irak.com/en/article/irans-goals-and-strategy-for-expelling-kurdish-opposition-groups-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq-2023-09-13 (accessed 14 April 2024).

[123] Frank Gardner, 'Confronting the Houthis: How Powerful Are Yemen's Rebel Rulers?' *BBC*, 3 February 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68182879 (accessed 13 March 2024).

bases, and they change their tactics, making them an even more difficult opponent. Initially, they only attacked ships associated with Israel. Still, after rocket attacks by the USA and other countries on their bases in January 2024, they began shelling all ships tied to owners or operators in the UK or the USA. From November 2023 to 1 February 2024, 28 ships were targeted in their attacks, resulting in a 29 percent decline in shipping using the Red Sea route. Yemeni Houthis are supported by Iran, which provides them with advanced weaponry and facilitates training by Hezbollah activists. They have ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in their arsenal.[124]

The Houthis have unexpectedly become an important player in the Israel–Hamas war. They remain beyond the control of any state other than Iran. If their actions were to contradict the interests of the Islamic Republic, it is believed that Iran has enough power to limit their influence and activity. However, as long as their activities align with Iran's strategic interests, limiting the impact of the Houthis on the Middle Eastern and global systems will be very difficult.

6. Power composite indices

The National Power Index classifies countries according to their economy, military, diplomatic influence, technology, and popularity worldwide. In 2011, Turkey was the highest-ranked country in the MENA region (17th place worldwide) and ranked 23rd in economic power, 9th in military strength, 17th in diplomatic influence, 17th in technology, and 31st in global popularity. Saudi Arabia was in 32nd place worldwide (26th in economic power, 29th in military strength, 44th in diplomatic influence, 81st in technology, and 25th in global popularity). The third country in the region was Israel, in 34th place worldwide (28th in economic power, 26th in military strength, 48th in diplomatic influence, 30th in technology, and 34th in global popularity), followed by the UAE (49th worldwide), Iran

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[124] Joshua Cheetham, Shruti Menon, Yi Ma and Paul Myers, 'US and UK Strikes Fail to Slow Houthi Attacks,' *BBC*, 1 February 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68159939 (accessed 13 March 2024).

(50th worldwide), and Egypt (51st worldwide). Qatar was then in 78th place worldwide after Kuwait – 63rd worldwide.[125]

After 20 years, the situation has changed in this regard. According to the annual ranking of *CEOWORLD* magazine, the most powerful countries were those that shaped global economic policies and dominated through seven attributes: political stability, economic influence, defence budget, weaponry, international alliances, soft power, and military strength. According to these criteria, in 2023, Turkey was the highest-ranking country among MENA countries (10th place), followed by Egypt (12th), Saudi Arabia (14th), Israel (15th), Iran (17th), UAE (23rd), Iraq (45th), Syria (63rd), and Qatar (64th).[126]

In *The Global Power Index* of 2022, Pareto Economics assumes that, in the era of globalization, four themes dominate international relations: Globalization, Geopolitics, Transformative Technology, and Societal Change.[127] In this ranking, which focuses on financial potential, technological prowess, and the ability to conduct market operations, and thus on the issue of business transformation and investment landscape, the highest among MENA countries in 2023 was the UAE – ranked 14th in the world. The next countries in the region were Turkey (20th), Israel (22nd), and Saudi Arabia (24th). Iran was in 40th place, Oman in 43rd, Egypt in 50th, and Qatar in 59th.[128]

In addition to 'hard' indicators such as GDP, the number of soldiers and the amount of FDI, a country's strength also depends on how its environment perceives it. *US News & World Report* ranks the world's most powerful countries by polling thousands of people from dozens of countries about their opinions on the

[125] '2011 National Power Index,' *National Ranking Qualifying the World of Sovereign States*, https://nationranking.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/2011-npi.png (accessed 22 February 2024).

[126] Alexandra Dimitropoulou, 'Ranked: The World's Most Powerful Countries For 2023,' *CEOWORLD Magazine*, August 2023, https://ceoworld.biz/2023/08/26/ranked-the-worlds-most-powerful-countries-for-2023 (accessed 22 February 2024).

[127] *Fundamentals*, Pareto Economics, 2024, Fundamentals | Pareto Economics (pareto-economics.com) (accessed 22 February 2024).

[128] *Global Power Index. Report 2023*, Pareto Economics, 2024, Global Power Index Report 2023 (pareto-economics.com) (accessed 22 February 2024).

subject. In the ranking for 2023, 17,000 people were polled in 87 different countries. The ranking assessed a country's power based on respondents' opinions about political, economic, military, and soft power. The USA, China, and Russia remained the top three strongest countries. Of the MENA countries, Saudi Arabia was the highest, ranking 9th. The UAE ranked 10th, Israel 11th, Turkey 15th, Iran 18th, and Qatar 22nd. The report indicated that Saudi Arabia, along with India, made the highest jump in the ranking.[129]

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[129] 'Power,' *U.S. News and World Report*, 2024, https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/rankings/power (accessed 15 February 2024).

Chapter III
Who Is the Most Influential in the Middle East?

1. International influence framework

In studies of International Relations theories, the terms 'power' and 'influence' are often used interchangeably, or at least the boundary between the contents of these terms is not always clearly marked. Robert Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner analyse both terms within the category of "influence terms," which they define as "the wants, desires, preferences, or intentions of one or more actors [that] affect the actions, or predispositions to act, of one or more other actors in a direction consistent with – and not contrary to – the wants, preferences, or intentions of the influence-wielders."[130] Evelyn Goh defines influence as "the act of modifying or otherwise having an impact upon another actor's preferences or behaviour in favour of one's own aims."[131]

In these definitions, there are inded two actors, one of which is the influencing party and the other the target or object of influence. Such influence involves intentional and deliberate interaction using specific resources, which are evaluated as sufficient to achieve the desired effect. It can also be assumed that the criterion

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[130] Robert A. Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 12.
[131] Evelyn Goh, *Rising China's Influence in Developing Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

for measuring influence is a change in the behaviour of the second actor. The fundamental question in this context is: How does a country obtain or sustain influence on the international system? In other words, how are the resources of an actor in the international system used or not used to influence other participants in the system, and thus, what is the causal mechanism of influence within the global system.

Emily Meierding and Rachel Sigman propose a framework of the causal mechanism, which first assumes the identification of power resources that a given participant in the system uses when engaging in influencing activities on a target unit of the system. It is assumed that a state's power resources can have material and cultural characteristics. We read: "Influence activities are the actions that a state undertakes that may generate international influence."[132] The fundamental element of the proposed framework is the power mechanisms that translate a state's resources and mechanisms into influence.

The framework for analysing international influence in Meierding and Sigman's approach includes factors that occur in the following sequence: power resources (military capabilities, economic wealth, natural resources, technology, political system, culture, educational system, and position in international organisations) create the possibility of undertaking influencing activities in many spheres (military, economic, diplomatic, informational), and these, in turn, generate such actions towards a target state as a reward, punishment, expertise, attractiveness, recognition. They create power mechanisms. The target state may react or not to the activities of an influencing state and may adopt, maintain, refrain from, or abandon the change desired by an influencing state. In the case of adopting or supporting the change, we speak of exerting influence by an influencing state on a target state.[133]

In our analysis, we intend to show what influencing activities each of the Middle Eastern system units has undertaken within the

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[132] Emily Meierding and Rachel Sigman, 'Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition,' *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, 4 (December 2021), 3, https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab011.

[133] Ibid., 6.

system over the last two decades and in which sectors: economic, military, educational, or diplomatic. In our analysis, we shall use qualitative methods to evaluate the power mechanisms mobilised by activities in different sectors. The analysis should include the dimension of development and humanitarian aid, support for political initiatives, military assistance, organisation of economic forums, political initiatives concerning other participants in the system, sports successes, and cultural support programmes (e.g., assistance in the restoration of historical monuments).[134] All these activities fall within the framework of foreign policy.

Determining a country's influence on the system through foreign policy requires some clarification. It should be noted that the dominant factors in determining a country's foreign policy are domestic or internal factors. These factors determine the behaviour of participants in the international system. For example, it is impossible to understand why the Iraq–Iran war broke out in 1980 without analysing the political system in both countries and the ideologies of their leaders. Internal factors are numerous and may include political institutions, and the ethnic-religious composition of society, as well as the economic situation and competition between factions in the power elite.[135]

It can be said that "state behaviour represents the preferences of the main actors who control the state."[136] Brent E. Sasley proposes a distinction between 'state' and 'regime in power' when studying a state's foreign policy. This approach has many supporters.[137] "By focusing on the regimes themselves, we can understand how the state will act; and in this way, we can also understand how state behaviour might be changed." The 'regime in power' concept includes the top positions of the state institutions occupied by

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[134] Meierding and Sigman analyse the influence of the USA in Africa in the security sector and identify four types of security sector engagement: combatting terrorism, maintaining regional stability, building partner capacity, and increasing interoperability with partner militaries.

[135] See Andrew Moravcsik, 'Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,' *International Organization* 51, 4 (Autumn 1997), 513–53.

[136] Sasley, 21.

[137] See Steven R. David, 'Explaining Third World Alignment,' *World Politics* 43, 2 (January 1991), 233–56.

officials and the structure of their family, tribal, ethnic, or religious connections. These people often create bureaucratic, military, and security institutions themselves to serve their primary goal, which is to maintain power.[138]

The distinction between 'state' and 'regime in power' is constructive. Although states appear on the international stage, paying attention to who 'stands behind' the state is helpful to understanding changes in foreign policy as well as conflicts and cooperation between participants in the system. Stability or lack thereof in foreign policy also becomes more understandable, as it reflects the legitimization of state power. Arab regimes generally lack internal legitimacy and are dependent on external legitimation. This situation affects the instability of power systems and internal stability and, consequently, the possibilities of conducting active foreign policy in the region. An example of this is Syria after 2011. On the other hand, such regimes attempt to generate internal legitimacy by manipulating public opinion and promoting radical ideologies of nationalism, Islamism, and the idea of revolution. It directly influences the country's foreign policy.[139] There are many examples here – from Jamal Abd al-Nasser to Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi.

2. Internal stability

Stability is an essential term in international Relations theories. Concerning the global system, 'international stability' is regarded either as a result of competition among sovereign powers pursuing their interests and operating in a state of anarchy or as a result of the complex nexus of interdependencies characterizing the contemporary global economy and regulated by international institutions. Stability is associated with conflict of interests among countries forming the system and each one's pursuit of maximizing

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[138] Sasley, 21.

[139] See Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995).

benefits to give them an edge over competitors and adversaries.[140] It is a state of calm after a period of tense confrontation "in which interstate violence is substantially nonexistent."[141]

In our approach, we focus on internal stability because we believe that a country's position in the International Relations system also depends on how it functions about its own society. The word 'stability' may mean, in this approach, 'equilibrium' and 'robustness.'[142] Both meanings refer to the state of order, cohesion, and resilience within the country's borders. Internal stability is, therefore, a function of the ability of a government to maintain the security and functionality of the political system. It requires effective governance, adherence to the rule of law and human rights, and the functioning of mechanisms for peaceful transfer of power after democratic elections. Internal stability is linked to social cohesion, resulting from an appropriate degree of unity and social solidarity. This degree depends on trust in state institutions, the willingness of various social groups to cooperate, tolerance of diversity, and the absence of social severe conflicts. Economic prosperity is fundamental to ensuring internal stability, which, in turn, depends on opportunities for employment and maintaining a decent standard of living. Internal stability is crucial because it affects relations with other countries and builds the country's position in the international system. Countries with higher degree of internal stability are perceived as more trustworthy partners than countries experiencing internal crises and torn by conflicts of a political, religious, or ethnic nature. The latter are perceived as weak and more vulnerable to external intervention.

In Middle Eastern countries, such stability varies. Some countries – Qatar, the UAE, and Oman – are relatively stable

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[140]   See Emerson M.S. Niou and Peter C. Ordenshook, 'Stability in Anarchic International System,' *American Political Science Review* 84, 4 (December 1990), 1207–34.

[141]   *International Stability* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND: 1966), https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P3420.html (accessed 29 February 2024).

[142]   Claudio D. Antonini, 'Definition of Stability in International Relations,' *IFAC Proceedings Volumes* 32, 2 (July 1999), 6344–6346, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1474667017570834 (accessed 29 February 2024).

compared with others because they have strong economies, effective governance structures, and relatively low levels of internal conflict. Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya are torn by internal severe conflicts that escalate into sectarian tensions, political unrest, and civil wars. These conflicts lead to severe disruptions in the functioning of the economy, humanitarian crises, and widespread displacement. In these countries, one should rather speak of a lack of stability or instability. Political instability is common in the Middle East due to authoritarian governance, corruption, lack of political freedom, and weaknesses of state institutions. The lack of mechanisms for the transferal of power means that any political change leads to political severe disturbance. Economic inequalities and high unemployment, especially among youth, also create tensions and undermine trust in authorities. Ethnic and religious divisions in some region countries contribute to social fragmentation and conflicts. Social grievances give rise to terrorism and regional conflicts, just as narratives of identity and historical grievances lead to tensions and violence.

Many manifestations of instability have their roots in authoritarianism. Freedom House's report *The World 2023* noted that, in the Middle East, only Israel could be classified as "Free," while Kuwait and Lebanon were classified as "Partly Free." In 2022, over 75 percent of the region's population lived in "Not Free" countries. The report pointed out that, in countries in the Middle East such as Turkey and Egypt, there were "dramatic declines in freedom." Political rights practically do not exist in most countries of the Arabian Peninsula. The populations of these countries cannot choose their leaders and cannot express themselves freely in the media, as the government controls the media. In recent years, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have granted some rights to women, allowing them to work and have limited freedom of movement in public spaces. However, any violations of the prescribed norms of behaviour face severe punishments. Political rights and civil liberties have been restricted in Iran since 1979. In September 2022, mass protests against authoritarian rule erupted in the country after 22-year-old Mahsa (Jina) Amini died in police custody. She was arrested for incorrectly wearing of the *hijab*. The protests were brutally suppressed,

but the authorities disbanded the morality police in December 2022.[143]

Authoritarianism boils down to the complete political subordination or physical elimination of opposition. The brutality of the authorities towards protesters intimidates people, and they rarely express their dissatisfaction in public. It may give the impression of stability, but it is a superficial stability because even the slightest easing of pressure from the authorities on society leads to outbreaks of dissatisfaction, sometimes on a massive scale, as was the case in 2011. There are many studies in which authors wonder about the sustainability of Middle Eastern authoritarianism and its 'resilience' against attempts at democratization. It is emphasized that country-level factors related to persistent authoritarianism in the Middle East are related to culture, economics, and institutions.[144] The change in the US position on this issue is also not without significance. As tensions in US relations with Russia and China escalate, the US administration has focused on security issues and set aside its concerns about democracy and human rights in some authoritarian Middle Eastern countries.[145]

Although Israel is treated as a "free" country, the government and society face several challenges regarding political rights and civil liberties. After Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right and ultra-nationalistic government came to power at the end of 2022, the country was shaken by demonstrations against attempts by politicians to take greater control over judicial appointments. The

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[143] See *Freedom in the World, 2023: Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy*, Freedom House, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigtalPDF.pdf (accessed 20 February 2024); Cathryn Grothe, 'Freedom Improved in the Middle East, but Authoritarian Repression Persists,' *Perspectives*, 23 March 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/article/freedom-improved-middle-east-authoritarian-repression-persists (accessed 29 February 2024).

[144] See Jülide Karakoç (ed.), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East* (London: Palgrave, 2015); Daniel Baissa and Melani Cammet, 'External Support and Persistent Authoritarianism in the Middle East,' *SSRN*, 2022, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4015909 (accessed 29 February 2024).

[145] Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Feldman, *Examining U.S. Relations with Authoritarian Countries* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023), 2.

government's implementation of judicial reforms would mean the Knesset could reject Supreme Court rulings.

An even greater challenge is the relationship with Palestinians and the government's policy regarding settlements in the West Bank. Israeli authorities' support for settlements leads to *de facto* occupation of the West Bank. In 2022, Israeli authorities allowed the demolition of over 900 Palestinian structures and housing units in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, resulting in over a thousand people being left homeless. Clashes and violence between Jewish settlers and Palestinian residents of the West Bank are constant.[146] The events of 7 October 2023, and the Gaza War shed new light on the problem of Israeli–Palestinian relations and, thus, on the stability of the State of Israel.

3. Power and Influence Composite Index

In answering the question of which country is the most influential in the Middle East, we assume that the potential associated with human and natural resources, and hard power, including GDP, FDI, military power, and geopolitical position, which encompasses the geographical location in the region and the ability to control communication routes, provides significant opportunities to influence the entire system. However, soft power factors are also important. We should consider (1) the quality and extent of diplomatic relationships, including membership and participation in international organizations and leadership roles in diplomatic initiatives, especially those directed at regional challenges and conflicts; (2) cultural and academic influence and ideological appeal, as well as international aid, scholarship programmes, and development assistance; (3) historical and cultural significance, including historical legacies, heritage, and religious significance, shapes a country's perception and influences its soft power assessment;

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[146] Grothe, op. cit.; Eyal Lurie-Pardes, 'Understanding the Legal Drama in Israel: Will the Supreme Court Prevent a Constitutional Crisis?' *MEI*, 6 October 2023, https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-legal-drama-israel-will-supreme-court-prevent-constitutional-crisis (accessed 29 February 2024).

(4) stability and governance, referring to the political system, societal unity, and strength of state institutions, allowing for the assessment of resilience in the face of internal and external challenges, translating into influencing capabilities within the system; (5) regional alliances, indicating the ability to form strategic alliances with other regional actors and external powers, influencing the position in the regional system; (6) regional leadership, which involves promoting regional stability, mediating conflicts, and fostering cooperation, as well as leadership in regional organizations, such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

These twelve indicators, meticulously assessed and scored on a point scale from 1 to 5, provide a comprehensive picture of a country's position in the regional system. This rigorous methodology ensures a fair and accurate ranking of the most influential countries in the region, which simultaneously form the poles of the system.

Power and Influence Composite Indices

Country	NR	HR	GDP p.c.	FDI	MP	GP	D	CAI	H&CS	IS	RA	RL	1–6	Overall	Ranking
S. Arabia	3	4	4	5	3	4	4	3	4	4	5	5	(23)	47	1 (1)
Israel	2	5	3	5	5	3	4	3	5	4	3	2	(23)	44	2 (1)
Turkey	2	4	2	4	5	5	4	5	5	3	3	3	(22)	44	2 (3)
Iran	4	4	1	2	5	5	4	3	4	3	4	4	(21)	43	4 (4)
UAE	3	4	5	5	2	1	3	4	2	4	4	3	(20)	40	5 (5)
Qatar	3	4	5	4	2	1	4	3	2	4	4	3	(20)	40	5 (5)
Egypt	2	2	1	3	4	5	3	4	5	3	3	3	(17)	38	7 (7)
Bahrain	3	4	3	4	1	1	4	3	2	3	4	3	(16)	35	8 (9)
Kuwait	4	4	5	2	1	1	3	3	2	4	2	2	(17)	33	9 (8)
Oman	2	4	2	2	1	2	4	4	2	4	3	3	(13)	33	9 (10)
Jordan	1	2	1	3	1	2	4	3	3	3	4	3	(10)	30	11 (12
Iraq	4	2	1	0	3	2	3	2	4	2	2	2	(12)	27	12 (11)
Lebanon	1	3	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	1	2	2	(10)	22	13 (12)
W.B. & G.	-	2	1	-	-	2	3	3	4	1	2	2	(5)	20	14 (16)

Country	NR	HR	GDP *p.c.*	FDI	MP	GP	D	CAI	H & CS	IS	RA	RL	1–6	Overall	Ranking
Yemen	1	2	1	0	1	3	1	1	2	1	2	2	(8)	17	15 (14)
Syria	1	2	-	-	2	2	1	1	3	1	2	2	(7)	17	15 (15)

NR – natural resources; HR – human resources, GDP *p.c.* – Gross Domestic Product *per capita*; FDI – Foreign Direct Investments; MP – military power; GP – geopolitical position; D – diplomacy; CAI – cultural & academic influence; H & CS – historical and cultural significance; IS – internal stability; RA – regional alliances: RL – regional leadership; W.B. & G. – West Bank and Gaza

Hard power encompasses human resources, natural resources, GDP *per capita*, FDI, military power, and geopolitical position. Soft power includes internal stability, regional leadership, cultural and academic influence, historical and cultural significance, diplomatic skills, and potentialities in regional alliances. In the case of human resources, the basis for assessment was the percentage of the workforce in the total population. Since the average for MENA was 46.4 percent, scores above the average were higher than those below the regional average. Military power assessment was based on the country's position in the world. The natural resources indicator includes the possession of resources, especially energy resources, and access to water, land, and food. The geopolitical position indicator considered the ability to control routes in four bodies of water: the Mediterranean Sea, the Turkish Straits, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea, along with the Indian Ocean, as well as the location in the planned trade corridor from India to Europe through the Persian Gulf. The assessment of diplomacy depends on the country's activity in mediating conflicts and breaking out of isolation in the international system. Soft power depends on global initiatives, the perception of the country, and its policies worldwide. The internal stability indicator takes into account the political system (authoritarian or democratic), internal tensions between the government and society, societal polarization, integration capabilities in the face of external threats, and the efficiency of the bureaucratic apparatus. Regional alliances and regional leadership involve forming alliances, membership in organizations, and leading those organizations.

4. Potentialities and limits of main actors

The composite indices presented above show that Saudi Arabia is the most powerful and influential country in the Middle East, followed by Israel, Turkey, and Iran. Qatar and the UAE are closely followed, with Egypt also occupying a significant position. Other countries in the region rank much lower in terms of both hard and soft power potential. Each of the main actors possesses potential, but there are visible factors that limit their ability to influence the entire system.

(a) Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is among the most influential countries in the Middle East and is the undisputed leader of the Arab part of the region. It is primarily due to its dynamically developing economy, high *per capita* income, vast energy resources, and favourable geographical location. Saudi Aramco, the Saudi corporation, was ranked second among the world's largest companies in 2022.[147]

Saudi Arabia strongly influences the Middle Eastern system through financial and diplomatic instruments. Under Muhammad bin Salman (MBS) rule, the country aims to occupy an essential place in the emerging new world order. It is intended to be achieved through the normalization of relations with neighbouring countries. In January 2021, Riyadh lifted the four-year blockade on Qatar and, in March 2023, resumed diplomatic relations with Iran after seven years of tension between the two countries. Riyadh also initiated negotiations with Houthi rebels to end the armed intervention in Yemen. In 2020, Saudi Arabia established the Red Sea Council with the participation of Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Egypt, Yemen, and Jordan to strengthen economic ties and security in the region. Riyadh's goal in this case was mainly to isolate the Red Sea region from the influence of Turkey, Qatar, and Iran, Riyadh's rivals in the Middle East arena.[148]

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[147] 'Global 500,' *Fortune*, 2024, https://fortune.com/franchise-list-page/global-500-methodology-2023 (accessed 1 March 2024).

[148] Laura Angela Bagnetto, 'New Red Sea Alliance Launched by Saudi Arabia, but Excludes Key Players,' *rfi.fr*, 10 January 2020, https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20200108-new-red-sea-alliance-formed-saudi-arabia-notable-exclusions (accessed 12 March 2024).

The USA is Saudi Arabia's leading strategic partner, but Riyadh seeks to balance US influence by developing diplomatic, economic, and security ties with China, Russia, and other powers. Riyadh perceives the USA as a partner that cannot be entirely relied upon. Already in 2003, Riyadh failed to dissuade President George W. Bush from attacking Iraq, fearing destabilization of the entire relationship system in the Middle East. The Saudi ruling class expressed concern about the USA turning away from its long-time partners during the Arab Spring, notably abandoning Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Riyadh also expressed concern about the Obama administration's nuclear agreement with Iran in 2015, which Riyadh believed allowed Tehran to obtain funds to finance its regional activities. The election of Joseph Biden as US President only strengthened Riyadh's belief that a radical shift in foreign policy is necessary to lessen reliance on US assistance. During his presidential campaign, Biden criticized Saudi Arabia for human rights abuses and pledged that the kingdom would "pay the price" for the 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was a US resident. It is in the context of weakened trust in a strategic partner that Saudi Arabia's accession to BRICS on 1 January 2024, can be assessed.[149]

Saudi Arabia exhibits an unprecedented degree of autonomy from the USA, as evidenced by its ignoring several appeals from Washington to increase oil production after Russia's aggression against Ukraine to lower global oil prices. Saudi Arabia sees itself as a top-tier power that is well-positioned to broker dialogue to end regional and international conflicts. In August 2023, Riyadh hosted a peace summit on Ukraine with the participation of over

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[149] See Christopher S. Chivvis, Aaron David Miller and Beatrix Geaghan-Breiner, 'Saudi Arabia in the Emerging World Order,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 6 November 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/11/06/saudi-arabia-in-emerging-world-order-pub-90819 (accessed 25 February 2024); Anna Jacobs, 'Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy,' *crisisgroup.org*, 14 September 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/saudi-arabia/understanding-saudi-arabias (accessed 10 March 2024); Rula Jebreal, 'My "Secret Interview" with Jamal Khashoggi Before His Brutal Murder by the Saudis,' *democracy now.org*, 23 October 2018, https://www.democracynow.org/2018/10/23/rula_jebreal_my_secret_interview_with (accessed 22 April 2024).

40 countries. The summit was a diplomatic success and a signal that Saudi Arabia intends to lead the Global South. Saudi Arabia also assisted Turkey in September 2022 in negotiations on the exchange of prisoners between Ukraine and Russia.[150]

The USA sees Saudi Arabia as the key player in the Middle East arena, and interested in normalizing relations with Israel and stabilizing the region. Saudi Arabia did not recognize the State of Israel in 1948, but after decades of tensions, relations have eased in recent years, with both countries perceiving Iran as a common adversary. As a result, the two countries have come closer regarding coordination and intelligence sharing. Saudi Arabia allowed Israeli airlines to fly over its territory, and received help from Israeli firms in countering cyber-attacks. The war between Israel and Hamas halted negotiations on the establishment of diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Israel but did not rule them out.[151]

The situation in the country has stabilized after opposition under the sign of radical Islamism was effectively eliminated. The authorities also ruthlessly dealt with criticism of corruption in the country. In August 2023, a court sentenced retired teacher Mohammad Alghamdi to death for his tweets criticizing the government. Other bloggers have been sentenced to prison terms ranging from 20 to 45 years for criticizing the government. [152]

Development plans outlined in the Vision 2030 programme envision not only the construction of a new futuristic capital but also the diversification of the economy and the creation of a non-oil economy, more women in the workforce, and more investment both in and outside the country. This programme was announced in 2016 after King Salman appointed his son Muhammad as his

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[150] See Chivvis.

[151] See Natasha Turak, 'A Saudi-Israel deal Could Dramatically Reshape the Middle East – but Don't Expect It Anytime Soon,' *CNBC*, 1 September 2023, https://www.cnbc.com/2023/09/01/saudi-arabia-israel-deal-could-dramatically-reshape-the-middle-east-.html (accessed 26 February 2024).

[152] Aya Batrawy, 'Saudi Man Sentenced to Death for Tweets in Harshest Verdict yet for Online Critics,' *npr.org*, 31 August 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/08/31/1196776390/saudi-arabia-man-death-sentence-tweets (accessed 10 March 2024).

successor. Prince Muhammad headed the new institution, the Council of Development and Economic Affairs, later became defence minister and prime minister. The prince's strong position in the power structure is an essential argument for the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030.[153] The consistent implementation of the program has led to the oil sector generating only 40 percent of the GDP at the beginning of 2024, which saw a steep decline in oil activities.[154] The share of women in the labour market jumped to 35 percent from 21 percent in five years.[155]

Saudi Arabia provides significant assistance to other countries in implementing their development projects. The Saudi Fund for Development was established in 1974 and has, since the end of 2023, helped implement over 800 development projects worth $20 billion in over 100 countries.[156] Saudi Arabia has long been a regional leader in providing humanitarian aid.[157] It also has made almost 500 financial contributions via the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre totalling $929 million to UN organizations, international entities, and humanitarian regional funds.[158] There is no doubt that the enormous financial capabilities are utilized not only to create an image of Saudi Arabia as

[153] See Jacobs.

[154] Deena Zaidi, 'Saudi Arabia's Faltering Growth Shows Oil's Importance,' *AXIOS*, 5 February 2024, https://www.axios.com/2024/02/05/opec-saudi-arabia-oil-gdp (accessed 29 April 2024).

[155] 'Saudi Women's Market Participation Surges 20%: GASTAT,' *Arab News*, 5 May 2024, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2352126/business-economy (accessed 5 May 2024).

[156] Nirmal Narayanan, 'Saudi Fund Continues to Support Development Efforts in Other Countries,' *Arab News*, 1 January 2024, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2434851/business-economy (accessed 26 February 2024).

[157] Jack Barton, 'Saudis Donate Aid to Non-Muslims,' *The Telegraph*, 26 March 2006, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudiarabia/1514026/Saudis-donate-aid-to-non-Muslims.html (accessed 6 March 2024); 'Arab Aid,' *Saudi Aramco World*, November/December 1979, http://saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/197906/arab.aid-an.introduction.htm (accessed 3 March 2024).

[158] 'Saudi Arabia's Aid to the World Reaches Nearly $33 Billion in 10 years,' *reliefweb*, 28 February 2018, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/saudi-arabia-s-aid-world-reaches-nearly-33-billion-10-years (accessed 27 February 2024).

a benefactor but also to achieve political goals. In August 2023, Riyadh proposed resuming funding for the Palestinian Authority and expected its leader Mahmoud Abbas to support the establishment of Saudi–Israeli relations.[159]

Saudi Arabia is a member of several multinational organizations, including OPEC, the UN, and the Arab League, and is a founding member of the GCC and the Islamic Development Bank, which are headquartered in Saudi. The country plays a prominent role in the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, and joined the World Trade Organization in 2005. Saudi Arabia itself has created several organizations that it uses to exert influence in the Middle East and the entire Muslim world. These include the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), established by King Faisal in 1969, al-Rabita (Muslim World League), funded a few years earlier as an Islamic outreach body, and the Higher Council of *Ulema* (HCU). Al-Rabita and the HCU are charitable bodies linked to the government and official *ulema* and serve as arms of the al-Saud political leadership. They operate abroad to influence religious and political affairs on the ground.[160]

Saudi Arabia's important position in the global system and its influence on the world's power dynamics was evidenced by Riyadh being entrusted with organizing the World Economic Forum Special Meeting on Global Collaboration, Growth, and Energy for Development. It was the first meeting of Forum participants held outside Davos. The meeting took place on 28–29 April 2024, with the participation of approximately a thousand experts from 92 countries. Saudi Arabia strengthened its image as a state stabilizing the situation in the Middle East region and worldwide during this event.[161]

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[159] See Turak.

[160] Neil Patrick, 'Domestic Factors and Foreign Policy,' in Neil Patrick (ed.), *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 4.

[161] 'Geopolitical Stability, Inclusive Growth, Energy Security Under Spotlight in Riyadh at World Economic Forum Special Meeting,' *businesswire*, 29 April 2024, https://www.afp.com/en/news/1312/geopolitical-stability-inclusive-growth-energy-security-under-spotlight-riyadh-world-economic-forum-special-meeting-202404283177131 (accessed 5 May 2024).

Four limiting factors can be identified in Saudi Arabia's influence on the Middle Eastern system. The first is the still unresolved relationship with Iran. The resumption of diplomatic relations did not automatically eliminate the sources of tension in bilateral ties, which include Tehran's support for militias across the region, disputes over the boundary of territorial waters, and attempts by both sides to interfere in each other's internal affairs. The second limitation is the ineffectiveness of Saudi diplomatic efforts to resolve regional conflicts, especially in Yemen and Sudan. The conflict in neighbouring Yemen is complicated for Saudi Arabia to resolve because Riyadh is itself one of the parties to the conflict. Riyadh is trying to revive the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative regarding the dormant Israeli–Palestinian peace process, but these attempts have so far been unsuccessful.

The third factor is the growing strength of the UAE, which seeks to emancipate itself from Saudi Arabia's tutelage and signal ambitions to be an independent regional power. Particularly active in this field are Abu Dhabi, and, in July 2023, Prince Muhammad stated that the actions of this Emirate undermine Riyadh's actions, and he threatened to take retaliatory measures similar to those previously taken against Qatar.[162] The issue of human rights compliance remains essential, as the fourth factor, casting a shadow over relations with the USA, where some politicians and NGOs shape[163] a negative image of the Kingdom.[164]

(b) Israel

Israel possesses powerful military and technological capabilities. The Israeli army is one of the most powerful in the region, equipped with the most advanced technology, well-trained units, and renowned for its efficient intelligence. This significant military

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[162] Summer Said, Dion Nissenbaum, Stephen Kalin and Saleh al-Batati, 'The Best of Frenemies: Saudi Crown Prince Clashes with U.A.E. President,' *Wall Street Journal*, 18 July 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/frenemies-saudi-crown-prince-mbs-clashes-uae-president-mbz-c500f9b1 (accessed 12 March 2024).

[163] Kali Robinson, 'Turkey's Growing Foreign Policy Ambitions,' *Council on Foreign Relation*s, 11 July 2023, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/turkeys-growing-foreign-policy-ambitions (accessed 16 March 2024).

[164] See Jacobs.

capability deters potential adversaries from attacking Israel and thus influences the Middle Eastern system. Israel's economy is among the most technologically advanced. Israel is referred to as the "Startups Nation," and it is the site of the world's highest number of tech startups and investments in research and development. Technological innovation and a highly skilled workforce drive economic growth, making Israel highly attractive for foreign investment and trade. The country's high position in the Middle Eastern system is favoured by its alliances, primarily with the USA, which are exceptionally stable and influenced by various factors, including Protestant Zionism. Israeli diplomacy has also created a network of regional alliances that have brought the country out of diplomatic isolation. Despite its lack of significant natural resources, Israel has made enormous progress in water technology, strategically crucial for sustainable development in such an arid area as the Middle East.

Israel's influence on the Middle Eastern system is limited due to the conflict over Palestine. Israel is formally at war with Syria and Lebanon and effectively with non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Since Hezbollah openly operates as an Iranian proxy, Israel's relations with Iran are hostile, and Iran's nuclear programme constitutes, according to Israeli authorities, a severe threat to Israel's security and the stability of the Middle Eastern system. Israel is criticized by the international community and human rights organizations for its policies towards Palestinians, particularly the support for Jewish settlements in the West Bank. It diminishes many countries' willingness to cooperate with Tel Aviv and generates tendencies to boycott and isolate Israel internationally. It also remains a significant obstacle to other Arab states establishing diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv. The regional dynamics are still primarily defined by the conflict over Palestine, but the rivalry for regional leadership between Saudi Arabia and Iran is equally essential. It compels Israeli diplomacy to seek allies in the region and engage in indirect actions to secure the state's safety. Israeli society itself is becoming increasingly polarized, particularly on internal political issues, weakening internal stability and affecting Israel's image as a strong state in the region. Demographic processes and the expected proportional increase of the Arab population in Israel further contribute to uncertainty.

Israel needs a new strategy because complete victory over Hamas is not possible, a situation that Israeli leaders should acknowledge. The position of Hamas is similar to that of ISIS, which was dismantled as a physical structure but not as an ideology, and, as a consequence, the USA still maintains around 3,000 soldiers in Iraq and 900 in Syria to prevent the resurgence of this structure. Stabilization in Gaza, where 2.3 million Palestinians live, is necessary, and a solution is needed that will allow enclave residents to function generally while providing Israel with guarantees that the Gaza-Egypt border will not be used as a channel for weapons smuggling to Hamas. Cooperation with wealthy Saudi Arabia and Qatar will be necessary to form a coalition for the reconstruction of the northern part of Gaza City, where 70 percent of buildings have been destroyed.[165]

The greatest challenge for Israel's political class is that the Hamas attack and the tragic war in Gaza "revived the dead concept of the two-state solution."[166] On the one hand, there is a belief worldwide that only the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside the Israeli state can end the current crisis, even though both Israelis and Palestinians see little possibility of implementing such a concept. The main obstacle is Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories – Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem – since 1967. Since then, Palestinians have lived under Israeli occupation, and attempts to change this situation made in the 1990s by the international community have not yielded results. Moreover, even if Israel were to withdraw from the occupied territories, there would still be a tiny territory left for Palestinians, as about 700,000 Jewish settlers are living there. Prime Minister Netanyahu has repeatedly rejected the idea of creating a Palestinian state, putting his allies in the USA and the UK in a difficult position. Meanwhile, many Palestinians and some Israelis have advocated for a 'one-state solution,' under which a binational secular

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[165] See Dennis Ross, 'Total Victory Is Not Possible – but Demilitarizing Hamas and Stabilizing Gaza Still Are,' *Foreign Affairs*, 13 March 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/israel-needs-new-strategy (accessed 16 March 2024).

[166] Martin Indyk, 'The Strange Resurrection of the Two-State Solution. How an Unimaginable War Could Bring About the Only Imaginable Peace,' *Foreign Affairs* 103, 2 (March/April 2024), 8.

state is established. However, this option was not accepted by the Israeli government out of concern that Jews could become a demographic minority in such a state. The current situation, which is effectively a 'one-state reality,' is characterized by Israel's unconditional control over the Arab population.[167]

Many Israeli observers emphasize that the concept of annexation of the West Bank, which was revived with the return of Benjamin Netanyahu to the prime minister's seat in May 2020, not only exposes Israel to international criticism but also weakens Israel's position in the region and makes peaceful coexistence with Arab states more difficult. The Palestinian issue remains a critical factor that determines Israel's relations with the Arab world.[168]

(c) Turkey

Turkey occupies an important geographical position at the crossroads of trade routes and communication between Europe and Asia, determining its strategic importance. Its geographical location allows Turkey to influence the Caucasus, Central Asia, the EU, the Mediterranean basin, and the Middle East. According to the 1936 Montreux Convention, Ankara controls navigation through the Turkish Straits. Turkey has built close relations with the West by joining NATO and has numerous ties with the EU. The Turkish army is the second largest in NATO after the USA and is modern and experienced in combat against the Kurds. The Turkish military played a significant role in the fight against ISIS and effectively secured Turkish interests in Syria.[169]

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[167] Ibid.; Oliver Holmes, 'Israel-Gaza War: What Is the Two-State Solution and Is It Possible?', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/22/israel-gaza-palestine-war-what-is-the-two-state-solution-and-is-it-possible (accessed 16 March 2024).

[168] Nimrod Goren, 'Israel's Regional Foreign Policies: What Is at Stake for the New Government?' *IEMed.*, 2020, https://www.iemed.org/publication/israels-regional-foreign-policies-what-is-at-stake-for-the-new-government (accessed 19 March 2024).

[169] Sinan Ülgen and Can Kasapoglu, 'Operation Euphrates Shield: Aims and Gains,' *Carnegie Europe*, 19 January 2017, https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/01/19/operation-euphrates-shield-aims-and-gains-pub-67754 (accessed 16 March 2024).

Turkey is a free market economy and one of the world's largest economies and is an active member of the G-20. It is a secular country that has traditionally pursued a Western-oriented foreign policy. The government has the third-largest global diplomatic network after China and the USA, with 252 diplomatic and consular missions in 2023. It allows Turkey to mediate in numerous conflicts in the Middle East. Turkey's soft power stems from its historical and cultural ties with the Middle East. Its television series, music, historical sites, and sporting achievements build Turkey's strong influence in the Middle Eastern arena.[170]

Ankara has ambitions for an increasingly strong influence in the Middle Eastern system. Ankara critically responded to the UAE's normalization of relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords. It threatened to withdraw its embassy from the Emirates, even though Turkey itself had established such relations with Israel seven decades earlier. By supporting Qatar, Turkey sought to prevent the UAE from strengthening its position in the Middle East by allying with Israel. Turkey thus found itself siding with Iran, which also condemned the Abraham Accords. Ankara became militarily and politically involved in the conflict in Libya, neutralizing the UAE-backed General Khalifa Haftar's air superiority during the fighting between Haftar and the Tripoli government. Libya thus became a place of competition between the UAE and Turkey for influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result, tensions escalated in this part of the Middle East, with Egypt, which also supported Haftar, threatening to send its troops to Libya. Saudi Arabia also entered the game by imposing an embargo on Turkish goods. The rivalry between Turkey and Saudi Arabia intensifies. Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood stand with Turkey, while the UAE and several other Arab states, including Egypt, side with Saudi Arabia. In 2017, Turkey deployed its troops at a base in Qatar, a strong expression of support for Qatar in the face of the embargo imposed on the country by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. That same year, Ankara established a military base in Mogadishu to limit Abu Dhabi's influence in the Horn of Africa. In 2018, Turkey signed a defence agreement with Kuwait, which

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170 'Global Diplomatic Index,' *Lowy Institute*, 2024, https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/country_ranking (accessed 6 March 2024).

has long felt threatened by territorial claims from Saudi Arabia.[171] Iran sides with Turkey in this rivalry due to its competition with Saudi Arabia, but in fact, pursues its policy and has interests that do not always align with Ankara.

The current rivalry between Turkey and the Persian Gulf Arab countries stems from the events of the Arab Spring. Turkey, ruled since 2002 by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), was often seen as a model for the Middle East region due to the AKP's Islamist roots. The situation changed when Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader, came to power. Ankara supported the new president, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE saw this choice threatening their power systems. According to Turkish sources, Abu Dhabi may have been behind an attempt to overthrow President Erdoğan in 2016, which further exacerbated Turkish-Emirati relations.[172]

Constraints on foreign policy are historical, religious-ethnic, and political. Turkey has long competed for influence in the region with Iran, Iraq, and Greece, which limits opportunities for cooperation and trust in Turkey as a partner. The Ottoman past, to which the authorities in Ankara refer, also raises suspicions of Turkey's desire to dominate the Arab part of the region. Turkey maintains diplomatic relations with Israel, which, on the one hand, gives it more excellent manoeuvrability in mediation but raises suspicions among the so-called 'Arab street' of the hidden objectives of these relations. On the other hand, hosting representatives of Hamas in Turkey raises Israel's suspicions that Turkey is playing a double game. Turkish society also includes Kurds, Arabs, and Alevi populations, complicating relations with neighbours and limiting Turkey's potential leadership in the region.

An example may be the delicate situation regarding the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. Turkey accepted tens of thousands of Kurds during the first Gulf War[173] and supports the

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[171] Andrew England, Laura Pitel and Simon Kerr, 'UAE vs Turkey: The Regional Rivalries Pitting MBZ against Erdogan,' *Financial Times*, 26 October 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/990f13cf-613f-48a5-ac02-c8c73741a786 (accessed 6 March 2024).

[172] Ibid.

[173] 'Chronology for Kurds in Iraq,' *refworld*, UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, 19 May 2023, https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20230519184927/

semi-autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq but opposes its independence. The Kurdish issue destabilizes the internal situation and thus weakens Turkey's influence in the area. Turkey is constantly threatened by terrorist activities, forcing the authorities to allocate resources to counter these attacks, which undermines the country's potential in the Middle Eastern arena.

Ankara maintains strong positions in the northern flank of the Middle Eastern system – in Syria and Iraq. The recent visit of President Erdoğan to Iraq on 24 April 2024, strengthened these positions. Ankara aimed to tighten cooperation with Iraq in combating Kurdish PKK guerrillas and undertaking joint development projects. In 2023, Turkey decided to allocate $17 billion for the construction of a road connection between the Iraqi port of Faw on the Persian Gulf and Turkish territory to the north, spanning 1,200 km.[174] In this way, Iraq would become a transit hub. The entire route would connect Europe with Asia as a competitive transit route against the US project of connecting Asia with Europe through the Persian Gulf, Jordan, and Israel.

Turkish diplomacy has many achievements in building the country's position in the region and the Turkish world. Still Ankara's involvement in the Syrian Civil War and support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2011–2013 led to increased tensions with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states. The Turkish economy is one of the largest in the world. However, in the last decade, the economy has experienced severe disruptions as the reform momentum has waned and efforts have turned to supporting growth with credit booms and demand stimulus. As a result, the private sector experiences debt, persistent current account deficits, and high inflation. The Turkish economy primarily needs more significant foreign capital inflows.

(d) Iran

Iran occupies a key position in the region, allowing it to control navigation in the Gulf and exert influence on neighbouring Arab

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https://www.refworld.org/docid/469f38a6c.html (accessed 16 March 2024).

[174] 'Turkey's Erdogan makes rare visit to Iraq,' *dw*, 4 April 2024, https://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-erdogan-makes-rare-visit-to-iraq/a-68886692 (accessed 25 April 2024).

countries. Iran's oil and gas reserves are among the largest in the world and constitute the primary source of revenue for its budget. It is one of the most populous countries in the Middle East, and its society is relatively well-educated, providing significant demographic potential for innovation and ensuring a steady flow of workers into the economy. Iran strongly influences the sub-region of the Persian Gulf, but also the entire Middle Eastern system through a network of alliances and informal connections with states and non-state actors in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Yemen. It allows Iran to pursue its geopolitical goals without directly engaging in regional conflicts. Iran's past and historical sites contribute to its high position in the region in terms of factors creating soft power. The Iranian military is one of the strongest and best-trained, and Iranians' strong attachment to their nationality contributes to the high morale of Iranian soldiers.[175]

Despite enormous natural wealth and human resources, the Iranian economy faces serious problems. These include international sanctions, frozen assets in Western banks, and markets closed to Iranian goods, as well as corruption, poor governance, and a raw material orientation. Over 80 percent of Iran's economy is controlled by state institutions, including the Revolutionary Guard, leaving little room for private business.[176] These factors, along with water shortages, the consequences of COVID-19, air pollution, desertification, and deforestation, make the economy inefficient, with a low *per capita* income. High inflation and unemployment are significant phenomena weakening internal stability and the country's economic potential.[177]

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[175] Omar Lamrani, 'Iran's Conventional Military Capabilities,' *New Lines Institute*, 9 July 2020, https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/irans-conventional-military-capabilities (accessed 18 March 2024); Alessandro Orsini, 'Medio Oriente. Una guerra con l'Iran sarebbe la disfatta finale di Joe Biden,' *Il Fatto Quatidiano*, 16 aprile 2024, https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/in-edicola/articoli/2024/04/16/medio-orienteu-na-guerra-con-liran-sarebbe-la-disfatta-finale-di-joe-biden/7514710 (accessed 17 April 2024).

[176] 'Iran Moves to Spread Its Foreign Policy Wings,' *Iran International Newsroom*, 11 May 2023, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202311057184 (accessed 19 March 2024).

[177] 'Islamic Republic of Iran,' *The World Bank*, 20 October 2022, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview (accessed 18 March

Iran is a multi-ethnic state with religious minorities that are a source of tension, but more importantly, societal polarization between conservative and pro-structural change factions. Tensions on this basis have repeatedly led to social protests, ruthlessly suppressed by the authorities. In 2022 and 2023, mass protests erupted after the death of 22-year-old Iranian Kurd Mahsa (Jina) Amini following her arrest by the morality police.[178] Iranian authorities are constantly criticized by human rights organizations for lack of freedom of speech, political repression, and discrimination against minorities, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals.[179] This is reflected in Iran's negative perception abroad as an authoritarian state and its low ranking in soft power.

Iran's foreign policy and its nuclear programme are subject to criticism from the West. It is accused of sponsoring militant groups in the Middle East and conducting secret work on nuclear weapons, which has led to Western sanctions and the partial isolation of Tehran on the international stage, limiting Iran's opportunities to participate in the global division of labour and pursue an active foreign policy. Particularly tense relations exist between Iran, Israel, and the European Union.

During President Hassan Rouhani's presidency, Iran's foreign policy focused on the 2015 nuclear deal, but the project to conclude this agreement was not realized. In May 2018, then-US President Donald Trump announced the so-called "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, which policy directly affected Iran's perception of the USA as a threat, and, as a result, Tehran expanded its nuclear programme. As US regional allies, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, supported Trump's anti-Iran approach, Iranian leaders began to believe that maximum pressure

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2024), 'Deep Data: The Iranian Economy in 2024,' *Amwaj*, 23 February 2024, https://amwaj.media/article/deep-data-the-iranian-economy-in-2024 (accessed 18 March 2024).

[178] See James M. Dorsey, 'Iran May Be on the Cusp of Change: A Conversation with Arash Azizi,' *The Turbulent World*, 18 March 2024, https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=rm&ogbl#inbox/FMfcgzGxSHngXqQvmcFbgkKMDgPDsTtC (accessed 18 March 2024).

[179] 'Iran,' *Amnesty International*, 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran (accessed 18 March 2024).

also had a strong regional element. As a result, Iranian foreign policy was aimed at countering two security threats to Iran. The first was the threats associated with the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. The second was the emerging trend towards the normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel.[180]

Iran's response to these threats combined sporadic military escalation on one hand and an expressed desire for regional diplomacy and dialogue on the other. In October 2019, President Hassan Rouhani proposed creating a regional security framework called the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE). He invited Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to join. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian foreign minister, proposed a regional dialogue forum in the Persian Gulf and signing a non-aggression pact with Arab neighbours.[181] Iran reacted to the growing ties between Arab states and Israel by combining threat and diplomacy. In early 2022, Iran-backed Yemeni Houthis launched a series of attacks against the UAE. Meanwhile, the administration of President Ebrahim Raisi has put forward its "neighborhood policy," which calls for dialogue and improving relations with Iran's Arab – and non-Arab – neighbours.

Trump's departure from the White House raised hopes in Iran that the new administration would return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA; the 'Iran nuclear deal') and abandon the policy of maximum pressure. Initially, the scenario desired by Tehran seemed probable. President Joseph Biden decided to start negotiations on the JCPOA, withdraw US forces from Afghanistan, and change the US role in Iraq. However, the trends in Washington's Middle East policy, including renewed US interest in maintaining close ties with Arab allies to win their support in the intensifying great power rivalry with Russia and China, only exacerbated Iran's perception of a US threat. Washington

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[180]   Hamidreza Azizi, 'Iran and Multilateralism in the Middle East: Possibilities and Constraints,' *Kalam*, 27 October 2022, https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/iran-and-multilateralism-in-the-middle-east-possibilities-and-constraints (accessed 19 March 2024).

[181]   'Iran says offered 'non-aggression pact' with Gulf. Tension has been rising between Iran and US,' *Anadolu Agency*, 26 May 2019, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-says-offered-non-aggression-pact-with-gulf/1489557 (accessed 24 April 2024).

also continued to integrate Arab and Israeli air defence systems to counter Iran.

Ebrahim Raisi's assumption of the presidency in June 2021 solidified hard-line control over three branches of government. Raisi accelerated the foreign policy approach towards the East by expanding ties with China and solidifying ties with Russia. A priority was also to improve relations with Arab neighbours and Central Asia. Regarding nuclear diplomacy, a new group of Iranian negotiators continued the position of their predecessors, foreseeing compromises from both sides but demanding greater concessions from the USA in terms of easing the sanctions regime.[182]

Iran believes that the main cause of insecurity in the Middle East is the presence and involvement of extra-regional powers, specifically the USA. The Iranian approach to regional dialogue is essentially reactive. Iran responds to newly emerging threats to its security, with Arab–Israeli normalization being at the top of the list. Tehran also desires to exclude Israel from security arrangements in the region. It means that Iran will not accept establishing of an all-inclusive framework for regional dialogue in the Middle East. A more realistic objective could be Iran–Arab dialogue to sign a mutual non-aggression pact with Iran's non-state allies as a party to this pact.

(e) UAE

The United Arab Emirates records a high GDP *per capita* and is successfully diversifying its economy to become less dependent on oil and gas extraction. The government allocates huge resources to develop the tourism, banking, real estate, and technology sectors, making the country's economy less sensitive to fluctuations in energy commodity prices. The UAE skilfully leverages

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[182] Garrett Nada, 'Iran in 2021: Politics and Foreign Policy,' *The Iran Primer*, 15 December 2021, https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/dec/15/iran-2021-politics-and-foreign-policy (accessed 19 March 2024); Kenneth M. Pollack, 'Iran's Grand Strategy Has Fundamentally Shifted,' *Foreign Policy*, 15 August 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/15/irans-grand-strategy-has-fundamentally-shifted (accessed 19 March 2024).

its convenient geographical location at the crossroads of routes from Europe, Asia, and Africa, becoming a key hub for trade, finance, communications, and international events. In 2023, Dubai hosted the COP28 climate summit, attracting additional tourists and businessmen. From January to November 2023, Dubai welcomed 15.4 million people, 20 percent more than the previous year. Dubai Airport is the world's largest hub for passenger and cargo flow. The government also invests in infrastructure, building modern ports, roads, and telecommunication networks. The cities of the Emirates are leading the world as smart cities. In the Smart City Index ranking, Abu Dhabi was in 28th place, and Dubai in 29th place out of 118 cities worldwide. Both cities moved up 14 places in just one year. The UAE's development potential is evidenced by joining one of the most important space projects of the 21st century, NASA's Lunar Gateway Station, on 7 January 2024, alongside the USA, Japan, Canada, and the EU. The political situation is stable, attracting foreign investors and masses of tourists. The objectives of the Vision 2030 programme, which aim to create a knowledge-based economy and improve residents' quality of life, are consistently pursued.[183]

Despite efforts to diversify, the UAE economy still relies on revenue from oil sales, so fluctuations in oil prices affect GDP growth and economic development opportunities. The UAE economy depends heavily on expatriate labour, especially in sectors such

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[183] 'Smart Sustainable Cities,' *TDRA*, The Official Portal of the UAE, 15 January 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/22/israel-gaza-palestine-war-what-is-the-two-state-solution-and-is-it-possible (accessed 17 March 2024); James King, 'Population Growth and Investment Reforms Lift the UAE's Economy,' *The Banker*, 20 October 2023, https://www.thebanker.com/Population-growth-and-investment-reforms-lift-the-UAE-s-economy-1697788691 (accessed 17 March 2024); Mahesh H. Puttaiah, 'UAE: Labour Market Growth to Continue with Policy Support and a Strong Private Sector,' *SwissRe Institute*, 1 February 2024, https://www.swissre.com/institute/research/sigma-research/Economic-Outlook/uae-economic-outlook-2024.html (accessed 18 March 2024); Ebtesam Al Ketbi, 'In 2024, Diplomacy and Economic Co-operation Will Define UAE Foreign Policy,' *The National*, 18 January 2024, https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/2024/01/18/in-2024-diplomacy-and-economic-co-operation-will-define-uae-foreign-policy (accessed 19 March 2024).

as construction and services. Emirati citizens are not numerous enough to replace expatriates. This situation creates tensions in labour market regulations and weakens social cohesion. It is also the subject of criticism from human rights organizations for labour rights that discriminate against expatriates. The authorities are also criticized for restricting freedom of speech. High temperatures, desertification, and a shortage of drinking water force the country's authorities to invest in sustainable water management and renewable energy.[184]

In its foreign policy, the UAE seeks to avoid conflicts and ease regional tensions. At the same time, it emphasizes increasing aspirations and opportunities to shape the Middle Eastern system based on economic potential, inevitably leading to conflict situations, even with allies. Relations with Iran are particularly important for the country's security, with which the UAE disputes Abu Musa Island. The Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah claims the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and the Emirate of Sharjah claims Abu Musa. Relations between the two countries are tense, and signals of improvement in these relations are weak. On 6 December 2021, Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahayan, UAE National Security Advisor, visited Tehran and invited Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi to visit the UAE. It would have been the first visit by an Iranian president to the UAE since 2006, but it did not take place. In April 2023, Iran appointed its ambassador to the UAE for the first time since 2016, and, in August 2023, Iran invited Muhammad bin Zayed to visit Tehran.[185]

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[184] 'UAE Economy,' *FocusEconomics*, 2024, https://www.focus-economics.com/countries/uae (accessed 19 March 2024).

[185] 'UAE,' *Amnesty International*, 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/united-arab-emirates/report-united-arab-emirates (accessed 17 March 2023); 'Iran's President Raisi Officially Invites UAE President to Visit Tehran in "Near future",' *Arab Weekly*, 3 August 2023; https://thearabweekly.com/irans-president-raisi-officially-invites-uae-president-visit-tehran-near-future (accessed 19 March 2024); 'Iran's Raisi Officially Invites UAE's MbZ to Visit Tehran: Semi-official Agency,' *The New Arab*, 3 August 2023, https://www.newarab.com/news/irans-raisi-officially-invites-uaes-mbz-visit-tehran (accessed 17 March 2023).

De-escalation of tension and normalization also occurred in relations with Turkey, Qatar, and Israel.[186] On 10 October 2023, the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced its strategy for 2024–2034, formulating five key objectives: (1) enhancing the UAE's reputation and soft power; (2) promoting global dialogue on sustainable development; (3) boosting the UAE's economic power and competitiveness at the regional and global levels; (4) protecting the interests of the Emirati community abroad by providing exceptional consular services, as well safeguarding the interests of the UAE's residents; (5) supporting global efforts to maintain regional security and stability.[187]

(f) Qatar

Despite its small size, Qatar has become an important player in the Middle East. It was facilitated by its strategic geographical location, natural resources, and active diplomacy. The country's traditional economy relied on fishing and pearl industries. However, in the 1940s, gas reserves were found, which drastically changed the country. Qatar has some of the world's largest gas reserves (about 13 percent in 2023), and the extraction of this resource determines the wealth of society and the strength of the state. Qatar also has oil reserves, discovered in 1939 in the Dukhan oil field. Qatar's oil resources are estimated to be about 1.5 percent of the world's total. Qatar has the highest wages in the world, the lowest taxes, and almost zero unemployment. In the 2010s, GDP growth in Qatar was the highest in the entire Gulf region; by 2018, the country had the highest GDP (PPP) *per capita* in the world. Huge investments in non-commodity sectors are intended to diversify the economy. Government institutions coordinate economic

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[186] Joshua Krasna, 'Big Changes in United Arab Emirates Foreign Policy,' Foreign Policy Research Institute, 18 April 2023, https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/04/big-changes-in-united-arab-emirates-foreign-policy (accessed 20 March 2024).

[187] *Strategy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023–2026*, UAE, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 October 2023, https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/foreign-affairs/strategy-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-2026 (accessed 19 March 2024).

development under the Qatar National Vision 2030 programme adopted in 2008, which aims to build a knowledge-based economy, with new technologies at its core, and "complete and comprehensive digital transformation will be central to Qatar's future development."[188]

Since 1992, Qatar has maintained allied relations with the USA, and its territory hosts the strategically important al-Udeid Air Base for the US armed forces. On 31 January 2022, President Biden announced that the USA had granted Qatar the status of Major Non-NATO Ally, strengthening Qatar's position as a strong and enduring US partner in countering extremism and combating terrorism. Earlier, this status was granted to Bahrain and Kuwait in the Gulf, Egypt, and Israel. Long before the announcement of the new status, the USA and Qatar had increased defence cooperation across presidential administrations through agreements and strategic dialogue. The Qatari authorities invested about $8 billion in the development of the al-Udeid Air Base.[189]

Numerous diplomatic mediations create the country's soft power. Just the lifting of the diplomatic blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia in 2021 by the coalition of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, the Tobruk government in Libya, and the government loyal to Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi in Yemen was a success of Qatari diplomacy. As a result, diplomatic ties and regional roles expanded in 2020–2023. In February 2020, Qatar mediated talks between the Afghan Taliban and the USA, which culminated in the signing of a historic agreement in Qatar's capital, ending a two-decade-long conflict in Afghanistan and enabling the USA to withdraw its troops from the country. In 2021, Qatar played

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[188] 'Economy of Qatar,' *milipolqatar*, 2023, https://www.milipolqatar.com/en/useful-information/discover-qatar/economy (accessed 18 March 2024); 'Qatar: The economy of the Future,' *World Finance*, 4 December 2023, https://www.worldfinance.com/strategy/qatar-the-economy-of-the-future (accessed 18 March 2024); 'Qatar – Economic Indicators,' *Moody's Analytics*, 8 March 2024, https://www.economy.com/qatar/indicators (accessed 18 March 2024).

[189] R. Clarke Cooper, 'As Qatar Becomes a non-NATO Ally, Greater Responsibility Conveys with the Status,' *Atlantic Council*, 3 March 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/as-qatar-becomes-a-non-nato-ally-greater-responsibility-coveys-with-the-status (accessed 19 March 2024).

a major role in mediating the restoration of diplomatic relations between Somalia and Kenya. Qatar's diplomacy helped resolve the crisis in Somalia so that parliamentary elections took place there in 2022. In 2023, Qatar achieved its greatest diplomatic success by mediating an agreement between the USA and Iran, resulting in the exchange of prisoners and releasing $6 billion of Iranian funds held by sanctions. Particularly notable was Qatar's role in achieving an agreement between Israel, Hamas, and Egypt for the release of foreign nationals and critically injured Palestinian civilians from Gaza to Egypt in October 2023.[190]

The high reputation Qatar Airways, hosting the global event for homeland security and safety known as Milipol Qatar for 15 years, and the influence of Qatari media outlets, particularly *al-Jazeera*, also contribute to building the country's soft power. Investments in global sports clubs and the organization of international sporting events, such as WTA tennis tournaments and the 2022 FIFA World Cup, shape a positive image of the country worldwide.

However, Qatar's ability to influence the Middle Eastern system is limited by several factors. The most significant are its relationships with neighbours – Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have greater potential and hinder Qatar's actions in the Middle Eastern arena. Qatar primarily has a smaller population potential than Saudi Arabia and Iran. Even if effective, diplomatic initiatives mostly concern marginal issues on a regional scale. Qatar's economy is still dependent on the extraction of energy resources and is sensitive to global market commodity price changes. It can lead to tensions within Qatari society, of which 88 percent are expatriates. Towards the end of 2023, nearly 63 percent of

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[190] Nadeen Ebrahim, 'How the Tiny Arab State of Qatar Became Indispensable in Talks with Hamas,' *CNN*, 2 November 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/01/middleeast/qatar-mediation-israel-hamas-intl/index.html (accessed 19 March 2024); Ali Noureddine, 'Qatari Diplomacy: Complex and Expanding Regional Roles,' *fanack.com*, 26 December 2023, https://fanack.com/politics/features-insights/qatari-diplomacy-complex-and-expanding-regional-roles~266159 (accessed 19 March 2024); 'Ongoing: Gaza Ceasefire Talks,' *Middle East Policy Council*, 19 March 2024, https://mepc.org/commentary/ongoing-gaza-ceasefire-talks (accessed 19 March 2024).

expatriates were satisfied with their life in Qatar, but this indicator may change in the event of a worsening economic situation.[191]

Qatar's positive image in the eyes of the public is marred by social conservatism, political authoritarianism, and human rights violations. Concerning the last issue, the country is regularly criticized by Amnesty International, which points out that migrant workers, including domestic servants, are still discriminated against and face wage theft, forced labour, and exploitation. Authorities suppress freedom of expression to silence critical voices. The law discriminates against LGBT+ people, exposing them to arrest and torture. Women are still discriminated against by the law and cannot move in public spaces without male guardianship.[192]

(g) Egypt

Egypt has enormous potential in soft power due to its cultural heritage. For hundreds of years, it has been a cultural and intellectual hub for the Arab world. Cairo is home to important centres of Muslim thought, such as the al-Azhar University, dating back to the 10th century AD. In early 2024, Egypt was inhabited by nearly 114 million people, making it a huge market and an attractive place for investment. Its geographical location at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and Africa and its control over the Suez Canal, determine its significant geopolitical importance, with military strength being an important hard-power factor. The Egyptian army is equipped with modern weapons and is well-trained. Egypt has played a leading role in Middle Eastern politics in the past. Cairo is the headquarters of the Arab League, emphasizing Egypt's importance as a promoter of Arab issues in the Middle East. In recent years, Egyptian diplomacy has sought to promote stability and cooperation among Arab states.

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[191] 'Expatriates In Qatar: Growth in the Employment Sector,' *go-globe.com*, 2023, https://www.go-globe.com/expats-in-qatar-employment-sector (accessed 19 March 2024).

[192] 'Qatar 2022,' *Amnesty International*, 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/qatar/report-qatar (accessed 19 March 2024).

However, Egypt's potential to influence the Middle Eastern system is counterbalanced by numerous challenges. The most pressing of these are severe economic issues. High unemployment, poverty, and reliance on foreign aid are the primary afflictions of the Egyptian economy. It is poorly managed and generates growth that is insufficiently high given the decreasing but still high (1.57 percent at the beginning of 2024) natural population increase. It is also vulnerable to fluctuations in tourism income and energy prices. Egyptian agriculture, a crucial sector, is dependent on water resources from the Nile River, which are increasingly scarce due to the growing population, water pollution, and the need to share resources with other countries through which the Nile flows. It is worth noting that the population of Egypt was 27 million in 1960, and it has quadrupled over 64 years. However, water resources have remained stagnant during this time.[193]

Under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's leadership, Egypt's external debt has quadrupled. In 2024, the government will need to allocate a staggering $28 billion solely for debt servicing. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have been staunch supporters of the al-Sisi government, becoming its primary sources of aid and credit. However, they have recently reduced aid and shifted towards investments aimed at generating profit, signalling a need for Egypt to focus on financial stability and debt management.[194]

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[193] 'Egypt Population (2024),' *worldometer*, 2024, https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/egypt-population (accessed 19 March 2024); 'Economic Survey of Egypt (February 2024),' *oecd.org*, 2024, https://www.oecd.org/economy/egypt-economic-snapshot/ (accessed 19 March 2024); 'Egypt Economy,' *focuseconomics*, 2024, https://www.focus-economics.com/countries/egypt (accessed 19 March 2024); 'Water Resources in Egypt,' *fanack.com*, 5 July 2023, https://water.fanack.com/egypt/water-resources-in-egypt (accessed 19 March 2024); Nada Arafat, 'Why Addressing Water Scarcity in Egypt Must Be a Priority,' *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 5 December 2023, https://carnegie-mec.org/2023/12/05/why-addressing-water-scarcity-in-egypt-must-be-priority-pub-90721 (accessed 19 March 2024).

[194] Adel Abdel Ghafar, 'Navigating Turbulence: Egyptian Foreign Policy under el-Sisi's Third Term,' *ISPI*, 13 December 2023, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/navigating-turbulence-egyptian-foreign-policy-under-el-sisis-third-term-156470 (accessed 19 March 2024).

After 2011, Egypt experienced a period of social unrest that destabilized the country. Tension persists, despite the brutal suppression of the opposition by the Egyptian army. In Sinai, terrorist groups remain strong, posing threats to internal stability and deterring foreign investors and tourists. Human rights organizations criticize the authorities' actions to eliminate terrorist groups. The Egyptian authorities are accused of maintaining restrictions on freedom of expression, political repression, and mass arrests of dissidents. This situation weakens the country's soft power in the eyes of Western public opinion and politicians. Egypt is involved in conflicts with Turkey and Qatar over influence in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, which limits the effectiveness of Egyptian diplomacy in promoting stability and cooperation. At the same time, Egypt distances itself from certain policies towards Israel and Palestinians from the period of ousted President Mubarak to rebuild its position as a leader in the Arab world. Four issues can be identified as crucial for Egypt's foreign policy. The first is Libya, which is an unstable neighbour. Egypt shares over 1,000 km of border with Libya, and maintaining security along such a long frontier is not easy. In Libya, ISIS and al-Qaeda groups are still active, transferring weapons to militant Islamists in the Sinai Peninsula. The second is the ongoing war in Gaza. The third is a civil war in Sudan, and the fourth is an increasingly fragmented global international order and growing mulitipolarity.[195]

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[195] 'Egypt,' *Freedom House*, 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/country/egypt/freedom-world/2022 (accessed 19 March 2024); 'Egypt. Events of 2022,' *Human Rights Watch*, 2023, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/egypt (accessed 19 March 2024); 'Egypt: Authorities Step up Repression ahead of Presidential Elections,' *Amnesty International*, 23 November 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/egypt-authorities-step-up-repression-ahead-of-presidential-elections (accessed 19 March 2024); 'Egyptian Opposition Claims Endorsements for President are Being Blocked,' *Aljazeera*, 4 October 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/4/egyptian-opposition-claims-endorsements-for-president-are-being-blocked (accessed 19 March 2024); 'Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Egypt,' US Department of State, 2023, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/egypt (accessed 19 March 2024); Ali Younes, Bahaa Mohamadi and Mohamed O. Abu Ghazala, 'Terrorism in Egypt: A Comprehensive Spatial, Spatio-temporal, and Statistical

Regarding multipolarity, the strategic significance for Egypt lies in its allied relations with the USA. Egypt is the second-largest recipient of the US military. Since the Camp David Accords of 1978, the USA has provided Egypt approximately $50 billion in military and $33 billion in economic assistance. At the same time, the return to global confrontation between the USA and Russia from the Cold War era and growing US-China competition creates an opportunity for manoeuvring between the superpowers for a more effective pursuit of the Egyptian national interests.[196]

5. The role of external actors

The Middle East has been a venue for centuries-long rivalries between global powers. The region is strategically located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Its proximity to major global powers and key maritime routes gives it pivotal in international geopolitics. Billions of tons of goods pass through the region, connecting the two pillars of the global economy: the Far East and the Euro-Atlantic world. The Suez Canal is one of the most vibrant trade arteries. Control over this region can influence global trade, energy flows, and geopolitical alliances. In the 19th century, the main external actors were Great Britain, France, and Russia. The dynamics of events in the Middle East were then shaped by the logic of the 'Great Game,' as the rivalry between Great Britain and Russia for control over Asia and maritime routes to India was called. After World War I, the USA joined the

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Analysis,' *Springer Link*, 9 November 2023, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10708-023-10972-w (accessed 19 March 2024); 'A New Foreign Policy in Egypt,' *Middle East Policy Council*, 2020, https://mepc.org/commentary/new-foreign-policy-egypt (accessed 19 March 2024).

[196] Adel Abdel Ghafar, 'The Return of Egypt? Assessing Egyptian Foreign Policy under Sisi,' *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, https://me-council.org/publication/the-return-of-egypt-assessing-egyptian-foreign-policy-under-sissi (accessed 21 March 2024); 'Egypt's Foreign Policy within a Challenging Regional Context,' European Parliament, 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698062/EPRS_BRI(2021)698062_EN.pdf (accessed 20 March 2024).

competition for influence in the Middle East, with the region's oil resources becoming a new object of rivalry. After World War II, the influence of Great Britain and France significantly weakened, symbolized by the failed so-called tripartite aggression of those two countries and Israel against Egypt in 1956. The establishment of Israel in 1948 meant that a new entity appeared in the Middle Eastern system, complicating the entire system. During the Cold War, the Middle East became a battleground between the USA and the USSR, which engaged all their resources to expand their spheres of influence and limit those of the other side.[197]

(a) USA

Henry Kissinger repeatedly emphasized the importance of the Middle East for the USA in the global game with the Soviet Union. Generally, US policy in the Middle East is aimed at protecting its interests by controlling regional powers. At the beginning of Richard Nixon's presidency, Kissinger announced that the new administration would seek to eliminate Soviet influence in the Middle East. Faced with Moscow's policy of supporting radical Middle Eastern regimes, Nixon's advisors concluded that "the best strategy was to demonstrate that the Soviet Union's capacity to foment crisis was not matched by its ability to resolve them."[198] At the same time, Washington's strategy involved supporting moderate Arab regimes "by rewarding responsible Arab leaders with American support when their grievances were legitimate."[199] To achieve this goal, the USA pursued two complementary policies. On the one hand, they blocked any Arab steps resulting from Soviet military aid or direct involvement, and, on the other they took the initiative in the process of peacefully settling the Arab–Israeli conflict at a time when some Arab leaders were frustrated with the stalemate and turned away from the Soviet Union towards the USA. The first signs of the validity

[197] Ellen Wald, *Saudi, Inc.: The Arabian Kingdom's Pursuit of Profit and Power* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2018); L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (London: IB Tauris Publishers, 1984).

[198] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 738.

[199] Ibid.

of this strategy appeared in 1972 when Egyptian President An-
war al-Sadat ordered Soviet military advisors to leave Egypt. At
the same time, Cairo engaged in secret diplomatic talks with the
USA. The validity of Washington's strategy was confirmed by
events related to the Arab–Israeli war in October 1973. When
the firing subsided, it became clear that without US assistance, it
would not have been possible to restore the *status quo ante* and
take any steps towards peace.[200] This, in turn, meant a significant
reduction in Soviet influence in the region.

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Iran shifted its
foreign policy direction and ceased to be a pillar of US strategy in
the Middle East. As neighbouring Iraq pursued a policy of rap-
prochement with the Soviet Union at that time, the USA adopt-
ed in 1994 an approach known as "dual containment," aimed at
isolating Iraq and Iran in the region and cutting them off from
the global market and international trade divisions. In the case
of Iran, the USA imposed sanctions aimed formally at preventing
the development of Iran's nuclear programme but effectively also
weakening the Iranian economy. The "dual containment" policy
aimed to stimulate political changes in both Iran and Iraq.[201]

There are different opinions about the current position of the
USA in the Middle East. This question arose due to Washington's
visible inclination to withdraw militarily from the region over
the past 15 years. "This policy began under President George W.
Bush, who was chastened by the fiasco of the war he had started in
Iraq."[202] The Trump administration continued the Obama adminis-
tration's policy of minimizing military presence in the Middle East.

[200] See Ali E.H. Dessouki, 'Regional Leadership: Balancing off Costs and
Dividends in the Foreign Policy of Egypt,' in Bahgat Korany and Ali
E.H Dessouki (eds.), *The Foreign Policy of Arab States. The Challenge
of Globalization* (The American University in Cairo Press: Cairo, New
York, 2010), 167–94; Ismail Fahmi, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle
East* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 188–251;
Raymond W. Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution under Nasser and Sa-
dat* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 138.

[201] See Mahnaz Zahirinejad, 'Conflict and Integration in the Middle East
and North Africa,' *Peace Studies Journal* 15, 1 (June 2022), 47.

[202] Fareed Zakaria, 'The Self-Doubting Superpower. America Shouldn't
Give Up on the World It Made,' *Foreign Affairs* 103, 1 (January/February
2024), 47.

Fareed Zakaria considers that the outcome of this trend "has not been the happy formation of a new balance of power but rather a vacuum that regional players have aggressively sought to fill."[203] President Trump's decision in October 2019 to withdraw most US forces from Syria strengthened the hands of Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Syria. At the same time, Trump increased pressure on Iran to reduce its influence in the region, which included the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in Iraq in January 2020.[204] Trump also encouraged Arab countries of the Gulf to countries to form a coalition with Israel.

The Wilson Center stated in early 2024 that "the United States is no longer the undisputed hegemon in the Middle East." This assessment is also related to the role of other external players in the Middle East. The Wilson Center specifically acknowledged that, as a consequence, Russia's role can be treated as a strategic challenge and "an urgent concern both to Israel and the United States."[205] This concerns sensitive areas such as Syria and Iraq, as well as cyberspace and the sphere of technology.

The USA's treating the Middle East as less important than the Far East has opened up space for Russia and China to expand their influence in the region. This does not mean that the USA is withdrawing from the Middle East and handing it over to these countries. Washington aims to maintain regional stability, counterterrorism, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, energy security, and Israel's security. The USA is still the region's preeminent power and occupies a unique place in the region due to its military resources. The normalization of relations between Israel, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco, and the UAE proved that the USA has greater diplomatic authority in the region than Russia or China.

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[203] Ibid.

[204] 'Remarks by President Trump on the Killing of Qasem Soleimani,' *National Security & Defense*, 3 January 2020, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-killing-qasem-soleimani (accessed 24 March 2024).

[205] 'Russia in the Middle East: National Security Challenges for the United States and Israel in the Biden Era,' *wilsoncenter.org*, Wilson Center, 2024, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/report-russia-middle-east-national-security-challenges-united-states-and-israel-biden (accessed 20 March 2024).

The US strategy towards the Middle East involves maintaining alliances with key countries in the region. The most important of these is a strong and enduring alliance with Israel, which includes significant military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation. This alliance is based on shared democratic values, strategic interests, and historical connections. The second key ally for the US is Saudi Arabia. Despite occasional tensions, the USA maintains a close relationship with Saudi Arabia, primarily driven by mutual interests in energy security, counterterrorism efforts, and regional stability. The USA provides military support and sells weapons to Saudi Arabia. The alliance with the UAE is similar in nature. The two countries cooperate closely on security issues, counter-terrorism efforts, and economic cooperation. The USA has military bases in the UAE, and advanced military equipment has been purchased from the USA.[206]

The US-Jordan alliance is one of the earliest. The USA provides military and economic assistance to Jordan to support its stability and security. The two countries also cooperate closely in anti-terrorism activities. Despite occasional tensions, the USA maintains a strategic partnership with Egypt, providing significant military assistance and collaborating on regional security issues, including counterterrorism and stabilization efforts in the Middle East. Kuwait is a vital US partner in the Gulf. The USA maintains a close military relationship with Kuwait dating back to the 1990–1991 Gulf War. There are American military bases in Kuwait, and Kuwait receives American military aid. The US Navy's Fifth Fleet base is located in Bahrain, and the two countries cooperate closely in maritime security and anti-terrorism activities.

During the peak of military activity, the USA maintained over 100,000 soldiers in Afghanistan (in 2011) and over 160,000 in Iraq (in 2007). After withdrawing from Afghanistan in 2021, approximately 30,000 US soldiers remained in various parts of the Middle East, underscoring the strategic importance of the region. The largest American base has been located in Qatar since 1996 and is known as al-Udeid Air Base. The USA maintains about 900 troops in Syria in small bases such as the Omar Oil Field and

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[206] See Maria Fantappie and Vali Nasr, 'The War That Remade the Middle East. How Washington Can Stabilize a Transformed Region,' *Foreign Affairs* 103, 1 (January/February 2024), 11.

al-Shaddadi. There are 2,000 military personnel in Iraq stationed at bases such as Union III and Ain al-Asad. The USA maintains its military personnel in countries of the region with the consent of those countries' authorities, except in Syria, where they are stationed without the consent of Damascus. In Syria and Iraq, they are stationed as part of the fight against the Islamic State.[207]

In the 2018 National Defense Strategy, China was identified as the primary strategic competitor using predatory economics, with American strategists paying particular attention to the militarization of the South China Sea. Russia was also mentioned as a country that violated the borders of nearby nations. North Korea was placed third in US strategy, followed by the Middle East. Iran was identified as the biggest threat to US interests in this region, as it "continues to sow violence and remains the most significant challenge to Middle East stability." The document also recognized that ISIS, although physically dismantled as a structure, still posed a potential source of terrorist activity.[208]

(b) Russia

Following the Syrian Civil War, Russia emerged as a formidable force in the Middle East, making significant strides in both military and diplomatic arenas. Its intervention in Syria, in support of President Bashar al-Assad, not only saved the Syrian regime but also thwarted US plans to remove al-Assad from power. This pivotal move by Russia, coupled with its role in the US-led Coalition's fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), led to the establishment of a Russian military base in Syria, thereby amplifying its influence in the region.[209]

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[207] 'US Troops in Middle East: What Are They Doing and Where?' *Reuters*, 3 February 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/us-troops-in-middle-east-what-are-they-doing-and-where-/7469452.html   (accessed 13 March 2024).

[208] *2018 National Defense Strategy* (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 2019), 1.

[209] Nikita Smagin, 'Forgotten Front: Why Syria Is Becoming a Headache for Russia,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 17 October 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90784 (accessed 24 February 2024).

Russia has strategically positioned itself in Syria and Libya and is a crucial partner of Iran. It also harbours intentions to broaden its influence in Egypt. Notably, Russia has found partners for dialogue in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, Afghanistan, and among the Palestinians. Its growing proximity to Iran has also elevated its role in Yemen, further solidifying its status as a significant player in the Middle East.

Russia cannot undermine US and Israeli cooperation in the region, but its presence alone affects the positions of the USA and Israel. Currently, Moscow does not play the role of a strategic actor. Still, with the imminent change of administration in the USA and the deterioration of Russian–American relations on a global scale, this role could become a strategic challenge. Operationally, Russia is a high-priority national security challenge for Israel. Russia does not interfere in Israel's military operations in Syria, and engagement with Russia indirectly allows Israel to weaken the military capabilities of the Iranian army. From the perspective of confronting Iran, maintaining correct relations with Moscow is of paramount importance for Israel. Maintaining the ability to consult with Russia on the Iranian nuclear programme is also essential.

Russia will not withdraw from the Middle East in the short or medium term. A transactional diplomacy style currently dominating the Middle East suits Moscow, allowing it to maximize opportunities as they arise. Moscow leverages its relations with Turkey and Iran to strengthen its positions in the Middle East and the Gulf in particular. Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Russia's trade with Turkey nearly doubled to $60 billion in 2022. Turkey has become an essential partner for Russia, second only to China in terms of trade. Russia's trade with the UAE increased by 68 percent to $9 billion in 2022.

Furthermore, the UAE has become an essential channel through which Russia purchase electronics, including microchips. As a result of the war in Ukraine, several hundred thousand Russians found themselves in various countries in the Middle East – Turkey, Israel, and the UAE, forming a Russian diaspora in the region. Although Moscow actively borrowed Western legal and bureaucratic patterns after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it turned, with its consequent isolation from

Europe, to alternative authoritarian governance models. Authoritarian modernization in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar became a model for Russia to follow.[210]

However, Russia's capabilities to intervene in the Middle Eastern system are limited. Russia is less affluent and less dynamic than the USA and China and, compared with them, has little to offer economically. It can be assumed that Russia's current strategic goal is to expand its influence through a military presence in Libya, given the country's oil and gas resources and strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean. The proximity of Egypt to Libya is also significant. Vladimir Putin maintains good relations with President al-Sisi, who is returning to the politics of the Cold War era, benefiting from the confrontation of global powers. Several agreements have been reached between Russia and Egypt regarding the supply of Russian weapons to Egypt, and Russia would like to sell advanced SU-36 aircraft to Egypt. Both countries have conducted joint military manoeuvres, Egyptian military personnel train in Russia, and Moscow wants to establish a military base in western Egypt. Russia is already the largest supplier of wheat to Egypt and is building the El Dabaa Nuclear Plant north-east of Cairo.[211]

It cannot be assumed that Moscow's influence on the region will not increase. Geopolitical changes beyond the region may determine this. Russia is strengthening ties with China as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, and it cannot be ruled out that they will present a united front on the issues of the Middle East. Additionally, Russia is building a network of trade connections with Asia to bypass sanctions imposed by the West and could become a centre of global trade. The planned North-South corridor,

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[210] Nikita Smagin, 'Middle Eastern Influence Is Growing Fast in Russia,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 16 November 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91028 (accessed 21 March 2024); Peter Brookes, 'Russia's Middle East Resurgence: Here to Stay?' *Politics*, 28 February 2024, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/russias-middle-east-resurgence-here-to-stay (accessed 21 March 2024).

[211] Gawdat Baghat, 'Russia and the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges,' in Graeme P. Herd (ed.), *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment* (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshal European Center for Security Studies, 2021), 72–9; 'Russia in the Middle East: National' (accessed 20 March 2024).

which aims to connect St. Petersburg with Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf, will compete with the American East-West corridor from India through the Persian Gulf to Europe.[212]

(c) China

In the 21st century, China has emerged as a significant political player, forging economic relations and diplomatic ties with Middle Eastern countries. A key aspect of China's strategy, unveiled in 2013 as the Belt and Road Initiative (also known as the New Silk Road), is its focus on infrastructure and communication technologies as the main drivers of its economic activity in the Middle East. This strategy, with its global reach, envisions China's infrastructure development in approximately 150 countries, making it a topic of great importance and interest.[213]

Regarding the Middle East, China's goal is to ensure the long-term security of energy resource supplies through routes beyond the USA's control. As it is projected to be in process until 2049, with funds allocated for its implementation amounting to $8 trillion, it can be assumed that China's presence in the Middle East will also strengthen. It can also be speculated that this presence will extend beyond the economic aspects and include the military sphere, which would come at the expense of the USA. However, it

[212] Sylvie Kauffmann, 'C'est l'un des effets géopolitiques les plus spectaculaires de la guerre en Ukraine : le renforcement de l'axe Chine-Russie, face aux Etats-Unis, *Le Monde*, 17 avril 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/04/17/c-est-l-un-des-geopolitiques-les-plus-spectaculaires-de-la-guerre-en-ukraine-le-renforcement-de-l-axe-chine-russie-face-aux-etats-unis_6228268_3232.html (accessed 17 April 2024); Henry Meyer, 'Russia Builds New Asia Trade Routes to Weaken Sanctions Over War,' *Bloomberg*, 18 April 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-17/russia-builds-new-asia-trade-routes-to-weaken-sanctions-over-war (accessed 17 April 2024).

[213] James McBride, Noah Berman and Andrew Chatzky, 'China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative,' *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2 February 2023, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative (accessed 12 March 2024); 'Belt and Road Initiative: Is China's Trillion-dollar Gamble Worth It?' *BBC News*, 17 October 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-67120726 (accessed 12 February 2024).

seems unlikely that China's military presence in the Middle East would have the same character as the American presence in the form of military bases in the region. The example of the Chinese naval base in Djibouti in 2017 showed that similar attempts by China would lead to severe tensions in relations with the USA, which Chinese authorities seek to avoid.[214] However, even limited plans by China create a barrier to the strengthening of US interests in the region. Moreover, Chinese information technologies in the form of Huawei, the fifth-generation mobile telephony network, enable the gathering of intelligence data, posing a threat to US military positions in the Middle East.[215]

China does not aim to oust the USA from the Middle East but rather to weaken its influence in the region. China is not yet ready to bear the costs of being a regional hegemon, which would involve many risks that China seeks to avoid because it is still building its military and economic potential to reach the US level. Also, China is convinced that the USA will not withdraw from the Middle East, given the region's strategic importance. Since 2018, when President Xi Jinping formally proposed "to forge a new Middle East security architecture that is common, cooperative and sustainable,"[216] China has been building an alternative security structure in contrast to the 'old' security architecture led by the USA based on the US alliance network the region. The first successful step in this direction was the sponsorship of the Iran–Saudi

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[214] Charlotte Gao, 'China Officially Sets Up Its First Overse (as Base in Djibouti,' *The Diplomat*, 12 July 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-officially-sets-up-its-first-overseas-base-in-djibouti (accessed 12 February 2024); Minnie Chan and Teddy Ng, 'Chinese and US Militaries on Covid-19 Alert in Djibouti as Rivals Face Common Threat,' *South China Morning Post*, 24 April 2020, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3081460/chinese-and-us-militaries-covid-19-alert-djibouti-rivals-face (accessed 12 February 2024).

[215] Alexander Cornwell, 'Bahrain to Use Huawei in 5G Rollout despite U.S. Warnings,' *Reuters*, 26 March 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-huawei-security-bahrain/bahrain-to-use-huawei-in-5g-rollout-despite-us-warnings-idUSKCN1R71B3 (accessed 12 February 2024).

[216] Yun Sun, 'China Doesn't Want the Costa of Running the Middle East,' *Foreign Policy*, 29 February 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/29/china-middle-east-united-states-regional-hegemon-war (accessed 24 March 2024).

agreement in 2023. However, the war in Gaza has complicated Beijing's plans. China sees two key challenges to peace and stability in the region: the Israel–Palestine issue and the Gulf issue, particularly relations between Iran and the other Gulf states. China's interest in the Gulf is understandable because more than half of China's crude oil imports come from this region.[217]

(d) European Union

The European Union is an essential factor in the Middle Eastern system. It is its closest neighbour and possesses enormous economic and military potential. The EU has the capacity for effective diplomatic influence and can play the role of mediator in conflicts and promote peace initiatives. It also supports development programmes and the reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure, and humanitarian aid provided by Brussels has saved the lives of thousands of Middle Eastern residents. The EU supports democratic initiatives and civil society development and significantly contributes to building a collective security system in the Mediterranean region and combating terrorism.

Since the announcement of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995, followed by the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004, and the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008, the EU's goal has been to provide financial and technical support for the development programmes of Middle Eastern countries. It is assumed that the countries receiving this support will accept the values that unite the EU. At the same time, trade agreements between the EU and Mediterranean Basin countries have been intended to integrate the economies of both shores of this basin. However, the events of the Arab Spring demonstrated the EU's limited ability to promote democratic norms and values in the region. MENA countries' economic situation indicated the inefficiency of EU policies aimed at inclusive growth. The

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[217] See Yun Sun, 'China Wants to Weaken, Not Replace, the U.S. in the Middle East,' *Foreign Policy*, March, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/29/china-middle-east-united-states-regional-hegemon-war/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Editorspercent20Pickspercent2003012024&utm_term=editors_picks (accessed 2 February 2024).

Arab Spring showed that EU countries remain at the forefront of US policy, and the only manifestation of Brussels' independence was criticism of President Trump for withdrawing from the Iran nuclear agreement in 2018.

The EU's weakness as an external actor lies in its fragmented foreign policy. In many issues concerning the situation in the Middle East, EU members had different opinions, making it impossible for decisions to be made promptly. Such controversies characterize the EU's position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the situation in Syria. The EU does not have its armed forces, limiting its impact on developments in the Middle East and promoting its solutions. The complexity of the Middle Eastern system, i.e., the intertwining of conflicts, alliances, rivalries, and ambitions of system participants, requires nuanced understanding and diplomatic agility, which poses a serious challenge to EU diplomacy. The recent conflict between Hamas and Israel was another opportunity for Brussels more actively to shape the Middle Eastern system, and EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell declared "the awakening of geopolitical Europe." However, this opportunity was not seized. While European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen issued a short statement during her visit to Israel, supporting Israel's right to self-defence against Hamas "in full respect of international humanitarian law," it was evident that such statements could not prevent the deaths of innocent Israelis and Palestinians, and that a firmer stance was needed. The EU has leverage in the form of its trade power to be a more active player in the Middle Eastern system.[218]

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[218] Assem Dandashly, Christos Kourtelis, Euroviews. 'Can the EU Become an Effective Geopolitical Power in the Middle East?' *Euronews*, November 2022, https://www.euronews.com/2023/10/30/can-the-eu-become-an-effective-geopolitical-power-in-the-middle-east (accessed 21 March 2024); see also Marede Gwyn Jones and Vincenzo Genovese, 'Faced with US and China, EU Leaders Call For sweeping Competitiveness Deal,' *euronews.com*, 18 April 2024, https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/04/18/faced-with-us-and-china-eu-leaders-call-for-sweeping-competitiveness-deal (accessed 22 April 2024).

Chapter IV
What System Exists in the Middle East?

1. Autonomous or subordinate?

In its current form, the Middle Eastern system traces its roots back to World War I and the plans of the Great Powers of the time, namely Britain, France, and Russia, for the partition of the Ottoman Empire. The agreements made then, such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the Paris Peace Conference, led to the creation of new territorial units whose borders were arbitrarily drawn by the European Great Powers. They controlled the Middle East at that time either through direct colonization or indirectly through the system of protectorates and mandates. The delineated borders often did not consider ethnic, religious, and tribal divisions, leading to numerous territorial disputes and armed conflicts. In many cases, the entire system was questioned. It was the position that was and continues to be presented by Islamist movements such as ISIS. The legacy of colonialism remains significant and contributes to external interference in the region's affairs and the destabilization of the entire system.

From the perspective of world-system theory, the Middle Eastern international system is a semi-peripheral region within the broader global system. While it may not be at the core of the world, it certainly holds a significant position. The Middle East's abundant oil and gas reserves make it a crucial player in the global

energy market, and it plays a pivotal role in global oil production. As of mid-2023, its 12 major oil fields were extracting over 15 million barrels of oil daily, and all Middle Eastern deposits combined accounted for 30.7 million barrels per day, approximately 31.3 percent of global oil production.[219] This underscores the region's economic importance and its impact on the global stage.

The Middle East is significant in the global system as one of the most conflict-prone regions, and events there, such as geopolitical shifts, conflicts, and the rise of extremist ideologies, have direct and far-reaching consequences for global security. These events raise fears of an increase in terrorism; they stimulate further waves of migration and destabilize the region, which has an impact on other parts of the globe. Competing interests of regional and global powers, sectarian tensions, and historical rivalries have fuelled conflicts in places such as Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, and understanding the geopolitical dimension is crucial for understanding the factors that drive these conflicts. The latest SIPRI report from 2023 says that global security is linked to climate change, heat waves, droughts, and floods, which affect millions of people. It means that the number of conflicts in the world, including in the Middle East, will increase.[220]

The Middle Eastern system occupies an intermediate position within the global hierarchy and demonstrates high autonomy. During the Cold War, when the world system was characterized by bipolarity, two superpowers tried to transfer this characteristic of the world system to the Middle East, but these attempts were not entirely successful. For example, the Eisenhower Doctrine, which was a reaction to the Soviet Union's expansion of influence in the Middle East after the military coup led by Nasser in Egypt

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[219] 'Middle East Plays Vital Role in Global Oil Production,' *Economy, Middle East*, 11 August 2023, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/middle-east-plays-vital-role-in-global-oil-production/2965593# (accessed 25 December 2023); 'Oil Production in the Middle East from 1998 to 2022,' *Statista*, 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/265200/middle-eastern-oil-production-in-barrels-per-day (accessed 25 December 2023).

[220] *Armed Conflict and Conflict Management*, SIPRI Yearbook 2023, 1, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/yb23_summary_en_1.pdf (accessed 27 December 2023).

in 1952, had a moderate effect. The region's countries that felt threatened by hypothetical Soviet aggression accepted it. However, those who did not perceive such a danger interpreted US actions as an attempt to interfere in the region's affairs, seeing the interests of individual states as more important than the logic of the world system.

On the other hand, the behaviour of regional countries was also challenging to understand in the context of global rivalry between the Soviet Union and the USA. When King Saud accepted US aid and leaned towards accepting the Eisenhower Doctrine, he was an American ally in regional affairs. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia voted against the USA and Turkey at the UN, supporting Syria, which the Soviet Union heavily influenced at that time. Another example of the ineffectiveness of external impulses was the USA's refusal to finance the construction of the Aswan High Dam. This step was supposed to weaken Nasser in Egypt or prompt him to move away from cooperation with the Soviet Union, but it had the opposite effect. In this case, national pride and awareness that, in conditions of global confrontation, one can manoeuvre between rivals to one's advantage were the main driving factors.

In the 1990s, while easing tensions and cooperation between the USA and Russia, Middle Eastern countries gained an opportunity to pursue a more independent policy in the region and create regional networks. As a result, there was talk of a 'new regionalism' and the emergence of a multipolar balance of power in the Middle East. However, the situation fundamentally changed a few weeks after 11 September 2001. The USA began preparations for direct intervention in the region and called on Middle Eastern countries to join a coalition against the Taliban. By framing the issue as "if you are not with us, you are against us," Washington significantly limited space for manoeuvre for the region's central states. Regional order thus changed from bipolar during the Cold War to multipolar in the 1990s and unipolar after 11 September 2001.[221] The example of Egypt, which initially expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of the USA's plan to fight terrorism, but ultimately changed its position and pushed controversial issues in relations with Washington into the background to

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[221] See Paul Rogers, *Global Security and the War on Terror: Elite Power and the Illusion of Control* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 159.

demonstrate full solidarity with Washington, shows how limited Middle Eastern countries' room for manoeuvre had become.[222]

The events of 11 September 2001, had a visible impact on Iran's foreign policy and the balance of political forces in the country. Since the Taliban in Afghanistan were enemies of Iran, the US offensive against the Taliban meant that Iran found itself on the same side of the conflict as the USA. It laid the groundwork for an improvement in Iranian–American relations, especially since Mohammad Khatami had been the president of Iran since 1997 and emphasized the need for Iran to open to the Western world in the name of Iranian national interest. Immediately after the attack on the Twin Towers in Manhattan, Iran offered the USA assistance in rescuing downed US pilots. It opened a military base for the Afghan opposition, which was crucial in driving the Taliban out of northern Afghanistan and ultimately defeating them. Iranian and American diplomacy worked together to create a new Afghan government in December 2001 at the Bonn Conference under the auspices of the UN. The chance for changes in relations with Iran was ultimately dashed by President George W. Bush's statement in January 2002, in which Iran was lumped together with Iraq and North Korea as part of the so-called "Axis of Evil." The statement by the American president undermined the reformers and gave strong arguments to the conservative part of the Iranian elite against engaging in dialogue with the USA.[223]

The independence of the Middle Eastern system from the global system is determined not only by the ruling elites in Middle Eastern countries but also by their societies. Despite authoritarian political systems in most countries in the MENA region, ruling groups must consider public opinion for fear of outbreaks of social unrest similar to the Arab Spring of 2011. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that there is a complete lack of alignment of views between the rulers and the ruled in all foreign policy

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[222] See Mustapha Kamal Al-Sayyid, 'U.S.-Egyptian Relations,' *Middle East Policy* 9, 4 (December 2002), 75–6.

[223] See Marvin G. Weinbaum, 'The United States and Afghanistan: From Marginality to Global Concern,' in David W. Lesch (ed.), *The Middle East and the United States, A Historical and Political Reassessment* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007), 474–79; Bahman Bachtiari, 'Iranian Foreign Policy,' *Middle East Policy* 9, 4 (December 2002), 77–80.

matters. In many cases, their views converge, as in the position of Middle Eastern countries on the Russo–Ukrainian conflict in 2022, for example.

An Arab News-YouGov opinion poll conducted in May 2022 showed that, of 7,835 respondents in 14 Arab countries, 66 percent had no opinion on the Russo–Ukrainian conflict. At the same time, 18 percent of respondents supported Ukraine, and 16 percent supported Russia. Sympathy for Russia was highest in four countries: Algeria (19 percent), Oman (19 percent), Qatar (19 percent), and Tunisia (18 percent). In the Gulf states, 22 percent of respondents declared themselves on the side of Ukraine and 15 percent on the side of Russia. The widespread lack of interest in the Arab countries in the war in Ukraine was conditioned by the geographical remoteness of the conflict site. For the inhabitants of the Middle East, conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Palestine were closer. The conflict in Ukraine was perceived as a European conflict, and its impact on the situation in the Middle East was assessed through the prism of rising energy and food prices. Ukraine and Russia were among the leading grain suppliers to Middle Eastern countries, and this fact could have been influential in formulating the view of the conflict. For example, in Egypt, which imported as much as 85 percent of its imported grain from Russia and Ukraine, interest in expressing a view was higher than in countries less dependent on grain imports from Russia and Ukraine.[224]

The same opinion poll revealed a stark contrast in public opinion between the Middle East and Europe. In 14 Arab states, the majority of respondents held NATO, not Russia, responsible for the conflict. The only exception was Syria, where both Russia and NATO were equally blamed. This divergence in public opinion underscores the unique perspective of the Middle East, which does not align with the Western narrative of an 'unprovoked act of aggression' by Russia against Ukraine.[225]

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[224] Arab News Staff, 'Poll Finds that Arab Street Has No Stance on Russia-Ukraine Conflict,' *Arab News*, 31 May 2022, 5.

[225] It was the EU statement of 28 February 2022. See 'EU Statement Regarding Russia's Unprovoked and Unjustified Military Aggression against Ukraine,' European Union. External Action, 28 February 2022, Brussels, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-statement-regarding-russiaper-

Thus, the Middle Eastern system is autonomous but simultaneously subordinate to the global system because it feels impulses from the outside. However, the possibilities of influence by the worldwide system on the regional one are not unlimited. In the 1950s, these limitations were due to the anti-imperialist attitude of Middle Eastern political leaders. It applied primarily to the so-called new middle classes, which took power in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, side-lining the 'old' layers associated with land ownership and participation in power systems created in colonial times. Historical, ideological, and social factors, and therefore those related to domestic politics, strongly influenced the system. The specificity of the Middle Eastern system lies in the fact that the foreign policy of many Middle Eastern countries was oriented not so much towards strengthening their position in the system as towards exerting the most substantial possible influence on the domestic affairs of other countries within it.[226]

2. Anarchical, hierarchical and non-polar?

If the system consists of units, then the question arises: what is the composition of the individual units as a whole? It depends on how power and capabilities are distributed. Since power is rarely evenly distributed, some states form 'poles,' giving rise to the phenomenon of polarity in the system. Then, the question arises of how many poles exist. "Poles are counted sometimes according to the physical capabilities of nations or alliances, sometimes by looking at the pattern of national interrelations, and sometimes by awarding or denying top status to those who get or fail to get their ways."[227] This means that a given state's recognition as a pole is subject to fluctuations.

What is more important is the basis on which we recognize that a given state constitutes a pole and how many poles exist in the system at a given time. It is difficult to deny that Yemen in 2024 constitutes a pole in the Middle Eastern system of relations

centE2percent80percent99s-unprovoked-and-unjustified-military-aggression-against-ukraine_en (accessed 7 July 2023).

[226]   Binder, 414.

[227]   Waltz, 15.

in the sense that the actions of the Houthi rebels attract the attention of the entire world and disrupt the global communication system. However, is this sufficient basis to consider Yemen as a pole within the system on the same level as, for example, Saudi Arabia or Iran?

Another question concerns whether a unipolar or a multipolar system is more stable and resilient to conflicts. While Waltz believed that a bipolar, followed by multipolar, distribution is such a system, others, like Robert Gilpin, believed that a unipolar system would be more stable because no one would dare to oppose the hegemon, i.e., the state that dominates over others.[228] Empirical studies of each region show that they have their boundaries, interactions between their constituent elements, and cores and peripheries. According to neorealism theory, examining these issues will indicate the possibility of one core or many in the system. In the latter case, neorealism states that the system is anarchical because there is no single decision-making centre. It is worth noting that the composition of the units in the system depends on both the impact of national behaviour on the system and the impact of the system on national behaviour. Regional membership "need not be a static proposition."[229] It can fluctuate considerably over time.

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[228] See, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967); Karl Deutsch and J. David Singer, 'Multipolar Systems and International Stability,' *World Politics* 16, 3 (1964), 390–406; G. John Ikenberry (ed.), *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973); Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Paul W. Schroeder, 'Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory,' *International Security* 19, 1 (1994), 108–48; Walt; Jack S. Levy, 'Preventive War and Democratic Politics,' *International Studies Quarterly* 52, 1 (2008), 1–24; Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, 'Wishful Thinking or Buying Time? The Logic of British Appeasement in the 1930s,' *International Security* 33, 2 (2008), 152–58.

[229] William R. Thompson, 'Delineating Regional Subsystems: Visit Networks and the Middle Eastern Case,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13, 2 (1981), 214.

From this perspective, the Middle Eastern system is anarchical because no single decision-making centre exists. It consists of four tiers. The first tier comprises the four strongest and most influential states: Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran. The second tier consists of the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt. There are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon at a lower level, and Yemen, Palestine, and Syria at the lowest tier. States occupying the highest positions in the ranking of power and influence have similar political, military, economic, and soft power potentials. They are also in conflict with each other, competing on many fronts and blocking each other.

Iran competes with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain to gain influence in the Gulf region. Qatar is the only higher-level state with which Iran maintains good relations and cooperates in gas extraction. However, the basis for their cooperation is to prevent Saudi Arabia's ambitions to dominate relations in the Gulf. In the case of Iran's conflict with Saudi Arabia, the additional source of tension is ethnic, religious, and historical divisions and conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites. Iran's main adversary in the system is Israel. Relations between the two countries have deteriorated since the Islamic revolution in Iran and have an ideological basis. The two countries are *de facto* in a state of war. Iran seeks to weaken Israel by acting through its proxies – Hamas and Hezbollah, which are considered threats by Israel. Tel Aviv believes that Iran's nuclear programme poses a threat to the existence of the Israeli state and threatens to attack Iranian installations. Iran also supports the Houthis in Yemen. Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, where Iranian-backed forces fought against ISIS, is Iran's main ally in the Middle East. An important instrument of Iran's policy in the Middle Eastern system is Shiite factions in Iraq, which have historical, ideological, and religious ties to Tehran. However, Iran's influence in Iraq is not unequivocal, as some Iraqi political forces oppose Iranian dominance.

Saudi Arabia is expanding its network of alliances and connections across the entire system, creating tensions and conflicts in relations with other participants. The closest ally to Riyadh is the UAE, and they cooperate on many fronts under a partnership called the Saudi-Emirati Coordination Council. However, the partnership is not free from tensions due to competition for influence in certain areas. Both countries seek to diversify their

economies and strive to play an important international role in scientific research, construction, sport, and other areas. Under the rule of Mohammad bin Salman, Riyadh is moving away from a religion-dominated identity towards hyper-nationalism. Abu Dhabi, ruled by Mohammad bin Zayed, has shifted towards accepting religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Against this background, tensions arise in relations between the two states. The first was the conflict over the location of the GCC central bank in 2008. Riyadh blocked the previously agreed plan to locate it in the UAE. Differences in positions also surfaced regarding the Houthi rebels in Yemen. In 2015, Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's positions were aligned, but over time, Riyadh supported President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, while Abu Dhabi supported the Southern Transitional Council. At the heart of these discrepancies were Saudi plans to build a pipeline to the Nishtun port on the Yemen-Oman border to free Saudi exports from Iranian control of the Strait of Hormuz. It would diminish the role of the UAE in oil and gas transportation and give greater power to Saudi Arabia in OPEC. Recently, Saudi–Emirati rivalry has spilled into Africa, particularly Sudan.[230]

Despite these discrepancies, similar positions on key regional challenges, such as Iranian influence in Yemen and the normalization of relations with Israel, determine the prevalence of cooperation tendencies over rivalry. Concerns about the expansion of Iranian influence in the Gulf bring Bahrain closer to Saudi Arabia, which has been a guarantor of maintaining the Bahraini political elite's political power since the Arab Spring. Egypt is also a partner of Saudi Arabia. Ties of cooperation have been strengthened since Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came to power in Egypt, and both countries oppose political Islamists. Egypt is heavily dependent on financial assistance from Riyadh, making it a tool in Saudi hands. This also applies to Jordan. Riyadh and Amman cooperate on many fronts and have similar positions on many issues of regional stability.

Saudi Arabia competed with Iran for influence in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq and blocked Iran's allies. In 2017, Saudi Arabia,

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[230] Talal Mohammad, 'How Sudan Became a Saudi-UAE Proxi War,' *Foreign Policy* 250 (Fall 2023), 23, https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=15&sid=690e14e4-c7ac-49b4-b3b6-ee1cb8d1f-970percent40redis (accessed 20 March 2024).

along with the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions on Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism and rapprochement with Iran. Tensions between Doha and Riyadh persist despite the lifting of the blockade in 2021. Riyadh's main ideological rival, with which it has waged an all-out war, is the Muslim Brotherhood. The rivalry concerns religious leadership and authority in interpreting Islamic law. The Muslim Brotherhood has repeatedly, over recent decades, viewed the House of Saud as usurpers and criticized them for corruption and excessive wealth accumulation. The Saudi authorities, therefore, support all the forces that are fighting the Muslim Brotherhood, as exemplified in Egypt after the military coup in 2013. As a result of the coup, the military ousted the Muslim Brotherhood from power and physically eliminated a significant portion of its supporters. For similar reasons, Riyadh fought against ISIS and joined the US-led coalition that dismantled ISIS structures in Iraq and Syria.

Ankara's main ally in the region is Qatar. Turkey supported Qatar in its confrontation with Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners in 2017 and provided diplomatic and economic support. The events of 2017 laid a solid foundation for the Turkish–Qatari alliance. During the Syrian Civil War, Turkey played a complex game aimed at overthrowing al-Assad and weakening the Kurds along the Turkish border. In this game, Turkey generally supported Sunni rebel groups and ultimately achieved one of its goals, namely weakening the Kurds in Syria. Turkey also effectively controls the Kurds in Iraq, maintaining economic and political ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), but opposes Kurdish independence aspirations and militarily combats the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).[231]

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[231] 'Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups,' *cfr*, Global Conflict Tracker, 8 August 2023, https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-turkey-and-armed-kurdish-groups (accessed 25 April 2024); Alessandro Ford, 'Turkey bombs Kurdish militants in Syria and Iraq,' *Politico*, 13 January 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-bombs-kurdish-militants-in-syria-and-iraq-pkk-ypg (accessed 25 April 2024); İdris Okuducu, 'Turkey's Anti-PKK Operation and "Development Road" in Iraq Are Two Sides of the Same Coin,' The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Fikra Forum*,

The relations between Turkey and Iran, with their long history of balancing their interests in the region, have reached a critical point. Tensions have escalated in recent years, particularly due to their rivalry in the southern Caucasus. Turkey's open support for Azerbaijan in the war over Karabakh in 2020, and its subsequent strengthening of its position in the region at the expense of Russia, has significantly altered the dynamics. However, this 'less Russia, more Turkey' option has also intensified relations between Tehran and Ankara. The conflict now centers around Turkey's plans to build a connection between Azerbaijan through Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan Enclave and Armenia's south-eastern Syunik province. The implementation of this plan could potentially marginalize Iran in the southern Caucasus, a prospect with far-reaching implications.[232]

In the western part of the Middle Eastern system, Turkey seeks to block the actions of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. An example of this was Turkey's military support for the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya in its fight against General Khalifa Haftar, who was supported by countries like Egypt and the UAE. Turkey has historically supported Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups in the Middle East and North Africa and treats them as allies in promoting political Islam and countering authoritarian regimes. Ankara took a critical stance against the military coup in Egypt in 2013 and provided sanctuary for Muslim Brotherhood activists, leading to increased tension in relations between the two countries. Ankara was the first Middle Eastern country to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, and although these relations are maintained, the two countries have clashed on issues such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict,

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https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-anti-pkk-operation-and-development-road-iraq-are-two-sides-same-coin (accessed 25 April 2024).

[232] Hamidreza Azizi, Daria Isachenko, *Turkey-Iran Rivalry in the Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politic, German Federal Foreign Office, No. 49 (September 2023), 1–4; Fuad Shahbazov, 'Unseen Tensions: The Undercurrents of Iran-Turkey Relations in the South Caucasus,' *Gulf International Forum (GIF)*, Washington, DC, 25 September 2023, https://gulfif.org/unseen-tensions-the-undercurrents-of-iran-turkey-relations-in-the-south-caucasus (accessed 24 April 2024).

the Gaza blockade, and the status of Jerusalem. Turkey is a wild card in the Middle Eastern system, and its increasing involvement in Syria and Libya could lead to an escalation of tensions in these countries and also to a confrontation between Russia and the US.[233]

The Middle Eastern system became even more complex and conflictual when two Persian Gulf Arab states – the UAE and Qatar – joined the quartet of leaders – Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran. The fact that the UAE has become a force in this system is evidenced by its establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel on 13 August 2020, as the third Arab country to take such a step.[234] The UAE sought to strengthen its positions in the region in the face of the US retreat from the region and to partner with Israel against geopolitical threats. Israel has substantial military and economic resources and blocks Iran's actions, which also threaten the Arab Gulf states. Thus, the UAE, along with Bahrain, aimed to connect with Israel's strong economy and become a regional business hub.[235]

The UAE is increasingly assessing the policies of other participants in the system and formulating its strategy. It applies primarily to Iran. In its 2021 foreign policy strategy, Abu Dhabi described Iran's regional policy as "aggressive" and acknowledged that this policy has an unfavourable impact on peace and stability. The UAE supported sanctions the UN Security Council imposed on the shipment of sensitive materials and technologies to Iran by sea. Among its enemies, it has listed the Assad regime in Syria, which has committed "crimes on its own people," as well as the Houthis in Yemen and al-Qaeda, and, among its allies, the government of Iraq, Egypt, and the government of Yemen

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[233] 'Russia in the Middle East: National.'

[234] 'The United Arab Emirates Has Become a Force in the Middle East,' *The Economist*, August 20, 2020, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/08/20/the-united-arab-emirates-has-become-a-force-in-the-middle-east?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18151738051&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIvrntx-6PihAMVhkeRBR1rGQ81EAMYASAAEgL98PD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds (accessed 19 March 2024).

[235] 'Russia in the Middle East: National.'

under President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The foreign strategy expressed support for "the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem," although this was not a condition for normalization of relations with Israel.[236]

Israel has more enemies than friends in the region, but it enjoys strong support from the USA, with which it cooperates militarily, economically, and diplomatically. Israel has established diplomatic relations with Turkey (since 1949), Egypt (since 1979), Jordan (since 1994), and in recent years with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. These agreements have resulted in diplomatic ties, economic cooperation, and security collaboration. Although Saudi Arabia has not established diplomatic relations with Israel, the two countries cooperate unofficially in the realms of security and intelligence, driven by shared concerns about Iran's regional influence. Iran is Israel's main enemy, supporting anti-Israeli groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as pursuing nuclear capabilities and promoting anti-Israel rhetoric. Another Palestinian militant group in Gaza, Islamic Jihad, also opposes Israel and has engaged in armed conflict with Israeli forces.

Qatar collaborates with Turkey in diplomacy and defence. They share common interests in supporting Islamist groups in the region and have cooperated on various political and economic initiatives. Qatar maintains relatively cordial relations with Iran, with which it shares the world's largest natural gas field, and has historically supported Islamist movements across the Middle East, including the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates. This support has strained relations with some Arab countries but has brought Qatar influence among certain regional political factions. Qatar has provided financial and political support for Hamas, the Islamist Palestinian militant group controlling the Gaza Strip. It has also played a significant role in facilitating negotiations between the Afghan Taliban and the USA, hosting peace talks and providing a diplomatic venue for discussions aimed at ending the conflict in Afghanistan.[237]

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[236] 'Foreign Policy,' United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 2, 2021, https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/Missions/Paris/The-UAE/Foreign-Policy (accessed 20 March 2024).

[237] Matthew Karnitschnig, 'On Hamas, what did Qatar know and when did it know it?' *Politico*, 11 January 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/

Egypt has a contentious relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist political organization that was briefly in power following the Arab Spring uprising but was later ousted by the military. The Egyptian government views the Muslim Brotherhood as a security threat and has cracked down on its members and supporters. Egypt's relations with Turkey have deteriorated in recent years, primarily due to Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its criticism of the Egyptian government's crackdown on political dissent. The two countries have also clashed over regional issues, such as Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean. Egypt's relations with Qatar soured following the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader, in 2013. Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its perceived interference in Egyptian domestic affairs led to a diplomatic rift between the two countries, which persists to some extent despite attempts at reconciliation. Egypt and Iran are not direct adversaries but have had strained relations due to ideological differences and regional rivalries. Egypt has historically been suspicious of Iran's ambitions for regional influence, particularly its support for Shia militant groups and its involvement in conflicts such as Syria and Yemen.[238]

The potential for external actors to influence the system does not favour its stabilization. The USA remains the main external force, but its increasing engagement in the Far East diminishes its ability to influence. At the same time, other actors, such as Russia, China, and the EU, are not powerful enough to significantly impact the Middle Eastern system. In a situation where the forces of

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west-search-truth-qatar-israel-hamas-war (accessed 26 April 2024); Ruxandra Iordache, 'Qatar re-evaluates key mediator role in Middle East conflict on concerns of 'political exploitation,' *CNBC*, 18 April 2024, https://www.cnbc.com/2024/04/18/israel-hamas-qatar-re-evaluates-key-mediator-role-in-middle-east-conflict-.html (accessed 25 April 2024); Ignacio Milman, 'Qatar: Afghanistan's gateway to the West,' *Universidad de Navarra*, 6 November 2021, https://en.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/catar-la-puerta-de-afganistan-para-occidente (accessed 25 April 2024).

[238] Khalil Al-Anani, 'Egypt and Iran: A Quest for Normalized Ties Amid Significant Obstacles,' *Arab Center Washington DC*, 9 June 2023, https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/egypt-and-iran-a-quest-for-normalized-ties-amid-significant-obstacles (24 April 2024).

the leading local participants balance each other out and flatten the hierarchy, the weakness of external actors exacerbates the state of anarchy. The system becomes increasingly anarchic as proxies become more independent. An example of this is the Hamas attack on Israeli settlements on 7 October 2023, which occurred without coordination with Iran, which is a major sponsor of this Palestinian organization. Iran is also unable to fully control its proxies in Iraq and Yemen, raising concerns that conflicts currently conducted outside Iran's borders may spill over into the country.[239]

As a result, according to some analysts, the Middle East is neither unipolar nor multipolar. "The Middle East is nonpolar, and no one is in charge," believes Gregg Carlsom. This author's conviction that the Middle East is in anarchy can be expressed differently by saying that the Middle Eastern system is in a transitional stage. The USA remains the hegemon but is not fully engaged in the region's affairs, and its actions are ineffective. Other superpowers have significantly less influence in the area. Israel cannot impose its way of resolving the conflict with the Palestinians, and Iran can only act through its proxies to fuel smouldering conflicts. Gulf countries look after their interests and do not intend to put them at risk by imposing on Israel a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue. Turkey maintains its influence in Iraq and Syria, but its impact on the Heartland of the Middle Eastern system is not significant. Most governments in Middle Eastern countries struggle with economic problems and weak legitimacy in their societies.[240]

3. Ordered or disordered?

Another consequence of recognising that power and capabilities are distributed unevenly in the system is the acknowledgement

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[239] Matthew Levitt, 'The Hamas-Iran Relationship', *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, November 2023, https://jstribune.com/levitt-the-hamas-iran-relationship (accessed 25 April 2024).

[240] Gregg Carlsom, 'The Power Vacuum in the Middle East: A Region Where No One's in Charge,' *Foreign Affairs*, 6 March 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/power-vacuum-middle-east (accessed 16 February 2024).

that the system has an overall structure understood as "a collection of elements that influence the behaviour of rulers and the operations of states by which the pattern of relations is formed."[241] This, in turn, raises the question of whether the structure of a complex system determines the behaviour of that system and, if so, to what extent. The impact of structure on the system has been the subject of much research, including that of Susan Strange. Already in the 1950s, Morton A. Kaplan answered this question in the affirmative, and Kaplan's position was essentially unchallenged, as criticism only accused him of overlooking the diversity of states and not considering domestic forces.[242] Stanley Hoffman, who defined structure as "a collection of items," also acknowledged that it influences foreign policy and the outcomes of interactions between the system's units.[243]

Lebovic proposed using a model of a 'disordered' and an 'ordered' system to examine the relationship between national behaviour and the system. The starting point of the analysis is the assumption that the two elements, namely the unit and systemic level, interact with each other. "Systemic transformation and continuity may be dependent on the characteristics of the units (nations) while the units themselves may be altered through systemic change."[244]

According to Lebovic, every system in its initial development phase is not ordered. However, it is still based on 'interrelatedness,' meaning a situation where "change at one point in the system affects other points."[245] Despite this, the system remains 'disordered' due to the impact of its units on the systemic level, if only through diffusion. The effects of any change in a unit on the systemic level depend on the degree to which the environment is sensitive and interdependent. Even so, the results of interaction can only be analysed in the most general terms. Examples

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[241] Waltz, *Theory*, 49.

[242] Morton A. Kaplan, 'Balance of Power, Biopolarity and Other Models of International Relations,' *The American Political Science Review* 51, 3 (September 1957), 684–95.

[243] Stanley Hoffmann, *The State of War: Essays on the Theory and Practice of International Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1965), 94–5.

[244] Lebovic, 268.

[245] Ibid., 269.

include the repercussions of Islamic extremists' capture of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and the consequences of the constant hostility between Iran and Iraq before the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The diffusion-driven impact of unit changes on the systemic level leads to forces generated by these changes taking on a life of their own, making it difficult to attribute their emergence to a specific situation.[246]

The fact that a unit impacts the system only through the diffusion of change, thus unintentionally, is a consequence of the unit being in a state of disorder. "National disorder is reflected in short-term calculations of national interest, issues that are concretely and narrowly defined, a disconcert with long-term behavioural consequences and an absence of norms and rules governing inter-nation behaviour."[247] In such a system, national leaders focus on negative goals to control threats and potential crises. National disorder also results from leaders setting irreconcilable goals. For example, the policy of Egypt and Syria to arm themselves before the October War had to consider the fact that both countries were dependent on financial aid from Saudi Arabia, which disagreed with initiating military action against Israel. Another factor creating disorder can be ideology. If it is imposed on society by the ruling elite and society is not convinced, a gap arises between the state and society. However, ideology can also work in the opposite direction, uniting society with the state and working towards order.[248]

So, what characterizes an 'ordered system'? William R. Thompson writes that an 'ordered system' has a meaning commonly given to regions – a condition in which "actors' pattern of relations or interactions exhibit a particular degree of regularity and intensity."[249] This should be understood as impulses directed from a unit to the systemic level being intentional and regular and contacts

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[246] Ibid.

[247] Andrew M. Scott, 'The Logic of International Interaction,' *International Studies Quarterly* 21 (September 1977), 429-60.

[248] See Lebovic, 271.

[249] William R. Thompson, 'The Regional Subsystem: A Conceptual Explication and a Propositional Inventory,' *International Studies Quarterly* 17, 1 (March, 1973), 93.

characterized by "interdependence and predictability."[250] In such a system, there is a 'convergence' of units, resulting in "the hierarchical organization of systemic behaviour." Convergence can occur under conditions of cooperation as well as conflict. Those states with greater capabilities attain the status of core or centre states and consequently define the structure of the system, reinforcing its rules and norms.[251]

A source of disorder in the system can be a conflict of ideologies among the ruling elites in the constituent states, as happened in the 1950s when radical ideologies and traditional ideologies clashed. Radicalism, in the case of the Middle East, should be understood as the belief that the government should be guided by principles formulated on a secular basis and which, according to the ruling group, reflect the 'objective' conditions in which society functions. Arab radicals have appealed to principles such as justice and social equality, Arab unity, the mission of the Arab nation, and independence from external actors. If traditionalists believed that their principles stemmed from an eternal order based on spirituality and constituted an eternal moral code, radicals questioned the existence of such a code, and the source of their moral principles was the social reality in which they operated.[252]

Disorder was not only a result of conflicting ideologies, but also exacerbated by the fact that Egypt, Syria, and Iraq – the core states during the Cold War – entered into short-lived alliances. These alliances were aimed at strengthening their positions in the system, but instead, competition prevailed over cooperation. This dynamic, where each state was vying for dominance, made the entire system conflicted and unpredictable. Additionally, radical states did not have an equivalent opponent in the system. Attempts by Saudi Arabia to counter Nasser, while leading to Egypt's defeat in Yemen, failed to create broad opposition to the radicals.

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[250] Donald E. Lampert, 'Patterns of Transregional Telation,' in Werner J. Feld and Gavin Boyd (eds.), *Comparative Regional Systems: West and East Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Developing Countries* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980), 465.

[251] Lebovic, 274.

[252] See Basheer Meibar, *Political Culture, Foreign Policy, and Conflict: The Palestinian Area Conflict System* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982), 85.

Countries such as Kuwait, Sudan, Lebanon, and Tunisia preferred to maintain neutrality in this confrontation.

Lebovic believed that the Middle Eastern system has been caught between disorder and order. If during the Cold War, Middle Eastern politics were dominated by Egypt, Syria, and Iraq – states advocating social radicalism and anti-imperialist slogans – by the late 1980s, new trends emerged: "the emergence of a regional hierarchy based primarily on national economic capability, the decline in appeal of pan-Arab ideology, and the increased political stability of member states."[253] This shift in power dynamics, where economic capability became a significant factor, marked a significant change in the Middle Eastern system. The turning point in shaping these trends was the 1967 war, which was a defeat for radical pan-Arabism. The states advocating it had to admit that their previous goals were unattainable, and the economic situation forced them to turn to conservative oil-producing states – their former ideological opponents – for help. At the same time, radicalism was tempered by incorporating elements of regional cooperation and economic development into the ideology. These trends worked towards order and a restructuring of the Middle Eastern system.

Lebovic argued in 1989 that the Middle Eastern system had become more 'normal' than it was during the Cold War in the sense that it was composed of states "with less grandiose ambitions, employing more traditional means."[254] This thesis would require verification through the analysis of the grand strategy concepts of the units of the current system.[255] For our study, the 'disordered' and 'ordered' approach must allow us to establish criteria for assessing the participation of a given unit in the system. However, some aspects would still require further clarification. For example, if core states are distinguished by both their rank and status, on what basis can their level of rank or status be determined? Consideration of the level of interaction with other highly active and high-ranking states is a good approach to use for analysis because taking

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[253] Lebovic, 277.

[254] Ibid.

[255] See Tore T. Petersen and Clive Jones, *Grand Strategy in the Contemporary Middle East: The Concepts and Debates* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2022).

account of only hard elements – such as GDP, military size, and armament – does not always reflect the position of a state or non-state actor in the system. However, the question remains: on what basis can one assess that a level of interaction is higher in one case and lower in another, and how does this relate to the question of the durability of interactions? A high level of interaction may be close to the concept of 'having influence.'

4. Stable or unstable?

Anthony H. Cordesman, analysing the destabilisation factors in the MENA region, emphasises that this region is exceptionally unstable, although the critical causes of instability vary sharply by nation. He lists long-term factors that are structural and very difficult to eliminate. These include (a) Wars and unresolved conflicts, the scale of which intensified after 2011; (b) Internal security issues provoked by violent extremism and sectarianism due to ethnic, tribal, and other internal divisions; (c) Arms races and the use of proxies in the struggle for regional influence; (d) Impact of outside powers; (e) Poor governance, corruption, nepotism, cronyism, repression; (f) Failure of Arab socialism and the rise of religious extremism; (g) High population growth, youth bulge, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, housing, and services; (h) Long history of inadequate development and economic growth, state-driven barriers.[256]

Four main lines of conflict can be identified in the Middle Eastern system. The first is the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over territory concerning the Holy Land between the Mediterranean coast and the Jordan River, fought by. Also, the Kurds, who live in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, seek to have their state.

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[256] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Stability in the MENA Region: The Range of Forces Shaping Stability* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 March 2018), 4–5; see also Anthony H. Cordesman and Nicholas Harrington, 'Stability in the Middle East: The Range of Short and Long-Term Causes,' *CSIS*, 9 April 2018, https://www.csis.org/analysis/stability-middle-east-range-short-and-long-term-causes (accessed 12 March 2024).

The second line is Turkey's search for its identity. On one hand, this country is part of the West, and on the other, it belongs to the Middle East. This 'split' identity also exists within society, creating tensions. The third line of conflict is the antagonism between the two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both states support various groups from Syria to Yemen to strengthen their influence throughout the Middle Eastern system. The fourth line is tensions between states and societies. In many countries in the region, society refuses to legitimize the ruling groups and does not accept these groups' appropriation of revenues from the exploitation of natural resources.[257]

Particularly dangerous for the entire region is the Arab–Iranian conflict, conditioned by competition for leadership in the area and fuelled by religious divisions and the 'ease' of using proxies due to the deprivation experienced by many social groups and ethnic-religious communities. Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, and Yemen are considered countries at risk of high levels of Islamic extremism. Due to wars and economic problems, Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, and Yemen are particularly unstable. Sectarian, ethnic, and tribal conflicts are a particular threat to stability in Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. All the MENA countries – except Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE – are experiencing severe economic difficulties and cannot create effective development plans for the economy and governance. This is due, among other factors, to the lack of funds allocated to armaments. In Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Yemen, funds are being spent on armaments at the expense of development plans and the standard of living of the inhabitants. Cordesman describes the Arab alliances as illusory and gives the example of divisions in the GCC, which was supposed to integrate Arab states of the Gulf but instead divided them into Saudi Arabia,

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[257] Christian-P. Hanelt and Alexander Weber, 'The EU and the Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa: How to Build a New Relationship between Old Neighbors,' *Trilogue Salzburg 2022*, 105, (103–121), https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/84_Salzburger_Trilog/Salzburger_Trilog_2022/6_The_EU_and_the_Conflicts.pdf (accessed 21 March 2024).

the UAE, and Bahrain on one side, and Qatar on the other, while simultaneously marginalizing Oman and Kuwait.[258]

Wars were particularly devastating for economies and societies. As a result of the internal conflict in Syria, which turned into a civil war from 2005 to 2013, 500,000 people were killed, 5.4 million became refugees, and 6.1 million were internally displaced. The GDP growth rate dropped from 6.2 percent in 2005 to -37.9 percent in 2013. In Iraq, from 2005 to 2014, approximately 200,000 people were killed, 280,000 had to flee across the border, and 2.1 million became internally displaced. It is estimated that, were it not for terrorism, which occurred in Iraq after 2003, Iraq's GDP in 2014 could have been $159 billion higher.[259]

The European Parliament formulated a similar assessment in a resolution on 23 November 2022, which described the Middle East as a region that "has been plagued by outbreaks of instability, resulting from both structural geopolitical tensions and persistent internal factors, such as socioeconomic development challenges, weak governance and religious radicalism." The European Parliament also described the Abraham Accords as a step towards shaping a stable region.[260]

As indicated by rankings, the Gaza War that began in 2023 caused the Middle Eastern system to lose some stability. Data from *The Conflict Intensity Index* of Verisk Analytics showed that, between 2018 and 2023, countries in the region, such as Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, were characterized by a significant reduction of risk. Israel and Palestine remained, of course, countries at high risk, but the situation stabilized in others. Between 2018 and 2023, Palestine moved from 14th to 3rd place among 170 monitored countries in terms of destabilization (behind Syria and Burkina Faso), and Israel moved from 14th to 6th. The situation after October 2023 signifies a collapse of the trend towards stabilization in the Middle East. Data from the Interstate Tensions

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[258] Cordesman, 11.

[259] Ibid., 15–6.

[260] 'European Parliament Resolution of 23 November 2022 on Promoting Regional Stability and Security in the Broader Middle East Region,' European Parliament, Strasbourg, 23 November 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0408_EN.html (accessed 12 March 2024).

Model, which measures the risk of a militarized dispute between two countries, indicate an 80 percent probability of military action between Israel and Iran. The Gaza War also increased the probability of destabilization in some countries. It particularly applies to Egypt and Turkey. Egypt moved from 61st to 41st place among countries at high risk of destabilization, caused, among other things, by high inflation and deepening social inequalities. At the same time, protests in support of Hamas could easily turn into a social conflict between the government and the population. A similar scenario led to Turkey moving from 24th to 22nd place in the ranking.[261]

The stability of the Middle East is intricately tied to the alliances formed within the region, which have undergone significant transformations over the past 70 years. A prime example is Iran, whose regional policy underwent a drastic shift after 1979. Similarly, Egypt altered its regional policy following the death of Nasser and the rise of Anwar al-Sadat. The year 2011 marked the formation of new alliances in the region, many of which have proven to be enduring. One such alliance is the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah axis, which began to take shape after 1979 through strengthened cooperation between Syria and Iran. After 2011, Hezbollah joined these two countries, for whom the fall of al-Assad's regime posed an existential threat. Sunni Hamas, which had reduced its contacts with Iran in 2012, also returned to close cooperation with the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah axis. The second axis of alliances is formed in response to Israel's perception of Iran as its main security threat. This alignment brings so-called 'moderate' Arab states closer to Israel, with authorities maintaining close cooperation with the USA out of fear of Iran's expansionism in the region and its proxies. These states include Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Arab states of the Gulf also maintain a close alliance with each other. After a period of rivalry for influence in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, they returned to the track of the initial dynamics of relations in the Gulf region.[262]

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[261] Jess Middleton, 'Gains in Middle East Stability and Threat,' *Verisk Maplecroft*, 3 November 2023, https://www.maplecroft.com/capabilities/geopolitical-and-country-risk/insights/gains-in-middle-east-stability-under-threat (accessed 12 March 2024).

[262] May Darwish, 'Alliances in the Post-2011 Middle East," *IEMed.*, 20 June

The alliance with Turkey is an important element of US strategy in the region and dates back to the Economic and Technical Cooperation agreement signed on 12 July 1947 under the Truman Doctrine. The USA condemned the attempted military coup on 15 July 2016 and constantly emphasized the priority given to the alliance with Ankara. Turkey is an important US partner in NATO, and the Incirlik Air Base has played a critical role since 2015 in maintaining the security and stability of the Middle Eastern system, as evidenced by the defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq.[263]

The relative durability of alliances after 2011 only deepened the destabilisation of the system, as the axes of alliances present extremely different concepts of political solutions in the region. An example may be the strategy of both sides in the war between Israel and Hamas. The fact that there were breaks in military operations and exchanges of hostages for prisoners did not necessarily indicate either side's willingness to compromise. On the contrary, Israeli authorities hoped that prolonged pressure would force Hamas to make concessions, while Hamas hoped that Israel's military strength would become a source of its political weakness. In this way, Hamas would lose the battle but win the war. The strong positions of non-state actors, essentially beyond the control of states in the territories where these non-state actors operate, are an additional destabilizing factor in the system. Besides Hezbollah and Hamas, the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, the secessionist al-Hirak in southern Yemen, and separatists in Libya strongly influence the system.[264] This fact does not contribute to stability, as it deepens confrontation.

2023, https://www.iemed.org/publication/alliances-in-the-post-2011-middle-east (accessed 13 March 2024).

[263] Ibid.

[264] Michael M. Gunter, 'The Kurds in the Changing Political Map of the Middle East', *Kurdish Studies* 3, 1 (2015), 64–81; Curtis R. Ryan, 'Shifting Alliances and Shifting Theories in the Middle East', in Marc Lynch and Amaney Jamal (eds.), *Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East*, POMEPS Studies, March 2019, 7–13.

Conclusion

Both traditional structural realism and neorealism theory assume that actors in international relations create a system and that this system has its structure. Power distribution is a key concept in explaining how the international system functions. Realist theory understands power as consisting of resources or capabilities that indicate actors' strength and ability to influence or control events. However, the empirical evidence of international relations shows that merely possessing natural, economic, or military resources does not guarantee the ability to influence or control events. An example of this is the failure of the USA in Vietnam, where a major world power could not impose its concept of international order. Resources must be 'translated' into influence and impact in the political bargaining process for the actor possessing them to influence and control the course of events.

This book aimed to analyse the process of translating power into influence and impact on the system, understood in terms of the realism school. The analysis covered 'hard' factors of power – natural and human resources, economic potential, and military strength in 2024. It also showed the changes that have occurred in recent years in the system's participants arrangement from the perspective of hard power factors. Recognising the influence of hard power on the system, we assumed that hard elements of power should be evaluated in conjunction with soft factors, as precisely these soft factors determine the effective or ineffective 'translation' of power into influence and impact.

Our Power and Influence Composite Index, a significant tool in our analysis, comprises twelve indicators: six of hard power

(human resources, natural resources, *per capita* GDP, FDI, military strenght, and geopolitical position) and six indicators of soft power: diplomatic initiatives, cultural and academic influence, historical and cultural significance, internal stability and governance, regional alliances and regional leadership. This comprehensive analysis of these indicators allowed us to discern the balance of power in the system and the system's characteristics, underscoring the importance of our findings.

The Middle Eastern system, a dynamic entity, is structured into four tiers. The first tier comprises the four strongest and most influential states: Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran. The second tier includes the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt. At a lower level, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon, while Yemen, Palestine, and Syria form the lowest tier. In terms of changes in the balance of power, the growing influence of the Persian Gulf Arab states has become evident. Saudi Arabia has emerged as the leading power in the Middle East, but the most remarkable growth in power and influence is observed in the UAE and Qatar, highlighting the relevance and timeliness of our analysis.

The Middle Eastern system is semi-autonomous, semi-ordered, anarchic, hierarchical, and unstable. States occupying the highest positions in the power and influence ranking have similar political, military, economic, and soft power potentials. They are also in conflict, competing on many fronts and blocking each other. As a result, the Middle Eastern system is highly conflict-prone, and factors driving conflict escalation are stronger than factors promoting cooperation. As a result, there may continue to be military attacks similar to Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on 1 April 2024, and Iran's missile attack on Israel on 19 April 2024.

There are two visible risks of escalation: one associated with the Iranian–Saudi confrontation and the other with the Israeli–Palestinian confrontation.

While the 10 March 2023 agreement eased tensions in relations between the two states and the region, there is no certainty that the trend towards de-escalation in Saudi–Iranian relations will persist in the longer term. This trend could be disrupted by anti-government protests in Iran and the lack of progress

in nuclear talks. The emerging ties between Israel and the Gulf countries since 2010, leading to the Abraham Accords and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Bahrain and the UAE, and talks about normalizing relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia were rooted in a shared fear of Iran. The USA supported these actions as it shifted its focus towards the Far East and prepared for confrontation with China. The issue of containing Iran was to be handed over to its proxies, namely Israel and the Gulf states. However, the war in Gaza after October 7 showed that the Persian Gulf Arab states were not ready to stand with Israel and face open confrontation with Iran and its proxies in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Considerations of their own security primarily drive these countries and they are aware that they are a soft target for Iran and its proxies. Their functioning depends on oil exports, the Gulf navigation security, food imports, and vulnerable infrastructure, including desalination plants. The experience of 2019, when Iranian rockets hit Saudi oil fields and disrupted half of the Kingdom's production, does not encourage hostile actions against Iran. Despite spending billions of dollars on armaments and being among the top five global arms importers, Saudi Arabia and Qatar do not have sufficiently strong and experienced armies on the battlefield to counter the Iranian military. In the case of Saudi Arabia, this was demonstrated by the loss in the war with the Houthis in Yemen. It may seem that the UAE army presents a higher combat value as it successfully conducted operations in southern Yemen, but in UAE society, the desire for enrichment outweighs the spirit of combat, and fighting guerrillas in Yemen is not the same as facing a solid and battle-hardened Iranian army.

Saudi–Iranian relations will remain conflict-prone because it is difficult to assume that Iran will relinquish its ambitions to play a role as a regional power and stop supporting its proxies in Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen. Moreover, cooperation with Russia regarding the war in Ukraine strengthens Iran's position in the region. At the same time, the Persian Gulf Arab countries still do not pose an effective counterbalance to Iran's influence.

The second risk of escalation in tension in the region is associated with the dynamics of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Here, the shift of the confrontation line from Israeli-Arab to Israeli-Iranian is characteristic. The structures and institutions created by the Israeli authorities regarding the Palestinian issue, as well as the policies of Israeli governments, have become a potential source of tension. On the other hand, the policies and institutions of the Palestinian Authority have found themselves in a state of paralysis. As a result, already at the turn of 2022 and 2023, there had been terrorist attacks, military interventions, and violence from settlers and, in October 2023, an even greater wave of violence that escalated into a bloody war.

Under Netanyahu's rule, Israel's policy amounted to weakening the Palestinian Authority and allowing Hamas to strengthen to claim that there was no partner on the Palestinian side for negotiations because Hamas, a terrorist organization, was the stronger. Additionally, in the face of sporadic suicide attacks, the world lost interest in the Palestinian issue, and the USA ceased to play the role of mediator. Even some Arab states prioritized the development of relations with technologically advanced Israel at the expense of the Palestinian issue. Israel no longer felt pressure and restrictions regarding settlements, and settlement activity accelerated. Public opinion polls showed that the majority of Israeli Jews supported maintaining and did not support a two-state solution. One can expect that the state of tension in Israeli–Palestinian relations will persist for a long time, and any process to stabilize Israeli–Palestinian relations will require the efforts of many actors.

Forces for stability in the region associated with economic cooperation and integration remain relatively nascent. However, before 7 October 2023, diplomatic efforts towards economic integration seemed to be gaining momentum, and the chances of success were greater than they had ever been since the mid-1990s. In 2022, Iran resumed diplomatic relations with Kuwait and the UAE and the following year with Saudi Arabia. Talks were also held to restore Iranian diplomatic relations with Egypt and Jordan. Several mechanisms were created, including the Negev Forum, the India–Israel–USA–UAE grouping (I2U2), and the Baghdad Summit. However, the Gaza War halted these processes, leaving open the question of when these processes will revive.

A significant feature is the return to grand strategies in the form of programmes called Visions in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. This resurgence in grand strategies, reminiscent of the 1960s when some countries promoted a grand strategy for the entire Middle East in the form of Arab socialism and pan-Arabism ideologies, signifies a shift in the geopolitical landscape. This time, grand strategies have a national character and focus on pragmatic goals, such as sustainable development and prosperity. Visions mean that the main actors in the system have set goals and will choose means for their achievement. In this respect, the solidarity project of pan-Arabism will further erode in favour of selfish national interests.

The events that occurred after 7 October 2023, require a different perspective on the role of external actors. In many US studies, the view was formulated that the USA was being displaced from the Middle East by China and Russia. The USA was indeed more preoccupied with the war in Ukraine and competition with China than with the Middle East. This shift in focus has significant implications for the balance of power in the region. Russia played a significant role in defeating ISIS and saving Bashar al-Assad in Syria, which may have created the impression that it was one of the poles in the Middle Eastern system. China engaged economically in the region and created a network of trade and investment connections. It is a fact that the influence of the USA in the Middle East is not as visible as in previous decades. Washington was unable to persuade Tel Aviv to accept a two-state solution to resolve the Palestinian issue and was unable to prevent attacks by the Houthis on ships in the Red Sea. US diplomacy was not as effective during the crisis after 7 October 2023, despite Secretary of State Blinken's frequent visits to the Middle East, as in the era of Henry Kissinger.

Nevertheless, the USA is capable of deploying significant military forces to the Middle East and influencing Israel and its allies, especially in the Gulf. Washington remains the only external power that has the potential to influence all the major actors in the regional system. The USA also has the potential to create a bipolar system with Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, it cannot be assumed that this situation will remain unchanged. The current rivalry among great powers for influence worldwide and

dynamic changes in the global balance of military and economic power will undoubtedly impact the situation in the Middle East region. It can also be assumed that global confrontation will be accompanied by further polarization of forces in the Middle East and the formation of a new proxy structure.

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Index

Middle East 2024: Decoding the Complexities of a Regional System presents a comprehensive analysis of the intricate geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and its most significant contemporary developments. The book's structure is notably effective, beginning with a chronological overview of key events, including the 9/11 attacks, the Arab Spring, and the recent Hamas attack on Israel. This chronological approach is commendable, as it provides a clear framework for understanding the timeline and context in which the following discussions unfold.

The book engages in theoretical discourse, with a particular focus on realism in the context of Middle Eastern international relations. By exploring key concepts, historical developments, and the contributions of prominent scholars in the field of realism, the authors offer valuable insights into the theoretical foundations that shape the region's politics. The research methodology, which applies realism to assess power in the Middle East, incorporates demographic trends and economic factors, enriching the analysis. This approach raises critical questions about shifting power dynamics and classifies Middle Eastern countries based on their resource endowments, offering readers a nuanced perspective on regional power structures.

Additionally, the book devotes considerable attention to the study of the Middle Eastern international system and its variables, tracing its historical evolution and highlighting the roles of both state and non-state actors in shaping the region's complex political landscape.

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