THE MIDDLE EAST AT THE CROSSROADS OF GREAT POWER COMPETITON AND REGIONAL AGENCY

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Abstract

The Middle East is undergoing a reconfiguration of its regional order driven by two simultaneous forces: strategic competition among great powers (the United States, China, and Russia), and proactive internal transformations led by regional actors. While external rivalries sustain patterns of confrontation and strategic ambiguity, domestic powers increasingly demonstrate the capacity to shape the rules, norms, and mechanisms of engagement through mediation, foreign policy diversification, and internal rebalancing. This article analyzes the interaction between these two vectors and argues that the contemporary Middle Eastern order is no longer governed by a model of absolute hegemony or classical balance of power. Instead, it is transitioning toward a "hybrid order" in which authority is flexibly distributed between external and internal actors. By employing the theoretical frameworks of regional order and post-hegemonic regionalism, the article contends that the process of "Middle Easternization of the Middle East", that is, the growing agency of regional powers is an irreversible trend despite ongoing conflicts of interest. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of order formation in a region long considered a geopolitical flashpoint of the international system.

Keywords: Middle East, great power competition, internal transformations.

1. Introduction

The Middle East has never been a static arena of power. Throughout the history of modern international relations, the region has consistently served as an open geopolitical theatre – where global rivalries intersect, clash, and shape regional dynamics (Fawcett, 2023). From the Cold War period to the post-1991 unipolar moment, the Middle East was largely defined through the lens of external powers: as a "strategic

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buffer zone," a "global energy axis," or a "volatile hotspot requiring containment" (Gause, 2010). These definitions often portrayed regional actors as passive agents, merely reacting within the parameters imposed by major powers (Barnett, 1998).

However, the regional order in the Middle East has become decidedly less unipolar in the first two decades of the 21st century. The gradual retreat of the United States from long-term security commitments (Miller, 2020), Russia's military expansion in Syria since 2015 (Trenin, 2016), and China's shift from strategic caution to active mediation, most notably in brokering the 2023 Iran–Saudi Arabia agreement (Fulton, 2023), have created a fragmented landscape of competition that lacks a dominant center of power. Meanwhile, key regional players such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Iran have not only expanded their strategic autonomy but also repositioned themselves within regional institutions and constructed a multipolar, multi-partner order (Valbjørn, 2023). Developments such as the Riyadh–Tehran rapprochement (2023), Syria's reintegration into the Arab League, and the UAE's "activist diplomacy" illustrate this internal momentum.

This gives rise to a core question: what type of order is currently operating in the Middle East? Is this merely an incoherent dispersion of power, or is a new structure gradually taking shape through the interaction between great power rivalry and regional agency? Addressing this question requires analytical approaches that go beyond classical balance-of-power logic and take seriously the endogenous dynamics long underexplored in Middle East political studies (Lynch, 2016). This article seeks to address that gap by integrating both exogenous and endogenous dimensions into a unified theoretical framework, thereby offering a more systematic interpretation of the region's evolving architecture.

2. Research methodology and theoretical framework

2.1. Research methodology

This article adopts a qualitative research design based on two main analytical techniques: (i) case-based analysis and (ii) political-diplomatic discourse analysis (George & Bennett, 2005; Fairclough, 1995). The first approach facilitates an examination of the strategic interventions and relationships of major powers – namely the United States, Russia, and China – in key countries such as Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. This allows for a comparative understanding of the scope and nature of each great power's involvement. The second technique aims to unpack how regional actors construct their own strategic narratives, define their interests, and articulate autonomous foreign policy strategies, particularly through the official statements of national leaders and diplomatic documents (Lynch, 2016). Sources used include secondary data from major strategic research institutes (Carnegie, Brookings, IISS, ECFR), international databases (UN, IMF, SIPRI), academic studies, and official

diplomatic communiqués (Fawcett, 2023; Gause, 2010). Rather than seeking to build a universally generalizable model, this approach focuses on identifying the interaction logic between two levels of analysis: external power rivalries and internal regional dynamics. It thereby provides a conceptual map of the evolving structure of the contemporary Middle East.

In terms of discourse analysis, the study does not approach discourse in a broad philosophical sense. Instead, it focuses on policy declarations and diplomatic orientations issued by the leadership of key regional states, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Iran between 2015 and the present. Speeches, official statements, and strategic planning documents are treated as empirical manifestations of how these actors self-identify, prioritize interests, and respond to changing structural conditions. The aim is not to interpret semantic nuance per se, but to uncover the underlying logic of action embedded in particular expressions – namely, how a given statement opens up (or restricts) strategic possibilities for a regional actor within the broader geopolitical game.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The analytical foundation of this article draws upon three interrelated and complementary strands of theory.

Firstly, neorealism offers a foundational lens for examining power competition among great powers in an anarchic international environment. According to this perspective, great powers act to maximize their relative power (Mearsheimer, 2001), and strategic regions like the Middle East become "open arenas" for the projection of both hard and soft power. However, this framework proves limited in explaining contexts where power is increasingly diffuse and no single hegemon dominates (Waltz, 1979).

Secondly, regional order theory, as developed by Lake and Morgan (1997), foregrounds the growing agency of regional actors in shaping order. Rather than merely being passive recipients of external imposition, regional states can establish their own "rules of the game" through institutions, alliances, and mediation efforts. This theoretical approach is particularly apt for analyzing recent trends in détente, multilateralism, and multi-vector strategies across the Middle East (Fawcett, 2023).

Thirdly, the *post-hegemonic* and *multiplex world* frameworks proposed by Amitav Acharya (2018) enable a move beyond Western-centric paradigms by emphasizing the non-linear and localized nature of global order. Within this framework, the Middle East is no longer merely an object of external power projection but is emerging as a proactive node in the reconfiguration of global power structures (Acharya, 2018; Buzan, 2019).

The purpose of integrating these three frameworks is not to propose a single unified theory, but to ensure analytical openness and conceptual depth – ranging from

great power behavior to regional autonomy and the uneven evolution of global power configurations.

In this article, the term "hybrid order" is not used as a rhetorical device or vague descriptor. Rather, it refers to an emergent form of regional structure in which power is no longer concentrated in a single center, yet not fully dispersed either. In other words, regional order is not being entirely dismantled to be rebuilt from scratch, but is instead being re-stitched, adapted, and managed through soft compromises and overlapping spheres of influence between external and internal actors. This structure may lack the clarity of a classical balance-of-power system, but it is arguably more resilient, as all parties operate within a flexible space while simultaneously bound by intangible constraints. Hence, the notion of "hybrid order" should be understood as an unfolding condition –one that may defy rigid categorization yet quietly reshapes how the Middle East functions in today's fragmented world (Acharya, 2018; Boas & Rothe, 2016).

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. The Middle East and strategic rivalries among great powers

The continued presence of great powers in the Middle East is not merely a reflection of short-term interests, but rather a consistent strategic aim: to control the structural variables that shape regional security and influence the global balance of power. In a system lacking centralized coordination, control over regional nodes – energy corridors, maritime routes, and institutional security frameworks – becomes the principal mechanism by which major powers defend core interests and constrain the influence of rival actors (Lake & Morgan, 1997; Mearsheimer, 2001). Within this logic, the Middle East is not an end in itself but a strategic instrument for recalibrating the global distribution of power (Barzegar, 2015).

The United States, as a former architect of the post–Cold War security structure in the region, has gradually shifted from direct control to delegated coordination. Its drawdown of traditional military deployments has not meant a withdrawal of influence but rather the evolution of a flexible alliance system, with Gulf states and Israel increasingly acting as key executors. This reflects a model of power management that disperses costs while retaining strategic deterrence capabilities through technology, intelligence, and institutional partnerships – rather than through large-scale military footprints (Gause, 2022). This strategy allows the U.S. to reduce binding commitments while maintaining strategic leverage (Blarel & Becker, 2022).

In contrast, Russia approaches the region without institutional advantages in the global order but with sufficient military capacity to intervene at key fault lines of the regional system. Its ongoing presence in Syria, the establishment of a naval base in Tartus, and expanding defense ties with Arab states are not ad hoc moves but part of a broader "structural anchoring" strategy – embedding itself in critical strategic spaces to

enhance bargaining power in other global arenas (Mearsheimer, 2001). Unlike the U.S., Russia does not seek to design a comprehensive regional order but maintains influence by entrenching itself in pivotal security junctures.

Meanwhile, China pursues a soft penetration approach. It does not seek to displace existing orders with an imposed alternative but instead attempts to shape them in ways compatible with its own power configuration. Through the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative, long-term energy cooperation with Gulf states, and its mediating role in the 2023 Iran–Saudi Arabia accord, China competes not through physical presence but by shaping cooperative frameworks (Zweiri, 2023). Without forging binding alliances, Beijing dilutes the exclusivity of influence held by other powers by offering a stable, low-conditionality, and development-oriented platform (Fulton, 2023).

The comparison of these strategies reveals that the Middle East is currently an arena of three distinct models of power competition: the U.S. model of delegated alliance coordination, Russia's strategic-point intervention model, and China's soft institutional design model. None of these has the capacity to dominate the entire region, and no single power possesses a decisive edge across all three dimensions – security, institutions, and economics. As a result, a multidimensional structure of competition has emerged in which great powers not only confront one another but are also compelled to adjust their behavior in response to increasingly assertive regional actors – actors that now possess the ability to bargain strategically, choose partners, and reposition themselves within specific cooperative frameworks (Acharya, 2018).

3.2. Internal dynamics and regional agency in the Middle East

While the presence of external powers remains a defining element of the Middle Eastern security architecture, a more significant – and steadily growing – trend over the past decade is the shift of regional actors from a reactive posture to one of active agency. This is not merely the outcome of isolated policy adjustments but reflects a systemic transformation whereby regional states increasingly act as order-makers rather than passive responders to external pressures (Lake & Morgan, 1997). From the lens of regional order theory, long-term stability in the Middle East will not result from external imposition but from the ways in which regional states construct and uphold their own relationships, institutions, and normative frameworks.

This trend now manifests in three interrelated dimensions: (i) the rise of regional powers, (ii) diversification of strategic partnerships, and (iii) the construction of soft order through mediation and institutionalization.

The first, the ascent of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Iran has extended beyond national boundaries to actively shape regional trajectories. These states have not only enhanced their financial and military capacities but have also invested significantly in shaping public discourse through international media platforms

(e.g., *Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiya*), policy forums (e.g., Doha Forum, Abu Dhabi Dialogue), and diplomatic initiatives. No longer bound by traditional client–patron relationships posited by neorealist theory, many Middle Eastern states now operate as strategic negotiators, flexibly choosing partners and shaping engagement rules according to their interests.

The second, multi-vector diplomacy, across security, economic, and technological domains has become a central strategic orientation. Saudi Arabia today maintains a strategic alliance with the U.S., holds dialogue partnership status with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and pursues BRICS membership (Fulton, 2023). The UAE is among the few states to have signed free trade agreements with both the EU and China, while also forging a technology–energy alliance with Israel under the Abraham Accords (Valbjørn, 2023). Qatar, while aligned with the U.S. and NATO, has also served as a credible mediator in negotiations on Afghanistan, Palestine, and most recently Gaza. These policies exemplify multi-alignment pragmatism, where "strategic autonomy" functions as a proactive diplomatic logic rather than a defensive slogan.

The third, regional states are increasingly capable of constructing soft order through mediation and institution-building. The mediating roles of Oman and Qatar, and the Iran–Saudi Arabia reconciliation brokered by China but initially negotiated in Baghdad and Muscat are emblematic (Zweiri 2023). Syria's readmission to the Arab League in 2023 resulted not from external pressure but from an emerging intra-Arab consensus to "Arabize the solution" to the Syrian conflict (Valbjørn, 2023). Likewise, the normalization of Turkey–Egypt relations and the Iran–UAE détente signal a shift toward intra-regional reconciliation, a logic previously overshadowed by great power imperatives.

Viewed through Acharya's post-hegemonic framework (2018), these dynamics suggest that the Middle East is moving away from a dependent order toward a hybrid regional configuration, where power is not monopolized by a single actor but is continuously negotiated across internal and external stakeholders. Regional states are no longer outsourcing the design of regional order; they are re-localizing globalization in ways that align with domestic priorities and regional contexts.

3.3. Interaction and regional power restructuring

The Middle East today no longer functions as a space subjected to linear power imposition from external forces. The continued presence of great powers, each pursuing different forms of engagement ranging from hard security control to institutional influence and soft mediation has not produced a coherent regional order. Instead, it has driven the region into a state of organized indeterminacy. This uncertainty is not the product of chaos but the result of a gradual power restructuring process marked by multi-layered and decentralized dynamics, in which influence is no longer tied strictly to

geostrategic positioning but to the ability to shape the rules of engagement. In this context, power is less about domination and more about the capacity to mobilize multilateral cooperation (Acharya, 2018).

Within the gaps left by the unfinished strategic projects of great powers, regional actors have begun to assert their agency not by dismantling the existing framework but by reshaping its internal logic. They are not creating an entirely new order but rendering the old one unsustainable without their participation. In other words, regional states are no longer merely enforcers of order – they are increasingly participating in its design. For instance, the UAE's ability to simultaneously expand technological cooperation with Israel, engage with China through multilateral initiatives, and maintain security commitments with the U.S. is not simply pragmatic balancing but a form of structural bargaining (Valbjørn, 2023). Flexibility is no longer the privilege of superpowers – it has become a strategic survival skill for regional middle powers.

Such developments defy binary models of power. There is no absolute hegemon, nor a single hub of resistance. Regional reconciliation efforts, selective institutional recovery (such as Syria's reintegration into the Arab League), and subtle rebalancing acts (e.g., Iran reopening dialogue with the UAE, Turkey recalibrating its policy toward Egypt) are not driven by direct confrontational pressure but by the imperative to maintain institutional compatibility within the region (Blarel & Becker, 2022). Power in this context is not imposed but negotiated and conditioned – accepted under terms that allow actors to remain within the system without being ideologically assimilated.

This evolving interaction between great power competition and rising regional bargaining capacity is transforming the architecture of power in the Middle East. There is no clear stratification, but neither is the region disorderly. What is emerging closely resembles a hybrid order, where rules are not issued by a single architect but result from continuous negotiation, soft institutional calibration, and the presence of "gray zones" of power that defy quantification (Lake & Morgan, 1997). In this framework, no actor holds decisive control, but all possess the potential to shape outcomes. This is how regional power is being restructured, not through absolute dominance but through asymmetric capacities to influence the rule-making process.

3.4. Identifying the emerging order

There has been no formal declaration marking the birth of a new order in the Middle East. Yet, transformation is quietly unfolding – gradually, unevenly reflected in the evolving actions, reactions, and strategic coordination of the region's actors. Whereas past regional orders were largely imposed by external powers and shaped by hard alliances, security patronage, and institutional Westernization, today's Middle East is shifting toward a fluid operational mode, where rules are forged through ongoing strategic practice (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

In this emergent configuration, the role of global powers is not erased but is no longer definitive. Every act of engagement, whether aid, mediation, or military deployment –now competes with the increasingly potent bargaining capacity of local actors. These states are leveraging neutrality as a soft security tool, resisting alignment with any single axis of power, and asserting agency through their ability to select partners consistent with domestic development priorities (Lynch, 2016).

The resulting power structure is neither vertically hierarchical (hegemon–dependent) nor horizontally fixed (alliance–counterbalance) but distributed through an interwoven network of soft power hubs. Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Tehran, Ankara, and Doha are not competing to establish a new hegemony but to sustain a state of soft equilibrium, in which no single model dominates, yet all must adjust to the region's shifting internal dynamics. The emerging order is thus neither static nor anarchic. It exists in a condition of tension – flexible enough to absorb global volatility, yet stable enough to avoid systemic collapse (Valbjørn, 2023).

This constitutes a textbook case of a post-structural regional order, not one designed by a central authority, but formed through cumulative interaction under the pressures of international complexity. Simultaneously, it is also a transregional order, given its increasing entanglement with extra-regional powers such as China, India, and the EU, as well as global institutions like BRICS and the SCO. Finally, it is best described as a negotiated order, a dynamic system in which diplomacy, security, and institutional norms are continuously reshaped by the strategic capacities of actors at any given moment (Acharya, 2018).

What most clearly characterizes this emerging structure is the absence of a singular power center. The Middle East no longer requires a hegemon to function; what it needs is a minimum level of compatibility among stakeholders to prevent systemic breakdown. The region's defining feature today is not central leadership but the simultaneous participation of multiple actors with divergent yet overlapping agendas. This condition of "non-totality", where no one leads but everyone participates, is the hallmark of the contemporary Middle Eastern order (Fawcett, 2023).

4. Conclusion

This article has argued that the Middle East is undergoing a fundamental reconfiguration in which external great-power rivalry and internal regional agency interact to generate a hybrid regional order. The findings demonstrate that the decline of unipolar dominance has not resulted in disorder, but in the gradual emergence of a negotiated, multilayered structure. Within this evolving framework, power is distributed through overlapping spheres of influence that combine external leverage with localized initiative.

Regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Iran, and Turkey have transitioned from being objects of global strategy to active architects of their own environment. Their diplomacy, economic diversification, and mediation efforts have transformed the Middle East from a reactive security arena into a proactive diplomatic space. Great powers remain influential, yet their ability to dictate outcomes is increasingly constrained by regional autonomy and strategic flexibility.

By integrating neorealist, regional order, and post-hegemonic perspectives, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how authority in the Middle East is re-localized rather than redistributed. The region's contemporary order is not defined by hegemony or balance, but by co-evolution, a fluid process in which internal and external actors continuously reshape the rules of engagement. The implications extend beyond the Middle East, suggesting that hybrid regionalism may become a defining feature of the twenty-first-century international system.

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