

Analyzing Middle Eastern Geopolitics from the Arab Spring to the Israel-Hamas War

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Since the Arab Spring of 2011, the Middle East has experienced profound geopolitical, social, and economic transformations that continue to shape the region. The mass uprisings challenged authoritarian regimes, exposed deep-rooted grievances, and led to a realignment of regional power dynamics. The ousting of long-standing rulers, the rise of political Islam, civil wars in countries like Syria, Libya, and Yemen, and external interventions by global powers redefined the region's political landscape. However, despite the initial hope for greater democracy and regional cooperation, the aftermath of the Arab uprisings has been marked by fragmentation, instability, and a reassertion of authoritarianism in many states. Against this backdrop, the emergence of "liquid alliances" coalitions has become a dominant feature of the Middle Eastern geopolitical order. These ad hoc alliances, often based on short-term security concerns rather than shared values, have supplanted formal regional organizations like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which have struggled to foster meaningful cooperation. The ongoing civil wars, sectarian conflicts, and the retraction of U.S. engagement have further compounded the region's challenges, leaving states to navigate a complex and often volatile power structure. In 2023, the Middle East faced another significant shock with the eruption of the Israel-Hamas war, illustrating how the region's shifting alliances, identity politics, and unresolved tensions continue to drive conflict. This paper examines the changes in the Middle East from the Arab Spring to the Israel-Hamas war, analyzing how regional cooperation, power dynamics, and political identities have evolved over the past decade. By applying realist, constructivist, and neo-Gramscian theoretical frameworks, the study comprehensively explains how internal and external pressures have reshaped the region's political landscape and what this means for its future stability. The Middle East's ongoing struggles with regionalism and cooperation reflect broader challenges of state legitimacy, security, and economic governance. Through this analysis, the paper aims to shed light on the persistent obstacles to peace and cooperation in the region and explore the factors contributing to its enduring instability.

Theoretical Approach

The decade following the Arab Spring in 2011, leading to the Israel-Hamas war, which started on October 7, 2023, has witnessed significant shifts in the Middle East's political landscape. A theoretical framework integrating realism, constructivism, and neo-Gramscian approaches offers valuable insights into the region's evolving dynamics. Each of these theories explains the power realignments, the role of non-

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state actors, and the impact of shifting ideologies and alliances in different but interconnected ways.

Realist Theory provides a crucial lens for understanding how states in the Middle East have recalibrated their foreign and domestic policies in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Realists argue that the international system is inherently anarchic, and states prioritize their survival by accumulating power and balancing threats (Waltz, 1979). The collapse of state authority in countries like Syria, Libya, and Yemen, coupled with the diminishing role of the U.S. as a hegemonic power, led to a reconfiguration of power dynamics in the region.

In the post-Arab Spring period, regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey have engaged in *realpolitik*, shifting alliances based on strategic interests rather than ideological commitments. The GCC's role in suppressing uprisings in Bahrain and supporting counter-revolutionary forces in Egypt reflects traditional realist concerns about regime security and the containment of threats (Gause, 2014). The realist theory also explains why states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE viewed the rise of political Islam, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, as an existential threat. This led them to support counter-revolutionary forces in Egypt and Libya, while Iran, following realist logic, expanded its influence through proxy wars in Syria and Yemen.

“Liquid alliances” are discussed in the context of the post-Arab Spring and Israel-Hamas conflict and align with the realist understanding of power balancing. As traditional security arrangements weakened, such as the U.S. security umbrella, states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE pursued ad hoc coalitions and strategic partnerships with external powers like Russia and China to secure their interests (Zhang, 2023). The realist approach is thus critical in explaining the regional power shifts and how alliances are formed not out of ideological affinity but for survival and power consolidation.

Constructivist Theory emphasizes the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping international relations. It provides an essential framework for understanding how ideological shifts and transnational identities, such as pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, and political Islam, influenced regional politics after the Arab Spring and the Israel-Hamas conflict. Constructivists argue that international politics is not only driven by material interests but also by the shared ideas and social constructs that define state and non-state actors' identities and interests (Wendt, 1999).

The decline of pan-Arabism as a unifying ideology, especially after the Arab Spring, can be understood through constructivist theory. Despite its rhetorical appeal, pan-Arabism failed to sustain itself as a mobilizing force due to the competing national interests of Arab states and the rise of other transnational identities, such as political Islam and sectarianism (Barnett & Solingen, 2007). After the uprisings, political Islam, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and later ISIS, emerged as an alternative ideological movement. For example, Turkey and Qatar's support for the Brotherhood can be seen as an attempt to reshape the regional order based on a new Islamist identity (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012).

In the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict, constructivism sheds light on how Hamas, a non-state actor, mobilizes Palestinian identity and the broader pan-Islamic narrative to legitimize its actions against Israel. Iran's role as a Shia state backing

Sunni groups like Hamas further complicates the ideological landscape, reflecting how actors may use identity politics strategically to pursue broader geopolitical goals.

A neo-Gramscian perspective offers another dimension to understanding the transformations in the Middle East, particularly regarding hegemonic power, the role of global capitalism, and how ideologies are constructed to maintain dominance. Neo-Gramscian theorists argue that international relations are shaped by the interplay of material power, ideas, and institutions, which work together to sustain the dominance of certain social groups or states over others.

In the Middle East, the U.S.'s hegemonic role as the global leader and primary security provider has eroded, particularly after the Arab Spring. The retreat of U.S. influence and the rise of new actors such as Russia and China signal a shift in global power relations. As U.S. hegemony declined, regional powers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE sought to secure their hegemonic positions by aligning with global capitalist interests, promoting economic reforms, and forging new alliances (Harris, 2022).

From a Neo-Gramscian perspective, the rise of neoliberal economic models and the integration of Middle Eastern economies into the global capitalist system has contributed to the reconfiguration of power structures. For instance, the Abraham Accords - Israel's normalization agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, and other Arab states - can be seen as part of a broader hegemonic strategy that integrates the region into global capitalist networks, prioritizing economic ties and security cooperation over traditional ideological solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

The persistence of non-state actors like Hamas reflects a Neo-Gramscian understanding of counter-hegemonic forces. Hamas represents resistance to both Israeli occupation and the broader hegemonic order that includes Arab states normalizing relations with Israel. This mirrors Gramsci's notion of the war of position, where Hamas contests the prevailing hegemony through counter-narratives and resistance strategies.

Arab Uprisings and the Limits of Regional Cooperation

The 2011 Arab uprisings exposed the structural weaknesses of many Arab states and revealed the limits of regional cooperation mechanisms like the Arab League and the GCC. The regimes have historically relied on confrontational foreign policies and symbolic commitments to pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism to project power and bolster domestic legitimacy. As Fawcett (2020) notes, these ideologies provided rhetorical tools that regimes could use to legitimize their authority, but in practice, they rarely translated into genuine cooperation. According to Barnett and Solingen (2007), Arab states have long embraced the rhetoric of Arab unity while simultaneously fearing its actual implementation, as empowering regional organizations could undermine regime sovereignty and expose internal vulnerabilities.

The uprisings highlighted these limitations. The revolts, which overthrew longstanding authoritarian rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, revealed the deep discontent beneath the surface. Regimes focused on maintaining control and

suppressing dissent, prioritizing survival over meaningful collaboration. Valbjørn and Bank (2012) argue that invoking Arab solidarity continues as a political tool. However, the lack of domestic legitimacy has historically limited the success of regionalism in the Middle East.

The political landscape of the Middle East post-2011 became more fragmented as regimes threatened by the protests sought to secure their positions through interest-based, short-term alliances rather than committing to formalized regional structures. These alliances, termed "liquid alliances," represent informal, flexible coalitions that emerge to address immediate security concerns, often bypassing traditional regional organizations. For example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE formed a coalition to counter the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, which they viewed as a destabilizing force (Lynch, 2016). At the same time, Turkey and Qatar backed Islamist movements in an attempt to expand their regional influence. This divergence of interests, driven by different ideological and geopolitical goals, made unified regional action challenging. Additionally, the Syrian civil war is another example of the failure of formal regional cooperation. As states backed rival factions pursuing their agendas, the conflict became a battleground for competing powers. Gause (2014) emphasizes that these informal alliances are shaped by the immediate geopolitical context and shifts in the broader international order, particularly the perceived decline in U.S. engagement in the region.

The role of external actors, especially the United States, has historically shaped the Middle East's regional system (Feldman, 2021). The perceived U.S. withdrawal from the region following the Arab uprisings contributed to heightened insecurity among Arab states, particularly in the Gulf. According to Gause (2014), Arab regimes that traditionally relied on U.S. security guarantees, such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, felt increasingly vulnerable, prompting them to form more transient alliances in response to evolving threats. These international dynamics, coupled with the region's ongoing conflicts—such as the wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen—further contributed to the fragmentation of the Middle East. As Iran's influence grew in these conflicts, many Arab states saw this as a direct threat to their security, exacerbating regional tensions and complicating efforts at formal cooperation (Smyth, 2015).

The Arab League and the GCC were largely ineffective in addressing the crises that followed the uprisings. While the Arab League initially endorsed international intervention in Libya and imposed sanctions on Syria, these efforts were limited in scope and impact. The fear of empowering regional organizations, which might undermine regime sovereignty, has long prevented these bodies from playing meaningful roles in regional governance. The GCC, often cited as the most effective regional organization in the Middle East, also faced challenges. Despite its intervention in Bahrain and its mediation in Yemen, efforts to transform the GCC into a more robust "Gulf Union" failed due to divergent threat perceptions among its members (Ulrichsen, 2017). The lack of consensus and the overriding focus on regime survival prevented the GCC from developing into a more cohesive and effective regional body.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 accelerated the decline of formal regional cooperation in the Middle East and led to the rise of "liquid alliances" as the dominant form of

power balancing. These informal, interest-based coalitions reflect the region's ongoing fragmentation and states' priority on immediate survival rather than long-term collaboration. As long as regimes remain insecure and focused on preserving their authority, liquid alliances will continue to dominate the region's geopolitical landscape. While these alliances allow for flexible, short-term responses to crises, they lack the stability and coherence necessary to promote sustained regional cooperation. The persistence of liquid alliances underscores the failure of traditional notions of Arab unity and the limits of regional organizations in addressing the challenges of a post-Arab Spring Middle East.

Comparing the Arab Uprisings to the Israel-Hamas Conflict

The dynamics of the Arab Uprising and the Israel-Hamas conflict share some structural similarities, particularly regarding the role of legitimacy, power, and regional alliances. However, they also differ significantly due to the nature of the actors involved, the geopolitical stakes, and the international implications.

The Arab Uprisings were primarily driven by domestic discontent with authoritarian regimes across the Arab world. These protests revealed the fragility of regimes that had relied on a combination of repression and pan-Arabic rhetoric to maintain power. These regimes employed liquid alliances to ensure survival (Kamrava, 2016). Domestic legitimacy was already fragile, and the uprisings exposed the cracks within these states' political structures, making survival the top priority for many regimes (Fawcett, 2020).

In contrast, the Israel-Hamas conflict is primarily centered around nationalistic and ideological legitimacy, with Hamas portraying itself as a defender of Palestinian rights and resistance to Israeli occupation. Hamas, as a non-state actor with a political and military wing, seeks to legitimize its rule over Gaza through a resistance narrative (Kaye, 2023). Israel, on the other hand, asserts its legitimacy through its national security concerns and its right to defend itself from rocket attacks and other forms of violence by Hamas from Gaza and Hezbollah from Lebanon (Khatib, 2023). As explained by Inbar & Fainberg (2022), while Arab regimes were challenged internally during the uprisings, the Israel-Hamas conflict represents an ongoing struggle over territorial legitimacy and control between two competing entities.

The uprisings led to the creation of short-term, flexible alliances as regimes faced new challenges to their rule. For instance, Saudi Arabia and the UAE formed coalitions to counter the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, while Turkey and Qatar supported Islamist movements in the region. Based on immediate interests, these liquid alliances reflected the region's fragmentation following the uprisings (Gause, 2014).

The Israel-Hamas conflict also involves regional alliances, but these alliances are more deeply rooted in the region's long-standing geopolitical rivalries. Hamas is supported by regional actors like Iran, which uses the group as a proxy to exert influence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast, Israel receives strong support from Western nations, particularly the United States (Hanieh, 2023). Unlike the fluid alliances seen during the Arab Uprisings, the alliances in the Israel-Hamas

conflict are more entrenched and represent broader regional and international ideological divides, particularly between Iran and the Gulf states, on the one hand, and Israel and its Western allies, on the other.

In the aftermath of the Arab uprising, regional organizations like the Arab League and the GCC attempted to mediate and intervene in crises like Libya and Yemen, but their effectiveness was limited. These organizations remained weak as regimes hesitated to empower any regional body that could threaten their sovereignty (Bromley, 2018). This hesitance reflects the broader failure of formal regional cooperation in the Middle East.

The Israel-Hamas conflict, by contrast, draws significant attention from international organizations such as the United Nations, which has been involved in various ceasefire and peace negotiation efforts. Additionally, external actors like the U.S., European countries, and regional powers such as Egypt and Qatar have played critical roles in mediating between Israel and Hamas (Efron, 2023). Unlike the liquid alliances that characterized the post-2011 Middle East, the internationalization of the Israel-Hamas conflict brings a higher level of involvement from powerful external states and institutions, making regional cooperation less central than broader global diplomacy (Darwich, 2021).

A perceived withdrawal of U.S. influence in the region marked the international context of the Arab Uprising. This perceived vacuum contributed to regional instability, as regimes could no longer rely on American support to the same extent as before. The shifting international order encouraged Gulf monarchies to take more active roles in shaping regional outcomes, particularly by supporting counter-revolutionary forces (Ulrichsen, 2020).

In contrast, the Israel-Hamas conflict remains closely tied to international geopolitics. U.S. support for Israel is a cornerstone of the regional security framework, and any military escalation between Israel and Hamas often results in diplomatic interventions from both Western and regional actors. Iran's role in supporting Hamas adds another layer of international complexity, as it positions itself as a challenger to U.S. influence in the region through its backing of proxy groups like Hamas and Hezbollah (Phillips, 2020).

The Arab Uprising and the Israel-Hamas conflict both highlight the limits of regional cooperation in the Middle East, but they do so in different ways. The Arab Uprising led to fragmentation within states and the rise of short-term liquid alliances based on regime survival and immediate interests (Lynch, 2016). Meanwhile, the Israel-Hamas conflict reflects the broader polarization of the region, with entrenched alliances and ideological divides shaping the geopolitical landscape. While both situations reveal the complexity of power dynamics and legitimacy in the Middle East, the uprisings underscore the failure of regionalism. In contrast, the Israel-Hamas conflict demonstrates the persistence of long-standing regional and international rivalries.

Fragmentation of States and the Rise of Non-State Actors

The decade following the Arab Spring in 2011 and leading up to the Israel-Hamas conflict had profound shifts in the Middle East's political landscape (Mounir, 2020). These changes can be understood through power realignments, regional fragmentation, the rise of non-state actors, and evolving geopolitical alliances. The region has seen state actors recalibrate their foreign policies in response to domestic instability while international actors have adjusted their influence and involvement.

The Arab Spring exposed the fragility of numerous Arab regimes, with popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria destabilizing governments and, in some cases, leading to their collapse. The uprisings laid bare deep-seated grievances such as economic inequality, unemployment, and the lack of political freedoms. The most striking outcome was the disintegration of state institutions in countries like Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where civil wars have ravaged the political landscape (Lynch, 2023).

This fragmentation empowered non-state actors like the Houthis in Yemen, ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and various militias in Libya. These actors filled the power vacuum left by the collapse of state authority, further complicating efforts at regional cooperation (Del Sarto, 2017). In contrast, authoritarian regimes in countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia reinforced their domestic control by suppressing opposition, emphasizing the varied responses to the uprisings (Brown, 2020).

The increasing role of non-state actors in the region is also evident in the Israel-Hamas conflict. Hamas, as a political and militant organization, represents the continuation of this trend. Iran, one of Hamas' prominent supporters, has used non-state actors across the region, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and various Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria, as tools for projecting its influence (Hertog, 2019). The rise of these non-state actors complicates regional security dynamics and poses challenges to traditional state-centric diplomacy and conflict resolution.

The post-2011 Middle East saw traditional alliances crumble as states pursued fluid and ad hoc coalitions, often based on immediate interests rather than ideological solidarity. This phenomenon has been described as "liquid alliances" in which states shift partners based on short-term geopolitical goals rather than long-term commitments (Fawcett, 2020). For instance, Turkey and Qatar initially backed Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements in Egypt and elsewhere, seeing these Islamist parties as vehicles for expanding their influence. In contrast, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, fearing the rise of political Islam, backed counter-revolutionary forces and sought to preserve the status quo. This led to intense rivalries, particularly between Turkey and the UAE, and contributed to the fracturing of regional cooperation mechanisms such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Gause, 2014).

The Israel-Hamas war reflects a continuation of this pattern of shifting alliances, particularly with the realignment of Gulf states. The Abraham Accords, signed between Israel and several Arab states (including the UAE and Bahrain) in 2020, signaled a significant shift in regional politics (Miller & Miller, 2023). These accords indicate a shift away from traditional Arab solidarity on the Palestinian issue, as some Arab states now prioritize their geopolitical and economic interests over the Palestinian cause (Fathollah-Nejad, 2021). However, the Israel-Hamas war has

created tensions within this new framework, as the conflict has reignited public opinion across the Arab world in favor of Palestinian rights, potentially straining these new alliances.

One of the most significant developments between the Arab Spring and the Israel-Hamas conflict has been the perceived retreat of the United States from its dominant role in the region. The Obama administration's cautious approach during the Arab Spring, its "pivot to Asia," and its nuclear deal with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) were seen by many traditional U.S. allies as a sign of American disengagement from the Middle East (Ulrichsen, 2020). This perceived vacuum allowed regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran, to assert themselves more aggressively, both politically and militarily.

As the U.S. recalibrated its presence in the Middle East, Russia expanded its influence, most notably through its military intervention in Syria in 2015 to support the Assad regime. Russia's presence in Syria has solidified its position as a key power broker in the region. Similarly, Iran has continued to extend its influence through its network of non-state actors and proxy groups, as seen in its support for Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and militias in Iraq and Syria (Smyth, 2015).

The Israel-Hamas conflict, with Iran's continued backing of Hamas, underscores Iran's strategy of using asymmetric warfare and non-state actors to challenge Israeli and U.S. influence in the region. Meanwhile, U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia have sought to balance their reliance on U.S. security guarantees with attempts to diversify their geopolitical partnerships, as evidenced by Saudi-Iran rapprochement talks facilitated by China in early 2023 (Lavi, 2023).

The Arab Spring revealed the limitations of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism as unifying ideologies. While the rhetoric of Arab solidarity persisted, especially during moments of regional crisis, in practice, regional cooperation remained weak. The uprisings and subsequent conflicts exposed the deep divisions within the Arab world, with countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar often working at cross-purposes (Barnett & Solingen, 2007). The failure of the Arab League and the GCC to effectively address the crises in Libya, Syria, and Yemen further highlighted the inefficacy of regional organizations in promoting collective security or political cooperation (Fawcett, 2020).

The erosion of pan-Arabism also impacted the Palestinian cause. While the Israel-Hamas conflict periodically rekindles pan-Arab sentiments, the cause of Palestinian statehood has increasingly taken a backseat in regional politics, especially following the Abraham Accords. Countries like the UAE have pursued normalization with Israel, prioritizing economic and security ties over solidarity with the Palestinians (Riedel, 2021). However, the conflict has revived public and political attention to the issue, raising questions about the sustainability of the accords in the face of renewed violence between Israel and Hamas (Bahgat, 2022).

Conclusion

The Middle East has undergone significant transformations between the Arab Spring of 2011 and the Israel-Hamas war that started in 2023, shaped by a complex interplay of power, identity, and economic forces. Realist, constructivist, and neo-Gramscian theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of these shifts.

From a realist perspective, state survival and security concerns have driven regional actors to forge fluid and short-term alliances, focusing on immediate threats rather than long-term cooperation. The decline of U.S. engagement in the region and the rise of informal coalitions, such as those seen in Yemen and Syria and the normalization agreements with Israel, illustrates how pragmatism has replaced ideology in foreign policy decision-making.

Constructivism reveals how the Arab Spring fractured longstanding identity narratives, such as pan-Arabism and Islamism, leading to new ideological alignments and sectarian divides. The rise of political Islam, the persistence of nationalist movements, and the sectarian schism between Sunni and Shia powers have profoundly impacted the region's political landscape. The Israel-Hamas war underscores how non-state actors continue to mobilize identity and ideological narratives despite shifting state alliances.

From a neo-Gramscian perspective, the integration of Middle Eastern states into the global capitalist system has been marked by neoliberal reforms and hegemonic projects, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. While these projects aim to secure long-term regime legitimacy, they have also spurred counter-hegemonic movements that challenge the region's political and economic order. The persistence of resistance movements like Hamas, alongside growing public discontent with neoliberal policies, reveals the deep tensions between ruling elites and marginalized populations.

The changes from 2011 reflect a fragmented regional order, where shifting alliances, evolving identities, and economic transformations have reshaped power dynamics. The region remains marked by instability, with traditional regional frameworks proving inadequate in addressing the profound challenges facing Arab states. Looking ahead, the persistence of fluid alliances and the rise of new ideological forces suggest that the Middle East will continue grappling with competing forces of cooperation and conflict, driven by domestic and international pressures.

The Israel-Hamas war can also be analyzed through a constructivist lens. Hamas frames its resistance not only as a national liberation struggle but as a pan-Islamic cause, emphasizing identity and religious solidarity. This draws attention to how non-state actors mobilize ideational resources to garner support, even as some Arab regimes, following normalization with Israel—prioritize pragmatic security concerns over traditional narratives of Arab unity and Palestinian liberation.

Neo-Gramscian theory adds a layer of understanding to the geopolitical and economic transformations of the Middle East between 2011 and 2024 by focusing on hegemony and counter-hegemonic forces. Following the Arab Spring, the neoliberal economic reforms initiated by states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, such as Vision 2030, sought to restructure their economies to ensure long-term survival

and integration into the global capitalist system. This process is part of the broader global hegemonic project driven by neoliberal capitalism, in which regional elites attempt to secure economic stability and legitimacy amid declining oil revenues and rising youth unemployment.

However, counter-hegemonic forces such as Hamas and Iran-backed militias challenge this status quo, resisting both global capitalism and regional authoritarianism. The persistence of these movements, which draw upon anti-Western and anti-Israel narratives, reflects their opposition to the regional hegemonic order that has emerged post-2011. For instance, while the Abraham Accords represented a move towards economic integration and security cooperation with Israel, they also deepened popular discontent in the region, creating fertile ground for counter-hegemonic movements to gain support by appealing to Islamic and nationalist ideologies.

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