

Charting Uprisings and Alliances in the Middle East: 2011-2024

*By Yaron Katz**

This paper investigates the political and strategic transformations that have reshaped the Middle East from the 2011 Arab uprisings through the Israel– Hamas War. It argues that the region's shifting landscape is marked by the emergence of "fluid alliances" that prioritize immediate strategic interests over long-term partnerships. These are informal, interest-based partnerships formed in response to acute security and political pressures. These alliances reflect a broader recalibration of regional order, shaped by diminished U.S. engagement, the fragmentation of traditional power blocs, and the enduring legacies of domestic unrest. Employing a multi-theoretical framework that draws on realism, constructivism, and neo-Gramscianism, the paper systematically analyzes how these paradigms illuminate different dimensions of alliance formation, power projection, and identity politics in the post-uprising period. It also critiques the inefficacy of longstanding regional organizations in sustaining cooperation, highlighting how ad hoc coalitions and bilateral arrangements have supplanted formal mechanisms. Through an examination of political discourse and regional behavior, the study reveals the complex interplay of ideational forces that have undermined state legitimacy, enabled authoritarian resilience, and impeded efforts toward regional integration. The findings emphasize the volatility and structural fragmentation that continue to define Middle Eastern geopolitics more than a decade after the uprisings

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Introduction

This study investigates the profound geopolitical, social, and economic transformations that have occurred in the Middle East from the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011 through the ongoing Israel– Hamas War. These years have marked a turbulent era of political reordering, ideological contestation, and shifting regional alignments. The initial mass protests that erupted across Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen in 2011 signaled a widespread challenge to entrenched authoritarian regimes and brought to the surface deep-rooted grievances related to governance, economic disparity, political repression, and identity. While the uprisings initially galvanized hopes for democratization and popular empowerment, the subsequent period has been defined by instability, protracted conflict, and the reassertion of authoritarian rule. These developments disrupted domestic politics and reconfigured the broader regional order.

*Senior Lecturer, Holon Institute of Technology, Israel.

One of the most striking features of the post-2011 Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape is the emergence of what this study terms “fluid alliances”. These are informal, pragmatic, and short-lived coalitions formed in response to immediate strategic or security imperatives, rather than grounded in ideological affinity or institutional commitment. These alignments reflect a departure from earlier patterns of pan-Arab solidarity or bloc-based politics. They underscore the limitations of traditional regional institutions, such as the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council, which have largely failed to provide cohesive responses to the region’s crises.

At the same time, the diminishing influence of the United States - a trend evident in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings - had significant ramifications for regional power dynamics. Although the U.S. continued to play a role in military operations and diplomatic engagements, its relative retrenchment contributed to the rise of alternative regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, empowered non-state actors, and allowed for greater Russian and Chinese involvement. Yet, while many scholars and policy analysts have observed this shift, there has been limited systematic analysis of how these developments intersect with evolving patterns of alliance formation, identity politics, and economic restructuring.

This paper seeks to address this gap by employing an integrative theoretical framework that draws on realism, constructivism, and neo-Gramscianism. Each lens brings a distinctive analytical utility: realism helps explain the strategic behavior of states and the formation of fluid alliances in a competitive regional environment; constructivism sheds light on how evolving identity narratives shape regional conflict and cooperation; and neo-Gramscianism provides tools for analyzing how hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces, linked to global capitalism and domestic class structures, influence regional political economies. This tripartite framework allows a multidimensional analysis of the Middle East’s transformations.

The research aims to clarify the persistent challenges to regionalism and cooperation by exploring how shifting power balances, contested identities, and economic restructuring interact to perpetuate instability. Particular attention is provided to the role of non-state actors such as Hamas, the entrenchment of authoritarian regimes through neoliberal reform packages such as Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, and the disjuncture between elite-driven foreign policy strategies and popular sentiments. By tracing these developments from 2011 through 2024, this study contributes to both empirical and theoretical debates in international relations.

Theoretical Framework

This study examines the profound geopolitical, ideological, and economic transformations in the Middle East from the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011 through to the Israel-Hamas War that started on October 7, 2023. To explain the complexities of this evolving regional landscape, a theoretical framework is employed, drawing on three prominent international relations and critical theories: realism, constructivism, and neo-Gramscian theory. Each of these perspectives offers distinct analytical tools that allow for a multi-layered examination of state

behavior, identity politics, and hegemonic power structures that have shaped the region's shifting alliances and conflicts.

Realism constitutes the foundational pillar of the theoretical framework, providing insight into how states navigate the international system defined by uncertainty and competition for power and security (Waltz, 1979). Central to realism is the understanding that states are rational actors primarily concerned with survival, power maximization, and balancing threats. In applying realism to this study, particular attention is given to state-centric actions such as military interventions, alliance formations, and strategic partnerships. The emergence of ad hoc partnerships motivated by strategic imperatives rather than enduring ideological alignment illustrates realist dynamics in a region marked by declining U.S. hegemonic influence and an increasingly multipolar order. Realism thus aids in decoding how pragmatic calculations of power and security dominate state behavior in a volatile and uncertain regional context.

While realism foregrounds material power and security interests, constructivism brings the significance of identities, ideas, and norms in shaping international relations (Wendt, 1999). Constructivist theory emphasizes that state interests are constructed through social interaction and collective meaning-making processes. This perspective is essential for understanding how ideological currents such as pan-Arabism, sectarianism, and political Islam have influenced both state and non-state actors in the Middle East during the post-Arab Spring era. Constructivism enriches the analysis by revealing the ideational underpinnings of conflicts and cooperation, highlighting that alliances and enmities in the region are shaped by material interests and contested social meanings and symbolic power.

The third theoretical lens employed is neo-Gramscian theory, which offers a perspective on the intersections between ideology, economic structures, and hegemonic power in global and regional contexts. This approach demonstrates how dominant social groups maintain power through ideological consent and the construction of hegemonic blocs that integrate political, economic, and cultural elements. In the Middle Eastern context, neo-Gramscian analysis focuses on the role of global capitalism, neoliberal reforms, and shifting hegemonic alignments in reshaping regional dynamics, thereby realigning regional actors toward pragmatic interests over ideological solidarity (Harris, 2022). Neo-Gramscian theory interrogates economic imperatives and hegemonic discourses of political strategies and alliances, shaping the structural conditions for both cooperation and conflict in the region.

The Arab uprisings exposed deep structural weaknesses within many Middle Eastern states and underscored the limitations of existing regional cooperation mechanisms such as the Arab League and the GCC. Historically, regimes in the region have leveraged confrontational foreign policies alongside symbolic commitments to pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism to project power and bolster domestic legitimacy. These ideological frameworks functioned as rhetorical tools legitimizing regime authority without fostering substantive cooperation (Fawcett, 2020). As Barnett and Solingen (2007) highlight, Arab states have long espoused unity rhetorically while fearing the institutionalization of regional mechanisms that could undermine their sovereignty and reveal internal vulnerabilities.

By integrating these three theoretical lenses, the framework provides a layered understanding of the fragmentation and fluidity characterizing the post-2011 Middle East. Realism explains the material logic behind state actions and alliance formation; constructivism reveals the ideational and identity-based motivations underlying those behaviors; and neo-Gramscian theory situates both within a broader context of structural power, economic dependency, and ideological control.

To operationalize this theoretical framework, the study adopts a combination of discourse analysis, geopolitical event mapping, and comparative institutional analysis. The post-2011 regional landscape witnessed increasing fragmentation, as threatened regimes sought to secure their positions through ad hoc, interest-based coalitions or “liquid alliances” (Gause, 2014). These temporary, flexible partnerships were motivated by immediate security concerns rather than long-term ideological alignments. Saudi Arabia and the UAE formed a strategic partnership to counter Islamist movements, while Turkey and Qatar supported opposing factions, revealing deep ideological and geopolitical divergences that complicated efforts at regional cohesion. The Syrian civil war epitomizes the failure of formal regional cooperation, as rival states backed opposing factions, turning the conflict into a proxy battlefield.

The role of external actors remains pivotal. The perceived U.S. retrenchment after the uprisings heightened insecurity among Arab states, especially within the Gulf monarchies, compelling regimes to pursue more transactional alliances to mitigate emerging threats (Feldman, 2021). Concurrently, Iran’s growing influence exacerbated sectarian and geopolitical tensions, further fracturing the potential for unified regional action. In contrast, the Arab League and the GCC demonstrated significant shortcomings in managing post-uprising crises (Achcar, 2013). While the Arab League endorsed international intervention in Libya and sanctions on Syria, these measures were limited by member states’ concerns over sovereignty. The GCC, although a more effective institution, faced internal divisions that hindered deeper integration or “Gulf Union” ambitions (Ulrichsen, 2020). Regime survival remained the paramount concern, undermining prospects for durable regional governance. This integrative framework enables a comprehensive understanding of a region marked by fragmentation, shifting alliances, and contested hegemonic projects.

The Arab Uprisings and the Israel-Hamas conflict reveal distinct but interconnected patterns of polarization and power contestation in the Middle East. The uprisings exposed the fragility of authoritarian regimes, generating fragmented and short-lived alliances rooted in regime survival and immediate interests. Conversely, the Israel-Hamas conflict exemplifies entrenched, ideologically driven rivalries supported by durable regional and international alliances. However, both cases demonstrate the limits of regional cooperation but in different ways: the uprisings through the collapse of formal regional institutions and the rise of fragmented state-centered politics, and the Israel-Hamas conflict through the persistence of deep geopolitical fault lines that draw in global powers. Together, they illustrate the complexity of legitimacy, power, and alliance formation in a region marked by enduring instability and contested futures.

Strategic Role of External Actors

The Arab uprisings precipitated a profound reconfiguration of the Middle East's political landscape, exposing entrenched structural weaknesses within many Arab states and fundamentally challenging the efficacy of regional governance institutions such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These upheavals illuminated the enduring paradox at the heart of Arab regionalism: while pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism have served as powerful rhetorical tools for regimes to project legitimacy and authority, their practical application as frameworks for genuine regional cooperation has been historically limited and, at times, counterproductive. As Fawcett (2020) asserts, the invocation of these ideological constructs often functioned as symbolic gestures designed primarily to reinforce domestic regimes rather than to foster robust interstate collaboration. This rhetorical mobilization of identity politics was intricately tied to regime survival strategies, privileging symbolic unity over substantive integration.

Barnett and Solingen (2007) provide a critical perspective on this phenomenon, highlighting the ambivalent stance of Arab states toward regional unity. While public discourse consistently espouses the value of Arab solidarity, underlying apprehensions about regime sovereignty and the potential empowerment of supranational bodies have hindered the institutionalization of regional cooperation. This tension has engendered a persistent fragmentation in regional governance, wherein states remain wary of formalized structures that might constrain their autonomous control or expose domestic vulnerabilities to external scrutiny.

The events of the Arab Spring crystallized these longstanding dynamics by unleashing widespread domestic upheaval and discontent, intensifying regime insecurities, and underscoring the primacy of survival over cooperation (Hinnebusch, 2020). The rapid overthrow of authoritarian rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya was emblematic of popular mobilization against repressive governance and indicated the fragility of state institutions and regional mechanisms. Valbjørn and Bank (2012) argue that although regimes continued to rhetorically invoke Arab solidarity as a means of legitimizing authority, the absence of deep-rooted domestic legitimacy significantly undermined the capacity for regional organizations to act cohesively or effectively. Consequently, the post-2011 period witnessed an increasing trend toward political fragmentation and a retreat from comprehensive regionalism in favor of pragmatic, interest-driven alliances tailored to immediate security concerns (Kamrava, 2018).

This strategic recalibration has led to the emergence and predominance of fluid, context-specific coalitions characterized by their informal nature, temporal flexibility, and pragmatic orientation. A salient illustration of this phenomenon is the coalition formed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to counteract the political influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, which both states perceive as a destabilizing actor threatening regime stability and the established regional order (Lynch, 2020). In contrast, Turkey and Qatar supported Islamist movements, including the Brotherhood, as part of their strategies to expand regional influence, reflecting a complex web of competing ideological and geopolitical agendas that further complicate attempts at unified regional action (Lynch, 2023).

The Syrian civil war exemplifies the limitations of formal regional cooperation and the resultant reliance on alliances. The conflict evolved into a multifaceted proxy war, with regional and international actors backing rival factions to advance their strategic interests. This battleground dynamic exposed the fragmentation of the regional system and underscored the declining efficacy of institutions like the Arab League, which failed to coordinate an effective, unified response. Phillips (2020) emphasizes that these alliances are intrinsically shaped by the broader international context and the perceived retrenchment of the United States' hegemonic role in the region, which prompted regional states to seek alternative partnerships and strategies for self-preservation.

The perceived diminution of American engagement following the uprisings contributed to an environment of heightened insecurity among key regional players, especially the Gulf monarchies that had long depended on U.S. military and diplomatic guarantees (Feldman, 2021). This strategic vacuum incentivized a recalibration of alliances and the adoption of more flexible and transactional coalitions aimed at countering emergent threats through the expanding influence of Iran in regional conflict zones such as Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. Iran's growing footprint was widely interpreted by Gulf states as an existential challenge, intensifying sectarian fault lines and heightening geopolitical rivalries. This development contributed to the disintegration of attempts to forge cohesive regional security frameworks (Koch and Stivachis, 2019).

Regional organizations have struggled to adapt to these new realities. The Arab League, historically the principal forum for regional dialogue, demonstrated limited capacity to mediate or resolve the crises unleashed by the uprisings (Valbjorn, 2021). Although it formally endorsed international interventions in Libya and imposed sanctions on the Assad regime in Syria, these measures were largely ineffective in altering conflict dynamics or fostering regional consensus. The League's inability to enforce collective decisions reflects its institutional weaknesses and the persistent reluctance of member states to cede sovereignty or empower supranational governance (Del Sarto et. al., 2024).

The GCC faced significant internal challenges that hindered its evolution. Despite undertaking military intervention in Bahrain to suppress popular protests and mediating the conflict in Yemen, the Gulf bloc was unable to overcome divergent threat perceptions among its members or to advance the vision of a unified "Gulf Union." The predominance of regime security considerations and inter-member rivalries perpetuated institutional fragmentation, limiting the GCC's capacity to function as a cohesive security community. These internal divisions and external pressures diminished the GCC's ability to serve as a stabilizing regional actor (Lawson, 2022).

The Arab uprisings accelerated the decline of traditional regionalism, paving the way for a regional order defined by fragmentation, fluidity, and pragmatism. The ascendancy of alliances as the principal modality of interstate interaction reflects the security imperatives and survival calculations of regimes confronting pervasive instability and external threats (Diab, 2021). While these informal coalitions enable rapid, flexible responses to emergent challenges, their lack of institutionalization and durability undermines prospects for sustained regional cooperation or conflict

resolution. The persistence of such alliances highlights the fundamental challenges confronting regional organizations and the enduring limits of ideological frameworks premised on Arab unity. This fragmented regionalism, shaped both by endogenous insecurities and shifting external influences, continues to define the strategic calculus of Middle Eastern actors in the post-Arab Spring era (Magee & Massoud, 2022).

U.S. Retrenchment and Regional Perceptions

The decade following the Arab Spring was marked by profound internal political transformations and a significant recalibration of the involvement and influence of external actors (Saaida, 2024). Historically, the preeminent external power in the region, the United States' post-Arab Spring policy trajectory, is widely perceived by regional rulers and policymakers as a period of strategic retrenchment and cautious disengagement (Mounir, 2020). This perceived shift from a historically dominant, interventionist role toward a more selective, ambiguous, and reactive posture shaped regional power dynamics and precipitated consequential realignments (Pollack, 2021).

The Obama administration's calibrated response to the Arab Spring signaled a marked departure from earlier paradigms of American foreign policy in the Middle East. Unlike the overt military interventions that characterized the early 2000s - the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011 - the administration adopted a posture of deliberate restraint (Aras & Kardaş, 2021). This strategic hesitancy was predicated on lessons drawn from the protracted and costly conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as domestic political considerations emphasizing "leading from behind" and reliance on multilateral institutions and regional actors to manage instability (Phillips, 2021). However, this calculated restraint was widely interpreted by regional governments as a withdrawal of the United States' traditional security umbrella and an erosion of American willingness to decisively influence regional outcomes in their favor. The failure to intervene militarily in Syria's protracted civil war and the equivocal stance toward Egypt's political upheavals post-Mubarak further fueled skepticism among allies regarding the reliability and predictability of U.S. security commitments (Lynch, 2020). During this period of less American involvement, this uncertainty engendered strategic anxiety, prompting states to reassess their dependence on U.S. backing and explore alternative security arrangements (Bahgat, 2022).

The "pivot to Asia" strategy announced by the Obama administration underscored a reorientation of American diplomatic and military priorities away from the Middle East toward the Indo-Pacific region. This strategic shift, driven by the perceived rise of China as a peer competitor and the necessity to safeguard economic and security interests in Asia-Pacific, effectively deprioritized the Middle East within a broader geopolitical calculus (Aras & Kardaş, 2021). The consequent redeployment of military assets and a reduction in diplomatic bandwidth contributed to a tangible diminution of U.S. presence and engagement in Middle Eastern affairs. For regional actors, this reallocation of resources created a power vacuum and heightened concerns about American commitment, encouraging regional powers to fill the void

through more assertive regional policies. This trend was emblematic of a broader realignment in international relations, wherein regional states increasingly perceived themselves as responsible agents rather than mere proxies within a U.S.-led global order (Phillips, 2021).

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran emerged as a pivotal juncture in U.S. regional policy, eliciting profound implications for alliance structures and regional security perceptions. While lauded by proponents as a diplomatic milestone aimed at curbing nuclear proliferation, the agreement was perceived as a strategic concession to Iran, a long-standing adversary and hegemonic rival within the Gulf and broader Middle East (Juneau, 2021). This perception was compounded by concerns that legitimized Iran's regional activities and expanded its influence through proxy networks, thereby undermining the security calculus of U.S. allies. The JCPOA catalyzed a palpable estrangement between the United States and its regional partners, eroding mutual trust and incentivizing these states to pursue autonomous and often more aggressive security and diplomatic postures (Salman & Ali, 2021). This dynamic illustrates the complex interplay between nuclear diplomacy and regional power politics, wherein efforts to manage one dimension of conflict inadvertently exacerbate tensions in others.

The withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraq and Afghanistan in the mid-2010s symbolized a broader narrative of American disengagement from the region. The drawdowns left fragile and often contested state institutions vulnerable to internal fragmentation and external interference, while simultaneously diminishing the United States' capacity to shape regional security architectures directly (Lynch, 2016). The vacuums created by these withdrawals facilitated the expansion of non-state actors and proxy militias and allowed regional powers to assert influence through asymmetric means (Nimer, 2022). These developments contributed to a complex security environment characterized by fragmentation, localized conflicts, and shifting alliances.

The cumulative effect of these interrelated factors fostered an environment in which regional actors recalibrated their foreign policies and strategic behaviors. Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates undertook more autonomous and often interventionist strategies, including military involvement in Yemen and assertive opposition to Islamist movements supported by rival states, notably the Muslim Brotherhood (Juneau, 2021).

Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, leveraged the reduced American footprint to expand its regional ambitions, promoting neo-Ottoman visions of influence through direct military involvement and political patronage in Syria, Libya, and beyond (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021). Concurrently, Iran intensified its reliance on non-state proxies, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and various militias in Iraq and Syria, to project power asymmetrically and counterbalance U.S. and Saudi influence. These developments illustrate a marked departure from Cold War-era bipolar alignments, with the emergence of fluid, transactional "liquid coalitions" predicated on immediate strategic interests rather than enduring ideological or sectarian commitments (Weissenburger, 2024).

This recalibration of U.S. engagement and the resultant regional responses have had profound implications for ongoing conflicts and political fragmentation in the

Middle East, including the protracted and complex Israel-Hamas conflict. The perception of American disengagement and ambivalence has created a permissive environment for the empowerment of non-state actors, undermining traditional state-centric security paradigms and encouraging regional powers to engage in more flexible, opportunistic foreign policy maneuvers (Emek Grosse, 2025). These dynamics contribute to the fragmentation of regional order, complicating prospects for conflict resolution and reinforcing patterns of volatility and competition.

Comparative Analysis of the Arab Uprisings and the Israel-Hamas War

The Middle East has had complex political struggles characterized by competing claims to legitimacy, shifting alliances, and regional rivalries. Two major events epitomize these dynamics, yet they differ fundamentally in their structural characteristics, actors, and geopolitical implications. A comparative analysis reveals how these events reflect different modes of regional polarization and the evolving nature of power and legitimacy.

The Arab Uprisings, which erupted across multiple Arab states beginning in 2011, were primarily manifestations of popular discontent with longstanding authoritarian regimes. These regimes had maintained power through a combination of coercive repression and legitimizing ideologies rooted in pan-Arab nationalism, religious rhetoric, or patronage networks (Kamrava, 2016). The uprisings exposed the structural fragility of these regimes, whose claims to legitimacy rested more on state control and less on popular consent. This legitimacy deficit became pronounced as socioeconomic grievances - unemployment, corruption, and lack of political freedom - eroded the social contract between rulers and ruled (Fawcett, 2020).

In response, many regimes adopted “liquid alliances,” characterized by short-term, opportunistic coalitions among regional actors and domestic factions to preserve the status quo (Kamrava, 2016). These alliances were inherently unstable and primarily reactive, aiming at regime survival rather than ideological coherence or long-term strategic objectives. This fragmentation underscored a broader pattern of state disintegration and political fluidity, which in some cases led to violent civil conflicts and enduring instability.

On October 7, 2023, Israel was struck by a sudden and devastating attack carried out by Hamas militants. The assault claimed the lives of 1,200 civilians and led to the abduction of 251 individuals, triggering a full-scale war involving Israel and neighboring actors. The inability of the government, military, and intelligence services to prevent the attack and safeguard civilians has deeply eroded public trust in the state, raising serious concerns about the nation’s collective sense of security and its future trajectory (Vitman Schorr et al., 2025). In contrast to the Arab Springs, the Israel-Hamas conflict is not primarily an internal state crisis but a territorially and ideologically rooted confrontation between a recognized state and a non-state actor. Hamas derives its legitimacy through a dual political-military identity, positioning itself as the defender of Palestinian national rights and resistance to Israeli occupation (Kaye, 2023). Unlike authoritarian regimes struggling with internal dissent, Hamas claims legitimacy through nationalist ideology and armed resistance,

asserting sovereignty over Gaza despite lacking broad international recognition (Colombo and Soler i Lecha, 2021).

Israel claims legitimacy through the principles of state sovereignty and national security, emphasizing its right to self-defense against what it perceives as existential threats from Hamas and other militant groups such as Hezbollah (Khatib, 2023). This ongoing conflict is a contest over territorial sovereignty, national identity, and the international recognition of statehood and governance, rendering it a protracted zero-sum struggle rather than a fluid contestation of internal legitimacy.

The Arab Uprisings catalyzed a wave of realignments, producing ephemeral alliances that reflected immediate strategic interests. Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, forged coalitions aimed at countering Islamist political movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, which they viewed as a destabilizing threat to their regimes (Gause, 2014). Turkey and Qatar supported various Islamist factions, positioning themselves as champions of political Islam and regional influence (Harel, 2019).

These alliances were notable for their volatility and transactional nature, lacking deep ideological foundations or institutionalization. They reflected a fractured regional order in which states prioritized short-term regime survival and influence over the pursuit of coherent, long-term regional strategies. This fluidity was symptomatic of a Middle East grappling with the erosion of traditional power structures and the rise of multipolar contestations (Bagheri and Kannarva, 2022). However, in stark contrast, the alliances that characterize the Israel-Hamas conflict are deeply entrenched and emblematic of longstanding geopolitical rivalries. Hamas's patronage by Iran represents a strategic proxy relationship through which Iran extends its influence across the Levant, challenging Israeli and Western interests (Hanieh, 2023). Conversely, Israel's security architecture is buttressed by support from Western powers, mainly the United States, whose military aid, diplomatic backing, and strategic cooperation underpin Israel's regional dominance. The war epitomizes a polarized Middle East where regional and global powers leverage local actors to pursue broader strategic aims, solidifying a bipolar or multipolar regional configuration rather than a fragmented or fluid landscape. Ahmed (2025) explains that in the "war on terror," state actions following terrorist attacks have redefined how state responses intersect with international law, although he criticizes state responses to the terrorist attacks through the lens of cosmopolitanism to demonstrate the principles of humanity, equality, and international law in the "war on terror".

The aftermath of the Arab Uprisings also revealed the ineffectiveness of regional institutions such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Although these bodies sought to mediate conflicts in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, their impact was constrained by member states' reluctance to cede sovereignty or empower supranational governance structures (Bromley, 2018). This hesitancy reflected entrenched state-centric norms and the absence of a cohesive regional security framework capable of managing intra-Arab conflicts. The result was a fragmented regional order characterized by competing national interests and the absence of coordinated multilateral action.

Conversely, the Israel-Hamas conflict has been the focus of sustained international attention and intervention. The United Nations has repeatedly attempted ceasefires

and peace negotiations with limited success, while regional powers such as Egypt and Qatar have played crucial mediatory roles (Efron, 2023). Western countries maintain a high-profile involvement, reflecting the conflict's broader geopolitical significance. This internationalization underscores the marginalization of regional organizations in managing the conflict and highlights the role of global powers in shaping outcomes. Unlike the fragmented regional responses to the Arab Uprisings, the Israel-Hamas conflict operates within an international diplomatic architecture that combines regional mediation with great-power diplomacy, demonstrating the globalization of Middle Eastern conflicts (Maronw, 2025). However, as explained by Kravetz (2024), while the Israeli political and military responses appear consistent with the outlined principles, unexpected problems like hostage dilemmas and urban warfare complexities present unforeseen challenges not directly addressed by the manifesto.

The international environment shaped the trajectories of both the Arab Uprisings and the Israel-Hamas War in distinct ways. The Arab Uprisings coincided with a perceived withdrawal of American influence in the Middle East, which created a power vacuum that exacerbated regional instability (Ulrichsen, 2020). This perceived U.S. retrenchment emboldened Gulf monarchies to assert greater regional agency by supporting counter-revolutionary forces, thereby influencing the trajectory of the uprisings and subsequent conflicts. In contrast, the ongoing conflict in Gaza remains a critical arena for U.S. strategic interests. American military and diplomatic support for Israel anchors the regional security architecture and shapes the conflict's international dimension. Simultaneously, Iran's backing of Hamas represents a direct challenge to U.S. regional hegemony, transforming Gaza into a proxy battleground for broader U.S.-Iranian rivalry (Szalai, 2025). This dynamic adds layers of complexity to the conflict, making it a focal point of global power competition.

Renewed Violence

The decade spanning the aftermath of the Arab Spring and preceding the Israel-Hamas conflict constitutes a critical period of transformation, distinguished by extensive shifts in political configurations, security dynamics, and regional alliances. These transformations are best understood through a multifaceted lens that captures the interplay between domestic upheavals, the disintegration and reconstitution of state authority, the ascendance of non-state actors, and the recalibration of regional and international power projections (Mounir, 2020). This period is emblematic of the broader challenges confronting state sovereignty, regional cooperation, and the traditional paradigms of Middle Eastern geopolitics. While Bauhn (2024) argues that the moral responsibility for the deaths of Palestinian non-combatants in the Gaza War rests with Hamas, Dahl & Strachan-Morris (2024) claim that intelligence agencies appear to have provided warning, and policymakers failed to listen before the Hamas attack on Israel.

The surprising nature of the Arab Spring uprisings also demonstrates the fragility of the region. The violence initially was a popular movement toward democratization and political liberalization that revealed the deep structural vulnerabilities of many

Arab regimes. Tunisia and Egypt experienced regime overthrows, but in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the uprisings precipitated devastating civil wars and the near-total collapse of centralized governance (Lynch, 2023). This disintegration must be contextualized within the socio-political economy of the region, where chronic unemployment, economic marginalization, and authoritarian repression fostered profound public discontent. The failure of these regimes to deliver inclusive political participation or address economic grievances rendered them susceptible to mass mobilization, challenging the long-standing authoritarian social contracts that had maintained relative stability. Szalai (2025) concludes that the changing role of the Israeli-Palestinian issue and the various strategic narratives of Gulf states demonstrate that the Middle Eastern regional system changed during this turbulent period.

The resultant state fragmentation generated significant political vacuums, which non-state actors exploited to establish *de facto* control over territories and populations. The emergence of entities such as Hamas, Hizballah, ISIS, the Houthis, and various Libyan militias illustrates a broader trend toward the decentralization of political authority and the erosion of the Western model of sovereign territorial control. These groups assert military dominance and engage in governance functions, complicating efforts at conflict resolution and state reconstruction (Bauhn, 2024). The divergence in state responses from violent repression in Egypt and Saudi Arabia to negotiated compromises and authoritarian resilience elsewhere highlights the heterogeneous trajectories within the region and the limits of pan-Arab solidarity (Brown, 2020).

The prominence of non-state actors constitutes a paradigm shift in Middle Eastern conflict dynamics. Hamas exemplifies this development as an organization straddling political governance and militancy, challenging Israel's state-centric security framework. Iran's strategic utilization of such groups, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria, epitomizes its doctrine of "asymmetric warfare," whereby proxy actors serve as force multipliers and instruments of regional influence (Miller and Miller, 2023). This strategy complicates conventional conflict paradigms, as these non-state actors operate transnationally, possess local legitimacy in some contexts, and blur the lines between state and non-state violence.

The proliferation of such actors undermines traditional diplomatic modalities predicated on sovereign actors and formal state negotiations. Regional security architectures thus face unprecedented challenges in conflict management, counterterrorism, and peacemaking. The reliance on non-state proxies intensifies sectarian and ideological fissures, contributing to the prolongation of conflicts and complicating pathways to comprehensive peace (Lynch, 2023).

Post-Arab Spring Middle Eastern diplomacy has been characterized by the fragmentation of long-standing alliances and the emergence of flexible partnerships shaped primarily by immediate strategic interests rather than enduring ideological or historical affinities (Fawcett, 2020). This fluidity reflects the precariousness of regional political landscapes and the pragmatic considerations of state actors seeking to maximize influence amidst uncertainty.

Turkey and Qatar's initial backing of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups exemplifies this dynamic, motivated by ideological affinities and strategic ambitions to extend influence through Islamist movements. In contrast, Saudi Arabia and the

UAE adopted counter-revolutionary stances, prioritizing regime security and regional dominance over revolutionary change. These competing agendas precipitated rivalries and undermined institutions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which struggled to reconcile divergent interests and coordinate unified responses (Lavi, 2023).

This shifting alliance system is starkly evident in the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict. The Abraham Accords, brokered in 2020, represent a watershed moment in regional diplomacy, wherein normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain signify a strategic departure from the traditional Arab consensus supporting Palestinian statehood (Riedel, 2021). These accords reflect the prioritization of geopolitical and economic imperatives over pan-Arab solidarity (Fathollah-Nejad, 2021). Nonetheless, the resurgence of violence in Gaza has complicated these emerging alignments, reinvigorating popular and political support for Palestinian rights and exposing potential fault lines within the newly forged diplomatic frameworks. Israel has continued to bombard Gaza since 7 October 2023 and, with the support of Western nations, built consensus around framing terrorists (Aitlhadj et al., 2024). Marone (2025) shows that the Israel-Hamas war contributed to increasing the frequency of attacks carried out in Europe and led to a growth in the number of attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets; however, it did not have profound effects on the level of organization and the severity of these acts of violence.

Concomitant with these regional realignments has been a perceptible retrenchment of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East (Ulrichsen, 2020). This perceived vacuum provided opportunities for regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran to pursue more assertive policies, both diplomatically and militarily. Iran's continued investment in proxy networks extends its regional reach and heightens sectarian polarization, challenging both Israeli security and U.S. strategic objectives (Del Sarto, 2024). The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement talks mediated by China in 2023 reflect a novel configuration of great power engagement, illustrating the region's growing integration into broader global power contests and the diversification of security partnerships (Lavi, 2023).

The Arab Spring exposed the limitations of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism as cohesive ideological frameworks. While symbolic rhetoric around Arab unity endured, substantive cooperation remained elusive, hampered by divergent national interests and intra-Arab rivalries, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The failure of the Arab League and GCC to effectively mediate crises in Libya, Syria, and Yemen further exemplifies the weakness of regional organizations in fostering collective security and political resolution (Fawcett, 2020).

This fragmentation profoundly influenced the trajectory of the Palestinian cause. Despite occasional surges of pan-Arab support, the centrality of Palestinian statehood in regional politics has diminished in the wake of normalization agreements with Israel. The UAE's engagement with Israel, motivated by economic and security considerations, typifies the shifting calculus among Arab states, signaling a pragmatic departure from historic solidarities (Riedel, 2021). Nonetheless, the latest Gaza conflict has reignited political discourse and public mobilization in support of Palestinians, underscoring the persistent salience and volatility of the issue, as well

as the potential fragility of the Abraham Accords under conditions of renewed violence (Hanieh, 2023).

Conclusion

The post-Arab Spring Middle East has undergone significant reconfiguration characterized by the erosion of traditional state sovereignty, the rise of non-state actors, the fracturing of regional alliances, and the emergence of new geopolitical dynamics involving global powers. The Israel-Hamas War exacerbates these underlying trends, demonstrating the intricate interplay between domestic grievances, regional rivalries, and international strategic competition.

The period between the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 and the resurgence of large-scale conflict in the form of the Israel-Hamas War marks a decisive epoch in the political evolution of the Middle East. This era has been characterized by the interplay of shifting geopolitical alignments, contested identity formations, and economic restructuring under global neoliberal imperatives. Employing the theoretical frameworks of realism, constructivism, and neo-Gramscianism provides a multidimensional analytical lens through which to understand the fragmentation and reconstitution of regional order.

From a realist perspective, the regional system has undergone a transformation driven primarily by the pursuit of security, survival, and relative power maximization among states. The retrenchment of the United States from direct intervention, particularly following the failures of interventionist policies in Iraq and Libya, created a strategic vacuum that regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates sought to fill. These actors increasingly engaged in proxy warfare and established informal and temporary alliances based on converging interests in specific conflicts. The Abraham Accords, which normalized diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab states, particularly the UAE and Bahrain, demonstrate the realist shift toward pragmatic security and economic cooperation over historical ideological commitments to the Palestinian cause. Such developments exemplify Kenneth Waltz's (1979) argument that the anarchic structure of the international system compels states to prioritize relative gains and security over normative alignment.

In contrast, constructivist theory foregrounds the role of ideas, norms, and identity in shaping the behavior of both state and non-state actors. The Arab Spring was a paradigmatic rupture in the discursive construction of political legitimacy across the region. It dislodged dominant narratives that had long sustained authoritarian rule and opened space for alternative identity formations, including resurgent Islamism, revived nationalism, and transnational solidarities. The intensification of the Sunni-Shia divide, particularly visible in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their respective regional clients, illustrates how identity can become securitized and strategically instrumentalized. Constructivist scholars such as Peter Katzenstein (1996) and Martha Finnemore (1996) have argued that interests and preferences are not exogenous givens but socially constructed through interaction, norms, and historical legacies. The continued ideological salience of

non-state actors whose framing of the conflict with Israel invokes pan-Islamic, anti-colonial, and liberationist discourses demonstrates that identity remains a powerful driver of mobilization, even amid shifting alliances and regional realignments.

The neo-Gramscian approach offers a political economy perspective that connects regional transformations to the global capitalist system and its neoliberal imperatives. Neo-Gramscianism views hegemony as the ideological and material leadership of a historical bloc that links domestic elites with transnational capital. Following the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia and the UAE accelerated neoliberal reform programs, including *Vision 2030*, under the banner of modernization and economic diversification. These programs, while ostensibly technocratic, are deeply political projects designed to secure elite dominance, attract foreign investment, and ensure integration into global markets. However, the dislocation caused by these reforms - rising inequality, labor market exclusion, housing crises, and youth unemployment - intensified social grievances, especially among marginalized groups.

Counter-hegemonic forces have emerged in opposition to both authoritarian governance and neoliberal restructuring. These actors contest the domestic legitimacy of ruling regimes and the broader regional hegemonic order aligned with U.S., Israeli, and Gulf interests. The Israel-Hamas War exemplifies this dialectic of hegemony and resistance. While Arab regimes increasingly prioritize normalization and economic integration with Israel, large segments of their populations remain deeply opposed to such moves, perceiving them as betrayals of the Palestinian cause and as capitulations to imperial and capitalist interests. The resultant legitimacy crisis creates a volatile political field where ideological contestation persists despite elite-level realignment.

These theoretical perspectives illuminate the complex nature of Middle Eastern politics in the post-2011 era. Realism explains the strategic behavior of states, constructivism reveals the enduring power of identity and ideology, and neo-Gramscianism exposes the structural contradictions of capitalist transformation and hegemonic projects. These frameworks operate on different analytical levels and can be synthesized to provide a more holistic account of regional dynamics. The erosion of traditional regional organizations, such as the Arab League, and the emergence of ad hoc coalitions reflect a fragmented regional order that lacks cohesive mechanisms for conflict resolution or cooperative governance. The durability of non-state actors, the persistence of authoritarianism, and the pressures of youth demographics and climate change further complicate the prospects for stability. While some regimes continue to pursue technocratic modernization and security partnerships, the underlying tensions between elite-driven reform and popular discontent suggest that the region will remain in flux.

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