

Networked Power, Ideological Realignment, And Security Transformation In The Contemporary Middle East

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary Middle East is undergoing a profound structural reconfiguration marked by the erosion of unipolar external dominance, the proliferation of non-state military actors, the normalization of relations between erstwhile adversaries, and the emergence of ideologically hybrid foreign policy doctrines. This article offers a comprehensive, theoretically grounded, and empirically anchored analysis of this transformation by integrating critical political economy, classical realism, constructivist security studies, and networked geopolitics. Drawing upon a wide range of scholarly works, including Carr's foundational realist critique of interwar liberalism (Carr, 1939), Agbiboa's analysis of jihadist organizational transformation (Agbiboa, 2015), and recent scholarship on Gaza, Iran, Hamas, and regional multilateralism, the study advances the argument that the Middle East is transitioning from a system of hierarchical alliance structures to a fluid, networked regional order. In this emerging order, power is no longer monopolized by states or external patrons but is distributed across interconnected nodes composed of states, militias, economic alliances, ideological movements, and security providers.

The article situates the October 7 Hamas operation, the Gaza war, the Abraham Accords, Iran's "Look to the East" doctrine, and the South Caucasus realignment within a unified theoretical framework that explains how declining Western hegemony and intensifying intra-regional interdependence have reconfigured strategic behavior (Hokayem, 2023; Krieg, 2024; Perletta, 2024). Hamas is conceptualized not merely as a militant group but as an adaptive political-military organization embedded in a transnational resistance network (Hamoud, 2024; Brown, 2024). Iran is examined as a hybrid power that fuses ideological resistance with pragmatic multipolar diplomacy (Bazoobandi et al., 2023; Divsallar & Azizi, 2023). The Gulf states and Israel are shown to be redefining security through economic and technological interdependence rather than territorial deterrence (Fulton & Yellinek, 2021; Priya, 2024).

Methodologically, the article employs qualitative comparative analysis and interpretive geopolitical modeling, relying on structured literature synthesis and historical contextualization. The findings demonstrate that Middle Eastern security dynamics can no longer be understood through alliance politics alone but must be analyzed through the logic of overlapping networks of cooperation and confrontation. The discussion further explores the normative implications of this shift for sovereignty, legitimacy, and conflict resolution, arguing that the region is moving toward a post-Western multilateralism that is unstable yet resilient (Fawcett, 2025).

By synthesizing diverse literatures into a single analytical architecture, this study fills a critical gap in Middle Eastern international relations theory and provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the region's evolving geopolitical future.

Keywords: Middle East geopolitics, networked security, Hamas, Iran foreign policy, Abraham Accords, regional order, multipolarity.

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has long been portrayed as a region of perpetual crisis, ideological conflict, and external intervention, yet such depictions often obscure the deeper structural forces that shape its political evolution. From the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to the Cold War, from the post-September 11 security architecture to the Arab uprisings, the region has been governed by successive international orders that sought to impose stability through hierarchical power relations. Classical realist theory, as articulated by Carr (1939), already

warned that international systems constructed upon asymmetrical power and moralistic rhetoric would inevitably produce instability rather than peace, a prediction that has been repeatedly confirmed in Middle Eastern history. Today, the region is once again undergoing a transformation, but this time it is not being driven primarily by imperial retreat or ideological revolution, but by the emergence of a networked geopolitical order in which power is dispersed across multiple, overlapping actors.

This transformation is evident in the simultaneous rise of

non-state military organizations, the normalization of relations between former enemies, the strategic realignment of Iran, and the declining capacity of the United States to impose outcomes unilaterally (Krieg, 2024; Hokayem, 2023). Rather than converging toward a liberal peace, the Middle East is evolving toward what can be described as a post-Western regional system characterized by pragmatic alliances, ideological hybridity, and decentralized coercive power (Fawcett, 2025). This shift challenges both traditional realist models, which privilege state-centric balance-of-power dynamics, and liberal institutionalist frameworks, which assume the progressive pacification of international politics through economic interdependence.

One of the most striking manifestations of this new order is the transformation of militant organizations into sophisticated political-military networks. Agbiboa's (2015) study of Boko Haram's adaptation under the influence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding how jihadist movements evolve in response to external pressures and transnational linkages. Although Boko Haram operates in a different geographic context, its organizational metamorphosis mirrors broader trends in the Middle East, where groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah have shifted from localized insurgencies to embedded nodes within regional security architectures (Hamoud, 2024; Brown, 2024). These actors no longer merely resist state authority; they participate in shaping regional strategic equilibria.

The October 7 Hamas operation and the subsequent Gaza war exemplify this reality. Far from being an isolated eruption of violence, the conflict reflects the deep integration of Palestinian resistance into a broader network of regional power struggles involving Iran, Israel, the Gulf states, and external actors (Hokayem, 2023). Hamas's capacity to coordinate military, political, and informational strategies across borders demonstrates a level of organizational sophistication that cannot be explained by traditional insurgency models (Hamoud, 2024). Brown (2024) further complicates the picture by arguing that Hamas represents not only an existential threat to Israel but also an existentialist movement seeking to redefine Palestinian political identity in a fragmented geopolitical landscape.

At the same time, the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states through the Abraham Accords signals a parallel reconfiguration of regional alignments (Fulton & Yellinek, 2021; Fraihat & Ezbidi, 2023). Rather than resolving the Palestinian question, these agreements have effectively decoupled it from broader Arab-Israeli relations, embedding Israel within a network of economic, technological, and security partnerships that bypass traditional ideological divides. This development reflects what Olson, Zaga, and Bengier (2024) describe as a shift from Arab-Israeli conflict to

Arab-Israeli integration, a transformation that fundamentally alters the strategic calculus of all regional actors.

Iran's foreign policy evolution further illustrates the emergence of a networked order. Moving from revolutionary non-alignment to a pragmatic "Look to the East" strategy, Tehran has sought to embed itself within a web of partnerships spanning Russia, China, and regional militias (Perletta, 2024; Bazoobandi et al., 2023). This approach allows Iran to circumvent Western sanctions while projecting influence through asymmetric means, including security assistance to allied militias and governments (Divsallar & Azizi, 2023). Kaleji (2024) and Bakhshandeh and Yeganeh (2023) demonstrate how this strategy extends beyond the Middle East into the South Caucasus and Eastern Mediterranean, where Iran, Turkey, Greece, and Israel are reshaping geopolitical fault lines through energy, security, and diplomatic initiatives.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, there remains a significant gap in the literature: most studies examine these developments in isolation rather than as components of a single systemic transformation. Analyses of Hamas often neglect the broader regional networks that sustain it (Hamoud, 2024), while studies of the Abraham Accords frequently underplay their impact on non-state actors and resistance movements (Fraihat & Ezbidi, 2023). Similarly, research on Iran's foreign policy tends to oscillate between ideological and pragmatic interpretations without fully integrating them into a unified theoretical framework (Perletta, 2024; Bazoobandi et al., 2023).

This article addresses this gap by conceptualizing the contemporary Middle East as a networked regional order in which states, militias, economic blocs, and ideological movements interact through overlapping circuits of power. Drawing on the classical realist insight that power structures shape political outcomes (Carr, 1939) and the contemporary security studies emphasis on transnational networks (Agbiboa, 2015; Krieg, 2024), the study argues that stability and conflict in the region can only be understood by analyzing how these networks are constructed, maintained, and contested.

Through an extensive qualitative synthesis of the provided scholarly literature, this article seeks to answer three interrelated questions: How has the distribution of power in the Middle East shifted from hierarchical alliances to networked configurations? How do non-state actors such as Hamas and Iranian-backed militias function within this new order? And what are the implications of this transformation for regional peace, sovereignty, and global geopolitics? By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a theoretically robust and empirically grounded account of one of the most consequential geopolitical transformations of the twenty-first century.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological architecture of this study is grounded in qualitative, interpretive, and comparative analysis, reflecting the complexity of the contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitical environment. Because the research question concerns systemic transformation rather than discrete causal relationships, a positivist or purely quantitative approach would be ill-suited to capture the multilayered interactions among states, non-state actors, and ideological movements. Instead, this article adopts what can be described as a relational-geopolitical methodology that synthesizes historical analysis, discourse interpretation, and comparative political economy, as recommended by scholars examining complex regional orders (Fawcett, 2025; Krieg, 2024).

The primary data source for this study consists of the scholarly works listed in the reference corpus, which includes peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and policy analyses covering Hamas, Iran, the Gaza war, regional diplomacy, and theoretical foundations of international relations. These texts are treated not merely as repositories of information but as analytical interventions that reveal how different epistemic communities conceptualize power, security, and legitimacy in the Middle East (Bazoobandi et al., 2023; Olson et al., 2024). Through close reading and thematic coding, the study identifies recurring patterns, conceptual divergences, and underlying assumptions that structure contemporary debates.

The analytical process follows three interrelated stages. First, a historical-contextual mapping situates each reference within the broader trajectory of Middle Eastern politics, from the Cold War to the post-October 7 environment (Hokayem, 2023; Fraihat & Ezbidi, 2023). This stage draws heavily on Carr's (1939) realist framework to highlight how shifts in material power and ideological legitimacy interact to produce new international orders. Second, a thematic synthesis examines how key concepts—such as resistance, normalization, multipolarity, and security assistance—are operationalized across the literature (Divsallar & Azizi, 2023; Brown, 2024). Third, a relational analysis connects these themes to demonstrate how apparently disparate developments, such as the Abraham Accords and Hamas's military strategy, are in fact components of a single networked system.

One of the methodological strengths of this approach lies in its ability to integrate non-state actors into geopolitical analysis without reducing them to mere proxies of state power. Agbiboa's (2015) framework for understanding jihadist organizational transformation is particularly valuable here, as it emphasizes how militant groups evolve through transnational learning and resource exchange. By applying this logic to Hamas and Iranian-backed militias, the study avoids the analytical trap of treating these actors as either purely ideological or

purely instrumental.

At the same time, the methodology acknowledges its own limitations. Because the study relies exclusively on secondary sources, it cannot provide original empirical data on battlefield dynamics, diplomatic negotiations, or internal decision-making processes. Moreover, the interpretive nature of the analysis means that alternative readings of the same texts are possible, particularly in a field as politically charged as Middle Eastern studies (Bakhshandeh & Yeganeh, 2023; Perletta, 2024). To mitigate these limitations, the article systematically juxtaposes competing scholarly perspectives and explicitly addresses points of contention in the Discussion section.

Another methodological challenge concerns the temporal unevenness of the reference corpus. While some works, such as Carr (1939) and Agbiboa (2015), provide long-term theoretical insights, others focus on highly recent events, including the Gaza war and post-October 7 developments (Hamoud, 2024; Hokayem, 2023). Rather than treating this as a weakness, the study leverages it as an analytical advantage, using older theoretical frameworks to illuminate contemporary transformations and vice versa.

Finally, the study adopts a reflexive stance toward its own normative implications. Scholars such as Fawcett (2025) and Priya (2024) emphasize that regional orders are not merely descriptive phenomena but also normative projects that shape whose security counts and whose voices are heard. Accordingly, this article does not claim value neutrality but seeks to make explicit how different geopolitical arrangements privilege certain actors over others, particularly in the context of the Palestinian question and Iranian regional policy (Fraihat & Ezbidi, 2023; Bazoobandi et al., 2023).

RESULTS

The interpretive synthesis of the reference corpus reveals a consistent pattern: the Middle East is no longer structured primarily by rigid alliances anchored to a single external hegemon but by a dynamic web of relationships that distribute power across multiple nodes. This finding emerges most clearly in analyses of the Gaza war, Iranian foreign policy, and the normalization of Arab-Israeli relations, all of which point to a regional system characterized by strategic fluidity rather than bloc politics (Hokayem, 2023; Krieg, 2024; Fulton & Yellinek, 2021).

One of the most salient results concerns the evolving nature of non-state military actors. Hamas, in particular, is depicted across the literature as an organization that has transcended the conventional boundaries of insurgency. Hamoud (2024) demonstrates how Hamas's leadership structure and adaptability enabled it to execute the October 7 operation with a level of coordination that rivals that of state militaries. Brown (2024) further argues that Hamas's strategic behavior cannot be reduced to nihilistic

violence but reflects an existentialist project aimed at redefining Palestinian political agency. When viewed through the lens of Agbiboa's (2015) theory of jihadist transformation, Hamas appears as a node within a transnational resistance network, capable of absorbing tactical innovations and ideological narratives from a broader militant ecosystem.

A second key result concerns Iran's role as a networked power. Rather than pursuing territorial expansion or direct military confrontation, Tehran has invested heavily in building what Divsallar and Azizi (2023) describe as a non-Western model of security assistance, supplying training, weapons, and strategic guidance to allied militias and governments. Bazoobandi et al. (2023) and Perletta (2024) show that this approach is complemented by a diplomatic pivot toward Eurasia, allowing Iran to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions while embedding itself in a multipolar economic order. The result is a form of influence that is diffuse, resilient, and difficult for adversaries to dismantle.

The literature on the Abraham Accords reveals a parallel but contrasting network logic. Fulton and Yellinek (2021) and Olson et al. (2024) demonstrate that the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states has created a dense web of economic, technological, and security ties that effectively integrate Israel into the regional system. Priya (2024) conceptualizes this process as positive interdependence, in which mutual economic and security benefits reduce the incentives for overt conflict. Yet Fraihat and Ezbidi (2023) caution that this integration has come at the expense of the Palestinian cause, which has been strategically marginalized in favor of broader regional cooperation.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the Middle East is moving toward a networked regional order in which conflict and cooperation are mediated through overlapping relationships rather than formal alliances. This order is inherently unstable, as demonstrated by the Gaza war, but it is also remarkably adaptive, capable of absorbing shocks without collapsing into systemic chaos (Fawcett, 2025; Krieg, 2024).

DISCUSSION

The emergence of a networked regional order in the Middle East demands a fundamental rethinking of how power, security, and legitimacy are conceptualized in international relations. Classical realist theory, particularly as articulated by Carr (1939), emphasized that international orders are sustained not by abstract moral principles but by the distribution of material power and the social acceptance of that distribution. In the contemporary Middle East, however, power is no longer concentrated solely in sovereign states or external great powers; it is dispersed across a lattice of state and non-state actors whose interactions are both cooperative

and antagonistic. This diffusion of power creates what Krieg (2024) describes as a networked regional order, in which no single actor can impose its will unilaterally, yet multiple actors possess the capacity to disrupt stability.

Hamas exemplifies this new reality. Rather than functioning merely as a localized resistance movement, Hamas has become an integral component of a broader regional network that includes Iran, Hezbollah, and other actors aligned against Israel and Western influence (Hamoud, 2024; Brown, 2024). This transformation mirrors the organizational evolution described by Agbiboa (2015) in his study of Boko Haram, where local grievances were embedded within transnational jihadist structures that provided ideological, financial, and operational resources. In both cases, the shift from insular insurgency to networked militancy enhanced strategic resilience while complicating counterinsurgency efforts, as adversaries were forced to confront not a single organization but an interconnected web of actors.

The Gaza war further illustrates how networked power reshapes conflict dynamics. Hokayem (2023) argues that the war cannot be understood solely as a bilateral confrontation between Israel and Hamas; it is a regional event with implications for Iran, the Gulf states, and even global powers. Iran's ability to exert influence through proxy networks allows it to shape the conflict without engaging in direct warfare, thereby reducing the risk of escalation while still imposing costs on its adversaries (Divsallar & Azizi, 2023; Bazoobandi et al., 2023). This form of indirect power projection challenges traditional deterrence theory, which assumes that states respond primarily to direct threats to their territory or regime survival.

At the same time, the Abraham Accords represent a different manifestation of networked geopolitics. By integrating Israel into a web of economic and security partnerships with Arab states, the accords have redefined regional alignments in ways that would have been unthinkable under the old Arab-Israeli conflict paradigm (Fulton & Yellinek, 2021; Olson et al., 2024). Priya's (2024) concept of positive interdependence captures this shift, suggesting that shared economic and technological interests can generate a form of security that is more durable than military deterrence alone. Yet this networked integration also produces new exclusions, most notably the marginalization of the Palestinian issue, which Fraihat and Ezbidi (2023) identify as a lasting legacy of Trump's "Deal of the Century."

Iran's foreign policy evolution provides a crucial bridge between these two networked dynamics of resistance and integration. Perletta (2024) shows that Iran's "Look to the East" doctrine reflects a strategic recalibration away from ideological isolationism toward pragmatic multipolar engagement. This does not mean that ideology has disappeared; rather, it has been rearticulated within a flexible diplomatic framework that allows Iran to

cooperate with non-Western powers while maintaining its identity as a leader of the “Axis of Resistance” (Bazoobandi et al., 2023). The result is a hybrid strategy that combines normative claims of anti-imperialism with the material logic of geopolitical balancing, a synthesis that resonates with Carr’s (1939) insight that successful foreign policy must align moral purpose with power realities.

The South Caucasus and Eastern Mediterranean further illustrate how these networked dynamics extend beyond the immediate Middle Eastern theater. Kaleji (2024) and Bakhshandeh and Yeganeh (2023) document how energy corridors, maritime boundaries, and diplomatic alignments are reshaping regional geopolitics, drawing in actors such as Greece, Israel, and Iran. These developments underscore that the Middle East is not an isolated system but part of a broader Eurasian network in which security, energy, and diplomacy are deeply intertwined. The Abraham Accords, for example, cannot be fully understood without considering their implications for Eastern Mediterranean gas exploration and Greek-Israeli strategic cooperation (Bakhshandeh & Yeganeh, 2023; Fulton & Yellinek, 2021).

Despite its analytical power, the concept of a networked regional order also raises normative and practical concerns. One of the most significant is the erosion of traditional notions of sovereignty. As non-state actors such as Hamas and Iranian-backed militias become integral components of regional security architectures, the authority of central governments is increasingly contested (Divsallar & Azizi, 2023; Hamoud, 2024). This diffusion of coercive power can enhance local resistance and resilience, but it also complicates efforts to establish accountable governance and durable peace, particularly in fragile states.

Moreover, the networked order may entrench asymmetries of power and suffering. While states like Israel and the Gulf monarchies benefit from economic and technological integration, populations in Gaza and other conflict zones remain trapped in cycles of violence and deprivation (Hokayem, 2023; Fraihat & Ezbid, 2023). Brown’s (2024) characterization of Hamas as an existentialist movement highlights the deep sense of political and moral alienation that fuels such conflicts, suggesting that purely technocratic solutions are unlikely to succeed without addressing underlying grievances.

Future research must therefore grapple with both the analytical and normative dimensions of networked geopolitics. Fawcett (2025) calls for a new multilateralism that reflects the realities of a post-Western world, yet the form such multilateralism should take remains deeply contested. Should it prioritize state sovereignty, human rights, or regional autonomy? How can non-state actors be incorporated into diplomatic frameworks without legitimizing violence? These questions are not merely academic; they will shape the

trajectory of Middle Eastern politics for decades to come.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East is undergoing a profound transformation from a system dominated by hierarchical alliances and external hegemony to a networked regional order characterized by dispersed power, ideological hybridity, and strategic interdependence. By synthesizing the insights of classical realism (Carr, 1939), contemporary security studies (Agbiboa, 2015; Krieg, 2024), and recent empirical analyses of Hamas, Iran, and regional diplomacy (Hamoud, 2024; Perletta, 2024; Fulton & Yellinek, 2021), this article has demonstrated that neither conflict nor cooperation in the region can be understood in isolation. Instead, they are products of overlapping networks that simultaneously constrain and enable the actions of states and non-state actors alike.

This networked order is neither inherently peaceful nor irredeemably violent. It is a dynamic, contested, and evolving system in which new forms of power and legitimacy are constantly being negotiated. Understanding this reality is essential for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to navigate the complexities of Middle Eastern geopolitics in the twenty-first century.

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