



Logical Structuring and Risk Analysis of Development Shifts in the Middle East Region

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ABSTRACT

In the evolving landscape of international relations, the Middle East stands at a pivotal juncture, influenced by both historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical dynamics. This paper delves into the intricate interplay of socio-political, economic, and geopolitical factors shaping the region's trajectory. Amidst the backdrop of global power shifts, the Middle East's development narrative underscores the necessity of cooperative solutions. However, multifaceted risks, including escalating security dilemmas, economic challenges, and geopolitical rivalries, threaten its stability. Using the balance of power theory, this study integrates the dynamics of the Middle East with the broader landscape of international politics, aiming to unearth the underlying logic behind its policy directions. The recent resurgence of the Israel-Palestine conflict serves as a focal point, reflecting broader tectonic shifts in the global balance of power. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of cooperative endeavors and a nuanced understanding of the region's dynamics for ensuring peace and prosperity.

1. Introduction

In the post-pandemic era, the sluggishness of the global economy and the turbulence of the international political order have posed unprecedented challenges to international relations. The risks of regional conflicts and geopolitical crises are escalating, reflecting not only shifts in the traditional power structures but also the emergence of new geopolitical dynamics. The armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 undoubtedly serves as a significant marker for this period. This confrontation not only signifies a turning point where the conventional international order begins to crumble but also clearly embodies the trend of multipolar world development. This event showcases the competition and antagonism among major powers while revealing the challenges and opportunities faced by smaller nations in the new international context. Against this backdrop, the Middle East, positioned at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, is also exhibiting new developmental characteristics. Reconciliation and cooperation are becoming the prevailing trends in the region, reflecting a reconsideration of long-standing conflicts and confrontations and an adaptation to the new international milieu.[1] This trend seems to herald a reintegration of the Arab world, of-

fering renewed hope for peace and prosperity in the region. However, the resurgence of the Israel-Palestine conflict introduces an element of uncertainty to this positive trajectory. This conflict not only epitomizes the enduring disputes in the Middle East but also mirrors the evolving geopolitical dynamics. This situation not only jeopardizes peace and stability in the Middle East but also challenges the region's multilateral diplomacy. In such circumstances, how to balance the interests of all parties and ensure regional peace and stability becomes a paramount task for Middle Eastern nations. A series of intricate shifts cast a shadow over the developmental prospects of the Middle East. Given this context, systematically sorting out and analyzing the multi-dimensional changes in the region, and scientifically discerning its characteristics and trends, is emerging as a crucial issue in international political studies.

2. Literature review

The Middle East has historically been a confluence of global political, economic, and cultural interactions. In recent years, the evolving situation in the region has garnered widespread academic attention. From a historical perspective, J. Lasmar and Leonardo Coelho Assunção Santa Rita revisited the Middle East's transformation into a stage for a series of regional conflicts and major power disputes since the demise of the Ottoman Empire.[2] They highlighted that these confrontations have profoundly influenced the evolution of the region's security complexities. From a geopolitical standpoint, Olivia Glombitza and K. Ulrichsen delved into the myriad changes in regional and domestic orders in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf post-2011. They posited that ideational factors play a pivotal role in both peace-building and threat construction, suggesting that achieving regional peace and stability requires not only material resources and tangible actions but also appropriate perceptions and thought processes.[3] M. Beck and T. Richter examined the shifts in the regional order in the Middle East following the Arab Spring, proposing that a new regional order, describable as a highly contested multipolar system, has emerged. This unstable regional system is reinforced by three facets: the securitization of policies, the increasing fragmentation of regional institutions, and the emergence of persistent conflict zones.[4] From a political and constitutional lens, Berna Öney analyzed the ideological dimensions of constitutions in the Middle East and North Africa, arguing that this dimension can be defined by a nation's openness to freedom and modern values. The article also presented evidence of the fourth phase of Islamic constitutional development, integrating the concept of the rule of law with Islamic norms, indicating that political and constitutional factors also play a crucial role in the region's evolving situation.[5] Some Chinese scholars have also explored this issue from various dimensions such as causes, characteristics, and trends.[6]-[12]

While these studies elucidate the developmental logic of the Middle East in modern times to some extent, the region's recent significant policy shifts have introduced new dynamics that existing research struggles to explain. The changes in the region are intricately linked to global political shifts. Balance of power theory posits that the distribution of power in the international system influences state behavior and the stability of the international order.[13] While the theory has various forms and variants, its core assumption is that states are rational, self-interested, and security-seeking entities that choose strategies of cooperation or competition based on perceived benefits and threats.[14] The theory also suggests that states respond to powerful or rising adversaries through balancing or bandwagoning to maintain or alter the power equilibrium in the international system. Thus, this study employs the analytical framework of the balance of power theory(Figure 1), attempting to integrate the dynamics of the Middle East with the macroscopic landscape of international politics, aiming to unearth the underlying logic behind its series of policy directions. Ultimately, this research endeavors to discuss the developmental characteristics and future trajectories of the region, offering insights for related studies in international politics.

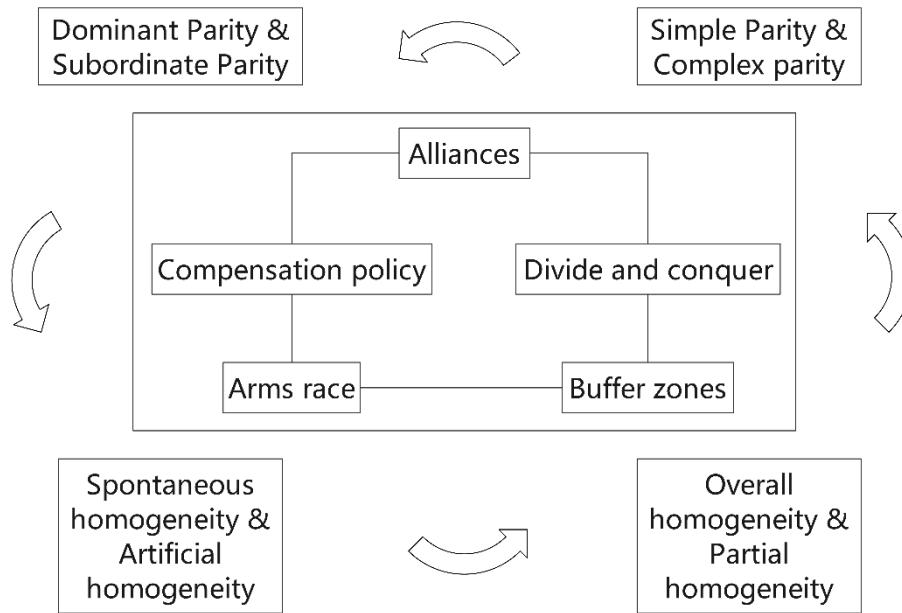


Figure 1 Basic framework of the balance of power theory

3. Reconciliation and Cooperation: New Trends in Middle Eastern Development

3.1 State Development as the Mainstream Governance Orientation

The modernization journey of Middle Eastern countries has been tumultuous, marked by conflicts in ideology, religious thought, class relations, and geopolitics. As a latecomer in development, the Middle East's dynamics are constantly influenced and intervened by global superpowers, infusing the region's growth with uncertainties.[15] This can be primarily observed on two fronts: domestically and internationally.

Firstly, on the domestic front, Middle Eastern countries are susceptible to the interference of dominant powers.[16] For their vested interests, elites, religious leaders, and military warlords often directly intervene in governance, disregarding the nation's modernization. This leads to a divergence between individual and collective interests. On the other hand, imbalances in industrial structures and a scarcity of human resources have kept economic growth at a low level, offering little momentum for modernization.

Secondly, from an international perspective, the Middle East has long been at risk of geopolitical conflicts. The reasons are multifaceted, encompassing religious antagonisms, ethnic animosities, ideological disparities, and conflicting national interests. Coupled with the intervention and propulsion of international forces, Middle Eastern countries have frequently erupted into armed conflicts and large-scale wars, such as the five Middle Eastern wars and the Iran-Iraq War. These disruptions have often halted the region's modernization process, with some countries even experiencing significant decline. Under the influence of these uncertainties, the Middle East has consistently been unable to focus on its nation-building, causing its development to lag behind the mainstream trends of modern human civilization.

In recent years, a focus on state development has emerged as a governance consensus among Middle Eastern nations. This shift is evident in the policy documents of various countries. Regional powers like Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have all rolled out medium-to-long-term development plans, prioritizing industrial construction and technological advancement. The pivot in the governance focus of these regional heavyweights indicates a transformation in the primary contradictions of the Middle East.

3.2 Reconciliation and Cooperation as the Trend in State Relations

Following the “Arab Spring,” multiple power centers emerged in the Middle East, such as the “Traditional Islamic Alliance,” “Pro-Muslim Brotherhood Alliance,” “Shiite Resistance Alliance,” and “Moderate Alliance,” among others.[17] These factions viewed each other with suspicion, engaging in intense rivalries across various domains, plunging the Middle East into fragmentation and disorder. The Middle East also remains the least integrated region globally.[18]

However, since 2021, confrontations between these regional blocs have eased, and the warming of multi-lateral relations has accelerated. This trend is evident in three aspects. First is the reconciliation among the three major camps: Turkey, Israel, and the Arab nations. In 2022, Turkish President Erdoğan visited the UAE and Saudi Arabia, followed by a return visit by Saudi Crown Prince Salman to Turkey. Turkey also normalized relations with Egypt in 2023. The same year, Israeli President Herzog visited Turkey, with high-level discussions taking place at the UN General Assembly in September. Moreover, following the 2020 “Abraham Accords,” the 2022 “Negev Forum” further enhanced relations between Israel and Arab nations. These diplomatic moves indicate a steady warming of tripartite relations. Second is the reconciliation between Iran and the Arab world. In 2022, Kuwait and the UAE resumed ambassadorial diplomatic relations with Iran, and Saudi Arabia initiated talks with Iran. In 2023, with China’s efforts, the two countries issued a joint statement agreeing to restore diplomatic relations. By September of the same year, both nations exchanged ambassadors, marking a historic reconciliation between the two major camps.[19] Relations between Iran and other countries like the UAE and Bahrain also gradually improved. Third is the internal reconciliation among Arab nations. Long-standing divisions, such as pro-US vs. anti-US, pro-Muslim Brotherhood vs. anti-Muslim Brotherhood, and pro-Iran vs. anti-Iran, have prevented the Arab world from forming a stable consensus. However, with Saudi Arabia’s announcement of restoring diplomatic ties with Syria, the Arab world is attempting to reintegrate Syria. The active assistance and “earthquake diplomacy” during Syria’s 2023 earthquake further attest to this.

3.3 Seeking Autonomy Becomes a Regional Consensus

The notion of global multipolarity is becoming a consensus among the elite in Middle Eastern countries.[19] The balance of international power is undergoing profound changes, with the rise of emerging market countries and developing nations. No longer can one or a few nations dominate international affairs; instead, multiple influential nations and blocs have emerged. This multipolar trend provides medium-sized countries and regional alliances with greater strategic flexibility, allowing them to exert more significant international influence. Due to their geographical location and energy resources, Middle Eastern countries possess the capital to seek international strategic autonomy.

This regional consciousness is first reflected in their foreign policies. Middle Eastern countries actively seek cooperation with various political forces, aiming to build a global partnership network. For instance, while Saudi Arabia maintains its alliance with the US, it is also expanding cooperation channels with countries like Russia, China, and India. In 2023, Iran joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and some Middle Eastern countries even joined the BRICS nations. These examples indicate that Middle Eastern countries are trying to reshape the international order by strengthening cooperation with various political forces.

The pursuit of regional autonomy is also evident in the struggle for discourse power in areas of advantage. For example, during the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Middle Eastern countries, leveraging the “OPEC+” organizational framework and acting from regional interests, formulated energy policies and repeatedly rejected US requests for increased oil production. This not only reflects these countries’ growing discourse power in the oil sector but also their determination to uphold regional autonomy. Furthermore, Middle

Eastern countries are not solely relying on the traditional oil industry; they are actively promoting the transition to new energy industries, aiming to secure a more advantageous position in the global economic industrial chain.

4. Dissolution and Reconstruction of Balance in the Middle East

4.1 The Israel-Palestine Conflict: The Catalyst for the Collapse of Balance

If the rise of the reconciliation trend and the sense of autonomy are seen as the maintenance and improvement of the balance in the Middle East, then the recent resurgence of the Israel-Palestine conflict is becoming the starting point for the collapse of this balanced structure. This conflict is a complex one, triggered by a combination of religious, ethnic, territorial, and political factors. It involves Israel, Palestine, and other Arab nations, and also affects the interests and influence of major powers like the United States and Russia. The immediate spark for this conflict was a series of actions by Israel in Jerusalem, including the eviction of Palestinian residents from East Jerusalem and restrictions on Palestinians visiting the Temple Mount for prayers during Ramadan, leading to strong protests and resistance from the Palestinians. The Palestinian militant group Hamas launched a military operation codenamed “Al-Aqsa Flood” on October 7, 2023, firing over 5,000 rockets at Israel and sending armed personnel into southern Israeli territory, capturing several Israeli Defense Forces generals. In response, Israel conducted extensive airstrikes and artillery shelling on the Gaza Strip, destroying Hamas’s command centers, tunnels, and weapon caches, and declared a “state of war.”

While the United States attempted to mediate between the conflicting parties immediately, its diplomatic efforts seem to have been ineffective so far. The international community’s efforts for peace also couldn’t deter Israel’s determination for retaliation. For Hamas, under the long-term pressure from Israel, its resolve for armed resistance is unwavering. As for Israel, the current government is historically the most hardline right-wing administration, and the domestic political and social environment is far from peaceful. This intense military action serves dual purposes: on one hand, it aims to weaken Hamas’s military capabilities and political influence, showcasing to the international community its firm stance and determination; on the other hand, it helps the ruling government divert domestic political crises and societal divisions, thereby consolidating its rule and legitimacy. Therefore, at present, neither side seems to have a strong desire or motive for a ceasefire. However, the escalation of this conflict could lead to structural changes in the previously stable balance of the entire Middle East region.

4.2 A Microcosm of the Global Balance of Power

In the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the world has witnessed an intensified jostling for power among global giants. This escalation has transformed the Middle East into a veritable “chessboard” for geopolitical maneuvering. Here, the intricate dance of power sees China and the U.S. locked in a technological duel, Russia and the EU wrestling over energy supremacy, and the U.S. and Russia in a tug-of-war for strategic allies. This evolving dynamic in the Middle East is not an isolated phenomenon but a reflection of broader tectonic shifts in the global balance of power.

The Middle East holds a dual significance in the global arena. On one hand, it is pivotal to China’s ambitious “Belt and Road” initiative, aiming to reshape global trade routes. On the other, it remains the linchpin of the U.S. “petrodollar” system, a cornerstone of global finance. Moreover, the volatility of the Middle East has direct ramifications for the Russia-Ukraine conflict, underscoring the region’s interconnectedness with global geopolitics. It is, therefore, an academic and policy imperative to recognize that any destabilization in the Middle East could trigger a cascade of upheavals in the international order.

Despite recent diplomatic overtures between Arab nations and Israel, the simmering Israel-Palestine conflict presents a formidable challenge to regional stability.[20] At its core, the Palestinian issue encapsulates the age-old territorial contestation between the Arab and Jewish communities. This struggle, steeped in layers of ethnic, religious, and geopolitical complexities, remains a festering wound in the collective consciousness of both groups. Israel's historical stance of armed dominance over the Palestinians has exacerbated these tensions, with each act further entrenching mutual distrust and animosity. The recent flare-up in hostilities has pushed many in the Arab world to their psychological brink, amplifying the urgency for a resolution. An unchecked escalation from Israel could very well be the catalyst for a broader Middle Eastern conflagration.

The potential for a full-blown war in the Middle East carries with it profound global implications. The most immediate concern would be its impact on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Western nations, already stretched thin in their support for Ukraine, might find their resources further strained. The U.S.'s decision to reallocate aid from Ukraine to Israel is a testament to this delicate balancing act. Such recalibrations could be decisive in shaping the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine standoff. Furthermore, the global strategies of powerhouse nations would be significantly affected. Both China's "Belt and Road" vision and the U.S.'s Middle East blueprint hinge on the region's stability. While global powers possess the agility to recalibrate their strategies, the Middle East's centrality cannot be understated. The U.S., given its deep-seated ties with Israel, is bound to prioritize its support, even if it means diluting its focus in other strategic areas like the Asia-Pacific. This could inadvertently create vacuums, allowing rival powers greater latitude, and potentially reshaping global power dynamics.

4.3 Trends and Characteristics of Changes in the Middle East

The Middle East, a region historically characterized by its intricate web of geopolitical dynamics, is currently undergoing significant transformations. These changes, while rooted in historical contexts, are also reflective of the broader shifts in the global political landscape. To understand the future trajectory of the region, it's essential to delve into the key trends and characteristics shaping its present and future.

Firstly, there's an emerging trend of reconciliation in the Middle East. This is not merely a fleeting sentiment but a strategic imperative. The majority of countries in the region recognize that a return to a pervasive state of conflict is detrimental to their national interests. The emphasis on development, both socio-economic and political, has become a shared vision among these nations. The initial successes, albeit modest, have been encouraging. This positive momentum underscores the idea that reigniting large-scale conflicts is not the preferred choice for most governments. The relatively swift response of the Arab world to the recent Israel-Palestine conflict is a testament to this. The nature and intensity of this conflict, and more importantly, its resolution, will be contingent on Israel's strategic calculus. Will Israel perceive this as an all-out war, or will it opt for calibrated, targeted strikes against specific entities?

Secondly, as the global order undergoes a phase of restructuring, Middle Eastern countries find themselves at a crossroads. The Israel-Palestine conflict, while regional in its scope, has broader implications, signaling a disruption in the global balance of power. For Middle Eastern nations to navigate this new world order effectively and to maximize their developmental prospects, they must adopt a proactive stance. This involves not only understanding their individual national interests but also conceptualizing the Middle East as a cohesive geopolitical entity. Establishing a unified regional identity will be instrumental in amplifying their collective voice on the global stage, thereby enhancing their influence in international affairs.

Lastly, the unfolding dynamics of the Israel-Palestine conflict serve as a barometer for the broader Middle Eastern trajectory. Israel's current actions, perceived by many as provocative, are treading on the sensitive spiritual and cultural ethos of the Islamic world. Symbolic gestures, such as the raising of black flags in

Iran and red flags in Syria, are emblematic of the simmering discontent and anger among Muslims. Yet, it's crucial to recognize the nuanced nature of this sentiment. While there's palpable anger, it doesn't necessarily translate into a unanimous call for large-scale warfare. The Islamic world, diverse in its political, cultural, and socio-economic fabric, is grappling with this complex interplay of power and sentiment. The eventual direction of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and by extension, the broader Middle East, remains shrouded in uncertainty.

In conclusion, the Middle East stands at a pivotal juncture. The choices made by its nations, individually and collectively, will have profound implications, not just for the region but for the global order. As scholars and policymakers grapple with these complexities, a nuanced, informed, and empathetic understanding of the region's dynamics will be paramount.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The Middle East, often described as the world's geopolitical epicenter, stands at a pivotal juncture. Its trajectory is shaped by a complex interplay of socio-political, economic, and geopolitical factors. While the region's historical and cultural richness offers a tapestry of opportunities, its present is marked by a series of challenges that threaten its future stability and prosperity. In the broader discourse of international relations and global politics, the Middle East's development narrative underscores the necessity of cooperative, win-win solutions. Yet, the contemporary landscape, riddled with multifaceted risks, casts a shadow over the prospects of lasting peace and sustainable development.

5.1 The Looming Shadow of Security Risks

At the forefront of these challenges is the escalating security dilemma. The region, historically a cauldron of conflicts, is witnessing a resurgence of tensions, with the specter of war looming larger than ever. The intricate web of alliances and rivalries, coupled with external interventions, has created a volatile environment. The ramifications of this heightened security risk are profound. Beyond the immediate human cost, prolonged instability could derail the region's developmental trajectory, pushing it into a quagmire of stagnation or, worse, regression. The international community, therefore, faces a moral and strategic imperative to prevent further escalation and foster an environment conducive to dialogue and diplomacy.

5.2 Economic Challenges: The Underbelly of the Middle Eastern Mirage

Parallel to the security concerns is the region's economic conundrum. Economic development is not uniform across the countries of the Middle East (Table 1). Despite its vast natural resources, particularly oil, the Middle East grapples with deep-seated structural economic issues. The dual challenges of diversifying economies away from oil-dependence and navigating the complexities of the global economic order have exacerbated existing problems. Countries are feeling the pinch of fiscal pressures, and the path to industrial transformation is fraught with obstacles. This economic quagmire manifests in stark wealth disparities, alarmingly high unemployment rates, and pervasive corruption. Such economic fragility, if left unaddressed, could further fuel social unrest and political instability, casting a pall over the region's future prospects.

Table 1 GDP status of major Middle Eastern countries in 2022

Countries	GDP ranking for 2022	GDP proportion among major Middle	Total GDP in 2022 (in billions
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		Eastern countries in 2022	of US dollars)
Saudi Arabia	1	23.05%	1108.15
Turkish	2	18.83%	905.53
Israel	3	10.87%	522.53
United Arab Emirates	4	10.55%	507.54
Egypt	5	9.88%	475.23
Iran	6	7.32%	352.21
Iraq	7	5.62%	270.36
Qatar	8	4.69%	225.48
Kuwait	9	3.84%	184.56
Oman	10	2.38%	114.67
Jordan	11	1.02%	48.84
Bahrain	12	0.92%	44.39
Cyprus	13	0.59%	28.47
Yemen	14	0.43%	20.65

Data source: IMF and China Caitong Securities Research Institute

5.3 Geopolitical Chessboard: The Great Game Redux

Lastly, the Middle East remains a theater for the grand geopolitical game, with major powers jockeying for influence. Issues such as the Yemeni crisis or the simmering tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan are not isolated incidents but symptomatic of a larger geopolitical contest. These rivalries, often exacerbated by external interventions, threaten to undermine regional cohesion. The Middle East's historical legacy as a battleground for empires serves as a somber reminder of the perils of external meddling. Unless there's a concerted effort to address these geopolitical tensions within a regional framework, the vision of a peaceful, integrated Middle East remains elusive.

5.4 In Summation

The Middle East's challenges, while daunting, are not insurmountable. The region's rich history is a testament to its resilience and adaptability. However, the current confluence of security, economic, and geopolitical challenges necessitate a reimagining of strategies and approaches. Cooperative endeavors, rooted in mutual respect and understanding, offer the best path forward. The international community, regional powers, and local stakeholders must come together, transcending narrow interests, to chart a course towards a peaceful and prosperous Middle East. The stakes, both for the region and the world, are too high to settle for anything less.

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