

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Variables and Dynamics of the Middle Eastern System

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Abstract

This study examines the structure of the Middle Eastern regional system, analysing the factors driving its transformation into a multi-tiered and inherently volatile framework. By integrating international relations theory with empirical analysis, the research evaluates key determinants of regional power, highlighting the competitive and fluid nature of influence within the system. The findings suggest that persistent rivalries and external interventions sustain instability, underscoring the challenges of achieving a sustainable regional equilibrium. Employing an integrative approach that combines area studies and international relations (IR) theory, this study examines the regional power dynamics using twelve indicators to assess hard and soft power, including economic, military, and socio-political metrics. The analysis positions regional actors within a multi-tiered structure, evaluating the interplay between internal and external influences to explain the current distribution of power. The study finds that the Middle Eastern system has developed into a hierarchical yet anarchic structure, characterized by a competitive and multi-polar power distribution. Although external actors, such as the United States, continue to play pivotal roles, regional powers – including Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran – exert significant influence, leading to an inherently unstable system. This dynamic interplay fosters competition and limits cooperative stability. The findings suggest that the Middle Eastern regional system's volatility is rooted in this unique distribution of power, where continuous struggles among actors contribute to persistent instability. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing future developments and potential stability within the region.

Keywords

Middle Eastern Studies, International Relations Theories, Middle Eastern system, power, influence, dynamics

Corresponding author: Jerzy Zdanowski (jzdanowski@uafm.edu.pl)

Author roles: Zdanowski J: Conceptualization, Methodology

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: This work was supported by WPAiSM/NoPiA/SUB/21/2021-KON.

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How to cite this article:

For printed version: Zdanowski Jerzy. "Variables and Dynamics of the Middle Eastern System". *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 60, (2024): 74–93. Printed 2025. <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17888.3>.

For online version: Zdanowski J. **Variables and Dynamics of the Middle Eastern System**. *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 2025, 4:16 <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17888.3>

Introduction

Methodology and data sources

This study employs an integrative approach, integrating area studies with International Relations (IR) theory, to provide a multidimensional analysis of power dynamics within the Middle Eastern regional system. Specifically, the study adopts neoclassical realism as its guiding framework, allowing for an analysis that balances systemic international influences with domestic-level variables to examine the nuanced and evolving regional power structure. The application of this combined method is justified by the current lack of popularity in using IR theory to study Middle Eastern international relations among scholars.¹

Research design and theoretical framework

The study's methodology is designed to examine power relations across multiple levels of analysis, as delineated in IR theory:

1. **Local Level:** At this level, the study examines how internal state factors, such as domestic political dynamics, economic structures, leadership, and societal influences, affect each actor's foreign policy and regional behaviour.

2. **Regional Level:** The core focus of this analysis, the regional level, addresses interactions between states, considering how domestic policies and systemic pressures shape each actor's approach to foreign policy, alliances, and regional competition.

3. **Global Level:** This level contextualizes Middle Eastern dynamics within the broader international system, analysing how global powers, including the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union, exert influence on the Middle Eastern system.²

Our investigation is centred on the regional level of international relations. We adopt Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's perspective, delineating the region as a distinct

¹ A. Tetti, "Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies and the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy," *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2007): 118; See also M. Valbjørn, "Towards a 'Mesopotamian Turn'? The Study of Middle Eastern International Relations within International Relations and Middle East Studies," *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 14, no. 1/2 (2004): 47–76; B.E. Sasley highlights the few publications where authors successfully merged both approaches: F. Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds. R. Hinnebusch and A. Ehteshami (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002); R. Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester University Press, 2003); See B.E. Sasley, "Studying Middle Eastern International Relations through IR Theories," *Ortadoğu Etütleri* 2, no. 2 (January, 2011): 15; The list of publications in which the Middle Eastern system was considered in purely theoretical discussions can be supplemented by J.J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Cornell University Press, 1983); B. Miller, *When Opponents Cooperate: Great Power Conflict and Collaboration in World Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 1995).

² See S.H. Hoffman, "International Relations: The Long Road to Theory," *World Politics* 11, no. 3 (April, 1959): 371, 372.

level within the international relations structure, “composed of geographically clustered sets”, “which has a structure of its own.” Consequently, regions “have analytical, and even ontological, standing.”³ Consequently, we agree that the foundational structure of the regional system is composed of four key elements: (1) boundary, delineating the region from its neighbouring areas; (2) anarchic structure, indicating that the region consists of two or more autonomous units; (3) polarity, encompassing the distribution of power among these units; and (4) social construction, encompassing the patterns of amity and enmity among the units.⁴

To comprehend the dynamics of a regional system, conducting a comprehensive analysis of foreign policy within the context of its formulation and implementation is crucial.⁵ This necessitates a close examination of domestic factors that influence actors’ behaviour towards each other. These factors, such as political and economic ideologies, national character, leadership styles, and socioeconomic structures, are key determinants of an actor’s internal stability. This internal stability, in turn, significantly influences their conduct within the system. By delving into these domestic dynamics, a deeper understanding of the interactions and behaviour of actors within the regional landscape can be achieved.⁶

Data collection and sources

The study relies on a combination of primary and secondary data sources to ensure a comprehensive examination of regional power dynamics:

1. Primary Sources: Key primary data were gathered from:

Government Documents and Declarations: Official statements, policy documents, and strategic declarations from Middle Eastern governments provide insights into each state’s foreign policy objectives and responses to regional developments.

Reports from International Organizations: Documents from the United Nations, the Arab League, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were reviewed to assess the influence of international mandates, resolutions, and multilateral agreements.

Regional Policy Statements and Treaties: Policy briefs, defense pacts, and strategic alliances between Middle Eastern countries and with external powers offer critical insights into shifting alliances and power structures.

³ B. Buzan and O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3; See also D.A. Lake and P.M. Morgan, *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (Penn State University Press, 1997), 6, 7.

⁴ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 53; See also H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Columbia University Press, 1977), 9.

⁵ For a comprehensive understanding of neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy, refer to G. Rose’s work, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October, 1998): 144–172.

⁶ About the role of domestic politics in foreign policy, see V.M. Hudson and B.S. Day, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 209–212, 214, 215.

2. Secondary Sources: To complement primary data, secondary sources were sourced from reputable academic databases:

Databases: Research articles and analysis were accessed from JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar to gather historical and contemporary perspectives on Middle Eastern power dynamics. This included literature on major events like the Arab Spring, U.S. interventions, and other critical junctures in Middle Eastern politics.

Keywords and Search Strategy: The search strategy employed targeted keywords, such as “Middle Eastern system,” “regional power dynamics,” “influence” “stability,” “anarchy,” “hierarchy,” “polarity,” “non-state actors,” alongside specific country names. This strategy ensured the inclusion of relevant literature and critical analyses.

Indicators of Power: Secondary sources were also used to identify metrics and indicators essential to assessing power, including studies on economic strength, military capability, and socio-political stability.

Data categorization and analysis

To standardize data analysis, collected data were categorized into four primary domains: military, economic, political, and socio-cultural indicators. This categorization aligns with a systematic framework that considers both hard power and soft power metrics, enabling a comprehensive view of each actor’s influence in the region.

1. Military Indicators: Military strength was assessed through data on defense spending, weaponry, troop strength, and strategic alliances, drawn from sources such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and the Global Militarization Index.

2. Economic Indicators: Economic influence was gauged through indicators like GDP, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and control over critical resources, with data sourced from national economic reports and international trade databases.

3. Political and Diplomatic Indicators: Political influence was measured by examining diplomatic engagement, international alliances, and regional organization memberships. Data were drawn from government documents, policy statements, and analysis of diplomatic activities within the region.

4. Socio-Cultural Indicators: This category assessed factors such as historical ties, religious influence, and cultural diplomacy, which contribute to soft power in the region. Data included historical texts, cultural analyses, and records of international educational and cultural exchanges.

Power and influence composite index

To quantify each actor’s regional influence, a **Power and Influence Composite Index** was developed based on twelve distinct indicators across the categories listed above (Table, page 17). Each indicator was assigned a score from 1 to 5 to measure the relative strength or influence of each actor within each category, providing a balanced

composite score that captures both tangible (hard power) and intangible (soft power) dimensions.

Analytical framework: neoclassical realism

The application of neoclassical realism allows the study to interpret regional power structures through the lens of systemic independent variables and domestic-level intervening variables. As such, neoclassical realism accommodates both the international pressures acting upon Middle Eastern states and the unique domestic factors that modify their responses. This framework helps clarify why certain actors emerge as more influential or central within the system and how domestic priorities shape their interactions with other regional or global actors.

The boundaries of the Middle Eastern system

Leonard Binder was one of the first to pose this question in 1958.⁷ Defining “the Middle Eastern system,” Binder took into account criteria such as the existence of regional organizations or defence pacts, the interrelationship of domestic and international politics, conflicting intra-area policies, existence of religious opposition to nationalism, government policies, historical and colonial experiences. Based on this, Binder writes that “the Middle East proper stretches from Libya to Iran, with fringe areas including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Maghreb, and the core area, including the Arab states and Israel.”⁸ The Middle East was thus broadly encompassed, with religion and colonial past serving as common elements linking individual components within the system.

Binder’s proposal initiated a discussion that showed that views on which states constitute the Middle East were diverse. While some accepted ‘Ottoman political culture’ as the main criterion, excluding Morocco and Iran from the system, others focused on Israel, neighbouring Arab states, and extra-regional great powers, excluding Iran and Turkey, and Maghreb states. Yet another approach limited the system to Arab states, taking the element of Arab nationalism as its basis.⁹

Depending on the criteria adopted, the system’s boundaries can expand or contract subjectively. If we consider Islamist issues as the binding factor of the system, then the subject of analysis will encompass territory from Morocco to the Philippines. It makes the system too extensive to be analytically useful. Buzan and Wæver propose the identification of subcomplexes within a system, particularly in cases where the number of states within a regional system is relatively large. In the

⁷ L. Binder, “The Middle East as a Subordinate International System,” *World Politics* 10, no. 3 (April, 1958): 408; About the terminology, see also W. Reitzel, M.A. Kaplan and C.G. Coblenz, *United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1955* (The Brookings Institution, 1956), especially chapter 16.

⁸ Binder, “The Middle East,” 415, 416.

⁹ See F.G. Gause III, “Systemic Approaches to Middle East International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (Spring, 1999): 11–31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3186364>.

context of the Middle East, they suggest recognizing distinct subcomplexes in the Levant (comprising Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria) and the Gulf (encompassing Iraq, Iran, and GCC countries).¹⁰

However, Buzan and Wæver refrain from specifying specific criteria for distinguishing these subregions beyond geographic proximity. They acknowledge the considerable overlap and interplay between these subcomplexes, challenging their disentanglement. Furthermore, they assert that Turkey lies outside the Middle East, a perspective that may seem contentious given Turkey's significant political involvement in both the Levant and the Gulf.

We believe that every system is created by those actors who are integrated around some heartland, a key issue from the perspective of the interests of those actors. The bonds of integration can be friendly or hostile; they can be expressed in cooperation or competition. However, regardless of their nature, they bind the actors into a whole. For these reasons, we agree that the Middle Eastern system should be geographically limited to those states whose foreign policy focuses on two issues: the Arab–Israeli conflict, and Gulf security.¹¹ Such an understanding of the Middle Eastern regional system makes the region a coherent unit in which interactions have significant importance for its participants. North Africa is outside this understood system; although it is focused on the first mentioned issue, its impact on this issue is not primary. Turkey, on the other hand, is a country that, in the last 70 years, has increasingly influenced the issues integrating the Middle Eastern system and has become one of its main participants.

Consequently, our approach formulates the Middle Eastern system as comprising sixteen state actors: Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen. Non-state actors in the Middle East can wield significant power and influence, often challenging the authority and stability of state governments in the region. Among them, we can distinguish militant groups (ISIS, al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, Hamas), paramilitary organizations (the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq), and political movements (Kurdish nationalist groups, Palestinian factions like Fatah and Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and others). Their power and influence vary depending on their resources, organizational capabilities, and ideological motivations.

Middle Eastern system variables

The question of variables holds significant importance within international relations theories, especially concerning whether the factors influencing outcomes in regional systems can function independently within the global context. Gideon

¹⁰ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 51, 52.

¹¹ Gause considered the third issue, namely Arab unity plans. However, since the 1990s, this issue has ceased to play a significant role.

Rose points out four approaches to understanding the factors influencing foreign policy have emerged in research. These are *Innenpolitik* theories, offensive and defensive realisms, and neoclassical realism. While *Innenpolitik* theories emphasize the dominant influence of domestic factors on foreign policy and treat specific domestic variables as independent, the other three perspectives recognize the predominant impact of the global system and systemic variables on regional dynamics. Rose himself treats only systemic factors as independent while labelling domestic variables as intervening variables.¹²

Neoclassical realism outlines systemic independent variables, domestic-level intervening variables, and a range of dependent variables. Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Stephen E. Lobell further clarify this framework by referring to systemic ‘stimuli’ that are “filtered through domestic-level intervening variables,” highlighting four main groups: (1) leader images, (2) strategic culture, (3) domestic institutions, and (4) state-society relations.¹³

In our analysis, we endeavour to elucidate power dynamics and foreign policy by delving into unit-level factors and concentrating on the interplay between variables within the regional system. However, we also acknowledge the significance of examining the interactions between systemic and domestic-level variables.

Believing that the core of the Middle Eastern system is the Palestine and Arab–Israeli conflict, we can identify specific variables and analyse their influence on the system. The primary independent variable is the territorial claims of both Israelis and Palestinians. The second group of independent variables includes security concerns perceived as threats to national security and survival from neighbouring states and non-state actors, as well as the policies, strategies, and decisions of political leaders. These factors provoke territorial disputes and the control of specific areas such as the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem. Refugee issues, including resettlement, compensation, and the right of Palestinian refugees to return can be considered dependent variables. Additionally, the broader geopolitical dynamics and power struggles within the Middle East, including rivalries between Arab states and the influence of Iran and Turkey, play a significant role.

The external alliances and partnerships of Israel and Arab states with regional and global actors such as the US, the European Union, Russia, China, and Iran can be considered important factors that determine the involvement of third-party actors in mediating or facilitating negotiations to solve the conflict, but also escalating tensions and wars. International law and norms, which create the legal frameworks governing the conduct of states and non-state actors in the context of the conflict, including UN resolutions and international humanitarian law, are significant independent variables.

¹² Rose, “Neoclassical Realism,” 148–152.

¹³ N.M. Ripsman, J.W. Taliaferro and S.E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–3.

Finally, economic interests, resources, and development opportunities, including access to water, trade routes, and natural resources, are independent variables that determine a country's position in the system and military potential. The military potential can also be considered an independent variable regarding a country's ability to form alliances and resolve disputed issues with other system participants. Demographic shifts and population dynamics within Israel, the Palestinian territories, and other Middle Eastern states, including issues related to immigration, population growth, and demographic diversity, form the broadest framework for the functioning of the system. They impact the grand strategy of ruling elites and the sentiments of the population of the Middle East towards the conflict and the region's future development.

Power and influence in the Middle East

There are various approaches to measuring the power of a state; however, there is no single universal metric. *Power* is treated interchangeably with terms such as *strength*, *might*, or *potential* in these approaches. One of the most common approaches is the *Composite Indicator of National Capability*, which measures hard power, understood as a combination of demographic, economic, and military potential. Power, understood as military force, is the basis of the *Global Firepower Index*. This index considers various factors related to military power such, as natural resources, logistics, financial capacity, and geographic conditions. In terms of military power, it considers the number and type of armaments and defence spending. This aspect is discussed by institutions such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and the *Global Militarization Index*. Other approaches to measuring power include scientific potential and soft power, as science is related to culture and influence the country's image. The United Nations specifically considers a country's preparedness for cyber attacks and cyber warfare and proposes the *Global Cybersecurity Index*.¹⁴

The National Power Index classifies countries according to their economy, military, diplomatic influence, technology, and popularity worldwide. In 2011, Turkey was the highest-ranked country in the MENA region (17th place worldwide) and ranked 23rd in economic power, 9th in military strength, 17th in diplomatic influence, 17th in technology, and 31st in global popularity. Saudi Arabia was in 32nd place worldwide (26th in economic power, 29th in military strength, 44th in diplomatic influence, 81st in technology, and 25th in global popularity). The third country in the region was Israel, in 34th place worldwide (28th in economic power, 26th in military strength, 48th in diplomatic influence, 30th in technology, and 34th in global popularity), followed by the UAE (49th worldwide), Iran (50th worldwide), and Egypt (51st worldwide). Qatar was then in 78th place worldwide after Kuwait – 63rd worldwide.¹⁵

¹⁴ "Global Security Index and Cyberwellness Profiles," *ABIresearch*, April, 2015, https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/str/D-STR-SECU-2015-PDF-E.pdf.

¹⁵ "2011 National Power Index," *National Ranking Qualifying the World of Sovereign States*, <https://nation-ranking.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/2011-npi.png>.

After 12 years, the situation has changed in this regard. According to the annual ranking of *CEOWORLD* magazine, the most powerful countries were those that shaped global economic policies and dominated through seven attributes: political stability, economic influence, defence budget, weaponry, international alliances, soft power, and military strength. According to these criteria, in 2023, Turkey was the highest-ranking country among MENA countries (10th place), followed by Egypt (12th), Saudi Arabia (14th), Israel (15th), Iran (17th), and UAE.¹⁶

The Global Power Index of 2022, Pareto Economics assumes that, in the era of globalization, four themes dominate international relations: Globalization, Geopolitics, Transformative Technology, and Societal Change.¹⁷ In this ranking, which focuses on financial potential, technological prowess, and the ability to conduct market operations, and thus on the issue of business transformation and investment landscape, the highest among MENA countries in 2023 was the UAE – ranked 14th in the world. The next countries in the region were Turkey (20th), Israel (22nd), and Saudi Arabia (24th). Iran was in 40th place, Oman in 43rd, Egypt in 50th, and Qatar in 59th.¹⁸

In addition to ‘hard’ indicators such as GDP, the number of soldiers and the amount of FDI, a country’s strength also depends on how its environment perceives it. *US News & World Report* ranks the world’s most powerful countries by polling thousands of people from dozens of countries about their opinions on the subject. In the ranking for 2023, 17,000 people were polled in 87 different countries. The ranking assessed a country’s power based on respondents’ opinions about political, economic, military, and soft power. The USA, China, and Russia remained the top three strongest countries. Of the MENA countries, Saudi Arabia was the highest, ranking 9th. The UAE ranked 10th, Israel 11th, Turkey 15th, Iran 18th, and Qatar 22nd. The report indicated that Saudi Arabia, along with India, made the highest jump in the ranking.¹⁹

In studies of International Relations theories, the terms ‘power’ and ‘influence’ are often used interchangeably, or at least the boundary between the contents of these terms is not always clearly marked. Robert Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner analyse both terms within the category of “influence terms,” which they define as “the wants, desires, preferences, or intentions of one or more actors [that] affect the actions, or predispositions to act, of one or more other actors in a direction consistent with – and not contrary to – the wants, preferences, or intentions of the influence-wielders.”²⁰

¹⁶ A. Dimitropoulou, “Ranked: The World’s Most Powerful Countries For 2023,” *CEOWORLD Magazine*, August, 2023, <https://ceoworld.biz/2023/08/26/ranked-the-worlds-most-powerful-countries-for-2023/>.

¹⁷ Pareto Economics, “Fundamentals,” 2024, <https://pareto-economics.com/fundamentals/>.

¹⁸ Pareto Economics, “Global Power Index. Report 2023,” 2024, <https://pareto-economics.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Global-Power-Index-Report-2023.pdf>.

¹⁹ U.S. News and World Report, “Power,” 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/rankings/power>.

²⁰ R.A. Dahl and B. Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis* (Prentice Hall, 2003), 12.

Evelyn Goh defines influence as “the act of modifying or otherwise having an impact upon another actor’s preferences or behaviour in favour of one’s own aims.”²¹

In these definitions, there are indeed two actors, one of which is the influencing party and the other the target or object of influence. Such influence involves intentional and deliberate interaction using specific resources, which are evaluated as sufficient to achieve the desired effect. It can also be assumed that the criterion for measuring influence is a change in the behaviour of the second actor. Emily Meierding and Rachel Sigman propose a framework of the causal mechanism, which first assumes the identification of power resources that a given participant in the system uses when engaging in influencing activities on a target unit of the system. It is assumed that a state’s power resources can have material and cultural characteristics.²² The fundamental element of the proposed framework is the power mechanisms that translate a state’s resources and mechanisms into influence.

In our analysis, we intend to show what influencing activities each of the Middle Eastern system units has undertaken within the system over the last two decades and in which sectors: economic, military, educational, or diplomatic. In our analysis, we shall use qualitative methods to evaluate the power mechanisms mobilised by activities in different sectors. The analysis should include the dimension of development and humanitarian aid, support for political initiatives, military assistance, organisation of economic forums, political initiatives concerning other participants in the system, sports successes, and cultural support programmes (e.g., assistance in the restoration of historical monuments). All these activities fall within the framework of foreign policy.

In answering the question of which country is the most influential in the Middle East, we assume that the potential associated with human and natural resources, and hard power, including GDP per capita, FDI, and military power, and geopolitical position provides significant opportunities to influence the entire system. However, soft power factors are also important. We should consider (1) the quality and extent of diplomatic relationships, including membership and participation in international organizations and leadership roles in diplomatic initiatives, especially those directed at regional challenges and conflicts; (2) cultural and academic influence and ideological appeal, as well as international aid, scholarship programmes, and development assistance; (3) historical and cultural significance, including historical legacies, heritage, and religious significance, shapes a country’s perception and influences its soft power assessment; (4) stability and governance, referring to the political system, societal unity, and strength of state institutions, allowing for the assessment of resilience in the face of internal and external challenges, translating into influencing capabilities within the system; (5) regional alliances, indicating the ability to form

²¹ E. Goh, *Rising China’s Influence in Developing Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

²² E. Meierding and R. Sigman, “Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (December, 2021): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab011>.

strategic alliances with other regional actors and external powers, influencing the position in the regional system; (6) regional leadership, which involves promoting regional stability, mediating conflicts, and fostering cooperation, as well as leadership in regional organizations, such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

These twelve indicators, meticulously assessed and scored on a point scale from 1 to 5, provide a comprehensive picture of a country's position in the regional system. This rigorous methodology ensures a fair and accurate ranking of the most influential countries in the region, which simultaneously form the poles of the system.

The composite indices presented in Table 1 show that Saudi Arabia is the most powerful and influential country in the Middle East followed by Israel, Turkey, and Iran. Qatar and the UAE are closely followed, with Egypt also occupying a significant position. Other countries in the region rank much lower in terms of both hard and soft power potential. Each of the main actors possesses potential, but there are visible factors that limit their ability to influence the entire system.

The role of external actors

The Middle East has been a venue for centuries-long rivalries between global powers. Currently, four external actors influence the Middle Eastern system. They are the USA, Russia, China, and the EU. The influence of each of these actors is different.

US policy in the Middle East is aimed at protecting its interests by controlling regional powers.²³ There are different opinions about the current position of the USA in the Middle East. This question arose due to Washington's visible inclination to withdraw militarily from the region over the past 15 years. "This policy began under President George W. Bush, who was chastened by the fiasco of the war he had started in Iraq."²⁴ The Trump administration continued the Obama administration's policy of minimizing Middle Eastern military involvement.

Fareed Zakaria considers that the outcome of this trend "has not been the happy formation of a new balance of power but rather a vacuum that regional players have aggressively sought to fill."²⁵ President Trump's decision in October 2019 to withdraw most US forces from Syria strengthened the hands of Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Syria. At the same time, Trump increased pressure on Iran to reduce its influence in the region.²⁶ Trump also encouraged Arab Gulf countries to form a coalition with Israel.

²³ See H. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (Simon & Schuster, 1994), 738.

²⁴ F. Zakaria, "The Self-Doubting Superpower. America Shouldn't Give Up on the World It Made," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 1 (January/February, 2024): 47.

²⁵ Zakaria, "The Self-Doubting Superpower."

²⁶ National Security & Defense, "Remarks by President Trump on the Killing of Qasem Soleimani," January 3, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-killing-qasem-soleimani/>.

Table 1. Power and Influence Composite Indices.

Country	NR	HR	GDP pc	FDI	MP	GP	D	C & AI	H & CS	IS	RA	RL	1 - 6	Overall	Ranking
S. Arabia	3	4	4	5	3	4	4	3	4	4	5	5	(23)	47	1 (1)
Israel	2	5	3	5	5	3	4	3	5	4	3	2	(23)	44	2 (1)
Turkey	2	4	2	4	5	5	4	5	5	3	3	3	(22)	44	2 (3)
Iran	4	4	1	2	5	5	4	3	4	3	4	4	(21)	43	4 (4)
UAE	3	4	5	5	2	1	3	4	2	4	4	3	(20)	40	5 (5)
Qatar	3	4	5	4	2	1	4	3	2	4	4	3	(20)	40	5 (5)
Egypt	2	2	1	3	4	5	3	4	5	3	3	3	(17)	38	7 (7)
Bahrain	3	4	3	4	1	1	4	3	2	3	4	3	(16)	35	8 (9)
Kuwait	4	4	5	2	1	1	3	3	2	4	2	2	(17)	33	9 (8)
Oman	2	4	2	2	1	2	4	4	2	4	3	3	(13)	33	9 (10)
Jordan	1	2	1	3	1	2	4	3	3	3	4	3	(10)	30	11 (12)
Iraq	4	2	1	0	3	2	3	2	4	2	2	2	(12)	27	12 (11)
Lebanon	1	3	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	1	2	2	(10)	22	13 (12)
W.B. & G.	-	2	1	-	-	2	3	3	4	1	2	2	(5)	20	14 (16)
Yemen	1	2	1	0	1	3	1	1	2	1	2	2	(8)	17	15 (14)
Syria	1	2	-	-	2	2	1	1	3	1	2	2	(7)	17	15 (15)

Author's own assessments based on the analysis of individual indicators: NR – natural resources; HR – human resources, GDP *p.c.* – Gross Domestic Product *per capita*; FDI – Foreign Direct Investments; MP – military power; GP – geopolitical position; D – diplomacy; CAI – cultural & academic influence; H & CS – historical and cultural significance; IS – internal stability; RA – regional alliances; RL – regional leadership; W.B. & G. – West Bank and Gaza

The USA's treating the Middle East as less important than the Far East has opened up space for Russia and China to expand their influence in the region. This does not mean that the USA is withdrawing from the Middle East and handing it over to these countries. Washington aims to maintain regional stability, counterterrorism, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, energy security, and Israel's security. The USA is still the region's preeminent power and occupies a unique place in the region due to its military resources. The US strategy towards the Middle East involves maintaining alliances with key countries in the region. The most important of these is a strong and enduring alliance with Israel, which includes significant military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation. The second key ally for the US is Saudi Arabia.

Despite occasional tensions, the USA maintains a close relationship with Saudi Arabia, primarily driven by mutual interests in energy security, counterterrorism efforts, and regional stability. The USA provides military support and sells weapons to Saudi Arabia.²⁷

Following the Syrian civil war, Russia emerged as a formidable force in the Middle East, making significant strides in both military and diplomatic arenas. Its intervention in Syria, in support of President Bashar al-Assad, not only saved the Syrian regime but also thwarted US plans to remove al-Assad from power. This pivotal move by Russia, coupled with its role in the US-led Coalition's fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), led to the establishment of a Russian military base in Syria, thereby amplifying its influence in the region.²⁸

Russia has strategically positioned itself in Syria and is a crucial partner of Iran. It also harbours intentions to broaden its influence in Egypt. Notably, Russia has found partners for dialogue in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, Afghanistan, and among the Palestinians. Its growing proximity to Iran has also elevated its role in Yemen, further solidifying its status as a significant player in the Middle East. However, Russia cannot undermine US and Israeli cooperation in the region, and does not play the role of a strategic actor. It cannot be assumed that Moscow's influence on the region will not increase. Geopolitical changes beyond the region may determine this. Russia is strengthening ties with China as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, and it cannot be ruled out that they will present a united front on the issues of the Middle East. Additionally, Russia is building a network of trade connections with Asia to bypass sanctions imposed by the West and could become a centre of global trade.²⁹

In the 21st century, China has emerged as a significant political player, forging economic relations and diplomatic ties with Middle Eastern countries.³⁰ Regarding the Middle East, China's goal is to ensure the long-term security of energy resource supplies through routes beyond the USA's control. It can also be speculated that this presence will extend beyond the economic aspects and include the military

²⁷ See M. Fantappie and V. Nasr, "The War That Remade the Middle East. How Washington Can Stabilize a Transformed Region," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 1 (January/February, 2024): 11.

²⁸ N. Smagin, "Forgotten Front: Why Syria Is Becoming a Headache for Russia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 17, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90784>.

²⁹ S. Kauffmann, "C'est l'un des effets géopolitiques les plus spectaculaires de la guerre en Ukraine: le renforcement de l'axe Chine-Russie, face aux Etats-Unis," *Le Monde*, April 17, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/04/17/c-est-l-un-des-effets-geopolitiques-les-plus-spectaculaires-de-la-guerre-en-ukraine-le-renforcement-de-l-axe-chine-russie-face-aux-etats-unis_6228268_3232.html; H. Meyer, "Russia Builds New Asia Trade Routes to Weaken Sanctions Over War," *Bloomberg*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-17/russia-builds-new-asia-trade-routes-to-weaken-sanctions-over-war>.

³⁰ J. McBride, N. Berman and A. Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>; "Belt and Road Initiative: Is China's Trillion-dollar Gamble Worth It?," *BBC News*, October 17, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-67120726>.

sphere, which would come at the expense of the USA. However, it seems unlikely that China's military presence in the Middle East would have the same character as the American presence in the form of military bases in the region.³¹ China does not aim to oust the USA from the Middle East but rather to weaken its influence in the region.³² China sees two key challenges to peace and stability in the region: the Israel–Palestine issue and the Gulf issue, particularly relations between Iran and the other Gulf states. China's interest in the Gulf is understandable because more than half of China's crude oil imports come from this region.³³

The European Union is an essential factor in the Middle Eastern system. Since the announcement of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995, followed by the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004, and the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008, the EU's goal has been to provide financial and technical support for the development programmes of Middle Eastern countries. At the same time, trade agreements between the EU and Mediterranean Basin countries have been intended to integrate the economies of both shores of this basin. The EU's weakness as an external actor lies in its fragmented foreign policy. In many issues concerning the situation in the Middle East, EU members had different opinions, making it impossible for decisions to be made promptly. Such controversies characterize the EU's position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the situation in Syria. The EU does not have its armed forces, limiting its impact on developments in the Middle East and promoting its solutions. The complexity of the Middle Eastern system, i.e., the intertwining of conflicts, alliances, rivalries, and ambitions of system participants, requires nuanced understanding and diplomatic agility, which poses a serious challenge to EU diplomacy. The recent conflict between Hamas and Israel was another opportunity for Brussels more actively to shape the Middle Eastern system. However, this opportunity was not seized.³⁴

³¹ C. Gao, "China Officially Sets Up Its First Overseas (as Base in Djibouti)," *The Diplomat*, July 12, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-officially-sets-up-its-first-overseas-base-in-djibouti/>; M. Chan and T. Ng, "Chinese and US Militaries on Covid-19 Alert in Djibouti as Rivals Face Common Threat," *South China Morning Post*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3081460/chinese-and-us-militaries-covid-19-alert-djibouti-rivals-face>.

³² Y. Sun, "China Doesn't Want the Costs of Running the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, February 29, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/29/china-middle-east-united-states-regional-hegemon-war/>.

³³ See Y. Sun, "China Wants to Weaken, Nor Replace, the U.S. in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, March, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/29/china-middle-east-united-states-regional-hegemon-war/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Editorspercent20Pickspercent2003012024&utm_term=editors_picks.

³⁴ A. Dandashly and C. Kourtellis, "Can the EU Become an Effective Geopolitical Power in the Middle East?," *Euronews*, November, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/10/30/can-the-eu-become-an-effective-geopolitical-power-in-the-middle-east>; See also M.G. Jones and V. Genovese, "Faced with US and China, EU Leaders Call Forsweeping Competitiveness Deal," *Euronews*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/04/18/faced-with-us-and-china-eu-leaders-call-for-sweeping-competitiveness-deal>.

What system exists in the Middle East?

The Middle Eastern system occupies an intermediate position within the global hierarchy and demonstrates high autonomy. During the Cold War, when the world system was characterized by bipolarity, two superpowers tried to transfer this characteristic of the world system to the Middle East. In the 1990s, while easing tensions and cooperation between the USA and Russia, Middle Eastern countries gained an opportunity to pursue a more independent policy in the region and create regional networks. As a result, there was talk of a 'new regionalism' and the emergence of a multipolar balance of power in the Middle East.

However, the autonomy of the Middle Eastern is relative and its system feels impulses from the outside. On the other hand, the possibilities of influence by the worldwide system on the regional one are not unlimited. In the 1950s, these limitations were due to the anti-imperialist attitude of Middle Eastern political leaders. It applied primarily to the so-called new middle classes, which took power in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, side-lining the 'old' layers associated with land ownership and participation in power systems created in colonial times. The specificity of the Middle Eastern system lies in the fact that the foreign policy of many Middle Eastern countries was oriented not so much towards strengthening their position in the system as towards exerting the most substantial possible influence on the domestic affairs of other countries within it.³⁵

If the system consists of units, then the question arises: what is the composition of the individual units as a whole? It depends on how power and capabilities are distributed. Since power is rarely evenly distributed, some states form 'poles,' giving rise to the phenomenon of polarity in the system.³⁶ From this perspective, the Middle Eastern system consists of four tiers. The first tier comprises the four strongest and most influential states: Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran. The second tier consists of the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt. There are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon at a lower level, and Yemen, Palestine, and Syria at the lowest tier. States occupying the highest positions in the ranking of power and influence

³⁵ Binder, "The Middle East," 414.

³⁶ See K.N. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Little Brown, 1967); K. Deutsch and J.D. Singer, "Multipolar Systems and International Stability," *World Politics* 16, no. 3 (1964): 390–406; *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*, ed. G.J. Ikenberry (Cornell University Press, 2002); R. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); G. Blainey, *The Causes of War* (Free Press, 1973); R.L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (Columbia University Press, 1997); P.W. Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 108–148; J.S. Levy, "Preventive War and Democratic Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2008): 1–24; N.M. Ripsman and J.S. Levy, "Wishful Thinking or Buying Time? The Logic of British Appeasement in the 1930s," *International Security* 33, no. 2 (2008): 152–158; W.R. Thompson, "Delineating Regional Subsystems: Visit Networks and the Middle Eastern Case," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13, no. 2 (1981): 213–235.

have similar political, military, economic, and soft power potentials. They are also in conflict with each other, competing on many fronts and blocking each other.

The U.S.'s heavy involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq after 2001 and 2003 created a power vacuum that allowed Iran to expand its influence in the region. U.S. actions—whether intentional or unintentional—facilitated Iran's growing influence in Iraq by reshaping the political and military landscape, particularly through the empowerment of Shi'a factions closely aligned with Tehran. In the broader Middle East, Iran leveraged its proxies, including Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militias, and other aligned groups, to consolidate its influence in key states and conflicts. Iran competes with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain to gain influence in the Gulf region. Qatar is the only higher-level state with which Iran maintains good relations and cooperates in gas extraction. Iran's main adversary in the system is Israel. Saudi Arabia is expanding its network of alliances and connections across the entire system, creating tensions and conflicts in relations with other participants. The closest ally to Riyadh is the UAE, and they cooperate on many fronts under a partnership called the Saudi-Emirati Coordination Council. Under the rule of Mohammad bin Salman, Riyadh is moving away from a religion-dominated identity towards hyper-nationalism. Abu Dhabi, ruled by Mohammad bin Zayed, has shifted towards accepting religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Against this background, tensions arise in relations between the two states. The first was the conflict over the location of the GCC central bank in 2008. Recently, Saudi-Emirati rivalry has spilled into Africa, particularly Sudan.³⁷

Ankara's main ally in the region is Qatar. Turkey supported Qatar in its confrontation with Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners in 2017 and provided diplomatic and economic support. The events of 2017 laid a solid foundation for the Turkish-Qatari alliance.³⁸ The relations between Turkey and Iran, with their long history of balancing their interests in the region, have reached a critical point.

³⁷ T. Mohammad, "How Sudan Became a Saudi-UAE Proxi War," *Foreign Policy* no. 250 (Fall, 2023): 23, <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=15&sid=690e14e4-c7ac-49b4-b3b6-ee1cb8d1f970> percent 40redis.

³⁸ "Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups," *cfr*, August 8, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-turkey-and-armed-kurdish-groups>; A. Ford, "Turkey bombs Kurdish militants in Syria and Iraq," *Politico*, January 13, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-bombs-kurdish-militants-in-syria-and-iraq-pkk-ypg/>; İ. Okuducu, "Turkey's Anti-PKK Operation and 'Development Road'," in *Iraq Are Two Sides of the Same Coin*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Fikra Forum*, April 8, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-anti-pkk-operation-and-development-road-iraq-are-two-sides-same-coin>.

Tensions have escalated in recent years, particularly due to their rivalry in the southern Caucasus.³⁹

In the western part of the Middle Eastern system, Turkey seeks to block the actions of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. An example of this was Turkey's military support for the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya in its fight against General Khalifa Haftar, who was supported by countries like Egypt and the UAE. Turkey is a wild card in the Middle East system. Turkey's NATO membership significantly shapes its political stance in the Middle East by balancing its strategic alliances with Western nations and its regional ambitions. As a key NATO member, Turkey maintains strong security ties with the U.S. and Europe, which influences its policies on issues like counterterrorism, defence cooperation, and regional conflicts. However, Turkey also seeks to assert its influence in the Middle East, often pursuing independent policies that sometimes contradict NATO's broader objectives, such as its military interventions in Syria and Libya or its complex relations with Iran and Russia. This dual approach allows Turkey to leverage its NATO membership for military and diplomatic support while maintaining a degree of autonomy in regional affairs.⁴⁰

The Middle Eastern system became even more complex and conflictual when two Arab Gulf states – the UAE and Qatar – recently joined the quartet of leaders – Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran. The fact that the UAE has become a force in this system is evidenced by its establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel on August 13, 2020, as the third Arab country to take such a step.⁴¹

The potential for external actors to influence the system does not favour its stabilization. The USA remains the main external force, but its increasing engagement

³⁹ H. Azizi and D. Isachenko, "Turkey-Iran Rivalry in the Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, German Federal Foreign Office, no. 49 (September, 2023): 1–4; F. Shahbazov, "Unseen Tensions: The Undercurrents of Iran-Turkey Relations in the South Caucasus," *Gulf International Forum (GIF)*, September 25, 2023, <https://gulfif.org/unseen-tensions-the-undercurrents-of-iran-turkey-relations-in-the-south-caucasus/>; H.J. Barkey, "What Role Is Turkey Playing in Syria's Civil War?," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/what-role-turkey-playing-syrias-civil-war/>; G. Dalay, "Turkey has emerged as a winner in Syria but must now use its influence to help build peace," *Chatham House*, December 13, 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/turkey-has-emerged-winner-syria-must-now-use-its-influence-help-build-peace/>; M.B. Altunışık, "Turkey and the US in the Middle East: A Case for Alliance Change," *All Azimuth* 14, no. 1 (2025): 42–61, https://www.allazimuth.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Altunisik-2025_issue2.pdf; A. Colibasanu, "Turkey's Evolving Geopolitical Strategy in the Black Sea," *FPRI*, December 4, 2024, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/12/turkeys-evolving-geopolitical-strategy-in-the-black-sea/>.

⁴⁰ "Russia in the Middle East: National Security Challenges for the United States and Israel in the Biden Era," *Wilson Center*, 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/report-russia-middle-east-national-security-challenges-united-states-and-israel-biden>.

⁴¹ "The United Arab Emirates Has Become a Force in the Middle East," *The Economist*, August 20, 2020, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/08/20/the-united-arab-emirates-has-become-a-force-in-the-middle-east?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18151738051&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIvrtx6PihAMVhkeRBR1rGQ81EAMYASAAEgL98PD_BwE&gclid=aw.ds.

in the Far East diminishes its ability to influence. At the same time, other actors, such as Russia, China, and the EU, are not powerful enough to significantly impact the Middle Eastern system. In a situation where the forces of the leading local participants balance each other out and flatten the hierarchy, the weakness of external actors exacerbates the state of anarchy. The system becomes increasingly anarchic as proxies become more independent.⁴²

As a result, according to some analysts, the Middle East is neither unipolar nor multipolar. “The Middle East is nonpolar, and no one is in charge,” believes Gregg Carlson. This author’s conviction that the Middle East is in anarchy can be expressed differently by saying that the Middle Eastern system is in a transitional stage. The USA remains the hegemon but is not fully engaged in the region’s affairs, and its actions are ineffective. Other superpowers have significantly less influence in the area. Israel cannot impose its way of resolving the conflict with the Palestinians, and Iran can only act through its proxies to fuel smouldering conflicts. Gulf countries look after their interests and do not intend to put them at risk by imposing on Israel a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue. Turkey maintains its influence in Iraq and Syria, but its impact on the *heartland* of the Middle Eastern system is not significant.⁴³

Anthony H. Cordesman, analysing the destabilisation factors in the MENA region, emphasises that this region is exceptionally unstable, although the critical causes of instability vary sharply by nation.⁴⁴ Four main lines of conflict can be identified in the Middle Eastern system. The first is the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over territory concerning the Holy Land between the Mediterranean coast and the Jordan River. The second line is Turkey’s search for its identity. On one hand, this country is part of the West, and on the other, it belongs to the Middle East. The third line of conflict is the antagonism between the two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both states support various groups from Syria to Yemen to strengthen their influence throughout the Middle Eastern system. The fourth line is tensions between states and societies. In many countries in the region, society refuses to legitimize the ruling groups and does not accept these groups’ appropriation of revenues from the exploitation of natural resources.⁴⁵

⁴² M. Levitt, “The Hamas-Iran Relationship,” *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, November, 2023, <https://jstribune.com/levitt-the-hamas-iran-relationship/>.

⁴³ G. Carlson, “The Power Vacuum in the Middle East: A Region Where No One’s in Charge,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 6, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/power-vacuum-middle-east>.

⁴⁴ A.H. Cordesman, *Stability in the MENA Region: The Range of Forces Shaping Stability* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 22, 2018), 4, 5; See also A.H. Cordesman and N. Harrington, “Stability in the Middle East: The Range of Short and Long-Term Causes,” *CSIS*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/stability-middle-east-range-short-and-long-term-causes>.

⁴⁵ C. Hanelt and A. Weber, “The EU and the Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa: How to Build a New Relationship between Old Neighbors,” *Trilogue Salzburg*, 2022, 105, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/84_Salzburger_Trilog/Salzburger_Trilog_2022/6_The_EU_and_the_Conflicts.pdf.

Conclusion

In 2024, the Middle Eastern system is semi-autonomous, anarchic, hierarchical, and unstable. States occupying the highest positions in the power and influence ranking have similar political, military, economic, and soft power potentials. They are also in conflict, competing on many fronts and blocking each other. As a result, the Middle Eastern system is highly conflict-prone, and factors driving conflict escalation are stronger than factors promoting cooperation. The region is not monolithic in terms of stability. Arab countries, as a whole, tend to be more stable within the broader regional context. However, even here, some parts are more stable than others. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries generally demonstrate greater economic and political stability. In contrast, the Levant often faces significant security and political challenges, as seen in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and the West Bank and Gaza.

There are two visible risks of escalation: one associated with the Iranian–Saudi confrontation and the other with the Israeli–Palestinian confrontation. Saudi–Iranian relations will remain conflict-prone because it is difficult to assume that Iran will relinquish its ambitions to play a role as a regional power and stop supporting its proxies in a long-term perspectives given the current external conditions. The second risk of escalation in tension in the region is associated with the dynamics of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Here, the shift of the confrontation line from Israeli–Arab to Israeli–Iranian is characteristic. The structures and institutions created by the Israeli authorities regarding the Palestinian issue, as well as the policies of Israeli governments, have become a potential source of tension. On the other hand, the policies and institutions of the Palestinian Authority have found themselves in a state of paralysis.

Forces for stability in the region associated with economic cooperation and integration remain relatively nascent. Destabilizing forces have been stronger in the region, driven by protracted conflicts (e.g., Syria, Yemen, Libya), weak institutions (e.g., Lebanon's political paralysis), and high unemployment and youth disenfranchisement (e.g., Egypt). These factors collectively contribute to a persistent instability in several areas, even as others maintain relative stability. However, before October 7, 2023, diplomatic efforts towards economic integration seemed to be gaining momentum, and the chances of success were greater than they had ever been since the mid-1990s.

It is a fact that the influence of the USA in the Middle East is not as visible as in previous decades. Nevertheless, the USA is capable of deploying significant military forces to the Middle East and influencing Israel and its allies, especially in the Gulf. Washington remains the only external power that has the potential to influence all the major actors in the regional system. The USA also has the potential to create a bipolar system with Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, it cannot be assumed that this situation will remain unchanged. The current rivalry among great powers for influence worldwide and dynamic changes in the global balance of military

and economic power will undoubtedly impact the situation in the Middle East region. It can also be assumed that global confrontation will be accompanied by further polarization of forces in the Middle East and the formation of a new proxy structure.

While the anarchic nature of the Middle Eastern system and the challenges of achieving regional hegemony through hard power are well-documented, this study makes a distinct contribution by introducing and applying the Composite Power and Influence Index. Unlike traditional power assessments that primarily focus on military strength, economic capacity, or diplomatic influence in isolation, this index integrates twelve distinct indicators, encompassing both hard power (e.g., military strength, economic resources, and geopolitical positioning) and soft power (e.g., cultural influence, diplomatic reach, and regional alliances). This multidimensional approach provides a more comprehensive and empirical assessment of power distribution in the Middle East, offering an innovative tool for analyzing state influence in a fragmented and volatile regional system. The empirical evidence of international relations shows that merely possessing natural, economic, or military resources does not guarantee the ability to influence or control events. Recognising the influence of hard power on the system, we assumed that 'hard' elements of power should be evaluated in conjunction with soft factors, as precisely these soft factors determine the effective or ineffective 'translation' of power into influence and impact.

Furthermore, the theoretical contribution of this study lies in its synthesis of neoclassical realism with a quantitative methodology. While neoclassical realism acknowledges that both systemic and domestic variables shape state behavior, existing analyses often lack structured measurement tools for assessing regional influence. The Composite Power and Influence Index bridges this gap by operationalizing these theoretical insights into an empirical framework that allows for comparative assessments across time and actors. This methodological innovation enhances the empirical literature on regional power dynamics and provides a replicable model for future studies examining shifting power balances in complex geopolitical landscapes.

Additionally, by applying this index to Middle Eastern states, the study reveals new insights into how power is distributed and exercised within a system characterized by persistent instability and external interventions. This framework can also be adapted for cross-regional comparisons, enabling scholars to evaluate the effectiveness of various power instruments across different geopolitical contexts. In doing so, this research not only confirms existing theoretical assumptions but also expands the methodological toolkit available for analyzing international relations in the Middle East and beyond.

Ethics and consent statement

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability statement

No data are associated with this article.