

**Research Article****REALIST APPROACHES TO GCC POLICIES: POWER, SECURITY, AND STRATEGIC SHIFTS IN A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST*****Yaron Katz**

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Abstract

This research explores the geopolitical strategies and policies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries within the context of shifting power dynamics in the Middle East. It applies a realist framework to analyze how these states, particularly in light of the diminishing influence of the United States, are recalibrating their security priorities, alliances, and foreign policy decisions. The research emphasizes that the GCC states prioritize survival, security, and power in a competitive geopolitical environment. These states increasingly navigate regional threats and opportunities through conventional diplomacy and strategic partnerships, as exemplified by the Abraham Accords and their engagement with Israel. Additionally, the study highlights the growing role of non-state actors in shaping regional dynamics by using proxy forces, especially Iran, to expand influence and counter regional rivals. It examines how their perceptions of power and security influence the GCC states' responses to U.S. foreign policy shifts. The research provides valuable insights into the ongoing strategic evolution of the GCC states, offering a comprehensive understanding of how they respond to the changing geopolitical landscape through a lens focused on power, security, and national survival.

Keywords: Geopolitical Strategies, GCC, Middle East, Abraham Accords, Iran.**INTRODUCTION**

This research explores the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East through a realist lens, focusing on the strategic behavior of both state and non-state actors, as well as the power competition and security concerns that shape the region. It argues that Middle Eastern states, particularly Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries - comprising Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman - are primarily driven by realist principles centered on power, security, and self-preservation. A complex interplay of material interests, ideological factors, and regional concerns influences these states' foreign policies. The study demonstrates how realist theory, which emphasizes power dynamics, security, and state behavior, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the region's evolving alliances and strategic decisions. Key events and developments, such as the Abraham Accords, Iran's regional strategy, and GCC security policies, demonstrate realist theory's enduring relevance in analyzing state behavior. As regional states adjust to shifting threats and opportunities, the increasing influence of non-state actors further enriches the realist framework. This provides valuable insights into how states navigate an increasingly multipolar international system. The study of alliances, proxy warfare, and the rise of non-state actors reveals how foreign policy decisions are shaped by evolving power structures and strategic interests. The Abraham Accords exemplify how Gulf states are recalibrating their security priorities in response to the diminishing influence of the United States. From a realist perspective, states like the UAE have adapted their security strategies based on their perception of U.S. support, reinforcing that survival is the primary motivator in state behavior.

Similarly, Iran's use of proxies and asymmetric warfare underscores the realist emphasis on power and self-preservation. Iran's evolving strategy highlights how states can adapt to resource constraints while strengthening their geopolitical position. The growing influence of non-state actors and constructing political and cultural identities reflect realist principles. Leaders balance material interests with preserving state identity, underscoring how power dynamics guide state behavior in a rapidly changing regional environment. This study provides a crucial understanding of how realist theory applies to Middle Eastern geopolitics, offering insights into the broader implications of power, security, and statecraft in the region. Rooted in realist theory, this analysis asserts that political decisions are driven primarily by pursuing power, survival, and material interests rather than ideological or moral values. Realism suggests that even when ideological or ethical considerations are sidelined, political actors are compelled to make strategic choices based on power dynamics, shifting alliances, and the potential for material benefits. This framework underscores how state and non-state actors navigate the region's complex power structures while prioritizing self-interest and survival over broader ideological or normative concerns. The analysis emphasizes how Middle Eastern states, including Iran and GCC members, leverage realist principles to navigate the region's shifting power dynamics. It highlights the significant role of non-state actors, proxy warfare, and regional influence in shaping state behavior. It offers a deeper understanding of how foreign policy decisions are influenced by evolving power structures and changing strategic interests. This study contributes to the broader academic knowledge of Middle Eastern geopolitics by reinforcing the importance of realist theory in explaining the region's strategic dynamics and expanding the framework to account for the influence of non-state actors and the complex motivations behind state actions.

Theoretical Approach

The evolving political landscape of the Middle East reflects a complex set of strategic calculations increasingly grounded in realist theory as states respond to shifting alliances and changing regional power dynamics. Particularly in the face of the relative decline of U.S. influence, the region's geopolitical transformation demonstrates how the fundamental principles of power, security, and self-preservation shape state behavior. This paper contributes to the academic discourse by examining how realist theory remains a vital framework for understanding the actions and motivations of both state and non-state. The analysis emphasizes the continued relevance of realism in a rapidly changing multipolar world, offering insights into how power dynamics and security concerns drive state decisions. The Abraham Accords are a key example of this shift, with Gulf states recalibrating their security priorities and alliances. In line with realist principles, these states are primarily motivated by self-interest and survival, adjusting their behavior based on perceived threats and opportunities. The engagement of Gulf states with Israel through the Accords demonstrates a strategic pivot, where power dynamics and security concerns – rather than shared ideological goals – shape their policy decisions (Madani, 2024). The Israel-Gaza conflict highlights the tension between Gulf states' pursuit of regional influence and their broader peace-building objectives. In both cases, survival and the quest for influence remain dominant motivators in decision-making.

The increasing influence of non-state actors complicates traditional state-to-state diplomacy, suggesting the need for an expanded realist framework that accounts for unconventional strategies and forms of influence shaping the region. Schumacher (2017) reinforces the realist view by emphasizing the GCC's focus on short and mid-term security and power gains. This supports the argument that survival and influence dominate state behavior, even when ideological objectives are cited. Furthermore, Non-state actors are critical in these strategic calculations, primarily as proxies for state interests. Iran's support for Shia militant groups across the Middle East exemplifies the realist emphasis on power and security. By deploying proxies in its shadow warfare against rivals such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, Iran expands its influence while countering external threats. This approach aligns with realist theory, underscoring the importance of power accumulation and self-preservation in an anarchic international system. Iran's internal challenges and ideological positioning are intertwined with its foreign policy, illustrating how domestic stability and geopolitical strategy are closely connected. The regime's anti-Western rhetoric to maintain legitimacy while pursuing broader objectives reflects the complex balance between power, survival, and ideological cohesion central to realist thought (Olson *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, Iran's evolving Security Assistance (SA) strategy, blending ideological motivations with pragmatic considerations, reflects realist principles. By forming regional alliances and challenging the U.S.-led security architecture, Iran seeks to bolster its deterrence capabilities and ensure its survival in a volatile geopolitical environment (Divsallar & Azizi, 2023). The strategic use of non-state actors and asymmetric warfare exemplifies how states adopt realist strategies to overcome resource constraints and enhance their geopolitical position. Similarly, the varying responses of GCC states to shifting U.S. influence further reinforce realist principles. As Parker and Bakir (2024) argue, countries adjust their defense and security

strategies based on their perceptions of U.S. security guarantees. States that feel less secure in U.S. support, such as the UAE, have diversified their security alliances. In contrast, others, like Qatar and Kuwait, have maintained reliance on the U.S. These decisions, rooted in power dynamics and security concerns, reinforce the realist notion that states prioritize survival by adapting their policies to changing international conditions. Additionally, the focus on identity construction in political strategies, as discussed by Navot *et al.* (2023), complements realist theory. Politicians balance material interests with preserving cultural and political identities, illustrating how power dynamics shape state behavior alongside internal political realities. This pragmatic approach to statecraft is especially relevant in the context of the growing influence of non-state actors, which further complicates the regional political environment. This analysis deepens our understanding of how realist principles guide state behavior by examining the intersection of identity, power, and material interests in an increasingly competitive and dynamic regional landscape.

METHODOLOGY

This research explores the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, focusing on the influence of state and non-state actors in shaping the region's power structures. In light of ongoing regional conflicts, such as the wars in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, and the growing influence of non-state actors, the study applies the lens of realist theory to understand these developments. Realism, a central theory in international relations, emphasizes the role of power, state interests, security concerns, and the anarchic nature of international relations in shaping state behavior. At the core of this research is an analysis of Iran's regional strategy, with particular attention to its use of proxy groups and non-state actors. Iran's actions, combined with the responses of the United States and other key states, are examined to understand the regional struggle for dominance. The study applies realist principles to analyze how these state and non-state actors pursue power, security, and survival. The research also highlights the increasing significance of non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas in shaping Middle Eastern geopolitics. As these actors increasingly challenge traditional state-centric diplomacy, the research argues for expanding the realist framework to better account for the unconventional power dynamics that non-state actors bring to the region. By integrating this realist perspective, the study explores how shifting power dynamics driven by state and non-state actors reshape the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. It challenges traditional state-centric diplomacy models, acknowledging the growing agency of non-state actors and providing a nuanced view of how diplomacy and regional stability are evolving. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of Middle Eastern geopolitics by applying realist theory to contemporary conflicts and alliances. It argues that the pursuit of power and security in a competitive international system drives the actions of both state and non-state actors, with significant implications for regional and global power structures. This study offers a more comprehensive framework for analyzing how modern geopolitical shifts are reshaping the region by adapting realism to consider the role of non-state actors. By extending traditional realist theory to incorporate the growing influence of non-state actors, the research provides new insights into the region's geopolitical transformations. It provides a comprehensive understanding of how state and non-state actors

interact and shape the geopolitical landscape, helping to redefine traditional concepts of power and security. The main contribution of the research to academic discourse is its application of a realist framework to analyze the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, particularly in the context of shifting alliances, regional power struggles, and security concerns. While realism has traditionally been used to analyze global power dynamics, this research offers a new perspective by examining how states such as Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries respond to changing international and regional conditions. It focuses on how regional actors navigate external pressures and internal security challenges and highlights the complex interplay between material interests, ideological factors, and regional influence.

Analysis of State and Non-State Actors

The research integrates the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East, particularly in the context of shifting alliances, state and non-state actor interactions, and the region's strategic recalibrations. Its relevance lies in applying the realist framework to understand power and security dynamics while integrating broader perspectives on identity and legitimacy. The research demonstrates that the Abraham Accords signify a transformative shift in regional alliances, highlighting how Gulf states are recalibrating their strategies to address changing power dynamics and security priorities. This development aligns with the realist perspective, emphasizing that states adjust their behavior in response to evolving threats and opportunities (Madani, 2024). The Accords reflect a practical reevaluation of regional priorities, underscoring how states, driven by survival and the desire to maximize influence, seek new partnerships to safeguard their interests (Priya, 2024). However, the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict presents a challenge to these recalibrations, exposing the tension between the Gulf states' pursuit of self-interest and their broader peace-building goals. In a realist context, where security and survival are paramount, these competing priorities illustrate the complex balance between pragmatic security calculations and long-term regional stability (Mansour & Ahmed, 2024).

The role of non-state actors, particularly in proxy relationships with state sponsors, is central to understanding the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. As Kausch (2017) notes, non-state proxies act as tools to intensify inter-state competition, compelling regional powers to incorporate their actions into military, diplomatic, and legal strategies. Iran's strategic use of Shia militant groups in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen exemplifies the realist emphasis on power projection and security dynamics. Through these proxies, Iran extends its influence, challenges rival states like Saudi Arabia and Israel, and consolidates its dominance in the region. However, this power projection comes at a cost. Iran faces internal challenges, such as ideological rifts and domestic unrest, which reveal the trade-offs inherent in managing power and survival within a realist framework. Shifting alliances, such as the Arab-Israeli normalization process and the U.S.-Iran nuclear deal, further complicate Iran's regional strategy. Koo (2024) argues that Iran's pragmatic use of non-state actors reflects realism's focus on maximizing influence within an anarchic international system. As these shifting dynamics reshape regional balances of power, Iran's foreign policy must adapt to a new geopolitical reality marked by economic constraints and strategic recalibrations. This evolving balance of power alters

Iran's approach to non-state proxies and shapes the broader strategic calculations of Gulf states and other regional actors. Cingöz *et al.* (2024) broaden this analysis by introducing the ontological security perspective, which argues that Iran's support for the Axis of Resistance extends beyond material interests, incorporating identity and legitimacy concerns. This ontological lens complements realist analysis by emphasizing how existential motivations, such as regime survival and ideological cohesion, drive Iran's actions. By integrating material and non-material factors, this perspective provides a better understanding of Iran's foreign policy, revealing the complex interplay between power, security, and identity in its regional strategy.

Iran's Security Assistance (SA) strategy further underscores these dynamics. Divsallar and Azizi (2023) demonstrate how Iran has transformed its SA policy into a cornerstone of its national security strategy, combining ideological goals with pragmatic tactics to build alliances, deter adversaries, and challenge the U.S.-led security architecture. This hybrid approach aligns with key principles of realism, as it reflects Iran's efforts to maximize its power and ensure its survival while navigating resource constraints and using asymmetric methods to extend influence. Cerioli (2024) enhances this understanding by applying a structural realist framework that considers local and regional contexts, offering a comprehensive lens to examine how Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states engage with the region's complex power dynamics.

The varied responses of GCC states to the strategic shifts in the Middle East, particularly the relative decline of U.S. influence, further illustrate the realist-driven nature of regional geopolitics. Parker and Bakir (2024) argue that these differences, exemplified by the UAE's proactive diversification efforts versus Kuwait's reliance on established U.S. alliances, result from a state's perception of U.S. security guarantees. These responses highlight how Gulf states prioritize power, security, and self-interest in their decision-making, adjusting their strategies in line with changing regional dynamics. Additionally, Navot *et al.* (2023) emphasize the importance of identity and material needs in shaping political strategies within a realist paradigm. Their analysis shows that power-driven approaches remain central to understanding the geopolitical realities of the Middle East, especially as non-state actors continue to rise in prominence. Their research contributes valuable insights into the region's shifting alliances, power struggles, and enduring conflicts by examining the intersections of identity, power, and material interests.

Strategic Shifts in the Middle East

The Abraham Accords demonstrated the dramatic shift in regional alliances, led by Gulf states' strategic recalibration of power dynamics and security priorities. This development aligns with the realist framework, which underscores how states adapt their behavior based on evolving threats and opportunities (Madani, 2024). However, the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict tests these recalibrations, exposing the tension between Gulf states' pursuit of self-interest and broader peace-building goals. In a realist context, where survival and influence predominate, these competing priorities reflect the complex interplay between security considerations and regional stability. Proxy relationships between non-state actors

and their external state sponsors significantly influence Middle Eastern geopolitics and stability. Koo (2024) suggests Iran's reliance on non-state actors exemplifies a realist focus on maximizing influence within an anarchic international system. Iran's strategic use of Shia militant groups in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen exemplifies the realist emphasis on power and security dynamics. By leveraging these proxies, Iran projects influence, counters rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, and consolidates its regional dominance (Kausch, 2024). However, this power projection comes at a cost as Iran grapples with internal challenges like ideological rifts and domestic unrest. These internal and external pressures illustrate the inherent trade-offs in managing power and survival within a realist framework. Shifting alliances, such as Arab-Israeli normalization and the U.S.-Iran nuclear deal, further complicate Iran's regional strategy, forcing it to recalibrate amidst an evolving balance of power. Koo (2024) explains that Iran's pragmatic use of non-state actors reflects realism's focus on maximizing influence in an anarchic international system. This approach highlights how states prioritize power accumulation and self-preservation while underscoring their economic and strategic constraints. Cingöz *et al.* (2024) expand this analysis through the ontological security perspective, arguing that Iran's support for the Axis of Resistance transcends material interests by integrating identity and legitimacy concerns. This broader lens reveals how existential motivations, such as regime survival and ideological cohesion, drive Iran's actions alongside traditional power-based calculations. By blending realist and ontological frameworks, this perspective provides a nuanced understanding of Iran's foreign policy, emphasizing the intersection of material and non-material factors.

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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members have exhibited varied responses to strategic shifts in the Middle East, particularly the relative decline of U.S. influence. Parker and Bakir (2024) argue that these differences - exemplified by the UAE's proactive diversification efforts versus Kuwait's reliance on established U.S. alliances - stem from each state's perception of U.S. security guarantees. This realist-driven approach highlights how Gulf states prioritize power dynamics, security concerns, and self-interest in their decision-making. Navot *et al.* (2023) emphasize the role of identity and material needs in shaping political strategies within realist paradigms. They show that practical, power-driven approaches remain central to addressing the geopolitical realities of the Middle East, particularly in the context of rising non-state actors. This analysis underscores the critical intersections between identity, power, and material interests, offering valuable insights into the region's shifting alliances and enduring conflicts.

GCC Foreign Policies and Shifting Alliances

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states confront a range of complex dilemmas in their foreign and domestic policies, shaped by the changing geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. These dilemmas primarily stem from the GCC's balancing act between regional influence, security concerns, economic interests, and the shifting nature of global and regional alliances. Key dilemmas for the GCC include managing relations with international powers, particularly the United States and Iran, amidst a turbulent regional context.

A significant dilemma revolves around balancing relations with the United States and Iran (Niblock & Ahmad, 2024). Historically, GCC states have maintained close ties with the U.S., relying on its military and economic support. However, they are simultaneously tasked with managing relations with Iran, a key regional power. The U.S.'s increasingly confrontational stance towards Iran, particularly during President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure," placed GCC states in a challenging position. While they seek to counter Iran's influence in the region, they also recognize that a confrontation with Iran could destabilize the Gulf and disrupt crucial oil exports (Salman, 2024). This balancing act exemplifies the realist framework, emphasizing power dynamics and security imperatives. GCC states, driven by the pursuit of regional stability, attempt to secure their power in a region where Iran's influence is growing. From a realist perspective, the differing strategic alignments and reliance on U.S. security guarantees among GCC states illustrate how power and security concerns shape foreign policy decisions. According to Parker and Bakir (2024), the GCC's reactions to the decline of U.S. influence highlight states' rational efforts to maximize security in an anarchic international system. The UAE, for instance, has proactively diversified its defense and security policies to reduce dependence on the U.S. and form alternative alliances. In contrast, with greater confidence in U.S. security guarantees, Kuwait remains more reliant on its longstanding partnership with Washington. This variance underscores how the GCC's perceptions of external threats and the reliability of their allies significantly influence their strategic choices, which align with realist principles.

The U.S.-GCC relationship reflects power asymmetry and hierarchy within the realist framework. As Saleh (2024) notes, realism stresses great powers' dominance and smaller states' subordination. The U.S., as a global hegemon, has leveraged its superior military and economic capabilities to maintain influence over the GCC, primarily through its control of critical resources like oil and its provision of security guarantees. The 2017 Riyadh summit exemplified this asymmetry, reinforcing the unequal nature of U.S.-GCC relations, where smaller states accept subordination in exchange for security assurances. Analyzing the Abraham Accords through a realist lens, the research explores how the normalization of relations between Gulf states and Israel reflects strategic interests and national security concerns. The Accords exemplify Gulf states' pursuit of self-interest, where states prioritize strategic alliances with Israel to counter regional threats, especially from Iran, and to bolster economic ties. However, Madani (2024) highlights that the fragility of these alliances is tested by ongoing regional conflicts, such as the Israel/Gaza conflict. Realists argue that such partnerships are transient and driven by shifting power dynamics. As the security environment evolves, Gulf states may reassess their alignment with Israel, adjusting policies based on the changing

cost-benefit calculations. The Gulf Crisis (2017–2021) provides another critical case study, illustrating how smaller states, like Qatar, navigate pressures within a U.S.-led global order. When Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain imposed sanctions on Qatar, accusing it of supporting Islamist terrorism, Qatar responded by asserting its sovereignty while strengthening its relationship with the U.S., mainly through the expansion of the al-Udeid airbase. El Taki (2024) emphasizes how sanctions and stigmatization function as norm enforcement mechanisms within regional and global hierarchies. Qatar's strategic response, leveraging its partnership with the U.S., highlighted its alignment with hegemonic norms and allowed it to maintain sovereignty and legitimacy amidst regional isolation. These developments show that the realist framework provides a valuable lens through which to understand the GCC's foreign policies. It illustrates how regional states navigate shifting alliances, power dynamics, and security imperatives in an increasingly complex Middle Eastern geopolitical environment. The varying approaches of the GCC states reflect rational efforts to ensure survival and maximize power, underscoring the centrality of national interests in shaping foreign policy decisions.

Iran's Role in Geopolitical Transformations

Iran's relevance to recent developments in the Middle East is undeniable, as it plays a central role in shaping both the political and military landscape. Through its state apparatus and its support for non-state actors, Iran has significantly influenced ongoing conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and beyond. Soltanzadeh (2024) explains that despite the defeats of its proxies in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, the "Shia Crescent" strategic vision aims to expand its influence across the Middle East, as Iran shapes the region's dynamics by supporting proxy groups, building alliances, and engaging in regional diplomacy. This approach is critical in understanding the shifting alliances in the Middle East, particularly in the context of the evolving conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. Iran has long positioned itself as the leader of the "Axis of Resistance," a coalition of states and non-state actors aligned against Western influence and Israeli expansion. In Gaza, Iran's support for Hamas is a critical element of the ongoing conflict. Through military, financial, and political backing, Iran seeks to weaken Israel and assert its influence in the Palestinian territories. This relationship underscores Iran's use of non-state actors to advance its ideological and political goals. Weimann & Weimann-Saks (2024) demonstrate that despite the eventual failure of this strategy with the collapse of the military and civil rule of Hamas, Iran's involvement was part of a broader regional strategy of proxy warfare, which has profound implications for the regional balance of power.

In Lebanon, Iran's support for Hezbollah is another significant aspect of its regional influence. Hezbollah has become a prominent political and military force in Lebanon, acting as a proxy for Iran's interests in the region. Iran's financial and military backing strengthens Hezbollah's position in Lebanon and escalates tensions with Israel. Soltanzadeh (2024) explains that Iran was also a critical supporter of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Through military and financial assistance and the deployment of proxy forces like Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, Iran played an instrumental role in preserving Assad's rule. The research discusses how Iran's involvement in Syria reflected its broader strategy to strengthen its regional

influence. By supporting Assad, Iran consolidated its power in the Levant and shaped the geopolitical dynamics of the region. However, the outcome of the Syrian conflict is deeply intertwined with Iran's efforts to shape the political future of the Middle East.

Syria was a critical element of Iran's "Shia Crescent," a strategic vision connecting Iran to its allies in Lebanon and beyond (Dinc & Eklund, 2023). The sudden fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime sent shockwaves through Iran's political establishment, intensifying its domestic and international challenges (Vakil, 2024). Assad's ouster marks a significant setback for Iran, exposing its strategic vulnerabilities. The collapse of Iran's proxies - including Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria, Iraqi militias, and Yemen's Houthis - was a significant blow to Iran's regional influence (Soltanzadeh, 2024).

Pragmatic considerations and evolving identities influence Saudi Arabia's changing relationship with Israel. Historically, Saudi Arabia adhered to the Arab nationalist and Islamic identity that viewed Israel as an enemy. However, as the regional dynamics have shifted, Saudi Arabia started reassessing its identity in the context of emerging threats from Iran and the need for economic modernization (Thafer, 2024). This evolving identity led to a pragmatic shift in foreign policy, particularly about Israel, since the Syrian regime's collapse and Iran's waning influence in the region are also driven by identity and ideological factors. On the other hand, as explained by Vakil (2024), the weakening of Iran's position in Syria reflects the fragility of ideologically driven coalitions, where the identity of the Iranian state is no longer as influential in maintaining unity within the Axis.

Saudi Arabia's shift towards pragmatic alliances can be understood through a liberal lens as an effort to secure long-term economic and political stability through regional cooperation. Economic interdependence with the U.S. and China allows Saudi Arabia to reduce its dependence on any one power, supporting its broader foreign policy goals of diversification and modernization (Janardhan, 2022). The normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel and China's role in mediating the Iran-Saudi rivalry reflects the liberal view that regional cooperation, institutional dialogue, and diplomacy can pave the way for stability. These efforts, facilitated by multilateral engagements, suggest that regional powers increasingly seek ways to cooperate, not compete.

The International Dimension: U.S., China, and Russia

The role of international powers in the evolving Middle Eastern order remains critical, as the U.S., China, and Russia each seek to assert influence in the region (Marten, 2024; Raz, 2024). The United States, historically dominant in Middle Eastern geopolitics, is increasingly focused on countering Iran's growing influence and managing the fallout from ongoing conflicts (Krieg, 2024). While the U.S. remains committed to ensuring regional stability, its priorities are evolving, especially with the growing competition with China and Russia. U.S. foreign policy, traditionally defined by the containment of terrorism and support for regional allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia, has shifted toward addressing Iran's nuclear ambitions and mitigating the destabilizing effects of proxy conflicts. The rise of China and Russia in the region has added complexity to U.S. objectives. Russia, with its long-standing alliance with Syria under Bashar al-Assad, is now

facing challenges as the collapse of Assad's regime forces Moscow to reconsider its role in the region (Mansour & Ahmed, 2024). Historically, Russia's involvement has been driven by its desire to limit U.S. influence and project power through military alliances and economic partnerships (Almohamad & Abdullah, 2024). However, with Syria's future uncertain, Russia's position has become more precarious, as the shifting alliances in the wake of Assad's fall could further weaken its strategic footing, risking losing its only reliable ally in the Arab world.

China's growing economic and diplomatic footprint in the region presents a new challenge to traditional Western dominance. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to enhance connectivity and trade across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, has provided the country with new opportunities to deepen its regional involvement (Beccaro, 2024). Through massive infrastructure projects, including the construction of ports, roads, and energy pipelines, China has positioned itself as an attractive partner for Middle Eastern states seeking development and economic diversification. Suliman *et al.* (2024) explain that the financial influence of China, coupled with its non-interventionist foreign policy approach, contrasts sharply with the more militarized engagement of the U.S. and Russia, offering Middle Eastern countries a viable alternative to reliance on traditional powers. In particular, China's growing ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states highlight a shift in regional economic alignments. Once heavily dependent on the U.S. for security and military assistance, the Gulf states increasingly seek to diversify their relationships, with China emerging as a key economic partner. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative, which aims to diversify its economy away from oil dependence, aligns closely with China's interest in investing in non-oil sectors in the region (Moshashai *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, China's role in facilitating diplomatic dialogue between regional adversaries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, underscores its emerging role as a mediator in Middle Eastern affairs. Afterman and Urhová (2024) maintain that China has become increasingly active in the Middle East over the past decade, both economically and politically. Its strategy to expand its reach and influence was parallel to the Gulf states and Israel's desire to leverage China's economic growth and global influence to advance their interests. As the U.S., Russia, and China continue to vie for influence, their interactions in the Middle East will significantly shape the region's geopolitical future. Chaziza (2024) argues that a new era of great power rivalry has returned to the center of the global stage, as the Middle East has emerged as one of the key arenas where this rivalry is being played out. While the U.S. remains focused on countering Iran and containing terrorism, its strategic reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific has challenged its capacity to influence regional politics. Russia's traditional reliance on military and security ties is now compromised, leaving it vulnerable to shifting allegiances. In contrast, China's economic diplomacy offers a more flexible approach, positioning it as an alternative to the U.S. and Russia, especially for countries seeking economic growth without the political entanglements often associated with Western powers. The shifting power dynamics reflect a region in flux, with longstanding alliances being questioned and new centers of power emerging. The interplay between regional conflicts, the collapse of key regimes, and the involvement of external powers is creating a multipolar environment that is more unpredictable and strategically significant than ever. As

regional powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia position themselves as key players and global actors like the U.S., Russia, and China vie for influence, the Middle East is entering an era of heightened competition. According to Schindler & Rolf (2024), geopolitical rivalry has intensified to a degree not seen since the Cold War as the US and China have embraced interventionist state-capitalist practices in competing attempts to gain control over the region. The consequences of these transformations will undoubtedly reshape regional and global power structures. The U.S., while still deeply involved, is now facing an increasingly multipolar environment in which it must navigate competition with China and Russia, both of which are leveraging their distinct approaches to assert influence. This evolving landscape indicates a reordering of regional power structures that will have profound implications for global geopolitics.

Conclusion

This research analyses the Middle East's geopolitical dynamics through a realist lens, emphasizing the strategic behavior of state and non-state actors amid a landscape of shifting alliances, competition for power, and security concerns. It argues that the decisions and actions of key states, particularly Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, are fundamentally driven by realist principles of the pursuit of power, security, and self-preservation. These actors navigate a complex matrix of material interests, ideological factors, and regional power struggles, ultimately shaping their foreign policies and strategic decisions. The application of realist theory provides a framework for understanding the region's shifting alliances and the competition for power. Focusing on pursuing security and balancing relations between competing powers, the research highlights essential trends such as the U.S.'s strategic priorities in the region, Russia's power projection in Syria, and China's growing influence through economic diplomacy. One of the research's key strengths is its ability to connect theoretical concepts to real-world geopolitical events, such as the U.S.-Iran dynamics, the Abraham Accords, and the Gulf Crisis. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how power struggles manifest in specific regional contexts and how states adapt their strategies based on changing power relations and security concerns. As a theory, realism stresses that states act primarily out of self-interest, seeking to maximize their security and influence. This framework is evident in the actions of global powers such as the United States, Russia, China, and regional actors like Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The U.S.'s involvement in the Middle East is shaped by its desire to maintain regional hegemony, counter Iran's growing influence, and secure its strategic interests, including energy resources and alliances with regional powers. From a realist perspective, the U.S.'s military presence and strategic partnerships in the region reflect its broader goal of maintaining global power, preventing challenges from rising actors like China and Russia, and ensuring the stability of its allies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia. The region's geopolitical order is transforming profoundly as global powers like the U.S., Russia, and China compete for influence. Concurrently, regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran continue recalibrating their alliances and strategies in response to the changing power dynamics. Realism underscores the region's competition for power and security remains the driving force. The U.S.'s strategic priorities of countering Iran's influence, protecting allies like Israel, and maintaining a balance of power continue

to shape its regional presence. The research demonstrates that the Middle East is transitioning toward a more multipolar order in which no single actor can dominate. This shift highlights the importance of direct military engagement and economic leverage in shaping the region's future. As power dynamics evolve, the Middle East's geopolitical landscape will be defined by increasingly complex relationships and strategic calculations from regional and global powers. The main conclusion of the research is that the realist principles of power, security, and self-preservation primarily shape the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East. States in the region, particularly Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, make strategic decisions based on a complex interplay of material interests, ideological factors, and regional influence, all driven by the pursuit of security and the need to maintain their power in an increasingly competitive and shifting environment. The research highlights that the actions of global powers like the United States, Russia, China, and regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran are deeply influenced by their efforts to maximize security and influence. This power struggle is the central force driving the region's evolving geopolitical landscape, with alliances and strategic choices shaped by the need to secure survival and counterbalance perceived threats. The conclusion emphasizes that understanding these behaviors through the lens of realism provides a crucial framework for interpreting the region's strategic decisions and shifting alliances.

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