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Regional Order Making after October 7

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The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.

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Regional Order Making after October 7

Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Marc Lynch and Simon Mabon

Since the Hamas attacks of October 7, Israel has sought to remake not only Gaza but the broader Middle Eastern order by force. It devastated Hezbollah, killing many of its senior leaders and largely removing the deterrent threat long posed by its missile arsenal; seized territory in Syria and bombed at will across the country following the fall of the Asad regime; launched (largely ineffectual) strikes against the Houthi regime in Yemen; and unleashed a large-scale twelve day bombing campaign against Iran which culminated in the United States bombing the Fordo nuclear complex and then imposing a ceasefire. Israeli policymakers and pundits are openly discussing the creation of a new Middle East defined by the military defeat of Iran and its allies and the removal of any red lines against its actions.

This Israeli project of reordering the Levant through unchecked air power is orthogonal to the regional order shaped and presided over by the US since 1991, however – simultaneously bringing it to its logical conclusion and upending its very foundations. Israel's military supremacy rests on American support. Very real tensions have emerged between the US and its core allies: the US and Israel are at odds over whether Syria should be allowed to consolidate a new regime; the US and its Gulf allies are at odds over American support for Israel's war on Gaza. Iran emerged from the twelve-day war bloodied but unbeaten; its rapprochement with the Gulf states continues to hold, and it remains uncertain whether and how Tehran might seek to rebuild its regional networks and restore deterrence against Israel – including potentially racing towards a nuclear bomb.

This moment of attempted order-making in real time is a good time, then, for the publication of our new Edinburgh University Press book *Order and Region Making in the Middle East.* Our book brought together some of the leading scholars of Middle Eastern international relations over a multi-year series of workshops to rigorously assess the nature of regional order across diverse theoretical perspectives. Much has changed in the short time between the production of the book and its publication. At the time of writing, the cover image of *Order and Region Making in the Middle East* highlighted the declining salience of American hegemony as manifested by the 2023 Chinese brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The primary competing ordering projects in the region at the time were the Abraham Accords model pushed by Israel, the UAE and the United States which featured Arab-Israeli normalization and cooperation against Iran without movement on the Palestinian issue, and the "Resistance Axis" model centered around Iran and its proxies. Today, in the wake of Israeli atrocities in Gaza the Abraham Accords model has faded from view – yet remains intact, with American hopes to expand it to include Saudi Arabia still enduring – while the "Resistance Axis" has been decimated by Israeli attacks on Hezbollah and Iran and the collapse of the Asad regime. What remains of regional order in its wake, and what might emerge from the turmoil?

In December 2024, we convened a workshop at the Robert Schuman Center of the European University Institute in partnership with POMEPS and SEPAD to discuss these regional changes and their meaning for our book. How did the October 7 attacks, the Gaza war, and Israel's rapidly expanding military actions from Lebanon to Iran change the region? Were those changes in line with the book's theoretical predictions? And what would our book have to say to the new aspirants hoping to remake regional order?

Order and Region Making

Before turning to those recent changes, it is worthwhile reviewing the various theoretical approaches to order which our book features. Conceptions of order, we argued,

first rely on definitions of the region to be ordered – definitions which are themselves quite political and have evolved over time. This collection devotes less time than the book to that critical dimension of ordering, focusing more on the concept of order, but readers of the book will find ample discussion of the politics of the shifting boundaries of the region (especially, but not only, the growing interconnections between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa). Scholars and policy analysts mean very different things by "order", and conflating those divergent meanings and their underlying theoretical assumptions can lead to disastrous results.

Approaches to order vary according to ontology, epistemology and, increasingly, geography. US approaches to order have typically adopted broadly Realist positions which range from the narrow, systemic approach, to the interplay of legitimacy and an underlying balance of power. Realists, both Classical and Neorealist, have focused on the distribution of power, though their specific focus varies, contingent upon factors including the number of great powers present, types of norms involved, forms of legitimacy, and alliances. In contrast, constructivist approaches and various European approaches have taken more post-positivist positions. The English School and Copenhagen School have gained considerable traction across European scholarship as the varied influence of continental philosophy takes hold, albeit often focusing on differing referent objects.

These theoretical approaches take very different positions on the importance of normative foundations for stable order. Realists view order as primarily a function of power and the willingness to deploy it in defense of allies and to deter adversaries. But most of the other approaches discussed above accept that an order can only truly be stable if it rests on some degree of legitimate authority and a common sense of normative purpose. One of the pathologies of American order in the Middle East is that many US officials and policy analysts seem to believe that their domination of the region rests on such a shared normative order, and to not understand how Gaza and broader support for Israel has stripped away such common purpose.

Trans-Atlantic divisions about order are not purely intellectual. In the aftermath of the US strikes on Iran earlier this month, US officials spoke of securing peace through force, while European leaders spoke of the need for de-escalation. While the complexities of bilateral relationships with the US made individual responses more complex, French President Emmanuel Macron was steadfast in his declaration that the US strikes were in breach of international law, highlighting the centrality of norms in global politics. And yet, at the same time, the need to retain strong links with the US meant that few European leaders diverged far from the Trump position. These machinations hint at the (impending) demise of the rules-based order that emerged from the ashes of the Second World War and instead point to a form of order predicated on force, on the notion that might is right.

By these definitions, has regional order changed in any fundamental way since the Hamas attacks on Israel of October 7, 2023? One of the book's major contributions is to examine the question of change in international orders – a surprisingly difficult question to pin down, whether in the Middle East or more broadly. It is not a new question. Every major event in the Middle East – the Gulf War, the invasion of Iraq, the Arab uprisings, and more – has prompted observers to ask whether the regional order has changed radically and irreversibly, with the answer often being affirmative. However, not every development in the politics and international relations of the Middle East equals a substantial change of the regional order. The book chapter by Del Sarto, Malmvig, and Soler i Lecha therefore introduced an analytical distinction between what defines a change *of* order and what can be considered changes *within* a given regional order – even if the latter are important ones. Focusing on the main structuring principles across different levels of analysis, the analysis considered not only the distribution of material power but also shared norms and rules that foment common assumptions and expectations, the type of security relations, region-wide securitization dynamics, and the degree of violence across the region. These elements structure relations between the actors in a region and define the parameters of legitimate behaviour.

Following the Arab uprisings, for instance, several developments could have led to a change *of* the regional order. While the demise of authoritarianism and the break-up of states along ethnic and/or religious lines did not materialize, other changes were significant. These included the trend among regional actors to diversify their foreign relations and the growing distance to their traditional allies in 'the West'. But perhaps even more importantly, the normalisation deals signed between Israel and several Arab states in 2020—the so-called Abraham Accords—could have led to Israel's integration into a regional security architecture. Yet, several key features of the regional order remained unchanged after 2011. These comprise the overarching norms of sovereignty and territoriality, the main features of key actors in the system, the region's multipolarity and the high extent of external meddling, and the high incidence of violence and wars. This led to the conclusion that while MENA's regional order was going through a significant phase of transition, it had not (yet) been fundamentally transformed.

The book was mostly written before October 7. Much has happened since. Does the destruction of Gaza, the weakening of the "Resistance Axis," and Israel's attempt to define a new order by airpower and military means without norms amount to a change of the system? Whether these developments signify a radical change *of* the regional order (as opposed to important changes *within* that order), what is certain is that the magnitude and type of violence we have been witnessing since October 7 has already impacted the region's politics and international relations in a massive and unprecedented way. Israel's extremely violent military reaction to the Hamas attacks—in Gaza, vis-à-vis Hizballah in Lebanon, and toward Iran—has altered the balance of material and ideational power of the main parties to the conflict, clearly in Israel's favor. The region's structuring principles and normative underpinnings have also been shaken profoundly, while persistent and massive violations of the rules of the international order and the laws of war have become the new normal. It is still too early to reach a definite conclusion on what type of change we are witnessing and what the implications in the medium and long run will be. However, all considered, a significant threshold may have been crossed in terms of the shift away from the previous order, but consolidating into a new order in the absence of significant shared normative underpinnings may prove challenging. Developments in the Middle East after October 7, 2023, are therefore very likely to foreshadow a lengthy period of the repeated, contested, but inconclusive efforts to define a new order.

This collection

These essays, all written after October 7 but before Israel's latest war with Iran, explore the questions about regional order raised by the book from a variety of perspectives. Waleed Hazbun builds on his chapter in the book to show the systematic ways in which American efforts to order the region backfire and produce exactly the disorder they are meant to prevent. Curtis Ryan also draws on his chapter in the book as he explores what alliance theory can tell us about the shifting diplomatic moves and alignments which characterize. Raffaella Del Sarto focuses on the role of violence in the (re)construction of regional order. May Darwich and Theo Blanc each interrogate the shifting role of non-state actors in the production and erosion of regional order. Finally, Eduard Soler i Lecha and Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal each consider the variation in order across sub-regions, challenging master narratives about a singular Middle Eastern order. We hope that readers will find much to engage with not only in this collection, but also in our book *Order and Region-Making in the Middle East*.

Reconfigurations of Turbulence and American Visions for Regional Order

Waleed Hazbun, University of Alabama

The deadly Hamas-led attacks into southern Israel on October 7, 2023 led to a ferocious response by Israel and over a year of violent regional conflict. These events reflect the continuing effects of the turbulence in the Middle East regional system which was the focus of my chapter in *Order and Region Making in the Middle East.* The unexpected and uncoordinated actions by the Palestinian militant group based in Gaza led to a spiral of cross border attacks engulfing the region and resulted in levels of violence and destruction that will reverberate for years to come (see Del Sarto in this collection). These dynamics also expose the limits of American visions for promoting regional order in the Middle East as they fail to address the diverse sources of insecurity that impact states and societies across the region.

Since the rise of US efforts to impose regional order, the Middle East regional system has increasingly suffered from turbulence, characterized by the proliferation of armed non-state actors, the interconnectedness of insecurity at the domestic and regional levels, and the increasingly multipolar nature of regional and global politics. In a turbulent regional system, regional order–based on balancing, hierarchy, interdependence, or shared norms between states–is especially difficult to sustain. While states remain the most powerful actors (especially those with consolidated control over their territory and security), they must navigate a volatile regional system with powerful non-state actors, shifting alliances, and conflicting understandings of regional security.

While the US strongly backed Israel's military efforts as the best route towards restoring regional order by hitting back hard against their shared adversaries, the post-October 7 regional conflicts disrupted the Biden administration's existing strategy for establishing a regional order through economic and security integration between US allies, particularly the normalization of Israel's relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. With the success of Israel's destructive military campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon as well as its strikes against Syria, Yemen, and Iran, the US appeared to embrace Israel's strategy for transforming regional order based on Israel's military dominance while exploiting the shift in the regional balance of power with the weakening of Iran and its allies.

The result, however, is likely to replicate the failure of past efforts to impose regional order through military dominance. Indeed, Israel's continuing military efforts in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and especially Iran have thrown into question the future of any US strategy based on regional integration and normalization. The violence and destruction of the recent conflict as well as Israel's maintenance of regional military dominance are likely to only foster the dynamics of regional turbulence, increase geopolitical rivalry, and intensify societal insecurity across the region.

Mapping the Evolution of Turbulence

The Biden administration had developed a clear ordering project prior to October 7, 2023. US national security advisor for the Middle East Brett McGurk (2021) referred to the administration's approach to the region as going "back to basics." This approach rejected the ambitious efforts of regional transformation promoted by the administration of George W. Bush and focused on rebuilding its security commitments to "traditional" US allies. Embracing the Abraham Accords that normalized Israel's relationship with Bahrain, the UAE, and Morocco, the Biden administration worked to extend regional economic and security integration aligning Israel with the

authoritarian regimes of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt (Biden 2022). These policies sought to balance against Iran while countering the influence of China and Russia in the region.

To consolidate this vision, the Biden administration set as their goal an agreement expanding US military support and security guarantees to Saudi Arabia in exchange for a Saudi normalization agreement with Israel. It viewed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as contained, offered little recognition of the sources of insecurity impacting states and societies across the region, and downplayed the likely disruptive effects that non-state actors could have. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan even famously assessed in late September 2023 that "The Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades" (Beckerman 2023, see also Sullivan 2023, 23).

How could the US have gotten regional order so wrong? To help explain the limits of US visions for regional order, my chapter draw on James C. Scott's (1998) critique of high modernist planning in the 20th century. Scott shows how state interventions sought to reorganize society to conform to planners' abstract and oversimplified maps while societies, in contrast, developed their own practices to navigate the unstable and unpredictable environment they inhabit. Likewise, US policy towards the Middle East in the post-Cold War era has often relied on the deployment of coercive power to transform regional politics according to US visions based on hierarchy among allies and balancing against rivals. These top-down efforts, however, failed to recognize and accommodate how diverse regional actors, both states and societies, might understand their own interests as well as the terms for regional security differently. As a result, US policies consistently ran adrift in the face of those unrecognized realities.

This shift from order to turbulence in the Middle East was not simply a product of a shift in the regional balance of power between states but also a reflection of the erosion of state capacities to provide security for their societies and the rise of self-organizing social movements and armed non-state actors often operating through transnational networks. Following Scott (1998), we might suggest that regional states and non-state actors with knowledge of local contexts, the ability to cultivate allies and access resources, and improvise diverse forms of governance – notably, but not exclusively, Iran – have been those best able to navigate the uncertainty and volatility of turbulence. The US, viewing the region from above and attempting to neatly order it, consistently did less well.

This turbulence was produced in the wake of past US efforts to impose a hegemonic regional order on the Middle East. In particular, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, its agenda for regional transformation, and the broader global war on terror generated intense insecurity for rival and allied states while witnessing the proliferation of armed non-state actors. The US military occupation of Iraq gave rise to a domestic insurgency and the mobilization of transnational jihadists bent on provoking sectarian conflict in Iraq and beyond. As a result, Iran expanded its influence in Iraq and its strategic coordination with Syria while supporting armed non-state actors that challenged Israeli and US influence in the region.

In 2011, popular protests led to the removal of US-backed authoritarian rulers in Tunisia and Egypt empowering long-repressed Islamist movements as well as other diverse political voices. As uprisings quickly spread across the region, the militarization of the rebellions in Syria, Libya, and Yemen led these territories to become violent geopolitical battlegrounds. Rival regional powers such as Türkiye and Qatar as well as Saudi Arabia and the UAE sought to influence regional politics by backing rival political forces and arming non-state actors. Violent conflicts across Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen led to the erosion and fragmentation of state territorial control.

Within this system of expanding turbulence and conflict, Iran was able to promote its own security and directly challenge US influence through its mosaic defense (*defah-e mozaik*) strategy (Krieg and Rickli 2019, 164-190). This system was shaped by the experience of the proliferation of popular militias during the 1979 revolution. The Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) emerged to manage these militias and develop a security sector that included a decentralized network of armed groups that were often autonomous from the central government. The IRGC al Quds Force helped develop foreign franchises, such as the Hizballah movement in Lebanon, the Shia Badr brigade in the context of the Iran-Iraq war, and the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) in Iraq in response to the rise of ISIS. Iran also supported other locally developed armed non-state actors, such as Hamas and Ansar Allah, with shared regional security interests.

In the context of increasing turbulence, Iran was able to expand its regional influence and security through a network self-styled as the "Axis of Resistance" that spans Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen. Such forces were essential for projecting Iran's influence in post 2003 Iraq, battling Israel to a standstill in the 2006 war in Lebanon, supporting the regime of Bashar Al Assad against Syrian rebels, and containing ISIS and other jihadist forces. By the 2010s' Iran had shifted to a more offensive capable approach referred to as "forward defense" able to project power against threats to Iran's security. Hizballah's missiles and drones targeting Israel played a central role in this strategy. While there is no evidence that Iran planned the October 7 assault by Hamas, its network helped mobilize and coordinate attacks against Israel, the US, and others as the post-October 7 conflict escalated (Sobelman 2024). While these groups support Iran's regional security interests while offering security to some local communities, not fully accountable to local states they also threaten rival communities and actors within and beyond those states and thus also contribute to the dynamics of turbulence.

Reconfigurations of Turbulence Before and After October 7

Not only were the October 7 attacks on Israel unanticipated by US officials, but the spread of intense regional conflict also exposed the limits of the Biden administration's approach to regional order. With the focus on security and economic integration between US regional allies, US strategy failed to address ongoing regional conflicts and viewed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as contained due to Israel's military strength and the other priorities of US Arab allies. As Andreas Krieg (2024) reflects, "The regional order has been increasingly shaped by non-state actors and networks who do not only challenge the position of the United States but the integrity, stability, and influence of states per se" (see also Darwich this volume).

While Hamas might have hoped its brazen attack, followed by Israel's campaign of massive retaliation, would lead to a multifront war against Israel by forces across the Axis of Resistance, each actor within it had different security interests and capabilities while Iran had little interest in an expanded confrontation with Israel. Hizballah engaged Israel on its northern border with daily, but limited, rocket and missile attacks. Pro-Iranian militias struck US forces in Iran, Syria, and Jordan, but halted after Iran's insistence. The Houthi Ansar Allah militia targeted Israel with drones and missiles and launched a campaign against "Israel-linked" ships in the Red Sea which disrupted shipping through the Suez Canal but posed a limited direct threat to Israel.

In response to the October 7 attacks, the US recommitted to backing Israel militarily and deploying US forces to the region to deter attacks against US forces and its regional allies. For almost a year, US officials appeared to hope for an end to the hostilities so it might return to its efforts to promote regional security and economic integration. Such an opportunity never appeared. Biden held back from applying the required pressure on Israel to accept a sustained cease fire while likely violating US law by continuing arms shipments (Borger 2024). Israel continued its destructive campaign in Gaza with so much unrestrained force and with seeming disregard for the civilian population that it was soon accused of war crimes and genocide (along with the military commanders of Hamas responsible for the October 7 attacks). As Mona Yacoubian (2024) observed, "The Middle East is no longer bound by established rules of engagement and modes of deterrence."

During the prolonged conflict, key regional US allies such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt feared the consequences of Israel's actions for Palestine and the region. These states face domestic as well as external threats to their own regime security (see Ryan this volume). The extent of the physical destruction and human suffering in Gaza as well as parts of Lebanon horrified Arab societies fostering networks of Palestinian solidarity and challenging efforts to promote expanded integration with Israel. In recent years, most Arab states have a sought to dampen the effects of turbulence by limiting their involvement in armed conflicts, deescalating regional rivalries, and attempting to rebuild political order within war-torn states. In some cases, states have tried to expand state control over armed non-state actors (Ardemagni 2023). Most states have worked to deescalate regional rivalries including Saudi ending its blockage of Qatar, Türkiye trying to patch up relations fractured during the Arab uprisings, the negotiation of a truce in Yemen, the reentry of Syria into the Arab League, and the reestablishment of diplomatic ties between Iran-Saudi Arabia (Kaye and Wehrey 2023).

For many Arab states normalizing relations with Israel and regional security integration have been viewed as means to assure US support and security guarantees. Most Arab states wish to avoid a more polarized region and seek ties with Israel as part of the broader diversification of their security relationships and arms suppliers, which includes ties with China (opposed by the US). While they remain repressive and generally resist addressing societal inequalities and other threats to human security, many Arab regimes nevertheless recognize that a major threat to their regime security is the challenge of sustaining economic welfare and managing the socioeconomic needs of their populations into the future. For even states like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, who have sought to expand cooperation with Israel and have suppressed pro-Palestinian demonstrations, the ongoing conflict strained their relations with Israel and exposed differences over the future of Palestine.

Israel's extensive, multifront military campaign has sought to eliminate the threatening capacities of rival non-state actors and their main state backer Iran (the so-called "Axis of Resistance"). Israel seeks to insulate itself from the effects of regional turbulence. While waging its campaign against Gaza, Israel also continued bombing sites in Lebanon as well as Hizballah and Iranian targets in Syria and Houthi targets in Yemen. A year later, with the bulk of Hamas's military capacity eliminated and Gaza in ruins, Israel escalated its conflict with Hizballah with an extensive campaign targeting its leadership, weapon stores, supply infrastructure, and eventually people and buildings across Lebanon that Israel viewed as associated with any aspect of Hizballah. By the end of 2024, Israel's devastating campaign had eliminated what Hizballah had long touted as its deterrent capability, debilitated Hizballah as an organization, and inflicted so much damage on Lebanon and its people that the group agreed to a ceasefire before there was one in Gaza. As a result, Iran has been forced to reconsider its forward defense strategy and might consider the nuclear option if its program survives the ongoing assault. Responding to the strategic failure and trauma of October 7, Israel not only claimed to restore deterrence by denial but to drastically shift the regional balance of power enabling a new regional order based on Israel's regional military dominance (Rachman 2024).

Violence, Insecurity, and Regional Order

With the success of Israel's military campaigns and the rapid collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, in early 2025, the outgoing Biden administration spoke about the new opportunities to forge a "more integrated region and security architecture" created by the shift in the regional balance of power (Blinken 2025). It would be impossible to predict the future polices of the second Trump administration, but the lack of US commitment to ensuring a pathway to Palestinians self-determination, guaranteeing the ceasefire in Lebanon, and supporting post-conflict state-building and reconstruction in Syria suggest that the forging of a regional order remains perilous. As the major states of the region lack a shared understanding of security, the dynamics of turbulence are likely to persist as they are reconfigured with more assertive, autonomous armed non-state actors, regional geopolitical rivalry, and societies facing profound insecurity.

While the US has worked to promote the integration of the security capacities of its regional allies, it has done little to ensure these states embrace a common understanding of regional security. While the US has insisted on an Israel-centered approach to regional security, such a vision is unsustainable even with expanded normalization agreements. Israel continues to maintain its own exclusive security concerns and strategic approach leading it to reject Palestinian self-determination, impose its preferences on its neighbors, seek to maximize its regional military dominance, and deny accusations of genocide. Meanwhile, the overthrowing of the Assad regime in Syria by a Syrian backed jihadist militia will likely result in Türkiye expanding its influence and clashing with US, Israeli, Kurdish, and Gulf interests (Phillips 2025). And across the ruins of Lebanon and Palestine, regional powers will likely compete for influence while new armed non-state actors might emerge creating more challenges for state consolidation efforts. The collective capacity of the Axis of Resistance might be diminished, but Iran and its allies will likely reconfigure their strategies and seek new tools to advance their different interests. More broadly, the US-backed devastation to Palestine, as well as Lebanon, and now Iran may leave a long-lasting mark on the political perspectives of Arab societies posing challenges to normalization as well as to the US role in the region and regimes dependent on it for security.

Any sustainable regional security architecture would need to avoid polarization, craft shared norms and attempt to find ways to be inclusive of the security needs of all regional states, including Iran. Rebuilding political order and addressing the major threats to societal insecurity across the domestic space of regional states will likely need to come first. Unfortunately, the uncertainty and geopolitical rivalries likely to shape the post-October 7 era in the region will only increase the insecurities of societies across the region and the challenges to any effort to build a more stable and secure regional order.

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Alliances and Regional Order in the Shadow of Regional Conflicts

Curtis R. Ryan, Appalachian State University

In my contribution to *Order and Region-Making in the Middle East*, I examined regional alliances as potential sources of regional order, in the sense of creating patterns of state behavior and interaction, and at times achieving cooperation and possibly even stability. Studies of order in international relations theory tend to focus on ideas, institutions, and regional organizations. But few would regard the League of Arab States as a particularly effective or meaningful regional institution or as a Middle East version of the EU. Absent region-wide effective institutions, can alliances instead be sources of regional order? What exactly are alliances? What would order through alliances look like in practice?

Since the writing of my chapter, regional politics have been upended by the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, the spread of war to Lebanon, and the sudden collapse of the Asad regime in Syria. This paper first revisits the broader theoretical issues at hand regarding the nature of alliances and alignments in the modern Middle East and their potential contributions to regional order, before briefly examining how regional alliances have shifted in light of these events.

Alliances and Regional Order

In international relations theory, studies of alliances and studies of order could usually have been found in different theoretical schools of thought, rather than studied together. Broadly speaking, traditional Realist scholarship tended to focused on conflict and security, while Liberal I.R. theorists – and later Constructivists – often focused on cooperation via ideas, institutions, organizations, or international regimes. Scholars in Middle East studies, however, have in many ways taken the lead in shifting the study of alliances away from its traditional foundations, opting for more "theoretical eclecticism" in explaining the international relations of the Middle East, which opens possibilities to examine alliances themselves as potential sources of regional order (Salloukh 2015).

Alliances may be a traditional topic in international relations theory, but to truly understand Middle East alliances and alignments, we need to examine them in non-traditional ways. Even in writing perhaps the most seminal Neorealist work on alliance politics, for example, Glenn Snyder was careful to move far beyond a focus on external threats or system-structure alone, turning to ideational and even psychological factors in alliance formation and maintenance. "The act of allying," he wrote, "can create common interests that did not previously exist … states entering an alliance may redefine their 'selves' so that they embrace at least some of the partner's interests as their own." And indeed, "having formed the alliance, its members will have a joint interest in keeping it alive; this common interest may very well overcome a divergence of self-regarding interests" (Snyder 1997: 9-10). Alliances, in short, can create limited amounts of order among members, in terms of common interests, goals, expectations, and interactions, so that they become more than mere "scraps of paper" (Snyder 1997: 10).

Regional alliances in the Middle East, whether bilateral or multilateral, rarely follow the traditional Western models of formal defense pacts. In that sense, they are better conceived of as *alignments*: looser, often informal agreements based on mutual expectations of support and cooperation. Alignments usually signal political and diplomatic support, but not necessarily military action, mutual defense, or strict security measures (Ryan 2009, 2015). Yet here too Middle East alignments can be difficult to categorize. While involving neither formal defense

pacts, nor entirely informal cooperation, they do frequently include formal summit meetings, pledges, communiques, and even pacts – but short of fixed military obligations for mutual defense. As Raffaella Del Sarto and Eduard Soler i Lecha note, these are effectively "liquid alliances" because they are based on "ad hoc, non-institutionalized, and rapidly shifting cooperation patterns" (Del Sarto and Soler i Lecha, 2024).

While alliances are vital to any balance of power, they also exist for other purposes. That is especially important in the Middle East and other non-Western settings (Ryan 2020a). Alliances might indeed be motivated – at times – by the most traditional concerns, resulting in defense pacts against external military threats, and perhaps even a balance of power along the way, as states balance against varying threats (Walt 1987, 1988). But they are more likely, especially in the Middle East, to include motivations rooted in economic concerns and in domestic politics, as regimes re-arrange their external relations to better secure themselves both at home and abroad (Barnett and Levy 1991; David 1991; Brand 1994; Ryan 2009; Darwich 2019).

Middle East regimes have also shown themselves to be particularly concerned with ideational and ideological threats, treating these as just as urgent as physical military threats, and affecting their alliance calculations accordingly (Barnett 1995, 1998; Gause 2003; Rubin 2014; Darwich 2019, 2021). Scholars of regime security, drawing on multiple paradigms in I.R. theory, have long argued that alliances are technically between states, but more realistically between ruling regimes. In my own previous work, I have argued that alliances in the Middle East can best be seen as linkages between specific constellations of ruling elites, with alliances acting as *transnational support coalitions* helping to prop up ruling regimes against internal as well as external threats. Alliances can therefore be used as one of many tools for regime security, used to counter challenges that are military, economic, or ideational (Ryan 2009, 2015). Indeed, as Del Sarto, Malmwig, and Soler i Lecha have noted, "the obsession of regimes with remaining in power has further blurred the boundary between the domestic and the regional, as perceived threats to regime survival are balanced by often erratic foreign policies, interventions and ever-shifting alliances" (Del Sarto, Malmvig, and Soler I Lecha, 2019: 3).

Intra-Regional Alliances after 2011

When the Arab uprisings began in 2011, the sole formal alignment bloc in the Middle East was the longstanding (since 1981) Gulf Cooperation Council. The GCC brought together the six Arab monarchies of the Gulf (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) originally to counter both Iran and Iraq, but not in a strict balance of power sense, since even combined the six were no match for either. Instead, the GCC amounted to more of an economic bloc, often derided in the region as a rich countries' country club rather than a truly defensive military alliance. But the formation of the GCC was also supported by the United States, and both the US and the bloc intended the alignment to be a vehicle for US-Gulf strategic and security cooperation in the region.

While maintaining the formal trappings of an alignment via summits and communiques, the GCC was also characterized by fairly independent foreign policies among its member states, despite or perhaps because of perceived Saudi and Emirati attempts to dominate the bloc. The latter two, along with Bahrain, even pursued a blockade of fellow GCC member Qatar from 2017 to 2021, in a failed attempt to change Qatari regional policies ranging from its satellite TV station – al-Jazeera – to its support for regional Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter policy led to a closer bilateral alignment between Qatar and Turkey, and indeed extensive Turkish support in countering the blockade only strengthened that alignment still further.

After the 2011 Arab uprisings, intra-regional politics in the Middle East seemed to be dominated (still) by the long-running 'cold war' between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and their various allies (Bank and Valbjorn 2012, Ryan 2012, Gause 2014). Each represented a different vision for regional order, invariably designed around themselves, and the region was therefore divided between competing

alliances (Kausch 2014). While Saudi Arabia seemed to have more potential and de facto alliance partners, both within the region and internationally, the Iranian-led 'Axis of Resistance' seemed to represent a small but consistent bloc of allies.

The Axis was also unusual (in theories of alliance, but not in the actual politics of the Middle East, as May Darwich shows in this collection) in combining regional states – Iran and Syria – with regional non-state actors, like Hizbullah and Hamas. As Syria's uprising turned into a deadly and seemingly interminable civil war, the alliance also proved to be more than commitments on paper. Indeed, members of the axis actually supported each other, specifically with Iranian Republican Guard troops, Hizbullah forces, and Russian air power all providing military support to the Asad regime in its brutal civil war, from 2011 to 2024. Hamas initially balked at this, seeing Islamist rebels rather than the Ba'thist state as the preferable side in the conflict. But by the time of the 2023-24 Gaza war, the Axis seemed to be fully back together again, and even added Houthi militias in Yemen to the mix, with the latter launching strikes on Red Sea shipping, allegedly in support of the Hamas war effort against Israel.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, attempted to craft a region-wide counter to Iran, in part through the U.S.-supported Middle East Strategic Alliance. This grouping ostensibly gathered together the six monarchies of the GCC along with Egypt and Jordan, and was dubiously dubbed a new 'Arab NATO' – a moniker believed by some in the Trump administration in Washington DC, but by no one else. The U.S. influence, in fact, also simultaneously pushed another alignment track, specifically between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel, looking for this to act as the key anti-Iran axis in the region, and perhaps to lead Saudi Arabia to join Bahrain, UAE, and Morocco in the series of normalization agreements with Israel known as the Abraham Accords.

Even as both Iran and Saudi Arabia pursued more intensely ideological and even sectarian alignments, matching their competing regional visions for order, there were at least some more pragmatic and even utilitarian alignments to emerge as well. This included, for example, a Jordanian-Egyptian-Iraqi bloc that focused on extensive cooperation in energy policies – including electricity, gas, and oil supplies – as well as mutual diplomatic support (al-Maleki 2021, Ryan 2020b). Billed as a 'New Mashreq' or *ash-Sham al-Jadeed*, the trilateral alignment nonetheless did not represent a counter to any other bloc, but instead intended to work with both the GCC and with outside powers like the U.S.

From the Gaza War to Regime Change in Syria

As the 2023-24 Gaza war expanded to include Israeli air strikes not only against Hamas in Gaza, but also against Hizbullah in Lebanon and Syria, and against Iran itself – often with extensive civilian casualties – regional alliances seemed to be shaken once again. Indeed, by December 2024, with the Asad regime seemingly on the point of collapse, its longstanding allies appeared to backing away, especially Iran and Russia, even as neighboring rivals like Turkey pressed their advantage via proxy rebel forces. The struggle for Syria had returned with a vengeance, and – as it had in its earlier incarnations – represented violent struggles between competing local and regional forces, each with very different visions for national or regional order.

The Axis of Resistance remained an alignment – barely -- but one that had suffered staggering losses in terms of leadership and personnel. That, in turn, contributed to a dramatic turn in the Syrian civil war, as the Asad regime's strongest allies – Russia included – were all reeling in different ways. Russian forces were so bogged down in their war in Ukraine that they actually turned to North Korea to send forces to support their war effort. Iran, meanwhile, was focused on the dangers of an escalating conflict with Israel, including exchanges of missiles. In addition to carrying attacks on Iran itself, Israeli forces were also bombarding Hizbullah forces and their leadership in Lebanon as well as in Syria.

The Axis of Resistance, in short, had its hands full as Syrian rebels launched their most extensive and most successful military assault on the last strongholds of the Asad regime, leading to its ultimate collapse, and perhaps also to the

collapse of the Axis of Resistance. The final implosion of the Ba'thist state removed Iran's key Arab ally from the regional scene, leaving other regional powers – Turkey and Saudi Arabia in particular – to attempt to fill the void left by the sudden Iranian absence, as each supported Syrian proxies or attempted to sway the new Syrian regime to its orbit (and to its vision of regional order).

Meanwhile the devastation of Gaza may also have ended (at least temporarily) Washington's dreams of Saudi-Israeli normalization. When the Trump administration returned to office in January 2025, it would need to contend with an Israel that was more deeply reviled by Arab publics than ever before, as well as somewhat surprising levels of rapprochement between erstwhile rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran. The regional context had changed dramatically, in short, but there were few signs that this had been noticed in Washington, either by the outgoing Biden administration or the incoming Trump administration.

Conclusions

The Middle East has long been known for its complicated alliance politics. These include bilateral international alliances between regional and global powers, as well as intra-regional alliances especially in inter-Arab relations. While the former have often included long-standing international commitments, the latter have tended to shift, not just in response to external stimuli or balance of power considerations, but also due to domestic political, economic, and even ideational concerns for regime security and regime survival. In the post-2011 period, given the fallout from the regional Arab Spring and the perceived decline in U.S. power, influence, and even interest in the Middle East, the set of active external powers has expanded, while intra-regional alliances appear to be even more fluid than in the past. With the onset and expansion of the Gaza war, regional instability increased still further, and 'order' seemed ever more elusive.

Alliances, as important as they are, are neither necessary nor sufficient to create regional order. They cannot do so alone, and indeed there are many other elements that can contribute to regional order (as the many chapters of *Order and Region-Making in the Middle East* demonstrate), but they do constitute one very important but understudied aspect in understanding regional order. In the absence of a single regional or global hegemon, or even of an influential and effective regional organization, alliances can play a role in filling the void.

Alliances and alignments may have more success in creating at least a partial regional order, when they are based on, or create, mutually agreed upon norms and expectations regarding both the purpose of the alliance itself and shared goals for the broader region. This does not, however, imply widespread regional order in the sense of harmony, peace, and stability. Rather, since the Middle East features multiple alignments at any given time, regional politics is instead characterized by *multiple competing visions of order*, each based on its own alignment or alliance. And these, in turn, help create greater order among the members of the alignment, but greater disorder and even instability for the region as a whole.

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Violence and Regional Order in the Middle East since October 7[1]

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'Nothing enduring can be built on violence.'
– Mahatma Gandhi[2]

'The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.'
–Hannah Arendt[3]

The starting point of my contribution (co-authored with Helle Malmvig and Eduard Soler i Lecha) to *Order and Region Making in the Middle East* is two essential questions. First, what is an order? Second, how and why do orders change? As political and social orders are always in flux, thereby featuring elements of both continuity and change, what allows us to define an order as *substantially new*? Our contribution introduces the analytical distinction between change *of* order and change *within* order.[4]

Written well before the events of October 7, 2023 in Israel/Palestine, our chapter shows that the revolutionary forces unleashed by the Arab uprisings could have changed the regional order profoundly. The same can be said about the normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan of 2020: Israel's potential integration into a regional security architecture could have led to the emergence of a very different Middle East. We also identified the growing distance of many regional actors from their traditional 'Western' allies, together with the diversification and 'liquidity' of alliances,[5] as significant features of the region after the Arab uprisings. However, the existing order proved far more resilient than anticipated. We therefore concluded that the transformations that resulted from the Arab uprisings qualify as a change *within* order and not a change *of* the order.

Are these conclusions still valid after October 7, 2023? Did Hamas' attacks on Israel that day, Israel's subsequent war on the Gaza Strip, and the regional escalations which followed signify the emergence of a qualitatively different regional order? While armed conflicts have been characterizing the Middle East for decades, one striking feature since October 7 is the *extent and type of violence*. Focusing on this aspect, I argue that extreme, sustained, and indiscriminate violence on and after October 7 has been affecting the region's ordering principles in various ways—and across different levels of analysis.

A note on regional order and change

From a constructivist and English School perspective, regional order entails more than the distribution of material and/or ideational power, the kind of polarity and international permeation, and patterns of alliances. Regional orders are also made up of shared norms and rules that are enacted in common practices and institutions, as well as identities.[6] These elements structure relations between the actors in a regional system, foment expectations, and define the parameters of legitimate behavior. We also assume that there is a hierarchy of ordering elements in any given regional order, with constitutive norms at the top, followed by durable institutions and practices.[7] A change of order occurs when constitutive and deeply entrenched norms and practices mutate substantially. Importantly, transformations at the domestic, regional, or international level may trigger or amplify processes of change across the other levels. Which ordering principles define a region, and which hierarchy exists among these, is an empirical question; these factors vary from region to region.

Central to any regional order is the way in which the actors in the system manage their security relations. These can range from open conflict and war to collective security arrangements and integration, which entail different degrees of actual or threatened violence.[8] Hence, what does a focus on violence tell us about the Middle East regional order after October 7?

Violence since October 7

The period since October 7 has been characterized by specific forms, locations, and degrees of violence. While the Hamas attacks resulted in the death of around 1,200 people *in one single day*, and over 240 hostages being taken, at the time of writing Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip, with the stated aim of eliminating Hamas and restoring deterrence, has caused the staggering number of over 52,000 Palestinian fatalities.[9] Over 250 aid workers and over 150 journalists have also been killed there.

The conflict quickly spiralled from the Gaza Strip to Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. For the first time, it led to a direct military confrontation between Iran and Israel in April 2024, and again in October 2024. In Lebanon, Israel's war on Hizballah in response to their launching of rockets on Israel in solidarity with Hamas has killed at least 3,500 people (a ceasefire went into effect in late November 2024; both sides have been accusing each other of violating it). Israel's pager attack on Hizballah members of September 2024 left 42 people dead, 12 of them civilians, and injured more than 3,000 people across Lebanon and Syria.[10] This attack was quite sophisticated, but it has been equalled with (state) terrorism.[11] Leaders and senior commanders of Hizballah, Hamas, and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have been killed by Israeli strikes or explosions. These include Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut in January 2024, two senior IRGC commanders in the Iranian embassy compound in Damascus in April, Hamas senior figure Ismael Haniyeh in the military-run guesthouse after he attended the inauguration of Iranian President Pezeshkian in July in Tehran, and longtime Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah in September of that year. The Israeli army has also bombed Yemen's Houthis, which also joined the fray against Israel, as well as various Iran-affiliated groups in Syria and Iraq.

The weakening of the 'axis of resistance' (and Russia's focus on Ukraine) set off a chain reaction in the region: Syrian rebels led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham took over Damascus in early December 2024, leading to the fall of the al-Assad regime. This has prompted Israel to conduct hundreds of airstrikes on Syrian territory, with the declared aim of destroying Assad's military facilities.[12] In violation of the 1974 Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreement, Israeli ground forces also advanced into and beyond the demilitarized zone on the Golan Heights, purportedly to provide security to Israeli citizens, and appear set on a long-term occupation of parts of southern Syria.

The impact of the military campaigns on civilians has been catastrophic. Infrastructure in the northern Gaza Strip has been destroyed while most residents have been forced to flee. This reflected the initial Israeli objective to push the Palestinian population southwards and create a buffer zone in the north.[13] The rest of the Gaza Strip lies in ruins, too. According to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, the 'scale of the Israeli military's destruction of homes, hospitals, schools and places of worship [is] deeply shocking'.[14] In November 2024, Israeli airstrikes and the subsequent ground invasion had already caused the forceful displacement of 1.9m people out of 2.2m, that is, 90% of Gaza Palestinians.[15]

After Israel let a weeks-long ceasefire with Hamas collapse in March 2025, Israeli attacks on Gaza resumed, forcing some 420,000 Gazans to flee yet again. The Israeli government also cut off all humanitarian aid and electricity to Gaza. As of May 2025, the blockade on food, water, fuel, and medication has persisted for two months, with the UN warning of an imminent hunger crisis.[16] In the West Bank, more than 800 Palestinians were killed by Israeli soldiers or settlers, and over 1,000 people were forced to leave their homes, between October 7, 2023 and the start of a massive Israeli campaign against Palestinian militants in January this year.[17] Since then, an additional 40,000 West Bank Palestinians have been displaced from their homes, the largest displacement of civilians in that territory since the 1967 war. The Israeli army has also destroyed buildings and power lines, as well as the water and sanitation systems in four refugee camps in the West Bank.[18] In Lebanon, around 1.3m people were forcefully displaced. 100,000 housing units were destroyed, with the World Bank estimating the damage to physical infrastructure at around 3.4 billion US-Dollars in November 2024.[19] In Israel, over

60,000 residents had to evacuate the northern border area because of Hizballah's rocket attacks; another 60,000 residents along the Gaza border left their homes after the destruction wrought by Hamas on October 7. At the time of writing, 58 hostages are still held in Gaza, with 35 of them declared dead.

Extent and type of violence

Since October 7, the magnitude and the type of violence, and especially the combination of these two features, is unparalleled. The death toll and the extent of destruction since October 7 by far exceed any period of violence in Israel/Palestine, including all previous Israel-Hamas wars, which claimed a total of around 6,000 victims. And this does not include the exorbitant high number of maimed and injured people, the malnutrition, starvation, and outbreak of diseases in the Gaza Strip, all of which will drive up the number of fatalities substantially. Also, by comparison, in the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war, around 1,100 people were killed in Lebanon and about 170 on the Israeli side.[20]

But this is not only about numbers. What is equally disturbing is the seemingly wilful ignoring of the distinction between civilians and combatants. While this is a not an entirely new phenomenon, it has reached an unprecedented level. In such a densely populated area as the Gaza Strip, massive Israeli air strikes and ground invasions cannot but cause a high number of civilian deaths—irrespective of whether Hamas uses civilians as human shields, as the Israeli government claims.[21] An additional explanation for the extraordinary high number of civilian fatalities is that the Israeli army reportedly relaxed the rules of civilian protection in its campaigns.[22] And indeed, 70% of those killed in the Gaza Strip are women and children.[23] Similarly, violence committed by Israeli soldiers and settlers against West Bank Palestinians mainly affects the civilian population, with violence patently also used for territorial and/or demographic engineering.

Neither did Hamas and other groups distinguish between soldiers and civilians when they staged their attacks on southern Israel on October 7. These were not a quick incursion: for example, in Kibbutz Be'eri, where over 80 people were killed, the killing spree lasted for hours. There is also evidence of sexual violence,[24] although Hamas denies this. Neither did Hizballah's rockets and drones distinguish between civilians and soldiers in Israel.

The decision of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to issue arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu, his former defense minister Yoav Gallant, and senior Hamas commander Mohammed Deif,[25] because there are 'reasonable grounds' the three men bear responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity, supports this observation. In other words, since October 7, indiscriminate violence has become ubiquitous, with the extremely high numbers of civilian death and suffering being tolerated—if not intended—by the perpetrators.

Equally important, irrespective of strategic justifications, this type of violence is directed towards specific ethnic or religious groups: Jewish Israelis in the case of Hamas, and Palestinians in the case of Israeli assaults on Gaza and the West Bank. Similarly, Israel's objective of weakening Hizballah has mainly targeted (Arab and non-Arab) Shi'a in Lebanon and the wider region. While members of other ethnic and religious groups are 'accidentally' killed as well,[26] sectarian securitization,[27] which had retreated in recent years in the Middle East, is back.

An additional aspect is the type of actors that are perpetrating and supporting this kind of violence. All evoke a fundamentalist interpretation of religion (see Blanc's essay in this collection). This seems obvious for Hamas and Hizballah (and the Iranian regime), but it also applies to the politically most influential components of the Israeli government. Indeed, the far-right religious parties on which Netanyahu's coalition depends are eager to continue the war on Gaza. Not only do they want to annex the West Bank according to their messianic worldview. They dream of resettling the Gaza Strip, too.[28]

Importantly, violent Israeli settlers can count on the support of these extremist parties, with far-right National Security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir bragging in May 2024

about having issued 100,000 gun licences to Jewish Israelis (including settlers) since October 7.[29] While settler violence in the West Bank has been enjoying impunity for years, but even more so under the current Israeli government, violent settlers act like state-sponsored militias that aim at terrorizing and expelling Palestinians from the West Bank. This consideration blurs the traditional distinction between states and armed non-state actors—a distinction that is already difficult to make for Hamas and Hizballah—in the case of Israel, too.

Finally, looking at the perpetrators and supporters of violence in the current conflict, one cannot but notice the gender aspect. Indeed, among the leadership of Hamas, Hizballah, Israel, and Iran, women are conspicuously absent.

Violence and regional order

In which way do the magnitude and the type of violence that we have been witnessing since October 7 challenge or even alter the ordering principles of the region?

Constitutive norms

At first sight, key constitutive norms of the region, namely sovereignty and territorial integrity – norms that also regulate international relations at large – are still setting the parameters of legitimate and predictable behaviour. Indeed, a forceful Israeli response to the violation of these principles by Hamas (incursion into Israeli territory) and Hizballah (launching of rockets) was to be expected. The assassination of political and military leaders — designated 'terrorists'— within the territory of other sovereign states, which has become a normal practice for Israel's leadership, has tested these principles. And yet, Iran's military response to the killing of Haniyeh on its territory also confirms the enduring validity of the norms of territoriality and sovereignty. However, the unprecedented type and the extent of violence after October 7, most prominent in Israel's military campaigns and its seeming indifference to the killing and forceful displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians, show that these norms are under attack—literally.

The challenge to the region's constitutive norms has also had repercussions at the international level. The question of whether the principle of legitimate self-defence justifies Israel's violent response in Gaza and the wider region,[30] as the Israeli government claims, or whether the Israeli army is committing war crimes, pits the government in Jerusalem and the US administration (plus many European governments) against the majority opinion in international law. The latter is defended by the UN, the ICC, and many governments in the Global South. Extreme polarization around the question of whether Israel is a victim or a perpetrator of genocide has also affected public opinion worldwide, as evidenced by 'pro-Palestinian' and 'pro-Israeli'[31] protests and clashes around the world, together with the militarised response to demonstrations on US campuses. With Israel currently losing the public opinion battle, discursive if not physical violence has been exported abroad.

What is at stake here is the legitimacy of UN institutions and international law, which, however imperfect, have been structuring international relations since World War II. The Israeli government's designation of UN Secretary-General António Guterres *persona non grata*,[32] its banning of UNRWA from Israeli-controlled territory, and its calls to not comply with the ICC's arrest warrants are cases in point. But even more so, the tacit—and not-so-tacit—support of these positions by the US administration as well as by some Western governments, together with Washington's repeated vetoing of UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, poses a serious threat to the rules-based international order.

Fault lines, actors, power

The second aspect of how the violence has affected the region's ordering principles regards the configuration of fault lines in the region, together with the power of the main conflicting parties. As a toxic mix of overreaction, provocation, miscalculation, and deterrence transformed the Hamas attacks into a regional war between Israel and the 'axis of resistance', Israel's response succeeded in weakening the military and organizational capabilities of Hamas, Hizballah, and even Iran.[33] Moreover, Iran's

normative power was damaged as it refrained from defending its allies, most notably Hizballah, and later the al-Assad regime. In other words, the violence deployed by the Israeli army, however deplorable, did alter the balance of power in the region—for now in Israel's favour. The Israeli government also succeeded in dragging Iran into the conflict, much in accordance with Israel's—and particularly Netanyahu's—long-standing obsession.[34]

The decision of Arab states to not intervene militarily despite the massive violence in Gaza also confirms that the 'old' Arab-Israeli conflict no longer exists. This fault-line had structured regional relations for decades. While once more confirming the erosion of the norm of Arab solidarity, the extreme violence and destruction in Gaza have however fuelled feelings of solidarity with the Palestinians among Arab *populations*. This bears evidence to the ever-growing gap between the people and their rulers.[35] And while the question of Palestine (or the political use of it) still lies at its origin, this fault line has mutated into a conflict between Israel and several semi-state actors (Hamas, Hizballah, the Houthis) plus Iran. Reflecting my previous observation on the perpetrators of indiscriminate violence, we could also say that it transmuted into a conflict between (predominantly male) actors whose political agenda is led or dominated by religious fundamentalism.

At the international level, the unwillingness of the Biden administration to reign in and pressure the Israeli government showed that 'tail-wagging-the dog' dynamics—an important feature of the region post-Arab uprisings—had reached a new high. This is even more so as Netanyahu was trying to drag the US into an armed conflict with Iran. Combined with Washington's massive military and diplomatic support of Israel,[36] which renders it complicit in Israel's violations of international law, the US' standing in the region took a further hit.

Israel/Palestine: End of negotiations and dialogue

Finally, the massive and genocidal violence employed by the Israeli army since October 7—as well as by Hamas on that day—has sounded the death knell to any peaceful and mutually acceptable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each side is focused on its own situation and trauma, with Israeli media for instance rarely showing footage of the massive destruction and inhuman conditions in Gaza. Even a dialogue among traditional pro-peace activists in Israel/Palestine has become extremely difficult. By also considering Israel's relative power at the regional and international level, together with its right-wing shift and expansionist appetite, going back to a negotiated framework to establish an independent—and meaningful—Palestinian state seems unthinkable at present. The existing one-state-reality in Israel/Palestine,[37] which only foments (further) violence, seems to be here to stay.

Conclusions

A focus on the scale and type of violence shows how much the Middle East regional order has changed since October 7, 2023. Excessive and indiscriminate violence perpetrated by political actors that are steeped in, or condone, religious fundamentalism has been challenging the constitutive principles of the region—as much as the international order with its laws of war. Particularly Israel's extremely violent reaction to the Hamas attacks has also transformed the material and ideational power of the principal actors in the current conflict. And it has confirmed the ever-diminishing relevance of solidarity with the Palestinians among Arab regimes—but not populations. While decimating the prospects of dialogue and a shared future for Israelis and Palestinians, including at the civil society level, massive and indiscriminate violence committed by all sides since October 7 has also further polarized and radicalized public opinion worldwide. Concurrently, Washington's material and diplomatic support of Israel, its incapacity or unwillingness to reign in the violence, and the (tacit) backing of these positions by other Western governments, erode the validity of the international system's foundational laws and rules.

A reading of the Middle East regional order through the lens of violence thus confirms that October 7 and its aftermath have affected key principles, normative

underpinnings, and the power relations of the regional order across different levels of analysis. While some of the current dynamics of violence are not entirely new to the region, their unprecedented pace and magnitude have shaken the order that preceded October 7, 2024. Whether this will precipitate a radical change *of* the regional order—as opposed to significant changes *within* that order—remains to be seen. Yet, considering the repercussions of the weakening of the 'axis of resistance', the challenging transition in Syria after Assad, and Trump's unpredictable policies on the region, the extent and type of violence after October 7, 2023 may well exceed a threshold, thereby prefiguring the beginning of a different Middle East.

Endnotes

[1] This paper was first presented at a workshop on 'Regional Order in the Middle East after October 7, 2023' that took place at the European University Institute on 12 December 2024. The author would like to thank all the participants for their insightful comments. Special thanks to Marc Lynch and Daniel Lubin for their feedback.

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[3] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence,* Orlando, Fl.: Harcourt Publishing, 1970; p. 80.

[4] Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig, and Eduard Soler i Lecha, 'Lost in Change: A Framework for Understanding Change in the Middle East Regional Order', in Marc Lynch and Simon Mabon, eds., *Order and Region Making in the Middle East*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming.

[5] Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Eduard Soler i Lecha, 'Regionalism and Alliances in the Middle East, 2011-2021: From a "Flash in the Pan" of Regional Cooperation to Liquid Alliances', *Geopolitics* 29(4), 2024, pp. 1447-1473.

[6] See for example Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

[7] Del Sarto, Malmvig, and Soler i Lecha, 'Lost in Change', *op. cit*.

[8] Buzan and Wæver, *op. cit.;* see also Patrick M. Morgan and David A. Lake, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

[9] Most international observers, the UN included, consider these figures reliable. A recent study finds that mortality may even have been *under*-reported, by over 40%. Zeina Jamaluddine, et al., 'Traumatic injury mortality in the Gaza Strip from Oct 7, 2023, to June 30, 2024: a capture–recapture analysis', *The Lancet*, published online 9 January, 2025.

[10] Suspecting that Israel had succeeded in hacking into the cell phone network, Nasrallah had instructed members to use pagers instead of cellular phones.

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[12] Ephrat Livni, 'Israel Conducts Raids in Syria Amid Accusations of Cease-Fire Violations', *New York Times*, 5 January 2025.

[13] Haaretz [editorial], 'Is Israel Really Implementing a Plan of Siege and Starvation in Gaza?', *Haaretz,* 22 October 2024.

[14] United Nations, 'Most of Gaza's 40,000 dead are women and children, says UN rights chief', 15 August 2024.

[15] Human Rights Watch, '"Hopeless, Starving, and Besieged": Israel's Forced Displacement of Palestinians in Gaza', November 2024.

[16] United Nations, 'Gazans face hunger crisis as aid blockade nears two months', 28 April 2025; Erika Solomon and Rawan Sheikh Ahmad, 'As Gaza Siege Grinds On, Gazan Children Go Hungry and Patients Die', *New York Times,* 4 May 2025.

[17] B'Tselem, 'Forcible transfer of isolated Palestinian communities and families in Area C under cover of Gaza fighting', 30 October 2024.

[18] Fatima AbdulKarim and Patrick Kingsley, 'Palestinian Displacement in the West Bank Is Highest Since 1967, Experts Say', *New York Times,* 17 February 2025.

[19] The World Bank, *Lebanon: Interim Damage and Loss Assessment (DaLA)*, November, Washington: The World Bank, 2024, pp. 5-6.

[20] Human Rights Watch, 'Why They Died: Civilian Casualties in Lebanon during the 2006 War', September 2007, p. 4. The report erroneously states that about 12 Israeli soldiers were killed in the war; the correct number is 120.

[21] Incidentally, the Israeli army has reportedly been using Palestinians as human shields. See Natan Odenheimer, Bilal Shbair, and Patrick Kingsley, 'How Israel's Army Uses Palestinians as Human Shields in Gaza', *New York Times*, 14 October 2024.

[22] Samuel Granados, Patrick Kingsley, and Natan Odenheimer, 'How Israel Weakened Civilian Protections When Bombing Hamas Fighters', *New York*

Times, 26 December 2024.

[23] United Nations, 'Most of Gaza's 40,000 dead', *op.cit.*

[24] United Nations, 'Mission Report: Official Visit of the Office of the SRSG-SVC to Israel and the Occupied West Bank, 29 January – 14 February 2024', 4 March 2024.

[25] Deif was reportedly killed in an Israeli airstrike in the summer of 2024.

[26] For example, in July 2024 a rocket launched by Hizballah killed 12 Druze children on a football field in Majdal Shams in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

[27] See for Helle Malmvig, 'Power, Identity and Securitization in the Middle East: Regional Order after the Arab Uprisings', *Mediterranean Politics* 19(1), 2014, pp. 145-148; Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'Sectarian Securitization in the Middle East and the Case of Israel', *International Affairs* 97(3), 2021, pp. 759-778; Simon Mabon, *Houses Built on Sand: Violence, Sectarianism and Revolution in the Middle East*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022.

[28] Marcella Simoni, '"Torniamo Subito:" Il disimpegno dalla Striscia di Gaza e l'aspirazione al ritorno dei coloni israeliani', in Arturo Marzano and Marcella Simoni, eds., *Il labirinto di Gaza: Storie, politiche, rappresentazioni (1987-2023)*, Brescia: Morcelliana, 2024, pp. 135-172.

[29] Rachel Fink, 'Israel's Far-right National Security Minister Celebrates Handing Out 100k Gun Permits Since Oct. 7', *Haaretz,* 19 March 2024.

[30] According to UN Charter VII, Article 51. The principle of legitimate self-defence applies if Gaza is considered a sovereign state or political entity ruled by Hamas (as Israel does). It does not apply if Gaza is considered occupied territory (as the majority opinion in international law maintains), meaning that Israel cannot claim to defend itself legitimately against a people it occupies.

[31] A discussion of what exactly 'pro-Palestinian' and 'pro-Israeli' mean is warranted, but this would be for another paper.

[32] Guterres dared saying that there is a context to the Hamas attacks (which he unequivocally condemned).

[33] Israel's attacks reportedly damaged Iran's air defence system. Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, 'Israel Struck Air Defenses Around Critical Iranian Energy Sites, Officials Say', *New York Times*, 26 October 2024.

[34] Raffaella A. Del Sarto, *Israel under Siege* 2017: *The Politics of Insecurity and the Rise of the Israeli Neo-Revisionist Right*, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2017; pp. 62-64, 113, 178-179.

[35] Morten Valbjørn, André Bank, and May Darwich, 'Forward to the Past? Regional Repercussions of the Gaza War', *Middle East Policy* 31(3): 3-17, 2024; see also Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'A Region in Transition: The Fluid Nature of Middle East Politics', in *The Middle East's Fragile Reset: Actors, Battlegrounds, and (Dis)Order*, ed. Galip Dalay and Tarik M. Yousef, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2023, pp. 8-15.

[36] In October 2024, the US had spent a record of at least US-$ 17.9 billion on military aid to Israel since October 7, 2023. Linda J. Bilmes et al., *United States Spending on Israel's Military Operations and Related U.S. Operations in the Region, October 7, 2023 – September 30, 2024*, Brown University, Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs, October 2024.

[37] Ian Lustick, *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019; Michael Barnett et al., eds., *The One State Reality: What is Israel/Palestine?*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023.

Non-State Actors and Regional Disorder in the Middle East

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When millions of citizens across the Arab world came out in 2011 chanting '*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*', no one thought that the people demanded the end of the state system, even though in Arabic both words 'system' and 'regime' translate as '*nizam*'. Nevertheless, these demands marked a critical juncture for a system populated by Arab states that had long been marked by weakness. What began with demands for regime change devolved into civil wars that tore apart already frail states. Although civil wars only tore apart some states, other regimes have also seen their sovereignty eroded with external interventions or the adoption of coercive mechanisms weakening their hegemonic control over societies while corroding state image and discourse, what Anderson (2018, 321) calls the 'fraying of the façade of the state system'.

Israel's wars in the Middle East following Hamas' attack on the 7th of October seem to be another critical juncture for the regional state system, with short- and long-term ramifications and repercussions for the Middle East (Valbjørn, Bank, and Darwich 2024). While some are unique, other repercussions intensify some of the already existing post-2011 regional dynamics. Specifically, Israel's wars in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria highlighted the Arab state's vulnerabilities and elevated non-state actors as key players in shaping the regional landscape.

The post-October 7 wars have taken place in global and regional orders of 'multiplexity', defined by the absence of a hegemon, the proliferation of non-state actors challenging sovereignty, and cultural and ideological diversity (Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman 2023). This essay examines how structural international and regional conditions have reshaped statehood and agency in the region in the post-2011 uprisings. The post-2011 Middle East state system is evolving as both *de jure* and *de facto* actors engage in constant negotiations over the revised map of the region and its new political order. I then explore how Israel's wars after October 7 and its regional reverberations have generated disintegrative effects for the Arab state while revealing the crucial role of non-state actors in shaping the region.

The Regional (Dis)order: Cold War, Pax-Americana, Multiplexity

Because of the sedimented history of state formation in the MENA region with legacies of colonialism, Arab states were vulnerable to threats of transnational ideologies due to the mismatch between identities and contemporary political institutions. During the 1950-60s, the 'Arab Cold War' was an illustration of how leaders, notably Gamal Abdel Nasser, used this weakness to advance geopolitical interests in the region. Over the following decades, Arab states attempted to reduce this vulnerability through state-building efforts to ensure control over societies. While states have been fierce in employing vast bureaucracies, large armies, and repression, they have lacked the capacity to enforce laws and attain hegemony (Ayubi 1996).

During the Cold War era, the Arab state system survived its weaknesses and endured, and when crises erupted threatening its cohesion, regional and great powers intervened either through external support to regimes or through direct military operations. With Kuwait's independence in 1960, and the aggressive speeches of Abdel Karim Qassim planning to annex Kuwait, Great Britain deployed military forces in 1961, a position that was supported by regional powers through a peace keeping force by the Arab League (Ashton 1997). When pan-Arabism had reached divisive peak and threatened civil wars, great powers pursued direct military interventions in Lebanon and Jordan in 1958 (Ovendale 1994). When state power faltered in Jordan during the 'Black September' 1970-71, the United States with the Israel supported King's

Hussein against his Palestinian opponents (Rubinovitz 2010). Therefore, state collapse or fail in the Arab world remained a rarity (only South Sudan) until the uprisings. Even at the end of the Cold War, Saddam Hussein's annexation of Kuwait in 1990s was rebuffed by a US-led coalition including Arab states to reinstate sovereignty. These interventions made the cost of challenging the state system particularly high for local actors, thus maintaining a status quo over postcolonial borders in the Middle East (Gause 1992).

During the post-Cold War era, a lack of commitment by great powers to maintain this 'fictional' sovereignty (Ahram and Lust 2016, 13) had exposed Arab states' weaknesses. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 failed to achieve peace and democracy in the Middle East. While the US described its intervention as one motivated by the perseveration of peace and stability, the invasion was a clear breach of the rules and norms of sovereignty. The failure of the US to achieve its masterplan of 'creating a New Middle East' was the beginning of its hegemonic retreat from the region (Yom 2020), thus creating the opportunity for regional powers to fill the power vacuum in the region, with each trying to re-organize regional roles in their favour (Darwich 2019).

Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, proxy wars in conflict-torn, weakened states became the main feature of conflict in the region, where regional powers clash through local proxies who are mobilized around identities based on religion, sect, ethnicity, or tribe. Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen became arenas for proxy conflicts. The rise of these proxy conflicts and the obsolescence of interstate wars across the Middle East is often attributed to state failure in the region (Darwich et al. 2022). The rise of proxies and the proliferation of armed non-state actors in the post-2011 Middle East did not necessarily challenge the principles of sovereignty and statehood (Ahram 2019, 204–5). Instead, armed non-state actors emerged as diverse: while some challenged states' sovereignty (such as the case of ISIS), others were separatists movements that aspired for a state of their own, and others have captured (or attempted to capture) existing states, such as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi (Popular Mobilization Front PMF) in Iraq (Haddad 2018), the Houthis in Yemen (Yadav 2020), and the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan (Darwich 2023).

The behaviour and policies of Arab states in the post-2011 uprisings were more regime-driven than institutional, with foreign policy making becoming more personalized. The uprisings prompted Arab regimes to reinvent their networks in society, build new alliances, and re-invent new mechanisms to capture the state. These mechanisms have weakened the Arab state and destroyed previous efforts of state building. This was further exacerbated by the inability of Arab regimes to control their militias and proxies, which often evolved into militarocracies, independent and threatening their earlier government allies (Voller 2022). Furthermore, the devolution of violence has also been accompanied with the devolution of foreign policy making, where non-state actors have engaged in foreign policy activities of their own, leading to the multiplicity of foreign policies in each state (Darwich 2021). Ultimately, some Arab regimes came out of the uprisings stronger than ever, and the Arab state weaker than ever. Thus, the regional order can be characterised as one of '*multiplexity*': lacking a hegemonic power, with a wide array of non-state actors diverse ideologically, culturally, and politically operating with various domestic and international agendas.

Israel's Wars in a Regional Disorder

In the post-2011 Middle East, the Palestinian question seemed to be a relic of the past, overshadowed by other regional priorities. During this period, Israeli leaders believed they had effectively managed the Gaza situation through a blockade that persisted for over 16 years. However, on October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a sophisticated operation, 'Al-Aqsa Flood' that shattered this status quo. In retaliation Israel launched not only a destructive war in the Gaza strip but also embarked on a regional war to reshape the Middle East. Israel targeted the so-called Axis of resistance (Iran and its allies in the region including Hamas, Hezbollah, the Assad regime, the Houthis in Yemen, and parts of PMF in Iraq). These wars are pivotal in shaping the current and future regional order,

as they weaken the Arab state and highlight the pivotal role of armed non-state actors.

During the first year of the Gaza war, the Axis of Resistance seem to have gained momentum (Bajoghli and Nasr 2024). Before 2011, the alliance between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas actively challenged the Western-supported regional order backed by Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The Axis maintained its cohesion through mutual opposition to the United States and Israel. However, after the Arab uprisings, the Axis weakened, notably when Hamas temporarily opposed the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war. The Hamas attacks on October 7 and Israel's subsequent response have realigned these groups, indicating a renewed division between the resistance and US-supported Arab regimes. The ongoing Gaza conflict has highlighted new dynamics: Syria had a diminished role after years of conflict, even before the December 2024 overthrow of the Asad regime, and Hezbollah no longer holds the same legitimacy it once did. Meanwhile, new actors have emerged. The Houthis in Yemen have attacked ships in the Red Sea, disrupting global trade, and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria have targeted US military bases.

The Axis suffered significant setbacks, including Israeli attacks on Iranian targets that dismantled some of its political and logistical infrastructure. Additionally, an unprecedent assassination campaign targeted the Axis' leadership, resulting in the death of senior commanders in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, and Hamas' leaders Ismail Haniyeh and Yehya Sinwar. The fall of Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, following an operation by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), is poised to alter the Axis and reshape regional alliances. Exploiting a perceived vulnerability within the Axis of Resistance, Israel identified a strategic opportunity to diminish Iran's regional influence and destabilize its government. In June 2025, Israel initiated a coordinated campaign involving aerial strikes and intelligence operations, targeting key military installations and nuclear facilities. This offensive resulted in the deaths of several high-ranking military officials and nuclear scientists. Prompted to retaliate, Iran revealed how effective its missile programme can be in causing devastating damages to Israeli cities — Tel Aviv and Haifa. The United States' subsequent decision to Iran's nuclear sites on 22 June 2025 marks an unprecedented escalation in regional hostilities, introducing multiple potential trajectories for the future of the region (Parmeter, 2025). Amid these escalating tensions, the fragility of Arab regimes has become increasingly apparent. Their capacity for autonomous foreign policy manoeuvring remains severely constrained, either by enduring strategic alignments with the United States or by entanglement in persistent domestic conflicts.

Over the past two years, regimes within both the Axis of resistance and the so-called moderate regimes have shown exceptional weakness, with Israel's wars exposing their domestic and regional vulnerabilities. Iran emerged as a regional actor that is often unable to protect its allies and network across the region. Its decades-long strategy of building a network of allies in the region seems to be increasingly ineffective. In addition, Israeli attacks on Syrian territories have been met with exceptional silence from Al-Assad regime (Hassan 2024), and with the fall of the regime, Israel has seized the opportunity to grab and annex further strategic land. These recent state borders violations between Israel and Syria amid international silence mark a significant shift away from the long-standing norm of preserving post-colonial borders despite their artificiality. Amid these changes, authoritarian Arab regimes have struggled to formulate effective foreign policies. This inaction and rigidity in positions have significantly widened the gap between regimes and their people. While the people mobilized, or attempted to mobilize, for the Palestinian cause, regimes have largely suppressed any expression of pro-Palestinian feelings and rejection of Israeli war in Lebanon and attacks on Syria (Valbjørn, Bank, and Darwich 2024, 12–14).

Nevertheless, non-state actors emerged as resilient actors capable of manoeuvre, learning, and adaptation. Despite Israel's exceptionally violent offensive in Gaza, depopulating the city and flattening it out, its strategy

has proven ineffective in eradicating Hamas (Wermenbol 2024). Hamas continues to inflict casualties on the Israeli military by changing its tactics, shifting from open combat to guerilla tactics. This evolution in the group's evolving strategies and resilience (Mehvar and Khdour 2024) has forced the Israeli army to repeatedly return to areas of Gaza that were thought to be cleared of fighters.

In Lebanon, despite Israel achieving several tactical wins over Hezbollah, including the assassination of its leader Hassan Nasrallah and numerous key leaders, as well as the pager attack, Hezbollah demonstrated exceptional resilience through its drone and missile attacks on North Israel and other key cities, such as Haifa and Tel Aviv, and successfully repelled Israel's ground operation. As the cease-fire in Lebanon was concluded, it has become evident that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were unable to achieve their primary objective: pushing Hezbollah north of the Litani river to secure northern Israel for displaced Israelis to return home. And while Hezbollah is weakened, it is far from destroyed.

Some non-state actors which were peripheral to the broader Middle East conflict — such as the Houthis in Yemen and Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq – now play a bigger role and have deepened their regional influence. The Houthis have disrupted ships with connection to Israel traveling through the Red Sea, forcing a reroute around Africa, putting further pressure on supply to Israel. The US-UK coordinated attack on Yemen seems far from successful in intimidating the Houthis or bringing any stability to the Red Sea maritime route (Şeker 2024). Kataib Hezbollah, a group currently linked to the PMF in Iraq, has shown exceptional autonomy beyond its role as an Iranian proxy by attacking US bases in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan against the wishes of the IRGC.

These non-state actors have demonstrated a remarkable ability to shape regional dynamics, maintaining organizational strength despite leadership assassination and setbacks. Notably, groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah are deeply rooted in societies, with popular support enabling them to recruit new members and rebuild critical resources. Israel's targeted killing of their leadership have, paradoxically, increased their public support. More importantly, non-state actors that have taken actions against Israel since October 7 have won the 'hearts and minds' of both local and regional publics. These actors emerged as the symbol of defence of Palestinian rights and Arab dignity, a role that Arab regimes can no longer effectively fulfil. Hamas, whose popularity had been waning before October 7, has re-invented its regional image and enhanced its ideological and political relevance. According to various polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip between December 2023 and September 2024, there remains a majority that continues to view Hamas' decision to carry out the October 7 attack as 'correct', although this majority has become a minority in Gaza in the poll conducted in September 2024.[1]

At the regional level, Abu Ubaida, the longtime spokesman for Hamas's Al-Qassam Brigades — an enigmatic figure, always masked in keffiyeh, known as *Al-Mulatham* ('the masked' in Arabic) — has emerged as a cultural, political phenomenon over social media, street art, and banners (Agathocleous and van Veen 2024). Hezbollah, whose popularity in the Arab world has been tarnished due to its support of al-Assad regime, was able to regain some of its previous image as defender of the Arab cause at domestic and regional level (Cleveland 2024). The Houthis have equally gained supporters across the Arab world, and their increasing popularity transcended sectarian divisions (Jalabi 2024). The polls by the PSR found that residents of Gaza and the occupied West Bank ranked the Houthis' response to the Israel-Hamas war as the most satisfying among regional actors. The group has thus reinvented its image domestically and regionally, rising into one with highest resonance among people in the Arab world.

Conclusion

The decade following the 2011 Arab uprisings has transformed the region into a multiplex arena of political and ideological diversity. Both state and non-state actors are actively competing to shape the regional order. Israel's

wars in the region have further intensified the multiplexity in the Middle East. Non-state actors have evolved into hybrid entities, with complex foreign policies and diplomatic capabilities alongside military capacity. While the post-colonial Arab state is steadily eroding, new actors are rising to fill the vacuum not only in domestic arenas but also regionally.

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Endnotes

[1] https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/991

Religious, Militant Non-State Actors in the Middle East Before and After 7 October

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Religious, militant non-state actors have played a pivotal role in the events that have unfolded since October 7, 2023. The military wing of Hamas orchestrated the largest and deadliest attack on Israeli territory. Hezbollah escalated its missile launches until suffering devastating blows from Israeli intelligence, airstrikes, and ground attacks. In parallel, the Haredim—ultra-orthodox Jews—have refused military conscription, while radical religious Zionists have increasingly militarized and expanded violent colonization in the West Bank and supported ethnic cleansing in Gaza. In Yemen, the Houthis have disrupted significant portions of Red Sea trade in solidarity with Palestine and have directly targeted Israel. In Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which has controlled Idlib province fully since 2019, captured Damascus and ousted Bashar al-Assad in an astonishing blitzkrieg facilitated by Russia's passivity and Turkish support. The weakening of Assad's ally Hezbollah and the inaction of Iran-backed Iraqi militias also contributed to the collapse of the Syrian regime. Overall, these actors have directly contributed to reshape the regional order emerging since October 7.

However, these religious non-state actors are not identical. They do not have the same organizational structure, objectives, or position within national and international politics. How can we best make sense of this diversity and their place within regional order? I argue that the framework of Islamism offers limited value in capturing this diversity, especially when analyzing armed groups such as Hamas, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, ISIS, and HTS. A more effective way of understanding actors is by examining their respective national context, attitudes towards state institutions, and engagement with national politics. These factors are what primarily shape behavior, while Islamist or religious ideology says little about the actors' *raison d'être*, such as Hamas' focus on the liberation of Palestine or HTS' overthrow of Assad. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the actors' logic of action and of the implications for governance, regional (in)stability, and international relations. It also allows a trans-ideological comparison of Islamic and non-Islamic actors who share similar attitudes towards the state. To this end, I propose a straightforward typology based on this approach:

Religious non-state actors that do not want to integrate or become states: al-Qaeda, Iraq-based militias, and the Haredim;

Religious non-state actors that want(ed) to integrate or control the state: Hamas, Hezbollah, and radical religious Zionists;

Religious non-state actors that want(ed) to become states: the Houthis, ISIS, and HTS.

Each of these types of religious non-state actors relates differently to regional order and to the existing state system, with important implications for how to think about the nature of their activism.

Religious non-state actors who do not want to become states

These actors do not aim to seize political power but are characterized by various forms of engagement with states. Some are pro-state actors (e.g. Iraq-based militias), others are anti-state actors (e.g. al-Qaeda), and still others are aloof opportunists (e.g. Haredim, Salafis). They also differ organizationally, from armed groups, to terrorist networks, to religious movements.

Pro-state actors, such as Iraq-based militias, occupy an ambivalent position, balancing patronage from state institutions, support for political forces, and their own

autonomous agendas and resources (Beaumont 2017). Anti-state actors, like al-Qaeda, reject participation in political systems and instead combine a global terror agenda with local insurgencies (Collombier & Roy eds 2019). Finally, aloof opportunists, such as the Haredim in Israel, negotiate terms for their special status, opting out of state requirements such as military conscriptions in exchange for political support. They only conceive their involvement in politics in terms of a lobby aimed at securing the interests of their religious movement. This is also the case of the Salafi party Hizb al-Nur in Egypt, which seeks to safeguard its Dawa Salafiyya movement (Lacroix 2025, forthcoming).

Religious non-state actors that want(ed) to integrate or control the state

Actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and radical religious Zionists have sought to integrate state institutions to partially or fully control governance. For Hezbollah and Hamas, this strategy has taken the form of successful participation in elections and extensive control of state institutions. These groups are not transnational Islamists but nationalist Islamists. Hamas is a Palestinian national liberation movement, while Hezbollah is a Lebanese political and military actor that can be described as driven more by an anti-Israeli agenda than a pro-Palestine one. Internally, these movements are/were characterized by the professionalization and bureaucratization of governance, while externally, their actions are shaped by intra-organisation politicking and national politics. More fragmented groups, such as radical religious Zionists in Israeli settlements or Salafi groups in Libya (Blanc & Collombier 2021), also attempt to integrate state institutions but focus on lobbying on specific policy areas, such as colonization, or controlling key arenas such as the religious sphere.

Hamas

Hamas has followed a trajectory marked by (partial) institutionalization, technocratization, and normalization as a central state actor (Baconi 2018). Far from being a monolithic entity, the organization is divided into three branches: a social branch, which relies on caritative associations distributing social services; a political branch, responsible for administering state institutions and conducting diplomatic relations; and a military branch, focused on armed resistance against Israel.

In 2006, Hamas won the legislative elections in Gaza with 56% of the vote. As the dominant political force, Hamas deployed a technocratic form of governance, focusing on consolidating institutions and providing services rather than pursuing the Islamization of the state and public space (Berti 2015). However, in 2014, Hamas decided to leave the responsibility of forming the government of the Palestinian authority solely to Fatah and thus to withdraw from official representation. In 2017, it dissolved the administrative committee in charge of managing the daily affairs of the Gaza strip. This, combined with the appointment of Yahya Sinwar as head of the organization in Gaza, marked a return to a logic of armed resistance against Israeli occupation (Seurat 2017). The departure of Ismail Haniyeh, head of the political bureau, to Doha in 2019 allowed for the consolidation of Sinwar's control over Hamas and the shift towards a more offensive policy against Israel (Seurat 2024). Between 2017 and 2023, Sinwar strengthened the military branch, expanding its ground forces and arsenal while securing financial aid. This strategy culminated in the 7 October attack masterminded by Sinwar, whose preparations seemed to have at least partially escaped the knowledge of the political branch based in Qatar.

Since then, the Israeli army has carried out both large-scale aerial and ground attacks on Hamas and the Gaza strip as a whole, resulting in a death toll estimated between 50,000 and 100,000. Despite the regular loss of its leaders, Hamas seemingly continues to recruit new combatants with ease while the Israeli army faces growing internal contestation—from pilots, reservists, and retired officers (Seurat 2025). As a result, both actors find themselves in a symmetrically opposite situation: while Israel maintains clear military and technological superiority, Hamas appears to hold the moral high ground. Paradoxically, Hamas' resilience

serves the Israeli government by providing a rationale to prolong the war. Although Hamas has consistently called for a permanent ceasefire and Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza strip in exchange for the release of all hostages, Israel's demands—that Hamas lay down weapons and leave Gaza entirely—are unrealistic, as they imply capitulation rather than negotiation. This allows Israel to voice repeated accusations that Hamas rejects ceasefires, thus laying the rhetorical groundwork for Netanyahu's decision to launch a new ground invasion on 19 May 2025, aimed at taking full control of the Gaza strip. In the short to medium term, the destruction of Gaza is likely to comfort Hamas in its post-2017 choice to focus on armed resistance as opposed to governance.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah has followed a similar trajectory to that of Hamas. After the civil war ended in 1990, the movement participated in legislative elections, obtained ministries in the 2000s, and became a key political force. Often described as a 'state within a state', Hezbollah is more accurately characterized as a 'state within a non-state'. The weakness of Lebanese institutions, coupled with the ongoing economic, political, military, and humanitarian crisis—rooted in widespread corruption, sectarian tensions, the Syrian refugee crisis, the Beirut port explosion, and Israeli bombings—have helped maintain Hezbollah's relevance as a prominent political and military actor.

Although Hezbollah is also often portrayed as a transnational movement, it is actually a country-based, nationalist movement. Like Hamas, it has prioritized national political goals and armed resistance against Israel over the Islamization of state institutions. The organization has officially abandoned the objective of the Islamic state as well as the Iranian concept of wilayat al-faqih, opting instead for the concept of citizenship (*muwatana*) in the late 2000s. To explain this shift, Hasan Nasrallah distinguished "between *al-fikr al-siyasi* (political ideology), which Hizbullah has maintained, and *al-barnamaj al-siyasi* (political program), which it has modified" (Bayat 2013: 17-18). The organization has also embraced neoliberal policies, such as privatizations and market deregulation (Daher 2019).

In parallel, Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime in Syria was largely driven by an anti-Israeli agenda. Its intervention in May 2013, against the Syrian rebels, played a key role in stabilizing the regime. By doing so, Hezbollah sought to secure a backyard in Syria to stockpile weapons and establish a fallback position in the event of open conflict with Israel. Assad's fall and the Israeli land invasion, alongside bombings throughout Lebanon, have significantly reduced Hezbollah's territorial outreach.

The assassination of Hezbollah leaders, including Hassan Nasrallah, amid Israel's invasion of Lebanon since September 2024, further calls into question the organization's ability to contribute to the reconstruction and political future of the country. Opposing Lebanese forces are also attempting—with US support—to capitalize on Hezbollah's moment of weakness to marginalize the movement politically.

Radical religious Zionists

Radical religious Zionists, once a minor political force in Israel, have significantly developed alongside the colonization of the occupied Palestinian territories since 1967. Today, they represent an important political force that integrated into state institutions, most notably the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Since the 1980s, the IDF has recruited massively from the ranks of religious settlers. This has allowed these radical religious Zionists to gain significant influence within the military, enabling them to lobby the IDF away from trying to curb settler violence in the West Bank (Mnaili 2022). They have also successfully pressured the Israeli government to formally recognize illegal settlements post facto (Mnaili 2024). At the same time, Israeli authorities have deliberately facilitated the militarization of settlers, who have been increasingly involved in violent acts against Palestinians but also Israeli security forces. In this way, radical religious Zionists have paradoxically been penetrating state institutions in order to weaken state authority.

Religious non-state actors that want(ed) to become states

These actors are characterized by a project to establish their own institutional system of governance. They typically emerge in contexts of civil wars and limited statehood, as seen with the Houthis in Yemen, ISIS in Iraq-Syria, and HTS in Syria.

The Houthis

The Houthis, who call themselves Ansar Allah, are not just a military force but also a political and religious movement with large popular support. Although they initially participated in the political system after Yemen's unification in 1990, securing parliamentary seats, they began armed rebellion in 2004 following the killing of their leader Hussein al-Houthi. In 2014, after the wave of Arab revolutions, the Houthis rejected a political pact between all Yemeni forces and formed an alliance with ex-President Ali Abdallah Saleh, ultimately capturing the capital, Sanaa. In 2017, Saleh shifted its alliance back to Saudi Arabia. After Saleh's death in combat against the Houthis, Saudi Arabia launched an unsuccessful military operation in Yemen. In April 2022, a UN-brokered cease-fire was agreed upon by the Houthis and Saudi Arabia. The Houthis are de facto no longer rebels but fully-fledged political actors. In territories under their control, they have developed a security apparatus and quasi-state institutions (Bonnefoy, 2024). They also initiated a policy of "Houthization," aimed at indoctrinating public servants and children in the movement's ideology. Notably, they reformed the education system to cultivate a new generation of Yemeni revolutionaries (Gastinel 2025).

The Houthis rely on a mix of nationalist and Islamic discourse, centered around countering US imperialism and Zionism—a rhetoric which is reminiscent of Hezbollah. Iran hoped to leverage this rhetorical alignment to its advantage; in 2010, Iranian foreign minister Velayati stated that the Houthis should become to Yemen what Hezbollah is to Lebanon (Gaub 2016). Over the next decade, Iran pursued an opportunistic form of realpolitik, 'shiitizing' the Houthis in opposition to their common Saudi enemy, despite significant differences between Yemeni Zaydism and Iranian Twelver Shiism. While the Houthis have benefited from Iranian weapon transfers, they have not become a mere Iranian proxy and remain a national-nationalist actor. The 'Iranian proxy' narrative overlooks the Houthis' autonomy and pro-Palestinian sentiment (Yadav 2023).

Following the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, which triggered the Israel–Hamas war, the Houthis expressed support for the Palestinians and launched missile attacks on trading ships crossing the Bab al-Mandab strait in the Red Sea. This regional outreach is not driven by pro-Iranian regional ambitions but is mainly the result of internal factors. The Houthis believe that their military operations in the Red Sea will help revive their popularity, which has somewhat waned since the cessation of fighting, and provide leverage in their negotiations with Saudi Arabia to secure the financial aid needed to consolidate their governance institutions and their popular support. The (temporary) breakdown of Saudi-Israeli normalization however makes this leverage less likely to succeed (Yadav 2023). In May 2025, the USA and the Houthis reached a ceasefire agreement mediated by Oman. Likely intended to restore commercial shipping in the Red Sea and build momentum for renewed nuclear deal talks with Iran, this ceasefire remains fragile and depends largely on whether the Houthis continue targeting Israel.

The idiosyncratic case of ISIS

Borne out of the civil wars in Iraq and Syria, ISIS acquired and controlled a vast transnational territory between 2014 and 2019. Within this territory, it built quasi-state institutions, levied taxes, and policed civilian populations (al-Tamimi 2015; Zelin 2016). The organization combined a local agenda, drawing on Sunni insurgencies and tribal factions in Iraq and Syria, with a global agenda aimed at projecting terrorist violence against regional and Western powers. This dual agenda meant that ISIS' project was inherently suicidal, as it rested on a fundamental contradiction between a territorial project

and a global agenda project that antagonized everyone—local governments, local minorities, regional powers, international powers.

With its military defeat in 2019, ISIS has focused on terrorist attacks and expanding its presence in other regions, especially the Sahel, North Africa, and Central Asia. After the ousting of Assad, it may benefit from a twofold dynamic: recent Israeli airstrikes on Syrian military facilities, which undermine the new authorities' ability to combat ISIS and pacify the country more generally; and clashes between the Kurdish Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) and the Syrian National Army (SNA), which could provide an opportunity for ISIS fighters to free themselves from Kurdish controlled prisons or camps like al-Hol. The intensification of US airstrikes since Assad's fall on December 8 represents an anticipation of such a scenario. Nevertheless, the new Syrian authorities have pledged to cooperate in counter-terrorism efforts.

HTS

HTS differs from ISIS in two major respects. First, after cutting ties with ISIS in 2013 and al-Qaeda in 2016, HTS has focused on a national-ist agenda rather than global jihad (Drevon & Haenni, 2021). The fact that Salafi-Jihadi ideologue Muhammad al-Maqdisi has called out the group is telling in that regard (Zelin 2020). The distinction between national and global jihadist organizations is crucial to understanding HTS' evolution into a more classic revolutionary movement, even though it still used terrorist tactics during its offensive (the attack on Aleppo started with a double suicide attack).

Second, HTS has favored a politics of administration, which contrasts with ISIS' politics of ideological purification implementing corporal punishments (Brynjar 2015). HTS not only distanced itself from Salafi-Jihadi ideology but has also focused on building a non-ideological, technocratic governance through a civil government in Idlib province (Drevon & Haenni 2020, 2021). This pragmatic state-building has led the group to institutionalize and centralize religious authority, codify sharia based on local jurisprudence, and protect religious minorities (Drevon & Haenni, 2025). It has not enforced corporal punishments in case of obvious inobservance of religious law in the public space (Haenni & Roy 2024). Since capturing Damascus, HTS has prioritized establishing governance institutions. As al-Sharaa stated, "Today we are in the state-building phase" (Asharq al-Awsat 2024).

In the first few months following Assad's fall, the question was less about who HTS was going to ally with and rather who were they not up against. HTS leaders have expressed no interest to antagonize Israel or interfering in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is revealing in that regard that, in its first interview with foreign media, Prime Minister Muhammad al-Bachir, refused to answer questions about attitudes towards Israel, Iran, and Russia (Nicastro, 2024), while HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa is doing everything he can to avoid confrontation with Israel and has even mentioned the possibility of normalization in the long term. There are several reasons for this reluctance to identify regional enemies.

First, HTS and the newly appointed civil government have more pressing issues. This includes asserting control over all of Syrian territory and coordinating with a myriad of rebel groups and local actors. Although HTS is the preponderant actor, it is not a mass movement and has a very low human projection capacity to assert its authority across the country. It also faces challenges from local actors who want to preserve their provincial chiefdoms. The new authorities are working on consolidating these disparate factions under a unified military command (Alarabiyya 2024). The massacres of 1300 Alawites in the West of the country in April 2025 raise high concerns about the authorities' ability to do so, not to mention their possible complacency.

Second, HTS relays a popular fatigue with international interventions (Hezbollah and Iran in 2013, Russia in 2015, International coalition against ISIS in 2015, Turkey in 2016, etc.). Al-Sharaa has made it clear: "Syria is tired of wars and of being a platform for the interests of others" (Asharq

al-Awsat 2024). By avoiding antagonizing regional powers, the new authorities signal their willingness to start from a blank page and give Syria's fate back to Syrians. However, this will necessarily require navigating competing regional interests, especially those seen in clashes between the Turkey-backed SNA and the Kurdish SDF backed by the USA and possibly by Israel, in northern Syria.

Third, HTS is hoping to build relations with the international community and regional partners (Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE). For several years, al-Sharaa has emphasized HTS' converging interests with the West, including its positive role in preventing more Syrian refugees, fighting ISIS, and opposing common enemies like Russia and Iran. Al-Sharaa's meeting with a US delegation on December 20, 2024, was a first step toward a potential alignment based on cooperation in counterterrorism, political transition, and the progressive lifting of sanctions, which the USA have initiated on January 6, 2025 and have pledged to complete on May 14 after Trump met with al-Charaa. The new Syrian president virtually accepted all US demands, including the end of Iranian influence in Syria, cooperation in anti-terrorism, the neutralization of chemical weapons, and the sidelining of foreign Jihadis and Palestinian groups. Trump's long-term goal of normalization with Israel is more ambitious, but al-Charaa has reportedly expressed openness to dialogue and pledged to uphold the 1974 agreement on the demilitarization of the Golan Heights, despite Israel's recent violations of the accords.

At the regional level, Turkey is providing key support in intelligence and military sectors and will likely play a major role in reconstruction efforts in the longer term. Saudi Arabia had also quickly agreed to send oil to Syria in response to Iran's decision to stop its exports and is emerging as a key partner for the reconstruction of the country. Al-Sharaa has expressed his admiration for the Saudi and Emirati model and is courting them to secure assistance.

In the medium term, HTS faces two key challenges to convince potential Western partners to delist (Drevon 2024) the organization and normalize relations completely. First, it must consolidate the new authorities without monopolizing power, a delicate—almost contradictory—task. Key to this has been ensuring the transfer of authority from the temporary civil government to a more inclusive governing body after its three-month mandate, in line with UN Resolution 2254 on Syria's political transition adopted in 2015. Secondly, HTS will need to establish a transitional justice process to institutionalize accountability, put an end to revenge killings, and spearhead national reconciliation. While the massacre of Alawites the previous month had endangered both this political transition and the rapprochement with the West, al-Charaa's pledge to identify and prosecute those responsible—along with the 11 March agreement with SDF leader Mazloum Abdi to integrate Kurdish-controlled institutions into the Syrian state—offered him a second chance. Finally, HTS will need to demonstrate its capacity to rebuild the country and reboot the economy in an inclusive way.

Conclusion

Non-state actors are largely buying the idea of the state. Few actors operate fully outside of the state (e.g. al-Qaeda). Some have experienced an upward trajectory over the past decade, such as the Houthis, radical Zionists, and HTS, while others have faced a downward trajectory, including ISIS, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Haredim. The key issue to understand their place in the new regional order lies less in their ideology than in their priority of action—fighting versus governing.

Islamism as a conceptual framework is inadequate for understanding these non-state actors because of their diverse methods of interacting with states—whether through integration, cooptation, lobbying, state-building, or opposition. For example, HTS does not embody an Islamic revolution. It lacks a clear ideological discourse and has invested years of efforts in building a civil rebel governance (Drevon & Haenni, 2025). The reasons for the group's transformation are not primarily ideological but practical—the experience of population management and state-building. The group exemplifies a transition from

'Islam is the solution' to 'institutions are the solution.'

The reason HTS succeeded where ISIS failed is that HTS focused on political dissidence, while ISIS focused on religious dissidence. This has two main implications: negatively, it risks HTS monopolizing power, but positively, it places HTS on a path-dependency towards state-building that requires pragmatism and inclusivity. HTS' lack of manpower means it cannot afford to be exclusive. A key challenge for HTS, therefore, is delegation—finding reliable local partners in the short-medium term and formulating a model of sovereignty that balances governmental centrality with territorial, ethnic, and religious fragmentation in the long term.

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A Stress Test for Arab Regionalism: Mapping Trends before and after October 7

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Regionalism and regional order: looking for the right questions

The study of regionalism in the Middle East and North Africa region, and particularly among Arab countries has mainly focused on identifying the reasons explaining its limited success. Is this a region without regionalism, as suggested by Paul Aarts (1999)? Why is political and economic integration among Arab states so weak despite the existence of a strong common cultural and linguistic bond and the broader phenomena of globalization that has translated into a regionalist dynamic elsewhere? (Salloukh and Brynen, 2004). Is it appropriate or analytically meaningful to apply 'Western' standards to the analysis of regionalism in the MENA? (Acharya, 2011; Fawcett, 2020). Can the region's integration shortcomings be explained by a sustained tension between the Pan-Arab ideals and the interests of Arab States aiming at securing their political autonomy? (Tripp, 1995; Barnett and Solingen, 2007; Awad, 2022). Or, instead of focusing on the shortcomings of top-down regionalism, should our attention be redirected to the understanding of bottom-up regionalization processes? (Harders & Legrenzi, 2008; Ferabolli, 2014). Under which conditions do formal organizations such as the League of the Arab States (LAS) or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) become the arenas where regional powers expose and confront their differences? (del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2024).

This essay examines the relationship between *regionalism* and *regional order*. Regionalism, conventionally defined as the formation of interstate organizations within specific regions, has had a limited influence on shaping regional dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa region. Instead, dynamics of regional fragmentation, conflict-driven inter-state relations and extra-regional interference explain many of the challenges and shortcomings faced by such organizations. Consequently, when examining the relationship between regionalism and regional order, the focus should be on how changes of regional order or within a specific order (del Sarto, Malmvig, Soler i Lecha, 2025) have shaped the conditions under which regionalism either advances or declines.

Building on the English School's definition of international order, regional order can be understood as the set of ordering principles within an international society, applied specifically to a regional context. This regional order comprises not only a specific distribution of power but also formal and informal institutions, shared norms, rules, practices, common assumptions, and durable expectations. Within this framework, regionalism—or its absence—constitutes an integral element of the regional order in the form of secondary institutions. It is crucial to highlight that orders may either be cooperative—creating opportunities for regionalism to flourish—or conflict-driven, where the prospects for regionalism are significantly constrained.

Three key moments challenged this regional order. The Arab countries, as part of the broader Middle East region, experienced an intensification of domestic and regional upheavals in 2011. Initially, the predominant view was that the Arab uprisings could herald a profound and irreversible transformation of the region, which could have eventually led to the emergence of a new regional order with greater regional cooperation and a more visible role for regional organizations. With the descent of Syria, Libya, and Yemen into interstate wars and the resilience or restauration of authoritarianism, those expectations faded away. In 2017, the coordinated boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain revealed the vulnerability of even a seemingly effective

regional organization like the Gulf Cooperation Council. Finally, in 2023, the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel and its subsequent brutal retaliation in Gaza, followed by the regionalization of the conflict. The involvement of Hezbollah, the Houthis and Iran, the Israeli military operations in Lebanon, and the weakening of the axis of resistance in the form of the sudden collapse of the Al-Asad regime in Syria in December 2024 represents a new stress test for Arab regionalism.

The analysis of these three episodes provides an empirical basis for comparative studies on Arab regionalism but also for the regionalism in contested regional orders. We already know that regionalism has not become more prominent or relevant, despite a brief, illusory resurgence in the early months of 2011 (del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2018). Thus, our focus should shift toward understanding how regionalism absorbs these challenges without collapsing entirely. In other words, is this dysfunctional regionalism merely another symptom of an old order clinging to survival? What are the elements that sustain this resilience? Can regionalism mitigate and buffer challenges to the regional order?

2011: A flash in a pan

The Arab Uprisings of 2011 presented a rare opportunity for regional organizations to assume a more assertive role. With mass protests sweeping through the region and the overthrow of authoritarian leaders in Tunisia and Egypt, uncertainty prompted calls for collective action. Organizations like the League of Arab States (LAS) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) took a more central role in shaping regional dynamics, creating momentum for organizations that had long been trying to upgrade regional cooperation and modernize those institutions.

The LAS's response to the uprisings highlighted both its potential and its limitations. It took unprecedented steps, such as supporting an international intervention in Libya and imposing sanctions on Syria. These actions marked a departure from its traditional non-interventionist stance, and analysts considered that it reflected "a change in both its initial conception and its general behavior" (Korany, 2013: 93–94) and argued that "the Arab League can be reformed to enhance its role in the development of the new Arab world" (Muasher, 2012) thus opening a significant window of opportunity for regional cooperation and cooperative security mechanisms that previously had been closed (Malmvig 2013: 30, Beck 2015). Despite bold proposals, such as the creation of a joint Arab military force, internal divisions among member states hindered the organization's ability to address regional challenges effectively and relegated the organization to its pre-2011 role.

The GCC also emerged as an active player during the uprisings, leveraging its relatively cohesive structure and resources. In Bahrain, the GCC deployed its Peninsula Shield Force to suppress protests, while in Yemen, it mediated President Saleh's resignation. These initiatives were primarily driven by the Gulf monarchies' desire to counter regional instability and curb Iranian influence. However, proposals by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to upgrade the GCC into a "Gulf Union" faced a growing resistance from smaller member states like Oman, Kuwait and Qatar, which feared Saudi dominance.

In the end, the Arab uprisings' potential to strengthen institutionalized regional cooperation proved ephemeral. This setback echoes Fawaz Gerges' (2014) description of the Arab uprisings as "a frustrated attempt to build a new, pluralistic, and post-authoritarian order"—one in which regional organizations might have explored new avenues to upgrade their cooperation or even envision regional integration. None of this happened. Authoritarianism rearmed itself, regimes resorted to repression and co-optation to resist the wave of change. New challenges to the regional system of states emerged, including the proclamation of a new Caliphate by the Islamic State and the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, popularly known as Rojava. However, the old state-centric, conflict-driven, and authoritarian order proved more resilient than initially thought. As a result, regional organizations ultimately embodied this return to the *status quo ante*.

2017: The risk of a permanent rupture

In June 2017 a new crisis tested the limits of the institutional architecture of the Arab region. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt – which named themselves the Arab Quartet - severed diplomatic ties with Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism and meddling in other Arab states' affairs. This Arab Quartet imposed a blockade, disrupting travel and trade within the Gulf. The rift stemmed from Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, its close ties with Turkey (which included the upgrade of Turkey's existing military base in Qatar), and its amicable relationship with Iran regarding the exploitation of gas fields. The blockade strained Gulf unity, an organization that had previously been seen as a rare exception of successful regional cooperation (Legrenzi, 2015).

Qatar refused to meet the Quartet's 13 conditions, which included shutting down Al-Jazeera and the Turkish military base. Supported by Turkey and Iran, Doha weathered the blockade, exposing deep divisions within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The crisis raised doubts about the GCC's effectiveness, as it struggled to mitigate inter-state rivalries or address divergent threat perceptions among its members. This marked the most severe crises in GCC history.

Its effects were also visible but less impactful on the LAS, partly because its members had already normalized the existence of major divisions within the organization. However, it is worth noting that this crisis coincided and to some extent culminated a process marked by the proliferation of alternative, less formalized frameworks for regional cooperation among ideologically aligned countries with the Arab region and beyond. Back in 2015 Saudi Arabia led the creation of a coalition of nine countries to intervene militarily in Yemen in March 2015, which overlapped and arguably neutralized the aforementioned proposal of Egypt and the Arab League to create an Arab Joint Military force. In December 2015 Saudi-led efforts also included the establishment of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), created in December 2015. The formation of the 'Arab Quartet' against the backdrop of the GCC crisis represented a new attempt to explore alternative, less formalized and more ideologically driven patterns of regional cooperation.

In January 2021, GCC leaders reconciled during the Al-'Ula summit in Saudi Arabia, reopening borders and airspace. Those alternative frameworks that had emerged since 2015 became less visible and the increased competition between Saudis and Emiratis considerably limited the GCC's effectiveness. Once more, already existing formal institutions such as the GCC and the League had proven their resilience.

Gulf countries also played a major role in the process that led to the reintegration of Assad's Syria into the Arab League. While some countries, notably the UAE, had already normalized relations with the Syrian regime, Bashar al-Assad's participation in the Jeddah summit in May 2023, following a vote within the League to reinstate Syria's membership after a 12-year suspension, appeared to signify the Arab leaders' willingness to consolidate a return to the *status quo ante*—as if the Arab uprisings were merely a temporary interruption. The only change that some, but not all, Arab leaders were ready to embrace was the normalization of Israel within the regional order. However, the October 7 attacks put those plans on hold.

October 7 and the Fall of Assad: New Stress Tests

Palestine has returned to the center of the regional agenda, thus reverting the trend of the previous two decades in which this issue was deliberately sidelined. Since 2011, and arguably even earlier, Palestine's prominence on the Arab security agenda had waned. The absence of a viable peace process and the emergence of other conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Sudan shifted Arab leaders' focus to issues they perceived as more decisive. For instance, Turkey's and Iran's interventions in conflicts such as Syria (for both of them), Libya (for the former), and Yemen (for the latter) unsettled many Arab leaders more than Israel's policies did. Under President Trump, the United States also bypassed the Palestinians in its approach to the conflict,

advocating for normalization agreements between Israel and friendly Arab nations in a mood that was also intended to counter Iran's regional role. The UAE and Bahrain spearheaded this "Abrahamic" initiative in 2020, followed shortly by Morocco, which received U.S. recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara in return.

This dynamic fostered an illusion of peace prospects in the region, a policy actively continued by the Biden administration. Negotiations to include Saudi Arabia in this new Abrahamic Bloc, gained momentum, with the Crown Prince confirming discussions shortly before Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) announced in September 2023 during the G20 summit in New Delhi pointed towards the same direction as this initiative indirectly integrated Saudi Arabia into this Abrahamic Bloc. By connecting India, the Gulf, and Israel through infrastructure projects, IMEC further positioned Saudi Arabia within a new regional and global geopolitical alignment.

These developments posed significant challenges to the longstanding Arab norm of solidarity with Palestine while bolstering multilateral engagement between Israel, the U.S., and states that had normalized relations. Forums like the Negev Forum, attended by Israeli, U.S., and several Arab foreign affairs ministers, exemplified these evolving ties and even hinted at the possibility of institutionalization as yet another regional format for political dialogue. However, the second summit, set to take place in Dakhla (Western Sahara, under Moroccan administration) was postponed without a definite timeline. The unprecedented escalation following the Hamas attack halted this process indefinitely.

The renewed centrality of Palestine since October 7 is a major test for the Arab League, which traditionally has regarded Palestine as a unifying cause among Arab nations. The memories of its worst crisis—Egypt's suspension and the temporary transfer of the headquarters from Cairo to Tunis in 1979 following the Egypt-Israel peace deal—indicate how Palestine can easily become a driver of division. After the Hamas attacks and the subsequent Israeli retaliation in Gaza, differences in tone among Arab ministries were apparent. Countries in the Abrahamic bloc urged de-escalation, hostage releases, and condemned attacks on civilians, irrespective of their nationality. Conversely, countries that had not normalized relations with Israel, such as Algeria, Iraq, and Syria, used harsher rhetoric to explicitly condemn Israeli actions. Kuwait and Qatar adopted a similarly critical stance, albeit with less inflammatory rhetoric. Jordan, a country aligned with the US and that had normalized relations with Israel in 1994, was exceptionally harsh in its condemnation of the war crimes committed by Israel. Interestingly, the restrained attitudes and contradictions of the most influential Arab countries allowed a non-Arab government, South Africa, to lead international denunciations of Israel's actions in Gaza.

The first regional meeting addressing the Israeli retaliation in Gaza was a joint summit of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Saudi Arabia, attended by the late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, exemplifying a rapprochement between the two regional powers. At this meeting, some leaders reportedly proposed threatening to disrupt oil supplies to Israel and its allies and severing the economic and diplomatic ties that some Arab League nations maintain with Israel (Le Monde, 2023). Instead, leaders decided to form a joint Arab-Islamic ministerial contact group, comprising representatives from Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia) and non-Arab nations (Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey). This group has led regional efforts to articulate a unified regional voice, marking an interesting shift by transcending the Arab region's boundaries. The group has also engaged in political dialogue with other actors, such as during the ministerial meeting held in Madrid in September 2024, attended by representatives from Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Ireland, and Josep Borrell, then High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Palestine has also become the main topic of the LAS meetings since October 2023. The summit of the League

of Arab States summit in Bahrain in May 2024 was the first occasion in which Arab countries tackled the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the risk of regional destabilization at the highest level. Leaders reaffirmed support for Palestine as a core Arab issue essential to regional peace and stability. They reiterated their support for the Arab-Islamic Joint Ministerial Committee in addressing the Gaza crisis, ending the humanitarian catastrophe, and advocating for Palestinian statehood and freedom. They called on Israel to halt its Gaza operations, lift the blockade, open crossings for humanitarian aid, and opposed any displacement of Palestinians (The National, 2024). The summit also reaffirmed the support for the two-state solution, which the League had espoused since adopting the Arab Peace Plan at the Beirut summit in 2002.

This position was reiterated in subsequent meetings of the Arab League, which, while acknowledging new developments, continued to have minimal impact on the ground. Notably, at the emergency meeting of Arab leaders held in Egypt in March 2025, participants agreed to support Egypt's reconstruction plan for Gaza—a stance reaffirmed at another summit in Baghdad in May 2025. The "Arab plan" is widely viewed as a response to Trump's unilateral proposals for Gaza, encapsulated in the notion of transforming the territory into a "Riviera of the Middle East." Although this initiative represents the League's lowest common denominator, it has not translated into the organization playing a prominent or influential role in the conflict.

In comparison, the GCC, as a regional bloc and institution, has been less directly affected by the October attacks and Israeli retaliation. Nonetheless, GCC countries remain concerned about potential regional spillovers, particularly the risk of an escalated Israel-Iran confrontation with unpredictable consequences. GCC leaders appear united in their desire to prevent this conflict from compromising the parallel normalization processes initiated with both Israel and Iran (Haghirian, 2024). This consensus among Gulf leaders, even if limited to shared concerns, has enhanced the GCC's image as a relevant international partner. For instance, the long-awaited first EU-GCC summit took place in October 2024. Alongside discussions on connectivity, energy, and trade, leaders issued a joint statement expressing shared positions on Ukraine and the Middle East conflict.

In December 2024, a new seismic episode shocked the regional order: the fall of the al-Assad regime following the rapid advances of HTS and other rebel groups, and the escape of the President to Moscow. This was a major issue for the League of Arab States, as Assad's Syria had reintegrated the organization a year earlier. One of the first signs of adaptation to the new political equation was the visit of the Assistant Secretary-General of the League of Arab States (LAS), Hossam Zaki, to Damascus in January 2025, during which he recalled the League's call to lift the sanctions against Syria (Ahram Online, 2025). The invitation extended to Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa to participate in the emergency Arab League summit in Cairo on March 4, 2025, marked a significant boost for the regional legitimation of the new leadership and political reality in Damascus. However, the political debate in Iraq prior to the Baghdad summit of the League in May 2025, and the fact that al-Sharaa chose not to participate in it, confirmed that divisions still exist within the Arab region on how to deal with the new Syria.

Although Syria is not a member of the organization, it has been a relevant topic for the GCC—particularly for its member states, which had displayed divergent policies before and after the fall of Assad. The UAE had played a visible role in the push to establish relations with Assad's Syria; Saudi Arabia, more cautiously and lately, supported the international normalization of the regime; and Qatar remained far more reluctant, maintaining open channels with the insurgents.

Thus, when Assad's regime collapsed, Qatar was portrayed as a "winner," and the country's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, became the first head of state to visit Damascus post-Assad, meeting the newly appointed transitional President Ahmed al-Sharaa on January 30, 2025. Although not enthusiastically, Saudi Arabia also accepted the new reality and even hosted the first meeting between the Syrian leader and Donald Trump. Riyadh's main concern appears to be avoiding another focus of

destabilization in the region. While the UAE's leadership is ideologically at odds with al-Sharaa, it is worth noting that, according to some sources, it is also mediating secret talks between Israel and Syria (Azhari and Al-Khalidi, 2025).

All this highlights the critical influence Arab Gulf countries can exert on the domestic and international consolidation of the new Syrian regime, and how central Syria is for the regional order. Some authors have even compared the fall of Assad to a 1989 moment (Khatib, 2024) and refer to a "new Levantine order" (Barnes-Dacey, Geranmayeh and Lovatt, 2025). What remains to be seen is whether this new Syria will become a platform for cooperation—such as through joint campaigns for sanctions relief and reconstruction—or yet another arena for geopolitical competition.

Conclusions

Key questions raised at the outset of this article—such as whether regionalism can actively mitigate challenges to the regional order, to what extent dysfunctional regionalism reflects an old order clinging to survival, and which elements sustain the resilience of that order and its institutions—find relevant answers in the events of 2023 and 2024, as well as in earlier crises such as the 2011 Arab Uprisings and the 2017 GCC crisis.

First, all these developments reaffirm the limitations of regional organizations like the Arab League and the GCC, whose responses are often constrained by inter-state rivalries and divergent priorities. For instance, the Arab League's strong rhetoric on Palestine contrasts sharply with its lack of consequential actions as a unified bloc since October 7.

Second, despite the apparent stagnation of formal regional cooperation, there are noteworthy developments that merit closer attention. Among them are the creation of a joint Arab-Islamic contact group and the roles that both the GCC and the LAS can play in supporting the transition in Syria.

Third, alongside these efforts, the normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel by some League members and attempts to establish permanent frameworks for dialogue with it indicate both a profound erosion of the foundational institutions of the old Arab regional order and the extent to which Palestine—once a unifying cause—has become a driver of fragmentation.

Fourth, in this conflict-driven and fractured region, the resilience of these organizations remains notable. Both the Arab League and the GCC have weathered severe disruptions, maintaining platforms for dialogue even as internal divisions deepened. Understanding the sources of this resilience may offer more analytical insight than focusing solely on their failures or the gap between regional aspirations and outcomes. Such an inquiry can shed light on how the existing regional order has endured and adapted amid the wide array of shocks and transformations that have shaped the Middle East and North Africa over the past two decades.

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GCC-driven Regional Order: Sub-Imperial Cartographies and the Question of Palestine Post-7 October

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The 2010–2011 uprisings marked a transformative period of shifting, overlapping cartographies of regime survival. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, notably the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, intensified efforts to consolidate an order beyond traditional conceptions of the region spanning the Mediterranean Middle East and the Red Sea. My chapter in *Order and Region Making in the Middle East* co-authored with Victoria Silva Sanchez shows how these subregions have increasingly coalesced into an adaptive system, with the GCC driving subregional and transregional practices that sustain a hierarchical structure rooted in material and ideational interests. This GCC-led order emerges through intricate processes of region-building, prioritising regime survival and capital accumulation aligned with shifting geopolitical realities. By embedding their influence in governance systems, economic dependencies, and security arrangements, GCC states institutionalise structural dominance, mirroring global imperialist practices on a regional scale.

This essay builds on that chapter to examine the GCC's role in shaping this emerging regional order, especially post-7 October 2023. It highlights how transnational and transregional dynamics reinforce sub-imperial cartographies. Through diplomatic, military, and economic tools, amongst others, the GCC drives top-down regionalisation processes aligned with their strategic vision, repositioning the region's centre of influence from the Arab Levant to a Gulf-centric configuration. Post-October 7 developments reaffirm the GCC's role as a gravitational centre driving regionalising flows that sustain a Gulf-centric hierarchy, as they balance depoliticized humanitarian assistance with ongoing political and military relationships with Israel and the United States.

Sub-imperialism, as theorised by David Harvey (2017), describes regional powers exerting dominant influence within a geographically concentrated area. Unlike mere power asymmetries, sub-imperialism is structural, rooted in governance, economic interdependence, and geopolitical arrangements that reproduce dominance over time. It institutionalises asymmetrical relationships, integrating peripheral states into hierarchical systems that favour hegemonic actors. Beyond major powers, mid-tier nations also engage in political, economic and military rivalries and capitalise on global power vacuums to assert influence and pursue their ambitions (Callinicos, 2009) and want to make it clear that they also have considerable agency to shape events around them.

In the GCC context, this form of sub-imperialism can be seen in the rise of mid-tier nations leveraging control over trade routes, energy markets, financial systems, and geopolitical events. Acting as facilitators and enforcers of global capitalism, they align with Western powers and emerging players like China and India while pursuing regional agendas. This dual role positions GCC states as pivotal actors in both regional and global hierarchies. GCC states' strategies of leveraging economic dependencies and security arrangements allow them to reshape relations within the region without fundamentally altering the hierarchical system. These dynamics foster dependencies and sustain structural dominance while integrating the region into broader global capitalist circuits. - The UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have emerged as dominant powers in the Middle East, exerting structural influence over neighbours through economic leverage rooted in energy production, financial markets, and infrastructure investments. These states foster dependencies and control regional dynamics, consolidating their sub-imperial status.

The post-October 7 landscape did not produce a rupture, but rather reaffirmed the strategic ambiguity with which Gulf states approach Palestine. Humanitarian

gestures were swiftly mobilised, not as departures from normalisation, but as carefully curated performances of solidarity that coexist with uninterrupted security and commercial ties to Israel. There is no contradiction here: only a continuation of the dual-track diplomacy that has long underpinned Gulf regimes' regional manoeuvring. By framing actions as humanitarian rather than geopolitical, the GCC projects stability and legitimacy while avoiding deeper political entanglements. As Hanieh (2018) observed, these states leverage regional shifts to reshape relations without fundamentally altering the prevailing hierarchical system. In this context, solidarity is wielded instrumentally to project positive images both domestically and internationally, while masking the asymmetrical power relations that underpin their regional dominance. Thus, certain GCC regimes' responses to October 7 align with their established patterns, balancing gestures of humanitarian assistance to Gaza - framed as humanitarian rather than geopolitical interventions - while maintaining formal and informal ties with Israel established through normalisation agreements. This cautious approach reflects a restrained securitisation of the Palestinian issue, characterised by strategic selectivity, continuity in GCC policies, and an overarching focus on preserving the Gulf-centric regional hierarchy.

Their sub-imperial practices adapt to shifting geopolitical realities while projecting solidarity through carefully framed humanitarian gestures. These actions obscure the asymmetrical power relations underlying GCC dominance, solidifying their status as contemporary imperial actors reshaping the Mediterranean Middle East and the Red Sea. My contribution to *Order and Region Making in the Middle East* outlined seven distinct regionalising flows that underpin GCC sub-imperial dynamics, circulating resources and ideas that bind peripheral states into asymmetrical relationships. Through economic investments, security arrangements, and diplomatic initiatives, the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia enforce behaviours that sustain their hierarchical influence. These flows illustrate how GCC-led processes integrate peripheral states into a system reflecting broader imperial logics. Those continue after October 7.

Securitisation and authoritarian diffusion

Since 2010–2011, the region has undergone a re-securitisation, marked by the resurgence of authoritarian 'walls of fear' at both domestic and regional levels. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have strategically positioned themselves as the ultimate protectors of state survival, framing their actions as the only viable path to achieving stability within and beyond their borders. Prior to October 7, repression targeted not only political activism but also solidarity movements, particularly those linked to the Palestinian cause, recognising their potential for revolutionary mobilisation. While such solidarity was generally suppressed, the GCC regimes selectively permitted limited expressions after October 7, often confined to artistic rather than political channels. For instance, during the COP28 climate conference, the UAE allowed protests but maintained tight monitoring and control. Additionally, GCC states have engaged in regional collaborations to mitigate instability arising from the Gaza conflict, including intelligence-sharing and military coordination to safeguard borders from potential violence spillovers.

Securitisation strategies have also intensified social and political polarisation. Domestically, these processes empower local actors aligned with GCC agendas, bolstered by diplomatic and economic support from member states. Before October 7, GCC regimes adopted differing approaches to Palestinian political dynamics: Qatar supported Hamas, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE aligned with the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority. These dynamics shifted following the outbreak of the genocidal war. Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE have refrained from explicitly designating Hamas as a terrorist organisation, they employ implicit distancing strategies, carefully navigating discourse to avoid the legally charged term 'terrorism'. In contrast, Qatar has positioned itself as a key mediator, highlighting its role in facilitating ceasefires and delivering humanitarian aid amid the violence in Gaza.

The divergence is again evident in Syria, where Qatar's early endorsement of the HTS-led government contrasts

with the UAE's initial hesitancy and Saudi Arabia's more cautious optimism. These moves, though, converge in their strategic aim: securing leverage in the post-Assad reconstruction phase.

Increasing militarisation

The securitisation dynamics previously discussed are evident in the regionalisation of conflicts, manifesting through cross-border military interventions and the incitement of so-called 'proxy wars'. The UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia present themselves as stabilisers and arbiters of regional order in an area characterised by instability, often framing their actions as necessary interventions to prevent chaos. This narrative echoes imperial justifications of the past, where interventions were rationalised as bringing order and modernity to 'less developed' regions, but also highlights the regional ordering and hierarchising practices that these regimes implement at a sub-imperial level, all while safeguarding broader imperialist interests.

Following October 7, the war in Yemen took a new turn, with campaigns in the Red Sea targeting Houthi attacks on shipping - an essential trade artery for the region. The UAE initially adopted an assertive stance, advocating for decisive military action to safeguard commercial shipping. However, shared concerns about potential regional escalation have dampened the appetite for proxy wars among GCC regimes, particularly when these conflicts risk drawing them in involuntarily. As a result, neither the UAE nor Saudi Arabia participated in Operation Protective Guardian, despite Bahrain's involvement (likely at Riyadh's behest).

Similar apprehensions have emerged regarding Palestine. While Iran reportedly shared its plans for attacks against Israel with Gulf neighbours beforehand, GCC capitals have avoided taking definitive positions in the confrontation, instead urging mutual restraint. Likewise, in October 2024, the GCC convened an extraordinary meeting to condemn the escalation of conflict in Lebanon, calling on all parties to exercise self-restraint and avoid violence. This response highlights the organisation's - and its members' - reluctance to intervene directly in escalating regional tensions. In the case of Syria, the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia were among the Arab countries that, after years of UAE efforts to normalise relations with the Syrian regime, met in Aqaba following Bashar al-Assad's overthrow to express support for a stable transition process, accompanied by the resumption of their diplomatic activities. Qatar has already emerged as a key regional mediator, a role bolstered by its unique positioning. The fact that Syria's new Foreign Minister visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE as his first three stops since taking office underscored the influence these countries exert within this sub-imperialist regional order. The GCC's sub-imperial governance adapts not only to power vacuums but to the possibility of leveraging transitional moments for strategic repositioning. The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a dramatic turning point. Far from a passive observer, the GCC has moved swiftly to engage Syria's new authorities - led by former HTS emir Ahmed al-Sharaa - in a display of pragmatic flexibility. While Qatar's embrace of the new Islamist-led government fits its longstanding patterns, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's shift marks a departure from their previous anti-Islamist doctrine, highlighting how sub-imperial actors recalibrate ideology in favour of structural dominance

In contrast to efforts to stabilise the Mediterranean Middle East, GCC states have deepened their involvement in the Red Sea. For example, the UAE has supported the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan's civil war, advancing its regional ambitions, including the development of ports and economic zones. However, this involvement complicates peace negotiations and exacerbates violence – drawing unwelcome attention to the Emirates' role in fueling a destructive war and humanitarian crisis.

The regionalisation of conflict is moreover closely tied to militarisation, with an ongoing arms race reshaping regional geopolitics. The Abraham Accords facilitated new arms supplies to the UAE, strengthening its security relationship with Israel through shared technologies, and 7O doesn't appear to have diminished this dynamic. Additionally, the US State Department approved

significant arms sales to GCC states, including Patriot missile interceptors for Saudi Arabia and THAAD systems for the UAE. Meanwhile, GCC states have enhanced the military capabilities of their regional allies, notably through UAE funding to modernise the Egyptian military's operations against Sinai Peninsula militants. This support consolidates GCC influence and strengthens local regimes' dependence. In March 2024, the GCC revealed a regional security vision that builds on its 2000 Joint Defence Treaty, including joint military exercises, intelligence-sharing, and integrated defence structures, further cementing its focus on collective security and reinforcing sub-imperialist power dynamics in the region.

The Political Economy of Regionalising Dynamics in and Beyond the Mediterranean Middle East–Red Sea Subregions

A range of capital accumulation sites, including manufacturing, transportation, and financial markets, shapes regionalisation in the broader Middle East. The UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia leverage immense financial resources from hydrocarbons to channel investments into infrastructure, financial markets, and strategic sectors in neighbouring states. This fosters economic dependencies, creating asymmetrical relationships that echo classical imperialism and entrench a hierarchical regional order, enhancing Gulf states' control over weaker economies.

The internationalisation of GCC capital has reshaped the Mediterranean Middle East, with the Abraham Accords potentially playing a key role in a 'New Middle East.' However, post-October 7, while UAE-Israel trade relations remain intact, signs suggest a return to pre-Accords dynamics - strong government and business ties with a reduced public profile. The UAE, and potentially also Qatar, is expected to contribute to Gaza's reconstruction, continuing a pattern seen in Syria, using such efforts to bolster its image as a supporter of stability, reinforcing its sub-imperialist influence.

The regional slowdown has reduced financial flows to Mediterranean and Red Sea countries. Egypt, for example, despite Gulf reluctance for further bailouts and privatisation investments, remains impacted by disruptions to Red Sea maritime traffic. To mitigate this, Egypt secured a £35 billion deal in 2023 with Abu Dhabi's ADQ for developing the Ras Al Hikma area, strengthening Egypt's trade position while deepening its dependence on the UAE, exemplified by Saudi Arabia's political influence in Lebanon in January 2025.

In the Red Sea, political interests often drive trade and investment decisions. The Red Sea is a key corridor for commerce and hydrocarbons. Post-October 7 developments highlight the region's strategic importance, with Houthi attacks disrupting commercial traffic at ports like Dubai-based DP World. Prolonged instability could disrupt projects along the southern Red Sea coast, where the UAE holds significant geopolitical influence. Saudi Arabia has also increased oil exports to Europe through its Red Sea terminal. The UAE's strategic position, particularly in the context of Israel's war against Gaza, highlights its role in the regional power dynamics. By capitalising on increased transit fees at its ports and road networks amid a broader 'security crisis', the UAE reinforces its sub-imperialist practices, positioning itself as a key actor in shaping economic flows and regional order. This includes leveraging its critical role in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), further entrenching its control over the region's trade routes and infrastructure.

Regionalising Through Development Aid

When analysing regionalising connections, it is essential to examine the role of aid at the regional level, particularly how these flows align with capitalist interests in the Gulf and serve sub-imperialist ambitions. UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have positioned themselves as significant humanitarian actors. However, much of the aid they provide is not purely humanitarian; instead, it often serves to reinforce hierarchical dependencies, aligning with the donor's foreign policy objectives or economic priorities. This practice is emblematic of sub-imperialist dynamics, where wealthier Gulf states use aid as a tool to assert influence and control over weaker, dependent states,

thereby creating asymmetrical relationships. In the post-October 7 context, for example, GCC states, particularly the UAE and Qatar, have allocated substantial resources to Palestinian assistance efforts, including aid for Gaza, to demonstrate their regional influence. However, this aid frequently comes with conditions that bind recipient countries politically, ensuring their alignment with Gulf interests. Qatar's longstanding financial support for Gaza, which has occasionally mediated tensions with Israel, and the UAE's infrastructural and medical aid, often coordinated with Israeli authorities, are prime examples of how Gulf states leverage assistance to influence local governance and regional alliances. These practices not only enhance the donor states' image domestically, regionally, and internationally but also secure political and economic ties, reinforcing sub-imperialist power dynamics in the region.

This strategic deployment of aid is evident in Lebanon. Following Israel's intensified attacks, several GCC countries announced substantial aid packages. Saudi Arabia pledged $10 million through the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief), while the UAE launched its relief initiative, 'The UAE Stands with You, Lebanon,' and Qatar initiated an airlift of medical supplies. Qatar also confirmed $20 million for Lebanon's military, reinforcing its ongoing support. This renewed Gulf involvement follows the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement and a shift from earlier tensions in 2021, when GCC countries withdrew ambassadors after a Lebanese minister's critical comments on the Yemen war. The Gulf's renewed interest in Lebanon aims to stabilise the economy while aligning the country with Gulf political priorities. Similarly, in post-Al Assad Syria, Qatar swiftly opened a humanitarian bridge in December 2024, with other GCC states gradually showing pragmatism towards the new political landscape, signalling a willingness to support Damascus and avoid being sidelined in the Levant's future.

Recent humanitarian initiatives in Syria exemplify this instrumentalisation. Following Assad's fall, GCC states dispatched dozens of aid planes and trucks - Saudi Arabia alone sent more than 50 relief flights. While framed as benevolent, such flows are highly strategic, often tied to diplomatic visits and aimed at reinforcing Gulf leadership in the transition. Aid acts not just as soft power, but as a mechanism for embedding influence in reconstruction processes and institutional rebuilding.

In the Red Sea region, Gulf states apply similar strategies to secure maritime routes and develop key ports. Aid to countries like Sudan and Somalia aims to stabilise local economies while safeguarding Gulf trade routes. While the aid undoubtedly supports recipient countries, it is also designed to align with Gulf interests in maintaining secure shipping lanes, positioning the GCC as a long-term economic partner with substantial leverage over local policymaking. Through such mechanisms, Gulf states reinforce their sub-imperialist control over regional dynamics, ensuring both economic dependency and political influence.

(Geo)Politics and Diplomacy

The UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia employ both soft and hard power to consolidate their regional dominance, creating a hierarchical order that reflects sub-imperial practices. These states act as de facto arbiters of political and military affairs, akin to imperial powers dictating the terms of engagement. When analysing regionalising connections, formal regionalism emerges as a key tool, particularly in the context of regime-boosting strategies. Autocratic states in the GCC exploit regionalism to secure domestic stability, bolster authoritarian legitimacy, and disseminate material support aligned with their political priorities (Russo & Stoddard, 2018). Organisations like the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have been active in responding to regional crises such as the Gaza conflict, issuing condemnations of violence and calling for urgent humanitarian assistance. However, during the 11 November 2023 emergency summit, UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco aligned with Saudi Arabia to obstruct anti-Israel resolutions, exemplifying how regional organisations can be manipulated to serve the geopolitical ambitions of GCC states.

The Abraham Accords framework underscores the sub-imperialist role of the GCC, particularly with regards to the events surrounding 7O. Despite escalating tensions, Saudi-Israeli normalisation agreements remained intact, with Israel's embassy in Abu Dhabi and consulate in Dubai - the only ones in the Arab world. This situation reveals how GCC countries use diplomatic frameworks like the Accords to advance their own regional order, while pursuing broader geopolitical objectives, even at the expense of regional solidarity.

What has emerged is not merely division of labour, but a choreographed assertion of differentiated authority. One actor projects influence through hyperactive mediation, another through multilateral diplomacy, and yet another through financial saturation. These are *not ad hoc* roles, but structural to the reproduction of Gulf hegemony in a region deliberately stripped of collective agency.

The GCC's regionalising efforts are also evident in their influence on both the Global North and South. In the Global North, GCC countries have strategically enhanced their standing, particularly in the UN. The UAE's term on the Security Council (2022–2023) saw its active promotion of ceasefire resolutions for Gaza, although these efforts were thwarted by the US veto. This highlights the limits of the UAE's influence and the balancing act required to navigate its strategic alliances, especially under the shadow of frameworks like the Abraham Accords. The muted response to South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the ICJ further demonstrates the GCC's prioritisation of ties with Israel, illustrating how their regional influence is part of a broader sub-imperialist agenda of realigning regional and global priorities.

Energy dynamics, such as those around the EastMed gas pipeline, further complicate these sub-imperialist practices. The pipeline, designed to transport natural gas from Israel and Cyprus to Europe, highlights how energy plays a central role in regional geopolitics. GCC states, particularly the UAE and Qatar, capitalise on energy as a tool of influence, presenting themselves as stable suppliers amid global disruptions. Their partnerships with European countries, including renewable energy projects, enhance their position as key geopolitical actors.

In the Global South, the GCC's diplomatic manoeuvres assert their role in shaping regional alliances independent of US interests, exemplifying a form of sub-imperialism. UAE and Qatar's increasing prominence through humanitarian diplomacy during the Gaza war, and their advocacy for ceasefires, bolsters their image as regional mediators. Furthermore, their participation in BRICS signals a shift in global political and economic alignments, as they seek to engage with calls for a renewed global order, reflecting their sensitivity to the evolving multipolar framework. While this shift does not entail a complete departure from ties with the US, it demonstrates their evolving role in shaping regional and global dynamics.

Migration as a Sub-Imperial Tool

The ideational and narrative dimensions of sub-imperialism are central to how regional power is projected and perceived, with the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia particularly focused on controlling and shaping these flows of ideas. These efforts are emblematic of sub-imperial strategies, where the management of narratives becomes a potent tool for consolidating power and asserting influence, both regionally and globally. In the post-October 7 context, GCC countries have harnessed state-backed media, online platforms, and other forms of communication to craft a narrative of solidarity with the Palestinian cause. However, this narrative is selectively constructed to serve their broader geopolitical and economic objectives, particularly as global energy players, while appealing to audiences both in the Arab world and the Global North. By carefully shaping their messaging, GCC regimes not only assert their leadership within the Arab world but also seek to gain legitimacy in international forums, positioning their interventions as benevolent or stabilising. This is a hallmark of sub-imperial influence - using soft power and controlled discourse to reframe regional dynamics in their favour.

For the Arab public, this narrative centres on a message of Arab unity and support for Palestinians, a strategy that

bolsters the GCC regimes' legitimacy as defenders of Arab interests. At the same time, these states frequently invoke international norms - such as humanitarian aid and peacebuilding - to justify their interventions. Yet, these gestures often serve to deflect attention from domestic criticisms, allowing the regimes to present themselves as committed to humanitarian principles while advancing their geopolitical agendas. This mirrors the historical practices of empires that cloaked expansionist ambitions in the rhetoric of civilisation and progress. Beyond the Arab world, the GCC's narratives are carefully crafted to project these regimes as modern, pragmatic, and civilised actors in international diplomacy. They portray themselves as constructive participants in global governance, thus appealing to Western powers while maintaining influence within the Global South.

This strategic messaging also reflects a notable shift in GCC rhetoric: while there is vocal criticism of Israel's current government policies, there is a deliberate avoidance of addressing the structural issues underlying the situation in historic Palestine. This omission aligns with broader international narratives that frame the issue as a 'conflict' - a narrative that obscures its colonial foundations. By sanitising the issue in this way, GCC countries present themselves as stabilising forces advocating for peace, all while refraining from directly challenging Western geopolitical interests. This approach enables them to maintain their regional power and influence, positioning themselves as pragmatic interlocutors who uphold global norms, while subtly advancing their own sub-imperialist agendas.

The Centrality of Migration

A key element of sub-imperial practices is the regulation of labour flows, and GCC countries have honed this strategy to maintain economic and political primacy in the region. These states manage vast networks of migrant labour, including many workers from countries within their sphere of influence. The exploitation of migrant labour is not only a cornerstone of the Gulf economies but also a means of reinforcing Gulf-centric economic and social models across the region. Through these systems, GCC states ensure that their economies remain dependent on foreign labour while maintaining control over both the migrant populations and their home countries.

The Palestinian diaspora in the Gulf is a particularly complex case within this broader labour strategy, as it intersects with the GCC's shifting stance on historic Palestine. Despite the rhetoric of solidarity with the Palestinian cause, GCC regimes have increasingly tightened control over Palestinian expatriates, particularly as some Gulf states have sought closer ties with Israel under the Abraham Accords. This development highlights a sub-imperial balancing act: while GCC states publicly champion Palestinian rights, their growing political and economic ties with Israel necessitate a controlled approach to Palestinian activism in the Gulf. Several GCC countries have restricted Palestinian political organising, subtly limiting their ability to engage in demonstrations or actions that might jeopardise state-level relations with Israel and Western powers. This reflects a broader sub-imperial strategy where the Gulf states project support for Palestinians to their Arab audiences while carefully managing their political relationships with Israel and the West.

At the same time, Palestinian migrant workers play a crucial role in the Gulf's economies. However, the economic contributions of these workers also serve as a tool of soft power, reinforcing Gulf states' narrative of supporting 'brotherly' Arab nations while maintaining regional dominance. By positioning themselves as key benefactors of Palestinian -and other Arab- labour, the GCC strengthens its image as the protector of Arab interests. Yet, this form of support is largely symbolic, with little to no substantial security or long-term rights afforded to these individuals and collectives. Their legal status remains precarious, subject to restrictive labour and residency policies that reflect the Gulf's broader sub-imperialist strategy: offering symbolic support to Arab peoples while ensuring that real political or social change does not interfere with the Gulf states' new, economically beneficial relationships and endeavours. This carefully

crafted balance of soft power, economic dependence, and geopolitical alignment underscores how the GCC manipulates migration flows to assert dominance in the regional order, all while shaping the Palestinian narrative to serve their broader strategic goals.

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Endnotes

[1] *This contribution builds upon a chapter co-authored with Victoria Silva Sánchez in Lynch and Mabon (2025), extending its theoretical foundations and applying its framework to post-2023 developments. By doing so, it elucidates how GCC-led regionalisation continues to reshape these overlapping cartographies in response to emerging geopolitical contingencies.*

The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.

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