MEHR NEWS AGENCY

POMEPS *STUDIES*

58

MARCH 2026

IR Theory and the Middle East at War

PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST POLITICAL SCIENCE

AARHUS BSS
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
AARHUS UNIVERSITY

Contents

IR Theory and the Middle East at War: Challenges and Opportunities 3
Marc Lynch, The George Washington University & Morten Valbjørn, Aarhus University

The Persistence of US Hierarchy in the Gulf. 11
Sean Yom, Temple University

Israel, the Axis of Resistance, and the End of Deterrence 17
Waleed Hazbun, University of Alabama

Egypt's Foreign Policy and the Limits of Underbalancing Theory 24
May Darwich, University of Birmingham

Ma ba´d al-harb? Epochal Bookending and Arab Intellectual Reactions to the Gaza War 30
Sune Haugbølle, Roskilde University

The End of Sanctions? Rethinking Termination Processes through the Syrian Case 36
Hana Attia, Leuphana University & German Institute for Global and Area Studies

Social Movement Theory and the Middle East after 7 October 2023:
(Dis)advantages of a modular "theory" 44
Jeroen Gunning, King's College London

Defending Shrines, Defending Borders: Iran's Syrian Intervention Reconsidered 52
Ehsan Kashfi, University of Copenhagen

Reassessing Principal–Agent Theory: The Houthis' evolving relationship with Iran 60
Maria-Louise Clausen, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)

Still an irreplaceable piece? Reflecting on the limits of Saudi reengagement in Lebanon 66
Anne Kirstine Rønn, Aarhus University

External Referents and the Dynamics of Opposition in the MENA 72
Massimo Ramaioli, Al-Akhawayn University & Francesco Cavatorta, Université Laval in Quebec

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.

Aarhus University

The Department of Political Science (https://ps.au.dk/en/) at Aarhus University, located in Aarhus, Denmark, is a premier institution for research and higher education consistently ranked among the world's top political science environments. Established in 1959, the department serves as a leading hub for advanced academic training and high-impact research across all major subfields, including comparative politics, international relations, political sociology, political theory, political behaviour and institutions, and public administration.

IR Theory and the Middle East at War: Challenges and Opportunities

Marc Lynch, The George Washington University & Morten Valbjørn, Aarhus University

The last couple of years in the Middle East have produced a range of surprises, both unanticipated events and unfulfilled predictions. In late September 2023, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan famously described the Middle East as quieter than it had been in two decades, lavishing praise on his administration's management of the region and confidently predicting progress towards normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. On October 7, Hamas shattered that calm with its shocking attack on Israel, one that Israel had considered virtually inconceivable. In the ensuing weeks and years, Israel surprised many observers by going beyond a punitive bombing campaign and instead launching a bloody, destructive and ultimately near-genocidal scorched earth invasion of Gaza. Few could have anticipated the Trump administration's move to use plans for the administration of post-ceasefire Gaza to establish the "Board of Peace" as an alternative to the United Nations.

The surprises did not end with Gaza. Observers were again shocked by Israel's sudden offensive against Hezbollah in November 2024, a bolt from the blue which comprehensively decapitated the organization, killed its top leaders, injured large numbers of its fighters (and their families and neighbors), dramatically degraded its vaunted missile arsenal, and largely removed Iran's most dangerous deterrent threat virtually overnight. Few expected that the Houthis would launch missiles at Israel and effectively blockade Red Sea shipping over Gaza or shrug off Israeli and American air strikes against them. Virtually nobody expected the sudden toppling of the Assad regime in December 2024, following nearly a decade of frozen conflict, at the hands of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formerly the Al-Qaeda branch in Syria, or the welcome the new very recently jihadist leaders would find in Riyadh, Davos, and Washington. The Israeli air strike targeting Hamas leaders in a residential area of Doha, which violated Qatar's sovereignty, also caught most observers by surprise.

Furthermore, virtually nobody anticipated the sudden December 2025 eruption of regionwide conflict between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, long very close partners in regional politics.

Few anticipated the shift from indirect to direct confrontations involving ballistic missiles and drones between Israel and Iran in 2024, nor Israel's first major direct air campaign against Iran in June 2025, nor the Trump administration's dramatic intervention twelve days later deploying an arsenal of bunker-buster bombs intended to destroy Iran's Fordow nuclear facility—or its failure to achieve that goal. Many actors, having perhaps learned the wrong lessons from the twelve-day war, failed to anticipate Iran's attack on the Gulf states and oil shipping in response to the US-Israeli attack in February 2026, or the regime's resilience against regime change attempts. After decades of debating whether or not to bomb Iran, it was surprising indeed that the Trump administration apparently had no plans for an Iranian move to close the Straits of Hormuz or to defend the Gulf states against sustained missile and drone attacks.

At the same time, some widely held predictions did *not* come to pass. For all the outrage among Arab publics, there were no serious regime-threatening protests. No regional regime broke its alliance with the United States, seriously downgraded its relations with Israel or intervened militarily in defense of Palestinians. Saudi Arabia, which had seemed more than ready to normalize with Israel prior to October 7, did move in the opposite direction, suggesting that public attitudes still hold some weight. China, despite a decade-long expansion of its diplomatic and economic presence in the region and prophesies about a growing Chinese role in the Middle East, disappointed many regional players by declining to get involved in any serious way, even when the Houthis blockaded Red Sea shipping.

What should scholars of the International Relations of the Middle East make of these surprises? The unforeseen surprises and unfulfilled predictions alike offer a fascinating collection of new evidence to assess competing hypotheses about the nature of regional politics. The literature on the IR of the Middle East has made great progress over the last decade by carefully specifying its theories and identifying expected behavioral implications. Some of these proved prescient, while others did not. Today there is arguably greater fundamental uncertainty about basic principles of regional order than at any point in recent memory. The range of possible outcomes -- from Iran emerging from the war stable and stronger than before to the complete fragmentation of Iran as a state, from the US emerging in command of an open and robust military alliance including Israel and the Gulf states to the complete collapse of the post-1991 American alliance with the Gulf states -- goes beyond more typical degrees of variation. How are actors in the region dealing with this uncertainty -- and how should Middle East IR theory?

Despite the opportunity for theory testing and theory building over the last two and a half years, there has thus far been remarkably little academic stock-taking in comparison to the vast outpouring of such internal critique which followed each of the major surprises which have punctuated the region roughly once a decade. The 1967 and 1973 wars resulted in the production of serious analysis of the end of pan-Arabism, the logic of strategic surprise, the flaws of deterrence theory, and the nature of the interplay between regional and global powers. The 1979 Iranian revolution inspired a vast body of new scholarship on Islamism, revolutions, social movements, and the flawed assumptions which had gone into relying on the Shah as a pillar of stability. The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait had prompted a serious rethinking of the nature of regional politics, and in short order gave way to a vast new literature on US primacy, the peace process, and the utility of sanctions. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq produced an enormous volume of retrospectives on what had gone wrong. Most recently, the 2011 Arab uprisings spawned a genuinely impressive volume of self-reflection across the field about the alleged failure to predict them, alongside an equally impressive outpouring of new theoretical and empirical development.[1]

There has been so far relatively little comparable intellectual production interrogating the dramatic changes, rampant uncertainty, and unfulfilled predictions since October 7. Perhaps this is a justifiable absence, because there has not been enough time or intellectual space for reflection, or because the surprises were not so significant nor the new developments so radical as to merit discarding or questioning existing theory. Or perhaps the intense political environment surrounding protests against Israel's war on Gaza pushed scholars to retreat into a defensive shell, avoiding self-criticism when there was more than ample external criticism to deal with, or to focus their energies on activism rather than scholarly self-reflection.[2]

Whatever the case, in December 2025, POMEPS convened a workshop at Aarhus University in Denmark, bringing together scholars to collectively interrogate these questions. What core concepts, theories, or hypotheses in Middle East IR require rethinking in the light of October 7 and its aftermath? What changes, if any, are needed in how we study the Middle East? Does Israel's rapid expansion of military operations across the entire region and the potential outcomes of another war with Iran represent a change *of* the regional order, as Raffaella Del Sarto has defined it in another POMEPS collection, or just a more routine evolution *within* the existing order?[3]

The workshop followed in the footsteps of a workshop hosted at Aarhus University a decade earlier, which had brought American, European, and Middle Eastern IR theorists into close dialogue about the field, and more recently built upon a POMEPS workshop on regional order hosted a year earlier at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy.[4] This volume of POMEPS Studies collects papers from the Aarhus workshop, which interrogate a wide range of concepts: US primacy (Sean Yom), deterrence (Waleed Hazbun), balancing and underbalancing (May Darwich), the Arab public sphere (Sune Haugbølle), sanctions (Hana Attia), the drivers of Hamas's decision to attack Israel (Jeroen Gunning), the

role of ideology in Iran's foreign policy (Ehsan Kashfi), Iran's relationship with its regional allies (Maria-Louise Clausen), Saudi involvement in Lebanon (Anne Kirstine Rønn), and the penetration of the region (Massimo Ramaioli and Francesco Cavatorta).

In this framing essay, we lay out our own thoughts on some key thematic areas where events since October 7 have opened up opportunities for rethinking key theories, hypotheses or mechanisms:

(1) **Hegemony**: The region has for decades been defined by a rough balance of power between the US led axis encompassing Israel and most Arab states on the one hand, and Iran and its regional axis of resistance on the other. As **Yom** notes in his essay, US primacy remains unchallenged despite perceptions of its decline (at least at the time of writing). With the destruction of Hezbollah and the attempted toppling of the Iranian regime, some Israelis aspire to a *Pax Hebraica*, regional domination based on unfettered military superiority and unconditional alliances with Arab states along the model of the Abraham Accords. Can Israel, with US backing, impose such a new regional order through airpower? Which states in the region would join such a new regional order, and on what terms? Would Arab states continue to "underbalance", as Darwich discusses in her essay, or would they see the need for more assertive policies to protect themselves in a new environment. Would this simply be a new iteration of long-standing US primacy, or would it be disruptive of that primacy because of Israel's divergent interests and priorities? What kind of hegemony would it be, in the absence of any of the normative foundations or ideational appeal which theories of hegemony typically claim to be necessary?[5] How stable and enduring would it be? Why would rising Israeli power not trigger a balancing coalition rather than submission -- and was the new Saudi-led alliance which emerged just before the US-Israeli attack on Iran early evidence of such balancing? A vast literature has emerged recently on hierarchy and gradations of hegemony within which the Middle East has been oddly marginal. Recent developments offer a prime opportunity for Middle East IR theory to join these debates about the relative importance of hard power and normative legitimacy, the complex politics of elite networks, the logic of balancing and bandwagoning, the tensions between top-down order building and internal rivalries among those being ordered, and the implications of growing or narrowing gaps between leaders and their populations.

(2) **Deterrence and War**: As Hazbun notes in his contribution to this collection, deterrence has long been at the heart of regional stability. But the events of the last few years should have badly shaken our confidence in the stability of deterrence. Simply calculating the real balance of power is increasingly challenging. While Israel and the US have decisively demonstrated their ability to dominate the air and bomb at will, their unwillingness or inability to deploy ground forces has limited their ability to dictate outcomes. Meanwhile, Iran's relatively cheap missiles and drones, and ability to target oil and gas production and shipping, have demonstrated an ability to compensate for weakness in the traditional forms of military power. Iran's proxies, such as Hezbollah, even in its weakened state, and the Houthis, offer force magnifiers of genuinely uncertain value when their deployment is ultimately a choice made by nominally independent actors with their own self-interests. Israel's decapitation of Hezbollah allowed it, at least for a time, a much wider margin of freedom to act by removing that deterrent threat. Iran's retaliation in the twelve-day war clearly did not suffice to restore it. Iran, for its part, maintains its graduated response during the twelve-day war was neither understood nor rewarded, and now likely believes that the only way to re-establish deterrence is to impose so much pain on Israel, the US and the Gulf that they will never again attempt an attack of this kind. Would regional order be better served by the disappearance or the reassertion of deterrence?

(3) **Leadership Decapitation**: The Israeli attack on Hezbollah and the US-Israeli attack on Iran have normalized the practice of assassinating the top leaders of adversaries. This is a stark change in not just regional but global practice -- even in recent wars as heated as Russia-Ukraine - as well as international law. What are the implications of the routinized killing of the leaders

of rival states? Can such practices really be restricted to American-Israeli enemies, or will it evolve into a new norm in the region and more broadly -- and what would be the argument against counterstrikes against American, Israeli, or Arab leaders? Will such a new norm be destabilizing, as leaders expecting to be killed in the first moments of war are incentivized to launch first? And how will it affect the ability of successors to the assassinated leaders to impose order and sustain a rational war strategy?

(4) **Regional Security Architecture**: The Middle Eastern regional order for decades has been built on the architecture of Israeli-Arab cooperation under US auspices against Iran. How will the US-Israeli war on Iran impact that regional order? The US and Israel have demonstrated great military power and battlefield supremacy, but have been unable to achieve rapid victory, defend completely against Iranian retaliation, or quickly topple its regime. What conclusions will allies and adversaries draw about US and Israeli power and reliability? What if there actually were a successful regime change that ends the Islamic Republic and produces something more transformational than an IRGC-led autocracy? How would a new Iran fit into regional architecture? Would it return the region to the days of the Shah, as a reliable and powerful autocratic American ally, or would it produce a new form of nationalist independence as challenging to American order as the Islamic Republic? Would it seek to balance against the power of a dominant Israeli-Gulf bloc or shelter under its umbrella? What would hold the US order together without an Iranian threat? How will the highly evident and profound doubts Gulf leaders and publics now express about the value of American bases and security guarantees affect their alliance choices and calculations? How will those regimes respond to Israel's demonstrated willingness and ability to strike at will across the region, which could well threaten them in the future?

(5) **Regime Security Theory**: The dominant analytical position within Middle East IR in recent years has been regime security theory, the argument that regimes in the region will prioritize any threat to their own survival, whether internal or external, ideological or material.[6] There has certainly been some of that on display, but overall, regimes seem less concerned about their survival in the face of internal threats than they have in the past -- or than they probably should be, given the accumulated pressures of a decade and a half of repression and the added systemic shocks since October 7. Have regimes finally moved on from 2011 and no longer perceive existential threats to their survival? Is that because of upgraded authoritarianism and improved repression or something else? Or is it simply because the intensity of external hard power threats requires a focus on traditional forms of security, while perhaps driving the kind of rally around the flag effect that temporarily pushes even the most disgruntled citizens into patriotic supporters of their leaders?

(6) **Foreign Policy Analysis**: Much IR theory is inherently structural, privileging broader forces such as the balance of power, collective identities, or regime survival over the role of individuals. Political psychology approaches, feminist theory, and some strands of foreign policy analysis have paid more attention to the importance of individual-level decision-making, cognitive biases, and personal characteristics.[7] Developments since October 7 seem to offer important new examples to advance that literature. The overwhelming importance of Trump's personal qualities and pursuit of individual self-interest in driving US policies has been accentuated by the relative impotence of both domestic and international institutions. Bargaining theories of war struggle with figures like Trump, who does not seem to believe he will pay the predicted costs for actions and is extremely risk-acceptant - but may now be confronting reality in the Straits of Hormuz for the first time in his life. Meanwhile, the assassination of top individual leaders such as Hassan Nasrallah and Ali Khamenei does not seem to have had a massive impact on the behavior, power, or organizational coherence of the regimes they led.

(7) **Proxy Wars**: The structure of regional power politics over the last decades has heavily rested on indirect

proxy warfare across the landscape of shattered and weakened states, as Kashfi, Clausen, Rønn, and Ramaioli and Cavatorta each discuss in their essays.[8] Israel's direct military actions since October 7, and the sudden weakening of most of Iran's Axis of Resistance, seem to have shifted us back into a world of direct military conflict. Does that reduce the salience of proxy warfare and nonstate actors, or should it be read in a more cumulative way? Does direct warfare return us to the logic of deterrence theory, or does the recent destruction of Hezbollah and Israel's failure to deter Hamas suggest that deterrence theory itself needs to be re-examined? Would the serious diminution of Iranian power, or a change of its regime, increase or diminish the importance of its erstwhile non-state partners across the region? How should we understand the decisions made by the Houthis, Hezbollah, and various Iraqi militias with regard to joining Iran's war effort against the US and Iran? Are they calculating their own self-interest based on local context or fighting Iran's war on its behalf?

It is possible to make two very different arguments looking forward. One would be that non-state actors and their supporters are weakened, and as a consequence, regional rivalries will become more aligned with what conventional IR theory would predict in terms of inter-state conflicts and rivalries; the direct clashes between Iran vs. US/Israel with limited role for non-state actors could be an expression of this. On the other hand, one could also argue that we should expect to see *more* proxy warfare in the coming years as states continue to fracture and competition to define regional order accelerates. State failure in Iran would offer a huge pool of non-state actors to be dragooned by various external actors with unpredictable effects -- reported US plans to arm Iraqi Kurds to invade Iran could be only the beginning.

(8) Region-Making: Could recent events lead to a more fundamental rethinking of the Middle East as a region at all? A key part of regional order building is the definition of the region itself. In recent years, we have seen an expansion of the Middle East's fuzzy borders, particularly in the East African area, where the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey increasingly competed for influence.[9] The Biden administration pushed several transregional concepts, including the India Middle East Corridor and the I2U2 grouping. We have seen a continued blurring of the borders of the Middle East in recent months. Iran has targeted Cyprus in addition to more traditionally Middle Eastern states. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu recently previewed a new strategic 'hexagon' alliance featuring India, African countries, Greece, Cyprus, and unnamed Asian countries. Saudi Arabia brought Turkey and Pakistan into its own new strategic alliance. As the Iran war expands and mutates, it seems unlikely to be contained within the traditional borders of the Middle East.

(9) **State-Making and State-Breaking**: Within the Middle East, we have seen challenges both to state borders and to the meaning of state sovereignty. These are not, perhaps, as brazen as the Islamic State's claim to have "broken the borders" of the Sykes-Picot Middle East with its declaration of a Caliphate spanning parts of Iraq and Syria. But Israel's claimed right to act in southern Syria, support for Druze secessionism, ongoing bombing across the country, and talk of establishing settlements in areas of claimed Biblical provenance all point to a new disregard for state sovereignty. So does its renewed war on Lebanon, which includes reported plans to reoccupy the south and establish a new security zone there, the evident dismemberment of Gaza under the auspices of post-Hamas reconstruction, and Israel's seeming war aim of shattering the Iranian state to encourage secessionist uprisings. There are continuities with Israel's long occupation of south Lebanon and claimed right to strike Hezbollah even north of Beirut, of course. But the trend towards disregard for state sovereignty and the promotion of secessionist or expansionist movements seems clear. The Saudi conflict with the UAE in late 2025 revolved around the latter's alleged support for secessionist movements in Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, with Saudi Arabia presenting itself as defending state sovereignty and stability to sustain regional order. Could we be entering an era of a fundamental redefinition of state sovereignty and its meanings? What's more, if a regime collapse turns into a

state collapse in Iran, then we might expect cascading state failure in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and other neighbors.

(10) **The Palestinian issue**: The Abraham Accords sought to sever the question of regional alliances from the question of Palestine. The evidence from Gaza about the ongoing relevance of linkage is mixed: Arab publics clearly do still care, and Saudi calculations about normalization have shifted, but we saw very little real change in the foreign policies of most states. Does the palpable shifting of US and global attitudes towards Israel and Palestine have significant implications for regional international relations? Does a declining sympathy with Israel across multiple contexts, increasing international isolation, or academic critique matter? If so, then why has Israel continued to enjoy critical support from most European governments and from the United States? If not, why does Israel pay so much attention to combating BDS, "delegitimation" and alleged antisemitism? Competing hypotheses present themselves: the rising salience of Palestine as a normative and identity issue will raise the costs of normalizing with Israel or will reduce global support for Israeli wars; or Israel's impending victory over the Palestinians and the Abraham Accords model are harbingers of the disappearance of Palestine as an issue.

(11) **Islamism**. The decision by Hamas to attack Israel on October 7 had many logics, as Gunning shows in his essay. But today, Islamist movements of all descriptions lie in ruins. Political Islam has suffered severe setbacks across the region, particularly since October 7, crushed by the weight of state and regional repression and demonized through the course of failed democratic transitions.[10] Iran too has suffered severe setbacks. At the same time, Islamism has proven resilient across decades of surges and setbacks, and it may be premature to write it off as a form of transnational political mobilization.[11] The horrors of Gaza and the impotence of Arab regimes in the face of Israeli expansionism seems to create an opportunity for new forms of resistance, perhaps in different shades of Islamist appeal. Jihadist movements have lost their wars and enjoy little public sympathy anywhere. Even the victory of HTS in Syria, which seems like a counterexample to the thesis of Islamist decline, may prove pyrrhic for Islamism, as Ahmed Sharaa sheds his weapons and combat robes for a sharp business suit and neatly trimmed beard while visiting the White House and basking in applause at Davos. Are we now at last in the "post-Islamist" Middle East which many have anticipated since at least the early 1990s, or on the brink of yet another dramatic revival of Islamist fortunes? What would that mean for the possibilities and modalities of political opposition and resistance?

(12) **Gulf economies**: Theories about Middle Eastern international relations have long taken for granted the growing centrality of the Gulf states and the general shift of regional power eastward. Iran's targeting of its neighbors during the war and its closure of the Straits of Hormuz could potentially force a fundamental rethinking of these assumptions. How would a long-term disruption of oil and gas production and shipping impact the domestic political economies of the Gulf regimes, their growth strategies, and even their ability to sustain the existing modes of governance? How would such a long-term closure affect their ability to project power within the region or to finance reconstruction projects in devastated zones such as Gaza and Syria? How might such a long disruption, and the potential for it to recur, impact the willingness of Asian and European markets to rely on them for energy?

(13) **Climate and the environment**: The horrifying images of US-Israeli bombing of Iranian desalination plants and oil refineries, and Iranian threats to retaliate against Gulf counterparts, have made the environmental impact of war impossible to ignore. Iran's closure of the Straits of Hormuz and targeting of Gulf oil facilities quickly drove the oil prices skyrocketing. This may cause a global recession, but the vulnerability of oil dependency could at the same time, in principle, also accelerate the process of decarbonization. At their extreme, these massive, rapid impacts could threaten the very possibility of human life in parts of the Gulf and Iran, areas where climate change already has temperatures surging, water running out, and environmentally driven disease spreading. What the Trump administration derided and de-emphasized as

"woke" concerns irrelevant to the hard realities of global power have quickly turned out to be absolutely central strategic issues in the spiraling war. The scholars who have centered climate and environmental issues in the Middle East have an important opportunity to demonstrate the relevance of their research, test long-debated hypotheses, and reshape the policy agenda.[12]

Towards a Rethinking

While these developments point to important changes in regional politics, the jury is still out as to whether it makes sense to speak of the rise of a completely "new Middle East", or if we instead are witnessing *changes in* rather than *changes of*. Here it is useful to recall the late Halliday's remark that "there are two predictable, and nearly always mistaken, responses to any great international upheaval: one is to say that everything has changed; the other is to say that nothing has changed."[13]

This serves as more than just a useful reminder of the importance of nuances in the current "new Middle East" debate. It is also relevant to the question of whether Middle East international relations have changed to such an extent that there is a need for a rethink of our past assumptions, approaches, and theories about regional politics. So far, this more inward-looking question concerning the *study* of regional politics has received less attention than debates on what has (and has not) changed in regional politics since October 7, 2023.

Perhaps it is time to begin engaging in such self-reflection on the broader scholarly and theoretical implications of recent developments in the region. In the spirit of Halliday, such an endeavor should not be framed as a binary choice between whether our theories and approaches have now become completely obsolete, or, conversely, are just as useful as in the past. Instead, we should start by recalling the post-Arab uprisings debate, which evolved from a polarized argument over whether, for instance, theories on authoritarian durability had become completely discredited (after the fall of various autocrats) or vindicated (after the counter-revolutions), to a much more subtle and nuanced discussion seeing to specify what these theories got right and wrong, and how their shortcomings could be addressed or "upgraded" without losing relevant insights.[14]

In a similar vein, the primary task when it comes to our theoretical approaches to Middle East international relations after October 7 is to gain a better understanding of three areas: whether there are new phenomena that existing theories do not address, requiring novel theory development; whether there are phenomena that are well-known, but for which our theories fall short in accounting for how they are currently playing out; and finally, whether there are phenomena for which our existing approaches remain robust. The essays in this collection begin this important mission. But there is much work remaining to be done.

Endnotes

[1] Lynch, Marc, Jillian Schwedler, and Sean Yom, *The Political Science of the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Bank, André & Jan Busse (2021). "MENA political science research a decade after the Arab uprisings: Facing the facts on tremulous grounds". *Mediterranean Politics,* vol. 26, no. 5, pp. 539-562. Valbjørn, Morten (2015). "Reflections on Self-Reflections - On framing the analytical implications of the Arab uprisings for the study of Arab politics". *Democratization,* vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 218-238; Gause, F. Gregory (2011). "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring - The Myth of Authoritarian Stability". *Foreign Affairs,* vol. 90, no. 4, pp. 81-90. Howard, Marc Morjé, Meir R. Walters, Eva Bellin, Ellen Lust & Marc Lynch (2014). "Symposium: Explaining the Unexpected: Political Science and the Surprises of 1989 and 2011". *Perspectives on Politics,* vol. 12, no. 02, pp. 394-419; Lynch, Marc (ed.) (2014). *The Arab Uprisings Explained - New Contentious Politics in the Middle East,* New York: Columbia University Press.

[2] The field of genocide studies did not similarly shy away, though - see Dirk Moses's long-running symposium in the Journal of Genocide Research which brought in most of the biggest names in the field. Nor have similarly vulnerable disciplines such as Palestine studies or anthropology.

[3] del Sarto, Raffaella (2025). "Violence and Regional Order in the Middle East since October 7". *POMEPS Studies,* vol. 56: Regional Order Making after October 7, pp. 17-23.

[4] "International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East". *POMEPS Studies* 16 (September 2015); "Regional Order Making after October 7". *POMEPS Studies* 56 (July 2025).

[5] Gause, F. Gregory (2019). ""Hegemony" Compared: Great Britain and the United States in the Middle East". *Security Studies,* vol. 28**,** no. 3, pp. 565-587. McConnaughy, M., P. Musgrave and D. Nexon. (2018). "Beyond anarchy: logics of political organization, hierarchy and international structure." *International Theory* 10, no.2: 181-218; Lake, D.A. (2009b). *Hierarchy in International Relations*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Ikenberry, G.J. and D.H. Nexon. (2019). "Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders." *Security Studies* 28, 3: 395-421.

[6] Ryan, Curtis (2009). *Inter-Arab Alliances: Regime Security and Jordanian Foreign Policy,* Miami: University Press of Florida. Gause, F. Gregory (2003). "Balancing What? - Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf". *Security Studies,* vol. 13**,** no. 2, pp. 273-305.

[7] Darwich, May & Juliet Kaarbo (2020). "IR in the Middle East: foreign policy analysis in theoretical approaches". *International Relations*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 225-245.

[8] Salloukh, Bassel F. (2017). "Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State". *PS: Political Science & Politics,* vol. 50**,** no. 3, pp. 660-663.Phillips, Christopher & Morten Valbjørn (2018). "'What is in a Name?': The Role of (Different) Identities in the Multiple Proxy Wars in Syria". *Small Wars & Insurgencies,* vol. 29**,** no. 3, pp. 414-433.

[9] Marc Lynch and Simon Mabon, eds., *Order and Region-Making in the Middle East* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024); Lynch, *What is the Middle East? The Theory and Practice of Regions* (Cambridge Elements, Cambridge University Press, 2025); Mohammed Soliman, *West Asia* (Polity 2026).

[10] See Hafez, Mohammed (2026). "A Waning Crescent: Why the Era of Islamism is Coming to an End". *Middle East Journal,* vol. 79**,** no. 1, pp. 57-66.

[11] Lynch, Marc (2022). "The Future of Islamism Through the Lens of the Past". *Religions,* vol. 13**,** no. 2

[12] For an introduction, see "Environmental Politics in the MENA," *POMEPS Studies* 46 (May 2022)

[13] Fred Halliday (2002) A New Global Configuration, in Ken Booth & Timothy Dunne (eds) *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*, pp. 235–244 (New York: Palgrave), p. 235.

[14] Valbjørn, Morten (2015). "Reflections on Self-Reflections - On framing the analytical implications of the Arab uprisings for the study of Arab politics". *Democratization,* vol. 22**,** no. 2, pp. 218-238.

The Persistence of US Hierarchy in the Gulf

Sean Yom, Temple University

How do we understand the persistence of US hegemony in the Arabian Gulf? Nearly two decades ago, President Barack Obama announced a "pivot to Asia," in which US grand strategy would rebalance away from the Middle East and towards the Asian-Pacific theater of great power competition. Since then, scholars and policymakers alike operated under the assumption that Washington's strategic interests had shifted, and that America's mammoth presence in the Gulf was inexorably declining. Yet today, US paramountcy in the Gulf remains as robust as ever, particularly in its war-making capacity, as the latest war in Iran evinces. Why do we struggle to predict the end of American hegemony in this sub-region, which seems immune to changes in presidential foreign policy doctrines? This memo uses theories of hierarchy to argue that in historical context, US primacy in the Gulf is exceptional—and that it will take a rare event, such as sudden economic collapse or democratic death, for Washington to truly "abandon" the Gulf.

Understanding Hierarchy

From a neorealist perspective, the hallmark of US hegemony in the Arabian Gulf since the 1980s has been its capacity to regulate the regional subsystem and set the boundaries of permissible state behavior through its diplomatic leverage, economic resources, and interventionist coercion. Structural linkages between the US and the Gulf kingdoms embody this footprint, among them American military bases sprawled across the Gulf littoral, financial and technological flows linking the US with the GCC kingdoms, the imbrication of these kingdoms into high-level US summitry (e.g., the 2020 Abraham Accords), and American cultural influence in shaping local social institutions and economic practices. So, too, does Washington's capacity to wage war against its anointed foes, such as Iran, as recent events illustrate.

Theories of international relations offer creative ways to conceptualize such large domains of power. One approach is *hierarchy*, which describes a particular kind of asymmetrical structure between sovereign states. Hierarchies are relationships that tie dominant states with smaller, subordinate ones in reciprocal arrangements of unequal authority.[1] A great power (i.e., the US) wields recognizable authority over the domestic and foreign affairs of subordinate states, which consent to this arrangement because they derive political, economic, or social benefits that bolster their own interests—national stability, external prestige, regime security, and so forth.[2] Its dominant authority is seen as legitimate not because it carries a sense of ethical rightness, but because it is normalized and recognized as an appropriate expression of statecraft: that is, smaller states consent to their subordination. For their part, dominant powers extract slices of sovereignty from the smaller partner that aggrandize their own interests. For instance, they sequester land to build military bases, secure preferential access to natural resources or domestic markets, and ensure diplomatic alignment on high-level issues. Hierarchies are therefore *contractual* understandings of asymmetry, unlike forms of domination based purely upon coercion such as colonialism.[3]

In international relations scholarship, studies of hierarchy overlap with ancillary work on patron-client ties, spheres of influence, principal-agent dynamics, and regional security complexes. All of these ideas utilize the same vocabulary that emphasize not just how the strong rule the weak, but rather that states of vastly different capabilities—dominant and subordinate, large and small, Global North and Global South—can enter into bargained, structured understandings that satisfy their mutual interests while preserving their structural inequality. For their part, dominant powers must pay considerable "upkeep" to sustain their hierarchies. Guaranteeing hegemonic

normalcy for subordinate states can require ever-increasing mountains of money, guns, and diplomacy, particularly when policing regional order requires waging war.

US Hegemony in the Gulf

In this context, it appears sensible to question the horizon of US hierarchy in the Gulf. In a context of ever-deepening involvement and renewed US war-making, is it possible to imagine a scenario in which American hegemony might *recede*? The last two decades of US foreign policy in the region returns an interminable pattern: no matter the president and regardless of public promises, Washington has not extricated itself from the Middle East and especially the Gulf.[4] For instance, President Obama engendered strident debate about the future of American paramountcy in the region. The Obama Doctrine promised to rebalance US interests to the Asia-Pacific region in the wake of the Bush administration's disastrous "Freedom Agenda," which spawned the disastrous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The most immediate impact of this strategic reorientation in the late 2000s lay in Washington's newfound reticence to military interventionism. Observers saw subsequent policy shifts—including America's withdrawal from Iraq, its hesitance to support the Arab Uprisings, the limited scope of its 2011-12 Libyan operation, the failure to enforce chemical weaponry "red lines" during Syria's civil war, and the crafting of the Iranian nuclear deal—as inexorable signs of this more defensive posture. The US still mattered; but it was less willing to pay the interventionist costs of its hierarchy.

From the Trump regime's first term into the Biden years, policy discussions in Washington hovered over the wisdom of America's perceived hegemonic retreat, with new phrases like "off-shore balancing" entering policy jargon. These debates were vociferous enough to fool many observers—including myself—that it was not only possible but likely that the US could voluntarily retrench its hegemonic impression in the Gulf by, for instance, withdrawing military forces or reducing its diplomatic commitments.[5] To simplify, two sides emerged in this debate. *Restrainers* endorsed US extrication from the region, arguing that shrinking America's enormous footprint was a necessary course correction to past decades of feckless adventurism that had only spawned the horrors of the Iraq War, immiserating authoritarian rule, and persistent crises in Palestine and beyond.[6] *Primacists* interpreted this strategy as aimless drift or, worse, surrender. Drawing upon both neoconservative ideology and liberal-internationalist ideas, they argued that by relinquishing its predominance, the US was absconding from its great power responsibility and deserting the region to Iran and its then-prominent Shi'a proxies, radicalized Islamist movements, Russian or Chinese competition, and other forces of chaos.[7]

This debate simmered among Gulf observers for good reason. By the Arab Spring, Washington's hegemonic footprint here—bolstered by successive geopolitical shocks in the Gulf War, the War on Terror, and Iraq War—had manifested into a titanic cluster of hierarchical assemblages. The forward architecture of the US military's Central Command, with operational oversight over the broader Middle East from Egypt eastwards, centered upon basing sites in Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Massive arms transactions had produced not just lucrative profits for US defense firms, but also long-term structural reliance of Gulf militaries upon American technology, services, and intelligence. Within most national hydrocarbon sectors, US officials and firms were deeply involved in shaping both upstream and downstream outputs. Bilateral relations and set-piece diplomacy made Washington the most prominent supporter of these autocratic monarchies, relegating concerns of democracy and human rights to the margins.

Gulf specialists are quite familiar with these contours of US involvement—the unbridled backing for royal dictatorships, the arms deals enriching US contractors, the putative safeguarding of Arabian energy production.[8] It was remarkable, thus, that Gulf-centric narratives from the early 2010s onwards were riveted by these debates about the future of American hegemony.[9] Skepticism abounded: US power seemed to be wilting, and many commentators believed that an overstretched, exhausted Washington

was intent on dismantling its hierarchical bargains in the Gulf. As evidence, analysts pointed out the absence of US interventionism running throughout the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. Every punctuated inaction, such as President Trump's tepid response to the September 2019 Houthi attacks on Saudi oil facilities, raised alarm that much like the British after 1968, the US was abandoning the Gulf monarchies, its strategic interests more focused upon great power competition in Asia rather than maintaining paramountcy in the Arab world. What further accentuated this sense of American twilight was the gush of new foreign policy strategies emanating from the Gulf kingdoms. Among these were rapid Saudi and Emirati militarization,[10] Kuwaiti hedging strategies,[11] Omani mediation efforts,[12] and Qatari nation-branding. Dipping into the canon of "small state" thinking, commentators saw these foreign policy approaches as proof that the Gulf kingdoms could productively swivel around Washington's irresolution by become more confident middle powers. A new epoch of insecurity and uncertain had arrived; Pax Americana was over.[13]

What US Retreat?

We know now that such alarmism tilted at windmills. Despite public diplomatic shifts, intentional changes in grand strategy, and voluble debate about the future of US primacy, the arc of American hegemony in the Arabian Gulf has not diminished over time. If anything, it has expanded, giving victory to primacists.[14] Most recently, in February 2026, the US launched a new war for regime change in Iran, unleashing an aerial onslaught alongside Israeli strikes to decapitate the Islamic Republic's political leadership and destroy much of its military infrastructure.

Yet well beforehand, Washington unambiguously entrenched its Gulf presence. Prior to the war, it utilized other instruments in its coercive toolbox of interventionism against Iran, from its June 2025 airstrikes against Iranian nuclear facilities and reliance upon Israeli attacks to episodic military operations against Iranian proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Moreover, the US has also maintained its basing facilities and force levels in the Gulf kingdoms, despite building newer military installations in Jordan and Iraq. There has been no "offshore" repositioning of military power to these non-Gulf sites, as some strategists predicted.[15] On the contrary, heightening US involvement in these Mashriq countries has accelerated their military and financial dependence upon Washington's authority. The Jordanian armed forces, for instance, have become an ancillary appendage to the US military, their operational imperatives tethered to the broader demands of American strategists.[16]

Annual arms sales to the Gulf kingdoms reached record heights by the early 2020s, and in November 2025, Saudi Arabia joined Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar as a Major Non-NATO ally. The $140 billion prospective package of US arms inked with Saudi Arabia in May 2025, if fulfilled, would be the single largest comprehensive arms deal made in American history.

The Gulf's interstate affairs similarly illustrate the chimaera of hierarchical regression. Take, for instance, the much-vaunted role of China. Beijing certainly succeeded after the Arab Uprisings in raising its regional profile, and its diplomatic presence—alongside that of Russia and, to a lesser extent, India and Pakistan—deepened in Gulf capitals. However, beyond a few notable breakthroughs, such as its 2023 mediation of Saudi-Iranian détente, China has hardly replaced the US as an order-providing hegemon capable of managing a regional hierarchical order. For instance, while China ranks as the top export destination for most of the Gulf kingdoms, those trade ties are weighted by one-way hydrocarbon sales. Without oil and gas, Chinese consumption of Gulf goods and services plummets down the league tables. These energy exports, in turn, are still priced in dollars, much like how most GCC currencies remained pegged to US currency. When Houthi forces in Yemen imperiled the Red Sea during 2024 at the height of the Gaza War, the Chinese government was content to rely upon US-led military action to restore this maritime trade route.

In essence, all the debate about the horizon of US paramountcy in the Gulf have been for nought. The most compelling explanation for why Washington never left weaves together geopolitical dynamics with political

economy logic and historical path dependency: even without regional actors objectively threatening the US homeland, too many toxic entanglements—Israel, oil production, defense profiteering, strategic habituation, Iranian fear-mongering—keep American power anchored to its Gulf moorings.[17] The hierarchical system feeds off crisis, using every rupture in regional order to justify itself. This comports with prevailing theory. Hierarchies encode great power dominance enforced through transactional mechanisms whose authoritative expectations become so quotidian—the annual arms deal, the periodic military training exercise, the chronic neglect of democracy—that their absence becomes unfathomable. Historically, their persistence over time reflects the mutual optimization of great power interests and subordinate state survival, often greased through the uncertainties of post-colonial transitions.

However, this approach is less helpful in forecasting how American hegemony might end. What scholarship does articulate are several scenarios in which hierarchical regional orders crumple. One possibility is domestic change. Major crises can transform subordinate state leadership. Popular revolutions can bring to power a new regime, which turns away from the former patron; Iran experienced this with it 1979 revolution, which replaced one US client regime in the Pahlavi monarchy with an ardently anti-Western one. Another is imperial exhaustion within the hegemon itself, which may sap its public appetite and elite will for imperial engagement.[18] The demise of Soviet-communist authority across Central and Eastern Europe through the 1989 Velvet Revolutions is a canonical example of this. Great powers can also suffer financial and military decline, and be no longer willing to underwrite the public goods necessary to exert hierarchical authority. The United Kingdom's post-colonial withdrawal from the Gulf itself after 1968, and the decay of French oversight across the African *Francophonie* over the past decades, are frequently cited as examples of this. And at the systemic level, contestation from other great powers can also force a hegemon to yield ground to external challengers. For Cooley and Nexon, for instance, the primary threat in the post-Cold War era to the rules-based global liberal order under American leadership has been counter-hegemonic pressures from Russian militarism and Chinese competition.[19]

However, none of these conditions characterize the persistent US position in the Gulf. Domestically, there has been no regime change across the Gulf kingdoms. The Arab Uprisings and its 2018-19 aftershocks largely bypassed Saudi Arabia and the five smaller littoral kingdoms, with the potentiality of Bahrain's March 2011 revolutions quashed handily by intra-Gulf interventionism. Their domestic leaderships exploited the fearful potential of US withdrawal to justify new foreign policy moves, such as Saudi-Emirati militarization, but they never faced this concrete scenario. Neither has it been the case that Washington, despite the backsliding of American democracy, the rise of right-wing populist politics, and economic troubles at home, has reached a measurable point of military exhaustion or fiscal overreach. Military spending as percent of US GDP has oscillated between 3-4 percent for two decades, and there are no macroeconomic red flags to suggest that the US cannot afford to sustain its massive overseas commitments. Finally, neither Russia nor China has successfully encroached upon Washington's geopolitical dominion in the Gulf, which would be evidenced by military basing and other high-level actions that indicate that the Gulf kingdoms are turning away from the US orbit.

Black Swans

Garrulous debates about the future of US primacy in the Gulf may have had more success in advancing careers at Western think tanks than in generating meaningful knowledge about foreign policy given that the dependent variable, American hegemonic order, never changed. The latest war on Iran confirms this. Nearly two decades after a promised pivot to Asia, the US has embarked upon a violent campaign to exterminate the incumbent regime of a Middle East country of 93 million people—by far, the most populous country that America has ever attacked. It bears wondering, nonetheless, what possible scenarios could result in either the US as dominant power

or the Gulf states as subordinate partners rethinking the contractual wisdom of their hierarchical bargain.

First, the Gulf could experience domestic political change. Another popular wave of revolutionary protests—that is, an Arab Spring 3.0—might erupt and dislodge the Gulf's ruling monarchies from their perch. This could bring to power more representative governments that, at minimum, strike softer tones with both traditional foes (e.g., Iran, or at least what the Islamic Republic has been for several generations) and allies alike. This is unlikely, however, for the same reasons why the Arab Spring largely bypassed the Gulf in the first place. Oil wealth, effective repression, and autocratic statecraft have bolstered the durability of these royal autocracy, and there have been no credible signs since those uprisings that this will change in the foreseeable future.[20] Indeed, at this point, the likeliest candidate of regime change in the Gulf is Iran. Should that occur due to US actions, then the American position will entrench further. The Trump administration will interpret its coercive imposition as evidence that interventionism in the Middle East works, and could succeed again. Meanwhile, the ever-widening radius of fallout from the February 2026 war—with Iranian retaliation in its early stages having quickly targeted Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE—justifies the very US military presence that catalyzed a spillover-producing conflict in the first place.

Second, US democracy could collapse. American democratic institutions have already suffered steep backsliding, and are being perpetually stress-tested today under the dual assault of President Trump's executive aggrandizement and the Republican Party's pursuit of minority rule. It is logical that should the US careen fully into the realm of authoritarianism, such that President Trump anoints himself as ruler-for-life or else ensures that a handpicked successor wins an orchestrated 2028 general election, certain voices within the right-wing populist establishment could gain greater influence. Among those are hardcore isolationists—often self-described as pure realists—who wish to relocate US resources from theaters like the Gulf back to the homeland. Because turning illiberal democracy (America's current status) into full-blown authoritarianism requires autocratic actors also colonize state institutions, such transformation would mean that isolationist proponents gain control over the Defense Department and State Department, as well as a more politicized military leadership.

Third, Western economies—including the US—could suffer a serious financial collapse. Unproductive investment bubbles, such as AI, combined with increasingly stratified labor churn, heightening financial market risk, and public debt crises could severely degrade Global North economies. Escalating trade wars and oil-induced stagflationary pressures might aggravate slowing growth curves. The end result might be American policymakers, even those held captive by Trump's populist fervor, forcibly rethinking the fiscal wisdom of their hierarchical commitments, given the potential for electoral backlash from US voters inflamed by rising living costs and material deprivation. This is less likely, however, then the democratic death scenario: during past major global recessions, the US did not retract its geopolitical adventurism, which seems immune to fiscal and monetary cycles.

Admittedly, all of these represent low-probability events. I invoke them here precisely to accentuate the difficulty of imagining a realistic scenario in which the arc of American hegemony objectively diminishes over the Arabian Gulf. That arc has resisted the grand-strategic pivot to Asia, the failures of the Iraq and Afghan wars, and other inflection points that a generation of foreign policy analysts had predicted would force the US to reckon with its hierarchical commitments in the Gulf. Those commitments have persisted across successive shifts across diametrically opposite foreign policy doctrines in Washington. They have deepened despite clamorous debates among Gulf commentators and Western think tanks regarding the future of US paramountcy. American hierarchy in the Gulf today, in quintessence, looks as if the last two decades of hand-wringing never happened.

Endnotes

[1] Ayşe Zarakol, ed., *Hierarchies in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Alexander Cooley and Hendrik Spruyt, *Contracting States: Sovereign Transfers in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
[2] David Lake, *Indirect Rule: The Making of US International Hierarchy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024).
[3] David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).
[4] Marc Lynch, *America's Middle East: The Ruination of a Region* (London: Hurst, 2025).
[5] See, for instance, Sean Yom, "US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Logic of Hegemonic Retreat," *Global Policy* 11, 1 (2020): 75-83.
[6] Andrew Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2017); Steven Simon, *Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East* (New York: Penguin, 2023).
[7] Kori Schake, "The Post-American Order: 'America First' Will Leave America Behind," *Foreign Affairs*, 21 October 2020; Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Knopf, 2018); and Bret Stephens, *America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder* (New York: Sentinel, 2014).
[8] Rachel Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Geoffrey Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); and David Roberts, *Security Politics in the Gulf Monarchies: Continuity Amid Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).
[9] F. Gregory Gause III, "Should We Stay or Should We Go? The United States and the Middle East," *Survival* 61 (2019): 7-24.
[10] Rory Miller, *Desert Kingdoms to Global Powers: The Rise of the Arab Gulf* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); and Dina Esfandiary, *New Order in the Gulf: The Rise of the UAE* (London: IB Tauris, 2023).
[11] Yoel Guzansky, "The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers: Strategic Hedging in the Persian Gulf," *Middle East Policy* 22 (2015): 112-122.
[12] James Worrall, "'Switzerland of Arabia': Omani Foreign Policy and Mediation Efforts in the Middle East," *International Spectator* 45, 4 (2021): 134-150.
[13] Hal Brands, Steven Cook, and Kenneth Pollack, "RIP the Carter Doctrine: 1980-2019," *Foreign Policy*, 13 December 2019; and Mehran Kamrava *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).
[14] F. Gregory Gause, "Should We Stay or Should We Go? The United States and the Middle East," *Survival* 61 (2019): 7-24.
[15] John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Super US Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016): 70-83. Indeed, the most contemporary threat to the sovereignty of Gulf states in recent years has been not Iran but another US client state in Israel.
[16] Sean Yom and Pete Moore, "The Fortress State: Extreme Militarization in Jordan," *Middle East Law and Governance* 16, 4 (2024): 371-386.
[17] Toby Craig Jones, "America, Oil, and War in the Middle East," *Journal of American History* 99, 1 (2012): 208-18; and Marc Lynch, *America's Middle East: The Ruination of a Region* (London: Hurst, 2025).
[18] The classic example of the latter is hegemonic stability theory. See further Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 1989).
[19] Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
[20] Sean Yom and F. Gregory Gause III, "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On," *Journal of Democracy* 23, 4 (2012): 74-88.

Israel, the Axis of Resistance, and the End of Deterrence

Waleed Hazbun, University of Alabama

Until last summer's twelve-day war, Israel and Iran had avoided direct warfare despite indirect conflict and covert operations spanning nearly half a century. The Hamas-led attacks on October 7, 2023, shattered any remaining Israeli understandings of the effectiveness of deterrence against Hamas. The regional conflict that followed the attacks ended the possibilities for limiting regional conflict through the maintenance of *mutual* deterrence. Israel's decapitation strike against Hizballah in November 2024 and attack on Iran the next summer, and the joint US-Israeli attack on Iran in early 2026 all revealed the limitations of deterrence. This essay assesses how the logic of deterrence was used in scholarship and policy analysis before, during, and after the conflicts initiated on October 7.

To the degree that the American National Security Adviser in late September 2023 could state that the Middle East was "quieter today than it has been in decades," (Sullivan 2023, 23) it was at least partially due to the establishment of mutual deterrence between Israel and its adversaries. This essay argues, however, that while mutual (non-nuclear) deterrence can help limit conflict to within a set of "rules," it is often fragile and unstable, especially when it involves multiple, overlapping conflicts. Moreover, deterrence is generally not sustainable after at least one party finds the political or security status quo untenable and is ready to disregard the likely consequences of initiating or escalating conflict. As a result, deterrence deployed as a one-sided military strategy of "peace through strength" without a political agenda for a sustainable status quo is usually a playbook for endless war.

Deterrence can restrain the eruption of major war but always comes with costs and risks. Israeli security strategy has generally sought to deter attacks through the continual demonstration of its ability and willingness to respond with massive, disproportionate punishment. In recent years, with the shift to a concern about threats from non-state actors based in "weak states," enforcing deterrence has required a continual refreshing of its commitment to disproportionate responses. Beginning in the 1990s, Israel became increasingly subject to "asymmetric deterrence" in which weaker actors, such as the Iran-backed Lebanese group Hizballah, were able to limit the scope of Israeli actions with both sides generally recognizing a set of "rules of the game" (Norton 2000; Sobelman 2025b). Following the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, Hizballah claimed that the group provided security for Lebanon due to its ability to maintain mutual deterrence with Israel. Hizballah also promoted its ability to establish asymmetric deterrence as a central strategy for members of the "Axis of Resistance" against Israel. In parallel fashion, by 2023 many Israeli policy makers had embraced the notion that Israel had established deterrence over Hamas confined within Gaza. The October 7 Hamas-led attacks into Israel, Israel's escalation in against Hizballah, and the eruption of direct military conflict with Iran, however, marked the breakdown of deterrence across these conflicts. While some actors still refer to establishing and maintaining deterrence, it is unlikely that it can be used to limit conflicts in the foreseeable future in the absence of mutual vulnerability and while the political and security status quo remains unsustainable.

The Concept of Deterrence and Its Limits

During the Cold War, the concept of deterrence was central to most international relations scholarship about the prevention and outbreak of war. The mutual vulnerability established between two nuclear-armed superpowers with second strike capabilities created a framework for mutual deterrence and the avoidance of nuclear war. More generally, the concept of deterrence is used to define the conditions and criteria for preventing a rival from launching an attack. For various reasons, many US-based scholars and policy makers have argued

that postcolonial states and non-state actors could not be deterred by threat of retaliation alone (for example, see Garfinkle 2006) but only by the elimination of their ability to effectively launch attacks ("deterrence by denial"). More recently, some scholars have developed a literature (the so-called fourth wave of deterrence studies) about the possibilities for effectively deterring, under certain conditions, armed non-state actors, at least for a period of time (Knopf 2010). This debate has informed Israeli efforts to address the rising threat posed by non-state actors such as Hizballah, Hamas, and other groups. At the same time, non-state actors have come to embrace a strategy referred to as "asymmetric deterrence" in which the ability to inflict pain -- not achieve victory -- inhibits aggression. Once mutual vulnerability is established, "weaker" actors are able to limit the scope of attacks by stronger actors, allowing such groups to achieve political goals while both sides offer relative protection to their own civilians by following mutually agreed "rules of the game" (Sobelman 2025a).

While deterrence can be understood as a tool to limit conflicts, it also carries risks. As Robert Jervis (1976) explains, misperception about the intentions of a rival (such as, mistaking a revisionist actor for a status quo one) can lead to a failure of deterrence or a spiral of conflict. Moreover, the concept of deterrence can also propel recurring violent conflict when an actor understands themselves as a "deterrence actor" and justifies attacks (usually on a weaker actor) as preventing future conflict by continually (re)establishing deterrence (Lupovici 2024). As a result, how the concept of deterrence is understood and deployed can either help prevent conflict and limit violence or justify ongoing violence and create vulnerabilities to be exploited.

Deterrence in Israeli Doctrine and Practice

The notion of deterrence has been central to Israeli strategic doctrine since the pre-1948 Yishuv era (Bar 2020). This doctrine calls for maintaining the credible threat of massive, disproportionate retaliation in response to any attack. From the late 1960s, Israel's deterrence against non-conventional and existential threats was enhanced by the development of an undeclared nuclear capability. While Israel failed to deter the Egyptian and Syrian offensives in 1973 to recapture territory occupied by Israel since 1967, a central challenge to Israeli strategy emerged with the rise of threats from non-state actors, beginning with "infiltrations" by armed Palestinian forces. As Pearlman and Atzili (2018) explain, one way Israel sought to contain such attacks was by punishing the states that hosted those actors, a strategy referred to as "triadic coercion." This approach, they argue, is most effective against militarily weaker states governed by a consolidated regime with the capability to contain the actions of non-state actors within their territory. By the 1990s, however, Israel faced multiple non-state actors operating within what Pearlman and Atzili (2018) term weak states, that is, states that lack the necessary coherence and capacity to control non state actors and prevent attacks from their territory.

The Emergence of "Resistance" as Asymmetric Deterrence

The Iran-backed Hizballah movement arose to challenge Israeli forces that fully invaded Lebanon in 1982. By the 1990s, the professionalization of Hizballah as an armed force (Norton 2000) and the mutual vulnerability produced by the ability of Hizballah to fire rockets into Israeli civilian areas, established a new dynamic of mutual deterrence (Sobelman 2025b). As a result of indirect negotiations, the "rules of the game" were established that governed the fighting and limited Hizballah's attacks to Israeli-aligned forces within occupied Lebanon and Israeli attacks on Hizballah military positions. This system of partial deterrence was vulnerable to violations of its rules that were either countered by balanced responses or else escalations that sought to change the rules, as Israel attempted in 1993 and again in 1996. Meanwhile, Hizballah's attacks, even if they remained within the rules, imposed increasing costs on the Israelis which eventually became politically unsustainable.

Following the 1989 Ta'if agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), the continuing Israeli

occupation of southern Lebanon and the threat posed by Israel's military capacity to Lebanon allowed Hizballah to remain the only armed Lebanese group in Lebanon. With Lebanon under effective Syrian control, Hizballah's armed capacity also served Syrian and Iranian interests by maintaining a mechanism to indirectly challenge Israel. Beginning with Hizballah in the 1990s, the forces of what would later be called the "Axis of Resistance" embraced the notion of asymmetric deterrence: They used their armed capabilities and Israel's hesitancy to allow escalations that could lead to unacceptable Israeli civilian causalities to establish "rules of engagement" based on mutual vulnerability.

As Pearlman and Atzili (2018) document, Hizballah was able to impose costs "within the rules of the game" on Israel for its continuing occupation of Lebanon. The withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon in 2000 left the remaining Israeli forces in the disputed Sheba'a Farms as a target that Hizballah recognized as within the rules. As a result, after 2000 there was a vast decline in the number of cross-border attacks between Israel and Lebanon as they were concentrated on the remaining disputed territory of Israeli occupation. The 2006 Israel-Lebanon War, inadvertently ignited by a Hizballah attack and hostage taking outside the rules, resulted in a failed effort by Israel to again deploy triadic coercion by targeting civilian infrastructure (including the destruction the Beirut's southern suburbs with Hizballah's political headquarters) and calling on Lebanon's government to contain Hizballah. Late in the war, Israel sought to impose deterrence by denial through a ground invasion to uproot Hizballah from South Lebanon. In the aftermath of the war, mutual deterrence based on mutual vulnerability between Israel and Hizballah led to an era of general quiet across the border. Hizballah largely refrained from attacks and avoided Israeli civilian areas while Israel refrained from attacks into Lebanese civilian areas including conducting aerial assassinations against Hizballah leaders and commanders.

By 2015, the Israeli Defense Forces Strategy would formally incorporate an understanding of mutual deterrence and these rules of the game (Sobelman 2016; Khalidi 2016)the weak actor must convince it that if conflict breaks out, the weak actor would be capable of rendering its opponent's strategic capabilities tactical and its own tactical capabilities strategic. The deterrence relationship that has evolved between Israel and the Lebanese Hezbollah in the decade since—and as a result of—the 2006 Lebanon War (a.k.a. the Second Lebanon War or the July War. Meanwhile, as Hizballah's capacity expanded with Iranian supplied precision-targeted missiles with longer ranges as well as surveillance drones, both sides sought to maintain the mutual deterrence with expanded, credible threats. Israeli commanders declared their "Dahiya Doctrine" outlining their intent to turn Lebanese urban areas into rubble in any future war, as they did to that Beirut suburb in 2006, while Hizballah professed its intention to match any Israeli strikes against Lebanese cities and infrastructure with their own strikes against equivalent Israeli targets (International Crisis Group 2010).

Something similar evolved after the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007, as Hamas targeted nearby Israeli communities (in the "Gaza envelope") with locally-made rockets while Israel responded with unrestrained attacks following a strategy referred to as "mowing the grass." While Hamas often justified its attacks as seeking to maintain a "balance of terror" with Israel (Baconi 2018, 42)42, it was only around 2014 that a shift occurred. Hamas demonstrated its capacity to maintain rocket strikes against Tel Aviv for weeks in the face of a brutal Israeli campaign that inflicted immense civilian destruction across Gaza (Sobelman 2025b, 279). Hamas would also come to better regulate the rocket fire from Gaza into Israel (including from other groups) and seek to establish their own rules of engagement with Israel to limit responses by both sides to "proportionate reciprocity" (Sobelman 2025b, 279). While Hamas could not attain its goal of ending Israel's siege of Gaza, imposed in 2007, it did gain Israeli consent to Qatari financial support for Gaza while Israel "abandoned aerial assassination" since the cost would be retaliatory rocket fire on Tel Aviv (Sobelman 2025b, 280).

October 7 as a Failure of Deterrence

The unanticipated scale, scope, and "success" of the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, led to an immediate recognition in Israel that the strategy of deterrence against Hamas had failed. The government of Israel soon embraced the view of many Israeli military analysts that the deterrence of Hamas had eroded and finally recognized the signs that the Palestinians of Gaza had signaled the unacceptability of the status quo of living under siege. More critically, the failure of deterrence in this case resulted not simply in an Israeli effort to "restore deterrence" as in past outbreaks of conflict. Israeli military strategists, political leaders, and the general public seem to have abandoned any notion of the possibility of deterring Hamas and instead were committed to its elimination (Freedman 2023).

Israeli political leaders had largely discounted the signs that the status quo was unacceptable to Hamas and the Palestinians of Gaza, even though the signals were especially clear, especially with the expansion of normalization agreements between Arab states and Israel. Additionally, Israel had intelligence about Hamas's efforts to stage a bold attack. But as Amir Lupovici (2024, 75) explains, "Israel told itself the story that deterrence was working and shaping its enemies' behavior." What deterrence theory suggests is that Israel convinced itself that Hamas was (or was forced to act as) a status quo actor burdened with the duty to govern Gaza. While Hamas seemed to have accepted playing by the rules of the game in the meanwhile, Israel had little interest in changing that status quo short of the disarming and deposing of Hamas.

The widespread focus in US and Israeli analysis on the "failure of deterrence" rather than on the unsustainability of Palestinian life in Gaza under siege, avoids any consideration of political alternatives to a military strategy of "elimination." Moreover, post-October 7, Israeli political leaders (and the public) seem to have adopted the perspective of many Israeli military strategists who had believe that deterrence was always a failed strategy because it led Israel to accept limits on its military actions such that it was "self-deterred in taking decisive action against Hamas" (Ouellet 2024, 351). This post-deterrence view understands claims about mass civilian causalities caused by Israeli offensives into Gaza as part of Hamas's strategy of deterrence through disinformation (Schleifer and Ansbacher 2024).

This view rejects the notion of mutual deterrence, on the basis that it requires Israel to "remain in a constant state of vulnerability" while accepting limits to its offensive actions (Schleifer and Ansbacher 2024). Prior to October 7 these voices called for the rejection of a strategy of deterrence and for a "military confrontation to dismantle the miliary wing of Hamas" that would likely "entail a large-scale, long-term bloody campaign" (Dekel 2019; Schleifer and Ansbacher 2024). Developing the capability for such a campaign had been part of the IDF force development plan since 2020 and thus the course of the Gaza campaign might have been over-determined (Ortal 2020).

Israeli Escalation in Lebanon and the Collapse of the "Rules of Engagement"

On the day following the Hamas-led attack, Hizballah opened a second front against Israel in solidarity with its Axis of Resistance ally by launching an attack on the disputed Sheba'a Farms (Makdisi 2024). While the conflict between Hizballah and Israel quickly expanded outside of the narrow existing "rule box," it maintained proportional retaliations across an expanded space on both sides of the border, leading to the large-scale displacement of civilians on both sides. Israel gradually expanded its attacks and crossed existing red lines, such as assassinating a Hamas leader in Beirut and hitting Lebanese civilian targets. Hamas likely had hoped Hizballah would escalate the conflict leading to involvement by all the Axis of Resistance actors, including Iran, as part of a "unification of the arenas" strategy. Instead, with no interest in escalation on the part of Hizballah or Iran, Hizballah maintained proportional retaliations while highlighting its supposed capacity to target Israeli civilians as well as conduct pinpoint strikes on selected Israeli military targets. Hizballah's leader Hassan Nasrallah publicly committed to this strategy of seeking to

"win by points," believing that Israel's fear of an expanded war would deter it from escalation (cited in Sobelman 2025a, 200) while the pressure from Lebanon would help Hamas achieve its goal of a new status quo with an end to the siege of Gaza (Daher 2025).

But in mid-2024, as Israel came close to accomplishing its main military goals in Gaza, it massively escalated the conflict, shattering the existing understandings of the rules of engagement with Hizballah. While Israel was willing to risk higher levels of Israeli civilian causalities and displacement for longer periods than Hizballah seemed to anticipate, Hizballah was forced to absorb higher and higher levels of damage, including the mass assassination of Hizballah commanders and Nasrallah himself. Writing in *al-Akhbar*, a Lebanese publication aligned with the "resistance," Zeinab Akil (2025) explains, "What changed was not Israel's intent, but its capability. A technological leap allowed Tel Aviv to assemble an extensive, high-precision 'target bank,' designed to paralyze Hizballah's deterrent capacity built over nearly two decades." By late 2024, Hizballah acquiesced to a ceasefire agreement without achieving its goal of a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. As part of the agreement, the Lebanese government was expected to ensure removal of armed Hizballah actors and their weapons from south of the Litani river. At the same time, while Israeli troops remain in Lebanon, drones buzz across the country, and Hizballah members continue to be targeted, the United States has pushed the Lebanese government to rapidly implement the complete disarming of Hizballah, which the group has continued to reject. Meanwhile, Hizballah refrained responding to Israeli attacks and violations of the ceasefire agreement. With the UN Security Council vote to end the mandate of UNIFIL in 2026 and US pressure on the Lebanese government to confront Hizballah, Israel faced decreasing restraints on its ability to project power into Lebanon.

A Future Middle East Without Deterrence?

Throughout the 2023-24 conflict, US officials warned regional actors against escalating the war as the United States deployed more assets to the region and ensured that Israel was armed with the capability to continue its wars. In early 2024, a former Defense Department official noted that a "former USCENTCOM commander wrote that the U.S. response has been 'tentative, overly signaled and unfocused' and that making escalation avoidance the top priority 'sends an unhelpful signal to our adversaries as well as our friends and allies.' He concluded that 'it is the U.S. that is being deterred, not Iran and its proxies'" (Trachtenberg 2024, 86). Israel continued to escalate the conflict, not only in Lebanon but also by striking a building the Iranians used as a consulate in Damascus. The attack led to a limited Iranian retaliation that Iran claimed was for the purpose of maintaining balance. In the summer of 2025, however, Israel escalated again with an attack on Iran, which the United States later joined with a massive bombardment of Iran's nuclear complexes. Iran responded with its largest volley of missiles and drones against Israel, but almost all were intercepted. Iran has claimed that it is maintaining a deterrent balance with Israel and the United States (Jamshidi and Mohammadi 2025), although it appears that Iran has simply been able to avoid regime collapse rather than actively establish mutual vulnerability. While the remaining actors within the Axis of Resistance seem to be seeking a restoration of mutual deterrence and re-establishment of the "rules of the game," Israel, with US backing, clearly rejected such a path.

While soon after October 7 some policymakers and analysts based in the United States and Israel referred to the need to restore Israeli deterrence at the regional level to prevent "a much bloodier conflict in the future" (Satloff 2023), any such strategy would have required the establishment of a status quo tolerable to regional parties. US and Israeli policy makers rejected any such negotiations over a future regional order while pushing maximalist goals in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. The ongoing Israeli strategy of continually deploying force across the region, even in the contexts where ceasefire agreements are in effect, suggests a strategy of dominance more akin to a "mowing the grass" policy at a regional scale with little concern for security and stability across the region. The outbreak of the extended 2026 Israeli-US military campaign against

Iran and the Israeli assault against Lebanon might even reflect what Amjad Iraqi's has termed a strategy of "burning the lawn" (cited in Mizrahi-Arnaud 2026). As a result, establishing mutual vulnerability, in which mutual deterrence can operate, seems out of the question for the foreseeable future. Instead, the United States is committed to expanding its security commitments across the region (US Department of War 2026, 20), although it is unclear if such a posture is sustainable (Karlin 2024, 17). And following the 2026 regional war, Gulf states might begin rethinking their security relationships with the US as these states remain vulnerable to attacks from Iran (Lynch 2026). In any case, a region defined by *asymmetric* (rather than mutual) vulnerability, without the establishment of a status quo acceptable to all, is likely to prove fragile, unstable, and prone to violence.

Akil, Zeinab. 2025. "The Shock of Lost Deterrence: Was Hezbollah Deceived?" Al-Akhbar English, October 22. http://en.al-akhbar.com/news/hezbollah-and-the-shock-of-lost-deterrence--a-strategic-misr.

Baconi, Tareq. 2018. *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*. Stanford University Press.

Bar, Shmuel. 2020. "Israeli Strategic Deterrence Doctrine and Practice." *Comparative Strategy* 39 (4): 321–53.

Daher, Aurélie. 2025. "Militant Islamism in Lebanon and the War on Gaza." *Mediterranean Politics* 30 (2): 396–405.

Dekel, Udi. 2019. "Israel's Exhausted Strategy of Deterrence Vis-à-Vis Hamas." *INSS Insight* No. 1151 (March): 1–5.

Freedman, Lawrence. 2023. "How Israel's Deterrence Policy Came Undone." *Inside Story*, November 1. https://insidestory.org.au/how-israels-deterrence-policy-came-undone/.

Garfinkle, Adam. 2006. "Culture and Deterrence." *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes*, August 1. https://www.fpri.org/article/2006/08/culture-and-deterrence/.

International Crisis Group. 2010. *Drums of War: Israel and the "Axis of Resistance."* Middle East Report N°97.

Jamshidi, Mohammad, and Mostafa Mohammadi. 2025. "Resetting Deterrence: The Evolution of Iran's Defense Doctrine Following the 12-Day War." *Middle East Critique* 34 (4): 797–802.

Jervis, Robert. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton University Press.

Karlin, Mara. 2024. "The Return of Total War." *Foreign Affairs* 103 (6): 8–19.

Khalidi, Ahmad Samih. 2016. "Original English Translation of the 2015 Gadi Eisenkot IDF Strategy." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 45 (2): 1–33.

Knopf, Jeffrey W. 2010. "The Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research." *Contemporary Security Policy* 31 (1): 1–33.

Lupovici, Amir. 2024. "Israeli Deterrence and the October 7 Attack." *Strategic Assessment (Tel Aviv)* 27 (1): 60–80.

Lynch, Marc. 2026. "The United States Could Lose the Gulf." *Foreign Policy*, March 9.

Makdisi, Karim. 2024. "The Oct. 8 War: Lebanon's Southern Front." *PassBlue,* July 22. https://passblue.com/2024/07/22/the-oct-8-war-lebanons-southern-front/.

Mizrahi-Arnaud, Yaël. 2026. *Israel Pushes for a War to "Burn the Lawn."* March 5. https://tcf.org/content/commentary/roundtable-war-on-iran-was-easy-to-start-it-wont-be-easy-to-end/.

Norton, Augustus Richard. 2000. "Hizballah and the Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30 (1): 22–35. JSTOR.

Ortal, Eran. 2020. "Going on the Attack: The Theoretical Foundation of the Israel Defense Forces' Momentum Plan." IDF, January 10. https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/dado-center/vol-28-30-military-superiority-and-the-momentum-multi-year-plan/going-on-the-attack-the-theoretical-foundation-of-the-israel-defense-forces-momentum-plan-1/.

Ouellet, Eric. 2024. "Postface." In *Deterrence in the 21st Century*, edited by Eric Ouellet, Madeleine D'Agata, and Keith Stewart. University of Calgary Press.

Pearlman, Wendy, and Boaz Atzili. 2018. *Triadic Coercion: Israel's Targeting of States That Host Nonstate Actors*. Columbia University Press.

Satloff, Robert. 2023. "Restoring Israeli Deterrence Is Critical to Both Security and Peace in the Middle East." The Washington Institute, October 23. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/restoring-israeli-deterrence-critical-both-security-and-peace-middle-east.

Schleifer, Ron, and Yair Ansbacher. 2024. "Deterrence in the Gaza Conflict: Hamas Case Study Analysis." In *Deterrence in the 21st Century*, edited by Eric Ouellet, Madeleine D'Agata, and Keith Stewart. University of Calgary Press.

Sobelman, Daniel. 2016. "Learning to Deter: Deterrence Failure and Success in the Israel-Hezbollah Conflict, 2006–16." *International Security* 41 (3): 151–96.

Sobelman, Daniel. 2025a. *Axis of Resistance: Asymmetric Deterrence and Rules of the Game in Contemporary Middle East Conflicts*. SUNY Press.

Sobelman, Daniel. 2025b. "Rules of the Game in Asymmetric Conflicts." *Security Studies* 34 (2): 261–91.

Sullivan, Jake. 2023. "The Sources of American Power." *Foreign Affairs* 102 (6): 8–29.

Trachtenberg, David J. 2024. "Lessons Learned from the Israel-Hamas Conflict and Implications for Deterrence." *Journal of Policy & Strategy* 4 (2): 85–86.

US Department of War. 2026. *National Defense Strategy*. US Department of War.

Egypt's Foreign Policy and the Limits of Underbalancing Theory

May Darwich, University of Birmingham

Over the past decade, Egypt has grappled with acute crises along nearly all its borders: civil wars in Libya and Sudan, mounting threats to strategic interests in the Nile Basin, and maritime insecurity in the Red Sea. The Arabic proverb, "misfortunes do not come singly," aptly captures the multiplicity of challenges confronting Sisi's regime. The events of 7 October 2023 and Israel's subsequent genocidal campaign in Gaza have only deepened the challenges facing Egypt's foreign policy, polarizing observers between those endorsing the regime's narrative of "Egypt's return to leadership" (Boussel 2025), especially after mediating a ceasefire in 2025, and those declaring the demise of its erstwhile leading role (el-Hamalawy 2024; Shama 2026; Darwich 2024). Beyond this discursive polarization over whether Egypt has maintained its leadership role in a region in flux, Cairo's foreign policy responses to these crises reveal a pronounced reluctance to balance looming threats. Even when core national interests were imperiled, Egypt's actions remained devoid of a balancing strategy, either relying on internal mobilization or external alliances, and instead seemed lacking a coherent vision of how to address these challenges. While many observers have expected Egypt to balance Israeli expansion in the region by forging strategic alliances regionally or internationally — whether through hedging via closer ties China and Russia, or through an internal military buildup to reduce its dependence on the US security umbrella —Egyptian response during those crises seemed frozen in time, with rhetorical gestures instead of any active balancing. Egypt has clearly "underperformed" in times of crises, prompting the question of how to understand its behavior.

This essay interrogates the theoretical construct of underbalancing and assesses its explanatory validity in the case of Egypt's foreign policy, especially toward Israel's genocidal war in Gaza. Egypt's posture toward Gaza constitutes a puzzling episode in a series of underperformance in Cairo's foreign policy. Despite Israel's growing military expansion and significant domestic mobilization in Egypt favoring a balancing response to Israel's military dominance, Sisi's government appeared either unwilling or unable (or both) to articulate a balancing stance, even a "soft balancing" (Feng and He 2017; Papa and Han 2025). Even signals of Egypt's alignment with Saudi Arabia and Turkey to balance UAE-Israel-US alliance seemed short-lived and failed to crystalize into a durable commitment. Such conduct could be characterized as "underbalancing," contravening the structural realist expectation that threatened states will counterbalance dangerous power concentrations, thereby exposing a critical deficiency in both balance-of-power and balance-of-threat logics. This essay argues that while neoclassical realism, and specifically the theory of underbalancing, offers a promising lens, Egypt's case may not merely exemplify underbalancing; rather, it poses a fundamental challenge to the theory. The subsequent section delineates the concept of underbalancing in neoclassical realism, explicating its core propositions, followed by an empirical analysis of Egypt's policies during the Gaza war—a critical case that interrogates the theory's explanatory reach.

Egypt: Underbalancing in Action?

Balancing means the aggregation of military power through either internal mobilization or forging external alliances to prevent or deter the military domination of a rising power and/or threat. Balancing often materializes when the stakes are high, such as territorial occupation or threatening vital interests (e.g., sea lanes, allies, etc.). Balancing does not require a direct military attack, but a state can decide to balance against a potential threat to protect long-term security interests by building new alliances (external balancing) or engaging in a military buildup (internal balancing). While balancing is the ideal response in a law-of-nature like terms when states'

interests are at stake, scholars have long established that such a response is rare in reality (Schweller 1994; Schroeder 1994). Sometimes states overbalance, i.e., doing "too much" in the face of arising problems (Mallett and Juneau 2023; Juneau 2024; Fatton 2023). In other instances, states may choose to do "too little" in the face of the threat, i.e., underbalancing. State may also choose other options: including bandwagoning, buckpassing, appeasement, or hiding.

Underbalancing "occurs when the state does not balance or does so inefficiently in response to a dangerous and unappeasable aggressor, and the state's efforts are essential to deter or defeat it" (Schweller 2004, 168). Scholars often explain underbalancing as a "theory of mistakes," where states do not adequately respond to threats, often due to domestic variables related to elite fragmentation and social cohesion (Schweller 2004, 2006) or ideational factors preventing balancing (Gause 2017). Relying on neoclassical realism, Schweller presented a theory of underbalancing, whereby states facing threats do not automatically respond to threats through balancing, but some domestic variables related to state coherence that would reflect the willingness and ability of actors to take the risk and cost of balancing behaviour. State coherence is an intervening variable creating policy adjustments to the automatic balance of power logic, changing how states respond to systemic changes. Schweller (2006, 47) identifies four variables that influence whether a state balances threat: elite consensus, elite cohesion, government or regime vulnerability, and social cohesion. Disagreement among elites about whether a threat exists (elite consensus) or about the source of threat reduces a state's willingness to balance (Schweller 2006, 48; 55). Furthermore, regimes that are vulnerable to removal from office struggle to mobilize public support for balancing policies (Schweller 2006, 49), while a fragmented society (social cohesion) is unlikely to share a uniform perception of threats (Schweller 2006, 54).

Scholars studying alliance in the Middle East also looked at underbalancing as a result of ideational factors playing as intervening variables preventing balancing behavior. Gause (2017) argues that alliance patterns in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings defy traditional balance-of-power expectations. Despite Iran's clear rise in regional influence — through its ties to Iraq, Hezbollah, and other actors — other states have not formed strong counterbalancing coalitions. Instead, they exhibit "underbalancing," focusing on partnerships with non-state actors rather than formal alliances, continued dependence on the US security umbrella, tacit coordination with Israel culminating in the 2020 Abraham Accords. Gause contends that this behavior is best explained by ideology and regime security taking priority over pure power politics. The ideological diversity and differences between Arab states, Turkey, Israel has prevented a regional balancing to materialize.

Turning to Egypt's behavior during the Gaza war, no balancing occurred despite clear security stakes: a conflict on its borders, Israeli encroachment on the border region in Rafah, and Houthi attacks in the Red Sea that have reduced Egypt's Suez Canal revenues nearly by half. Egypt has increasingly found itself with limited capacity to shape unfolding events along its borders. Furthermore, the Israeli incursion into Rafah, a city adjacent to Egypt's border, compounded the erosion of Egypt's military and strategic image. The images of Israeli army raising their flag on the Philadelphi Corridor constituted a violation of the 1979 peace treaty, according to which the area around the border (zones C and D) remains demilitarized, with a limited Egyptian police force deployed along the borders, according to the 2005 Philadelphi Accord (annexed to the peace agreement) (Higazy and Mamdouh 2024). With no reaction from the Egyptian government or armed forces, such flagrant infringement reflects an underbalancing behavior. Despite nominal control over the Rafah crossing according to the 2005 accord, Egypt struggled to assert effective authority, particularly in the face of Israeli bombardments and operational disruptions. The crossing, once a symbol of Egypt's gatekeeping role in Gaza, became emblematic of its waning influence, as humanitarian aid convoys faced repeated delays and logistical challenges. Moreover, the escalation of Houthi attacks in the Red Sea — ostensibly in solidarity with Gaza — exposed

vulnerabilities in Egypt's maritime security posture, necessary for maintaining its profits from the Suez Canal at a time of substantial economic crises (Shama 2026; el-Hamalawy 2024). These attacks disrupted global shipping routes and underscored Egypt's inability to project military deterrence or coordinate a robust regional response in the Red Sea region.

From a balance-of-power or balance-of-threat perspective, these regional dynamics should have prompted the formation of a coalition among various Middle Eastern actors aimed at constraining and reversing Israel's military capabilities and its perceived opportunistic expansion. Given Israel's unprecedented military support from the United States and Europe, all regional states had reason to be concerned about its behavior. Egypt, in particular — given its historical military confrontations with Israel and Israel's persistent claims over the Sinai Peninsula — should have assessed that the Gaza conflict heightened its vulnerability to Israeli military dominance, with potential implications for Egyptian security. Yet, such balancing behavior did not materialize. Egypt has even failed to exercise "soft balancing" in international and regional institutions. Nor did Egypt bandwagon with Israel or the United States; bilateral tensions have deepened, and Egypt rejected proposals to relocate Palestinians to the Sinai Peninsula (International Crisis Group 2024; Darwich 2025). Attempts at appeasement through mediation also failed until mid-2025, as Israel proved resistant to compromise. "Hiding" was not feasible given Egypt's geographic proximity to Gaza.

The Pathology of Inaction

While "underbalancing" appears to offer a plausible explanation, the case of Egypt challenges key premises of the theory. Post-October 7, elite cohesion remained intact, and despite agreement along the Egyptian elites that Israel's military dominance poses a critical threat to Egypt's security (Aboudouh 2025), there has been a near consensus around a policy of strategic inaction — a continuation of intellectual advocacy for "strategic dormancy," a term advanced by Abdel Moneim Said, a prominent analyst closely aligned with the regime (Said 2018). This intellectual framing legitimized inaction as a rational choice, even as regional instability deepened.

Nevertheless, Egypt's inaction in the case of Gaza challenges the logic of underbalancing as understood in the neoclassical realist theory, where the absence of balancing behavior is primarily attributed to constraining domestic factors. In the case of Egypt, the domestic context reveals a more complex dynamic. The public opinion was strongly mobilized in favor of a balancing behavior against Israel, and such a balancing stance could have enhanced the regime's eroding legitimacy, particularly amid an unprecedent economic crisis. Therefore, the conventional assumption that the domestic public opinion or societal cohesion inhibit balancing behavior does not apply here. Nor does the case fit the concept of "omnibalancing," whereby elites in power align with great powers (or external powers) to fend off domestic threats (David 1991; Nonneman 2005; Watkins 2020). Instead, the Egyptian regime faced unprecedent pressure from its external allies to relocate Palestinians to the Sinai Peninsula, which caused tension between Egypt and the US (Darwich 2025). Nevertheless, a rejection of these proposals was not followed by a balancing behavior. In fact, pursuing balancing behavior carried significant external risks, as it threatened the loss of critical US support.

At the same time, the regime faced the delicate challenge of suppressing public outrage and calls for balancing Israel's military aggression, thereby departing from the historical practice of earlier regimes that have long instrumentalized the 'Palestine' cause for domestic purposes (Valbjørn, Bank, and Darwich 2024). Egypt's underbalancing thus reflects a strategic tradeoff between preserving external backing and containing domestic anger over Palestine. This choice of underbalancing behavior here thus partly aligns with the long-standing scholarly consensus underscoring Egyptian foreign policy as driven by economic constraints and authoritarian regime survival imperatives (Abou-El-Fadl 2019; Shama 2013; Selim 2022; Piazza 2019; Magued 2024). Moreover, the ideological diversity among many regional actors, as rightly mentioned by Gause (2017),

has also in this instance inhibited a regional alignment to counter Israeli military expansion, especially with deep divisions between Arab states and their entrenched partnerships with the US. Balancing meant endangering the regime's external support and bandwagoning with US and Israel meant endangering domestic stability.

Therefore, the underbalancing theory does not fully explain the foreign policy options of regional powers, such as Egypt, when faced with such shifts in regional power distributions, often along with interference from great powers. Scholars often assume that theories developed to explain the behavior of great powers at the international level could be scaled down to the regional level, assuming regions could be regional security complexes in their own right (Buzan and Waever 2003; Lake and Morgan 1997). Nevertheless, scholars often noted that the principal difficulty in "downscaling" underbalancing to the regional level is the difference between great powers and regional powers (Hutto 2023). Obviously, regional powers are smaller than great powers; their power projection capabilities are not global. Given the power asymmetries between great and regional powers, underbalancing might be driven by other considerations or following different logics at the regional level. Furthermore, the intrusion or penetration of a great power, i.e. in this case the US, in the regional power distribution has crucial consequences for state behavior as illustrated by the case of Egypt.

Beyond simple inaction in the face of the crisis, Egypt's Gaza policy exemplifies another trend: foreign policy as performance rather than substance. Cairo's approach — what might be termed "photographic diplomacy" (Newbury 2024) — relies on symbolic gestures of "pretending to balance" while avoiding serious commitments. This performative strategy reflects a deeper malaise in regional security politics: overestimating deterrent capacity and indulging rhetorical boasting about minor achievements. Egypt's behavior illustrates this phenomenon vividly. International relations theory has paid scant attention to the pathology of such inaction. By clinging to narratives of past achievements and overstating its diplomatic leverage, Cairo is struggling to adapt coherently to a rapidly deteriorating regional order. This gap in theoretical understanding calls for a more nuanced framework that integrates regime vulnerability, symbolic diplomacy, and the performative dimensions of foreign policy to understand "underbalancing" within what remains a deeply "penetrated" regional order.

References

Aboudouh, Ahmed. 2025. "Egypt Now Sees Israel as an Imminent Threat." *Chatham House*. October 9. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/09/egypt-now-sees-israel-imminent-threat.

Abou-El-Fadl, Reem. 2019. *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War*. The Global Middle East. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boussel, Pierre. 2025. "The Resurgence of Egyptian Diplomacy." May 28. https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/egyptian-diplomacy/.

Buzan, Barry, and Ole Waever. 2003. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Darwich, May. 2024. "Foreign Policy and the Decline of Regional Power." In *Egypt's New Authoritarian Republic*, edited by Robert Springborg and Abdel-Fattah Mady, 213–32. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

———. 2025. "Egypt on Edge: Finding a Delicate Balance between Gaza and Trump." *The Conversation*. March 7. http://theconversation.com/egypt-on-edge-finding-a-delicate-balance-between-gaza-and-trump-251375.

David, Steven. 1991. *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Fatton, Lionel P. 2023. "Overbalancing as a Systemic Pathology." In *Japan's Rush to the Pacific War: The Institutional Roots of Overbalancing*, edited by Lionel P. Fatton, 1–23. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Feng, Huiyun, and Kai He. 2017. "Soft Balancing." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.549.

Gause, F. Gregory. 2017. "Ideologies, Alignments, and Underbalancing in the New Middle East Cold War." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50 (03): 672–75.

Hamalawy, Hossam el-. 2024. "Egypt, a Regional Hegemon in Decline Escalating Tensions in the Red Sea Are Exposing Cairo's Dwindling Influence in the Horn of Africa." https://rosaluxna.org/publications/egypt-a-regional-hegemon-in-decline-escalating-tensions-in-the-red-sea-are-exposing-cairos-dwindling-influence-in-the-horn-of-africa/.

Higazy, Mourad, and Rana Mamdouh. 2024. "What Is Happening in the Philadelphi Corridor?" *Mada Masr*. January 1. https://www.madamasr.com/en/2024/01/01/feature/politics/what-is-happening-in-the-philadelphi-corridor/.

Hutto, James. 2023. "Underbalancing in a Regional World." *Journal of Regional Security* 18 (2): 135–62.

International Crisis Group. 2024. "Egypt's Gaza Dilemmas." May 16. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/egypt-israelpalestine/b91-egypts-gaza-dilemmas.

Juneau, Thomas. 2024. "Saudi Arabia's Costly War in Yemen: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Overbalancing." *International Relations*, February. SAGE Publications Ltd, 00471178241231728. doi:10.1177/00471178241231728.

Lake, David A., and Patrick M. Morgan, eds. 1997. *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Magued, Shaimaa. 2024. "Foreign Policy Decision-Making within Authoritarian Contexts: Al-Sisi's Foreign Policy (2014–2024)." *International Political Science Review*, 46(4): 592-609.

Mallett, Ellis, and Thomas Juneau. 2023. "A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Overbalancing." *Global Studies Quarterly* 3 (2): ksad023. doi:10.1093/isagsq/ksad023.

Newbury, Darren. 2024. *Cold War Photographic Diplomacy: The US Information Agency and Africa*. 1st ed. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Nonneman, Gerd. 2005. "Determinants and Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy: 'Omnibalancing' and 'Relative Autonomy' in Multiple Environments." In *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Soceity, Foreign Affairs*, edited by Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman, 315–51. London: Hurst & Company.

Papa, Mihaela, and Zhen Han. 2025. "The Evolution of Soft Balancing in Informal Institutions: The Case of BRICS." *International Affairs* 101 (1): 73–95.

Piazza, Bárbara Azaola. 2019. "The Foreign Policy of Post-Mubarak Egypt and the Strengthening of Relations with Saudi Arabia: Balancing between Economic Vulnerability and Regional and Regime Security." *The Journal of North African Studies* 24 (3): 401–25.

Said, Abdel Moneim. 2018. "Al-Kumūn al-Istrātījī." *Al-Ahram Online*, November 21. https://gate.ahram.org.eg/daily/News/202838/4/681016/%D9%82%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%89.aspx.

Schroeder, Paul. 1994. "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory." *International Security* 19 (1): 108–48.

Schweller, Randall. 1994. "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In." *International Security* 19 (1): 72–107.

———. 2004. "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing." *International Security* 29 (2): 159–201.

———. 2006. *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints of the Balance of Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Selim, Gamal M. 2022. "Egyptian Foreign Policy after the 2011 Revolution: The Dynamics of Continuity and Change." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49 (1): 1–22.

Shama, Nael. 2013. *Egyptian Foreign Policy from Mubarak to Morsi: Against the National Interest*. London: Routledge.

———. 2026. *Egyptian Foreign Policy: Power Dynamics and Regional Influence after 2011*. London: I.B Tauris.

Valbjørn, Morten, André Bank, and May Darwich. 2024. "Forward to the Past? Regional Repercussions of the Gaza War." *Middle East Policy* 31 (3): 3–17.

Watkins, Jessica. 2020. "Identity Politics, Elites and Omnibalancing: Reassessing Arab Gulf State Interventions in the Uprisings from the inside Out." *Conflict, Security & Development* 20 (5): 653–75.

Ma ba´d al-harb? Epochal Bookending and Arab Intellectual Reactions to the Gaza War

Sune Haugbølle, Roskilde University

The period from October 2023 to October 2025 can be seen as a regional war of epochal importance that involved the decimation of military resistance to Israel, the fall of the Assad regime, and the re-internationalization of the Palestinian question. It arguably continues with the latest conflict between the US, Israel and Iran that began on February 28. The de-facto military defeat of the Iranian resistance project should not just be understood as a political event that is changing regional and international alignments and economic constellations, possibly towards what Bernard Haykel (2025) recently called "Pax Hebraica" – an Israel-imposed regional order backed by the US. Like the epochal wars in 1948 and 1967, the Gaza war is also likely to shape political and ideological trajectories. In the tradition of vernacular political theory, I reflect on the notion of epochal transition in the double meaning of the Arabic expression *ma ba'd al-harb*, which means post-war as well as simply a big, open question about what comes after the war. As we appear to be on the precipice of a fundamental change in the regional order, how are Arab publics interpreting the change underway in the Middle East after Gaza? What can Arab intellectual reactions to the war/genocide tell us about the meaning of epochal transition? Is the Arab public the same public that responded to those earlier moments? This essay investigates assumptions about the nature and significance of the Arab public sphere, and what can be learned about the meaning of the Gaza War through close engagement with the ideas and arguments circulating within it.

Not all events have meanings as such, but epochal events do. I see the war since 2023 and specifically the part of it that concerns the destruction of Gaza as an epochal event (Simon 2020), defined as events like wars and catastrophes that attain symbolic significance across borders and come to define international relations, economies and cultures. They are different from other historical events in that the transformations they provoke open to a "new reality" with the potential to introduce a radical temporal break. Historians and political sociologists have theorized how such events over time shape worldviews and outlook through interpretive and commemorative practices in the public sphere (Assmann and Shortt 2012). In the Middle East, the well-known wars of 1948 and 1967, and revolutions in 1979 and 2011, each engendered ideological, intellectual and political formations. Just as French history is constantly re-interpreted in light of 1789, modern Arab history as it is interpreted by intellectuals, historians and the general public reflects on these important turning points and their effects on thought and politics. The most important turning points are the *Nakba* that made the Palestinian cause a central pivot of Arab politics for decades, the *Naksa* that ended the pan-Arabist project and triggered self-critique and revolutionary and Islamist tendencies after 1967, the return of religion symbolized and empowered by the Iranian revolution, and the popular uprisings from 2011 that challenged neoliberal autocracy but in many places ended up solidifying it. Over time, they have become markers of wider social, cultural and political reordering.

As Hayden White (2008), Reinhart Koselleck (1989) and other theorists have stressed, epochal events change the way we view history, both because of their symbolic meaning and because of the way they are experienced individually and socially. They shape transitions to new eras through successes and (more commonly, as per Arab history) failures of grand political projects and ideological tendencies in the region, and in doing so also change consciousness of what is at stake during a particular period and the broadly accepted narratives about the event that began it. In that way, epochal events take form gradually

in a conversation over their significance. That conversation may be different in wider society than among intellectuals, but the two things are usually related. To orientate themselves in time and create historical consciousness, intellectuals, professional historians as others tend to identify events that 'bookend' periods. In Europe today, for example, liberal intellectuals are obsessed with the idea that the 1990s was a golden era for something they call the rules-based international order forged on the basis of the end of the Cold War. As they now feel it is unravelling, they bookend it, perhaps by the 2003 invasion of Iraq, or by the election of populist leaders in 2016, or most recently by Donald Trump's attempt to claim Greenland in 2025. In the case of regional events like 1967, that conversation was and is mainly "Arab." In the case of the Gaza War, the conversation is *global*, reflecting an epochal event akin to 9/11 and the end of the Cold War, which could, over time, bookend a period not just regionally but also globally.

Gaza in the 'new new Arab public sphere'

There is no clearly established narrative about the Gaza War yet in the Arab public sphere. At some level, confusion reigns supreme as violence continues in Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, the West Bank, and Yemen, and now Iran and the Gulf. However, conversations are underway among Arab intellectuals and in the public sphere, and there are certain discernable tendencies that I hope to outline in this paper. The place where this public conversation takes place is important to define first. Whereas researchers two decades ago talked about the emergence of a "new Arab public sphere" produced by the integration of national discussions on satellite TV and the Internet (Lynch 2006), today's media ecology is much more fractured. State-controlled national media (conglomerates) exist next to various counter-publics on the Internet that do not always fully communicate with each other. Al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya and other satellite channels that also operate as web-based media, continue to have high viewerships. No-one who has followed Gaza in the Arab world would be unfamiliar with al-Jazeera correspondents like Anas al-Sharif (killed in August 2025) and Wael al-Dahdouh, the bureau chief whose family was killed in October 2023. Their voices, and the general editorial interpretation of al-Jazeera, have shaped the general understanding of the war for Arabs globally. That interpretation can be summarized as pro-resistance without being overtly pro-Hamas, dedicated to documenting crimes and injustices against the Palestinian people, while criticizing Western hypocrisy and the absence of international law. But also, just the sense that the world as it used to be portrayed does not make sense anymore. Witnessing in this reporting becomes a kind of truth-telling, which the reporters share with a general audience, who can only watch as the butchering and destruction continues unabated.

As the prominent Lebanese writer Dominique Eddé writes in an essay in Le Monde from November 2024, expanded and published as a book in 2025, this experience of watching a live-streamed genocide marks a shift not just for the region but for the world:

> This world has crossed a line since October 7, 2023. Every day since then has been a caricature of the day before: a delirium to which the mind becomes accustomed as if under the influence of a drug, as if it had nothing to say or nothing better to say. It's as if this deluge of fire were normal for the simple reason that it exists. We were in a neurotic situation; now, beyond all politics, we find ourselves on the edge of a generalized psychotic state. In neurosis, reality tests or exhausts its subject. In psychosis, the subject loses sight of it (Eddé 2025: 34).

If it makes sense to talk about one keynote in the cacophony of Arab interpretations of Gaza, the experience of relentless horror and an injustice that beggars belief, or as in Eddé's text even trust in reality itself, aligns with the experience that viewers of al-Jazeera's coverage will have had (Hassan 2024). But much has also changed in Arab media in the past two decades. Al-Jazeera has many competitors. And traditional venues for intellectual debate such as the Arab press and publicist media generally (to the extent that this category makes sense in authoritarian states) have almost fully collapsed under pressure from the Internet, although London-based newspapers like al-

Quds al-Arabi and state-controlled national newspapers like the Saudi Okaz, and the Egyptian al-Ahram still serve a function (if nothing else as a mirror of state discourse and ideology and, by omission of what is not said on their pages, of the red lines). What has emerged instead is a variety of web-based journals, podcasts, bloggers, collectives, influencers, and content-creators, who influence public debate. There is also an Islamic public sphere where devout Muslims and committed Islamists debate Gaza through a religious lens. The Islamic sphere matters a lot, because of the centrality of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in the war/genocide and in culture wars over Islam and Islamism (Gunning and Valbjørn 2025).

The most important counter-publics, in terms of wide media consumption, are probably new internet-based media sites with a more secular and often liberal profile that resulted from the Arab uprisings and have grown popular for their ability to interact seamlessly with social media debates as shared and liked content. They include Mada Masr (Egypt), al-Mudun (Lebanon), Megaphone (Lebanon), Daraj (Syria), al-Arab al-Jadid (Qatar), and al-Jumhurriya (Syria/Turkey), which are all mainly written and edited by Arabs (including Arabic speaking non-Arabs) born between 1980 and 2000. These generational differences matter a lot for intellectual debate and historical interpretation, especially in today's rapidly changing media ecology. Other than reading these online media forums and posts, the younger Arab generation also debates and processes the two-years war through artistic and cultural production, such as novels, plays, poetry, cinema and documentary.

Transformations of the intellectual field

If we take such a broad view of intellectual debate that also encompasses media discourse, cultural production and social media, it becomes a gargantuan task to make sense of Arab interpretations of the war and of Gaza as a historical bookend. So, my approach is admittedly impressionistic and could be criticized for representing my own situated viewpoints. However, I believe that this debate about the meaning of Gaza is crucial for our understanding of the contemporary Middle East and that, although difficult and diffuse, it must start somewhere. I concur with the Lebanese philosopher Suzanne Kassab (2025), who recently suggested that the debate about Gaza is crystalizing the emergence of a "new contemporary" thinking in the Arab world that has been underway since 2011. In her view, our old ways of understanding the intellectual field are becoming obsolete as the very notion of an intellectual sphere – of who fits the category of an intellectual – has changed drastically in the Middle East and globally because of the changing media ecology. By way of criticizing her own older work on contemporary Arab thought, Kassab now does her own kind of epochal bookending. She highlights the way that the discipline of Arab intellectual history from Albert Hourani and his genre-defining book *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* to her own influential *Contemporary Arab Thought* (2010) and *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution* (2019) has tended to favour 'great' (male) intellectuals, and whether consciously or not, exclude political thought at 'lower' levels of society, including mass media and popular culture.

Where to start, then? Methodologically, one can start the discussion about broader tendencies through analysis of texts, expressions and individuals whose verdicts have stood out and have given shape to public debate. At the very beginning of the war, there were many statements circulating on social media and in the press, *mawqif* (statement) after *mawqif*, *bayan* (communique) after *bayan*. Both among Arab writers and intellectuals, and in academia and the culture industry, people sought to collectively express their horror over the Israeli attacks on Gaza but also protest the relative silence from Arab regimes and the West, who were shell-shocked by their own horror of the attack on Israeli citizens and therefore maintained the right of Israel to defend itself, even when that defense very early on clearly took the form of revenge and collective punishment.

One example of collective texts is a public letter from Arab intellectuals to their Western colleagues organized by the Syrian veteran poet Adonis (2023). Signed by several

hundred Arab intellectuals mainly of the older generation, the letter called for a common human response to the atrocities, to war crimes and to genocide, and it decried the silence from the West, whose leaders' openly supported Israel's bombing campaign. In early 2024, the letter was answered by a letter signed by Western intellectuals who largely agreed and called for intercultural dialogue. The Adonis letter in many ways represents what Kassab calls the old guard of 'contemporary Arab thought' and their old mode of expression suited to the Arab public sphere before the Arab Uprisings and before the Internet, when newspapers and books were primary media for intellectual exchange. When we look a bit wider in the media landscape, the newspaper al-Quds al-arabi and other 'resistance' media including al-Jazeera and al-Mayadeen, went much further in their critique. Some openly defended the Islamic resistance, while many others stressed the Palestinian right to national defense, the hypocrisy of calling any armed Palestinian group from the PLO to Hamas 'terrorist,' and generally criticizing the American imperialist imprint on Israeli actions. Some also lambasted loyalist Arab intellectuals who toed the line to please their rulers. Most of all, critics condemned the Western reaction. But unlike Adonis, they did not look for bridges and allies, mainly for the destruction of an outdated order where the West has the prerogative to dictate universal values and norm. Revolution, not reform.

In the view of this discourse, the significance of the Gaza War is to have revealed once and for all the racist roots of Western thought. By ignoring a genocide in motion, Western leaders and much of its public have exposed the way deep-seated double standards in the international system undergird the erasure of colonized people. In the words of Hamid Dabashi (an Iranian intellectual aligned with Arab post-colonial critique), whose book *After Savagery – Gaza, Genocide, and the Illusion of Western Civilization* is the most critical of a number of recent book-length interpretations of Gaza: "The death toll in Gaza continues to rise—a cold, lifeless number representing entire communities crushed under the weight of settler colonialism. What remains of the theories we use to understand our world?" (Dabashi, 2025: 2).

This lifting of the scales from the eyes affects the problem-space of intellectual debates. To Kassab, the "new contemporary" intellectuals of the post-Arab Spring era are thus done with two longstanding debates that had dominated pre-2011 Arab thought: first, the endless debate over how to engage with Tradition (al-turath), and second, the equally exhausted debate over how to engage with the "West" as a modern intellectual episteme. In her reading of Arab intellectual debates after Gaza, it is not just the critique of the West that stands out but the very need to defer to Western standards. In short, she writes, "The whole claim of 'European' or 'Western' civilization to universal categories and values collapsed irremediably in the genocide in Gaza. This time, it was no longer the well-known problem of 'double-standards' but the total loss of intellectual and moral credibility." (Kassab 2025). What had been underway in the wake of a democratic uprising in 2011, which many Arabs felt that the West did not support wholeheartedly despite their pretense to support universal values of freedom, now became crystal clear as Gazans were bludgeoned and the built infrastructure smashed to dust.

That conclusion has been drawn on the basis of Palestinian documentation of the war. Embedded journalists in Gaza have paid with their lives for reporting where Western reporters could not. Palestinian testimonies in form of books, websites, essays, films, and poetry have recorded the genocide for an Arab audience. And Palestinians in the diaspora have recorded their grief and stood at the forefront of a global protest and solidarity movement that has also encompassed parts of academia and the student body. In fact, Palestine protests have been more substantial in Western countries. Some Arab intellectuals explain this by autocratic crackdown and 'activist burn-out' in countries like Egypt where popular uprisings were effectively defeated. Others like the Lebanese writer and co-founder of Megaphone, Samer Frangie, point to a general 'Palestine fatigue' that took hold after the 1990s. Oddly enough, he writes in a recent essay, Palestine was not a key priority for the Arab revolutions that broke out in 2011. "In the division of Arab opposition discourse since after the end of the cold war, the issue belongs to what is

known as the axis of resistance and has been separated from internal political contexts" (Frangie 2025).

The revolutions did not center Palestine due to 'tiring' of *al-qadiya* ("the cause") in large parts of the Arab public. In Frangie's view, the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah protests were more of an event in the West than in the Arab public. This Palestine fatigue is a "structure of feeling" – to use Raymond William's expression of a social and cultural mood - that, according to him, allowed Gulf countries and Morrocco to sign the Abraham accords in 2020 without any general uproar from the Arab public. He sees fatigue as a symptom of a long-standing project to destroy Arab politics, empowering autocrats allied to the West – backed and governed by immense technological advantage. The Arab Uprisings, in this reading, protested this order, but largely in a liberal or Islamist framework that – for several reasons – often (not always) sidestepped Palestine. One of the reasons was the set framework of the Resistance Axis versus the 'moderate' Arab states in the region, in place even before the end of the Cold War and at least since Egypt's peace with Israel in 1978. Here, Gaza becomes the culmination of a long, twisted process where neoliberal autocracies and Islamist movements had become the de-facto safe-keepers of the Palestinian cause, as opposed to a defeated and cowed Palestinian Authority, formally backed by the West but with no ability or ambition to stop the advance of Israeli control over Palestinian land. In the lands of defeated revolutions, a re-empowered form of neoliberal autocracy thus ruled – or should we say rules – supreme. This order fits perfectly with and in fact accommodates the ultraviolent assertion of what pro-Israeli pundits now perhaps prematurely call 'Pax Hebraica.'

Rethinking order after Gaza

If the Gaza War is supposed to mark a transition, but the political order is not changing but in fact consolidating, how are we to interpret this change? The war/genocide was/is regional. Therefore, a post-war transition will be regional too. Like previous transitional periods in the region, such as the two-years war in Lebanon that marked the first phase of civil conflict from April 1975 to November 1976, the Gaza War could also turn out to be but a first phase in a longer conflict. Hamas could use the current ceasefire to re-arm; the Iranian leadership could double down on regional resistance rather than disarmament and entente; Hizbollah could continue to resist the attempt by the US, Israel and the Lebanese state to disarm the group and use the current moment of uncertainty to replenish weapon stockpiles north of the Litani river. In fact, some of these scenarios appear to be playing out as of early March 2026. We may now be in a full confrontation between the resistance Axis and the USA, Israel and their regional allies. For those who choose resistance, their arguments are partly religious, and partly based on a long-established anti-imperialism, both of which have been buttressed by a particular interpretation of the Gaza War that highlights American hegemony. They simply refuse to surrender to the idea that 'resistance is futile.'

The important point is that these interpretations, as I have shown, do not stand alone in confined political environments of the *mumana'a* (critics of US hegemony in the region) but echo broader readings and concerns in the Arab public from leftists, liberals, nationalists, Islamists and many other orientations. They rely on a historical experience made since October 2023 by following the many reactions and testimonies of the Gaza genocide that Palestinians and others have continued to produce.

For intellectuals, the act of observing, bearing witness, as Palestinian writer Hala Alyan (2024) writes in an essay from January 2024, becomes the central task of writing in a time of genocide. In Greek, as she cites Agamben for pointing out, the word for martyr is 'martis', derived from the verb 'remember' or, 'Those who bore witness to their faith.' In Arabic, the word *ishtashada* – derivative of *shadid*, martyr - means to have borne witness to God; that is, to have been martyred (i.e. killed by the enemy). The connection between seeing and dying is visceral if we think of the more than 200 Palestinian journalists but also literary writers who have been 'martyred' in the past two years. Key works like the poems of Areef al-Arir, whose was killed during the war and whose long poem

If I must die (2024) has become emblematic of the war, as well as powerful and widely read essays by writers like Mohammed al-Kurd, Hala Alyan, Nour Hindi and others writing in the West, circle around witnessing from afar, from the position of exile. And having to live with the strange double consciousness of the genocide-denying society on one hand, and on the other hand the daily experience of witnessing the horror on al-Jazeera, on Instagram, in that steady flow of dead, mass mediated children, broken buildings and broken bodies competing with empty words, vague calls for restraint, and flat-out denials in Western media. And, as the Palestinian-American academic Helga Tawil-Souri records in a strong essay called *I don't heart Palestine*, the constant need to "like" and follow the horrors, to be attached to the grief without being able to do much in reality. This has been the structure of feeling for so many Arabs and the epochal, bookending experience that they will draw from as they make sense of it in the years to come.

References

Al-Arir, Areef. 2024. *If I Must Die: Poetry and Prose*. New York: OR Books.

Assmann, Aleida and Shortt, Linda (eds.) 2012. *Memory and Political Change*. New York: Palgrave.

Ayan, Hala. 2024. "'I am not there and I am not here': a Palestinian American poet on bearing witness to atrocity," *The Guardian*, 28 January 2024.

Eddé, Dominique. 2025. *La mort est en train de changer*. Paris: Les Liens qui Libèrent.

Frangie, Samer. 2025. "الكتابة التي لم تنجُ من الإبادة", *Megaphone*, 7 September 2025.

Gunning, Jeroen, and Morten Valbjørn. 2025. "Grasping Arab Islamist responses to the war on Gaza." *Mediterranean Politics* 30 (2), pp. 384-395.

Hassan, Kiran. "Why Al Jazeera's news coverage of Israel's war on Gaza has gained global credibility." *Media Development* 70 (4), p. 31-39.

Haykel, Bernhard. 2025. "Regard de Bernhard Heykel sur la diplomatie saoudienne à l'heure de la 'pax hebraica'". *Moyen Orient* 68, Oct-Dec 2025, pp 10-14.

Kassab, Suzanne. 2025. "The Arab Spring as a Turning Point." *Reset Dialogues*, 12 November 2025. https://www.resetdoc.org/story/from-2011-to-gaza-transformation-arab-intellectual-scene/

Kassab, Suzanne. 2009. *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Kassab,, Suzanne. 2019. *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Koselleck, Reinhart. 1989. "Linguistic change and the history of events," *The Journal of Modern History* 61 (4).

Lynch, Marc. 2006. *Voices of the New Arab Public*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Tawil, Souri, Helga. 2024. "I don't 'heart' Genocide." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 17 (3).

White, Hayden. 2008. "The Historical Event," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 19 (2).

The End of Sanctions? Rethinking Termination Processes through the Syrian Case

Hana Attia, Leuphana University & German Institute for Global and Area Studies

Introduction

Economic sanctions have evolved into the go-to response to challenges of international peace and security. Since the 1990s, the US, EU, and UN have imposed more than 400 sanctions to address a wide range of issues, including armed conflict, human rights violations, drug trafficking, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation (Attia and Grauvogel 2022). Yet sanctions regimes are often criticized for exhibiting lock-in effects, whereby the political and institutional mechanisms that facilitate their imposition simultaneously constrain their removal. Prominent examples include Cuba, Iran, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Iraq, all of which have been subject to sanctions for decades and shaped debates on sanctions termination. The difficulty of terminating sanctions even after their original goals have been overtaken by events represents a significant obstacle to achieving durable change.

The recent experience of Syria offers an empirical case to reassess termination processes. On May 13, 2025, six months after the fall of the Assad regime, President Donald Trump announced the cessation of US sanctions against Syria (Reuters 2025). The US decision followed similar moves by the EU and UK, which had effectively removed most sanctions against Syria by that time. Originally imposed in 2011 against the Assad regime, these Western sanctions targeted specific individuals and entities and extended to Syria's key industries, including energy, finance, and transport. Over time, the measures were expanded to target any state or entity supporting the Syrian government, its military, or reconstruction efforts (Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019). The sanctions weakened the state's capacity in an attempt to pressure the government for change, while inflicting significant humanitarian harm on the broader population (Human Rights Watch 2023) and affecting daily life for many Syrians.[1] The rapid termination of the Syrian sanctions regime after the fall of Assad has been described as a rare instance of swift and accelerated policy reversal in the Middle East and reportedly caught Trump's own administration off guard, leaving sanctions officials scrambling to determine how to unwind the measures (The Straits Times 2025).

The Syrian case challenges two common assumptions in IR research on sanctions: first, that (longstanding) sanctions invariably create lock-in effects for policymakers; and second, that sanctions termination is synonymous with sanctions relief – namely, with economic relief. Using Syria as a primary case, this research note examines the dynamics of sanctions-termination processes showing how political pragmatism facilitated the lifting of sanctions in the case of Syria. At the same time, it underscores the persistent challenges of translating political decisions into tangible economic recovery. By connecting Syria with other examples, the essay argues that sanctions termination is neither a linear nor a binary process, but rather a prolonged and "volatile" one (Grauvogel and Attia 2019). Even after sanctions removal, lingering uncertainty among Western governments and continued investor caution have delayed economic normalization, creating openings for emerging actors – particularly the Gulf states and Turkey – to reshape post-sanctions engagement.

In sum, the Syrian case challenges scholarly work that emphasizes the lock-in effects of sanctions by showing that political will among sanctioning states can overcome barriers to sanctions termination, while also demonstrating that sanctions relief does not automatically lead to effective post-sanctions recovery, revealing the need to pay greater attention to the afterlife of sanctions.

The (prolonged) process of terminating sanctions

Scholarship on sanctions has overwhelmingly focused on sanctions imposition and effectiveness, while the termination of these measures has received comparatively little attention. Existing approaches often treat sanctions as static events, overlooking the ways in which both their imposition and termination unfold over time. This tendency is particularly evident in large-N studies that typically code sanctions termination as a singular endpoint, thereby lumping all termination processes together and assuming that sanctions are imposed and lifted in a uniform, all-at-once manner (but see Attia et al. 2020; Krustev and Morgan 2011). This gap is noteworthy given that more than one-third of the sanctions imposed between 1990 and 2018 have been lifted gradually rather than in a single step (Attia and Grauvogel 2022).

Recent large-N studies have started to address the first limitation by distinguishing between different types of sanctions termination, separating cases in which termination follows target compliance from those in which termination results from sender capitulation, i.e. when senders lift sanctions despite incomplete goal attainment (Attia et al. 2020; Jeong 2019; Krustev and Morgan 2011). This research shows that these two termination pathways are not mirror images of one another and are instead driven by distinct factors. Large-N studies remain constrained by data limitations when assessing how sanctions end, since most sanctions datasets provide only a single termination date for each sanctions case or episode (Attia and Grauvogel 2022; Morgan et al. 2014; Weber and Schneider 2022). As a result, they insufficiently capture prolonged termination processes in which specific measures are gradually lifted over time. Meanwhile, qualitative case studies highlight the evolutionary nature of sanctions, but still largely focus on their imposition rather than termination (Eriksson 2007).

Existing research on sanctions termination highlights that lifting sanctions is often more difficult than imposing them. The decision to lift sanctions often concerns stigmatized and ostracized regimes (Hellquist 2018). Sanctions label targets as "pariah states" (Early and Jadoon 2016) and facilitate the adoption of hostile policies against them (Peterson and Drury 2011). Ending sanctions against such states is not merely a matter of removing economic restrictions; it also involves the act of diplomatically reintegrating the target into the international community (Grauvogel and Attia 2019). Given that the decision concerns states and actors labeled as pariahs or major violators, scholars argue that it is easier for the senders to get into than out of sanctions. Moreover, particularly in longstanding sanctions cases, sanctions tend to create "lock-in" effects (Attia et al. 2020). Years of political justification and institutional investment in maintaining a sanctions regime (Bonetti 1994) make it harder to reverse the policy. As a consequence, policymakers often struggle to end sanctions once the time comes to do so (Biersteker, Eckart, and Tourinho 2016).

The case of Syria

Syria presents a major recent case of sanctions imposition and termination. Syria has been under sanctions since 1979, when the US first designated it as a state sponsor of terrorism (SST). Over the years, it was targeted by several additional rounds of sanctions, codified through executive decisions and legislation. This continued until 2011, when the US and EU imposed sweeping measures against the Assad regime, targeting specific individuals and entities, and extending restrictions to the country's key industries, including energy, finance, and transport. The most devastating were the US sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, which were extraterritorial in nature.

After the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Western governments moved swiftly to lift sanctions against Syria. Despite the speed of these developments, there was a significant lag between the fall of Assad and the political imperative to lift sanctions and the actual termination of all sanctions. I divide the termination process in the period from December 2025 to January 2026 into four phases, highlighting key decisions as measures were gradually removed: the first phase starts after the fall of Assad, when the US issued the time-bound General License 24 on January 6, 2025, which allowed

transactions with the new governing institutions to provide essential services, including electricity and energy, and to ease hardship while broader sanctions remained in place. The EU and UK also began lifting or suspending sanctions, with the UK moving ahead more aggressively by unfreezing assets, delisting banks, and easing restrictions across several sectors by the end of February. By the end of April, the UK had revoked most sectoral and financial sanctions on the country.

The second phase began on May 13, when President Trump announced the cessation of US sanctions against Syria. The US Department of the Treasury followed by issuing a new General License 25, which effectively lifted most Syria-related sanctions and included a 180-day waiver of the Ceasar Act pending repeal by Congress. Similarly, on May 20, the EU announced the lifting of all remaining economic sanctions against Syria. One month later, a US executive order formally revoked sanctions and ended the national emergency concerning Syria. Targeted sanctions against al-Assad and his affiliates over human rights violations remained.

The third phase began on July 8, when the US not only lifted Syria-specific sanctions but also revoked the Foreign Terrorist designation of HTS. This move allows financial transactions with the transitional government under current President Ahmed al-Sharaa, the head of HTS,[2] and facilitates broader re-engagement with Syria. On November 6, the United Nations Security Council removed the designations of Syria's President al-Sharaa and Interior Minister Anas Khattab under the sanctions regime targeting members and supporters of terrorist groups ISIL and al-Qaeda. The fourth phase began on December 19, when President Trump signed into law the formal repeal of the Caesar Act, which was considered the major hurdle to reinvestment in Syria.

Rapid sanctions relief

The case of Syria challenges prevailing assumptions about the durability and lock-in effects of longstanding sanctions and offers an example of an accelerated policy reversal in the Middle East. While leadership change is often associated with sanctions relief, the Syrian case is puzzling because the new governing authorities are themselves deeply stigmatized actors and also targeted by sanctions for well over a decade. Thus, sanctions related stigmatization and ostracization discussed in the literature operated on two levels: first, through the targeting of Syria, and second, through the designation of HTS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and its leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists. Yet, the Trump administration framed the lifting of measures as keeping designations and sanctions only on "the worst of the worst," which includes members of the former Assad regime and now notably excludes former designated terrorists al-Sharaa and members of his transitional government (U.S. Department of State 2025). This swift shift in policy marked by the removal of sanctions has been described as "sudden" (The Straits Times 2025), "surprising" (Gillian and Lankes 2025), and – with respect to the removal of al-Sharaa and HTS designations – as an abrupt departure in US policy (Ungar 2025) and a rapid and "dramatic" shift in European, especially German, policy.[3] Despite the speed of this policy shift, it generated notable domestic contestation in the US, highlighting the political barriers to lifting sanctions. Around 134 Republican House members threatened to reimpose sanctions (U.S. Congress 2025), Senator Lindsey Graham vowed to "push for reimposing […] sanctions on steroids" if the transitional government attacks Kurdish forces (U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham 2026), and some Democrats in Congress stressed that sanctions relief is not "unconditional" (Welat TV 2026).

This rapid removal of sanctions was driven by political pragmatism of the sanctioners that wanted to gain influence over Syria's political transition. Their objectives were threefold: first, limiting the influence of rivals in the emerging contest to redraw the country's geopolitical map following an era marked by Iranian dominance and Russian influence; second, advancing counterterrorism goals by preventing Syria from becoming a ground for renewed jihadi or proxy-conflict activity (Alterman 2025); and third, striving to shape Syria as a stable pillar in the region, perceiving it as a key component of the transforming architecture of the Middle East (Wieland 2025). This was evident in US efforts to press Syria into a

security agreement with Israel, in a US attempt to secure its key ally in the region. For the EU – especially Germany and Italy, who were the vocal proponents of a quick lifting of sanctions – in addition to security concerns, a stable and safe Syria is key to refugee return (European Council of the European Union 2025; European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2025). It was also facilitated, albeit to a much lesser extent by civil society advocacy. Due to their scope, the sanctions against Syria inflicted significant harm on the broader population (Human Rights Watch 2023), contributing to a humanitarian emergency and harming the socio-economic well-being of ordinary citizens (Moret 2015). Thus, as soon as the Assad regime fell, civil society advocacy began to press for the removal of sanctions. More than 160 Syrian, as well as, international organizations, such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the American Coalition for Syria, and the Syrian Emergency Task Force, began calling for the EU and US to lift sanctions (Syrian British Consortium 2025; Syrian Network for Human Rights 2025). The civil society pressure even targeted individual legislators to push for the full repeal, and not only the suspension of sanctions to enable immediate reconstruction and recovery. Civil society pressure further underscored the geostrategic relevance of Syria for the West warning that a vacuum would risk heightened instability, potentially allowing Western adversaries such as Russia and Iran to "re-anchor" themselves (Eurobserver 2025). Yet translating these political decisions on sanctions relief into tangible economic recovery remained a challenge.

Sanctions lifted, uncertainty and economic constraints remain

The case of Syria illustrates that sanctions are not a simple switch that senders can turn on and off, and that the effects of sanctions measures persist even after they are formally lifted. Despite the removal of most EU and UK sanctions, European investors have continued to delay economic normalization. This hesitation stemmed largely from the different pace at which the various sanctioning states lifted "overlapping" sanctions (Maresca di Serracapriola and Shaar 2025). As outlined above, the EU and UK began easing sanctions prior to the US, with the UK moving particularly quickly by unfreezing assets and sectors. Yet, sanctions relief remained constrained by unresolved measures, especially the extraterritorial US sanctions. This lack of coordination also affected sanctions relief in other cases, such as Iran after the US withdrew from the Nuclear Deal, or the UN embargo against Iraq, where the different P5 members had strikingly different stances regarding the termination of the measures (Grauvogel and Attia 2023). Thus, coordination among senders is essential for reducing uncertainty about permissible economic activities and encouraging economic engagement with formerly sanctioned states.

Moreover, the first three phases of the termination process – which included the lifting of most US sanctions against Syria and members of the transitional government, and the formal suspension of the Caesar Act – is characterized by lingering uncertainty regarding economic engagement with Syria and slow economic normalization. The remaining sanctions measures, or the lifting of measures through suspension rather than repeal, created uncertainties for investors and complicate the work of humanitarian actors. For private actors, sanctions suspension or gradual termination creates regulatory uncertainty because they lack a clear understanding of what is allowed and what is not. Even if all activities and transactions are allowed, there is a lack of "trust" and foreign institutions remain "reluctant to reengage due to compliance risks and reputational concerns, while correspondent banking channels remain effectively frozen" (Fève et al. 2025, 5). Indeed many Western companies cited the suspension rather than the repeal of the Caesar Act as a key barrier to investing in the country, as it continues to hinder formal financial transfers and the establishment of correspondent banking relationships (Fève et al. 2025). Although the Caesar Act has now been formally repealed (phase four above), sanctions relief is likely to remain constrained by other measures, including the US designation of Syria as an SST and the continued listing of HTS under the UN ISIL and al-Qaeda sanctions regime. The SST designation subjects Syria to export controls, limiting "access to parts and machinery needed for reconstruction and development" (Maresca di Serracapriola and Hall 2025), whereas the HTS designation

"sustains a high-risk compliance environment" increasing uncertainty over Syria's reintegration into the global financial system (Maresca di Serracapriola and Hall 2026). Persisting security challenges and political instability, also add hesitation to engaging with the transitional government. These economic and security uncertainties have therefore created a context where sanctions termination cannot easily translate into economic relief. A similar dynamic was at play in the case of Iran, as many European companies judged the risk too high to engage with Iran despite sanctions termination granted under the Nuclear Deal (JCPOA).

In sum, the case of Syria demonstrates how sanctions termination does not automatically translate into economic relief from sanctions, due to the lingering effects of the measures that continue to dissuade private actors from engaging. The delayed economic normalization with the West has created openings for emerging actors – particularly the Gulf states and Turkey – allowing them to redefine post-sanctions engagement. This development was not as prominent in previous termination processes in the region, including Iran, Iraq, and Sudan, where regional actors did not play a significant role in shaping post-sanctions recovery. In the case of Syria, dozens of Memoranda of Understanding worth millions of dollars have already been signed between Syria and mainly Gulf and Turkish actors, signaling a prominent realignment in the Syrian investment landscape away from Russian and Iranian contracts (Karam Shaar Advisory 2025).

Conclusion

This essay examines the Syrian case, where the rapid termination of sanctions following the fall of Assad represents a rare instance of accelerated policy reversal in the Middle East, encouraging us to rethink sanctions termination processes. The case of Syria challenges two key assumptions: first, that longstanding sanctions ostracize targets and create a lock-in effect that makes their removal difficult, and second, that sanctions termination is synonymous with economic relief from sanctions. The analysis highlights how political pragmatism facilitated the lifting of sanctions. Western actors sought to, among other things, shape Syria as a stable pillar in the region, viewing it as a key component of the Middle East's evolving geopolitical architecture, particularly following developments after October 7, 2023. Yet, while Western sanctioning states moved swiftly to lift sanctions on Syria following the fall of Assad, the essay demonstrates that sanctions relief does not automatically translate into effective economic recovery, revealing persistent structural barriers to post-sanctions reconstruction.

By connecting the Syrian case with other examples, the research note demonstrates that sanctions termination can be a prolonged process. It shows that even after the removal of the most restrictive sanctions, lingering uncertainty among Western governments and continued investor caution have delayed economic normalization, creating openings for emerging actors to redefine post-sanctions engagement. For Syria, economic recovery is essential for the country's transition period. While the removal of sanctions is a positive step, it will not automatically translate into sanctions relief and economic recovery. Recovery will take time and must be facilitated by pro-active support from international actors, including the former sanctioning states. At the same time, the Syrian government must actively engage in economic reforms to address the country's structural challenges and create the conditions for sustainable recovery.

References

Alterman, Jon B. 2025. *After Assad: The Future of Syria*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. https://www.csis.org/analysis/after-assad-future-syria?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Attia, Hana, and Julia Grauvogel. 2022. "International Sanctions Termination, 1990–2018: Introducing the IST Dataset." *Journal of Peace Research* 60 (4): 709–19.

Attia, Hana, Julia Grauvogel, and Christian von Soest. 2020. "The Termination of International Sanctions: Explaining Target Compliance and Sender Capitulation."

European Economic Review 129 (October): 103565.

Bonetti, Shane. 1994. "The Persistence and Frequency of Economic Sanctions." In *Economics of International Security*, edited by Manas Chatterji, Henk Jager, and Annemarie Rima. Macmillan.

Early, Bryan R., and Amira Jadoon. 2016. "Do Sanctions Always Stigmatize? The Effects of Economic Sanctions on Foreign Aid." *International Interactions* 42 (2): 217–43.

Eriksson, Mikael. 2007. *Targeting the Leadership of Zimbabwe: A Path to Democracy and Normalization?* Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University.

Eurobserver. 2025. "Why EU's 'suspend, Not Lift' Syria Sanctions Policy Will Backfire." *Eurobserver*, March 27. https://euobserver.com/eu-and-the-world/ar9499a187.

European Council of the European Union. 2025. *Syria: Council Statement on the Lifting of EU Economic Sanctions*. May 20. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/20/syria-council-statement-on-the-lifting-of-eu-economic-sanctions/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

European Council on Refugees and Exiles. 2025. *ECRE Policy Note: Maintaining International Protection in Europe during Syria's Transition*. March 20. https://ecre.org/ecre-policy-note-maintaining-international-protection-in-europe-during-syrias-transition/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Fève, Benjamin, Vittorio Maresca di Serracapriola, and Karam Shaar. 2025. *Implications and Policy Responses for Banking Sector Sanctions on Syria*. Karam Shaar Advisory & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. https://www.kas.de/documents/284382/284431/Implications+and+Policy+Responses+for+Banking+Sector+Sanctions+on+Syria.pdf/7c3d81bc-ffad-13d4-3443-6a272921e6b1?version=1.0&t=1752055230631.

Gillian, Kettaneh, and Hans Peter Lankes. 2025. "Lifting Sanctions on Syria: A Bumpy Path." *Lifting Sanctions on Syria: A Bumpy Path*, May 20. https://odi.org/en/insights/lifting-sanctions-on-syria-a-bumpy-path/.

Grauvogel, Julia, and Hana Attia. 2019. "Wie Enden Internationale Sanktionen? Zur Bedeutung von Prozessen, Beziehungen Und Signalen." *Zeitschrift Für Internationale Beziehungen* 26 (2): 5–33.

Grauvogel, Julia, and Hana Attia. 2023. "Easier In than Out: Lessons Learned from the Termination of the Iraq Sanctions Regime." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 8 (4): ogad021.

Hellquist, Elin. 2018. "Ostracism and the EU's Contradictory Approach to Sanctions at Home and Abroad." *Contemporary Politics*, 393–418. h

Human Rights Watch. 2023. "Questions and Answers: How Sanctions Affect the Humanitarian Response in Syria." *Human Rights Watch*, June 22. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/22/questions-and-answers-how-sanctions-affect-humanitarian-response-syria.

Jeong, Jin Mun. 2019. "Do Sanction Types Affect the Duration of Economic Sanctions? The Case of Foreign Aid." *International Political Science Review* 40 (2): 231–45.

Karam Shaar Advisory. 2025. *Mapping MoUs in Syria: Shifting Investment Agendas*. November 28. https://karamshaar.com/syria-in-figures/syria-investment-gulf-turkey-new-government/.

Krustev, Valentin L., and T. Clifton Morgan. 2011. "Ending Economic Coercion: Domestic Politics and International Bargaining." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28 (4): 351–76.

Maresca di Serracapriola, Vittorio, and Natasha Hall. 2025. "Syria Sanctions Monitor: Issue 4." *Karam Shaar*, December. https://karamshaar.com/sanctions_program/syria-sanctions-monitor-issue-4/.

Maresca di Serracapriola, Vittorio, and Natasha Hall. 2026. "Analytical Brief: Sectoral Implications of UN 1267 Sanctions on HTS." *Karam Shaar*, January. https://karamshaar.com/sanctions_program/un-1267-sanctions-on-hts-sector-impact-syria/.

Maresca di Serracapriola, Vittorio, and Karam Shaar. 2025. "What Should Be Done with EU Targeted Sanctions on Syria." *Observatory of Political and Economic Networks*. https://opensyr.com/en/pages/p-35.

Moret, Erica S. 2015. "Humanitarian Impacts of Economic Sanctions on Iran and Syria." *European Security* 24 (1): 120–40.

Morgan, T. Clifton, Navin Bapat, and Yoshiharu Kobayashi. 2014. "Threat and Imposition of Economic Sanctions 1945–2005: Updating the TIES Dataset." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 31 (5): 541–58.

Peterson, Timothy M., and A. Cooper Drury. 2011. "Sanctioning Violence: The Effect of Third-Party Economic Coercion on Militarized Conflict." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55 (4): 580–605.

Reuters. 2025. "Trump to Remove US Sanctions on Syria in Major Policy Shift." *Reuters*, May 14. https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-says-will-remove-us-sanctions-syria-2025-05-13/.

Syrian British Consortium. 2025. *Joint Letter: 161 Organizations Urge U.S. Government to Lift Sanctions on Syria*. January 30. https://syrianbritish.org/joint-letter-161-organizations-urge-u-s-government-to-lift-sanctions-on-syria/.

Syrian Network for Human Rights. 2025. "Joint Statement: Syrian and International Organizations Call on EU to End Assad-Era Sanctions on Syria Now." *Syrian Network for Human Rights*, May 7. https://snhr.org/blog/2025/05/07/syrian-and-international-organizations-call-on-eu-to-end-assad-era-sanctions-on-syria-now/.

The Straits Times. 2025. "Trump's Big Syria Announcement Surprised His Own Sanctions Officials." *The Straits Times*, May 15. https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/trumps-big-syria-announcement-surprised-his-own-sanctions-officials.

Ungar, Maya. 2025. *UN Lifts Sanctions on Syria's President as White House Visit Beckons*. November 7. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/syria/un-lifts-sanctions-syrias-president-white-house-visit-beckons.

U.S. Congress. 2025. "Congressional Republicans Remain Vigilant Regarding Opportunities Afforded by the Trump Administration." U.S. Congress, December 19. https://brecheen.house.gov/uploadedfiles/syria_sanctions_statement_w__134_signatures.pdf.

U.S. Department of State. 2025. "Termination of Syria Sanctions." U.S. Department of State, June 30. https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/06/termination-of-syria-sanctions/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham. 2026. "Press Releases: Graham, Blumenthal Introduce Save The Kurds Act." U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, January 29. https://www.lgraham.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=02A14373-A796-4EB1-9994-9D542C9C5915.

Weber, Patrick M., and Gerald Schneider. 2022. "Post-Cold War Sanctioning by the EU, the UN, and the US: Introducing the EUSANCT Dataset." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39 (1): 97–114. https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894220948729.

Welat TV. 2026. "U.S. Congressman Warns Damascus of 'Severe Sanctions' If Military Operations Continue." *Welat TV* (Erbil), January 24. https://welattv.com/en/node/22920.

Wieland, Carsten. 2025. *Syria's Transition at the Crossroads: Will the New Syria Become a Pillar of Stability or a Source of Turmoil for the Region?* Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & PRIO Cyprus Centre. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/zypern/22176.pdf.

Endnotes

* The author is grateful to the participants of the *Bologna Initiative for Sanctions Relief* for their feedback on her intervention and for sharing their expertise at SAIS Bologna in November 2025, which motivated this essay. The author also thanks the participants of the POMEPS workshop for their constructive comments and Mailin Hüring for her excellent research assistance.

1 This negative impact was further exacerbated by the Assad regime's own mismanagement.

2 During the Syrian Revolution Victory Conference in Damascus, on January 9, 2025, the spokesperson for the Military Operations Command, announced that HTS and several other armed groups were being dissolved and integrated into state institutions.

3 Interview with Stefan Schneck Germany's Special Envoy for Syria: https://karamshaar.com/syria-in-figures/interview-the-eus-position-toward-syria-step-by-step-not-step-for-step/.

Social Movement Theory and the Middle East after 7 October 2023: (Dis)advantages of a modular "theory"

Jeroen Gunning, King's College London

The unprecedented brutal attacks carried out by Hamas on 7 October 2023 came as a shock not just to Israel's intelligence community but to International Relations scholars and social scientists more broadly. Social science has a dismal record at predicting events such as the Iranian revolution, the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9/11, the Arab Uprisings, Assad's fall. Like IR, social movement theory (SMT) is ill-equipped for predictions. However, when it comes to explanatory power and descriptive accuracy, SMT does rather better. The same reasons why SMT is bad at predicting – recognition of the fundamental contingency of events and an abundance of possible causal factors – are why it is good at explaining events after they happened, especially compared to more parsimonious IR theories which bracket domestic dynamics from their analysis. This raises questions about the value of predictiveness and parsimony – whether in terms of number of variables ("parsimony by components") or number of outcomes and thus predictive accuracy ("parsimony by constraints") (Dubova et al. 2025) – as a basis for judging a theory's worth. This essay argues that the shortcomings of other theoretical approaches in both predicting and explaining 7 October might open the door to more consideration for SMT by IR scholars. Though international dynamics are core to any explanation, social movement and other domestic dynamics offer critical context for making sense of an important case. IR theories' search for parsimony hinders consideration of this complexity.

What is Social Movement Theory?

SMT is not a "theory" in the strict sense of the word, but a dynamic (and often contradictory) collection of models rooted in different research traditions, ontologies and epistemologies which explain social movement dynamics focusing (to different degrees) on mechanisms, repertoires, relations, interactions, frames, beliefs, identities, cultures, emotions and structural conditions. While SMT was predominantly structuralist in the second half of the 20th century, the field has become more focused on the *micro-practices* of agents, their life experiences, emotions, beliefs and events (Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Jasper 2010; Gillan 2020). SMT has also become more *modular*, both in the sense of emphasising how movements combine different broadly identifiable building blocks (causal/functional mechanisms) to mobilise,[1] and in the sense of scholars drawing on different theories in the tradition of "modular theory-building": "link[ing] compatible elements across otherwise distinct, and often interdisciplinary, theoretical realms… to build broader, flexible, multi-scalar theoretical frameworks that can be used … [to explain] high complexity, dynamism and variation" (Ponte and Sturgeon 2014, 196). In this sense, it manifests all three aspects of what Sil and Katzenstein (2010, 411) call "analytic eclecticism," by "downplaying unresolvable metaphysical divides and presumptions of incommensurability" between theories, focusing on "the messiness and complexity of concrete dilemmas facing "real world" actors," and "offer[ing] complex causal stories that… selectively recombine analytic components—most notably, causal mechanisms—from… competing research traditions."

This trend has gone hand in hand with greater acknowledgement of the fundamental historical, situational and conjunctural contingency of movement outcomes (Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Morris 2000; Gunning and Baron 2014). Practices are caused by a highly contingent interplay of causal mechanisms, including broader structural and mobilising structures as well as agential strategy, emotions and culture (Platt 2004). Political opportunity and threat structures (POTS) do not simply exist, they are interpreted by agents in

complex organisational, ideational and relational webs whose practices in turn affect those structures. Activists interpret/use the building blocks differently depending on how other actors act; how they interpret those actions, threats and opportunities; how emotions, habitual practices and culture shape those interpretations, etc. – i.e. similar structures and collections of agents can produce very different outcomes. Yet combining complex structural and agential analysis remains a challenge for SMT both in terms of linking the different types of explanation (e.g. interpreting "mechanisms" contingently rather than deterministically) and in terms of deciding which factors/dynamics are most important (Gunning and Baron 2014; Chalcraft 2016).

Because of the plurality of theoretical explanations and the move away from law-like generalisations, different SMT scholars emphasise different building blocks to explain movements, making explanations even more ambiguous and fragmented (though richer). The variety of SMT approaches ensures that there will never be a single SMT prediction. This makes SMT unfit to predict any particular outcome confidently but simultaneously good at explaining unexpected outcomes. For, following Tetlock (summarised in Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 414), "grossly inaccurate forecasts are more likely… when experts… [rely] on a single parsimonious approach to explain many things and [depend] excessively upon "powerful abstractions to organize messy facts…."

SMT and 7 October

SMT can identify a number of contingent dynamics that explain both Hamas's turn to shocking violence and the timing of the violence. Three sets of dynamics stand out – all an interplay between structural and strategic changes, organisational dynamics, and actors' lived experience, emotions, calculations and interactions.[2]

Gaza's blockade: As Sara Roy (2023) has shown, the de-development of Gaza has been ongoing for decades, with Israel gradually destroying its economic base through expropriation, dispossession, destruction and deinstitutionalisation. Its once flourishing orange and flower industries were destroyed and, from the 1990s, most Gazans were forbidden from crossing the border. After the blockade's formalisation in 2007 following Hamas's consolidation of power, Israel reportedly limited what went into Gaza to sustain bare life while preventing a humanitarian disaster. After each 'mowing the lawn' war, as Israeli generals called the regular wars to cut down Hamas's capabilities, more of Gaza remained destroyed as rebuilding materials could not enter. By the late 2010s, Gaza had become virtually unliveable, with over 80% of the population living under the poverty line and dependent on humanitarian aid (UNRWA n.d.). Further, between 2008-2023, over 20 Palestinian civilians (the vast majority in Gaza) were killed for every Israeli civilian killed (OCHA n.d.). This lived experience, produced by the structural and strategic context, arguably created an "emotion culture" (Gould 2004) that can help to explain the brutality of the violence on 7 October (the blockade and civilian deaths feature centrally in Hamas's official explanation of Operation al-Aqsa Flood; Hamas 2024).

The previous rounds of armed conflict had resulted in limited temporary easing of the blockade (Skare 2025), but none of them resulted in its ending. None of Hamas's political overtures had been taken seriously either. Hamas engaged in numerous national unity governments negotiations and, despite having won the last national elections (2006), conceded to not being directly part government and granting Fatah control of Gaza's Egyptian border. Its 2017 Manifesto publicly accepted a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders and no longer contained the antisemitic tropes that had permeated its 1988 Charter, distinguishing between Jews and Zionists. It refused to recognise Israel or give up the right of return of Palestinian refugees – but, that is not uncommon for anticolonial armed groups, especially in settler colonial contexts (Gunning 2025b, para 28).

The fact that Hamas was willing to accept the 1967 borders as a matter of national consensus in its Manifesto was significant, particularly as hardliners had become stronger by 2017 (among them, Mohammed Deif, head of

the Qassam Brigades, and Yahya Sinwar, head of Hamas in Gaza, who both would go on to plan the 7 October attacks). The publication of the Manifesto appears to have been an attempt by Hamas's pragmatists to bind the hardliners to a consensually produced document (Skare 2025). Hamas's organisational culture values consensus and loyalty to the movement's formal decisions, shaping how its leaders responded to the structural conditions of blockade and marginalisation. Following the Manifesto's publication, Hamas in Gaza, under Sinwar's leadership, made the most extensive concessions to Fatah in the 2017 National Unity Government negotiations, although the negotiations ultimately failed (Hroub 2025).

Hamas endorsed the Great March of Return in 2018, a broadly non-violent grassroots protest of the blockade, which resulted in over 200 killed and 36,000 injured. This, combined with the high death rate of civilians since 2008 and the lack of international support, was a key turning point in how Hamas leaders, and particularly the hardliners, viewed political options (Hubbard and Abi-Habib 2023; Skare 2025). The final straw seems to have been the cancellation of Palestinian elections in 2021 by President Abbas, allegedly for fear of losing to Hamas. Elections had been seen as central to reuniting Gaza and the West Bank and ending the blockade. Their cancellation, coupled with the intensification of violence in May 2021 over Israeli evictions in Jerusalem's Sheikh Radwan area, strengthened hardliners within Hamas and the detailed planning for 7 October appears to have begun shortly after (building on earlier planning that appears to have intensified after the failure of the Great March of Return, with the first announced joint "war games-style exercise" led by Hamas in 2020) (BBC 2023).

Illustrating the contingency of Hamas's actions, hardliners, while complying with the movement's decision to attempt pragmatism in 2017-2019, began preparing for more extensive military action for if/when pragmatism failed. They had been strengthened by the lack of results of political strategies, the tunnel economy, and Iranian support (Skare 2025, 185–87, 191). The close personal ties between Deif and Sinwar, Sinwar's closeness to the Brigades and his election to head of Hamas's Gaza Political Bureau, and their shared hardline views, shaped by their personal histories, facilitated this strengthening. In 2018, at the start of the Great March of Return (and partly to facilitate it), a joint operations room was set up with a dozen Palestinian armed groups which reportedly began assisting military attacks in November 2018 (alongside the Great March) and would play an important role in the May 2021 Sword of al-Aqsa war (Musa 2019; Abu Amer 2021). Hamas's rapprochement with Iran and Hizbullah, after falling out over the Syrian war in 2012 under Khaled Mishal's leadership, accelerated following the election of pro-Iranians Sinwar and Saleh al-Arouri (Deputy Head of Political Bureau) in 2017 and Mishal's stepping down as Head of Political Bureau (Jawhar 2022) – showing the importance of agency and personal life trajectories in shaping the structural and strategic context. By 2021, a "joint security room" had reportedly been established in Lebanon which similarly helped Hamas in the May 2021 war (Majid 2022). Illustrating the interplay between regional dynamics, specific Hamas leaders and their beliefs, and the movement's organisational evolution, Arouri and others had settled in Lebanon after having been forced out of Turkey following the latter's rapprochement with Israel (Jawhar 2022).

A speech Sinwar gave after the May 2021 war underlines the multiple scenarios Hamas had been preparing for, ranging from non-violence to extreme violence, contingent on how Israel and the world would respond to the Palestinians' plight: "We hoped that the free and civilized world and international organizations would respond [to our non-violent March of Return]… [but] the conscience of the free world didn't wake up… if the world does not respond, and if this occupation does not respond or commits serious crimes, then our resistance must act to deter them. … [We have] *an existing and known scenario, and the rehearsal has been made for it* [i.e. the Sword of Al-Aqsa confrontation]" (Hroub 2025; italics in original).

The brutality of the violence seems to have been calculated to change the equation of occupation and blockade. The timing of the attacks was further driven by what Hamas

leaders saw as two existential threats (structural and strategic context interpreted through Hamas leaders' beliefs, personal histories, etc.):

West Bank annexation: In 2023, the West Bank had seen a sharp escalation of violence – with over a 1,000 attacks by Israeli settlers and over 200 Palestinians killed, the highest since the al-Aqsa Intifada – and a record in new approved settlements (Gunning 2025a). Israeli ministers openly called for the West Bank's annexation and threats against the al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest, had intensified (both threats feature in Hamas 2024). Hamas had initiated violence in response to threats to the al-Aqsa Mosque before – partly because it saw this as a red line and a sign of Israel making Palestinian statehood impossible, partly to show solidarity with Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank, but also to reclaim leadership of Palestinian politics, against Fatah's ineffectiveness and its being seen as Israel's policeman (Hubbard and Abi-Habib 2023).

In 2023, the intent was also to trigger an uprising. Sinwar had already alluded to this in his 2021 speech if Israel and the world would not respond: "the West Bank will explode with all its power. Our people will attack all the settlements at once" (Hroub 2025). Public support for a return to armed struggle in the West Bank had jumped from 35% to 54% in 2023 (PCPSR n.d.) and, after 7 October, Hamas and the Brigades have called repeatedly on West Bankers to rise up while its operatives there have increased attacks (alqassam.ps). In the Brigades' eyes, triggering an uprising required shocking violence and a shocking response from Israel (e.g., Khalid al-Hayya, currently head of Hamas's negotiations team and one of the five-men leadership of the Political Bureau, telling the *New York Times*: "What could change the equation was a great act, and without a doubt, it was known that the reaction to this great act would be big") (Hubbard and Abi-Habib 2023). While this can be explained strategically, the emotion culture caused by the effects of the blockade, occupation and high death count helps to contextualise the decision to use extreme violence to cause an extreme reaction.

Regional normalisation: normalisation with Israel, without a Palestinian state, was another strategic factor that would change Hamas's POTS. Four Arab states had signed normalisation agreements in 2020. Rumours about Saudi Arabia, historically a stalwart supporter of a Palestinian state, being next intensified in September 2023, when Netanyahu announced at the UN that Israel was "at the cusp" of a deal with Saudi Arabia, followed by unprecedented high-level visits to each other's states (Knell 2023). For Hamas, this meant the end of the possibility of a Palestinian state as it would only leave Gaza, just 1% of historic British Mandate Palestine – ostensibly contained, with Hamas as prison warden. This would be both a profound structural change and one that would lock Hamas as an organisation into a position where the internal tensions between those who saw themselves as primarily a resistance movement and those who wanted to govern would continue, without end. As al-Hayya said after 7 October:

> Hamas's goal is not to run Gaza and to bring it water and electricity and such… Hamas, the Qassam and the resistance woke the world up from its deep sleep and showed that this issue must remain on the table. …This battle was not because we wanted fuel or laborers… It did not seek to improve the situation in Gaza. This battle is to completely overthrow the situation.

To derail regional normalisation, the rationale again seems to have been that shocking violence was required – to "change the entire equation and not just have a clash", in al-Hayya's words, "putting the Palestinian issue back on the table, and now no one in the region is experiencing calm" (Hubbard and Abi-Habib 2023). Sinwar is reportedly to have told colleagues on October 2 that "an extraordinary act" was required to derail Saudi normalisation and "that it was time to activate the plan for an attack that [Hamas] had been planning for some two years "to bring about… a strategic shift in the paths and balances of the region with regard to the Palestinian cause."" (ToI 2025)

Reflections on SMT's explanatory power

The interplay between key structural and strategic changes in Hamas' POTS outlined above and how a small subset of Hamas leaders interpreted and responded to them goes a long way in explaining, retrospectively, why Hamas acted the way it did. Each of these dynamics was clearly visible before 7 October (including Hamas's military training sessions) and, in theory, an SMT scholar could have predicted a scenario in which an attack of unprecedented reach and shock would take place. SMT's modularity and its recognition of contingency enable it to, at least in principle, forecast multiple scenarios. But precisely because SMT foregrounds contingency, such a scenario would have been one among many and difficult to predict with any certainty – partly because it lies so far outside of what Hamas had done before, but mainly because the effect of each of these dynamics is contingent on the sequential interplay between key actors' agency, interpretations, relations and interactions.

Hamas had further pursued an intentionally ambiguous/multi-pronged strategy over the years, distinguishing between medium- and long-term goals (a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders vs liberation of all of historic Palestine) and developing capabilities along multiple axes (diplomatic, political, social, military) (see also Skare 2025 on the intentional ambiguity of Hamas's New Manifesto). This means that it could be flexible in what it did in response to different pressures without undermining its narrative fidelity with past statements. That it opted for 7 October rather than political engagement does not mean that the 2017 Manifesto did not authentically reflect one possible version of Hamas; it just means that the interaction between POTS, internal organisational dynamics and particular leader trajectories created conditions favouring this strategy. For SMT, this means even more contingency, thus making it more difficult to predict.

The inability to make narrowly accurate predictions is also partly due to the sheer number of (f)actors considered by SMT which has been accused of "becoming a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment… Used to explain so much, it may ultimately explain nothing at all" (Gamson and Meyer 1996, 275). This critique was levelled at SMT's structuralists. But scholarship on agency, culture and emotions has tended to eschew structuralist insights and grand theory and become fragmented into "subspecialities" with often highly situated and similarly multi-causal accounts of contingent mechanisms (Jasper 2010, 973–74). The more structuralist and the more contingent/agential SMT approaches need to be combined to explain situated movement dynamics. But that further increases the number of possible (and non-deterministically contingent) mechanisms.

Here, SMT can benefit from critical realism: its distinction between the "real" (the underlying causal mechanisms that make up our world), the "actual" (the mechanisms that have been actually activated in a particular set of events), and the "empirical" (what has been experienced/observed); but also its notions of "emergent properties", "abduction" and "retroduction". Each of SMT's modular elements describes real causal mechanisms that *could* play a role. Which of these mechanisms is activated depends on the *actual* constellation of (f)actors that have produced observed events (e.g. 7 October versus political engagement). To arrive at an explanation, one has to first abductively hypothesise which mechanisms might explain the events ("theoretical redescription"), then retroductively work back from the events to reconstruct the most plausible combination of "real" mechanisms that appear to have been actualised (Fletcher 2017, 188–89). Thinking back, I arrived at the above explanation two days after 7 October 2023 in preparation for a radio interview – I did not yet have access to Hamas statements explaining their reasoning, yet through retroduction, starting with the events, then reflecting on the real causal mechanisms that could be at play (drawing on SMT, conflict studies, etc.) and what actual structural, organisational and ideational changes could be observed over the years (drawing on media, reports and secondary literature on Hamas/Gaza/Palestine/Israel, as well as my own, long-term analysis of the movement), I settled on what appeared to be the most critical mechanisms that had been actualised.

Crucially, these mechanisms coming together produce "emergent properties that are more than, and different from, the sum of their constituent parts" (Easton 2010, 121). The causal properties of each of the (f)actors described above alone or even interacting as independent building blocks cannot explain 7 October – treating each "module" as semi-independent is one of the dangers of a modular approach. The causal properties of each (f)actor shaped others, sequentially and concurrently, thus creating emergent properties that become more than their parts. A good modular theory "illuminates not only how specific variables influence [practice] in isolation, but also how key variables… themselves co-evolve in larger systems" (Ponte and Sturgeon 2014, 217). 7 October thus pushes SMT to reflect more on how the different (f)actors interact and shape each other and to distinguish between "real" and "actual" mechanisms retroductively to arrive at an explanation that does not include "everything under the sun" (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 31) but singles out the most important actual mechanisms from the plethora of real ones.

SMT (and IR and social science generally) can also be critiqued for not thinking boldly enough outside of what has occurred in the past – unexpected events are unexpected because they are rare/unprecedented, but they are still products of visible structural changes and agential actions that, though varied, nevertheless follow a broadly known logic.

Finally, SMT has historically focused on mobilisation within states. The rise of globalisation theories and increasingly visible forms of cross-national mobilisation have "forced social movement theorists to rethink their obsession with the nation state and to recognize the importance of different arenas" (Jasper 2010, 974). However, much of SMT is still methodologically nationalist/statist – and without understanding the regional and international dynamics that shaped Hamas's leadership, their lived experience and calculations, it would be impossible to arrive at a compelling explanation of 7 October. Crucially, though, as Jasper (2010, 974) warns, "we cannot understand the special nature of the global without understanding the microfoundations that make up global, national, and local politics". To be compelling, SMT thus has to combine an analysis of micro-practices and broad regional and global dynamics. If it does, it is much more likely to be successful as an explanatory framework than the more parsimonious IR theories which operate on a macro level.

References

Abu Amer, Adnan. 2021. "غرفة العمليات المشتركة للمقاومة في غزة: نواة لـ"جيش التحرير" | أخبار سياسة | الجزيرة نت." Aljazeera/الجزيرة نت. May 28, 2021.

BBC. 2023. "How Hamas Built a Force to Attack Israel on 7 October," November 27, 2023.

Chalcraft, John. 2016. *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dubova, Marina, Suyog Chandramouli, Gerd Gigerenzer, Peter Grünwald, William Holmes, Tania Lombrozo, Marco Marelli, et al. 2025. "Is Ockham's Razor Losing Its Edge? New Perspectives on the Principle of Model Parsimony." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122(5).

Easton, Geoff. 2010. "Critical Realism in Case Study Research." *Industrial Marketing Management* 39(1): 118–28.

Egeland, Jonathan. 2024. "Making Sense of the Modularity Debate." *New Ideas in Psychology* 75(December): 101108.

Fletcher, Amber. 2017. "Applying Critical Realism in Qualitative Research: Methodology Meets Method." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 20(2): 181–94.

Gamson, William, and David Meyer. 1996. "Framing Political Opportunity." In *Comparative Perspectives on*

Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings, edited by Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, and Mayer Zald, 275–90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gillan, Kevin. 2020. "Temporality in Social Movement Theory: Vectors and Events in the Neoliberal Timescape." *Social Movement Studies* 19(5–6): 516–36.

Goodwin, Jeff, and James Jasper. 1999. "Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory." *Sociological Forum* 14(1): 27–54.

Gould, Deborah. 2004. "Passionate Political Processes: Bringing Emotions Back Into the Study of Social Movements." In *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion*, edited by Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper, 155–76. People, Passions, and Power. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Gunning, Jeroen. 2025a. "The Politics and Effects of Proscription - Written Evidence for 'The Hamas Case.'" Riverway Law.

———. 2025b. "Written Evidence Submitted to the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs' for 'The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict' Inquiry (IPC0109)." The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

Gunning, Jeroen, and Ilan Zvi Baron. 2014. *Why Occupy a Square?: People, Protests and Movements in the Egyptian Revolution*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Hamas. 2024. "Our Narrative… Operation Al-Aqsa Flood." Hamas Media Office. January 21, 2024.

Hroub, Khaled. 2025. "Postscript: What Did Sinwar Want? — In His Own Words." Jadaliyya - 2025 .جدلية.

Hubbard, Ben, and Maria Abi-Habib. 2023. "Behind Hamas's Bloody Gambit to Create a 'Permanent' State of War." *New York Times*, November 8, 2023.

Jasper, James. 2010. "Social Movement Theory Today: Toward a Theory of Action?" *Sociology Compass* 4(11): 965–76.

Jawhar, Souhayb. 2022. "Lebanon: New Strategic Base for Hamas." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. October 17, 2022.

Knell, Yolande. 2023. "Landmark Saudi and Israeli Trips as Normalisation Talks Progress." BBC News. September 26, 2023.

Majid, Mohammed. 2022. "'الجزيرة' تكشف معلومات عن الحرب الأخيرة في غزة." Anadolu Ajansı. 5 2022.

Morris, Aldon. 2000. "Reflections on Social Movement Theory: Criticisms and Proposals." *Contemporary Sociology* 29(3): 445–54.

Musa, Raed. 2019. "'غرفة العمليات المشتركة.. 'قيادة أركان المقاومة في غزة." Aljazeera/الجزيرة نت. April 11, 2019.

OCHA. n.d. "Data on Casualties." United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Occupied Palestinian Territory. n.d.

PCPSR. n.d. "Index PSR Polls." Ramallah: People's Company for Palestinian Survey Research. n.d.

Platt, Gerald. 2004. "Unifying Social Movement Theories." *Qualitative Sociology* 27(1): 107–16.

Ponte, Stefano, and Timothy Sturgeon. 2014. "Explaining Governance in Global Value Chains: A Modular Theory-Building Effort." *Review of International Political Economy* 21(1): 195–223.

Roy, Sara. 2023. "The Long War on Gaza." *The New York Review of Books*, December 19, 2023.

Sil, Rudra, and Peter Katzenstein. 2010. "Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics: Reconfiguring

Problems and Mechanisms across Research Traditions." *Perspectives on Politics* 8(2): 411–31.

Skare, Erik. 2025. *Road to October 7: A Brief History of Palestinian Islamism*. London: Verso.

Tarrow, Sidney. 1993. "Modular Collective Action and the Rise of the Social Movement: Why the French Revolution Was Not Enough." *Politics & Society* 21(1): 69–90.

ToI. 2025. "Report: In Days Prior to Oct. 7, Yahya Sinwar Said 'Extraordinary Act' Needed to Derail Saudi Normalization." *Times of Israel*, May 18, 2025.

UNRWA. n.d. "Gaza_15 Years of Blockade." n.d.

Endnotes

[1] This goes beyond 'modular' in Tarrow's (1993) sense of repertoires becoming readily diffusible. See Ponte and Sturgeon (2014), Egeland (2024).
[2] For distinction between strategy and structure, see Goodwin and Jasper (1999).

Defending Shrines, Defending Borders: Iran's Syrian Intervention Reconsidered

Ehsan Kashfi, University of Copenhagen

On November 7, 2025, the Islamic Republic of Iran, in a choreographed public celebration broadcast live on state television, unveiled a new statue in Tehran's Enghelab (Revolution) Square depicting Shapur I, the Sasanian shah, standing triumphantly over the kneeling figure of Valerian, the Roman emperor he captured in battle in AD 260. For a regime that has long claimed to ground its legitimacy in Islamic revolutionary ideology, this monument seemed a stunning ideological shift that took nearly everyone by surprise. And the irony of the location was hard to miss: the very square that revolutionaries renamed from "Reza Shah" to "Enghelab [Revolution]" in 1979 now has a monument celebrating a shah of pre-Islamic Iran. In forty-six years of the Islamic Republic, this early period of history had never received such clear and deliberate state-sanctioned celebration, despite the regime's periodic flirtations with nationalist symbolism.

This symbolic gesture is but one manifestation of broader and more consequential changes that have reshaped the Middle East in ways unimaginable just two years ago. Iranian missiles have struck Israeli cities directly. Israeli-American bombing has devastated Iran's military infrastructure. Hezbollah has been significantly degraded, the Assad regime has fallen, and the "Axis of Resistance" that Tehran spent three decades building has, in many ways, weakened significantly. These dramatic changes on the ground might conceal similar changes at the ideological level. Iran, long studied as the paradigmatic ideological actor in Middle Eastern international relations. For decades, while the academic literature has been more nuanced, the Islamic Republic has been represented in popular and policy discourse as a state whose foreign policy is guided mainly by its religious identity and resistance discourse. Iran's support for proxy forces in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, its anti-Western positioning in the region, and, of course, its championing of transnational Shia solidarity have all been interpreted as compelling evidence that ideological commitments, not material calculations, drive its behaviour and regional maneuvers. The assumption has been that for Iran, ideas shape interests, revolutionary norms constrain strategic choices, and ideology operates as more than mere rhetoric.

Events like the Shapur monument show dramatic changes in ideological rhetoric and legitimation discourse that fundamentally challenge these assumptions about the primacy of ideational factors. And the statue is one among many examples: the rhetoric of defending holy shrines has been displaced by explicit language about defending Iran's borders; discourses of Shia solidarity and resistance, at least temporarily, have given way to appeals to Iranian nationalism and territorial integrity. From Revolution Square's Sasanian shah to a mobile caravan wandering in Tehran displaying Iran's historic victories on giant LED screens, from performances of "Ey Iran" at the late Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's request to the rehabilitation of pre-Islamic heritage across the country's urban spaces, the rhetorical transformation has been remarkably rapid and comprehensive.

This raises questions about the relationship between ideology and strategic behaviour. If ideology was constitutive of Iran's foreign policy, how could it shift so fundamentally in such a compressed timeframe? If ideological commitments constrained strategic behaviour, why does the state now pursue similar security imperatives under different ideological packaging? And what does it mean when a revolution erects a statue to a shah it once condemned? These questions must be put into context: what happens when a self-proclaimed ideological state confronts existential defeat and the collapse of its regional

project? Under what conditions does ideology shape state behaviour, and under what conditions does it give way to other imperatives?

The ideational account in the policy literature holds that Iran's foreign policy reflects its revolutionary identity and resistance ideology. But if identity can be discarded overnight when material conditions shift, perhaps we need to reconsider the causal weight assigned to ideas, identity and ideology, particularly under conditions of systemic pressure. Iran's foreign policy, often interpreted through ideological lenses, is better understood through the logic of neoclassical realism, with ideology playing a significant yet subordinate role. Ideology has functioned not as a causal structure determining interests but as an instrumental discourse that legitimates strategic imperatives and mobilizes domestic and transnational support. The partial loss of Iran's ideological infrastructure in the last two years, I believe, has once again exposed the underlying realist core of its behaviour, not because ideas never mattered, but because when forced to choose between ideology and regime survival, the latter always predominates. When the "Axis of Resistance" fractured, Iran did not uphold its ideological commitments at a strategic cost; it pivoted, at least temporarily, to nationalism.

This is not to argue that ideology is mere window dressing or that the Islamic Republic leaders are cynical manipulators. Ideas clearly matter for how the Islamic Republic, most importantly its leader, pursues security, what alliances it builds, the way it perceives and frames threats, and the domestic and transnational coalitions it mobilizes, as four decades of Islamic Republic rule attest to. But the important question is whether ideology determines strategic choices or whether it adapts to serve security imperatives defined by Iran's position in a regional system that has long found it threatening. The evidence, I argue, suggests the latter: ideology has proven remarkably flexible, shifting from revolutionary Shiism to defensive nationalism without disrupting core strategic objectives of deterrence, buffer state construction, and regime survival or what the Islamic Republic itself has long publicly termed *maslahat-e nezām*, the expediency or interests of the regime. To support this argument, I examine a recent case where ideology confronted material constraints: the rhetorical development of Iran's Syrian intervention. I trace how official discourse shifted from "defending the shrine" to "defending Iran" as material pressures intensified; a turn toward Iranian nationalism following the regional setbacks of 2023–2024.

The Ideological Paradigm

To understand why this rhetorical transformation is so theoretically significant, we must first look at how Iran's foreign policy and the role of ideology within it have long been understood or explained. Scholars and analysts have approached Iranian foreign policy from different theoretical angles, yet constructivist accounts have largely dominated the conversation, emphasizing ideational factors. For much of the past four decades, constructivist and identity-based accounts have portrayed the Islamic Republic as a state whose revolutionary ideology, Shia identity, and resistance discourse drive its regional behaviour in ways that material calculations alone cannot explain (Adib-Moghaddam, 2008; Takeyh, 2009). Iran's decades-long support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, its costly intervention in Syria, its backing of the Houthis in Yemen despite international isolation, and its unwavering defence of the Palestinian cause have all been interpreted as evidence that ideological commitment, rather than strategic calculation, defines Iran's regional policy (El Husseini, 2010; Stein, 2017). The Islamic Republic's anti-Western rhetoric and its refusal to normalize relations with the United States, even when such normalization might serve material interests, have been presented as further evidence that revolutionary norms genuinely constrain strategic flexibility (Javaid, Naz, Watoo, & Rashid, 2016).

Yet this ideational approach has long faced criticism from an alternative tradition grounded in realist thought, which emphasizes how Iran's regional behaviour responds to the structural constraints of an anarchic international system, the imperatives of regime survival, and the strategic logic of balancing against perceived threats. From this perspective, Iranian policies often attributed to ideological

commitment can be understood as rational responses to security dilemmas, encirclement by hostile powers, and the pursuit of strategic depth (Chubin, 2012; Ostovar, 2016; Wehrey et al., 2009). From this perspective, the Islamic Republic behaves much like other states facing similar structural pressures would, using ideology as a tool for mobilization and legitimation rather than as the primary driver of strategic choice. The present analysis builds on and extends this neoclassical realist tradition, while engaging seriously with the constructivist claims it challenges. The question is not whether ideology matters, it clearly does, but whether it determines strategic behaviour or adapts to serve security imperatives defined by Iran's position in the regional system.

According to the constructivist account, Iran seeks not simply to maximize security within the existing regional order but to contest that order itself, reshaping norms and institutions in line with its ideology and challenging the legitimacy of a system built on imperialism, capitalism, and American hegemony (Hunter, 2010). The claim is that ideology functions as a constraint, that the regime cannot simply abandon these commitments when they become costly without undermining the very foundations of its legitimacy. The more assertive versions of this reading produce clear behavioural predictions: Iran will sacrifice material interests for ideological commitments, fighting to the end for identity allies like Hezbollah rather than abandoning them for pragmatic gains. In this view, Iran's foreign policy represents a case where rhetoric genuinely matches action, where stated commitments reflect real constraints, and where revolutionary identity determines interests rather than merely legitimating them.

Yet, the past two years of regional changes, unprecedented challenges to Iran's strategic position in the region, give us another empirical opportunity to reassess these claims. Do revolutionary norms constrain strategic adaptation, forcing the Islamic Republic to accept material costs to preserve ideological consistency? Or does ideology prove flexible, adapting to serve security imperatives that remain constant across different discursive frameworks? The analytical challenge is one of causal direction. Because Iran speaks in the language of Islamic revolution, anti-imperialism, and Shia solidarity, many have assumed these ideational commitments drive strategic behaviour. But what if the causal arrow runs the other way? What if we are observing realist behaviour patterns cloaked in ideological rhetoric, with ideology providing legitimation and mobilization resources for strategies already determined by Iran's material position in a hostile regional system like the Middle East?

Syria: From Sacred Duty to National Defence

To examine this question, I trace the rhetorical evolution of Iran's Syrian intervention from 2012 to 2025 through close readings of Supreme Leader speeches and public addresses, statements of IRGC commanders and other military and political figures, state media coverage patterns (particularly IRIB, Tasnim, and Fars News), and commemorative practices including martyrdom narratives, funeral rhetoric, and cultural festivals honoring the fallen. The Syrian case, I believe, offers particular analytical leverage because it allows us to see how official discourse transformed in real time as material conditions shifted, moving from shrine defence as religious duty, to military intervention as national security imperative, to retroactive justification following collapse.

This rhetorical trajectory culminates in the broader post-2024 nationalist turn, where the regime resorted to a form of Iranian nationalism following Israeli and US strikes on Iranian territory. If ideology constrains strategic choice, we should see the Islamic Republic firmly maintaining ideological commitments even as material conditions deteriorate, or at a minimum, ideological change happening with visible resistance and legitimacy crises. What we see instead is rhetorical adaptation following each material setback, with discourse shifting to justify whatever strategy survival demands while core security objectives, securing buffer states, projecting deterrence, and ensuring regime survival remain constant.

Phase 1: Ideological Framing

When Iran committed substantial military resources to propping up the Assad regime beginning in 2012-13, the intervention was framed almost exclusively through the vocabulary of religious obligation and revolutionary resistance. This was a period when Iran's economy could still support costly military action abroad, when Russia provided indispensable strategic cover, and when the intervention appeared successful in preventing Assad's immediate collapse. Under these relatively favourable material conditions, the regime mobilized legitimation discourse that emphasized religious duty and shrine protection. The dominant narrative was the defence of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus against takfiri terrorism, particularly ISIS. Iranian casualties were systematically presented as *shahid-e modafe-e haram* (shrine defence martyrs), a term that linked the Syrian campaign to the sacred defence (*defa-e moqaddas*) vocabulary that had legitimated Iran's own war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988. The intervention was narrated as part of the broader "Axis of Resistance" against imperialism and U.S. hegemony in the region, with frequent religious references to Karbala, Ashura, and the righteous struggle against oppression. This rhetorical strategy clearly positioned Syria not as a foreign intervention but as an extension of Iran's founding ideological mission.

Khamenei himself articulated this ideological framing in multiple addresses. In one representative speech to the families of the fallen, he declared: "Indeed, both your martyrs and their families, the fathers, mothers, and children, hold a great debt upon the entire Iranian nation. These martyrs possess certain distinctions; one of them is that they defended the sanctity of the Ahl al-Bayt in Iraq and Syria and were martyred on this path" (2016). The framing is instructive: Iranian casualties were defenders of Shia sacred sites whose sacrifice placed the entire nation in their debt. IRGC General Qassem Soleimani used similar rhetoric, describing how General Hamedani, a senior commander killed in Syria in 2015, "was martyred on this path out of his love for the Ahl al-Bayt and the sanctuary of Sayyida Zaynab," and asserting that "Karbala and Ashura have had significant influence on the fronts in Iraq and Syria" (2016). State media consistently used the *shahid-e modafe-e haram* designation, and the regime organized elaborate commemorations, ceremonies, festivals, and memorials that paralleled those honouring Iran-Iraq War martyrs. The case of Mohsen Hojaji is telling: captured and killed by ISIS near the Syria-Iraq border in 2017, Hojaji was elevated to near-cult status, with a designated day on the national calendar, public spaces named in his honour, and extensive commemoration as a young man who sacrificed himself defending the shrine and fulfilling sacred duty. The regime's investment in this commemorative infrastructure was extensive and systematic.

This phase appeared to validate ideational explanations of Iranian foreign policy. Here was a state acting on identity commitments to Shia solidarity and revolutionary ideology despite mounting costs, thousands of casualties, billions in expenditure, and deepening isolation. The consistency of religious framing, the elaborate commemorative infrastructure, and the regime's willingness to sustain the intervention even as economic pressures grew all suggested that ideological commitments constituted Iran's interests rather than merely legitimating them.

Phase 2: Strategic Reframing

Yet as material circumstances shifted, so too did the discursive framework. By 2016-17, the Syrian war dragged on inconclusively with no clear end in sight, economic costs became unsustainable under U.S. "maximum pressure", Russia began redirecting attention toward Ukraine, and the broader "Axis of Resistance" began suffering systematic degradation through Israeli strikes and internal challenges. Under these deteriorating conditions, the official narrative underwent a visible change. The rhetoric of shrine defence did not disappear entirely, yet it was increasingly supplemented by language emphasizing national security, territorial defence, and strategic necessity. Syria was reframed as Iran's strategic depth, the intervention as forward defence, and the fallen as defenders of the country rather than martyrs for holy shrines or the Ahl al-Bayt.

Khamenei himself hinted at this discursive turn. In a speech that shows a shift from earlier framing, he told an audience: "Someone who goes from here to Iraq or Syria and stands to defend the sanctity of the Ahl al-Bayt against these takfiri groups is, in fact, defending their own cities (Khamenei, 2016)." The rhetorical move is revealing: the speech begins with shrine-defense vocabulary but immediately reinterprets it as territorial defense. IRGC commanders made this even more explicit in their public speeches. One stated bluntly: "God revealed an aspect of the importance of the work of the Defenders of the Shrine, and everyone realized that if they had not been there [in Syria], nothing would have remained of Iran (Abdollahpour, 2017)." Official statements increasingly justified economic expenditure and military budgets in strategic rather than religious terms. State television reports and documentaries on the Syrian campaign began emphasizing geographic maps, strategic corridors, and deterrence calculations rather than shrine protection and religious obligation.

This phase poses a challenge to ideological interpretations of Iran's regional policy. If ideology genuinely constrained strategic behaviour, the regime should have maintained the shrine defence framing despite mounting costs. Instead, what we observe is rapid, seamless rhetorical adaptation with no visible legitimacy crisis. Officials who had invoked religious duty transitioned to the language of strategic necessity without acknowledging any contradiction. Significantly, the same military interventions continued under a new discursive framework, and the policies remained unchanged while only their justification shifted. The ease of this transition suggests that ideology was never the binding constraint constructivism claimed; rather, it functioned as a legitimation tool that could be recalibrated when the original framing lost domestic resonance

Phase 3: Post-Collapse Rationalization

In late 2024, Assad's abrupt fall in Syria, the systematic decimation of proxy networks in Lebanon and Iraq, and the devastating Israeli-American bombardment of Iran's nuclear and military facilities exposed the regime's military vulnerability and strategic isolation. Under these conditions of acute material crisis, the discursive transformation became complete. The regime now speaks about Syria in exclusively strategic terms, with ideological and religious commitments to resistance rarely invoked, as if they had never structured the intervention's legitimation. Official rhetoric has shifted to explicit security language: "The Syrian front was Iran's first line of defence" or "If we had not fought in Syria, we would have had to fight in our own borders and provinces (Kargar, 2025)." Yet no officials claim the Syrian intervention was a mistake; indeed, they continue insisting it was necessary, but none defend it in ideological terms anymore. State media now emphasize the regime's strategic foresight in recognizing Syria's importance for protecting Iran, with rare references to shrine defence or the vocabulary of Ahl al-Bayt and Karbala. The complete absence of religious or revolutionary justification, despite decades of such rhetoric, reveals ideology's instrumental function. When ideological framing served legitimation needs, it was deployed; when it no longer resonated or explained outcomes, it was discarded without difficulty or apparent cost to regime legitimacy.

And this rhetorical transformation about the intervention in Syria was indeed part of a broader post-2024 pivot toward Iranian nationalism that extends far beyond the Syrian case. Following the twelve-day war with Israel, the regime confronted twin crises of legitimacy: a domestic population increasingly alienated from Islamic Republic ideology after years of economic misery, repression, and visible military defeat, and an exhausted ideological vocabulary that could no longer legitimate regime policies or effectively mobilize popular support. The regime thus desperately resorted to a form of nationalism to salvage some relative measure of domestic support. It appealed to sovereignty, territorial integrity, civilizational pride, and defence of the homeland, ready-made themes that could potentially transcend decades-long societal divides, particularly resonant during moments of external threat.

The evidence of this pivot was surprisingly pervasive. In July 2025, Khamenei personally requested Mahmoud

Karimi to perform "Ey Iran" (Tabnak 2025), a nationalistic song, during a mourning ceremony, an act unthinkable in earlier decades. Pre-Islamic imagery flooded public space: the Shapur statue in Revolution Square, a statue of Arash, the mythical archer, in Vanak Square, both in Tehran and a statue of Rostam, the legendary hero, in Isfahan (Fararu, 2025). A mobile caravan toured Tehran, displaying the nation's military victories on giant LED screens. Official rhetoric shifted dramatically. The Mayor of Tehran, a regime hardliner, tweeted: "Enmity toward Greater Iran has no outcome other than eventually kneeling before this historic nation (Zakani, 2025)." References to "civilizational continuity" and "the ever-proud and resilient nation" replaced revolutionary and Islamic vocabulary in official statements.

Conclusion

The Syrian case, when situated within the broader post-2024 nationalist turn, thus offers empirical support for the neoclassical realist tradition, and shows limitations in ideational accounts of Iranian foreign policy, with further implications for how we understand the relationship between identity, ideology, and state behaviour in international relations, particularly in a contested region like the Middle East. Constructivist approaches to Iranian foreign policy rest on several interconnected claims: that Iran's revolutionary identity constitutes its interests rather than merely reflecting them; that ideological commitments constrain strategic options in ways that material calculations alone cannot explain; and that the persistence of revolutionary rhetoric over four decades demonstrates the causal primacy of ideas over interests. The case presented here suggests that each of these claims may require reconsideration.

The first problem is the direction of causation. When Iran speaks in the language of Islamic revolution and Shia solidarity, pursuing policies that support Shia allies and challenge American hegemony, many infer that identity drives behaviour. Yet the Syrian case shows a different pattern: identical strategic objectives, maintaining buffer states, projecting deterrence, ensuring regime survival, persisted across radically different ideological frameworks. When shrine defence rhetoric lost resonance, it was replaced by strategic necessity; when strategic necessity failed to explain outcomes, the regime pivoted to nationalism. Throughout these discursive changes, core security objectives remained constant. This suggests we may be observing not ideology determining strategy but strategy selecting ideology, with the regime drawing upon whatever discursive resources prove most effective for legitimation and mobilization under given material conditions.

The second problem is the claimed constraining function of ideology. If revolutionary norms genuinely constrained strategic behaviour, the regime should have faced a legitimacy crisis when abandoning ideological commitments. We should see some resistance to rhetorical change, factional conflict over ideological consistency, or at least backlash against perceived compromise of revolutionary principles. Instead, the rhetorical transition proceeded with remarkable smoothness. No officials acknowledged contradiction; no legitimacy crisis followed. The regime's capacity to shift ideological languages without apparent cost suggests that ideology functions less as a binding constraint than as a flexible resource, deployed instrumentally and discarded when no longer useful. This is not to claim that ideology is infinitely malleable; certain discursive moves remain unavailable, and path dependencies exist, but the range of ideological flexibility seen far exceeds what constructivist accounts would predict.

The third problem is the pace of ideological change, particularly the post-2024 nationalist pivot. Constructivist theories generally assume that identities are sticky, that they change slowly through socialization processes, generational shifts, and gradual norm evolution. The Islamic Republic's rhetorical shift happened over months, not decades. A regime that had spent forty-six years cultivating revolutionary Islamic identity, that had built elaborate commemorative infrastructures around shrine defence martyrdom, that had systematically suppressed pre-Islamic symbolism as un-Islamic or monarchist,

erected a statue of a Sasanian shah in Revolution Square within a year of its regional project's collapse. This pace is difficult to reconcile with constructivist claims about the constitutive role of identity. If identity genuinely constituted interests, such a rapid transformation should have been far more difficult; the regime should have been trapped by its own ideological commitments. Equally telling is the sequence of change. In each phase examined here, material setbacks preceded ideological adaptation, not the reverse. The shift from shrine defence to strategic necessity followed the war's prolongation and economic strain; the shift from strategic necessity to nationalist territorial defence followed Assad's fall, the decimation of proxy networks and direct strikes on Iranian territory. At no point did ideological change drive strategic reorientation; rather, ideological discourse adjusted to legitimate strategies already compelled by material circumstances.

And the post-2024 transformation, dramatic as it appears, is less an aberration than another telling example of patterns visible throughout the Islamic Republic's history. Even during its most ostensibly ideological phases, the regime consistently subordinated ideological consistency to strategic necessity when the two conflicted. The Iran-Contra affair of 1985-86 is instructive: at the height of its revolutionary fervour and barely six years after the hostage crisis, the Islamic Republic secretly purchased weapons from the United States and Israel (Parsi, 2007). The pattern, ideological rhetoric in public, strategic pragmatism in practice, was established early. What distinguishes the post-2024 moment is not the presence of realist behaviour but its visibility. Previous episodes of strategic pragmatism occurred in shadows, secret arms deals, quiet diplomatic channels, unstated alliance logic. The collapse of the "Axis of Resistance" and direct military confrontation with Israel stripped away this ambiguity. With proxy networks decimated and Iranian territory struck, the regime could no longer point to Hezbollah's strength or Assad's survival as evidence of resistance ideology's viability. The post-2024 nationalist turn represents not a break from previous patterns but their public acknowledgment, the regime reaching for whatever legitimation resources remain when its preferred ideological framework has been discredited by events.

And Iran is not unique in deploying religious or revolutionary discourse to legitimate policies shaped by security calculations. Turkey's neo-Ottomanism or Qatar's support for Islamist movements may similarly function as legitimation tools rather than causal drivers. The question is not whether leaders believe their own rhetoric, many probably do, but whether ideology determines strategic choices or adapts to serve them. This also raises questions about regional stability. If Iran's ideological flexibility reflects instrumental calculation, then the post-2024 nationalist turn may prove equally temporary. Should material conditions shift, the regime might pivot back toward resistance ideology as readily as it pivoted toward nationalism. Those hoping the nationalist turn signals genuine change may be observing tactical repositioning rather than strategic change. Yet, the Shapur statue in Revolution Square stands as a monument to the priority of survival over consistency. Revolutions, it turns out, can honour shahs when survival demands it.

Bibliography

Abdollahpour, M. (2017, June 25). *If the shrine-defenders had not existed, nothing would remain of Iran* [statement reported by 8Dey News]. 8Dey News. https://shorturl.at/v7vQB

Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2008). *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic.* New York: Hurst & Co.

Chubin, S. (2012). *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions.* Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

El Husseini, R. (2010). Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria. *Third World Quarterly, 31*(5), 803-815.

Fararu. (2025, October 18). *Photo shows pilgrims from Najaf and Mashhad gathered outside the holy city's gates once again* [in Persian]. Fararu https://shorturl.at/al3uj

Hunter, S. T. (2010). *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order.* Santa Barbara, California: Praeger.

Javaid, U., Naz, U., Watoo, M. A., & Rashid, A. (2016). Role of Ideology in Foreign Policy: A Case Study of Iran. *Journal of Political Studies, 23*(1), 37–47.

Kargar, B. (2025, January 5). *Commander Kargar: If we had not fought in Syria, we would have had to fight on our own borders and provinces…* Virasty. https://virasty.com/bahmankargar/17360954369535262 77?lang=en

Khamenei, A. (2016, January 25). *Remarks in the meeting with a group of families of the shrine-defenders*. Khamenei.ir. https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=32186

Khamenei, A. (2016, June 26). *Remarks at the meeting with the families of the 7 Tir martyrs and a group of families of the Shrine-Defenders*. Khamenei.ir. https://www.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=33600

Ostovar, A. (2016). *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parsi, T. (2007). *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Soleimani, Q. (2016, October 5). *In Syria, we are defending Islam and the Islamic Republic*. [statement reported by Asriran]. Asriran. https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/498024/

Stein, E. (2017). Ideological Codependency and Regional Order: Iran, Syria, and the Axis of Refusal. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 50*(3), 676-680.

Tabnak. (2025, July 5). *Supreme Leader minutes ago to Mahmoud Karimi: "Sing Ey Iran."* https://shorturl.at/ww6Ue

Takeyh, R. (2009). *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wehrey, F., Green, J. D., Nichiporuk, B., Nader, A., Hansell, L., Nafisi, R., & Bohandy, S. R. (2009). *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

Zakani, A. [@arzakani4]. (2025, November 7). *Enmity toward Greater Iran has no outcome other than eventually kneeling before this historic nation* [Post]. X. https://x.com/arzakani4/status/1986925365055336844

Reassessing Principal–Agent Theory: The Houthis' evolving relationship with Iran

Maria-Louise Clausen, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)

Armed non-state actors are increasingly important actors in international and regional politics. In the post-2011 Middle East the delegation of coercive tasks from an external patron to a local armed actor operating within another state's territory is a defining characteristic of conflicts (Lynch 2018; Mumford 2013). These conflicts, often referred to as proxy wars, entail a principal–agent relationship, which offers the analytical framework for examining both the logic of delegation and its attendant challenges (Karlén and Rauta 2023, 114; Groh 2019, 3).

Iran has often been characterized as uniquely successful in developing principal–agent relationships with non-state actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, which constitute a key pillar of its foreign policy (Juneau 2021, 2). This reflects how the regional network has functioned not only as a tool of influence but also as a form of deterrence, rooted in the possibility of asymmetric retaliation (see Hazbun in this collection). The network has provided Iran with strategic depth, extending its security posture beyond its borders while reducing the risks of direct interstate confrontation. But 7 October 2023 and its aftermath have prompted a reconsideration of assumptions about the benefits to Iran of these principal-agent relationships. The actions of armed non-state actors in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen (as well as the attack by Hamas itself) produced forms of agency slippage and escalation that threatened to undermine Iran's national security.

While others focus on asymmetric deterrence, this essay argues that the events following 7 October 2023 require a reconsideration of plausible deniability as a core concept in principal–agent theories of proxy warfare. Deniability has often been treated as a strategic asset that enables delegation while limiting escalation risks. However, as armed non-state actors gain greater operational autonomy, deniability becomes more fluid and politically contested. Under these conditions, the attribution of responsibility for an agent's actions can generate escalation pressures that undermine, rather than reinforce, the principal's security. In this piece, I focus on the Iran–Houthi connection as a critical example of how the attribution of responsibility to Iran for a supposed agent's actions came to threaten its national security, thus offering a lens through which to examine how one of principal–agent theory's core assumptions perform under post-2023 conflict dynamics.

Principal–Agent Dynamics as Delegation

The most common description of principal–agent relationships holds that delegation is "a useful tool that principals use when they wish to avoid the costs, including time, resources, and developing knowledge, associated with particular tasks" (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 713). Existing work emphasizes that delegation is chosen by principals as a cost-saving strategy that allows them to influence events while avoiding the financial, political, and reputational burdens of direct intervention. Delegation can be facilitated by the agent's comparative advantage in a particular skill set, greater knowledge of the local context, or localized legitimacy that enhances effectiveness (Byman and Kreps 2010, 3). This rationalist approach to delegation is complemented by accounts that emphasize delegation as a product of shared ideas and identities. Such work highlights the importance of interest alignment, particularly in the Middle East, where trans-state identities often resonate regionally (Phillips and Valbjørn 2018, 417).

Delegation, especially when framed as proxy war, is used colloquially as a label applied to a wide range of conflicts, but the academic literature has worked to develop proxy war into a more rigorous analytical category by examining variation within principal–agent relationships

(Rauta 2021). This allows us to explore how relationships of delegation are negotiated, contested, and subject to reinterpretation over time, including how delegation itself can redistribute power and create new political actors. Delegation often takes place within a web of alliances and reciprocal dependencies in which actors may simultaneously function as both principals and agents. Agents may surpass their principals' capabilities, thereby challenging the notion of clear hierarchies in which principals give orders and clients obey, underlining instead the co-constitution of principals and agents. This also brings attention to the agency of armed non-state actors, who pursue their own political and economic agendas through these relationships, using external support to advance strategic goals that may or may not align with those of the principal (Moghadam and Wyss 2020).

The purpose of delegation is often to manage the risks of direct involvement in conflict, but its ability to function as a tool of crisis management depends on a delicate balancing act that requires that principal control be both exercised in practice and recognized by rivals. Although the principal–agent literature emphasizes the "agency problem", whereby self-interested agents may diverge from principal preferences, the relationship nonetheless presupposes that principals retain the capacity to monitor and discipline agent behavior within acceptable bounds (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 715; Salehyan 2010, 495, 502). Absent meaningful principal control, the analytical distinction between principal–agent relationships and looser forms of alignment become blurred. Yet it remains unclear how principal–agent theory specifies when rivals grant such space for restraint rather than escalate directly, how strategic reputation and bargaining dynamics shape that decision, and whether identifiable thresholds shift conflicts from indirect to direct confrontation. For instance, Iran is widely viewed by Yemen experts as lacking direct command and control over the Houthis' maritime campaign since 2023 but despite the group's apparent operational autonomy, its actions are still routinely ascribed to Iran. This suggests a potential blind spot in existing models, which tend to assume that control and external attribution move in tandem.

Deniability is one key mechanism explored within this literature. The principal reserves indirect action for issues where the costs of direct involvement are especially high, using delegation as a way to avoid or limit the risk of international penalties and negative blowback (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 714). The drone strikes against Saudi oil refineries in 2019, for example, were claimed by the Houthis, but responsibility remained contested, with Iran widely alleged to have orchestrated the attack. This ambiguity complicated the justification for direct retaliation. While plausible deniability is commonly understood as one of the key advantages of delegating conflict, in practice it has become increasingly difficult to sustain, as widespread surveillance and rapid attribution have made external involvement more traceable and documentable (Cormac and Aldrich 2018). Yet deniability can also serve a de-escalatory function, as ambiguity can raise the political and legal threshold for retaliation or create space for restraint, allowing actors to avoid escalation even where retaliation could be justified.

Iran's use of the so-called Axis of Resistance reflects an attempt to balance plausible deniability with the desire to employ aligned non-state actors both as instruments of deterrence and as strategic force multipliers. Yet, as Cordesman and Kleiber already noted in 2007, the increasing implausibility of deniability raises the likelihood that Iran is drawn into far more serious conflicts than it intends through the actions of its agents (Cordesman and Kleiber 2007, 203). This likelihood increases as these dynamics now unfold in a context shaped by faster attribution, weakened international norms of restraint, and growing agent autonomy, all of which complicate escalation management and strain deniability as a risk-management tool. This highlights a problem of control that can be unpacked along three dimensions identified by Groh (2019): the compatibility of objectives, the agent's capabilities, and its dependence on external support. These dimensions help illuminate different aspects of the challenge of principal control. While similar dynamics apply in the case of Iran's relationship with Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and other clients, this essay focuses on the evolving consequences of implausible deniability in the Iran–Houthi relationship.

The Houthis and the Challenge of Delegation

At the onset of the conflict in Yemen, Iran's interests in the country were limited and centered on sustaining the Houthis' capacity to challenge Saudi Arabia and draw it into a costly and protracted conflict, rather than on seeking to exert direct control over Yemen (Juneau 2021). The relationship provided Iran with a point of leverage against Saudi Arabia along its southern flank. Since Yemen was not a priority for Tehran or considered critical to Iran's national security, Iran appears to have accepted limited control over the Houthis (Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2016). While Iran and the Houthis share anti-Israeli rhetoric and the Houthis have long sought to elevate their regional standing through a broader discourse of resistance to the US-led regional order, this posture became more pronounced after 7 October 2023 as the movement began targeting international shipping in the Red Sea. What had previously remained largely rhetorical thus appeared to take on a more operational character. The Houthis not only internationalized the conflict through maritime attacks but escalated further with direct strikes on Israel (Clausen 2022; Knights 2024, 4). These operations involved the use of long-range drones and ballistic missiles targeting southern Israeli locations, including a drone strike near Ilan and Asaf Ramon International Airport outside Eilat in September 2025. Israel responded with strikes on Yemen, stating that it targeted Houthi infrastructure.

The widening geographic scope of the conflict also drew in the United States more directly. In March 2025, US President Donald Trump warned Iran that it would be held responsible for "every shot fired by the Houthis" and face dire consequences if the attacks continued (BBC 2025). Iran officially maintained that the Houthis are an independent organization, but reports emerged that it had appealed to them to avoid further escalation (Reuters 2025). While some observers have argued that Iran orchestrated the involvement of the Houthis to "shield Iran and Hezbollah from direct U.S. pressure", there are indications that the Houthis escalated in ways that ran counter to Iran's preferences carrying direct strategic costs for Tehran as the presumed coordinator of the attacks. Although causality is difficult to establish, the Houthi campaign became embedded in the broader escalation dynamics leading to US-Israeli military action against Iran.

Existing analyses of Iran's regional alignments have often foregrounded sectarian overlap as important to understanding the success of Iran's relationships (Ostovar 2018). However, the sectarian narrative cannot explain the onset of conflict in Yemen even - if it has gained some credence as the conflict has dragged on (Clausen 2019). Rather than shared Shi'a identity, it is political-ideological alignment that appears particularly salient in this relationship. The Houthis' strong anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric and their confrontation with Saudi Arabia largely reflect Iranian foreign policy messaging. Both actors have been able to derive reputational benefits from presenting themselves as defenders of the politically oppressed, most visibly through alignment with the Palestinian cause. This form of alignment facilitated cooperation on issues where interests converged but did not necessarily translate into shared assessments of acceptable escalation, limiting its effectiveness as a mechanism of principal control.

The Houthis have, since the Arab uprising, developed from a minor associated group to a defining member of the so-called Axis of resistance (Bank and Mohns 2012, 26). From an operational perspective, they have gone from localized insurgency activities in northern Yemen to being able to take and maintain control over most of the Yemeni population, a territory of approximately 110,000 km2, threatening international trade, and carrying out missile and drone strikes on Israel. Their ability to globalize the conflict reflects a determined effort to expand their military capacity, building on stockpiles looted from the Yemeni military, supplemented with black-market purchases and support from Iran (Clausen 2015). They have combined the growing availability of short-range drones with the import of high-value components from Iran or through smuggling networks as well as the acquisition of dual-use items. This has enabled the development of a domestic military industry that fuses technologically advanced imports with locally produced components (Juneau 2021).

In this process, the Houthis have not only developed their military capabilities but also their political acumen. They have built the ability to administer large parts of Yemen in a state-like manner, including gaining control over internal sources of income. As a result of the Houthis' expanding capabilities, they have become less dependent on continued logistical, organizational, and military support from Tehran. In terms of political independence, the Houthis have sought to cultivate independent relationships with like-minded actors such as the Iranian-backed members of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq (Badawi 2024), while Iran has few ideologically viable alternatives inside Yemen that it could readily turn to in their place.

These dynamics complicate how responsibility is attributed. Plausible deniability in such a context depends not only on opacity, but also on reciprocal restraint and shifting attribution norms. Traditionally, plausible deniability has relied on uncertainty about the nature and extent of the principal's support to an agent, making culpability harder to establish (Salehyan 2010, 503-504). This has been found to shield principals from direct responsibility and limit the reputational, strategic, and legal costs of involvement, as support is often difficult to prove conclusively and therefore less likely to provoke strong countermeasures (Pischedda, Cheon, and Moller 2024, 496). In the Iran–Houthi relationship, opacity leaves the precise significance of Iranian support for the Houthis indeterminate. Nevertheless, the linkage itself, regardless of the relationship's exact character, became strategically consequential for Iran after 7 October 2023.

Conclusion

The weakening of international order, combined with a reframing of domestic Israeli politics toward more expansive security responses and a more confrontational U.S. stance toward Iran, have substantially changed the context of the Iran–Houthi relationship. The threshold for what is required in terms of public justification is declining and the consequences of deniability failures are increasing (Clausen 2026). Plausible deniability has historically helped shield principals from possible retaliation as well as international criticism. For instance, Israel found it "politically difficult" to retaliate against Iran for attacks committed by Hezbollah (Byman and Kreps 2010, 4). Hence, while the principal-agent literature has warned that delegation carries risks for the principal, the speed and degree of attribution that Iran experienced following 7 October stand out relative to earlier episodes of proxy escalation. The consequences that Iran is suffering demonstrate that its strategy of supporting armed non-state actors to expand its regional influence while managing escalation through a careful balance of acknowledgment and denial has become harder to sustain. Rather than insulating Iran from risk, delegation in this case exposed it to reputational, strategic, and military consequences it could not fully control, reflecting limits not only in principal oversight but also in shaping escalation dynamics and external attribution. As such, the piece shows the continued relevance of principal–agent theory for understanding proxy warfare but highlights the need to revisit plausible deniability as one of its core assumptions under contemporary conflict conditions.

Bibliography

Badawi, Tamer. 2024. Inside story: How Yemen's Houthis dig for strategic depth in Iraq. *Amwaj Media*.

Bank, Andre, and Erik Mohns. 2012. "Syrian Revolt Fallout: End of the Resistance Axis?" *Middle East Policy* 19 (4):25-35

BBC. 2025. Trump warns Iran will face 'dire' consequences unless Houthi attacks stop, 18 March https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyd2l17ygpo

Byman, Daniel, and Sarah E. Kreps. 2010. "Agents of Destruction? Applying Principal-Agent Analysis to State-Sponsored Terrorism." *International Studies Perspectives* 11 (1):1-18. doi: 10.1111/j.1528-3585.2009.00389.x.

Clausen, Maria-Louise. 2015. "Understanding the Crisis in Yemen: Evaluating Competing Narratives." *The International Spectator* 50 (3):16-29. doi: 10.1080/03932729.2015.1053707.

Clausen, Maria-Louise. 2019. "Sectarianisation of a multidimensional conflict: a reply to Durac." *Global Discourse* 9 (4):675-677.

Clausen, Maria-Louise. 2022. "More than a Proxy - The Huthis as a Non-State Actor with a Foreign Policy." In *The Huthi movement in Yemen: ideology, ambition and security in the Arab Gulf*, edited by Abdullah Hamidaddin, 241-260. London, England: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.

Clausen, Maria-Louise. 2026. "Violent Peacemaking: The Violence Within Liberal Peacebuilding." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 20 (3). Ahead-of-print. Doi: 10.1080/17502977.2026.2623686

Cordesman, Anthony H., and Martin Kleiber. 2007. *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat in the Northern Gulf*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International.

Cormac, Rory, and Richard J. Aldrich. 2018. "Grey is the new black: covert action and implausible deniability." *International Affairs* 94 (3):477-494. doi: 10.1093/ia/iiy067.

Esfandiary, Dina, and Ariane Tabatabai. 2016. "Yemen: an Opportunity for Iran–Saudi Dialogue?" *The Washington Quarterly* 39 (2):155-174. doi: 10.1080/0163660X.2016.1204415.

Grauer, Ryan, and Dominic Tierney. 2018. "The Arsenal of Insurrection: Explaining Rising Support for Rebels." *Security Studies* 27 (2):263-295. doi: 10.1080/09636412.2017.1386936.

Groh, Tyrone L. 2019. *Proxy War : The Least Bad Option*. United States of America: Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Juneau, Thomas. 2021. "How War in Yemen Transformed the Iran-Houthi Partnership." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*:1-23. doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2021.1954353.

Hazbun, Waleed. 2026. Israel, the Axis of Resistance, and the Logic of Deterrence, POMEPS Briefings

Karlén, Niklas, and Vladimir Rauta. 2023. "Dealers and Brokers in Civil Wars: Why States Delegate Rebel Support to Conduit Countries." *International Security* 47 (4):107-146. doi: 10.1162/isec_a_00461.

Knights, Michael. 2024. "Assessing the Houthi War Effort Since October 2023." *CTC Sentinel* April 2024:1-20.

Lynch, Marc. 2018. "New Arab World Order." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

Moghadam, Assaf, and Michel Wyss. 2020. "The Political Power of Proxies: Why Nonstate Actors Use Local Surrogates." *International Security* 44 (4):119-157. doi: 10.1162/isec_a_00377.

Mumford, Andrew. 2013. "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict." *The RUSI Journal* 158 (2):40-46. doi: 10.1080/03071847.2013.787733.

Ostovar, Afshon. 2018. "Iran, its clients, and the future of the Middle East: The limits of religion." *International Affairs* 94 (6):1237-1255. doi: 10.1093/ia/iiy185.

Phillips, Christopher, and Morten Valbjørn. 2018. "'What is in a Name?': The Role of (Different) Identities in the Multiple Proxy Wars in Syria." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29 (3):414-433. doi: 10.1080/09592318.2018.1455328.

Pischedda, Costantino, Andrew Cheon, and Sara B. Moller. 2024. "Can you have it both ways? Attribution and plausible deniability in unclaimed coercion." *European Journal of International Security* 9 (4):493-510. doi: 10.1017/eis.2024.14.

Rauta, Vladimir. 2021. "A conceptual critique of remote warfare." *Defence Studies* 21 (4):545-572. doi: 10.1080/14702436.2021.1994398.

Reuters. 2025. Exclusive: Yemen's Houthis won't 'dial down' under US pressure or Iranian appeals, March 18, 2025 https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemens-houthis-wont-dial-down-under-us-pressure-or-iranian-appeals-2025-03-18/

Salehyan, Idean. 2010. "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54 (3):493-515. doi: 10.1177/0022002709357890.

Salehyan, Idean, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham. 2011. "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups." *International Organization* 65 (4):709-744. doi: 10.1017/S0020818311000233.

Still an irreplaceable piece? Reflecting on the limits of Saudi reengagement in Lebanon

Anne Kirstine Rønn, Aarhus University

Within the broader scholarship on Middle Eastern regional politics, a common argument asserts that weak states are likely to remain susceptible to penetration by regional powers seeking dominance (Gause III, 2014; Kamrava et al., 2014). In this context, Lebanon is seen as a central case of a "chronically weak" state (Kamrava et al., 2014), and has been described as an irreplaceable piece for both Saudi Arabia and Iran in their geostrategic competition (Kalout, 2022). For much of the past decade, Iran maintained a clear advantage in the geostrategic rivalry over Lebanon, and Hezbollah's growing influence was widely cited as the main reason that Saudi Arabia disengaged from the small Levantine state, regarding it as a "lost cause," at least in the short term (Moussa, 2017). However, such disengagement did not necessarily challenge the core assumptions about Saudi Arabia's long-term geostrategic interests in Lebanon, which remained a strategically important location for the Kingdom and a central case in the analysis of Saudi-Iranian contestation (Kalout, 2022; Mabon & Wastnidge, 2022). The implicit expectation was that Saudi Arabia would reengage if Iran's influence over Lebanon weakened, or if new opportunities for leverage emerged. Those conditions have come to pass since October 7. With Hezbollah's diminishment following Israel's November 2024 attack, and the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, the traditional logic of weak-state penetration in the MENA region would suggest that Riyadh would seek to reconsolidate its political influence in Lebanon and push for Hezbollah's long-term containment. However, following Hezbollah's weakening, the Kingdom has been reluctant to involve itself in key areas of Lebanon's domestic politics and economic investment. The resumption of war in Lebanon following the attacks on Iran by the US and Israel arguably present constrained Saudi opportunities in these areas. However, it remains relevant to ask whether Riyad's cautious involvement prior to this new round of war warrant a revision of the assumption about Saudi interests in Lebanon. Has Lebanon become less significant as a geostrategic arena for Saudi Arabia, or do current indicators suggest that the underlying logic still holds and that the kingdom is merely returning to the game gradually?

Saudi engagement in Lebanon before and after October 7

Saudi involvement in postwar Lebanon has fluctuated and evolved over time and has relied on several strategies. Riyadh has had a relatively consistent goal of limiting Iran's and Hezbollah's political and military power (Kalout, 2022). After the Lebanese civil war ended in 1990, the Kingdom secured significant influence in the country's economic sphere by providing billions of U.S. dollars for reconstruction and by strengthening its principal ally, Rafik Hariri, who emerged as the leading Sunni political figure until his assassination in 2005. Following the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, the Saudi–Iranian rivalry mirrored the intense divide in the domestic political arena. Saudi Arabia used its economic leverage to bolster the anti-Iran March 14 bloc, led by Rafik Hariri's party, Future Movement, now headed by his son, Saad. Iran backed Hezbollah, whose growing power - particularly after a show of military power in 2008 nearly brought civil war - prompted the Saudis to disengage from Lebanon. In 2016, Riyadh announced the suspension of both a $3 billion grant to the Lebanese Armed Forces and a $1 billion grant to the Internal Security Forces, which Saudi officials described as a direct response to Hezbollah's pervasive influence (Mabon, 2023, p. 179). The same year, Saudi authorities also revoked the residency permits of about 1,000 Lebanese citizens and cancelled the business licenses of 250 Lebanese companies operating in the Kingdom

(Legrenzi & Lawson, 2016). In 2017, Riyadh shockingly detained then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri, effectively forcing him to retreat from political life over his alleged failure to sufficiently pressure Hezbollah and its allies (Kalout, 2022). Finally, in 2021, the Kingdom tightened restrictions on Saudi nationals traveling to Lebanon, withdrew their ambassador,[1] and suspended imports of Lebanese fruit and vegetables, alleging that shipments were being used for drug smuggling (Al Jazeera, 2025).

There are some developments in Saudi-Lebanese relations which suggest that the Kingdom has begun to reengage with Lebanese affairs. On January 23, 2025, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan visited Beirut, becoming the first high-ranking Saudi official to do so since 2010. Two months later, the newly appointed President Joseph Aoun then visited Riyadh and met with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman to "discuss the development of bilateral relations and the preparation of several agreements across various sectors." (L'Orient Today, 2025). Another sign of reengagement has been Riyadh's efforts to pressure the new Lebanese government to implement the so-called "Barrack Paper," aimed at politically sidelining Hezbollah and disarming the group (Kobaissy, 2025). This pressure became apparent in July 2025, when Saudi envoy to Lebanon Prince Yazid bin Farhan held private meetings with Lebanese leaders to prepare the ground for US envoy Tom Barrack's visit (Ghanem, 2025). Bin Farhan's meetings fit the assumption that Hezbollah's weakening would invite Saudi reengagement. However, in the two key areas where Saudi Arabia has traditionally sought influence, domestic politics and economic investment, reengagement has remained limited.

Domestic political interference

If Saudi Arabia wishes to reengage in Lebanon with the aim of curbing Iran's influence in the long term, a viable strategic option would be to cultivate domestic allies to increase pressure on Hezbollah. Some level of Saudi willingness to reengage was evident even before October 7, 2023, as the Kingdom gradually began reactivating relations on the Lebanese political scene. For example, ahead of the 2022 national elections, the Saudi ambassador met with Sunni leaders and allegedly offered financial support to allied politicians (Rabih, 2022). Riyadh exerted pressure on Lebanese lawmakers to elect its preferred candidate, Joseph Aoun, as president in January 2025, and Saudi leadership has since pursued closer dialogue with the new Lebanese officials. Although the 2026 parliamentary elections have been postponed by two years, the period leading up to the election nevertheless served as an indicator of how and whether Saudi Arabia intended to exploit the power vacuum within Lebanon's Sunni community to cultivate domestic allies.

One closely watched candidate is Hariri's Future Movement, the traditional Saudi ally in Beirut. In February 2025, the Future Movement offered itself, at least indirectly, as an ally capable of advancing Saudi interests in Lebanon when its leader, Saad Hariri, relaunched the party after a three-year hiatus. The relaunch likely did not happen without Saudi approval. Still, sources close to Hariri suggest that Saudi leaders may have influenced his decision to withdraw from the municipal vote a few months later (Abi Akl, 2025). This observation, that Riyadh is not yet ready to endorse Hariri's return to political life, has been echoed by several analysts, who suggest that Saudi Arabia may instead be considering alternative actors to advance its interests (Cian Ward, 2025). Such an interpretation would not, in itself, undermine the assumption about Lebanon's continued geostrategic significance for Saudi Arabia. Rather, it would align with the Kingdom's recent tendency to avoid promoting a unified social base or directing all of its resources toward building a single local Sunni political party to counter Tehran's influence (Kalout, 2022).

The question of Saudi engagement in domestic politics became increasingly salient in the wake of the Abu Omar affair, a case in which a Lebanese man impersonated a Saudi royal intermediary to mislead senior Lebanese politicians and business figures with promises of political support, financial leverage, and privileged access in Riyadh (The New Arab, 2025). The affair showcases strong

demand for Saudi support among some Lebanese Sunni stakeholders, but it also raises questions about Saudi willingness to respond to these demands. Shortly after the affair, Saudi envoy, Yazid bin Farhan, made a visit to Beirut, where he met with influential figures from the Sunni community, leading observers to speculate whether Riyadh wants to (re)assert itself as the political leader of the community (Abi Akl, 2026). However, the Abu Omar affair has also created further fragmentation and unpredictability among potential Saudi allies, as it led to the collapse of the National Moderation bloc, the main structured group representing Sunnis in Lebanon's parliament. Consequently, one can ask whether Saudi Arabia's hitherto limited political engagement reflects a lack of interest or a lack of opportunity.

Economic involvement

Lebanon's economy has become extremely fragile in recent years. In the aftermath of destructive Israeli attacks and years of compounded crises, the country faces enormous reconstruction and recovery costs (Bank, 2025). Meanwhile, the Lebanese Armed Forces lack sustainable funding while confronting an expanding range of tasks and responsibilities. The prospects for successful disarmament of Hezbollah are widely seen to hinge on the state's ability to address these challenges (Daher, Zoughaib, & Atallah, 2025). Hence, if Saudi Arabia seeks to push back more forcefully against Hezbollah to limit Iran's influence, Riyadh could choose to lift sanctions, reactivate the military aid it suspended in 2016 and engage actively in reconstruction projects. The Kingdom has taken limited steps in the direction of economic reengagement. Following President Aoun's visit to Riyadh in March 2025, the official Saudi Press Agency reported that the two sides had "agreed to start studying the obstacles facing the resumption of exports from the Lebanese Republic to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the measures necessary to allow Saudi citizens to travel to Lebanon." Later, in November, a delegation from Saudi Arabia participated in the so-called 'Beirut One' investor conference, organized by the Lebanese government. The same month, a senior Saudi official told Reuters that plans were underway to strengthen commercial ties with Lebanon and address the obstacles hindering Lebanese exports (Azhari, 2025). This move followed what Saudi officials described as Lebanese authorities' "effective" efforts to curb drug smuggling to the Kingdom.

So far, however, Riyadh has yet to take concrete steps with regards to lifting travel bans to Lebanon and actively promoting business investment. Moreover, no official sources indicate that Saudi Arabia has concrete plans to resume its $3 billion grant to the Lebanese Army, as requested by Joseph Aoun during his visit to Riyadh in March 2025. With regard to reconstruction, the picture is similar. Notably, the disarmament and investment plans for southern Lebanon presented by U.S. Special Envoy Tom Barrack mention funding from Saudi Arabia (Shaya, 2025). However, it remains unclear how and to what extent this funding will materialize, and it is far from certain that Saudi Arabia will once again commit billions, as it did after the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. All of this does not, in itself, overturn existing assumptions about Lebanon's geostrategic importance for Saudi Arabia. Rather, it remains plausible that the Kingdom views the resumption of economic support for the Lebanese Armed Forces, alongside contributions to reconstruction, as measures better undertaken at a later stage within a longer-term strategy of reengagement. For now, Riyadh may therefore withhold economic engagement as leverage to encourage the Lebanese leadership to pursue Hezbollah's disarmament. Moreover, as argued in an analysis by the Arab Centre in Washington DC from April 2025, Saudi Arabia has "remained cautious, recognizing that Hezbollah's continued presence in Lebanon's government through affiliated ministers highlights the limitations on meaningful change." (Arab Center Washington DC, 2025).

Revising assumptions about Saudi engagement in Lebanon

Altogether, Saudi Arabia's limited reengagement in Lebanon does not unequivocally overturn the assumption that Lebanon remains an irreplaceable geopolitical piece for the Kingdom. It may suggest that Riyadh is tentatively

returning to a more active role in Lebanon as the theory would predict. However, is still too early to gauge the depth of Saudi interest in a long-term return to Lebanon, or the price Riyadh may ultimately be willing to pay for such a return. It is worth noting that Saudi Arabia has chosen not to engage at the level requested and expected by actors within Lebanon and by its Western allies, particularly the United States. This indicates that Saudi Arabia's willingness to engage in Lebanon may be more limited than commonly assumed. Three main explanations help account for this development, each prompting, to varying degrees, a reassessment of our understanding of Saudi interests in Lebanon and other weak states.

The first explanation is that Saudi Arabia has de-prioritized Lebanon in favor of arenas it deems more critical to its regional power competition. In particular, following the fall of Assad, analysts have suggested that Saudi Arabia may be redirecting its attention toward Syria to stabilize the country and counter growing Turkish, Iranian, and Israeli influence. Several analyses emphasize that Riyadh fears Iran would benefit from a destabilized Syria, and that investing in Syria would enable Saudi Arabia to shape a new regional order that prioritizes Arab leadership over Iranian influence (Cafiero, 2025; Calabrese, 2025). So far, the Kingdom has appeared more eager to engage economically in Syria than in Lebanon. In July 2025, it announced investments worth $6.4 billion, a large portion of which is devoted to real estate and infrastructure projects. This, on the one hand, challenges the assumption that Lebanon holds a uniquely special importance for Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, it aligns with the broader assumption that the Kingdom continues to engage in weak states as a means of containing Iranian influence. At the same time, the Lebanese case may also reflect wider shifts in Saudi geostrategic priorities.

A second possible explanation for declining Saudi engagement would be that the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is no longer the primary driver of regional policy in the Middle East. As Hazbun (2019) observes, the emergence of multiple Middle Eastern powers after 2011, each pursuing its own, often competing, ambitions, has meant that the region can no longer be understood as a bipolar system structured around Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Similarly, Valbjørn, Bank, and Darwich (2024) argue that the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia has nearly dissipated, and that Saudi-Iranian rivalry no longer shapes regional political dynamics in the way it once did. Instead, the authors note, Riyadh and Tehran appear to be drawing closer, evidenced by high-level diplomatic exchanges and a Saudi willingness to warn against further escalation in Yemen. Moreover, challenges in Saudi-US relations have prompted the Kingdom to diversify its foreign policy, including pursuing rapprochement with Iran. This rapprochement not only signals a shift in Riyadh's attitude toward Tehran, but also may create conditions for the Kingdom to adopt a less confrontational strategy toward Iran's role in Lebanon.

A third explanation takes its outset at the domestic level. Here, the new Saudi nationalism embodied in Vision 2030 is transforming both the Kingdom's domestic politics and its foreign policy. Whereas Saudi nationalism in the immediate years after 2011 was associated with a confrontational approach toward Iran (Darwich, 2022), more recent nationalist currents are grounded in visions of international partnership, diplomatic initiative, and regional de-escalation. As Ulrichsen (2024) argues, having realized that funding for Vision 2030 and other 'giga-projects' needs to be largely self-generated, Mohammed bin Salman has in recent years placed a premium on 'de-risking' Saudi Arabia from regional instability. In the case of Lebanon, the prioritization of domestic growth has been highlighted as a key reason why Riyadh is unlikely to commit substantial funds to reconstruction as it did in previous eras (C. Ward, 2024). The idea of Saudi First has also found more direct expressions, for instance by the Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz responding to US critique of the OPEC+ production cut in 2022: "I keep listening, are you with us or against us? Is there any room for, 'We are for Saudi Arabia and for the people of Saudi Arabia?'"(Diwan, 2022). Although the comment does not directly relate to Lebanese affairs, it may help explain why Saudi Arabia has so far been reluctant to follow US requests to co-fund Lebanon's reconstruction. Finally, Saudi First sentiments have been evident online, where Saudi groups and users on social media have

expressed general discontent that their country supports the economies of other states in the region rather than prioritizing Saudi growth.

The Kingdom's strategy toward Lebanon is still evolving in the wake of Assad's fall, the weakening of Hezbollah, and the unfolding regional war. While these two developments are decisive for Middle East politics, they may not be the main factors driving a potential shift in Saudi Arabia's geopolitical interests. Rather, the case of Lebanon suggests that to understand the Kingdom's engagement in weak states, we must remain attentive to regional and domestic transformations that were already underway prior to the Gaza war and may have already altered the conditions for Saudi Arabia's role in Lebanon.

Abi Akl, Y. (2025). Municipal elections: In the end, Hariri won't keep his promise. . *L'Orient Today*. Retrieved from https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1456489/municipal-elections-in-the-end-hariri-wont-keep-his-promise.html

Abi Akl, Y. (2026). Riyadh returns to the helm of the Sunni scene in Lebanon. *L'Orient Today*. Retrieved from https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1491988/riyadh-returns-to-the-helm-of-the-sunni-scene-in-lebanon.html

Al Jazeera. (2025). Saudi Arabia to consider resuming Lebanon imports, lifting travel ban. Retrieved from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/4/saudi-arabia-to-consider-resuming-lebanon-imports-lifting-travel-ban

Arab Center Washington DC. (2025). Saudi Arabia's Calculated Re engagement in Syria and Lebanon. Retrieved from https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/saudi-arabias-calculated-re-engagement-in-syria-and-lebanon/

Azhari, T. (2025). Saudi Arabia to bolster trade with Lebanon after drug smuggling curbed. . *Reuters*. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-bolster-trade-with-lebanon-after-drug-smuggling-curbed-2025-11-13/

Bank, W. (2025). Lebanon's recovery and reconstruction needs estimated at US$11 billion. Retrieved from https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/03/07/lebanon-s-recovery-and-reconstruction-needs-estimated-at-us-11-billion

Cafiero, G. (2025). Why Saudi Turkish collaboration in Syria is more likely than a clash. *Amwaj.media*. Retrieved from https://amwaj.media/en/article/why-saudi-turkish-collaboration-in-syria-is-more-likely-than-a-clash

Calabrese, J. (2025). Recasting Syria after Assad: Saudi Arabia's bid to shape a Gulf-led regional order. *AGSI*. Retrieved from https://agsi.org/analysis/recasting-syria-after-assad-saudi-arabias-bid-to-shape-a-gulf-led-regional-order/

Daher, J., Zoughaib, S., & Atallah, S. (2025). Crisis of Lebanese sovereignty: Hezbollah disarmament. *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*. Retrieved from https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/crisis-of-lebanese-sovereignty-hezbollah-disarmament/

Darwich, M. (2022). The view from Riyadh: A neoclassical realist perspective of Saudi foreign policy towards Iran in the post-2011 Middle East. In *Saudi Arabia and Iran* (pp. 14-32): Manchester University Press.

Diwan, K. S. (2022). Saudi Arabia's new nationalist foreign policy. *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*.

Gause III, F. G. (2014). Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East cold war. *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, 11*, 1-27.

Ghanem, V. (2025). Saudi Arabia reasserts role in Lebanon amid international push for Hezbollah disarmament. *The National*. Retrieved from https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2025/07/09/saudi-arabia-reasserts-role-in-lebanon-amid-international-push-for-hezbollah-disarmament/

Hazbun, W. (2019). In America's wake: Turbulence and insecurity in the Middle East. *Shifting global politics and the Middle East, 14*.

Kalout, H. (2022). The irreplaceable piece: Lebanon's strategic value in the Saudi–Iranian foreign policy chessboard. *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 118-140.

Kamrava, M., Schmitz, C., Phillips, S., Esser, D. E., Wehrey, F., Mikaelian, S., . . . Babar, Z. (2014). Fragile politics: Weak states in the greater Middle East.

Kobaissy, T. (2025). Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia's uneasy détente. *The Cradle*. Retrieved from https://thecradle.co/articles/hezbollah-and-saudi-arabias-uneasy-detente

L'Orient Today. (2025). Aoun received by MBS in first foreign trip to Riyadh. Retrieved from https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1450228/aoun-received-by-mbs-in-first-foreign-trip-to-riyadh.html

Legrenzi, M., & Lawson, F. H. (2016). Saudi Arabia Calls Out Hezbollah: Why Now? *Middle East Policy, 23*(2).

Mabon, S. (2023). *The Struggle for Supremacy in the Middle East*: Cambridge University Press.

Mabon, S., & Wastnidge, E. (2022). Conclusion. In S. Mabon & E. Wastnidge (Eds.), *Saudi Arabia and Iran: the struggle to shape the Middle East* (pp. 173-179).

Moussa, N. (2017). Saudi Arabia's (Bad) Options in Lebanon. *Arab Reform Initiative*.

Rabih, M. (2022). Saudi Arabia joins Lebanon's electoral battle head-on. *L'Orient Today*. Retrieved from https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1296860/saudi-arabia-joins-lebanons-electoral-battle-head-on.html

Shaya, P. (2025). The Gulf's return to Lebanon? . *AGSI*.

The New Arab. (2025). How a fake Saudi prince infiltrated Lebanon's political elite. Retrieved from https://www.newarab.com/news/how-fake-saudi-prince-infiltrated-lebanons-political-elite

Ulrichsen, K. C. (2024). Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Search for a Durable, Less Militarized Consensus. *PRISME Initiative*.

Valbjørn, M., Bank, A., & Darwich, M. (2024). Forward to the past? Regional repercussions of the Gaza war. *Middle East Policy, 31*(3), 3-17.

Ward, C. (2024). Who will rebuild Lebanon after Israel's war? *The New Arab*. Retrieved from https://www.newarab.com/analysis/who-will-rebuild-lebanon-after-israels-war

Ward, C. (2025). Prodigal son: Is Saad Hariri making a political comeback in Lebanon? . *The New Arab*. Retrieved from https://www.newarab.com/analysis/saad-hariri-making-political-comeback-lebanon

Endnotes

[1] Saudi Arabia returned its ambassador to Lebanon in April 2022.

External Referents and the Dynamics of Opposition in the MENA

Massimo Ramaioli, Al-Akhawayn University & Francesco Cavatorta, Université Laval in Quebec

November 10, 2025, marked the first ever visit of a Syrian president to Washington as Ahmad al Shar'a, shedding the turban and fatigue attire of the rebel and donning suit and tie, met Donald Trump. This event followed several pledges by the new Syrian Transition Government (STG) to respect minority rights, building an inclusive, secular state, and proceed with the drafting of a new constitution, which would include dispositions for regular free and fair elections. This development may very well be rhetorical posturing, necessary to earn a degree of legitimacy and support from the US. Be that as it may, listening to a former Jihadi fighter speaking the language of constitutional, liberal democracy causes, at the very least, some surprise. The former radical opposition leader promptly embraced a discourse squarely at odds with Salafi ideology, an about-face that can only be partially explained by sheer pragmatism. This prompts a more general question about opposition actors in the region, whether they manage to finally get to power as in the case of *Hay'at Tahrir ash-Sham* (HTS) in Syria or they remain marginalised: what and how do they learn in the face of changing circumstances?

We attempt an answer via two key concepts. We posit MENA as a penetrated region. Second, and based on that, we prime the concept of 'external referent' to elucidate one mechanism whereby penetration occurs. While most of the efforts to rethink Middle Eastern politics since October 7 (in this collection and elsewhere) focus on the international dimension, we argue that it is important to also rethink how those international changes impact domestic politics across the region.

The MENA is often portrayed as a 'penetrated' system more than other areas: international actors and events have here a more substantial impact on the domestic politics of the countries making up the system than anywhere else (Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, 1997). This 'penetration' is not limited solely to great powers' interference in regional interstate relations and domestic politics. Regional actors – state and non-state – also contribute to such high degree of external influence due to the linguistic, religious or tribal connections that exist between groups living under different political authorities. These connections, furthermore, may extend beyond the boundaries of the region itself, however defined.

The assumption of penetration has informed a significant number of studies on how the international dimension shapes domestic political outcomes, ranging from state-making (Yom, 2015) to democratization (Cavatorta, 2009), from public opinion (Lynch, 2007) to support for authoritarian rule (Brownlee, 2012) and from sectarianism (Mathiesen, 2013) to migration (Tsourapas, 2021). In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, this literature also found its way in the work of Heydemann and Leenders (2013), who argued that Arab societies and authoritarian regimes were able to adapt their strategies during and after the uprisings by learning from what the first movers did or did not do at a particular moment in time. Their contribution has opened the door to studies that no longer focused exclusively on the domestic context to explain the adaptative strategies of authoritarian regimes or, conversely, of the opposition to these regimes.

Our essay takes their findings as a starting point to reflect on opposition movements in the MENA. We argue that the international dimension, in the specific configuration of outer penetration of the regional system, influences not only the regimes in power, but also opposition actors. Hence, the domestic context of repression, co-optation or both might not be the sole factor, let alone the decisive one, in determining how opposition actors learn and adapt. This is even more evident in the aftermath of the tragic (such as the war in Gaza), worrisome (fears of regional conflagration), unexpected (as the sudden fall of the Asad

regime in Syria), or potentially seismic (the US-Israeli war with Iran) events that have shaken the region. These events have had significant repercussions throughout the MENA, where regimes have had to adapt to the quickly evolving regional landscape and where opposition movements had to do the same.

These kinds of momentous shifts have occurred in the past as well, and the ways in which they shaped regimes' responses across the region have been analysed in detail (see Keddie, 1992 on the end of the Cold War on regional relations and Darwich, 2016 on the Iran-Iraq war impact on their neighbours). However, less attention has been paid to the impact of such significant events on opposition movements. Currently, most of the regimes in the region are authoritarian or, at best, semi-authoritarian. This fact places opposition formations in a more precarious position as opposed to opposition formations which operate in democratic contexts. But it does not follow that they are not also similarly deeply involved and affected by the dynamics of regional penetration. Rather, given the impact, influence and, in fact, penetration of outer actors and ideas in the vicissitudes and dynamics of the region, opposition actors learn not only through their interactions with authoritarian regimes, but also from key actors outside the country.

Building on the assumptions of penetrability and on the importance of the international dimension, we propose the concept of 'external referent': an actor, situated outside the boundaries of a given state, which serves as an ideological and institutional template for a political force (ruling or in opposition) inside the country (for other dimensions of this dynamic, see Clausen in this collection). It is usually a sovereign country, but any player (such as a party, militia, or movement) capable of offering such a template would fit our definition. The external referent can also provide active or open support (military, financially, logistically). But it does not have to. What is key is that it may be considered a source of inspiration for doing politics.

We illustrate this dynamic in the case of opposition movements. We offer three cases and then present some reflections about its usefulness in the current MENA scenario. The first case is the radical Arab left, specifically communist. The trajectory of Marxist-Leninist parties in the Arab world clearly demonstrates that international events and actors have a decisive influence on how opposition actors react and strategize in their relations with the incumbent regimes. Never in power (at best, members of a loose governing coalition, such as in Iraq in the early 1970s), more often an embattled minority opposition force, their presence has been significant in Arab politics at least throughout the Cold War (Jebari, 2020).

It is crucial to notice the presence and role of an external referent: in this case, the USSR as the sponsor for world communist parties towing Moscow's line. Such an external reference provided key ideological guidance, coupled indeed with material resources, that allowed Arab leftists through much of the Cold War to withstand the significant repression they faced without coming to terms with the incumbent regimes (which often exerted tremendous repression against them). Relations with those regimes only mattered to a limited extent when it came to defend and sustain communism as a political project. As long as the Soviet Union existed and performed the role of external referent, the Arab left – and the communist left elsewhere for that matter – remained true to its ideological outlook and plans.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, these formations sought to accommodate such a demise through a mechanism of *external diffusion* (an involuntary process of adaption spurred by developments outside the domestic theatre). In doing so, they adapted to the extenuating circumstances (marginalization, repression, co-optation) under which they operated. The external change forced a different outlook and a different strategy on these opposition movements. Leftist formations suffered more from the loss of an external referent which supplied crucial ideological coordinates and organizational guidelines (in addition, to be sure, with logistical and financial support) than from domestic constraints. This suggests that an authoritarian context, no matter how restrictive

or repressive (and again, the case of Iraq with extensive purges of the local communists after Saddam came to power is a case in point), has limits in its reach against opposition actors. In the case of the communist left, the external dimension emerges as a crucial mechanism through which the opposition 'learned' in reaction to what occurred outside and not solely to what occurred inside the country.

The logic of the external referent also applies to Shi'a Islamist formations across the region. The successful Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 played the role of an external reference for a host of groups. Notably, the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon in the early 1980s, or Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq in Iraq in the mid-2010s, represent in fact formations making the *velayat-e faqih,* the principle of the guardianship of the jurists that underpins the Islamic Republic, their key ideological tenet, too. This is not of course to dismiss the financial support, military equipment and training they receive from Teheran. What is key here, however, is the Islamic Republic *qua* a political template they can latch on to. Their prominence as opposition forces in Lebanese and Iraqi politics, and the fundamental incapacity of either government to disarm their military wings, owes just as much to Teheran's unrelenting support as it does to its ideological example.

However, the *velayat-e faqih* have hardly played the same role in a Sunni context. Considering the Islamic Republic as an external referent for Shi'a Islamist forces highlights by contrast the overall trajectory of Islamism in the region. Iran did seek to represent an international template for a specific kind (Islamic) of revolutionary state in ways not dissimilar from the USSR (Walt, 1996). But only some Islamist actors accepted the Iranian proposition. The vast majority, stemming from either the Muslim Brotherhood tradition or various permutations of Salafism, never considered Teheran as a viable (or even acceptable) example to follow. In Tunisia, for instance, Ennahda historic leader Rachid Ghannouchi initially expressed sympathies for the Iranian Revolution, hailing it as a major inspirational example – but he quickly abandoned that position (in 1984). After the fall of Ben Ali in 2011, Ennahda increasingly talked the language of liberal democratic principles and rejected Iran as any sort of external referent. Repression and co-optation by the regime under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, or alliances, deals and contrasts with other political parties and social forces after 2011, would represent the privileged locus of analysis.

The recent, dramatic events in Syria also point in this direction. An avowedly Salafi-Jihadist movement, HTS overthrew the Baathist regime in December 2024. Some have questioned whether HTS may still be considered a Salafi-Jihadi formation (Haenni and Drevon, 2025). Ensconced in Damascus, it has seemingly forfeited most of its erstwhile uncompromising ideological positions. The lack of a clear, viable and internationally legitimate template for Islamic (much less Salafi-Jihadi) governance has prodded the STG to fly to America as opposed fighting it, nodding to the US and its liberal democratic norms as a possible external referent.

The recent regional upheaval has not undermined the assumption of the penetrability of the regional system: rather, it has underlined the relevance of the international dimension in shaping domestic politics and, in the cases presented here, the influence on domestic opposition actors. Some of the cases presented here suggest also a further significant and somewhat paradoxical point when it comes to democratic norms diffusion and adoption. Across the globe, democracy is under considerable pressure. It is backsliding in established western democracies for its inability to deliver what citizens expect. Authoritarian rule is increasingly attractive, particularly among younger cohorts of citizens who do not seem to see the benefits of liberal democracy. Democratization also seems to be off the agenda in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries. In fact, indicators suggest that not only semi-authoritarian countries are regressing towards full autocracy, but a process of further autocratization is taking place in established authoritarian regimes (Cassani and Tomini, 2019).

The dynamics of opposition movements in the MENA region that we have presented here seem to manifest an interesting, and somewhat confounding, trend. The momentous shifts that have affected opposition actors in the region have led such actors to embrace, or at least to make overtures towards, the discourse and practice of liberal democracy. In the past, when the communist and socialist left railed against authoritarian rule in the region, it did so in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It certainly did not preach for the establishment of a liberal democratic system based on elections and individual civil and political rights. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Marxist-Leninist parties quickly embraced the fundamental traits of hitherto despised 'bourgeois democracies' and made them their own, emphasizing the necessity of elected officials around liberal principles.

When the Islamist project floundered under the weight of widespread violence and evolutionary failure, Muslim Brotherhood-inspired movements and parties like Ennahda or the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development replaced the notion of an Islamist state with the one of a civil state, embracing political pluralism and manifesting increasing secular dispositions. Ghannouchi has been, in this sense, one of the most articulate voices supporting an ideological transition from an Islamic to a civil (*madaniy*) state. Conversations about post-Islamism (Bayat, 2013 and Roy, 2004) reflect this trend. Even in the face of post-uprisings authoritarian retrenchment with Kais Saied, when Ennahda was marginalized from the power acquired through elections, it did not react by turning to violence but insisted for the return to electoral legitimacy as did the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

This process occurred even for battle-hardened and violent jihadis. The doomed political experiences of governance of kin formations like Al Qaeda in Yemen and the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (Furlan, 2025) has prompted HTS-STG to steer away from such a model of governance. As briefly mentioned before, it has started in fact 'to talk the talk' of liberal democracy. Even when faced with an Israeli invasion over the Golan Heights, and direct interference in its domestic affairs regarding the Syrian Druze community, the new regime has demonstrated a surprising commitment to restraint and moderation in both rhetoric and practice – certainly not a sufficient condition for liberal democratic governance, but certainly an encouraging sign of abandonment of earlier ideological radicalism.

In other words, regardless of their provenance (Marxism-Leninism, Islamism, even Salafi-Jihadism), movements in opposition have all progressively shed their ideological radicalism. Erstwhile external referents that may have guided or inspired steadfast anti-systemic courses of action have gradually lost their capacity to represent viable templates of political action. In the cases we have examined – the Arab Communist Left, Islamist Ennahda, and Jihadi HTS – a turn towards what may be regarded as moderation, at different stages, in different modalities and in different contexts, can clearly be detected.

This ideological moderation on the heels of withering external referents suggests two additional considerations, only *prima facie* at odds with one another. First, this process has entailed at the very least the rhetorical adoption of some of the principles of liberal democracy, in particular the combination of civil and social rights, a degree of political pluralism, and some version of government accountability (though not necessarily or immediately via the electoral process). This is all the more remarkable given how staunchly anti-western and relatedly anti-liberal democracy all these movements have historically been.

Second, this turn to liberal democracy is itself an appeal to an external referent which can wither. In other words, we are in no position to declare that History, after all, is really over. The adoption of liberal democracy is at least rhetorical: but it may not be much more than that. It is not so much that this template, this external referent, has proven its viability. Rather, nothing else has really emerged as an appealing alternative for guiding the politics of opposition movements writ large. Russian traditionalist authoritarianism or Chinese one-party rule may work for those in power, not for those trying to gain it. Dubai

hedonistic and authoritarian capitalism may have better chances, but it is not hailed yet as such an inspiring political template and might have very limited application in larger countries with no energy riches. All the while, one may well notice Al-Shar'a's conciliatory statements towards minorities while remaining sceptical whether Syria will develop anything resembling a liberal democracy. We may in fact be witnessing a transition in the region that ominously resembles a systemic crisis: with Gramsci, we say that "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

References

Bayat, A. (2013). *Post-Islamism: the many faces of Political Islam*. Oxford University Press.

Brownlee, J. (2012). *Democracy prevention: the politics of the US-Egyptian alliance*. Cambridge University Press.

Cassani, A. and Tomini, L. (2019) Post-Cold War autocratization: trends and patterns of regime change opposite to democratization. Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica. 2019;49(2):121-138.

Cavatorta, F (2009) *The international dimension of the failed Algerian transition*. Manchester University Press.

Darwich, M. (2016). Ideational and material force in threat perception: the divergent cases of Syria and Saudi Arabia during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1(2): 142-156.

Haenni, P. and Drevon, J. (2025). *Transformed by the people*. Hurst.

Ehteshami, A and Hinnebusch, R (1997). *Syria and Iran: middle powers in a penetrated regional system*. Routledge.

Furlan, M. (2025) *Inside Salafi-Jihadi Governance*. Columbia University Press.

Heydemann, S. and Leenders, R. (2013). Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the 'Arab Awakening. In Agathangelou, A. and Soguk, N. (eds.) *Arab Revolutions and World Transformations*. Routledge

Jebari, I. (2020). The rise and fall of the Arab left. In Cavatorta, F., Storm, L. and Resta, V. (eds) *Handbook on political parties in the Middle East and North Africa*. Routledge.

Keddie, N. (1992). The End of the Cold War and the Middle East. *Diplomatic History* 16(1): 95–103.

Lynch, M. (2007). *Voices of the new Arab public*. Columbia University Press.

Mampilly, Z. (2012). *Rebel rulers: insurgent governance and civilian life during war.* Cornell University Press.

Mathiesen, T. (2013). *Sectarian Gulf*. Stanford University Press.

Roy, O. (2004). *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. Columbia University Press.

Tsourapas, G. (2021) *Migration diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa*. Manchester University Press.

Yom, S. (2015). *From resilience to revolution: how foreign interventions destabilize the Middle East*. Columbia University Press.

Walt, S. (1996). *Revolution and war*. Cornell University Press.

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.