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Strategic Transformations in the Middle East: From Alliance Disintegration to the Redrawing of Power Equations

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Abstract

Objectives: This study provides a comprehensive and critical analysis of the strategic transformations reshaping the Middle East over the past decade. It examines the disintegration of traditional alliances, the emergence of new regional and international dynamics, and the evolving balance of power—focusing on internal transformations, foreign interventions, non-state actors, and socio-economic shifts.

Methods: A multidisciplinary analytical framework integrating comparative geopolitics with regional political economy was adopted. The study draws on qualitative data, academic literature, and policy reports to analyze ten thematic areas, including regime collapse, foreign military presence, sectarian resurgence, and the rise of subnational actors.

Results: The findings reveal a region in flux, marked by state fragmentation, the decline of traditional power centers, and the rise of agile middle powers such as Turkey and Qatar. Iran's diminishing influence in Syria and Lebanon has created a strategic vacuum, while Israel contends with internal political instability. Non-state actors have gained prominence, and economic collapse in countries like Lebanon and Syria has deepened regional disorder. Concurrently, emerging alliances involving Iran, Russia, and China are challenging Western dominance, contributing to complex and shifting alignments.

Conclusions: The study concludes that regional stability increasingly depends on redefining state legitimacy, repairing fractured social contracts, and promoting inclusive governance. Navigating this fluid multipolar environment requires adaptive strategies, cross-border collaboration, and equitable political frameworks.

Keywords: Strategic realignment, Non-state actors, Middle East geopolitics, Sectarian fragmentation

التحولات الاستراتيجية في الشرق الأوسط : من تفكك التحالفات إلى إعادة رسم معادلات القوة

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ملخّص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم تحليل شامل ونقدي للتحولات الاستراتيجية التي أعادت تشكيل الشرق الأوسط خلال العقد الماضي. وتتناول الدراسة التغيرات في موازين القوى، وتراجع التحالفات التقليدية، وظهور ديناميكيات إقليمية ودولية جديدة، مع تركيز خاص على التحولات الداخلية، والتدخلات الخارجية، وصعود الفواعل غير الدولتية، إضافة إلى التغيرات الاقتصادية والديموغرافية.

المنهجية: تعتمد الدراسة إطارًا تحليليًا متعدد التخصصات يدمج بين الجيوبوليتيكا المقارنة والاقتصاد السياسي الإقليمي. وتستند إلى بيانات نوعية، وأدبيات أكاديمية حديثة، وتقارير سياساتية لتحليل عشرة محاور رئيسية، تشمل انهيار الأنظمة، والوجود العسكري الأجنبي، وصعود الطائفية، وصعود الفاعلين السياسيين دون الدولة. وتركز المنهجية على فهم شامل ومحايد لكل من المحركات البنيوية والطارئة للتغيير.

النتائج: تُظهر نتائج الدراسة أن الشرق الأوسط يمر بمرحلة انتقالية غير مسبوقة تتسم بتفكك النظام الدولتي، وتآكل مراكز القوة التقليدية، وصعود قوى متوسطة أكثر مرونة مثل تركيا وقطر. وقد أدى تراجع النفوذ الإيراني في سوريا ولبنان إلى إحداث فراغ استراتيجي، بينما تواجه إسرائيل حالة من الاضطراب السياسي الداخلي. كما ازداد نفوذ الفواعل غير الدولتية، وساهم الانهيار الاقتصادي في دول مثل لبنان وسوريا في تعميق حالة عدم الاستقرار. في المقابل، تسعى تحالفات ناشئة بين إيران وروسيا والصين إلى تحدي الهيمنة الغربية، مما يزيد من تعقيد المشهد الإقليمي.

الخلاصة: تشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن استقرار الشرق الأوسط لم يعد يعتمد فقط على القوة الصلبة أو التسويات السياسية الفوقية، بل بات مرهونًا بشكل متزايد بإعادة تعريف شرعية الدولة، وإعادة بناء العقود الاجتماعية المتصدعة، وتعزيز نماذج الحوكمة الشاملة. وسيُشكّل مستقبل المنطقة من خلال قدرتها على التكيف مع نظام دولي متعدد الأقطاب، من خلال استراتيجيات مرنة، وتنسيق عابر للحدود، وأطر سياسية عادلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إعادة الاصطفاف الاستراتيجي، الفواعل غير الدولتية، الجيوبوليتيك الشرق أوسطي، التفكك الطائفي

I. Introduction

In recent years, the Middle East has experienced a series of unprecedented strategic transformations that have significantly reshaped regional power dynamics and redefined the architecture of influence and alliances. These changes have been driven by a complex interplay of internal and external factors, including the collapse of established political regimes, the rise of non-state and non-traditional actors, and the decline of traditional regional powers. Simultaneously, new regional players have emerged, aiming to recalibrate the balance of power and redefine the contours of regional influence. These developments have been further complicated by the intensification of ethnic, sectarian, and religious fault lines, alongside growing international involvement through both direct military engagement and indirect political and economic mechanisms (Gause, 2022; Hinnebusch, 2006).

One of the most pivotal developments has been the fall of the traditional Syrian regime and the rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, led by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, also known as Ahmad al-Shar'a. This marked a radical shift in the Levantine balance of power, effectively pushing Iran out of Syria and significantly reducing its strategic reach in the region. The decline of Iranian influence has had profound ramifications in Lebanon, particularly with the political and military contraction of Hezbollah, which has traditionally relied on Tehran's logistical and financial support. Meanwhile, regional actors such as Turkey and Qatar have moved swiftly to fill the vacuum, expanding their influence within a newly restructured Syrian landscape (Valbjørn et al., 2024).

Simultaneously, countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, and the Gulf States have experienced varying degrees of domestic transformation, ranging from relative stability to profound structural crises. The rise of ethnic and sectarian minorities as influential political agents—such as the Kurds in Iraq and Syria, the Shi'a in the Gulf, and the Druze in Lebanon—has further contributed to the fragmentation of the regional order and posed renewed challenges to the nation-state model, identity politics, and representative governance (Makdisi, 2019; Dodge, 2013).

These shifts have also redefined the strategic weight of regional states. Turkey and Qatar have asserted themselves as agile diplomatic and political actors, while traditional powers such as Syria and Iran have seen their regional roles diminish (The Guardian, 2024). Notably, a new axis of cooperation has emerged among Iran, Russia, and China, seeking to counterbalance Western influence through security coordination and long-term economic partnerships (Kozhanov, 2016).

Foreign military presence has expanded markedly, with the United States, Russia, and Turkey solidifying their military footprints across Syria, Iraq, and the broader Gulf region. This has entrenched the Middle East as a theater for global competition, raising critical questions about sovereignty and the future of regional equilibrium (Amina, 2024). Additionally, the growing prominence of non-state actors—including militias, private security firms, and transnational armed groups—has challenged state authority and contributed to the normalization of "parallel governance," wherein security is traded for political allegiance (Lister, 2015).

In tandem, the region continues to grapple with profound economic crises, particularly in Lebanon and Syria, where state collapse and humanitarian disasters have undermined social cohesion and exacerbated insecurity. Gulf States are increasingly expected to shoulder the financial burden of reconstruction, though such commitments may strain their domestic priorities and long-term economic reform agendas (Cammett & Diwan, 2013)

Even Israel, traditionally seen as a bastion of stability, is facing an escalating internal crisis characterized by sharp political polarization, declining public trust in institutions, and mass mobilizations against judicial reforms. These developments underscore a broader erosion of political consensus and pose long-term risks to its internal cohesion and strategic posture (Pedahzur, 2012).

Meanwhile, the region has seen renewed proposals for the forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank—moves that threaten to destabilize the region further and contravene international law. The resurgence of sectarian tensions in Iraq, Lebanon, and other states, driven by regional rivalries and proxy dynamics, has amplified internal fragmentation and weakened prospects for national reconciliation.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of the strategic transformations that have unfolded in the Middle East over the past decade. It examines the political, economic, and security dimensions of

these changes, analyzing how they have affected the regional order and the stability of the state system. The study is organized around ten core themes: internal transformations in key states (Syria, Lebanon, and the Gulf); shifts in strategic power balances; foreign military interventions; the rise of non-state actors; economic collapse and reconstruction; emerging global alignments (Iran-Russia-China); the Israeli political crisis; demographic engineering and forced displacement of Palestinians; resurgence of sectarianism; and the role of subnational cultural and identity groups.

This study employs a multidisciplinary analytical approach, integrating comparative geopolitics with regional political economy, and draws on authoritative sources and current scholarship. Its goal is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the structural and contingent drivers of instability and transformation in the region, offering insights for scholars, policymakers, and regional stakeholders seeking to navigate the complexities of a rapidly evolving Middle Eastern landscape.

II. Theoretical Framework Components

II.1. Research Problem

The Middle East is undergoing a period of profound and unprecedented strategic transformation. Traditional alliances are fragmenting, state authority is eroding, and the region is witnessing the rise of new state and non-state actors operating within an increasingly multipolar and contested global order. These changes are not merely episodic but indicative of a deeper structural reordering of regional power dynamics, marked by shifting military alignments, economic collapse in key states, ideological fragmentation, and intensified foreign intervention.

This study seeks to answer the central research question:

How have political, security and economic transformations reshaped regional power balances in the Middle East, and what implications do these changes have for state and non-state actors in shaping the region's future?

II.2. Key Concepts and Definitions

Strategic Transformation: A fundamental and systemic shift in regional power configurations involving realignment of influence, restructuring of alliances, and redefinition of state and actor roles within the geopolitical landscape.

Non-State Actors (NSAs): Armed militias, transnational movements, private military companies, and other non-governmental entities that have assumed significant roles in governance, security provision, and regional diplomacy.

Sectarian Fragmentation: The intensification of identity-based divisions—especially along ethnic or religious lines—that undermines national unity and challenges the legitimacy and coherence of state institutions.

Multipolar Alliances: Emerging coalitions, most notably among Iran, Russia, and China, that seek to counterbalance Western influence and reshape global and regional power structures through alternative frameworks of cooperation.

II.3. Significance of the Study

Theoretical Contribution: This study makes a significant contribution to the literature on geopolitical transformation by providing a multidimensional and interdisciplinary analysis of political, economic, and identity-based shifts in the Middle East. It expands the theoretical understanding of state decay, alliance fluidity, and regional reconfiguration.

Practical Implications: The study provides actionable insights for policymakers, international organizations, and regional stakeholders. It provides a strategic framework for navigating emerging threats, mitigating instability, and designing governance models responsive to the realities of power diffusion and societal fragmentation.

II.4. Methodology

II.4.1, Research Design

The study follows a theory-informed, exploratory qualitative design rooted in comparative geopolitics and regional political economy. It draws on the principles of critical security studies to understand how both state and non-state actors navigate power vacuums and shifting alliances.

II.4.2, Data Sources and Materials

The research relies exclusively on secondary qualitative data, ensuring analytical rigor through triangulation of**:**

Peer-reviewed academic literature

Policy briefs and think tank publications (e.g., Chatham House, Carnegie, RAND)

Reports from multilateral bodies (e.g., UN, Arab League)

Media analysis and expert commentary from regional and international sources

Official statements from governments and armed non-state entities

This dataset supports a rich, layered interpretation of trends, actors, and turning points over the past decade.

II.5. Scope and Limitations

The geographic focus includes Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, the Gulf States, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Israel, with a temporal scope extending from 2011 to 2024. The study does not incorporate fieldwork or primary interview data and is therefore limited to publicly available, documented sources. While this enables broad thematic coverage, it may overlook nuanced grassroots perspectives not captured in formal publications.

II.6. Research Questions

What are the principal strategic transformations reshaping the Middle East's

In what ways have non-state actors, foreign military interventions, and emerging powers—such as Turkey and Qatar—altered the distribution of influence and the foundations of national sovereignty in the region?

How have prolonged economic crises and reconstruction challenges, particularly in Syria and Lebanon, intersected with broader geopolitical realignments, such as the Iran–Russia–China alliance?

How can models of governance in the Middle East evolve to address sectarian fragmentation and identity pluralism while preserving national cohesion and inclusive legitimacy?

III. Internal Transformations in Key Regional States

.III.1. Syria: The Collapse of the Regime and the Rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

Syria has undergone a profound political transformation following the collapse of the Assad regime and the ascendancy of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) under the leadership of Ahmad al-Shar'a. This development represents a pivotal turning point in Syria's contemporary political history, reshaping both its domestic power structures and its regional alignments. One of the most significant outcomes of this transformation has been the severance of Syria's longstanding strategic alliance with Iran, which for decades constituted a cornerstone of Iran's regional influence. The termination of Iran's military and security presence in Syria marks a strategic setback for Tehran's ambitions in the Levant (Mabon, 2023).

The emergence of a Salafi-jihadist entity such as HTS as the dominant power in Damascus has triggered considerable concern both regionally and internationally. The group's ideological orientation has raised alarms about the resurgence of extremist movements, prompting key international actors—such as Russia and the United States—and regional players to reassess their strategies vis-à-vis Syria and consider cautious and indirect forms of diplomatic engagement (Drevon, J.2024)

The decline of Iran's influence has also prompted a realignment of regional alliances, providing states like Turkey and Qatar with new opportunities to expand their influence in the Syrian arena. Syria now stands at the threshold of a new political era, with implications that could reverberate across the Middle East and significantly alter the regional stability dynamics (Phillips, 2016). This observation aligns with Bani Salameh's (2021, 2024) analysis, which situates Turkey and Iran at the heart of strategic hydro-political competition in the region, reshaping influence through infrastructure and resource leverage.

III.2. Lebanon: The Decline of Hezbollah and the Shifting Balance of Power

Following Iran's withdrawal from Syria and the resulting contraction of its regional presence, Hezbollah—Tehran's primary military and ideological proxy in Lebanon—has experienced a notable reduction in its political and operational capacity. Once bolstered by sustained Iranian financial and logistical support, Hezbollah now faces mounting challenges

as its influence wanes (Akbarzadeh, 2025).

This decline has created a relative power vacuum, allowing traditional political actors, such as the Free Patriotic Movement and the Amal Movement, to reassert their presence within Lebanon's fragmented political landscape. Moreover, the ongoing economic collapse, deteriorating public services, and widespread societal discontent have further eroded Hezbollah's popular support, especially among its core constituencies (Akbarzadeh, 2025).

In this shifting context, Hezbollah is compelled to reassess its internal strategy, recalibrate its alliances, and adapt to an increasingly competitive political environment, one that no longer relies on the external support that once underpinned its dominance. These developments suggest a broader reconfiguration of Lebanon's internal power dynamics in light of regional transformations.

The persistence of entrenched elite networks in Lebanon and Iraq mirrors patterns observed in Jordan, where deep state dynamics complicate democratic transformation (Bani Salameh et al., 2023).

III.3. The Gulf States: Divergent Approaches to the Muslim Brotherhood

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries exhibit a marked divergence in their stances toward the Muslim Brotherhood, reflecting varied domestic political priorities, security concerns, and regional alliances. These positions can be categorized into four main approaches: antagonistic, cautious, accommodative, and supportive.

The antagonistic stance is most strongly represented by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, both of which perceive the Brotherhood as a fundamental threat to domestic stability. These states associate the movement’s ideology with broader Islamist political activism that could undermine existing political structures. Consequently, they have outlawed the group domestically and pushed for a regional consensus against its legitimacy (Salameh, 2019).

By contrast, Kuwait and Oman adopt a more accommodating approach, marked by the legal recognition of the group's political participation—particularly in Kuwait's parliamentary system—and an emphasis on maintaining a neutral stance in regional disputes. Saudi Arabia, for its part, maintains a cautious stance. While it has officially designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, its actual policy has fluctuated by broader geopolitical dynamics and temporary strategic alliances with Islamist actors (Al-Jaber & Ulrichsen, 2021).

At the other end of the spectrum, Qatar has maintained a supportive position, offering political and media platforms to Brotherhood-affiliated figures. This policy has intensified diplomatic rifts within the GCC, particularly during the Gulf crisis (2017–2021), and underscored the fragmented nature of intra-GCC consensus on political Islam (Roberts, 2014).

This divergence highlights the lack of a unified regional vision regarding political Islam and reflects the broader fragmentation of the GCC's strategic outlook in a rapidly evolving regional context.

III.4. Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq: Relative Stability amid Limited Strategic Shifts

Despite the seismic shifts affecting the broader region, countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq have maintained a relative degree of political and institutional continuity. Nevertheless, their trajectories remain vulnerable to both internal pressures and external disruptions.

In Turkey, the decision to withdraw its ambassador from Israel in response to renewed violence in Gaza highlights the enduring volatility of its foreign policy. While Ankara has periodically pursued normalization with Israel, such moves continue to be shaped by domestic political calculations and broader ideological currents rather than reflecting a fundamental strategic realignment (FUTÁK-CAMPBELL & de SAUVAGE NOLTING, 2022).

Iran, meanwhile, has seen its regional influence diminish—particularly after its exit from Syria—but this retrenchment has not yet precipitated significant changes in the Iraqi political order. Iraq remains mired in a complex interplay of internal and external actors, with a tenuous balance between Iranian-backed factions and nationalist political movements (Radpey, 2025).

Egypt, for its part, has largely insulated itself from the convulsions gripping neighboring states. By maintaining a relatively stable domestic front and adopting a pragmatic, security-driven foreign policy, Cairo continues to position itself

as a stabilizing force in the region (Csicsmann & Rózsa, 2022).

Taken together, these cases illustrate that while regional turbulence has spared no country entirely, its impact remains uneven, and some states have managed to preserve a degree of equilibrium by leveraging internal cohesion and strategic neutrality.

IV. Shifts in the Strategic Weight of Regional Powers

In recent years, the Middle East has experienced significant strategic transformations in the regional balance of power. These changes have directly influenced the positions of several states in both regional and international arenas. A closer analysis reveals a distinct trend: while some states have emerged as increasingly influential actors, others—historically central to the regional power equation—have seen their influence decline markedly.

First, Turkey's expanding regional role has become one of the defining features of this period. Ankara has adopted a proactive and flexible foreign policy, positioning itself as a key player in several critical files. In the Palestinian context, Turkey has consistently taken assertive diplomatic and humanitarian stances in support of Gaza. It has also engaged militarily in northern Syria, aiming to establish buffer zones and prevent the formation of a Kurdish autonomous region along its border. In Libya, Turkey has supported the internationally recognized government in Tripoli with military assistance, thereby enhancing its geopolitical leverage in North Africa (Salameh, 2025). Turkish operations in northern Iraq against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) further illustrate Ankara's commitment to maintaining strategic depth in its immediate periphery (Okuducu, 2024).

Second, both Iran and Syria have witnessed a relative decline in their regional influence. Iran's withdrawal from Syria, following shifts in internal alliances and mounting domestic pressures, has reduced its capacity to shape events in the Levant. Concurrently, Syria has evolved into a fragmented state, no longer firmly aligned with traditional regional blocs. Local actors now dominate Syria's political landscape, leading to a recalibration of regional power dynamics.

Third, the influence of the so-called "Axis of Resistance" in Iraq has diminished, especially as armed groups aligned with Iran, such as elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), have lost traction amid growing friction with the Iraqi state and competing Shiite factions like the Sadrist Movement. This fragmentation has weakened their ability to impose political agendas and has opened space for more nationally focused political movements (Dodge, 2013).

Fourth, Qatar and Egypt have expanded their diplomatic influence in the region, particularly in managing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Qatar, through its diplomatic channels and influential media networks, has positioned itself as a key mediator and voice for the people of Gaza. At the same time, Egypt has leveraged its longstanding security relationships with both Israel and Palestinian factions to broker ceasefires and prisoner exchanges. These diplomatic efforts have reestablished both countries as credible intermediaries in complex regional crises. Similar hedging behavior is seen in Kuwait, which maintains strategic autonomy by balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Bani Salameh, 2024), exemplifying the nuanced recalibration of alliances in the Gulf. As traditional powers falter, a new cadre of regional actors has stepped forward, determined to recalibrate the balance of power through strategic flexibility and multifaceted engagement. Kuwait stands out as a compelling example—its carefully calibrated hedging strategy between Iran and Saudi Arabia demonstrates how smaller Gulf states are leveraging diplomatic nuance to maintain sovereignty and maneuver within a polarized regional environment (Bani Salameh & Mubaideen, 2024).

Collectively, these developments indicate that strategic influence in the Middle East is no longer solely anchored in military might or economic weight. Instead, it increasingly hinges on foreign policy adaptability, deft conflict mediation, and the capacity to forge dynamic, cross-cutting alliances amid an ever-shifting geopolitical terrain.

V. The Expansion of Foreign Military Presence in the Middle East

The last decade has witnessed a sharp increase in the presence of foreign military forces across the Middle East, driven by intensifying regional conflicts and the region's centrality to global geopolitical calculations. Countries such as the United States, Russia, France, Iran, and Turkey have all deepened their military engagements—either directly through bases and deployments or indirectly via proxy forces and security partnerships. According to Hayajneh and Bani Salameh (2023), this

military expansion is symptomatic of an ongoing struggle for regional hegemony between Turkey and Iran, particularly in the context of Gulf security arrangements and the broader contest for influence (Hayajneh & Bani Salameh, 2023).

The United States remains the most entrenched foreign power, maintaining military bases in the Gulf, Iraq, and Syria. Washington continues to emphasize its commitment to regional security, especially amid rising threats from Iranian proxies and extremist groups. U.S. policy also aims to counterbalance Russian and Iranian influence by strengthening ties with traditional allies in the region (Gause, 2022).

France, meanwhile, has extended its military footprint in North Africa and the Sahel, as well as in Lebanon and Iraq. Drawing on historical ties and strategic interests, Paris seeks to assert itself as an autonomous international actor with a unique role in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern security affairs.

Russia has significantly expanded its military presence since 2015, most notably in Syria. Moscow's intervention has been critical to the survival of the Assad regime. It has enabled Russia to secure strategic military installations in the eastern Mediterranean, thereby challenging Western dominance in the region (Kozhanov, 2021).

Iran, though lacking formal bases, wields military influence through an extensive network of non-state actors and militias in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. By investing in the so-called Axis of Resistance, Tehran aims to enhance its deterrence capabilities and utilize its regional proxies for strategic depth and diplomatic advantage (Mabon, 2023).

Turkey has pursued an expansionist security policy, establishing military bases in northern Syria and Iraq and maintaining a permanent military presence in Qatar and Somalia. Its military intervention in Libya further signals Ankara's ambition to restore its influence as a regional hegemon. (Koktsidis, 2024).

This surge in foreign military presence has transformed the Middle East into a competitive arena for international influence, raising urgent questions about national sovereignty, regional stability, and the prospects for long-term peace. Rather than fostering stability, the overlapping interventions often serve to entrench conflict, necessitating renewed efforts to develop inclusive, multilateral, regional security frameworks as alternatives to militarized competition.

VI. The Rise of Non-State Actors in Regional Security and Governance

In recent years, the nature of actors shaping regional security and political dynamics in the Middle East has undergone a significant transformation. Non-state actors (NSAs)—including armed militias, private military companies (PMCs), transnational ideological movements, and border-transcending armed groups—have emerged as pivotal forces in conflict zones, often assuming roles traditionally held by the state. This trend reflects the erosion of central authority in several countries and the emergence of hybrid governance models that operate outside constitutional frameworks (Lister, 2015; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2025).

In Syria, Libya, and Yemen, NSAs have effectively assumed control over large swathes of territory, managing security, extracting natural resources, and enforcing governance structures that lack formal legitimacy. In Libya, various militias control strategic cities and oil infrastructure, competing for power within a fractured political environment (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2025). In Yemen, the Houthi movement has established de facto governance in the north, leveraging external support—particularly from Iran—and a robust paramilitary infrastructure. In Syria, the landscape is characterized by a mosaic of armed factions, many of which are backed by regional or global powers, resulting in a fragmented and externally influenced security order (Phillips, 2016).

Private military companies have also gained prominence, acting as substitutes for state security forces in environments characterized by instability or institutional collapse. These firms, often contracted by foreign governments or local authorities, operate in legal gray zones and wield substantial influence in shaping the balance of power within conflict-affected territories (Kinsey**,** 2009).

The implications of this shift are profound. First, it challenges the very foundation of national sovereignty, as the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force is eroded by actors unaccountable to formal institutions. Second, these NSAs create parallel power structures, offering protection and services in exchange for loyalty or ideological alignment, thereby deepening state fragility and fueling fragmentation. Third, their transnational affiliations often render them proxies in larger

geopolitical struggles, prolonging conflicts and obstructing peacebuilding initiatives (Mabon, 2023; Berti, 2020).

Collectively, the rise of NSAs represents a fundamental challenge to the Westphalian state model in the Middle East. It necessitates a reevaluation of state-building strategies and the promotion of inclusive governance frameworks that acknowledge local realities while upholding institutional legitimacy. Without such efforts, the region risks entrenching a post-state security order that undermines long-term stability.

VII. Economic Transformations in the Middle East: Deepening Collapse and the Challenge of Reconstruction

The Middle East has undergone significant economic transformations over the past decade, primarily driven by political instability and armed conflicts. Two countries—Syria and Lebanon—offer stark examples of economic collapse, revealing the multidimensional nature of the region's financial and developmental crises and highlighting the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction.

In Syria, the civil war, which began in 2011, has decimated the country's infrastructure and led to the collapse of formal economic institutions. A shadow economy based on smuggling, patronage networks, and informal trade has taken hold. The withdrawal of Iranian support, which had previously propped up key state sectors, exacerbated the crisis, leading to fuel shortages, hyperinflation, and a steep decline in public sector functionality (Cammett & Diwan, 2013). As the Syrian regime struggles to reassert control over economic management, the country has descended further into monetary instability and widespread poverty.

In Lebanon, a confluence of systemic corruption, political paralysis, overreliance on remittances, and exposure to the Syrian conflict has triggered an economic freefall. The 2020 Beirut port explosion, the collapse of the banking system, and sharp declines in GDP and foreign reserves have rendered the state incapable of fulfilling its basic obligations. The sharp contraction in external financial flows has compounded Lebanon's inability to stabilize its currency or finance public services,

Given the scale of devastation, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are expected to play a key role in the reconstruction of Syria and Lebanon. With their substantial financial resources and technical capacities, the GCC countries are positioned to fund large-scale development projects. However, this role presents a paradox: while reconstruction could serve as a vehicle for extending regional influence and fostering long-term stability, it also risks straining domestic budgets, particularly as oil-dependent economies face volatility in global energy markets and pursue ambitious domestic reforms under frameworks such as Saudi Vision 2030 (Al-Sulaymān, 2021).

Moreover, reconstruction in both countries is entangled in issues of political legitimacy and governance. Questions remain over which local or international actors will manage reconstruction funds and whether transparency and accountability can be ensured in environments plagued by institutional weakness. The absence of clear governance frameworks in both Syria and Lebanon threatens to derail potential international cooperation and reduce the willingness of donors to engage meaningfully.

In conclusion, economic recovery in the post-conflict Middle East is not merely a matter of finance. It is inherently political, shaped by competing visions for reconstruction, contested authority, and the broader regional struggle over influence. Without a coherent, inclusive, and transparent reconstruction strategy, the region's economic woes will continue to undermine efforts toward sustainable peace and development.

VIII. Increasing Iran–Russia–China Coordination: A Strategic Alliance Against Western Hegemony

A notable feature of the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Middle East is the deepening strategic coordination between Iran, Russia, and China. This trilateral alignment aims to challenge U.S. and broader Western influence in the region through a multidimensional partnership that spans economic, military, and diplomatic domains (Fulton et al., 2013; Wasser et al., 2022).

On the economic front, Iran has sought to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions by strengthening long-term partnerships with China and Russia. A prime example is the 25-year strategic cooperation agreement between Iran and

China, which involves significant Chinese investments in Iran's energy, infrastructure, and transportation sectors. This agreement not only provides Tehran with access to critical markets outside the Western-dominated global financial system but also strengthens Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative in the region (Vaisi, 2022).

In the military sphere, the three powers have intensified cooperation through joint drills, defense technology exchanges, and strategic coordination in theaters such as Syria, the Black Sea, and the Persian Gulf. These activities signal their shared ambition to establish a counterbalance to U.S.-led military alliances and to assert influence over regional security arrangements (Kozhanov, 2016; Weitz, 2010).

Although Iran's influence has receded in some arenas—particularly in Syria and Iraq—due to shifting domestic and regional dynamics, this trilateral coordination enables Tehran to maintain strategic relevance. It enables Iran to operate as a pivotal actor within a broader, multipolar framework that extends beyond its immediate neighborhood. For China and Russia, the alliance provides both economic leverage and a foothold in a region crucial to global energy and security dynamics.

Ultimately, this emergent axis represents not merely a tactical convergence but a broader reconfiguration of the international order. It reflects the fragmentation of Western-centric power structures and the rise of alternative global centers with overlapping but distinct interests in the Middle East.

IX. Political Instability in Israel: A Multidimensional Domestic Crisis

Israel is currently experiencing a period of unprecedented domestic instability, marked by growing societal polarization, political volatility, and public disillusionment with state institutions. These dynamics have significantly undermined both internal cohesion and the state's capacity to project strategic stability (Pedahzur, 2012). Such fragmentation is deeply rooted in identity politics, as elaborated by Bani Salameh and Ishakat (2022), who argue that Israel's foreign and domestic instability stems from the securitization of identity and governance structures (Bani Salameh & Ishakat, 2022).

One of the most prominent manifestations of this crisis has been the mass protests triggered by the far-right government's controversial judicial reforms. The reforms, perceived as an attempt to curtail the Supreme Court's powers, have sparked fears of democratic backsliding and weakened the doctrine of separation of powers. Israeli society has become deeply divided, with supporters citing the need for institutional balance and opponents warning against authoritarian tendencies (Shomer, Tzelgov, & Zur, 2025).

Public confidence in the security establishment has also eroded, especially following the failure to anticipate and contain the most recent escalation in Gaza. The perceived intelligence and operational shortcomings have fueled widespread criticism of both military and political leadership, raising concerns about Israel's preparedness for potential multi-front conflicts, including in southern Lebanon and the West Bank.

The ongoing political fragmentation in the Knesset, repeated elections, and unstable coalition politics further reflect a structural crisis within the Israeli political system. This dysfunction hampers national consensus-building and exposes vulnerabilities in a country that has long relied on internal resilience to maintain regional dominance.

As internal divisions widen and governance institutions falter, Israel's regional posture could be significantly weakened, diminishing its strategic leverage in a volatile neighborhood.

X. Forced Displacement of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank: Political and Humanitarian Implications

Amid the intensifying Israeli–Palestinian conflict, there are growing concerns over de facto or intentional strategies aimed at the forced displacement of Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank. Whether pursued directly or through sustained violence, economic strangulation, and infrastructural devastation, such actions may constitute grave breaches of international humanitarian law and risk destabilizing the entire region (Khalidi, 2020).

These displacement strategies are rooted in longstanding political ambitions among segments of Israel's right-wing establishment to reengineer the demographic makeup of the Palestinian territories. Proposed scenarios include transferring Gaza's population to Egypt or encouraging migration from Area C of the West Bank under the pretext of security or

economic development (Pappé, 2022).

In Gaza, the intensity of Israeli airstrikes on civilian infrastructure during recent escalations appears to reflect a deliberate effort to render life untenable, thereby inducing mass exodus. In the West Bank, the uptick in settler violence, home demolitions, and land expropriations—especially in Area C—supports fears of a gradual, bureaucratically masked policy of ethnic cleansing (UN OCHA, 2023).

The potential consequences are dire. A mass displacement could trigger a new refugee crisis exceeding the capacity of neighboring states such as Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon. It would also exacerbate regional tensions, embolden militant responses, and obliterate prospects for a negotiated settlement or a two-state solution.

These developments demand urgent international attention and accountability. Upholding the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and resisting coerced demographic manipulation is essential to safeguarding regional stability and preserving the foundations of the international legal order.

XI. The Resurgence of Sectarian Conflicts and Their Impact on the Regional Landscape

Among the most troubling consequences of the prolonged Israeli–Palestinian conflict and growing regional interventions is the renewed prominence of sectarian tensions in several Arab states. These developments have deepened internal fractures and threatened the social fabric of multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian societies, intensifying both political polarization and societal instability (Mabon, 2023; Dodge, 2013).

In Iraq, sectarian divisions have re-emerged in the context of political competition between factions aligned with Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance and more nationalist or reformist groups, particularly the Sadrist Movement. Regional actors have frequently exploited these divisions to advance their domestic political agendas, thereby exacerbating societal polarization and undermining national unity. The failure to establish a coherent, inclusive state framework has led to recurring instability and hindered efforts toward institutional consolidation (Haddad, 2020).

In Lebanon, Hezbollah's dual role—as a domestic political actor and as a key pillar of the Iranian regional strategy—has contributed to rising sectarian tensions. The group's involvement in supporting Palestinian resistance has been polarizing, triggering renewed discourse reminiscent of the sectarian alignments seen during the Lebanese Civil War. The divide over Lebanon's relationship with Israel and Iran has translated into growing sectarian fragmentation, further strained by a collapsing economy and eroding public services.

Elsewhere in the region, sectarian mobilization has also intensified. The Sunni–Shia divide, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran, continues to shape regional power alignments and proxy conflicts. During episodes of escalation—such as recent military campaigns in Gaza—regional actors have weaponized sectarian rhetoric to strengthen their strategic positioning, with media and political discourse reinforcing identity-based divisions.

If left unaddressed, this trajectory threatens to transform political disputes into protracted sectarian conflicts, rendering reconciliation increasingly difficult and eroding the foundations of the nation-state. Sectarianism, when politicized, entrenches narrow identity loyalties, weakens civil institutions, and obstructs pathways to inclusive governance and development (Hinnebusch, 2006).

The revival of sectarianism thus constitutes a strategic threat to regional stability, demanding proactive regional and international responses. Addressing this phenomenon requires a dual focus on deconstructing sectarian narratives and investing in civic national identities rooted in equal citizenship and pluralism. Promoting local peacebuilding initiatives, enhancing democratic representation, and supporting inclusive governance models are essential steps toward mitigating the destructive potential of sectarian politics in the Middle East.

XII. The Rise of Subnational Cultures and Minority Influence in the Middle East's Political Landscape

In recent years, the Middle East has witnessed a growing influence of subnational cultures and ethnic and sectarian minorities, reshaping the political and social dynamics in several states. Once considered peripheral to state authority, these groups have become central actors in shaping public policy, wielding influence through both formal political mechanisms

and informal power structures, including armed militias and transnational alliances (Yiftachel, 2020).

The Kurdish populations in Iraq and Syria exemplify this transformation. In Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has established a quasi-state entity comprising its parliament, security forces (the Peshmerga), and its foreign relations. The KRG operates with substantial autonomy within the Iraqi federal framework and has become a significant regional actor (Romano, 2022). In Syria, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have established de facto control over northeastern regions, supported militarily and politically by the United States. This control has opened new debates around federalism and minority rights in the context of a fragmented Syrian state (Phillips, 2016).

In Lebanon, the Druze, though a numerical minority, continue to wield disproportionate influence, primarily through established political leaderships such as the Progressive Socialist Party. Their strategic positioning within Lebanon's confessional system reflects both the resilience and fragility of sect-based power-sharing arrangements. The continued prominence of such minorities illustrates the challenges of transitioning to a civic-based national identity in Lebanon's political system (Makdisi, 2019).

In the Gulf, Shiite minorities—particularly in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait—have become more vocal and politically engaged. Despite institutional restrictions, Shiite communities have participated in both civic and oppositional movements, advocating for political reform and equal representation. However, their activism is often viewed through a securitized lens by ruling elites, especially in the context of alleged affiliations with Iran, further complicating their political integration (Louër, 2022). These dynamics parallel the strategic recalibrations within the Gulf monarchies, as detailed in Bahrain's evolving security vision (Bani Salameh, 2023), which underscores the delicate balance between domestic cohesion and regional strategic commitments.

The increasing visibility of minority identities underscores a more profound transformation in state-society relations across the region. As central state authority is challenged or renegotiated, these groups are asserting alternative visions of governance, autonomy, and citizenship. Their emergence compels a rethinking of the centralized state model, paving the way for pluralistic frameworks that accommodate diversity without undermining national cohesion.

Ultimately, the rise of subnational actors and minority politics underscores the need to redefine citizenship, identity, and political inclusion in the Middle East. Future stability will depend on the region's ability to integrate these groups into its state structures, develop inclusive political systems, and strike a balance between local autonomy and national unity.

XIII. Conclusion and Strategic Policy Recommendations

This study has examined the profound and multidimensional transformations currently reshaping the Middle East, emphasizing the intersection of internal state collapse, shifting regional alliances, economic disintegration, and the emergence of both non-state actors and transnational coalitions. The analysis reveals that the region’s volatility is not merely cyclical but indicative of a deeper structural reordering that challenges conventional models of governance, security, and diplomacy.

Among the most critical findings is the recognition that Syria and Lebanon have transitioned from pivotal nodes in Iranian regional influence to fragmented arenas of geopolitical contestation. The retreat of Iranian authority in these states has created strategic vacuums that regional middle powers, such as Turkey and Qatar, have moved swiftly to fill. In parallel, Israel—once viewed as a bastion of internal stability—now confronts its legitimacy crisis, fueled by domestic polarization and institutional erosion.

Moreover, the resurgence of sectarian tensions, forced displacement of Palestinians, and demographic reengineering further illustrate the fragility of national identities and the instrumentalization of conflict for political ends. These dynamics are compounded by a dramatic rise in the strategic agency of non-state actors, many of whom have evolved from insurgent forces into quasi-governance entities. This transformation has redefined the nature of sovereignty and challenged the state's monopoly over violence and legitimacy.

Internationally, the intensifying coordination among Iran, Russia, and China represents a deliberate pivot away from U.S.-led frameworks toward a multipolar world order. Their growing involvement in military, economic, and infrastructural

domains suggests that any comprehensive strategy for the region must grapple with a broader global realignment.

Given these developments, the study concludes that the path to long-term regional stability lies not in reasserting outdated security paradigms or top-down political settlements but in reconfiguring legitimacy, inclusiveness, and governance. Strategic recalibration must reflect the realities of fragmented authority, diversified actors, and evolving conceptions of identity and statehood.

Strategic Policy Recommendations

1. Redefine State Legitimacy and Rebuild Social Contracts

Regional governments must reimagine the foundations of state legitimacy by prioritizing civic inclusion, decentralization, and responsive governance. Rebuilding broken social contracts requires engagement with marginalized communities, youth movements, and civil society actors to address systemic grievances and establish participatory frameworks for political reform.

2. Integrate Non-State Actors into Inclusive Security Frameworks

The enduring presence of non-state actors necessitates a shift from exclusionary counterinsurgency models to integrated security arrangements. While recognizing their legitimacy poses risks, pragmatic engagement—through disarmament, reintegration, and power-sharing mechanisms—may foster more sustainable peace in areas where state capacity is weak or absent.

3. Support Pluralistic Governance Models

Acknowledging the growing influence of ethnic, sectarian, and cultural minorities, governance models must accommodate identity pluralism without undermining national cohesion. Federalism, regional autonomy, and inclusive electoral representation can offer pathways toward coexistence while preventing monopolization of power by dominant groups.

4. Enhance Regional Cooperation Beyond Traditional Alliances

Institutions such as the Arab League and GCC must evolve to reflect the fragmented and multipolar realities of the current order. New diplomatic platforms that incorporate non-state stakeholders, civil society actors, and emerging middle powers should be developed to foster regional dialogue on conflict prevention, migration, and economic integration.

5. Develop an Equitable Reconstruction Strategy for Post-Conflict States

Reconstruction efforts in Syria, Lebanon, and beyond should be anchored in transparency, local ownership, and equitable resource distribution. Donor states—especially those from the Gulf—should coordinate with international bodies to ensure that reconstruction funds are not siphoned through corrupt networks but rather serve to promote long-term stabilization and institutional renewal.

6. Adapt to the Shifting Global Order

Western and regional policymakers must recognize that global power is no longer unipolar. Engagement with rising actors like China and Russia should strike a balance between competition and collaboration, particularly in areas of shared interest, such as counterterrorism, climate resilience, and cross-border trade.

In sum, the future of the Middle East hinges on its capacity to adapt to uncertainty through inclusive governance, regional innovation, and global recalibration. These policy directions offer not a panacea but a strategic starting point for reimagining a more stable, pluralistic, and cooperative regional order.

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