

FLUID ALLIANCES AND REGIONAL INSTABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A REALIST AND CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

BY

Yaron Katz

Holon Institute of Technology, Israel

Abstract

The Middle East has historically been marked by political instability, civil conflicts, and shifting alliances, presenting significant obstacles to regional cooperation. These challenges have shaped the regional order, resulting in the ineffectiveness of organizations like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which struggle to facilitate meaningful collaboration. Since the Arab uprisings of 2011, the region has experienced rapid geopolitical shifts, characterized by civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, as well as the emergence of informal alliances. A notable illustration of the region's volatility occurred in October 2023, when a surprise terrorist attack on Israel started a multi-front war involving Gaza, Lebanon, and other areas in the Middle East. This paper investigates the factors behind the ineffectiveness of formal regional organizations in promoting cooperation and stability, in contrast to the apparent vitality of informal alliances. It employs a theoretical framework that integrates realism, emphasizing the role of power and security in state behavior, with constructivism, which focuses on the significance of ideas, identity, and norms. Drawing from both realist and constructivist perspectives, the paper argues that the region's fragmented and often contradictory political landscape obstructs substantial cooperation.

Keywords: Middle East; Arab Spring; GCC; Abraham Accords; Israel-Hamas War

Introduction

The Middle East has always been marked by political instability, civil wars, and shifting alliances, presenting unique challenges for regional cooperation. Historically, Arab regimes have struggled with internal legitimacy, contested borders, and the constant threat of external and internal destabilization (Fawcett, 2017). These vulnerabilities have shaped the regional system, leading to the emergence of weak regional organizations like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), whose effectiveness in fostering cooperation has been limited. Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, the region has experienced rapid and significant geopolitical shifts, triggering civil conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, and causing new

forms of informal alliances to emerge. The magnitude of the region's volatility was evident in October 2023, with the surprise terror attack on Israel, followed by a multi-front war in Gaza, Lebanon, and further parts of the Middle East.

This research examines why formal regional organizations struggle to succeed while informal alliances thrive. It uses a theoretical framework that combines realism, emphasizing the role of power and security in state behavior, with constructivism, focusing on the impact of ideas and identity. By analysing domestic vulnerabilities and the influence of global powers like the United States and Iran, the paper demonstrates how internal and external factors

contribute to the failure of regional cooperation mechanisms.

This paper contributes to Middle Eastern geopolitics by examining the complex interplay between domestic politics and regional cooperation. It focuses on the influence of intra-regional conflicts, regime insecurity, and external interventions on the development of regional organizations. Drawing on realist and constructivist approaches, the paper argues that the region's fragmented and contradictory political landscape hinders meaningful cooperation. The study evaluates the effectiveness of regional organizations like the Arab League and the GCC in promoting stability. It suggests that "liquid alliances" - informal and interest-based coalitions - have replaced formal regional cooperation frameworks. This shift has significant implications for the future of Middle Eastern geopolitics, a development that this paper aims to bring to the attention of scholars and policymakers, thereby keeping them informed and aware of the evolving nature of the region.

The Israel-Hamas war provided a significant escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and contributed to the emergence of liquid alliances. This war not only strained relationships between Arab states but also demonstrated the limitations of organizations like the Arab League and the GCC in resolving or mitigating regional tensions. The war catalysed the rise of liquid alliances, where states aligned themselves with proxies based on immediate strategic calculations rather than long-standing partnerships or institutional frameworks.

Theoretical Approach

The dual theoretical approaches of realism and constructivism provide valuable frameworks for

analysing regional cooperation and dynamics in the Middle East. Each theory offers distinct but complementary insights into state behaviour and geopolitical developments, particularly within a region characterized by complex security dilemmas, fragile political systems, and fluctuating alliances.

The realist theory focuses on power and security and aligns with the immediate survival concerns of Middle Eastern regimes, driving confrontational and opportunistic foreign policies. Constructivism theory highlights the enduring influence of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping state behaviour, especially in a region marked by ideological divides and transnational identities. Combining both theoretical frameworks offers a comprehensive understanding of the Middle East's complex regional dynamics and the ongoing challenges to achieving long-term regional cooperation.

According to realist theory, states operate in an anarchic international system, meaning there is no central authority to enforce rules or ensure security. As a result, states are primarily motivated by concerns for their survival, seeking power and security to defend against external and internal threats (Waltz, 1979). In the Middle East, where regime stability is fragile and borders and authority are contested, states face constant security challenges that heighten their realist tendencies, such as political dissent, ethnic and sectarian divisions, and economic instability. This vulnerability leads to aggressive foreign policies or interventions in neighboring states to project strength and distract from domestic weaknesses.

Middle Eastern states are also heavily influenced by external threats from regional rivals and global powers. For instance, Iran and Saudi Arabia's geopolitical rivalry has shaped many of the region's

conflicts, as each pursues a confrontational foreign policy to enhance its regional influence and counter perceived threats (Mearsheimer, 2001; Fawcett, 2020). Realism helps explain why states form alliances based on immediate security interests, even with unlikely partners, and why these alliances are often temporary and transactional.

Conversely, constructivist theory emphasizes the role of identities, norms, and ideas in shaping state behaviour. Unlike realism, which assumes that material power and security are the primary drivers of state actions, constructivism argues that state interests are not fixed but are shaped by historical, cultural, and social factors. In the Middle Eastern context, Pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism have historically influenced regional dynamics by appealing to transnational identities and shared norms of Arab or Islamic solidarity (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012).

Even though these ideologies have weakened, they influence political rhetoric and state legitimacy since Arab regimes invoke these identities to justify foreign policies or align with non-state actors like Hamas to bolster domestic legitimacy (Barnett, 1998). Constructivism highlights why regional organizations, such as the Arab League and GCC, fail to foster meaningful cooperation. While these organizations promote ideals of unity and collective security, member states' divergent political interests and identities often undermine collective action. For example, the GCC's 2017 crisis, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain severed ties with Qatar, highlighted how differing perceptions of political Islam and national sovereignty can erode regional unity (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012).

The Israel-Hamas war highlighted the intersection of realism and constructivism. Realism explains why

regional actors are recalibrating their alliances based on shifting security needs. For example, Egypt and Jordan made peace treaties with Israel while managing domestic pressures over the Palestinian issue (Gause, 2014). At the same time, constructivist analysis can explain why identity-based conflicts, such as those involving Palestinian nationalism and Islamist movements, continue to resonate intensely, shaping the region's discourses of legitimacy and justifications for intervention.

Methodology

The dual theoretical frameworks of realism and constructivism offer complementary approaches to understanding the complexities of regional cooperation and dynamics in the Middle East, a region characterized by entrenched security dilemmas, fragile political systems, and shifting alliances. Each theory provides distinct insights into the motivations and behaviour of states, offering a nuanced view of regional geopolitical developments.

Realism also provides a framework for understanding short-term or "liquid alliances" that have emerged in the region. These interest-based coalitions are often formed to address specific security threats, such as the Saudi-UAE coalition in Yemen or temporary alignments between Turkey, Russia, and Iran in the Syrian conflict. Such alliances are instrumental, dissolving when shared interests no longer align (Fawcett, 2017). The Israel-Hamas war exemplified the realist dynamics at play, where states like Egypt and Jordan had to navigate domestic pressures while maintaining strategic alliances, including peace treaties with Israel.

While realism emphasizes material power and security, constructivism adds depth by focusing on how ideas, norms, and identities shape state

behaviour. In the Middle East, identity politics, including sectarian divides, religious ideologies, and nationalism, play a critical role in shaping domestic and foreign policies. The enduring resonance of Pan-Arabism and Islamic solidarity in regional discourse reflects how non-material factors influence state actions. Even though these ideologies have weakened, they continue to serve as sources of legitimacy for regimes and non-state actors, such as Hamas in Palestine or Hezbollah in Lebanon (Barnett, 1998).

Constructivism also helps explain why regional organizations such as the Arab League or the GCC struggle to foster sustainable cooperation. While these organizations are nominally based on shared cultural and ideological foundations, divergent national interests and competing visions for the region's future often undermine their effectiveness. The Qatar diplomatic crisis within the GCC is a prime example, where political Islam and sovereignty differences led to a significant rift among member states (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012).

The Israel-Hamas war offers a contemporary example of how realism and constructivism intersect in the Middle East. From a realist perspective, the war reflects the strategic calculations of regional powers, each responding to immediate security threats and power shifts. The imperative drives Israel's military response to secure its borders, while states like Iran and Qatar offered support to Hamas based on regional power dynamics and security concerns (Mearsheimer, 2001). At the same time, constructivist insights highlight the role of identity and ideology in sustaining the conflict. Hamas' narrative of resistance is rooted in Palestinian nationalism and Islamic identity, which shapes its legitimacy both

domestically and among sympathizers across the Arab and Islamic world (Fawcett, 2020).

The war also affects the broader region, as Egypt and Jordan had to balance their peace treaties with Israel against domestic opposition and the pressure to support Palestinian causes. Constructivism helps explain these tensions as these regimes navigate between international alliances and domestic identities, illustrating the dual pressures of pragmatic security concerns and normative commitments.

By combining realist and constructivist approaches, scholars can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the Middle East's complex regional dynamics. Realism explains why states prioritize power and security in a highly fragmented and volatile region, while constructivism underscores the importance of identity, norms, and historical legacies in shaping state behaviour. As the Israel-Hamas war and broader regional conflicts demonstrate, achieving long-term cooperation and stability in the Middle East requires understanding both the material and ideational factors that drive state actions and alliances.

The Arab Spring

Pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism have long been significant ideational forces in the Middle East, influencing domestic politics and foreign relations (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012). Although these transnational identities have waned, they continue to inform regimes' rhetoric and legitimization strategies. Realism elucidates the prevalence of "liquid alliances" - ad hoc coalitions formed around immediate interests rather than shared values or long-term cooperation. In contrast, constructivism highlights why regional organizations, founded on the lofty ideals of Arab solidarity, often falter when political interests diverge. The persistent invocation of Arab unity, despite its

superficial application, underscores the disparity between rhetoric and reality in the region.

A crucial factor in analysing regional cooperation in the Middle East is the interplay between domestic politics and regional or international dynamics. Domestic political considerations significantly influence how regimes perceive and respond to threats. However, Arab regimes are often viewed not as bastions of strength but as entities asserting dominance in reaction to their vulnerabilities. These regimes' fragile legitimacy and acute insecurity have historically shaped the region's security dilemmas (Del Sarto, 2017).

The aftermath of the Arab Spring further complicates this landscape, as the uprisings exposed deep-seated grievances and fractured the facade of unity among Arab states. The resulting instability has prompted regimes to prioritize immediate survival over long-term collaboration, relying on transient alliances that address pressing concerns rather than fostering genuine cooperation. This shift further accentuates the challenges of establishing stable regional frameworks, revealing the limitations of traditional constructs of solidarity in the face of evolving political realities.

Leading scholars analysed the complex dynamics following the Arab Spring and the implications for regional cooperation among Arab states. Achcar (2013) provided a comprehensive analysis of the Arab uprisings, discussing their consequences for regional unity and cooperation and examining the motivations behind forming new alliances. Bromley (2018) examined how the Arab Spring revealed deep-seated grievances and challenged the notion of Arab unity, leading to shifts in alliances and the prioritization of regime survival. Kamrava (2016) showed how the uprisings impacted the stability of Arab regimes,

resulting in a realignment of priorities that favoured immediate political survival over long-term collaboration. Herzog (2019) analysed how the Arab Spring reshaped the region's political economy, emphasizing the emergence of fragile alliances and the challenges to state cohesion and collaboration. Mounir (2020) explored how the Arab Spring led to fragmentation within the Arab world, affecting the ability of states to collaborate effectively and highlighting the transient nature of new alliances formed in the wake of the uprisings.

These studies highlight a significant shift in the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. Immediate political considerations and the urgent need for regime stability increasingly shape the dynamics of power, security, and cooperation. This has profound implications for the future of regional politics, governance, and cooperation among Arab states.

The common conclusion drawn from these studies is that the Arab Spring exposed deep-seated grievances and discontent within Arab societies, revealing the limitations of traditional notions of Arab unity. The uprisings fractured the facade of solidarity among Arab states, highlighting significant political, social, and economic disparities. Following the uprisings, regional regimes have prioritized immediate survival over long-term collaboration. Faced with popular unrest and threats to their legitimacy, many governments have focused on consolidating power and maintaining stability rather than fostering genuine regional cooperation. Further, the conclusion is that the instability resulting from the Arab Spring has led to liquid alliances based on immediate interests rather than shared values or long-term goals. These alliances tend to be more flexible and responsive to current

challenges but lack the structural coherence necessary for sustained cooperation.

The aftermath of the Arab Spring has increased regional fragmentation, with various states responding differently to the upheaval. This fragmentation has exacerbated tensions and conflicts, complicating efforts to establish stable regional frameworks and cooperative mechanisms. These studies emphasize that traditional constructs of solidarity and regional cooperation are increasingly inadequate in addressing the evolving political realities in the Middle East. The focus on regime survival and the reliance on temporary alliances often undermine the potential for effective collaboration on broader regional issues.

The GCC Crisis

The 2017 GCC crisis, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed ties with Qatar over its alleged support for the Muslim Brotherhood and relations with Iran, underscored deep divisions within the organization. Despite mediation efforts led by Kuwait and Oman, the crisis revealed how divergent geopolitical interests can undermine well-established regional cooperation frameworks (Ulrichsen, 2020). The 2021 reconciliation at the Al-‘Ula summit was a notable diplomatic step toward resolving the conflict, yet underlying tensions regarding Iran and political Islam remain unresolved (Fathollah-Nejad, 2021). This period marks the persistence of ideological and strategic rivalries within the GCC and the broader Middle East.

The rise of liquid alliances has become a defining feature of Middle Eastern politics in the past decade. These transient coalitions are often formed to address specific, immediate threats rather than foster long-term regional cooperation. Yemen’s Southern Transitional Council aligning with the UAE, the

Houthi partnering with Iran, and Khalifa Haftar’s cooperation with Egypt and the UAE in Libya exemplify how pragmatism drives these alliances (Darwich, 2021). These partnerships illustrate how regional actors increasingly rely on short-term, interest-driven alignments rather than the more structured, long-term commitments traditionally expected of formal organizations like the Arab League or the GCC (Karavar, 2021).

The evolving nature of alliances and ideational forces plays a significant role in shaping regional dynamics. While these ideologies have waned in practical importance, their rhetorical value remains instrumental for regime legitimacy. Valbjørn and Bank (2012) note that regimes often invoke these ideas to strengthen their domestic standing despite the disjunction between ideological posturing and the pragmatic realities of regional politics. Ayubi’s (1996) characterization of Arab states as “fierce in their external postures but weak internally” remains a powerful lens for understanding contemporary regional dynamics, as regimes use external assertiveness to mask their domestic fragilities.

Liquid alliances have become dominant, reflecting a shift towards short-term pragmatism and away from long-standing ideational commitments. Realist interpretations, such as those by Walt (1987), explain these alliances as products of shifting power dynamics and immediate security needs. Conversely, constructivism helps account for the persistent failure of formal regional organizations like the Arab League, which remain constrained by divergent political interests despite their shared ideological heritage (Barnett & Solingen, 2007). The gap between Arab unity rhetoric and the practical challenges of

cooperation has exposed the limitations of regional institutions (Tripp, 1995).

Domestic political concerns are central to how Middle Eastern regimes navigate regional and international dynamics. Ayubi (1996) and Fawcett (2017) emphasize that weak domestic legitimacy often drives regimes to assert external dominance, masking their internal vulnerabilities. This fragility undermines the effectiveness of regional cooperation, as the empowerment of collective regional institutions could threaten regimes' domestic survival (Del Sarto, 2017). Consequently, regimes prefer to engage in more controllable, informal alliances rather than risk ceding authority to morerobust regional frameworks.

One of the most significant developments shaping the Middle East's security landscape has been the perceived retreat of the United States from direct military intervention, particularly after 2011. The US's reduced role has contributed to heightened vulnerability among Gulf monarchies and US-aligned states such as Saudi Arabia, which have historically relied on American security guarantees (Lynch, 2023). The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 further recalibrated the region's power dynamics as the rise of Islamist movements, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, challenged regimes that had built their legitimacy on Islamic foundations. In response, countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed counter-revolutionary forces, while Qatar and Turkey supported Islamist factions, deepening regional divisions. The failures of formal regional organizations to effectively manage these complex dynamics are stark. Although the GCC played a role in Bahrain and Yemen during the Arab uprisings, internal divisions have continued undermining efforts to build more robust regional mechanisms, such as the proposed "Gulf Union"

(Gause, 2014). The 2017 GCC crisis revealed how deep these fractures had become with the blockade of Qatar.

Leading scholars have identified the theoretical and empirical backing for analysing regional cooperation, domestic legitimacy, and alliance-building in the Middle East during this period. Valbjørn & Bank (2012) explored the divergent interests among Arab states and how ideological constructs like pan-Arabism influence regional relations but often fail to achieve concrete cooperation due to competing national interests. Ulrichsen (2020) discussed the 2017 GCC crisis and the long-standing tensions within the Gulf Cooperation Council, highlighting how divergent geopolitical strategies and internal divisions undermined regional unity. Fawcett (2017) explored how states have recalibrated their foreign policies post-Arab Spring in response to shifting regional dynamics. Darwich (2021) further describes how these informal and opportunistic coalitions have replaced more formalized regional frameworks. Del Sarto (2017) concluded that weak governance and contested borders within Middle Eastern states shape their external policies and undermine efforts toward sustainable regional cooperation.

The Abraham Accords

The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 between Israel and several Arab states (the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan), represent a significant realignment in Middle Eastern politics. The accords signal a shift from long-standing Arab Israeli animosity to pragmatic cooperation based on mutual interests such as economic ties, security concerns, and countering Iran. They are especially relevant when analysing the Middle East through the lens of fluid alliances and regional instability, using both realist and

constructivist theoretical perspectives. The accords reflect realism's emphasis on security interests over ideological commitments. For decades, Arab states refused to normalize relations with Israel until the Palestinian issue was resolved. However, the rise of Iranian influence, mainly through its proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, has made Gulf monarchies, especially the UAE and Bahrain, more willing to engage with Israel. This aligns with Walt's (1987) "balance of threat" theory, which posits that states will align against a common threat, in this case, Iran, rather than against traditional foes like Israel.

The Middle East has long been characterized by shifting alliances, where regimes quickly adapt to changing geopolitical realities. This is evident in Saudi Arabia and the UAE's relationship with Israel, which has transitioned from antagonism to strategic partnership. According to Realist thought, these alliances are not based on long-term cooperation but on immediate mutual gains, such as defence cooperation and intelligence sharing against Iran and Islamist movements. The Abraham Accords are thus emblematic of these fluid alliances, where relationships are driven by pragmatism and shifting power dynamics rather than shared values or long-term ideologies (Mearsheimer, 2001). On the other hand, while Realism explains the strategic rationale behind the Abraham Accords, Constructivism provides insight into the shifting ideational forces and norms that have allowed these agreements to occur. Constructivism focuses on the role of identity, norms, and ideologies in shaping state behaviour.

One of the core ideas of constructivism is that social norms and shared ideas shape states' identity and behaviour. Historically, Pan-Arabism - the idea of Arab unity against Israel - was a dominant ideology in

the region, making normalization with Israel politically impossible. However, the erosion of Pan-Arabism and the rise of state-centric nationalism have reshaped the Middle East. The Abraham Accords reflect this shift in identity politics, where states like the UAE and Bahrain now see national interests, such as economic development and security, outweighing the Pan-Arab cause (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012).

Constructivist scholars also emphasize how states construct identities by framing others as allies or enemies. In this case, Iran has been socially constructed as a primary threat to the Gulf monarchies and Israel alike. This shared perception has facilitated alliances between states that traditionally viewed each other as enemies. The Abraham Accords illustrate how framing Iran as a regional destabilizer has become more critical than the normative commitment to the Palestinian cause, demonstrating a shift in the region's identity politics (Del Sarto, 2017).

Despite the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states, the Middle East remains deeply unstable. The Abraham Accords have exacerbated existing tensions in some areas, particularly about Iran and its proxy networks, as well as between Israel and Palestinian factions like Hamas. According to the realist analysis of Fawcett (2017), it can be seen as part of the ongoing power struggles that define the region's politics. Iran views the Abraham Accords as a direct threat to its regional influence. Forming liquid alliances, such as the cooperation between Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia against Iranian influence, has increased regional polarization. Iran's proxy warfare in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon is a direct response to these alliances, leading to further regional instability. From a Constructivist perspective, Brown (2020) explains that the Abraham

Accords also reveal how the Palestinian cause has been deprioritized in regional politics. While the Palestinian question once united much of the Arab world, new norms and priorities, such as economic growth and security, have taken precedence. This has alienated Palestinian factions Hamas and Islamic Jihad, leading to further instability and violence, particularly during the 2021 Israel-Gaza conflict.

As can be concluded from this research, the Abraham Accords highlight the rise of fluid alliances in the Middle East, driven by realist power considerations and shifts in constructivist ideational forces. While the accords reflect a pragmatic recalibration of alliances, they also reveal the limitations of formal regional organizations and the persistence of regional instability. The accords have intensified geopolitical rivalries, particularly with Iran, while exposing the decline of once-dominant ideologies such as Pan-Arabism and the Palestinian cause. As seen just three years later, the Abraham Accords shaped the region's power dynamics but did not resolve the underlying tensions that drive regional instability.

The Israel-Hamas War

Arab regimes assert dominance in response to external vulnerabilities. The fragile legitimacy of these regimes has historically defined the region's security dilemmas. The Israel-Hamas war exacerbated these insecurities, with some regimes adopting more assertive stances to bolster domestic legitimacy. For instance, Hezbollah in Lebanon escalated its rhetoric and military posturing in response to the conflict, partly to divert attention from Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis and bolster its credentials as a resistance movement (Khatib, 2023).

While pan-Arabism waned amid competing transnational identities, Arab solidarity continues to be

invoked by both states and non-state actors to legitimize policies and strengthen regimes (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012). The Israel-Hamas war provided a platform for these invocations, yet the lack of cohesive action across the Arab world underscores the limitations of such solidarity. Despite rhetorical support for the Palestinian cause, regimes in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain were reluctant to engage in the conflict entirely, mindful of their strategic interests and fears of domestic unrest (Lynch, 2023). Meanwhile, Iran capitalized on the conflict, using it to strengthen its influence over non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah, positioning itself as a defender of Palestinian resistance (Hanieh, 2023).

International dynamics also heavily influence the Middle East's regional system, shaping domestic and regional politics. The ongoing civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, combined with a declining US inclination for direct intervention, have heightened regional regimes' sense of vulnerability (Fawcett, 2020). This vulnerability was exacerbated by the Israel-Hamas war, as it raised questions about the future of US engagement in the region. The U.S. reaffirmed its support for Israel, but also faced increased pressure to mediate the conflict and address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, leading to tensions with Arab allies (Kaye, 2023).

The post-2011 Middle East saw rapid changes, leading to more volatile and ad hoc power balancing. Informal multinational coalitions and alliances, driven by common interests and shared fears, became prominent (Phillips, 2020). These alliances, often involving state and non-state actors, emerged as new forms of cooperation in response to regional instability (Bahi, 2018). The Israel-Hamas conflict has only reinforced the trend toward such fluid alliances. While the war

initially led to increased cooperation between Iran and Hamas, it also strained relations between Iran and some Sunni Arab states that had moved toward normalization with Israel (Lynch, 2023).

The Israel-Hamas conflict has highlighted the increasing polarization of the region. On the one hand, the conflict has strengthened the "Axis of Resistance," comprising Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Syria, as these actors rallied around the Palestinian cause to challenge Israel and its allies (Hanieh, 2023). On the other hand, the war deepened divisions within the Arab world, particularly between those states that have pursued normalization with Israel and those that remain hostile to Israeli policies (Phillips, 2020).

The conflict generated significant global protest movements, both in support of Palestinian rights and against anti-Semitism, reflecting the deep polarization in public discourse surrounding the war. Reports from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2023) highlight the staggering civilian toll in Gaza, further intensifying the global debate. The rise of hate crimes, particularly anti-Semitic and Islamophobic incidents in Europe, underscores the ripple effects of the conflict on international communities. This polarization complicates efforts for peaceful coexistence and underscores the need for more nuanced and respectful dialogue in addressing such deeply entrenched issues. The escalation of the Israel-Hamas war further underscored the limitations of formal regional organizations in mediating or resolving conflicts. The war exposed deep divides between Arab states regarding their approaches to the Palestinian cause and highlighted the strategic recalibration of alliances within the region. Key states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE balanced their responses,

navigating domestic pressures while maintaining relationships with external powers like the United States and Israel. This shifting dynamic has reinforced the role of liquid alliances as states align with non-state actors like Hamas or leverage short-term coalitions to manage their strategic interests.

Conclusion

The Middle East's regional cooperation mechanisms have been severely hampered by the domestic vulnerabilities of Arab regimes and the region's fragmented geopolitical landscape. Regional organizations such as the Arab League and GCC were unable to offer lasting solutions to conflicts, while informal, ad hoc alliances have emerged as more effective means of addressing security concerns. The rise of liquid alliances illustrates the region's shift from formal, ideologically driven cooperation to pragmatic, interest-based coalitions.

In the wake of the Arab uprisings, regional organizations initially played a proactive role, but their influence quickly waned as divisions deepened and conflicts escalated. As civil wars broke out in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the focus shifted to regime survival, driving the formation of flexible, short-term coalitions. The lack of domestic legitimacy, heightened insecurity, and shifting threat perceptions all contributed to the prominence of these liquid alliances.

The Arab Spring also saw an increased interplay between domestic and regional politics, with authoritarian regimes framing domestic opposition as the work of foreign actors. Meanwhile, regional and international involvement provided local actors with new avenues of support. This interaction between internal and external factors has fuelled instability, making liquid alliances and volatility a permanent

fixture of Middle Eastern politics. Developments like the Abraham Accords and, in contrast, Israel's conflict with terror organizations demonstrate that the region is in constant and contrasting transition.

This paper demonstrates that the dual pressures of internal regime insecurity and external geopolitical shifts make formal regional cooperation challenging to sustain in the Middle East. The Israel-Hamas war has further accelerated the fragmentation of the regional order, where informal alliances provide short-term solutions but lack the structure and stability necessary for long-term peace and security. Regional organizations must adapt to the changing political landscape or risk becoming irrelevant in the face of growing instability, the rising influence of non-state actors, and shifting external interventions.

The Israel-Hamas war serves as a critical case study in understanding the emergence of these liquid alliances. The conflict strained relations between Arab states and demonstrated the limitations of organizations like the Arab League and the GCC in addressing regional tensions. As the war progressed, it catalysed the formation of short-term alliances where states aligned themselves based on immediate strategic calculations, often with non-state actors, rather than relying on long-standing institutional frameworks. This realignment reflects the broader fragmentation within the region, which poses risks and opportunities for the future of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Realist theory provides a valuable lens for analyzing the motivations behind these fluid alliances, often formed in response to immediate security concerns. According to realist principles, states in the Middle East, faced with fragile political systems and contested borders, prioritize power and survival. This results in confrontational foreign policies and aggressive

interventions in neighbouring states. Regional powers, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, pursue influence through alliances with proxies and temporary coalitions to project strength and secure their regimes.

Conversely, constructivism offers insights into how ideas, identities, and historical legacies influence state behaviour. In the Middle East, ideological divides, transnational identities, and the legacy of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism continue to shape political rhetoric and foreign policy decisions. These identities are essential for regimes seeking to bolster their domestic and regional legitimacy. Despite their diminished practical relevance, the persistence of these ideas illustrates how constructivism complements realist explanations in understanding the region's dynamics.

This paper analyses why regional cooperation in the Middle East remains elusive by integrating realist and constructivist approaches. While power struggles and security concerns drive much of the region's politics, the influence of identity, norms, and historical legacies cannot be overlooked. As the Israel-Hamas war and the broader geopolitical environment demonstrate, achieving long-term stability and cooperation in the Middle East requires an understanding of both material and ideational factors. The findings of this paper suggest that the shift towards informal, interest-based alliances may continue to shape the region's future, with formal organizations like the Arab League and GCC likely to play a diminished role.

The October 2025 agreement for peace in Gaza offers a tentative example of how the interplay between realist and constructivist dynamics can produce temporary stability in the region. From a realist perspective, the ceasefire reflects the strategic

calculations of regional actors seeking to de-escalate immediate security threats while maintaining broader power balances, particularly for Egypt, Qatar, and Israel. Constructivist insights further explain how shifts in norms and identity politics, including international pressure, humanitarian considerations, and evolving perceptions of Palestinian legitimacy, contributed to a shared incentive for compromise. While this agreement may signal a short-term reduction in hostilities, it underscores the paper's central argument: that Middle Eastern peace and stability are contingent on fluid, interest-driven coalitions rather than formal regional institutions. The Gaza agreement exemplifies how liquid alliances can provide pragmatic solutions, yet also highlights the fragility of such arrangements, which depend on continuously aligning strategic interests rather than enduring institutional frameworks.

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