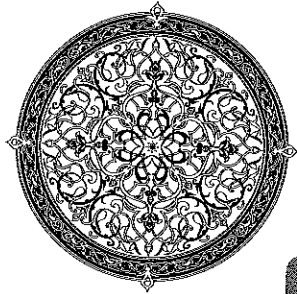


CHAPTER 7



Regional International Relations

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WHEN IRAQ INVADED KUWAIT IN 1990, Saddam Hussein appealed to Arabs everywhere to rally to his side as he stood up for Arab nationalism against Western imperialism. Although his calls resonated with popular opinion across the Arab world, almost every Arab government chose to side with the United States in the war that followed—except for Jordan, which had been one of the closest U.S. allies in the region. The response was strikingly different from 1980, when almost the entire Arab world—with the exception of avowedly Arab nationalist Syria—rallied to Iraq's side after it invaded revolutionary Iran. In the 1950s and 1960s, Arab states frequently changed sides in a bitter inter-Arab struggle for power masked by a common language of Arab unity. In the 2000s, many Arab states quietly cooperated with Israel and the United States against Iran, Hamas, and Hizballah. What could explain such seemingly baffling behavior?

The recurrent patterns of regional alliances and power struggles in the Middle East have long been fertile ground for theorists in the field of international relations. For some, Middle Eastern regional politics are characterized by a uniquely high level of identity, ideology, and religious concerns. Arabs or Muslims, in this view, have a distinctive political culture that leads them to respect only force or makes them distinctively susceptible to radical ideological appeals. For others, the region is the epitome of cold-blooded *realpolitik*, shaped by little more than the survival calculations of authoritarian leaders who bow to public opinion only when absolutely forced to do so. Which is right—and when? How do the states of the Middle East formulate their foreign policies? Are there consistent patterns of regional international relations? What might change them?

A range of widely accepted theoretical approaches to the international politics of the Middle East offers radically different answers to such questions. Realism, the dominant theory in international relations, argues that Middle Eastern states are fundamentally rational actors competing for power in a hostile, anarchic environment shaped by the constant threat of war and subversion.¹ A variant of realism—called

regime security—contends that the primary concern of Arab leaders in this hostile environment is not the interests of their states, but rather their own survival in power against both internal and external threats.² A political economy school of thought emphasizes the role of oil and of the historical construction of distinctive state forms.³ A constructivist approach focuses on the role of ideas, identity, and ideology in shaping the dynamics and patterns of regional politics—with hostility toward Israel or inter-Arab political dynamics, for instance, shaped as much by identity as by security or power concerns.⁴

These theoretical differences have extremely important real-world implications. Whether Iran is understood fundamentally as a realist actor, as a unified state rationally pursuing self-interest in an anarchic and high-risk environment, or as an ideologically motivated actor pursuing power in the name of Islamic revolution matters a great deal for deciding how to respond to Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program. The Iranian pursuit of a nuclear weapons program might be seen as the logical move of a regional great power in a competitive environment (realism), a gamble aimed at preserving the survival of a regime threatened at home and abroad (regime security), or an expression of a distinctive revolutionary ideology (constructivism). Each perspective would point to fundamentally different policies toward Iran.

Whether Iraq embarked on so many wars in the 1980s and 1990s because of Saddam Hussein's unique worldview and ideology or because of Iraq's difficult power position between Iran, the Gulf, and Israel matters a lot for deciding whether invading Iraq to change the regime would fundamentally change regional politics. The realist may read the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 as a response to a rapidly shifting global and regional balance of power in which Iraq seized an opportunity to increase its power but miscalculated the international response. A constructivist may see the same decision as a function of the Baathist ideology of Iraq's leadership or of its bid to reshape the norms of the Arab order. But for the regime security theorist, the invasion may have primarily been about Saddam's perception of threats to his own survival, both internal and external, a desperate bid to escape a closing trap rather than an aggressive bid for hegemony. Which of these explanations best accounts for Iraqi or Iranian decision making clearly matters for our understanding of regional politics and for how to best respond to regional events at the policy level.

While some are most impressed by the timeless, recurring patterns of behavior in the Middle East—whether attributed to a fixed political culture or to the deep realities of geopolitics and the balance of power—at least some patterns of alliances and competition have changed dramatically over the years.⁵ The “Arab cold war” of the 1950s pitted Arab nationalists against conservative, Western-backed Arab states, and the various would-be leaders of Arab nationalism against each other in vicious political warfare.⁶ During the 1970s, more of a realpolitik dynamic set in as states established their internal dominance over domestic opponents and normalized their relations with one another. In the 1980s, most of the Arab world backed Iraq against Iran—with the striking exception of Syria, the most avowedly Arabist of states, which

sided with Iran against its Baathist rival. The 1990s were dominated by growing U.S. unipolarity, stewardship of the Arab-Israeli peace process, and maintenance of "dual containment" in the Gulf. Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the so-called global war on terror have been accompanied by a renewed cold war between a U.S.-Saudi camp and an Iranian resistance camp. Which matters more: the persistence of basic patterns such as the pursuit of regime survival or the enduring risk of war and domestic subversion, or the changing alliances and ideational context? What most explains the changes—shifts in the international or regional balance of power, changing ideas and identities, or changes in the domestic power of states?

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, it lays out some of the key conceptual and theoretical issues that lie at the heart of any systematic analysis of regional international politics. After considering what, if anything, might make the Middle East unique compared with other parts of the world, the first section analyzes the nature of anarchy in the Middle East, the nature of power, the importance of domestic political and security concerns relative to international concerns, and the role of identity and the importance of transnational actors. The chapter then offers a brief overview of the major players in regional politics, highlighting their power potential and their foreign policy proclivities over the years. Third, the chapter shows the different patterns of regional politics across historical periods—the Arab cold war of the 1950s and 1960s, the state-dominated politics of the 1970s and 1980s, the post-cold war period of the 1990s, and the post-9/11 period of the invasion of Iraq and the global war on terror. Finally, it considers a number of potentially transformative forces—democratization, new media, transnational Islamist movements, Iranian nuclear weapons, and Arab-Israeli peace—to determine what, if anything, might realistically change in the regional politics of the Middle East.

Conceptualizing the International Politics of the Middle East

The states of the Middle East compete with each other for power, security, and ideological influence in an environment that is formally anarchic but in fact thoroughly ordered by a shared public sphere and ideological concerns. In this intensely competitive environment, Arab leaders are primarily concerned with ensuring their own survival in the face of both external and internal threats. The nature of those threats has changed dramatically over the years, however, as authoritarian regimes and state structures have hardened, the international environment has transformed and U.S. imperium deepened, and the ideological stakes have been redefined.

This theoretical synthesis helps make sense of the bewildering fluidity and unchanging patterns of regional politics. But like all syntheses, it breaks down at moments when the separate logics of the different theories point in different directions that are not mutually reinforcing—when the logic of regime survival suggests the opposite policy from the logic of realism or the demands of ideology—and regimes must choose. This section therefore delves more deeply into several of the core concepts underlying theoretical analysis of the international relations of the Middle East.

Military Strength

Realism, long the starting point for theoretical analysis of international relations, begins by identifying the great powers of the system, defined primarily by military capabilities. The strong do what they can, as Thucydides told us millennia ago, while the weak suffer what they must. Great powers are those with the material resources necessary to bid for regional leadership. Because of the ultimate possibility of war, the essential measure of power is always in the end military. The discussion of anarchy (in the section "Anarchy and Regional Institutions") matters because it gets to the question of the credibility of the threat of war and, thus, the primacy of military capabilities. But what is power in the Middle East? How is it measured, used, and understood? What exactly can Middle Eastern states do to, and for, one another? And who are the powers in the region?

Analysts who subscribe to realism traditionally focus on material capabilities when evaluating power. The great powers would be those with the size, population, economic base, and military power to compete for leadership or to force their interests to be taken into account. For realism, there are enduring patterns best explained by the distribution of power among leading states—not by ideology or identity. The area of the Persian Gulf is dominated by the balance of power between Iran and Iraq because two powerful states in close proximity will necessarily compete for influence and will fear for their security. Ideas often follow material power in the view of the realists. Arab politics reflect a struggle between Egypt and Saudi Arabia—and not between Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, for instance—because one of the powerful states, Egypt, has a large military and the other, Saudi Arabia, has a bottomless checkbook, not because of some intrinsic appeal of their ideas.

It is often claimed that the Middle East is uniquely war prone. This is not exactly correct, particularly given its level of economic development. Most of the region's wars have clustered around two nodes: Israel and Iraq (Figure 7.1). Through the rest of the region, despite intense ideological contestation and domestic turbulence, there have been very few interstate wars.

Nevertheless, the Middle East remains heavily militarized. The expectation of the possibility of war so central to realist theory, turning the permissive condition of anarchy to concrete patterns of alliances and conflict, looms large in the Middle East. The perceived threat of war and the ongoing, grinding Israeli and Iraqi war clusters have contributed to a deep structural effect on regional politics. The threat of war also has had a deeply constitutive effect on states themselves, justifying and sustaining political cultures and governing institutions dominated by national security.⁷ Regimes have shared an interest in perpetuating an atmosphere of conflict and war as a justification for massive security apparatuses and failures of development.

If outright war has been uncommon, various forms of intervention across borders have been endemic. Strong powers routinely fought proxy political battles in weaker counterparts, from Syria in the 1950s,⁸ to Yemen in the 1960s,⁹ to Lebanon and Iraq today. The utility of such interventions is shaped in part by the degree

FIGURE 7.1

MAJOR WARS, INTERVENTIONS, AND CONFLICTS

1948	Arab-Israeli war
1956	Suez War
1958	Jordan, Lebanon interventions; Iraqi revolution
1962	Yemen proxy war
1967	Arab-Israeli war
1970	Black September (Jordan versus Palestine Liberation Organization)
1973	October War
1979	Iranian Revolution
1980	Iraq-Iran War
1982	Israeli invasion of Lebanon
1987	Palestinian intifada
1990	Iraqi invasion of Kuwait
1991	Persian Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm)
2000	Palestinian al-Aqsa intifada
2001	al-Qaida attack on United States on September 11
2003	U.S. invasion of Iraq
2006	Israeli attack on Lebanon
2008–2009	Israeli attack on Gaza

of ideological potency, and in part by variation in the opportunity to intervene—that is, domestic state strength. Since 1970 there has been significant “hardening” of Arab states, however, which has dramatically reduced their ability to engage in such meddling—except in those states, such as Yemen and Iraq, that are said to have “failed.”

The security concerns and power aspirations of Middle Eastern states reflect both their material power and their ideological soft power, with the key mechanisms for both often lying in the variable ability of public opinion to put pressure on leaders or to shape their calculation of the political payoffs of alternative strategies. In an odd twist—not a coincidence, in the belief of most Arab nationalists—almost no Arab states combine all the aspects of potential national power.¹⁰ Egypt is large and has a strong state, but it lacks oil and has steadily lost both economic stature and ideological appeal since the 1960s. Saudi Arabia is wealthy, but small and vulnerable. Only Iraq combines oil wealth with a sizable population, but it has been wracked by

internal sectarian struggles and is checked by powerful neighbors (Iran, Turkey, and Syria) on most of its borders. Less powerful states—Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen—rate less attention because they tend to be takers rather than makers of regional alliances and conflict. The North African Maghreb states have also played less of a role over time, as their economies oriented toward Europe and their identities and political concerns grew distant from the center. A relationship with an external power can also increase the power of a local actor. Jordan, for instance, parlayed a close relationship with the United States into outsized influence in the region.

Economic Factors

Oil and the distinctive political economy of the region have always played an important role in the balance of power and in the nature of politics. The intense international interest in the region is primarily driven by the importance of the regular flow of petroleum at reasonable prices to the functioning of the global economy. The region's political structures have been deeply shaped by what many call the "oil curse," in which the massive flow of revenues directly into state coffers fuels an outsized state security and patronage apparatus while crippling other sectors of the economy. The impact of oil has gone far beyond the oil-producing states. Large numbers of Arabs migrated from the poorer states to the Gulf starting in the 1960s to help build these new states by working as engineers and teachers and in all other sectors and sending their wages back as remittances.

Wealth matters in the calculation of power not only because it can be converted into military power (as in massive Gulf arms purchases during recent decades) but also because it can be used to buy influence or to shape the media and public discourse. Arab oil states have used their wealth to establish or influence a wide array of politicians, newspapers, and television stations—from Saudi ownership of multiple media outlets in the 1980s to Qatar's creation of al-Jazeera in the 1990s. Saudi Arabia, using its vast wealth to make itself the center of regional diplomacy, has sought to monopolize Arab conflict resolution. Saudi Arabia has also funded the establishment of hundreds of mosques and institutions to spread its version of Islam and contribute to a transformation of public culture from below. Wealth also creates vulnerabilities, particularly when wealth is rooted in petroleum resources beneath territory that could be seized by force (as Iraq attempted to seize Kuwait in 1990). But to the extent that war is impossible or highly unlikely (whether because of international constraints, such as U.S. military bases on a country's soil, or because of an institutional or normative environment in which conquest would not pay politically), then other resources besides military become relevant.

Anarchy and Regional Institutions

International relations theory generally begins with the concept of anarchy. This does not mean chaos; it means the absence of any central authority able to legitimately

make and enforce agreements. Anarchy, along with the possibility of war, means that every state must above all else be concerned with providing for its own security and survival. States in such an environment can never count on others to provide for security because no commitment can be enforced and self-interest must dominate regardless of intentions or affinity. Realism therefore places a great deal of weight on the structuring power of anarchy, which forces states to the rational pursuit of security and national interests or pay the consequences.

States in such a system have little choice but to balance against threatening power wielded by others. Ideology, identity, and public discourse are a mask for the underlying state interests and pursuit of power and should not be taken at anything close to face value. Domestic political systems are not particularly important, and democracy would make little difference because in the end states are forced by the structure of the system to pursue similar strategies. In the end, it does not especially matter whether Iraq is ruled by a totalitarian Sunni (Saddam Hussein) or by a democratically elected Shiite (Nuri al-Maliki) because Iraq remains in the same structural position in the region and will have no choice but to behave in similar ways.

The security dilemma—meaning the unintended consequences of the search for security under anarchy—is a key concept for those who subscribe to realism.¹¹ The security dilemma does not refer simply to the prosaic fact of insecurity or competition—after all, war fought for valid reasons would be destructive but not a tragedy. The security dilemma refers to a perverse logic in which the search for security through increased military power becomes self-defeating as others feel threatened and arm themselves in response. Israel's efforts to provide for its own security, for example, have led it to adopt a range of hawkish, militaristic policies toward its Arab neighbors that then generated a self-fulfilling prophecy of hostility and mistrust. No amount of identification or common interests allows states to overcome the iron logic of such competition and mistrust.

Recent international relations scholarship has introduced variations in both the structural nature of anarchy, with variations in the institutional environment and elements of hierarchy, and in the surrounding culture. In densely institutionalized international environments such as the European Union, war becomes exceedingly unlikely and ceases to be a primary motivation for states; international politics then take on many of the characteristics of domestic politics.¹² Constructivists such as Alexander Wendt have further argued that anarchies have distinctive cultures, in which the likelihood of war varies dramatically independent of anarchy.

At first blush, the Middle East seems to defy both of these theoretical innovations. Lacking either dense shared institutions or a cooperative political culture, the Middle East seems to remain one of the most realist parts of the world, with a high risk of war, deep mistrust, and fierce competitiveness. But is this correct?

Is the Middle East accurately described as anarchic? At the formal level, yes. There is no central authority capable of making or enforcing binding decisions. There is nothing to prevent war, which means that states must always prepare for its

possibility. And the tense, suspicious, conflict-ridden nature of the region means that the implications of anarchy should be particularly intense. The Middle East lacks effective regional institutions compared with the European Union,¹³ which in crucial ways transcends at least the effects, if not the formal properties, of anarchy. The Middle East remains highly state centric, with few signs of a willingness to surrender control in order to achieve the benefits of economic or political integration.¹⁴ The Arab League has never been an efficacious organization in any meaningful sense. The institution of the Arab Summit, regularly bringing together Arab heads of state to confer on regional issues, is more significant but has no real institutional component. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) offers some limited coordination mechanisms for the Gulf states, but efforts to transform it into a vehicle for economic and political integration have routinely failed. But failing to live up to that unprecedented experiment in international integration is hardly unique to the Middle East.

BOX 7.1

Regional Institutions

Arab Summit. Beginning in 1964, meetings of the Arab Summit have brought together the heads of state of the member countries of the League of Arab States to discuss issues of regional interest. There have been thirty-one summit meetings, including a number of emergency summits held at moments of crisis. Meetings of the Arab Summit, rather than meetings of the Arab League, have been the most important location for the formulation of common Arab political positions and for the airing of intra-Arab political conflicts. Among the most important Arab Summit meetings have been Khartoum (1967), which formulated the collective response to the June 1967 War; Rabat (1974), which declared the Palestine Liberation Organization to be the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; Cairo (1990), which decided to support the United States in its opposition to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait; and Beirut (2002), which endorsed the Saudi peace plan.

Gulf Cooperation Council. Created in 1981, the GCC comprises six wealthy Arab Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). Although technically a trade bloc and an economic cooperation zone, the GCC

has primarily been a political and security organization designed to coordinate a response to more powerful neighbors such as Iraq and (especially) Iran.

League of Arab States. Established in 1945 with six members, the Arab League is a formal international organization composed of all states that identify as Arab (formally, with Arabic being the mother tongue of the majority of the population). It currently has twenty-two members. Based in Cairo, it hosts a number of technical agencies promoting inter-Arab cooperation, but it has little formal authority or power. Former Egyptian foreign minister Amr Moussa has been secretary general since 2001.

Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. Formed in 1960, OPEC includes both Middle Eastern and non-Middle Eastern states. A cartel designed to coordinate petroleum policy among its member states, OPEC has achieved notable successes in its history, especially the 1973 oil embargo that contributed to dramatically increasing the price of oil. OPEC has been plagued, however, by persistent cheating by countries that produce in excess of their quotas in order to maximize their revenues, and it has struggled in the face of changes in the global oil markets.

But at other levels, this is less clear. The Middle Eastern regional system is necessarily embedded in the wider international environment. As early as 1959 Leonard Binder described the region as a "subordinate regional system," whose dynamics were fundamentally shaped by the interests of relations with outside powers. Throughout the cold war, the Soviet Union and the United States identified the region as a crucial battlefield of a global struggle—meaning that few local conflicts could remain truly local. The Egyptian decision both to launch war against Israel in 1973 and to pursue peace afterward were driven in large part by an effort to engage U.S. support.¹⁵ Since the end of the cold war, the U.S. role as the primary international patron of almost every state in the region has rendered it virtually impossible to analyze the region's international relations in isolation from the growing direct role of the United States. Indeed, the Gulf region in particular today looks more like a U.S. imperium than like a true anarchy.¹⁶

Second, what the Middle East lacks in formal international institutions it more than makes up for with transnational identity and a wide array of informal rules and norms. The Arab order has some characteristics of what Hedley Bull once called an "anarchical society," in which the absence of central authority is buffered by shared norms and expectations and relationships. Personal relationships and the shadow of the past matter in a system where states are governed almost exclusively by long-serving autocrats. With repeated interactions over decades—and every expectation of decades of interaction to come—Arab leaders tend to know and understand each other quite well (for better or for worse).

A common language and a politically salient identity bind the Arab world together, focusing political attention on core issues of shared concern such as Palestine. This has been reinforced in the past decade by the rise of transnational satellite television stations such as al-Jazeera, which broadcast across the region and tend to focus on such issues of presumed shared concern and to frame issues within an explicit pan-Arab identity.¹⁷ This regionwide public sphere, bound by a common language, common media, and common political frames, puts even the European public sphere to shame. This unusually robust transnational public sphere creates a political space that transcends state borders and creates a zone of political contention beyond either state or anarchy. The robust regional political culture and shared identity—a mismatch between state and nation—at least throw into question some of the basic assumptions about the logic of anarchy.

Ideology and Identity

Even defining the boundaries of the Middle East is easier said than done. Who belongs in the region? Does Israel belong? Iran or Turkey? For Arab nationalists—and constructivists—the region might be best defined by a shared language, political culture, and institutions, meaning Arab countries, members of the Arab League. This would exclude Israel, of course, but also Persian Iran and Turkey. The realist thinker would find this absurd: systems, realists believe, should be defined not by self-conception

but by strategic interaction, those states that must take each other into account when making security calculations. By this measure, Israel, Iran, and Turkey would be in—but marginal Arab countries might not. And what about Afghanistan and Pakistan, or even India with its historic trading ties with the Gulf? That few other regions have such potent arguments about their very definition is suggestive of the strength of identity and normative ideas in the foundations of regional politics.

Identity and ideology have been potent weapons and sources of threat for Arab states. More than twenty years ago, Steven Walt argued that Arab states prioritize threat rather than abstract considerations of material power. For Walt, an avowed realist, “a different form of balancing has occurred in inter-Arab relations. In the Arab world, the most important source of power has been the ability to manipulate one’s image and the image of one’s rivals in the minds of other Arab elites. Regimes have gained power and legitimacy if they have been seen as loyal to accepted Arab goals, and they have lost those assets if they have appeared to stray outside the Arab consensus.”¹⁸ Michael Barnett, a constructivist, went further: “Arab states fought about the norms that should govern their relations; social processes, not social structures—defining norms of Arabism was an exercise of power and a mechanism of social control.”¹⁹ Gregory Gause argues that “words—if it is feared that they will find resonance among a state’s citizens—were seen as more immediately threatening than guns.”²⁰

Those who see identity as highly determinative in shaping political behavior—for example, Samuel Huntington in his famous “clash of civilizations” thesis—assume that states that share a common identity will be likely to cooperate with each other and act as a coherent bloc in international politics. The constructivist theorist Michael Barnett argues convincingly, however, that there is no reason to assume that a shared identity leads to more cooperative behavior. Certainly, the Middle East is full of examples of a common identity driving conflict rather than cooperation. Baathist Syria and Iraq were archenemies despite a shared ideology and identity, while the 1960s were dominated by intense conflict among Arab states. Barnett details how strategic framing processes are used to exercise power among a shared identity group, through mechanisms that he labels symbolic sanctioning (where actors try to make others pay a political cost for their positions that stand outside the consensus), symbolic competition (outbidding, where actors are forced to up the ante in the face of political challenges), and symbolic entrapment (where actors are forced to deliver on rhetoric that they never meant to be taken seriously).²¹

Identity matters in other ways as well. Israel, Iran, and Turkey punch well below their material weight inside Arab politics because of their identity and status. For all its military might, Israel has had very little influence within the Arab world and was ruled out as a possible alliance partner by virtue of the widely shared and deeply felt hostility to the Jewish state and Arab support for the Palestinian cause. Israel’s long struggle for security involved not only establishing military deterrence or peace treaties but also seeking “normalization” with a region that fundamentally rejected its legitimacy and identity. Iran’s Shiite and Persian identity place it outside the

predominantly Sunni Arab identity consensus—not automatically, but as the raw material for its adversaries' efforts to deny it political influence. This helped solidify the Arab front against Iran in the 1980s and has fueled at least some of the moves by Arab regimes in the 2000s to contain Iran even when public opinion views Iran more favorably. Turkey was a marginal player in the Middle East for decades because of the memories of its imperial past and because of its decision to orient its foreign policy toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its efforts to be admitted into the European Union. It has returned to the Middle East in recent years in part by vocally embracing the Palestinian cause, pursuing dialogue with Iran and Syria, yet seeking to maintain its good relations with the United States and Israel.

Identity and ideology have long been potent sources of power in the Middle East, defining the stakes of political competition. Egyptian power in the 1950s could not be reduced to its military might—indeed, its military defeat in 1956 transformed into a political victory that galvanized Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arab message, and its military challenge to Israel stood at the heart of its ideological appeal. Yasir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) commanded great power for decades despite lacking a territorial state or even a stable base of operations. This is not to say that ideological appeal is completely independent of material capabilities. Arab states often built and demonstrated military might in order to build credibility for their ideas or used wealth to purchase support in the public realm more directly. They also used their ideas to mobilize support inside other states, to put pressure on their rivals from below, and in some cases to even overthrow externally powerful rivals (the fall of the monarchy in Iraq in 1958, the voluntary decision by Syria to dissolve itself into a union with Egypt in 1958, and the near collapse of the monarchy in Jordan in the 1950s being the premier examples).

The new Arab media space that emerged in the late 1990s has reshaped the nature and salience of identity politics.²² The satellite television revolution, fueled by the Qatari station al-Jazeera, has shattered the ability of states to monopolize the flow of information or opinion. Al-Jazeera and its competitors focused on issues of region-wide concern, rather than local affairs, with heavy coverage of Palestine, Iraq, and the need for social and political reform all framed within an overt Arab identity. Arab satellite TV fueled outrage over the second Palestinian intifada in 2000 and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in 2002, as well as the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the war on terror. This tipped the balance of forces more toward the populist edge of the mass public than had been the case since the 1960s—although regimes soon found ways to hit back against protestors and sought to recapture control over the political narrative. It is telling that in 2003, at the height of al-Jazeera's influence and audience and at a time of virtually unprecedented popular mobilization and anger, most Arab regimes felt comfortable quietly cooperating with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

Finally, it is important to note that there are several competing identities at play in the Middle East. Arabist identity competes with the nationalist identities cultivated by many states, with a real tension often appearing between the self-interest

and patriotic feelings of an individual state and the collective interests or identity of the Arab world. The salience of identities also waxes and wanes. Islam has become an extremely potent identity in the Middle East during the past two decades, but in the 1950s and 1960s it played virtually no role whatsoever in the great domestic and international political battles of the day. Finally, many countries in the region have intense internal identity conflicts that shape their international behavior: Jordan is divided between Palestinian- and Transjordan-origin (or West Bank and East Bank) citizens; Iraq is divided among Arab Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds; and Israel faces tension between ultra-Orthodox Jews and secularists as well as competing conceptions of whether the West Bank should be part of the state of Israel. Indeed, Benjamin Miller views the mismatch between "state" and "nation" as the most important driving force behind the conflict and instability of the Middle East.²³

State Strength and Regime Security

The Arab response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 demonstrates the importance of domestic state strength as a crucial variable in the international politics of the region.²⁴ It was the great power of Arab authoritarian regimes, with their vast security services and societal control mechanisms, that allowed them to largely ignore a vocally pro-Iraqi popular opinion. This contrasts sharply with the 1950s, when shaky regimes risked overthrow if they bucked the tides of a galvanized public opinion. While realists tend to emphasize external threats, in the Middle East "states overwhelmingly identified ideological and political threats emanating from abroad to the domestic stability of their ruling regimes as more salient than threats based upon aggregate power, geographic proximity and offensive capabilities."²⁵ The focus on regime security offers a unified theory that points toward a specific mechanism driving state foreign policy behavior: norms and ideology matter when they can mobilize threats to the regime's survival, while rising powers threaten when they can mobilize domestic opposition against the regime.

This makes domestic state strength a key variable in calculating power balances. Syria, for instance, went from a weak state to a strong one between the 1950s and 1970s not because of dramatic changes in its size, wealth, or military capabilities but because of the consolidation of state power under Hafiz al-Asad. As Syrian state capacity grew, it no longer served as a battlefield on which others could wage their proxy battles. Iraq today is a minor player in regional politics despite its large size and vast resources in large part because of the weak state and sharply divided political system that were the outcome of the U.S. occupation after 2003. Whereas Iraq before 2003 was a major actor in regional politics, after 2003 it became an arena in which the strong states waged their proxy wars. For that to change will require not a larger Iraqi army but a more stable and competent Iraqi domestic state.

The focus on regime survival, rather than state interest, has far-ranging implications. It helps to explain Iraqi behavior in the 1990s, for instance, if Saddam Hussein valued his personal survival over an abstract Iraqi national interest. As Gause

convincingly argues, Saddam Hussein launched wars in 1980 and 1990 because he believed foreign forces (Iran, Kuwait, the United States) were working to destabilize the Baath regime and that not attacking meant a greater chance of his regime falling. If Syrian rulers fear that peace with Israel could threaten their hold on power by removing the justification for repressive rule, this could explain their hesitation to conclude an agreement with Israel over the Golan Heights. Even Israeli foreign policy can be understood within this approach, to the extent that major foreign policy decisions are driven by coalition and electoral politics rather than by external threats.

The Power Structure of Regional Politics

Based on this conception of the multiple sources of power—military, economic, ideological, institutional, and domestic—in Middle Eastern regional politics, it is now possible to sketch out the relationships among the major powers of the region. Geography matters as well: some states are destined to be peripheral players by virtue of their location, while others are fated to be central because of their proximity to major zones of conflict. Iraq's long borders with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Syria mean that its security situation will always be very different from that of, say, Egypt, which enjoys relative security along its borders. Israel and Iran may be bitter ideological rivals, but the vast distance between them could potentially mitigate the security dilemma. (See map on inside front cover of this book.)

Egypt. For much of the history of the modern Middle East, Egypt aspired to leadership of the Arab world—in the 1950s and 1960s as the avatar of pan-Arabism, in the 1980s and beyond as the would-be leader of the pro-U.S. moderate “peace camp.” Its leadership claims rested on a material base as by far the largest Arab state in terms of population and a large, capable, and well-armed military. Its long history of a centralized, relatively effective state with a strong national identity rendered it largely impervious to the attempted interventions of other states and political movements. Its central location and proximity to Israel made it geostrategically important in ways that marginal powers such as Iran or Algeria could not be.

Egyptian influence began to wane as did its material power, however. With the massive shift of wealth to the Gulf following the oil price shocks of the early 1970s, Egypt found itself relegated to the level of a poor state searching for budgetary assistance instead of a powerful leader. Its shift to an alliance with the United States represented in part a search for another source of power, this one through harnessing the superpower in its own interest. But the decline in Egypt's economic power, and its increasing loss of ideational power as a U.S. ally and peace partner with Israel at a time when both were unpopular, increasingly undermined Egyptian influence.²⁶

Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has enjoyed fabulous economic power, especially during periods of high oil prices. It used this wealth to purchase a wide range of advanced

weapons systems and as a key instrument of diplomatic influence through direct and indirect subventions to a wide range of actors. It cultivated close relations with the United States. It also used its wealth to purchase a great deal of control over the Arab media, both through individual journalists and through ownership of newspapers and television stations. Finally, it sponsored the spread of its distinctive version of Islam through the Middle East and the world by extending financial support to mosques, Islamic evangelism, and the publication of materials ranging from Qurans to religious materials.

For all its assets, Saudi Arabia also had distinct vulnerabilities. Its domestic political system rested on tight control over society, with great power devolved to the religious establishment. Its extensive system of patronage and cradle-to-grave social welfare to purchase loyalty required high oil prices, which left it vulnerable at home when prices slumped. It also found itself challenged ideologically, as its domestic and foreign policies clashed with the austere Islamic ideas propagated by its own religious establishment. The attractiveness of radical ideas to many in the kingdom proved a potent challenge in the 1950s (Nasser) through the present (al-Qaida). Finally, despite all its expenditures on military technology, it remained a military pygmy, as was painfully revealed by its need to call on the United States to protect it from Iraq after the 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Iraq. Iraq is the only Arab state to combine oil wealth with a sizable population and geographic centrality. It has generally commanded a powerful military machine and supported it with an economic base that included both sizable oil reserves and a mercantile middle class. It regularly bid for Arab leadership, offering a distinctively martial form of Arab nationalism rooted in an ugly ethnic Baathism directed against its Persian Iranian rival. It has been far more likely to launch wars with its neighbors and to use military force against its own people than any other country in the region besides Israel.

Iraq's weaknesses were equally telling. Like Germany in the European balance-of-power system (to which it was often compared), Iraq suffered from its geography, with long borders with powerful competitors that were difficult to defend or to police. Its internal sectarian and ethnic divisions always represented a threat to the central government, which generally led to authoritarian rule from Baghdad. The Kurdish provinces in the north posed an endemic challenge to state integrity, which led in the late 1980s to a vicious campaign of ethnic cleansing, including the use of chemical weapons.²⁷ This meant that the impressive military machine was often turned inward, against Iraqi society, as much as outward. After the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, insurgency and the weakness of the state apparatus transformed Iraq from one of the strong to one of the weak, the battlefield on which others waged their battles rather than a powerful player in its own right.

Syria. Syria ranked as a strong second-tier power in material terms—not quite as big as Egypt or Iraq, nowhere near as wealthy as Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states. It maintained a relatively large military, but its reliance on Soviet arms left it weak in comparison

with Israel or even other Arab competitors such as Jordan, and its domestic instability meant that many of its guns aimed inward. It presented itself as the “beating heart of Arabism,” the standard-bearer of Arab opposition to Israel (especially after Camp David)—although it found little difficulty in being the only major Arab power to align with Persian Iran against Arab Iraq. From 1990 through 2005 it used a smothering domination of post-civil war Lebanon as a crucial extension of its power—keeping Israel’s northern front “hot” through support for Hizballah and putting down efforts by the proxies of other great powers to exert influence. When the “Cedar Revolution,” combined with significant U.S. pressure, drove Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005, the result was much less about democracy than about curbing Syrian power.

Syria’s ability to be a power player at all is a testament to the importance of domestic state capacity as a crucial variable. During the 1950s and 1960s, Syria’s famously unstable, coup-ridden, and ideologically divided domestic system made it a primary target of the great powers of the era, as recounted in Patrick Seale’s masterful *The Struggle for Syria*. Between 1958 and 1961, Syria formally dissolved itself into the short-lived United Arab Republic with Egypt. After Hafiz al-Asad seized power in 1970, however, this all changed as he created a repressive national security state that prioritized regime survival over all other considerations. The stability at home that this achieved allowed Syria to play a much more active role as a regional power in the following decades.

Iran. The importance of identity is seen clearly in the case of Iran, which has by far the strongest combination of material power—military, size, economic resources—and state capacity of any state in the region (even without nuclear weapons) but which has largely failed to convert this power into influence. Instead, it has consistently been viewed as a foreign power by the Arabs, and as a particularly potent threat to those Arab states with sizable Shiite populations. This was the case both before and after the 1979 Islamic revolution. Before the revolution, the shah of Iran was a key U.S. and Israeli ally, one of the pillars of U.S. grand strategy, and Iran was the dominant military power in the Gulf. Its identification with the conservative forces in the Arab cold war limited its ability to wield influence with much of the Arab world. After the revolution, what inspired much of the Arab population terrified Arab leaders who feared both Iran’s Islamic fervor and the example of a successful revolution. In the 1980s, Iraq and its Gulf backers mobilized an anti-Persian (and anti-Shiite) campaign against Iran, similar to the anti-Shiite fervor whipped up in the mid-2000s in the face of rising Iranian power following the invasion of Iraq.

Israel. Like Iran, Israel has been unable to convert its dramatic military and economic advantages over its Arab neighbors into influence for primarily ideational reasons. Its military advantages are unquestioned, from technological sophistication to an undeclared but well-known nuclear weapons capability. Israel also has an advanced economy and close relations with the United States, which paradoxically makes the United States perhaps the greatest threat to Israeli interests because of Israel’s dependence on U.S.

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support. Israel has been consumed since its creation by the difficulty of gaining acceptance in the region as a legitimate entity, which has made a constructivist battle over identity and legitimacy central to Israel's place in regional politics. Israel's relations with the Arab world have aimed both at physical security and at what might be called ontological security, a demand for normalization or recognition as a normal state in the region.

Others. A number of other states have occasionally become prominent players. Libya, a state with a small population and limited military capability but considerable oil wealth, played a role driven in large part by the idiosyncratic behavior and rhetoric of Muammar al-Qadhafi. Turkey, which for decades had shunned the Middle East and focused on its bid to join Europe, began to refocus on the Arab world after the election of the mildly Islamist Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party) and the diminished prospects for EU membership. After forming a close military alliance with Israel during the 1990s, during the second half of the first decade of the twenty-first century Turkey distanced itself from Israel and began to form good working relationships across the region, including with Iraq and Iran. This earned it considerable popularity with Arab public opinion and considerable suspicion from the Arab states. Qatar, one of the tiny but extremely wealthy Gulf ministates, set itself off from the other GCC states by using its petroleum wealth to fuel an ambitious diplomacy and the astonishingly successful al-Jazeera television station. For a tiny state that hosted a major U.S. military base and had long enjoyed good relations with Israel, Qatar emerged as a surprising avatar of a renewed Arab nationalism positioned against the old Arab order. With its hyperactive diplomacy, often aimed at contesting the Saudi role, it brokered important agreements in Lebanon and Sudan and took an increasingly active role in the Palestinian issue.

Historical Periods

The various theories described above may apply differently in different historical contexts. Many argue that the power of identity and ideology waned in the 1970s after the ignominious Arab defeat in the June 1967 War, giving way to an era of more *realpolitik* behavior. Others point to the "hardening" of the Arab state in the same period, reducing regime security concerns and perhaps facilitating more realist maneuvering. In this section, I briefly describe a number of commonly identified periods in Middle Eastern regional politics and trace the evolution of Arab-Israeli relations, Iran's role, and the inter-Arab struggle for leadership.

Arab Cold War

During the so-called Arab cold war of the 1950s and 1960s, the role of ideology and identity was exceptionally high while internal state strength was unusually low in a number of key Arab states. As the international structure shifted from multipolarity

to bipolarity, with the crystallization of the post-World War II environment into the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Middle East emerged as a key battlefield. The key lines of conflict were between the Arabist states such as Egypt and the conservative, pro-Western states, and between the Western- and the Soviet-backed camps. Those two lines only sometimes overlapped, and often the local actors worked to harness a superpower to their cause by alleging that their enemies harbored allegiances to a superpower's enemy.

Wars were often key moments in either shaping or revealing the deep changes in the region's politics. The Arab failure in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that created the state of Israel had deep effects across the region—revealing the hollowness of Arab cooperation and the weakness of Arab states. Transjordan, with a British-led Arab Legion that outperformed all other Arab armies, expanded to incorporate the West Bank as part of the new Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The poor performance of Egyptian troops badly delegitimized the monarchy, spreading the discontent that grew into the 1952 Free Officers coup.

The coup that brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power in Egypt had the most obvious effects on the region's international politics. Nasser reoriented Egyptian foreign policy around a commitment to Arab unity. The broadcasts of the Voice of the Arabs radio station proved a potent weapon, galvanizing the passions of Arabs across the Middle East and elevating Egypt to a position of leadership. In 1956 Israel collaborated with France and Britain in part in an effort to limit Nasser's rising power after he nationalized the Suez Canal, but their venture failed when the United States under the Eisenhower administration objected for fear of driving the Arab world into Soviet arms. Nasser's political

fortunes skyrocketed in the aftermath, despite his military defeat.

Although Israel was forced to pull back from Suez, it pursued a policy vis-à-vis its neighbors of massive retaliation intended to compel its neighbors to rein in Palestinian infiltration to avoid Israeli collective reprisals. These attacks did succeed in compelling the regimes to control their borders. They also militarized the environment and generated great suspicion, outrage, and anger that hardened Arab views of the new Jewish state. The cycle of reprisals and attacks contributed to the justification of both internal repression and rhetorically aggressive foreign policies. Israel's policy did establish



Nasser cheered by supporters after nationalizing the Suez Canal, 1956.

deterrence, while it also generated a self-fulfilling prophecy of hatred and hostility that has yet to be overcome.

The period was defined by an ideological struggle over the definition and practice of Arabism. In general, this struggle was waged in the realm of ideological warfare and subversion, with fierce media battles driving domestic turbulence. Egypt used its pan-Arab ideology to bid for regional leadership as it sought to establish regional norms and dominate Arab collective action. Saudi Arabia's efforts at the regional level were driven at least in part by its own domestic insecurity as parts of the public and even of the royal family clearly preferred the Arabist model.

The combination of domestic instability, intense ideological polarization, and fierce competition for regional leadership shaped the turbulent dynamics of the Arab cold war. Nasserist mobilization kept small states like Jordan and Lebanon in perpetual crisis for much of the 1950s, drawing Western military interventions in both countries in 1958. Syria became a central battlefield between the camps, with a series of military coups serving as the vehicle for regional power struggles. Syria's decisions to dissolve itself into the United Arab Republic with Egypt in 1958 and then to leave the union in 1961 were key moments in the ups and downs of the regional cold war. The Syrian decision to voluntarily merge with Egypt is, in fact, one of the more remarkable moments in contemporary international history—a major regional power surrendering its sovereignty, even temporarily, to another competing regional power out of ideological conviction rather than military threat. Iraq, another potentially powerful state, changed sides after the bloody 1958 revolution ripped one of the most powerful of conservative states into the ranks of the radicals. And from 1962 to 1967 Egyptian and Saudi forces clashed directly in a proxy war in the isolated mountains of Yemen.

This period in Arab politics culminated in the Arab disaster of the June 1967 War. That war was driven in no small part by the forces described here. Intense ideological competition between Egypt and a radical regime in Syria drove each to take ever more radical positions toward Israel—including the demand to remove United Nations forces from the Sinai Peninsula—which in turn fueled Israeli fears of encirclement and attack. Egypt found itself in a high-stakes game of chicken with Israel at a time when much of its military was tied down in Yemen and its own economic and political problems at home argued against military adventurism. Because of the enormous popularity of radical positions toward Israel and the continuing instability of Arab regimes, few Arab governments could risk standing on the sidelines, at least rhetorically. When Israel caught Egypt by surprise and destroyed most of its air force on the ground, it rapidly defeated Arab forces and captured a vast swath of Arab lands—the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria.

After 1967 to the End of the Cold War

The aftermath of the June 1967 War set in motion fundamental changes in regional politics. Israel overnight went from being perceived as a small, threatened, and likely

transient part of the region to a military powerhouse that occupied vast swaths of Arab land. Much of the region's diplomacy and wars since have been focused on dealing with the aftermath of those occupations. The disastrous performance of the Arab militaries discredited the promises of Nasser's pan-Arabism, taking the air out of the ideological wars of the preceding decades and crippling Egyptian soft power. It also led to the emergence of the PLO as the bearer of Palestinian nationalism (see Chapter 6).

Israel's occupation of Arab territories and recognition as the predominant military power in the Mashriq transformed the security balance in the region. Its occupation of the Sinai, Golan Heights, and West Bank gave it a territorial strategic buffer, as well as something over which to negotiate with its neighbors other than its existence. Despite the "three nos" of the 1967 Khartoum Arab Summit (no peace with Israel, no recognition, no negotiation), the diplomatic focus inexorably shifted toward those Arab states determined to reclaim their lost territories. Israeli military superiority also generated overconfidence, however, leading Israel to not take sufficiently seriously the warnings of a coming Egyptian and Syrian attack in October 1973. Even that war primarily aimed at improving the bargaining position of those states, however—and, in the Egyptian case, triggered a realignment away from the Soviet Union toward the United States.

The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza also transformed the politics of the Palestinian issue. The PLO emerged as the claimant of Palestinian identity and Palestinian sovereignty, on the back of the fedayeen attacks against Israel (see Chapter 19). Israeli reprisals against the hosting states and the growing power of the PLO put Jordan, especially, in an impossible position. This came to a head in the wrenching 1970 civil war of "Black September," when the Jordanian armed forces moved against the PLO and its supporters. The Arab world stood by helplessly as the Palestinians were crushed by an Arab army; a threatened Syrian intervention did not materialize while Gamal Abdel Nasser's desperate mediation ended with his collapse from exhaustion and death. Nasserist pan-Arabism quite literally died with Black September.

The early 1970s also saw the beginnings of a dramatic shift in the balance of power away from Egypt and toward the oil-producing states of the Gulf. It was not only Egypt's pan-Arab ideas that faded after 1967; it was also its economic and military position. The enormous influx of wealth into Saudi coffers transformed Saudi Arabia's ability to shape inter-Arab politics and ideas, while Egypt shifted from a deal maker to a taker in its desperate efforts to open its ailing economy. Egypt's decision to negotiate a peace treaty with Israel in 1978–1979 confirmed its reorientation away from pan-Arabism toward the pro-U.S. conservative camp. The subsequent Arab boycott of Egypt, including its expulsion from the Arab League, temporarily removed the most traditionally powerful player from the Arab equation. Egypt would not fully return to the inter-Arab game until the late 1980s.

With Egypt out of the military equation, Israel rapidly turned to the north and in 1982 launched a war against Lebanon in hopes of crushing the PLO. After initial easy military success, the Israeli military laid siege to Beirut and the PLO leadership.

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But then things began to go wrong, as international attention focused on horrors such as the massacre of Palestinians at the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila by Lebanese forces in an area under Israeli control and the sufferings of Lebanese civilians in Beirut. Finally, the PLO leadership was allowed safe passage from Lebanon, and Israeli forces retreated to a buffer zone in southern Lebanon. Hizballah, the Shiite movement backed by Iran, emerged to wage a determined insurgency against this Israeli occupation—a campaign that included the devastating 1983 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut—which continued until Israel finally unilaterally withdrew in 2000. After the Israeli withdrawal, Lebanon collapsed into a horrific civil war that lasted until an Arab accord finally agreed in 1990 to establish Syrian military hegemony in order to oversee a fragile truce in a broken country.

The combination of the end of pan-Arabism and the rise of Saudi oil wealth contributed to the dramatic growth in the repressive capacity of most Arab states. In general, whatever regimes happened to be in power in 1970 benefited from the transformation, and with few exceptions they remain in power to the present day. Oil wealth, along with strategic rents extracted from superpower patrons, allowed most Arab states to construct massive, overwhelming national security institutions designed primarily to ensure regime survival. Suffocating control of the political realm, the media, and even of the economy became the norm as the Arab system hardened against the kind of cross-border mobilization that had characterized the previous era.

Then came the Iranian revolution of 1979. No single event—not even the 1967 war debacle or the horror of Black September—so shook the Arab status quo. Arab regimes designed for little more than remaining in power were confronted with their worst nightmare as a militarily strong, modernizing, wealthy Middle Eastern power closely allied with the United States crumbled in the face of a massive popular mobilization. The Arab response took several forms. Virtually the entire Arab world rallied to the side of Iraq when Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980 out of fear for his own regime's survival in the face of a galvanized Shiite population and out of hope that the Iranian revolutionary regime might be temporarily vulnerable during the transitional chaos of revolution. When that war degenerated into a bloody eight-year standoff, Arab states contributed both financial support and ideological backing to Saddam's campaign—with only Baathist Syria opting to side with Iran against its hated Iraqi rivals. The Arab states of the Gulf formed the GCC to coordinate their response to revolutionary Iran. The other face of the Arab response was to intensify the process of hardening national security states, crushing domestic opposition, and exercising suffocating control over any signs of independent political organization or independent critical public speech.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan also shaped regional politics in the 1980s as Saudi Arabia led a transnational campaign to support the Afghan mujahidin against Soviet occupation. While the details of that campaign are beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting the extent to which the regionwide campaign to mobilize support for the Afghan jihad shaped and established the transnational Islamist

networks that would later become so crucial to the evolution of al-Qaida. Islamist movements and nominally apolitical mosques alike, with the tacit or explicit approval of governments, raised money and support for the mujahidin. These efforts laid the foundations for the Islamist transformation of regional political culture to come.

In sum, the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a recognizably realist international politics in the Middle East. The appeal of transnational ideologies faded, although new Islamist trends were growing beneath the surface, while state institutions hardened against both external subversion and domestic dissent. Wars were waged over the narrow self-interest of states (the October 1973 War) and peace agreements negotiated based on the balance of power (Camp David). Power shifted from Egypt and the Levant toward Israel and the Gulf, and the Iranian revolution dramatically unsettled the region.

After the Cold War

The end of the cold war between East and West was felt immediately in regional international relations, with the August 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Although it took several years to be fully felt, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a fundamentally new logic of unipolarity in the region and a much deeper, more direct U.S. role in every facet of the region's politics. In the post-1990s Middle East, all roads led through Washington. By the mid-2000s, virtually every regime in the region was either allied with the United States or seeking some accommodation (for example, Libya and Syria). U.S. military bases and troop deployments from Iraq to the ministates of the Gulf created a fundamentally new military and security situation. Across almost the entire region, Israel faced Arab competitors that shared the same superpower patron (the United States, which could presumably shape and to a large extent control their decisions about war) and increasingly conceived of their own interests much as the United States and Israel did—even as Arab public opinion turned in sharply different directions.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait took place in the eye of the storm caused by the end of the cold war. Although he was motivated primarily by regime security concerns, frustration over Kuwaiti intransigence, and a bid for regional hegemony, Saddam Hussein also saw the closing of a window to act while the United States was distracted with the reunification of Germany and the reordering of Europe. The decision to invade Kuwait shockingly violated Arab norms (which tolerated competition and subversion but not cross-border invasion) and shocked Arab leaders who had been personally assured by Saddam that force would not be used—violations of norms that help explain why the Arab leaders were willing to undertake unprecedented open military cooperation with the United States.

Operation Desert Storm caused the United States to move much more deeply into the region in several ways. First, the basing of approximately 500,000 troops in Saudi Arabia proved a shock to the system that galvanized domestic criticism of the Saudi ruling family. Even when those forces dispersed to bases strung along the Gulf

periphery (Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait), the momentum of direct U.S. military presence in the Gulf proved irreversible. The Clinton administration's policy of dual containment, which sought to maintain a balance of power, including sanctions and no-fly zones, against both Iraq and Iran (the traditional powers in the Gulf), required this massive U.S. presence.

The war with Iraq also prompted a much more direct and intense U.S. role in attempting to broker Arab-Israeli peace. The Madrid peace conference and the effort to implement the surprising Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO brought the United States in as a direct broker of negotiations at the most intimate possible levels.

Even as the regimes of the region adapted to this global international structure, public opinion went in quite a different direction. The forces of globalization came together around the focal point of the al-Jazeera satellite television station, which galvanized Arab identity with news coverage and popular debate programs focused on issues of shared, core Arab concern such as Palestine, Iraq, and general dissatisfaction with the political and economic status quo.²⁸ Arab anger with both the United States and their own governments peaked in the face of the official order's impotence during the second Palestinian intifada, the ongoing sanctions against Iraq, and then the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Meanwhile, Islamist movements across the region were transforming the political culture from below.

The terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, built on the trends of the 1990s far more than has generally been realized. The George W. Bush administration's aggressive unilateralism, including the invasion and occupation of Iraq, only accelerated trends evident in the second half of the Clinton administration. The U.S. imperium in the region had been developing for more than a decade, as had the trends in Arab and Muslim public opinion. The global war on terror that defined the Bush administration's engagement with the region combined close cooperation with security-minded Arab regimes with a vastly intensified engagement with all aspects of Arab politics.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq by the United States cannot help but have a massive impact on regional international relations, even if the long-range verdict remains unclear. The removal of Iraq as a major power, and then its reformulation as a democracy dominated by pro-Iranian Shiite politicians, tipped the balance of power in the Gulf decisively toward Iran even without the latter acquiring nuclear weapons. The spread of concern about the "Shiite crescent" in the region was driven at least as much by regime fears of rising Iranian power as by genuine religious or sectarian rage (even if many Arab Sunnis were genuinely outraged by the demonstrations of violent sectarianism in Iraq). Many hope that Iraq will transition into a democratic, pro-Western state, but it is far too early to know—and it is important to recall that, for those subscribing to the theory of realism in international relations, such domestic considerations will not likely matter much as the new Iraq formulates its national interests in response to an intensely competitive international environment. For now, the most important effect has been Iraq's weakness, changing it from

a powerful actor to an arena in which other powers fight their proxy wars. Whether Iraq reemerges in the near to mid-range future as a fully sovereign and territorially unified state playing an active role in regional politics—and whether that role is in alignment with or against Iran—will be decisive in judging the long-term effects of the invasion.

Conclusion: Potential Transformative Forces

Are the international relations of the Middle East exceptional? Is anything unique about the region that requires a theoretical lens different from that employed in the wider literature on international relations theory? The distinctive ideological preoccupations of the region and the transnationalism of its identities and political movements point to the region's singularity. Some theorists point to a unique, deeply embedded, and unchanging culture or religion;²⁹ the common language; and weak national identities. Others point to the distorting effects of oil: rentierism,³⁰ soft budgets, outside of the trade flows associated with globalization. Still others point to the absence of a single great power, the legacy of colonialism, and historical development.³¹ Others point to the distinct persistence of Arab authoritarianism, the distinctively transnational media, the continuing payoffs to war and conquest, the level of international involvement, terrorism and Islamist movements, and Israel.

But such analyses may confuse the surface for the substance. Much of the behavior of Arab states appears to be grounded in realism beneath the rhetoric, while many of the region's pathologies appear more typical of the third world than distinctive to Arab or Islamic culture. The resurgence of Sunni-Shiite tension in late 2005 appeared to many observers as the eruption of timeless sectarian hostilities and the expression of the formative essentialism of religious identity.³² To others, no such resort to essentialism or even to distinctive religious culture was required. The demonization of Shiites in the Sunni-majority Arab countries was clearly led by states, promoted in their official media and in government-monitored mosques, and fairly clearly followed those regimes' concerns about rising Iranian power and influence in the region. A top-down mobilization of domestic hostility against a rising foreign power is not difficult for an international relations theorist to understand even without deep knowledge of the Middle East or its allegedly unique political culture.

What about the role of Islam and of transnational Islamist actors? During the past thirty years, Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood may not have taken power in Arab countries, but they have played important roles in the democratic process and have contributed to a dramatic transformation of the public culture across the region. Saudi Arabia has a deeply Islamist state that shapes its domestic politics and that seeks to export Islam across the region and the world. Extremist Islamists have waged insurgencies in several key Arab countries, including Egypt and Algeria in the 1990s and Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Al-Qaida, finally, represents a new kind of transnational violent Islamist challenge to the official

Arab order. Although all of these have clearly mattered in important ways, it is important to recall, despite the unique Iranian revolution, how rarely Islamist movements have succeeded in taking control of a Middle Eastern state—in Sudan a military coup searching for an identity brought in Islamist ideologues, and in Turkey a moderately Islamist party won elections and continues to govern today.

The seemingly unique resistance of the Arab Middle East to political democracy, the deep focus on regime survival, and the oil-fueled overdeveloped state do seem distinctive to the region.³³ As discussed in Chapter 4, political systems in the region have rarely approximated Western notions of democracy, and the region largely resisted the various waves of democratization that swept other regions in the 1980s and after. The persistence of authoritarianism in the region could arguably have effects at the level of international, not only domestic, politics. International relations theorists have identified a wide range of effects of democracy, well beyond the oft-referenced “democratic peace thesis” that democracies do not go to war against each other. Theorists have argued that democratic systems differ systematically from non-democracies by increasing the transparency of politics and introducing multiple veto points in the policy formation process and, also, by increasing the points of access for outside actors to engage in efforts to influence political outcomes.³⁴

Finally, some posit that the Middle East is uniquely outside of Western economic globalization. Again, this is somewhat misplaced.³⁵ It is true that the region is largely irrelevant in global trade flows, and it produces few products competitive on global markets. At the same time, the region is deeply involved in global capital flows, with petrodollar recycling an overlooked but crucial part of the global economic system. It has been deeply affected by the global information revolution, with rapidly growing Internet penetration and a powerful role for transnational satellite television. It has also been a major contributor to global migration flows, both inside the region (Arabs to the Gulf) and to the outside (from the Arab world to Europe, especially, and from South Asia to the Gulf).

The history of the regional politics of the Middle East suggests a complex mix of enduring patterns and significant changes. The deep substructure remains relatively unchanged: regimes that primarily value their own survival and guarantee it through undemocratic means, the structuring effects of vast oil revenues, publics who value Arab identity, the Palestinian issue and the seemingly unresolvable Arab-Israeli struggle, and the enduring imbalances of power destabilizing the Gulf. Significant changes have occurred though: The United States is much more directly present in the region than ever before. Arab states have become far more open to coordination—or even cooperation—with Israel despite the lack of progress on resolving the Palestinian conflict. Political Islam has risen from irrelevance in the 1950s to a dominant political cultural position. Iraq has been invaded, occupied, and transformed by the United States. And Iran has gone from an Islamic revolution to what many think is the brink of a counterrevolution while getting ever closer to nuclear weapons capability. What kinds of change are possible in the future in the regional dynamics described in this chapter? What would represent genuine, fundamental change?

For realist theorists, the most likely source of enduring change would be a significant change in the balance of power at either the global or the regional level. The shift from the cold war's bipolarity to the post-cold war unipolar U.S. imperium in the early 1990s led to profound change in the logic and patterns of regional politics. A comparable global change would presumably have similar effects. The most likely such change is the decline of U.S. power and the return of global multipolar politics. Such trends are already clearly visible. The global financial crisis that devastated the United States and Western economies in 2008 and the vast U.S. expenditures on the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have dramatically impacted U.S. capabilities and willingness to intervene abroad. The dramatic shift of global wealth toward the East, especially India and China, and those countries' ravenous energy needs suggest a very high likelihood of the restructuring of the global order that will draw those powers into the Middle East. Should that happen, Arab states would be faced with a plausible choice of great-power patrons for the first time since the 1980s, and many of the restraining effects of U.S. imperium could fade. So could the U.S. ability and presumption to intervene wherever desired.

The balance of power could also change within the region. The occupation of Iraq created one such massive, unprecedented change in the distribution of power. This is likely to prove temporary, as Iraq reemerges as a centralized state with a competent military and continuing economic power. Should it not, however—whether through a partition that produces several smaller states (Kurdistan and some form of rump Iraq) or a perpetual condition of U.S. or Iranian occupation or control that denies Iraq freedom of political action—then the balance of power in the region would fundamentally change.

Iran succeeding in obtaining nuclear weapons is often suggested as another game changer in terms of regional power dynamics. This is less obvious. Nuclear weapons have limited utility for conventional political influence; and although they might increase Iran's status, they could also increase its political isolation at least in the short to medium term. Arab states threatened by increased Iranian destructive power would more likely solidify their anti-Iranian alliance choice than they would climb on a bandwagon with a feared, rising competitor. Neither Indian nor Pakistani nuclear weapons have fundamentally changed the status or political dynamics in South Asia, and Iranian nuclear weapons might have a similarly limited impact. An Iranian nuclear deterrent could limit the U.S. freedom of maneuver in the region as well as its ability to threaten Iranian interests—which could prove stabilizing, even as it frustrates U.S. policymakers. Israel would also find its nuclear primacy challenged for the first time, which could lead either to a stable condition of mutual deterrence or to an unstable, tense, ongoing brinksmanship or even preventive war.

The entry of new actors into the political arena could also change the patterns if not the underlying structure of the political system. In Qatar a more dynamic foreign policy fueled by massive oil and natural gas wealth, al-Jazeera's soft power, and an energetic young leadership have already challenged Saudi aspirations to monopolize

conflict resolution and media discourse. Turkey's turn to the Middle East, driven by frustration with the European Union, significant economic and security interests, and domestic political trends, puts a powerful new player with great material power and considerable popular attractiveness into the equation.

What about the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict? A negotiated, two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement would at least partially close the door on the most enduring conflict in the region. If this commanded popular support, it could help to fundamentally transform the political culture of the region as well as the strategic balance. Israel could become a legitimate security partner while a major source of destabilization and popular anger would be removed. This would not in and of itself change the power balance in the Gulf or any of the other trends, but it would almost certainly have a major impact across the region. In contrast, the failure of the peace process—the end of negotiations and return to some form of armed conflict—would likely reinforce existing patterns of regime security focus and competition.

Finally, would democratization across the region change the fundamental patterns of politics? As unlikely as serious democratization appears, it would certainly change the nature of the regime security concerns that seem to be so central to the foreign policy decision making of leaders in the region. Some, citing evidence of the rarity of democracies fighting wars with each other, argue that this would facilitate cooperation and moderation. This may be too optimistic, however. Arab leaders tend to be far more pragmatic, pro-U.S., and pro-Israeli than their disenfranchised populations are. More democratic states could increase opportunities for cross-border ideological mobilization as in the 1950s and complicate the well-established routines of international cooperation.

Regional politics in the Middle East have witnessed significant changes during the last half century even as enduring patterns continue to play out in predictable ways. The shift to a unipolar world in the early 1990s brought the United States into the region in far more intense ways than in the past, a change that profoundly shaped all levels of politics. The steady shift of economic power to the Gulf beginning in the 1970s drove Egypt's decline and Saudi ascendance in shaping Arab political outcomes. Powerful forces of globalization—especially the information revolution—empowered democratic activists and popular protest, but security-obsessed authoritarian Arab regimes sought ways to retain their power. The Arab-Israeli conflict defied efforts at resolution, and popular mobilization around the Palestinian issue escalated dramatically in the 2000s, but the official Arab taboo against cooperation with Israel nevertheless faded. Iraq's removal from the equation created a vacuum at the heart of the Gulf that other would-be powers struggled to fill—sparking regionwide conflict between Arab states and Iran. The rise of Islamist movements transformed public culture and sparked a new round of insurgencies and the global war on terror in response. Faced with the blizzard of developments and trends, it is essential to keep a careful eye on the underlying balance of power and the enduring imperative of

regime security as states compete for power, security, and influence in a shifting and turbulent environment.

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