

Transformations in The Middle East: Geopolitical Tensions and Rivalries Among Key Players

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ABSTRACT: The evolving nature of war and political dynamics in the Middle East, shaped by internal and external factors, has undergone profound transformations in recent decades, mainly catalyzed by the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011. This paper examines these complexities, emphasizing the interplay between historical legacies and contemporary developments. The Arab Spring epitomized a moment of significant social and political upheaval, challenging entrenched authoritarian regimes and fostering civic engagement, notably through the widespread use of social media. During this transformative period, they highlighted the power of mass mobilization and technology in altering the traditional power dynamics between governments and citizens. However, the aftermath of the Arab Spring also exposed the complexities of democratization, with some countries experiencing waves of instability, sectarian violence, and political polarization. These challenges underscore the deep-rooted issues and fault lines within societies, contributing to the rise of extremist groups and external intervention. Despite these challenges, the resilience of Middle Eastern societies was evident as they continued to strive for stability and progress. Furthermore, the response of regional actors and the international community shaped the trajectory of political developments, leading to the fragmentation of regional institutions and the emergence of fluid alliances. This dynamic geopolitical landscape intensified rivalries and competing interests among critical players, further complicating the region's dynamics. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as neorealism and ideational security dilemmas, this analysis emphasizes the importance of understanding these underlying drivers, which are crucial for addressing the root causes of instability and conflict in the Middle East.

KEYWORDS: Middle East; Arab Spring; Regional Actors; International Community; Geopolitical Landscape

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the changing nature of warfare in the Middle East over the past few decades, highlighting how these conflicts differ significantly from earlier ones. A central theme is the shift from traditional interstate wars to conflicts driven by internal dynamics within states. Unlike past wars, often between countries, modern Middle Eastern conflicts are mainly internal, with domestic unrest becoming a primary driver of regional instability. This shift is exemplified by the Arab uprisings, which demonstrate how internal issues can lead to regional upheaval, invite foreign intervention, and impact global stability. The research aims to analyze the shift from traditional interstate wars to internal conflicts within states and explore how this transformation impacts regional and international stability. By investigating the underlying causes of these modern conflicts, the paper seeks to uncover the key drivers of instability in the Middle East today.

Theoretical approaches, like the "balance of threat" model, suggest that Middle Eastern states prioritize regime survival over external threats. This focus on internal security leads regimes to balance against perceived threats to their power, regardless of those states' material strength or geographic proximity. This perspective emphasizes that, for many Middle Eastern regimes, maintaining control and addressing internal challenges is more critical than traditional foreign policy concerns. Furthermore, the concept of ideational threats - such as political movements or ideological shifts - plays a crucial role in shaping the region's security landscape, often posing a more significant challenge to regime stability than changes in military power. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to offer a deeper understanding of how internal dynamics shape the region's security landscape, influence foreign policy decisions, and trigger foreign interventions. Ultimately, the research aims to provide insight into the complexities of modern Middle Eastern conflicts and their broader geopolitical implications.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Political instability is the most common political phenomenon in developing countries, particularly in the Arab World, and includes government and parliamentary instability (Fawcett, 2019). However, the degree of political violence depends on the scope of violence, the degree of participation in political violence within the state, and the time taken by political violence (Fawcett, 2019a). Interstate and intrastate conflicts have been a persistent and impactful aspect of life in the Middle East for decades. These conflicts

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have inflicted severe consequences on Arab society, exacerbating issues such as poverty, underdevelopment, illiteracy, inequality, inadequate education and healthcare, and various other socioeconomic challenges. The region witnessed low-intensity warfare among politicized ethnic groups striving for recognition of their rights.

Theoretical perspectives, such as Walt's "balance of threat" approach (1987), suggest that Middle Eastern states focus on regime survival rather than external threats. Gause (2003) built on this by asserting that Middle Eastern states prioritize regime security over traditional foreign policy concerns, with regimes balancing against the states they perceive as the most significant threats rather than those with the most material power. Ryan (2009) similarly noted that Arab foreign policies are often driven by the need to secure the regime from internal and external challenges. Rubin (2014) examined how Middle Eastern regimes responded to ideational threats, such as Iran's revolution and the Muslim Brotherhood's rise in Egypt, and suggests that ideational threats, rather than shifts in military power, are often more significant for regional security. Rubin introduced the concept of "ideational balancing," proposing that ideational threats are central to understanding regional political dynamics.

The paper examines the changing nature of war in the Middle East, arguing that it differs significantly from previous conflicts. It cites Holsti's work (1996 and 1991) to support this assertion. According to Holsti, contemporary wars have different sources and characteristics from past ones. One key argument is that many internal conflicts occur within states rather than between them. Melander (1999) supported this perspective, suggesting that most contemporary wars are not primarily about interstate relations but internal dynamics within states. Although military considerations remained at the core of states' security policies, it was recognized that threats of a non-military nature coming from the internal environment of the state could have a significant impact on the security of the state, and domestic strife may lead to regional and international upheaval and invite foreign political and military intervention. The Arab uprising demonstrated that regional states' domestic environments are the primary sources of regional instability in the Middle East. The Syrian conflict clearly showed how civil wars can lead to regional and international instability and invite foreign intervention. Examining Syrian domestic politics and regional and global geopolitics, Tan and Perudin (2019) found that internal politics resulted in the continuation of the conflict. In contrast, the Israel-Hamas conflict is primarily centered around nationalistic and ideological legitimacy, with Hamas portraying itself as a defender of Palestinian rights and resistance to occupation. Hamas, as a non-state actor with a political and military wing, seeks to legitimize its rule over Gaza through a resistance narrative (Kaye, 2023). Israel, on the other hand, asserts its legitimacy through its national security concerns and its right to defend itself from rocket attacks and other forms of violence by Hamas from Gaza and Hezbollah from Lebanon (Khatib, 2023).

POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Before the Arab Spring, the Arab world was mired in political instability. The Arab Spring, as illuminated by Zeyneb and Bensouici (2016), marked the first popular uprising that overthrew an established regime in the Middle East and North Africa. Alshammari and Willoughby (2017) found that increased democracy correlates with reduced unrest. The uprisings, a testament to the power of mass demonstrations and peaceful protests, showed the role of social media in galvanizing protests and communicating objectives to the global community. This technological aspect underscores the evolving landscape of political movements in the digital age. It further underlines that political stability in modern countries cannot be achieved by military and security forces alone; instead, they must address the legitimate needs and aspirations of the people. The Arab Spring states, despite their substantial military forces and robust security apparatus, continued to grapple with political instability. This was evident in countries like Pakistan, Iraq, Nigeria, and Egypt, which are ranked among the least stable globally, irrespective of their significant military spending (Political Stability, 2017).

The Arab Spring served as a poignant example of the transition towards democracy, involving a complex restructuring of state institutions from authoritarian rule to a more politically inclusive government. This shift was viewed as a move towards democratization in the modern era. According to Fukuyama (2014), the democratization process necessitated an initial mobilization to dismantle the existing regime. However, as was evident in a short timeframe, instability escalated as political demands increased, while the capacity of political institutions to effectively address these demands diminished (Al-Serhan et al., 2017).

The Arab Spring was primarily driven by three factors: the mobilization of the masses, facilitated by technology and the youth; the involvement of the military and regime security forces; and the influence of external forces. Over the years, the Arab Spring states have actively suppressed the emergence of alternative leadership beyond the ruling regimes. What changed was that technology empowered citizens to confront oppressive security forces. No longer relying on established leaders, it only takes tech-savvy individuals with organizational abilities and live media coverage, such as Al-Jazeera, to mobilize the masses. Furthermore, the prolonged leadership tenure in the Arab Spring countries identified those responsible for each nation's predicament, and street revolutions have erupted, with alternative political leadership struggling to emerge amidst the protests and conflicts (Keiswetter, 2012).

Political instability and violence have had a detrimental impact on macroeconomic and financial development, as highlighted by Abadie and Gardeazabal (2008). Muslu (2013) asserts that the distribution of economic capabilities is the primary determinant of social and political dynamics in the Middle East, where states exert control across various domains, from the economy to culture. Poulis (2015) argued that the Arab Spring failed to yield positive outcomes, instead empowering political Islamism, fostering

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religious radicalism, eroding state secularism, and facilitating the rise of semi-theocratic regimes. This shift negatively impacted public freedoms, minority rights, women's rights, and democratization efforts. The uprisings led to riots, civil wars, social militarization, regional interference, increased Iranian hegemony, anarchized petrodollars, proxy wars, the resurgence of terrorist cells, and economic repercussions. Mohammed Bani Salameh defines political reform as change and adjustment to the best for an abnormal or bad situation, especially in the practices and behaviors of corrupt or authoritarian institutions or backward societies, removal of injustice, or correction of a distortion (Bani Salameh, 2017).

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The Arab Spring, stemming from mass dissatisfaction with respective regimes, sparked conflicts across the Middle East, mobilizing collective identities and informal networks. Hamada (2019) emphasizes the significant interaction between press freedom and political instability, noting that the Arab Spring did not enhance this relationship positively. The influence of social media on global politics is profound, with politicians increasingly utilizing platforms like Twitter and Facebook to engage with audiences. The internet's disruptive impact challenges traditional media and politics worldwide, prompting a shift towards a more reactive stance from governments and media outlets. Its role in social revolutions became evident, signaling a change in power dynamics.

Initially underestimated the internet's potential to disseminate social and political messages empowered social movements to circumvent government and traditional media influence. This dynamic reshaped global politics, particularly in developing countries like North Africa and the Arab world. However, by 2018, with movements like the Yellow Vest protests in France, the balance of power had shifted back towards governments. Arab governments demonstrated an ability to control social movements, signaling a shift in the social impact of the Internet. Governments now seek to leverage technology to enhance their competitive edge in the global arena.

Social media involvement in uprisings across the Arab World has been a significant and central aspect of shaping political discourse during the Arab Spring and the following years. Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari, and Maziad (2019) highlight this role of social media. Lynch (2011) notes the transformative impact of information delivery and the consequent shift in power dynamics from local to global media platforms. Social media platforms provide avenues for information dissemination that governments find challenging to control, unlike traditional media outlets that often echo governmental interests in the Arab World. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) suggest that social media played a critical role in shaping individual decisions to participate in protests, including logistical planning and assessing the likelihood of success. Shirky (2011) viewed social media positively as a platform for online activism, facilitating offline activism and civic engagement in countries like Tunisia and Egypt.

The Arab Spring demonstrated how social media lowered the barriers to participation in protests, reducing mobilization costs and altering traditional editorial policies of mainstream media. While Duggan and Smith (2016) argue that social media tends to reinforce existing opinions rather than change them, Howard and Hussain (2011) and Shirky (2011) contend that it has been instrumental in spreading ideas of freedom and democracy. Kassim (2012) suggests that platforms like Facebook and Twitter were particularly effective in enabling citizen journalism, allowing ordinary individuals to share news and information about the uprisings. The growth of social media usage during the Arab Spring led to a significant shift in the relationship between governments and societies in the Middle East, as observed by Ghannam (2011) and Mourtada and Salem (2012). The extensive use of social media in the Middle East, surpassing the global average, underscores its integral role in daily life, as highlighted by the Pew Research Center (2017).

New media, particularly social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, have emerged as powerful tools for nations to advance their diplomatic goals. This digital shift has transformed traditional diplomacy into what scholars call digital diplomacy. The United States actively use social media platforms to promote its foreign policy objectives. Digital diplomacy allows states to communicate more effectively with global audiences, expand their influence, and shape international perceptions. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been proactive in this field, incorporating digital diplomacy into its foreign policy strategy to expand its influence globally despite the complexities of navigating state security concerns and media regulations. Antwi-Boateng and Al Mazrouei (2021) argue that the UAE's integration of digital tools into its diplomatic efforts marks a significant adaptation to globalization. However, challenges such as censorship and linguistic barriers continue to limit its full potential.

However, the democratizing potential of social media has not been without consequences. While platforms like Facebook and Twitter have played a role in empowering civil society and spreading democratic ideals, they have also been exploited by extremist groups. Neumann (2016) highlights that terrorist organizations in the Middle East have used social media as a tool for propaganda, recruitment, and psychological warfare. The ability to disseminate content quickly and anonymously has allowed these groups to target vulnerable individuals, while encrypted communication platforms help them coordinate attacks and raise funds. Torok (2020) emphasizes that terrorist groups like ISIS have mastered social media algorithms to maximize the reach of their messages, making them a powerful tool for both radicalization and tactical coordination.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR POLITICAL ACTIVISM

The Arab Spring marked a significant turning point in the use of social media for political activism, signaling a shift in the balance of power between governments and the public. Brown, Guskin, and Mitchell (2012) underscore the groundbreaking role of social

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media in disseminating political messages, garnering support, and raising awareness of people's causes. Online campaigns gained momentum, with social websites playing a pivotal role in supplying public information. Social media facilitated the organization of large-scale protests and empowered activists by providing a platform to share uncensored and accurate information, as noted by Kassim (2012). The ability to coordinate and communicate through social networks helped alleviate the fear barrier among protestors, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose. The utilization of messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram, along with features like Facebook Live, further enhanced the effectiveness of social media in facilitating protests and disseminating real-time coverage. This digital revolution transformed the political landscape in the Arab World, challenging the traditional media's government-controlled narrative.

The impact of these social movements extended beyond the Arab Spring, fueling civic engagement in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, as highlighted by Howard (2018). The transformations spurred by social media reached policymaking circles at regional and global levels, shaping political agendas and discussions (Mourtada et al., 2012). However, governments responded to these challenges by adapting their strategies. While initially caught off guard in 2011, governments in the Arab World increasingly utilized social media for their agendas while also combating extremist ideologies propagated through these platforms. Despite initial success in catching governments off guard, subsequent protests in 2018 faced more resistance due to governments' improved response strategies. Arab governments demonstrated a proactive approach, preempting escalations and thwarting significant social and political changes. The evolution of governments' policies towards social media reflects their growing awareness of its power and potential impact on global politics. Today, governments play a crucial role in navigating the digital landscape, advancing technology, and engaging with new policy frameworks involving digital technologies (Garrett, 2019).

While investigating the contrasting outcomes of social revolutions in the Middle East during the second decade of the 21st century, it is clear that the civil unrest in 2011, initiated and propelled by social media, swiftly evolved into widespread civil demonstrations across the Arab World. Originating in Tunisia, the upheaval rapidly spread via social media channels, inspiring citizens in Egypt and other Arab nations to rise, fundamentally altering the region's political landscape.

The contrasting fate of the Yellow Vest movement in France in 2018 and 2019, which failed to reignite a social revolution in the Middle East, underscores the altered dynamics between governments and social movements since 2011. The research indicates that the success of the 2011 protests stemmed from social media catching Arab governments off guard, precipitating swift social and political pressure from the populace. Conversely, the failure of the 2018 uprising can be attributed to the government's adept response to the new wave of social movements, contrasting sharply with the influential role social movements played in 2011 (Achcar, 2021).

To comprehend the divergent power dynamics between the two protest waves, analyzing the transformed role of governments in shaping social and political changes is imperative. Notably, contemporary governments refrain from attempting to block the Internet, a stark departure from their tactics during the protests earlier in the century. These uprisings underscored that while social media presents significant opportunities and challenges for social and political actors worldwide, the balance of power has shifted, and governments, the public, media, and international organizations recognize the potency and impact of social media in instigating and propelling civil demonstrations, thereby shaping public discourse and national or global policies.

Despite social media's benefits to civil society and state actors, its dark side cannot be ignored. Terrorist organizations' use of platforms for psychological manipulation, funding operations, and intelligence gathering has heightened the complexity of digital technology's role in global security. Governments worldwide face the dual challenge of leveraging social media for positive diplomatic engagement while countering its use by extremist groups. (Antwi-Boateng, and Mazrouei, 2021).

The geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East further illustrate the profound impact of digital tools and socio-political movements. The region's authoritarian regimes have been challenged by widespread protests, often amplified by digital platforms. As Garlick and Havlová (2020) discuss, the Arab Spring fragmented regional alliances and intensified rivalries, particularly between significant powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia. These competing interests have created fluid alliances, complicating regional stability efforts. The rise of regional powers like the UAE and Qatar, bolstered by rapid industrialization and economic growth, has attracted foreign investments but also brought economic and political issues to the forefront of international relations.

POLITICAL CRISES AND UPHEAVAL

The Arab uprisings swept the Middle East as significant political crises and upheaval. In the immediate aftermath of these revolts, Arab states sought to navigate the turbulent waters by collaborating through established regional institutions, with widespread anticipation that cooperative security mechanisms could be strengthened (Fawcett, 2019b), prompting proactive engagement from institutions like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. However, the Arab League took unprecedented steps, such as suspending Syria's membership in November 2011 and endorsing international interventions in Libya. These actions marked a departure from the Arab League's traditional stance of non-interference in member states' domestic affairs. From 2013 onwards, the dynamics of regional cooperation underwent significant changes. The Arab League, once a symbol of unity, began to exhibit signs of disunity with the boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Bahrain in June 2017. In response, alternative patterns of regional cooperation emerged, focusing on countering shared adversaries and threats, including the

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establishment of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition and the formation of the so-called Arab Quartet comprising Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt.

In the aftermath of the uprisings, we witnessed the emergence of fluid alliances as established regional institutions faltered in relevance. A heightened sense of regime vulnerability from various sources primarily propelled this transformation. Interrupted by domestic politics, regional developments played a role in exacerbating these insecurities. The removal of several Arab leaders and the subsequent plunge into civil strife in nations like Syria, Libya, and Yemen created an unstable landscape, giving rise to armed non-state groups and extremist factions challenging state authority and stability. The widespread lack of domestic legitimacy among many Arab governments spurred intensified repression and internal violence, coupled with efforts to manipulate and securitize sectarian identities both domestically and beyond.

Further shifts in regional and global politics compounded the threats faced by these regimes. The Arab uprisings triggered a reshuffling of regional power dynamics, with established and aspiring regional players increasingly entangled in the region's affairs. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran deepened, while sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shia factions exacerbated tensions within the area. Initially bolstered by the global financial crisis, Gulf states faced new insecurities due to perceived shifts in US foreign policy, such as support for the uprisings and a strategic pivot towards Asia. Russia's interventionism and perceived US disengagement further fueled uncertainty, prompting regional powers to pursue their agendas and forge alliances with various actors, including the US and Russia.

During this period, there was also a notable strengthening of bilateral cooperation between key regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as between Qatar and Turkey. This trend of bilateral engagement continued with the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab countries in 2020. In times of turmoil, Middle Eastern governments continued to seek allies but increasingly favored flexible and ad-hoc alliances over established organizations.

As established regional institutions crumbled, escalating violence and evolving geopolitical dynamics brought heightened volatility to the Middle East. Threats emerged from multiple intersecting levels, creating a multifaceted gap for regimes. In response to these developments and amid growing perceptions of regime vulnerability, fluid alliances became a prominent feature. Leading the charge, Saudi Arabia initially sought regional engagement through institutions like the Arab League and the GCC but found them inadequate for addressing pressing security concerns. Fueled by Iran's growing assertiveness and internal power struggles, Saudi Arabia spearheaded initiatives such as "Operation Decisive Storm" in Yemen in 2015, aimed at supporting the internationally recognized government against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. Additionally, Saudi Arabia launched the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) in 2015, comprising 41 nations dedicated to combating terrorism, albeit facing reluctance from certain Muslim-majority countries like Iraq and Algeria, with Qatar eventually being expelled from the coalition.

In contrast, the role of non-state actors has also emerged. Groups like Hamad, Hezbollah, and ISIS have challenged state sovereignty and reshaped alliances through their ideological commitments and tactical engagements. These groups exploit existing identities and grievances to mobilize support and influence regional dynamics. The interplay of these ideational forces with material interests creates a complex environment where alliances can shift rapidly, reflecting changes in public sentiment and identity politics. The Israel-Hamas conflict, with Iran's continued backing of Hamas, underscores Iran's strategy of using asymmetric warfare and non-state actors to challenge Israeli and U.S. influence in the region. Meanwhile, U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia have sought to balance their reliance on U.S. security guarantees with attempts to diversify their geopolitical partnerships, as evidenced by Saudi-Iran rapprochement talks facilitated by China in early 2023 (Lavi, 2023).

DIVISIONS AMONG ARAB STATES

Divisions among Arab states have also emerged regarding the stance towards Israel. Relations between al-Sisi's Egypt and the government in Jerusalem have improved notably, mainly because of their joint opposition to the Palestinian Hamas – originally an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The two countries also share an interest in fighting the Islamic State-affiliated insurgency in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula at Israel's southern border. It has fostered a considerable degree of covert military and intelligence cooperation, as once (and probably rashly) acknowledged by al-Sisi in public (Kirkpatrick, 2019).

Shared hostility towards Iran and its allies has also forged a new rapprochement between Israel and several Arab monarchies, with the UAE and Bahrain formally establishing diplomatic relations with Israel in August 2020, followed by Morocco and Sudan in early 2021. Saudi Arabia increased intelligence cooperation with Israel, too, but has not normalized relations, fearing that such a move could undermine its legitimacy as a leader of the 'Muslim world'. Other states, such as Algeria, Kuwait, and Lebanon, vehemently oppose any normalization of relations with Israel as long as the conflict with the Palestinians is not resolved (Hokayem, 2023).

A defining feature of Middle Eastern geopolitics since the Arab Spring has been the emergence of fluid alliances, whereby states form temporary coalitions based on immediate political and security interests (Gause, 2011). This trend reflects a shift from formal multilateral organizations to more pragmatic, interest-based alliances. The UAE and Egypt aligned to support General Haftar's forces in Libya, while Turkey backed the Government of National Accord (GNA), creating a highly fluid situation (Chorev, 2021).

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Yasser et al. (2022) argue that a correlation exists between the growing relevance of social media in the Middle East and the escalation of violence and hostility in the region.

The region's diverse cultural identities and traditional perspectives on power, interest, and communication contribute to its divergent responses to globalization trends. They argue that despite the significant role of public diplomacy and social media in facilitating communication among regional actors, there is a simultaneous increase in violence and hostility, challenging the notion of cooperation and trustworthiness. As Neumann (2016) explained, the use of social media in the region is not limited to states. Non-state actors, including terrorist organizations, have also exploited these platforms to disseminate propaganda and coordinate activities. ISIS, in particular, mastered the use of social media to recruit fighters and promote its ideology, posing significant challenges to counterterrorism efforts.

The Syrian conflict prompted divisions within the traditional 'axis of resistance,' which includes Syria, Iran, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Palestinian Hamas. As Hamas decided to support the opposition to the Assad regime in the erupting Syrian civil war, it broke its traditional links with Damascus. It challenged Iran's strategy in this specific conflict. With the Hamas overseas leadership moving from Damascus to Doha, Qatar became the main financial backer of Hamas with Israel's tacit approval (Harel, 2019).

Several key factors drove the evolution of UAE-Israel relations, including concerns regarding Iran, internal unrest, economic pressures, and the strategic benefits of discreet diplomacy. External events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Israel's annexation plans between 2019 and 2020 also played pivotal roles, capitalizing on existing covert collaborations and shared regional interests. Positive strategies, notably incentives, successfully reshaped their previously adversarial relationship. The resultant agreement, brokered by the U.S., afforded both parties strategic, security, economic, and diplomatic benefits. Notably, the efficacy of conflict management through constructive engagement, mainly when bolstered by external circumstances and deepening mutual interests, emerged as a crucial factor in resolving longstanding hostilities.

The Abraham Accords, which saw the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states, including the UAE and Bahrain, also highlight the rise of pragmatic alliances over ideological unity (Hokayem, 2023). While these agreements signal a shift toward more interest-based cooperation, they have also exacerbated divisions within the region, particularly with countries like Iran and Turkey, which view the accords as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause (Entessar & Afrasiabi, 2021).

The Israel-Hamas conflict is primarily centered around nationalistic and ideological legitimacy, with Hamas portraying itself as a defender of Palestinian rights and resistance to Israeli occupation. Hamas, as a non-state actor with a political and military wing, seeks to legitimize its rule over Gaza through a resistance narrative (Kaye, 2023). Israel, on the other hand, asserts its legitimacy through its national security concerns and its right to defend itself from rocket attacks and other forms of violence by Hamas from Gaza and Hezbollah from Lebanon (Khatib, 2023).

The conflict also involves regional alliances, but these alliances are more deeply rooted in the region's long-standing geopolitical rivalries. Hamas is supported by regional actors like Iran, which uses the group as a proxy to exert influence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast, Israel receives strong support from Western nations, particularly the United States (Hanieh, 2023). Unlike the alliances seen during the Arab Uprisings, the alliances in the Israel-Hamas conflict are more entrenched and represent broader regional and international ideological divides, particularly between Iran and the Gulf states, on the one hand, and Israel and its Western allies, on the other.

CONCLUSION

Over the past decades, the evolving nature of war and political dynamics in the Middle East reflects a complex interplay of internal and external factors driven by historical legacies and contemporary developments. The analysis presented in this paper underscores the profound transformations that have occurred in the region, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011.

The revolution catalyzed widespread social and political change, challenging entrenched authoritarian regimes and ushering in a new civic engagement and activism era primarily facilitated by social media platforms. The uprisings demonstrated the power of mass mobilization and the potential of technology to amplify voices and catalyze political change, fundamentally altering the balance of power between governments and the populace.

However, the aftermath of the Arab Spring also revealed the complexities and challenges associated with democratization and political transition in the region. While the uprisings succeeded in toppling regimes in some countries, they also unleashed waves of instability, sectarian violence, and political polarization, exacerbating existing fault lines and creating fertile ground for the rise of extremist groups and external intervention.

The response of regional actors and the international community to the uprisings further shaped the trajectory of political developments in the Middle East. The fragmentation of regional institutions and the emergence of fluid alliances underscored the shifting geopolitical landscape, marked by intensified rivalries and competing interests among key players.

In this context, the paper highlights the significance of understanding the underlying drivers of conflict and cooperation in the Middle East and the evolving strategic actors' changing strategies and dynamic ethical frameworks such as neorealism and

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ideational security dilemmas; the analysis sheds light on the complex interplay of domestic politics, regime security, and external pressures shaping regional dynamics.

Addressing the root causes of instability and conflict in the Middle East will require a comprehensive approach addressing internal and external factors. This includes promoting inclusive governance, addressing socioeconomic grievances, countering extremist ideologies, and fostering constructive engagement and cooperation among regional actors. The changing nature of war and political dynamics in the Middle East underscores the need for adaptive and nuanced approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

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