

The Rise of Non-State Actors and the Implications for International Relations Theory

Yaron Katz

Holon Institute of Technology, Israel

ABSTRACT: This research explores the evolving role of non-state actors in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, with a particular focus on how these entities are reshaping power dynamics, diplomacy, and international relations. Traditionally, diplomacy and international politics have been state-centric, emphasizing the role of sovereign states as the primary actors in global affairs. However, the rise of non-state actors such as militant groups, transnational organizations, and militias has fundamentally altered this framework. This study examines how these actors, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and various militia factions, are no longer peripheral entities but key players in military, diplomatic, and ideological processes that influence regional and global power structures. The research also analyzes the implications of this shift for realist theory in international relations, which traditionally prioritizes state interests, power, and security. Through a realist lens, this paper argues that non-state actors now play an integral role in shaping both regional diplomacy and global security strategies, necessitating a rethinking of traditional international relations theories. By highlighting the challenges posed by non-state actors to established diplomatic frameworks, this study contributes to the academic discourse by offering a more comprehensive understanding of the changing nature of power, diplomacy, and state behavior in the world today.

KEYWORDS: Non-State Actors; International Relations; Middle East; Military; Diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has long been in intense geopolitical volatility, shaped by shifting alliances, internal conflicts, and the competing interests of regional and global powers. Recent developments - the ongoing war in Gaza and Lebanon and the collapse of the Syrian government - have intensified the region's complex political landscape. While state actors have traditionally dominated diplomatic and strategic interactions in international relations, the past decade has witnessed the emergence of non-state actors as influential participants in both regional and global affairs.

Militant groups, transnational networks, and politically engaged non-governmental organizations (NGOs) now play increasingly central roles in shaping political outcomes across the Middle East. Entities such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and various armed militias have evolved beyond their initial roles as insurgent or resistance movements. They engage in activities typically reserved for sovereign states, conducting military operations, participating in negotiations, and forming strategic alliances. Their growing prominence represents a significant departure from conventional, state-centric diplomatic models, yet remains underexplored within the academic discourse of International Relations (IR).

This research seeks to fill that gap by examining the evolving role of non-state actors in Middle Eastern diplomacy and security. It investigates whether their engagement in diplomatic and military processes constitutes a novel form of diplomacy that fundamentally challenges traditional notions of sovereignty and interstate relations. Drawing upon realist theory, which emphasizes power, security, and the pursuit of national interest, this study will analyze how non-state actors reshape regional power dynamics and redefine diplomatic engagement.

Realism, with its foundational premise that the international system is anarchic and that states act to preserve their survival and maximize power, provides a useful framework for understanding the strategic behavior of both state and non-state actors. However, this research argues that realism must be adapted to account for the growing influence of non-state actors, particularly in regions like the Middle East, where their activities have begun to rival those of states in terms of impact and scope.

By focusing on the political, military, and ideological strategies of key actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas, along with their regional patrons and adversaries, this study explores how non-state actors are redefining diplomacy and security in the region. It contends that their participation in alliance-building, conflict resolution, and strategic negotiations is reshaping the geopolitical order and demanding a reassessment of established IR paradigms. In doing so, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary Middle Eastern political environment. It demonstrates how the inclusion of non-state actors in diplomatic

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frameworks alters traditional power calculations and challenges the primacy of state sovereignty, calling for a reconfiguration of realist theory to reflect the realities of current geopolitics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research adopts a realist theoretical framework to explore the evolving role of non-state actors in Middle Eastern geopolitics and diplomacy. Classical realism emphasizes power, security, and national interest within an anarchic international system where states are the principal actors. However, the growing agency of non-state actors - such as militias, proxy forces, and transnational networks - necessitates an expanded interpretation of realism that incorporates their influence on regional and global power dynamics.

The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East has undergone profound transformations in recent years, catalyzed by internal conflicts, regime instability, and shifting global power dynamics. Events such as the protracted Syrian civil war, the war in Gaza, and renewed tensions in Lebanon have eroded traditional alliances and fostered new power alignments. These developments have drawn in regional powers - Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel - as well as global actors like the United States, Russia, and China, creating a volatile and multi-layered geopolitical environment.

Simultaneously, a defining feature of this evolving order is the rise of non-state actors (NSAs) assuming diplomatic and strategic roles traditionally reserved for states. In the Middle East, groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and transnational Shia militias have entrenched themselves militarily and politically and are actively engaging in regional diplomacy. These actors increasingly participate in negotiations, manage foreign relations, and even shape ceasefire agreements - tasks historically limited to sovereign states. Yet, while the influence of NSAs is growing, academic literature in International Relations (IR) has only recently begun to fully account for their role in diplomatic affairs. Traditional state-centric frameworks, especially within realist theory, remain insufficient for analyzing the complex web of alliances, proxy conflicts, and political negotiations in which NSAs are central players. This research addresses that gap by exploring how NSAs redefine diplomacy in the Middle East. It argues that the diplomatic behavior of actors like Hezbollah and Hamas challenges established models of international relations and expands the realist paradigm. Unlike traditional diplomatic channels based on recognition, sovereignty, and formal treaties, NSAs operate through alternative mechanisms: military leverage, ideological alliances, cross-border mobilization, and informal negotiations. Hezbollah's coordination with Iran and Syria, or Hamas' indirect negotiations with Israel via Qatar and Egypt, demonstrate how these groups are embedded in regional diplomacy. This reconceptualization aligns with emerging scholarship that calls for the expansion of IR theories to include hybrid actors - those who simultaneously challenge and reinforce state structures. NSAs in regions of protracted conflict increasingly "perform state functions without statehood," acting as both spoilers and stabilizers in the international system. The study draws on contemporary realist perspectives that consider both state and non-state actors as strategic players engaged in power struggles. These actors not only participate in armed conflict but also in diplomatic negotiations, alliance formation, and ideological propagation. Their actions reflect a realist logic of power maximization, survival, and strategic positioning, even though they often lack formal sovereignty. This theoretical lens enables a nuanced understanding of how regional powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia utilize non-state actors to project influence and reshape the geopolitical landscape.

The research utilizes a case study approach to examine non-state actors operating in major Middle Eastern conflict zones. This includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, as a non-state actor with formal political power, military capability, and deep ties to Iran, and Hamas in Gaza, representing an ideologically driven militant group engaged in both governance and conflict, with regional diplomatic implications. Also included is Iran and its proxy networks, focusing on how Iran utilizes non-state actors to extend regional influence and counterbalance rivals such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the U.S., and the Syrian conflict, examining the roles of non-state militias and transnational actors during and after state collapse. These cases provide a diverse set of contexts in which non-state actors challenge state-centric diplomatic norms, engage in realist strategic behavior, and influence both regional and international security frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, case study-based methodology to investigate the evolving role of non-state actors in Middle Eastern geopolitics and diplomacy. Focusing on key conflict zones and power struggles - Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria - the research explores how non-state actors challenge traditional state-centric models of diplomacy and international relations. By examining the intersection of armed conflict, regional alliances, and strategic interests, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these actors influence regional and global political dynamics. The analysis is interpretive and comparative, identifying patterns in how non-state actors assert diplomatic agency and engage with state actors within a realist framework. By tracing these interactions, the study seeks to demonstrate how power, security, and survival remain central to both state and non-state strategies in the region.

The methodological framework centers on the transformation of international relations theory, particularly realism, in response to the growing prominence of non-state actors, of militias, proxy forces, transnational networks, and ideologically driven armed groups. Traditionally, realism has emphasized state behavior, national interest, and security in an anarchic international system. However,

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the increasing diplomatic and strategic agency of non-state actors demands an expanded theoretical lens that accommodates their role in shaping regional balances of power.

This research analyzes the strategic functions of non-state actors supported by influential regional powers like Iran, as instrumental agents in geopolitical contests. Iran's support of groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas illustrates how non-state actors operate as extensions of state policy while also pursuing their political agendas. These actors engage in diplomacy, alliance-building, and military operations, thereby redefining diplomatic engagement and security strategies in the region. Through a realist lens, the study examines the ways both state and non-state actors navigate power structures, form strategic alliances, and seek influence and survival within the region's fluid and volatile environment. This approach highlights how states like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council adapt their foreign policies and security frameworks to account for the presence and impact of non-state actors.

By integrating case-specific analysis with broader theoretical insights, the research contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges the state-centric assumptions of international relations. It argues that the increasing diplomatic engagement of non-state actors and their use of political, military, and ideological tools to shape outcomes in complex conflict zones. This study aims to expand the application of realism by demonstrating how non-state actors have become central players in regional diplomacy and security, altering traditional understandings of power, legitimacy, and international engagement in the Middle East.

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of diplomacy and international relations by centering NSAs within a realist framework. It contends that non-state armed groups are not anomalies in a state-based system, and are major actors reshaping regional power balances. Their involvement in military strategy, political negotiation, and alliance formation underscores a major shift in global diplomacy. In this environment, state sovereignty is increasingly contested by sub-state entities with transnational ambitions. By examining the intersection of realism and non-state diplomacy, this research highlights the urgent need for updated theoretical models that reflect the lived realities of modern international politics. In the Middle East, NSAs are no longer peripheral actors, they are central to the evolving balance of power and the future architecture of regional and global diplomacy.

The Abraham Accords and Realist Adaptation

The Abraham Accords mark a transformative moment in Middle Eastern geopolitics, signaling a strategic recalibration by Gulf states in response to shifting power dynamics and emergent security threats. This regional realignment of the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states illustrates a pragmatic application of realist theory, where states adapt to maximize power, ensure survival, and balance against perceived threats (Ullah and Xinlei, 2024). Bakhshandeh & Yeganeh (2023) explain that one of the key developments following the accords has been the deeper integration of Gulf Arab states into the geo-economic and geo-strategic frameworks dominated by regional players like Israel.

In realist terms, the Abraham Accords represent an instrumental alliance, a response to the shared threat perceptions of Iran's regional behavior, U.S. retrenchment, and the uncertain future of the security order in the Middle East. As Fulton & Yellinek (2021) explain, Gulf states have pragmatically aligned with Israel not because of ideological convergence, but as a strategic hedge to counterbalance regional volatility and enhance deterrence. These moves underscore realism's emphasis on interest-based diplomacy and threat-driven cooperation. Yet, the Israel-Gaza war has complicated the strategic assumptions underpinning the Accords. The war has tested the resilience of newly formed partnerships, revealing the tension between normative legitimacy at home and strategic alignment abroad. Worrall (2025) argues that Gulf leaders now face a dual pressure: managing public outrage over the humanitarian crisis while sustaining security cooperation with Israel. From a realist lens, this tension underscores the limits of alliance durability when domestic political costs outweigh strategic benefits, highlighting the enduring centrality of regime stability in foreign policy decisions.

Within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the states' divergent responses to regional instability reflect asymmetries in threat perception and national security doctrine. The UAE, for example, has pursued a forward-leaning strategy of military modernization, strategic normalization, and interventionism (Fraihat & Ezbid, 2023). In contrast, Qatar continues its diplomatic hedging strategy, fostering ties with both Western powers and regional rivals. Kuwait has remained cautious, emphasizing neutrality and domestic consensus. As Szalai (2025) notes, these differences are shaped largely by each state's assessment of U.S. reliability and the evolving global order.

Declining confidence in U.S. security guarantees has prompted Gulf states to diversify their defense partnerships, acquiring advanced weapons systems and engaging in multi-vector diplomacy with China, Russia, India, and Turkey. These developments reflect what Olson et al. (2024) term a "strategic pluralism" that aligns with realism's self-help principle, whereby states must fend for their security in an anarchic international system. In contrast, the rise of non-state actors, particularly Iranian-backed militias and transnational jihadist networks, further complicates the regional landscape. According to Ahn (2025), the aftermath of the Arab Spring dramatically altered the geopolitical balance in the Middle East, particularly by enhancing Iran's influence in several Arab states through proxies and ideological allies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria. This expansion alarmed the Sunni Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, prompting them to reassess their regional security strategies.

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Foreign policy behaviour of the GCC members is changing. The countries are embracing discussion and diplomacy rather than focusing on contention and opposition (Priya, 2024). Faced with what they perceived as an existential threat from Iran and its regional allies, the Gulf monarchies began to view Israel, not as a traditional adversary, but as a potential partner in countering Iranian aggression. This strategic realignment eventually led to the Abraham Accords and the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states, fundamentally shifting the regional power dynamics. Yet, this rapidly changing landscape presented a strategic crisis for Hamas, a Palestinian group with ideological, political, and at times logistical ties to Iran. As the Gulf states appeared to move closer to Israel, Hamas risked losing key sources of political and financial support, while simultaneously watching the regional consensus on Palestinian resistance weaken (Fawcett, 2025).

Against this backdrop, Hamas's October 2023 attack on Israel can be interpreted as an attempt to reassert its relevance, disrupt normalization efforts, and provoke a regional response that would draw attention back to the Palestinian cause. By escalating the conflict, Hamas likely hoped to fracture emerging Arab-Israeli alliances and reframe the region's narrative around Palestinian grievances and resistance, forcing Arab governments to reconsider or delay further normalization with Israel. However, as Yetim and Kaşıkçı (2025) explain, despite significant challenges following the events of October 2023 that unleashed new confrontational dynamics amidst the Gaza War, the normalization process remained intact, which confirmed the structural weight of this process. As a result, the shifting alliances in the Middle East created a geopolitical squeeze for Hamas, leading it to escalate tensions in a high-stakes gamble to reshape regional priorities. These actors challenge the traditional state-centric model of international relations by blurring the lines between domestic insecurity and regional geopolitics. Gulf states now operate in a hybrid threat environment, where state power must be balanced against other states and ideologically motivated and often autonomous non-state forces.

In realist terms, the behavior of Gulf states exemplifies the logic of adaptive self-preservation. Their actions demonstrate a calculated effort to maximize autonomy, increase deterrence capacity, and maneuver within a multipolar order that offers both opportunities and constraints. These developments affirm realism's enduring relevance in explaining state behavior but also call for a refined lens that integrates domestic legitimacy, non-state threats, and the evolving global hierarchy into traditional power-based frameworks.

Non-State Actors and the Shifting Geopolitics

Proxy relationships in the Middle East, particularly between non-state actors and their external state sponsors, play a critical role in shaping regional stability and power dynamics. These partnerships have intensified interstate rivalries and complicated international diplomacy. As Singh (2024) observes, proxy actors have become "strategic extensions of state foreign policy" in an era of multipolar regionalism, acting as tools of influence, deterrence, and disruption. Their growing autonomy and military capacity force state and international policymakers to revise traditional diplomatic, military, and legal strategies.

Iran's regional strategy provides a compelling case study in realist statecraft. The Islamic Republic has established a network of Shia-aligned militant groups across Lebanon (Hezbollah), Iraq (PMF factions), Syria, and Yemen (the Houthis) to expand its sphere of influence and counterbalance adversaries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Through this proxy network, referred to as the "Axis of Resistance," Iran engages in asymmetric shadow warfare, enhancing its regional leverage while avoiding the costs of confrontation (Saraswat, 2024).

This strategy aligns closely with the tenets of classical realism, which emphasize the primacy of power, security, and national interest in an anarchic international system. Iran's reliance on non-state actors is a rational response to structural insecurity, enabling it to shape outcomes in weak or fragmented states without overextending its military or economic resources. As explained by Perletta (2024), this policy allows it to uphold its revolutionary ideology of self-determination and independence, while at the same time pursuing more pragmatic policies seemingly at odds with the principles of non-alignment. However, this approach is not without cost. Ongoing internal dissent, economic sanctions, and ideological fractures within Iran's conservative establishment reveal the domestic vulnerabilities that accompany its external assertiveness (Balali et al., 2024). This is because its invocation of anti-Zionist and anti-Western rhetoric is central to constructing a coherent narrative that legitimizes its domestic and international posture. The integration of ontological security into realism thus provides a more nuanced account of how states behave under normative and emotional pressures.

Iran's Security Assistance (SA) strategy, rooted in revolutionary ideology, has evolved into a hybrid model combining ideological commitment, strategic pragmatism, and operational adaptability. According to Kaleji (2024), this model blends asymmetric warfare, personal networks, and centralized command structures, allowing Iran to deploy influence without direct attribution. Rather than reducing its reliance on proxies, Iran has deepened its proxy engagements as a hedge against strategic isolation. In doing so, it reinforces realist notions of self-help and power balancing, albeit through non-traditional actors and methods. Its use of proxy warfare underscores the adaptive power of realist theory when broadened to include identity dynamics and non-state agency. Its strategic behavior reflects a deliberate balancing of pragmatism, ideology, and survival, demonstrating how states in the contemporary Middle East pursue power through formal diplomacy or conventional warfare and decentralized, ideologically charged networks capable of reshaping regional order (Saeed, 2025). As explained by Akbarzadeh & Naeni (2025), Iran has strategically leveraged its growing drone technology as a central tool in its foreign policy and military operations beyond its borders. This expansion in drone warfare is not simply about enhancing military capability and reflects a broader ideological and geopolitical

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shift within Iranian strategy, rooted in its leadership's belief that a multipolar world order is emerging, in which the influence of the United States is waning.

The Iranian regime frames this transformation through a revisionist worldview, which actively seeks to challenge the Western-dominated international system, particularly U.S. interests in the Middle East, Central Asia, and increasingly, in Eastern Europe. Central to this worldview is the concept developed in recent academic work called "Authoritarian Imagined Geopolitical Alternatives." This idea helps to explain how authoritarian states like Iran construct alternative geopolitical visions, rejecting liberal-democratic norms and instead promoting their narratives of resistance, sovereignty, and multipolarity. As explained by Divsallar & Azizi (2023), ideologically-driven support for Islamic movements is the centrepiece of its national security strategy. According to Bazoobandi et al. (2023), while Iran's foreign policy might outwardly appear pluralistic, with multiple actors participating, it is, in practice, tightly coordinated and centrally controlled, especially on critical issues.

The Israel–Hamas war has demonstrated how non-state actors have become central players in shaping regional dynamics, sometimes even more influential than national governments. These actors, which include militias and terrorist organizations, operate with far fewer constraints. Unlike governments, they are not held accountable to a civilian population, national economy, or formal legal system. As a result, their strategic decisions are less inhibited by concerns over infrastructure, public welfare, or diplomatic repercussions. However, global powers are finding it increasingly difficult to contain or deter this policy, which is designed to engage sovereign states, not decentralized militias or ideologically driven networks. Non-state actors operate outside the global financial system, making them resilient to economic pressure, and they have no formal diplomatic presence that can be leveraged for negotiations or concessions. This shift presents a major strategic dilemma, as non-state actors continue to grow in influence and capability, the tools available to counter them are increasingly ineffective, forcing the international community to rethink how security, accountability, and conflict resolution are approached.

The use of non-state actors by Iran and corresponding counter-hybrid strategies by Gulf states shows that asymmetric threats have become institutionalized elements of regional diplomacy, warranting deeper integration into realist models. The Gaza War highlights the limitations of transactional realism, where alliances may be strategically rational, but can provoke domestic unrest, underscoring the need for a more holistic realist framework that incorporates public opinion and legitimacy.

Realism in the Multipolar Middle East

The Middle East's evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly in the wake of the Abraham Accords and the increasing prominence of non-state actors, underscores the dynamic and complex nature of regional politics. The Accords represent a significant shift in alliances, as Gulf states, seeking security and economic benefits, recalibrate their foreign policies in response to new threats and opportunities. By normalizing relations with Israel, these states aim to strengthen their security positions and counter Iranian influence, reflecting a realist approach in international relations where power and self-preservation are central. However, the Israel-Gaza war serves as a reminder of the limits of these strategic alignments. While Gulf states have pursued pragmatic security solutions, the ongoing conflict highlights the tension between their broader diplomatic goals and the realities of domestic and regional stability.

This tension reveals the intricate balance Gulf countries must strike between their strategic interests and the sensitivities of the Arab street, where anti-Israeli sentiment remains strong. Hokayem (2023) explains that the scale and shock of the attack forced Arab and international attention back to the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It has undermined the assumption that the Palestinian issue could be managed or marginalized through regional normalization. In Arab diplomatic circles, it is once again a central agenda item, limiting the political space for further normalization with Israel in the short term.

The war validates Iran's strategy of supporting proxy forces close to Israel's borders, as Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iraqi militias have expressed solidarity with Hamas, projecting Iranian influence and demonstrating regional reach. As a result, normalization talks between Israel and Arab states have been delayed, as governments are under pressure from their populations, where public support for Palestine remains strong. Saudi Arabia had to recalibrate its diplomatic efforts, making clear that normalization cannot bypass the Palestinian issue.

The October 7 attack has redrawn the strategic landscape of the Middle East, reinforcing the salience of the Palestinian issue, undermining assumptions of Israeli invincibility, and giving new momentum to Iran's regional strategy, which complicates U.S. and Gulf states' visions for a stable, normalized region (Saraswat, 2024a). The growing influence of non-state actors like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iranian-backed militias complicates the region's diplomatic dynamics. These groups act as extensions of state power, influencing military, political, and ideological outcomes in ways that challenge traditional state-centric diplomatic frameworks. Iran's support for such proxies reflects its pursuit of strategic leverage, illustrating how non-state actors are integral to the broader power competition in the region (Brown, 2024).

The realist perspective remains a useful framework for understanding the behavior of Middle Eastern states, particularly as they navigate an increasingly multipolar world. States in the region continue to prioritize security, survival, and the maximization of power in a system characterized by uncertainty and shifting alliances. At the same time, the rise of non-state actors and the strategic role they play highlight the complexity in which regional and global power dynamics shape the Middle East's political future. As explained by Teti (2024), although Arab governments vigorously oppose Israel's actions in Gaza, despite the Palestinian question

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being central to their domestic politics and despite energy suppliers' leverage over energy-insecure Western states, they have issued little more than stern statements.

The Hamas-led attack demonstrated the potency and unpredictability of non-state actors, undermining conventional deterrence frameworks and shaking Western confidence in strategic stability. Saeed (2025) argues that this moment catalyzed a global rethink of security doctrines, highlighting the erosion of intelligence supremacy and multilateral crisis management. The ensuing regional instability spurred recalibrations in global power relations, including shifts in the strategies of Russia, China, and Iran. On the one hand, the attack highlighted regional and international failures to engage with Hamas as both a resistance movement and governing authority (Hamoud, 2024). On the other hand, the attack and its aftermath have accelerated the reconfiguration of alliances, exposed the limitations of conventional military power, upended many assumptions about a US-centric regional order, and highlighted the growing influence of non-state actors in shaping diplomatic outcomes (Krieg, 2024).

In this context, the conflict in Syria is also emblematic. For more than a decade, Syria's civil war was seen as too intractable to resolve, but the rapid collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 created a historic opportunity to reshape the country. Despite ongoing threats from ISIS, pro-Assad loyalists, and Iranian-backed militias, there is now a fragile window for reconstruction and reunification, underscoring the importance of international engagement in post-conflict transitions. Nevertheless, non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and Iranian-backed militias play a central role in shaping regional dynamics. These groups extend state power beyond traditional borders and challenge the conventional state-centric diplomatic framework. Iran's reliance on these proxies amplifies its influence and creates a persistent security dilemma, compelling Gulf states to adapt their military doctrines. Investments in counter-hybrid warfare, cyber defense, and regional intelligence networks reflect a materialist approach consistent with realism's core tenets.

Taken together, these developments reveal a nuanced and evolving regional order where statecraft is shaped by both power politics and internal legitimacy concerns. The interplay between realist imperatives of security, survival, and power and constructivist insights into identity and perception reveals a hybrid framework for understanding Gulf foreign policy. As the Middle East continues to transition into a fragmented yet interdependent arena, successful diplomacy will depend on the ability of regional actors to manage both traditional and non-traditional threats within a multipolar, asymmetric, and ideologically divided world.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental contribution of this research lies in its assertion that the increasing prominence of non-state actors in Middle Eastern geopolitics necessitates a significant rethinking of traditional International Relations (IR) theories. This study challenges the foundational assumptions of state-centric models, particularly within the realist tradition, by demonstrating that non-state actors - militant groups, transnational organizations, and militias - are not only peripheral players but increasingly central figures in shaping both regional and global power dynamics.

Historically, realism in international relations has been anchored in the idea that state actors are the primary, if not sole, agents of diplomacy, power, and security. The rise of non-state actors, as explored in this research, challenges this framework by highlighting their growing role in directly influencing military outcomes, forging alliances, and engaging in diplomatic processes traditionally the domain of states. This study suggests that power in the modern geopolitical order is becoming more diffuse, with non-state entities assuming positions of influence that were once reserved for sovereign states. The research advocates for the incorporation of these non-state actors into IR theory in a way that moves beyond their traditional treatment as secondary players.

The research further emphasizes that the interaction between state and non-state actors, particularly in conflict-prone regions like the Middle East, is not merely a matter of cooperation or opposition but a complex and dynamic reconfiguration of power. Non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis are not simply pursuing localized goals. They are actively reshaping regional and global diplomatic engagements, often with significant implications for international security. This finding urges a reconsideration of existing frameworks that largely ignore the agency of these actors in favor of state-to-state relations.

By highlighting how non-state actors engage in negotiations, influence peace processes, and alter power structures through military and ideological influence, this research contributes to the academic discourse by calling for an updated theoretical approach to IR that accounts for the agency of non-state actors in a world where state sovereignty and diplomatic practice are increasingly contested. This is particularly important for scholars and policymakers who seek to understand and navigate the complexities of contemporary global diplomacy and security, where traditional state actors are no longer the sole or even primary drivers of geopolitical outcomes. The research advocates for integrating non-state actors into the core of international relations theories, proposing a paradigm shift that acknowledges their critical role in shaping global politics. This represents a significant contribution to the academic field by pushing the boundaries of traditional IR theories and providing a new lens through which to analyze power, diplomacy, and security in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment.

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