

The Middle East Security Nexus: Patterns of Interdependence and Rivalry

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Abstract

Due to historical rivalries, ideological differences, and the strategic interests of both regional and extra-regional powers, the Middle East Security Complex offers a singular example of regional interdependence and persistent conflict. This article examines the mutually reinforcing nature of security dynamics in the region, where a state's insecurity often leads to reactive actions from neighboring states, resulting in a circular pattern of tension. Within the framework of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), it examines the roles of key actors, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey, while emphasizing how external interventions—particularly those from the US, Russia, and China—impact their interactions. The study also looks at how sectarianism, proxy wars, and the spread of weapons interact to maintain the complex. This essay makes the case for a cooperative regional security approach as a long-term substitute for zero-sum power politics by charting the Middle East's changing security architecture.

Keywords: Regional Security Complex, Middle East, Gulf Region, Non-state actors, Indian Ocean Region

Middle East Security Complex:

Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the other Gulf countries belong to the Middle Eastern security complex. The Middle East's dynamics impact the IOR, especially through the Persian Gulf. The complex features include historic rivalries, sectarian tension, and geopolitical competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Geopolitical strategic importance is further enhanced by the Strait of Hormuz, which is a strategic chokepoint. The Middle East security complex is not a homogeneous whole. There are sub-complexes within it, which are distinguished by specific conflicts and threats. The Levant sub-complex, which constitutes Israel, Palestine, and the surrounding Arab countries, revolves around the Arab-Israeli conflict. Conflicts based on sectarian issues of Sunni versus Shia Islam and rivalry for regional

domination define the Gulf sub-complex, led by Saudi Arabia and Iran. Another sub-complex is North Africa, which has its own set of security problems with political instability and terrorism. The security dynamics of the Middle East are highly affected by a series of regional powers. Being the leader of the Sunni bloc and a major oil producer, Saudi Arabia's objective is to maintain regional stability and counter Iranian expansion (*Iran - Middle East Battle Lines*, 2018). Iran, a nuclear-having developing country, employs proxies to assert its presence and challenge Saudi dominance. Israel prioritizes its security due to having a strong army. Turkey, although being an insulator, also has a tricky role due to its past with the Arab world and its ambition in the area. There is also a great influence from outside powers. Being a long-standing security guarantor in the region, the United States is reassessing its commitments. Russia strategically intervenes in conflicts like the Syrian Civil War in a bid to expand its influence in the region. In addition, the European Union, as well as its politico-economic relations, is also a significant actor.

Theoretical Analysis:

The theory Regional Security Complex by Barry Buzan is being used in this article. Buzan differentiates a "lower" from a "higher-level" security complex (1991, 1995). Local states are those whose scope of power extends no further than their immediate neighbors. A combination of such local states comprises a lower-level complex. Conversely, great powers with capabilities far beyond their immediate locale and whose power is sufficient to influence multiple regions belong to a higher-order security complex. Therefore, there is a high-order security complex due to the US and Russia's active involvement in the Middle East. There are quite a number of small states that often find themselves within security complexes. For example, the small Gulf States belong to the Middle East security complex. Due to their relatively low power compared to their neighbors, such states may not have much influence on the structure of the complex. In addition, the mode of interconnection between greater states is closely tied to the security of lesser states. However, their alignment with the greater powers can only render them a threat to a greater state. Iran's influence over Lebanon is a main element of the Iranian-Israeli security relationship. Buzan has also raised the issue of whether regional security complexes overlap or are exclusive. Buzan and Waever (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) have argued that regional security complexes are mutually exclusive. But David Lake and Patrick Morgan (Lake & Morgan, 1997) say that there may be overlapping membership for security complexes. Therefore, no Middle Eastern state can be a member of two different security complexes. Instead, the idea that there are some states in insulating positions between neighboring security complexes has been put forward by Buzan and Wæver. These insulators can be open to both directions on the periphery

of neighboring complexes with or without connections, or they can be relatively cut off from the security dynamics in both directions, like Turkey and Afghanistan.

There are two regional security complexes, according to Buzan and Waever (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), "standard" and "centered." There are three forms of centered regional security complexes: those centered on a great power (such as Russia and the CIS), a superpower (such as the US that dominates North and Central America), or a regional organization that is indicative of a high degree of regional integration (such as the European Union and Europe). Two or more states with a primarily political and military security agenda constitute a standard regional security complex. The nature of all typical complexes is anarchic. The Middle East security complex is similar to standard security complexes in this aspect.

Per RSCT, the Middle East security complex is high-level and normative, and Afghanistan and Turkey act to protect it from the security complexes within South Asia and Europe, respectively. Cultural, religious, and ethnic ties between states also contribute to the Middle East security complex, although power relationships and amity/enmity patterns are its fundamental characterizing features.

Patterns of Enmities:

An atmosphere of hostilities has been generated by past grievances, ideological rivalries, conflict over resources, and interference by outside powers, all of which feed the ongoing tensions that define the Middle East security complex. Its resolution and promotion of a more stable future demand comprehension of these patterns of hostility. The decades-long conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, rooted in conflicting national narratives and competing claims to territory, is among the most enduring animosities. Feelings of deep-seated injustice and dispossession were exacerbated by the 1948 Israeli declaration of independence and Palestinian expulsion that followed. Mistrust and violence continue to be generated by the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and lack of a viable peace process. Extremist factions are emerging on both sides. The recent building of settlements in the West Bank by Israel and the razing of Palestinian homes fuel tensions, making a two-state solution more and more unlikely.

The Sunni-Shia divide, always present though largely contained hitherto, has been aggravated by regional conflicts. Saudi Arabia views Iranian support for Shia militias as a strategic effort to undermine Sunni control in the region and to create sectarian conflict in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. Saudi Arabia's patronage of Sunni factions stems from an apprehension of Iranian influence, which is further used to drive sectarian divides across the Middle East. The Sunni and Shia individuals' sense of vulnerability undermines regional cooperation and fosters a distrustful atmosphere. The web of hostilities is

further compounded by the presence of external forces. The long history of Western mistrust of Iran, in particular its nuclear program, nurtures tensions and thwarts attempts to secure the region. Justified by the false allegation that Iraq had WMDs, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq emboldened sectarian forces and destabilized the surrounding region (MacDiarmid, 2018). In addition, competition between powers like the US, China, and Russia for dominance in the region could fuel already-present animosities. These external agents often patronize sides in proxy wars, prioritizing their strategic interests over the stability of the region. The possibility of a lasting peace is obstructed by this massive power rivalry, further entrenching power imbalances. For example, cooperation between the regions for counterterror efforts is being hindered by the US-Iranian competition, which often supersedes attempts to manage threats such as ISIS.

Recent Escalation of Violence:

The most recent significant escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict was the October 7, 2023, surprise attack on Israel by Hamas. This campaign, which included coordinated attacks on Israeli towns close to Gaza, claimed the lives of around 1,100 Israelis. In Israeli history, it was among the worst security breaches. The attack's intensity and scope astounded Israel, prompting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to declare war and issue broad condemnations. In response, Israel launched extensive military operations in Gaza, including airstrikes aimed at destroying Hamas's military capabilities. According to the horrifying humanitarian toll, there have been thousands of Palestinian deaths and extensive destruction in Gaza (Tejero, 2023). During the next year, Israel killed nearly 42000 Palestinians and injured 97000 people. Of these, almost 69 percent victims are women and children (*Israel Marks a Year since Deadly Hamas-Led October 7 Attack | Israel-Palestine Conflict News | Al Jazeera*, 2024).

In addition to increasing tensions between Israel and Hamas, this escalation has sparked worries about a wider regional battle involving Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iranian proxies throughout the Middle East. Since the start of the conflict, there have been multiple shootouts along the Israel-Lebanon border, and Hezbollah has launched missiles into northern Israel as a show of support for Hamas. This has raised concerns that Hezbollah, which has fought directly against Israeli troops in the past and is significantly more armed than Hamas, may start a full-scale conflict with Israel (Jones et al., 2024). Hezbollah's role in the dynamics of the current Arab-Israeli conflict is especially important for several reasons. One reason is that, in addition to being an armed organization, Hezbollah is a major political force in Lebanon that influences both politics and society. Supported by Iran, Hezbollah has accumulated a massive arsenal that is thought to include more than 150,000 rockets that can penetrate deep into Israeli territory. Israel's security is seriously threatened by the group's military might (Byman et al., 2024).

Since October 2023, Hezbollah has attacked Israeli troops multiple times in response to the Gaza crisis. These actions, which have included cross-border warfare and rocket strikes, have resulted in the forced migration of thousands of people. The possibility of the confrontation getting worse is very high (Byman et al., 2024). The situation is further complicated by Iran's strategic objectives of assisting its proxies around the region. Iran supports Hezbollah and Hamas to provide a united front against Israeli aggression and obtain influence in regional affairs. This convergence raises concerns of a wider conflict that would attract other regional powers and destabilize the already unstable Middle East (Yahya, 2023).

Implications for Regional Stability:

The ongoing war has significant ramifications for local stability. The humanitarian crisis caused by Israel's military action in Gaza has angered the Arab world and beyond. The growing public dissatisfaction with Israel's actions has led to demands and protests by several Arab states. This Israeli hegemony also muddies diplomatic ties between Israel and its Arab neighbors, especially with governments that were moving toward normalization accords before the crisis (Yahya, 2023).

The possibility of normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel had gained traction before the October assaults. These talks have now been put on hold indefinitely due to the growing anti-Israel sentiment among Arab populations and the international condemnation of Israel's military operation in Gaza. Peace is unlikely as long as the conflict persists without resolving the fundamental problems with Palestinian rights and sovereignty.

Hamas unexpectedly attacked Israeli cities in the Gaza region on October 7, upending several factors that had come to define regional politics in previous years (Heydemann, 2024). The first of these was the misconception that peace in the region could be achieved despite the Palestinians still living under an especially harsh form of Israeli occupation, and that Arabs had forgotten Palestine and the Palestinians. Palestinians and the injustice they endure are still seen by many as a political symbol that may incite more ire in the Arab world than any other topic. Before October 7, Arab popular opinion reflected the growing fury over Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. It is also inciting a growing anti-Western sentiment because the United States and the majority of Western European nations seem to be endorsing Israel's bombing of Gaza. This has reaffirmed Palestine at the forefront of public conversation, rekindled calls for a political solution to the Palestinian problem, and refocused discussion on establishing a two-state reality in the wake of the impossibility of a two-state solution. Regional public uproar and accusations of double standards against Western powers have also hampered the majority of diplomatic attempts to rally the support of important Global South nations for Ukraine (Kravik, 2024).

Second, on October 7, the Abraham Accords, a set of normalization agreements between Israel and the majority of Arab states, were put on hold. These agreements sought to establish a new security and economic order that primarily involved Israel and the Gulf Arab governments by bringing Israel closer to the area (Prowant, 2024). Yet they undermined the land for peace principle enshrined in Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, which the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 reiterated (*RESOLUTIONS ON PALESTINE AFFAIRS*, 2003). Iran was able to fill the void left by the Abraham Accords, which are causing the Palestinians to lose support in the area. The primary backer of the Abraham Accords, the United States government, ignored the Levantine governments and the Palestinians in favor of the Gulf States. Washington's recently declared India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor, which would connect India with the Gulf and subsequently with Israel, served to emphasize this even more (Cafiero, 2025).

The most important stage in this new regional order was to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, which were still being discussed at the time of the attack. The Gaza situation has resulted in an indefinite suspension of these negotiations (*Saudi 'suspends Israel Normalisation Talks' Due to Gaza War*, 2023). The general anti-Israel sentiment among countries that have ratified treaties with Israel under the Abraham Accords, which were initiated in 2020 by the Biden administration, has escalated as a result of Israeli atrocities in Gaza and the increase in attacks in the West Bank, which has been accompanied by the deportation of Palestinians. The end of the conflict, the establishment of a new Israeli administration, and political solutions to the dire situation facing the Palestinian people are all prerequisites for the reopening of talks between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Finally, there was evidence to support a third theory that the October 7 strikes might have weakened Iran's attempts to increase its regional power. Riyadh's de facto acknowledgment of Iran's network of non-state players in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and other important Middle Eastern countries prompted Saudi Arabia and Iran to rapprochement earlier this year. Despite their earlier criticism of the "snake" of Iranian influence, Saudi authorities were now prepared to deal with Tehran in a practical manner (Murphy, 2016). At the same time, U.S.-Iranian negotiations continued in an agreement to free five imprisoned U.S. dual nationals in exchange for \$6 billion in Iranian assets held in South Korea. Additionally, Iran had successfully surrounded Israel with a web of surrogates. Because of Hamas's probable strategic triumph, the world and the region are on the verge of a regional and possibly global conflict. With the growing number of Palestinian casualties-roughly 41,000 killed and over 93,000 wounded, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs-and the damage to about 30% of Gaza's housing stock, Iran's "unity of the fronts" policy is coming under pressure (KAAG,

2024). Tehran cannot afford to remain silent in the face of a full-scale assault on Hamas, despite its desire to stay out of the conflict. Iran may attempt to unite its allies in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria in the struggle against Israel. All of these Iranian friends have been singled out by Israel, which has made it much harder for them to fight back. Hezbollah has been working to encircle the entire ring by gradually escalating tensions with Israel along Lebanon's border. Thus far, this opportunity has been limited. However, pro-Iranian organizations from Yemen, Syria, and Iraq have recently started to directly attack Israel, placing the region at risk of a far larger battle. There is a good chance that regional escalation may attract global powers to the region. Furthermore, the struggle has broader effects that go beyond direct combat. There is a chance that sectarian tensions will resurface in Lebanon and throughout the region as different factions position themselves against or in support of Iran's ambitions. The fact that there are Iranian-aligned militias in Syria and Iraq complicates matters since they may try to take advantage of the situation to attack American interests or friends in retaliation for Israeli provocations (*Conflict in Yemen and the Red Sea | Global Conflict Tracker*, 2025).

The humanitarian crisis and conflict in Yemen:

Due to its devastating impact on civilians, the Yemen war is often described as one of the worst humanitarian crises in modern history. In 2014, Houthi rebels captured Yemen's capital, Sana'a, and this initiated a civil war against the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Saudi Arabia has been criticized for its bombings that have resulted in a significant number of civilian casualties, even though it had militarily intervened in 2015 to restore Hadi's government. The UN states that Yemen is facing "the world's worst humanitarian crisis," with millions of individuals facing starvation due to ongoing bloodshed and blockades (*Crisis in Yemen Worsening, as Fighting Near Ma'rib, Crippling Fuel Shortages Amplify Humanitarian Needs, United Nations Experts Warn Security Council | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*, 2021). Due to the devastating impact on the health infrastructure, cholera outbreaks and mass starvation result.

Patterns of Amities:

The Middle Eastern security complex's amity patterns are a complex weave of shared threats, realpolitik interests, and historic ties. In this case, allegiances shift as easily as shifting sands in a desert, and the persistent tides of regional competition can strain even the best of friendships. The long-standing relationship between the United States and Israel is just one such example of amity. The US regards Israel as a strategic partner in counterterrorism and as a shield against regional chaos; thus, relations are founded on shared strategic interests. Israel benefits from US military and financial assistance in return. Since the presidency of Harry S. Truman,

unflinching support for Israel's security has been the cornerstone of American foreign policy in each administration. To counter emerging and unprecedented security challenges, close Israel's capability gaps through security assistance and cooperation, increase interoperability through cooperative exercises, and assist Israel in preserving its Qualitative Military Edge (QME), the United States has provided Israel over 310 billion USD in bilateral assistance since the nation's establishment in 1948 (Masters & Merrow, 2024). With the benefit of such aid, the Israel Defense Forces have emerged as among the most skilled and effective militaries worldwide, and the Israeli military industry and technology sector is now one of the world's leading exporters of military capabilities to foreign nations. Israel's portion of the global arms market, whose foreign sales during the period 2017 to 2022 were between 7 and 12.5 billion dollars yearly, is 2.3%, which is roughly five times greater than Israel's 0.5% portion of worldwide total exports (Evron, 2025). The US and Israel have met regularly since 1983 through the Joint Political-Military Group (JPMG) to pursue common policies, discuss problems and concerns, and find new areas of cooperation for security (Deen, 2023). The United States and Israel enjoy a firm strategic alliance, which was reconfirmed in October 2022 at the 48th JPMG (*U.S. Security Cooperation with Israel*, 2025). Both nations are dedicated to deepening cooperation in the service of regional security and strengthening the recent historic achievements of normalization under the Abraham Accords. Several bilateral defense cooperation agreements have been negotiated between Israel and the US. Such agreements are the Status of Forces Agreement (1994), the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement (1952), the General Security of Information Agreement (1982), and the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (1991) (*U.S. Security Cooperation with Israel*, 2025). This relationship is not without its challenges, though. Friction can occasionally arise from disagreements over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Myre, 2024) and Iran's nuclear program, as well as from domestic politics in both nations.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a regional bloc consisting of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates, is another significant source of amity. The level of cooperation between the GCC members is generally measured by comparing it to other organizations of the same kind, mainly the European Union. GCC representatives often make particular arguments by directly utilizing such comparisons. Several calls have been made to enhance the GCC's functional cooperation in day-to-day administrative matters. Therefore, even prior to the establishment of the GCC, there has been a long-standing desire for the adoption of a single Gulf currency. When the GCC was originally established in the early 1980s, its politicians were guarded about appearing too excited or getting overexcited by a prediction that was too rosy. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established with

consideration for how Iraq and Iran, two of the regional fighting neighbors, might react. Thus, the primary objective of the GCC was to encourage social and economic cooperation. After the first summit, a chain of talks with trade ministers, industry ministers, ministers of finance, and ministers of economic cooperation was arranged. Health ministries, port authorities, postal services, and immigration specialists met to discuss common problems and decide on a common agenda of action for the future. By December 1982, the six member states of the GCC had accumulated an estimated 2.1 billion USD in excess resources to be mobilized by a "Gulf Investment Corporation" (Al-Fayez, 1984).

As of 2016, GCC nations - Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman - held 29% of the total known oil reserves. Plentiful fossil fuels still supply the regional domestic energy needs, and the region has, internationally, low prices of primary energy and electricity. For example, the most regional oil reserves are located in Saudi Arabia (266.6 bbl.), followed by Kuwait (101.5 bbl.) and the UAE (97.8 bbl.), while Qatar holds one of the biggest gas reserves with 24.5 trillion cubic meters (Praveen et al., 2020). Therefore, the oil policy was felt to be the most important sector of cooperation. During the early 1980s, the Gulf Cooperation Council oil ministers set up a committee and held regular meetings. It was a time when the oil shortage that had been present at the beginning of the decade had turned into an excess, prices were declining, and output by countries such as Iran, which were desperately low on funds, was threatening to bring even more price declines. The need for all to pool their efforts to counteract the position of the European Union on the acceptance of refined oil products was another issue. During the GCC's over 40-year period of existence, a long list of decisions and agreements has been taken, either at the summit level or through several ministerial meetings and committee resolutions composed of civil servants. The list is a strong indicator of how committed the parties are to cooperating. In some fields, the state of play effectively requires that there be coordination of plans.

Sunni states like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan often come together on issues relating to the perceived threat from Iran and its Shia allies. Similarly, Iran, having a Shia population, cultivates relations with Shia factions in Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq and gives them political and sometimes even military assistance. Iran has built a system of proxies across the Middle East since the 1979 revolution. By 2022, there had been over a dozen prominent militias that were in opposition to local and regional governments aligned with Tehran. Some of these even created political parties. A minimum of six countries, namely Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Syria, and Yemen, as well as other political groups, were equipped, trained, and funded by Iran's Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force (Lane, 2023).



(Iran Proxy Map Only 2020 Small.Webp (833×849), n.d.)

These sectarian coalitions are not fixed, however. For instance, to constrain Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia has sometimes collaborated with Iraq, the predominantly Shia state. Although in a more muted fashion, religion plays a role in the formation of amity as well. For instance, cultural and historical ties connect Jordan and Morocco, two predominantly Sunni monarchies, together. Like this, several Arab governments maintain cordial relationships with Turkey, a Sunni-majority country with historical connections in the region. There may be occasional tensions with Arab governments due to the regional leadership ambitions of Turkey. Patterns of amity also stem from economic linkages. Because they are so dependent on the exportation of oil, the Gulf countries have warm economic ties with great consumers like the European Union, China, and Japan. With these business partnerships, there is a mutual interest in regional stability to ensure consistent energy supplies.

Critically deconstructing the Middle East Security Complex

The Middle East is more than a collection of states operating within a shared security context. Non-state actors such as transnational crime syndicates, sectarian militias such as Hezbollah and Houthis, and terror groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda play as significant a role as regional dynamics and security concerns. Non-state actors often act beyond national borders, eroding the RSC's typical focus on state-based security interests. Further, the RSC model emphasizes the centripetal force of common security threats. The Middle East is characterized by a range of security issues, despite the presence of threats such as terrorism and scarcity of resources. In most nations, domestic power competition, regime stability issues, and ethnic or sectarian strife often overshadow regional issues.

The Middle East witnesses shifts in rivalries and alliances due to the changing requirements of the time. States will compete with each other over influence or resources in the region, but also cooperate on some issues, like counterterrorism. Because of the fluidity of such relations, a more nuanced understanding of how governments coordinate their interests in the region is needed, one that accounts for both the cooperative and competitive elements of their relationships. Additional critical examination is also needed in terms of the involvement of external powers. The regional security complex (RSC) is often depicted in the RSC model as being shaped by extra-regional actors. The existing security climate has been significantly shaped by the previous foreign military interventions, exploitation of resources, and foreign colonialism in the region.

Finally, the idea of a security complex assumes some level of unity and shared identity among local populations. However, there is a significant amount of historical, religious, and cultural diversity throughout the Middle East. The currents of unity and diversity run parallel in this region. Internal divisions and conflicting histories shape the security of the milieu of this region.

In conclusion, a more accurate understanding of the region's security dynamics can be achieved by considering the roles of non-state actors, the diversity of security concerns, the volatility of state relations, the influence of external powers, and the domestic diversity within the region. Developing effective solutions that address the root causes of conflict and promote a safer, more peaceful future depends on this essential study.

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