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**PERSPECTIVES OF THE MIDDLE EAST
UNION FORMATION**

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**PERSPEKTIVE STVARANJA
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SAŽETAK

Doktorska disertacija pod naslovom „Perspektive stvaranja Bliskoistočne unije“ bavi se analizom mogućnosti, uslova i normativnih osnova za formiranje regionalne integracije na prostoru Bliskog istoka kroz koncept Bliskoistočne unije (Middle East Union – MEU). Polazeći od interdisciplinarnog pristupa koji obuhvata međunarodno pravo, međunarodne odnose, regionalne studije i političku ekonomiju, istraživanje nastoji da pruži sveobuhvatnu analizu istorijskih, političkih, ekonomskih i institucionalnih faktora koji oblikuju savremene procese saradnje i konflikta u regionu.

Bliski istok predstavlja jednu od geopolitički, ekonomski i kulturno najznačajnijih oblasti savremenog međunarodnog sistema. Njegov strateški položaj na raskrsnici Evrope, Azije i Afrike, zajedno sa ogromnim prirodnim resursima, ključnim pomorskim rutama i mladom i rastućom populacijom, čini ga centralnim elementom globalne bezbednosti, energetske stabilnosti i međunarodne politike. Međutim, uprkos ovim značajnim strukturnim prednostima, region je tokom savremene istorije karakterisan dugotrajnim sukobima, političkom fragmentacijom, slabim institucionalnim kapacitetima i socioekonomskim nejednakostima. Ovi izazovi nisu samo ograničili održivi razvoj regiona, već su proizveli i značajne posledice po međunarodni mir, bezbednost, migracione tokove, energetska tržišta i globalnu ekonomsku stabilnost.

U tom kontekstu, centralna teza ove disertacije jeste da se formiranje Bliskoistočne unije može posmatrati kao potencijalni institucionalni okvir koji bi omogućio transformaciju regionalnih odnosa iz konfliktnog u kooperativni model. Ideja regionalne integracije kao sredstva za stabilizaciju konfliktnim regiona nije nova u međunarodnim odnosima. Naprotiv, istorijska iskustva iz drugih delova sveta pokazuju da su regiona koji su bili opterećeni sukobima i rivalstvima često upravo kroz integracione procese uspevali da izgrade stabilnije političke, ekonomske i bezbednosne strukture. Primeri kao što su Evropska unija (EU), Afrička unija (AU), Asocijacija država jugoistočne Azije (ASEAN), Organizacija američkih država (OAS) i Unija južnoameričkih nacija (USAN/UNASUR) ilustruju različite modele regionalne saradnje koji su doprineli političkoj stabilnosti, ekonomskom razvoju i kolektivnoj bezbednosti.

Polazeći od ovih komparativnih iskustava, disertacija postavlja osnovno istraživačko pitanje: da li i pod kojim pravnim, političkim i institucionalnim uslovima može nastati Bliskoistočna unija kao okvir regionalne integracije. Istraživanje ne polazi od pretpostavke da je integracija neizbežna ili neposredno ostvariva, već nastoji da kroz kritičku i realističku analizu ispita njenu izvodljivost, prednosti, prepreke i potencijalne razvojne puteve.

Prvo poglavlje disertacije pruža sveobuhvatan pregled Bliskog istoka kao geografskog, istorijskog i političkog prostora. Analiziraju se poreklo i evolucija pojma „Bliski istok“, geografske karakteristike regiona, kao i istorijski procesi koji su oblikovali savremeni politički poredak. Posebna pažnja posvećena je uticaju kolonijalnog nasleđa, raspadu imperija, formiranju nacionalnih država i posledicama svetskih ratova i Hladnog rata. U ovom poglavlju takođe se razmatraju demografske karakteristike regiona, kao i komparativni modeli regionalne integracije koji mogu poslužiti kao teorijski okvir za razumevanje potencijalnog razvoja Bliskoistočne unije.

Drugo poglavlje bavi se analizom potrebe za regionalnom integracijom na Bliskom istoku. Polazi se od pretpostavke da mnogi od ključnih problema regiona imaju transnacionalni karakter i da ih nije moguće efikasno rešavati isključivo na nivou pojedinačnih država. Oružani sukobi, politička nestabilnost, ekonomske nejednakosti, migracije, terorizam i problemi u oblasti ljudskih prava

predstavljaju međusobno povezane izazove koji zahtevaju koordinisane regionalne odgovore. U tom smislu, Bliskoistočna unija se razmatra kao potencijalni mehanizam za jačanje regionalne saradnje, unapređenje ekonomskih reformi, jačanje demokratskih institucija i zaštitu ljudskih prava. Poglavlje takođe razmatra potencijalne koristi koje bi takva integracija mogla imati za Evropu i međunarodnu zajednicu, posebno u oblastima energetske bezbednosti, migracione politike i globalne stabilnosti.

Treće poglavlje fokusira se na analizu kapaciteta i snaga koje bi mogle predstavljati osnovu za regionalnu integraciju. Suprotno dominantnim narativima koji naglašavaju fragmentaciju regiona, analiza pokazuje da Bliski istok poseduje brojne integrativne elemente, uključujući zajedničke kulturne i religijske tradicije, istorijske veze, slične pravne sisteme i komplementarne ekonomske strukture. Region raspolaže i značajnim prirodnim resursima, posebno u oblasti nafte i gasa, kao i značajnim potencijalima za razvoj obnovljivih izvora energije. Posebna pažnja posvećena je ulozi ključnih regionalnih aktera, uključujući Iran, Saudijsku Arabiju, Tursku, Egipat i države Persijskog zaliva, čiji geopolitički, ekonomski i demografski kapaciteti mogu igrati važnu ulogu u procesu regionalne integracije.

Četvrto poglavlje analizira prepreke koje su istorijski otežavale razvoj regionalne saradnje na Bliskom istoku. Među najznačajnijim faktorima izdvajaju se verske i etničke podele, geopolitička rivalstva, spoljne intervencije, zavisnost od vojnih saveza i negativni identitetski narativi poput islamofobije, arabofobije i drugih oblika politički instrumentalizovanih stereotipa. Poglavlje takođe kritički razmatra teorijske pristupe koji Bliski istok predstavljaju kao region inherentno nesposoban za saradnju, posebno u kontekstu teorija civilizacijskog konflikta. Kao odgovor na ove izazove, disertacija razmatra različite teorijske okvire koji mogu doprineti prevazilaženju fragmentacije, uključujući teoriju demokratskog mira, ekonomskog mira, bezbednosne zajednice i institucionalističke pristupe regionalnoj saradnji.

Peto poglavlje pokazuje da region već poseduje određene institucionalne strukture koje bi mogle predstavljati osnovu za buduću integraciju. Analiziraju se postojeće regionalne organizacije i inicijative u političkoj, ekonomskoj, bezbednosnoj i kulturnoj sferi, uključujući Arapsku ligu, Savet za saradnju zemalja Zaliva, Organizaciju islamske saradnje, Arapski monetarni fond i druge institucije. Iako ove organizacije do sada nisu uspele da stvore duboku integraciju, njihovo postojanje ukazuje na postojanje institucionalne infrastrukture koja bi u budućnosti mogla biti razvijena i konsolidovana u širi integracioni okvir.

Šesto poglavlje bavi se teorijskim raspravama o odnosima između civilizacija, posebno kritičkom analizom teze o „sukobu civilizacija“. Disertacija argumentuje da ova teorija često funkcioniše ne samo kao akademska hipoteza, već i kao politički diskurs koji može legitimisati konflikte i produbiti regionalne podele. Kao alternativu ovom pristupu, razmatra se koncept „dijaloga među civilizacijama“, koji naglašava značaj međukulturnog razumevanja, saradnje i institucionalnog dijaloga kao osnove za stabilnije međunarodne odnose.

Metodološki okvir koristi normativnu, komparativnu i istorijsku metodu u okviru interdisciplinarnog pristupa, što omogućava analizu međunarodnog prava, institucionalnih rešenja i političkih mehanizama relevantnih za regionalnu integraciju. Poseban deo istraživanja identifikuje naučni doprinos disertacije kroz analitički okvir za proučavanje integracije u konfliktima opterećenim regionima, potencijalne institucionalne modele i normativnu dimenziju saradnje.

Disertacija takođe razmatra praktičnu primenu rezultata za kreatore politike, međunarodne organizacije i akademsku zajednicu. Završni deo opisuje moguće faze razvoja MEU: prva faza – jačanje ekonomske saradnje; druga faza – razvoj regionalnih institucionalnih mehanizama; treća faza – dugoročna perspektiva političke i pravne integracije, uz prilagođavanje specifičnim političkim i kulturnim karakteristikama Bliskog istoka.

Ključne reči: Middle East Union, regional integration, international law, peace and security, clash of civilizations, dialogue of civilizations.

ABSTRACT

The Middle East region has long been a focal point of global attention due to its abundant energy resources. The interplay of dynamics within this area is intricately tied to international affairs so that developments and challenges in one domain swiftly impact the other. The trend of global developments in the post-Cold War era and the wide-ranging efforts of the West, particularly America, in various spots of the world, particularly in the Middle East, exhibit their clear agenda and strategic pursuit for the world. In this strategy, the nature and angles of which can be well understood from the words and theories of British and American politicians and theorists such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, the arrangement and organization of Middle Eastern affairs are based on the ideas, theories, and interests of the West. In the framework of this agenda, the West, particularly the United States with slogans such as fighting terrorism, establishing international peace and stability, spreading democracy, preventing human rights violations, and enhancing the economic conditions of the people in the region, is trying to reach own aims such as controlling resources and energy transmission routes, securing all-round interests and ultimately adapting the region to the values of the West.

To manage the influence and supremacy of the West, the leaders and authorities of the Middle East must take measures to prevent the emergence of the conspiracy of trans-regional and global competitors and the resulting challenges in the region. In this regard, the aim of the present study is to discuss the circumstances of the Middle East in the world in terms of history, geography, politics, resources, etc.; and examine various perspectives on establishing peace and unity in the Middle East, its importance, necessity, capabilities, strengths and weaknesses in forming a Middle East Union.

Keywords: Middle East Union, Regional Integration, International Law, Peace and Security, Clash of Civilizations, Dialogue of Civilizations.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AU	African Union
AUPSC	African Union Peace & Security Council
APSA	African Union Peace and Security Architecture
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
APOC	Anglo-Persian Oil Company
ASA	Association of Southeast Asia
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AMENA	Association of Middle East and North Africa
AWANA	Association of West Asia and North Africa
APSC	ASEAN Political-Security Community
AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Area
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ADIA	Abu Dhabi Investment Authority
ARAMCO	Saudi Arabian National Oil Company
ALECSO	Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization
AMF	Arab Monetary Fund
AMF	African Monetary Fund
BIT	Bilateral Investment Treaties
BWC	Biological Weapons Convention
Bapco	Bahrain Petroleum Company
Banagas	Bahrain National Gas Company
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BP	British Petroleum
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention
CSA	Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement
CTBT	Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty

DPT	Democratic Peace Theory
EU	European Union
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
EUGS	European Union Global Strategy
EEAS	European External Action Service
EDF	European Defence Fund
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
EMS	European Monetary System
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ESS	European Security Strategy
EPT	Economic Peace Theory
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EMFTA	Euro–Mediterranean Free Trade Area
EIA	Emirates Investment Authority
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GAFTA	Greater Arab Free Trade Area
IATRA	Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance
IADB	Inter-American Defence Board
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
IPC	Iraq Petroleum Company
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IDB	Islamic Development Bank
IsDB	Islamic Development Bank
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ICESCO	Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
JPA	Joint Plan of Action
KIA	Kuwait Investment Authority
KOC	Kuwait Oil Company
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
LAS	League of Arab States
LAFTA	Latin American Free Trade Association
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
LEU	Low Enriched Uranium
ME	Middle East
MEU	Middle East Union
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MENAU	Middle East and North Africa Union
METO	Middle East Treaty Organization
MEFTA	Middle East Free Trade Area
MERC	Middle East Regional Cooperation
MEPC	Middle East Policy Council
MCPMR	Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDFI	National Development Fund of Iran
NPT	Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OAS	Organisation of American State
OAPEC	Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OOC	Oman Oil Company

OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PDO	Petroleum Development Oman
PSF	Peninsula Shield Force
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PIF	Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund
PSC	Peace & Security Council
PTA	Preferential Trade Agreement
Qafco	Qatar Fertilizer Company
Qasco	Qatar Steel Company
Qapco	Qatar Petrochemical Company
QIA	Qatar Investment Authority
ROs	Regional Organizations
RSC	Regional Security Cooperation
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADC	South American Defense Council
SAMA	Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SCT	Security Community Theory
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SEA	Single European Act
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SOCAL	Standard Oil Company of California
SWFs	Sovereign Wealth Funds
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
TIFA	Trade and Investment Framework Agreement
TPNW	Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons
Texaco	Texas Oil Company
TWF	Türkiye Wealth Fund

UAC	United Arab Command
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNASUR	Union of South American Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USAN	Union of South American Nations
USA	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UK	United Kingdom
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
WTO	World Trade Organisation
WMDFZ	Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone
9/11	September 9, 2001

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has long been recognized as one of the most geopolitically, economically, and culturally significant regions in the international system. Situated at the strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, coupled with vast natural resources, critical maritime routes, and a young and rapidly growing population, the region occupies a central position in global security, economic stability, and international politics. Yet, despite these structural advantages, the region has been historically characterized by persistent conflicts, political fragmentation, weak institutional governance, and socio-economic disparities. These challenges have not only hindered sustainable development within the region itself, but have also generated far-reaching consequences and implications for global peace, security, migration dynamics, energy markets, and international economic cooperation.

What distinguishes the Middle East from other strategically significant regions is not merely the frequency or intensity of conflict, but the enduring absence of a comprehensive, legally grounded, and regionally owned framework for managing transnational challenges. While conflicts in other parts of the world have increasingly been addressed through institutionalized regional mechanisms, the Middle East remains one of the few major regions in the international system lacking an overarching structure of regional integration capable of translating interdependence into cooperation. In this context, the concept of a Middle East Union emerges not as an abstract ideal or political slogan, but as a compelling framework to address the region's challenges and harness its latent potential, an institutional response to the region's structural vulnerabilities and governance deficits.

The idea of regional integration as a strategy for peace, stability, and development is not a novel concept in international relations or international law. Historical precedents from other parts of the world demonstrate that regions characterized by conflict, rivalry, and fragmentation have often turned to integration as a means of managing disputes, consolidating peace, and promoting collective prosperity through the transformative power of unified political, economic, and security structures. The European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) illustrate diverse models and exemplify how regional cooperation can contribute to varying degrees, to political stability, economic growth, and collective security. Importantly, these integration projects did not emerge from conditions of homogeneity or prior stability, but rather from historical experiences of war, colonial legacies, ideological rivalry, and systemic crises. This comparative insight challenges the assumption that the Middle East's diversity or conflict-prone history renders integration inherently unrealistic.

At the same time, the Middle East presents a distinctive and unique constellation of challenges and opportunities that require careful contextualization. The region's diverse religious, ethnic, linguistic, and political landscapes, as well as its centrality to global energy and trade networks, create both centrifugal pressures and integrative potential. This dissertation, therefore, seeks to examine whether, and under what legal, political, and institutional conditions, a Middle East Union could emerge as a viable framework for regional integration. Rather than presupposing integration as inevitable or imminent, the study adopts a critical and realist perspective, assessing feasibility, necessity, advantages, obstacles, and normative foundations through an interdisciplinary but law-

centered approach in establishing a Middle East Union, drawing insights from both theoretical frameworks and practical precedents in regional integration.

Historically, the Middle East has undergone dramatic and successive waves of political transformations, shaped by the legacies of imperial rule, colonial intervention, the emergence of nationalism, and intense geopolitical contests among global powers. From the aftermath of World War I and the redrawing of territorial reconfiguration and the imposition of externally designed state boundaries, through the Cold War and the Arab-Israeli conflicts, to contemporary wars, sanctions regimes, proxy confrontations, and regional instability, the Middle East has faced continuous political, institutional, social, and economic upheaval. These historical experiences have both constrained and motivated attempts at regional cooperation, highlighting the importance of understanding the foundations upon which a future union could be constructed. The persistence of conflict has revealed the limitations of purely state-centric approaches and balance-of-power politics in a region characterized by deep transnational interdependence.

Moreover, demographically and economically, the Middle East presents a complex landscape. Vast hydrocarbon resources coexist with economic inequality, rentier structures, and uneven development. A rapidly growing and youthful population offers significant long-term potential, yet also generates acute pressures related to employment, governance, migration, and social stability. These dynamics reinforce the need for cooperative regional solutions that transcend national borders and short-term political calculations. Despite repeated attempts at regional cooperation, existing initiatives such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA), and the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF) have produced limited integrative outcomes. Their shortcomings, however, should not be interpreted as evidence of the impossibility of regional integration, but rather as indicators of institutional design constraints, political rivalries, and external pressures that have restricted their effectiveness.

In order to expand the frameworks and boundaries of analysis and assessment in Middle Eastern studies and regional integration research, it is necessary to consider data and findings from the concept of the term Middle East, geography, history, philosophy, sociology, demography, anthropology, psychology, cultural studies, communication, international relations, and political economics. These broader perspectives are not treated as autonomous fields of inquiry, but as analytical lenses supporting a legal and institutional assessment of regional integration. Such an interdisciplinary approach enables a more nuanced understanding of phenomena such as globalization, regionalization, international security, environmental sustainability, nationalism, foreign intervention, terrorism, human rights, and economic development as interconnected processes operating at international, regional, and domestic levels in a more rational manner. Crucially, international law functions as the central organizing framework through which these dynamics are evaluated, particularly concerning institutional legitimacy, norm compliance, and peaceful dispute settlement.

The present study addresses several critical interrelated research questions regarding the formation of such a union. Specifically, it investigates: what material, institutional, and normative capabilities and resources do the Middle Eastern states possess to support a process of regional integration? What political, legal, religious, economic, and external obstacles impede such a process? How can the comparative experience from other regional unions inform a context-sensitive model of integration tailored to the Middle East and guide the process? And which theoretical and legal

frameworks are most suitable for analyzing the prospects of a Middle East Union within the contemporary international system? The research adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, legal and political assessment, and comparative studies of existing regional unions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and potential of Middle Eastern integration.

This dissertation is guided by several interrelated objectives. First, it aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the Middle East, including its conceptual, geographical, historical, demographic, and political foundations, to establish the context and prerequisites for regional integration (Chapter I). Second, it examines the necessity of forming a Middle East Union by evaluating the potential benefits for regional peace, security, democracy, human rights, economic development, and global cooperation (Chapter II). Third, it analyzes the capabilities and strengths of the region, including shared cultural, religious, linguistic, economic, and strategic resources, as well as the specific roles of key states such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Egypt (Chapter III). Fourth, it identifies the obstacles to integration, both internal, such as sectarianism, ideological challenges, and political fragmentation, and external, including foreign interventions, and proposes strategies to overcome these barriers (Chapter IV). Fifth, it assesses the current institutional frameworks and initiatives across political, economic, security, educational, and cultural dimensions, to understand existing structures and their advantages and disadvantages, and potential contribution to a Middle East Union (Chapter V). Finally, it engages with theoretical debates on regional and civilizational dynamics by advancing a sub-hypothesis that conceptualizes the “Clash of Civilizations” not as a neutral scientific prediction, but as a conflict-oriented agenda that has been discursively constructed, operationalized, and defended in policy and strategic practices, while simultaneously advocating dialogue-oriented approaches as a viable alternative for cooperative diplomacy and regional integration across the Middle East (Chapter VI).

Methodologically, the research employs a combination of qualitative approaches, including historical and legal analysis, policy review, and comparative studies of regional unions worldwide. This methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of both the theoretical and practical dimensions of regional integration. Primary sources, including legal documents, treaties, and policy reports, are analyzed alongside secondary literature on political theory, international law, economics, and regional studies. This approach ensures that the study is firmly grounded in empirical evidence while contributing to scholarly debates on regional integration and Middle Eastern politics. In sum, this study seeks to provide a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the Middle East’s potential for integration, offering insights into the strategic, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of a prospective union. By combining historical, theoretical, and empirical perspectives, the dissertation aims to contribute both to academic scholarship and to practical policy discussions on regional stability and cooperation. Ultimately, the research argues that a Middle East Union is not merely a theoretical aspiration but a feasible and necessary framework for addressing the region’s persistent challenges and advancing its collective potential.

Perspectives of the Middle East Union Formation

CHAPTER I:

AN OVERVIEW OF THE MIDDLE EAST (ME)

This Chapter provides a structured framework for discussing the Middle East, contextualizing the root of term, broad exploration of its history including its nationalism and wars, geography, demography, and geopolitical dynamics, analyzing the hypothesis of the formation of the Middle East Union (MEU), and exploring some patterns of current active Regional Unions including African Union (AU), European Union (EU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), The Organisation of American States (OAS), Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the lessons and successes from existing unions that could guide the Middle East.

1. Concept of the Term “Middle East”

The "Middle East" is not a continent or a strictly defined geographical term; it's a historical and geopolitical concept originating from a Eurocentric worldview, particularly from British imperial usage in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The term “Middle East” was first coined by the British in the 1850s, but the term became popular after Alfred Thayer Mahan (strategist, historian, and geographer of the United States Navy) used it in 1902. He, who looked at this region from the continent of Europe, applied this term to the region around the Persian Gulf because, in his opinion, the terms Near East and the Far East did not seem appropriate for this region. In an article about the difficulties of the Persian Gulf for England in “National Review”, he proposed this term. A bit later, the term was used by the London Times then in the official correspondence of the British government, and then by the British and American governments in World War I and II. The term “Middle East” has been mentioned since 1900 AD, however, it is also possible that this term has also been used since the middle of the 19th century in the Department of Affairs related to India in the British Foreign Ministry.¹ At that time, the term Middle East was generally used to refer to the regions between the Arab world, India, or the regions around the Persian Gulf. On March 22, 1911, Lord Curzon used the term Middle East in the English House of Lords while discussing the issues of Iran, Türkiye, and the Persian Gulf.² During World War I (1914-1918), the Allied forces sent to Iraq, which were routed through India, were called the Middle East Forces. Also, at the beginning of World War II (1939-1945), the British Military Headquarters in Cairo was called the General Headquarters of the Middle East Command, and gradually this term became common and

¹ A. Drysdale, G. H. Blake, *The Middle East and North Africa: A Political Geography*, Oxford University Press, 1985, 19-20.

² P. Beaumont, G. Blake, J. Malcolm Wagstaff, *The Middle East: A Geographical Study*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, 1988, 1-2.

popular among the public.³ Before the outbreak of World War I, the term Near East in English referred to the region of the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire, while the term Middle East included the lands of Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Turkestan, and the Caucasus. Also, the term Far East was applied to East Asian countries such as China, Japan, two Koreas, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and so on. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (1908-1922), the term Near East was no longer used much, while the term Middle East used to refer to the newly founded countries in the Islamic world.⁴

Although, all these terms (Near, Far, and Middle East) were used as a tool to secure the interests of the French and British empires at the time., but the term Middle East gained popularity when it was used in English and French. In the past decades, Persian speakers have also started using the same “Europe-oriented” term without question, regardless of their opinion that the term “Southwest Asia”, which is meaningful and geographically correct, is suitable for this region. Some people criticize the term Middle East because of its Eurocentricity. This region is located in the East only from the point of view of Western Europe, while the same region is located in the west for an Indian and in the south for a Russian. Furthermore, the word “Middle” has also caused confusion due to different interpretations.

The Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Seyyed Ali Khamenei, believes that the Westerners' naming of the region of “West Asia” as the “Middle East” is a misnomer, and evidence of the Europeans' arrogance and sense of superiority that they consider Europe as the center of the world and measure the East or the Orient concerning their zone and divide it into three regions of the Far, Middle, and Near East. According to Khamenei, the term “West Asia” is a correct term to replace “Middle East”, and the definitions of the Far, Near, and Middle East are inappropriate.

Khamenei expressed his opinion about the geographical classification of the region during a meeting with university professors on August 12, 2012, stated:

“I insist on calling the region «West Asia» and not «Middle East». The definitions of the Far East, Near East, and Middle East are incorrect, because they revolve around Europe as the center of the world. Far from where? Near to where? It means that Europe is the center of the world; Wherever it is Far from Europe, it is called the Far East; Wherever it is Nearer, it is the Near East; Anywhere in the Middle is the Middle East! This is the definition made by the Europeans themselves; No, we do not accept this. Asia is a continent; It has Eastern, Western, and Central regions; We are located in West Asia. Therefore, our region is called «West Asia», not the «Middle East».”⁵

Ebrahim Motaghi, a professor of political science and international relations at Tehran University, also sees Europe-centricity as an attempt to centralize the West in the general pattern of the world system and believes that a critical evaluation of concepts such as the Far East, the Near East, and

³ E. Anderson, *The Middle East: Geography & Geopolitics*, 8th Edition, Routledge, 2013, 12.

⁴ C. Swisher, *The Ancient Near East*, San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 1995.

⁵ “West Asia” instead of “Middle East” [“غرب آسیا” به جای “خاورمیانه”], An Interview with Dr. Hassan Abbasi (Analyst of Political and Strategic Issues, and the Head of the Certainty Think Tank), Radio Mehr, No:63, 2012. Accessible on <https://ensani.ir/fa/article/339740/>. Last Visit March 2024. [Persian]

the Middle East should be considered as one of the signs of criticism to European orientation in the world system.

During a meeting held on November 9th, 2012, the Specialized Committee on the Naming and Unification of Geographical Names of Iran also discussed the naming of the Middle East and found the term Middle East “Originating from the Colonial attitudes of the West” and “having ambiguity and fundamental flaw from various geographical and political aspects”, and suggested the term “West Asia” for the Asian part, and “North Africa” for the African part of the Middle East. Also, the result of this meeting was reflected in the Broadcasting Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran and some universities as well as relevant scientific associations.⁶

There is a significant disagreement among scholars over the precise extent of this region; some experts even reject the term “Middle East”, and find it too vague and inaccurate; This term was given to this region by the Europeans since they considered the lands that were in the east of Europe divided into three parts, the Far East (East Asia), the Middle East (Southwest Asia) and the Near East. Primarily, the term “Middle East” was meant to distinguish the region between the “Near East” (Balkans and Ottoman territories) and the “Far East” (East Asia). Despite its contested origins and imprecise boundaries, the term “Middle East” has become widely used as a regional descriptor that is not easily replaced.⁷

Although there is no generally accepted definition of the term, anyway the Middle East is a term that refers to the region of West Asia and North Africa. In this dissertation, North Africa is considered part of the Middle East, and the term “Middle East” is used in its historical, geopolitical, and geocommercial sense, encompassing both West Asia and North Africa. In light of the historical and geographical ambiguity, Eurocentric origin, and conceptual arguments of the term “Middle East”, it is reasonable to propose the Association of Middle East and North Africa (AMENA), or Association of West Asia and North Africa (AWANA) as alternatives and more inclusive regional designation. Thus, “AMENA” or “AWANA” can correct the geographical imbalance and serve as a regional self-identification in a contemporary framework for redefining and institutionalizing regional identity beyond the constraints of Eurocentric terminology and externally imposed perspectives.

2. Geography of the Middle East

The Middle East is an Afro-Eurasian region, a geographical region in West Asia and North Africa, that stretches from the Bab-Al-Mandeb Strait in the southwest to the Dardanelles Strait in the northwest, and from the east to the Himalayas and the port of Karachi. The region of Asia which is commonly referred to as the Middle East or Southwest Asia can be classified into two parts: The northern part including Türkiye and Iran and the southern part including the Arabian Peninsula. The Northern part is like an ornamental knot, which its center is located in the South Caucasus, and the left side of it is covered by Asia Minor; and the right side of the Knot is Iran, which is a

⁶ E. Motaghi, “European Orientation; Why West Asia was Called the Middle East? [اروپامداری؛ چرا غرب آسیا خاورمیانه نامیده شد؟]”, December 2013, 1-4. Accessible on <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=24684>. Last Visit March 2024. [Persian]

⁷ R. Badiei, *Detailed Geography of Iran* [جغرافیای مفصل ایران], Eghbal, 1983, 12. [Persian]

plateau land with a general slope towards the east, surrounded by high mountain ranges. The Arabian Peninsula or the southern part of Southwest Asia has a very simple composition, which means that it is all made up of a huge Slab (Block) whose protruding parts can be seen in the vicinity of the Mediterranean and Red Seas. The second region of Asia is created by the huge subcontinent of India and Pakistan, which is separated from the regions by large mountain ranges such as Sulaiman in the northwest the Karakoram-Himalayas in the north, and Arakan and Yoma in the east.⁸

Geopolitically, the Middle East is divided into two major regions; the Northern Belt (non-Arab region) and the Southern Belt (Arab region). The northern belt includes the countries of Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye, and the Arab region itself is divided into two parts, the “Fertile Crescent”⁹ (between the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf) and the Red Sea area, which is called the Arab Middle East. The Middle East is a geographical region that is predominantly characterized by vast expanses of deserts and grasslands. Most of the Middle East has a hot and dry climate and barren areas. However, the existence of several large and important rivers, including the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, and Karun, has helped agriculture, development, and civilization in this region.¹⁰

In the last few decades, the geographical boundaries of the Middle East have never been clearly defined and uniform in different sources and references; sometimes, it encompasses regions such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Transoxania, and the Caucasus, and in other instances, it is described as the Middle East and North Africa. The borders of the Middle East are somewhat ambiguous in terms of their geographical scope, and other definitions of the region have also been presented; For example, the term Greater Middle East, in addition to the usual definition of the Middle East, includes the countries of the Arab Maghreb region, such as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania, and Libya, as well as other countries such as Djibouti, Somalia, Etihad Qamar, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and countries in Central Asia. Sometimes the Middle East includes all the lands that extend from North Africa to India.¹¹ In some sources, the Middle East includes the countries of Cyprus, Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia, the Maghreb region (Morocco), and sometimes even Greece and Bulgaria.¹² However, the territory of the Middle East based on the new boundaries includes Iran, Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Arab countries situated along the Persian

⁸ M.H. Ganji, “Examining the Earth as a Natural Resource with Samples from Asia [آزمایش زمین به صورت یک منبع]”, *Journal of the Association of Geographers of Iran*, Spring 1979. [Persian]

⁹ Al Hilal Al Khasib (الهلل الخصيب)

¹⁰ S.L. Rearden, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense: The Formative Years: 1947-1950*, Office of the Secretary, Historical Office, Vol.1, December 1984.

¹¹ P. Mojtahedzadeh, “A look at the Political Geography of the Persian Gulf in 2000 [فارس نگاهی به جغرافیای سیاسی خلیج]”, *Middle East Quarterly*, No.3, 499-518, Winter 1995, 506; J. Eta'at, “Geopolitical Features of the Middle East [ویژگیهای ژئوپلیتیک خاورمیانه]”, the Series Articles on the Middle Eastern Studies, No.4, Tehran, *Middle East Center for Scientific Research and Strategic Studies*, 1995, 3. [Persian]

¹² E.W. Anderson, *The Middle East: Geography & Geopolitics*, Psychology Press, 2000, 13-15; M. Brawer, *Atlas of the Middle East*, New York: Macmillan Library Reference, 1998, 8.

Gulf including Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Egypt and Libya.¹³

As mentioned, there is no single and universal definition of the geographical boundaries of the region known as the Middle East for about a century; however, on the other hand, historians, journalists, and members of the Mass Media agree on focusing on the Persian Gulf and the surrounding countries as the center of the Middle East. Webster's New Geographical Dictionary defines the Middle East as follows: "The vast region that includes the countries of Northern Africa and Southwestern Asia, which in the past also included Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Burma."¹⁴

The New Encyclopaedia Britannica defines the Middle East in more detail: "the Middle East, the lands around the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, encompassing at least the Arabian Peninsula and, by some definitions, Iran, North Africa, and sometimes beyond. The central part of this general area was formerly called the Near East, a name given to it by some of the first modern Western geographers and historians, who tended to divide what they called the Orient into three regions. Near East applied to the region nearest Europe, extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf; Middle East, from the Persian Gulf to Southeast Asia; and Far East, those regions facing the Pacific Ocean."¹⁵

According to Ahmad Naghibzadeh, a professor at Tehran University: "the Middle East includes almost all the countries to the east of the Mediterranean, including Türkiye, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Egypt, and the Arab Peninsula countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Oman), as well as Iran, Afghanistan, and even Pakistan; and also parts of African continent, countries like Sudan and Libya."¹⁶ Among the debates over which countries should be classified as part of the Middle East, some people believe that Arab-African countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco should be included due to their strong historical and cultural ties and dependence to the region. Additionally, African countries like Mauritania and Somalia have links with the Middle East. Türkiye and Cyprus, although geographically within or close to the region, consider themselves part of Europe. The eastern border of the Middle East is generally considered to be Iran, although Afghanistan is sometimes included as well. The term Middle East is a geostrategic concept that was first used for the region between the Persian Gulf and Pakistan. During World War II, the term (Middle East) included a vast area from Egypt to Iran and from Syria and Iraq to Sudan.¹⁷

¹³ M. Kort, *The Handbook of the Middle East*, Twenty-First Century Books, 2008, 10; P. Beaumont, G. Blake, J. Malcolm Wagstaff, *The Middle East: A Geographical Study*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, 1988, 4.

¹⁴ L. Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 2019, 187; M. Webster, *Webster's New Geographical Dictionary*, Merriam Webster, U.S.; New Edition, 1988.

¹⁵ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Middle East: Region, Asia, Africa, and Europe", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, September 4, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.britannica.com/place/Middle-East>. Last Visit September 2025.

¹⁶ A. Naghibzadeh, "European Society and Middle East Issues [اروپا و مسائل خاورمیانه جامعه]", *Middle East Quarterly*, 1994, 266. [Persian]; B. Cabrillac, *L'Économie du Moyen-Orient*, Paris: PUF, QUE SAIS JE, 1985, 3.

¹⁷ B. Lewis, "Rethinking the Middle East", *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.71, No.4, 99-119, 1992.

In the recent half-century, the concept of the Middle East gained new dimensions and significant popularity due to the prosperity of the mutual relations between the Middle Eastern countries, which was increasing due to the Islamic-Arabic commonality. Gradually, the scope of the Middle East concept expanded to non-Arab countries such as Iran, Türkiye, and Israel; since these countries had close relations with Arab countries due to many geographical, military, and economic reasons (oil issues). The states of the Maghreb (including Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, etc.) were not initially considered in the Middle East, but in the 80s and with the drawing of a new map of the region's economy by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Middle East was used in a wider area and the public opinion of the world found a new attitude towards this strategic area.

According to the aforementioned definitions of the term Middle East, it is not a concept rooted in natural geography in such a way that natural borders separate this region from its neighbors in Asia and Africa, rather the Middle East is a historical, humane, geographical, cultural, political, and economic, or a geostrategic concept. Some theorists have used concepts such as the Arab world, the Islamic world, and the Mediterranean area for this region, however, what is certain is that the term Middle East, since the beginning of the second half of the last century, has been the most useful and stable framework of scientific and public discourses for the West in the region.¹⁸

According to G.B. Cressey, the Middle East is a crucial “Crossroads”¹⁹ linking the three continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa. The region is located at the intersection of the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, adjacent to the Indian Ocean, and five seas, the Mediterranean, Red, Caspian, Black, and Persian Gulf, are located in it. Also, the existence of four big straits between the forks of the oceans, ports, and seaways has caused this region to be of strategic importance in terms of trade and military since a long time ago.²⁰ The construction of the Suez Canal in 1869 connected the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. In addition, the discovery of oil in the Middle East in the early 1920s and its transfer and distribution increased the strategic importance of this region and intensified the conflict and competition between the great powers.²¹

The Middle East is a strategic region in terms of geography and energy, and 56.6% of the world's oil resources are located in this region. As the heart of Eurasia geostrategically, the Middle East is considered a huge part of the international community as a place where railways, land, and air

¹⁸ M. Mahmoodi, “Why and How Was the Middle East Created? [چگونه به وجود آمد؟]”, *Farsnews*, 2012. Accessible on <https://farsnews.ir/news/13910210000909/>. Last Visit March 2024. [Persian]

¹⁹ G.B. Cressey, *Crossroads; Land and Life in Southwest Asia*, University of Michigan, Lippincott, 1960.

²⁰ P. Beaumont, G. Blake, J. Malcolm Wagstaff, *The Middle East: A Geographical Study*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, 1988, 7-9; A. Drysdale, G. H. Blake, *The Middle East and North Africa: A Political Geography*, Oxford University Press, 1985, 13.

²¹ Y.A. Ka'aki, *The Middle East and the International Conflict: a General Study of the Region 's Position in the Conflict* دراسة عامة لموقع المنطقة في الصراع: الشرق الاوسط و الصراع الدولي, Beirut, Dar al-Nahda al-Arabiya, 1986, 164-165. [Arabic]

lines cross. This region is considered to be the place of air and land transit between Europe and Africa with India and East Asia, which adds to its strategic values.²²

3. History of the Middle East

The Middle East, with an ancient and rich history, was one of the first regions of human settlements. “The Middle East is an area of ancient civilization, indeed, the most ancient in the world.”²³ The history of the Middle East has a high value and geopolitical importance and its beginning goes back to ancient times. The Middle East was one of the first origins of world civilization. It was the birthplace of the three great civilizations of ancient Persia, ancient Egypt, and Mesopotamia. Many beliefs, religions and rituals of the world originated from this region. The first human discoveries were made here, as well as the first encounter between intelligent African humans (the current generation of humans) and Neanderthals. “The discovery of a 55,000-year-old partial skull of a modern human in an Israeli cave, the first sighting of Homo sapiens in this time and place, offers skeletal evidence to support the idea that Neandertals and moderns mated in the Middle East between 50,000 and 60,000 years ago.”²⁴ The first laws of the world (Hammurabi's Law) were written in this area.

The Middle East is the birthplace of main religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and non-Abrahamic religions such as Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, and Manichaeism. The Middle East is culturally and historically the origin and birthplace of great monotheistic and divine religions. The Prophets of God have announced their global mission in this region. Among about twenty or so discovered civilizations, more than half of them have been identified in the Middle East. Many other known civilizations have also been recognized in the neighborhood of the Middle East, such as the civilizations of China and India. In the religious perspective, the city of Jerusalem is very sacred and precious for the followers of the divine religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In addition, the Middle East is considered the cradle of legislation, philosophy, literature, etc. The art of the ancient world has roots in this region and has spread all over the world from here.²⁵

It cannot be said that the entire Middle East has a common history, yet it is uniform in some cultural characteristics. Habib Borjian has called the Middle East a “Cultural Continent,” and he believes that Iran's contribution to the history and culture of this region was significant, especially during the Achaemenid period and before the Safavid period.²⁶ The region, often seen as the “Cradle of Civilization,” has historically been marked by diversity, internal instability, and outside interference. Since the middle of the 20th century, the Middle East has become the center of global

²² M.H. Salahshour, “The Geographical, Political, Cultural and Economic Importance of the Middle East in Today's Political World [اهمیت جغرافیائی، سیاسی، امروز، جهانی سیاسی امروز، CIVILICA, 2014, Abstract. Accessible on <https://civilica.com/doc/337098/>. Last Visit March 2024. [Persian]

²³ J.H. Wheeler, *Regional Geography of the World*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston; 3rd edition, January 1, 1969; B. Lewis, “The Map of the Middle East: A Guide for the Perplexed”, *The American Scholar*, Vol.58, 19-38, 1989, 23.

²⁴ M. Balter, “Humans and Neandertals Likely Interbred in Middle East”, 2015. Accessible on <https://www.science.org/content/article/humans-and-neandertals-likely-interbred-middle-east>. Last Visit March 2024.

²⁵ M. Mahmoodi, “Why and How Was the Middle East Created? [چگونه و چرا و چگونه به وجود آمد؟]”, *Farsnews*, 2012. Accessible on <https://farsnews.ir/news/13910210000909/>. Last Visit March 2024. [Persian]

²⁶ H. Borjian, “Cultural Continent of Middle East [قاره فرهنگی خاورمیانه]”, 2002, 98-99. Accessible on https://www.academia.edu/8077574/Cultural_Continent_of_Middle_East. Last Visit March 2024. [Persian]

attention and perhaps the most sensitive region in the world in terms of strategy, economy, politics, and culture, and the place of long-term conflicts between Arabs and Israel.

3.1. Emergence of Nationalism in the Middle East

The idea of nationalism entered the Middle East in the second half of the 19th century and became the source of many transformations in the Middle East. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of new governments, as well as the establishment of new parties and the increase of political awareness, were effective in strengthening nationalism in the Islamic world, especially in the Middle East, which simultaneously caused the emergence of Arab, Turkish, Iranian (Persian), Kurdish, and Jewish nationalism in this region.²⁷

- **Arab Nationalism**²⁸ was strengthened after the Young Turks movement in 1947, in response to the Turkification policy of the Ottomans. The establishment of various parties and communities in the cities of Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo was effective in spreading Arab nationalism and exerting pressure on the Ottoman leaders. Some of them wanted autonomy within the framework of the Ottoman Empire, and some others wanted transformation in the Ottoman system or even independence from it.²⁹
- **Turkish Nationalism**, which introduced itself as a reformist movement with the Young Turks movement, provoked the separatist tendencies of other nationalities with its radical pan-Turkism tendencies. Turkish Nationalism was strengthened after World War I and became the basis for the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.³⁰
- **Iranian Nationalism** spread among modernist intellectuals from the beginning of the 19th century. The goal of these intellectuals was to create a centralized and powerful government to end the feudal system and government corruption.³¹
- **Kurdish Nationalism** was also formed in the early 19th century. The supporters of this trend were divided into two groups: one group sought autonomy within the framework of the Ottoman Empire, and the other group wanted separation and independence from it.³²

²⁷ B. Lewis, "Nationalism and Patriotism in the Middle East", *World Affairs Interpreter*, Vol.24, No.2, 1954; A. Hourani, *The Emergence Of The Modern Middle East*, Palgrave MacMillan, 1990, 18; A. Drysdale, G.H. Blake, *The Middle East and North Africa: A Political Geography*, Oxford University Press, 1985, 57.

²⁸ R. Khalidi, L. Anderson, M. Muslih, R.S. Simon, *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, Columbia University Press, 1991.

²⁹ M. Khadduri, *Political Trends in the Arab World: The Role of Ideas and Ideals in Politics* [الاتجاهات السياسية في العالم]، [دور الأفكار والمثل العليا في السياسة: العربي]، The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970, 28-31. [Arabic]

³⁰ C.E. Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of Arab Nationalism*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973, 17; A. Drysdale, G.H. Blake, *The Middle East and North Africa: A Political Geography*, Oxford University Press, 1985, 57-59.

³¹ R.W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1st Edition, 1964, 35-36.

³² D. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, London: I. B. Tauris, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 89-90.

- **Jewish Nationalism** also emerged in the late 19th century during the Ottoman Empire, which took several hundred thousand population of the Jewish people. Jews lived in the cities of Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Izmir, Baghdad, Damascus, and parts of Israel and Yemen and had the same status as other minorities in the Ottoman System. Jewish nationalism was a European phenomenon whose impacts appeared in the 19th century when they migrated to Palestine.³³

3.2. Middle East and Wars

The modern history of the Middle East has been engaged extensively by a continuous series of wars, invasions, occupations, revolutions, and regional rivalries. From the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the geopolitical aftermath of World War I and the arbitrary colonial borders it imposed, to the transformative consequences of World War II and the Cold War, the region has experienced repeated waves of conflicts and foreign interventions that have transformed its political landscape.

“The region has been the theater of multiple conflicts and tensions among which the unresolved and long-lasting Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the Suez Crisis in 1956; the Iran-Iraq war in 1980–88; the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990; the US-led invasion of Iraq resulting in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003; and multiple intra-state and inter-state tensions across the entire region, not least the regional turmoil that spread across the entire area in 2011, known as the Arab Springs. The origins of many of these conflicts pre-date oil, and some have ancient causes, such as the early succession to the Islam leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and later extra-regional influences due to the colonization process.”³⁴

These wars, whether driven by ideological rivalries, territorial disputes, or struggles over sovereignty, have played a decisive role in shaping state formation, fostering authoritarian regimes, shifting regional alliances, and perpetuating chronic instability. Most critically, they have fragmented the region’s political unity and undermined the long-term stability and potential for sustainable cooperation.

This section provides an overview of the most significant phases of conflict across five historical junctures: World War I, World War II, the Cold War, contemporary regional wars, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. These historical patterns are critical for diagnosing the roots of instability and challenges the region faces today, the region’s political evolution, and the pressing need for strategic integration. These wars, though diverse in nature and impact, collectively illustrate the enduring instability and fragmentation, reinforce the long-standing urgency of establishing a cohesive, cooperative, structured, and unified regional framework, such as a Middle East Union (MEU), capable of transforming fragmentation into cooperation and conflict into lasting integration.

3.2.1. World War I and the Formation of New States

³³ J.P. Derriennic, *Le Moyen-Orient au XXe Siècle*, Armand Colin, 1983, 36.

³⁴ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 17.

Before the World War I, there were four types of political territories in the Middle East, which were:

1. The Tribal Territory included sedentary and nomads who lived in the vicinity of pastures, whilst the borders of this type of territories were not clearly defined.
2. The Independent Country was referred to as any political unit that was neither tribal nor extensive. Governments in these countries used to collect taxes, enforce laws, and establish regular armies.
3. Empires and governments with extensive territory, which were created by military campaigning and dominating other existing political units.
4. Colonial Territories, which had been formed as a result of the competition of great colonial powers in recent centuries.³⁵

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the Ottoman Empire entered the war against the Allies. In the same year, the Ottoman Arab regions were in direct contact with the British government, which was based in Egypt, Aden, and the Persian Gulf. From the beginning of the war, the British provided facilities for the Arab rebellion in the Middle East against the Ottomans, since their rebellion would weaken the Ottoman power in the short term, and in the long term, it would provide the British establishment in the Middle East.³⁶ By exploiting the separatist tendencies of the Arabs in the formation of an independent Arab government, the British provoked Sharif Hussein, the king of Hejaz, against the Ottoman government. On the other hand, with the ratification of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, a secret Treaty in 1916 between the United Kingdom and France, large areas of the Ottoman Empire were divided.³⁷

After the end of World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, based on the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire were allowed to become independent states under the condition of accepting the tutelage of the great powers. Obviously, before that, the new States in the Middle East had experienced statecraft training since 1876, including the knowledge of governance, communication with the government bureaucracy, compliance with new principles and laws through census, land registration, administration of tax affairs, and military service. According to the San Remo Conference (on April 25, 1920) and according to the Treaty of Sèvres (August 10, 1920), Hejaz was recognized as an independent country, and Syria and Lebanon were assigned to be under the tutelage of France, and Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan were assigned to be under the tutelage of England. Since the policies of these new governments were not accompanied by the satisfaction of the people, the Arabs' strategy was more focused on gaining independence from the colonial governments. In general, the approach by which the new Middle East was formed in the period after World War I, created several stable states that gradually have proven themselves in the League of Nations, however, this process entailed great problems, which were influential in regional and international

³⁵ A. Drysdale, G.H. Blake, *The Middle East and North Africa: A Political Geography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1985, 41-45.

³⁶ J.P. Derriennic, *Le Moyen-Orient au XXe Siècle*, Armand Colin, 1983, 68.

³⁷ A. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 315-319; E.L. Rogan, "The Emergence of the Middle East Into the Modern State System", *Oxford University Press*, 2019, 22-23; G. Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* [تاريخ حركة العرب القومية: بقطعة العرب], Hamish Hamilton, 1938, 247. [Arabic]

developments. The most obvious of these problems was the occupation of Palestine by the Zionists and, as a result, the conflict between the Arabs and Israel, and the political instability of the Middle Eastern countries.³⁸

Libya also included two separate states of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania during the Ottoman Empire. Italy colonized this region in 1911 and merged these two colonies in 1934 into the form of one colony of Libya. Egypt became a British colony in 1882, and although Iran has never been colonized, was under the influence of the Russian and British governments.³⁹

3.2.2. World War II and its Consequences

During World War II, the semi-independent states of the Middle East, although were not directly involved in the war, the entry of their colonial states involved them in a way. The anti-Jewish propaganda of the Germans, the anti-colonial tendency of the colonies and the initial victory of the Allies (Germany, Italy, Japan) in the war made many Middle Eastern countries determined to support the Axis powers, however, the consequences of the war were unpleasant for them.⁴⁰ Axis powers did not meet the expectations of their supporters. Also, despite the promise of independence, many allied forces remained in the Middle East countries. After this, these countries tried to achieve independence. Before that, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, and Egypt had gained independence. In 1943, with the forced withdrawal of French troops, Syria and Lebanon also became independent. The Arab League was formed in Cairo on March 22, 1945. In 1946, Jordan, which was under British tutelage, gained independence. The first goal of these states was to abolish treaties and drive out foreign forces and gain complete independence, which happened with the withdrawal of colonial states from all occupied territories in the early 1950s. After the independence of these countries, the independence movement spread to other countries as well; Libya in 1951, Kuwait in 1961, South Yemen in 1967, and United Arab Emirates in 1971 gained independence.⁴¹

3.2.3. Middle East and Cold War

³⁸ F.K. Hitti, *The Near East in History: A 5000 Year Story*, Van Nostrand, 1961, 531; A. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 318; B. Lewis, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 1994, 128-129.

³⁹ L. Abd Al-Sater, *Contemporary History* التاريخ المعاصر, Dar El Machreq, Beirut, 1993. [Arabic]; I.M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, 441-458, 612-616; J.L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East; A History*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 189-254.

⁴⁰ P. Mansfield, N. Pelham, *A History of the Middle East*, Penguin Books, 2013, 247-250.

⁴¹ B. Lewis, *The Middle East: 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day*, Orion Publishing Group, 1995, 362, 367-368; P. Mansfield, N. Pelham, *A History of the Middle East*, Penguin Books, 2013, 253-257; Z. Kaddoura, *Modern Arab History* [تاريخ العرب الحديث], Arab Renaissance House for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, 1985, 266, 313. [Arabic]

The Cold War had consequences affecting the Middle East due to the competition between two rival powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, since 1945. Achieving strategic superiority in the region and obtaining access to the oil resources were the reasons for the competition. The Cold War was an ideological war between two different political, economic, and social systems, i.e. capitalism and communism.⁴² The growth and development of American and Soviet Union power influence gradually filled the power vacuum that was created in the absence of the former colonial powers, especially England and France. America led liberalism, democracy, and capitalism, and the Soviet Union, based on Marxism, sought to apply it to the government system of the countries under its influence. Therefore, the Middle East became the scene of these ideological competitions for four decades; It was based on these ideologies that the states of the Middle East were attracted to one of these two great powers and joined the two blocs of the West and the East.⁴³

In 1947, the US President Truman Doctrine was issued, which emphasized the US support for countries that were threatened by the Soviet Union. Based on this, other US presidents continued the policy of preventing Soviet Union influence and maintaining and guaranteeing the US strategic interests in the region, especially obtaining access to the oil resources in the Middle East.⁴⁴ Taking advantage of the chaotic situation after World War II, the Soviet Union strengthened its position in the region by supporting left-wing opposition groups and parties in the Middle East, and in the following decades, established close ties with the left-wing states of the Arab world such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.⁴⁵

The Cold War in the Middle East caused crises such as the Suez crisis in 1956, successive revolutions and coups in countries such as Syria and Iraq, and many other regional conflicts. The frustration of the Middle Eastern countries due to the non-realization of their interests caused them to finally establish the Non-Alignment Movement in 1961, together with other Asian and African countries, with the aim of not depending on the Western and Eastern powers.⁴⁶

3.2.4. Contemporary Wars in the Middle East

Contemporary conflicts in the Middle East have continued to destabilize the region well into the 21st century. These include the protracted Arab-Israeli wars, Iran's ongoing confrontation with Israel, the Gulf conflicts (1990-1991), Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), and civil wars in countries like

⁴² P. Sluglett, "The Cold War in the Middle East", *Oxford University Press*, 2019, 67-68.

⁴³ B. Milton-Edwards, P. Hinchcliffe, *Conflicts in the Middle East Since 1945*, London & New York, Routledge, 2007, 36-37.

⁴⁴ Z. Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: the History and Politics of Orientalism*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 112.

⁴⁵ B. Milton-Edwards, P. Hinchcliffe, *Conflicts in the Middle East Since 1945*, London & New York, Routledge, 2007, 37-43; M. Khadduri, *Political Trends in the Arab World: The Role of Ideas and Ideals in Politics* [الاتجاهات / دور الأفكار والمثل العليا في السياسة: السياسية في العالم العربي], The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970, 163. [Arabic]

⁴⁶ B. Rubin, *The Great Powers in the Middle East 1941-1947: The Road to the Cold War*, London: Frank Cass, 1980; A. Abdul Rashidi, *The Non-Aligned Movement from the Beginning to 1985* [جنبش عدم تعهد از آغاز تا سال ۱۹۸۵], Soroush Publications, 1986, 15-20; A. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 365-366.

Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. These wars were later compounded by major external interventions, notably the U.S.-led operations in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) justified under the banners of counterterrorism and regime change objectives, which resulted in long-term instability, power vacuums, and the proliferation of extremist movements (since 2013). These interventions, along with continued U.S. military interventions in countries like Syria and Yemen, reflect the deep involvement of external powers in the regional tensions.⁴⁷

In addition, the twelve-day war between Iran and Israel (13-24 June 2025), alongside escalating tensions involving the United States and Israel with Iran, has highlighted the highly dynamic and volatile nature of security challenges in the region.⁴⁸ Given the ongoing developments and the fluidity of these events, it is currently difficult and unnecessary to analyze or elaborate on them in detail within this dissertation. Overall, all these wars illustrate the region's persistent exposure and vulnerability to both internal fragmentation and external pressures, thereby further underscoring the absence of a unified and cohesive regional security architecture and strategic cooperation.

Examining the wars in the Middle East in the contemporary era indicates that simply having advanced military power and resorting to force to resolve the conflict does not prevent the war. Analyses and surveys indicate that political and economic factors have been important causes of war in the Middle East. Attempts to achieve political legitimacy and economic interests have been powerful motivations for starting many wars in the Middle East. The issue of preventing war and violence is considered a political issue in addition to being a military one. Some wars in the Middle East are the result of the disruption of the balance of power and the loss of deterrence in the region. In this circumstance, the countries fight with each other once an opportunity is provided to achieve more interests, and until the Middle Eastern countries reach a political agreement and compatibility, the region will remain insecure and unstable, and the natural resources of the region will be used to purchase weapons and militarization.⁴⁹ In the Middle East, like many underdeveloped countries, the military has played a prominent role in creating new structures and modernizing society. More than 50 military coups took place in this region from 1936 to 2000, which shows the intervention of the military in politics.⁵⁰ Also, the regional and international developments after the two world wars were effective in expanding and continuing military intervention in politics in the Middle Eastern countries. The establishment of the Israeli regime in 1948 and the humiliation of the Arabs in the conflict with Israel have affected the growth and expansion of Arab nationalism and the increase of military power in Arab countries. The Cold War was also an effective factor in the Middle East for the expansion of militarism, increasing the power of military institutions, and military intervention in politics. The arms race and military and security relations of these countries in the framework of the competition between the two world's superior powers and the desire of these powers to continue the existing structures in these countries

⁴⁷ Encyclopedia of Humanities, Encyclopedia of Humanities, "Conflicts in the Middle East", *Encyclopedia of Humanities*. Accessible on <https://humanidades.com/en/conflicts-in-the-middle-east/>. Last Visit July 2025.

⁴⁸ Al Jazeera, "Visualising 12 days of the Israel-Iran conflict", *Al Jazeera*, 26 June, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/26/visualising-12-days-of-the-israel-iran-conflict>. Last Visit January 2026.

⁴⁹ J.G. Stein, "War and Security in the Middle East", *Routledge Library*, 2016, 197-198, 213.

⁵⁰ V. Sinai, *Government, Military and Politics in Iran: from 1920 to 1979* [نظامیان و سیاست در ایران دولت] از ۱۳۹۹ تا ۱۳۵۷, Mashhad Ferdowsi University, 2017, 63. [Persian]

that relied on the military forces led to the consolidation of the position of the military and exerting pressure on the opposing forces inside the country.⁵¹

3.2.5. Arab-Israeli War

This conflict is one of the most important conflicts in the history of the Middle East, which even affected international polarization and intensified disputes between the great powers, and caused an arms race in the Middle East. This conflict was a direct consequence of the occupation of Palestine, which originated from the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and the Palestinian Mandate, and caused a split between the Arab countries.⁵² The Zionist invaders, with the support of the British government, occupied parts of the Palestinian land after World War II and established the Israeli regime; subsequently, the 1948 war took place for the liberation of Palestine, which failed. Since then, the conflict between the Arab countries, which most of the Islamic countries are also with, and the occupying regime, continues, and this regime, which, in addition to Palestine, has also occupied the Syrian Golan Heights, keeps enjoying the military-political support from several Western countries, especially the United States of America. During this time, Arab countries have tried to regain their lands through military and political means. The signing of the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel in 1978, the peace dialogues in the 1990s, and the holding of the Madrid Conference in 1991 on Peace, which led to the conclusion of the Oslo Accords in 1993, as well as the signing of the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel in 1994, have not been able to restore peace to the region so far.⁵³

4. Demography of the Middle East

The Middle East has an area of about 8,8 million square kilometers (3.4 million square miles) and its population is over five hundred million (507,924,160 in 2025).⁵⁴ The three countries of Iran, Türkiye, and Egypt comprise 52% of the region's population.⁵⁵ The demographic composition of the Middle East consists of a diverse mixture of Arab, Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, Armenian, Berber, Jewish, Christian, Sunni, Shia, and Druze ethnicities and religions, whilst Arabs and

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 67-68; T.A. Musallam, *Issues and requirements for Arab military security at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century* [قضايا ومتطلبات الأمن العسكري العربي في نهاية القرن العشرين و مطلع القرن الحادي و العشرين], Lebanon, Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2000, 275-276. [Arabic]

⁵² M. Muhammad Saleh, *The Palestinian Issue: Historical Background & Contemporary Developments* [خلفياتها التاريخية وتطوراتها المعاصرة: القضية الفلسطينية], Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, 2014, 36; A. Abd Al Wahhab, *The New Middle East?! : The Scenario of Israeli Domination* [سيناريو الهيمنة : الشرق الاوسط الجديد؟!], Cairo: Sina Publication, 1995, 51-52. [Arabic]

⁵³ C.D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004, 217, 229-235; L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*, Princeton University Press, 1984, 240-245.

⁵⁴ World Population View, Accessible on <https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/the-middle-east-population>. Last Visit November 2025.

⁵⁵ A. Drysdale, G.H. Blake, *The Middle East and North Africa: A Political Geography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1985, 14-16; M. Kort, *The Handbook of the Middle East*, Twenty-First Century Books, 2008, 11.

Sunnis have the largest population.⁵⁶ The Middle East is the origin of the three great heavenly religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam;⁵⁷ and also non-Abrahamic religions such as Zoroastrianism, Mehr (Mithraism), and Manichaeism. Muslims make up the largest population of the Middle East. Most of the Jews live in the occupied territories of Palestine and also in Iran, Türkiye, Tunisia, Syria, Maghreb, and Egypt; and Christians live in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq.⁵⁸ 13 countries out of 18 countries in the Middle East are Arab countries. The most populous countries in the Middle East are Egypt, Iran and Türkiye, and the largest country in this region is Saudi Arabia. The western countries of the Middle East (Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco) are also considered part of the Middle East due to their strong historical and cultural dependence. The African countries of Sudan, Mauritania and Somalia also due to their ties with the Middle East, are considered as Middle Eastern. This region contains various cultural and ethnic groups such as Persian (Fars), Lurs, Kurds, Laks, Assyrians, Azerbaijanis, Anatolian Turks, Qashqais, Balochis, Arabs, Jews, Copts, Iraqi Turkmens and Berbers. The main languages of this region are Persian, Azerbaijani, Luri, Kurdish, Leki, Balochi, Assyrian, Turkish, Arabic, Greek and Hebrew, and in the definition of the Greater Middle East, Urdu and Pashto languages are also included.⁵⁹

5. Hypothesis of the Formation of the Middle East Union (MEU)

Peace is one of the main human needs that has been sought by men of all eras. The Middle East is one of the oldest lands that has been involved with war and peace for a long time, and due to its specific situation and the profit-seeking policies and propaganda of foreign powers, it has never achieved continuous peace. The Middle East is one of the geo-strategic, geo-politic, geo-economic, and geo-cultural regions of the world, which has made this region particularly important and prominent compared to other regions of the world. The Middle East due to its important features such as wealth and rich natural resources, special geographical location and global political importance, homogeneity, and commonalities has the ability, capacity, and capability to form a union, more than any other region. The prerequisite for the Middle East Union formation is the establishment of “Peace in the Middle East”,⁶⁰ although the Union itself also bolsters peace.

When Hitler's German army was destroying the borders of European countries one by one, no one could imagine that in the next few decades, movement between European countries would not only not require military equipment, but it would not even be necessary to carry the smallest identification documents. Thinking about a unified Europe during a war that killed more than 50 million people seemed very naive and simplistic. But with the end of the war, much faster than expected, peaceful relations between Western European countries emerged. The worst racism in

⁵⁶ E. Anderson, *The Middle East: Geography & Geopolitics*, 8th Edition, Routledge, 2013, 130-137; M. Kort, *The Handbook of the Middle East*, Twenty-First Century Books, 2008, 16-17.

⁵⁷ J.L. Esposito, M.A. Muqtedar Khan, *Understanding The Contemporary Middle East: (Understanding Series)* [محاولة للفهم: الشرق الاوسط المعاصر], Supreme Council of Culture, 2003, 497. [Arabic]

⁵⁸ M.T. Razaviyan, *The Middle East* [خاور میانه], National University of Iran, Tehran, 1979, 182-184. [Persian]

⁵⁹ L. Weitz, “Religious Minorities in the Modern Middle East”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, November 2015; A.N. Longva, A.S. Roald, *Religious Minorities in the Middle East, Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2012, 1-80.

⁶⁰ S.A. Nabavi, M. Khorram-Nasr, *Prospects of Peace in the Middle East: Emerging Crises and Old Politics* [بحرانهای نوظهور و سیاستهای قدیمی: چشمانداز صلح در خاور میانه], Karaj, Forough Sepehr, 2023. [Persian]

human history immediately gave way to altruism and mutual respect. The borders faded one after another and many institutions and organizations were created to strengthen the unity of the countries. However, in this part of the world (Middle East), the situation is different. Ethnic and religious diversity, asymmetric distribution of resources, political leaders mostly lagging behind pre-modern eras, in addition to the low level of public awareness and education, and of course the exploitation of global powers have caused the Middle East to appear like a swamp. But what should be done? Shall we beat the drum of hypocrisy and enmity? Or shall we cause irreparable damage to each other at any cost?⁶¹

Today, the state of affairs in the Middle East is facing emerging crises and challenges across the political, social, economic, and cultural domains, which are gradually increasing in both scope and depth, posing significant concerns for the region. The contemporary Middle East is characterized by continuous turbulence, featuring ongoing conflicts and instability, where the pursuit of Peace and Stability in this region has become an elusive aspiration. The Middle East is a region highly vulnerable and greatly susceptible to external and international influence from a variety of political and economic entities, including governmental, quasi-governmental, and non-governmental actors, due to the diverse interests of all kinds of political stakeholders. The complex and far-reaching relationships among various political actors are intricately woven into the power dynamics in the region's countries. To address the enduring challenges in the region and to foster optimism for peace, the most viable approach is through rigorous scientific, academic, research, study, and methodical analysis of historical and contemporary experiences.⁶²

In the current moment that different angles of the region are surrounded by war, peace dialogues should be put on the agenda to achieve security, stability, and sustainable development for all the countries of the region. Now is the opportune moment to focus on new approaches of the globalization era, with each Middle Eastern country playing its part in the most effective dialogue with other states in the region. Forming the Middle East Union is not that difficult and impossible, despite its unfamiliar and strange concept. Now is the right time to propose the formation of the Middle East Union by gathering all the countries of the Middle East together. In this regard, the experience of the European Union (EU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and some other unions can be useful.

5.1. Semi-Patterns of the Formation of the Union

In order to conceptualize the potential framework for a Middle East Union (MEU), it is essential to examine precedent models of regional integration that have emerged in various parts of the world. These semi-patterns, though shaped by distinct historical, political, cultural, and economic circumstances across different geographical regions, due to their similarities offer valuable insights into the institutional foundations, driving forces, and recurring common challenges associated with regional union formation, which may inform the prospects and design of a potential Middle East Union. By analyzing cases such as the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Organization of American States (OAS),

⁶¹ F. Ghanad, "The Middle Eastern Union: From a Dream to a Reality [اتحادیه خاورمیانه]", *IRNA, the Islamic Republic of Iran News Agency*, 18 February 2018. [Persian]

⁶² S.A. Nabavi, *Prospects of Peace in the Middle East: Emerging Crises and Old Politics* [چشم‌انداز صلح در خاورمیانه], Karaj, Forough Sepehr, 2023, Introduction. [Persian]

and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), this section aims to extract comparative lessons that can inform the feasibility and design of a future Middle East Union. These examples not only provide strategic and operational models but also highlight the transformative inherent potential of regional cooperation in fostering peace, promoting human rights and democracy, resolving conflicts, and advancing economic growth in regional cooperative initiatives.

5.1.1. African Union (AU)

The African Union (AU) is the successor Organization of African Unity (OAU), which was changed to this name in 2002. The Organization of African Unity was established in 1963 during the independence of African countries from the colonialists,⁶³ and in 2002, it was dissolved and replaced by a new organization called the African Union. The African Union is an African organization whose main and fundamental goal is to lead the African continent towards Peace, Stability, Security, and sustainable development by referring to the principle of “the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes by Negotiation, Mediation, Conciliation or Arbitration”. The constitution of the African Union consists of a series of guiding principles laid down, including early response to crises, respect for the rule of law and human rights, respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states, respecting borders inherited on the achievement of independence, promotion of peace, security, and stability in Africa, early warning and preventive diplomacy, peacemaking including the use of good offices, mediation, conciliation, and inquiry; peace-support operations and intervention; peace-building; peace-keeping; and humanitarian action.⁶⁴

The African Union is a union of 55 member states, comprising all African countries including Morocco which joined in 2017. It aims to promote political and economic ties between member states, foster development, provide grounds for eradicating poverty among these countries, and ultimately connect the continent's economy with the global economy. The purpose of the Union is to promote Unity and Peace among its member states, strengthen Democracy, Human Rights,⁶⁵ and establish a desired form of government. The Union believes that conflicts and disputes should be Prevented, Managed, and Resolved⁶⁶ before they harm the Peace and Stability of the continent. For this purpose, in 2004, the African Union established the Peace and Security Council (PSC), which grants the Union the ability to intervene in military conflicts between member states or in the internal conflicts of members. In other words, the policy of the Union was changed from “Non-interference” in conflicts between members (which was one of the principles of the Organization of African Unity) to the policy of “Non-indifference” in times of conflicts and deterioration of the

⁶³ T. Maluwa, “The Peaceful Settlement of Disputes among African States, 1963–1983: Some Conceptual Issues and Practical Trends”, *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 299-320.

⁶⁴ M.N. Shaw, *International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 1026-1028; Constitutive Act of the African Union, 2000, Art.4. Accessible on https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf. Last Visit July 2024.

⁶⁵ O. De Schutter, *International Human Rights Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 28-30.

⁶⁶ Organization of African Unity Secretary-General, AHG/Dec. 1 (XXVIII), Report of the OAU Secretary-General, Doc. CM/1747 (LVIII) and AHG/Dec. 3 (XXIX), Cairo, 1993.

situation to take urgent action towards the establishment of peace and tranquility between the conflicting parties. Some activities of the African Union Peace & Security Council (PSC) are:

- “Intervention in a Member State in respect of grave circumstances or at the request of a Member State in order to restore peace and security;
- Prevention of a dispute or conflict from escalating;
- Peacebuilding, including post-conflict disarmament and demobilisation; and
- Humanitarian assistance”⁶⁷

The Council has the power to take necessary initiatives and actions in potential or ongoing conflicts, and can decide to intervene collectively through the Council itself or through the chairperson of the Commission, the Panel of the Wise, or in collaboration with regional mechanisms. The Council will use its discretion to determine the appropriate course of action.⁶⁸ The African Union has so far sent troops to Burundi, Darfur region (Sudan), Mauritania, Somalia, Mali, and recently the Central African Republic.

The Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU) brought significant normative changes, particularly in the areas of “Peace and Security”, “Human Rights”, and “Democracy, respect for the sanctity of human life”, “condemnation and rejection of unconstitutional governments”,⁶⁹ and permission for intervention.⁷⁰ The objectives of the African Union, as stated in its founding document, in Art.3 are as follows:

- “Achieve greater Unity and Solidarity between the African countries and the peoples of Africa;
- Defend the Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Independence of its Member States;
- Accelerate the Political and Socio-economic Integration of the continent;
- Promote and Defend African Common Positions on issues of interest to the continent and its peoples;
- Encourage International Cooperation, taking due account of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- Promote Peace, Security, and Stability on the continent;
- Promote Democratic Principles and Institutions, popular participation and good governance;
- Promote and Protect Human and Peoples’ Rights in accordance with the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and other relevant Human Rights instruments;
- Establish the necessary conditions which enable the continent to play its rightful role in the global Economy and in International Negotiations;
- Promote sustainable development at the Economic, Social and Cultural levels as well as the integration of African economies;

⁶⁷ The African Union Peace & Security Council; Accessible on <https://au.int/en/psc>; Last Visit April 2024.

⁶⁸ Constitutive Act of the African Union, 2000, Art.9. Accessible on https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf. Last Visit July 2024.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, Art.4 (e, i, l, m, o p).

⁷⁰ A. Oluwadare, “The African Union and the Conflict in Mali: Extra-regional Influence and the Limitations of a Regional Actor”, *African Journal of Governance and Development*, 2014, 8.

- Promote Co-operation in all fields of human activity to raise the living standards of African peoples;
- Coordinate and Harmonize the Policies between the existing and future Regional Economic Communities for the gradual attainment of the objectives of the Union;
- Advance the development of the continent by promoting research in all fields, in particular in Science and Technology;
- Work with relevant international partners in the eradication of preventable diseases and the promotion of good Health on the continent”.⁷¹

Article 3 of the Constitutive Act of the Union lists a series of objectives that briefly include the achieving of greater unity between African countries; defending the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of its member states; the promotion of peace, security, and stability on the continent and of human and peoples’ rights under the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and other relevant human rights instruments; and the promotion of sustainable development.

Article 4 also sets out the Principles of the Union that include respect for borders existing on achievement of independence; establishment of a common defence policy for the African continent; peaceful resolution of conflicts among member states, prohibition of the use of force or threat to use force among member states.⁷²

Several other subregional organizations in Africa are also playing a significant role in resolving conflict; One such organization is the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) established in 1975. The primary goal of ECOWAS is to promote economic integration; and it comprises several institutions including the Authority of Heads of State and Government, the Council of Ministers, the Community Parliament, the Economic and Social Council, the Community Court of Justice, a secretariat, and a co-operation fund. The revised treaty mentions the responsibility of ECOWAS to prevent and settle regional conflicts, and it has adopted the ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) as its regional intervention force.⁷³ In 1990, the ECOWAS intervened in the Liberian civil war via a Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), and since then has remained concerned with the conflicts that have arisen in countries such as Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau. In 1999, ECOWAS established a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, and in 2001, adopted a Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

Another such subregional organization is the Southern African Development Community (SADC) which was established in 1992, formed an Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Co-operation in 1996, and adopted a Protocol on Politics, Defence and Security Co-operation in 2001. Under this Protocol, the Organ aims to promote Peace and Security in the region and in particular to consider enforcement action according to international law and as a matter of last resort where

⁷¹ Constitutive Act of the African Union, 2000, Art.3. Accessible on https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf. Last Visit July 2024.

⁷² M.N. Shaw, *International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 1293; Constitutive Act of the African Union, 2000, Art.4. Accessible on https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf. Last Visit July 2024.

⁷³ Regional Security, Revised Treaty of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), 1993, Art.58. Accessible on <https://ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Revised-treaty-1.pdf>. Last Visit July 2024.

peaceful means have failed. The Organ has jurisdiction to resolve any significant inter-state conflict or any significant intra-state conflict.⁷⁴

5.1.2. European Union (EU)

In 1944, After World War II, the most important industrialized countries of the world ratified the agreement called the Bretton Woods System of Monetary Management to rule the commercial relations among its members. In 1957-1958, Europeans also formed the European Economic Community. Thus, the origin of the European Union goes back to the establishment of the European Economic Community, which was formed in 1957 with the Treaty of Rome; whose its purpose was to establish economic cooperation and resolve former enmities and reconciliation between European countries. Following the cancellation of the Bretton Woods Agreement, the exchange rates of the countries fluctuated relative to each other, therefore, in 1979, Europeans in order to regulate their monetary system, created the European Monetary System (EMS). In 1987, European countries in order to improve Europe's economy and eliminate border restrictions and facilitate the transfer of goods and human resources, approved the Single European Act (SEA).

Eventually, in 1992-1993, the Maastricht Treaty known as the Treaty on European Union,⁷⁵ amended the Treaty of Rome and established the current legal framework of the European Union, founded on the European Communities supplemented by the policies and forms of co-operation established under the 1992 Treaty. Since then, the EU has grown in size with the association of new members. The European Union (EU) is an Economic-Political Union that currently has 27 members.⁷⁶

The European Union (EU), by its establishment, for the first time novated and inducted the concept of the European citizen, which itself by encouraging and persuading people to identify as part of the broader European region rather than just as citizens of individual countries or states, is the gateway to promote peace and stability in the region, enhance intergovernmental cooperation between member states in financial and economic affairs, and create a common foreign and security policy as well as cooperation in judicial and internal affairs. The European Union (EU), since the beginning of its integration proces, has developed an advanced arrangement for cooperation amongst its members in a wide array of policy areas. The EU's emergence in global politics is a principally important issue. This political figure has achieved success in the diplomatic, security, and defense dimensions of foreign policy, international relations, economics and trade. EU is the largest international trade actor in the world and the global leader in development assistance.⁷⁷ The European Union (EU) has become the primary actor in international affairs and external relations, particularly in security and defense matters. Although its member states still have their own development assistance policies, there is also a parallel existence of EU policies in this area. This success has been possible due to a well-established set of institutions, a range of

⁷⁴ M.N. Shaw, *International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 1029-1030.

⁷⁵ Treaty on European Union (Maastricht) signed in February 1992, Art. 1/A, Title I. Accessible on <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:11997M/TXT&from=PL>. Last Visit July 2024.

⁷⁶ M.N. Shaw, *International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 369-372.

⁷⁷ World Trade Organisation database, Accessibl on www.wto.org. Last Visit April 2024.

Also Visit The EU International Partnership, Accessible on https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/news/european-union-remains-worlds-leading-donor-official-development-assistance_en. Last Visit April 2024.

resources, and a degree of strategic thinking. The EU's role, effectiveness, and impact are not only a reflection of internal developments, ambitions, and conflicts in internal capacity and capability, but fundamentally also a reflection of changes in external events, in the global power configuration, and the foreign policy behavior of the Great Powers in the international system. Developments in security and defence, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) innovation as well as the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the annual review of defence capabilities are all manifestations of such developments.⁷⁸

“Returning to the notion of foreign policy actorness as co-constituted by internal and external pre-conditions, the Lisbon Treaty has brought new institutional pre-conditions for EU foreign policy and not least the institutionalization of the office of the high representative, and the establishment and operation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) have enhanced the relevance of the EU in global affairs.”⁷⁹ The Lisbon Treaty that is the most authoritative of the current legal basis of the EU, having entered into force in 2009, declares:

“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. ... The Union’s aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples.”⁸⁰

In addition, “the European Court of Justice noted in the *Internationale Handelsgesellschaft* case that ‘respect for fundamental rights forms an integral part of the general principles of law protected by the Court of Justice’; the Court emphasized that measures incompatible with fundamental rights recognized and protected by the constitutions of member states could not be upheld. The European Convention on Human Rights is clearly the prime example of this and it has been referred to on several occasions by the Court.”⁸¹

The Statute of the Council of Europe in Article. 3 defines as a condition for membership:

“Every member of the Council of Europe must accept the principles of the rule of law and of the enjoyment by all persons within its jurisdiction of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and collaborate sincerely and effectively in the realisation of the aim of the Council.”⁸²

The ratification of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), which is usually called as the European Convention on Human Rights, is now considered a condition for membership of the Council of Europe.⁸³ “The European Parliament is also active in consideration of human rights issues.”⁸⁴

⁷⁸ R. Bengtsson, B. McKercher, *The Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Routledge, 2nd Edition, 2022, 235-236, 243.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 242.

⁸⁰ Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2012, Art.2-3. Accessible on <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/collection/eu-law/treaties/treaties-force.html>. Last Visit April 2024.

⁸¹ M.N. Shaw, *International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 369.

⁸² Statute of the Council of Europe, Art.3.

⁸³ O. De Schutter, *International Human Rights Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 21.

⁸⁴ M.N. Shaw, *International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 372.

That is obvious that the European Union has also prioritized the respect for democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law at the top of its agenda in the internal level. On the other hand, in an international aspect, the Lisbon Treaty declares in Article 21:

“The Union shall seek to develop relations and build partnerships with third countries, and international, regional or global organisations which share the principles referred to in the first sub-paragraph. It shall promote multilateral solutions to common problems, in particular in the framework of the United Nations.”⁸⁵

What can be concluded from this article is that the EU has an external agenda to promote its values in an international level, and the values referred are not unique only for the EU, or for Europe, but generally embraced in the Western zone of peace. The European Union (EU) is a multi-level polity that involves various levels of decision-making processes on two levels of the polity simultaneously, in the capitals of member-states and EU headquarters in Brussels, comprise a complex process of coordination, in internal and external events, and at times contestation. To improve the strategic element of the EU foreign policy and address issues such as passivity, division, and weakness in key developments in international relations, the EU has developed two security strategies: the European Security Strategy (ESS) in 2003, and the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016, to guide and enhance future behavior.⁸⁶ As rightly mentioned in the EU Shared Vision:

“We need a stronger Europe. This is what our citizens deserve, this is what the wider world expects. We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned. To the east, the European security order has been violated, while terrorism and violence plague North Africa and the Middle East, as well as Europe itself.”⁸⁷

The ESS had an outward-oriented and transnational strategy to address key threats and security challenges to the EU, such as terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, organized crime, regional conflicts, and state failures; The ESS aimed to establish the EU as a values-based global security actor within a liberal, American-led global order. However, the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) from 2016 displays a fundamentally different strategic perspective on the world and the EU's role in international relations.⁸⁸ Thus, the European Commission (under the presidency of Ursula von der Leyen, 2019–2024) presents itself as “This is the Geopolitical

⁸⁵ Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2012, Art.21. Accessible on <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/collection/eu-law/treaties/treaties-force.html>. Last Visit April 2024.

⁸⁶ R. Bengtsson, B. McKercher, *The Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Routledge, 2nd Edition, 2022, 237, 241-242.

⁸⁷ Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy, 2016, 13.

⁸⁸ R. Bengtsson, B. McKercher, *The Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Routledge, 2nd Edition, 2022, 242.

Commission”.⁸⁹ In addition, the statement by the high representative, Josep Borrell, emphasized that “we (the EU) must relearn the language of power and conceive of Europe as a top-tier geostrategic actor.”⁹⁰

5.1.3. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is another of the thriving, active, and successful regional unions that has achieved success in expanding its effective cooperation and activities with other countries around the world regarding economic relations, socio-cultural exchange, and scientific and technological advancements. The ASEAN is the successor of an earlier organization known as the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), which was formed in 1961. ASEAN is a Union of 10 countries located in Southeast Asia, which strives for the economic and political development of its member states, and regional stability. This union was formed by signing the Bangkok Declaration on August 8, 1967, by Thailand, Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia,⁹¹ and then the countries of Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Myanmar and Laos (1997), and Cambodia (1999) also joined it. In addition to political and economic growth, ASEAN emphasizes social progress, socio-cultural relations between member countries, and developing strategies to solve regional issues. At present, ASEAN member states cooperate in the fields of industry, trade, joint ventures, finance and banking, agriculture, energy, technology, joint research, education and training, social development, tourism, cultural affairs, transport, and communication.⁹²

ASEAN pursues purposes that can be briefly mentioned as follows:⁹³

1. To accelerate the growth and development of the region through the joint participation and integration of member states;
2. To ensure the ‘Peace, Security, and Stability’ in the region;
3. To expand the political, security, economic, socio-cultural, trading, commercial, financial, banking, industrial, agricultural, educational, scientific and technological, and research cooperations;
4. To enhance the ‘Social Welfare’, and ‘Well-being’ and ‘Alleviate Poverty’;
5. To strengthen ‘Democracy’ and the ‘Rule of Law’, promote and protect ‘Human Rights’, and ‘Fundamental Freedoms’;⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Speech by President-elect of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary Session, November. 27, 2019, 7.

⁹⁰ J. Borrell, “Embracing Europe’s Power”, *Project Syndicate*, February, 2020, 8.

⁹¹ A. Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, Routledge, 2009, 47-48.

⁹² A. Tak Rusta, *International Financial and Economic Monetary Organizations* [سازمان‌های پولی، مالی و اقتصادی]، تهران، University of Economic Sciences, 2014, 131-139. [Persian]

⁹³ M. Ebrahiminejad, *International Financial and Monetary Organizations* [المللی‌های مالی و پولی بین‌سازمان]، Tehran, SAMT Publicity, 2016, 249. [Persian]

⁹⁴ The ASEAN Charter, 2008, Art.1, 3-5. Accessible on <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>. Last Visit May 2024.

Some economic agreements have also been signed in 1992 to develop trade and commercial relations among states, such as the Framework Agreement on Enhancing ASEAN Economic Cooperation, and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). AFTA was signed between ASEAN Member States in Singapore to reduce trade and customs tariffs.⁹⁵ It appears that the free trade zone among the ASEAN member countries is becoming increasingly fortified and supported with each passing day based on available evidence.

The highest authority in ASEAN responsible for policy-making is the Summit, which consists of the Heads of State or Government;⁹⁶ And the ASEAN Coordinating Council also plays a vital role, which is made up of Foreign Ministers;⁹⁷ Additionally, a range of ASEAN Community Councils⁹⁸, Sectorial Ministerial Bodies,⁹⁹ a Secretary-General and Secretariat,¹⁰⁰ and a Committee of Permanent Representatives¹⁰¹ have been also established. The ASEAN Human Rights Body¹⁰² is considered under conditions to be determined; And the Decision-making as a principle must be done by Consultation and Consensus.¹⁰³ ASEAN members emphasized in their security document that the democratic elections that are taking place in several ASEAN member states are a sign of the regional movement toward democracy. ASEAN member states in the Security Community Plan of Action, to create a peaceful region free of foreign military intervention, accepted to adhere to the following fundamental principles: ‘Non-alignment’; adopting ‘peace-oriented attitudes’ towards each other, using ‘non-violent means’ to resolve conflicts, ‘Renunciation of nuclear weapons’ and other means of mass destruction, ‘Renunciation of the threat or the use of force’.¹⁰⁴

Since a long time ago, futurists have emphasized that in the process of global developments, after the international conditions marked the 19th century as the century of Europe and the 20th century as the century of America, the 21st century will be the century of Asia.

“In the 19th century, the world was Europeanized. In the 20th century, it was Americanized. Now, in the 21st century, the world is being irreversibly Asianized.”¹⁰⁵

Although ASEAN has taken the right path in this direction to some extent during the early years of the century, there is no doubt that the realization of the Asian century requires the participation of all the countries of this continent, especially the West Asian countries that have huge reserves of oil and gas necessary for the economic growth and progress required for the realization of the Asian century. If ASEAN so far has correctly considered the economic power of Japan, the huge and growing economy of China, the potential power of India, and the actual role of Russia in the realization of the Asian century, then to complete this process, it should also consider the huge amount of oil and gas reserves of the Middle Eastern countries, particularly Iran, and to provide

⁹⁵ M.N. Shaw, *International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 1294.

⁹⁶ The ASEAN Charter, 2008, Art.7. Accessible on <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>. Last Visit May 2024.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, Art.8.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, Art.9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, Art.10.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, Art.11.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, Art.12.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, Art.14.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, Art.20.

¹⁰⁴ ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action, II. Shaping and Sharing of Norms, 3. Accessible on <https://arc-agreement.asean.org/file/doc/2015/02/asean-security-community-plan-of-action.pdf>. Last Visit May 2024.

¹⁰⁵ P. Khanna, *The Future is Asian*, Simon & Schuster, 2019.

the basis for the presence of more continental countries, especially the Middle Eastern countries, in the future meetings.¹⁰⁶

5.1.4. Organisation of American States (OAS)

The Organization of American States (OAS) is actually the oldest Regional Organization in the world. The International Union of American Republics was established in 1890; then became the Pan-American Union in 1910, and eventually, the Organisation of American States (OAS) was formed in its present shape in 1948, upon adopting the OAS Charter in Bogotá, Colombia, by 21 States.¹⁰⁷

The Organisation of American States (OAS) is another regional union that emerged in 1948, after the Second World War, and currently consists of 35 (almost all sovereign states of the Americas) independent American states that aim to promote and strengthen peace and justice, solidarity, collaboration, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence; The Organization of American States (OAS) has prioritized various mandates to combat transnational crime, including drugs, corruption, terrorism; as well as generating regional norms on security, stability, peaceful dispute resolution, democracy, arms control, sustainable development, and the environmental protection; At the same time, economic, military, and cultural cooperation among its member states. The 1948 Pact of Bogota, also known as the American Treaty of Pacific Settlement, outlines detailed procedures for resolving disputes, including good offices, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, and judicial settlement by the International Court of Justice; However in practice, the OAS used the Inter-American Peace Committee for peaceful dispute resolution, which was created in 1940.¹⁰⁸ “The OAS is a collective security system, an attack on one being deemed an attack on all.”¹⁰⁹ As it is also mentioned in Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance Article 3(1) that:¹¹⁰

“The High Contracting Parties agree that an armed attack by any State against an American State shall be considered as an attack against all the American States and, consequently, each one of the said Contracting Parties undertakes to assist in meeting the attack in the exercise of the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations.”¹¹¹

The Charter of the OAS defines in Article 23:

¹⁰⁶ A. Sabbaghian, “Research on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) [تحقیق درباره آشنایی با اتحادیه (ان آسه) کشورهای جنوب شرقی آسیا]”. Accessible on <https://filect.ir/%d8%aa%d8%ad%d9%82%db%8c%d9%82-%d8%af%d8%b1%d8%a8%d8%a7%d8%b1%d9%87-%d8%a2%d8%b4%d9%86%d8%a7%d9%8a%d9%8a-%d8%a8%d8%a7->. Last Visit May 2024. [Persian]

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Mission to the Organization of American States, Accessible on <https://usoas.usmission.gov/our-relationship/about-oas/#:~:text=Established%3A%20April%2014%2C%201890%2C,OAS%20Charter%20in%20Bogot%C3%A1%2C%20Colombia>. Last Visit May 2024.

¹⁰⁸ M.N. Shaw, *International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 1030-1031.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 1292.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 1137.

¹¹¹ Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Treaty), 1947, Art.3(1). Accessible on <https://www.oas.org/sap/peacefund/VirtualLibrary/KeyPeaceInstruments/TIARRioTreaty/TIAR-RioTreaty.pdf>. Last Visit May 2025.

“A special treaty will establish adequate procedures for the pacific settlement of disputes and will determine the appropriate means for their application, so that no dispute between American States shall fail of definitive settlement within a reasonable period.”¹¹²

The decision-making process of the Organization of American States (OAS) is based on a traditional definition of sovereignty, wherein all member states have equal rights, and are treated as equals, using the one country/one vote system.¹¹³ The OAS has adopted a Human Rights Convention,¹¹⁴ which is the most developed regional organization outside Europe.¹¹⁵ The Inter-American Convention on Human Rights was adopted in 1969 and came into force in 1978; it outlines a range of rights that are to be protected by the states parties. These rights are fundamentally similar to those protected by the European Convention but with some interesting differences; and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has jurisdiction over all member states of the OAS, including those that have not ratified the Convention. The Commission has a wide-ranging competence to publicize human rights matters by way of reports, studies, lectures, recommendations, advisory services to states on the measures in favor of human rights and so forth. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights also supports the commission and the implementation of laws on human rights.¹¹⁶ “Considering the object of the Convention to integrate the regional and universal systems of human rights protection, the Court also possesses an advisory jurisdiction regarding the interpretation of the Inter-American Convention and other treaties or conventions concerning the protection of human rights in the American states at the request of any member states of the OAS”.¹¹⁷

“In addition, nearly every country in the region (of OAS) experienced meaningful economic growth between 1990 and 2010. For example, Brazil’s GDP grew by more than 40 per cent and it moved from eleventh to seventh place in the world’s ranking.¹¹⁸ ... The OAS also joined the Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA) created in 1960”.¹¹⁹

5.1.5. Union of South American Nations (USAN) (UNASUR)

¹¹² The Charter of the Organisation of American States, No.1609, 1948, Art.23. Accessible on <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20119/volume-119-I-1609-English.pdf>. Last Visit May 2025.

¹¹³ M. Herz, “Does the Organisation of American States Matter?”, *Institute of International Relations PUC-Rio*, 2008, 6.

¹¹⁴ AMERICAN CONVENTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS, 1969. Accessible on <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/mandate/Basics/3.AMERICAN%20CONVENTION.pdf>. Last Visit May 2024.

¹¹⁵ M.N. Shaw, *International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 1292.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 381-383.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 388; American Convention on Human Rights, 1969, Art.64. Accessible on <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/mandate/Basics/3.AMERICAN%20CONVENTION.pdf>. Last Visit May 2024.

¹¹⁸ Ph. Brenner, J. Shim, B. McKercher, *The Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Routledge, 2nd Edition, 2022, 189.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 200.

The Union of South American Nations (USAN) (UNASUR in Spanish) is the successor of the South American Community of Nations and one of the last regional unions whose Constitutive Treaty was signed in 2008, and expresses its ‘Objectives’ as follows in Article 2:

“The objective of the South American Union of Nations is to set up, in a participatory, agreed manner, a space for integration and union among its peoples in the cultural, social, economic and political fields, prioritising political dialogue, social policies, education, energy, infrastructure, financing and the environment, among others, with a view to eliminating socio-economic inequality, in order to achieve social inclusion and citizen participation, strengthen democracy and reduce asymmetries within the framework of bolstering the sovereignty and independence of the States.”¹²⁰

Continues its ‘Specific Objectives’ in Article 3. briefly as follows:

“The strengthening of political dialogue among Member States to reinforce South American integration and UNASUR’s participation in the international arena; Social and human development with equity and inclusion to eradicate poverty and illiteracy in the region; Energy integration for the sustainable use of the region’s resources; development of infrastructure for the interconnection of the region, social and economic development; Financial integration among Member States; protection of biodiversity, water resources and ecosystems, preventing catastrophes and causes of climate change; consolidation of a South American identity, recognition of rights to nationals of a Member State resident in any other Member State, establishing a South American citizenship; Universal access to social security and health services; Cooperation on issues of migration, unrestricted respect for human and labor rights, migratory regularisation, and the harmonization of policies; Economic and commercial cooperation, promotion of the well-being of all the population; Industrial and productive integration; scientific and technological development; promotion of cultural diversity; Citizen participation; Coordination among specialized bodies of the Member States, taking into account international norms to strengthen the fight against terrorism, corruption, global drug, human, and weapons trafficking, transnational organised crime and other threats, as well as for disarmament, the non-proliferation of nuclear and mass destruction weapons, and demining; cooperation among the judicial authorities of the Member States; exchange of information and experiences in matters of defense; strengthening the citizen security; and Sectoral cooperation.”¹²¹

5.2. Achievements of Union Formation

Regional Unions are a type of International Organization whose membership extends beyond the internal boundaries of a national State and requires the member states to abide by the Union's Constitution, Charter, Treaty, Convention, Pact, or other legal documents.¹²² These boundaries are often defined with specific and unique borders and demarcations, within a particular geopolitical area, such as continents. They are established to promote multilateral cooperation, political and

¹²⁰ South American Union of Nations Constitutive Treaty, 2008, Art.2. Accessible on <https://mppre.gob.ve/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/UNASUR-Constitutive-Treaty.pdf>. Last Visit May 2024.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, Art.3.

¹²² T.A. Börzel, T. Risse, *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford University Press, 2016, 6-11, 16-33.

economic integration, and dialogue among governments or institutions within a specific geographic or geopolitical area. These boundaries reflect common patterns of development and history that have emerged from wars and the inherent fragmentation associated with globalization.¹²³

The world today is characterized as *A World of Regions*.¹²⁴ Since the end of World War II, if not the end of the Cold War, regionalism has risen globally in several waves.¹²⁵ Wars, power shifts, economic globalization, developments, regional security, and the spread of new ideas about regional and political order have led to the emergence and growth of transnational and supranational spaces, as well as a demand for new forms of governance beyond the nation-state.¹²⁶ In other words, the creation of a Union is an attempt to qualify independence, keep the polities in close political union, and maintain special ties, as embodied by the constitutional frameworks of the Commonwealth.¹²⁷ The established post-liberal or post-hegemonic regionalism and the institutional arrangements aim to use diplomacy and statecraft to reject hegemonic impositions and reform the system from within.¹²⁸ Due to these elements, the number of Regional Organizations (Ros), including Regional Unions is proliferating; insofar as there is now hardly a state in the world that is not a member of at least one regional organization.

As we have witnessed in all the mentioned Unions, the move towards Political Union requires certain unavoidable and necessary pillars and consequences, including a common Foreign and Security Policy, Peacebuilding and Peacekeeping, an integrated Economic and Monetary Union, radical changes to the existing situation regarding Citizenship and Democracy, Social and Cultural integration among citizens, respect the essential and Fundamental Freedoms, Human Rights, democratic legitimacy, and so on. Essentially, these fundamental pillars, Rights and Obligations of a Union are derived from the Union's progressive Constitution, Charter, Convention, or any other legal documents of the Union.¹²⁹

The establishment of regional unions has produced notable accomplishments across different parts of the world, demonstrating the potential advantages of integration. These achievements has been and will be referenced, throughout this dissertation to acknowledge as a testament to the potential

¹²³ K. Spandler, *Regional Organizations in International Society: ASEAN, the EU and the Politics of Normative Arguing*, Palgrave Macmillan, Springer International Publishing, 2018.

¹²⁴ P.J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium*, Cornell Studies in Political Economy, Cornell University Press, 2005.

¹²⁵ E.D. Mansfield, H.V Milner, "The New Wave of Regionalism", *International Organization*, Vol.53, No.3, 589–627, 1999.

¹²⁶ D.A. Lake, P.M. Morgan, *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, Penn State Press, 1997, 3-19; J.U. Wunderlich, *Regionalism, Globalization and International Order: Europe and Southeast Asia*, Routledge, 2007, 45-47.

¹²⁷ K. Spandler, *Regional Organizations in International Society: Decolonization, Regionalization and Enlargement in Europe and Southeast Asia*, PhD Dissertation, University of Tübingen, 2016, 120.

¹²⁸ B.J.C. McKercher, *The Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Routledge, 2022, 317.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 157.

benefits that such collaborations can yield. For instance, the European Union (EU) stands as the most advanced model, achieving the creation of a single market, a common currency for many of its members, and the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital. Beyond economics, it has also been instrumental in transforming Europe from a war-torn continent into a space of peace, stability, and shared prosperity. Regional unions in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, while less institutionalized, have nevertheless promoted cooperation in trade, infrastructure development, and conflict resolution, gradually fostering an environment of dialogue rather than confrontation.¹³⁰

In addition, unions have helped member states amplify their voices in global governance. By pooling sovereignty and forming collective bargaining platforms, smaller and medium-sized states gain leverage in international negotiations that they could not achieve independently. Regional unions also strengthen internal resilience against external shocks, whether economic crises, security threats, or environmental challenges, by promoting joint responses and shared strategies. These achievements show that union formation is not only about institutionalizing cooperation but also about empowering regions to shape their own destinies in a multipolar world.

In the context of a Regional Union (in any form such as an Association or Organization), member states initiate dialogue and maintain open channels of communication and negotiation to resolve issues or disputes and seek trusted intermediaries when required. Member States consider the fears and concerns of rival parties and neighboring countries and try to build and foster trust by pursuing strategies to alleviate these apprehensions. Member States are encouraged to enhance the frameworks of regional security and strengthen partnerships with the United Nations (UN) and regional organizations to facilitate effective collaboration and the resolution of regional issues. When the priorities, values, and interests of regional actors are seriously integrated, States may contribute to influencing political or security stability in their neighborhood.¹³¹

The potential achievements of Union formation in the Middle East, including the promotion of peace and stability through conflict resolution, the enhancement of living standards and welfare in line with broader economic development, and the advancement of human rights and democracy, will be examined in detail in the following chapter.

6. Conclusion: Toward Comprehending the Middle East's Foundations and Integration Potential

The chapter has provided a foundational overview of the Middle East, exploring its conceptual definition, geographic boundaries, historical evolution, demographic features, and the intellectual hypothesis of forming a regional union. The term "Middle East" itself reflects externally imposed geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic categorizations, yet, it denotes a region of immense and profound traditional, cultural, linguistic, religious, and strategic significance. The region's geography reveals its central role in global trade, energy flows, and strategic security routes; at the same time its complex history, characterized by colonial legacies, nationalist movements, world

¹³⁰ T.A. Börzel, T. Risse, *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford University Press, 2016, 16-33, 64-80; W. Mattli, *The Logic of Regional Integration: Europe and Beyond*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 19-188.

¹³¹ F. Söderbaum, *Rethinking Regionalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 1-130.

wars, and ongoing conflicts, continues to shape its contemporary international relations and political dynamics.

Moreover, by introducing the hypothesis of the Formation of a Middle East Union, this chapter situates the idea within a comparative framework, analyzing analogous and examining other regional integration efforts such as the African Union (AU), European Union (EU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Organization of American States (OAS), and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). These semi-patterns offer valuable insights into the potential trajectories, institutional architectures and frameworks, and enabling conditions required for successful regional union formation.

Overall, this chapter lays the foundational groundwork for the dissertation's core inquiry into the feasibility, necessity, and implications of forming a Middle East Union. By providing the conceptual definitions, geographical and geopolitical context, historical depth, and comparative regional models, it establishes the analytical lenses through which the region's integration prospects in the Middle East will be further assessed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER II

NECESSITY OF THE MIDDLE EAST UNION FORMATION

This Chapter discusses the importance, necessity, and impacts of forming a Middle East Union, highlighting several key areas of focus such as the Settlement of Wars and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, Economic Growth, Development, and collaboration, some required internal reforms including Peace, Security, Stability, Democracy, Human Rights within the Middle Eastern States, and finally the benefits of the Middle East Union for Europe and its contributions on the global community.

1. Settlement of Wars in the Region

The Middle East continues to be one of the most unstable regions in the world; unlike many other developing areas, regional conflicts, particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict, have not yet ended, even nearly two decades after the conclusion of the Cold War! Against this backdrop, there is a need for a comprehensive and inclusive mechanism for dialogue, conflict resolution, and a regional collective security mechanism. The urgency of establishing a Middle East Union capable of fostering internal cooperation, limiting foreign interference, and promoting lasting peace and stability is also evident.

Historically, it is frequently observed in the Formation of Regional Unions that they are often formed in the wake of wars, to suppress and prevent conflicts and aggressions, and prevent possible future wars. It seems that the Formation of Regional Unions is inherently linked to wars and is somehow tied to wartime experiences. In recent decades, Peace and Security have become top priorities for the international community, and as is truly mentioned, “Regional Stability is Key to Global Peace and Security”.¹³² Therefore, forming regional-global security partnerships has become a crucial aspect of peace and security policy-making. Furthermore, the decision to regionalize is a solution that facilitates a platform for collaboration between the United Nations and Regional Unions in situations where the UN Security Council (UNSC) determines a ‘threat to international peace, security, and stability in the region’. In addition, the guiding principle of the modern Westphalian state system, which is officially enshrined in the charter of the United Nations (UN) as well as the founding documents of various regional organizations (ROs) such as ASEAN, OAU (AU), the OAS, and the Arab League, itself serves as a means to prevent potential conflicts or battles. This foundational principle maintains that every member state of the UN, regardless of its size, possesses an equal claim to rights, freedom, and the obligations to exercise sovereignty.¹³³

¹³² United Nations General Assembly, *Regional Stability Is Key to Global Peace and Security: Foreign Ministers Tell General Assembly*, United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Release GA/9115, 3 October, 1996. Accessible on

<https://press.un.org/en/1996/19961003.ga9115.html>. Last Visit October 2025.

¹³³ Charter of the United Nations (UN), Chapter I, Art. 2(1), “The Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members.”, 1945.

The following sections examine the impact of regional unions on the settlement of wars and conflicts, as well as their contribution to the establishment of peace and stability in various parts of the world.

1.1. African Union (AU)

The rise of regionalism is most evident in wars and conflicts in Africa.¹³⁴ For instance, after the end of the Cold War, concerns about the escalation of sustained violent conflicts in Africa have increased. In 1990, in the declaration of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the heads of Member States realized that the prevalence of conflicts in Africa was seriously impeding their collective and individual efforts to improve the continent's economic crises. Therefore, they resolved to cooperate toward the peaceful and rapid resolution of conflicts; Thus, in 1993, the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution (MCPMR) was established “to anticipate and prevent situations of potential conflict from developing into full-blown wars; to undertake peace-making and peace-building efforts if full-blown conflicts should arise; and to carry out peace-making and peace-building activities in post-conflict situations”.¹³⁵ Subsequently, in the Constitutive Act of the African Union, Peace and Security became the primary issue on the AU agenda and since the Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU) allowed the intervention in the internal affairs of member states in cases of ‘unconstitutional changes of governments’, genocide, and conflicts that threaten regional stability,¹³⁶ the African Union (AU) with the decision of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) and the cooperation of African Union Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has so far intervened in the regional conflicts in places like Burundi, Darfur (Sudan), Comoros, Chad, Mauritania, Somalia, Liberia, Mali, Kenya, and the Central African Republic with varying degrees of success, otherwise, the conflicts in these countries would have been continuing today.¹³⁷ The shift from prioritizing state sovereignty to prioritizing the duty to protect populations and the right to intervene in shaping Africa's security management agenda, under Article 4(h) of the Act, is not just a commitment to promoting peace and security but also demonstrates Africa's determination to prevent a recurrence of the tragedy experienced in Rwanda.¹³⁸ The Protocol of Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) recognizes that the PSC must operate by the

¹³⁴ L. Gelot, *Legitimacy, Peace Operations and Global-Regional Security: The African Union–United Nations Partnership in Darfur*, London, Routledge, 2012, 2.

¹³⁵ Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, 2002, Art.4, Art.7, Art.9. Accessible on <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/psc-protocol-en.pdf>. Last Visit June 2024.

¹³⁶ H. Jeffrey, M. Greg, *The Future of Africa: A New Order in Sight?*, Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2003, 21; Constitutive Act of the African Union, 2000, Art.4 (h, j, p). Accessible on https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf. Last Visit July 2024.

¹³⁷ A. Oluwadare, “The African Union and the Conflict in Mali: Extra-regional Influence and the Limitations of a Regional Actor”, *African Journal of Governance and Development*, Vol.3, No.1, 2014, 5-7.

¹³⁸ A. Sarjoh Bah, E. Choge-Nyangoro, S. Dersso, B. Mofya, T. Murithi, *The African Peace and Security Architecture: A Handbook*, Addis Ababa Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Office and The African Union, 2014, 16.

UN's principles and framework for international as well as regional Peace and Security;¹³⁹ Even to the extent that some of the AU peace operations have been integrated into multi-dimensional UN peace missions. In recent years, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with the cooperation of the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community Organisation of West African States (ECOWAS), has carried out challenging peace operations on the continent. For instance, the hybrid collaboration and operations of the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN) in conflict management at the African regional level to maintain peace and protect civilians in Darfur (Sudan) extend beyond the prevailing framework of regional-global security partnerships. The AU–UN collaboration on peace and security during African conflicts, such as the Darfur war, is significant, especially in the context of evolving regional and global relations.¹⁴⁰

1.2. European Union (EU)

A similar situation prevailed in the formation of the European Union (EU); Europe endured two devastating and bloody wars in a relatively short span of time. In particular, World War II was a full-scale global conflict that involved nearly all countries and led to the loss of over 50 million lives worldwide. The aftermath of World War II left Europe in a very chaotic status. Ultimately, between 1945 and 1957, following the end of two world wars, European leaders acknowledged that the best way to prevent future wars and conflicts was to cooperate; in other words, cooperation is better than engaging in War. This realization led to the formation of the European Union, aimed at putting an end to the frequent wars that had culminated in World War II. Accordingly, the idea of the formation of the European Union (EU) dates back to the end of the wars. In 1946, following World War II, Winston Churchill, in his speech at the University of Zurich, emphasized the necessity of establishing transnational institutions and legislation in Europe, stated:

“It is to recreate the European fabric, or as much of it as we can, and to provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, safety and freedom. We must build a kind of United States of Europe. ... why should there not be a European group which could give a sense of enlarged patriotism and common citizenship to the distracted peoples of this mighty continent? ... Therefore I say to you «Let Europe arise!»”¹⁴¹

In the 20th century, after the First and Second World Wars, and especially in the 90s after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and subsequently the collapse of the division of Europe into East and West as well as the dissolution of the communist bloc, there were significant changes and transformations across the continent. After World War II and the subsequent events, along with the disasters and experiences of European countries during the wars, several European States (six countries of Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) had a strong desire to cooperate in order to prevent the occurrence of future wars. In this regard, in 1952, they established the “European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)” as a

¹³⁹ Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, 2002.

¹⁴⁰ L. Gelot, *Legitimacy, Peace Operations and Global-Regional Security: The African Union–United Nations Partnership in Darfur*, London, Routledge, 2012.

¹⁴¹ Winston Churchill, Speech Delivered at the University of Zurich, 19 September 1946. Accessible on <https://rm.coe.int/16806981f3>. Last Visit July 2024.

single common market to facilitate cooperation in the production of coal and steel, which were crucial raw materials for the military industry, in order to prevent any single country from building up its military capabilities and equipping its Arsenal independently. This initiative marked the first step towards the creation of the European Union (EU). Eventually, the European single market cooperation developed over time and included environment, agriculture, transportation, etc.; and ultimately led to the formation of the European Union (EU) in 1993. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), Europe has been considered the most peaceful region in the world in terms of armed conflict since the end of the Cold War.¹⁴²

1.3. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Likewise, the primary aim of establishing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Union was to diminish existing tensions among Member States and subsequently bolster and develop the region's economy. The founding document of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), known as the Bangkok Declaration, emphasized the importance of promoting “economic growth” while encouraging “lasting peace, security and stability”, and protecting the countries of the region against external “interference”.¹⁴³

During the 1960s, the security and stability in Southeast Asia were notably bleak. Between 1963 and 1966, the Confrontation (Konfrontasi) occurred between Indonesia and the newly independent Federation of Malaysia (and Singapore); as well as the North Borneo dispute (known as the Sabah dispute) between the Philippines and Malaysia, and Singapore-Indonesia conflicts, played a significant role in efforts to establish more cooperative relations among the Southeast Asian countries. The idea of forming the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was proposed during intra-regional negotiations leading to the resolution of the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation. The formation of ASEAN was the result of the interest and desire of the five original member states (Thailand, Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia) to create a mechanism for preventing future wars and managing conflicts. In 1976, the need for the pacific settlement of conflicts and disputes made ASEAN’s founders sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which established an official dispute-settlement mechanism called the High Council consisting of ministerial-level representatives from each member state. The Council is obligated “to prevent disputes” and “to take cognizance of the existence of disputes and situations likely to disturb regional peace and harmony” and “in the event, no solution is reached through direct negotiations”, “to recommend to the parties in dispute appropriate means (measures) of settlement such as good offices, mediation, inquiry or conciliation.”¹⁴⁴

On the other side, since the polarization of the Cold War in Southeast Asia resulted from efforts by the revolutionary communist governments in Southeast Asian states, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) also impacted the strategic perspectives in the region. The ASEAN has also restricted the use of force and alleviated the sense of vulnerability experienced by its smallest

¹⁴² Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), Accessible on <https://ucdp.uu.se/exploratory>. Last Visit May 2024.

¹⁴³ The ASEAN Charter, 2008, Preamble & Art. 1, 1-5. Accessible on <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>. Last Visit May 2024.

¹⁴⁴ Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia, 1976, Chapter IV, Art. 13-17.

members, such as Singapore and Brunei.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, as Singapore's foreign minister, Shunmugam Jayakumar emphasized in 1997: "ASEAN's principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of another country was the key factor as to why no military conflict had broken out between any two member states since 1967."¹⁴⁶ Numerous bilateral security agreements and arrangements have been focused on managing border security issues within the ASEAN; for instance, Malaysia and Thailand Security Cooperation since the 1950s (and a new agreement in 1970), the agreement to control border movement between Indonesia and the Philippines dating back to 1964. These bilateral security cooperation and agreements have expanded in scope since the formation of ASEAN and have served as a fundamental building block of multilateralism.¹⁴⁷

1.4. Organisation of American States (OAS)

Although, the latter half of the twentieth century and especially after the mid-1980s, the OAS region was characterized by both inter-state and intra-state wars; the most significant inter-American wars occurred between the mid-19th century and the 1930s: the Mexican-American War in 1846-1848; the Triple Alliance War in 1864-1870 involving Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay; the War of the Pacific in 1879-1883 involving Chile and a Bolivian-Peruvian alliance; and the Chaco War in 1932-1935 involving Paraguay and Bolivia.¹⁴⁸ The Organisation of American States (OAS) has played a vital role in the peaceful settlement of disputes and conflict prevention since the end of the Cold War; As mentioned in Article 2 of the OAS Charter, the Organisation of American States (OAS) is obligated:

"a) To strengthen the peace and security of the continent;

... c) To prevent possible causes of difficulties and to ensure the pacific settlement of disputes that may arise among the Member States; ..."¹⁴⁹

In addition, Articles 24 to 27 of the Charter provide a more detailed explanation of the peaceful settlement of disputes and the available mechanisms as referred to in Article 2, as follows:¹⁵⁰

"International disputes between Member States shall be submitted to the peaceful procedures set forth in this Charter."¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ A. Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, Routledge, 2009, 48-51.

¹⁴⁶ S. Jayakumar, Singapore's Foreign Minister, Reported in the Straits Times, 25 July 1997; A. Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, Routledge, 2009, 57.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 62.

¹⁴⁸ M. Herz, "Does the Organisation of American States Matter?", *Institute of International Relations PUC-Rio*, 2008, 9-10.

¹⁴⁹ Charter of the Organisation of American States, No.1609, 1948, Art.2.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, Chapter V, Art. 24-27.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, Art.24.

“The following are peaceful procedures: direct negotiation, good offices, mediation, investigation and conciliation, judicial settlement, arbitration, and those which the parties to the dispute may especially agree upon at any time.”¹⁵²

The establishment of the “good neighbor policy” in 1933 allowed disputes between member states to be recognized as a collective problem and incorporated the idea of peaceful settlement of disputes. Also, the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (IATRA), also known as the Rio Treaty (1948), stipulates that “an armed attack on one member state is to be considered as an attack on all” and “provides for a collective security mechanism” and mutual defense provision.¹⁵³ The Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), established in 1942, is also an international committee of defense officials appointed by member states to develop collaborative approaches to defense and security challenges in the Americas. The Rio Treaty provides that the Organ of Consultation, comprising all member states, should meet “in case of aggression against a sovereign state to assist the victim of the aggression or, for the common defense and for the maintenance of the peace and security of the Continent.”¹⁵⁴ Thus, Articles 28 and 29 of the Charter continue to contain measures for Collective Security to safeguard “the inviolability or the integrity of the territory or the sovereignty or political independence of American States.”¹⁵⁵ The Organization of American States (OAS) has made significant strides in mitigating regional tensions and thwarting the escalation of conflicts.¹⁵⁶ The principles of non-intervention, territorial integrity, peaceful dispute resolution, and prevention of war and conflicts were established within the framework of both multilateral and bilateral relationships; As a result, the Organization of American States (OAS) currently operates effectively in the fields of peaceful dispute settlement and conflict prevention. The impact of the mentioned articles has been such that the use of military capabilities in OAS is now extremely rare. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the Americas have been considered the second most peaceful region in the world (after Europe) in terms of armed conflict since the end of the Cold War.¹⁵⁷

1.5. Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)

The creation of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) serves as a prime example of anti-hegemonic and strategic diplomacy, where the South American Defense Council (SADC) acts as a specific mechanism for South American safety and security by dealing with defense cooperation. UNASUR acted decisively and promptly in response to the “political crises” in the region “at certain times”, which prevented the outbreak of war with the peaceful settlement of the dispute; For instance: during the 2008 Bolivian political crisis, when the opponents attempted to

¹⁵² *Ibid*, Art.25.

¹⁵³ Archive for the U.S. Department of States, 2001-2009. Accessible on <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2001/4988.htm>. Last Visit July 2024.

¹⁵⁴ Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Treaty), Art.6. Accessible on <https://www.oas.org/sap/peacefund/VirtualLibrary/KeyPeaceInstruments/TIARRioTreaty/TIAR-RioTreaty.pdf>. Last Visit July 2024.

¹⁵⁵ Charter of the Organization of American States, No.1609, 1948, Chapter VI, Art. 28-29.

¹⁵⁶ C.M. Shaw, *Cooperation, Conflict and Consensus in the Organisation of American States*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 96.

¹⁵⁷ M. Herz, “Does the Organisation of American States Matter?”, *Institute of International Relations PUC-Rio*, 2008, 3-12.

stage a coup d'etat against President Evo Morales; Or the 2009 coup d'état against President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras and also in 2012, in the coup d'état against President Fernando Lugo of Paraguay, UNASUR acted as a “defender of democracy”; In 2010, UNASUR successfully mediated between Colombia and Venezuela, ending the crisis peacefully; Additionally, the same year, in the coup d'etat attempt by opponents in Ecuador, UNASUR called for an emergency meeting of presidents, condemned the attack, and sent foreign ministers of the member states to Quito, effectively settling the crisis.¹⁵⁸

In light of these experiences, it becomes clear that the establishment of regional unions has historically functioned as a mechanism to suppress wars, prevent conflict escalation, and provide platforms for long-term cooperation. The Middle East, with its prolonged instability and unresolved disputes, particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict, stands as one of the regions most in need of such a framework. Although both Israel and Palestine have so far rejected peace initiatives, the precedent of other regions demonstrates that a coherent, well-regulated union could offer an institutional structure to address disputes, regulate cooperation, limit external interference, and ultimately by ending wars transform the region from a zone of perpetual conflict into one of stability, lasting peace, and shared prosperity. Toward this end, regional integration should be regarded not as an abstract aspiration, but as a practical necessity for ensuring peace and security in the Middle East.

2. Economic Reforms

On average, the Middle East is neither predominantly affluent nor impoverished, with varied economic landscapes between both wealth and poverty across its different countries. While certain countries in the region have substantial resources and significant economic growth, others, such as Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Morocco, Mauritania, and Yemen, face very narrow prospects for development due to limited resources and opportunities.

The new regionalism approach involves analyzing the potential costs and benefits associated with regional associations. Such an alliance could settle wars and enhance security and political stability within the region, thereby fostering stronger diplomatic relations and economic cooperation. Regional Unions or regional integration are expected to yield economic benefits. Regional integration is typically seen as a method to promote trade and commerce among Member States, facilitate resource allocation efficiency, and stimulate competition by enhancing the capacity of the internal market. It is anticipated to result in faster economic growth and an increase in higher per capita income.

The relationship between economic growth and development and the factors that influence them is crucial. Acknowledging the fact that improving and promoting the economic situation in a country by creating a solid link between the different economic and political sectors of the states in the region can lay the foundation for increasing regional interactions and cooperation and accelerate the process of economic growth and development. The economic growth and

¹⁵⁸ RT, “¿Por qué la Unasur ha perdido su liderazgo en América Latina? [Why has UNASUR Lost its Leadership in Latin America?]", RT, 20 April, 2018. Accessible on <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/269152-unasur-perdido-liderazo-america-latina/amp>. Last Visit September 2024. [Spanish]

development of both individual states and the region as a whole are interconnected. This means that the overall economic growth of the region impacts the growth of individual states, and vice versa.

The establishment of the Regional Unions, due to the implementation of trading regulations and the facilitation of financial and commercial transactions within and outside the region, has a significant impact on the overall economic development of both the region as a whole as well as its member states. Economic integration in a defined geographic area in various forms, such as Free Trade Areas (Free Trade Agreement [FTA]), Preferential Trade Agreements (PTA), Customs Unions, Common Markets, Single Markets, Monetary Unions, and Economic Unions or Communities within a Political Union, by reducing or eliminating trading barriers and coordinating monetary and fiscal policies, facilitate and increase trade and cross-border investments and improve welfare and living standards.¹⁵⁹

“Africa after the decades 1980s and 1990s, has begun enjoying strong and sustained economic growth. Since the early 21st century, the growth has accelerated among the entire continent, with many countries achieving annual double-digit growth rates. Since 2000, the average growth rate has been around 5%, outpacing other regions. The African Union (AU), through Agenda 2063, aims to engage Member States in developing strategies and policies for “inclusive growth”, job creation, and “reducing inequalities”. The economic growth within and between countries and regions in Africa “remains positive and is expected to reach 4%, compared to the global projection of 3.4%.” Additionally, reducing inequalities within and between countries can lead to “higher growth”, fairer societies, and increased stability.”¹⁶⁰

The European Union (EU) is the oldest and most important economic bloc in the world, which through integration and unity in economic and commercial policies, created significant changes over nearly half a century and became a serious competitor to the economic superpower of the world, United States of America (USA), and serving as a model of success for regional economic blocs. Since its establishment, the European Union (EU) has aimed to reduce regional disparities, expand regional integration, and promote solidarity. The EU's enlargement since 2004 exemplifies the positive impact of the Cohesion Policy. Over the past twenty years, the average Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in the Member States has increased from about 52% of the EU average in 2004 to nearly 80% in 2023. Additionally, unemployment rates in these Member States have decreased from an average of 13% to 4% over this period.¹⁶¹

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is considered one of the most enduring and successful Regional Unions in the developing world. ASEAN has consistently prioritized economic relations since its inception, leading to a growing integration of its economies in various market-driven aspects. Since its establishment in 1976, ASEAN has made significant strides

¹⁵⁹ W. Kenton, G. Scott, V. Velasquez, “Economic Integration Definition and Real World Example”, Accessible on <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/e/economic-integration.asp>. Last Visit September 2024.

¹⁶⁰ *Report on the Dynamics of African Economies: Theme of the first edition: Growth, Inequality and Employment*, Accessible on https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32816-file-concept_note-report_on_the_dynamics_of_african_economies.pdf; African Development Bank Group, *Africa's Economic Outlook 2024: Driving Africa's Transformation: The Reform of the Global Financial Architecture*, African Development Bank Group. Accessible on https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/2024/06/06/aeo_2024_-_chapter_1.pdf. Last Visit September 2024.

¹⁶¹ J. Durán Laguna, *Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, XV.

towards economic cooperation and integration, with an initial emphasis on trading. ASEAN embraces “Open Regionalism”, which may potentially evolve into an EU-style economic integration with a common external trade regime.¹⁶² These regional examples of the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), and ASEAN demonstrate that forming a union leads to economic growth and advancement, and this approach can be also applied in the Middle East.

Another major problem in the Middle Eastern economy that requires serious reform is the Rentier State structure and dependence on oil rents. Economies in the region, instead of focusing on production and innovation, rely heavily on oil and gas revenues. This dependence leads to the “Dutch Disease”, weakening non-oil sectors, and creates political systems that rely on rent rather than taxation, which undermines democracy and accountability. It also fosters corruption and unequal wealth distribution, as governments use oil revenues as a tool to distribute rents among specific groups. To the extent that “major driver of the revolts in the region is the unequal redistribution of the oil rent and benefits among the population. ... a small or unequal redistribution of oil revenues is one of the main drivers of social instability, threatening the political power in place.”¹⁶³

Necessary economic reforms include economic diversification through the development of non-oil industries, advanced agriculture, tourism, and technology; reforming the tax system to reduce dependence on rents and enhance state accountability; investing in human capital through education and skill development; strengthening the private sector and entrepreneurship; ensuring transparency in managing oil revenues via sovereign wealth funds and clear spending rules; and promoting regional cooperation to create a common market for non-oil trade and harmonize energy policies. All of which may occur under a union framework within integration and a true cooperative approach.

3. Internal Reforms within the Member States

The “Arab Spring”, a series of widespread protests that began in 2010, originated in Tunisia and subsequently spread across several countries in the Middle East, including Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Sudan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, additional protests in Iran, notably the “Green Movement” or “Green Wave” following the 2009 elections and the 2022 uprising promoting the slogan “Women, Life, Freedom”, highlight the region's call for reform. These movements or uprisings collectively advocate for the establishment of democracy, the enhancement of human rights, economic freedom, employment opportunities, regime change, and the implementation of fair electoral processes. Such aspirations reflect the urgent demand for reform within the region.

Reforms and upgrades of the multilateral rules-based orders, as outlined in the Union Constitution and other legal documents, are inevitable and essential, with a key focus on peace, security,

¹⁶² H. Hill, J. Menon, “ASEAN Economic Integration: Features, Fulfillments, Failures and the Future”, ADB Working Paper Series on Regional Economic Integration, *ASEAN Development Bank (ADB)*, 2010, 1.

¹⁶³ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 67-68.

stability, citizens' welfare, human rights, sustainable development, democracy, and access to the global commons. Membership in a Union significantly strengthens member states by fostering confidence in their reform momentum across various areas and facilitating learning from their more advanced and developed neighbors.

3.1. Peace, Security, and Stability

The current state of international relations necessitates a commitment to Peace, Security, and Stability more than ever. The pursuit of peace, efforts to avoid war, and the reduction of violence can be traced back to the aftermath of World War I with the gradual establishment of a new international system and the drafting of the Covenant of the League of Nations, which underscored the importance and necessity of ensuring international peace and security based on principles of justice and finally lead to the establishment of the League of Nations in 1920.¹⁶⁴ The aforementioned Covenant begins as follows:

“The High Contracting Parties; In order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security; ... by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war; ... understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments; ... by the maintenance of justice and ...”¹⁶⁵

In response to the profound impact of the two world wars and the resultant devastation and violence, the global community sought to prioritize the pursuit of universal peace and security within the legal framework and guarantee the enforcement of international law. These objectives were elevated to the forefront of the newly established United Nations (UN) charter in 1945, signifying a pivotal commitment to the promotion of international peace and security. Even though numerous wars and prolonged conflicts have taken place at various levels after the formation of the United Nations, particularly on regional and internal fronts due to power struggles and competition, we should not underestimate the UN's role and position in reducing conflicts.¹⁶⁶ When the founders of the United Nations (UN) were discussing arrangements for maintaining international peace and security in the post-World-War period, they saw an important role for regional bodies in solving regional conflicts. Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations explicitly encourages UN Member States to “make every effort to achieve pacific settlement of local disputes through such regional arrangements or by such regional agencies before referring them to the Security Council”.¹⁶⁷ Also, in the general debate in the General Assembly in October

¹⁶⁴ S.A. Nabavi, *Prospects of Peace in the Middle East: Emerging Crises and Old Politics* [انداز صلح در خاورمیانه چشیم], Karaj, Forough Sepehr, 2023, Introduction. [Persian]

¹⁶⁵ Covenant of the League of Nations, Part I of the Treaty of Versailles, signed on 28 June, 1919.

¹⁶⁶ S.A. Nabavi, *Prospects of Peace in the Middle East: Emerging Crises and Old Politics* [انداز صلح در خاورمیانه چشیم], Karaj, Forough Sepehr, 2023, Introduction. [Persian]

¹⁶⁷ Charter of the United Nations, 1945, Chapter VIII, Art.52.2; *The Current Situation of Regional Security Co-operation and its Future, from European Viewpoint*, Speech at the Ninth Meeting of the International Security Forum, Tokyo, II., 1996.

1996, several speakers emphasized “Regional Stability as a key to international Peace and Security”.¹⁶⁸ The Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Pavol Hamzik, stated:

“The European continent had been the theatre of two world wars, and therefore it was of utmost importance to pay great attention to the issues of peace and security in Europe”.¹⁶⁹

The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nigeria, Tom Ikimi said:

“No region in the world was more afflicted by conflicts than Africa. The individual and collective efforts of African States at achieving socio-political transformation had been threatened by these conflicts. The unique role being played by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Central Mechanism of Conflict Prevention and Management was important and should be supported by the international community.”¹⁷⁰

“Following the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict and the protracted Russia-Ukraine war, during the Security Council meeting on October 20, 2023, the United Nations and regional and subregional organizations delegates emphasized further strengthening their cooperation and promotion among Member States full use of the diplomatic tools and mechanisms outlined in the UN Charter to peacefully resolve conflicts, and foremost prevent them. The Assistant Secretary-General for the Middle East, Khaled Khiari cited:”¹⁷¹

“today, the stakes for preventive diplomacy and dialogue could not be higher, warning that absent a negotiated two-State solution for Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the vicious cycle of violence risks plunging the entire region into conflict for years and generations to come. ... The ensuing loss of trust and the risks of escalation affect almost all regions, ... Diplomacy must be the driving force for a more effective collective security system, and that demands a commitment to the pacific settlement disputes as set forth in Chapter VI of the UN Charter. ... Regional organizations and frameworks have a critical role in resolving armed conflict, noting that they can, among other things, bring credibility and legitimacy for preventive diplomacy, increase trust and reduce misperceptions, as well as enhance mechanisms for crisis management, ... highlighting that regional actions have successfully prevented conflicts and escalation throughout recent history.”¹⁷²

3.2. Democracy

Despite the progress of democratization in many regions of the world, Middle Eastern governments still resist transforming their political systems. The fact that the Middle East is lagging behind other developing regions of the world has been emphasized by many experts and theorists, who consider it due to the lack of democratization and the continuation of authoritarian

¹⁶⁸ “Regional Stability is Key to Global Peace and Security, Foreign Ministers Tell General Assembly”, General Assembly, 1a-Press Release GA/9115 21st Meeting (PM) 3 October, 1996.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, Pavol Hamzik, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, Tom Ikimi, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nigeria.

¹⁷¹ United Nations Security Council, *As Geopolitical Tensions Escalate, United Nations, Regional Organizations Must Strengthen Cooperation, Preventive Diplomacy, Speakers Tell Security Council*, UN Meetings Coverage and Press Release SC/14548, 9448th Meeting, October 20, 2023. Accessible on <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc14548.doc.htm>. Last Visit October 2024.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, Mohamed Khaled Khiari, Assistant Secretary-General for the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific.

governments in this region and characterize the Middle East as a part of the third world. For instance, Saudi Arabia may be a first-world player economically, and its citizens enjoy a high gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, but its conservative, anti-democratic, and authoritarian government structure still condemns this country to third-world status in the general and global perception.¹⁷³ The Middle East is distinguished from other regions by several features that have caused an unfavorable environment for legal pluralism and democracy. In the context of the gradual democratization observed in Latin America and Southern Europe, as well as the experimental democratization efforts in South Korea and Taiwan, the Middle East has lagged behind. Additionally, the significant popular pressure for enhanced democracy in numerous African countries, along with the overthrow of regimes in Eastern Europe, has further exacerbated the unfavorable conditions in the Middle East.¹⁷⁴

Homa Katouzian, an Iranian scholar, examines how the petroleum and oil revenues grant significant power to the governments in many Middle Eastern states. With ample funding and finance for their political projects, these governments are less reliant and dependent on taxpayers, private companies, or various parties, which is allowing them to dominate the economies and consequently politics. The oil influence results in private entities needing government approval to profit, giving the state predominant status, control over the main national economic sources, and the ability to impose its interests at the expense of citizens' rights. As a consequence, oil-exporting governments often impose their values and interests, disregarding public demands for political, civil, and human rights that may threaten the government's authoritarianism, fostering authoritarian regimes that prioritize their control over democratic values. Persian Gulf states exemplify this Autocratic dynamic, such as in the monarchies, where substantial oil revenues undermine civil society and limit citizens' ability to demand respect for their rights.¹⁷⁵ Oil revenues in the Middle East lead to strong governments and weak civil societies, which depend on the government's wealth distribution, limiting their ability to demand rights, including democracy and human rights, which lack strong backing due to the government's economic dominance.

“The Arab Spring started as a new generation’s uprising for liberal democracy. ... In practice, the Arab Spring has exhibited rather than overcome the internal contradictions of the ArabIslamic world and of the policies designed to resolve them.”¹⁷⁶ It seems that the relative emergence of democracy and the process of democratization within the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) can be traced back to the early 20th century, and between the years of 1950 to 1979, this phenomenon spread across the Middle Eastern nations such as Egypt, Morocco, Israel, Lebanon, and Türkiye.¹⁷⁷ Thus, the growing process of democratization has compelled even the few autocratic regimes in the region to try to present themselves as democratic governments. Numerous factors and elements, encompassing Economic, Social, Political, and External dimensions, play a significant role in influencing the progression and sustainability of democratization processes in the Middle East. Economic factors such as economic growth, stages of development or stagnation, instability, employment rates, levels of poverty, etc; Social factors

¹⁷³ B. Milton-Edwards, *Contemporary Politics in the Middle East*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, 69-70.

¹⁷⁴ J. Waterbury, “Democracy Without Democrats?: The Potential for Political Liberalization in the Middle East,” *I. B. Tauris Publishers*, 1994, 25.

¹⁷⁵ H. Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism, 1926-1979*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1981.

¹⁷⁶ H. Kissinger, *World Order*, Penguin Press, 2014, 71.

¹⁷⁷ Ch. Tilly, *Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 42-44.

include aspects of social equality or inequality, the presence of conflicting identities, the degree of unity or pluralism within society, the existence and treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, the influence of dependent elites, feelings of powerlessness to make changes, societal acclimatization to domination, the overall strength or weakness of society and civil organizations, the orientation of government and the populace towards secularism, beliefs, religion, and religious attitudes, etc; Political factors involve the prevailing political culture, the presence of a powerful and interventionist military, the characteristics of resource-dependent or rentier states, environmental challenges, water and energy resources, distribution of natural resources, wealth, geographical location, etc; Lastly, external factors, particularly foreign interference, and the capacity of international institutions and processes to promote and support democratic governance and likewise.¹⁷⁸ This comprehensive framework enables a nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay among these various elements in the process of democratization and formation of democratic governance.

“Of late, many voices have been heard in the Arab lands, and more openly in the Arab Diaspora, speaking of freedom, and more specifically, of liberal democracy.”¹⁷⁹ In a research conducted by *Arab Barometer* in 2018, it was concluded that “Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), eight-in-ten Arabs believe that democracy is the best system of government, even though it may have problems. However, Arab views on the flaws of democracies are mixed: One third believe that democracy is ineffective in maintaining stability; four-in-ten think that democracy is indecisive; almost every other person says that the people of their country are not ready for democracy.”¹⁸⁰

Given that over 90% of the population in the Middle East identifies as Muslim, it is essential to take Islamic religious beliefs into account when engaging in discussions regarding both democracy and human rights. And some scholars like Bernard Lewis contend that Islam and democracy are inherently incompatible in their functional frameworks.¹⁸¹ Although democratization is considered a threat to the existing political systems in Middle Eastern countries, the majority of them cannot accept, manage, and reform democratization, or do not even believe in it, nonetheless, a genuine democratization is the only solution proposed by a large number of theorists, which the formation of a Union may facilitate.

3.3. Human Rights

From an analytical perspective, key internal and external factors, such as Islam, the oil industry, Islamic-Western relations, Israel, and overarching cultural, civilizational, or religious

¹⁷⁸ M. Shariati, H. Salimi, “Future Trends of Democracy in the Middle East by 2025 and its Effect on the National Interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran [روندهای آینده دموکراسی در خاورمیانه تا ۲۰۲۵ و تأثیر آن بر منافع ملی جمهوری اسلامی ایران]”, *Strategic Policy Research Quarterly*, Vol.55, No.25, 2018, 48.

¹⁷⁹ B. Lewis, “Rethinking the Middle East”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.71, No.4, 99-119, 1992.

¹⁸⁰ N. Rahman, “Democracy in the Middle East and North Africa: Five Years after the Arab Uprisings”, *Arab Barometer*, Wave IV, *Princeton University*, 2018, 2.

¹⁸¹ M. Samiei, *Neo-Orientalism? A Critical Appraisal of Changing Western Perspective: Bernard Lewis, Jom Esposito and Gilles Kepel*, PhD Dissertation, University of Westminster, 2009, 88-90; B. Lewis, “Islam and Liberal Democracy, a Historical Overview”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.7, No.2, 52-63, 1996; B. Lewis, *Faith and Power: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 2010, 131-152.

infrastructure, play a significant role in shaping the context of human rights in the Middle East. “The human rights situation in the Middle East (ME) is a significant focus of contemporary Western political and academic discussions, frequently characterized as a ‘black zone’ or ‘hell of human rights’. There is extensive literature, both scholarly and journalistic perspectives, that critiques the ME for its poor record on human rights standards. Such treatment is not only far from giving a chance for human rights betterment in the Middle East, but it also risks worsening the situation.” Furthermore, “Human rights [violation] constitute a main aspect of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East. The scale of human rights and humanitarian law violations in this conflict is massive, widespread and long lasting. ... The Israeli violations and violent reactions have created an environment that helps legitimize various kinds of human rights violations. ... [Israeli] operations are responsible for violating human rights on a considerable scale in a number of regional conflicts, including Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. These operations also provide justifications for occupying forces to target civilian neighbourhoods, ... the broad range of human rights violations in the Palestinian territories has made this question a high priority for anyone attempting to improve the human rights situation in the Middle East. ... This position can be simplified as follows; if human rights, then Palestine! Israel might represent the largest challenge that now faces a normal, learning and fruitful relationship between the West and the ME. ... Israel, is a main force for human rights violations in the ME.”¹⁸²

Human rights in the Middle East are heavily constrained by the tension between state security and individual liberties. Governments in the region, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Israel, have frequently used national security as justification for widespread repression, ranging from restrictions on dissent to the imposition of emergency laws that suspend basic rights. Reports from Amnesty International and other organizations document extensive violations, including torture, arbitrary detention, and collective punishment, especially in conflict zones such as Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories. Israeli policies during the occupation and its military interventions, alongside the conduct of Arab governments, reveal how both state and non-state actors contribute to systemic human rights abuses. A recurring problem is the legal loophole that allows states to derogate from international human rights obligations under claims of national emergency, often prolonged for decades, undermining the universality of rights. Although international advocacy and monitoring bodies like Amnesty International play an important role in exposing abuses, the overall picture painted by these reports is one of entrenched violations, with only limited prospects for reform at the time.¹⁸³

In this regard, the establishment of a Union could serve as a transformative framework for improving the region’s human rights situation by adopting binding legal standards and institutional mechanisms similar to those of other regional patterns. The Union could ensure greater accountability, promote harmonization of rights protections, and provide regional oversight where national systems fall short. In addition to resolving wars and conflicts, strengthening legal guarantees within such a framework would directly address the primary sources of human rights violations in the Middle East. In this way, the Middle East Union would elevate human rights

¹⁸² S.H. Borhani, “The Regional Context of Human Rights in the Middle East”, Department of Middle East Studies, World Studies Faculty, University of Tehran, *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, Vol.2, No.1, 127-159, January 2018, 128-133, 150-154.

¹⁸³ L.A. Malone, “Review Article: Human Rights in the Middle East”, *The Middle East Journal*, Vol.38, No.4, 733-738, Autumn 1984.

standards and freedoms as shared regional values but also embed them into a sustainable regional order.

4. Advantages of the Middle East Union Formation for Europe

Europe's relationship with the Middle East is one of the oldest intercontinental relations with deep historical roots that have continued since the Roman Empire in interactions with the Sasanian Empire, later with the Ottoman Empire, ultimately followed by the periods of Western colonialism in the Middle East. Europe, due to having the closest borders to the Middle East, and various interests, including economic, political, security, and strategic concerns, is closely linked to this region. Its geographic proximity heightens sensitivity to the incidents, events, and developments occurring within the Middle East. Consequently, the Middle East is a region of significant importance to Europe, which cannot afford to remain indifferent to its challenges.

The formation of the Middle East Union presents significant advantages for Europe. Such an association, by resolving conflicts and wars and enhancing security and political stability within the region, could also facilitate stronger diplomatic relations and economic cooperation. A cooperative framework would foster a collaborative approach to cultural exchange and deepen understanding between Europeans and Middle Eastern nations, and lead to managing shared challenges, such as security threats and resource scarcity. The proposed Middle East Union could unveil new avenues for trade and investment, thereby fostering economic growth for both regions, where the ties between the Middle East and Europe grow stronger. Heightened collaboration in sectors such as technology, energy transactions, and infrastructure development could generate mutual benefits and align common interests, ultimately driving innovation. Overall, the formation of a Middle East Union holds the potential to bolster Europe's geopolitical and economic interests, contributing to a more stable and prosperous future for all involved parties.

4.1. Addressing Europe's Immigration and Asylum Crisis

The immigration and asylum pressures have been growing in Europe from the 1980s onward. As conflicts, political instability, and economic hardship intensified in regions such as the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa, increasing numbers of people sought refuge in European countries. The migration of individuals from the Middle Eastern countries to Europe is primarily driven by reasons, including the pursuit of safety and stability amidst conflicts and wars, the threat of death, human rights violations, and the desire for freedom, democracy, enhanced financial conditions, welfare, and living standards.¹⁸⁴

The mass displacements, particularly following wars and other regional conflicts, destabilized neighboring countries and generated ripple effects on Europe, where asylum systems faced mounting pressure. The growing migration and number of asylum seekers also fueled public anxiety and raised the far-right political movements across Europe. These movements intensified European concerns over border control and contributed to restrictive asylum policies. This influx greatly strained the European asylum systems, especially in countries like Germany. European

¹⁸⁴ S. Castles, m.J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, London: MacMillan Press LTD, 2nd Edition, 1998, 213-252.

authorities began to frame migration not just as a social issue but as a matter of national security. In response, European governments introduced stricter immigration controls, limited asylum rights, and reinforced their external borders, especially through agreements like Schengen and the Dublin Convention. In addition, parties such as France's National Front gained traction by promoting anti-immigration rhetoric, while in the United Kingdom (UK), similar sentiments were echoed by other far-right groups. Acts of xenophobic violence became more frequent, particularly in post-reunification Germany. These efforts created the impression of a "Fortress Europe"¹⁸⁵ that prioritized border control over humanitarian responsibilities. Overall, the European immigration and asylum crisis has been marked by growing politicization, policy restrictions, and social tensions surrounding the integration of migrant populations.¹⁸⁶

To effectively address the ongoing immigration and asylum crisis in Europe, the Formation of a Middle East Union (MEU) could play a significant transformative role. The MEU would serve as a platform for addressing the root causes of forced migration and irregular flows to Europe. Such a Union by fostering regional cooperation and collective approaches through joint efforts aimed at conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and stabilization of volatile areas, could significantly reduce the number of individuals compelled to flee their countries in search of safety.

In addition to security measures, the MEU could promote sustainable economic development, by encouraging investment, infrastructure development, and regional trade. Such initiatives would create jobs, alleviate poverty, and provide citizens with viable opportunities at home, thus reducing the economic push factors that drive migration. Internal reforms focusing on human rights, democratic governance, and public welfare within the region, would further diminish the need for people to seek refuge abroad. These initiatives have the potential to provide Europe with collaborative strategies and viable solutions to manage the challenges posed by the influx of migrants seeking refuge for better livelihoods. By improving living standards and protecting individual freedoms, the MEU could address many of the socio-political grievances that fuel migration to Europe.

Furthermore, enhanced cooperation among the Middle Eastern nations and reinforcing the partnership between the Middle East Union (MEU) and the European Union (EU), could lead to the establishment of a comprehensive migration partnership, and Europe could gain considerably from a more systematic approach to controlling migratory flows and establishing collaborative frameworks for shared borders management. This collaboration could include shared border management, joint asylum processing mechanisms, and co-development projects that target the sources of displacement. Through structured dialogue and mutual support, Europe and the Middle East could devise coordinated migration policies that balance humanitarian obligations with security and economic interests. Such a partnership would not only ease the burden on European asylum systems but also contribute to regional stability and peace. In essence, the creation of a Middle East Union offers a proactive and strategic solution, enabling Europe to shift from reactive crisis management to long-term collaborative frameworks that benefit both regions.

4.2. Mitigating Terrorism Threats in Europe

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 100, 249, 298.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 254-282.

In 2024, 58 terrorist incidents were recorded across 14 EU Member States. Although this number shows a decline compared to 2023, terrorism remains a significant and evolving security threat to Europe, driven by diverse ideological motives and external geopolitical factors. Out of the 58 incidents, 24 were carried out by jihadist terrorist groups inspired by or connected to Middle Eastern extremist networks such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda, and the remaining attacks were linked to other ideological actors. Some of these, particularly those motivated by right-wing extremism, were acts of aggression against the influx of migration into Europe. Ongoing conflicts, particularly Israel's brutal military campaign in Gaza and Russia's war in Ukraine, are key factors fueling extremist narratives across ideological lines.

Middle Eastern terrorist organizations also maintain logistical and financial ties with their European-based affiliated cells. Funds for groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and ISIS are funneled from Europe to conflict zones in Syria and Türkiye through complex networks using cryptocurrencies and informal systems like hawala. Or, Kurdish PKK operations in Europe continue to raise millions annually through both legal and illicit means, supporting armed activities in the Middle East. In addition, Youth radicalization is a growing concern, with minors increasingly targeted by online propaganda and recruitment networks. Technology plays a critical role in this evolution, with extremists exploiting generative AI for disinformation, encrypted channels for communication, and cryptocurrencies for financing.

Europe's terrorism threats are diversifying, with jihadist groups retaining lethality while other forms of radicalism and extremism expand their presence. Events in the region, particularly the Gaza conflict and the collapse of the Bashar Assad regime in Syria, significantly fueled radicalization in Europe and were exploited in jihadist propaganda to incite violence.¹⁸⁷

There is a strong link between terrorism in Europe and challenges in the Middle East. As detailed in the Europol Report, terrorism in Europe is largely influenced by networks ideologically or operationally connected to Middle Eastern groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, as well as by radicalization fueled by conflicts like the war in Gaza. The region remains the primary and most lethal driver of radicalization, propaganda, and terrorist activities within the EU, responsible for inspiring attacks, financing networks, and providing operational guidance.

The current tensions, instability, and lack of unity within the Middle East, due to its proximity to the region, reverberate directly into Europe's security landscape. In this regard, a unified Middle East could contribute to reducing ongoing terrorism in Europe by addressing the root causes and operational links between Middle Eastern conflicts and extremist activities on European soil. Such unity could strengthen regional governance, settle wars, stabilize conflict zones, and diminish conditions such as state fragility, sectarian divisions, and proxy wars that terrorist organizations exploit for recruitment and propaganda. Furthermore, by implementing comprehensive social and economic reforms, the union could reduce the socioeconomic grievances that terrorists often manipulate to radicalize young people. Such measures would also curb the flow of extremist propaganda into Europe, where online radicalization remains a major threat.

Moreover, by coordinating common counter-terrorism policies, sharing intelligence, and harmonizing security strategies across member states, the Middle East Union (MEU) would disrupt

¹⁸⁷ Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2025 (TE-SAT 2025)*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/new-report-major-developments-and-trends-terrorism-in-europe-in-2024>. Last Visit July 2025.

the cross-border movements of fighters, weapons, and illicit financing that feed extremist networks operating in Europe. Additionally, it would enhance early detection of plots and prevent attacks not only within the Middle East but also in Europe and other neighboring regions often targeted by Middle Eastern-based groups.

As Europol also emphasizes, enhanced intelligence-sharing, stronger online monitoring, and broader international cooperation are essential to counter these evolving terrorist threats. Such cooperation must extend beyond the EU to include global and regional solutions, reinforcing the argument that a stable and unified Middle East is crucial to reducing the spillover of terrorism into Europe. This stability would allow the Middle East Union (MEU) to emerge as a reliable partner for the EU in combating terrorism through joint operations, improved intelligence exchange, and stricter control over transnational funding channels. Overall, this deep cooperation would not only lower the risk of terrorist attacks in Europe but also strengthen the global security architecture.

Ultimately, the potential Middle East Union could significantly contribute to control of the risks associated with terrorist threats. Enhanced regional cooperation might facilitate the exchange of intelligence, improve security protocols, and strengthen joint initiatives aimed at counter-terrorism, thus enhancing the overall safety of European nations. Moreover, coordinated strategies to counter terrorism, extremism, and cross-border criminal activities would enhance regional security, contributing to the stability of Europe's neighboring environment.

4.3. Facilitating Europe's Energy Transition

The Middle Eastern countries are traditional suppliers of oil and gas to Europe. The energy transition from Middle East to Europe shows contrasting dynamics. “Enhanced and more focused cooperation between the European Union (EU) and member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has become a priority for the EU, especially with a view to jointly addressing a series of global and regional challenges. Building on strong ties established over decades of a close trading and investment relationship, the EU is now seeking to put relations on a more secure footing, with new impetus and a much broader scope. ... These include Increasing trade and investment, fighting climate change, ensuring energy security and a smooth green transition, safeguarding global health, meeting growing global development and humanitarian needs and promoting peace and stability, including the de-escalation of tensions, in the broader region. ... On 23 November 2022, Parliament adopted a resolution on promoting regional stability and security in the broader Middle East region, in which it welcomed the joint communication for putting inter-regional relations between the EU and the Gulf on a new footing.”¹⁸⁸

In addition, the Middle East and North Africa region possesses significant potential for renewable energy, particularly solar and hydrogen, and has demonstrated growing political commitment to advancing clean energy initiatives. However, its energy transition remains hampered by a strong dependence on fossil fuels legacy and existing infrastructure limitations. While the region benefits from high energy equity, supported by low energy prices and widespread electricity access, persistent fossil fuel subsidies and limited capacity for deploying clean technologies slow the pace

¹⁸⁸ M. Damen, “Joint Communication on the Partnership with the Gulf: In “A Stronger Europe in the World”, *European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)*, April 2023. Accessible on <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-stronger-europe-in-the-world/file-partnership-with-the-gulf>. Last Visit August 2025.

of progress. In addition, underinvestment in the oil sector poses a critical challenge, as it risks undermining the region's ability to sustain future production levels and meet rising global demand. Overall, both regions (Europe and the Middle East) need to invest in modernizing grids, expanding renewable capacity, and strengthening cooperation to achieve a resilient and balanced energy transition. It will be crucial for Middle Eastern oil and gas producers to ensure a diversified export portfolio, enabling them to adapt to the evolving geopolitical landscape of the energy transition while safeguarding and expanding the demand for their energy exports.¹⁸⁹

As Europe expands its green hydrogen ambitions under RePowerEU, the Middle East, leveraging abundant solar resources and vast natural gas infrastructure, is positioning itself as a key renewable hydrogen and ammonia supplier to European markets. Starting in 2022, the EU and Egypt cemented a strategic hydrogen partnership at COP27, establishing frameworks for investment, production, and export. Meanwhile, Germany and Saudi Arabia signed a five-year energy cooperation agreement in early 2025 that highlights Saudi hydrogen and ammonia exports as competitive fast-entry routes into Europe via Italy. "These elements highlight an important feature of future energy geopolitics: the increasing dominance of energy demand."¹⁹⁰

"The decision to invest in gas is vital for these countries, mostly reliant on oil revenues, in order to remain at the forefront of the global energy system in the medium-term, gas being a key component of the global energy transition for European and Asian countries alike. Key chokepoints, are located in this region, such as the Hormuz Strait, where 21 million barrels of oil pass through every day, corresponding to nearly one-third of the total sea-traded oil. After passing through the Hormuz Strait, the oil export volumes must pass through other major chokepoints: the Bab el-Mandab and the Suez Canal before reaching Europe, and the Malacca Strait before arriving to Asia."¹⁹¹ Hence, joint decision-making, planning, and investment by Europe and the Middle East in energy transit routes are essential and mutually beneficial. Such collaboration can be realized through a partnership between the two regional unions.

The Middle East region's oil exports are crucial to Europe, however, these energy flows have been frequently threatened by wars, political instability, terrorism, and sanctions. Wars, conflicts, and instability in the Middle East due to the presence of vast oil and energy reserves have posed a significant threat to the interests of the West. Insofar as, the fears of dependence on Middle Eastern oil often drive Western energy policies towards diversification, alternatives, and strategic reserves.¹⁹² Despite diversification efforts, Europe's dependence on Middle Eastern energy sources remains unavoidable and inevitable, making sustained cooperation with the region crucial for ensuring energy security and stability of supply.¹⁹³

The Middle Eastern countries, due to their geographical proximity and established political and energy ties with Europe, offer greater flexibility for oil and gas exports and are better positioned

¹⁸⁹ M. Ashraf, R. Bocca, *Fostering Effective Energy Transition 2025*, World Economic Forum (WEF) Insight Report, June 2025.

¹⁹⁰ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 351.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 65-66.

¹⁹² A. Widuto, "Energy Transition", *European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)*, PE 762.409, September 2024.

¹⁹³ B. Fattouh, "How Secure Are Middle East Oil Supplies?", *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*, Working Paper WPM 33, September 2007, 6.

to meet shifting energy market demand. The establishment of the Middle East Union by promoting peace, stability, and collaboration among member states for economic growth and development presents an opportunity to address the energy transition imperative.

Forming a Middle East Union could significantly enhance Europe's energy transition by creating a more unified, coordinated, and reliable partner in the region's energy landscape. Since Europe reduces its reliance on fossil fuels and accelerates its shift toward renewables, particularly green hydrogen under the RePowerEU initiative, it increasingly depends on stable, forward-looking partnerships with resource-rich regions. The Middle East, which is long established as a key supplier of oil and gas to Europe, is also emerging as a potential leader in renewable energy, especially solar and hydrogen.

However, the region's energy transition remains uneven due to infrastructure limitations, heavy dependence on fossil fuels, and underinvestment in clean technologies. A formal Middle East Union could address these challenges by fostering regional coordination in infrastructure development, clean energy investment, and energy export strategies. It would strengthen collective bargaining power, attract foreign investment, and streamline interregional cooperation with the European Union (EU), especially in hydrogen partnerships like those already initiated between individual European states and countries such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Such cooperations would likely be more effective and sustainable if conducted at the level of regional unions rather than through fragmented bilateral agreements between independent states.

Moreover, such a union could enhance the security and resilience of critical energy transit routes, such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandab, and the Suez Canal, through joint planning and geopolitical stability, thus benefiting both regions. Europe's diversification efforts would be more effective with a stable, cooperative, and energy-aligned Middle East Union that can flexibly meet evolving demand while supporting shared climate goals. Through collaborating on energy resources and sustainable practices, Europe can significantly enhance its energy security and diversify its energy supply, fostering a more resilient economy that aligns with contemporary environmental objectives. Ultimately, this institutional collaboration would help ensure secure, sustainable, and equitable energy flows in a rapidly transforming global energy order.

4.4. EU and Middle East Integration

Owing to their geographic proximity, the mutual interest and necessity of fostering relations and integration between the Middle East and Europe are evident across multiple dimensions, particularly in the spheres of economics and energy. Both regions are bound by shared strategic concerns and interdependencies that make closer cooperation not only desirable but imperative. This interconnectedness underscores the potential for institutionalized and harmonized frameworks of collaboration that could enhance stability, prosperity, and long-term development on both sides.

The EU's interest in integration stems from several interconnected concerns including ensuring stable access to oil and gas, preventing the spillover of conflicts and extremism, and promoting economic modernization and democratization. Unlike the United States, which often emphasizes military solutions, the EU stresses gradual reform through dialogue, institution-building, and partnership frameworks such as the 1995 Barcelona Process, the European Neighborhood Policy

(ENP), and cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These initiatives aim to integrate through deep economic ties, foster political dialogue, and promote security cooperation.¹⁹⁴

In this regard, the European-Middle Eastern integration has primarily developed through EU-led initiatives that aim to connect the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern states with Europe. Europe's approach to Middle Eastern integration has been shaped by successive initiatives aimed at linking the two regions through stability, economic interdependence, and political cooperation. Beginning with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the European Union's most ambitious initiative for integration with the Middle East was the 1995 Barcelona Process, which sought to create peace, security, and stability, foster cultural exchange and political dialogue, trade and economic liberalization, and civil society support, and establish a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area (EMFTA) by 2010. However, the plan largely failed since it created a hub-and-spoke arrangement where individual Middle Eastern countries were more connected to the EU than to one another.

In addition, the EU's support for regional projects like the 2004 Agadir Agreement among Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, framed within the broader Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), linking Arab economies with one another and with Europe, also indicates its willingness to foster regional expansion and policy harmonization. Some Middle Eastern countries, such as Lebanon, Syria, Algeria, and Palestine, have already expressed their interest in joining the Agadir Agreement, while some others, like Libya and Mauritania, are regarded as potential future members. However, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states have left a major gap in regional integration efforts. The initiative is intended not only to encourage deeper integration among Arab states but also to strengthen their collective linkage with EU markets. The EU, acting as a "civilian power," has relied on economic agreements as instruments of foreign policy, seeking to achieve integration and political security through trade and institutional development.¹⁹⁵

The Barcelona Process was followed by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, which expanded cooperation by offering incentives like trade access to southern and eastern Mediterranean states, and aid in exchange for reforms modeled on EU enlargement experiences. The creation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008 represented another ambitious institutional step, designed to institutionalize this cooperation, by promoting joint projects in infrastructure, energy, education, and the environment under shared leadership between the EU and regional partners, yet many projects struggled due to overlapping initiatives, regional political conflicts, particularly the Arab-Israeli dispute, authoritarian resilience, and divergent expectations between Europe and Arab states, and a preference for bilateral rather than regional approaches.¹⁹⁶

Beyond economic interests, Europe's geostrategic priorities in the Middle East include reducing migration flows, curbing extremism by raising living standards, and encouraging governance reforms that enhance regional stability. For the EU's strategy to succeed, however, wider participation by Middle Eastern states is required, coupled with genuine domestic reforms that transcend shallow and superficial integration. Such objectives can best be realized within a

¹⁹⁴ E. Hatipoglu, "The European Union's Role in the Greater Middle East", *University of Malta: European Documentation and Research Center*, 117-130, 2004.

¹⁹⁵ B. Momani, "The EU, the Middle East, and Regional Integration", *WORLD ECONOMICS*, Vol.8, No.1, January-March 2007.

¹⁹⁶ M. Franco, O. Al Ghazali Harb (eds.), *Europe and the Middle East: Perspectives on Major Policy Issues*, Special Supplement, Al Siyassa Al Dawliya, Cairo, 2010.

structured union framework and subsequently through a balanced partnership and bilateralism between the two regional blocs.

While Europe provides a successful model of regional integration through institutionalism and policy alignment, replicating this in the Middle East requires adapting to local conditions, overcoming entrenched rivalries, and building mechanisms of trust and cooperation. The European efforts to anchor the Middle East and North Africa into its broader framework of stability, prosperity, and deeper integration have remained sterile, uneven, and hampered by regional rivalries, external interventions, and limited trust. The EU efforts face significant challenges such as the absence of a unified Middle Eastern Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), limited resources, and divergent national interests among member states. Moreover, Arab expectations of the EU as a counterbalance to U.S. dominance are often unmet, leading to frustration.

Despite these setbacks and barriers, Europe keeps framing the Middle East as a natural partner, seeing integration as essential to shared security, prosperity, and long-term stability. The EU positions itself as a more credible partner by emphasizing that reform must emerge from within Middle Eastern societies, while also insisting that peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essential for sustainable integration.¹⁹⁷ Ultimately, the European Union and Middle Eastern harmonization is possible but contingent upon political will, inclusive institutions, and gradual steps toward regulatory and policy convergence.¹⁹⁸ This objective appears attainable within the framework of a Middle East Union, which would provide a cohesive and coherent platform for negotiations between two regional unions, rather than between the European Union (EU) and individual Middle Eastern states.

5. Worldwide Advantages of the Middle East Union Formation

The formation of a Middle East Union (MEU) holds not only regional but also far-reaching international implications. As a region historically marked by geopolitical tensions, resource abundance, and with significant geo-economic and strategic importance, the Middle East has long exerted considerable influence on global security, energy markets, migration dynamics, environmental cooperation, the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and broader political stability. Therefore, a unified and cooperative Middle Eastern bloc could significantly reshape the international landscape by transforming the region from a source of recurring conflict into a hub of stability, innovation, and sustainable development.

The following explores the major multifaceted contributions that a Middle East Union could offer to the worldwide community, such as the enhancement of the international security system through collective conflict resolution, multilateral diplomacy, coordinated counterterrorism efforts, the acceleration of renewable energy adoption to address the global climate crisis, and broader contributions to global peace, sustainability, and international cooperation.

¹⁹⁷ E. Hatipoglu, "The European Union's Role in the Greater Middle East", *University of Malta: European Documentation and Research Center*, 117-130, 2004.

¹⁹⁸ B. Aras, S. Bicakci, "Europe, Turkey and the Middle East: Is harmonisation possible?", *East European Quarterly*, No.3, 367-381, September 2006.

5.1. Alleviating Global Migration Pressures

The dynamics of the global immigration crisis originating from the Middle East are shaped by a combination of armed conflicts, political instability, authoritarian repression, human rights abuses, and deep socio-economic hardships and inequalities, which collectively generate large-scale population movements, compelling individuals to leave their homelands in pursuit of safety, security, and better opportunities. Many Middle Eastern migrants fled not only to adjacent states like Jordan, Syria, Iran, and Türkiye but also to the West, drawn by safety, economic opportunities, and higher living standards.

The Middle East region stands out as both a major source of refugees, particularly from conflict-affected countries such as Iraq, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Palestinian territories, and as a hub for labor migration within the region, especially to the oil-rich Gulf States like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The region has long been a significant source of refugees and migrant workers. This dual role has created complex migration patterns where the region functions both as a source and a destination for migrants with significant implications. The Middle Eastern migration crisis is thus described as deeply intertwined with global migration trends.¹⁹⁹

This persistent volatility within the Middle East, ranging from regional and international conflicts, wars, human rights violations, and sectarian socio-economic crises, feeds into a continuous cycle of immigration and displacement. This, therefore, shapes migration policies and political discourse not only in nearby regions but also globally, making the Middle East region a focal point in understanding the dynamics of the broader global migration crisis.

Creating a Middle East Union (MEU) could significantly contribute to alleviating the global immigration crisis by addressing its root causes within the region. A unified Middle East would be better positioned to resolve ongoing conflicts, reduce political instability, and coordinate peacebuilding initiatives while implementing internal reforms that strengthen human rights and improve socio-economic conditions, thereby significantly decreasing the forced displacement of populations. By promoting economic integration and development, and by creating job opportunities and improving living standards, the MEU could reduce the economic push factors that drive irregular migration. A harmonized policy on human rights and governance across member states would enhance social stability and reduce the persecution that often compels individuals to flee.

In addition, the MEU's collaboration with global actors, particularly with international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), International Labour Organization (ILO), and the European Union (EU), could establish joint frameworks for managing migration flows, supporting refugees locally, and reducing pressure on global asylum systems. In essence, the MEU has the potential to transform the Middle East from a region often associated with outflows of refugees and irregular migrants into a partner in creating sustainable, cooperative solutions to global migration challenges.

¹⁹⁹ S. Castles, m.J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, London: MacMillan Press LTD, 2nd Edition, 1998, 104-125, 283-298.

5.2. Strengthening Global Security System

One of the major universal concern that Middle Eastern unification may enhance is the global security system. The Middle Eastern institutionalization would provide a unified framework to engage constructively with other regional organizations, such as the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), and ASEAN. Through such engagement, the Union would not only reinforce the global security architecture but also facilitate channels for dialogue, coordinated crisis management, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution, thereby reducing the likelihood of regional disputes escalating into global crises.²⁰⁰

Such region-to-region cooperation could serve as a stabilizing force in international relations, mitigating the risks of proxy wars and limiting the instrumentalization of local conflicts by global powers. Moreover, a cohesive Middle Eastern bloc would strengthen the effectiveness of international norms in areas such as counter-proliferation, disarmament, cybersecurity, and anti-terrorism, ensuring that regional security concerns are integrated into a multilateral and rules-based framework.

Another critical dimension lies in eliminating the financing networks that sustain such crimes and security threats. As outlined in the UNODC report on the linkages between organized crime and terrorism, groups in the Middle East often fund their operations through drug and human trafficking, oil and arms smuggling, kidnapping for ransom, illicit trade in antiquities, and exploitation of natural resources. It refers to case studies, such as the Taliban's involvement in the Afghan opium trade, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)'s antiquities trafficking, and Al-Shabaab's heroin routes, which illustrate how terrorist groups finance their operations through illicit markets. Furthermore, it highlights that in fragile states or conflict zones, these groups may converge, creating hybrid entities that blend political and criminal objectives.²⁰¹ A unified Middle Eastern financial monitoring system, combined with strong anti-money laundering laws and coordinated enforcement, would drastically reduce these revenue streams.

Furthermore, the establishment of such a union could foster a more coordinated global response to critical challenges, including the stabilization of energy markets, the protection of vital trade routes, the promotion of global economic stability, the mitigation of migration pressures, and the advancement of climate policies, all of which would indirectly enhance international security concerns. Overall, the Middle East's regional stability would profoundly influence global security.

Ultimately, by stabilizing one of the world's most strategically significant regions, the Middle East Union would contribute directly to both regional and global security and stability. Instead of fragmented and inconsistent approaches, a collective regional stance would promote greater compliance with international norms simultaneously ensuring that Middle Eastern security

²⁰⁰ B. Lewis, *The Middle East and the West*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964, 11-47, 115-140; United Nations General Assembly, *Regional Stability Is Key to Global Peace and Security: Foreign Ministers Tell General Assembly*, United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Release GA/9115, 3 October, 1996. Accessible on <https://press.un.org/en/1996/19961003.ga9115.html>. Last Visit October 2025.

²⁰¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *University Module Series: Linkages between Organized Crime and Terrorism, Module 16*, Vienna: United Nations, 2019; Financial Action Task Force (FATF), *Comprehensive Update on Terrorist Financing Risk*, Report, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), July 2025. Accessible on <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Methodsand Trends/comprehensive-update-terrorist-financing-risks-2025.html>. Last Visit October 2025.

concerns are addressed within multilateral forums. By reducing the incentive for unilateral or bilateral external intervention in the region, the Union would help establish a more balanced and rules-based international order, reinforcing not only regional but also global sustainable stability, peace, and security.

5.3. Controlling International Terrorism

Since 9/11, 2001, terrorism studies have proliferated rapidly. “In recent decades, the world has witnessed an unprecedented escalation in terrorist acts that have had a devastating impact on peace, security, stability and development. In many cases, terrorist groups have taken advantage of regional conflicts and security vacuums in a number of countries, which has led to the emergence of a fertile environment for the growth of terrorism. Although terrorism is a global phenomenon that does not belong to a specific religion, race, or culture, some extremist groups that claim to represent Islam have distorted its true teachings to justify their terrorist agenda; ... that require joint international intervention to address them. In recent years, complex and unprecedented terrorist challenges and threats have emerged that require a rapid and effective response to enhance coordination and cooperation between states, regional, and international organizations. ... From this standpoint, terrorism represents a global challenge that no country or international organization can confront alone, but rather requires comprehensive international cooperation to eliminate it and dry up its sources.”²⁰²

While numerous research studies, policy reports, and international initiatives have sought solutions to the persistent challenges of terrorism and organized crimes, these efforts often remain fragmented and limited in their impact. Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS), framing terrorism as “evil”, calls for a more nuanced, emancipatory understanding of political violence, a human-centered, and cooperative approach,²⁰³ while UNODC’s Module 16 highlights the need for enhanced international cooperation and policies that address the multifaceted crime-terror nexus, tackling root causes such as weak governance and corruption to effectively counter both organized crime and terrorism.²⁰⁴ However, these measures, though valuable, could never fully succeed without a comprehensive and unified regional strategy.

In this regard, forming a Middle East Union (MEU) could serve as a transformative mechanism to address and control global terrorism by fostering regional and international cooperation, enhancing intelligence-sharing, and stabilizing the political landscape. The Middle East due to its geopolitical significance, historical conflicts, and the emergence of many transnational Islamic extremist groups and terrorist organizations from within the region, occupies a central role in the global fight against terrorism. The current fragmented state policies, rivalries, and weak governance in Wars and conflict-affected areas allow extremist groups to exploit power vacuums. By establishing unified security structures and coordinated counter-terrorism strategies, the MEU would

²⁰² Y.M. Al-Dubaie, “Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Comprehensive Efforts to Combat Terrorism”, *Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition*, Jeddah, 2025, 1-2.

²⁰³ R. Jackson, J. Gunning, M. Smyth, “The Case for a Critical Terrorism Studies”, *American Political Science Association*, 2007.

²⁰⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *University Module Series: Linkages between Organized Crime and Terrorism, Module 16*, Vienna: United Nations, 2019.

significantly reduce the operational space for terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al-Qaeda, and their affiliates.

By ending intra-regional conflicts, such as proxy wars, and fostering a common security identity, the union would neutralize the conditions that allow terrorist groups to regenerate after military defeats. Furthermore, joint military and law enforcement operations under the MEU would ensure that terrorist cells are systematically dismantled, and their funding networks eliminated.

Beyond military measures, the MEU could address the root causes of such radicalization. Many terrorist groups thrive in environments characterized by deprivation, poverty, political repression, and lack of education. A union-wide agenda focusing on economic development, youth employment, and democratic reforms would undermine extremist ideologies by offering alternative pathways to disenfranchised populations. Additionally, promoting inclusive governance and protecting human rights would weaken the propaganda narratives that terrorist groups use to recruit members both locally and abroad.

In addition, a coordinated approach to border security under a union framework would disrupt the illicit flows of arms, fighters, and financing that sustain terrorist groups. Terrorist organizations rely heavily on porous borders to move recruits and smuggle arms and weapons, or trafficking drugs.²⁰⁵ A joint security apparatus, similar to the EU's Schengen Information System but tailored to the region's security realities, would enable member states to monitor cross-border movements and dismantle logistical networks.

Even though there is still no coherent union of Middle Eastern states, there have been several measures committed to controlling terrorism, organized crime, and illegal immigration resuled by them, including the adoption of resolutions and conventions. For instance, “the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Convention on Combating International Terrorism (1999),²⁰⁶ aimed at standardizing legal definitions and improving judicial cooperation, ... (and) to combat terrorism and the extremism that leads to a ground for terrorist groups that have escalated the pace of their operations in recent years, resulting in difficult humanitarian repercussions due to the growing number of refugees and displaced persons.”²⁰⁷ “Under paragraph 18 of the first Article of the Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC),²⁰⁸ which refers to the necessity of cooperation in combating terrorism, the Organization demonstrated its commitment to unifying international efforts to confront the terrorist threats facing the Islamic world and the world as a whole.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Financial Action Task Force (FATF), *Comprehensive Update on Terrorist Financing Risk*, Report, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), July 2025. Accessible on <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Methodsand Trends/comprehensive-update-terrorist-financing-risks-2025.html>. Last Visit October 2025.

²⁰⁶ Convention of the Organisation of The Islamic Conference on Combating International Terrorism, 1999. Accessible on https://www1.oic-oci.org/english/convention/terrorism_convention.htm. Last Visit May 2025.

²⁰⁷ Y.M. Al-Dubaie, “Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Comprehensive Efforts to Combat Terrorism”, *Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition*, Jeddah, 2025, 2-3.

²⁰⁸ Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), *Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation*, 1969, revised 2008, Art.1, para.18. Accessible on https://www.oic-oci.org/upload/documents/charter/en/oic_charter_2018_en.pdf. Last Visit May 2025.

²⁰⁹ Y.M. Al-Dubaie, “Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Comprehensive Efforts to Combat Terrorism”, *Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition*, Jeddah, 2025, 1.

The Middle East, the region most directly affected by and often at the center of global terrorism dynamics, holds the key to breaking this cycle. Only through a strong Middle East Union, which brings together states under a shared framework of security, intelligence, economic development, and political reform, can the underlying factors fueling terrorism be effectively addressed. Such unity would not only strengthen internal stability but also enable the region to act as a cohesive partner in global counter-terrorism efforts. A stable Middle East would reduce the spillover of terrorism into Europe, Africa, and Asia, thereby contributing to the overall control of global terrorism. In this way, the Middle East Union would not only strengthen internal security but also become a vital partner in international counter-terrorism efforts. Therefore, the international community's aspirations for eradicating terrorism and enhancing global security can move from a theory to reality.

5.4. Advancing Energy Sources

“The MENA region is a cornerstone of the current global energy system. Oil has shaped the domestic socioeconomic model, contributing to form the existing ruling elites, and positioning the MENA region at the center of the architecture of energy geopolitics. ... MENA producing countries have historically enjoyed an important geopolitical influence because they supply a large portion of the fossil fuels needed to run the world's economy.”²¹⁰

“Western countries, which constitute the majority of the industrial powers of the world are strongly concerned with Middle Eastern oil and its secure flow towards their industries. This offers ‘the secure flow of oil’, as an overarching interest, a concern that governs their overall policies towards the Middle East. The importance of Middle Eastern oil for their industrial performance encourages them to adopt a realistic policy, in a real - politic sense, and a conservative position about that, keeping a distance with any risks that may threaten their interests in this field. ... The history of oil in the region demonstrates that Western powers have followed a persistent policy to secure their interests in this field, ... The occupation of Iraq by American-led forces is recognized broadly as a war for oil.”²¹¹ “Today, with the ending, at least for the time being, of global strategic confrontation, the most important single element in the Middle East, for the outside world, is oil. Middle Eastern countries, now including the former Soviet republics Transcaucasia and Central Asia, contain the largest oven resources of oil in the whole world, and more are being discovered all the time.”²¹² Therefore, following the energy-related importance of the Middle East, any changes in its political or economic situation in the region can significantly affect the global energy security.

The Middle East is a key supplier of oil for the world, particularly for industrialized countries that rely heavily on it. This dependence has made oil a major concern for Western nations, which constitute the majority of the industrial powers of the world, prompting them to adopt a cautious realpolitik approach to protect their interests and ensure a secure flow of oil from the Middle East toward their industries. The Middle East is significant not only for its abundant fossil fuel

²¹⁰ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 343.

²¹¹ S.H. Borhani, “The Regional Context of Human Rights in the Middle East”, Department of Middle East Studies, World Studies Faculty, University of Tehran, *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, Vol.2, No.1, 2018, 138-140.

²¹² B. Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East*, California, Hoover Institution Press, 2011, 42.

resources, including oil and gas but also for the critical transmission routes that facilitate the distribution of these energies.²¹³

Globally, concerns over Middle Eastern energy security are heightened by vulnerabilities at critical transit chokepoints, most notably the Strait of Hormuz, a passageway through which a substantial portion of the region's oil exports flows to the world. During periods of deepened tensions, particularly in confrontations involving Iran, threats to disrupt or block the strait have periodically surfaced, underscoring its strategic importance to global energy markets. Meanwhile, geopolitical events, such as the Iran-Iraq war and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, have demonstrated that armed conflicts can cause prolonged disruptions and lasting declines in energy production capacity.²¹⁴ The future of global energy security, heavily depends on stable investments, geopolitical stability, and the maintenance of spare production capacity in Middle Eastern states.

6. Conclusion: Toward the Necessity of the Middle East Union Formation

This chapter has demonstrated that the formation of a Middle East Union is not only a regional imperative but also a strategic necessity with far-reaching implications. By addressing persistent conflicts, promoting internal reforms, and fostering peace, security, and democratic governance, the Union could stabilize member states and mitigate the structural causes of regional instability. Economically, it offers opportunities for coordinated reforms, resource optimization, and enhanced resilience, while providing Europe and the global community with tangible benefits, including reduced migration pressures, strengthened security, and reliable energy cooperation.

Toward the realization of this vision, the Middle East Union emerges as a mechanism capable of transforming geopolitical challenges into cooperative solutions, balancing regional interests with global responsibilities, and establishing a framework for sustainable development, security, and integration across the Middle East and beyond.

²¹³ International Energy Agency (IEA), *Global Energy Review 2025*. Accessible on <https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/909b7120-1cbd-439a-a9da-e971a4419977/GlobalEnergyReview2025.pdf>. Last Visit October 2025.

²¹⁴ B. Fattouh, "How Secure Are Middle East Oil Supplies?", *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*, Working Paper WPM 33, September 2007, 9-16.

CHAPTER III

CAPABILITIES AND STRENGTHS OF THE MIDDLE EAST UNION FORMATION

This chapter explores the abilities, capabilities, and strengths of the Middle East for forming a Union by examining shared characteristics, similarities, and commonalities such as unifying Religion, mutual understanding, Language, shared heritage and customs, similar governance systems, interconnected economies with abundant natural wealth and resources such as oil, gas, and trade, Islamic legal principles, and by highlighting strategic importance of key nations in the region, the role and contribution of Persian Gulf and Gulf States, and major regional players with significant influence such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Türkiye, and Egypt, and emphasizing their potential to form a cohesive and influential Middle East Union.

1. Commonalities:

A successful regional union requires not only shared interests but also a foundation of common identity, values, and structures that can foster cohesion and long-term cooperation. The Middle East, despite its diversity, possesses a wide range of intrinsic commonalities that can serve as the intellectual, socio-cultural, and institutional bedrock for the formation of a Middle East Union. These commonalities encompass deeply rooted similarities in religion, language, culture and traditions, family structures, legal norms, shared historical narratives legacies, heritage values, common development challenges, political systems, and economic frameworks, many of which transcend national borders and have gradually shaped regional interaction.

Ideology, linguistic and cultural continuities, shared economic frameworks, and overlapping legal traditions, such as the influence of Sharia and civil law, and shared challenges, further reinforce the inherent potential incentives for collective governance, social cohesion, and political integration within the region. The following section explores these fundamental commonalities, which provide a strong basis and ties for integration and unity in the Middle East.

1.1. Religion

Religious affiliation, particularly Islam in its various denominations, serves as a major unifying factor. The first factor that distinguishes the Middle East from other geographical regions of the world is the predominant role of religion, despite the region being the home to some of the world's oldest Christian communities located in the Caucasus, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan, as well as the settlement of a significant part of the world's Jews, yet, Muslims constitute more than 90% of the region's population, and in overall Islamic culture plays a central and dominant role in shaping the identity and dynamics of the region.²¹⁵ The predominant religion in

²¹⁵ H. Borjjan, "Cultural Continent of Middle East [قاره فرهنگی خاورمیانه]", No.198, 2002, 8. Accessible on https://www.academia.edu/8077574/Cultural_Continent_of_Middle_East. Last Visit March 2024. [Persian]

the Middle East, with over 90% of the population identifying with it, is Islam. This faith has not only been the cornerstone of religious practice in the Middle East for an extended period but also serves as a fundamental component of the cultural and social identity of its inhabitants.

1.2. Language²¹⁶

The linguistic landscape of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), from Morocco to Iran, is highly diverse, with over 60 languages spoken. However, the primary official languages with the largest number of speakers, as the first or second language include Arabic, Turkic, Persian, Kurdish, and Hebrew.

- **Arabic** boasts approximately 450 million speakers globally and is the official language in 25 independent countries in Africa and the Middle East.²¹⁷
- **Turkic**, the language family that is also connected to the Middle East, with over 200 million speakers worldwide, encompasses Turkish (over 80 million), Azerbaijani, Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Uyghur.²¹⁸
- **Persian** (Farsi) includes Dari, Tajik and Pashto in Iranic language family, is one of the most widespread languages, is used by over 120 million individuals in the Middle East.
- **Kurdish** is an Indo-Iranian language spoken by around 30–40 million Kurds, mainly in Kurdish-inhabited regions of Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. It is divided into several dialect groups, including Kurmanji, Sorani, and Pehlewani/Gorani.²¹⁹
- **Hebrew** is spoken by nearly 9 million people globally, with the majority residing in Israel.

“A common language between two societies fosters an exchange of ideas and values; ... while the language barrier does not allow the same opportunity for exchanging cultural commodities between the West and the Middle East, although they are two close neighbouring regions of the world.”²²⁰ This explanation highlights the linguistic homogeneity and cultural convergence arising from shared languages in the Middle East. Although linguistic minorities exist across the region, virtually all its peoples speak at least one of the main languages as their mother tongue. By comparison, despite its 24 official languages and numerous unofficial ones,²²¹ Europe has succeeded in forming a coherent and effective union. Accordingly, with its greater degree of

²¹⁶ B. Lewis, “The Map of the Middle East: A Guide for the Perplexed”, *The American Scholar*, Vol.58, 19-38, 1989, 25.

²¹⁷ “World Arabic Language Day 2024”, *UNESCO*, 18 December 2024. Accessible on <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/world-arabic-language-day-2024#:~:text=Why%20Arabic%20Language%20and%20AI,a%20captivating%20light%20calligraphy%20show.> Last Visit December 2024.

²¹⁸ M. Robbeets, A. Savelyev, *The Oxford Guide to the Transeurasian Languages*, Oxford University Press, 2020, 22-28.

²¹⁹ H. Khezri, *Kurdish: Modern Languages and Literatures*, University of Central Florida (UCF). Accessible on <https://cah.ucf.edu/languages/languages/kurdish/>. Last Visit September 2025.

²²⁰ S.H. Borhani, “The Regional Context of Human Rights in the Middle East”, *Department of Middle East Studies, World Studies Faculty, University of Tehran, Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, Vol.2, No.1, 2018, 149.

²²¹ P. Videsott, *Linguistic and Cultural Diversity – Minority and Minoritised Languages as Part of European Linguistic and Cultural Diversity*, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, PE 751.273, June 2023, 14.

linguistic commonality, the Middle East appears to possess even stronger potential for establishing a regional union.

1.3. Cultural Practices and Traditions

Language itself serves a crucial function in the transmission of traditions and cultural values. The existence of a common language, as well as the linguistic similarities and commonalities within a given region, significantly enhances the ability of communities to engage in meaningful cultural exchanges. “All of this, whether ultimately for the good or ill of mankind, must be attributed to the dominant role of language in the transmission of culture”²²²

The culture of the Middle East, whether we call it Islamic or anything else, presents distinct features that differentiate it from the cultural expressions of Muslims in other regions worldwide, including the Muslim communities in the Balkans such as those in Albania and Bosnia; the black Muslim in America and Africa; as well as those in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia and Malaysia, and in the Indian subcontinent, such as Bengali and Punjabi Muslims. While there is a remarkable coherence in the cultural practices and traditions across the Middle Eastern nations, extending from Iran to North Africa; The unity is reflected in various aspects, including the texture of ancient cities, the architectural styles of houses, mosques, schools, old traditional roofed bazaars, and goods that are often sold in them such as spices, traditional clothes, jewelry, and crafts; social etiquette and body languages, courtship and marriage customs, personal grooming and makeup practices, religious holidays and ceremonies, traditional musical instruments, ancient folklore and myths, the atmosphere of coffeehouses and hookah bars along with communal games like backgammon showcase the cultural uniqueness and rich tapestry of Middle Eastern culture.²²³

1.4. Political Structures

In examining the political Structures, is evident that there are some strong similarities between the prevailing patterns observed within regional regimes. “Arab and Islamic countries in the Middle East are typically governed either by traditional ruling families, or by post-revolutionary nationalists regimes that depend on the military.”²²⁴ Oil and other sources of wealth such as coal, copper, diamonds, and gold, as a major part of the budgets of many Middle Eastern governments, significantly influencing their tendency to adopt autocratic approaches toward their citizens. These oil-exporting nations have easy access to substantial giant financial resources, enjoying some of the highest GDP rates and positioning among the world's wealthiest, alongside industrialized countries. Governments are the primary beneficiaries of this wealth, which creates a distinct political environment.

Despite the numerous benefits and pros associated with oil and wealth in the Middle East, it is important to acknowledge that these resources also present certain cons and challenges,

²²² D. Crystal, R.H. Robins, “Language and Culture”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, October 28, 2024. Accessible on <https://www.britannica.com/topic/language/Language-and-culture>. Last Visit November 2024.

²²³ H. Borjian, “Cultural Continent of Middle East [قاره فرهنگی خاورمیانه]”, No.198, 2002, 9. Accessible on https://www.academia.edu/8077574/Cultural_Continent_of_Middle_East. Last Visit March 2024. [Persian]

²²⁴ H. Macdonald, *Geopolitics and Middle East Conflict*, Institutt for forsvarsstudier (IFS), Oslo, 2002, 43.

particularly due to the prevailing economic position of government policies within society. Oil revenues grant extraordinary power to governments in many Middle Eastern countries, allowing them to finance their political projects without relying on other parties, taxpayers, or private entities. This financial independence enables these governments to dominate the economy, imposing their interests while neglecting the civil and political rights of their citizens. As a result, Middle Eastern oil-exporting nations often establish authoritarian regimes, lacking motivation to respect people's demands and rights that may threaten their authoritarianism. Consequently, the Middle Eastern citizens reliant on powerful governments to distribute national wealth, find it challenging to advocate for their civil and political rights, including human rights.²²⁵

1.5. Economic Framework

Despite the significant wealth, abundant natural resources, and substantial economic potentials of the Middle East region as a whole as well as its individual nations, economic challenges such as inflation, economic fluctuations, material instability, and a lack of persistent economic vitality, class conflicts, unfair and unequal distribution of wealth have been caused a growing sense of dissatisfaction and distrust among the populace. “In Middle Eastern countries, citizens are subjected to some social codes that require conformity in exchange for economic inclusion. There is a partial distribution of wealth through welfare programs, education, housing, etc., all of which are free. In general, citizens pay no or few taxes.”²²⁶

The economic structures of most Middle Eastern states display remarkable similarities. Their economies are predominantly resource-based and heavily dependent on the export of natural resources like oil, gas, and other raw materials, which remain under the control of central authorities. This concentration of economic power in the hands of ruling elites, combined with limited taxation and low citizen participation in economic decision-making, has historically produced authoritarian, rentier-style governance. In such systems, state revenues stem primarily from external rents rather than domestic production or taxation, reducing accountability to citizens and reinforcing a centralized, autocratic political order. Moreover, the reliance on state-led economies, extensive welfare mechanisms, and a public sector-dominated labor market further strengthen these common patterns. The combination of economic dependency on natural resources and political centralization has created an interlinked system of economic and political autocracy across the region.²²⁷ These shared structural characteristics, resource reliance, centralization of wealth, and limited economic pluralism, constitute both a challenge and an opportunity: a challenge in perpetuating inequality and political stagnation, but an opportunity in forming a unified regional framework aimed at transforming rent-based economies into cooperative, productive, and sustainable systems within a prospective Middle East Union.

²²⁵ H. Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism, 1926-1979*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1981, 245-246.

²²⁶ H. Macdonald, *Geopolitics and Middle East Conflict*, Institutt for forsvarsstudier (IFS), Oslo, 2002, 38.

²²⁷ M.L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations*, Princeton University Press, 2012, 1-92, 189-221; H. Beblawi, G. Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State*, Croom Helm, 1987; H. Beblawi, “The Rentier State in the Arab World”, *Arab Studies Quarterly, Pluto Journals*, Vol.9, No.4, 383-398, Fall 1987.

1.6. Legal System

The legal systems in the Middle East exhibit considerable similarities in a framework of legal pluralism, influenced by the coexistence of a range of foundations, including religious legal system (Islamic law), civil law, and local customary legal system (Customs or Urf), as well as the influence of Western laws, particularly, British and French legal systems. While certain jurisdictions adopt a more secular approach, elements of Islamic legal principles are evident throughout the region. Known as Sharia, Islamic law is based on the Quran, the Sunna, and the Hadith, and additional sources of Sharia law include Ijma'a, Qiyas, Fatwas, contracts, as well as various literary and historical texts. Sharia law is recognized as one of the most prevalent legal systems worldwide. In particular nations, such as Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Iran, the legal framework is predominantly grounded in Sharia.²²⁸

In various Middle Eastern nations, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Qatar, there exists a unique blend of Sharia law and secular legal principles, which means Sharia law is primarily applied to govern personal status issues, while other types of disputes are addressed within the framework of civil and criminal courts. Furthermore, numerous Muslim-majority countries, such as Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Iran, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Libya, have legal systems that incorporate aspects of Islamic law into common law or civil law structures, reflecting a diverse approach to governance and the administration of justice.

In several Muslim-majority Middle Eastern countries, even though the legal framework is predominantly secular, elements of the Islamic legal system can still be observed. This is also true in regions where Muslims constitute a minority, as individuals may adhere to Islamic principles concerning family law, personal property, and lifestyle practices, such as regulations regarding prayer, charitable giving, and interpersonal conduct. The state, albeit, does not officially incorporate Sharia law in its legislative or judiciary frameworks. Muslim-majority states having secular legal systems in the Middle East consist of Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Tunisia. In these nations, there may exist governmental bodies tasked with overseeing religious affairs, as well as mandates that designate government positions to specific religious or ethnic backgrounds.²²⁹

The legal systems in several Middle Eastern countries combine Islamic law with civil law in European-based legal systems, particularly from Britain and France. For instance, Iraq and the Gulf States have adopted the British legal system, whereas Iran, Egypt, and other North African nations merged Islamic law with civil law drawing from the French system. Egypt stands out as the first Arab and Middle Eastern country to experience Western legal influence during the nineteenth century. The Egyptian legal framework is grounded in the Napoleonic Code alongside Islamic law. Consequently, numerous Middle Eastern nations have been influenced by Egypt's civil law principles, which emphasize the concept of “good faith” as a fundamental principle.

²²⁸ M. Samiei, *Neo-Orientalism? A Critical Appraisal of Changing Western Perspective: Bernard Lewis, Jom Esposito and Gilles Kepel*, PhD Dissertation, University of Westminster, 2009, 100-112.

²²⁹ “A Resource on Comparative Judicial Practice”, *Judiciaries Worldwide*, Accessible on <https://judiciariesworldwide.fjc.gov/islamic-legal-systems#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20perception%20that,classical%2C%20mixed%2C%20and%20secular>. Last Visit December 2024.

1.7. Wealth and Sources

Beyond their shared cultural, historical, geopolitical, and political traits, the substantial and abundance of natural resources and financial strength across the Middle East region offers significant opportunities for regional wealth-sharing mechanisms and collaborative joint development initiatives. From vast reserves of oil and natural gas to solar energy potential, fertile agricultural zones, and critical minerals such as phosphate and gold, the region holds strategic assets essential for both domestic growth and global supply chains. In addition, sovereign wealth funds, a dynamic tourism sector, human capital, and the youth demographics further contribute to economic resilience. Following the major regional wealth, which can form the backbone of a sustainable and independent Middle East Union, will be briefly discussed.

- **Petroleum:** Oil and petroleum stand as the primary sources of wealth in the contemporary Middle East, fundamentally shaping the region's dynamics and possessing significant potential to impact various regional processes. The Middle East holds a pivotal position in the global energy landscape, housing over fifty percent of the world's oil reserves. By the end of 2024, the Middle East region held approximately 52% of the world's total proven oil reserves and about 42% of gas reserves. The countries with the largest oil reserves within the region are Saudi Arabia, Iran, Libya, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).²³⁰ "Petroleum is not distributed evenly around the world. Slightly less than half of the world's proven reserves are located in the Middle East (including Iran but not North Africa). ... the Middle East contains approximately 50 percent of the world's proven reserves but accounts for only about 30 percent of global oil production (though this figure is still higher than in any other region). ... The Arabian-Iranian sedimentary basin in the Persian Gulf region contains two-thirds of supergiant (Oil) fields (the two largest classes of fields are the super giants' fields with 5,000,000,000 or more barrels of ultimately recoverable oil). ... The Arabian-Iranian sedimentary basin is predominant because it contains more than 20 supergiant fields. No other basin has more than one such field. In 20 of the 26 most significant oil-containing basins, the 10 largest fields originally contained more than 50 percent of the known recoverable oil."²³¹ "Oil revenues represent a major part of the budget of many governments in the region. ... In fact, oil-exporting countries could be considered the main wealthy nations of the world besides the wealthy industrial ones. ... governments are the main beneficiaries of that wealth; indeed, oil revenues constitute a high proportion of their budgets."²³² "MENA countries are among the world's largest oil and gas exporting countries. ... Countries in the region have witnessed a strong economic growth over the last decades, underpinned by oil revenues. ... In real terms, GDP per capita has significantly risen across the region, with some of the MENA countries becoming among the richest countries on a GDP per capita basis in

²³⁰ J.L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East; A History*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 288-299; British Petroleum (BP), Statistical Review of World Energy, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/energy-economics.html>. Last Visit August 2025.

²³¹ J.P. Riva, P.G. McLeroy, "Status of the World Oil Supply: Petroleum in World Distribution of Oil", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, November 4, 2024. Accessible on <https://www.britannica.com/science/petroleum/Status-of-the-world-oil-supply>. Last Visit November 2024.

²³² S.H. Borhani, "The Regional Context of Human Rights in the Middle East", Department of Middle East Studies, World Studies Faculty, University of Tehran, *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, Vol.2, No.1, 2018, 140.

today's world. That is particularly true in the major oil producing countries located in the Arabian-Persian Gulf.”²³³

- **Hydrocarbon:** “The region has been significantly shaped by its abundant hydrocarbon endowment and by the surge of oil consumption worldwide following World War II, which has prompted its socioeconomic growth, shaping its political economy, and consolidating its governance. ...Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have the largest share of the region's total proved gas reserves, while Qatar, Algeria and the UAE have the highest total proved reserves per capita rate, which shows these countries' wealth.”²³⁴ The Middle East region has also vast natural gas reserves. “The Middle East owns the largest proven natural gas reserves in the world. As of 2023 statistics, nearly 40% (one-third) of the world's total natural gas reserves are located in this region. Worldwide reserves of natural gas reached over 206 trillion cubic meters that same year, having increased ten-fold since the 1960s”.²³⁵ Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Iraq have the highest gas reserves in the region, respectively.²³⁶
- **Solar Energy:** The Middle East demonstrates remarkable potential for solar energy, with countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Morocco, Egypt, and Iran benefiting from an average solar irradiance exceeding 2,000 kilowatt-hours per square meter, annually.²³⁷ Jordan owns the world's first major accelerator facility fully powered by solar energy, known as the Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East (SESAME).²³⁸

The Middle East has been increasingly redirecting its attention towards solar energy as a component of its sustainable development strategy and is making significant strides in enhancing its renewable energy capabilities to diversify energy sources beyond hydrocarbons and address the challenges posed by climate change. Middle Eastern countries have established ambitious solar targets by using solar photovoltaic (PV) technology, expected to account for more than half of the region's power supply by 2050. However, in addition to solar energy, the region is also focusing on wind power, exemplified by Saudi Arabia's establishment of Dumat Al Jandal, the largest wind farm in the Middle East. By 2050, renewable energy sources, including hydro, alongside solar and wind, are anticipated to constitute a staggering 70% of the power generation mix in the Middle East.

As of the end of 2023, the total solar capacity in the region has exceeded 16 gigawatts (GW) and was anticipated to reach 23 GW by the conclusion of 2024. Projections indicate that this capacity surpass 100 GW by the end of 2030. This remarkable growth can be

²³³ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 6-11.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, 4-9.

²³⁵ Statista, *Distribution of Proved Natural Gas Reserves Worldwide in 1960 and 2023, by Region*, Statista, 2024. Accessible on <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273584/distribution-of-natural-gas-reserves-by-region/>. Last Visit November 2024.

²³⁶ NS Energy, “Countries with Largest Natural Gas Reserves in the Middle East”, *NS ENERGY*, 2019. Accessible on <https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/analysis/largest-natural-gas-reserves-middle-east/>. Last Visit November 2024.

²³⁷ Middle East Solar Industry Association, *Solar Outlook Report 2024*, MESIA, 2024.

²³⁸ Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East (SESAME), Accessible on <https://www.sesame.org.jo/news/sesame-becomes-worlds-first-large-accelerator-complex-be-fully-powered-renewable-energy>. Last Visit November 2024.

attributed to several factors, including the region's abundant sunlight, low development costs, a growing population, and a global commitment to reducing carbon emissions.

- **Phosphate:** The Upper Cretaceous-Eocene Mediterranean Tethyan phosphogenic belt, extending from North Africa to West Asia, is recognized as one of the world's most significant phosphate provinces. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) serve as a pivotal hub for phosphate mining, with Morocco and Saudi Arabia possessing a substantial share of global phosphate reserves. Notably, Morocco accounts for approximately 70% of the world's phosphate rock reserves and is distinguished as the country with the largest phosphate reserves worldwide, exceeding 50 billion metric tons of phosphate rock, and is also a prominent leader in phosphate extraction, while Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, and Iran also contribute significantly to the world's abundant phosphate available resources.²³⁹
- **Gold:** The Middle East is home to several significant gold sources, encompassing various mines and countries with substantial gold reserves; among them, Saudi Arabia stands out as the nation with the largest gold reserves in the region, ranking as the twenty-seventh-largest gold producer worldwide in 2023. According to Mining Technology, “Saudi Arabia accounts for 0.38% of global (Gold) production.”²⁴⁰ Other Middle Eastern countries with notable gold reserves include Lebanon, Algeria, Libya, Iraq, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), respectively.²⁴¹ Middle Eastern gold products, typically ranging from 18 to 24 carat purity, are mostly sourced from various countries within the region, such as Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, United Arab Emirates (UAE).
- **Water and Agriculture:** Despite the scarcity of water resources in the region, Egypt, Iran, and Türkiye possess abundant freshwater supplies. Several major rivers in the Middle East support agricultural irrigation in limited areas, including the Nile Delta in Egypt, the Tigris and Euphrates watersheds of Mesopotamia, and the Jordan River basin. These areas collectively constitute the Fertile Crescent. While the Middle East is predominantly characterized by desert landscapes, agriculture has played a critical role for millennia in this region, and farmers adapted their practices to varying environmental conditions. “Iran and Egypt, large and important economies, generate around 20-30% of GDP from agriculture or food processing.”²⁴² The historical significance of cotton production in Egypt serves as a notable example of this adaptation. However, Middle Eastern cotton and textile products continue to be vital exports, with the presence of “Made in Turkey” labels illustrating this ongoing relevance. Other significant agricultural exports from the Middle East, which are commonly found in global markets, include fish, fruits, cereals, citrus, poultry, dried dates, figs, and apricots, along with Iranian saffron and various olive products.²⁴³

²³⁹ A.J.G. Notholt, “Phosphorite Resources in the Mediterranean (Tethyan) Phosphogenic Province : a Progress Report”, *Sciences Géologiques, bulletin, persee*, 1985, 9-17.

²⁴⁰ Mining Technology, Accessible on <https://www.mining-technology.com/data-insights/gold-in-saudi-arabia/#:~:text=According%20to%20GlobalData%2C%20Saudi%20Arabia,up%20by%2016%25%20on%202022.> Last Visit November 2024.

²⁴¹ Forbes Middle East, Accessible on <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/industry/economy/top-10-mena-countries-by-gold-reserves>. Last Visit November 2024.

²⁴² H. Macdonald, *Geopolitics and Middle East Conflict*, Institutt for forsvarsstudier (IFS), Oslo, 2002, 51.

²⁴³ “What Role Have Natural Resources Played in the Politics and Economy of the Middle East?”, *PBS*. Accessible on

- Tourism:** According to World Bank Group “Tourism is a key source of economic growth in the Arab world. (And) is potentially a ‘win-win’ sector to promote recovery and employment in the Middle East & North Africa.”²⁴⁴ Or according to its recent repetitive report, “In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), tourism is a key driver for economic growth, job creation, and economic diversification.”²⁴⁵ Religious tourism is a vital and enduring component of the Middle Eastern tourism economy, driven by the region’s unparalleled spiritual and historical significance to the world’s major monotheistic religions. Sacred sites such as Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia for all Muslims worldwide, Karbala and Najaf in Iraq, Qom and Mashhad in Iran for Shia Muslims, and Jerusalem’s religious landmarks attract millions of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish pilgrims annually. These religious destinations not only generate substantial revenue and employment opportunities, but also promote interregional mobility, cultural exchange, and infrastructure development. As such, religious tourism enhances the region’s soft power and can serve as a unifying cultural asset within a Middle East Union, fostering intra-regional cooperation and mutual respect among diverse faith communities. In addition, tourism intersects with industrial overlap with the evolving services sector in the Middle Eastern regional economy, where most countries have established their national or sub-regional airlines, business, and tourism hubs. Israel, Türkiye, Cyprus, Egypt, Lebanon, and Dubai have made significant tourism development efforts, although these could be hindered by violence, as seen in Lebanon, Israel, and Egypt, or by infrastructure issues in Jordan. However, Iran and Saudi Arabia despite their high tourist attraction, often restrict tourism, while US and UN sanctions also affect tourism in Iraq, Iran, and Libya. The region’s vast potential for advancing tourism and enhancing the services sector within its economies hinges ultimately upon the attainment of political stability and social openness,²⁴⁶ which may be more attainable within the context of a Union framework.
- Sovereign Wealth Funds:** The Middle East hosts several of the largest Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) globally, which manage a significant portion of the region’s capital; including the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) (1953), which is the oldest SWFs in the Middle East and the world; Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF), Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA), the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), the Emirates Investment Authority (EIA), Mubadala Investment Company (PJSC), the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), the Türkiye Wealth Fund (TWF), and the National Development Fund of Iran (NDFI). These Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) are owned by the respective governments that invest in foreign financial assets. Their funds derive from various sources, including trade surpluses, budget surpluses, investment returns, land leasing fees, and additional revenue streams. SWFs play a crucial role in influencing the global financial

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/resource/index.html#:~:text=Like%20oil%20and%20water,the%20ecosystems%20to%20sustain%20crops>. Last Visit November 2024.

²⁴⁴ World Bank, *Tourism in the Arab World can mean more than Sun, Sand and Beaches*, WB, 2013. Accessible on <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/02/11/tourism-in-the-arab-world-can-mean-more-than-sun-sand-and-beaches#:~:text=STORY%20HIGHLIGHTS,growth%20in%20the%20Arab%20world>. Last Visit November 2024.

²⁴⁵ World Bank, *Transitioning Towards Sustainable and Climate-Smart Tourism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)*, World Bank Group (WBG), 2024. Accessible on <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099061424112040218/p1790251c8bbf90771b95c1b1d97df28915> Last Visit November 2024.

²⁴⁶ H. Macdonald, *Geopolitics and Middle East Conflict*, Institutt for forsvarsstudier (IFS), Oslo, 2002, 53.

system and investing across a diverse array of sectors, including real estate, infrastructure, and technology, and due to their long-term investment strategies and substantial capital reserves, they can influence market dynamics and shape industry trends effectively.²⁴⁷

- **Growing Young Population:** “The MENA region has witnessed a remarkable demographic growth over the last decades. ... The exceptional ‘youth bulge’ experienced by this region since the 1950s can be ascribed to the combination of declining infant mortality and high fertility rate, which has triggered a booming population growth for over forty years.”²⁴⁸ Population in the Middle East is swiftly increasing, and the region has a significant young population, which holds the potential to be a major source of wealth for the region. The Middle East is one of the youngest regions globally, with over 50% of its population under 30 years old in many countries. “The population of the Middle East has grown very rapidly in the past three decades, faster than all regions of the world. Along with this demographic explosion, the region’s labor force has grown.”²⁴⁹ However, whether this demographic advantage translates into actual wealth depends on how governments and societies address key challenges and opportunities.²⁵⁰ According to the Report of UNICEF: “Children and young people (0-24 year olds) in the Middle East and North Africa currently account for nearly half of the region’s population and have the potential to become agents of change, acting for a more prosperous and stable future for themselves and their communities, and playing their part in reaping the demographic dividend.”²⁵¹

2. Persian Gulf States

The Persian Gulf States encompasses the countries that border the coastline of the Persian Gulf, including Iran (with the longest coastline), Iraq (with the shortest coastline), Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The waterbody is traditionally known as the Persian Gulf, deriving its name from the historical designation of Iran, which was formerly known as Persia. However, the Arab states located on the coastline of the Gulf advocate for it to be referred to as the Arabian Gulf.

“The Persian Gulf region is strategically important because it contains an estimated 50% of the world's oil reserves. The area's main industries are related to crude oil, including the world's largest offshore oil field, Al-Safaniya. Buoyed by oil wealth and increasingly prone to intervene in the region’s political and security affairs, the Arab Gulf States and especially Saudi Arabia, partnered

²⁴⁷ FSR, “Gulf Sovereign Wealth Funds”, *Foundation for Strategic Research*, 2019. Accessible on [https://www.frstrategie.org/en/programs/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/gulf-sovereign-wealth-funds-2019#:~:text=Sovereign%20wealth%20funds%20\(SWFs\)%20in,originate%20from%20the%20Middle%20East.](https://www.frstrategie.org/en/programs/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/gulf-sovereign-wealth-funds-2019#:~:text=Sovereign%20wealth%20funds%20(SWFs)%20in,originate%20from%20the%20Middle%20East.) Last Visit November 2024.

²⁴⁸ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 3.

²⁴⁹ P. Dhonte, R. Bhattacharya, T. Yousef, “Demographic Transition in the Middle East: Implications for Growth, Employment, and Housing”, *IMF eLIBRARY*, 19-40, 2001, 19.

²⁵⁰ “Jobs and the Future of Work: MENA’s Growing Young Population is a Huge Opportunity, If We Get It Right”, *WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM*, 2019.

²⁵¹ United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Division of Data, Research and Policy, April 2019. Accessible on <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/mena-generation-2030>. Last Visit January 2025.

closely with the UAE, are a major force in the Middle East's geopolitical structure.”²⁵² “The continental shelf is a geological expression ..., the whole of the underwater area of the North Sea and Persian Gulf consists of shelf. The vital fact about the continental shelves is that they are rich in oil and gas resources and quite often are host to extensive fishing grounds.”²⁵³

“Oil was first discovered in Iran, and by 1911 a British concern, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), was producing oil in Iran. The British found oil in Iraq after World War I. In 1932 Standard Oil Company of California (Socal) discovered oil in commercial quantities in Bahrain. Socal then obtained a concession in Saudi Arabia in 1933 and discovered oil in commercial quantities in 1938. A flurry of oil exploration activity occurred in the gulf in the 1930s with the United States and Britain competing with one another for oil concessions. One reason for the increased activity was that in 1932 the new Iranian government of Reza Shah Pahlavi revoked APOC's concession. Although the Shah and the British later agreed on new terms, the threat of losing Iranian oil convinced the British in particular that they must find other sources. The small states of the Persian Gulf were a natural place to look. ... The oil fields in Kuwait were developed the most quickly, and by 1953 that nation had become the largest oil producer in the gulf. Considerably smaller fields in Qatar came onstream in commercial quantities in the 1950s, and Abu Dhabi began to export offshore oil in 1962. Dubai began to profit from offshore oil deposits in the late 1960s. ... Moreover, in 1930 no one knew the size of gulf oil reserves.”²⁵⁴

“The Middle Eastern countries of Iraq, Kuwait, and Iran are each estimated to have had an original oil endowment in excess of 100 billion barrels. Together they account for more than 23 percent of all proven reserves in the world. These countries have a number of supergiant fields, all of which are located in the Arabian-Iranian basin. Kuwait's field at Al-Burqān, discovered in 1938, is the world's second largest oil field (the first and third in Saudi Arabia), containing 75 billion barrels of recoverable oil. Iraq also possesses a significant potential for oil discoveries, especially in its southwest, with an estimated 45–100 billion barrels of crude oil. However, this resource has been slow to develop due to the country's long history of wars and civil unrest since 1980.”²⁵⁵ “Oil has contributed to the integration of this area with the rest of the world, prompting significant socioeconomic development. Benefiting from their vast hydrocarbon resources and small populations, Gulf countries have experienced a generally high wealth level per capita, with a GDP per capita (PPP) ranging between \$12,389.2 (Iran) and \$90,043.8 (Qatar).”²⁵⁶

The Persian Gulf region remains politically and militarily volatile. Any conflict would severely impact the Persian Gulf states and have broader economic repercussions due to the region's energy exports. The subsequent analyses will explore the countries bordering the Persian Gulf in greater detail.

²⁵² B.J.C. McKercher, *The Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Routledge, 2022, 370.

²⁵³ M.N. Shaw, *International Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 584.

²⁵⁴ H. Chapin Metz, *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1994, 29-30.

²⁵⁵ J.P. Riva, P.G. McLeroy, “Status of the World Oil Supply: Petroleum in World Distribution of Oil”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, November 4, 2024. Accessible on <https://www.britannica.com/science/petroleum/Status-of-the-world-oil-supply>. Last Visit November 2024.

²⁵⁶ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 66.

2.1. Kuwait; is an Arab Muslim State bordering the Persian Gulf and a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with a high capacity in the Oil industry and crude oil and refined products exports, and one of the top players in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). “Kuwait is located at the far northwestern corner of the Persian Gulf, known locally as the Arabian Gulf. It is a small state of about 17,818 square kilometers. Shaped roughly like a triangle, Kuwait borders the gulf to the east, with 195 kilometers of coast. Kuwait includes within its territory nine gulf islands, two of which, Bubiyan (the largest) and Warbah, are largely uninhabited but strategically important. ... To the south and west, Kuwait shares a long border of 250 kilometers with Saudi Arabia. ... The third side of the triangle is the 240 kilometers of historically contested border to the north and west that Kuwait shares with Iraq. ... In the south, limestone rises in a long, north-oriented dome that lies beneath the surface. It is within and below this formation that the principal oil fields, Kuwait's most important natural resource, are located. ... In 1938 oil was discovered in Kuwait. ... After the government began receiving oil revenues, it expanded the health care system. The Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) also opened some small health facilities.” “In 1993 Kuwait's population was highly educated, both in comparison to other states in the region and in comparison to its pre-oil education levels.”²⁵⁷ “Kuwait literacy rate for 2020 was 96.46%.”²⁵⁸

Beyond the Oil Industry, Kuwait is also wealthy in Gas Production, Pearl diving, Fisheries, Marine Life from the Persian Gulf, Salt Flats, and Solar and Wind Renewable Energy Potential.²⁵⁹ “(While) the energy sector is the pillar of the Kuwaiti economy since it accounts for more than 90% of government revenues and total exports, and 50% of the country's GDP. ... Nowadays, Kuwait is striving to horizontally diversify its production and exports from hydrocarbons, shifting towards an integrated energy sector, by diversifying downstream activities, boosting refining capacities and realizing the full potential of natural gas fields. ... Overall, in theoretical terms, Kuwait is one of the best placed countries in the GCC to diversify its revenues, export and energy mix from oil, thanks to a relatively small population, a large oil production and reserves base and an ideal geographical position to develop both wind and solar energy.”²⁶⁰ Currently, the Kuwaiti dinar (KWD) is the strongest currency worldwide.

2.2. Bahrain; another member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), is also an Arab-majority state bordering the Persian Gulf, with a fairly large number of Iranian origin who are referred to as Ajam Bahrainis (Bahrainis of Persian descent). The majority of Bahraini citizens are Shia Muslims, while a significant minority are Sunnis. Although at least two-thirds of Bahrain's

²⁵⁷ H. Chapin Metz, *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1994, 43-54.

²⁵⁸ Macrotrends, “Kuwait Literacy Rate 1975-2025”, *macrotrends*, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/KWT/kuwait/literacy-rate>. Last Visit March 2025.

²⁵⁹ H. Chapin Metz, *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1994, 57-68.

²⁶⁰ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 96-97.

population are Shia Muslims, the ruling family, Al Khalifa, and their political allies are Sunni Muslims.²⁶¹

“Bahrain (from the Arabic word for ‘two seas’) comprises an archipelago of thirty-three islands situated midway in the Persian Gulf close to the shore of the Arabian Peninsula (and a relatively shallow inlet of the Persian Gulf known as the Gulf of Bahrain). ... Most of the country's oil wells are situated in the vicinity of Jabal ad Dukhan. ... Manama, the capital, is located on the northeastern tip of the island of Bahrain. The main port, Mina Salman, also is located on the island, as are the major petroleum refining facilities and commercial centers.”²⁶² Bahrain is a wealthy country, primarily due to its oil and gas reserves, strong financial sector, and strategic location in the Persian Gulf. Standard Oil Company of California (Socal) drilling crews discovered oil in 1932 on the island of Bahrain. Socal, along with the Texas Oil Company (Texaco), formed the Bahrain Petroleum Company (Bapco). Major exports of Bahrain include crude oil, refined oil products, aviation fuel, fuel oil, gasoline, and aluminum. “Substantial deposits of natural gas are associated with Bahrain's oil fields. ... Bahrain National Gas Company (Banagas) opened a gas liquefaction plant that collected this gas and processed it into propane, butane, and naphtha. There are also large deposits of natural gas in the Khuff field, which is separate from the oil fields.”²⁶³ However, compared to other lower Persian Gulf States and its neighbors like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), proven oil reserves are limited and rely less on oil revenues.

Bahrain's long-term economic well-being is additionally based on commercial and industrial diversification, including a large-scale industry of an aluminum plant, iron and steel foundry, petrochemical factory, pharmaceutical facility, and ship-repair yard. In addition, Bahrain has a rich history of agriculture and traditional industries, including date palm cultivation, pearling, fishing, and other local products, and their exports. “Bahrain's efficient communications system and relatively liberal financial policies enabled the island state to emerge in the 1980s as a principal center for regional banking, insurance, and business operations.”²⁶⁴ Bahrain has a high GDP per capita and a well-developed banking industry, making it one of the more prosperous nations in the region.

2.3. Qatar; is a small, wealthy country located on the peninsula that extends from the Arabian Peninsula into the Persian Gulf, with a predominantly population of Arab ethnic and some Iranian or African ancestry. Most Qataris follow the Wahhabi with a strict and conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam, and the remaining Muslims are Sunni, while a minority of Qataris of Iranian origin are mainly Shia. Doha is the capital of Qatar and serves as the major administrative, commercial, shipping hub, population center, and the home to a majority of the country's residents. The city is known for its modern skyline, cultural landmarks, and role as a major economic center in the Middle East.

Qatar's economy is heavily dependent on its Oil and natural gas extraction and processing and most industrial activities are associated with exports of oil, gas, and petroleum products, which

²⁶¹ H. Chapin Metz, *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1994, 107-109.

²⁶² *Ibid*, 114-117.

²⁶³ *Ibid*, 128.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 112.

account for a significant portion of its Gross domestic product (GDP). “Qatar's Oil was discovered in Dukhan, on the west coast, in 1939. ... (Later) The major offshore fields were discovered in Idd ash Sharqi (1960) and Maydan Mahzam (1963). ... Once exports began, oil became extremely profitable in Qatar and in the rest of the Persian Gulf as a result of favorable concession terms, cheap labor, relatively inexpensive drilling and pumping costs, and easy access to transportation. ... Qatar joined the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1961, one year after it was formed. ... The North Field is the world's largest natural gas field, and its exploitation will place Qatar in the top ranks of the world's gas producers. Natural gas from other fields provides fuel for power generation and raw materials for fertilizers, petrochemicals, and steel plants.”²⁶⁵ “Qatar holds the third largest proven gas reserves (after Russia and Iran) with 24.7 tcm (12.4% of the world's total). ... Qatar's production share amounts to 4.5% (178.1 bcm) of global gas output. ... Qatar is responsible for about 10% of the world's gas exports (exporting 128.6 bcm mainly via LNG). ... Today Qatar is the world's richest country in terms of GDP per capita.”²⁶⁶ “The small emirate has focused on LNG exports rather than oil, benefiting from its vast reserves based on the giant field, North Dome, shared with Iran. ... Growing production volumes combined with a small population has allowed Qatar to consolidate its status as the world's top LNG producer and exporter.”²⁶⁷ “Oil and gas revenues make up 90 percent of government revenue, and government spending is the primary means of injecting these earnings into the economy. Given the small size of the local market, government spending generates most of the economic activity. ... The main export and source of revenue is oil, although the government's efforts to diversify Qatar's industrial base have resulted in the growth of other exports.”²⁶⁸ “The government has established heavy industry to diversify Qatar's economy. ... Oil revenues have funded the construction of plants and the development of infrastructure; natural gas has been used as a source of power and as feedstock. ... The government encourages business and industry by offering, among other things, low-interest loans; free road, water, and electrical hookups; subsidized electricity and water; land leases at minimal cost; and protective tariffs and tax incentives. The three largest enterprises are the Qatar Fertilizer Company (Qafco), Qatar Steel Company (Qasco), and Qatar Petrochemical Company (Qapco).”²⁶⁹ Qatar is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the organizations that play a significant role in regional economic cooperation, oil production, and energy policies, particularly in the Middle East. Qatar's membership in these organizations contributes a significant effect as a key player in the global energy market, particularly due to its vast natural gas reserves. Qatar has some of the world's largest reserves of natural gas, and it is a leading exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG).

Apart from hydrocarbons, other major Qatari industries are fertilizers, petrochemicals, steel, and cement. These industries benefit from the country's abundant natural gas resources, which serve as a key feedstock. Qatar has undergone rapid modernization, particularly in the recent few decades, making it one of the richest nations worldwide in terms of Gross domestic product (GDP)

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 149-150, 167-172.

²⁶⁶ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 8-9.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 83-84.

²⁶⁸ H. Chapin Metz, *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1994, 180-182.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 173.

per capita. The Qatari government has also been working on economic diversification under its “Qatar National Vision 2030”²⁷⁰ to reduce reliance on hydrocarbons and promote sectors like finance, tourism, and technology. Qatar's traditional industries, such as pearl diving and farming, fisheries, modernized agriculture, Date farming, Camel, and livestock, although no longer dominate Qatar's economy, remain important as parts of other sources of wealth, cultural heritage, and economic diversification. Although Qatar remains heavily dependent on its natural gas, it is actively pursuing economic diversification. Its aviation sector, exemplified by Qatar Airways, along with the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, has gained global recognition. Non-nationals constitute the vast majority of the population, accounting for approximately 87% of the total, reflecting the country's high foreign labor mobility and attractiveness.²⁷¹

2.4. United Arab Emirates (UAE); was a federation of seven separate emirates that united together in 1971-72 and formed a single independent country. The UAE is an Arab-majority state on the southeastern Arabian Peninsula, alongside the Persian Gulf coast to the north, with land bordering Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Abu Dhabi is the Capital of the country, and Dubai is the largest city, which is known due to its rapid development, modern architecture, tourism hub, and economic strength. Power in the federation is shared between the federal government and the seven emirates, with Abu Dhabi and Dubai exercising predominant influence due to their economic strength, population size, and key governmental roles. Emiratis are predominantly Muslims, about 85–90% Sunnis, and a smaller percentage, about 10–15%, are Shia Muslims.

“The UAE's oil resources make it one of the wealthiest countries in the world. ... Revenues from petroleum exports accrue principally to the government of Abu Dhabi, where more than 80 percent of the oil is located. ... since the formation of the UAE, Abu Dhabi has made significant annual contributions to the federal budget. ... The UAE also joined the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a collective security and cooperation association, established in 1981, of the six oil-producing Arabian Peninsula states.”²⁷² “Abu Dhabi became a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1966. When the emirates federated in 1971, membership was transferred to the UAE. ... Discoveries in the 1980s and 1990s greatly increased the UAE's oil and gas reserves. ... Based on the relative size of their reserves and on their long-term development plans, Abu Dhabi and the other oil-producing emirates have pursued differing policies. Abu Dhabi, with massive reserves, has on the whole based its production and economic development plans on long-term benefits.” While Oil and Gas are dominant in the UAE's economy, the major industries, including Oil refining and Gas processing, are the most significant, followed by petrochemicals, utilities, and cement, all of which heavily rely on hydrocarbons, oil, or gas as fuel and feedstock. The major UAE exports include crude oil, natural gas, petroleum products, gold and precious metals, diamonds, aluminum, and machinery equipment. Furthermore, the UAE has made strides in expanding its economy with industries such as tourism hub, real estate, finance, banking and investment, aviation, and trading. “The UAE, in particular Dubayy, epitomizes trade. The federal government promotes open and free trade as an official policy, and a thriving source of income

²⁷⁰ General Secretariat For Development Planning, *Qatar National Vision 2030*, July 2008.

²⁷¹ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 78-79.

²⁷² H. Chapin Metz, *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1994, 199-200, 203-204.

and full employment has resulted. The oil economy (world prices and demand as well as local production) and regional security strongly influence trade. Oil and gas exports account for about three-fourths of all exports. ... Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are the principal recipients of reexports. The view along bustling Dubayy Creek gives ample evidence of the vibrant reexport trade.”²⁷³

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) holds substantial regional and global significance, underpinned by its economic, political, and strategic assets. The UAE remains heavily dependent on natural gas, which in 2019 accounted for up to 94% of total primary energy supply and virtually all power generation. Abu Dhabi, possessing 93% of the federation’s oil and gas reserves, serves as the UAE’s political center and petroleum powerhouse, while Dubai has transitioned toward a post-oil economy driven by trade and real estate. However, to reduce the country’s dependency on oil revenue, beyond the energy sector, the UAE bolstered its economic resilience by revitalizing traditional industries such as fisheries and pearls diving from the Persian Gulf, the cultivation of date palms and fodder crops, as well as large-scale boatbuilding supplying vessels for pearling, fishing, and transportation, and their exports.

In addition, internationally renowned for its flagship carriers, Emirates in Dubai and Etihad Airways in Abu Dhabi, and as a major events hub, exemplified by Expo 2020, the country leverages its global connectivity and soft power. Demographically, non-nationals constitute approximately 87% of the population, reflecting its reliance on foreign labor and migration-driven market economic growth.²⁷⁴ The UAE’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is ranked as one of the highest per capita incomes worldwide.²⁷⁵

2.5. Sultanate of Oman; mostly referred to as Oman, is a country located on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, with a long coastline along the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, which connects by a narrow entry point to the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz. So technically, Oman has a presence very close to the Persian Gulf, but not a full border along it. Oman’s Capital is Muscat, and the governing system is an Absolute monarchy.

Although the majority of Omanis are Arabs, numerous citizens of non-Arab are of African descent. Most Omanis are Muslims, predominantly Ibadi Islam, followers of Abd Allah ibn Ibad, which constitutes the largest group that is a unique branch distinct from Sunni and Shia. The largest non-Ibadi minority, approximately 25 percent of Omanis, are Sunni Muslims, and the Shia minority is of Iraqi or Iranian (Ajam) descent.²⁷⁶

The petroleum and oil Industry has dominated Oman’s economy. “Oman’s exports are dominated by oil earnings. ... The government’s heavy reliance on crude oil export earnings to maintain its

²⁷³ *Ibid*, 218-219, 238-239.

²⁷⁴ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 78-79.

²⁷⁵ Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the United Arab Emirates from 1980 to 2030, Accessible on <https://www.statista.com/statistics/297659/uae-gross-domestic-product-per-capita/>. Last Visit August 2025.

²⁷⁶ H. Chapin Metz, *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1994, 253-255.

income distribution system and political stability made continued development of this sector a priority. ... Oil prospecting (in Oman) began in 1924 when the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later renamed British Petroleum (BP)) obtained a concession. ... The first concession agreement was signed with Petroleum Concessions, a Western consortium formed by the owners of the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). In 1951 the concessionaire's name was changed to Petroleum Development Oman (PDO). ... PDO operates two main production areas: a group of northern oil fields, including Jibal, Fuhud, and Sayh Nuhaidah, that produce lighter grades of crude oil; and a group of southern fields, including Rima, Mamul, Amal, Nimr, Mukhaizna, and Sayyala, that produce heavier crudes. ... More than one-half of Oman's total reserves are concentrated in the northern region, ... part of a single geological structure containing recoverable reserves of more than 2 billion barrels. Similarly, in the south, eight principal producing fields also come from a single geological structure. ... All crude oil from the northern and southern fields is collected and blended into Omani export blend. ... The majority of Oman's oil production is exported. The majority of Oman's exports are destined for the Far East market. ... The Oman Oil Company (OOC) is responsible for the government's foreign petroleum activities. The OOC engages in international oil trading, including the purchase and sale of Omani crude oil, and in acquiring foreign downstream holdings.”

Apart from its oil resources, Oman possesses substantial amounts of natural gas reserves, which play a crucial role in the country's energy sector and economic development. In recent decades, natural gas has become increasingly crucial in Oman's energy strategy and economic development efforts, including power generation and gas-based industries such as petrochemicals, desalination, fertilizers, methanol, and methyl tertiary-butyl ester (MTBE). In addition, the refinery produces liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), butane, jet fuel, and two grades of gasoline. The Omani government has invested seriously in gas exploration and production to diversify its energy mix and boost exports. The Omani government accelerated efforts to increase the use of natural gas, especially for electric power generation and industrial use. Since the early 1970s, gas has been part of the Sultanate's electricity sector; however, by the 1990s, the focus expanded to maximizing and exploiting natural gas output to meet growing demand. The gas production strategy aimed to maintain greater volumes of crude oil production levels for export without rapidly exhausting reserves. This involved using gas extracted alongside oil to reinject into aging oil fields to boost output and replacing oil with gas in domestic use to allow more oil to be exported. Oman also explored importing natural gas from Qatar, potentially from Qatar through an extended pipeline to Dubai with a spur line branch to Oman.

In addition to the energy sectors, the Omani government has made significant efforts to diversify its economy and reduce reliance on oil and gas exports; These initiatives include encouraging tourism, modernizing and expanding the mining of non-oil minerals (such as copper, chromite, gold, and silver), developing manufacturing, industry and logistics, agriculture, fisheries, and constructing light industrial parks to export consumer goods to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners.²⁷⁷ Oman has published its comprehensive national plan focused on economic development and diversification, education, innovation, and sustainability titled “Oman Vision 2040, its priorities and objectives.”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 272-289.

²⁷⁸ Oman Vision 2040 Committee, *Oman Vision 2040: its Priorities and Objectives*, 2021. Accessible on <https://www.oman2040.om/?lang=en>; Foreign Affairs Forum, *Where News is not Just a Fact but Reality: Oman*

2.6. Iraq; although, is not usually classified as a Persian Gulf State, is a Middle Eastern country with the shortest coastline along the northern tip of the Persian Gulf. Iraq is characterized by notable demographic diversity. Iraqi population primarily includes Muslims, Arab-majority, and a substantial number of Kurds, with predominantly Shia Islam, alongside a significant Sunni minority. Although Shia and Sunni Arabs and Kurds constitute the biggest ethnic and religious sects, Iraq also hosts a variety of other communities such as Christians, Turkmen, Shabak, Circassians, Yazidis, and Ajams with Iranian or Persian ancestry.²⁷⁹

Iraq is geo-strategically located along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers that flow into the Persian Gulf and is among the most resource-rich states globally. Iraq's vast mineral wealth and abundant natural reserves, particularly in hydrocarbons, have ranked it as a country of economic trajectory and international geopolitical and strategic importance since the 1950s. Iraq is the world's fourth-largest oil exporter and possesses the fifth-largest proven petroleum reserves, which makes its development and economic growth deeply intertwined with its oil sector. Iraq is one of the most oil-dependent states worldwide with the hydrocarbon sector and oil exports account for over 90% of government revenue and a large share of GDP. Iraq's oil production has some of the lowest costs globally due to its specific geological situation and several massive onshore oil fields near coastal export terminals. Iraq is a key member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).²⁸⁰ Although the energy sector can contribute to diversification, Iraq has a huge capacity to attract significant foreign investment to leverage oil revenues to grow non-oil sectors and diversify the economy. Iraq's oil wealth by a right policy and institutional frameworks, could become a catalyst for broader economic transformation from an oil-dependent state to a more resilient and inclusive economy system. Geopolitically, Iraq, although is dominated by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, is characterized by geographic diversity, a landscape comprising mountains, fertile plains, deserts, marshlands, valleys, terraced hills, pastures, and access to the sea of the Persian Gulf. Iraq, "unlike most of its oil-rich neighbors", has a notable agricultural capacity and a large young population to support skills for potential economic, specialization, industrial, and petrochemical diversification. In addition, Iraq, due to its ethnic, cultural, and religious diversities and its historical heritage attracts significant tourism, particularly religious tourism, with its holy Shia cities.²⁸¹

3. Iran's Significance in the Middle East

Iran's significance in the Middle East is multifactored, including historical, geographical, cultural, political, ideological, economic, and strategic dimensions. Given the ideological foundation of its governance, combined with its significant demographic, territorial, economic, and geo-economic potential, as well as its unique geopolitical and geo-strategic features in the Middle East, Iran has naturally emerged as a prominent major power within the region influencing politics, securities

Vision 2040, 29 December 2024. Accessible on <https://www.faf.ae/home/2024/12/29/oman-vision-2040>. Last Visit April 2025.

²⁷⁹ World Bank Group, *Iraq: Systematic County Diagnostic*, WBG, Report No. 112333-IQ, 2017, 1.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 13; World Bank Group, "Iraq Economic Monitor: Harnessing the Oil Windfall for Sustainable Growth", WBG, Spring, 2022, 5-12.

²⁸¹ World Bank Group, *Iraq: Systematic County Diagnostic*, WBG, Report No. 112333-IQ, 2017, 16, 55.

and stabilities, conflicts, and energy markets. Several key aspects highlight Iran's significance within the region, as outlined below:

- **Geopolitical and Strategic Importance:** Iran possesses a cross-border influence on its surrounding countries and the region in terms of geostrategic, geopolitical, and geoeconomic factors. Its geostrategic position has its roots in its geography and is a constant and continuous phenomenon. Iran is the second-largest country in the Middle East, with a youthful and growing population of over 92 million (in 2025),²⁸² located at the heart of regional security dynamics, the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, bordering key countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, influencing issues such as trade, immigration, and military strategies. Iran's geographical location characterized it as a natural energy bridge from the Middle East to other regions, particularly to the West. Iran has access to the Persian Gulf, and the control over the Strait of Hormuz, a vital chokepoint for global oil shipments, through which nearly 20% of the world's oil trade passes. Iran is located in a part of Eurasia that is the scene of constant competition between land and sea powers, and its special control over the Strait of Hormuz also adds to its significance.²⁸³ “Most of Saudi's oil exports flow through the Hormuz Strait heading to Asia (69% of its total oil exports in 2019). To mitigate risks, such as the potential closure of the Hormuz Strait by Iran, Saudi Arabia is exploring alternative export routes, like the East-West pipeline, which has a capacity of 5 mb/d, although it still relies heavily on the Strait for most oil exports.”²⁸⁴ Hence, Iran could disrupt the Gulf oil exports by targeting key sea routes or infrastructure. “Eurasia is home to most of the world’s politically assertive and dynamic states. All the historical pretenders to global power originated in Eurasia. The world's most populous aspirants to regional hegemony, China and India, are in Eurasia, ... Eurasia accounts for 75 percent of the world s population, 60 percent of its GNP, and 75 percent of its energy resources. ... Eurasia is the world s axial supercontinent. A power that dominated Eurasia would exercise decisive influence over two of the worlds three most economically productive regions, Western Europe and East Asia. ... a country dominant in Eurasia would almost automatically control the Middle East and Africa. Eurasia now serving as the decisive geopolitical chessboard.”²⁸⁵ Iran's influence over Eurasia is combined with its geopolitical strategy, historical and cultural ties, economic initiatives, diplomatic efforts, trade partnerships, and military alliances. In addition, Iran has historically been one of the most important countries and a central element along the Silk Road economic belt, and its strategically advantageous geographical position makes it a vital crossing point for both the sea and land Silk Roads, serving as a crucial trade route connecting Russia, India, and the Persian Gulf. As a key trade corridor in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and a participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), referred to as the New Silk Road, Iran plays a critical transit

²⁸² World Population View, Accessible on <https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/the-middle-east-population>, Last Visit April 2025.

²⁸³ S. Sugihartono, “The Impact of Iran’s Geographical Landscape on Its Economy and Politics”, *Modern Diplomacy*, August 23, 2024. Accessible on <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/08/23/the-impact-of-irans-geographical-landscape-on-its-economy-and-politics/>. Last Visit April 2025.

²⁸⁴ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 72.

²⁸⁵ Z. Bergeneski, “A Geostrategy for Eurasia”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.76, No.5, 50-64, 1997, 50-51.

role in linking China, India, and Russia to the Middle East and Europe. Geographically positioned at a significant crossroad connecting the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia, and China, Iran can project its influence across various directions.²⁸⁶ Hence, Iran is also referred to as the geostrategic heartland of global energy in the twenty-first century.²⁸⁷

- **Oil and Energy Powerhouse:** Iran occupies a central position in the Middle East regarding oil and gas resources, playing a crucial role in the production and transmission of these vital commodities globally, hence its significance in the energy sector is akin to the heart of the Middle East. If the growing reserves of the Caspian Sea are added to the resources of the Persian Gulf, then the Persian Gulf-Caspian Sea Energy Oval is formed. Iran, in terms of energy resources, has a significant position both in the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, which has its largest coastline. Hence, Iran is a key player in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and global energy markets. “Iran's vast natural gas reserves constitute more than one-tenth of the world's total.”²⁸⁸ “Iran ranks second-largest natural gas reserves in the world and the fourth-largest proven crude oil reserves.”²⁸⁹ “Iran ranks second worldwide in proven gas reserves with 32 trillion cubic metres (tcm) (16.1% of the world’s total). ... Iran provides 6.1% (244.2 bcm) of global gas output.” “Iran is a major oil and gas producing country with vast oil and gas resources. Iran’s heavy reliance on oil and gas derives from its conspicuous hydrocarbon reserves: it ranks fourth in the world in terms of oil reserves, representing 9% of total proven oil reserves. It also holds the second largest gas reserves worldwide, preceded by Russia, accounting for 16.1% of total proven gas reserves. ... Iran remains nonetheless the second largest economy in the MENA region, after Saudi Arabia. ... In fact, oil in the Middle East was first discovered in today’s Iran in 1908 by the British geologist G.B Reynolds and the following year a subsidiary of the British oil company Burmah Oil was established: the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC).”²⁹⁰ In addition, Iran’s role remains critical for the transmission of these resources to the global energy consumption markets, due to its geographic and geo-strategic location as one of the key routes. Pipelines and trade routes through Iran provide alternative supply corridors for landlocked Central Asian countries and even for Middle Eastern producers looking for non-maritime routes. Iran is supplying energy, particularly oil and gas to markets like China, India, Türkiye, and neighboring countries. It is also a key role player in regional energy diplomacy, engaging in pipeline projects and trading agreements.²⁹¹
- **Military Power:** Iran possesses a high military capability, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is a strong branch of Iran's armed forces. Iran

²⁸⁶ A. Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, Yale University Press, 2017, 1.

²⁸⁷ H. Noorali, S.A. Ahmadi, “Iran's New Geopolitics: Heartland of the World’s Corridors”, *GeoJournal*, 2022; M. Sharfman, J. Schneider Malamud, et al, “Israel’s Fight for the Eurasian Heartland”, *National Interest*, August 28, 2024. Accessible on <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/israels-fight-eurasian-heartland-212511>. Last Visit September 2025.

²⁸⁸ J. Afary, P.W. Avery, “Iran: Oil, Gas, Minerals”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, September 4, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran/Resources-and-power>. Last Visit September 2025.

²⁸⁹ World Bank Group, “Islamic Republic of Iran”, *World Bank Group*, 2022.

²⁹⁰ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 9, 100-101.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 100-111.

owns the largest Armed Forces in the Middle East in terms of active military troops. Iran has also a strong naval presence in the Persian Gulf. Iran's military forces comprise approximately 610,000 active-duty personnel, in addition to 350,000 reserve and trained individuals who can be mobilized as necessary, which becomes a total sum of military manpower of the country to around 960,000 personnel.²⁹² Iran also has advanced drone technology and ballistic missile systems that have been used in various regional conflicts extending influence to project power and support allied groups. According to the Global Firepower Index (GFP), Iran's global military strength, depending on the year and considering various factors, including manpower, equipment, geography, and finances, is ranked within the top 20 worldwide. Over the past decade, Iran peaked at 13th or 14th place in several years. And in 2025, Iranian army power has been positioned in 16th of 145.²⁹³

- **Nuclear Capacity and Controversy:** Iran's nuclear activities, which have been a major point of tensions with the West, particularly the United States of America (USA), Israel, Gulf states, and regional rivals in recent decades, commenced in the 1950s, initially with the assistance of the United States of America (USA) to pursue civilian applications. However, due to the dual usage nature of uranium enrichment serving for both peaceful and military purposes, the 1970s raised concerns over potential military dimensions and the possibility of nuclear weaponization. Iran joined the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear-weapon state in 1970 and has signed a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since 1974.²⁹⁴ ²⁹⁵ The United States believes that Iran has the capacity and capability to build nuclear weapons, even though it hasn't yet mastered all required technologies! Although Iran insists its nuclear activities are for peaceful intentions and purposes, namely energy production and medical isotopes, fears of weaponization have fueled suspicions and led to sanctions and international negotiations like the Joint Plan of Action (JPA, 2013) and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, 2015) to limit Iran's enrichment activities and stockpiles.²⁹⁶ The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is monitoring and detecting Iran's nuclear facilities and sites confirmed Iran's remaining in compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) despite U.S. unilateral withdrawal until 2018.²⁹⁷

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Analysis Report, Iran possesses significantly advanced nuclear capacity. Iran's uranium enrichment at sites like Natanz and Fordow, and working on a heavy-water reactor in Arak makes concerns about nuclear weapons development. Iran operates around 20,600 centrifuges, 13,355 of which are advanced, with a total enrichment capacity of roughly about 58,800 Separative Work

²⁹² The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2023*, edited by J.Hackett, London: Routledge, 2023, 324-328.

²⁹³ Global Firepower, "2025 Military Strength Ranking", *Global Firepower (GFP)*, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>; Regional Defence Review, "War Power: Iran", *Regional Defence Review 2025*. Accessible on <https://www.warpoweriran.com/>. Last Visit April 2025.

²⁹⁴ P.K. Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Status", *Congressional Research Service*, December 20, 2019, 1-2.

²⁹⁵ P.K. Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Tehran's Compliance with International Obligations", *Congressional Research Service*, January 16, 2025, 1-2.

²⁹⁶ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 279.

²⁹⁷ P.K. Kerr, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Status", *Congressional Research Service*, December 20, 2019, 3-4.

Units (SWU) per year. As of February 2025, Iran's enriched uranium stock totaled 8,294.4 kg, including 274.8 kg at 60%, 606.8 kg at 20%, and 3,655.4 kg at 5% (LEU). Iran has produced significant amounts of Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) for power generation, alongside Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) with natural levels enriched up to 60% at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant (FFEP) potentially convertible to enrich up to 90% in Weapons-Grade Uranium (WGU), enough for seven bombs in about three weeks. The large and growing uranium stockpile and advanced enrichment facilities in Iran indicate that Iran could swiftly produce nuclear weapons if it is willing to.²⁹⁸

- Cultural and Historical Influence:** Iran, historically known as Persia, is one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations, an ancient regional power, and a major influencing historical and cultural player in the Middle East and beyond. The Persian Empire, particularly the Achaemenid Empire under rulers like Great Cyrus and Great Darius (c. 550–330 BCE), was one of the most influential empires of antiquity that contributed to the current ongoing historical-cultural influence of the broader Middle Eastern identity. The Persian language, Farsi, has played a major role in literature, philosophy, and science throughout history and remained a dominant cultural force in the region. Renowned poets like Hafez, Saadi, Rumi, Ferdowsi, and Omar Khayyam are celebrated worldwide for their mystical, philosophical, and profound works. During the Islamic Golden Age, Persian scholars such as Avicenna and Al-Razi made significant contributions to various fields including astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and philosophy, shaping Islamic and global intellectual thought. While the legacy of ancient Persia still resonates, Iranian media and Soft Power, religious institutions, and cultural diplomacy help spread its influence. Iranian cinema has gained global prominence through directors like Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, and Asghar Farhadi, contributing to the cultural dialogue of the Middle East.²⁹⁹ Additionally, “Perso-Islamic” art and architecture, characterized by the exquisite tiles, domed structures, calligraphy, and geometric designs of Iranian mosques and palaces, have left a lasting cultural legacy in the region.³⁰⁰
- Religious and Ideological Dynamics:** In 1979, the Islamic Revolution of Iran was established under Ayatollah Khomeini’s leadership, which marked a profound shift and positioned Iran as the heartland of Shia Islam, which distinguishes it from many of its neighboring countries which are predominantly Sunni-majority. Islam spread to Iran after the Arab conquests, and until the sixteenth century, the region remained predominantly Sunni. In 1501, Shah Esmâ’il of the Safavids declared Shi’ism the state religion to legitimize his rule, unify his subjects, and resist Sunni neighbors. Within generations, Iran transformed into a Shi’ite-majority society.³⁰¹ In Iran's neighboring countries, from Pakistan to Türkiye and the Arab states bordering the Persian Gulf, especially in regions that were once part of Iranian territory, significant populations of Shiites of Iranian descent reside, contributing to the expansion of Iran's influence in these areas. In this regard, referring to Iran's sphere of influence among the region's Shia populations, former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stated that in most countries “Shiites are loyal to Iran more than

²⁹⁸ D. Albright, S. Burkhard, S. Faragasso, “Analysis of IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report: February 2025”, *Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS)*, March 3, 2025.

²⁹⁹ E.L. Daniel, A. Mahdi, *Culture and Customs of Iran*, Greenwood Press, 2006, 65-118.

³⁰⁰ A. Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, Yale University Press, 2017, 1-2, 85-86.

³⁰¹ E.L. Daniel, A. Mahdi, *Culture and Customs of Iran*, Greenwood Press, 2006, 44-52.

to their own countries.”³⁰² As the leading Shia-majority country, Iran considers itself the protector and a leader of Shia communities worldwide and it exerts significant cultural and political influence through religious diplomacy.³⁰³

- **Ties with Global Great Powers:** Iran has strong relationships with some global great powers like Russia and China, countering Western influence in the region. These relationships, along with Iran’s pragmatic dealings with various global powers, enhance Tehran’s status. These ties have also enabled Iran to counterbalance Western sanctions, particularly those imposed by the United States. Iran and Russia have forged a strategic alignment, with their partnership combining both tactical collaboration and broader strategic coordination. Tehran views Moscow as a key partner against Western pressure. At the same time, Iran’s “Look East”³⁰⁴ policy has placed China at the center of its long-term strategy. The 25-year cooperation agreement signed in 2021 envisions major investments in energy and infrastructure, while China’s mediation of the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement, enhanced its role as a regional power broker and reinforced Tehran’s eastward orientation, a trajectory further cemented by Iran’s full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS³⁰⁵ in 2023.

A recent key theme of Iran’s international relations is the “good neighborly policy,”³⁰⁶ formally adopted under President Raisi, which seeks to improve ties with Arab states, most notably Saudi Arabia, as a gateway to broader regional reconciliation. A significant shift was from prior tensions to the 2023 China-brokered Iran-Saudi Arabia normalization and rapprochement. Although Iran and Saudi Arabia, as regional great powers, have in recent years undertaken positive diplomatic steps to resume and normalize their relations, their fraught and competitive history, rooted in geopolitical, sectarian, and ideological rivalries, continues to cast a shadow over bilateral ties.³⁰⁷ However, persistent disputes over regional influence, Iran’s nuclear program, the U.S. military presence in the region, and the normalization with Israel remain significant challenges to the full restoration of mutual trust.³⁰⁸

- **Economic Resilience and Diversification:** Rather than the term ‘Economic Resilience’, the notion of ‘Iran’s Economic Power and Influence’ might have been more appropriate. However, under the decades of severe sanctions imposed on various pretexts, Iran’s economic power has declined, transforming the country from one of economic strength into one characterized primarily by economic resilience. Nevertheless, Iran has demonstrated considerable resilience in the face of sanctions and external pressures by

³⁰² Al-Arabiya, *Egyptian President Husni Mubarak: Shiites Are Loyal to Iran More Than to Their Own Countries*, [Video], Al-Arabiya Network, Dubai/Saudi Arabia, April 8, 2006. Accessible on <https://www.memri.org/tv/egyptian-president-husni-mubarak-shiites-are-loyal-iran-more-their-own-countries>; Al-Jazeera, *Mubarak’s Shia Remarks Stir Anger*, [Video], AL-JAZEERA, Dubai/Saudi Arabia, April 10, 2006. Accessible on <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2006/4/10/mubaraks-shia-remarks-stir-anger>. Last Visit September 2025.

³⁰³ A. Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, Yale University Press, 2017, 31-59.

³⁰⁴ Sh. Akbarzadeh, H. Azizi, *Iran in the Middle East: Building Bridges or Expanding Influence?*, DOSSIER, The Middle East Council on Global Affairs, April 2024.

³⁰⁵ BRICS is an acronym for the grouping of five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, established as a platform for cooperation in economics, politics, and development.

³⁰⁶ Sh. Akbarzadeh, H. Azizi, *Iran in the Middle East: Building Bridges or Expanding Influence?*, DOSSIER, The Middle East Council on Global Affairs, April 2024, 10.

³⁰⁷ F. Salimi, “Iran and Saudi Arabia Conflict Causes”, *Harmonius*, October 2023.

³⁰⁸ Sh. Akbarzadeh, H. Azizi, *Iran in the Middle East: Building Bridges or Expanding Influence?*, DOSSIER, The Middle East Council on Global Affairs, April 2024, 24-25.

adopting strategies of economic diversification and self-reliance. Beyond its traditional dependence on oil revenues, Iran has invested in non-oil sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and services to reduce vulnerability to global energy fluctuations. Domestic industries have been promoted through import substitution and protectionist measures, while regional trade partnerships and alternative financial mechanisms have helped cushion the impact of international restrictions. This diversification, combined with a relatively large internal market and state-led initiatives, has allowed Iran to sustain a degree of economic stability despite recurring crises.³⁰⁹ Despite sanctions, Iran has built alliances and maintained trade relationships with China, Russia, India, and several Middle Eastern countries, withstanding economic pressures and sanctions to date.

In addition to its vast energy resources, Iran possesses a range of commercial and economic assets that enhance its appeal as a potential trade hub and strategic partner. The country is one of the world's leading producers and exporters of high-value agricultural commodities, particularly nuts and pistachios, saffron, and dried fruits, which enjoy strong demand in global markets. Iran's fisheries and marine resources, including the world-renowned caviar from the Caspian Sea, pearls, and a wide variety of seafood from the Persian Gulf, further strengthen the country's export profile. Equally significant are Iran's cultural handicrafts and artisanal industries, most notably the production of handwoven carpets, which have long been recognized as symbols of craftsmanship and heritage.³¹⁰

Iran possesses the largest agriculturally cultivated area in the Middle East, encompassing approximately 17.5 million hectares, a significant portion of which is devoted to crops such as wheat, one of the earliest staples of the region, positioning Iran as one of the leading crop and wheat producers in the region. While production levels vary annually due to climatic fluctuations, particularly recurrent droughts, Iran's extensive cultivation capacity continues to sustain its strategic role in regional agricultural output and self-sufficiency policies.³¹¹ Together, these sectors provide Iran with comparative advantages that extend beyond hydrocarbons, positioning it not only as a unique commercial partner but also as a country capable of supporting economic diversification and long-term sustainable development.

Iran occupies a uniquely complex position in the Middle East. Its geopolitical location, vast energy reserves, military capabilities, history, inclusive culture, and religious authority grant it a multi-dimensional presence in regional affairs and position it as a key player in the emerging multipolar world order. In addition, through a combination of statecraft and proxy networks, Iran has maintained influence across conflict zones and politically fragile states, asserting itself as both a regional power and a challenger to the existing order. However, the scope and effectiveness of this influence has been constrained. International sanctions, economic mismanagement, and limited technological development have curbed Iran's potential to convert strategic assets into long-term regional dominance. While its military, cultural, and ideological reach remains significant, particularly among Shi'a populations worldwide, Tehran's capacity to shape the broader Middle East is often seen as more disruptive than constructive. In sum, Iran is a consequential power in

³⁰⁹ A. Jafari, E. Faghihi, "Beyond Oil: Strategic Tax and Investment Reforms for Iran's Economic Resilience and Diversification", *Business, Marketing, and Finance Open*, Vol.1, No.5, 64-89, 2024.

³¹⁰ World Trade Organization (WTO), *Trade Profiles on Iran*, 2023. Accessible on https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statistics_e/daily_update_e/trade_profiles/IR_e.pdf. Last Visit September 2025.

³¹¹ A. Puri-Mirza, "Agriculture in the Middle East: statistics & facts", *Statista*, Jul 22, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.statista.com/topics/10525/agriculture-in-the-middle-east/>. Last Visit September 2025.

the region, not because it leads through military force or economic or diplomatic strength, but because it strategically leverages its assets to contest rival influences, resist isolation, and assert its vision of regional order.

4. Saudi Arabia, an Economic Polar in the Middle East

Saudi Arabia is a large, arid country in the Middle East, covering about four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula land, which is known for its vast Saharas, including the Rub' al-Khali, the world's largest sand desert. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is often characterized as a traditional Arab-Islamic polity that blends the attributes of a tribal monarchy with those of an Islamic theocracy. Its governing structure rests on the long-standing partnership forged in the eighteenth century between the Al Saud ruling family and the religious Al ash-Sheikh establishment, a relationship that has historically provided mutual reinforcement of political and religious authority. At the apex of this system stands the king, a member of the Al Saud dynasty, who presides over an extensive hierarchy shaped by enduring tribal connections, expectations of loyalty, and reciprocal obligations. These social and political networks form the backbone of governance and enable the monarch to exercise decisive influence over both the kingdom's internal administration and its foreign relations. Saudi Arabia's strategic weight in the Middle East arises from its unique geographic position, vast natural resources, and institutional stability, which together have shaped its role as a dominant regional actor. The Kingdom's political structure, founded upon tribal cohesion and religious legitimacy, provides the basis for its enduring influence, while, its unparalleled hydrocarbon wealth underpins both its domestic prosperity and international standing. In the following sections, the underlying causes and factors behind Saudi Arabia's special position in the region will be examined in greater detail.

- **Geographic, Geostrategic, and Goeconomic Influence:** Geographically, the Kingdom occupies a strategic central position at the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, bordered by the Red Sea to the west and the Persian Gulf to the east, two of the most critical waterways for global energy transit. This location places the Kingdom at the intersection of three continents, Asia, Africa, and Europe, granting it a pivotal influensive role over regional and international trade, maritime navigation, security, and energy flows. Saudi Arabia's long coastlines, stretching over 2,600 kilometers, allow it to control critical ports such as Jeddah and Dammam, strengthening its logistical and commercial connectivity with global markets.

From a geostrategic and goeconomic perspective, Saudi Arabia's position provides significant leverage over both regional stability and global economic flows. The Kingdom sits close to key chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which a large portion of the world's oil shipments pass. Its proximity to these corridors enhances its geopolitical relevance and explains why Saudi Arabia is often regarded as the center of gravity in the Middle East. This position enables Riyadh to influence security dynamics in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Horn of Africa, while maintaining strategic partnerships with global powers such as the United States, China, and members of the European Union (EU).³¹² This geographic and geostrategic configuration has fostered Saudi Arabia's goeconomic power, allowing it to act as a bridge between

³¹² H. Kissinger, *World Order*, Penguin Press, 2014, 76-81.

energy-producing and energy-consuming regions. Its role as a reliable energy supplier, combined with massive investment initiatives like Vision 2030 and the Red Sea economic projects,³¹³ has transformed the Kingdom into a key node in global energy and trade networks. Thus, Saudi Arabia's geographic position not only defines its regional political influence but also secures its long-term geoeconomic centrality in the global system.

- **Oil and Energy Power:** “Saudi Arabia has the second largest proven oil reserves in the world, some 268 billion barrels, approximately 16 percent of the world’s proven reserves, not to mention significant potential for additional discoveries. The Al-Ghawār oil field (discovered in 1948) that transformed Saudi Arabia into a leading oil country, discovered in 1948 and in production since 1951, is the world’s largest, with an estimated 55 billion barrels produced and over 120 billion barrels in recoverable reserves. Another important discovery was the Saffāniyyah offshore field in the Persian Gulf in 1951, the third world's largest oil field overall and the largest offshore. Saudi Arabia has eight other supergiant oil fields, as well as many other Middle fields located in the great Arabian-Iranian basin.”³¹⁴ Saudi Arabia possesses 17% of the world’s proven petroleum reserves and controls the world's second-largest oil reserves, while is the largest oil exporter and one of the largest gas producers globally, with the hydrocarbon sector accounting for 70% of exports and 50% of Gross domestic product (GDP). Traditionally, Saudi Arabia is known as the world's oil supplier of last resort due to its vast and inexpensive reserves, which are available and accessible to produce oil as long as there is demand. “Saudi Arabia is the world’s largest oil exporter followed by Russia, Canada and Iraq. Oil might stand as a synonym for Saudi Arabia.”³¹⁵

The Saudi Arabian National Oil Company (ARAMCO) operates supergiant fields like Ghawar, the global largest conventional oil field, and Safaniya, the largest offshore oil field. Saudi ARAMCO is one of the most profitable companies globally that plays a crucial role in Saudi Arabia's economic and social development by focusing on non-combustion oil and gas activities and generating capital through the Public Investment Fund (PIF) and Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund (SWF) to support the country's diversification strategies. Saudi ARAMCO, the “Economic Star” of the Kingdom, significantly contributes to Saudi’s stability through its role in the global energy market, while Saudi Arabia itself is the 13th largest energy consumer globally. In addition, ARAMCO owns a 70% stake in Saudi’s petrochemicals giant, Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), the fourth largest chemical company worldwide, and is focused on expanding its chemical and downstream activities “to become a world player”. Furthermore, ARAMCO has traditionally been the sole gas provider for domestic consumption, particularly for water desalination and energy-intensive industries like steel and aluminum. It has been also looking to expand its trade and activities in the gas sector, particularly in the Liquefied natural gas (LNG) sector, especially in Asian markets.

³¹³ Red Sea Global, “Red Sea Global Master Plan Wins Seal of Approval”, January 22, 2019.

<https://www.redseaglobal.com/en/w/red-sea-project-master-plan-wins-seal-of-approval/>. Last Visit October 2025.

³¹⁴ J.P. Riva, P.G. McLeroy, “Status of the World Oil Supply: Petroleum in World Distribution of Oil”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, November 4, 2024. Accessible on <https://www.britannica.com/science/petroleum/Status-of-the-world-oil-supply>. Last Visit November 2024.

³¹⁵ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 68-69.

Between the years of 1980 to 2015, Saudi's oil demand grew by 6% annually, leading to oil production levels of approximately 10–11 mb/d during the 2010s to meet rising domestic and international demands. In Saudi's energy mix, oil makes up 63% and gas constitutes 37%. Power generation has also grown since 2005. Natural gas is increasingly significant for Saudi electricity generation as the adoption of renewable energy. The Kingdom leads the world in using crude oil for power generation. Saudi Arabia, due to its endowed potential in renewable energy sources, particularly solar, is also prompting the consideration of solar, nuclear, and wind energy development as spare energy reserves.³¹⁶ Thus, Saudi Arabia's control over vast hydrocarbon resources and its strategic energy policies have consolidated its position as both a global energy leader and a pivotal actor in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

- **Religious Heritage and Spiritual Economy:** Saudi Arabia's geostrategic value is further amplified by its religious centrality as the custodian of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. This status grants the Kingdom unparalleled soft power and legitimacy across the global Muslim community, reinforcing its leadership role in religious, cultural, and political spheres. The annual Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages attract millions of visitors worldwide, generating substantial economic activity through travel, hospitality, and related services, which contribute significantly to domestic revenue. This spiritual authority provides Saudi Arabia with a unique source of soft power that complements its energy-based influence. Beyond economics, this spiritual authority enables Saudi Arabia to project influence across the Muslim world, shaping regional policies, mediating conflicts, and cultivating strategic alliances based on religious legitimacy. Consequently, the Kingdom's geographic and geoeconomic foundations, when combined with its religious heritage, establish a dual identity as both a religious and energy hub, reinforcing its ability to exercise power and influence beyond its borders and secure a central economic role regionally and globally.³¹⁷
- **Economic Diversification and Vision 2030:** Although petroleum is also predominant and influencing in the social development and political affairs in Saudi Arabia, since economic diversification is a top priority for sustainable development and enhancing socio-political stability in Saudi Arabia, in 2016, the Kingdom published the "Vision 2030", a document of comprehensive strategies in numerous fields aimed at reducing the country's reliance upon oil revenues and promoting sustainable development. The Vision 2030 outlines ambitious targets and objectives across various sectors, including a significant expansion of renewable energy capacity and efforts to diversify economies through technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI), tourism, and economic reform initiatives such as the National Transformation Program (NTP) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) strategy.³¹⁸ Saudi Arabia aims to be a global leader in ICT, focusing on digital content, telecommunications, and smart industries.³¹⁹ Currently, Saudi's ICT market is the largest

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, 69-78.

³¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report: Saudi Arabia 2023*. Office of International Religious Freedom, 2023. Accessible on <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/>. Last Visit October 2025.

³¹⁸ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Vision 2030, April 2016. Accessible on www.vision2030.gov.sa. Last Visit May 2025.

³¹⁹ Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, *Saudi Arabi: Leadership of Digital Economy in the Middle East, Saudi Vision 2030*, 2023, 17-19.

in the MENA region, valued at approximately \$44.2 billion, and is experiencing significant growth.

- **Social Transformation and Regional Influence:** Saudi Arabia's recent social transformation, as the Heart of the Islamic World, represents a significant evolution within the broader Muslim world. As the birthplace of Islam and custodian of its holiest sites, the Kingdom's modernization efforts, particularly under Vision 2030, resonate far beyond its borders. Moderating religious interpretations, expanding and empowering women's participation, liberalizing the cultural sphere, diversifying the workforce, and advancing modernization through education and innovation collectively signal a redefinition of social norms within an Islamic framework. These reforms project a new image of Saudi Arabia as a modernizing force at the center of the Islamic world, shaping new perceptions of social and cultural change across the broader Middle East. By balancing religious legitimacy with modernization, the Kingdom reinforces its position not only as an economic and political power but also as a source of soft power, a cultural and moral reference point for the wider Muslim community.³²⁰

In sum, Saudi Arabia's multidimensional strength rests upon the intersection of its geographic centrality, geostrategic leverage, hydrocarbon wealth, and religious authority, all of which sustain its pivotal role in the Middle East and beyond. Through Vision 2030 and its ongoing social transformations, the Kingdom is actively redefining the parameters of power in the region, from an oil-dependent state to a diversified, innovation-driven, and globally connected economy. By coupling modernization with cultural and religious authenticity, Saudi Arabia continues to consolidate its identity as both the spiritual heart and economic pole of the Islamic and Arab world, positioning itself as a decisive actor in shaping the future geopolitical and socio-economic landscape of the Middle East.

5. Türkiye, a Rising Great Power in the Middle East

Türkiye is gradually evolving from a traditional Eurasian middle power, historically aligned with Western institutions, into an autonomous regional pole balancing between the West and the Middle East. This evolution transformed Türkiye into both a regional challenger and a model of adaptive middle-power behavior amid systemic transformations. Although Türkiye's primary strategy of Europeanisation linked its Western identity to regional engagement through economic partnerships, participation in NATO, and EU accession talks, the collapse of the Arab uprisings and tensions with the U.S. and the EU, especially after the 2016 coup attempt, redirected Ankara's focus toward strategic autonomy. This reorientation manifested in transactional relations, diversification of alliances (notably with Russia and China), and a growing presence in conflict theatres such as Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus.³²¹ Today, Türkiye's ascent reflects the convergence of its historical legacy, modernization experience, and strategic geography, reinforced by its growing economic and military capabilities. These elements collectively underpin its

³²⁰ A. Wisdorff, *Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), PE 777.922, September 2025. Accessible on [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/777922/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)777922_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/777922/EPRS_BRI(2025)777922_EN.pdf). Last Visit October 2025.

³²¹ B.J.C. McKercher, *The Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Routledge, 2nd Edition, 2022, 171-178.

ambition to act as a regional great power and a central pole within a multipolar Middle East, an actor capable of shaping regional alignments and contributing to any future framework of Middle Eastern integration. Following this overview, Türkiye's significance in its rise as a regional great power will be examined in more detail under the subsequent sub-sections.

- **Geostrategic Crossroads and Regional Balancing:** Türkiye's growing prominence in the Middle East reflects the cumulative outcome of its historical and cultural evolution, strategic geography, transit position, and multidimensional state-building experience. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Türkiye has long viewed itself as both a linking bridge and a balancing power between civilizational and political spheres, serving as a strategic path connecting the Middle East directly to Europe. Türkiye's geographical position at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East grants it exceptional strategic leverage. Sitting astride key trade routes, energy corridors, and security lines, Türkiye functions as both a bridge and a buffer among competing regional and global powers. Its early "zero problems with neighbors" policy expanded soft power through trade and cooperation, while growing economic and military capacity later produced a more assertive, security-oriented posture. In an era of multipolarity, Türkiye seeks strategic autonomy, positioning itself as a stabilizing force and regional pole grounded in modern governance, cultural identity, and economic dynamism.³²² Despite their geographic proximity and overlapping economic and security interests, efforts at harmonization between Türkiye, Europe, and the Middle East have so far remained limited, due to structural asymmetries, divergent political systems, and a legacy of historical mistrust, compounded by persistent authoritarianism, unresolved conflicts, and the lack of strong regional institutionalism in the Middle East.³²³ Its growing involvement in regional conflicts, energy diplomacy, and humanitarian initiatives has further consolidated its role as a key regional stakeholder. In this strategic geography, Türkiye acts as both a bridge and a balancer, converting its transit position and multidimensional diplomacy into tools of regional influence and equilibrium management.
- **Historical Heritage and Cultural Influence:** Türkiye's historical depth and cultural legacy form the foundation of its contemporary strategic posture. Rooted in the experience of the Ottoman Empire, Türkiye inherited a civilizational memory that continues to influence its political and cultural identity and regional outlook. Its transformation from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire into a modern, industrial, and regionally assertive state has produced a unique capacity for political adaptation and strategic autonomy. This combination of inherited imperial legacies, modern state institutions, and an expanding economic and military base has enabled Türkiye to assume a central position in shaping regional politics. The consolidation of the Republic in the early twentieth century laid the institutional and ideological foundations for Türkiye's later rise. Through modernization, secular reforms, and the establishment of a strong centralized state, the country developed the political stability and administrative coherence that distinguish it from many of its regional counterparts. Drawing on this historical continuity and cultural influence, Türkiye projects a multifaceted identity that blends Western institutionalism with Middle Eastern

³²² A. Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.10, No.1, 77-96, 2008.

³²³ B. Aras, S. Bıçakçı, "Europe, Turkey and the Middle East: Is harmonisation possible?", *East European Quarterly*, No.3, 367-381, September 2006.

social and religious familiarity, positioning it as a bridge between civilizations and a model for regional renewal.

- **Modernization and the Eastern-Western Synthesis:** Türkiye's modernization experience and geopolitical orientation have produced a unique synthesis between Western institutionalism and Eastern regional identity. Its strategic ascent owes much to its ability to balance Western alignment with an increasingly autonomous regional role. Türkiye's contemporary foreign policy vision reflects a deliberate effort to transform its unique historical and geographical position into strategic influence across multiple regions. Türkiye increasingly defines itself as a central power linking Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Pursuing multidimensional and autonomous diplomacy, Türkiye balances Western institutional engagement with deeper regional outreach. Its modernization experience and geopolitical orientation have produced a unique synthesis between Western institutionalism and Eastern regional identity. Türkiye's participation in Western institutions such as NATO and the Council of Europe ensures its access to security and economic partnerships, while domestic development policies cultivated an independent industrial and technological base. Over time, this dual orientation evolved into a flexible diplomacy that allows Türkiye to pursue both Western and Middle Eastern interests. This balancing posture has become more pronounced in the twenty-first century, as Ankara engages simultaneously with the European Union, the United States, Russia, and Middle Eastern states.³²⁴
- **Goeconomic Dynamism and Global Connectivity:** Industrialization and economic restructuring, initially state-led and later market-oriented, strengthened national capacity and created the material foundations for a dynamic foreign policy. As Türkiye diversified its economy, invested in infrastructure, and expanded its export markets, it gradually developed the means to project influence beyond its borders. Economically, Türkiye's rising industrial base, energy transit role, and participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative reinforced its geopolitical weight. Türkiye has achieved significant economic growth in recent decades. The "Asia Anew" strategy, launched in 2019 deepened economic integration with East and Southeast Asia, expanding Türkiye's influence beyond the Middle East. These multidimensional engagements support its emergence as a regional pole, capable of shaping regional balances between Western and Eurasian blocs.
- **Military Modernization and Defense Power:** Türkiye's military and defense evolution, "as a top ten global military power", has been central to its transformation into a regional great power, reflecting a combination of modernization, strategic autonomy, and operational experience.³²⁵ While Türkiye's early Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) era foreign policy was grounded in the concept of "zero problems with neighbors" and economic soft power, the post-2010 trajectory shifted toward assertive realism and militarised diplomacy.³²⁶ Over the past two decades, through a nationalization drive, Ankara has significantly modernized its armed forces, shifting from reliance on foreign suppliers toward a strategy of indigenous production and technological autonomy. This transformation has been driven by the development of advanced defense technologies,

³²⁴ F. Ahmad, *The making of modern Turkey*, The Making of the Middle East Series, London: Routledge, 1993, 15-101, 181-227.

³²⁵ Global Firepower, "2025 Military Strength Ranking", *Global Firepower (GFP)*, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>. Last Visit November 2025.

³²⁶ B.J.C. McKercher, *The Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Routledge, 2nd Edition, 2022, 171-178.

including drones, armored vehicles, naval platforms, missile systems, and next-generation fighter aircraft. These advancements have enhanced Türkiye's capacity to act independently while maintaining interoperability within NATO frameworks. This self-reliance grants Ankara greater freedom to pursue its geopolitical interests, reducing dependency on Western supply chains while enhancing its influence across the Middle East. Turkish-made defense systems, such as the Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı UAVs, MilGem warships, and Hisar air-defense systems, have demonstrated growing operational effectiveness in Syria, Libya, the South Caucasus, and the Eastern Mediterranean, projecting Türkiye's military credibility and expanding its defense export profile across multiple regional theaters. This active military presence complements Ankara's diplomatic initiatives and economic engagements, reinforcing its role as a stabilizing yet assertive regional actor. At the same time, Türkiye's defense posture reflects a deliberate balance between Western alliances and autonomous regional decision-making, underlining its pursuit of strategic flexibility.³²⁷ Taken together, military modernization, operational experience, defense industrialization, and strategic autonomy position Türkiye not only as one of the central pillars of regional security but also as a potential security anchor for any future framework of Middle Eastern integration. Its armed forces, integrated with economic strength, geostrategic leverage, and cultural influence, form a crucial component of Türkiye's capacity to shape both regional alignments and broader multipolar dynamics.

In sum, these dynamics illustrate the multifaceted nature of Türkiye's regional power and its evolving role within the Middle East's strategic architecture. Türkiye's rise as a great power in the Middle East represents the convergence of its historical depth, economic vitality, and strategic pragmatism. It is a state that combines Western-derived institutions with the Middle East's regional legitimacy and cultural proximity, enabling it to navigate the complexities of a fragmented and competitive regional order toward integration. Its expanding economic reach, diplomatic activism, and assertive security posture position Türkiye as one of the principal poles in the emerging multipolar Middle East, an actor capable of influencing both regional alignments and the broader architecture of global power. This evolution underlines Türkiye's growing capacity not only to influence regional security and economic dynamics but also to serve as a foundational pillar in any future Middle Eastern integration framework. Its trajectory exemplifies the transition from middle power to regional great power within an emerging multipolar order.³²⁸ Overall, Türkiye's assertive regional policies, anchored in economic resilience, military capability, and strategic diversification, position it as both a pivotal actor in the Middle East and a key potential member or leader in any future framework of regional integration, such as a prospective Middle East Union.

6. Egypt, an Enduring Pillar in the Middle East

Egypt has long been one of the Middle East's central powers, shaping the region's political, cultural, and military dynamics. Its enduring influence stems from the convergence of historical continuity, strategic geography, and demographic strength. Historically, Egypt's largely stable and unaltered borders since the Pharaonic era attest to its territorial integrity and reflect a rare

³²⁷ Ç. Kurç, S. Egeli, A. Mevlütoğlu, S. Güvenç, "Türkiye's Defence Industry: Which Way Forward?", *The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Center for Foreign Policy and Peace Research*, November 2024; A.İ.A. Özer, *The Rise of the Turkish Defense Industry*, SETA, 2019, 11-127.

³²⁸ B. Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961.

civilizational depth that underpins its regional significance. Its ability to adapt to shifting regional and global dynamics while maintaining internal coherence has ensured that Egypt remains a lasting and influential force in Middle Eastern affairs. Egypt's role extends beyond its borders, encompassing strategic, cultural, ideological, demographic, military, and economic dimensions that collectively define its status as an enduring pillar of the region. The following section examines these multifaceted aspects of Egypt's influence in greater detail.

- **Geostrategic and Geoeconomic Significance:** Egypt plays a complex regional role as a state strategically positioned at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, serving as a critical bridge between continents and a gatekeeper of global trade flows. Its geography, anchored by the Nile River and the Suez Canal, grants Egypt an enduring relevance in regional and global politics. The Suez Canal, through which nearly 12 percent of global maritime trade and 8 percent of the world's liquefied natural gas (LNG) transit, functions not only as an economic lifeline but also as a strategic lever linking the global trade routes, connecting the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean and Atlantic. Control over this chokepoint affords Cairo considerable geopolitical leverage in both regional security and international navigation regimes.

Beyond its maritime importance, Egypt's geographic position connects multiple strategic theaters: the Arab world, the African continent, the Red Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean. This multidimensional geography enables Egypt to balance overlapping affiliations and diversify its partnerships with Europe, Maghreb, the Gulf, and Sub-Saharan Africa. This overlapping affiliations with the Arab world, Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Nile Basin, allow Egypt to develop its influential partnerships, while the Suez Canal further amplifies its strategic importance as a global trade artery and a regional security hub. The discovery and development of East Mediterranean gas reserves have further elevated Egypt's role as a regional energy hub. The operationalization of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in Cairo and the expansion of the Idku and Damietta LNG terminals have positioned Egypt as the principal exporter of re-gasified LNG to Europe amid global energy disruptions. The government's Suez Canal Economic Zone (SCZone) initiative seeks to transform the canal corridor into a logistics and industrial hub linking Asian manufacturing chains to European markets. Meanwhile, Egypt's partnerships with Gulf countries, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and the EU's Global Gateway reflect its centrality in evolving global connectivity patterns.

Overall, Egypt's geostrategic value stems not only from its control of vital sea lanes but also from its emerging role as a regional energy and logistics hub connecting the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Its geopolitical strength lies in its ability to translate geography into strategic influence, balancing between its African depth, Arab identity, and Mediterranean outreach, a position that continues to define its enduring significance in the Middle East's evolving order.³²⁹

- **Cultural and Historical Influence:** Egypt stands as one of the oldest and most influential civilizations in human history, its cultural and intellectual heritage profoundly shaping both regional and global narratives. From the Pharaonic legacy that symbolizes statehood and

³²⁹ A. Bassou, *The Geopolitics of Egypt: Strengths, Opportunities, Constraints and Vulnerabilities*, Policy Brief, OCP Policy Center, PB-16/20, June 2016; S. Roussos, "Egypt's Economic and Political Challenges in 2023: Strategic Realalignments Amidst Debt and Human Rights Concerns", *Institute of Studies for Politics and Democracy (ISPD)*, The ISPD EastMed Geostrategic Outlook Series, Analysis Paper No.2, April 2023; P. Platan, J. Teal, *Comparative Geopolitics: A Geopolitical Analysis of Egypt*, Groupe ESC, IBP 2, Spring 2001.

continuity, to the Arab renaissance (Nahda) and the postcolonial struggle for independence, Egypt's intellectual life has continually redefined the region's political consciousness. Hence, Egypt is portrayed as the historic heart of the evolution of Arab identity and the cradle of modern Arab political trajectory, soft power, and intellectual leadership, embodying the broader struggle of the Arab world between authoritarian stability and democratic transformation, and its evolution continues to shape regional politics. As one of the oldest nation-states in the world, Egypt represents a unique blend of civilizational depth and modern statehood, serving as both a political anchor and a cultural beacon for the Arab community worldwide. Cairo, often described as the “cultural capital of the Arab world”, remains a center of education, media, and artistic production, home to Al-Azhar University, one of Islam's oldest and most respected institutions, and Egyptian cinema, which for decades has dominated Arabic-language popular culture.

Throughout the twentieth century, Egypt's cultural and political influence transcended its borders. Under Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt became the symbolic core of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialist movements, inspiring pan-Arab solidarity and modernization efforts across the region. Egyptian writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals, ranging from Taha Hussein and Naguib Mahfouz to modern Arab journalists and artists, have shaped Arab literature, critical thought, and cultural reform. Today, Egypt's unique combination of ancient civilizational depth, modern cultural diplomacy, and political centrality, through its educational networks, media presence, and religious institutions, projects soft power and normative influence across the Arab and Islamic worlds and has made it a continuous source of inspiration and identity formation within the Middle East. Its ability to merge heritage with modernity and tradition with reform, sustains its enduring role as the cultural and intellectual pillar of the Arab world.³³⁰

- **Ideological Role:** In addition to cultural influence, Egypt has long projected ideological leadership across the Middle East and North Africa, reflecting its position as a producer and arbiter of regional ideas, shaping the political and intellectual currents across successive eras. In the modern era, Egypt's ideological leadership reached its peak under Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose revolutionary discourse of Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism, and Arab socialism positioned Cairo as the ideological heart of the Arab world. Through state institutions, transnational media, and education, Egypt projected a unifying vision that shaped Arab political identity and inspired movements for independence and social reform across the region. Following the decline of pan-Arabism after 1967, Egypt reoriented its ideological posture under Anwar al-Sadat, emphasizing state pragmatism, economic liberalization (infitah), and the pursuit of peace with Israel. This shift symbolized a broader transformation from revolutionary populism to pragmatic nationalism, reflecting Egypt's adaptation to new geopolitical realities and its aspiration for stability and modernization. Under Hosni Mubarak, this pragmatism evolved into a security-based model of authoritarian resilience, balancing internal control with regional cooperation, Western alignment, and reliance on external support, while maintaining Egypt's image as a stabilizing force.

³³⁰ J. Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 45-84, 203-222; D. Butter, *Egypt and the Gulf: Allies and Rivals*, Research Paper, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, London, April 2020; E.N. Rózsa, “A Nation State with Multiple Identities: Egypt in the Middle East Transition”, *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, Vol.8, No.3, 589-614, Summer 2024.

At the same time, Egypt remains a central arena for the ideological contest between secular nationalism and political Islam. The emergence and endurance of the Muslim Brotherhood made Egypt a focal point for the global Islamic revival, influencing political and religious movements across the Arab world. The state's long-standing engagement with Islamist ideology, whether through confrontation, cooptation, or moderation, reflects the broader regional struggle between tradition and reform, religion and governance, and modernization and authenticity. In the post-2011 period, following the uprisings and the subsequent reassertion of military authority, Egypt has sought to redefine its ideological identity and national dignity once more. The government now promotes a discourse of "religious renewal" (tajdid al-khitab al-dini), anchored in moderate Islam, national unity, and developmental modernity, aiming to counter extremism and preserve state legitimacy. This synthesis of secular governance, religious moderation, and national resilience illustrates Egypt's enduring role as an ideological model for the wider Arab world. This state continues to shape how regional societies reconcile faith, authority, and reform.³³¹

- **Demographic and Societal Weight:** Egypt's demographic magnitude, as the most populous country in the region, forms a cornerstone of its regional influence. With a population exceeding 110 million, Egypt is the most populous Arab country and the third most populous in Africa, granting it substantial political and cultural leverage within the Middle East. Its youthful demographic structure, with a majority under 35, creates both opportunities for labor-driven growth and challenges in employment, education, and resource management.³³² This dense population sustains Egypt's role as a driving force in regional labor markets, migration dynamics, and cultural production. Although Egypt's multifaceted identity also presents both opportunities and challenges, despite so many historical changes in fortune, Egypt has remained a critical pillar of Arab politics, its stability, leadership, and vast population (as the most populous Arab state) giving it enduring significance. Domestically, it underpins the state's legitimacy and social cohesion, while regionally, it amplifies Egypt's voice in Arab, Middle Eastern, and African affairs, reinforcing its position as a societal anchor and a demographic power within the Middle East.³³³
- **Military Strength and Security Role:** Egypt's military has long been the backbone of its statehood and a defining element of its regional influence. It possesses one of the largest and most capable armed forces in the Middle East and the strongest in Africa, serving as a cornerstone of both national and regional security. This military dominance, however, limits democratic development and sustains a "praetorian state", where politics and security are inseparable. Egypt's military has historically functioned not only as the guardian of state sovereignty but also as a central political actor shaping Egypt's governance and foreign policy. With a significant manpower, exceeding 450,000 active personnel and extensive reserves, Egypt maintains advanced land, air, modern equipment,

³³¹ E.N. Rózsa, "A Nation State with Multiple Identities: Egypt in the Middle East Transition", *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, Vol.8, No.3, 589-614, Summer 2024; H. Al Khalifa, *The role of the Muslim Brotherhood the post January 25 Egyptian political system*, Master's Thesis, American University in Cairo, AUC Knowledge Fountain, 2016. Accessible on <https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/557>. Last Visit November 2025.

³³² World Population View. Accessible on <https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/the-middle-east-population>. Last Visit November 2025.

³³³ M. Kamal, "The Middle East According to Egypt: Egypt Faces Challenges and Opportunities as the Government Charts a New Regional Role for the Arab World's Most Populous Nation", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 70-77, 2018.

and naval capabilities, supported by diversified partnerships with the United States, Russia, and, increasingly, France and China.³³⁴ Its control over the Suez Canal and access to the Red Sea give Cairo strategic leverage in maritime security and global trade protection. Regionally, Egypt plays a stabilizing role through counterterrorism operations in Sinai, mediation in Gaza, and participation in Arab and African security frameworks. The armed forces' institutional strength and enduring legitimacy have ensured Egypt's position as a military cornerstone of the Arab world and a decisive actor in shaping the Middle East's balance of power. This capacity underpins Egypt's stabilizing role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where it acts as the principal Arab mediator, and in counterterrorism operations in Sinai and border regions. Balancing complex regional relations, maintaining peace with Israel while affirming Arab solidarity, and cooperating with Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) while differing over Syria and Iran, has required nuanced diplomacy. Despite persistent economic and social pressures, Egypt's strategic geography, regional partnerships, and deterrence capability ensure its continued role as the Arab world's security anchor and a pivotal stabilizing force in shaping the balance of power across the Middle East and North Africa.³³⁵

- **Economic Power and Regional Integration Potential:** Economically, Egypt's integration into maritime, energy, and trade networks has strengthened its geoeconomic weight and positioned it as a pivotal economic hub linking Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. The Suez Canal remains a vital source of national revenue and global connectivity, accounting for billions in annual income and nearly 12 percent of world maritime trade. Egypt's growing role as an energy hub, facilitated by the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) headquartered in Cairo and the reactivation of its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminals at Idku and Damietta, has elevated its strategic partnership with Europe and regional neighbors amid global energy realignments. The Suez Canal Economic Zone (SCZone) serves as a cornerstone of Egypt's Vision 2030, attracting foreign investment, fostering industrialization, and linking Asian production with European markets. Through diversified cooperation with Gulf countries, the EU, and Asian partners under China's Belt and Road Initiative, Egypt seeks not only to enhance its economic resilience but also to promote regional integration by transforming its geographic position into a platform for interregional trade and development.³³⁶

³³⁴ Global Firepower, "2025 Military Strength Ranking", *Global Firepower (GFP)*, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>. Last Visit November 2025.

³³⁵ G. Audit, "Egypt and the Middle East Crisis", *Labour Monthly*, 276-279, 1956; D. Butter, *Egypt and the Gulf: Allies and Rivals*, Research Paper, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, London, April 2020; E.N. Rózsa, "A Nation State with Multiple Identities: Egypt in the Middle East Transition", *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, Vol.8, No.3, 589-614, Summer 2024; M. Kamal, "The Middle East According to Egypt: Egypt Faces Challenges and Opportunities as the Government Charts a New Regional Role for the Arab World's Most Populous Nation", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 70-77, 2018.

³³⁶ Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (Egypt), *Egypt's Vision 2030: The National Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Egypt's Updated Vision 2030, 2023. Accessible on https://mped.gov.eg/Files/Egypt_Vision_2030_EnglishDigitalUse.pdf; and [https://www.greenpolicyplatform.org/sites/default/files/downloads/policy-database/Egypt%20Vision%202030%20\(English\).pdf](https://www.greenpolicyplatform.org/sites/default/files/downloads/policy-database/Egypt%20Vision%202030%20(English).pdf); S. Frederick, *Sustainable Development Goals Report: Egypt 2030*, Pardee Center for International Futures and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), November 2018. Accessible on <https://korbel.du.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-Egypt-2030.pdf>. Last Visit November 2025.

Egypt's multifaceted power, including geostrategic, cultural, ideological, demographic, military, and economic capabilities, continues to anchor its role as a resilient yet contested pillar of the Middle East. Its stability, historic depth, and capacity to adapt to shifting regional and global dynamics have preserved its influence amid transformation. By translating geography into strategic leverage and heritage into soft power, Egypt sustains its position as both a stabilizing force and a bridge linking Africa, Asia, and Europe. Despite Egypt's military powers, it advocates a diplomacy centered on political solutions rather than military intervention, viewing state reconstruction as essential to ending regional disorders and instability. It combats terrorism through institutional strengthening and comprehensive strategies while engaging in active mediation across regional conflicts, including Syria, Libya, Palestine, Lebanon, and is reportedly involved confidentially in U.S.-Iran nuclear discussions. Through pragmatic diplomacy and support for multilateral initiatives, Egypt has reaffirmed its role as a stabilizing actor and guardian of state sovereignty, rejection of sectarian fragmentation, and regional order. Toward the evolving regional order, Egypt's enduring centrality remains indispensable to any vision of Middle Eastern balance, integration, and renewal.

7. Conclusion: Toward Understanding the Middle East's Capabilities and Strengths

Chapter III has highlighted the diverse capabilities and strategic strengths of the Middle Eastern states that underpin the feasibility of regional integration. Commonalities in religion, language, culture, political structures, economic frameworks, and legal systems provide a foundational basis for cooperation, while shared natural and human resources, ranging from hydrocarbons and minerals to tourism and youthful populations, offer tangible assets for collective development.

Middle Eastern individual states, including the Persian Gulf countries, Türkiye, and Egypt, demonstrate unique but complementary strengths. Iran wields geopolitical leverage, energy resources, military power, cultural, and ideological influence. Saudi Arabia combines religious authority with economic might and modernization initiatives. Türkiye balances cultural-historical heritage with geostrategic and geoeconomic dynamism. Egypt contributes stability, regional mediation capacity, and economic integration potential. Collectively, these states form a mosaic of political, economic, military, and cultural assets that, if aligned through shared vision and cooperation, could provide the basis for a durable Middle East Union. Toward the larger goal of regional integration, understanding these capabilities emphasizes both the opportunities and the challenges: while historical rivalries, ideological differences, and economic asymmetries remain, the convergence of common interests, resources, and strategic positions provides a foundation for collective resilience, development, and a more balanced regional order.

CHAPTER IV

OBSTACLES TO THE MIDDLE EAST UNION FORMATION AND STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THEM

This chapter examines the barriers to forming the Middle East Union including the Lewis Doctrine that argues how the Middle East is inherently fragmented and prone to division, and the unification challenges such as hostility among the region's indigenous-social forces, sectarian divides among Shia, Sunni, Wahhabi, Alawites, and ethnic rivalries among Arabs, Persians, Kurds, Turks, and external efforts and their Propaganda such as Arabophobia, Islamophobia, Shiittophobia, and Iranophobia to prevent the region's unity, and the direct presence of foreign forces in the region and ultimately proposes strategies to overcome these obstacles.

1. Bernard Lewis' Breakdown Narrative (Lewis Doctrine)

Bernard Lewis (1916–2018) was a prominent British-American Jewish orientalist and scholar specializing in the history of Islamic societies. Throughout his prolific career, he authored numerous books and articles addressing various aspects of Islamic history, argued that the unity of the Islamic Ummah ought to be undermined, and advocated for the fragmentation of large Middle Eastern countries into smaller entities, thereby reducing their power and better serving Western interests. This strategy for the disintegration of the Middle East, referred to as the “New Middle East Theory”, has been one of the central themes reflected throughout Lewis's writing career. By proposing strategies of Westernization and fragmentation of the Middle East based on the indicators recognized by the Westerners, such as nationalism and democratic governance, as well as facilitating the establishment and fortification of Israel and the Jewish presence within the region, he intends to deconstruct the existing geopolitical structure and create a balance of power among the nations, as well as among the diverse religious groups of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity within the area. In this context, Lewis posits that Western nations, particularly the United States, should endeavor to diminish the influence of both internal and external hegemonies in the region, including those of Russia, Iran, and Iraq. While, throughout his body of work, he exhibits a consistent bias and a determination to assert the preeminence of the West over the East, initially proposed the theory of the fragmentation of the Middle East through historiographical methods, and encouraged Western intervention to incite chaos in the region and pose a challenge to the Islamic Ummah. Lewis has been identified as one of the initiators and proponents behind the United States military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as confrontations with Iran, pan-

Arabism movements, and the bolstering of Israel's actions that align with a broader strategy aimed at fragmenting the Middle East.³³⁷

One of Lewis's most important contributions, which explicitly mentions his solution for the fragmentation of the Middle East, is articulated in his article titled "The Map of the Middle East"³³⁸ published in 1989, as well as in his subsequent book, *Multiple Identities of the Middle East*,³³⁹ released in 1998. In these writings, he provides a comprehensive analysis of his proposed solutions to address the fragmentation within the region. In his analysis, Lewis examines the formation of Western countries, emphasizing their demarcation based on a common language and ethnic characteristics, as well as the matching name of the country with these indicators. For instance, he cites France, where the Frankish lineage coincides and speaks the French language; or England, where the English language aligns with the English people. Additionally, he references the cases of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, noting that these states dissolved due to the absence of these defining indicators, subsequently leading to the emergence of smaller states characterized by such markers.³⁴⁰ He suggests the same indicators for the countries of the Middle East,³⁴¹ such as the plan to form Kurdistan with Kurds speaking the Kurdish language, which aligns with the broader strategy of promoting this regional fragmentation. Lewis by referring to the racial conflict between Kurds and Arabs in Iraq, and expressing the process of forming Kurdistan as the first Kurdish country with a Kurdish government, supported the legitimacy of this act, and by encouraging the Kurds of Iran, Türkiye, and Iraq to have an independent country, believes that this goal has been delayed and postponed until now due to the opposition of Iran, Türkiye, and Iraq:

"In Iraq, alone among the eastern Arab states, the position is complicated by the presence of an important non-Arab minority, the Kurds. At one time it seemed that Kurds and Arabs might live together in an Iraqi nation, ... That hope, and the tolerant atmosphere that encouraged it, dwindled with the rise of ethnic nationalism, which affected both parties."³⁴² "Although the Turks, no doubt because of their past experience, have remained cautious and defensive, mainly concerned with a possible threat from Kurdish northern Iraq, the Iranians have become more active, especially since Iran's Islamic Revolution entered a new militant and expansionist phase. ... At the same time, issues of national identity are becoming significant. Non-Arab ethnic minorities such as the Kurds in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey ... Saddam('s) ... control did not extend to a significant part of northern Iraq, where a local Kurdish regime in effect became an autonomous government. This region was largely, although not entirely, Kurdish and included most of the Kurdish region of Iraq. For the first time in modern history, there was a Kurdish country with a Kurdish government at least in practice, if not in theory. This posed problems not only for the government of

³³⁷ S.A. Mirhelli, A. Montazerlghayem, M. PirMoradian, "An Analysis of Bernard Lewis's Historical Notion of the New Middle East [تبيين انگاره تاريخی برنارد لوئیس در ارتباط با نظریه خاورمیانه جدید]", *Historical Sciences Studies*, 2020, 176-177. [Persian]

³³⁸ B. Lewis, "The Map of the Middle East: A Guide for the Perplexed", *The American Scholar*, Vol. 58, 1989, 19-38.

³³⁹ B. Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1998.

³⁴⁰ B. Lewis, "The Map of the Middle East: A Guide for the Perplexed", *The American Scholar*, Vol.58, 1989, 19-20.

³⁴¹ B. Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1998, 59-65.

³⁴² B. Lewis, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 1994, 94-95.

Iraq but also for those of some neighboring countries with significant Kurdish population notably Turkey.”³⁴³

Lewis posits that one of the most effective factors in the fall of the Ottoman Empire was the emergence of the uprisings among various nationalities and ethnicities that shared common linguistic, cultural, religious, and identity ties.³⁴⁴ He proposes the same Propaganda to disintegrate the Middle East. In the same direction, Engdahl addresses the American conspiracies in Iran as follows:

“Their scheme was based on detailed study of the phenomenon of Islamic Fundamentalism as presented by British Islamic expert Dr. Bernard Lewis, then on assignment at Princeton University in the United States. Lewis’ scheme, unveiled in the May 1979 Bilderberg meeting in Austria, endorsed the radical Muslim Brotherhood³⁴⁵ movement behind Khomeini, to promote balkanization of the entire Muslim Near East along tribal and religious lines. Lewis argued that the West should encourage autonomous groups such as the Kurds, Armenians, Lebanese Maronites, Ethiopian Copts, Azerbaijani Turks, and so forth. The chaos would spread in what he termed an “Arc of Crisis,” which would spill over into the Muslim regions of the Soviet Union.”³⁴⁶

In reference to the same meeting held in May 1979 at Bilderberg in Austria, where Bernard Lewis was an attendee, Dreyfuss also discussed the following points:

“Lewis’s plan calls for the balkanization and fragmentation of Brzezinski’s ‘Arc of Crisis’ along defined ethnic, tribal, and religious sectarian lines. It was, not surprisingly, worked out with the aid of Israeli intelligence.

According to Lewis, the British should encourage rebellions for national autonomy by the minorities such as the Lebanese Maronites, the Kurds, the Armenians, Druze, Baluchis, Azerbaijani Turks, Syrian Alawites, the Copts of Ethiopia, Sudanese, mystical sects, Arabian tribes, and so forth. The goal is the break-up of the Middle East into a mosaic of competing mini-states and the weakening of the sovereignty of existing republics and kingdoms.”³⁴⁷

Dreyfuss noted:

“Based on his [Lewis’s] assessments, the British can then decide what type of intervention will be most effective in shaping Middle East affairs to British advantage. ... The Bernard Lewis plan puts the heads of states of Muslim nations in a squeeze play between the Brotherhood and those nations own national minorities.”³⁴⁸

And on Lewis’s behalf cites:

³⁴³ B. Lewis, “Free at Last? The Arab World in the Twenty-first Century”, *Foreign Affairs*, 88(2), 2009, 78-79.

³⁴⁴ B. Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961, 333-340; B. Lewis, *Islam in History: Ideas, People, and Events in the Middle East*, Chicago, Open Court, 1993, 223-233.

³⁴⁵ Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn (الإخوان المسلمون) is a transnational Sunni Islamist organization founded in Egypt in 1928, advocating political and social reform according to Islamic principles.

³⁴⁶ F.W. Engdahl, *A Century of War: Anglo-American Oil Politics and the New World Order*, London, Pluto Press, 1992, 191.

³⁴⁷ R. Dreyfuss, *Hostage to Khomeini*, New York, New Benjamin Franklin House, 1980, 157-158.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 157-158.

“The Brotherhood's pan-Islamic movement is, to the partisans of the smaller sects and minorities, a dangerous threat to their autonomous existence. The British then take the role of mediator, making deals with tribal and ethnic leaders to sponsor their rebellions against the Muslim Brotherhood.”³⁴⁹

He continues about Iran and its neighboring countries as follows:

“Case in point: Iran. Almost as soon as the Khomeini dictatorship seized power, the British began making contact with the tribal leaders of the Iranian nations who threatened to declare independence from Iran. Although most of these groups, because of their hatred of Khomeini, have joined in one way or another with the anti-Khomeini opposition in exile, there is still the danger that the success of the Khomeini revolution will spark a series of breakaway movements by Iran's Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis, and Arabs, among others. These independence movements, in turn, would represent dire threats to Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and other neighboring states.”³⁵⁰

Lewis believes that in the Middle East, the concept of loyalty is primarily influenced by religious affiliations rather than linguistic or nationalistic sentiments, or patriotism, and in this regard, he writes:

“The territorial and linguistic nation and the nation-state are both alien to the Muslim Middle East, where men's basic loyalties were determined not by language or fatherland, but by religion. ... The ultimate loyalty, the measure by which a man distinguished between brother and stranger, was religion and political allegiance belonged to the dynastic sovereign of the Islamic state.”³⁵¹ “The Islamization of the Middle East, has shaped the region since the seventh century. unknown until they were exhumed, deciphered, interpreted, and restored to history, or rather to historiography, and ultimately to the peoples who live in the region. For a long time the effort was exclusively the work of non-Middle Easterners, and it remains predominantly so. ... The religious map of the region was overwhelmingly Islamic. ... with their capitals in Tabriz, in Istanbul and in Cairo.”³⁵²

In general, Lewis believes that the Western nations cannot effectively face this civilization as a mere assemblage of states. He argues that it is essential to replace Islamic allegiances and loyalty with nationalistic sentiments and to foster a separation from religious unity.

“The ‘Bernard Lewis plan,’ was a design to fracture all the countries in the region, from the Middle East to India, along ethnic, sectarian, and linguistic lines. ... Lewis, in his article “Rethinking the Mideast,”³⁵³ predicts that the Middle East will undergo a process of “Lebanonization” a reference to the years-long civil war unleashed in Lebanon in 1975 by then-U.S. The war pitted Lebanon's Catholic, Palestinian, Shiite Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Druze, and Greek Orthodox populations against each other. With a steady supply of arms to all sides, the war resulted in the de facto partitioning of Lebanon by Israel and Syria. Today, the nation-state of Lebanon, once considered the jewel of the Mideast, no longer exists. The process of disintegration of the Mideast, projected by Lewis, is facilitated not only by the

³⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 158.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 158.

³⁵¹ B. Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting The Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 2004, 232.

³⁵² B. Lewis, “The Map of the Middle East: A Guide for the Perplexed”, *The American Scholar*, Vol.58, 1989, 24-26.

³⁵³ B. Lewis, “Rethinking the Middle East”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.71, No.4, 99-119, 1992.

collapse of the Soviet Union but what Lewis calls the: “demise of pan-Arabism.” ... Lewis asserts that the war [in Iraq] was primarily a war among Arab states, in which the United States only became involved “reluctantly.” ... For him, the collapse of Arab nationalism removes the threat of industrial development and national independence in the Mideast. ... the Mideast will be developed, if at all, only under circumstances controlled by powers outside the region.”³⁵⁴

The author of the article titled “Bush-Cheney Heading For Nuclear Rendezvous At Desert One” delves into the Map of the New Middle East envisioned by the Lewis plan and briefly describes its proposed divisions as follows:

“Also in correspondence with the Bernard Lewis Plan, the CIA is agitating among Kurds and Turkmen along the border with Iraq and Turkey and among Baluchis along the border with Pakistan by promising them their own balkanized homelands. The Persians, according to this report, would be relegated to an oil-poor “Irani triangle” (or “Iranistan”, in classic Bernard Lewis Plan terminology) around Teheran, Isfahan, and Qom. ... Bernard Lewis served during World War II as an agent of the British Arab Bureau, the imperialist agency charged with keeping the Arab world weak so as to preserve London's domination. ... Lewis, second idea is that the existing Arab countries are illegitimate, and need to be carved up into a crazy quilt of ridiculous petty states who will be unable to threaten any important interest of Anglo-American imperialism. In a 1992 Foreign Affairs article ..., Lewis offered the following prophecy of the coming Lebanization of the entire Middle East on the lines of the post-1975 Lebanese civil war: ... The more oppressive the regime, the greater the help it gives to fundamentalists by eliminating competing oppositionists. If the central power is sufficiently weakened, there is no real civil society to hold the polity together, no real sense of common national identity or overriding allegiance to the nation-state. The state then disintegrates as happened in Lebanon into a chaos of squabbling, feuding, fighting sects, tribes, regions and parties.

Of course, Bernard Lewis only repeats with his usual arid banality the geopolitical nostrums which his British imperialist predecessors had expressed with far greater panache. ... If properly handled the Arab states would remain in a state of political mosaic, a tissue of jealous principalities incapable of cohesion, and yet always ready to combine against an outside force. In other words, the eternal British mantra of divide and conquer, ... The Bernard Lewis Plan represents the real US-UK war aims in the Middle East.”³⁵⁵

Lewis’s view of the Middle East is not benevolent, but out of fear; as he stated:

“I think that the effort is difficult and the outcome uncertain, but I think the effort must be made. Either we bring them freedom, or they destroy us!”³⁵⁶

Following the September 11 incident, Lewis adopted a more aggressive and bellicose tone towards the Middle East, portraying the region as a potential threat to Western security.³⁵⁷ In sum, the Lewis Doctrine illustrates a deeply entrenched framework aimed at the fragmentation and perpetual instability of the Middle East, rooted in ethnic, sectarian, and external manipulations. Understanding these deliberate divisions is essential for any serious effort toward regional unity,

³⁵⁴ J. Brewda, “New Bernard Lewis Plan will Carve up the Mideast”, *EIR Strategic Studies*, 1992, 26-29.

³⁵⁵ W.G. Tarpley, “Bush-Cheney Heading For Nuclear Rendezvous At Desert One”. Accessible on <https://rense.com/general67/heading.htm>. Last Visit January 2025.

³⁵⁶ B. Lewis, *Faith and Power: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 2010, 168.

³⁵⁷ B. Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East*, California, Hoover Institution Press, 2011, 12-36.

as they reveal both the historical and ongoing obstacles that must be addressed. Overcoming such engineered disunity requires a strategy that not only counters external interference but also fosters internal cohesion across the region's diverse communities, laying the groundwork for a sustainable Middle East Union.

2. Conflicts and Weaknesses

The Middle East is characterized by complex social, religious, and ethnic landscapes that have historically shaped its political dynamics and hindered regional cohesion. Deep-seated sectarian divisions, competing religious interpretations, and persistent ethnic-racial rivalries create structural obstacles to unity. These conflicts, often exacerbated by external interventions and ideological agendas, have fragmented societies and limited the prospects for cooperation. In the following sections, these issues, including religious sectarian diversity, sectarian disputes, and ethnic-racial provocations, will be examined in detail to provide a clearer understanding of the challenges facing the formation of a cohesive Middle East Union.

2.1. Religious Sectarian Diversity

The dominant religion in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is Islam, with approximately 95% of the population identifying as Muslims. Islam is diverse, with Sunnism and Shi'ism as its two main branches. Both share core beliefs and practices, but they diverged over legitimate leadership after the Prophet's death.

- **Sunni Muslim;** "Islam is a system of religious beliefs. ... Muslims believe that God (Allah) revealed to the Prophet Muhammad the rules governing society and the proper conduct of society's members. ... After the Prophet Muhammad's death, his followers compiled those of his words regarded as coming directly from God into the Quran, the holy scripture of Islam. Others of his sayings, recalled by those who had known him, became the hadith (meaning Sayings or Quotes). The precedent of Muhammad's deeds is called the sunna. Together they form a comprehensive guide to the spiritual, ethical, and social life of an orthodox Sunni Muslim. The major duties of Muslims are found in the five pillars of Islam. These are the recitation of the shahada ("There is no god but God [Allah], and Muhammad is his prophet"), daily prayer (salat), almsgiving (zakat), fasting (sawm), and pilgrimage (hajj). ... a Sunni approaches God directly: there is no clerical hierarchy. ... Imams usually are men of importance in their communities, but they need not have any formal training."³⁵⁸ Sunni Islam is the largest sect of Muslims, making up around 85-90% of Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).
- **Shia Muslims;** "After Prophet Muhammad's (Peace be upon him) death, the leaders of the Muslim community consensually chose Abu-Bakr, the Prophet's father-in-law and one of his earliest followers, to succeed him. At that time, some people favored Ali ibn Abu Talib, Muhammad's cousin and the husband of his daughter, Fatima. Ali and his supporters are called the Shiat of Ali, or Ali's Party. The next two caliphs (after Abu-Bakr) were Umar (634), and Uthman (644). Ali finally succeeded to the caliphate in 656. ... Shia Muslims

³⁵⁸ H. Chapin Metz, *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1994, 9-12.

hold the fundamental beliefs of other Muslims as in Sunni Islam. In addition to these tenets, however, the largest of the Shia denominations believe in the imamate, a distinctive institution. Whereas Sunni Muslims view the caliph as a temporal leader only and consider an imam to be a prayer leader, Shia Muslims, known as Twelve Imam Shia, hold a hereditary view of Muslim leadership. They believe the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) designated Ali to be his successor as Imam (when uppercase, Imam refers to the Shia descendant of the House of Ali). ... The imamate began with Ali, who is also accepted by Sunni Muslims as the fourth of the “rightly guided caliphs” to succeed the Prophet. Twelve Imam Shia revere Ali as the First Imam, and his descendants, beginning with his sons Hasan and Husayn, continue the line of the Imams until the twelfth. ... Sunnis claim that the Twelfth Imam never existed, or that he died while still a child, but Shia believe that the Twelfth Imam never died, but disappeared. ... Shia believe that during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, he is spiritually present.”³⁵⁹ Shi‘ism primarily emerged in the sixteenth century in Iran and over the following centuries, developed a structured clerical hierarchy that elevated religious scholars to the rank of Ayatollah, creating a de facto clergy. Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini’s leadership and later consolidated under his successor Ali Khamenei, the Shi‘ite clergy assumed state control. This development has since intensified Shia-Sunni tensions across the region. The martyrdom of Hossein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at Karbalâ became a defining event, shaping Shi‘ite identity around themes of justice, sacrifice, and resistance. Over time, Shi‘ism split into several sects; including Zaydiyya, the Seveners or Ismailis, Alawites, Kharijites, and the dominant Twelver or Ithna-Ashari.³⁶⁰ Shia Islam represents about 13-15 percent of Muslims, with significant populations in Iran, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, and parts of Yemen.³⁶¹

- **Wahhabi Islam;** “The name Wahhabi derived from Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab (1703–1792), who lived in eighteenth century in central Arabia. He studied Hanbah law, usually considered the strictest of Islamic legal schools. ... he attacked as idolatry many of the customs followed by tribes in the area who venerated rocks and trees. He extended his criticism to practices of the Twelve Imam Shia, such as veneration of the tombs of holy men. He focused on the central Muslim principle that there is only one God and that this God does not share his divinity with anyone. ... Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab considered himself a reformer and looked for a political figure to give his ideas a wider audience. He found this person in Muhammad ibn Saud. In 1744 the two swore a traditional Muslim pledge to establish together a new state (which later became present-day Saudi Arabia) based on Islamic principles. ... the Wahhabi faith provided them with a justification for continuing these incursions to spread true Islam. In the nineteenth century, Wahhabi tribes, under the leadership of the Al Saud, moved at various times against Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar. Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab's ideas proved popular among many of the peninsula tribes, over the area from Bahrain at the beginning of the nineteenth century. ... and the present-day UAE. Whereas Wahhabi thought opposed all that was not orthodox in Islam, it particularly opposed non-Muslim elements such as the increasing European presence in the Persian Gulf.”³⁶² Wahhabism is a conservative Islamic movement sought

³⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 11-15.

³⁶⁰ E.L. Daniel, A. Mahdi, *Culture and Customs of Iran*, Greenwood Press, 2006, 39-52.

³⁶¹ A. Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, “A Shi‘i Empire”, Yale University Press, 2017, 31-126.

³⁶² *Ibid*. 24-25.

to purify Islam by returning to what's considered original principles based on the Quran and Hadith, Strict Monotheism by emphasizing the absolute oneness of God, opposing any form of intercession or veneration of saints, any innovations (bid'ah) in religious practices not explicitly mentioned in the Quran or authentic Hadith, strictly opposing the Shrine Worship, advocating strict literalist interpretation of Sharia and Islamic law, and rejecting Sufi and Shia Practices. Wahhabis are mostly spread in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Peninsula. Although Wahhabis are ultraconservative, overly rigid, and dismissive of diverse Islamic traditions and contribute to sectarian tensions by opposing Shia Islam and Sufi practices, while extremist groups have drawn inspiration from Wahhabi ideology, most Wahhabis reject violence and focus instead on religious conservatism and social reform within their framework.

- **Salafi Islam;** Historically, Salafism grew out of Wahhabism, the puritanical Sunni reform movement of 18th-century Saudi Arabia, which rejected Shi'ism, Sufism practices, and later innovations. Wahhabism provided the foundation for Salafism, but has since diversified. After the Arab Spring, Salafis gained visibility, especially in Egypt and Tunisia. Though often confused with the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis differ in ideology and operate as separate forces. Salafi movements spread widely abroad, particularly across the Arab world through Saudi influence, oil wealth, religious education, and media.³⁶³ Salafism represents a Sunni Islamic movement that emphasizes strict devotion and adherence to the Quran and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (Sunnah) and the early generations of Muslims, al-salaf al-salih. Central to the movement is the study and authentication of Hadith, which Salafis consider the key to preserving authentic Islam, presenting themselves in contrast to Shi'ites, Sufis, Ash'arite theologians, and Muslim philosophers, all of whom they regard as deviating from the true path. Salafism is a pursuit of religious purity and an adaptation to modern challenges such as secularism, Western influence, and sectarian rivalry, all claim to embody "true Islam." Salafism is also divided into various subsects; including traditional Salafis focused on worship and teaching, activist Salafis engaged in politics and reform, Jami Salafis aligned with obedience to ruling authorities, and jihadi Salafis who prioritize armed struggle.³⁶⁴ The Salafi movement, often called Wahhabism (however, not all Salafis are Wahhabis), is a strict creed centered on tawhid (oneness of God), claiming exclusive representation of Islam, and rejecting human reason, innovation, and pluralism. They view any deviation or innovation (bid'ah) as a threat to the purity of Islam. The Jihadi (and Takfiri) Salafis, who interpret the current global and regional situation as requiring violence, armed struggle, and revolution, are the most threatening group and the main source of terrorism. The jihadi faction believes violence and revolution are necessary to defend Islam and establish Islamic governance. This militant approach connects them directly to groups like Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and similar extremist networks, making radical Salafi the faction most associated with terrorism and global security threats.³⁶⁵

³⁶³ S. Fukuda, *Wahhābis and the Development of Salafism: The Nature and Policy Trend of Salafis*, Specific Issues, Institute of Developing Economies (IDE), Research Paper Series, July 2013.

³⁶⁴ M. Abu Rumman, *I Am A Salafi: A Study of The Actual And Imagined Identities of Salafis*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2014, 43-76.

³⁶⁵ Q. Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, No.29, 207-239, 2006; Y. Qadhi, *Understanding Salafism: Seeking the Path of the Pious Predecessor*, Oneworld Publications, 2025.

- **Ibadi Islam;** The Ibadis, emerging in the first century of Islam (7th century CE), are an early Islamic sect, and a distinct Muslim community whose roots trace back to the earliest generations of Muslims. They take their name from ‘Abdallah ibn Ibad, though their true religious lineage is traced to the Prophet Muhammad, whom they regard as their only flawless imam. While often associated with the Khawarij, Ibadis distinguish themselves through a moderate approach compared to other groups often labeled as Khawarij, and reject extremism and rebellion. The Ibadi doctrine evolved its theology and jurisprudence, grounded in the Qur’an and Sunnah, distinguished from Sunnis, Shi’a, Mu‘tazilites, and Ash‘arites, though it shares points of agreement with each. It emphasizes justice, upright conduct, accountability of rulers in leadership, and the balance between faith and deeds. Historically, Ibadism spread across the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, and North Africa, while established its dominant presence in Oman to this day. Today, Ibadis form a third major branch of Islam distinct from Sunni and Shi’a, with their largest population in Oman, parts of North and East Africa (such as Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Zanzibar), and smaller communities in the Middle East. They are often described as “closest to the Sunnis” in moderation and practice, yet they preserve a distinct religious identity, neither Sunni nor Shi’a.³⁶⁶
- **Religious Minorities;** Although Islam is the predominant religion, the Middle East has always been a mosaic of faiths, reflecting the region’s long and diverse history. Religious minorities in the Middle East occupy a complex position rooted in history, politics, and socioeconomic structures. They have long reflected the region’s deep diversity, yet their status has continually shifted in response to changing political and social landscapes. Historically, under the Ottoman Empire, Middle Eastern minorities were defined by religion. Christian communities, including Copts in Egypt, Maronites in Lebanon, and Greek Orthodox, Syriac, Assyrian, Armenian, and Chaldean groups across Syria, Iraq, Iran, Türkiye, and parts of Lebanon, remain significant despite steady emigration. Twelver Shiite Muslims, while a regional majority in Iran, Iraq, and Azerbaijan, form a significant minority in states like Bahrain, Lebanon, while Zaydi Shi’a dominate in Yemen and Ismailis in Syria and Lebanon, alongside smaller groups such as Druze in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel; Alawites in Syria, and Alevis in Türkiye. Other distinct communities include the Yezidis of Iraq, remnants of Zoroastrians and Baha’is in Iran, and small Jewish populations mainly in Morocco, Türkiye, and Iran.³⁶⁷

2.2. Religious Sectarian Disputes

³⁶⁶ A.Y. Mu‘ammar, *Ibadism in History, Volume 1: The Emergence of the Ibadi School*, Oman: Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, 2007, 7-32; V.J. Hoffman, *The Essentials of Ibadi Islam*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012, 5-45.

³⁶⁷ L. Weitz, “Religious Minorities in the Modern Middle East”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, November 2015; A.N. Longva, A.S. Roald, *Religious Minorities in the Middle East, Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*, BRILL, Leiden-Boston, 2012, 1-80; M. Monshipouri, “Minorities in the Middle East: Integration or Autonomy?”, *International Studies Journal (ISJ)*, Vol.6, No.3, 1-15, Winter 2010.

Currently, two major and dominant religious factors, though not the only ones, shaping Middle Eastern dynamics are the Sunni-Shia divide and Salafi extremism, both of which contribute to violence and terrorism.³⁶⁸

- Shia-Sunni Tensions;** The most prominent religious tension within the region arises from differences between Shi'ites and Sunnis, which have historically shaped political, social, and military dynamics across the Middle East. After the 1979 revolution, Iran's religious status as the leader of Shi'a, radically altered the religious and political order in the Middle East. By positioning itself as the vanguard of Shi'a Islam, the Islamic Republic fundamentally reshaped regional dynamics, not only within Iran but across the entire Middle East, with repercussions that continue to reverberate in the global balance of power. Iran's claim to religious leadership and efforts to export its revolutionary ideology through soft power, cultural and religious influence have been central to the deepening of Shia-Sunni tensions. Additionally, through material and ideological support for Shi'a movements abroad, including Shi'a militias such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Houthis (Ansar Allah) in Yemen Iran has extended its influence beyond its borders. Investments in religious propaganda, clerical networks, and sophisticated media platforms have further amplified its reach, consolidating a sphere of influence often described as the so-called "Shi'a Crescent,"³⁶⁹ stretching from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut. These policies, while enhancing Iran's strategic depth and access to the Mediterranean, have also intensified sectarian rivalries, provoking counter-reactions from Sunni powers, most notably Saudi Arabia, and fueling cycles of violence, proxy wars, and terrorism across the region. Since King Abdullah of Jordan's 2004 warning about a potential "Shia Crescent," the Middle East has undergone major shifts shaped by sectarian conflict, demographic shifts, and geopolitical maneuvering. The wars in Syria and Iraq, intensified after the 2003 U.S. invasion, produced massive refugee flows that altered population balances and strengthened Shiite influence. Through ethnic cleansing, strategic displacement, and the consolidation of Shiite strongholds supported by Iran and its allies, the Sunni presence has been weakened. This is interpreted as a broader strategy of securing a loyal population base along the Iranian Corridor. Although Iran completely rejects sectarian motives, its policies appear to empower Shiite communities as a means of ensuring political dominance. The outcome suggests a growing risk of renewed sectarian wars between Shias and Sunnis.³⁷⁰
- Religious Extremism;** Extremist sources in the Middle East arise from a complex interplay of historical, social, structural, political, economic, and psychological drivers. Key sources include foreign interventions, ongoing wars, poverty, injustice, economic inequality, unresolved tribal and sectarian conflicts, and lack of education. Yet, religious or ideological narratives often serve as central catalysts, providing justification, mobilization, and identity frameworks for extremist groups, especially when the deeper roots lie in inequality, exclusion, corruption, weak governance, and unresolved conflicts.³⁷¹ As

³⁶⁸ F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War", *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, No.11, July 2014, 1-22.

³⁶⁹ Al-Hilal Al-Shi'i (الهلل الشيعي): A geopolitical term referring to the areas of Iran's Shi'a-influenced populations expanding from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon.

³⁷⁰ F. Balanche, "From the Iranian Corridor to the Shia Crescent", *HAL: Open Science, Hoover Institution*, 2021.

³⁷¹ D. Mansour-Ille, "Counterterrorism policies in the Middle East and North Africa: A regional perspective", *International Review of the Red Cross (IRRC)*, Vol.103, No.916-917, 653-679, 2021; United Nations Development

previously discussed with respect to Wahhabism and Salafism, religious beliefs or ideological doctrines are widely regarded as prominent sources fueling radicalization and violent extremism, as providing both the narratives and justifications through which broader political, social, and economic grievances are channeled into violent movements. “Religious radicalism has been a growing force in the Muslim world for some time and especially since the Iranian revolution.”³⁷²

“In the Middle East, jihadists on both sides of the Sunni-Shia divide tear at societies and dismantle states in quest of visions of global revolution based on the fundamentalist version of their religion.”³⁷³ “Radical groups promised to replace the existing system in the Middle East with a religiously based Middle East order reflecting two distinct universalist approaches to world order: the Sunni version by way of the regionally extensive Muslim Brotherhood founded in 1928, Hamas, the radical movement that gained power in Gaza in 2007, and the global terrorist movement al-Qaeda; and the Shia version through the Khomeini revolution and its offshoot, the Lebanese “state within a state” Hezbollah. In violent conflict with each other, they were united in their commitment to dismantle the existing regional order and rebuild it as a divinely inspired system.”³⁷⁴ “American military actions to oust the odious dictatorships in Iraq and Libya, accompanied by U.S. political pressures to bring about “the transformation of the Greater Middle East”; and the resurgence of Sunni-Shia rivalry, most devastatingly during the Iraq War and the Syrian conflict. In each of these, the parallel interests of Saudi Arabia and the United States have proved difficult to distill. As a matter of regional leadership, balance of power, and doctrinal contention, Saudi Arabia considers itself threatened by Shia Iran, as both a religious and an imperial phenomenon. Saudi Arabia sees a Tehran-led archipelago of rising Shia power and influence running from Iran’s Afghan border through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the Mediterranean in confrontation with a Saudi-led Sunni order composed of Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf states, and the Arabian Peninsula, all in a wary partnership with Turkey. The tensions, turmoil, and violence wracking the Middle East in the first two decades of the twenty-first century should therefore be understood as layers of civil and religious strife carried out in a contest to determine whether and how the region will relate to any larger concept of world order. Much depends on the United States’ capacity, skill, and will to help shape an outcome that fulfills American interests and that Saudi Arabia and its allies consider compatible with their security and their principles.”³⁷⁵ These quotations from Henry Kissinger, an American diplomat and political scientist, highlights the pivotal role and influence of the United States in shaping and intensifying religious conflicts in the Middle East, illustrating how extremism in the region stems from a combination of religious and political drivers, as well as external interventions. Jihadist movements on both the Sunni and Shia sides seek to replace the existing order with competing religiously inspired systems, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and al-Qaeda to the Khomeini revolution and Hezbollah. At the same time, U.S. interventions in Iraq and Libya, coupled with the broader Sunni-Shia rivalry between Saudi

Programme (UNDP), *Preventing Violent Extremism: Through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity: A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism*, UNDP, 2016.

³⁷² B. Lewis, “Rethinking the Middle East”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.71, No.4, 99-119, 1992.

³⁷³ H. Kissinger, *World Order*, Penguin Press, 2014, 11.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 68.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 79.

Arabia and Iran, have further destabilized the region. Together, these dynamics reveal how sectarianism, ideological ambitions, and foreign involvement converge to dismantle states and fuel cycles of violence.

In addition to the Sunni-Shia divide and extremism as predominant religious conflicts, there are other peripheral religious factors shaping Middle Eastern dynamics include the role of political Islam, particularly the status and treatment of non-Muslim minorities, whose protection or marginalization often influences regional politics; sectarian variations within Shiism, such as the distinction between Twelvers, Isma'ilis and Zaydis, which carry geopolitical implications; and the competition for religious authority among leading clerical centers, including Najaf, Qom, and Al-Azhar, each seeking to define orthodoxy and exert influence across the region. However, these secondary factors are less contested and less challenging.

2.3. Ethnic-Racial Provocations: Arab, Fars, Kurd, Turk, and Others

The provocation of ethnic and racial conflicts has historically shaped the political landscape of the Middle East, often serving as fault lines that hinder regional integration, unity, and the ultimate formation of a cohesive Middle East Union. Although compared to other regions, such as Europe, the overall ethnic-racial diversity in the Middle East is relatively limited, the region has never been culturally or linguistically homogeneous. Multiple identities, Arab, Persian (Fars), Kurdish, and Turkish (including Azerbaijanis), coexist within and across national borders, sometimes reinforcing loyalty to subnational communities over state or regional structures. These overlapping identities are not merely cultural markers but also instruments through which political and social mobilization occurs, generating recurring tensions between central authorities and ethnic groups, as well as among state officials at the intergovernmental level. However, there are also other ethnic minority challenges in the Middle East, involving groups such as the Baluchis, Azeris, Turkmens, and Berbers. While these communities contribute to the region's ethnic-racial diversity and occasionally to local tensions, the principal ethnic and racial fault lines shaping the Middle Eastern political landscape remain those among the Kurds, Arabs, Turks, and Persians, whose historical and geopolitical rivalries have had the most profound and enduring regional impact.

Bernard Lewis highlights how nationalism and patriotism in the Middle East often intersect with ethnic consciousness. Kurdish populations in Iraq, Türkiye, and Iran, for instance, have pursued varying degrees of autonomy or recognition, while Arab and Persian identities sometimes clash in overlapping spheres of political influence. Similarly, Iran's and Türkiye's historical roles as multiethnic countries and their interactions with Arab and Kurdish populations illustrate how ethnic provocations can become a source of regional friction.³⁷⁶

In the same line, Samuel Huntington complements this analysis by framing these ethnic and civilizational distinctions as central to understanding the recurrent conflicts in the Middle East. He argued that clashes along cultural and identity lines, between Arabs and Turks, Persians and Arabs,

³⁷⁶ B. Lewis, "Nationalism and Patriotism in the Middle East", *World Affairs Interpreter*, Vol.24, No.2, 1954; B. Lewis, *Islam in History: Ideas, People, and Events in the Middle East*, Chicago, Open Court, 1993, 61-66; D. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, London: I. B. Tauris, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 89-90; R. Hevian, "The Main Kurdish Political Parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: A Research Guide", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.17, No.2, 2013.

and among other groups, persist as one of the main obstacles to regional cohesion.³⁷⁷ These identity-based provocations are often exploited by both domestic and external actors, exacerbating distrust and impeding cooperative mechanisms that a Middle East Union would require.

In sum, ethnic and racial provocations in the Middle East represent a persistent structural challenge. The competing loyalties of Arabs, Fars, Kurds, Turks, and other groups underline the complexity of unifying the region under a single political or economic framework, making the management of identity politics an essential component of any strategy toward regional integration.

3. Profiteers' Attempts in Preventing the Middle East Union Formation

The prospect of Middle Eastern integration has long been obstructed by both external powers and internal profiteers who benefit materially and politically from ongoing conflicts and divisions. This dual dynamic has made the region uniquely vulnerable to external manipulation and internal exploitation. External actors, particularly the United States and United Kingdom, have strategically supported fragmentation in the Middle East through selective alliances, arms deals, military interventions, lobbying strategies, by funding mechanisms, networking, and privileged political access.³⁷⁸ While simultaneously, internal profiteers, ranging from rentier elites tied to energy wealth to groups connected with military interests and foreign economic corporations, have equally found advantage in maintaining disunity.³⁷⁹ By exploiting divisions and prioritizing their own strategic or financial gains, these actors have systematically weakened initiatives aimed at fostering unity, preventing the emergence of viable frameworks that could pave the way for regional integration, ultimately leading to the formation of a Middle East Union. Thus, both external powers like the United States and the United Kingdom, alongside domestic profiteering elites, have found common cause in undermining integration efforts, either by exploiting ethnic, religious, and sectarian differences or by reinforcing narratives that present unity as unrealistic.

In the latter half of the 20th century, U.S. and British involvement in the Middle East steadily expanded, especially driven by Cold War rivalries, oil security, and later the global "War on Terror."³⁸⁰ Nevertheless, among external profiteers, the United States' increasing role in promoting fragmentation and obstructing regional unity in the Middle East has been more evident, ranging from the need to counter Soviet influence, counterterrorism policies after the 9/11 incident, to the quest to secure access to oil flow and strategic routes. To achieve these, Washington's strategy by framing threats such as terrorism or nuclear proliferation in exaggerated terms to justify deeper military and political engagement, focused on promoting peace and stability and building regional allies, aiming to prevent nuclear threats, combat terrorism, protect Israel's existence and security, and encourage democratization. However, many of these threats have often been exaggerated, and

³⁷⁷ S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1996; S.P. Huntington, "The clash of civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.72, No.3, 22-49, 1993.

³⁷⁸ A. Feinstein, *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade*, Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Group, 2011, 56-272; N. Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*, Metropolitan Books, 2003, Ch.2.

³⁷⁹ H. Beblawi, G. Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State*, Croom Helm, 1987; G. Luciani, *The Arab State*, University of California Press, 1990, 85-219.

³⁸⁰ N. Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*, Metropolitan Books, 2003, Ch.2-3.

many challenges stemmed from America's own allies, and the region's internal instability.³⁸¹ In addition, U.S. invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq,³⁸² and its involvement in conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq War,³⁸³ the Gulf War,³⁸⁴ and the ongoing instability, particularly in Gaza illustrate the shift in American policy from that of a peace-broker to a power-stabilizer, revealing that its influence has been motivated more by oil and security interests rather than by genuine concerns for peace.³⁸⁵

Washington has consistently favored bilateral relations with individual states over supporting regional integration, as fragmented states are easier to influence and control in terms of oil, security, and geopolitical alignment. By emphasizing security pacts, arms supports, and selective peace treaties, U.S. policy has prevented the emergence of a collective and cohesive political or economic framework that could rival its dominance in the region. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom, through its historical colonial legacy and subsequent alignment with U.S. policies, reinforced fragmentation by nurturing client regimes and privileging stability over regional unity.³⁸⁶ The interplay between external and internal profiteers operates through several mechanisms as follows:

3.1. Arms Deals and Military-Industrial Complex: The vested financial profits from the global arms trade and military-industrial complex, which thrive on war, insecurity, instability, and the mutual distrust among regional states constitute a major factor in preventing unity. This dynamic is further reinforced by the fact that military expenditures by Middle Eastern states have historically been ranked among the highest worldwide relative to GDP.³⁸⁷ A peaceful and unified Middle East, free from conflict, would foster peace and stability, thereby diminishing the demand for foreign weapons, thereby undermining the benefits of the military industry, particularly by weakening dependency on U.S. arms. This explains one of the reasons why arms manufacturers and private security providers hold vested interests in preventing integration.

Attached to external powers, the military establishments of several Middle Eastern states are also equally complicit. Foreign military aid and weapons sales create dependency networks that tie regional armies more closely to Washington or London than to each other. The US, which is “the world's largest manufacturer, seller, and buyer of arms and weapons, selling about 40% of the world's armaments,”³⁸⁸ has been deriving substantial commercial benefits from wars and conflicts

³⁸¹ D. Byman, S.B. Moller, “The United States and the Middle East: Interests, Risks, and Costs”, *Oxford University Press*, 2016; B. Beaver, J. Beaver, M. Wilsey, “The Middle East: United States Policy and Relations in the Latter Half of the 20th Century,” *War & Peace: The Middle East in Transition, Ethics of Development in a Global Environment (EDGE)*, *Stanford University*, July 26, 1999; M. Lynch, “The United States and the Middle East”, *Great Decisions 2024*, *Foreign Policy Association (FPA)*, 2024.

³⁸² F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 136-183.

³⁸³ *Ibid*, 45-87; P. Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, Harvard University Press, 2015, 347-500.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 88-135; L. Freedman, E. Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order*, Princeton University Press, 1993, 23-200.

³⁸⁵ R. Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East*, Beacon Press, 2004, 70-103.

³⁸⁶ N. Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*, Metropolitan Books, 2003, ch.2-3.

³⁸⁷ A. Feinstein, *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade*, Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Group, 2011, 56-272.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 249.

in the Middle East. While, domestic military elites enjoy these arrangements, gaining access to advanced weaponry, training, and political legitimacy.

Internal profiteers have even weaponized sectarian, ethnic, and tribal divisions to maintain disunity, consolidate power, and maximize material gain. For instance, in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, in Syria under the Assad regime, or in Lebanon, and Yemen, ruling elites and local factions have systematically exploited religious, sectarian, ethnic, and tribal divisions to consolidate power, extract rents, and prevent unified opposition, thereby obstructing national cohesion and reinforcing disunity.³⁸⁹ These divisions, when exploited, serve both internal elites and external powers, as they perpetuate the perception that regional unity is unrealistic or dangerous.

Beyond state policies, a network of non-governmental profiteers in the defense and security sector, including arms manufacturers, energy corporations, and private contractors, has had vested interests in maintaining instability and preventing integration. These actors profit from perpetual conflicts, high military expenditures, and competition among regional states for Western approval and support. For instance, some private military companies such as Executive Outcomes, Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI), and Brown & Root became integral in sustaining conflicts, often through contracts tied to U.S. and U.K. foreign policy. These firms not only supplied logistical and combat support but also shaped strategic outcomes by embedding themselves in local security apparatuses.³⁹⁰

3.2. Lobbying and Selective Allies: Another significant international approach fostering fragmentation and preventing regional unity in the Middle East is the role of lobbies and special interest groups, which institutionalize fragmented diplomacy by privileging bilateral arrangements over broader multilateral engagement. While such influence can emanate from any superpower or great power, the role of the United States is particularly pronounced in this regard, especially in the Middle East. A clear example is the Camp David Accords, brokered by the United States between Egypt and Israel in 1978, which illustrate this dynamic. While the agreement secured peace between the two nations, it also exemplified Washington's tendency to engage in bilateral diplomacy that sidelined Palestinian interests and broader Arab-Israeli reconciliation. At the same time, the accords reflected the logic of the selective alliances, while achieving peace, by drawing Egypt into a privileged relationship with the United States and Israel, they effectively neutralized Cairo's role as a leading advocate for Palestinian rights and broader Arab unity, thereby entrenching regional fragmentation. This political approach, by normalizing relations with individual states while sidelining others, fosters distrust and deepens regional divisions.

Such selective alliances serve U.S. strategic interests but often come at the expense of regional cohesion and the pursuit of a comprehensive peace. These diplomatic strategies are part of a broader pattern in which the United States supports authoritarian regimes and engages selectively with regional actors, thereby maintaining a status quo that advances its geopolitical and strategic

³⁸⁹ R. Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East*, Beacon Press, 2004, 25-35,

³⁹⁰ J.J. Terry, *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Role of Lobbies and Special Interest Groups*, Pluto Press, 2005; P.W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, Cornell University Press, 2008, 12-13, 130-174.

objectives while constraining prospects for genuine regional integration and cooperation. By institutionalizing dependence on U.S. support and privileging exclusive alignments, these policies perpetuate divisions and weaken the region's capacity for collective action.³⁹¹

Nevertheless, as an analyst has observed, "In the current perception, the one urgent issue is to prevent the monopolization of oil by a regional power, and the best way to achieve this is by some sort of security arrangement with regional powers. ... Just as such allies can at any time abandon the United States, the United States has obviously also felt free to abandon such allies, if the alliance becomes too troublesome, or ceases to be cost-effective as for example, in South Vietnam, Kurdistan or Lebanon."³⁹² This observation underscores that the U.S. cannot be regarded as a reliable ally to any state, as its commitments are ultimately contingent upon cost-effectiveness and strategic convenience.

Together, they provide critical insight into how lobbying and selective partnerships have shaped Middle Eastern diplomacy, reinforcing fragmentation and limiting the region's capacity for autonomous decision-making. While these strategies may achieve specific short-term objectives, they often contribute to regional fragmentation and impede efforts toward broader, multilateral cooperation and peace.

3.3. Oil and Rent Dependency: The energy sector is another key interest for profiteers to prevent the Middle East's unity. Integration, through a unified energy framework, could have significantly increased the region's leverage in the global energy market, much like OPEC's brief assertion of power in the 1970s. However, the "rentier state" system tied Middle Eastern economies to external patrons, particularly Western oil companies and consumers. The perpetuation of fragmented, rentier economies has discouraged regional coordination over natural resources, ensuring that bargaining power remained limited to bilateral negotiations with global powers. Consequently, external powers and corporations had every incentive to preserve this disunity and dependency. Meaning, oil's rent dependency in order to ensure that individual regimes negotiated separately with Western powers has prevented the emergence of collective resource strategies.

At the same time, internal rentier elites, sustained by oil revenues, relied on foreign patrons to ensure their regime survival, effectively trading regional autonomy for domestic security. Such elites perceive integration as a direct threat to their domestic power and authority, since pooling sovereignty in a supranational framework could undermine their control over wealth distribution and political patronage. As a result, they often align with external powers to resist initiatives aimed at collective bargaining or resource-sharing.³⁹³

Ultimately, the prevention of a Middle East Union reflects not only the external pressures of global powers but also the internal dynamics of those who benefit materially and politically from division.

³⁹¹ J.J. Terry, *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Role of Lobbies and Special Interest Groups*, Pluto Press, 2005; N. Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*, Metropolitan Books, 2003, ch.7.

³⁹² B. Lewis, "Rethinking the Middle East", *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.71, No.4, 99-119, 1992.

³⁹³ H. Beblawi, G. Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State*, Croom Helm, 1987; H. Beblawi, "The Rentier State in the Arab World", *Arab Studies Quarterly, Pluto Journals*, Vol.9, No.4, 383-398, Fall 1987; G. Luciani, *The Arab State*, University of California Press, 1990, 85-219.

Taken together, the combined effect of these profiteering dynamics has been the systematic weakening of regional institutions, such as the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as well as various attempts at economic unions. Rather than moving toward a cohesive framework, the Middle East has remained fragmented into competing blocs, with no effective mechanism to negotiate collectively on issues of security, energy, economy, or development. A Middle East Union, free from foreign manipulation and profiteering elites, would foster peace and stability, diminish demand for foreign weapons, reduce dependency on U.S. mediation, and enhance regional bargaining power over natural resources. Precisely because of these benefits for the peoples of the region, both external and internal profiteers have aligned to prevent such integration.

Overcoming these obstacles requires regional leaders and authorities to recognize the costs of dependency and conflicts, and to reclaim the initiative for collective security, economic cooperation, and political integration that serve the interests of the Middle East's peoples rather than external and internal profiteers. Building resilience against profiteering dynamics, through independent regional institutions, cooperative energy strategies, and reduced militarization, remains a necessary step toward the eventual realization of a Middle East Union.

4. Negative Propaganda Against the Middle Eastern Nations

Negative propaganda against Middle Eastern elements, such as Islamic communities and Middle Eastern nations including Arabs, Iranians, Turks or Kurds, has been a persistent issue, often driven by political, economic, and ideological motives. Such propaganda has been spread through fear-mongering and manipulation by misinformation and false narratives in Social Media, Media, News, Entertainment, Movies and TV shows, Political Discourse, Academic Publications, etc. Due to various reasons, the contemporary Middle East is portrayed globally as a mysterious region suffering from chaos and war, the cradle of terrorism, religious extremism, anti-modernization, and autocratic government. In this regard, the significant influence of Hollywood, which is also referred to as Hollywood Culture is undeniable. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Polish-American political scientist and U.S. National Security Advisor (1977–1981), acknowledges the main pattern of geopolitics in the USA culture and states that cinematic attacks on other nations have purely political dimensions and resemble a real war. Both the US military and politicians have a significant presence in this industry that affects different parts of the globe. Concerning the American Global System Brzezinski cites that:

“All of the foregoing are reinforced by the massive but intangible impact of the American domination of global communications, popular entertainment, and mass culture and by the potentially very tangible clout of America's technological edge and global military reach.”³⁹⁴

Cinematic and Hollywood's influences on shaping public perception as soft power instruments, after countering the Soviet Union and its collapse, are now targeting the Middle Eastern great powers. Hollywood's history of portraying Middle Eastern countries in a negative light and showing them as secretive and dangerous nations reinforces Islamophobia, Arabophobia, and

³⁹⁴ Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1998, 24.

Iranophobic stereotypes. Xenophobic tendencies and racism that have been widely witnessed in the contemporary world, particularly in the West, have risen in recent decades against the Middle Eastern Nations due to negative propaganda.

The negative propaganda often portrays Middle Eastern societies as resistant to modernization, while ignoring their advancements in science, technology, and cultural activities. Even though some Western countries face internal governance issues, media coverage tends to highlight negative stories about the Middle East and Islamic states, neglecting similar problems in the West or allied nations. These narratives suggest a Middle Eastern inherent hate for the West, referred to as Anti-Western Sentiment, which fuels fear and justifies Westerners' interventionist policies. The region is frequently depicted as perpetually at war and in instability while downplaying the role and impact of foreign intervention in creating and sustaining ongoing conflicts. Negative stereotypes in Western countries contribute to racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia against Islamic communities and the Middle Eastern Nations, which comprises Muslims.

These propagandas, by generating fear and alarm both internally within the region, and externally worldwide, foster hostility and mistrust. For instance, Middle Eastern states, influenced by anti-Shia and anti-Iran sentiments, perceive Iran as a potential threat, seek to curb its rise, and maintain distance, thereby resulting in disunity and hindering integration. A similar pattern exists regarding Türkiye in the context of anti-Turkism, while anti-Arabism in Iran and Türkiye produces comparable effects. Collectively, these phobias impede the establishment of peace, regional integration, and cohesion. The followings provide further examination of these concepts.

4.1. Arabophobia

Arabophobia refers to prejudice, fear, hatred, or hostility toward Arabs, Arabic language, or Arab culture that can manifest in stereotypes, harassment and racial profiling, discrimination, hate speech, and even violence against Arab individuals or communities. Arabophobia has existed for centuries and this form of bias has historical roots and is influenced by political conflicts, media portrayals, and cultural misunderstandings. Western powers have always promoted Orientalist stereotypes that depicted Arabs as backward or uncivilized, while Arabs' positive contributions or diverse cultural aspects are overlooked.

In the immediate aftermath of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, there was early widespread speculation that it was the work of Arab or Middle Eastern terrorists, and some Arab and Muslim individuals faced suspicion and wrongful accusations. However, later, it was discovered that Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, who were homegrown extremists, launched the explosion. ... The American strategy to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism, targeted at "terrorists," actually has led to institutionalized racial profiling against "Arabs" and "Muslims." This legislation has facilitated the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to spy on mosques and civil groups and monitoring of libraries and universities. Such actions exemplify "institutionalized discrimination", fueled by inspiring Islamophobia and Anti-Arabism sentiment in society. Certainly, there has been a renewed anti-Arab movement after the events of September 11, 2001.

Since most Arabs are Muslims, anti-Muslim sentiment often overlaps with Arabophobia. Even though Arabophobia and Islamophobia are closely related, but not identical. "Islamophobia is a

form of bigotry and hostility targeted at Muslims, and more generally at those perceived as "Arab." Like all stereotypes, this one is made up of gross over-generalizations. Further, within the context of the social stratification system in the United States, both Islamophobia and "Arab" have been racialized. This means that the underlying assumption is that both Arabs and Muslims are a single racial group. ... The term "Arab" is actually a linguistic term that refers to people who speak Arabic. There are approximately 300 million people in 22 Arabic speaking countries in the "Middle East" and Northern Africa."³⁹⁵

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 in the US intensified anti-Arab sentiment by associating Arabs with terrorism and restricting immigration policies. Wars and conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and some other Arab States have led to mass displacement further fear-mongering and racial profiling around Arab refugees, and disproportionate security screenings and restrictive immigration policies, especially at airports. Of course, the significant role of Media representations, social media negative narratives, and News also contributed to reinforcing harmful stereotypes, Wars, terrorism, and geopolitical tensions to the perception of Arabs as a threat. For instance, Hollywood movies such as *True Lies*³⁹⁶ and *American Sniper*³⁹⁷ exaggeratedly link Arabs to terrorism.

In addition, Hollywood cinema has long reinforced Orientalist propaganda by portraying Arabs and other Muslims as violent, backward, and despotic. Films such as *The Sheik*,³⁹⁸ *The Son of the Sheik*,³⁹⁹ *Jewel of the Nile*,⁴⁰⁰ and *Harem*⁴⁰¹ perpetuated the stereotype of Western women being abducted into harems, with Eastern men depicted as brutal captors. As Professor Jack Shaheen observes, these depictions consistently presented Muslims as barbaric, fanatical, and greedy, shaping Western audiences' perceptions and reinforcing Islamophobia and Arabophobia through popular culture. Shaheen further highlights numerous other movie titles and cartoons that attempt to vilify Arabs and Muslims.⁴⁰² Although primarily targeting Arabs, these movies portray the broader Middle Eastern region as hostile, brutal, and violent, implicitly extending negative perceptions to countries such as Türkiye and Iran as well.

4.2. Islamophobia

"In recent years a new word has gained currency which evokes the outlook and world-view of that officer (an Arab Muslim Seaman). The word is 'Islamophobia'. It was coined in 1980s, ... referring to dread or hatred of Islam and therefore to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims."⁴⁰³ In 1997, the "Runnymede Trust" Institute in England defined "the term Islamophobia as fear and hatred of Islam and, therefore, of all Muslims, and stated that Islam is a single monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to new realities, and does not have any aims or values in common with other cultures,

³⁹⁵ R. Wolf, "An Introduction to Islamophobia and Anti-Arabism", *Oregon: Portland Community College*, 2018.

³⁹⁶ *True Lies*, Directed by James Cameron, United States: 20th Century Fox, 1994.

³⁹⁷ *American Sniper*, Directed by Clint Eastwood, United States: Village Roadshow Pictures, 2014.

³⁹⁸ *The Sheik*, Directed by George Melford, United States: Paramount Pictures, 1921.

³⁹⁹ *The Son of the Sheik*, Directed by George Fitzmaurice, United States: Paramount Pictures, 1926.

⁴⁰⁰ *Jewel of the Nile*, Directed by Lewis Teague, United States: 20th Century Fox, 1985.

⁴⁰¹ *Harem*, Directed by Arthur Joffé, France: Gaumont, UGC Europe 1, 1985.

⁴⁰² J.G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Olive Branch Press, Northampton 2001; *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Directed by Sut Jhally, Media Education Foundation, 2006; J. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* [Video Interview], YouTube. Accessible on <https://youtu.be/TPxak6lFd-I?si=JghYb4U-z4De5Zws>. Last Visit September 2025.

⁴⁰³ G. Conway, "Islamophobia A Challenge For Us All", *The Runnymede Trust*, 1997, 1.

Muslims are in an inferior position to the West _ barbaric, irrational, primitive, sexist, violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, engaged in a ‘clash of civilizations’ _ and Islam is more a political ideology, used for political or military advantage, rather than being a religion.”⁴⁰⁴

“Islamophobia refers also to practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs. ... The word 'Islamophobia' has been coined because there is a new reality which needs naming anti-Muslim prejudice has grown so considerably and so rapidly.”⁴⁰⁵

The phenomenon referred to as Islamophobia has emerged since the inception of Islam, and is increasing today in both intensity and prevalence, particularly in the Western world. Western theorist, Samuel Huntington argues that three civilizations around the world can replace Western civilization: Islamic civilization, Confucius Chinese civilization, and Russian Orthodox civilization!⁴⁰⁶ Bernard Lewis's studies also present Muslim history as scholarly endorsed as a threat to the West.⁴⁰⁷ Islamophobia includes any fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islamic groups and Muslims that affects the growth and development of Muslims through discriminatory and annoying behaviors.

One of the most widespread propaganda against Middle Eastern nations portrays them as hotbeds of terrorism, often generalizing the actions of extremist groups from Middle Eastern countries and Muslims. In the academic works, “mainly conducted in Western academia, ... a negative view of the Middle East and a positive view of the West and Western values dominate these works. (In their perspective regarding) the ‘tragedy of human rights in the Middle East’ ... Islam is referred to frequently in the related literature as a main element responsible for the unfortunate human rights condition in the region. This factor used to be known as a ‘religious’ factor but after Huntington’s thesis on ‘Clash of Civilizations’ (1993), it is seen through a ‘civilizational’ framework as well.”⁴⁰⁸ “Although terrorism is a global phenomenon that does not belong to a specific religion, race or culture, some extremist groups that claim to represent Islam have distorted its true teachings to justify their terrorist agenda. This incorrect use of religion has increased the severity of the challenges facing Muslims worldwide, and they are now facing the spread of the phenomenon of Islamophobia.”⁴⁰⁹

“On September 11, 2001, the offensive reached its apogee by striking New York, the hub of the world financial system, and Washington, the political hub of American power. The deadliest terrorist attack yet experienced, the 9/11 assault killed 2,977 within minutes, nearly all civilians; thousands of others were injured in the attacks or suffered severe health complications. Osama bin Laden had preceded the attack with a proclamation of al-Qaeda’s aims: The West and its influence were to be expelled from the Middle East. Governments in cooperative partnership with America were to be overthrown and their political structures—derided as illegitimate “paper statelets” formed for the convenience of Western powers—dissolved. A new Islamic caliphate would take

⁴⁰⁴ Runnymede Trust, “Islamophobia, its Features and Dangers: a Consultation Paper”, *Runnymede Trust*. Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997.

⁴⁰⁵ G. Conway, “Islamophobia A Challenge For Us All”, *The Runnymede Trust*, 1997, 4.

⁴⁰⁶ S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1996, 155-174.

⁴⁰⁷ B. Lewis, *Islam and The West*, USA, Oxford University Press, 1993.

⁴⁰⁸ S.H. Borhani, “The Regional Context of Human Rights in the Middle East”, Department of Middle East Studies, World Studies Faculty, University of Tehran, *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018, 130.

⁴⁰⁹ Y.M. Al-Dubaie, “Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Comprehensive Efforts to Combat Terrorism”, *Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition*, Jeddah, 2025, 1-2.

their place, restoring Islam to its seventh-century glory.”⁴¹⁰ “The terrorist attack of 9/11 was what they needed to impress Western public opinion of the validity of their claims against the Islamic world. In an instant reaction, they introduced Muslims, Muslim groups, and Islamic countries as responsible for that attack. They read the event as the targeting of the whole of Western civilization by ‘fanatic Muslims’, who hate this civilization. Soon afterwards, ... US president, George W. Bush, ... succeeded in introducing the evil countries of the world, the axis of evil, as being constituted by countries from the Middle East.”⁴¹¹

The "Islamophobia" approach, which presents Islam and Muslims as a global threat, gained significant traction with the release of the 1994 film "True Lies,"⁴¹² directed by James Cameron and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. In this movie, the character "Harry Tasker," played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, serves as a security agent who intercepts the attempt of an extremist Islamist group intent on orchestrating multiple explosions in American cities. In this movie, the terrorists are introduced as Muslims and Arabs, whose commander's face bears a strange resemblance to Osama bin Laden, the leader of the Al-Qaeda terrorist group.⁴¹³ Although the role of the United States in the creation, supervision, and financial and weaponry of these terrorist groups, including Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al-Nusra Front, and Al-Qaeda, cannot be ignored, its scrutinized is not included in the discussion of the present dissertation.

In addition, factors such as Immigration and Asylum of Muslims in Western countries, acts of extremist Terrorist such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic States of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or Daesh), Terrorist Incidents, the Global War on Terrorism, the actions and statements of Radical Islamist groups, Identity Crises in Europe, the Historical Background of Conflicts between Islam and the West, ideological issues and weaknesses and internal problems between Muslims, the 9/11 incident, and the biased activities of some Western and the US media and politicians, have been instrumental in shaping and spreading Islamophobia.⁴¹⁴

In the post-Cold War Era, the Islamic world has been introduced as the main source of a new threat for the West. Westerners tend to see the Muslim world as the most severe foreign threat that Europe experienced in its history. Based on the past miserable experiences of Europeans with the Ottoman Empire, as well as the influence of current negative propaganda, Westerners are afraid that peace and unity in the Middle East will lead to the emergence of a Middle Eastern empire as a Muslim Empire. All these aforementioned ultimately create the fear of unity among the Middle Eastern States that include Islamic nations, hence they prevent the formation of such a union in any way possible.

4.3. Iranophobia (Persophobia)

⁴¹⁰ H. Kissinger, *World Order*, Penguin Press, 2014, 78.

⁴¹¹ S.H. Borhani, “The Regional Context of Human Rights in the Middle East”, Department of Middle East Studies, World Studies Faculty, University of Tehran, *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018, 147.

⁴¹² True Lies, Directed by James Cameron, United States: 20th Century Fox, 1994.

⁴¹³ O, Ghasvand, “Hollywood against Iran; From Shirin Vahshi to Tehran [از شیرین وحشی تا تهران]”, *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, September 12, 2023. [Persian] Accessible on <https://www.irna.ir/news/85226107/>. Last Visit February 2025.

⁴¹⁴ J. Drakhshe, M. Husseini Faeq, “Dimensions of Islamophobia in Britain after 9/11”, *Islamic Revolution Studies*, Vol. 9, NO. 28, 2012, 278.

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), there has been an observable growing phenomenon of Iranophobia and Shiitophobia both regionally and globally. Since the Iranian Revolution, the USA policies in the Middle East faced a serious obstacle in interests with the rise of power of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has emerged as the main enemy of America in the Middle East. Therefore, the USA began confronting Iran under different titles since the very beginning of the revolution, where Iranphobia, Persophobia, and Anti-Iranianism are examples of these confrontations.⁴¹⁵

Iranophobia is a deliberate program designed to portray Iran as a major threat to the region and beyond a major threat to world peace and security. This propaganda seeks to undermine, destroy, and seclude Iran by creating a sense of threat and panic and changing the international actors' behavior against Iran. The role of the United States of America (USA) in the proliferation and provocation of anti-Iranian or anti-Persian sentiment, commonly referred to as Iranophobia, cannot be considered ineffective. This phenomenon is largely attributable to the strained and adversarial relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the United States, coupled with Iran's pursuit of independence from American influence. As Iran exhibits greater autonomy, there is a corresponding increase in the intensity and frequency of propaganda disseminated by the United States.⁴¹⁶

Along with "Islamophobia," after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, Hollywood also put the approach of "Iranophobia" on its agenda and has spent a lot of effort to present an unrealistic image of Iran's historical events and achievements. The failure of the United States and its allies to suspend Iran's pursuit of its peaceful nuclear program has forced Hollywood to turn to an "Iranophobic" approach and anti-Iranian propaganda. The United States, through Hollywood, has so far promoted the "Iranophobia" approach under the cultural war along with the economic war against Iran, which, according to cinema experts, has now become an intrinsic matter for this film industry. Among these, several Hollywood movies can be mentioned as instances:

- *Not Without My Daughter*;⁴¹⁷ is a movie that tries to depict brutality in the "religious extremism institutionalized in an Iranian Muslim family" ridiculously and exaggeratedly. The movie was based on the novel of the same title by Betty Mahmoody,⁴¹⁸ the American wife of an Iranian named Sayyed Bozorg Mahmoody, directed by Brian Gilbert in 1991. This totally distorted story is the memoir of an American woman who traveled to Tehran at the request of her Iranian husband but observed certain oppressive, violent, and fanatical behaviors that caused her to escape from Iran. In this film, the Islamic values are ridiculed, and the violence of Iranian men, extremism, rigid religious rules, and the hatred of Iranian families are exhibited, without showing any sympathy in Iranian society in an abusive situation. The movie, by using dramatic storytelling, ominous music, and a stark contrast between freedom-loving Westerners and restrictive laws in Iran, manipulates emotions and reinforces a simplistic "good vs. evil" narrative. This negative portrayal of Iranians affects

⁴¹⁵ A. Salehi Najaf-Abadi, B. Khosravi, R. Saneie, "Examining the reasons for the hegemonic discourse on Iranophobia and Shiaphobia based on the theory of Laclau and Mouffe [بررسی دلایل هژمونیک شدن گفتمان ایران‌هراسی و]", *Islamic World Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2015, 191. [Persian]

⁴¹⁶ M. Sadeghi, "The Forms of Iranophobia and Shiitophobia in Today's World; and Cultural Approaches to Coping with It", *Center for Strategic Studies of Cultural Relations, Organization of Islamic Culture and Communications*, Vol. 5, No. 10, 2019, 38-39.

⁴¹⁷ *Not Without My Daughter*, Directed by Brian Gilbert, United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1991.

⁴¹⁸ B. Mahmoody, W. Hoffer, *Not Without My Daughter*, St. Martin's Press, 1987.

their reputation as propaganda. However, the narrative in both forms, book and film, is accused of presenting a one-sided and overly negative depiction of Iran and its people. Therefore, a documentary titled *Without My Daughter*,⁴¹⁹ defending the other side and Iranians in response to this movie.

- ***RoboCop***;⁴²⁰ produced in 2014, presents significant American propaganda against Iran. This movie, whose story takes place in 2028, begins the opening scene in Iran, where Washington has occupied all of Tehran with OmniCorp's robotic military forces. In the movie, the Iranian government has been overthrown and all the military forces have been disarmed. The OmniCorps enforced security and controlled the population, searching and scanning surrendered people for nuclear weapons. The screenwriters intended to highlight the future of American wars by replacing human soldiers with autonomous machines and robots while proposing the location of these wars in Iran. However, the operation to liberate Tehran faced a problem when Iranians launched a suicide attack against the robots.
- ***300***;⁴²¹ directed by American Jewish director Zack Snyder, inspired by the historical battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC, and based on Frank Miller's graphic novel titled *300*,⁴²² narrates the battle of 300 Greek Spartan warriors with the massive Persian army of King Xerxes. This movie, targeting the glorious Persian history and ancient civilization of Iran, portrays the Persian Empire and its leader, King Xerxes, as a corrupt, androgynous, and Iranian soldiers as monstrous, bloodthirsty, cruel, corrupt, savage, and marauders. The movie reinforces Western stereotypes against Easterners as exotic, decadent, and tyrannical. The contrast between the disciplined Spartans and the dehumanized Persians provoke old colonial narratives and Iranophobia. The distortion, insult, and audacity of the ancient history of Iran and the demonization of Persians in this movie was an exaggerated depiction that provoked the quick official and unofficial reactions of Iranians from all over the world.
- ***Rosewater***;⁴²³ produced in 2014, and directed by John Stewart, is based on the memoir of the Iranian-Canadian journalist Maziar Bahari in one of the Western Persian Media, who tries to show the events after the June 2008 elections.⁴²⁴ The movie narrates the story of Bahari's imprisonment and interrogation in Iran after he was accused of being a spy. It portrays Iran through the lens of Western victimization in a Hollywoodized negative light, which could contribute to negative perceptions of the country and reinforce certain biases and one-sided Narratives of Westerners. The movie vilifies Iran without any deeper context about Iran's political history, foreign interference, or its perspective on security concerns and acknowledging external factors. Given the history of foreign interventions in Iran (such as the 1953 CIA-backed coup),⁴²⁵ the film does not delve deeply into why the Iranian government is paranoid about foreign influence. This movie won the Freedom of Expression Award from the National Film Review Board, USA, in 2014!

⁴¹⁹ *Without My Daughter*, Directed by Alexis Kouros & Kari Tervo, Finland: Dream Catcher, Tarinatalo, 2002.

⁴²⁰ *RoboCop*, Directed by José Padilha, United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Columbia Pictures, 2014.

⁴²¹ *300*, Directed by Zack Snyder, United States: Legendary Pictures, 2006.

⁴²² F. Miller, *300*, Dark Horse Comics, 1998.

⁴²³ *Rosewater*, Directed by Jon Stewart, United States: Open Road Films, 2014.

⁴²⁴ M. Bahari, A. Molloy, *Then They Came for Me: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity, and Survival*, Random House, 2011.

⁴²⁵ The 1953 CIA-backed coup in Iran, known as Operation Ajax, occurred on August 19 and ousted Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, reinstating Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

- ***Transformers 3: Dark of the Moon***,⁴²⁶ also depicts a covert U.S. military operation in Iran, where the Autobots attack and bomb a supposed nuclear facility of Iran and insult the Iranian flag. In this movie, the word "illegal" has been used for Iran's nuclear facilities. In this film, the Smart Autobots, in line with US foreign policy, blow up one of the nuclear facilities in the Middle East, which, by its features and the presence of soldiers speaking Persian while protecting the nuclear power plant, seems to be the Natanz nuclear site in Iran. The comic and ridiculous point in this movie is the alliance of Autobots with Americans in attacking Iran's nuclear power plants!

This strategy focuses on manipulating certain realities in the Middle East while disseminating various misleading narratives, suggesting that Iran is a potential danger and that a strengthened Iran could impose significant costs and present serious risks for regional nations. Iranophobia has been promoted by introducing Iran under various labels such as an uncultured nation, the axis of evil, the biggest supporter of global terrorists, a promoter of discord, the spreading of hatred in the world, the biggest threat to the neighboring countries, a serious threat to regional and world peace, stability and security. Particularly, the magnification of the threat of Nuclear activities of Iran by the United States through its Iranophobia policies aims to create a coalition between the West, the Arabs, and Israel against Iran. In fact, Iranophobia is based on the idea that Iran is on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons in order to attack Israel or the West and initiate an unprecedented nuclear arms race in the Middle East. There are also serious accusations suggesting Iran's potential conspiracies that could lead to the genocide of Jews in the future! To the extent that Haggai Ram, a Professor at Ben Gurion University, believes in *Iranophobia: The Logic of an Israeli Obsession*.⁴²⁷

In addition to the historical context of xenophobia in Western culture that has longstanding ties to the rise of Islamophobia, and USA influence, another significant factor contributing to the increasing escalation and proliferation of Iranophobia in the West is the influence of Israeli advocacy groups and Zionist lobbies, which entities have consistently aimed to shape public opinion and the perspectives of Western elites, politicians, policymakers, and decision-makers in a manner that portrays Iran in a negative and threatening light.

Iranophobia, which is formed by the political and economic interests of Westerners, particularly the United States, is led by many political movements in the global media, academia, and diplomacy. Hence, due to Iran's Significance and influence in the Middle East, Iranophobia and lack of trust and enmity with Iran are one of the major obstacles to the formation of the Middle East Union. The negative provocations, propaganda, and ideology surrounding Iranophobia have positioned Iran as a significant concern for the region, including Sunnis, Arabs, and Persian Gulf nations, by fostering fears regarding Iranian culture and identity, which are major causes contributing to the hostility in the region and impeding the potential for establishing a Middle East Union.

4.4. Shittophobia in the Region

⁴²⁶ *Transformers 3: Dark of the Moon*, Directed by Michael Bay, United States: Paramount Pictures, 2011.

⁴²⁷ H. Ram, *Iranophobia: The Logic of an Israeli Obsession*, Stanford University Press, 2009.

Iranophobia includes two general forms in the region and in the world, the stimulation of each of which requires its own policies. Shiaphobia is one of the mechanisms and the most significant of Iranophobia in the region.

The Islamic Revolution made Iran the center of attention of the Islamic world. The official religion in the Islamic Republic of Iran is Shi'ite. "Anti-Shiism is a strong element of the salafi extremist agenda. In such an atmosphere of regional tension, crises are more likely to spin out of control, increasing the chances of renewed civil wars in a number of Arab states and of direct Arab-Iranian confrontation that could drag the United States into another armed conflict in the Middle East."⁴²⁸ According to the aforementioned propaganda, Iran's activities as a Shia State are against the Middle Eastern Nations, which are comprised of a Sunni majority; and this is exactly what the Westerners, particularly the USA, needed to "Divide and Conquer!"

"The Iranian Revolution of 1979 challenged gulf stability. Many gulf leaders agreed with some of the social goals of the revolution and its efforts to tie Iran more firmly to its Islamic roots. But Iran's desire to spread the movement beyond its borders clearly threatened gulf leaders. Furthermore, several gulf states have significant Shia or Iranian minorities (Bahrain has a Shia majority although the ruling family is Sunni), and gulf rulers feared that Iran would use ethnic or sectarian loyalties to stir up such minorities. ... Iran was perhaps more threatening to gulf stability because of its strong anti-Western stance in world and regional politics. The new Iranian position stood in stark contrast to the gulf amirs' long history of involvement with the British and the close ties to the West that the oil industry entailed."⁴²⁹ What can be understood from the above-mentioned text is that the emergence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the world, as well as in the region has jeopardized the interests of the West, particularly Britain, more than anything else. This is probably why the Westerners attempt to create align and unite with other regional states by blackening Iran and portraying it as a potential threat and danger that intends to promote Shiism in the region.

In the line with Shittophobia, and the dissemination of fear regarding the formation of an "Iranian Shia Crescent," despite all Iran's denials and rejections, constitute one of the factors exacerbating anti-Shia sentiment and fostering animosity, discord, and hostility. Although no definitive evidence exists, since King Abdullah II of Jordan was the first to warn about the potential "Iranian Shia Crescent," and given his British ancestry, it is not implausible that this propaganda also originated from the West, particularly from the United Kingdom. This phenomenon was discussed in detail earlier in Chapter IV, under the section *Religious Sectarian Disputes*.

Iran, as a Shi'ite-majority country, positions itself as the leader of Shi'a Islam, which itself opposes Sunni-majority powers like Saudi Arabia. Iran's activities are often interpreted as promoting its Shia ideology through soft power, media, and diplomacy. Arab fear and horror over the spread of Shi'ite Islam in the region through Iran's expansionist policies, has led Arabs to keep fighting and in a defensive mode against Iran. For instance, Shittophobia led to conflicts in a part of the Riyadh-led Arab world with Tehran, stemming from developments in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Iran-Saudi Arabia disputes over Shi'ites and Sunnis have expanded the strategic confrontation and competition between the two great powers in the Middle East, which has unfolded in Syria, Iraq,

⁴²⁸ F.G. Gause III, *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East*, Council on Foreign Relations Press, Council Special Report No. 63, 2011, 21.

⁴²⁹ H. Chapin Metz, *Persian Gulf States: Country Studies*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1994, 35-36.

Bahrain, and Yemen, and has opened up opportunities for the US and the Western beneficiaries. The confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, two major powers in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, plays a significant role in the developments and events in this region and seriously impacts the formation of peace and unity in the region.

4.5. Turkophobia

Turkophobia or anti-Turkish sentiment refers to feelings, attitudes, and actions that contain discrimination, hostility, and hatred against people of Turkish descent, Turkish culture, the Ottoman Empire, and the country of Türkiye. This phenomenon can also include Turkish descent and Turkic language speakers in various regions such as the Balkans, the former Soviet republics, Azerbaijan of Iran, and the Republic of Azerbaijan. As the trend of Turkophobia intensifies, citizens of Turkish origin in the West become prey to attacks and discrimination.

Turkophobia, or fear and prejudice against Turks, is a phenomenon that has been raised due to historical “Turkish peril” narratives, political, and cultural factors. Turkophobia is portrayed as a long-standing Western construct rooted in the Crusades and reinforced by the Ottoman Empire’s conquest of Constantinople and the sieges of Vienna, casting the Turks as Europe’s barbaric enemy. Turkophobia in the West can often be traced to historical conflicts, mostly the Ottoman Empire’s expansion and the tensions during the World Wars. By the nineteenth century, this fear shifted into contempt with the label “Sick Man of Europe” image, sustaining a legacy of hostility that laid the groundwork for later Turkophobic stereotypes in Western literature and culture. Western popular culture inherited and reproduced these negative stereotypes, depicting Turks and Islam as barbaric, backward, and morally inferior.⁴³⁰

St. George Rathborne’s *Her Rescue from the Turks: A Novel*⁴³¹ illustrates this Orientalist bias by presenting Turks as despotic, irrational, and sensual “others,” contrasted with noble, rational, and chivalrous Americans. The novel vilifies Islam as a false and superstitious religion, distorts the image of the harem as a prison of oppressed women, and depicts Turkish society as corrupt and stagnant. Such portrayals served to elevate Western superiority, reinforce nationalist sentiment, and justify cultural dominance. Ultimately, this kind of literature perpetuated Turkophobic and Islamophobic attitudes that later carried into Western cinema and popular culture, embedding enduring stereotypes about Turks and the Islamic world.⁴³²

Although the anti-Turkish sentiment has been more prominent in some Western countries, it is not exclusive to the West and can manifest in different regions of the world, even in the Middle East. However, prejudices and stereotypes related to Turks that are present in some regions in the Middle East and other parts of the world are also often influenced by Western media, political dynamics, and historical conflicts. In light of the recent provocations associated with Turkophobia and anti-Turkism observed in Iran, a concise article from Iranian Diplomacy addressing these issues’ sensitivity as follows:

⁴³⁰ B. Jezernik, *Imagining ‘the Turk’*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010, 1-5.

⁴³¹ S.G. Rathborne, *Her Rescue from the Turks: A Novel*, F. Tennyson Neely, 1896.

⁴³² F.B. Akman, “On Dokuzuncu Yüzyıl Batı/Amerikan Popüler Edebiyatında Türkofobi ve İslamofobi: Her Rescue from the Turks Romanının Oryantalist Okuması”, *ERDEM*, No.76, 23-46, 2019.

“We must be conscious not to be fooled by the promotion of Turkophobia! Israel and its allies, particularly the United States and Britain, by intensifying provocations on ethnic and religious diversities, have always tried to facilitate the achievement of their interests. ... This idea is mainly a part of the divisive policies of the domineering West... just as they have painted a false and violent image of this religion and its followers in the minds of the people of the world by distorting Islam and destroying Muslims for years, they are promoting the danger of pan-Turkism with widespread and organized propaganda. Today, we have to add also Turkophobia, along with Iranphobia, Islamophobia, Shiaphobia, Arabphobia, etc., to the phenomena of Western propaganda to interfere in the internal affairs of the countries of the region and intensify the war and crisis. ... Since Türkiye is a strong and Muslim country, despite its membership in NATO, it is considered a potential threat to the West. Therefore, certainly weakening or preventing the progress of Türkiye is the agenda of the US and its allies. The performance of Westerners in the past has shown that they do not allow independence, progress, and development even to their closest allies in the region. The evidence indicates that... by intimidating and intensifying the disagreements between Iran and Türkiye and lowering the threshold of tolerance of both sides, they are preparing the conditions for war and by deceiving the Turkish authorities and promising them support in the war and post-war, like Saddam, encouraging Türkiye to attack Iran. In this way, by following the principle of destroying one enemy at the hands of another enemy, without the need for direct military intervention, by involving Türkiye and Iran in an attrition war, causing the maximum weakening of two powerful and influential countries in the Middle East strategic region and removed the danger of two powerful rivals.”⁴³³

5. Foreign Military Interventions in the Middle East

“For many centuries now the countries of the Middle East have variously enjoyed and endured the attention of outsiders; first, the commercial and diplomatic rivalries of mercantilist European states, then the successive clashes of the British, French, and Russian empires, of the Allies and the Axis, and most recently, of the United States and the Soviet Union. In both peace and war, the governments, and some-times the peoples, of the Middle East were the object of intensive efforts by outside powers to win their hearts and minds, so as to gain access to their communications and resources.”⁴³⁴

Historically, conflicts in the Middle East have been heavily shaped by the involvement of external powers, whose interventions are often driven by strategic, economic, and ideological motives. From the colonial powers of Britain and France, which sought to divide and control the region after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, to the Cold War rivalries between the United States and the Soviet Union, outside actors have consistently influenced the trajectory of regional disputes. Russia reemerged as a key player, especially through its decisive support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria, aiming to counter U.S. dominance and expand influence. Meanwhile, Iran and Saudi Arabia, driven by sectarian and ideological rivalry, have waged proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, and beyond,

⁴³³ A. Fijani, “Promoting Turkophobia in the Dominion System Program [اترویج ترک هراسی در برنامه نظام سلطه]”, *Iranian Diplomacy*, Jan 17, 2025. [Persian]

⁴³⁴ B. Lewis, “Rethinking the Middle East”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.71, No.4, 99-119, 1992.

worsening conflicts. Non-state actors like Hezbollah, ISIS, and Kurdish forces, often backed by external powers, further complicate the region's dynamics.⁴³⁵

Case studies of Syria and Yemen show how interventions by the U.S., Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye prolonged wars, intensified humanitarian crises, and destabilized the region. Control over vital resources such as oil, the protection of trade routes, and the safeguarding of geopolitical interests have been central to these interventions. In other words, many of the region's conflicts and crises stem from a long history of entanglement between local dynamics and global power struggles, encompassing military positioning, lobbying, alliances, the pursuit of economic interests such as energy, and ideological agendas, ranging from the promotion of democracy to resistance against Western influence.⁴³⁶

Given the relatively limited scope of Türkiye's, Russia's and Iran's activities, they will not be examined in detail here, although Iran's influence through military capacity and Shi'i ideological ambitions has been noted earlier. Instead, the following analyses focus in greater detail on the United States and the Israeli military, whose broad scope and significant impacts have involved nearly the entire Middle East, either directly or indirectly.

5.1. The U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East

The issue of Energy and Petroleum supply falls under the category of America's vital interests since oil and energy are essential as the driving force for the continued existence of the Western capitalist economy, of which America sees itself as the embodiment. "The United States holds 35,230,000,000 barrels of proven oil reserves as of 2016, ranking 11th in the world and accounting for about 2.1% of the world's total oil reserves of 1,650,585,140,000 barrels. The United States has proven reserves equivalent to 4.9 times its annual consumption. This means that, without imports, there would be about 5 years of oil left (at current consumption levels and excluding unproven reserves). ... The United States ranks 1st in the world for oil consumption, accounting for about 20.3% of the world's total consumption of 97,103,871 barrels per day."⁴³⁷ "In 2023, petroleum provided about 89% of the transportation sector's primary energy consumption. ... Fossil fuels, petroleum, natural gas, and coal, accounted for about 84% of total U.S. primary energy production in 2023."⁴³⁸ "The United States is the world's second-largest importer of crude oil, after China and crude oil is the country's second-most imported commodity."⁴³⁹

The United States, with only about 2% of the world's oil reserves while consuming about 25% of the world's oil, has the necessary incentive to ensure the security of energy, oil, and gas resources

⁴³⁵ F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War", *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, No.11, July 2014, 23-27.

⁴³⁶ F. Amina, "The Influence of External Powers on Middle Eastern Conflicts", *SSRN*, 2024; A. Drysdale, A.R. Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace*, Council on Foreign Relations, 1992, 149-199.

⁴³⁷ "United States Oil Reserves, Production and Consumption Statistics", *Worldmeters*, 2016. Accessible on <https://www.worldometers.info/oil/us-oil/>. Last Visit March 2025.

⁴³⁸ EIA, "U.S. energy facts explained", *U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)*, 2023. Accessible on <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/us-energy-facts/>. Last Visit March 2025

⁴³⁹ "US Crude Oil Imports by Country: List of Crude Oil Importers in the US", *Tradeimex*, 2024. Accessible on <https://www.tradeimex.in/blogs/us-crude-oil-import-data-by-country-list-of-crude-oil-importers-in-the-us#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20is%20the,affect%20the%20world%20energy%20market.> Last Visit March 2025.

and their transportation routes, through its presence and playing an effective role in the region, in addition to meeting its own energy needs to control its competitors. In other words, besides meeting its domestic energy needs through the imports of oil and gas, another driving factor motivating the United States to expand its influence over energy resources and transportation routes is its desire to control global competitors, mainly Russia and China, by restricting their access to energy supply lines, thereby restricting their roles in the region. In the evolving Middle Eastern energy landscape, Washington also seeks to prevent major pipelines from passing through the territories of its regional and global rivals, particularly Russia and Iran, thereby limiting their capacity to shape regional and global energy politics.⁴⁴⁰ The importance of the oil and gas resources in the Middle East and the Caspian Sea, which account for around 70 percent of the world's oil reserves and around 40 percent of gas reserves, has led the United States to propose the Greater Middle East Initiative to create political, economic, and cultural platforms in line with its interests in the Middle East region to establish its global hegemony.⁴⁴¹

Today, nearly three-quarters of the world's proven oil reserves lie in the Middle East, and two-thirds of Persian Gulf oil is exported to the industrialized West. Hence, oil represents the most significant, if not the sole, strategic factor influencing the United States' policy goals in the Middle East. Controlling the Middle East, therefore, means controlling oil, not only as a fuel but also as a strategic lever of power, which in turn implies control over Europe, Japan, and China, thereby seizing the key arteries of global influence. In other words, the Middle East's significance extends beyond supplying oil to the United States. By dominating this region, Washington can lock the world's energy arteries and, if necessary, deny access to global rivals. For Western Europe, Japan, and the rapidly industrializing states of East Asia, the Persian Gulf remains indispensable; whoever commands its oil will hold a decisive lever of global power for decades.⁴⁴²

Given these facts, intervention in the pricing and supply of oil is of great importance to American national security. This is the reason why industrial democracies, particularly the United States, do not want to be deprived of access to Persian Gulf Oil or they prevent the Middle East and Persian Gulf States from coming under the influence or domination of a country or group of countries that confronted the USA. "President Jimmy Carter made this explicit with respect to Persian Gulf oil in 1980, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America," he told a joint session of Congress, "[and] will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." ... In line with this principle, known since as the "Carter Doctrine", the United States commenced a military buildup in the Persian Gulf area that has continued to this day."⁴⁴³

David Harvey emphasizes the strategic centrality of Middle Eastern oil to the global economy and U.S. hegemony, noting that "whoever controls the Middle East controls the global oil spigot, and whoever controls the global oil spigot can control the global economy, at least for the near

⁴⁴⁰ Z. Bergenieski, "A Geostrategy for Eurasia", *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.76, No.5, 50-64, 1997.

⁴⁴¹ M. Hafner, P. Raimondi, B. Bonometti, *The Energy Sector and Energy Geopolitics in the MENA Region at a Crossroad: Towards a Great Transformation? Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, Springer Nature, 2023, 265-335.

⁴⁴² H. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Simon and Schuster, 1994; H. Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?: Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, Simon & Schuster, 2001, 164-206, 251-282.

⁴⁴³ M.T. Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict*, Henry Holt and Company, 2002, 4, 33.

future.”⁴⁴⁴ This underscores why the Middle East has long been central to global geopolitical power, shaping the policies and interventions of external actors, and why, by raising initiatives such as the “Greater Middle East,” the United States seeks to establish a groundwork for expanding its influence over the region’s energy resources.

“Because of some superficial resemblances of language and institutions, there is a widespread belief in the Middle East that the United States is the British empire back in business, with new management, a new trading name, and a new address.” According to Lewis “a new American policy has emerged in the Middle East [that] its main aim is to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemony of a single regional power that could dominate the area, and thus establish monopolistic control of Middle Eastern oil. [exemplified by Iran and Iraq] ... The principal concern is of course oil (... the effectiveness of oil as a weapon in the hands of the producer countries). ... The real danger is not commercial extortion, but politically-motivated monopolies. [continuing with the example of Iraq and Saddam Hussein] The real danger was monopolistic control, by a megalomaniac dictator, of Middle Eastern oil and that, I would remind you, is a very large proportion of world oil. ... [Hence] The United States will no doubt seek to remain the predominant outside power in the Middle East but the operative word is “outside”.”

“In addition to oil, there is another concern, perhaps not immediate, but already causing some alarm and that is the coming nuclearization of the Middle East by the acquisition of nuclear weapons, or perhaps even the building of a nuclear capacity by one or more potentially hostile powers in the region. ... There is also the possibility that they might have nuclear weapons, either for terrorist or for regular military use.”⁴⁴⁵ In this regard, to ensure access to oil, energy flows, and strategic routes, as well as preventing nuclear proliferation and terrorism, and stabilizing its regional power, the U.S. has developed extensive military bases, defense agreements, and arms sales across the Gulf, Egypt, and Israel, thereby reinforcing its presence in the Middle East. On the other hand, the U.S.-Israel alliance emerged as a central pillar, serving both as a tool of containment and as a source of tension with Iran and Arab states. However, these interventions, such as the 2003 Iraq invasion, have worsened domestic issues and fueled anti-Americanism within the region.

Over decades, the U.S. role in the Middle East has gradually shifted from that of a peace-broker to a power-stabilizer, though its influence has consistently been constrained by deep mutual distrust, diverging interests, and the region’s chronic volatility. Nevertheless, Washington continues to occupy a central position in shaping Middle Eastern politics, relying not only on its military and diplomatic weight but also on the strategic mobilization of lobbies and special interest groups operating within the region.⁴⁴⁶

In sum, U.S. military predominance across the Middle East, marked by extensive bases, alliances, and arms sales, has evolved beyond the traditional logic of deterrence or peacekeeping; while ostensibly aimed at ensuring regional stability and securing energy flows, it has paradoxically entrenched dependency, reinforced divisions and distrust, and strategic imbalance that hindered

⁴⁴⁴ D. Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, 2003, 19.

⁴⁴⁵ B. Lewis, “Rethinking the Middle East”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.71, No.4, 99-119, 1992.

⁴⁴⁶ D. Byman, S.B. Moller, “The United States and the Middle East: Interests, Risks, and Costs”, *Oxford University Press*, 2016; B. Beaver, J. Beaver, M. Wilsey, “The Middle East: United States Policy and Relations in the Latter Half of the 20th Century,” *War & Peace: The Middle East in Transition, Ethics of Development in a Global Environment (EDGE)*, *Stanford University*, July 26, 1999; M. Lynch, “The United States and the Middle East”, *Great Decisions 2024, Foreign Policy Association (FPA)*, 2024.

the development of autonomous regional cooperation, and prevented the evolution of conflict resolution, regional integration, and collective security initiatives.⁴⁴⁷ Through permanent bases, arms transfers, and defense agreements, the United States projects power across the Gulf and the Levant while constraining regional autonomy. Although Washington's capacity has declined amid regional assertiveness and the erosion of moral legitimacy, it still maintains the largest external military network in the Middle East. However, the rise of multipolarity, diversification of energy markets, and growing engagement of Russia, China, and regional powers are steadily challenging America's once-unipolar role, limiting its military influence through selective partnerships with countries such as Pakistan, Egypt, and Iran.⁴⁴⁸

Ultimately, a lasting stability in the Middle East requires moving from externally imposed security to a balanced, cooperative regional order. Reducing extra-regional footprints and fostering mechanisms of dialogue, interdependence, and collective defense, similar to other integration models, would enable regional states to shape their own security architecture. In this context, the formation of a Middle East Union is not only a political vision but a strategic necessity for achieving genuine peace and autonomy.

5.2. Israeli Regime Activities

Today, one of the foremost regional challenges considered a major obstacle to peace, integration, and the unification of the Middle East by scholars and theorists of international law and political science is Zionism and the activities of the Israeli regime, particularly the support it receives from the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Persistent political instability, inconsistent reform efforts, and regional tensions, particularly regarding Israeli Regime Activities, continue to hinder or delay broader regional integration.

After Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), the Austrian-Jewish journalist and playwright widely regarded as the founder of modern political Zionism, the formation of the Israeli regime in the Middle East was further reinforced by Western intellectual and political figures.⁴⁴⁹ Among them, the significant role of Bernard Lewis, a fanatic Jewish author, British-American historian, and political commentator, is notable. Writing during the consolidation of Israel, Lewis consistently advocated for its legitimacy and acceptance by Muslims, framing the establishment of the regime as a corrective to what he described as the historical dominance of Islam in the Middle East. He saw his mission in returning Jews to reclaim their former position and liberate the region from the "monopoly" of Islam. In this way, his intellectual interventions aligned with and reinforced the broader Western project of securing Israel's place in the regional order.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁷ R. Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006, 1-18, 65-119, 303-342.

⁴⁴⁸ A.L. Rhoades, et al., *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the Middle East*, RAND Corporation, 2023, 27-31; J.L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 300-317.

⁴⁴⁹ S. Beller, *Theodor Herzl and Austria: A Century Later*, Vienna: Austrian Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2004.

⁴⁵⁰ S.A. Mirhelli, A. Montazeralghayem, M. PirMoradian, "An Analysis of Bernard Lewis's Historical Notion of the New Middle East [تبيين انگاره تاریخی برنارد لوئیس در ارتباط با نظریه خاورمیانه جدید]", *Historical Sciences Studies*, 2020, 179. [Persian]

The formation of the Israeli regime, as a product of Western interference in the region, has continued to shape regional instability and hinder integration. For over seventy years, the ongoing hostilities and conflicts between Israel and various countries in the region, notably Arab states and Iran, have generated a persistently unstable atmosphere throughout the entire Middle East. The prevailing tension and the constant risk of war have compelled regional states to adopt defensive strategies primarily based on security, arms, and military considerations. This complex environment has not only constrained broader political and economic development but has also evoked powerful elites to exploit security rationalizations to consolidate their authoritarian rule, while simultaneously alerting significant concern and attention at both regional and global scales.

“Israel is a regional factor that heavily affected the history of the modern Middle East. It represents an important factor with an influential role in the Middle East, and is a major problem in Islamic-Western relations. ... Islamic-Western relations have not been damaged only by history of Western treatment towards Israel/Palestine question, but are affected by the Zionist policy that sees such relation harmful for their project in the Middle East. ... Israel dose to destroy any chances for establishing an effective and fruitful relationship between the West and the Islamic world. From this perspective, Israel and pro-Israeli lobbies are mainly responsible for hostile positions that the West takes towards Islamic countries. Israel’s role in pushing the US army to invade Iraq through different means, including provision of false intelligence about Iraq’s arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, is a well-known instance.”⁴⁵¹

“Israel has been able to pursue its colonial, anti-human rights policies for decades because it receives full support from United States. Washington has not only made Israel the biggest recipient of foreign aid in the history of the world, it has repeatedly employed its veto in a manner to cripple the ability of UN security Council to carry out its charter duty to deal with the disruptions to international peace the Israeli- Palestinian problem has caused.”⁴⁵²

Although the Israeli regime's policies and activities, particularly its military operations, occupation policies, and regional posture, have been directly supported by the United States due to its perception of Israel’s strategic goals,⁴⁵³ “the value of Israel to the United States as a strategic asset has been much disputed. ... some viewed Israel as a major strategic ally in the region, ... Others have argued that Israel, far from being a strategic asset, has been a strategic liability, by embittering United States relations with the Arab world, and causing the failure of U.S. policies in the region. ... in the Gulf crisis and war, Israel was not an asset, but an irrelevance some even said, a nuisance.”⁴⁵⁴

In sum, the Israeli regime’s activities, rooted in Zionist ideology and sustained by unwavering Western support, have remained a central source of division and instability in the Middle East and are considered one of the most significant barriers to regional stability. By perpetuating conflict and obstructing regional trust, these policies continue to undermine prospects for peace, cooperation, and ultimately, the realization of any form of Middle Eastern integration.

⁴⁵¹ S.H. Borhani, “The Regional Context of Human Rights in the Middle East”, *Department of Middle East Studies, World Studies Faculty, University of Tehran, Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, Vol.2, No.1, 127-159, January 2018, 150-154.

⁴⁵² P.J. Magnarella, *Middle East and North Africa: Governance, Democratization, Human Rights (Contemporary Perspectives on Developing Societies)*, New York: Routledge, 1999, 9.

⁴⁵³ J.L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East; A History*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 230-255.

⁴⁵⁴ B. Lewis, “Rethinking the Middle East”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.71, No.4, 99-119, 1992.

6. Strategies to Overcome Barriers

The obstacles examined in the preceding sections suggest that the formation of a Middle East Union cannot be achieved solely through institutional design, nor without addressing the region's core sources of instability. At present, the most persistent and destabilizing axis shaping Middle Eastern fragmentation remains the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict and the extensive political, military, and strategic involvement of the United States in regional affairs. These dynamics continue to reinforce security dilemmas, undermine trust among regional actors, and obstruct autonomous regional cooperation.

This section argues that, despite these constraints, regional integration is not structurally impossible but requires gradual, theory-informed strategies aimed at conflict mitigation, trust-building, and institutional convergence. Drawing on Democratic Peace Theory (DPT), Economic Peace Theory (EPT), Security Community Theory (SCT), and Institutionalism, the chapter explores how legal and political reform, economic interdependence, security cooperation, and policy harmonization can function as incremental mechanisms for reducing confrontation and weakening the drivers of fragmentation. Rather than presupposing comprehensive political settlements, these approaches offer pragmatic pathways through which the Middle East may progressively move toward structured cooperation and the long-term conditions necessary for a viable Middle East Union.

6.1. Democratic Peace Theory (DPT)

Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) is widely regarded as one of the foremost and most influential theoretical frameworks explaining the prospects for regional peace and unity among states, particularly in conflict-prone regions such as the Middle East. The Theory originated from the political philosophy of Immanuel Kant, particularly his 1795 work *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch (Essay)*.⁴⁵⁵ In this treatise, Kant argued that the spread of republican constitutions, the creation of a federation of free states, and the recognition of universal rights would establish conditions under which wars between such states would become highly unlikely. Although the modern formulation and empirical testing of DPT were developed by contemporary scholars, its conceptual foundations are directly drawn from Kant's vision of a perpetual peace based on shared liberal values and institutions. DPT underpins concepts such as the Community of Democracies and Liberal Internationalism, which operationalize the idea of peace among democracies through institutions and shared norms.

The Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) is rooted in Kant's political philosophy but has been adapted within modern liberal international relations theory. While Michael Doyle's liberal interpretation of Kant's ideas dominates Democratic Peace Theory, alternative Kantian perspectives also exist. Michael Doyle's influential interpretation, in addition to liberal constitutional order, emphasizes the role of cosmopolitan rights, economic interdependence, and international law as foundations for peace among democracies. Kantian alternatives also consider how his framework might apply in regions with different political systems, like the Middle East, proposing that democratic peace

⁴⁵⁵ I. Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay (1795)*, Translated by M. Campbell Smith, London, Swan Sonnenschein, 1903.

could develop through gradual norm-building, regional institutions, and economic cooperation, rather than solely through the spread of liberal democracies.⁴⁵⁶

According to the modern interpretation of Kant's political philosophy, referred as Democratic Peace Theory (DPT), states possessing salient democratic characteristics (or Liberal Peace features) and sharing a common liberal democratic identity are capable of establishing a secure society and a zone of peace among themselves. In fact, it is the political culture and norms of liberal states that, through processes of socialization, communication, legislation, and lawmaking, generate a shared identity among political actors. This shared identity fosters a friendly perception of one another and forms a union that differentiates "us" from "them," delineating those outside this identity circle as the "other." This theory posits that democracies are less likely to engage in war and armed conflict with one another due to shared norms, institutional constraints, and mutual recognition of legitimacy.

Within Kant's framework, it is precisely this common liberal identity that cultivates a shared perception of threat among these states. Based on this common identity and threat perception, France and the United Kingdom (UK), despite their considerable power disparity, did not perceive the United States as a threatening actor after World War II. This was because these states represented the U.S. as part of the "self" or "us" under a shared identity.⁴⁵⁷

Given the link between internal democratization and regional stability, the Democratic Peace Theory seems to be the most significant and effective political approach towards the Middle East. Applying this perspective to the Middle East suggests that fostering democratic governance and liberal political culture among regional states could be a crucial pathway toward achieving lasting peace, stability, unity, and regional integration. Building and strengthening democratic institutions, such as transparent governance, rule of law, accountable leadership, and inclusive political participation, can reduce internal sources of violence like civil unrest, coups, and repression. When citizens have legitimate political channels to express grievances and influence policy, the likelihood of domestic conflict and internal tensions decreases. This internal stability also carries an external dimension within the region. Governments, which are accountable for their decisions, policies, and populations tend to avoid risky or aggressive foreign policies as a means of securing legitimacy, thereby lowering the likelihood chances of interstate conflict. In the Middle East, where authoritarian politics and internal instability often spill over into regional disputes, domestic democratization could serve as a foundation for broader regional peace, security, stability, and cooperation.

However, regarding the application and limitations of Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) in the Middle East, while its core claim, that democracies are less likely to engage in conflict with one another due to shared norms, has strong empirical support in Western contexts, its direct transfer to the Middle East may faces challenges due to authoritarian governance, weak institutions, lack of institutional checks, entrenched regional conflicts, and the other region's political realities, all of which hinder the theory's straightforward applicability. But even partial democratization,

⁴⁵⁶ P.G. Rear, "Democratic Peace Theory as Applied to Europe and the Middle East", *Pepperdine University, Global Tides*, Vol.7, No.4, 2013. Accessible on <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol7/iss1/4>. Last Visit August 2025; G. Cavalla, "Kantian Perspectives on Democratic Peace: Alternatives to Doyle", *Review of International Studies*, British International Studies Association, Vol.27, 229–248, 2001.

⁴⁵⁷ S. Simpson, "Making Liberal Use of Kant: Democratic Peace Theory and International Relations", *International Relations*, SAGE, 1-20, 2018.

economic interdependence, building effective regional institutions, and developing cooperative security arrangements could still foster elements of democratic peace in the Middle East region. A comparison with regions such as Europe and Southeast Asia's reforms under ASEAN shows that gradual reforms, institution-building, and norm development have been effective elsewhere in emerging peace and long-term stability through incremental reforms, norm formation, and sustained dialogue, and suggesting it as a possible, though complex and context-specific, path for adaptation toward greater stability in the Middle East.⁴⁵⁸ Regional peace can not rely merely on democratization but must address socio-economic cohesion and cooperative security frameworks.⁴⁵⁹

Contrary to the opinion of some authors, I do not believe that the current deep-rooted conflicts and ongoing wars in the Middle East constitute an obstacle to the formation of a union, just as explained in Chapter II on Settlement of Wars, all unions emerged in the aftermath of prolonged wars and tensions, serving as a means to quell ongoing conflicts and prevent future ones. For instance, in the same line, public opinion surveys from the Arab Barometer and similar regional datasets' findings indicate that individuals who hold stronger democratic principles, such as political pluralism, rule of law, civil liberties, and accountable governance, are more likely to favor peaceful relations and conflict resolution with Israel. The democratic norms encourage tolerance, negotiation, and compromise, which can shift public opinion away from hostility and toward reconciliation. It also notes that public attitudes are shaped by perceptions of fairness, justice, and mutual respect in the peace process. The findings suggest that promoting democratic governance and values in Arab societies could increase public backing for peace initiatives, making democratization not only a domestic reform goal but also a tool for advancing regional stability and conflict resolution.⁴⁶⁰ In addition to regional complex conflicts, other internal, political, economic, social, cultural, and related challenges are also expected to improve under the peace and unity in the framework of the union, and these issues should not be seen as barriers to Union Formation.

Another author argues that while the core tenet of Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) is that democracies are less likely to go to war with each other, democracies may be as prone to war as autocracies in general. The DPT outlines two explanations, including normative/cultural and structural/institutional for why democracies may rarely fight one another. This argument is tested against post-9/11 U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, while concluding that DPT's predictive power is limited in modern asymmetric conflicts and that democracies can bypass its constraints when facing perceived existential threats. Thus, the author's conclusion undervalues DPT's potential in regions like the Middle East by focusing on exceptional wartime contexts involving non-democracies and counterterrorism.⁴⁶¹

However, these cases do not disprove the core premise that democracies maintain peaceful relations with one another, a principle that remains relevant for advancing democratic governance

⁴⁵⁸ U. Abulof, O. Goldman, "The Domestic Democratic Peace in the Middle East", *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, Vol.9, No.1, 73-89, 2015.

⁴⁵⁹ E. Solingen, "Democratization in the Middle East: Quandaries of the Peace Process", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.7, No.3, 139-155, July 1996.

⁴⁶⁰ L. Berger, "Democratic Values and Arab Support for Peace with Israel", *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol.36, No.3, 270-290, 2019.

⁴⁶¹ L. Gomari-Luksch, "The Democratic Peace Theory after 9/11", *SSRN*, November 2012. Accessible on https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2179540. Last Visit August 2025.

and regional peace in the Middle East. The cited wars were conducted against non-democratic states, whereas DPT concerns relations between democratic states. Proposing DPT for the Middle East aims to establish democracy in the region; thus, the current absence of democracy should not be viewed as an obstacle.

In addition, the United States' unlawful military actions, such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, and its current support for Israel's crimes in Gaza, represent exceptional and specific cases that cannot be taken as representative of all democracies and therefore cannot be generalized to all and be used to undermine the core principle of Democratic Peace Theory (DPT).

Despite all critiques and challenges to its application, Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) offers a compelling framework for fostering long-term stability and unity in the Middle East. Historical evidence from other regions demonstrates that democratization, combined with institutional development, economic interdependence, and cooperative security frameworks, can transform conflict-prone areas into peace zones. While the region's current authoritarian structures and ongoing disputes present obstacles, these conditions mirror the pre-union environments of Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Americas, where gradual reforms ultimately led to integration and stability. Implementing DPT in the Middle East is therefore not only feasible but necessary, as it addresses both internal and interstate sources of conflict by promoting accountable governance, shared norms, and mutual legitimacy, paving the way for a sustainable regional peace and potential union.

6.2. Economic Peace Theory (EPT)

The Economic Peace Theory (EPT) posits that expanding strong economic interdependence and shared interests among regional states, achieved through deep regional trade ties, market integration, and economic cooperation, foster peace and stability by reducing incentives for conflict and the likelihood of war. In essence, the theory holds that the economic, financial, and commercial benefits derived from international trade and cooperation discourage countries from engaging in armed conflict with each other, as war would jeopardize their mutual trade, investments, and overall prosperity. The theory draws on liberal thought, suggesting that globalization, free trade, and cross-border economic ties create incentives for cooperation and conflict avoidance.

Historical examples often cited include post-World War II Western Europe (1945), where economic integration through institutions such as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) (1951-1952) eventually evolved into the European Union (EU), and its Single Market (1993), alongside the creation of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) (1960) as a separate and parallel trade bloc to promote economic interdependence for regional European, but non-EU member states. Other similar cases include the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) (1992), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (1992–1994), the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (2018), and the African Monetary Fund (AMF) (2014), which, despite engaging states that have at times experienced political tensions or localized conflicts, have strengthened economic

interdependence, thereby contributing to regional peace and stability and reducing the likelihood of large-scale conflict among their member states.⁴⁶²

The *Peace Progress Report 2024* overviews global and regional peace trends, assessing political, economic, and social factors influencing stability. It tracks changes in conflict dynamics, governance quality, human rights conditions, and economic resilience, using a combination of statistical indicators and qualitative analysis. It highlights ongoing challenges such as geopolitical rivalries, armed conflicts, climate-related security risks, and the erosion of democratic norms. It also examines the role of international cooperation, trade, and diplomacy in mitigating tensions, noting that economic interdependence can help stabilize relations. Case studies illustrate successes and setbacks in peacebuilding, with recommendations emphasizing the need for inclusive governance, equitable economic development, and stronger conflict prevention mechanisms, and underscore that sustainable peace requires integrated approaches combining security, political reform, and economic opportunity.⁴⁶³

In the Middle East, the structural problems including rentier economies, low levels of intra-regional trade, high tariffs, weak transport infrastructure, and crony capitalism, persistently undermine regional economic cooperation. In addition, political authoritarianism, regime insecurity, and foreign domination block stronger institutions, regional conflicts like Syria and rivalries such as Iran-Gulf states prevent a coherent security framework. Even though, external actors, including the EU, U.S., and G8, have launched multiple initiatives such as the Barcelona Process, Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA), Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs), Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA), and the Deauville Partnership. Yet, these efforts often overlap, compete, or emphasize bilateralism, ultimately undermining economic regionalism.⁴⁶⁴

However, some critics note that economic interdependence does not always resolve or prevent conflict, especially when political or security tensions outweigh economic interests. For instance, the concept of Economic Peace, in the ongoing tensions in the Middle East, particularly the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has failed so far. The analysis of economic interdependencies and cooperations, such as joint industrial zones, trade facilitation measures, donor-funded development projects, and infrastructure projects between Israel and Palestine, notes that while these initiatives can provide short-term economic relief, they have not eliminated political tensions, mistrust, and wars. Therefore, peaceful economic initiatives alone are insufficient if they are not paired with political progress, mutual recognition, and equitable arrangements. A lasting resolution requires integrating economic cooperation into a broader cohesive framework addressing core political disputes, rather than relying on Economic Peace incentives as a substitute for a comprehensive political agreement.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶² I. Bijaoui, *The Economic Reconciliation Process: Middle Eastern Populations in Conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 19, 53, 67.

⁴⁶³ Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Peace Progress Report 2024*, Analysing the Factors that Build, Predict and Sustain Peace, Sydney, March 2024. Accessible on <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>. Last Visit August 2025.

⁴⁶⁴ M. Legrenzi, M. Calculli, "Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East: Options and Challenges", *International Peace Institute (IPI)*, March 2013.

⁴⁶⁵ C.H. Anderton, J. Brauer, "Conflict and Peace Economics (ECONOMIA DE CONFLITO E PAZ)", *Cadernos de Campo, Araraquara*, No.26, 39-61, 2019.

Within Israel and Palestine, economic integration has occurred alongside persistent conflict, challenging the core premise of Economic Peace Theory (EPT) that interdependence reduces violence. This is largely due to a misunderstanding or conflation between economic dependency and economic integration, which fundamentally undermines the application of EPT in the Israeli-Palestinian context, but does not represent a genuine conceptual flaw in the theory itself. Achieving lasting peace requires a shift from dependency toward genuine Palestinian economic independence, the establishment of clear economic borders, the creation of free-trade opportunities with regional and international partners, and the transfer of regulatory authority from Israel to a neutral framework (i.e., an impartial, internationally supervised economic governance system free from unilateral control).⁴⁶⁶

In other words, the role of economic reconciliation in the Israeli-Palestinian context, while holding the potential to create mutual interests and improve living standards, has been undermined by political instability, security restrictions, asymmetrical economic relations, and the absence of parallel political negotiations. In such cases, economic projects have served as tools of political leverage rather than instruments of mutual benefit, reinforcing dependency instead of promoting balanced integration. “Palestinian trade is mainly with Israel. In 2011, 86% of exports were to Israel, especially agricultural products, 10% to Arab countries, and 4% to other countries. Seventy percent of imports were from Israel, 10% from Europe, 4% from Arab countries, and 16% from other countries.”⁴⁶⁷ These statistics reflect a form of destructive dependency rather than a peaceful economic interdependence or genuine integration.

In conclusion, a peaceful economic integration and economic interdependence should not be mistaken for the unilateral dependency of one party, nor should Economic Peace Theory be dismissed as ineffective in advancing regional peace, security, stability, and unity on this basis. Nevertheless, as other scholars have rightly observed, Economic Peace alone is insufficient and must be complemented by other structural and political mechanisms. Although economic engagement can support peacebuilding, it cannot replace the need to address core political and sovereignty issues. For economic reconciliation to succeed, it must be embedded within a comprehensive political framework that guarantees equality, autonomy, and sustained cooperation between both parties.

6.3. Security Community Theory (SCT)

Security Community Theory (SCT), originally developed by Karl Deutsch in *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*,⁴⁶⁸ and subsequently expanded by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, explains how a group of independent sovereign states can cultivate stable expectations of peaceful change and gradually

⁴⁶⁶ R. Odeh, “Economic Peace and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”, *International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), Department of War Studies, King's College London*, 2018; N. Feldman, “Economic Peace: Theory Versus Reality”, *Strategic Assessment, Neubauer Research Fellow at INSS*, Vol.12, No.3, 19-28, November 2009.

⁴⁶⁷ I. Bijaoui, *The Economic Reconciliation Process: Middle Eastern Populations in Conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 21; State of Palestine, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Accessible on <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/default.aspx>. Last Visit August 2025.

⁴⁶⁸ K.W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

evolve to a stage where war and armed conflict between them become virtually inconceivable, with all disputes increasingly resolved through peaceful means.

According to the Security Community Theory (SCT), such a community is built on mechanisms grounded in mutual trust, shared understandings of security, and habitual interactions. Gradually, these consistent cooperative practices can transform states' perceptions of one another, from rivalries or adversaries to partnership within a common security space, replacing realist balance-of-power logic with cooperative norms, laying the groundwork for a strong sense of "we-feeling" that shapes how states address security challenges and fosters the collective identity essential to a security community.⁴⁶⁹ In the same regard, Constructivism highlights that regional identities are socially constructed, emerging through interaction and shared understandings. Identity-building emphasizes that the socially constructed nature of regions is central to regionalism and the promotion of cooperation. In this sense, Constructivist identity-building, as the core mechanism behind the emergence of a security community, explains how reshaping common norms, values, perceptions, and collective narratives can foster regional cohesion, reduce conflicts, and provide the foundation for Buzan and Wæver's Security Cooperation.⁴⁷⁰ This is exemplified in ASEAN's motto, "One Vision, One Identity, One Community",⁴⁷¹ or the EU's "European Identity",⁴⁷² which clearly reflect the objectives of regional unity and integration among their member states.

The Regional Security Cooperation (RSC), as conceptualized in Buzan & Wæver's framework in *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*,⁴⁷³ which is grounded in the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), explains how security interdependence is clustered geographically and managed through region-specific arrangements and plays a crucial role in the gradual development of a security community. The analytical foundations of understanding security, including its sectoral dimensions and the concept of securitization, were established earlier in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*.⁴⁷⁴

The Regional Security Cooperation (RSC) refers to practical arrangements among regional and neighboring states, such as joint security frameworks, arms control agreements, crisis management mechanisms, and sustained political dialogues, designed to manage or reduce the region's threats. Buzan and Wæver argue that Europe is a rare example of a security community that emerged from Deutsch's classical Security Community Theory, whereby states gradually developed mutual confidence, stabilized their relations, and securitized the region in a non-war mode.⁴⁷⁵ South Asia also provides a case, illustrating the development of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), emphasizing security rhetoric of "comprehensive" and "cooperative" approaches in many

⁴⁶⁹ O. Dilek, "Constructing Security and Community in the Middle East: A Security Community Approach to the Structure and Agents of the Arab Spring", *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, Vol.11, No.42, 51-74, August 2014.

⁴⁷⁰ E. Holmquist, J. Rydqvist, *The Future of Regional Security in the Middle East: Expert Perspectives on Coming Developments*, FOI, April 2016, 14-16.

⁴⁷¹ The ASEAN Charter, 2008, Art.36. Accessible on <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>. Last Visit August 2025.

⁴⁷² European Council, "Declaration on the European Identity", Copenhagen, 14 December 1973. Accessible on https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/declaration_on_european_identity_copenhagen_14_december_1973-en-02798dc9-9c69-4b7d-b2c9-f03a8db7da32.html. Last Visit August 2025.

⁴⁷³ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁴⁷⁴ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997.

⁴⁷⁵ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 375.

Asian states, particularly in Southeast Asia through ASEAN. However, the region still largely exemplifies traditional security dynamics, dominated by military and political considerations.⁴⁷⁶ “The ASEAN states managed to shelve the disputes among themselves, effectively forming a weak subregional security regime whose members agreed not to pursue their disagreements by force.”⁴⁷⁷

Regional security cooperation has been modeled under regional organizations or unions in different institutional forms worldwide, including, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) providing collective defense, crisis management, and arms-control in Europe; the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) promoting “comprehensive security” in Southeast Asia; and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) advancing conflict prevention and peacekeeping in the African Union (AU). These models suggest that, under the framework of a Middle East Union, the prospect of establishing lasting peace and stability is attainable.⁴⁷⁸

According to the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the Middle East constitutes “a typical conflict formation” in which security is shaped by rivalries among regional powers and reinforced by external interventions, especially the United States, due to oil wealth and geostrategic significance, producing instability rather than cooperation. The persistence of authoritarianism, interstate rivalries competing interests, sectarian and ethnic divisions, fragile states, political fragmentation, and weak institutions undermines regional stability. Security dynamics are increasingly shaped not only by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also by Sunni-Shiite hostility, Islamic fundamentalism, and domestic fragility.⁴⁷⁹ Unlike Europe and other regions where institutional frameworks mitigate insecurity, the Middle East lacks effective mechanisms for collective security or integration, and is still dominated by securitisation, arms races, and identity-based conflicts. Regional organizations such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have also been largely symbolic, weak, ineffective, and fragmented, heavily influenced by interstate rivalries rather than overcoming divisions. Consequently, the Middle East, despite various proposals for dialogue and cooperation, trapped in cycles of conflict and power struggles, remains a fragmented security complex, far from the emergence of a genuine Security Community.⁴⁸⁰

Drawing on Deutsch’s Security Community Theory and Buzan and Wæver’s Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), a Middle Eastern security community, based on mutual trust, peaceful conflict resolution, and shared identity, could effectively contribute to resolving the current ongoing wars and regional tensions and fostering lasting peace and stability. However, the weakening of core Arab states like Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and the unwillingness of powerful non-Arab

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 93.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 135.

⁴⁷⁸ A.J.K. Bailes, A. Cottey, “Regional security cooperation in the early 21st century”, in *Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, SIPRI Yearbook 2006, Oxford University Press, 195-223, 2006.

⁴⁷⁹ J. Jarzabek, “The Theory of Regional Security Complexes in the Middle Eastern Dimension”, *Wschodnioznawstwo*, Vol.12, 155-170, 2018.

⁴⁸⁰ H. Moshirzadeh, “Identity and Security in the Middle East”, *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol.4, No.2, 5-32, 2013; P. Jones, *Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options*, Report of the SIPRI Middle East Expert Group with a New Afterword, SIPRI, October 2011; R.H. Santini, “A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited”, *Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)*, Vol.52, No.4, 93-111, 2017; E. Holmquist, J. Rydqvist, *The Future of Regional Security in the Middle East: Expert Perspectives on Coming Developments*, FOI, April 2016, 17-35.

states (Israel, Iran) to fill the leadership gap so far have prevented the Middle East's progress toward a security community. Historically, the Middle East has been trapped in anarchy and balance-of-power attempts rather than cooperation, reinforced by weak regional institutions, external interference, identity fragmentation, and economic dependency. Although pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism offer a rhetorical unity, they are often instrumentalized for state interests, and deepening regional divisions. Additionally, while Iran and Israel articulate their foreign policies in supra-state ideological terms, Islamic solidarity, democracy, and Jewish identity, in practice have favored a fragmented regional order, leaving the vision of a Middle Eastern Security Community still a distant ideal.⁴⁸¹

Here, three phrases are used, all of which, although interconnected and relevant, address regional security and interdependence, emphasizing the need for cooperation among regional and neighboring states, also having some differences:

- **Deutsch's Security Community Theory (SCT)**, which is a normative-political, identity-focused approach, emphasizes deeper integration, mutual trust, shared identity, and peaceful conflict resolution to address regional security issues;
- **Regional Security Cooperation (RSC)**, which is an action-oriented method, focuses on practical arrangements, measures, and concrete mechanisms among states, such as strategic alliances, joint exercises, or agreements for an immediate approach to the current threats and security concerns; and
- **Buzan & Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)**, which is an analytical framework, structural, and systemic, analyzing patterns of conflict, cooperation, security interdependence, and geographical clusters in a region.

Since the current work mainly focuses on the assessment of the Formation of a Middle East Union, I refer to Security Community Theory as the principal theoretical framework, and RSC and RSCT are mentioned to support the theory, contextualize practical arrangements, and regional dynamics, and their application in the Middle East.

The application of the Regional Security Cooperation (RSC) under the Security Community Theory (SCT), despite all the above-mentioned complexities highlighted by the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) in the Middle East, is challenging, but not impossible. In this regard, given the linguistic, religious, and cultural similarities, as well as the existing region's geopolitical and geo-economic homogeneity (as assessed in Chapter III), a common identity, shared norms and values, considered a prerequisite for the emergence of a Middle Eastern Security Community, does not need to be newly constructed but rather already exists. This requires focusing on and promoting the many existing commonalities and similarities instead of emphasizing minor distinctions, such as religious sects of Sunni and Shia, as well as ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversities, which are not unique to the Middle East and have long existed elsewhere in the world, without preventing regional cooperation. The era of allowing such diversities and differences to generate persistent tension and division should therefore be considered over.

In this regard, the ASEAN region encompasses far greater religious diversity, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, as well as a much broader ethnic and linguistic variety than the Middle East, yet it has managed to foster regional cohesion, and move toward unity and a

⁴⁸¹ O. Dilek, "Constructing Security and Community in the Middle East: A Security Community Approach to the Structure and Agents of the Arab Spring", *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, Vol.11, No.42, 51-74, August 2014.

nascent security community by transcending differences, focusing on commonalities, and respecting diversities.⁴⁸² Similarly, the European Union (EU) unites together states characterized by religious pluralism, Christianity in its Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions, alongside Islam, Judaism, and other faiths, as well as 24 official languages and some 60 regional or minority languages across diverse ethnic groups, yet has nonetheless fostered integration, developed a security community, and cultivated a shared European identity with the official motto, “United in Diversity”.⁴⁸³ All this indicates that linguistic, religious, ethnic, and racial diversity does not inherently prevent common identity-building or the construction of a security community. Especially, since the diversity in the Middle East is comparatively less pronounced than in other regions and the similarities and commonalities more substantial, the foundations for such a community already exist.

As observed earlier, diversity is not an obstacle to identity-building and the formation of a security community, but what obstructs this potential are not diversities themselves, but foreign politicisation, external manipulation, and propagandistic narratives that exaggerate minor differences and revive historical tensions and divisions. If Middle Eastern nations look closely, they realize that historically, external great powers, pursuing their own interests, either directly or indirectly, have often contributed to, instigated, encouraged, or organized regional conflicts,⁴⁸⁴ as is evident today in the United States’ support for Israel’s military actions in Gaza.⁴⁸⁵

Given these facts, building such a Security Community requires a pluralistic approach, in which populations reimagine security beyond strict national borders, while regional states, especially regional great powers, benefit from both ideological appeal and material resources to concentrate on constructing and strengthening their common regional identity of “we-feeling”, rooted in shared cultural and religious bonds, building mutual confidence, and working toward a united security community capable of cooperatively preventing the influence of external powers in the region. This, in turn, can lead to the integration process, transform the region into a stable security community, and embed a political culture in which peaceful dispute resolution becomes the norm.

6.4. Institutionalism and Policy Harmonization Theory

The deficiencies, challenges, and prospects of regional integration positioned the Middle East in comparative regionalism as a region with very limited institutionalized integration, where attempts at cooperation have been repeatedly obstructed by authoritarianism, political fragmentation, historical rivalries, security dilemmas, and ethnic, sectarian, and religious conflicts. Compared to Europe, Africa, America, or even Asia, the Middle East neither has developed strong

⁴⁸² ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Identity: Now and Beyond, Post Publication of the Symposium on ASEAN Identity and Strengthening ASEAN-ROK Cooperation: Now and Beyond*, Jakarta, ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF), October 2023, 20-29.

⁴⁸³ P. Videsott, *Linguistic and Cultural Diversity – Minority and Minoritised Languages as Part of European Linguistic and Cultural Diversity*, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, PE 751.273, June 2023, 14-15.

⁴⁸⁴ A.L. Rhoades, et al., *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the Middle East*, RAND Corporation, 2023; F. Halliday, “The Great Powers and the Middle East”, *Middle East Report*, No.151, March/April 1988. Accessible on <https://merip.org/1988/03/the-great-powers-and-the-middle-east/>. Last Visit August 2025.

⁴⁸⁵ The Watson School of International and Public Affairs, *Cost of War: United States Spending on Israel’s Military Operations and Related U.S. Operations in the Region, October 7, 2023-September 30, 2024*, Brown University, 2024. Accessible on <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2024/USpendingIsrael/>. Last Visit August 2025.

Institutionalism to govern regional relations, nor has it succeeded in achieving regional hegemony and harmonizing policies across states that could lead to integration. Most regional organizations, such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have mostly remained weak and symbolic, often serving more as forums for political rhetoric than as mechanisms for binding cooperation. Security concerns, ideological divides, and the influence of external powers have prevented the region from advancing toward harmonization and institutionalization.⁴⁸⁶

The failure of Middle Eastern regionalism, institutionalism, and policy harmonization has been driven primarily by ‘inward-looking coalitions’ rather than internationalizing ones. Unlike East Asia, where internationalizing coalitions promoted regional cooperation, economic openness, and institution-building, the Middle East’s political coalitions often prioritized self-sufficiency, protectionism, and militarization. This orientation has entrenched regional political fragmentation, limited economic interdependence, and obstructed effective institutional development. For example, the Arab League, which was created under inward-looking conditions, instead of fostering integration, functioned as a minimal, non-intrusive institution designed to protect ruling elites from pan-Arab pressures, and finally, failed to reduce conflicts, harmonize policies, or build genuine institutionalized regionalism. Inward-looking strategies across the region reinforced each other, creating “zones of war” rather than “zones of peace,” which weakened attempts at cooperation.

Attempts at policy harmonization or regional institutionalization have therefore remained superficial, largely rhetorical, and unable to overcome the competitive agendas of ruling elites. While globalization and internationalization spurred institutional innovation in other regions, in the Middle East the dominance of inward-looking coalitions produced institutions that mirrored those preferences, resisting open regionalism and blocking deeper convergence. Middle Eastern regionalism has been constrained by domestic political economies and coalitional dynamics that prioritize authoritarian regime survival and sovereignty over integration and harmonization.⁴⁸⁷

Although, there is enough cultural commonality, linguistic, and religious bond that could provide a foundation for cooperation, the absence of mutual institutional trust and effective governance structures has blocked the development of deeper regionalism, institutionalism, and policy harmonization among Middle Eastern states. Consequently, the Middle East was portrayed as a region described as an example of “failed regionalism,” where policy harmonization, economic interdependence, and institutional frameworks remain shallow, and unity and integration are more aspirational than real.

Despite the numerous initiatives since 1945 (to be discussed in Chapter V), regional institutionalized integration and the Middle Eastern regionalism have produced weak or limited results due to structural, political, and external barriers. For instance, so far, Middle Eastern attempts at regional economic cooperation and integration have consistently fallen short, as the region lacks the institutional foundations and harmonized policies necessary for sustained growth and interdependence. Economic interdependence among states creates shared interests, which in turn generate a demand for international institutions and rules to manage cooperation.

⁴⁸⁶ T.A. Börzel, “Comparative Regionalism: A New Research Agenda”, *KFG Working Paper Series, German Research Foundation (DFG), Kolleg-Forschergruppe (KFG) “The Transformative Power of Europe”*, Freie Universität Berlin, No.28, August 2011.

⁴⁸⁷ E. Solingen, J. Malnight, “Globalization, Domestic Politics, and Regionalism”, Edited by T.A. Börzel, T. Risse, *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*, Oxford University Press, 64-86, 2016.

Institutionalists emphasize that these arrangements, known as “international regimes,” with their norms, rules, and decision-making procedures, facilitate policy coordination and stable cooperation, even in a world where power politics (Realism) also plays a role. A comprehensive understanding of regional and international cooperation emerges from combining Economic Peace Theory (EPT) with insights from Institutionalism, Realism, and Policy Harmonization, as interdependence creates incentives for peace while institutions provide the mechanisms to manage and sustain cooperation.⁴⁸⁸ A meaningful regional integration to succeed requires building credible institutional reforms, fostering trust, harmonizing regulatory frameworks, and implementing coordinated mechanisms to overcome historical fragmentation and external dependencies. Only through such political will and confidence-building measures can institutionalism and policy harmonization in the Middle East become viable foundations for lasting peace, political stability, economic development, and integration.⁴⁸⁹

“New institutionalism” can also influence “radicalization and violent extremism (VE)” in the Middle East by highlighting the role of states, civil society, religious bodies, international actors, and the media as soft power, institutions guided by their own norms, rules, and practices in shaping organized responses to radicalization. Several interrelated drivers, including territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political ideologies, cultural and religious factors, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics, contribute to the emergence of radicalization. Addressing these challenges requires not only security-centered approaches but also institutionalized and harmonized policies that gather state and non-state actors, investing in education and socio-economic development, youth empowerment, and stronger inter-institutional coordination.⁴⁹⁰

The relationship between regionalism, institutionalism, policy harmonization, and union formation is mutually reinforcing, as each influences the other. This means regionalism can pave the way for the creation of a union, while the establishment of a union can, in turn, serve as the foundation for deeper regionalism and more effective policy harmonization. Regional policy harmonization and institutionalism in the Middle East need to be developed across multiple dimensions, including political, cultural, scientific, economic, commercial, security, and defense spheres. However, success in this sense requires mutual institutional confidence among regional states and stronger political commitment to collective goals.

For advancing Middle Eastern harmonization and institutionalism, drawing lessons from comparative models in other regions, the European Union’s Commission, the African Union’s Peace and Security Council, and the ASEAN Secretariat demonstrate how supranational and intergovernmental bodies can coordinate policies, mediate conflicts, and implement collective decision-making. Comparable mechanisms in the Middle East could provide continuity, credibility, and enforcement capacity, moving beyond symbolic agreements toward effective regional integration.

7. Conclusion: Toward Overcoming Barriers and Eliminating the Middle Eastern Fragmentation

⁴⁸⁸ D.J. Puchala, “Domestic Politics and Regional Harmonization in the European Communities”, *World Politics*, Vol.27, No.4, 496-520, July 1975.

⁴⁸⁹ T. Kuran, “Institutional Roots of Authoritarian Rule in the Middle East: Civic Legacies of the Islamic Waqf”, *Economic Research Initiatives at Duke Working Paper Series*, Duke University, No.171, June 2014.

⁴⁹⁰ D. Kapidžić, M. Hirkić, S. Turčalo, “Contextualizing Institutional Approaches to Radicalization in the Balkans, Middle East and North Africa”, *Journal of Regional Security*, Vol.20, No.1, 5-22, 2025.

This chapter illustrated how the Middle East's fragmentation, reinforced by the "breakdown theory," sectarian and ethnic provocations, external profiteering, stigmatizing propaganda, and the direct presence of foreign military forces such as U.S. deployments and Israeli actions, has jointly entrenched mistrust and obstructed regional coordination. The region remains among the world's most conflict-prone, least institutionalized, and least harmonized regions, characterized by unresolved rivalries, weak institutionalism, democratic deficits, persistent authoritarianism, and sectarian and ethnic cleavages, all exacerbated by external interference from global powers. The absence of effective mechanisms for conflict resolution and regional integration has intensified instability and fragmentation.

As Lewis truly mentioned: "For the governments and peoples of the Middle East, the opportunities and the dangers are incomparably greater. What is at stake for them is not only a matter of interests and policies, but the whole future direction of their societies. The most obvious is the mixture as before to continue with the same political games, with the same or similar radical dictatorships and traditional autocracies, trying to subvert or invade each other but with this important difference, that the West would no longer be concerned, but would rather remain indifferent to whatever happened, to wars and disasters and upheavals, as long as the oil continues to flow. ... All these regional changes, however important to the countries and peoples of the Middle East, are of little interest to the rest of the world, except insofar as they may affect the availability of Middle Eastern oil. ... As long as the oil companies continued to work, and the oil still flowed, no one greatly cared what they did to each other or what others did to them. The Western capacity for turning a blind eye, already manifested in other respects."⁴⁹¹ Therefore, the Middle Eastern statesmen must remain vigilant and farsighted, drawing lessons from history and seeking appropriate solutions to improve the region's condition.

However, these barriers remain surmountable through a multifaceted and sequenced strategy: such as broadening democratic accountability and the rule of law (ROL) to reduce war incentives through Democratic Peace Theory (DPT); deepening interdependence via region-wide trade, energy, infrastructure, and shared-value development projects through Economic Peace Theory (EPT); fostering a security community via persistent confidence-building measures, crisis hotlines, arms-control initiatives, and joint missions through Security Community Theory (SCT); and consolidating progress with robust institutionalism and gradual policy harmonization to standardize rules to reduce transaction costs and socialize elites in cooperative norms. Combining these techniques can transform zero-sum rivalries into structured cooperation, laying the practical foundations for a future Middle East Union. Genuine integration demands that states prioritize lasting peace, long-term regional stability, and public welfare and prosperity over short-term national rivalries and strategic interests, while committing to shared political mechanisms of governance, democratic development, dispute resolution, and economic coordination via a cooperative diplomatic approach. In this regard, the formation of a Middle East Union emerges as the most viable solution.

During the 12-day Iran–Israel war (13–24 June 2025), Mohsen Rezaei, senior military officer and Secretary of Iran's Expediency Discernment Council, announced in an official interview the proposal for a regional union comprising 25 countries, centered on five pivotal states in the region, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Türkiye, and Pakistan, which share religious affinities, energy resources as the world's energy hubs, and common strategic characteristics. Rezaei likened the initiative to

⁴⁹¹ B. Lewis, "Rethinking the Middle East", *Council on Foreign Relations*, Vol.71, No.4, 99-119, 1992.

the European Union formation, recalling how European conflicts after two world wars led rise to regional integration. He further emphasized that such a union could emerge as a pole in the new multipolar world order alongside the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union, thereby shielding the region from becoming an arena of future rivalries between major powers such as China and Russia or India and the United States.⁴⁹² Earlier, in 2021, he also proposed the formation of an Economic Union in the region, involving 25 “bordering” and “co-regional” countries.⁴⁹³ This demonstrates that Middle Eastern authorities recognize the urgent need for unification, integration, regionalism, institutionalism, convergence, and policy harmonization, and are taking steps toward these objectives.

⁴⁹² M. Rezaei, *A New Alliance Formation with the axis of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Pakistan and Egypt*, [Video Interview], July 8, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/1316024>. Last Visit August 2025.

⁴⁹³ Jamaran, *Mohsen Rezaei's Proposal to Form an Economic Union in the Region*, [Interview], January 16, 2021. Accessible on https://www-jamaran-news.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/www.jamaran.news/fa/amp/news-1492230?amp_gsa=1&_js_v=a. Last Visit August 2025.

CHAPTER V:

CURRENT FRAMEWORK OF THE MIDDLE EAST UNION

Unions typically initiate their collaboration, unification, and integration through a variety of shared political, security, legal, social, cultural, commercial, and economic domains. Currently, the Middle East is undergoing this foundational process, with diverse sectors actively contributing towards enhancing regional unity, harmonization, and cooperation. Therefore, this chapter aims to explore the current framework of the Middle East Union.

While multiple classifications of the Middle East regional institutions are possible, such as distinguishing between subregional and pan-regional scope, or internal versus externally driven initiatives, this paper categorizes the current framework of the Middle East Union according to the primary functions and purposes of each organization. This thematic approach allows for a clearer understanding of the diverse areas of integration and cooperation, including political, economic, commercial, defense, security, cultural, and intellectual domains.

I. Political and Regional Integration

The Middle East has long witnessed efforts to forge political and regional unity among its states, driven by shared cultural, traditional, linguistic, and religious ties, as well as common geo-economic and geopolitical interests. Although these attempts have often been challenged by internal divisions, power asymmetries, and external interference, a number of institutional frameworks have emerged with the goal of promoting policy harmonization, intergovernmental cooperation, and regional solidarity.

This section examines the major political and regional integration structures in the Middle East, focusing on the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Each of these entities represents a distinct model of collaboration, whether pan-Arab, sub-regional, or pan-Islamic, that contributes in varying degrees to the evolving architecture of regional integration and to the long-term prospects of a Middle East Union.

1. Arab League

The Arab League (AL), also called the League of Arab States (LAS), is the first and the oldest initiative to strengthen the ties between the Middle Eastern states to coordinate their political, legal, economic, strategic, and security cooperation while respecting the independence and sovereignty of member states. It is a regional organization founded on March 22, 1945, by seven founding members of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen, and later has expanded to include 22 Arabic-speaking independent countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), (10 North-African and 12 West-Asian). The Arab League's primary objectives include fostering unity among Arab nations, coordinating policies, resolving disputes, and advancing the

development of the region by promoting political, economic, cultural, social, military, health, communication, judicial, and administrative cooperation among its member states.⁴⁹⁴ The Charter of the Arab League in Article 2 defines the purpose of the League as follows:

“to draw closer the relations between member States and co-ordinate their political activities with the aim of realizing a close collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries. It also has among its purposes a close co-operation of the member States ..., in the following matters:

- (a) Economic and financial matters, including trade, customs, currency, agriculture and industry;
- (b) communications, including railways, roads, aviation, navigation, and posts and telegraphs;
- (c) Cultural matters;
- (d) Matters connected with nationality, passports, visas, execution of judgments and extradition;
- (e) Social welfare matters;
- (f) Health matters.”⁴⁹⁵

In emphasizing the necessity to observe peace, security, stability, and the peaceful settlement of disputes continues:

“... the League will collaborate with the international organizations which may be created in the future to guarantee peace and security and organize economic and social relations.”⁴⁹⁶

“The recourse to force for the settlement of disputes between two or more member States shall not be allowed. Should there arise among them a dispute that does not involve the independence of a State, its sovereignty or its territorial integrity, and should the two contending parties apply to the Council for the settlement of this dispute, the decision of the Council shall then be effective and obligatory.”⁴⁹⁷

The Arab League, while established to promote regional unity among Arab states, has remained weak and insufficient due to member states’ insistence on sovereignty, regime differences, economic disparities, and external interference. However, it is still considered an attempt towards regional integration and political harmonization.

2. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

On May 25, 1981, the Arab Gulf States formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to foster political, economic and military integration among its six Middle Eastern member states: Bahrain,

⁴⁹⁴ Arab Information Center (U.S.), *The Arab League: Its Origin, Purposes, Structure and Activities*, New York: Arab Information Center, 1955, 5-11.

⁴⁹⁵ Charter of the Arab League, March 22, 1945, Art.2. Accessible on <https://arableague-us.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Charter%20of%20the%20Arab%20League.pdf>. Last Visit January 2025.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid*, Art.3.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid*, Art.5.

Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This regional organization, also referred to as the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf bordering the Persian Gulf, serves as a political-commercial bloc that aims to promote collaboration in shared commercial, cultural, and social objectives, with an aspiration of establishing a common currency, reflecting their commitment to enhanced economic cooperation and integration.⁴⁹⁸ “The purpose of the GCC is to achieve unity among its members based on their common objectives and their similar political and cultural identities, which are rooted in Arab and Islamic cultures. ... the most important article of the GCC charter is Article 4, which states that the alliance was formed to strengthen relations among its member countries and to promote cooperation among the countries’ citizens. The GCC also has a defense planning council that coordinates military cooperation between member countries. The first significant deployment of the Peninsula Shield Force was in 2011 in Bahrain to guard government infrastructure against an uprising there during the Arab Spring protests. Economic coordination included attempts at economic union, though integrative agreements were often lacklustre in comparison with policy coordination. An agreement to launch a single regional currency similar to the euro by 2010 saw little movement apart from the establishment of a monetary council in 2009. Coordination in tax policy proved fruitful, ...”⁴⁹⁹

Article 4 of the Charter of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) delineates the fundamental objectives of the organization as follows:

“To effect coordination, integration and inter-connection between Member States in all fields in order to achieve unity between them.

To deepen and strengthen relations, links and areas of cooperation now prevailing between their peoples in various fields.

To formulate similar regulations in various fields including the following:

- Economic and financial affairs
- Commerce, customs and communications
- Education and culture

To stimulate scientific and technological progress in the fields of industry, mining, agriculture, water and animal resources; to establish scientific research; to establish joint ventures and encourage cooperation by the private sector for the good of their peoples.”⁵⁰⁰

Article 10 regarding the Settlement of Disputes in the region of the Persian Gulf provides as follows:

“The Cooperation Council shall have a "Commission for the Settlement of Disputes" attached to the Supreme Council. The Supreme Council will establish the Commission's composition on an "ad hoc" basis on the nature of the dispute. If a dispute arises over the Charter's interpretation or implementation and is not resolved by the Ministerial or

⁴⁹⁸ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, November 28, 2024. Accessible on <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gulf-Cooperation-Council>. Last Visit January 2025.

⁴⁹⁹ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, January 11, 2025. Accessible on <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gulf-Cooperation-Council>. Last Visit February 2025.

⁵⁰⁰ Charter of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), 25 May 1981, Art.4.

Supreme Council, it may be referred to the Commission for the Settlement of Disputes, which shall submit its recommendations or opinion to the Supreme Council for action.”⁵⁰¹

Although the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was initially established in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, with a focus on an anti-Iranian agenda, there exists significant potential for a shift in this approach to enhance and strengthen the alliance among the Gulf States and influence the broader dynamics of the Middle East. GCC has been the most successful Middle Eastern coordination due to its shared security concerns, similar political systems, and Saudi Arabia’s leadership, though oil dependency and reliance on U.S. security still hinder deeper integration.⁵⁰²

In 2023, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, during his visit to the Prime Minister's Palace in Kuwait, proposed the formation of a political, economic, and cultural forum, encompassing the northern states of the Persian Gulf means Iran and Iraq, along with the six member states of the GCC located in the southern region of the Persian Gulf, namely Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman.⁵⁰³ Iran's association with the GCC, due to the geopolitical and strategic factors outlined earlier in the section on Iran's Significance in the Middle East, would have a substantial impact on the council’s regional performance.

3. Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

After the arson attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) was formed in Rabat in 1969 as a unified expression of outrage and solidarity among Muslim nations to this insolence. In 2011, the Organization's name was officially changed to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to better reflect its objectives and missions. Although the formation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was an initiative originated from the Middle East states and driven by Middle Eastern actors and events as a regional organization, it was conceived as a global platform and intended as a broader pan-Islamic effort and Transregional alongside other Muslim-majority states. “The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is the second largest international organization after the United Nations, with 57 member states spanning four continents (Including 12 Asian, 21 African, 20 Arab, 2 European (Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina), and 2 South American (Suriname and Guyana) countries); ... to be a unifying platform for the Islamic nation, expressing its collective voice, (and) stands as a united voice against terrorism, condemning it in all its forms and manifestations.”⁵⁰⁴ Although the formation of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was primarily catalyzed as a Middle Eastern initiative (particularly concerning the Palestinian issue) and led prominently by the Middle East and North African (MENA) states such as Saudi Arabia, it was conceived from the outset as a pan-Islamic organization that also included major non-Middle Eastern Muslim-majority states.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid*, Art.10.

⁵⁰² M. Legrenzi, M. Calculi, “Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East: Options and Challenges”, *International Peace Institute (IPI)*, March 2013, 3.

⁵⁰³ N. Bayramli, “Iran Proposes Persian Gulf Forum for Enhanced Regional Relations”, *Politics*, 23 June 2023. Accessible on <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/iran-proposes-persian-gulf-forum-for-enhanced-regional-relations-2023-6-22-0/>. Last Visit August 2025.

⁵⁰⁴ Y.M. Al-Dubaie, “Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Comprehensive Efforts to Combat Terrorism”, *Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition*, Jeddah, 2025, 1-2.

The most important goals of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as stated in the first Article of the Charter, include: To promote human rights, Islamic brotherhood, integrity, solidarity and intra-Islamic cooperation in various fields among its member states, to unify the efforts of the members in facing challenges by Islamic World, to protect peace and security, and safeguard common interests, mutual respect to each state's right to self-determination, sovereignty, and non-interference in internal affairs, to encourage active participation in global political and economic decision-making, to support the struggle of the Palestinians to gain their rights and liberate their land, to counter Islamophobia worldwide, fight against terrorism, and encourage interfaith and intercultural dialogue, and increase cooperation and multilateral understanding between member states and other countries of the world.⁵⁰⁵

One of the primary objectives of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is to address and combat any kind of organized crimes as well as terrorism, which is clearly articulated in paragraph 18 of the first Article of the OIC Charter as follows:

“To cooperate in combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, organised crime, illicit drug trafficking, corruption, money laundering and human trafficking.”⁵⁰⁶

“In this context, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation was a pioneer in combating terrorism and establishing the necessary legal frameworks by adopting a treaty to combat terrorism in 1999; ... as well as a numerous of Resolutions including the Resolutions on combating terrorism, Resolution on Voice of Wisdom Centre Dialogue, Peace and Understanding, Resolution on combating the distortion of the image of religions, on the crime of desecrating the Holy Qur'an, on extremism leading to terrorism, on the crimes of the terrorist organization ISIS, etc. ... The OIC condemns terrorism in all forms.”⁵⁰⁷ The Voice of Wisdom Centre, by focusing on deconstructing extremist discourse on social media, promotes the real Islamic values like tolerance and moderation; the Executive Committee and the Observatory for Combating Islamophobia address Islamophobia and anti-Muslimism, and try to correct the misconceptions that link terrorism to Islam. The Security and Peace Unit of the OIC, in order to tackle and develop common strategies against terrorism and resolve disputes peacefully and diplomatically, enhances security cooperation among members through signing several memoranda of understanding, collaborating with the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism and the Islamic Military Alliance. The OIC cooperates closely with the United Nations, regional and global organizations, and other stakeholders in border control and security operations to enhance global counterterrorism strategies. Additionally, the OIC emphasizes addressing the underlying root causes of terrorism, including economic inequality, political suppression, and occupation, through education, development, and dialogue. The OIC also supports these initiatives by training programs and

⁵⁰⁵ Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), *Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation*, 1969, revised 2008, Art.1. Accessible on https://www.oic-oci.org/upload/documents/charter/en/oic_charter_2018_en.pdf. Last Visit May 2025.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Art.1, Para.18.

⁵⁰⁷ Y.M. Al-Dubaie, “Organization of Islamic Cooperation: Comprehensive Efforts to Combat Terrorism”, *Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition*, Jeddah, 2025, 2-3.

workshops to strengthen law enforcement and intelligence networks while advocating for counterterrorism efforts that adhere to international laws and human rights standards.⁵⁰⁸

In addition, in the context of addressing the growing issue of Islamophobia in the West, which has been intensified by factors such as terrorism, immigration, and discriminatory policies like the ban on Islamic symbols under secularism that have marginalized Muslims in a systemic discrimination especially in employment, education, and social inclusion, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) by employing qualitative methods and international organization theory, playing a vital role to counter negative portrayals of Islam, combat religious discrimination, and supports global peace efforts. Some government actions, such as particular legislation, and far-right political and nationalist rhetoric by showing Muslims as security threats have further fueled public hostility towards Muslims. In response, the OIC has taken on multiple roles: such as an initiator, it raises global awareness through international forums or media campaigns, and pressures international actors to recognize Islamophobia; as a mediator, it facilitates public dialogues in diplomatic strategies, advocates for inclusive policies, and encourages peaceful resolutions to religious tensions; and as a facilitator, it organizes, multilateral intergovernmental collaboration, international forums such as conferences to promote tolerance and support Muslim rights. Through these efforts, the OIC aims to foster human rights, tolerance, and global peace.⁵⁰⁹

Conclusion I: Toward a Unified Middle Eastern Political Regionalism

While the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are the key active entities and form the primary pillars of political and regional integration in the Middle East, several additional or subsidiary frameworks also have emerged over time. These entities include sub-regional efforts such as the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) (founded in 1989), which remains largely dormant due to enduring political disputes, and inter-parliamentary mechanisms like the Union of Arab Parliaments (UAP), which promote dialogue without substantive institutional power. Broader multilateral initiatives such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) incorporate Middle Eastern states in cooperation with the European Union (EU), reflecting external engagement in regional dynamics. Furthermore, conceptual initiatives such as the proposed Organization for Security and Development in the Middle East (OSDME) indicate a continued interest in reimagining the region's defense and security architecture. Taken together, all these examples underscore both the richness and fragmentation of political integration efforts within the Middle East region, a reality that continues to shape the prospects for a cohesive Middle East Union.

II. Economic and Financial Integration Initiatives

The institutional landscape of economic and financial integration in the Middle East reflects a multifaceted effort to address the region's shared developmental, fiscal, and trade-related challenges. Various monetary and economic initiatives in the Middle East have emerged through

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 4-5.

⁵⁰⁹ A.H. Kristiyanto, P.A. Afifah, S. Rahmah, "The Role and Significance of Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Global Issues: A Case Study of Islamophobia in France", *Department of International Relations, Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Jakarta*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 116-125, December 2024.

some institutional mechanisms aimed at fostering macroeconomic stability, policy coordination, trade liberalization, development financing, and deeper economic integration. The key initiatives include the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), and the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), all of which reflect efforts to address shared fiscal, monetary, and developmental challenges. Moreover, trade arrangements such as the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) and the proposed Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) underscore the region's broader aspiration to facilitate intra-regional commerce and advance economic integration. Together, these institutions indicate foundational steps toward building a cohesive regional economic unity. The aforementioned major initiatives will be further explored in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

4. Arab Monetary Fund (AMF)

On April 27, 1976, the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF) was established following the signing of the founding agreement by Arab states. However, it officially commenced operations in 1977, with its headquarters in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE). The AMF is a regional financial institution affiliated with the League of Arab States. According to the founding agreement and official publications, the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF)'s primary objectives include fostering economic growth and stabilizing exchange rates, promoting monetary cooperation, trade, and the financial market, and advancing regional development and integration among its member states through a range of strategies. The AMF also aims to encourage intra-Arab trade, coordinate exchange rate policies, and ultimately work toward the long-term goal of establishing a unified Arab currency. The AMF currently has 22 Arab member states, which include all members of the League of Arab States.

The Arab Monetary Fund (AMF) Annual Reports outline key interventions to mitigate regional economic challenges exacerbated by global inflation, supply chain disruptions, and post-pandemic recovery constraints. According to these reports, the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF) plays a multifaceted role in supporting its member states. The AMF provides various types of concessional loans to member states for supporting reforms in key areas such as Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) development, balance of payments disequilibria, fiscal sustainability, and macroeconomic stability. In addition to its lending operations, in response to economic challenges, AMF provides structural adjustment financing and trade support to help member states manage fiscal and monetary crises. The AMF also actively engages in delivering capacity-building and knowledge sharing, such as providing technical assistance, organizing training programs in public finance and banking supervision, benefiting over 1,850 Arab officials, and publishing research studies to aid informed policymaking.

Through strategic initiatives like the Buna payment platform (cross-border transactions system), programs, and settlement platform supporting transactions and financial inclusion, green finance, and digital transformation, the AMF reinforced its role as a key financial and consultative institution in the region. In addition, the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF) cooperates closely with international institutions like the IMF and World Bank to enhance financial systems and capital markets in the region. All the AMF's efforts align with its broader mission and strategic vision to

be the “closest partner to Arab countries” to strengthen economic resilience and integration, Arab monetary sovereignty reform, financial connectivity, and sustainable development.⁵¹⁰

Overall, the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF)’s founding mission reflects a comprehensive approach to regional economic development, stability, and integration. Although the AMF operates effectively within its current framework, there is a growing need for a broader and more inclusive monetary institution and cooperation mechanism that encompasses the entire Middle East region, not only Arab countries. The existing structure, limited to Arab countries, prevents the participation of other important Middle Eastern states, which, although not Arab, play a vital role in the region’s monetary and economic development; thereby restricting the potential for comprehensive regional economic integration. To address this gap, either the AMF should consider expanding its membership and scope into a more inclusive institution that incorporates non-Arab Middle Eastern countries; or in addition to AMF, the establishment of a new regional monetary body, like the Middle East Monetary Fund may be required to reflect wider and deeper monetary cooperation, enhance financial stability, and support inclusive development and integration across the entire Middle East region.

5. Islamic Development Bank (IsDB)

The Islamic Development Bank (IDB) Group is a Middle Eastern-led financial institution and a multilateral development bank founded in 1974 and beginning operations in 1975 following one of the objectives of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to foster economic growth and social development within its member states and among Muslim communities worldwide, guided by Islamic Shari’ah principles. The IDB utilizes Islamic Shari’ah-compliant financial instruments such as Murabaha, Sukuk, profit-sharing leasing, and installment sales.

In addition, the IDB Group has expanded its scope to include multiple affiliated entities and funds that offer specialized services; such as the Islamic Research and Training Institute (IRTI), the Islamic Corporation for the Insurance of Investment and Export Credit (ICIEC), the Islamic Corporation for the Development of the Private Sector (ICD), Islamic Solidarity Fund for Development (ISFD), and the International Center for Biosaline Agriculture (ICBA), among others. It also plays a major role in co-financing development projects alongside international partners such as the World Bank (WB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the OPEC Fund, the Arab Coordination Group (ACG), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and the UN agencies (e.g., UNDP, UNICEF, WHO), and has helped establish institutions for the regulation of Islamic finance. The IDB Group operates across various sectors including agriculture, trade, infrastructure, education, health, and capacity building, and administers a Waqf Fund to support humanitarian, scholarship, and technical assistance programs.⁵¹¹

Currently, the IsDB’s membership spans 57 states across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, and it functions as a global Islamic development institution. While the headquarters is located in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, there are regional offices and field representatives across various member states. Its major mission focuses on promoting comprehensive human development, particularly

⁵¹⁰ Arab Monetary Fund, *Arab Monetary Fund (AMF), Annual Report 2022*, AMF, Abu Dhabi, April 2023.

⁵¹¹ Islamic Development Bank Group, *Islamic Development Bank Group in Brief*, Jeddah, 2003.

in poverty alleviation, health, education, governance, and economic prosperity. In this regard, the Bank uses the Islamic Dinar (ISD), equivalent to one Special Drawing Right (SDR), as its accounting unit. Since its inception, by 2025, the IsDB Group has approved a cumulative total of over US\$200 billion in financing across sectors such as energy, agriculture, industry, mining, health, and education. Its approvals are geographically distributed, with Asia, Latin America, and Europe receiving the largest share (45.2%), followed by the Middle East and North Africa (33.5%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (18.1%), while IsDB's main beneficiaries include Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, and Türkiye.⁵¹²

Over the decades the IsDB significantly increased its capital and global presence. Overall, the IsDB's unique financial model emphasizes cooperation among developing nations and the ethical application of Islamic finance for sustainable development to the extent that its development projects are not confined to the Middle East, but also extend to sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and non-member Muslim communities worldwide. Highlights include strategic support for the Trans-Saharan Road Corridor, the development of Islamic microfinance initiatives such as the Herfati project, capacity building for Islamic banking regulation, and economic empowerment through training, technical assistance, and scholarships. The launch of the Country Engagement Framework (CEF) in 2025 further deepens this cooperation, with a focus on economic diversification, human capital development, regional integration, and South–South cooperation.

The IsDB Group has helped fund hundreds of development operations, most notably in infrastructure, telecommunications, power, and waste management, which are supported through its affiliated entities, such as the Islamic Corporation for the Development of the Private Sector (ICD), the Islamic Corporation for the Insurance of Investment and Export Credit (ICIEC), the International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation (ITFC), and the IsDB Institute.⁵¹³

Although the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) emerged as a Middle Eastern initiative and was founded under the leadership of key Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, Türkiye, Libya, and Egypt, which are also its largest shareholders, it later rebranded to function as a global Islamic financial institution and support Muslim-majority states' development. In fact, IsDB orientation and governance are rooted in the Middle East, but its development assistance and membership are international, which indicates effectiveness and reflecting characteristics of the Middle Eastern activities globally on broader stages.

6. Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC)

On 9 January 1968, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Libya signed the founding agreement of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) in Beirut, and the organization later established its headquarters in Kuwait City. Membership later expanded to include the Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Syria, and Tunisia (suspended in 1986), with eligibility based on petroleum's role in national income and approval by three-quarters of existing members, including all founding states.

⁵¹² Islamic Development Bank Group, *IsDB Group in Brief: 1975–2025 (Q1)*, Jeddah, 2025.

⁵¹³ Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), *Renewed Partnership for Lasting Impact*, Jeddah, 2025.

The OAPEC's core objectives are to strengthen cooperation among member states in petroleum-related economic activities, safeguard their collective and individual interests, ensure stable oil flows to global markets on fair terms, and encourage investment in the petroleum sector. In addition, the OAPEC is sponsoring certain major joint ventures, including Arab Maritime Petroleum Transport Company (AMPTC), Arab Shipbuilding and Repair Yard Company (ASRY), Arab Petroleum Investments Corporation (APICORP), and the Arab Petroleum Services Company (APSC), to foster petroleum infrastructure and regional cooperation among Arab countries.

OAPEC's activities also include efforts to strengthen cooperation with the Arab Planning Institute, participation in the Libya Energy and Economy Summit, and diplomatic engagements with Russian and Kuwaiti delegations, all aimed at contributing to developments in the petroleum and natural gas markets. Additionally, OAPEC emphasizes the role of carbon neutrality in economic growth, with OAPEC member states investing in renewable energy, improving operational efficiency, adopting Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies, applying Carbon Capture, Storage, and Utilization (CCSU) methods, as well as advancing green hydrogen initiatives.⁵¹⁴

The Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) is a Middle Eastern initiative. As its title suggests, OAPEC resembles the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in structure and purpose, but it is composed exclusively of Arab states. While the two organizations share similarities, particularly in their concern with oil policy and cooperation among producing countries, OAPEC is distinct in its focus on fostering regional cooperation specifically among Arab petroleum-exporting countries. Overall, OAPEC supports developments in the global, Arab, and broader Middle Eastern oil and energy sectors through cooperation, policy coordination, and joint initiatives among its member states.

However, the OAPEC's membership is restricted to a limited group of Arab states, thereby excluding several oil-rich countries in the broader Middle East and surrounding regions, such as Iran, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan, despite their geographic proximity and strategic roles in regional oil and gas transit. Additionally, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, which hold significant hydrocarbon reserves in the Caspian Basin and maintain energy linkages with the Middle East, are also outside the organization. This limited scope has constrained the potential for fully utilizing the region's collective oil capacity and coordinating its energy strategies.

In this context, the establishment of a broader framework, such as an Organization of Middle East Petroleum Exporting Countries could be proposed. Such an organization would encompass all oil-exporting countries in the Middle East and adjacent regions, regardless of linguistic, ethnic or political identity, thereby enhancing regional integration, strengthen market coordination, and foster more inclusive energy diplomacy.

7. Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA)

The Arab region of the Middle East has always pursued economic integration since the 1940s, but the previous initiatives were largely unimplemented. In 1997, fourteen Arab nations committed under the umbrella of the Arab League to establishing the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), targeting full implementation by January 2007. Currently, the Greater Arab Free Trade Area

⁵¹⁴ Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), *OAPEC Monthly Bulletin*, Vol.51, No.2, Kuwait, February 2025. Accessible on <https://oapecorg.org/>. Last Visit July 2025.

(GAFTA) has 18 active Middle Eastern member states, all of which are also members of the Arab League, consisting of 12 West Asian and 6 North African countries. Several additional Arab League countries like Mauritania, Somalia, Djibouti, and Comoros, have been identified as potential future members, although they have yet to fully join the agreement. GAFTA stands out as the most ambitious effort, supported by the Middle Eastern political frameworks like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The core objectives of GAFTA were to eliminate tariffs and non-tariff barriers (NTBs) on industrial and manufactured goods traded between member states, with limited exceptions for agricultural products during harvest seasons. It addressed both tariff and non-tariff barriers (NTBs) reductions, and sets Rules of Origin (ROO), services, and cooperation in broader trade and economic fields.

The gravity model used to assess GAFTA's trade effects incorporates key variables like the economic size of member states (measured by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)), physical distance between trading partners, language differences, level of trade openness, the accessibility of infrastructure, legal reliability and institutional frameworks.

By 2005, tariff eliminations were largely completed, although non-tariff barriers (NTBs) (such as administrative and regulatory hurdles) persisted only partially and are still significant. In addition, the trade data indicate strong growth and a significant increase in intra-GAFTA exports post-1997, outpacing global export growth. Based on trade flow data between GAFTA members and other countries, and employing various econometric techniques, the findings reveal that GAFTA has resulted in a 20% increase in intra-regional trade since its implementation.

The GAFTA's key trading products include fuel (26%), manufactured goods (23%), and food including beverages (15.8%). However, GAFTA is pursuing regional economic integration, trade is still highly unbalanced and the majority of trades (both exports and imports) are dominated by Gulf states (for around 70%), particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), while North African states contribute less.⁵¹⁵

GAFTA is regarded as one of the most comprehensive Arab economic efforts, which supports regional economic cooperation and deeper integration. It has successfully boosted intra-regional trade. The GAFTA effect is consistently positive across all estimators and comparable in impact to other major trade agreements like the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). To maximize the gains, deeper regional integration and expansion towards a broader Middle Eastern economic bloc, extending beyond only Arab countries, are recommended. This would involve including other non-Arab Middle Eastern nations but regionally significant economies such as Iran and Türkiye, which could create stronger trade synergies.

8. Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA)

The initiative of the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) was launched in 2003 by the U.S. President George W. Bush. It was primarily driven by U.S. political and economic interests and motivations behind it. The proposal aimed to promote and foster economic integration and trade

⁵¹⁵ J. Abedini, N Périidy, "The Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA): An Estimation of Its Trade Effects", *Journal of Economic Integration*, 23(4), 848-872, December 2008.

liberalization in the Middle East as a path to achieve regional peace, stability, counterterrorism, and political reform.

The MENA trade integration framework, namely MEFTA, unlike its counterparts in other regions such as African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) that are seen as strategic opportunities, goes beyond reducing tariffs and instead connects trade to broader reforms like enhancing public services, digital infrastructure, and regional value chains. Particular attention is given to digital and technology trade, e-commerce, health services, and cross-border labor mobility, reflecting the region's evolving economic priorities. These reforms aim to stimulate job creation, especially for youth and women, reduce poverty, promote economic diversification, and shift economies away from oil dependency.

As of 2025, the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) initiative has not yet materialized as a single unified agreement but continues to exist through World Trade Organisation (WTO) membership, Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs), a comprehensive patchwork of bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and Trade and Investment Framework Agreements (TIFAs). In this regard, the MEFTA's current member states can be categorized into three groups of official, partial, and potential members, based on the depth and status of their trade agreements with the United States, in addition to a separate group of excluded states from the MEFTA process, as outlined below:

- **Official members** are those with formally ratified and active Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), including Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, and Oman. These countries have demonstrated a commitment to comprehensive trade liberalization by adopting economic liberalization policies and regulatory frameworks aligned with U.S. conditions, such as WTO membership and abstention from the Arab boycott of Israel.
- **Partial members** are those countries engaged through Trade and Investment Framework Agreements (TIFAs), Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs), or World Trade Organisation (WTO) accession support, but have not progressed to full FTAs, largely due to political or reform-related hesitations. This category includes Egypt, Tunisia, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Yemen, Algeria, and Lebanon, as well as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has signed TIFA and BIT agreements but never finalized an FTA with the United States.
- **Potential members** are states identified by U.S. policy as having varying levels of engagement, but which remain outside the formal MEFTA process. These countries are considered future candidates for official membership through WTO accession efforts or preliminary trade agreements, though progress is limited due to political conditions or strained relations. This category includes Sudan, Mauritania, and the Palestinian territories, including the West Bank and Gaza.
- **Excluded countries** from the MEFTA process, namely Syria, Iran, and Libya, have been primarily excluded due to persistent geopolitical conflicts, international sanctions, and restrictive U.S. foreign policy positions.⁵¹⁶

⁵¹⁶ World Bank, *Trading Together: Reviving Middle East and North Africa Regional Integration in the Post-COVID Era*, MENA Economic Update (Report), International Bank for Reconstruction and Development: The World Bank, Washington DC, October 2020, 5-22.

Most Free Trade Areas (FTAs) or Customs Unions around the world are typically regional in nature, meaning they are agreements among neighboring countries located within a specific geopolitic area to reduce trade barriers and promote economic cooperation. Instances include: the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) among European countries; the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), across African states; MERCOSUR, among South American countries; ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), within Southeast Asian nations. These are all based on geographic proximity, shared economic interests, and often cultural or political ties. In this regard, one of the core critiques of the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) is the prominent role and extensive influence of the United States in the MEFTA initiative, to the extent that it has excluded a crucial and significant regional economic player, namely Iran, from the MEFTA's potential membership. Hence, numerous analysts and scholars have questioned whether the MEFTA genuinely serves regional economic integration or merely advances and prioritizes U.S. strategic goals and political objectives. The United States is ruling MEFTA because it created it, not as a regional trade bloc among Middle Eastern states, but as a foreign policy tool to shape the region, as a kind of soft power strategy.⁵¹⁷

Despite certain economic ties (such as between Jordan and Israel), political tensions persist, and many Arabs remain suspicious of the U.S. intentions, and viewing MEFTA as neo-imperialistic. Moreover, the neoliberal assumptions that economic interdependence may automatically foster peace have been also increasingly questioned. The current MEFTA framework is where the U.S. becomes the central hub benefiting most, while Middle Eastern countries remain dependent and economically marginalized. This model could in fact hinder intra-regional trade and foster inequalities. Overall, instead of fostering mutual regional development, peace, and stability, MEFTA appears to reinforce U.S. dominance and compel Middle Eastern states to conform politically and economically, with little promise of sustainable regional integration and long-term harmony.⁵¹⁸

Unlike Europe, Asia, Africa, and other world regions, the Middle East, despite an obvious and longstanding need for such integration, has lacked a strong and cohesive regional bloc or an effective regional trade institution. Structural barriers, such as similar production profiles, small economies, significant income disparities, and persistent tariff and non-tariff barriers, have historically limited intra-regional trade in the Middle East. Although a few initiatives, such as the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) and the Agadir Agreement (a Free Trade Agreement between Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan), have been launched, they have remained limited in scope and effectiveness.⁵¹⁹

The concept of a Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA), even though initiated by the United States of America (USA), is necessary and valuable in nature, principle, and holds significant potential for promoting regional economic integration. However, for MEFTA to be genuinely effective and inclusive, it must be implemented without disproportionate influence and dominance

⁵¹⁷ J.J. Schott, "Free Trade Agreements and US Trade Policy: A Comparative Analysis of US Initiatives in Latin America, the Asia-Pacific Region, and the Middle East and North Africa", *International Trade Journal*, Vol.20, No.2, 95-138, 2006.

⁵¹⁸ B. Momani, "A Middle East Free Trade Area: Economic Interdependence and Peace Considered", *The World Economy*, Vol.30, No.11, 1682-1700, November 2007.

⁵¹⁹ M.J. Bolle, "Middle East Free Trade Area: Progress report (CRS Report No. RL32638)", *Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress*, February 2005. Accessible on <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL32638.pdf>. Last Visit June 2025.

by external actors, particularly the United States, whose involvement has often been tied to advancing its own strategic, political, and economic interests. Furthermore, the success of such an initiative depends on the inclusion of all regional states without exception or exclusion. In this regard, the exclusion of key countries such as Iran undermines the objective of regional cohesion and limits the initiative's credibility and long-term viability. Ultimately, while the vision and ambitious goals of a comprehensive MEFTA remains unrealized, the Middle East region can transform trade into a key driver of recovery, resilience, and long-term development if political and economic objectives are carefully balanced.

Conclusion II: Toward Middle Eastern Economic Integration

In addition to above-mentioned major institutions, other regional efforts such as the proposed GCC Monetary Union, the Arab Common Market (1964), the Arab Customs Union (2009), and the Agadir Agreement (in 2004, among Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan) represent further, though fragmented and uneven, attempts at economic coordination. The Middle East, despite its vast oil wealth and strategic significance, due to protectionist trade policies, lack of regulatory harmonization, and political rivalries continues to experience one of the lowest levels of intraregional trade in the world. Even when oil exports are excluded, regional trade remains weak, pointing to deep-rooted structural and political barriers.⁵²⁰ While some of these initiatives have provided partial progress, suffering from a lack of implementation and low economic complementarity, they remain aspirational or limited in scope and effectiveness, collectively indicating a longstanding interest in fostering deeper economic unification, monetary and financial integration across the Middle East. Despite the contributions of these key initiatives, there remains a clear necessity for more inclusive and unified institutions that encompass all Middle Eastern states, not just subsets based on language, religion, or sub-regional affiliations. The idea of establishing a Middle Eastern Monetary Fund (MEMF), for instance, could provide a vital mechanism to foster broader financial stability, currency coordination, and equitable development across the entire region. In addition, a redefined Middle Eastern Free Trade Area (MEFTA), independent of external influences such as the United States, including all regional countries, could serve as a genuinely regional economic platform grounded in shared interests and mutual benefit. Without such comprehensive institutions, the vision of a truly integrated Middle Eastern economic system will remain incomplete.

III. Defence, Military and Security Cooperation

The security and military cooperation have long played a central role in the efforts to stabilize and unify the Middle East. While political fragmentation and regional rivalries have often hindered progress, several multilateral defense arrangements have emerged intending to promote collective security and coordinated military responses. Notable among these are the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab League Joint Defense Council (JDC), and the proposed Middle East Treaty Organization (METO). These initiatives reflect both the region's security challenges and the strategic imperative of institutional defense collaboration. The

⁵²⁰ B. Momani, "The EU, the Middle East, and Regional Integration", *WORLD ECONOMICS*, Vol.8, No.1, January-March 2007.

following section examines the development, objectives, and limitations of these efforts as potential building blocks for a more integrated, secure, and stable Middle Eastern defense and military framework.

9. Peninsula Shield Force (PSF)

In 1984, the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) was formed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a joint military arm during the Iran-Iraq War as a strategic responses to regional conflicts to deter external threats, maintain internal stability, provide a collective defense and enhance military coordination and response capabilities to any military aggression against any of its six member states, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman. The Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) includes land forces from each country, comprising infantry, armor, artillery, and support units. Although the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) is a multinational force composed of troops from all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the force headquarters is based in Hafar al-Batin, and Saudi Arabia contributes the largest contingent. While its objective is to safeguard and defend the GCC's territories, it has struggled to perform effectively during serious regional crises, including intervention in Bahrain's 2011 unrest and supporting operations to liberate Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War. Despite some political disagreements and internal challenges such as logistical inefficiencies, uneven contributions, and strategic ambiguity among its members, the PSF has nonetheless demonstrated symbolic unity through its deployments in response to regional threats. However, until the PSF overcomes its internal challenges and gains political momentum, it remains dependent on external powers, particularly the United States; it cannot serve as a standalone defensive force for meaningful security.⁵²¹

As an instance of political disagreements and challenges among member states, regarding the Iranian influence in the region, while Saudi Arabia favors military containment, Oman advocates for dialogue and diplomatic engagement with Iran, emphasizing shared interests such as control over the Strait of Hormuz, indicating that Gulf security would benefit more from constructive military cooperation with Iran rather than ongoing rivalry, given Iran's growing military and nuclear capabilities and the possibility of a multipolar global system.⁵²²

Despite all cultural, religious, and financial commonalities, the Middle Eastern military integration has remained weak. Although the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) is a form of Middle Eastern military unity, it is still limited in its scope and membership and is not a comprehensive regional or continent-wide military unity. A broader regional military unity (like a Middle Eastern NATO) has been discussed but not yet realized. Despite being hindered and delayed so far due to reasons such as rivalries, fears of dominance, and some diverging interests, given the large and growing youth population in the region, the financial and military capabilities of the Middle Eastern states,

⁵²¹ G.P. Kuffel, "The Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsula Shield Force", *Department of Joint Military Operations, Faculty of the Naval War College*, February 2000.

⁵²² M.M.A. Aljabri, "Gulf Security: Peninsula Shield Force and Iran", Paper Presented at the Third International Security Conference, March 15, 2017. Accessible on https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316666885_Gulf_Security_Peninsula_Shield_Force_and_Iran. Last Visit May 2025.

there is a high capacity for military and security integration and convergence that remains attainable.

10. Arab League Joint Defense Council (JDC)

The Arab League Joint Defense Council (JDC) was founded through the 1950 treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation.⁵²³ This treaty, signed by founding Arab League members including Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Egypt, and Yemen, formally established both the Joint Defense Council and the Economic Council to enhance regional cooperation in defense and economic matters. The JDC was created to coordinate military and defense efforts among member states to ensure collective security and mutual defense. Currently, the JDC includes all 22 member states of the Arab League.

The Arab League Joint Defense Council (JDC)'s mandate, as outlined in Articles 2 and 4 of the treaty, includes a collective security agreement and consolidation of armed forces among member states as follows:

“any [act of] armed aggression made against any one or more of them or their armed forces, to be directed against them all. Therefore, in accordance with the right of self-defense, individually and collectively, they undertake to go without delay to the aid of the State or States against which such an act of aggression is made, and immediately to take, individually and collectively, all steps available, including the use of armed force, to repel the aggression and restore security and peace.”⁵²⁴

“The Contracting States, ... shall cooperate in consolidating and coordinating their armed forces, and shall participate according to their resources and needs in preparing individual and collective means of defense to repulse the said armed aggression.”⁵²⁵

However, despite the early legal and institutional framework and JDC's attempts to operationalize a unified Arab military force have so far been inconsistent and challenged by political disunity, lack of coordination, and divergent national interests. Historical examples include the lack of coordination and unified strategic frameworks among Arab forces during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War; ineffectiveness and failure of the United Arab Command (UAC), established in 1964, to respond the 1966 Samu Incident and the 1967 Six-Day War; and the 2015 proposal for a joint Arab military force to intervene in Yemen, which, despite being more sophisticated, worsened and intensified the humanitarian crisis and attracted widespread international criticism.

While the Joint Defense Council (JDC) is more inclusive than the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) and encompasses a broader range of Middle Eastern countries, it nonetheless excludes key strategic actors such as Türkiye and Iran. The “2018–2019 Model Arab League Joint Defense Council Background Guide”⁵²⁶ highlights the strategic significance of maritime chokepoints like

⁵²³ Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation Between the States of the Arab League, *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, June 17, 1950. Accessible on http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/arabjoin.asp. Last Visit July 2025.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid*, Art.2.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid*, Art.4.

⁵²⁶ NCUSAR, *Model Arab League Joint Defense Council Background Guide 2019–2020*, National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, 2020. Accessible on <https://ncusar.org/modelarableague>. Last Visit July 2025.

the Strait of Hormuz, thereby underscoring the pivotal role that Iran plays in regional security and the potential value of its inclusion in any comprehensive defense framework. This limitation of membership undermines its overall effectiveness. Consequently, the region continues to require a more expansive and inclusive framework for defense and military cooperation to address collective security challenges more comprehensively.

In addition, the annual guides address the issue of unauthorized involvement by Arab states in one another's internal affairs, highlighting the Prohibition of such actions according to foundational documents of the Arab League. It also draws attention to the growing threat of cybersecurity risks in the region, including digital espionage, malware, and broader cyberattacks. Recognizing the fragmented approaches across member states, the guide stresses the need for unified definitions and coordinated cyber defense protocols. Delegates are urged to develop shared terminology and formulate preventative and proactive strategies to confront these challenges. Overall, the guide underscores the importance of mediation and arbitration mechanisms in regional unity, institutional reform, and commitment to sovereignty and collective peace.⁵²⁷

11. Middle East Treaty Organization (METO)

The Middle East Treaty Organization (METO) is a non-governmental and Middle Eastern initiative launched in 2017 by the Middle Eastern civil society actors, aimed at creating a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (WMDFZ) among the Middle East. Building on Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak's proposal in 1990 and Iran's support, METO focuses on nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons through diplomacy, advocacy, education, building partnerships, and treaty drafting. The Middle East Treaty Organization (METO) unites 24 Middle Eastern countries, comprising all 22 members of the Arab League as well as Israel and Iran. In December 2018, the draft treaty on the WMDFZ was introduced to the United Nations General Assembly by Egypt, which led to annual UN conferences to discuss the issue.

The METO's overarching objectives are to promote a peaceful, cooperative, and prosperous Middle East founded on principles of human dignity and environmental sustainability. While METO is not a military alliance or a traditional political integration project, it seeks to gather regional stakeholders “by negotiating, signing, and ratifying a treaty, establishing a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East”, and fostering regional cooperation in disarmament and non-proliferation. By a treaty-based strategy and legally binding framework “to eliminate the possession, production, stockpile, and use of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons of mass destruction” in the Middle East, promoting transparency, building trust, and encouraging dialogue among Middle Eastern countries, METO aims to contribute enhancing the long-term regional peace, security, and stability. As part of their commitment, all member states are required to sign and ratify both existing and future international agreements, treaties, and conventions aimed at the elimination of weapons of mass destruction: including key treaties such as “the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).” Encouragingly, most of

⁵²⁷ NCUSAR, *Model Arab League Joint Defense Council Background Guide 2018–2019*, National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, 2019. Accessible on <https://ncusar.org/modelarableague>. Last Visit July 2025.

these countries have already endorsed many of these essential treaties, signaling strong regional momentum toward disarmament and long-term security.⁵²⁸

METO, although not yet an operational entity, is a proposed initiative, designed to promote peace, security, and stability across the Middle East by establishing a region free of weapons of mass destruction. Its central goal is to advance disarmament and curb the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Rather than functioning as a military alliance, defense, and security corps, METO is seeking to foster cooperation on security issues through agreements that enhance transparency, regional tensions reduction, and conflict prevention. While it does not directly involve collective defense mechanisms, METO represents a form of regional security-oriented integration. METO encourages diplomatic dialogues, the establishment and development of shared norms, and collective joint disarmament commitments as a foundation for lasting peace and stability in a zone, which is characterized as a deeply and historically divided region.⁵²⁹

The METO emphasizes three main pillars: drafting actionable treaties and agreements, engaging civil society, and holding governments accountable to their non-proliferation and human security commitments. The organization has made significant strides by offering practical, politically viable treaty proposals and by fostering dialogue among policymakers, scholars, and activists throughout the region. Its initiatives have contributed to shaping future leaders in disarmament, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping through education and capacity-building, raised global awareness on human security issues, and influenced policy “at the highest levels of international diplomacy and policymaking.” “Although the process to establish a WMDFZ in the Middle East has near-universal support, for decades it has been mired with fractious dispute over how and when to get there; (which) combined with the geopolitical realities leaves stakeholders more familiar with the obstacles than the opportunities.”⁵³⁰ While still in the proposal stage, with “evolving text Draft Treaty” and without formal membership, METO reflects a growing interest among Middle Eastern states and civil society practitioners in addressing regional threats through cooperation. If realized, it could play a significant role in building trust, peace, stability, and laying the groundwork for broader collaboration in the future.

Conclusion III: Toward Middle Eastern Defense and Military Unification

Despite ongoing tensions, divisions, and persistent challenges across the region, the Middle East has initiated several efforts to establish cooperative defense, military, and security mechanisms aimed at fostering collective stability and strategic coordination. In addition to the core initiatives discussed above, other frameworks, such as the now-defunct Baghdad Pact (known as the Central Treaty Organization or CENTO), the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), and various scattered bilateral or trilateral military alignments, reflect further, albeit fragmented, attempts toward strategic cooperation in the region. Although these initiatives have been limited in scope, effectiveness, and inclusiveness, they represent the region’s principal institutional attempts to address common security concerns. While these efforts demonstrate a

⁵²⁸ The Middle East Treaty Organization (METO). Accessible on <https://www.wmd-free.me/>. Last Visit June 2025.

⁵²⁹ Middle East Treaty Organization (METO), *METO Student Journal of WMD Disarmament and Security in the Middle East*, Issue.1, METO, February 2022. Accessible on <https://www.wmd-free.me/meto-student-journal/>. Last Visit June 2025.

⁵³⁰ The Middle East Treaty Organization (METO). Accessible on <https://www.wmd-free.me/>. Last Visit June 2025.

regional awareness of the necessity for collective defense and security, they remain largely reactive, externally influenced, or narrowly based. A comprehensive, inclusive, and regionally owned security institution, independent of foreign dominance, remains essential to achieving sustainable peace and military integration in the Middle East.

IV. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Institutions

Beyond political and economic collaboration, the Middle East has also sought to build common platforms in the realms of education, science, and cultural unification. These initiatives aim to preserve the region's rich heritage and ancient cultural legacies, while promoting knowledge exchange and fostering mutual understanding among member states. Key institutions such as ALECSO and ICESCO play a central role in coordinating efforts across these fields, supporting cultural solidarity and long-term developmental goals through soft power and intellectual cooperation.

12. Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO)

The Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) was established in 1970 by the Arab League. Its headquarters is in Tunis, Tunisia, and includes 22 Arab-speaking member states (the same states as those in the Arab League) from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The ALECSO's initial purpose and founding mission, rooted in pan-Arabist ideals, is to emphasize a common Arab identity and cultural heritage and harmonize educational and scientific efforts across the Arab world. It aims to foster intellectual cohesion among Arab nations and enhance education as a contribution to global civilization progress. Rather than implementing projects directly, ALECSO's approach is to operate by raising awareness, coordinating efforts, and gathering data, including research, educational planning, and cultural publication. The ALECSO Observatory collects and disseminates data, trends, and strategic insights on education and culture across the Arab world, and monitors regional educational developments and publications and produces analytical reports and curricular resources. The organization's Constitution outlines its role and tasks in diplomatic coordinating Arab efforts in education, culture, and science, supporting educational system development, and updating curricula and teaching methods for the Arabic language. The main objectives of ALECSO are to enhance human resources in the Arab society and foster development in education, culture, science, environment, and communication in the Arab community. Its key tasks include promoting the Arabic language and Arab-Islamic culture globally and facilitating dialogue with other cultures worldwide.⁵³¹

ALECSO's educational policies are primarily led by the "Plan for the Development of Education in the Arab countries," which was established in 2008 at the Damascus Conference and developed under ALECSO supervision, focusing on improving education quality in member countries. Additionally, ALECSO's policies align with global frameworks like the UN's SDG 4, the United

⁵³¹ D. Krogmann, "International Organizations and Education in the Islamic World", in: K. Martens, M. Windzio, *Global Pathways to Education: Cultural Spheres, Networks, and International Organizations*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 204-208.

Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and World Bank guidelines.⁵³²

In addition, as a kind of strategy, to strengthen its active global presence and cooperation, the ALECSO collaborates with various international and regional partner organizations and global entities like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO), local foundations and universities. It tries to implement purposeful activities and programs that align with its priorities, accelerating developments and addressing challenges.

13. Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO)

The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) (also known as (ISESCO)) was founded in 1979. While its headquarters is based in Rabat, Morocco, the Organization has the authority to establish offices or affiliated institutions in any other country. The organization's statute was adopted in 1982 and was revised in three stages between 1986 and 1997. Currently, ICESCO has 54 member states, and the official languages of this organization are Arabic, English, and French. The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) established under the auspices of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), plays a significant role in fostering educational, scientific, and cultural interaction, and promoting the dissemination of science, technology, communication, and culture among Muslim nations, and introducing scientific and cultural achievements of the Islamic world to the international community. The ICESCO, through its close ties to academicians and its engagement with scholars, artists, educators, scientists, and intellectuals, can harness their expertise as a foundation for its continued growth, excellence, and expanding influence in the international arena.⁵³³

The ICESCO's primary mission and objectives are to foster mutual cooperation and collaboration among its Member States in education, science, culture, and communication while preserving Islamic heritage and identity in a globalized world. One of its flagship initiatives, the Capitals of Culture Program, serves as an influential platform for cultural diplomacy, educational, and sustainable development, with improved funding mechanisms, expanded outreach, and strengthened partnerships, particularly with international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and regional organizations, which can position ICESCO as a prominent force in global cultural engagement and heritage preservation. Its activities include celebrating and safeguarding Islamic cultural heritage through events, festivals, artistic exhibitions, youth initiatives, and interfaith dialogue; to support inclusive and quality educational and advancement, and literacy initiatives, it organizes curriculum innovation, scientific research, technology collaboration, and knowledge

⁵³² ALECSO, *An Overview of Education Development in the Arab Region: Insights and Recommendations towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), November 2021. Accessible on https://www.alecso.org/publications/SLIBNU-ALECSO_BOOK.pdf. Last Visit June 2025.

⁵³³ Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO), *Charter and Statutes of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, 1979. Accessible on <https://icesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Charter-and-Statutes.pdf>. Last Visit January 2026; D. Krogmann, "International Organizations and Education in the Islamic World", in: K. Martens, M. Windzio, *Global Pathways to Education: Cultural Spheres, Networks, and International Organizations*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 197-198.

exchange. Additionally, the program contributes to scientific progress by facilitating technology transfer, building research infrastructure, and encouraging international cooperation in science and innovation. It also aligns closely with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including quality education (SDG 4), innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), sustainable cities (SDG 11), climate action (SDG 13), peace and strong institutions (SDG 16), and global partnerships (SDG 17). ICESCO and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) share similar activities in education, science, and culture. However, ICESCO comprises 54 member states, along with some observers, and serves the Islamic world with a focus on shared religious and cultural identity, while UNESCO includes 195 member states from across the globe, and operates globally, representing nearly all UN countries with a secular and universal mission.⁵³⁴

The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) is a soft mechanism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) integration, as many of its founding and active member states are from the region. It reflects common cultural, linguistic (especially Arabic), and religious identities, and promotes cooperation in education, science, and culture. While its early initiatives and activities were shaped significantly by MENA priorities, ICESCO has always served the broader Islamic world through pan-Islamic collaboration.

Conclusion IV: Toward Middle Eastern Cultural and Intellectual Synergy

While political, defense, and economic cooperation remain central to the vision of a unified Middle East, cultural and intellectual solidarity constitute equally vital pillars of regional integration. Hence, in addition to the major initiatives of ALECSO and ICESCO, other entities such as the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS), the Arab Thought Foundation (ATF), and the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), have contributed, albeit with more specialized and limited reach, to fostering cultural solidarity, scientific collaboration, and educational development. These supplementary initiatives, though less institutionalized or influential, underscore the region's broader ambition to achieve academic collaboration, intellectual unity, and cultural cohesion. They reinforce the aspiration for a cohesive civilizational identity rooted in shared educational strategies, scientific advancement, and cultural preservation via soft power and intellectual cooperation. However, still for a more unified Middle East Union, there remains a need for stronger institutional linkages and inclusive platforms that bridge linguistic, sectarian, and geopolitical divides across the entire region.

V. External Policy-Shaping and Intellectual Dialogue Platforms

Beyond formal intergovernmental regional organizations, the Middle East has also witnessed the emergence of various institutions dedicated to shaping external perceptions, influencing policy discourse, and fostering research and international engagement. These primarily US-led entities, albeit operating through externally driven frameworks, contribute to shaping regional narratives,

⁵³⁴ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 2015. Accessible on <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>. Last Visit May 2025; M.O. Elamin, "Analyzing ICESCO's Capitals of Culture Program: Impacts on Education, Science, and Culture in Comparison to UNESCO and Global Initiatives", *International Journal of Religion*, Vol.5, No.1, 150-169, 2024, 155-163.

fostering academic exchange and diplomatic dialogue, and enhancing the Middle East's voice in global decision-making processes. The following sections examine two prominent examples of such initiatives, illustrating how they operate at the intersection of diplomacy, academia, and strategic communication.

14. Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC)

Following the 1979 Camp David Accords, the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) Program was formed, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), as a collaborative and competitive grant initiative that fosters scientific and technical collaboration between Arab and Israeli researchers on projects aimed at promoting lasting regional stability, peace, and economic development and addressing shared regional challenges by comprehensive locally-developed solutions. The MERC membership has historically expanded on fostering partnerships between Arab countries and Israel, including participants from the Palestinian territories (West Bank and Gaza), Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, and Tunisia, with Palestine being the major beneficiary. The MERC programs try to raise Palestinian participation while contributing significantly to regional development and scientific diplomacy. In addition to participants, the eligible partners include Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The MERC program offers three types of funding including Applied Research Grants, Continuation Grants, and Travel and Workshop Grants. It funds applied, actionable research with the capacity to build regional development, joint scientific exchange, knowledge sharing, research with tangible development impacts, especially in resource-limited populations, and addressing gender equity and inclusion. All proposals must involve at least one institution from Israel and one from an eligible MENA country, while non-MENA participants are only allowed in exceptional cases with strong technical justification.⁵³⁵

The MERC supports cooperative efforts between Israel and the Middle Eastern countries as a people-to-people diplomacy in scientific research in areas such as sustainable agriculture, water resource management, public health improvements, and environmental protection. It emphasizes technical merit, innovation, and long-term cross-border and multilateral collaboration, aiming to build trust through shared goals and technical problem-solving. In fact, it has moved from relying on U.S. intermediaries to facilitating direct partnerships among Middle Eastern institutions. These efforts not only advance science but also strengthen regional capacity as a whole by establishing new laboratories and providing training to numerous students and researchers.⁵³⁶

Despite the grand title that sounds like a large-scale visions of Middle Eastern unity and major political or economic initiative, suggesting broad regional integration or diplomatic alignment, the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC), in practice, the actual scope is narrow, pragmatic and

⁵³⁵ USAID, *Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) Program: Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) NEAAC24MERC1002*, October 2024. Accessible on <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/352615>. Last Visit July 2025.

⁵³⁶ K.E. Mock, "The Middle East Regional Cooperation Program: Opportunities for Israeli-Palestinian Collaborative Research", *Science & Diplomacy, American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)*, Vol.2, No.1, March 2013. Accessible on <http://www.sciencediplomacy.org/perspective/2013/middle-east-regional-cooperation-program>. Last Visit July 2025.

operates in a small-scale, technical grant program, mainly focused on scientific collaboration between Israeli and only a few Arab countries on targeted projects in agriculture, health, and environmental science. While many countries are eligible, active and actual participation is often limited due to challenges such as security restrictions, political sensitivities, diplomatic constraints, limited mobility across borders, or logistical challenges, hindering open collaboration and communication, meaning only a smaller group has consistently engaged in projects. This selective engagement undermines the program's stated regional character and raises concerns about its inclusivity and representativeness.

Overall, the MERC represents an important example of track-two diplomacy, using science and development to foster dialogue and cooperation in a politically sensitive region. Its real value lies in scientific diplomacy, building bridges in a politically tense region through shared research targets, rather than grand political cooperation. Although often limited in scope due to ongoing conflicts, its legacy highlights the potential for regional integration through shared interests and technical collaboration.

As its title suggests, the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) program is expected to promote broad and inclusive regional collaboration across the Middle East, and not only limited to a small group of countries, excluding and ignoring others in the region. A truly regional initiative should aim to involve all Middle Eastern countries, fostering cooperation that reflects the diverse political, social, and scientific landscape of the region, rather than selectively focusing on a few eligible or willing participants. To the extent that it might even exacerbate regional tensions and deepen divisions, rather than fostering the intended spirit of cooperation and integration.

15. Middle East Policy Council (MEPC)

In 1981, American diplomats, scholars, former government officials, and the founding director initiated the Middle East Policy Council (MEPC) in Washington, D.C. as a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, and educational platform with the core objective of enhancing public understanding of the political, economic, and strategic issues affecting U.S. relations with the Middle East. The council was primarily named the American-Arab Affairs Council, but later rebranded to the Middle East Policy Council (MEPC) to reflect a broader regional scope.

The Middle East Policy Council aims to bridge the gap between academia, policymakers, educators, and the public. According to the MEPC's official publications and commentary, the council has emerged in response to the need for more balanced and nuanced discourse on the Middle East's political, economic, cultural, and security issues, particularly during a time when mainstream narratives in the U.S. lacked depth and regional sensitivity. By promoting balanced, research-based, peer-reviewed, and rigorous analysis on political, economic, and security issues (in the official journal *Middle East Policy*) affecting the Middle East, MEPC helps to fill gaps in mutual understanding between the region and global powers.

The Middle East Policy Council (MEPC)'s primary mission was to expand dialogue, shift the conversation about the Middle East within the U.S., challenge prevailing biases, and promote informed U.S. policies within the region through independent analysis, accessible publications, and advocating for deeper, more inclusive perspectives in policy and public education initiatives, widely respected in both academic and policy circles. The MEPC's journal, *Middle East Policy*,

established in 1982, is among the most cited publications in international affairs related to the region. In addition, MEPC plays a key role in shaping understandings of Middle Eastern affairs through initiatives such as its Capitol Hill Conference Series, which provides briefings and panel discussions for policymakers, diplomats, media, scholars, and other experts, and its TeachMideast program, which provides literacy initiatives for educators. Through these platforms, MEPC fosters informed debate, connects academic research with policy deliberation, and promotes media literacy on Middle Eastern affairs.⁵³⁷

Although the Middle East Policy Council (MEPC) is not a regional initiative and its core objective is to protect the USA interests in the region, it can meaningfully contribute to policymaking on Middle Eastern integration through its role in shaping international public discourse, informing U.S. foreign policy, and amplifying diverse voices from the Middle East. This can foster more constructive foreign engagement, reduce external polarization, and support policies that provoke and encourage cooperation among Middle Eastern states. Furthermore, MEPC's emphasis on dialogue, mutual respect, long-term engagement, and inclusive representation of Arab and regional perspectives creates intellectual space for ideas related to integration, institutional development, and collective regional interests to be debated and disseminated.

Conclusion V: Toward Coherent Middle Eastern Discourse

While traditional regional cooperation has focused on political, economic, cultural, defense, and military dimensions, intellectual diplomacy and policy-shaping institutions also play a crucial role in defining the Middle East's position in global narratives, facilitating intra-regional dialogue and engagement with international stakeholders. In addition to major intergovernmental initiatives such as the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) and the Middle East Policy Council (MEPC), a growing ecosystem of regional think tanks and research institutions has emerged to research, inform, and shape foreign policy recommendations, strategic priorities, regional dialogue, and collective identity. Prominent among these are the Arab Center Washington DC (ACW); the Emirates Policy Center (EPC) and TRENDS Research & Advisory in the United Arab Emirates (UAE); the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW); the Carnegie Middle East Center in Lebanon; the Brookings Doha Center (BDC); the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in Qatar; the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) in Saudi Arabia; the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies and the Issam Fares Institute (IFI) for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB), all of which offer high-level academic and strategic analysis on Middle Eastern affairs and contribute to intellectual soft power and facilitate dialogue on the regional policy agenda, security, governance, and international relations, often reflecting national strategic interests.

These intellectual, diplomatic, and policy-driven platforms, though often operating outside official intergovernmental frameworks, contribute significantly to regional dialogue, research-based advocacy, and the projection of Middle Eastern perspectives in global affairs. They bridge between Middle Eastern perspectives and global policy environments, enhancing the region's ability to articulate its interests, challenges, and visions.

⁵³⁷ Middle East Policy Council, *Middle East Policy*, est.1982. Accessible on <https://mepc.org/journal/>. Last Visit July 2025.

While many of these institutions contribute to policy discourse and regional soft power, they are criticized for their frameworks being often externally influenced, primarily by U.S. funding or strategic agendas, or selectively driven by Gulf-led priorities, by focusing only on Gulf states and excluding key regional actors such as Iran, Syria, Palestine, or Lebanon, aligning with specific national or foreign policy interests. This selective and exclusive engagement not only weakens prospects for genuine regional integration but also risks deepening ideological divisions, fueling sectarian polarization, and entrenching existing geopolitical fractures. As such, rather than advancing pan-regional cohesion, some of these efforts may reinforce divisions, heighten geopolitical polarization, and cause further external dependencies.

For the Middle East Union to emerge as a cohesive and representative entity, intellectual and policy platforms must operate independently with a genuine autonomy, and evolve beyond selective participation and geopolitical bias toward inclusive, regionally-owned frameworks that reflect the full diversity and complexity of the region. For such unification, deeper collaboration among these entities, coupled with inclusive participation from across the region's linguistic and ideological spectrum, remains essential. Such attempts would not only counter external misrepresentations but also cultivate a coherent and strategic voice for the region in global governance, peacebuilding, and international cooperation.

Collectively, these institutions, though diverse in their affiliations, scope, and methodologies, underscore the Middle East's gradual yet deliberate shift toward intellectual diplomacy and strategic outreach. By contributing to a more cohesive regional narrative, they reflect the growing recognition that global influence and regional agencies require not only political, military, or economic strength, but also robust knowledge production, cultural soft power, and coordinated strategic messaging.

CHAPTER VI

CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS! A SCIENTIFIC PREDICTION OR EXECUTIVE PROJECT?

This Chapter, after analyzing the concept of the term, discusses impacts, critiques, and counterpoint claims and questions whether the “Clash of Civilizations” is a legitimate scientific forecast or a politically motivated project that underscores the importance of cultural, religious, and linguistic diversities in fostering conflicts to bridge divides and achieve Western interests. The Chapter also explores how the paradigm of the “Clash of Civilizations” can be reoriented toward a constructive framework of a “Dialogue of Civilizations.” Rather than viewing cultural and religious diversity as a source of inevitable confrontation, this approach emphasizes mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation among different societies.

1. Concept of the Term “Clash of Civilizations”

The concept of the Clash of Civilizations is more known by a book titled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*⁵³⁸ by Samuel Phillips Huntington in 1996, while Bernard Lewis was the first to articulate the theory of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ in 1957 in a “meeting in Washington where it was recorded in the transcript”,⁵³⁹ and through an article titled “The Middle East in World Affairs”.⁵⁴⁰ Lewis in the meantime explaining the anti-Western feelings in the Middle East which were directed against Britain France, and the United States, argued:

“Why should the United State be also included in this generalized hostility to the West, which has never annexed or occupied an inch of territory in the Middle East, which on the contrary has shown a generosity without precedent in history towards the states of the Middle East? We shall be better able to understand this situation if we view the present discontents of the Middle East not as a conflict between states or nations, but as a **Clash between Civilizations**. The ‘great debate,’ as Gibbon called it, between Islam and Christendom has been going on since the Arab Muslim conquerors first swept westward into Christian Syria, North Africa, and Spain.”⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁸ S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

⁵³⁹ R.B. Liebowitz, “One on One: When Defeat Means Liberation”, *Jerusalem Post*, 2008.

⁵⁴⁰ B. Lewis, “The Middle East in World Affairs”, in *From Babel to Dragomans* (2004), Oxford University Press, 1957, 232-239.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid*, 237.

Subsequently, Lewis repeatedly referenced this theoretical concept in his articles, books, and speeches, such as “The Roots of Muslim Rage”,⁵⁴² *The End of Modern History in the Middle East*,⁵⁴³ and “The Third Wave: Muslim Migration to Europe”.⁵⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the phrase Clash of Civilizations itself had been previously utilized in 1926 in a book titled *Young Islam on Trek: A Study in the Clash of Civilizations*,⁵⁴⁵ regarding the Middle East by Basil Mathews and in 1946 by Albert Camus in the context of Russian-American problematic relations and colonial transformations, in which he observed that “the Russo-American problem, and here we return to Algeria, will soon be overcome, it will not be a clash of empires but a **clash of civilizations**, and we are witnessing the colonized civilizations worldwide gradually rising and standing against the colonizing civilizations”.⁵⁴⁶ In addition, it has been used by some other authors such as Girilal Jain in his analysis of the Ayodhya socio-religious dispute in 1988, and Mehdi El Mandjra in his book titled “La première guerre civilisationnelle” released in 1992. A similar expression, also known as “Clash of Cultures,” was used during the colonial period and the Belle Époque era (1871–1914).⁵⁴⁷

While earlier usages of the phrase reflected colonial and geopolitical tensions, Huntington transformed it into a systematic global theory that redefined the parameters of post–Cold War conflict.

The concept of the “Clash of Civilizations”, which was initially introduced by Bernard Lewis in 1957 and later expanded upon by Samuel Huntington in his 1993 essay, “The clash of civilizations?”⁵⁴⁸ and subsequent 1996 book, is a political thesis that proposed that future conflicts, disputes, and wars will primarily arise not from ideological or economic differences, but rather from cultural, religious, and civilizational diversities. In essence, Lewis and Huntington presented cultural, linguistic, traditional, and religious distinctions as the principal drivers of wars in the future global landscape, with particular emphasis on the Middle East.

Samuel Huntington in response to the question “Why Civilizations Will Clash?”, states:

“Civilization identity will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization. The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another. ... Civilizations

⁵⁴² B. Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage”, *The Atlantic*, Vol.266, No.3, 47-60, 1990, 56.

⁵⁴³ B. Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East*, California, Hoover Institution Press, 2011.

⁵⁴⁴ B. Lewis, “The Third Wave: Muslim Migration to Europe”, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol.24, No.3, 2007, 30-35.

⁵⁴⁵ B. Mathews, *Young Islam on Trek: A Study in the Clash of Civilizations*, Friendship Press, 1926.

⁵⁴⁶ Albert Camus, Interview: “le problème russo-américain, et là nous revenons à l'Algérie, va être dépassé lui-même avant très peu, cela ne sera pas un choc d'empires nous assistons au choc de civilisations et nous voyons dans le monde entier les civilisations colonisées surgir peu à peu et se dresser contre les civilisations colonisatrices.”, 1946. Accessible on <https://www.philomag.com/articles/camus-et-le-choc-des-civilisations-en-1946>. Last Visit November 2025.

⁵⁴⁷ L. Massignon, “La psychologie musulmane: Et Ses Contacts Avec La Colonisation Française” (1931), in *Ecrits mémorables*, Robert Laffont, 2009, 629.

⁵⁴⁸ S.P. Huntington, “The clash of civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.72, No.3, 22-49, 1993.

are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion.”⁵⁴⁹

He argues that after the Cold War, ideological and economic rivalries would be replaced by cultural and civilizational divisions as the primary sources of global conflict. In his view, humanity had entered a multipolar and multicivilizational era in which people increasingly define themselves by religion, language, history, and tradition rather than by political or economic systems. He sees the most significant confrontations emerging between the Western world and non-Western civilizations, particularly Islamic and Confucian societies. This framing reinterprets global relations in cultural terms, transforming “civilization” from a sociological idea into a strategic framework for managing conflict and preserving Western dominance.

Huntington’s model replaces the Cold War’s bipolar world with a new civilizational map, portraying Western civilization as powerful but declining, while Asia and Islam are gaining strength. He argues that Western universalism, the belief in the global applicability of Western values, provokes resistance and could become a major source of instability. Accordingly, he calls for renewed unity among Western nations to defend their cultural identity and sustain their global influence. Although presented as a theoretical forecast, the book’s prescriptions function as a political strategy, urging the West to consolidate its alliances, maintain military superiority, and contain potential rivals. This perspective encourages viewing conflicts as inevitable cultural clashes, which, while analytically influential, risks legitimizing interventionist policies and reinforcing stereotypes about non-Western societies. He warns, however, that forcing Western culture on others could trigger broader inter-civilizational wars.⁵⁵⁰

The contributors analyze that although Huntington accurately anticipated the growing importance of culture and identity in global politics after the Cold War, his framework, when viewed through the perspectives of international relations, law, history, and political theory, oversimplified the nature of civilizations, treating them as static, homogeneous, and inherently conflictual. Such a deterministic approach not only ignores the internal plurality, diversity, evolving nature, and interdependence of civilizations but also legitimizes political narratives that divide the world into antagonistic and opposing cultural blocs. The thesis of “Clash of Civilizations” has served less as a neutral scientific model and more as a geopolitical discourse that influenced Western strategic thought, particularly after 9/11, by framing Islam and non-Western societies as civilizational adversaries and threats. Its continuing relevance lies not in empirical accuracy but in its ideological capacity to interpret global crises such as terrorism, the Ukraine conflict, and migration tensions through a civilizational lens.⁵⁵¹

Huntington’s theory, after a quarter-century, remains politically and academically relevant despite persistent controversy. His framework shaped both scholarly and public debates, offering a new paradigm grounded in civilizational identity rather than ideology or power politics. The Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations is a durable but problematic construct: influential for understanding cultural dimensions of global politics, yet deeply entangled with Western-centric

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 25.

⁵⁵⁰ S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1996, 19-21, 28-55, 183-192, 207-218, 301-321.

⁵⁵¹ A. Aya, R. Norhane, *The Clash of Civilizations Thesis in Light of US Foreign Policy: The Global War on Terror and the 2022 Russia-Ukrainian War*, Master's Thesis, University of Guelma, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Algeria, June 2024.

assumptions and political agendas. Overall, Huntington's thesis remains an influential yet politically, sociologically, and philosophically charged construct, whose longevity rests less on its empirical accuracy than on its effectiveness as an ideological construct for shaping post-Cold War international relations.⁵⁵²

2. Consequences of the Thesis Clash of Civilizations

These theoreticians present the Clash of Civilizations as a thesis and scientific prediction. At the same time, the discussion itself seems more to be a project, an executive agenda, and war planning by inciting diverse ethnicities and strata from different religions and cultures, and bringing diversities into account as the sources of conflicts and wars around the world!

“Iran is threatened by centrifugal forces: the Persians properly so called form a bare majority of the total population. The rest belong to other ethnic groups and speak other languages. A potentially dangerous feature is that, on many of the frontiers of Iran, the inhabitants share a language and an identity with the people on the other side. In the northwest, the Iranian province of Azerbaijan adjoins the independent former Soviet republic of the same name. In the southwest, the province of Khuzistan is inhabited by Arabic speakers very similar to those of Iraq. In the southeast, the people of Iranian Baluchistan share a common identity with the Baluchis of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Along the eastern and northeastern frontiers, speakers of various Turkic and Iranic languages share a cultural and perhaps more dangerous religious, Sunni identity with their neighbors in Afghanistan and in Central Asia. Hitherto they have been held together by Iranian patriotism by a shared sense of historic identity. But it is easy to imagine a situation in which the central government in Tehran becomes too weak or too oppressive-either could lead to the other to retain the loyalty of the frontier provinces. And in such a case, Iran, too, could follow the Lebanese paradigm. The danger in Iran, however, is not as great as in Syria, Iraq or Saudi Arabia.”⁵⁵³

Considering the reference above about Iran, which is expressed as an academic anticipation, we are witnessing the recent decades of the rise of pan-Arabism, pan-Kurdism, pan-Turkism, and pan-Sunnism movements. The distortion of the name of the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Gulf to stimulate pan-Arabism has been for the same purpose to fuel the fire of conflicts between Persians and Arabs (both inside and outside of Iran), which most probably are not unrelated to these executive scenarios.

Although, Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis, in their controversial writings, particularly “The Clash of Civilizations,” formulated these strategic assertions in an academic and thoughtfully anticipated manner, what is surprisingly intriguing is that both of these scholars have ties to American politics and are American politicians or political advisors (with the added consideration of Lewis's Jewish-British heritage). This raises the question of whether isn't this theory suspiciously inspired by and a fusion with American and British political contexts to take their best

⁵⁵² J.P. Barker, “The Clash of Civilizations Twenty Years On”, *E-International Relations*, October 2013; D. Orsi, *The Clash of Civilizations: 25 Years On: A Multidisciplinary Appraisal*, E-International Relations, 2018; E.W. Said, “The Clash of Ignorance”, *The Nation*, October 4, 2001. Accessible on <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/>. Last Visit November 2025.

⁵⁵³ B. Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East*, California, Hoover Institution Press, 2011, 40.

advantages from the Middle East? Why have none of the Middle Eastern scholars ever identified the potential for this Clash of Civilizations? Even conversely, many Middle Eastern scholars and politicians emphasize the Muslim community and the concept of the Islamic Ummah, as noted by Lewis in his various works, advocating for a *Dialogue Among Civilizations*.⁵⁵⁴ The thesis appears to be that it is not merely a scientific forecast, but rather a fundamental factor contributing to contemporary wars and conflicts, as well as potential future conflicts.

In fact, Huntington's thesis operates on two levels: as a sociopolitical paradigm explaining post-Cold War tensions and as a strategic doctrine guiding Western policy. It predicts the rise of culture-based conflicts but simultaneously prescribes a plan for the West to retain leadership in a shifting global order. The widespread adoption of this framework in political and academic circles, particularly after 9/11, demonstrates that The Clash of Civilizations functioned not only as a scientific hypothesis but also as a political project that shaped Western perceptions of Islam, China, and the developing world. In essence, what Huntington presented as a neutral analysis of future conflicts became, in practice, an ideological and executive tool for redefining global power relations under the guise of cultural inevitability.

2.1. From Prediction to Prescription

Although presented as a forward-looking analytical framework, the thesis of the Clash of Civilizations gradually shifted from a descriptive prediction of post-Cold War conflicts to a prescriptive logic that implicitly legitimized military action guiding political, military, and strategic decision-making. Rather than remaining a neutral sociological interpretation of emerging global tensions, the theory increasingly functioned as a policy-oriented doctrine that framed conflicts through civilizational, religious, and cultural lenses, thereby shaping how crises were understood and addressed by Western powers. In this sense, Huntington's thesis did not merely anticipate conflict; it actively contributed to the way conflicts were conceptualized, legitimized, and managed.

The wars in the Balkans and the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s offer an early illustration of this transformation. While these conflicts were deeply rooted in political collapse, economic crisis, and power struggles following the end of socialist federal governance, they were frequently interpreted and narrated as clashes between Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim civilizations. Such civilizational framing obscured the structural causes of the wars and reinforced the perception that cultural and religious identities were the primary drivers of violence, thereby aligning closely with the Clash of Civilizations narrative and normalizing identity-based explanations for complex political breakdowns.

A similar pattern emerged in the Middle East. The prolonged eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, as well as subsequent Western military interventions in the region were increasingly read through sectarian and civilizational categories rather than geopolitical or legal frameworks. After 9/11, this tendency intensified. The U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), were not only justified on security grounds but were also discursively embedded within a broader civilizational confrontation between the West and what was portrayed as radical or incompatible Islamic

⁵⁵⁴ M. Khatami, *Dialogue Among Civilizations: A Paradigm for Peace*, University of Pretoria, 2001.

societies. In practice, this framing transformed Huntington's thesis into an operational lens that influenced strategic planning, threat perception, and military engagement.

The civil wars in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen further demonstrate how the prescriptive logic of the Clash of Civilizations has contributed to the sectarianization and fragmentation of regional conflicts. Although these wars originated from domestic political failures, authoritarian governance, socio-economic inequalities, and external interventions, they were increasingly interpreted as Sunni-Shia or broader Islamic civilizational struggles. This interpretation not only reinforced internal divisions but also facilitated regional and international involvement along identity lines, deepening conflicts rather than resolving them. In this way, civilizational discourse became self-reinforcing, encouraging policies that treated identity differences as immutable sources of conflict rather than as politically constructed and potentially negotiable factors.

The Arab-Israeli conflict further illustrates how the Clash of Civilizations logic has operated as a prescriptive framework rather than a neutral analytical tool. While the roots of this conflict lie in colonial legacies, territorial disputes, occupation, and violations of international law, it has increasingly been reframed in civilizational and religious terms, particularly in Western political discourse. This shift has transformed a fundamentally political and legal conflict into a symbolic confrontation between "Western democratic values" and an allegedly hostile or incompatible Middle Eastern and Islamic environment. Such framing has contributed to the depoliticization of occupation and the marginalization of international legal norms in favor of security-driven and identity-based narratives. More recently, the escalation of tensions and direct confrontations between Iran and Israel (2025) has further reinforced this civilizational framing. Rather than being analyzed primarily through the lenses of regional power rivalry, deterrence theory, or international law, these confrontations are frequently portrayed as manifestations of a broader civilizational struggle between the West and its regional allies on one side, and an Islamic or anti-Western axis on the other. This interpretation echoes Huntington's prescriptions by presenting conflict as culturally inevitable, thereby legitimizing preemptive actions, covert operations, and regional militarization under the assumption of an unavoidable civilizational clash. In this context, the persistence of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the intensification of Iran-Israel hostilities demonstrate how the Clash of Civilizations thesis has shaped strategic perceptions and policy responses. By embedding these conflicts within a civilizational narrative, political actors reduce the space for diplomatic solutions, regional dialogue, and legal accountability, while reinforcing polarized identities and long-term instability. The theory thus functions less as a predictive model and more as an executive framework that normalizes confrontation and perpetuates conflict across the Middle East.

These cases illustrate how civilizational framing does not merely explain conflict, but actively restructures political identities and internal divisions, a dynamic that becomes most visible in the ethnicization and sectarianization of politics. More broadly, the repeated application of the Clash of Civilizations framework contributed to the normalization of interventionist policies in the Middle East and beyond. Military operations, regime-change strategies, and prolonged sanctions regimes were increasingly justified as necessary responses to culturally rooted threats, rather than as political choices subject to international legal constraints. The thesis thus moved beyond prediction and entered the realm of prescription, offering an implicit roadmap for maintaining Western dominance in a multipolar world by managing, containing, or confronting perceived civilizational rivals. Ultimately, the practical consequences of this shift are significant. By treating cultural and religious diversity as the primary source of global instability, the Clash of Civilizations

thesis risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. It encourages policymakers to anticipate conflict along civilizational lines and to act accordingly, thereby reinforcing the very divisions it claims to describe. In this sense, Huntington's framework operates not only as an explanatory model of post-Cold War tensions but also as an executive logic that has shaped real-world conflicts, interventions, and regional destabilization.⁵⁵⁵

2.2. Ethnicization and Sectarianization of Politics

One of the most consequential outcomes of the Clash of Civilizations thesis has been the progressive ethnicization, sectarianization, and polarization of politics, particularly in regions characterized by historical pluralism and complex social fabrics. By framing conflicts primarily through civilizational, religious, and cultural identities, this paradigm has encouraged the reinterpretation of political, economic, and governance-related disputes as manifestations of immutable ethnic or sectarian antagonisms. As a result, identities that were once fluid, overlapping, and politically negotiable have increasingly been reified as fixed and antagonistic categories.

In the Middle East, this dynamic has been especially pronounced. Societies historically organized around diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities were gradually re-narrated as inherently fragmented and conflict-prone along sectarian lines. Political grievances related to authoritarian governance, uneven development, corruption, and foreign intervention were recast as Shia-Sunni, Arab-Persian, Kurd-non-Kurd, or Muslim-non-Muslim, and similar internal and external sectarian conflicts. This shift not only distorted the underlying causes of instability but also legitimized external involvement and internal power struggles conducted in the name of identity protection rather than political reform. The ethnicization of politics has similarly affected multiethnic states where national identity had previously functioned as a unifying framework. By emphasizing centrifugal forces and cross-border ethnic affinities, the Clash of Civilizations logic implicitly weakens state-based cohesion and promotes a vision of political order grounded in civilizational or ethno-sectarian affiliation. In practice, this has facilitated the mobilization of pan-ethnic and pan-sectarian movements, such as pan-Arabism, pan-Kurdism, pan-Turkism, and pan-Sunnism, which have increasingly been instrumentalized within regional rivalries and international power struggles.

This process is further reinforced by the discursive power of global media, policy narratives, and academic discourse, which often portray ethnic and sectarian identities as primordial sources of conflict rather than as socially constructed and politically activated variables. Once internal divisions are framed as civilizational fault lines, compromise, power-sharing, and inclusive governance are perceived as unrealistic or temporary solutions. Conflict thus becomes normalized, and fragmentation appears inevitable, aligning closely with the deterministic assumptions of the Clash of Civilizations thesis. Moreover, the sectarianization of politics has had profound implications for international law and conflict resolution. By reducing complex political crises to identity-based struggles, this framework undermines legal principles such as state sovereignty,

⁵⁵⁵ S.P. Huntington, "The clash of civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.72, No.3, 22-49, 1993; S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1996; J.P. Barker, "The Clash of Civilizations Twenty Years On", *E-International Relations*, October 2013; D. Orsi, *The Clash of Civilizations: 25 Years On: A Multidisciplinary Appraisal*, E-International Relations, 2018; E.W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance", *The Nation*, October 4, 2001. Accessible on <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/>. Last Visit November 2025.

non-intervention, and equal citizenship. External actors increasingly justify intervention, proxy warfare, or selective engagement by claiming to defend specific communities or civilizational interests, further entrenching divisions and prolonging instability. Ultimately, the ethnicization and sectarianization of politics represent a critical transformation produced by the operationalization of the Clash of Civilizations thesis. Rather than fostering understanding of diversity, this approach converts pluralism into a source of insecurity and conflict. In doing so, it not only deepens internal fragmentation within states but also obstructs regional cooperation, dialogue, and integrative political projects, thereby reinforcing the very conditions of instability it purports to explain. This dynamic prepares the ground for the discursive normalization of conflict, whereby civilizational narratives increasingly function as self-fulfilling prophecies in global politics.⁵⁵⁶

2.3. Discursive Power and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Beyond its analytical claims, the Clash of Civilizations thesis derives much of its influence from its discursive power, that is, its capacity to shape how political actors, institutions, media, and societies interpret global conflicts. Once internalized within policy debates and strategic cultures, the civilizational narrative ceases to function as a neutral explanatory model. Instead, it becomes a performative discourse that actively structures expectations, threat perceptions, and political behavior. In this sense, Huntington's framework operates not merely as a theory about conflict, but as a discursive mechanism that contributes to producing the very realities it claims to predict. By repeatedly framing international and regional tensions as manifestations of big, immutable civilizational differences, the Clash of Civilizations thesis encourages policymakers to anticipate hostility along cultural and religious lines. These expectations, in turn, inform concrete political choices, such as militarization, alliance formation, preemptive strategies, and exclusionary security doctrines. When actors behave on the assumption that conflict between civilizations is inevitable, diplomatic engagement, legal restraint, and compromise are perceived as naïve or futile. As a result, policies driven by civilizational pessimism increase the likelihood of confrontation, thereby transforming prediction into practice.

This dynamic is particularly visible in regions such as the Middle East, where external and internal actors have increasingly adopted civilizational language to justify intervention, proxy warfare, and identity-based mobilization. The persistent portrayal of the region as inherently unstable or incompatible with Western political norms reinforces cycles of mistrust and securitization. Over time, such narratives contribute to the hardening of identities, the erosion of pluralistic political traditions, and the normalization of conflict as a permanent condition. What emerges is a self-fulfilling prophecy: conflicts framed as civilizational become increasingly difficult to resolve precisely because policies are designed around the assumption of irreconcilable difference. Ultimately, the discursive power of the Clash of Civilizations lies in its ability to naturalize conflict and depoliticize alternative explanations rooted in history, power relations, international law, and political economy. By presenting cultural and religious divisions as the primary drivers of global instability, the thesis narrows the horizon of political imagination and constrains the range of legitimate policy responses. In doing so, it does not simply describe a divided world, but actively

⁵⁵⁶ S.P. Huntington, "The clash of civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.72, No.3, 22-49, 1993; S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1996; F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War", *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, No.11, July 2014.

participates in reproducing and stabilizing those divisions, with long-term consequences for conflict management, regional integration, and prospects for cooperative international order.⁵⁵⁷

2.4. Consequences for International Law and Regional Order

The operationalization of the Clash of Civilizations thesis has had profound and enduring consequences for international law and regional order, through the erosion of legal universality and the normalization of civilizational exceptionalism, particularly in regions characterized by weak institutional frameworks and persistent external intervention. By privileging civilizational identity over legal norms and political accountability and framing conflicts as existential struggles between incompatible cultural and religious entities, this paradigm weakens the foundational principles of international law, including state sovereignty, non-intervention, peaceful settlement of disputes, and the universality of legal norms that apply equally to all actors regardless of identity, culture, or belief. In practice, civilizational framing encourages selective compliance with international law; obligations are interpreted flexibly when confronting actors portrayed as belonging to a “hostile” or “non-Western” civilization, thereby undermining the coherence and authority of the international legal system. In this context, conflicts framed as civilizational struggles are increasingly removed from the realm of law and diplomacy and repositioned within a logic of existential threat, where exceptional measures are portrayed as necessary and justified.⁵⁵⁸

In practice, this shift has facilitated the normalization of selective legal interpretation and the application of double standards. International legal norms are often applied unevenly, depending on whether a state or actor is perceived as belonging to the “civilizational core” or positioned as part of an external or adversarial civilization. Military interventions, sanctions regimes, targeted killings, and prolonged occupations are frequently justified not through consistent legal reasoning, but through civilizational narratives emphasizing security, cultural incompatibility, or moral superiority. This has weakened the credibility of international law as a neutral and universal framework and has reinforced perceptions of law as an instrument of power rather than a constraint upon it.

One of the most tangible legal outcomes of this process has been the systematic marginalization of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. When conflicts are securitized and framed as civilizational confrontations, core principles of humanitarian law, such as distinction, proportionality, necessity, and the protection of civilians, are increasingly treated as strategic constraints rather than binding legal duties. Military operations justified under civilizational narratives tend to normalize extensive civilian harm, collective punishment, prolonged occupations, and the expansion of exceptional security measures, all while remaining formally insulated from accountability through claims of necessity and existential threat. Similarly, international human rights law has been selectively suspended or relativized under the assumption that certain societies are culturally incompatible with universal norms. Practices such as targeted killings, mass surveillance, indefinite detention, and restrictions on collective political rights are increasingly legitimized when applied to populations framed as civilizational adversaries. This selective application transforms human rights from universal legal entitlements into conditional privileges, contingent upon cultural proximity or political alignment. As a result, the principle of

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid*; O. Wæver, “Securitization and Desecuritization”, in *On Security*, Columbia University Press, 1995.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

universality, central to the post-World War II legal order, is gradually replaced by a hierarchy of rights based on identity, security narratives, and geopolitical interests.⁵⁵⁹

At the regional level, particularly in the Middle East, the Clash of Civilizations logic has contributed to chronic instability and the fragmentation of regional order. Rather than encouraging inclusive security arrangements or regional cooperation mechanisms, civilizational framing incentivizes alliance-building along identity lines and promotes zero-sum geopolitical competition. Regional organizations and legal frameworks remain underdeveloped or ineffective, as political actors prioritize external patronage and civilizational alignment over regional integration and collective problem-solving. The result is a persistent security dilemma in which mistrust, militarization, and proxy conflicts become structural features of regional politics. Moreover, the civilizationalization of conflict undermines the development of regional legal cultures and conflict-resolution mechanisms. When disputes are viewed as manifestations of irreconcilable cultural differences, legal dialogue, arbitration, and institutional reform are often dismissed as insufficient or irrelevant. This has long-term implications for post-conflict reconstruction, transitional justice, and reconciliation, as societies emerging from conflict are encouraged to internalize narratives of permanent division rather than shared legal and political futures.

These dynamics have particularly destabilizing effects on regional order in the Middle East. Civilizational discourse contributes to the fragmentation of legal responsibility by privileging security alliances and identity-based alignments over multilateral legal frameworks. External interventions, proxy wars, and sanctions regimes are increasingly justified outside the language of international law and instead framed as necessary responses to civilizational threats. This weakens regional mechanisms for conflict resolution, reinforces patterns of militarization, and marginalizes diplomatic and legal avenues for cooperation. Ultimately, the Clash of Civilizations thesis does not merely reinterpret international and regional conflicts; it reshapes the normative environment in which law operates. By legitimizing double standards in the application of humanitarian and human rights norms, it contributes to the weakening of global legal norms, the gradual normalization of legal exceptionalism, and the erosion of a rule-based international order. In this sense, the theory's most enduring consequence is not predictive accuracy but its capacity to recalibrate legal norms in favor of power, security, and identity-based governance, with long-term implications for regional stability and the future of international law. Rather than offering a viable framework for managing diversity, it reinforces a fragmented international and regional order in which power, identity, and security override law, cooperation, and institutional legitimacy.⁵⁶⁰

3. Dialogue of Civilizations

As a normative and conceptual counter-response to the determinism embedded in the *Clash of Civilizations* narrative, the idea of a *Dialogue Among Civilizations* advances an alternative vision of international relations grounded in mutual recognition, cultural pluralism, and cooperative

⁵⁵⁹ M. Koskeniemi, *From Apology to Utopia*, Cambridge University Press, 2005; D. Kennedy, *Of War and Law*, Princeton University Press, 2006; A. Orford, *International Authority and the Responsibility to Protect*, Cambridge University Press, 2011; G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

⁵⁶⁰ S.P. Huntington, "The clash of civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.72, No.3, 22-49, 1993; S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1996; F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War", *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, No.11, July 2014.

coexistence. Articulated most prominently by Mohammad Khatami during his presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1997-2005), this framework rejects the assumption that cultural, religious, or civilizational diversity constitutes an inherent source of conflict. Instead, it conceptualizes diversity as a potential foundation for dialogue, collective problem-solving, and shared global responsibility. This idea promotes an approach of mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation between cultures by emphasizing shared values, cultural exchange, and global collaboration to address common challenges and advocating for peaceful coexistence instead of inevitable conflict.⁵⁶¹

At its core, the Dialogue of Civilizations approach challenges the epistemological premises of civilizational confrontation. Whereas the Clash of Civilizations thesis essentializes cultures as homogeneous, static, and mutually heterogeneous and exclusive entities, dialogue-oriented thinking recognizes civilizations as historically interconnected, internally plural, and dynamically evolving. This perspective emphasizes that identities are neither immutable nor inherently antagonistic; rather, they are socially constructed and politically mediated. As such, conflict is not the natural outcome of difference, but rather the result of political choices, power asymmetries, and exclusionary narratives that instrumentalize identity for strategic purposes. The Dialogue of Civilizations framework promotes diplomacy rooted in cultural engagement, ethical reciprocity, and institutional cooperation. Through sustained dialogue, states and societies are encouraged to reinterpret perceived differences as opportunities for learning and enrichment rather than as security threats. Cultural exchange, educational cooperation, interfaith engagement, and people-to-people diplomacy serve as mechanisms for building trust and preventing long-term conflict. Unlike dialogue initiatives that merely aim at symbolic coexistence, this approach aspires to embed dialogue within political, legal, and economic structures, thereby transforming it into a durable component of international order.

Through dialogue-oriented diplomacy, states and civilizations can transform perceived differences into instruments of peacebuilding and joint development. Such diplomacy encourages cultural exchange, trust-building, and inclusive negotiation, replacing the logic of competition and dominance with one of coexistence and shared responsibility for global stability. From an international law perspective, the Dialogue of Civilizations reinforces the principle of legal universality and equal dignity among peoples and cultures. By rejecting civilizational hierarchies, it reaffirms the foundational post-World War II assumption that international norms, including human rights, humanitarian law, and principles of peaceful dispute settlement, apply equally to all states and societies. Dialogue-oriented frameworks thus counteract the erosion of legal universality caused by civilizational exceptionalism and selective norm application. In this sense, dialogue does not stand in opposition to law, but rather serves as a complementary process that facilitates legal compliance, normative convergence, and institutional legitimacy.⁵⁶²

The relevance of the Dialogue of Civilizations becomes particularly evident in regions marked by historical pluralism and persistent conflict, such as the Middle East. Rather than reinforcing sectarian or ethnic fault lines, dialogue-based regionalism emphasizes shared historical experiences, overlapping cultural traditions, and common developmental challenges. This approach provides a conceptual foundation for regional cooperation mechanisms that transcend

⁵⁶¹ M. Khatami, *Dialogue Among Civilizations: A Paradigm for Peace*, University of Pretoria, 2001

⁵⁶² Charter of the United Nations, 1945, Arts. 1, 2, 55; United Nations General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, Arts. 1, 2, 18, 19, 26, 27, 28.

identity-based alliances and zero-sum geopolitics. By shifting attention from civilizational confrontation to shared interests, such as economic development, environmental sustainability, public health, and collective security, dialogue-oriented strategies offer a pathway toward gradual regional integration and stability. Moreover, the Dialogue of Civilizations framework has significant implications for global governance. Contemporary transnational challenges, including climate change, migration, pandemics, cyber insecurity, and economic inequality, cannot be effectively addressed through civilizational competition or exclusionary security paradigms. Dialogue-based cooperation enables inclusive governance structures that recognize interdependence and shared vulnerability. In this context, dialogue is not merely a moral or cultural ideal, but a pragmatic necessity for managing global complexity in an interconnected world.⁵⁶³

However, on the same path, various initiatives have been undertaken through institutional frameworks such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) to promote regional convergence and foster dialogue among cultures and civilizations.⁵⁶⁴ These organizations were established with the stated objective of enhancing solidarity, cultural exchange, and cooperation among Muslim-majority societies and beyond. However, despite their normative aspirations, their practical impact has remained limited. Their effectiveness has been consistently constrained by internal divisions among member states, geopolitical rivalries, and external political interventions dynamics that were examined in detail in the preceding chapter. As a result, while such institutions reflect an embryonic form of civilizational dialogue and regional integration, they have thus far been unable to function as autonomous or transformative platforms capable of overcoming entrenched political conflicts and identity-based fragmentation.⁵⁶⁵

Critically, the Dialogue of Civilizations does not deny the existence of conflict, power asymmetries, or ideological disagreement. Rather, it seeks to reframe how such disagreements are managed. Conflict is treated as a political and legal problem requiring negotiation, mediation, and institutional solutions, not as evidence of inevitable cultural incompatibility. By preserving space for compromise and mutual recognition, dialogue-oriented diplomacy resists the normalization of perpetual conflict and securitization that characterizes civilizational thinking. Ultimately, it offers a forward-looking alternative to the self-fulfilling prophecies generated by the Clash of Civilizations thesis. While the latter narrows political imagination by portraying conflict as unavoidable, dialogue expands the horizon of possibility by reaffirming human agency, legal universality, and the transformative potential of cooperation. In doing so, it aligns more closely

⁵⁶³ United Nations General Assembly, *2001 Should Be Year of Dialogue among Civilizations; President of Iran Tells General Assembly*, UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, GA/9446, 21 September, 1998. Accessible on <https://press.un.org/en/1998/19980921.ga9446.html>; United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, 2001 Launched with Headquarters Round Table Discussion*, UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, GA/9747, 5 September, 2000. Accessible on <https://press.un.org/en/2000/20000905.ga9747.doc.html>; UNESCO, *United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations: UNESCO Framework for Action*, Report by the Director-General, 161 EX/INF.14, 21 May, 2001. Accessible on <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000122589>; UNESCO, *Dialogue among civilizations*. Accessible on <https://www.unesco.org/en/tags/dialogue-among-civilizations>. Last Visit January 2026.

⁵⁶⁴ Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), *Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation*, 1969, revised 2008; Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO), *Charter and Statutes of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, 1979. Accessible on <https://icesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Charter-and-Statutes.pdf>. Last Visit January 2026.

⁵⁶⁵ A. Aydin, “The Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Conflict Management”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol.12, No.4, 2010.

with the normative foundations of international law and the long-term objectives of regional and global stability.

In conclusion, the contrast between the Clash of Civilizations and the Dialogue of Civilizations reflects a deeper choice about the future of international order. One path prioritizes identity, power, and exclusion, legitimizing fragmentation and legal exceptionalism. The other emphasizes dialogue, pluralism, and cooperation, offering a framework for managing diversity within a rule-based and inclusive international system. This dissertation argues that sustainable peace, regional integration, and legal legitimacy are far more likely to emerge from the latter approach. Rather than accepting civilizational conflict as destiny, the Dialogue of Civilizations affirms that coexistence is a political project, one that requires sustained commitment, institutional support, and a conscious rejection of deterministic narratives that transform difference into division.

4. Conclusion: Toward Dialogue-oriented Diplomacy and Cooperation Across Civilizations

This Chapter has critically examined the “Clash of Civilizations” thesis not merely as an intellectual framework for interpreting post-Cold War international relations, but as a politically consequential discourse with tangible effects on global governance, regional order, and the operation of international law. While initially presented as a descriptive and predictive theory, the analysis demonstrates that the Clash of Civilizations has functioned increasingly as a prescriptive and executive logic, shaping threat perceptions, legitimizing interventionist policies, and normalizing identity-based conflict narratives. By essentializing cultures and religions as homogeneous and inherently antagonistic, this paradigm has contributed to the ethnicization and sectarianization of politics, particularly in regions characterized by historical pluralism such as the Middle East, thereby reinforcing fragmentation, insecurity, and legal exceptionalism.

From an international law perspective, the operationalization of civilizational thinking has undermined the principle of legal universality by encouraging selective norm application, double standards, and the marginalization of humanitarian and human rights obligations under securitized narratives of existential threat. The Chapter has shown that when conflicts are framed as civilizational struggles, law is increasingly subordinated to power, identity, and security imperatives, weakening the legitimacy and coherence of the international legal order. In this sense, the most enduring impact of the Clash of Civilizations thesis lies not in its explanatory accuracy, but in its capacity to reshape normative environments and recalibrate the balance between law and power in international relations. Against this backdrop, the Dialogue of Civilizations emerges not as a naïve moral appeal, but as a coherent normative and conceptual alternative capable of addressing diversity within a rule-based and cooperative international system. By rejecting deterministic assumptions about cultural incompatibility, the Dialogue framework reaffirms the plurality, historical interconnectedness, and dynamic nature of civilizations. It reconceptualizes difference as a resource for dialogue, mutual learning, and collective problem-solving, rather than as a trigger for inevitable conflict. Importantly, this approach aligns closely with the foundational assumptions of post-World War II international law, including equal dignity among peoples, the universality of human rights, and the peaceful settlement of disputes.

The Chapter has also highlighted the limits of existing institutional efforts to operationalize dialogue, particularly within organizations such as the OIC and ICESCO. While these frameworks

reflect embryonic forms of dialogue-oriented regionalism, their effectiveness has been constrained by geopolitical rivalries, internal fragmentation, and external intervention. This underscores that dialogue cannot be sustained through symbolic or rhetorical commitments alone, but requires institutional embedding, legal articulation, and political will at both regional and global levels. Ultimately, the contrast between the Clash of Civilizations and the Dialogue of Civilizations reflects a fundamental choice about the future of international order. One path normalizes division, securitization, and legal exceptionalism under the guise of cultural inevitability. The other affirms human agency, normative universality, and the possibility of cooperation across cultural and civilizational boundaries. This dissertation argues that durable peace, regional integration, and legal legitimacy are far more likely to be achieved through the latter path. Dialogue-oriented diplomacy, when anchored in international law and supported by inclusive institutions, offers a viable framework for managing diversity without sacrificing legal coherence or political stability. In this sense, dialogue is not an alternative to law or power politics, but a necessary condition for restoring the credibility of international norms and for constructing a more inclusive and sustainable global order.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to examine the feasibility, necessity, and normative foundations of establishing a Middle East Union as a structured framework for regional integration, cooperation, peace, security, and stability. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines international law, international relations theory, regional studies, political economy, and cultural analysis, the study sought to move beyond fragmented, conflict-centered narratives of the Middle East and to reframe the region as a potential space for institutionalized cooperation and collective governance.

The analysis began with a comprehensive examination of the Middle East as a historical, geographical, and socio-political construct. Chapter I demonstrated that the Middle East is not merely a geopolitical invention or a conflict-ridden space, but a historically interconnected region shaped by shared experiences of empire, colonial intervention, nationalism, war, and state formation. The emergence of modern nation-states, while producing political sovereignty, simultaneously fragmented a region that had long been characterized by cultural, economic, and civilizational continuity. This foundational chapter established that regional integration in the Middle East is not an artificial or externally imposed concept, but rather a historically grounded possibility disrupted by twentieth-century geopolitical restructuring. By comparing semi-patterns of integration in other regions, including the European Union (EU), African Union (AU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Organization of American States (OAS), and Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Chapter illustrated that regional unions typically emerge from conditions of conflict, crisis, and fragmentation, rather than from stability alone. Accordingly, the hypothesis of a Middle East Union was framed not as an idealistic aspiration, but as a rational response to structural regional challenges. By situating the Middle East within comparative experiences of regional integration, the study highlights that crisis, fragmentation, and contested identities are not anomalies in integration processes, but often their starting conditions. This perspective calls into question Eurocentric benchmarks of success and suggests that the viability of regional unions should be assessed not by their conformity to a single model, but by their capacity to evolve through incremental, context-sensitive, and institutionally grounded pathways.

Chapter II demonstrated that the necessity of forming a Middle East Union stems from the fundamentally transnational character of many of the region's most persistent challenges, which render unilateral or strictly state-centric solutions ineffective. Armed conflicts, economic underdevelopment, rentier structures, authoritarian governance, migration pressures, terrorism, and human rights deficits were shown to constitute mutually reinforcing dynamics that transcend national borders. The analysis further established that regional integration would not only serve the interests of Middle East states themselves, but would also produce positive spillover effects for Europe and the broader international community, particularly in areas such as migration management, energy security, counterterrorism, and global stability. Accordingly, the Middle East Union was conceptualized not as a zero-sum regional project, but as a cooperative framework that contributes to international peace and security, in line with the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Chapter III shifted the focus from necessity to capability by examining the material, cultural, demographic, and geopolitical strengths that could underpin a Middle East Union. Contrary to prevailing narratives that emphasize fragmentation and incompatibility, the Chapter demonstrated

that the region possesses substantial commonalities in religion, language, culture, legal traditions, and economic structures, alongside unparalleled natural resources and a young, dynamic population. The detailed analysis of key regional actors, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Egypt, and the Persian Gulf states, illustrated that the Middle East already contains multiple regional powers whose complementary capacities could serve as pillars of integration rather than sources of rivalry. This Chapter challenged the assumption that power asymmetries necessarily obstruct integration, arguing instead that managed diversity and differentiated integration could constitute functional strengths within a union framework.

Chapter IV critically examined the obstacles to Middle Eastern integration, including sectarian divisions, ethnic provocations, external interference, arms dependency, and negative identity-based propaganda such as Islamophobia, Arabophobia, Iranophobia, and Turkophobia. By engaging with Bernard Lewis's breakdown theory and related fragmentation narratives, the Chapter argued that many perceived "internal" divisions have been politically activated and externally instrumentalized rather than organically inevitable. Importantly, the Chapter did not deny the existence of real conflicts and grievances, but reframed them as political and institutional challenges rather than civilizational impossibilities. Drawing on Democratic Peace Theory (DPT), Economic Peace Theory (EPT), Security Community Theory (SCT), and Institutionalism, the study proposed concrete strategies for overcoming fragmentation through democratization, economic interdependence, security cooperation, and policy harmonization.

Chapter V demonstrated that the Middle East is not institutionally empty. On the contrary, it already contains a dense but fragmented network of political, economic, security, cultural, and intellectual institutions, including the Arab League (AL), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), The Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO), The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), and various defense and policy platforms. While these institutions have thus far fallen short of producing deep integration, their existence reflects an embryonic regional architecture that could be consolidated and restructured within a Middle East Union framework. The Chapter argued that the failure of these institutions should not be interpreted as evidence against integration, but rather as a consequence of limited mandates, political rivalries, and external constraints. Each sub-conclusion emphasized that political, economic, security, cultural, and intellectual integration must advance in parallel to avoid asymmetric or unsustainable outcomes.

Chapter VI situated the Middle East Union project within a broader global intellectual and normative debate by critically interrogating the Clash of Civilizations thesis. The analysis demonstrated that this thesis has functioned less as a neutral scientific prediction and more as an executive discourse that legitimizes conflict, intervention, and legal exceptionalism. By essentializing identities and framing diversity as a source of inevitable conflict, the Clash of Civilizations paradigm has contributed to sectarianization, militarization, and the erosion of international legal universality, particularly in the Middle East. In response, the Dialogue of Civilizations was articulated as a normative and legal counter-framework that reaffirms pluralism, mutual recognition, and cooperation. Grounded in international law and supported by United Nations and UNESCO initiatives, dialogue-oriented diplomacy was presented not as an abstract moral appeal, but as a pragmatic necessity for managing diversity, restoring legal legitimacy, and enabling regional integration.

Taken together, the findings of this dissertation support the central argument that the formation of a Middle East Union is both theoretically defensible and practically conceivable, provided that it is pursued through gradual, inclusive, and law-based processes. The study does not claim that integration is imminent or inevitable, nor does it underestimate the depth of political rivalries and structural challenges facing the region. Rather, it contends that the absence of a regional union perpetuates a cycle of fragmentation, dependency, and instability that benefits neither the Middle East nor the international community. In contrast, a Middle East Union, even in a flexible and differentiated form, offers a framework for transforming conflict into cooperation, competition into complementarity, and diversity into institutional strength.

In other words, the thesis suggests that prevailing assumptions about the impossibility of regional integration in the Middle East are neither analytically inevitable nor normatively justified. By treating regional integration as a legal and institutional process rather than a purely geopolitical ambition, the study demonstrates that the absence of a Middle East Union reflects contingent political trajectories and structural constraints, not an inherent incompatibility with rule-based cooperation. More broadly, the analysis indicates that dominant explanatory frameworks, particularly those rooted in civilizational determinism, have contributed to both policy paralysis and legal exceptionalism toward the Middle East. When diversity is framed as an immutable source of conflict, legal norms are more easily suspended, intervention becomes normalized, and institutional alternatives remain underexplored. The rejection of such determinism, therefore, is not merely an intellectual exercise, but a prerequisite for restoring the credibility of international law and multilateral governance in the region.

At the intersection of international law and regional integration theory, this dissertation underscores that legal norms can play a constitutive role in shaping political behavior, institutional trust, and cooperative expectations. Rather than functioning solely as post-conflict regulatory tools, legal principles related to peaceful dispute settlement, equality of states, and collective responsibility can actively structure regional governance frameworks. From an international law perspective, the Middle East Union represents an opportunity to re-anchor regional politics within a rule-based order that emphasizes peaceful dispute settlement, human rights, economic cooperation, and collective security. By aligning regional integration with the principles of the United Nations Charter and the universality of legal norms, such a union could contribute to reversing the trend of legal exceptionalism and selective norm application that has characterized much of the region's recent history. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that sustainable peace in the Middle East cannot be achieved solely through external intervention, military deterrence, or fragmented alliances. It requires a regionally owned, institutionally grounded, and normatively coherent project of integration. In this respect, a Middle East Union would not challenge the existing international legal order, but would operate as a regional mechanism for its internalization and practical realization.

Today, the mere possession of strategic geography and abundant energy resources is no longer sufficient to guarantee stability, prosperity, or international influence. In the absence of effective governance, institutional coordination, and cooperative regional frameworks, such advantages may instead become sources of vulnerability, external intervention, and chronic insecurity. This dynamic is clearly observable in the Middle East, where geopolitical centrality and resource wealth have repeatedly coincided with persistent conflict, economic fragmentation, and political instability. The region's crises are not the result of a single factor, but rather the cumulative outcome of weak regional institutions, fragmented political orders, external interference, identity-

based conflicts, and the absence of a shared framework for collective problem-solving. Overcoming these interconnected challenges requires more than ad hoc crisis management or reliance on traditional balance-of-power strategies. It necessitates a clear understanding of contemporary global realities, including economic interdependence, transnational security threats, demographic pressures, energy transition, and the growing importance of regional integration as a stabilizing mechanism in international relations. Equally essential are political determination, long-term foresight, and strategic patience to uphold peace not merely as a normative aspiration, but as a functional and regulatory principle guiding regional governance and cooperation.

In a region as historically turbulent and persistently securitized as the Middle East, achieving sustainable peace cannot be realized through military dominance, external guardianship, or exclusionary alliances. Rather, it demands a fundamental shift in political approach, one that prioritizes dialogue over confrontation, institutionalization over personalization of power, and regional cooperation over fragmented and competitive geopolitics. Such an approach aligns with the broader argument of this dissertation, which maintains that only through structured regional integration, grounded in legal norms, inclusive governance, and mutual recognition, can the Middle East transform its structural vulnerabilities into collective strengths and move toward lasting stability and development.

At the time of finalizing this dissertation (January 2026), regional tensions in the Middle East, particularly those centered on Iran, Israel, and the United States, have reached an unprecedented level of intensity and international concern. These developments have not only exacerbated regional instability, but have also prompted diverse reactions from governments across the Middle East and from extra-regional actors, including states in Europe and Asia. The expanding scope of these tensions demonstrates that their consequences are no longer confined to the region itself, but increasingly affect international peace and security, global energy markets, migration dynamics, and the integrity of the international legal order. Under such conditions, continued reliance on narrowly defined security-based approaches, military deterrence, or ad hoc crisis management has proven insufficient to produce durable stability. In many instances, these strategies have instead reinforced cycles of escalation and structural insecurity. Against this background, this dissertation maintains that the establishment of a Middle East Union represents the most viable and sustainable framework for stabilizing the current regional environment. By institutionalizing dialogue, political coordination, economic cooperation, and legal mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes, such a union could transform confrontational rivalries into rule-based processes of regional governance. From the perspective of international law and regional order, the Middle East Union should be understood not as a short-term response to episodic crises, but as a structural solution to the chronic drivers of instability in the region. In this sense, contemporary regional developments do not undermine the central hypothesis of this study; rather, they reinforce its relevance and urgency. The absence of an inclusive and institutionalized regional framework remains one of the principal factors enabling the persistence of conflict and insecurity in the Middle East.

In conclusion, the Middle East Union should be understood not as a utopian end-state, but as a long-term political project rooted in historical continuity, shared interests, and legal principles. Its realization depends on political will, societal engagement, and the gradual construction of trust through dialogue, cooperation, and institutional reform. By advancing a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analysis, this dissertation contributes to reimagining the Middle East not as a permanent theater of conflict, but as a potential space of convergence, cooperation, and collective

future-making within the international system. Future research may build upon this framework by examining pathways of differentiated integration, sectoral cooperation, and legal harmonization mechanisms that could gradually operationalize the Middle East Union in practice.

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U Beogradu, 26. maja 2026. godine

Farnaz Salimi