

# Power and Security: Realist Theory and the Middle East in the post-Arab Uprisings Context

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***Abstract:** Despite the emphasis typically placed on ideational and identity-based factors within the Middle East, realist theory remains the most effective conceptual lens through which to analyze the region. The purpose of this analysis is to develop a realist conceptual framework through which to analyze the Middle East in the post-2011 Arab Uprisings context. In doing so, this research examines realist policies utilized by both regional and extra-regional powers, as well as the role(s) played by Islam and sectarian sentiments and rhetoric within the overall realist calculus of state actors. Rather than constructing policies based off of ideational or identity-based variables, this study argues that these elements are instead utilized and manipulated in an actor's ultimate pursuit for the foundational pillars of realism: power and security.*

**Keywords:** Middle East; Realism; International Affairs; Arab Uprising; Security

## **Introduction**

Although the uprisings dramatically altered the international relations (IR) landscape, this study argues that realist theory (specifically structural realist theory) remains the most applicable theoretical framework through which to view the Middle Eastern context. Indeed, the 2011 Arab Uprisings – and the years and conflicts following their inception – demonstrated the overwhelming preoccupation concerning self-interests and self-preservation among regional powers. Further, the uprisings and their aftermath witnessed intense extra-regional competition within the Middle Eastern theater, fundamentally in pursuit of the advancement of strategic interests. Considering that the examination of every particular case across the region during the uprisings is beyond the scope of this analysis, the primary focus of this research is centered on the prevailing realist themes and patterns that emerged following the eruption of mass mobilization in 2011. In a world where people and scholars alike tend to champion the role of ideology and religion within the Middle East and its subsequent “exceptionalism,” the realist framework provides a sobering picture of a region dominated by power politics and hegemonic ambitions.

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The foundation of structural realist theory (sometimes referred to as neorealist theory) emphasizes the centrality of power as the primary currency of international politics, with state actors paying careful attention to how much power they maintain relative to each other.<sup>1</sup> As opposed to classical realists – which emphasizes human nature and the pursuit of power as an end in and of itself – structural realists consider power as a means towards the ultimate end of survival. In this sense, states are always searching to maximize power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal, due to the anarchic nature of the international system and the fact that the system comprises independent actors with no central authority (i.e. there is no “government over governments”).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, states primarily look to alter the balance of power in favor of their national interests. Thought of as an equation, realism could be considered as  $X + Y = P + S$ , where “P” represents power and “S” represents security (the two primary end goals of realism). In this pursuit of power (P) and security (S), actors will substitute in whatever is necessary and most effective for “X” and “Y,” which represent the means utilized to achieve the objectives of realism.

Realism is not a new concept to the Middle East, which is a region often plagued by the dynamics of both global and regional power competitions. Beginning with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the construction of what is now termed the “Middle East,” realism was exhibited by the various European powers (primarily the British and French) seeking to carve out their own respective spheres of influence, ultimately resulting in colonization. This period of colonialization established the institutions and governmental structures for continued European power projection and influence following the cessation of formal dominance. The region then witnessed a fierce realist power competition during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, followed by a period of U.S. unipolarity, in which the United States sought to further alter the regional balance of power in its favor, particularly following 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Therefore, the post-Arab Uprisings period must be viewed within the contextual continuum of glaring realism.

To properly analyze the prevalence of realism within the contemporary Middle Eastern context, this paper will discuss: the prevailing literature and narratives surrounding the international relations of the Middle East; the reaction of regional and extra-regional actors to the uprisings and their aftermath; and how to re-conceptualize what exactly translates into power within the contemporary Middle East, particularly now that inter-state competition is increasingly conducted through the manipulation of proxies and transnational movements. Of particular interest within this analysis will be the discussion on the role of Islam and sectarianism within the post-Arab Uprisings context. Such discussions will be utilized to counter the argument that the region’s affairs are somehow dictated by ideational factors. Instead, this study will demonstrate that there is only one prevailing “ideology” currently dominating the Middle Eastern landscape: that of power and security.

## Literature Review

There are myriad differing opinions as to what IR theory is the most effective conceptual framework when analyzing the Middle East, and numerous debates over whether traditional IR

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<sup>1</sup> John Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism,” *International Relations Theory: Discipline and Diversity*, edited by Tim Dunne et al., 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Mearsheimer, John. “Anarchy and the Struggle for Power.” *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, edited by Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, 13<sup>th</sup> ed., Pearson, 2017, pp. 70-80.

theory is even relevant when analyzing the region. As Mary Darwich contends, many scholars have long treated the Middle East as too “exceptional” to be theory relevant, subsequently resulting in the region’s presentation to students of IR as a context that defies existing theoretical arguments and approaches.<sup>3</sup> Further, Darwich highlights how this has resulted in the Middle East typically being excluded from theory development in general, as academics have tended to be apprehensive toward the region and use different case studies in the development of these abstract approaches.<sup>4</sup> These factors explain the overwhelming lack of literature focused on Middle East IR as compared to other global regions. This being the case, however, certain scholars have attempted to apply existing IR theoretical frameworks to the region, particularly constructivism and realism, as well as variants of their variants.

Beginning with the former, proponents of the constructivist camp are primarily concerned with the prevalence of identity-based and ideational factors in determining the actions of states. According to scholars such as Bassel Salloukh, the constructivist emphasis on “identity threats” can best explain the “puzzling and startling trends” in the contemporary Middle East, and that regimes within the region must simultaneously combat both political and ideational threats.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Mark Haas asserts that it is not simply power that defines the structure of an international system, but that identity also plays a role in the way that states define friends and foes: states may “eschew alliances...because they dislike and fear the ideological stance of a potential ally.”<sup>6</sup> Seen in this light, both identities and ideologies play a critical role in the construction of a state’s calculus. Courtney Freer notes the salience of ideational factors in a state’s foreign policy, arguing that “foreign policy has been used to promote ideology” within the post-Arab Uprisings context.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Michael Barnett argues a similar notion, focusing on the role of ideas, identity, and ideology in shaping the dynamics and patterns of regional politics – with hostility toward Israel or inter-Arab political dynamics, for instance, shaped as much by identity as by security or power concerns.<sup>8</sup>

Alternately, the realist camp, exemplified here by Stephen Walt, argues that Middle Eastern states are fundamentally rational actors competing for power in a hostile, anarchic environment shaped by the constant threat of war and subversion.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Marc Lynch contends that the Middle East remains one of the “most realist parts of the world,” with no central authority capable of making or enforcing binding decisions, making the possibility for conflict ever-present.<sup>10</sup> Seen through the lens of realism, ideology, identity, and public discourse

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<sup>3</sup> Darwich, M. (2015). The Challenge of Bridging IR and Area Studies in Middle East International Relations Teaching. *LSE Middle East Center Blog*, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2015/08/18/the-challenge-of-bridging-ir-and-area-studies-in-middle-east-international-relations-teaching/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Salloukh, B. (2017). Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State, *50*(3), 660–663. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517000348>.

<sup>6</sup> Haas, Mark. (2014). “Ideological Polarity and Balancing in Great Power Politics.” *Security Studies* 23 (4): pp. 715–53.

<sup>7</sup> Freer, C., et al. (2018) “The Future of Political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa under the Changing Regional Order.” *Jadaliyya - جدلية*, Arab Studies Institute, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/37864/The-Future-of-Political-Islam-in-the-MENA-under-the-Changing-Regional-Order>.

<sup>8</sup> Barnett, M. *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Walt, S. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Lynch, M. “International Relations.” *The Middle East*, edited by Ellen Lust, 14th ed., CQ Press, 2017, pp. 369–402.

are a mask for the underlying state interests and pursuit of power and should not be taken at anything close to face value.<sup>11</sup> Realism, then, sidelines the roles played by ideational and identity-based factors, and instead stresses the overriding primacy of its two dominant principles: power and security.

This analysis adopts the foundational components of the realist conceptual lens to explain dynamics within the region; it also seeks to stretch the theory to understand the increased salience of religious and sectarian sentiments and rhetoric in the post-Arab Uprisings context. First, there are numerous developments within the region that contradict the constructivist notion of ideational and identity-based influences, such as the rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the U.S.-Saudi strategic relationship, the current Russia-Iran strategic relationship, the growing GCC-Israel relationship, and numerous other examples of ideational hypocrisy (discussed more below). These developments directly contradict both Barnett's and Haas's explanations above regarding Israel and the eschewing of alliances due to fears of ideology, and represent not "puzzling and startling trends" as Salloukh argues, but rather rational actors attempting to advance their strategic interests and their own security. As will be demonstrated within this analysis, identities and ideational factors instead often serve as legitimization and mobilization tools as states seek to advance their realist strategic interest, not a doctrinal-or-identity-based agenda. While the salience of different identities fluctuates over time, the objectives of power and security remain constant and dominating.

## Argument

### *Regional Realism*

The 2011 Arab Uprisings fundamentally altered the regional balance of power, as well as what factors now translate into power itself. Traditional powers such as Egypt and Syria were consumed by internal conflicts, and power quickly shifted to the oil-rich Gulf States who sought to use this material power (wealth) to advance their realist interests abroad through various different networks. This resulted in a rather clear dichotomy following the uprisings: states were either classified as the "meddler," or the one being "meddled" with. The virtual collapse of the states of Syria, Libya, and Yemen resulted in intense power competition within the region, as regional and extra-regional powers sought the advancement of their interests. Every event was viewed as both an index of power and a potential threat: whether out of a desire to spread power or a defensive interest in preventing rivals from doing the same, almost every regime found itself drawn into the regional civil wars and power games in some shape or form.<sup>12</sup> As Marc Lynch points out, many of these interventions and proxy efforts have failed, resulting in powers being trapped by the classic competitive logic of the security dilemma: they are unable to win, yet unable to leave for fear of the advancement of their rivals.<sup>13</sup>

Since the inception of the uprisings, states have sought to maximize both their domestic security domestically and regional power, the latter of which also subsequently increases the former by providing them with greater resources and alliances to call upon when necessary. This interconnectedness was demonstrated by the large sums of money granted to Egypt following the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Lynch, Marc. "New Arab World Order." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 16 Aug. 2018, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/16/new-arab-world-order-pub-77056>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

rise of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as the crushing of the Bahraini Uprising by Saudi Arabia. In each of these instances the aiding power – in these cases, Saudi Arabia – assisted states abroad out of the perceived fear of both the domestic and regional threats that would have accompanied either the continued empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or the empowerment of the majority-Shia population in Bahrain. Numerous rivalries have been rekindled and developed due to the uprisings, such as the Saudi-Iranian rivalry for regional hegemony and the growing rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia (addressed below).

These interconnected perceived threats to power and security – coupled with the desire of different powers to enhance their influence abroad – has led to the construction of different “camps” within the region: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, (the four of which can be termed the counterrevolutionary bloc) and Israel in one camp; Turkey, Qatar, and the Muslim Brotherhood in another; and Iran and its various proxy network in a third. As will be addressed below, these often contradictory camps represent how regional powers do not really defend any sole ideological position, but rather are most predominantly interested in their own power and security: while ideological rhetorical devices are employed constantly, they have little credibility and are typically employed as a façade to disguise the real underlying realist objectives.<sup>14</sup> Equally important are the unprecedented international roles assumed by transnational movements in the wake of the Arab Uprisings such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State, al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran’s various regional proxy networks, etc. (discussed more below).

Before examining these camps and movements as well as their often contradictory nature, however, there is a need to re-conceptualize what constitutes power in the Middle East post-Arab uprisings. While traditional elements of power projection such as military capabilities will undoubtedly remain important factors, power in the post-Arab Uprisings context has largely operated through influence peddling and proxy warfare, particularly the manipulation of various regional Islamist movements.<sup>15</sup> The massive amounts of Gulf oil and gas money played an instrumental role in the new proxy calculus, allowing states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE to funnel enormous quantities of money to different regional patrons. While some have pointed to the prevalence of proxy manipulation – specifically differing Islamist actors – as proof of the role of ideology in the manufacturing of policies (discussed further below), proxies themselves are quite realist in nature and fit well into the overall theoretical paradigm of realism. Indeed, it is logical that states would seek to maximize their interests through power projection while utilizing as limited resources as possible. In this sense, the demonstrated ability of states to manipulate different identities and ideologies throughout the region is but another way to advance their realist strategic interests.

Shifting back to the topic of the formation of new regional “blocs,” these constructions increasingly demonstrate the primacy of strategic interests over identity and ideology. If Saudi Arabia – which espouses a hardline interpretation of Islam called *Wahhabism* – truly formed foreign relations based on like-minded ideational factors, why, then, did it embrace the 2013 Egyptian coup that brought the military-secularist Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to power and removed the Islamist-inclined Muslim Brotherhood (MB)? The answer lies in clear-cut perceived threats to power and security: not only does the Saudi state perceive a threat from the MB strand of

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<sup>14</sup> Freer, C., Cavatorta, F., et al. (2018) “The Future of Political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa under the Changing Regional Order.” *Jadaliyya* - جدلية, Arab Studies Institute, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/37864/The-Future-of-Political-Islam-in-the-MENA-under-the-Changing-Regional-Order>.

<sup>15</sup> Lynch, M. *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*. Philadelphia, PA: Public Affairs, 2016.

political Islam internally, but it also viewed the empowerment of the Brotherhood in Egypt as an increase in the power posture of neighboring Qatar, with which the Saudis have developed an increasingly adversarial relationship following the uprisings. At the same time as they are supporting the secularist government in Egypt, the Saudis are simultaneously funneling money to hardline *salafist* groups in Syria fighting against the Assad regime, further demonstrating their ideational hypocrisy. Similarly, if ideology indeed dictates policies, the region certainly would not have witnessed what can be considered an unprecedented public rapprochement between the state of Israel and the Saudi-led camp on the basis of shared interests against Iran.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the shared perceived threat from Iran is considered by these actors as more serious than any sort of ideational disdain for the state of Israel.

### *Extra-Regional Realism*

Extra-regional powers were quick to exploit the 2011 Arab Uprisings hoping to advance their own realist strategic interests. The two extra-regional powers most heavily involved in the pursuit of power and security following the uprisings were the United States and Russia.<sup>19</sup> Beginning with the former, the U.S. has a long history of embracing authoritarian governments within the region in order to use these states to advance its realist interests. Perhaps the most paradigmatic case of the United States' sidelining of ideologies in the formation of its realist policies is the long-standing relationship it maintains with Saudi Arabia; there is certainly nothing ideologically that unites the democratic United States and *Wahhabist* Saudi Arabia. Instead, this relationship is based off of stone-cold realism, as both powers seek to use the other in the advancement of their respective interests, particularly when it comes to stemming the expansion of Iranian influence.

When the uprisings began in 2011, the U.S. under Obama utilized a cautionary approach, not quite sure how events would unfold. Daniel Morey et al. notes how the U.S. was essentially a "spectator" during the earlier days of the Arab Uprisings under Obama, who had largely ran on a campaign of ending U.S. involvement in the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> Gradually, however, elements of realist doctrine began to permeate: the U.S. began covertly arming Syrian rebels, intervened directly in Libya in 2011, and remained quiet as the Saudis crushed the uprising in neighboring Bahrain. The U.S. reaction to the Egyptian case in particular is worth highlighting as an instructive example of how realist policies dominate ideology within the region. Once the U.S. threw its weight behind the protestors in Egypt and Mubarak fell, Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Morsi was elected to the presidency. Uneasy over the ascension of an Islamist candidate to the presidency, the U.S. under Obama nevertheless embraced Morsi as democratically elected and therefore legitimate. However, Morsi's reign was short-lived as the

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<sup>16</sup> See for a thorough explanation: Marcus, J. "Israel and Saudi Arabia: The Relationship Emerging into the Open." *BBC News*, BBC, 3 Apr. 2018, [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43632905](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43632905).

<sup>18</sup> Turak, Natasha. "Qatari Foreign Minister Criticizes Iran Sanctions, UAE Foreign Policy as 'Destabilizing'." *CNBC*, CNBC, 16 Dec. 2018, [www.cnbc.com/2018/12/16/qatar-foreign-minister-on-gulf-blockade-saudi-arabia-and-us-sanctions.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2018/12/16/qatar-foreign-minister-on-gulf-blockade-saudi-arabia-and-us-sanctions.html).

<sup>19</sup> Other external powers such as China and several European countries were also involved in seeking the advancement of their strategic interests within the region following the uprisings, but for the sake of this analysis, only the U.S. and Russia will be discussed.

<sup>20</sup> Morey, D., Thyne, C., Hayden, S., & Senters, M. (2012). Leader, Follower, or Spectator? The Role of President Obama in the Arab Spring Uprisings. *Social Science Quarterly*, 93(5), 1185–1201.

democratically-elected leader was overthrown by a military coup in 2013 that installed military man Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to the presidency. The U.S. now faced an interesting predicament: the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act clearly “restricts assistance to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree”.<sup>21</sup> If ideology, here exemplified by U.S. law, is indeed the primary determinant in the construction of foreign policies, then U.S. assistance to Egypt should have ceased due their ideational clash. However, realism prevailed and assistance to the country was maintained and relations strengthened under Obama’s successor, Donald Trump (see below).

The election of U.S. President Donald Trump witnessed the resumption of staunch and blatant realist policies within the region. Indeed, the United States has effectively sidelined democratic principles for “pragmatic” deals with autocrats throughout the region in order to combat terrorism, quell Iranian expansionism, and maintain its strategic posturing within the region.<sup>22</sup> The U.S. under Donald Trump has “doubled down” on realist policies, exemplified by his first trip abroad as president to Saudi Arabia, reinforcing their strategic alliance, his strong stance against Iran, his strong support for Egyptian President El-Sisi, his strong support for the Al-Khalifa regime in Bahrain, and his strong support for Saudi Arabia in the wake of the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.<sup>23</sup> Now deep into his first presidential term, Donald Trump continues to demonstrate his unwavering support for whomever in the region will aid in his pursuit for power and security, regardless of identity or ideology.

In the case of Russia, the Kremlin too employed a cautionary approach in the beginning of the uprisings, albeit in a much more concerned manner. For Russia, the Arab Uprisings hit closer to home; to the Kremlin, the Arab Uprisings were viewed as a strategy by Washington to promote Western-style democracy in the Middle East (Moscow’s “underbelly”), and in the overall context of the “color revolutions” in various former Soviet countries.<sup>24</sup> Seen in this context, the Arab Uprisings for Russia were not solely a regional issue within the Middle East, but were part of a broader trend of the U.S. increasing its strategic influence over Moscow. The uprising in Syria was particularly worrisome for Russia, who decided in 2015 to intervene directly in support of the Assad regime. Following its largely successful intervention in Syria, Russia has sought greater political and economic cooperation with Saudi Arabia, greater military cooperation with Egypt and General Haftar in Libya, and greater involvement in Yemen’s civil war.<sup>25</sup> Each of these actions represent Russia’s utmost realist desire for the advancement of its power and security.

The Russian case of realist policies towards the region also has a larger, more global dimension to it. Russia has effectively used intervening in the post-Arab Uprisings Middle East as an instrument within its overall strategy towards the construction of a multi-polar global balance of power that the country has actively sought since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>21</sup> “22 U.S. Code § 8422 - Authorization of Assistance.” *LII / Legal Information Institute*, Legal Information Institute, [www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/8422](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/8422).

<sup>22</sup> Abrams, E. (2017). *Realism and democracy : American foreign policy after the Arab Spring*. New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Walt, S. “This Is America's Middle East Strategy on Steroids.” *Foreign Policy*, Foreign Policy, 15 Oct. 2018, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/15/this-is-americas-middle-east-strategy-on-steroids/>.

<sup>24</sup> Trenin Dmitrij Vital’evič. *What Is Russia up to in the Middle East?* Polity Press, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> See for a thorough explanation: Brown, N., et al. “Arab Horizons: Pathways and Pitfalls to Renewal.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2018, [https://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/ArabHorizons\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/ArabHorizons_report_final.pdf).

Considering the relative decline of U.S. influence following its increased weariness with the region due to the war in Iraq, Russia felt that this presented them with an opportunity to inject itself back into the region and enhance its strategic posturing vis-à-vis Washington.<sup>26</sup> This is part of Russia's greater realist desire to reassert itself on global stage as a "great power". Equally significant is Russia's sidelining of ideology when forming its alliances; Moscow has demonstrated that it is "ideologically blind" and willing to work with any actor whom it views can best enhance its geopolitical position against the U.S.<sup>27</sup> This once again demonstrates the superiority of the pursuit of power and security over the desire to advance or abide by identity-based or ideational doctrines.

*Islam and Sectarianism as "Ideational Variables"*

Perhaps the most commonly highlighted and focused-upon ideational variables within the region are those of Islam and sectarianism between its two dominant sects, Sunnism and Shiism. The religion of Islam has often been cast as "exceptional" in the manner in which it relates to politics.<sup>28</sup> This in turn has led to an overemphasized fixation on the role of Islam and sectarianism in the determination of various states' foreign policies, particularly in the post-Arab Uprisings context.<sup>29</sup> The premise of this analysis, however, has been that ideologies are relevant as long as they can advance the realist geopolitical aims of a state, and they themselves do not determine policy. In other words, ideological manipulation – here the manipulation of sectarian sentiments and rhetoric – is a form of realist power. States seek to manipulate Islamic and sectarian identities in the pursuit of the advancement of their own power and security, not ideational-or doctrine-based agendas.

Not all agree, however. Salloukh asserts that "transnational sectarian identities have re-emerged as a potent power resource shaping regime foreign policy and alliances choices", and that the "elective affinity between co-sectarian state and non-state actors" has subsequently increased as actors have begun to align themselves with other co-sectarian actors.<sup>30</sup> Assumptions like these, however, are highly essentialist and reductionist, ignoring various sectarian hypocrisies throughout the region: the alignment of Shia Iran and Hamas, the covert support that has been ongoing between Iran and al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the bitter hatred between co-sectarian Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood, the strategic rapprochement between Israel and the Saudi-led camp to counter Iran, etc. Similarly, if identities and ideologies do indeed formulate policies, why are the rich Gulf States so hesitant to admit Syrian refugees into their countries, who represent their co-sectarian Sunni brethren? Or how about the sidelining of long-standing discrimination espoused by the Twelver Shia community in Iran against the Alawites in Syria or the Zaydi Houthis in Yemen? These examples represent how easily identities and ideologies can be discarded for the sake of the advance of realist objectives. An important point to remember is that the salience of different ideologies and identities wax and wane within any

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<sup>26</sup> Unnikrishnan, N., Purushothaman, U., & Kumaraswamy, P. (n.d.). Russia in Middle East: Playing the Long Game? *India Quarterly*, 73(2), 251–258. doi:10.1177/0974928417700788.

<sup>27</sup> Dannreuther, R. (n.d.). Russia and the Middle East: A Cold War Paradigm? *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64(3), 543–560. doi:10.1080/09668136.2012.661922.

<sup>28</sup> Hamid, S. (2016). *Islamic exceptionalism : how the struggle over Islam is reshaping the world* (First edition.). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example: Abdo, Geneive. *The New Sectarianism: the Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Salloukh, B. (2017). Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations: The Return of the Weak Arab State, 50(3), 660–663. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517000348>.

geographical context, and the Middle East is no different; pan-Arab nationalism, pan-Islamism, and sectarianism are but examples of different trends and patterns. However, the variables that remain constant are the pursuit of both power and security.

Seen in this context, sectarian manipulation serves as a successful method through which to advance one's strategic geopolitical interests. Indeed, the pervasiveness and successes of the manipulation of sectarianism for geopolitical purposes has come to represent what Robert Mason describes as *geosectarianism*.<sup>31</sup> These geosectarian policies are not themselves influenced by the doctrinal components of Sunni or Shia Islam, but are rather utilized due to their lucrative nature in advancing an actor's power and security. Despite the overwhelming abundance of sectarian sentiments throughout the region, the realist conceptual framework provides a lens through which to see beyond the rhetoric and assess what is truly behind the pervasiveness of the sectarian phenomenon: power and security.

## Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that the IR theoretical framework of realism continues to be the most effective conceptual lens through which to analyze the Middle East in the post-2011 Arab Uprisings context. Rather than seeking the advancement of identity-based or ideational doctrines, states within the region continue to prioritize power and security above all else. While religious and ideological rhetoric has been employed by different actors, these represent tools for mobilization and legitimization in pursuit of rational realist agendas. Extra-regional actors have also sought the pursuit of their realist agendas through the Middle Eastern region, particularly the United States and Russia. As demonstrated in this research, Russia has attempted to use the region as an avenue through which to reassert itself on the global political stage. Alternatively, the U.S. has attempted to stem Russian gains within the region and maintain its own influence. The revival of this Cold War paradigm will be critical moving forward, as states within the Middle East are now able to balance and play these global powers off one another in pursuit of their own realist agendas.

Looking towards the future, realist theory will certainly have to contend with different emerging trends throughout the region, such as the continued empowerment of transnational movements, the ongoing presence of radical Islamist movements, and the rapidly increasing salience of sectarian sentiments and rhetoric. The last point about sectarianism is particularly thought-provoking and raises an interesting question: in the pursuit of their realist agendas, have the states in the Middle East promulgated sectarian sentiments and rhetoric beyond their ability to control them? In other words, has the promotion of confessional "top down" sectarianism by state actors in pursuit of their strategic interests led to sectarianism being promoted within communities from the "bottom-up" to the point that it now poses a threat to their own security? This trend is best exemplified by the emergence of the ultra-sectarian "Islamic State", but also by changes in the overall communal perceptions and demonization of the "other". An interesting example of this phenomenon is the emergence of hardline Sunni groups calling for the overthrow of the Bahraini regime because it is not "hard enough" against the country's Shia. Developments such as these suggest that sectarianism may be beginning to assume a life of its own, outside of the control of state actors who sought to mobilize and exploit it for their own interests in the first place. Indeed, the virulent new forms of sectarianism ripping the region apart appear to be one of

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<sup>31</sup> See: Mason, R. *Reassessing Order and Disorder in the Middle East: Regional Imbalance or Disintegration?* Lanham, Md: Rowan & Littlefield, 2017.

the most dangerous by-products of the current realist power competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>32</sup> If this is indeed the case, realist actors will have to adjust their calculus so as to not create a force that is beyond its control to maintain. These facets considered, realism will likely remain the primary conceptual lens through which to best analyze the region, as all actors seek the ultimate objectives of power and security.

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<sup>32</sup> Lynch, M. *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*. Philadelphia, PA: Public Affairs, 2016.

- Abdo, Geneive. *The New Sectarianism: the Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Abrams, E. (2017). *Realism and Democracy: American foreign policy after the Arab Spring*. New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.
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