

THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER OCTOBER 7: CONFLICT, REALIGNMENT, AND THE RESHAPING OF REGIONAL ORDER

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Abstract

The attacks of October 7th were a turning point in Middle Eastern politics, leading to a crisis that was felt across the region and had far reaching consequences beyond the Gaza War itself. This study analyzes the transformation of the regional order in the Middle East following October 7, including the process of conflict escalation, strategic adjustment and the distribution of power. The study utilizes a qualitative form of explanatory research design, its main theoretical frameworks are Neorealism and Regional Security Complex Theory, and process tracing and comparative case study methods are used to analyze major regional actors (Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar) from October 2023 to May 2026. The results show that 7 October not only furthered the shift away from the previous regional normalization, but also brought about a decline in the traditional order of deterrence and a swelling of proxy warfare and interstate competition as well. The study also reveals slow progress towards Arab-Israel normalization and a renewed strategic importance of non-state actors and a growing multipolar model of the region's geopolitics. It suggests the region's political and security structure will undergo a fundamental change after October 7 and that the post-October 7 Middle East is headed for a period of 'managed instability', with multipolarities, fragmented alliances and a continued state of insecurity.

Keywords: The Middle East, October 7, regional order, conflict, realignment, multipolarity, and security

Introduction

The Middle East has been one of the geopolitically sensitive and politically turbulent areas in the history of international politics. It has been affected by frequent wars, intervention, ideological rivalry and ongoing security competition between state and non-state actors, both internal and external (Buzan & Waever, 2003). This resulted in further destabilisation after the Arab Spring due to weakened state institutions, escalation of proxy warfare and the fragmentation of regional alliances (Aras, B. & Yorulmazlar, E 2016). But signs abounded that the region was going through a strategic balancing period prior to the month of October of 2023. The Abraham Accords were often seen as a new approach to diplomatic relations and cooperation with Israel built around normalization, security, and practical regional cooperation between the Arab states and Israel (Vakil, S., & Quilliam, N. 2023). This image was reinforced by the resumption of regional diplomacy through the re-establishment of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023, indicating a wider trend of de-escalation (Albarasneh, A. 2025). This was all turned upside down with the October 7 attacks. The attack, which resulted in the death of some 1200 Israeli civilians and soldiers and the abductions of more than 250 hostages, was the bloodiest in a single day against the Jewish people since the Holocaust, revealing key gaps in Israel's deterrence and intelligence, and sparking a multi-dimensional regional crisis (Bar, S.2020). The initial Hamas-Israel conflict quickly turned into a regional conflict between Hamas and Hezbollah, between the Houthis and Israel, and, to a lesser extent, between Iran and the United States, thus altering the strategic landscape of the Middle East (Saeed, 2025). The number of theaters of conflict and the simultaneity of these escalations, spread out over

five theatres in just 18 months, highlights the systemic nature of the post-October 7 regional disruption, as opposed to episodic.

Increasingly, by May 2026, the region has shifted from the expectation of ‘diplomatic normalisation’ in the immediate past to a new era of ‘managed instability’, characterised by a prolonged conflict, strategic uncertainty and a return to power competition. The October 7 is not only a security threat, it is also a geopolitical rupture, a change from an order based on the idea of ‘normalisation’ towards a region that is multipolar and fractious in many ways (Yang, Z. (2023).

Research Questions

1. What impact has the October 7 attack had on the Middle East balance of power in the region?
2. How has the crisis affected the process of Arab–Israel normalisation?
3. What part have non-state actors played in influencing the regional environment from the time of the 7th until after October 7?
4. How has the role of external powers changed after October 7?
5. What type of regional order is emerging in the Middle East after October 7?

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the effect of the events of 7 October on the regional balance of power in the Middle East.
2. To analyze changes in Arab–Israel normalization after October 7.
3. To assess the impact of the non-state actors in the evolving regional security landscape.
4. To evaluate how the key external actors in the area have evolved.
5. To recognize the developing regional pattern of order in the Middle East.

Theoretical Framework:

The research method adopted in this research is by using the combination method, which combines Neorealism and Regional Security Complex Theory.

Firstly, the lens of Neorealism is the main theory. Neorealist scholars contend that states competing for power, security dilemmas, and balancing, in an anarchic system, influence the nature of international politics (Powell, R 1994). The distribution of capabilities among states is central to predicting international outcomes, as Waltz's structural realism suggests (Waltz, K. N. (2000)), and the post-10th Anniversary of the Holocaust surge in relative military capabilities has sparked renewed balancing activity throughout the region. It is important because of the changed dynamics of power-balancing between Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the region and the impact on deterrence structures in the region since October 7.

Secondly, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) helps to tease out how security threats in one region quickly spill over into neighbouring regions and actors. This theory states that regional security is intertwined: conflicts are rarely localised (Buzan & Waever, 2003). This is especially pertinent as the Gaza conflict soon spread over to Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and the Red Sea, which highlighted the interdependent nature of security in the Middle East region. The two theories complement each other well, so that this study can examine the regions' security interdependence and the state-level power politics.

Methodology

This research uses qualitative explanations research design because the research is aimed to explain how and why the regional order changes, not describing events in the region that are still in progress. Process tracing is the main methodological tool that will be adopted, especially in IR research, as it can be used to trace mechanisms of causation and political change over

time (George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005)). The three purposes of this study are to explore the chronology of events from the October 7 attacks to the escalation into conflict, disruption in diplomacy, strategic realignment and finally the transformation of regional order in this study, process tracing is employed to investigate how these events unfolded.

For analytical depth, the study also uses a comparative case study method utilizing five key regional actors: Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. The cases are chosen on the basis of their central role in the regional politics since the October 7. The study will include major developments such as the ongoing Gaza conflict, the ongoing Israel–Hezbollah tensions, the insecurity of the Red Sea, and the wider diplomatic recalibrations, spanning from October 2023 to May 2026. The data has been collected from primary sources like official statements and policy documents of the governments and secondary sources like peer-reviewed academic literature and scholarly policy analyses.

Literature Review

Recent years have seen the Middle East plunge into cycles of conflict, alliance change and foreign involvement, rekindling scholarly interest in the concept of regional order in the region. The idea of competitive multipolarity, in which numerous regional actors simultaneously seek to gain influence, ensure security, and assert strategic autonomy, is emerging as a recent theme in scholarship on the contemporary Middle East (Moeini, A., Mott, C., Paikin, Z., & Polansky, D.). (2022).

One important branch of the recent literature is devoted to the revision of the diplomatic system of the region before October 2023. One of the most significant interpretations of the Abraham Accords was the notion of a new regional order that should emerge out of strategic normalization between Arab states and Israel. Some scholars suggested that this new structure was meant to minimize differences of ideology and foster cooperation on security issues, particularly over Iran (Karami, J. (2024). But criticism pointed out that the Palestinian question had not been resolved and was thus a big structural fault in this new order (Bashir, B.). (2016). An additional body of recent research focuses on the impact of non-state actors on the security landscape in the Middle East. In this regard, researchers suggest that a series of groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis have been stepping up their efforts to challenge the traditional security models based on the state, introducing hybrid warfare and cross-border proxy conflict (Katz, Y.). (2025). These events since October 7 have confirmed this argument, and proved that non-state actors have concrete strategic influence on the region.

Another strand of the new scholarship focuses on the humanitarian and governance aspects of the post Oct-07 crisis, with their growing entanglements with regional security issues. The absence of civilian governance has been coupled with the unprecedented level of displacement, estimated to be more than 1.9 million IDPs by early 2025, which has led to conditions conducive to prolonged periods of instability and cycles of radicalization, extending beyond the conflict zone (Hossen, M. D.). (2025). These humanitarian aspects have also made the diplomacy of Gulf countries more complicated, as they have pressured on the one hand and requested to keep distance on the other hand with respect to open normalization with Israel (Yetim, M., & Kaşıkçı, T.). (2025).

More recent studies pinpoint the events of October 7 as a watershed moment in regional politics. Critics have begun to question the idea that the war brought any measure of stability to the region, undermined the wave of “normalization” and hastened the reconfiguration of geopolitics in the Middle East (Jones, 2025). This new literature indicates that the region is

now entering a more complex and precarious strategic phase, which to date, has not been analyzed systemically. This study aims to close this gap.

Findings and Discussion:

According to the results of this study, the events that took place on 7 October were a major regional strategic jolt which furthered a current shift in the regional order of the Middle East. Instead of a brand new political landscape, October 7 only amplified the existing regional dynamics—strategic competition, institutional fragmentation, and alliance fluidity—and highlighted the fragility of the post-Abraham Accords order (Choudhury, J. U.). (2024). The failure of a previous security framework to adequately tackle the basic political grievances, including the un-resolved Palestinian question, was proved by the immediate collapse of deterrence in southern Israel. Notably, the attacks exposed a structural paradox at the core of the Abraham Accords framework: the deepened ties at the top of the Arab-Israeli security coordination, which were more extensive than ever before, had left the Palestinian issue neglected, rather than solved, and had produced a growing disconnect between elite-level diplomacy and street-level legitimacy across Arab societies (Bukhari, S. R. H., Iqbal, N. & Khan, A. U., (2024). This gap ultimately contributed to the political constraints faced by Arab governments in responding to the Gaza conflict.

The first big discovery is that of regional realignment. Israel's approach to conflict containment has turned to a more aggressive doctrine of security through military strength and strategic depth since October 7. This encompasses longer military engagements in Gaza Strip, more such engagement in Lebanon and a wider region deterrence signaling (Minko, A. E. (2024)). Turkey's place is also worth mentioning because of the opportunity for the country to assert itself as a prominent player in Palestine's cause in the Muslim world and NATO as well, as a way to build regional soft power, and as a means to promote its new relations with the United States, while at the same time building up tensions with Israel. Meanwhile, Iran has tried to maintain its influence in the region by cultivating its proxy model with a series of partnered non-state actors, but in recent years, its military efforts have tempered some of its longstanding proxy strategies (Alsemien, M.). (2026). Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has embraced a much more nuanced balancing approach that is not a sudden change of course, but rather a rebalancing (Hwang, W. J.). (2024).

The second key discovery is that a hybrid security order has emerged, in which both state and non-state actors are increasingly becoming involved in shaping regional outcomes collaboratively. Proxy warfare has remained an important tool in Middle East politics, as shown by groups like Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis. Sustained attacks by the Houthis on commercial shipping through the Red Sea corridor are a good example of this change: an estimated 15–20 percent of global container shipping through the Suez Canal was rerouted around the Cape of Good Hope and freight costs were significantly higher as a result of Houthi attacks by drones and missiles (Donelli, F.). (2025). The way they acted extended the conflict geographically, from the Gaza Strip to the Red Sea, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria; which was a good proof that regional security is extremely interconnected (EDITION, F., & AMIN, D. M.). (2025).

The third key finding relates to great power competition. The United States had reestablished military control in the region post October 7, but there have been growing doubts about its long-term regional dominance. In October of 2023, the deployment of two carrier strike groups to the eastern Mediterranean was one of the largest U.S. military concentrations in the region in decades, and this display of force did not quell the spread of fighting into Lebanon, Yemen,

and the Red Sea, which emphasizes the role of soft power in complex asymmetric settings (Gupta, T., & Ganguly, A. N. (2025). Qatar has also become a unique element in the post-October 7 order: It has been the main venue for ceasefire talks between Israel and Hamas, and it maintains complex relationships with the United States and Iran, with a regional mediation role that is not on the cards in other nations. (Forward, A. W.) (2025). At the same time, China has grown more active in diplomacy and adopted a strategic neutral approach, and Russia is utilizing the instability of the region for strategic leverage (Ali, J., Mu, R., & Yaqub, M.). (2025). These changes imply a shift from U.S.-dominated regional order towards multipolar competition.

All of this points to the Middle East not making a transition to stable peace or a complete collapse of the region after October 7. However, it's being transformed into a more fractured regional order featuring managed instability, low-intensity conflict and power balancing. Rather, it's emerging as a more fractious regional order that features low-intensity conflict, managed instability, and flexible power balancing — an order in which the most important strategic condition is uncertainty itself.

Conclusion

The events of October 7 were a significant watershed in modern Middle Eastern politics, changing the course of the region's strategy and politics. This study shows this was not just a challenge to security in the short term, or a stand-alone military engagement, but a geopolitical event which acted as a catalyst for structural changes already underway within the regional system.

The results suggest that the pre-October 7 regional order, which was mainly marked by careful diplomatic normalization, some de-escalation, and overall relative strategic predictability, has considerably eroded. Instead, a more fractured and volatile hierarchy is taking root, with heightened rivalry among states, a resurgence of proxy warfare and non-state actors. The crisis has also highlighted the power of traditional deterrence and the importance of the ongoing unresolved political conflicts, especially the Palestinian issue, in determining the stability of the region.

In parallel, the study reveals that regional actors have managed to adapt by modifying their strategies instead of fundamentally turning policies around. The policies of states like Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar have come to reflect their national interests in a fast-changing context, leading to new patterns of alliance flexibility and competitive balancing. Moreover, the growing role of extra-regional actors has furthered the gradual transition from a mainly U.S.-dominated regional system to a more multipolar political landscape.

Overall, the Middle East after the October 7 tragedy is not a region that's heading toward a stable peace or a complete breakdown, but rather one that's heading toward a prolonged period of managed instability. In this new order, major shifts in one's strategy will be a prominent element of regional politics as will be conflict and uncertainty. Whether regional and/or international actors can establish a more inclusive and sustainable political framework to tackle the root causes of instability is therefore the key to the Middle East's future, not only from a military standpoint.

Policy Recommendations

This study's results have important policy implications on both regional and international levels. Security cannot solve the problem of the Middle East's "managed instability" and the

responses must be coordinated, diplomatic, economic and institutional, involving the structural causes of regional conflict. The following recommendations are made accordingly:

1. Restore Inclusive Diplomatic Systems.

What has been tried with the Abraham Accords is a model that avoided the Palestinian issue altogether, instead focusing on bilateral security cooperation at a high level and has proven to be structurally flawed. The regional political system and external benefactors – especially the United States and the European Union – must invest in a more expansive diplomatic system that will include the voice of the Palestinian political process in a meaningful way. The fundamental grievances that drive cyclical conflicts should be dealt with, not put on hold, by any durable normalization process, with a regional multilateral forum, perhaps under the auspices of the Arab League or the United Nations, offering a structured space for dialogue.

2. Establish Regional De-escalation Tracks.

Lacking effective regional conflict management institutions, the quick spread of the post-October 7 conflict geographically, from Gaza to Lebanon, the Red Sea, Iraq and Syria, demonstrates this. Policymakers should consider establishing ongoing lines of communication and de-escalation mechanisms between the main regional stakeholders: Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. If formal normalization is not to be put in place, back-channel crisis communication tools like those used in the Cold War may help avert miscalculation and minimize the escalation of conflict.

3. Respond to Governance and Humanitarian Dimensions of Instability.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is not only an emergency; it has become a long-term security liability with more than 1.9 million displaced persons and the almost complete failure of the civilian governance system. The need for stabilization assistance and post-conflict governance planning should be considered as part of any security settlement arrangement by international donors, regional states, and multilateral institutions. Failure to address the governance dimension can perpetuate circumstances that can contribute to the recruitment and radicalization of non-state actors. The international community should also continue to support humanitarian access to and expand in active conflict areas in the region.

4. Create plans for the management of Non-State Actor Networks and Proxy Warfare.

Groups like Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis have proved adept at throwing wrenches into regional peace and international trade and a more advanced policy strategy is needed than military attrition. Policymakers need to create comprehensive approaches that address targeted counter-finance options, diplomacy efforts with state sponsors, and political approaches to lessen the socio-economic conditions that underlie the recruitment of non-state actors. Purely coercive approaches may further destabilise already precariously balanced state structures where non-state actors have broad popular acceptance such as Hezbollah in parts of Lebanon.

5. Engage in U.S. and External Power Engagement in a Multipolar Environment.

The post-October 7 crisis has indeed proven that the balance of the region is no longer a U.S.-dominated one. Washington must adjust its approach to regional engagement to the multipolar world: It should pursue selective burden sharing with Gulf partners; it should engage China's increasing role, not compete with it on all fronts; and it should improve multilateral processes and frameworks. Specifically, Qatar's role as a mediator that has proven to be effective should be supported further by powers through the implementation of small-state diplomacy and

multiple avenues. A more diversified architecture of regional engagement, not reliance on bilateral U.S. security assurances will generate more lasting stability.

Future Research Gaps

This study has provided an in-depth system level analysis of the changes taking place in the region since October 7, but has also suffered from the constraints of qualitative research in a rapidly evolving context. A number of relevant issues are not sufficiently explored and require special scholarly interest in future studies.

1.Responses to Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy.

The study was not only state level strategic behavior but also system level dynamics. But the connection between domestic pressures and foreign policy outcomes in the important regional countries, especially in Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran, has received little theorization in the post-October 7 literature. Future studies should look at how domestic audiences, electoral cycles and the processes of leadership consolidation have influenced the external behaviour of each state in the crisis, and in the manner in which they have done so. The inclusion of foreign policy analysis frameworks in conjunction with structural IR theories would be useful for such research.

2. Iran's Proxy Network: A Long-Term Development.

Since the events of October 7, Iran's "Axis of Resistance" has been facing an unprecedented military and strategic attack, which has led to serious degradation in both Hezbollah's senior leadership and Hamas' command structure. It is hoped that future studies will systematically investigate if this pressure has resulted in a lasting strategic setback for Iran's proxy model as well as if it has just transiently reconfigured. The reconstitution of these networks, and how their state-level pressure is (or isn't) translated into long-term non-state actor weakness, would be valuable for the larger body of work on proxy warfare from a longitudinal comparative perspective.

3. China's growing involvement in Middle East security architecture.

Beijing's involvement in Saudi-Iranian rapprochement in 2023 was a sign of a newfound attitude toward engaging more actively in Middle East affairs. There is, however, little existing scholarship that has fully theorized the nature of the new regional actor that China is becoming, what it does differently when engaging with traditional great powers, and how this new role of China will impact regional order and U.S. strategic interests. Comparative foreign policy analysis in future research should focus on the changing posture of China in various regional crises, and more research into the linkage between China's economic investments (Belt and Road Initiative linkages, energy partnership) and its diplomatic leverage.

4.Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Governance in Gaza.

Following the conclusion of armed conflict in Gaza, no existing body of theory has adequately covered the heightened governance vacuum that will be experienced. Comparative studies of post-conflict reconstruction in divided societies, such as Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan, should be conducted in order to draw lessons, applicable to Gaza's political and demographic context. The issues of legitimacy, security sector reform, transitional justice and the role of neighbouring countries (including Egypt and Jordan) in any future governance mechanism need specific interdisciplinary research.

5. Public Opinion, Normalization and Legitimacy in Arab societies.

However, strategic behavior, at the elite level, is not the whole story of the transformation in the region since the October 7th events. The Gaza conflict has had a deep impact on public

opinion in Arab societies, and their governments' measure of domestic legitimacy in their pursuit of normalization or security cooperation with Israel will be determined by this impact. Future research should, on the basis of existing Arab Barometer surveys and other systems of opinion polls, examine the changes in mass opinion on Israel, the Palestinian issue, and regional affiliations since October 2023 and what these changes mean for the flexibility of state-level diplomacy.

6. Militarisation of Red Sea and Maritime Security Governance.

The Houthis' attack on commercial shipping has brought a glaring lack of research into the current state of maritime security governance in the Red Sea and Indo-Pacific corridor to the fore. Future research should explore the legal, institutional, and military structures that can be put in place to govern sub-state threats to critical maritime chokepoints, as well as the circumstances that enable or disable multilateral naval coalitions such as Operation Prosperity Guardian from deterring non-state maritime actors. The geopolitics of energy security, supply chains and regional proxy wars in this region should be explored separately as a field of its own within the discipline of Middle Eastern and maritime security studies.

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