

THE REGIME SECURITY AND ALLIANCE POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

This article seeks to systematically understand the logic of unstable alliances in the post-revolutionary Arab Middle East. On what basis do the states in the Middle East enter into alliances with each other and what variables influence their fluid coalition-forming policy? Contrary to mainstream approaches that explain the nature of alliances through variables such as the balance of power, anarchy, identity, and external threats, however, understanding the mechanisms and empirical complexities of the alliance-making policy of Middle East states go beyond those variables. The present study proposes using the theories of alliance in international relations as an approach to 'regime security', an alternative integrated framework in understanding the roots of alliance in the Middle East. Despite the changes in international and regional politics, the main interest for each of the Middle East states is still to ensure the survival and security of their political regime. The options of foreign relations and alliances of the states in the Middle East are based on their dynamic action to maintain the security of the ruling regime against potential internal and external threats. In such a situation, alliances are formulated as transnational coalitions among potential allies to ensure the survival of political regimes. In line with the test of the main idea of the article, a case study of regional alliances in the Middle East is discussed.

Keywords

Alliances, the Middle East, the Arab Uprisings, Balance of Power, Regime Security.

Resumo

Este artigo procura compreender de forma sistemática a lógica das alianças instáveis no Médio Oriente árabe pós-revolucionário. Com que base é que os Estados do Médio Oriente estabelecem alianças entre si e que variáveis influenciam a sua política de formação de coligações fluidas? Contrariamente às abordagens tradicionais que explicam a natureza das alianças através de variáveis como o equilíbrio de poder, a anarquia, a identidade e as ameaças externas, a compreensão dos mecanismos e das complexidades empíricas da política de formação de alianças dos Estados do Médio Oriente vai, no entanto, além dessas variáveis. O presente estudo propõe a utilização das teorias da aliança nas relações internacionais como uma abordagem à "segurança do regime", um quadro integrado alternativo para compreender as raízes da aliança no Médio Oriente. Apesar das mudanças na política internacional e regional, o principal interesse de cada um dos Estados do Médio Oriente continua a ser o de assegurar a sobrevivência e a segurança do seu regime político. As opções de relações



externas e alianças dos Estados do Médio Oriente baseiam-se na sua ação dinâmica para manter a segurança do regime no poder contra potenciais ameaças internas e externas. Nesta situação, as alianças são formuladas como coligações transnacionais entre potenciais aliados para garantir a sobrevivência dos regimes políticos. Para testar a ideia principal do artigo, é discutido um estudo de caso de alianças regionais no Médio Oriente.

Palavras-chave

Alianças, Médio Oriente, Revoltas Árabes, Balanço de Poder, Segurança de Regime.

How to cite this article

Ababakr, Amer (2024). The Regime Security and Alliance Politics in the Middle East. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. VOL 15, Nº.1, May-October, pp. 21-40. DOI <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.15.1.2>

Article received on November 7, 2022, and accepted for publication on March 13, 2024.





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Introduction

The transformation in the strategic political environment of the Middle East after the Arab revolutions has led to a change in the logic of alliances and the instability of regional alliances. Although the dynamics of regional power redistribution in the anarchic and permeable environment of the Middle East still play a fundamental role in shaping the logic of regional alliances, several major developments necessitate a review of traditional approaches to alliances in the region. Unlike the traditional alliances that were determined based on security and defense treaties between allies, the changing regional politics is more focused on informal and fluid patterns of coalition forming. Non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Kurdish forces, Salafi movements, and militia groups play an important role in regional politics by challenging the traditional functioning of states, security, and even alliances. Furthermore, the change in the US's Middle East policy and the reduction of strategic commitments to determine the rules of the game in the region has given the regional powers more room to maneuver and shape the order in the Middle East. Finally, the structural changes in the international system have brought the Middle East into a new context of competition between great powers, in which the relative decline of the US hegemony has provided a wider arena to policies of eastern powers, including Russia and China, each based on strategic interests to develop relations with regional states.

In the macro view, there is a significant connection between the structural changes in the international system and the dynamics of alliances in the changing geopolitics of the Middle East. After the Cold War, the conditions of the structure of the Unipolar system and the undisputed power of the US shaped the alliance-forming policy of allies and enemies in the region. In recent years, with the decline of the hegemony of the US or at least the reduction of its strategic inclinations to shape order in the Middle East has been weakened, and at the same time, no competing power has replaced it. Although in terms of material power, it is not easy to talk about the decline of the US dominance in the international system, especially in the Middle East, where it has the largest number of military bases and regional alliances, the results of its performance show that the power structure and equations of the region as a whole are no longer directed from Washington. In such a situation, it seems that Middle East geopolitics is transitioning from the post-Cold war US order to post-US disorder (Valbjørn, 2019; Darwich, 2018). This situation



encourages not only regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, but also major eastern powers such as Russia and China to play an active role in the changing regional political landscape.

In such a context, regional powers have found a special position in shaping the changing order of the Middle East. At the same time, the limitation in structural power and the lack of capacity to apply for hegemonic order on the part of each of the regional players have led them to help and create regional alliances to expand influence and shape the path of the Middle East equations. In the period after 2011, while the traditional centers of power in the Arab Middle East such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq became the focus of regional conflicts, regional politics in many cases were affected by the activism of non-Arab powers, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and the only comparable Arab power has been Saudi Arabia. In the meantime, while Saudi Arabia and Israel have sought to maintain the status quo, Iran and Turkey, considering their national role as anti-hegemonic powers, have mobilized their power sources to weaken the hierarchy and the Western-oriented system (Kamrava, 2018).

At the intermediate level, there are small powers and weak states that are inclined towards alliances with regional powers based on security motivations, identity ties, or pragmatic approaches. A group of these actors sees the provision of their strategic interests in connection with maintaining the regional status quo, and therefore, they follow the initiatives of the Western powers and their main allies in the region. The UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan have approached Saudi Arabia and Israel based on ideological links and common security concerns, especially the increasing influence of the Resistance Axis and the adventures of the Muslim Brotherhood, which are supported by Western allies. Another group, whom not identically motivated, but based on strategic considerations, moves closer to or away from alliances. This group of states that have flexible and pragmatic behavior includes Algeria, Oman, Morocco, Qatar, and Tunisia. Qatar is a clear example of the overlap of strategic interests and identity in alliance forming. While it approaches Iran and Western powers due to strategic and security considerations, under the influence of ideological motivations, it enters into a strategic alliance with the forces of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially Turkey, and moves away from the Sunni axis led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, an example of it that is the Qatar blockade crisis.

At the domestic level, there is another cluster of regional actors who are unable to influence the equations of the Middle East due to the weakness and fragility of the central government and internal crises. Hence, to ensure survival, they are inevitably inclined towards forming alliances with regional powers and non-state actors. Those states which include Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Lebanon, have become the playground of competition and conflict between regional and extra-regional powers. The intervention of foreign powers in the internal equations of fragile states, directly or through proxy forces, has increasingly led to the inefficiency of the central governments in providing system and internal security; which naturally forms part of the disorder in the chaotic geopolitics of the Middle East.

Meanwhile, each of the regional power's allies with the middle powers and the weak states in the region based on their strategic preferences. Some of their priorities are also affected by the policies and preferences of extra-regional powers. The strategic priorities



of the US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, as the guardians of the status quo, have made a comprehensive alliance against Iran's regional influence in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Saudi Arabia, in an alliance with the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain, seeks to keep Qatar - even at the cost of regime change - within their alliance. Turkey and Qatar have united with Hamas and other Brotherhood forces in the region in order to dominate their strategic arrangements in the Middle East, especially in the internal equations of Syria, Egypt, Libya, and the Gulf. At the same time, the threats posed by the strategic rise of the Syrian Kurds shape the nature of Turkey's security alliance behavior in relations with neighboring states and Western allies. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah have allied with Syria in order to preserve Bashar al-Assad's regime and change the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean. In a comprehensive alliance with the forces of the resistance front, Iran is trying to challenge the US order in the region, to safeguard the security of its allies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, and to maximize geopolitical influence in competition with other regional powers.

The Syrian crisis is a clear example of the complex situation of the formation of competing alliances between extra-regional powers, regional actors, and non-state actors. In the meantime, the perspective of the regional alliances on the Palestinian issue as the most important traditional variable of the alliances in the Arab world is controversial and based on the regional goals of the alliances. The Palestinian issue, and from a closer perspective, the Arab-Israeli conflict traditionally played a fundamental role in the forming of alliances in the region. After 2011, with the deepening of regional crises, especially wars and internal conflicts in the Arab world, the issue of Palestine and the confrontation with Israel's hostile policies in the occupied territories have been removed from the strategic priorities of many Islamic states, and on the other hand, they have witnessed an alliance. We are unofficially fighting between the Arab and Israeli states against Iran and its allies, which is part of this process influenced by the Middle East conspirators of Washington and Brussels to weaken Iran's regional influence. It seems that the main reason for the decentralization of the Palestinian issue is the volume and depth of crises throughout the Middle East. On the other hand, while the strengthening of Salafi movements, especially IS, is one of the major common security threats among different regional actors, the regional offensive policies and priorities have prevented the adoption of joint measures by rival alliances in the Middle East.

In such a situation in the Middle East after 2011, where instability and lack of regional order are one of its most important characteristics, the states of the region, under the influence of the fluidity of attempts and the lack of threatening uncertainties, faced the puzzle of what are the most urgent and main threats against them to adjust or change their union-forming behavior based on that. This article seeks to systematically understand the logic of alliances in the Middle East after 2011. On what basis do the states of the Middle East enter alliances with each other and what variables and motivations influence their alliance options? How can the fluidity and instability of regional alliances in the Middle East be explained? Contrary to mainstream approaches in explaining the nature of alliances in the Middle East, variables such as the balance of power, anarchy, and external threats cannot explain the dynamics and complexities of the alliance-forming policy of states in the Middle East and the changing field realities of regional politics. On the other hand, although alternative perspectives such as the universal balance of shifting responsibility and Structuralist concerns in shaping the



nature of the alliances in the region, broaden our theoretical perspective in understanding the logic of fluid regional alliances, but do not provide a comprehensive and systematic approach to us.

It is simplistic to explain the nature of Middle East alliances after 2011 based on Shia-Sunni ideological clashes and sectarian conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia. According to the logic of the balance of power, the region should have witnessed the emergence of a comprehensive alliance between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel to deal with the common threat of Iran's regional influence. Also, contrary to the predictions of the balance of threats, the states of the region never entered into a comprehensive alliance against IS as a common security threat. In such a situation, to systematically understand these complexities and the underlying layers of the alliance-forming policy in the Middle East, a unified framework of international relations theories is needed that formulates the variables and different levels of analysis of 'regime security' in the form of a unified idea or concept. Based on this, this article sees the issue as the main driving force behind the alliance-forming policy of the Middle East states after 2011 and suggests a way to recognize alliance-forming in the region. In the security of the regime, this basis, the actual framework, after the revolutionary developments of 2011, was the logic of forming alliances of the Middle East states based on their dynamic action to ensure the security of the political regime against potential internal and external threats.

The Nature of Alliances: A Look from the Theoretical Perspectives

From the point of view of some neorealist approaches, power distribution and anarchy as the main drivers of international relations alone cannot explain the changing dynamics of alliances in the regional politics of the Middle East. Contrary to Waltz's balance of power theory, from Stephen Walt's point of view, the policy of states is not just a reaction to a change in the balance of power but is influenced by the perception of common threats and the need to balance threats against the capabilities and aggressive intentions of competitors (1987). Consistent with Mearsheimer, Alliances are an adversarial response to the aggressive policy of other states to maximize power and defend against threats (Mearsheimer, 2001). In such circumstances, states need to choose between Bandwagoning or balancing against it. Walt's main argument is based on the hypothesis that international anarchy, binds the states in the Middle East to always seek to balance each other in order to maintain security. Perhaps one of the prominent features of Walt's theory is to consider the different understanding of regional states of security and threats in the process of alliance forming.

Walt believes that during the Cold War, the leaders of the Middle East, unlike their Western allies, were not worried about the threats caused by the spread of communism, but the threat of the Zionist regime and the perception of threats from each other shaped the alliance policy of the Middle East states more than the Soviet threat (Walt, 1987). What was neglected in the Cold War thinking about the regional security of the Middle East was the regional actors' understanding of security. What did they consider as a threat, what was their security concern, and based on what motivations did they ally? Other alternative perspectives explain the scope of coalition forming beyond the necessity of choosing between balancing and sequencing, which include inclusive balancing and



delegation of responsibility. By examining the relations between regional states and international powers, believes that the logic of unification of third-world states (including Middle East states) is affected by structural conditions and balancing against external threats, as much as it is a reaction to threats. Domestic is against the security of their political system. In this framework, weaker states take comprehensive measures to balance with foreign powers to ensure the survival of their political regime and deal with internal threats. In such a context, the security of the state is considered to mean the security of the established political regime (David, 1991).

In the event of a legitimacy crisis, the leaders of the Middle East in the field of foreign policy adopt a strategy that serves to consolidate their internal power and ensure the survival of their political system, even if the state's interests and national security are jeopardized in the long run. Weaker states are also likely not to put any of the balancing strategies on their agenda, and at the same time, not follow through, due to a lack of material capabilities or fear of entering into an unwanted conflict. In such a situation, they follow the responsibility-shifting strategy in the hope that stronger aligned states will bear the cost of balancing in the face of common threats or aggressive actions of emerging powers, the results of which are highly uncertain. However, if these states conclude that the survival of their political system is in danger, they will undertake even more commitments in their alliances (Ryan, 2016). Concerning the reason for the instability of alliances in the Middle East, Snyder (1991) believes that due to the lack of sufficient information about the intentions of other allies, in addition to the threats of the hostile bloc, the states also have a threat perception about the intentions and behavior of their allies. Therefore, the situation of security bottleneck within the alliances prevents their stability.

Although the approaches influenced by realist assumptions seek to include the imaginations of regional actors in the analysis of the pattern of Middle East alliances (Walt, 1987; Schweller, 2004). But they cannot explain how some states in the region seek to balance against internal threats and, in this way, unite with secondary allies to concentrate foreign resources against the main enemy. On the contrary, some, by challenging the assumptions of realism, consider political economy and internal political relations as the main variables in foreign policy regulation and alliance forming in the region. Michel Brent believes that domestic policy concerns and the issue of economic development are more capable of explaining the foreign policy behavior and coalition forming of states in the Middle East than the high policy variables such as the distribution of military capabilities and the balance of power (Barnett, 1998). By studying the unification policy of small Arab states such as Jordan, Allinson concluded that the logic of the Middle East states' unification is rooted in 'budget security' and the provision of financial resources of the ruling regime, which forces or encourages their economic needs to participate in a regional alliance (Allinson, 2016).

Constructivists also consider the understanding of the logic of alliances in the Middle East as dependent on the introduction of the roles, identities, and constructed norms, especially in the Arab world. By moving away from the material focus of neo-realist approaches, Barnett (1998) believes that Arab policymakers seek security through representational politics. In the sense that by strengthening the 'Pan Arab' image, they both reproduce their legitimacy and determine their friendship and enmity patterns based



on its representations. Accordingly, Arab leaders have used symbolic power instead of military power to strengthen their security and control each other's foreign policy, and states that are outside of this pan-Arab representation are seen as hostile. In this respect, Bilgin (2004) by asking critical questions about 'the meaning of security in the Middle East, believes that the neglected point in the approaches investigating the regional alliances in the Middle East is not taking into account the alternative understandings about security that coexist in the region in the sense that the identity and conventional wisdom create collective interests, and the clash of intangible interests is the primary factor in forming alliances. Neoclassical realists such as Randall Schuler, by combining different approaches and criticizing the Structuralist assumptions of Neorealists, developed a new concept called 'the Balance of Interests'. From this point of view, states create a balance when it is in their favor. Balancing involves situations in which a state is not directly threatened by a hostile state, but in order to maintain its long-term security interests, it decides to balance against a state that, in different circumstances, wherever it is, acts against it (Schweller, 2004). Underbalancing happens when a coalition state cannot balance against the hostile state or does not have an efficient response to the perceived threat. Mark Haas (2014), using the idea of Schweller's balance deficit in explaining the alliances in the Middle East, believes that the alliance-making policy in the region is based on the ideology and the type of political system of the potential allies. If the ideological distance between the states and potential allies is large or if they perceive each other's political system as a threat, despite the balance of power predictions, they will not be able to ally against the hostile power and will suffer a balance deficit against it. This approach can explain the non-formation of a comprehensive alliance between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel against Iran's regional influence after 2011, and, the balance deficit against it.

The Regime's Security Framework and Middle East Exceptionalism

Understanding the international relations of the Middle East is incomprehensible without understanding the internal and regional structures in which states maneuver, and also without paying attention to the patterns of cooperation, competition, and permanent conflicts in this region. Political trends in the Middle East challenge universal theoretical considerations that hinder generalization and resist explanation. The unpredictable chain of events in the Middle East since the beginning of the last decade is a confirmation of this outlook (Fawcett, 2018). The heterogeneous and complex structure of the Middle East has caused this region to live in constant instability and crisis. This critical structure has become more fragile due to the unprecedented intervention of great powers, and the states of the region are always in a state of security enigma. Subsequently in the Middle East, it is not possible to be allied with a state without being hostile to another (Buzan & Weaver, 2003). For instance, if the US strengthens the regional position of Saudi Arabia by issuing strategic plans, it has inadvertently strengthened it against Israel. If Iran manufactures or buys defense weapons, the Arab states in the Gulf feel a security threat. This is a special structure of the Middle East, whose pattern of friendship and enmity is still influenced by Hobbesian thought regarding the main priority of survival.

Compared to other luminaries, the regional political atmosphere of the Middle East is unique. Regionalism in the Middle East is theoretically and empirically more diverse and



complex than it is portrayed. Contrary to popular views, the Middle East is not a region without regionalism. There are potential forces in the Middle East, especially the Arab world, with an emphasis on identity, interests, and common concerns for cooperation and convergence in the region, which are multiple coalitions based on Arab and non-Arab, Shiite and Sunni criteria, pro-status quo and revisionist. Despite this, internal competitions and crises, instability, insecurity of regimes, lack of effective institutions, and the influence of foreign powers prevent the formation of a regional community in the Middle East (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2019). Moreover, regionalism is a political process in which states and other actors pursue common goals and policies within a region, and may ultimately lead to fragmentation, polarization, and instead of consensus and convergence Buzan and Weave (2003). Regionalism in the Middle East has always suffered from the lack of legitimacy of state-nation forming, the fragility of states, the effects of authoritarianism, and the destabilizing intervention of foreign powers, and the main forces behind these setbacks are the consequences of regime insecurity.

A brief look at the theoretical literature on alliances in international relations shows that operationally, these approaches are mainly focused on alliances in Europe and the historical experiences of the West, and rarely confirm their assumptions in the non-Western world. In line with testing the main ideas of the West, almost all of these approaches have pointed to why and how to unite Western powers in institutional frameworks such as NATO. However, significant empirical reasoning has not been provided in the nature of coalitions in non-western regions such as the Middle East. In this framework, it necessitates examining the role of the politics of great powers more than the policies of other actors. Unlike Western structures, the concept of state and security has many different and more complex meanings in the context of the Middle East. Basically, when the talk is about the concept of national interests as a guiding light of foreign policy in the context of the West, it cannot have a similar function in the context of the region. In the Middle East, there is no clear line between national interests and the interests of the ruling regime or even the security of the state and the security of the regime, and the state is often considered the ruling regime (Halliday, 2005; Hinnebusch, 2003).

Despite the effects of structural conditions and systemic limitations, who and when is in power, what are his main concerns and preferences, and what is his interpretation of systemic opportunities and limitations, are important in the Middle East. Therefore, different meanings and readings of the main concepts such as state, security, and national interests are used in these societies, and the need to revise the dominant Eurocentric model in understanding the nature of Middle East alliances is necessary. Paying special attention to the regime's security approach in understanding the logic of Middle East alliances helps break away from the Western-oriented model and exploit the assumptions of different approaches of realism, constructivism, and political economy in explaining the alliance-forming policy of regional states. The alliances forming in the Middle East are not only based on traditional defense treaties between states to deal with external threats but also often result from the security concerns of the political system at home. In this framework, alliances mean transnational coalitions between the ruling elites in different states to deal simultaneously with traditional threats and threats emanating from their domestic politics. When the talk is about the importance of the survival of the ruling political regime, naturally economic and identity variables are also



highlighted, especially concerning the weak states. In this sense, alliances not only include military, political, and diplomatic support but also provide the economic needs of states to ensure the survival of the ruling political regime in the face of economic crises (Ryan, 2019). There is a broad definition of regime security here that includes internal and external, economic and military, and material and discursive threats. Any challenge that threatens the survival of the political regime, or at least perceived by the ruling elite, is somehow related to the security of the regime (Barnett, 1998). Therefore, regime security as a theoretical bridge connects different approaches and levels of analysis to provide a comprehensive explanation of the logic of alliances in the Middle East.

The coalitions discussed in this article are more than based on the traditional definition and formal treaties of alliances 'such as the Santo or Baghdad Pact', looking at the framework of cooperation and mutual support between two or more political units to achieve common goals in regional politics. Especially considering that some alliances are between states and non-state actors. A coalition is a non-treaty and dynamic form of alliance that is done informally between two or more actors and by including political and economic support, it is not limited to military and security matters. This distinction is important because many theoretical studies, taking into account the experience and practice of Western states' alliances, use alliances as formal security treaties (such as the NATO and the Warsaw Pact) that are used in politics. The Middle East variable is rarely identifiable. In contrast to the practice of alliances in Western politics, informal alliances are the main feature of Middle East regional politics. The coalition seems to be a more accurate term to describe the Middle East's variable alignments, but the current study uses both interchangeably (Salsmey, 2009).

The regime's security approach emphasizes different empirical realities that Middle Eastern states and even most third-world states are facing. Focusing on the regime instead of the state as a single actor provides a more realistic view of the alliance-forming policy of the Middle East states, where diverse sources of threats against the security and survival of the ruling regime are taken into consideration whether these threats are internal and systematic, or military and economic. In this regard, the alliances are a reaction to the threats emanating from these different areas and are not limited to systematic military challenges (Susser, 2008). Therefore, the options to ally are naturally limited and the cost-benefit calculation of ruling elites in being far or close to a coalition is affected by their priority in maintaining security and consolidating the power of the established regime.

In summary, the main features of the regime's security approach in understanding the nature of the changing alliances in the Middle East can be discussed as follows: First, internal security is as important as an external security threat in foreign policy, and security in such a context, non-conventional factors such as economic support to maintain the regime. Second, the demarcation between internal and external security is very faint for those weak states that are economically dependent, and this situation makes them constantly need to form external allies to protect their fragile regime. Third, coalitions are the result of strategic calculations and the elites' perception of their regime security, which constantly leads them to evaluate different options for securing their existential security. If a state is in a state of economic crisis, the leader looks for allies to meet its economic needs, especially through foreign aid. If the state has economic



capability but is weak militarily, they tend to form alliances with allies that strengthen its military capabilities. In a situation where the internal and external environment is constantly changing, the perceptions and estimates of the leaders of their strategic needs lead to the instability of the pattern of alliances in the Middle East. Fourth, ideology is not a determining causal variable in forming alliances in the Middle East. Even at the height of Middle East identity politics, coalitions are essentially a pragmatic response to the material needs of survival. Although the role of ideology in Middle East politics cannot be ignored, it is not the main driving force in shaping foreign alliances (Ryan, 2009; Gause, 2015; Bank & Valbjorn, 2012).

Even if regional alliances and coalitions change, the security dynamics of the political regime are still a determining factor in shaping the options of foreign relations and alliances of states in the region. States' alliance options are always hostage to the riddle of internal and external security created by the minds of their elites (Ryan, 2016). In such a situation, it is important what the ruling political elites think about the security and stability of their political regime. When states face fundamental challenges, the elites try to rearrange political alliances and national security priorities at home and change alliances in foreign policy to ensure the security of their political regime. Due to the low risk of revising foreign relations and the high risks of reforming alliances or carrying out internal reforms, Middle Eastern states often tend to manipulate foreign policy options and alliances when faced with emerging threats to the security of their political regime (Bank & Valbjorn, 2012). Therefore, one of the main reasons for the fluidity of alliances in the Middle East is the states' avoidance of comprehensive changes in domestic politics and the outsourcing of dealing with threats to the security of the ruling political regime through foreign policy options.

It can be argued that the framework of regime security is an approach to understanding the nature and function of non-western coalitions and, in addition to the Middle East, it can be applied in other third-world societies that are somehow still concerned about securing the security of their political regimes (Bellin, 2004). In the study of alliances in the Middle East, the identification of internal and external threats to the survival of the regimes broadens our theoretical horizons regarding the multi-dimensional understanding and the explanation of several variables of fluid regional alliances. This section emphasized the central idea that Middle Eastern states enter or leave an alliance based on the relatively intransigent interests of their regime's security and survival. In such a framework, states, Arab or non-Arab, do not have national interests or goals that are systematically defined, and national interests are nothing but the interests of the ruling elites in consolidating their power and ensuring the survival of their political system (Santini, 2017). It is the interests of the ruling political regime that guides the foreign policy options and alliance-forming policy of the states, on top of which ensuring the survival of the regime has an incomparable priority.

Political regimes seeking long-term survival must be able to adapt to the changing domestic and international political atmosphere. How to adapt and react to political changes requires resources that are provided through coalitions formed with internal and external forces. Depending on the type of political system and the level of pluralism, states put alliances with domestic political forces or alliances with foreign actors on the agenda (Gause, 2015). For example, authoritarian regimes are often inclined to form



alliances with external forces to ensure their survival, while quasi-democracies also evaluate domestic coalition options. For this reason, many authoritarian states in the region have become the center of influence of foreign powers and do not risk strengthen potential domestic allies. On the other hand, while the non-oil states can provide a part of their economic resources from within by changing the tax law, due to the fear of economic and political reforms, they inevitably tend to attract foreign aid, which results follow the initiatives of the supporting powers in regional politics. In such a situation, the widespread reliance on foreign support sources provides the conditions for the ruling regime to neutralize the domestic demand for political participation in the affairs of the country. To the extent that states are less dependent on foreign support (economic-military-security), they have more options for alliances to ensure their survival.

The Logic of Alliance in the Middle East: The Security of Regime

In line with the test of the main idea of the article, this section, empirically examines regional alliances after the Arab Uprisings, which include a range of bilateral and multilateral alliances between Arab, non-Arab, and non-state actors. Although the focus of this research is not on a specific alliance case study, a brief study of the alliance-making policy of Middle East states shows how similar political regimes with common security concerns can ally with each other and maintain or change their alignment. The unbridled developments after the Arab Uprisings are often seen as the weak point of regionalism in the Middle East, where cooperation and coalition forming are artificial and transitory measures for alliances has been explained in the form of realist state-oriented analyzes which are the cornerstones of international relations (Fawcett, 2018). However, the lack of an effective network of cooperation arrangements and regional institutionalism, the crisis of legitimacy, and the lack of the nation-state in its Westphalian sense have prevented the realization of the predictions of the mainstream views. In the meantime, it seems that the security of the regime and its type of it still plays a fundamental role in determining the positions and capabilities of the Middle East states for cooperation and forming alliances.

In the middle of the first wave of Arab Uprisings, the November 2011 meeting of the Arab League leaders was held in Cairo, while the kingdoms of the Gulf found themselves next to the revolutionary representatives who had recently replaced the Arab authoritarian regimes based on democratic mechanisms. The main agenda of the summit for many Arab kingdoms, this time was not Israel and Iran, nor even the emergence of Salafi movements, but the spread of public protests for democracy and demands of revolutionaries for regime change throughout the Arab world. For others, the bigger threat came from reformists and revolutionary movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which greatly worried the conservative Arab elites. The strengthening of Brotherhood forces through elections, Ennahda led by Rached Ghannouchi in Tunisia and Freedom and Justice Party led by Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, led to the formation of an alliance between the states in the Gulf Cooperation Council and some non-member kingdoms such as Morocco and Jordan. To prevent popular revolutions from spreading inside themselves, they should create some kind of collective regime security mechanism (Ryan, 2015).



In the meantime, wide differences over the future of the political system in Syria, as well as the increase in Salafist-Ikhwani ideological clashes throughout the region prevented the realization of such a mechanism. The active policy of non-Arab powers in the changing equations of the Arab world and the reduction of the strategic commitments of the US to its Arab allies fueled the perception of the threats of the kingdoms in ensuring the security of their political regime. Turkey's extensive support to Brotherhood movements in Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Iran's continuous support to Shiite groups, especially in Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon, led to the intensification of ideological polarization and changes in the power structure, resulting in the rearrangement of alliances in the region. Meanwhile, the finalization of the JCPOA nuclear agreement between Iran and the 5+1 group in 2015, as a systematic shock, affected many calculations and security options of the conservative Arab states (Raffaella et al, 2024). Such an impression was formed among the kingdoms that the reduction of US security commitments to its regional allies and the possible reduction of tension in Tehran-Washington relations will lead to the expansion of Iran's influence in the Middle East, and therefore, their fear of the existential security of their regime increased.

Under this circumstance, the Saudi-led coalition moved towards bringing in new allies such as Israel and Turkey against the threat caused by Iran's regional influence in the Middle East. From this onwards, military options became the priority of the Arab kingdoms, an example is a war in Yemen. Despite this, the traditional concerns about each other's intentions and the existence of a kind of security mystery among the allies hindered the efficiency and sustainability of such coalitions against Iran. Tehran's threat was one of the main focuses of President Erdoğan's visit in November 2015 at the invitation of King Salman to Riyadh, but the two states' different and sometimes conflicting readings of the changing equations in the region, especially in the Arab world, prevented their unit against a common threat. Mutual distrust in the case of Khashoggi's murder and Bin Salman's intelligence plan to create a crisis inside Turkey to weaken Erdogan's regime reached its peak (Middle East Eye, 2018). The Arab revolutions, the Syrian war, the rise of IS, and the Iran nuclear Deal brought a systemic shock to the regional security mechanisms in the Middle East after 2011, in each of which the alliance-forming policy of states was significantly influenced by their concerns about the security of their regimes. The readings and intentions of the regional states to enter the regional alignment are different from each other since they have different perceptions of the threat to their existential security.

For example, the policies of states such as Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, and Egypt to provide diplomatic support and even send military forces to help the Saudi Arabia coalition in the Yemen war are more than rooted in the threats caused by the Houthis gaining power or Iran's regional influence. It is an effort to attract capital and economic aid from the kingdoms of the Gulf to ensure their survival against internal pressures. Therefore, the continuation of economic aid from the Gulf States is directly related to the security of the political regimes of Jordan, Egypt, and other weak states in the region, and makes them inevitably follow the regional initiatives of the Saudi coalition. Based on this, the alliance-forming policy in the region is a function of the urgency of the corresponding threats to the security of their political system (Darwich, 2019). For this reason, although they unite around a common threat such as terrorism or Iran, each of them has a different perception of their security threats. For Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the main threat is



Iran's influence in the region and even their internal politics, while the most immediate threat to the security of the political regime of the UAE and Egypt is the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood network, and for Jordan, the emergence of Salafi movements within the borders.

In the big picture, the Middle East was in a multipolar state of power and ideology after 2011. The growing conflict between the poles of Shia, Ikhwani, and Salafi power was going on in the centers of regional conflicts. In such a situation, the possibility of the power poles uniting against the other power is very small due to the fear of the ideological aspirations of the potential ally. Hence, the ideological differences between potential allies prevent effective balancing against potential threats and as a result the balance deficit against the threatening power (Haas, 2014). Both Saudi Arabia and Turkey threaten Iran's regional influence, especially in Syria and Iraq, but they cannot unite against Iran, because Saudi Arabia has serious concerns about Turkey's Islamic democratic model and its support for the Muslim Brotherhood's revolutionary movements in the Sunni world. While Saudi Arabia seeks to weaken Iran's regional influence in its surroundings, it declares the Muslim Brotherhood network as a terrorist organization. On the other hand, despite Washington's efforts to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia to balance against Iran's influence, Saudi elites do not establish official diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv due to ideological reasons and its possible consequences in the internal balance of power (Darwich et al, 2022). Therefore, the balance deficit in the ideologically multipolar situation is strongly rooted in the fear of the security of the political regimes of potential allies.

Based on this, the leaders of the Middle East are always concerned about the internal consequences of transnational ideological coalitions and do not ally with potential allies whose ideological construction of their state conflicts with the legitimacy of their political regimes, given that it weakens the foundations of legitimacy and security of their established political system (Gause, 2015; Rubin, 2014). This argument shows well why an alliance was never formed between the Sunni powers of 'Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf Arab States' against the Shia coalition of Iran. On the other hand, the priority of the regime's security in alliance forming can be the reason for the alliance. Saudi Arabia should clarify with the Arab kingdoms and the anti-Brotherhood regime of General Al-Sisi in Egypt, as well as Turkey's strategic alliance with Qatar and other Brotherhood forces in the Sunni world. Basically, historically, the Brotherhood forces perceive the Sunni powers as more threatening than the common Iranian coalition. Even the ideological links between Iran and the Shiite factions of the region, especially Hezbollah, Hashd al-Shaabi, and the Houthis, 'even though they are Zaydis', is also a fundamental factor in Iran's alliance policy and creating a shared destiny in securing the security of the allied political system. In such a situation, due to the potential domestic political consequences of an open partnership with Tel Aviv, Israel cannot become an acceptable ally for any of the regional states.

On the other hand, economic motives are also an important variable in the formation of alliances between weaker states and regional powers, which to ensure survival in the face of economic crises inevitably lean towards the follow-up strategy. Egypt after the 2013 coup is a clear example of this. Immediately after General Fattah al-Sisi took power in Egypt, he received about 5 billion dollars from Saudi Arabia, 4 billion dollars from



Kuwait, and 2 billion dollars from the UAE to avoid the consequences of internal economic crises. So far, Cairo has received more than 10 billion dollars in foreign aid from Saudi Arabia, and since 2016, Riyadh has pledged that Aramco will supply Egypt with one million barrels of oil per month for five years (Kamrava, 2018). General al-Sisi, who carried out his coup project with the support of the Arab kingdoms, was forced to participate in an international coalition against the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Yemen, and Libya for the survival of his regime. On the other hand, Cairo inevitably accompanies the Saudi coalition in regional equations, especially Yemen, and the military capabilities of this country are very important in the strategic calculations of the sheikhs of the Gulf to deal with internal and external threats.

Although Bahrain's association with the Saudi coalition does not have economic motives, Manama's fear of the country's Shiite movements and Iran's regional influence is directly related to the security of the Al-Khalifa regime. Hence, the military intervention of the Peninsula Shield Force in the internal unrest in Bahrain in 2011, inviting Morocco and Jordan to join the Gulf Cooperation Council and signing a joint security agreement between the members of the council along with Jordan and Morocco in November 2012 to deal with potential internal unrest and revolutions. All efforts to form a counter-revolutionary coalition of Sunni kingdoms are evaluated to ensure survival (Yom, 2016). In such a framework, the policies of the Arab kingdoms to suspend diplomatic relations with the democratic governments of Tunisia and Egypt in 2012 and stop financial aid to them, as well as the blockade of Qatar due to its support for the Brotherhood forces in the region in 2017, are understandable. In the meantime, the fact that states such as Oman, Egypt, and Qatar do not have an active presence in the Saudi coalition against Iran and often take a neutral side is related to the fact that their leaders, unlike their neighbors, are not threatened by Iran's influence. They do not see the existential security of their regime in danger from Iran.

In addition to ideological clashes and economic motives, security threats caused by destabilizing raids in the changing geopolitics of the Middle East, which in some way shakes the security of the political regimes of regional states, play an important role in the policy of states to form alliances. For example, the strategic preparation of the Syrian Kurds and their territorial influence in the self-governing cantons of Rojava has shaped Turkey's foreign relations and alliance-forming policies more than the threat of ISIS and the geopolitical influence of competing powers. Because the security threat of the Syrian Kurds has directly affected the Kurdish identity policy inside Turkey and as a result the national security of this country. The US's policy in consoling and equipping the Kurdish democratic forces of Syria and its military arm, the People's Defense Units, to achieve their field goals in Syria, is the focal point of the rupture in Turkey's relations with Western allies, especially US. Considering the gaining power of Turkish Kurdish forces and their entry into the parliament of this country (Peoples' Democratic Party) in the June 2015 elections, as well as the financial support of some Arab states to Syrian Kurds, Ankara is more concerned about the security threat caused by Kurdish movements.

In such a situation, Turkey moved away from Western allies and reconsidered its Syrian policies towards alternative alliances, which are headed by Russia and Iran. In the shadow of the Astana trilateral talks, Turkey established several de-escalation zones and conducted three military operations in cantons administered by Kurdish militias. The turn



in Turkey's alliance-forming policy in the Kurdish issue points to the threats that targeted the national security of this country, and naturally, it can endanger the survival of the ruling political regime. The logic of the balance of power and the balance of threats in the study of the nature of alliances in the Middle East leads us to the conclusion that we can never witness a strategic alliance and cooperation between Iran and Turkey as two competing powers in the changing regional equations. But the security logic of the regime provides a different output. The failed coup of July 2016 is a turning point in reforming the internal and external allies of Erdogan's regime. Unlike Western allies, Moscow and Tehran immediately supported Ankara against the coup plotters. Ambiguity in the reaction of Saudi's allies and Arab rivals created this perception of threat in Erdogan's thinking room, that the West and some Arab states, with the support of the coup plotters, have keyed the 'Erdogan's oust Project'.

After the coup in 2016, the concern of ensuring the survival of the established government has played an essential role in guiding Turkey's foreign policy and alliance forming, which has also been reflected in the strategic closeness of Turkey-Iran relations (Yücesoy, 2019). Despite conflicting priorities in regional politics, especially in Syria, Turkey, and Iran in the Qatar blockade issue 'the conflict between Qatar and the Gulf kingdoms, the April 2017 referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, and the hostile policies of the US against the two states', took joint steps. Therefore, the strategic closeness of Turkey to Russia and Iran is actually evaluated as a smart move to create a comprehensive balance to ensure the security of the Turkish political regime against internal and external threats. In addition to the cases that have been reviewed in brief, there are other examples of the logic of alliances in the Middle East that can be used objectively for the security of the regime in the formation of fluid regional alliances.

Meanwhile, why the long-standing alliance between Iran and Syria, Iran and Iraq after Saddam Hussein, the comprehensive alliance between Iran and allied Shiite groups (Hezbollah, Ansarullah, and the Popular Mobilization Forces) in the form of the resistance front, why the region's Kurds turned away from the US, the emerging government alliance Fayeza Siraj's national agreement with Turkey to ensure its survival against General Khalifa Haftar, the inevitable alliance of Jordan with the Gulf kingdoms, and why the IS is not united against the US deal of the century and Israel's hostile policies in annexing other parts of the land occupations are among the other cases that scrutinize their nature, strengthen the main idea of the regime's security in shaping Middle Eastern alliances. Providing a detailed discussion of the various cases above is not within the form and content of this article. However, each of these cases can be researched with more details and data in separate writings.

Conclusion

To explain the mechanism of unstable alliances in the Middle East after the Arab Uprisings, this article tried to provide an alternative theoretical framework to the dominant Western-oriented paradigm in the literature of alliances in the international relations of the Middle East. Emphasizing only the Western model and considering alliances as official defense treaties between states limits our theoretical horizons in understanding the complexities of relationships and the empirical realities of Middle East



alliances. As such alliances can rarely be identified in the modern history of the Middle East and if there is a need, it has been influenced by the initiative of the western powers. Contrary to common theories of alliances that ignore the role of the dynamics of internal politics and the security of political systems, the approach of regime security investigates the multiple sources of internal and external threats, military, economic, material, and discourse, emphasizing the importance of the ruling leaders' perception of the changing political realities. At the same time, the regime's security approach does not ignore the role of traditional factors such as anarchy, power distribution, state security, and foreign military threats.

The article proposed such an idea that despite the change in structural conditions and the importance of lower policy issues in shaping alliances in international relations, the main interests of each of the states in the region are still ensuring the survival and security of their political regime against potential threats whether internal and external. The states often consider their political system as a government in its general sense and somehow tie the survival of their political regime to national security. In this way, national security is defined as the security of their established political system, and in the meantime, the survival of the political regime is considered to be the main security concern in shaping the alliance-forming policy. Based on this, alliances are formulated as transnational coalitions between potential allies to ensure the existential security of regimes, which is aimed at weakening the function of the nation-state in the sense of the whole political unit.

Focusing on the importance of maintaining the security of the regime reveals more and more the internal historical gap between the political elites and the society of the state. Arab Uprisings showed that civil society is dynamic and growing in many states of the region. While the regimes of the Arab Republic have gradually weakened, the Arab kingdoms are trying to maintain and stabilize themselves against the destabilizing effects of change. The fact is that the regimes in the region are in an unstable and fragile state, and by manipulating foreign policy options, they resist any internal reforms and changes. Some of them, including Yemen, Libya, and Syria, are engaged in civil wars, and others resort to any means against public protests and destabilizing environmental trends. This situation also includes the non-Arab regional powers that still have the issue of ensuring the survival of the political system of the ruling elites of high priority and urgency in shaping their alliance-forming policy. Considering that the security of the regime is the driving force of the Middle East states in their foreign policy, the need to deal with internal and external threats is unavoidable.

Although some states have significantly invested in the development of their defense and deterrence capabilities, the situation of the security dilemma in the security structure of the Middle East and the internal legitimacy crisis has caused the political elites to always perceive the security of their regime as a threat. In addition to explaining the logic of coalitions in the Middle East after 2011, the regime's security framework helps to predict possible future coalitions by broadening our theoretical perspective regarding the alliance-forming dynamics of regional states. If the ruling leaders perceive potential allies as a threat to their survival, no stable and efficient alliance can be formed. On the other hand, if the ruling political elites recognize that the security of their regime is ensured in the form of an alliance even with rivals and potential enemies, the realization of such an



alliance is likely. More objectively, if the Hashemite family of Jordan concludes that the main threat to its kingdom is from the Salafi groups of the Saudi-Emirati alliance, it will move towards an alliance with the internal forces of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Turkish-Qatar regional alliance.

If the sheikhs of the United Arab Emirates conclude that Iran's regional influence is not a threat to their political regime, not only will they not have an active presence and action in the Saudi coalition, but they will also move towards the normalization of relations with Tehran. On the other hand, if Egypt can meet its economic needs in any way and sees the Brotherhood's threats evaporate, it will not doubt the regional initiatives of the Saudi coalition. If there is a regime change in Turkey and a Western-oriented regime replaces the incumbent government, surely will have a different view on the continuation of strategic relations with Iran and Russia.

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