

**The Concept of Regional Power:
The Middle East as a Deviant Case?**

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1. Basic Thesis

The concept of regional power stipulates that conflicts on the emergence of regional powers have been significantly increasing since the end of the Cold War. Yet, although the Middle East is an extremely conflict-loaded region, currently no regional power stands out in the region. Moreover, it is not likely that there will be a basic change in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the concept of regional power seems to be useful for Middle Eastern studies for two reasons. Firstly, the prevention of the emergence of a regional actor dominating regional affairs is an important issue in the Middle East. Secondly, the application of the concept may shed some light on the particularities of the Middle East regional system.

2. Structure of Argument

In part three, it will be shown that no regional power exists in the Middle East. Moreover, there are no strong indicators that one will emerge in the foreseeable future. However, as will be shown in the fourth part of the present paper, the concept of regional power may help to understand regional structures in the Middle East, especially the way in which the Middle East is embedded in the global system.

3. A Regional Power in the Middle East?

In the following, eight main criteria of what constitutes a regional power will be applied to the Middle East.¹ A regional power must ...

- (1) ... be part of a definable region with an identity of its own
- (2) ... claim to be one (self-image of a regional power)
- (3) ... exert decisive influence on the geographic extension of the region as well as on its ideological construction
- (4) ... dispose over comparatively high military, economic, demographic, political and ideological capabilities
- (5) ... be well integrated into the region
- (6) ... define the regional security agenda to a high degree
- (7) ... be appreciated as a regional power by other powers in the region and beyond, especially by other regional powers
- (8) ... be well connected with regional and global fora.

3.1 The Middle East as a Definable Region

At first glance, the Middle East appears to be a highly coherent region because most of its (core) members share two features: affiliation with the Arab nation and a Muslim majority.

¹ Detlef Nolte: Macht und Machthierarchien in den internationalen Beziehungen. Ein Analysekonzept für die Forschung über regionale Führungsmächte, in: GIGA Working Paper No. 29, Hamburg: GIGA, 2006, p. 28, available at: www.giga-hamburg.de.

However, apart from significant exceptions such as Israel and Iran, the Middle East also divides into several sub-regions all of which are structured in a multi-polar manner. In the Maghrib, the two potential regional powers, Algeria and Morocco, are at loggerheads with one another. In the Gulf, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia are in confrontation with each other. In the Near East, the most powerful state, namely Israel, is surrounded by enemies.

3.2 Middle Eastern States that have the Self-Image of a Regional Power

Four Middle Eastern countries somehow claim—or have recently claimed—to fill the position of a regional power: Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Yet, in all cases severe restrictions are observable. Egypt claimed to be—and actually acted as—a regional power until the disaster of the Six-Day War in 1967. Ever since, the Egyptian political elite has been more or less aware of the discrepancy between its still strong dream of leading the region and limitations in its ability to do so in reality. In the short period during which the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was functioning in the 1990s, Israel developed the idea of heading the “New Middle East” (Shimon Peres). However, Israeli governments elected after the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000 did not pursue this vision anymore. The Saudi regime and its Wahhabi ideology is torn between leading the entire Muslim world and provincial localism. Finally, Iran’s self-image as the spearhead of the Islamic world implies regional leadership. However, as other global revolutionary ideologies, such as socialism in the Soviet Union, there is also a tendency in Iran to focus on the survival of the “revolution in one country,” especially in crisis situations.

3.3 Who influences the Geographic Extension of the region as well as its Ideological Construction?

In the period since the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948/49 as a whole, no factor has had greater influence on the ideological coherence of the Middle East than Arab-Muslim rejection of Zionism, Israeli occupation of Palestine or even Israel and its Jewish inhabitants. Periods in which other powerful ideologies such as Pan-Arabism shaped the Middle East were limited. Moreover, although Pan-Arabism was much more than anti-Zionism, the latter idea was a major ingredient of Pan-Arabism. According to this criterion, the inability of any of the Arab-Muslim actors to challenge Israel’s single role as defining the identity of the region in the last fifty plus years has left the Jewish state as a candidate for regional leadership.

3.4 Disposition over Power Capabilities

3.4.1 Military Capabilities

There is only one country in the region with a significant impact on the military structure of the Middle East. Iran may be about to become another actor of this kind. However, all attempts of regional actors to exert a long-lasting military dominance in the region have otherwise failed. Especially in the Gulf region, the potential rise of regional military powers such

as Iraq and Iran was curtailed by the USA. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, no regional actor was capable of restoring the status quo ante. However, the US-led coalition contained Saddam Husain's ambitions to become a regional power. Also currently, as the Third Gulf War of 2003 proves, the Middle East stands out as a world region whose regional military capabilities are largely outweighed by extra-regional actors.

3.4.2 Economic Capabilities

The economic power of the Arab Middle East is very limited. In contrast to other developing areas, for example, Asia and Latin America, no Arab-Muslim country has managed to catch up with the advanced economies of the OECD world. Especially in the area of technology, the Arab world lags far behind, as was pointed out by the authors of the Arab Human Development Report. Again, the only Middle Eastern exception is Israel, which has turned from an agrarian based economy to one of the most advanced economies worldwide.

3.4.3 Demographic Capabilities

It is a matter of dispute to which degree (very) high population figures always contribute to the power of a country. For instance, China was already the most populous country on earth twenty five ago. However, at that time China was not grouped among the most powerful countries. Yet, a small population appears to be a severe handicap for a country wanting to become a regional power. Thus, in terms of population Iran and Egypt are in a much better position to become regional powers than Israel and Saudi Arabia with their comparatively small populations.

3.4.4 Political Capabilities

Democracies are politically more efficient than authoritarian systems. In particular, their capability to absorb shocks and to respond to crisis situations flexibly is much more pronounced. Accordingly, the Arab Human Development Report argues that the main economic development problem of the Middle East is the lack of freedom and absence of democratic structures in the region. Again, Israel as a democracy is better placed to become a regional power than all Arab countries.

3.4.5 Ideological Capabilities

Israeli society disposes over strong ideological capabilities: hardly any society with West European roots is as unified to such a high degree by a strong nationalistic ideology: Zionism. Although Zionism is indeed one of Israel's sources for exerting influence in the Middle East, Zionism at the same significantly prevents Israel from turning into a regional power. In the Middle East beyond Israel, Zionism is generally perceived as an ideology hostile to the Arab world.

In addition, the ideological capabilities of Arab candidates for regional leadership are limited. In particular, Egypt is not considered a representative of “true” Arab interests. By concluding a “separate peace” with Israel in 1979, Egypt neglected the interests of the Palestinians occupied by Israel. Likewise, Iran’s ideological resources in the region are limited: Firstly because of the schism between Sunna and Shia and secondly, because Iranians are not part of the Arab world. The protagonists of the Saudi ideology of Wahhabism are too provincial to attract the whole Muslim world. All in all in terms of ideology, Syria appears to be in a favourable position. Yet, due to shortcomings in other areas, Syria is not a serious candidate to become a regional power.

3.5 Are Regional States Well Integrated into the Regional System of the Middle East?

Despite intensive diplomatic activities inside the Middle East, regional structures are fairly underdeveloped. Firstly, the Arab League recently failed to contribute to the solution of major regional issues. For instance, the Arab League did not play a significant role in the three Gulf Wars (1980-88, 1990/91 and 2003). Also, its contribution to the Oslo peace process in the 1990s was negligible. In addition, the role of sub-regional institutions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council is rather limited. What appears to be even more important is that regional integration in the Middle East lags far behind other developing areas, especially Asia and Latin America. Even among many regional experts, the knowledge of MAFTA (Mediterranean Arab Free Trade Area) and GAFTA (Greater Arab Free Trade Area) is limited. It is very instructive that when googling “GAFTA,” you will end up on the website of the “Grain and Feed Trade Association” rather than the “Greater Arab Free Trade Area.”

3.6 Who Defines the Regional Security Agenda?

It is doubtful whether there is any regional actor who significantly contributes to the definition of the Middle Eastern security agenda. In consequence of the resource richness of the Middle East, the USA has sought to prevent the emergence of a dominant regional actor capable of setting the regional security agenda.

3.7 What Actors in the Middle East are Appreciated as a regional Power by Other Powers in the Region and Beyond?

As has been argued above, what could be called sub-regionalism is pronounced in the Middle East. Potential or actual leaders both inside and across these sub-regions are rather suspiciously competing with each other than cooperating. In Middle Eastern history one has to go back forty or even fifty years before discovering a period in which one regional power, namely Egypt, was in a position to be appreciated as a regional power by influential actors both inside and outside the region. Thus, Syria agreed to form a union of states dominated by Egypt from 1958 to 1961 (United Arab Republic). In the 1960s, Egypt also played a major

role in the non-allied movement and was at parity with a country such as India, which, today, has developed into a far more advanced country.

The peculiar regional position of Israel is characterised by the fact that its standing in the developing countries is extremely weak whereas it is strongly supported by the USA and the EU (headed by Great Britain and Germany) and Australia. Thus, extra-regional support towards Israel is by and large confined to super and great powers rather than regional powers.

3.8 The Role of Regional Actors in International and Global Fora

All Middle Eastern actors, including Israel, play a rather defensive role in international organisations. As far as the Arab states are concerned, the reason for this is their resistance to global trends, especially democratisation. Due to the Arab world's *sonderweg*, the regimes adhere to the traditional principle of non-interference in internal relations. Yet, Israel is also in a defensive position in international affairs. As a result of prolonged occupation in the Palestinian territories, Israel lacks credibility in most international organisations and fora.

3.9 Preliminary Conclusions

As could be seen, regional actors' ability to assume regional leadership are highly dispersed in the Middle East. Moreover, the region is divided into several sub-regions in which power capabilities are again heterogeneous. Thus, for the last forty years, the Middle East has been a region without a regional power. There are no strong indicators that the intra-regional dispersion of power could vanish in the foreseeable future. The creation of regional leadership in the Middle East would require that at least two, if not three of the four following actors would closely cooperate with each other: Egypt, Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Such a scenario seems to be fairly unrealistic.

4. The Concept of Regional Power as a Tool for Gaining a Better Understanding of the Middle East

In the strict sense of the word, the concept of regional power is not useful for analysing the Middle East. Its application to this world region does not confirm the concept's basic thesis that regional powers will play an increasingly important role in managing regional conflicts. However, the concept may still be useful in shedding light on the structural particularities of the Middle East. Thus, one should ask what factors are inhibiting the emergence of a regional power. For this purpose, three aspects will be examined in more detail. Firstly, the historical dispersion of power in the Middle East as a result of the Six Day War in 1967 will be analysed. Secondly, the regional particularity of rent-based economies contributes to the lack of regional powers. Finally, oil is a resource of global rather than regional importance. Thus, insofar as Arab Middle Eastern actors play a role in the international system, it tends to be

global rather than regional. At the same time, external powers, especially the USA, have also prevented the emergence of regional powers which attempted to control oil resources.

4.1 Regional Power Dispersion as a Result of the Six Day War in 1967

The concept of regional power is strongly inspired by political realism. This may be considered as a theoretical problem for many analysis carried out in other world regions. However, as far as the Middle East is concerned, this theoretical bias helps to understand why the Middle East has not bred a regional power.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt shared some of the main features of a regional power. In these two decades, Egypt's ideology of republicanism and pan-Arabism was a real threat to the survival of the Arab monarchies, which were clearly on the defensive. However, two major factors reversed the relative distribution of power in the Middle East around the year 1970. Firstly, Egypt lost a lot of its power due to a creeping economic crisis in the 1960s whose negative repercussions on its regional status were exacerbated by the exhaustive loss in the 1967 war. Secondly, Saudi Arabia gained considerable relative strength as a result of the oil revolution in the early 1970s. Beyond the influx of a huge amount of petrodollars, the regime in Riyadh also gained significant control capabilities over the production and distribution of energy sources. Immediately after the war in 1967, Saudi Arabia even started to fund the state budget of its former enemy. Another result of the war in 1967 was the US-American alliance with Israel, whose power capabilities subsequently increased tremendously in comparison to Egypt's. In this situation, Egypt had two options: It could have formed a stable alliance with Saudi Arabia, thereby attempting to install a double leadership role with Riyadh. Alternatively, it could have sought US-American support. Egypt favoured the latter option. From the perspective of political realism, this decision made perfectly sense because dependence on a neighbouring state is much more delicate than dependence on an extra-regional actor whose power capabilities are much higher anyway. At the same time, from a realist point of view the real issue of the Israeli-Egyptian negotiations was about the intensity of the alliance with the USA rather than peace between the two nations. In other words, Egypt and Israel attempted to improve their alliances with the USA by signing a peace treaty. Consequently, the main issue of peace—the Israeli occupation of Palestine—could be ignored by both of them.

When Israel decided to initiate a peace process with the PLO in the early 1990s, the Jewish state also developed the vision of becoming a regional power. Two main obstacles preventing Israel from playing such a role in the region would have been removed if Israel and the PLO had made enduring peace: Israel's lack of acceptance in the Middle East and the absence of partners that Israel, a country with a small population, needed. When the Oslo peace process failed, this vision vanished.

4.2 Rent-Based Economies as an Obstacle to the Emergence of a Regional Power

Many of the political systems of the Middle East are based on rent income. A rent is an income which is not balanced by investment or labour. The bulk of the state budget of Saudi Arabia is composed of economic rents. Thus, Saudi Arabia is a rentier state par excellence. Even the Egyptian regime receives high rent income, especially political aid donated by the USA. Moreover, fees for ships passing the Suez channel are also rents.

In what way do rents inhibit the emergence of regional powers? Rentier states are “strong” states insofar as their power capabilities are fairly high vis-à-vis their own societies. However, rentier states are very weak in terms of social and economic factors with a positive influence on development. For instance, the civil society is underdeveloped in rentier states. Thus, there are no strong forces from below pressuring the state apparatus to be efficient in terms of regional integration. Moreover, the socio-economic level in general and the technological standard in particular are very low in a rentier state. The ruling state bureaucracy of a rentier state tends to be very cautious about investing in social and economic development because this could trigger processes challenging their privileged position in the existing political system. Rather, state elites of rentier states tend to buy off those with ambitions to participate in the state in order to stabilize the system. However, this kind of stabilisation goes hand in hand with socio-economic stagnation.

To a certain degree, economic rents are converted into political rents in the Middle East. In particular, Saudi Arabia distributes part of its petrodollars into the Arab world. However, again the logic of this policy is not to enhance socio-economic development in the region. Rather, the aim of Saudi Arabia is to stabilize the region in a traditional manner, i.e. preventing dynamic socio-economic forces. Moreover, Middle Eastern Islamist groups sponsored by Saudi Arabia tend to focus on cultural “development” rather than socio-economic progress.

4.3 Oil as a Global Rather than a Regional Resource

Saudi Arabia certainly exerts leadership in international oil politics. There were several occasions when Saudi Arabia prevented oil price escalations by significantly increasing its oil production. The most prominent example for such a policy was the Saudi behaviour during the Second Gulf War when the market had to deal with the loss of both Kuwait’s and Iraq’s oil production. In general, Saudi Arabia’s role as the “swing producer” in OPEC is a major factor in stabilizing international energy politics whose primary beneficiaries are the energy consumer nations.

In addition, the US-American perspective on the Middle East is shaped by the special relevance of petroleum. Oil is a commodity whose stable flow is crucial for the stability of the capitalist system. Thus, when the USA started to organise the post-war system at the end of

World War II, oil played a major role in its strategy to establish itself as the hegemonic leader.

5. Conclusion

Due to an extreme dispersion of power among Middle Eastern actors, no regional power has been able to emerge. Thus, strictly speaking, the concept of regional power is not applicable to the Middle East. However, the concept proves to be very useful to anyone attempting to understand the particularities of the Middle Eastern regional system. Although other aspects must also be taken into account, oil stands out as a single factor explaining the specific structure of the Middle East. Firstly, rent-based economies lack the dynamics necessary to breed a regional power. Secondly, oil is so important to the global capitalist system that the USA is not ready to hand on its control to a strong independent regional power.