

Decentralizing Power: The Impact of the Gaza Conflict on the Emergence of a Spontaneous Order in the Middle East

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This paper explores the transformation of the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape following the Gaza conflict, highlighting a shift from a structured, U.S.-centric order to a decentralized, spontaneous order as conceptualized by Hayek's theory of spontaneous order. Utilizing a qualitative methodology that includes document analysis, case studies, and network analysis, this study examines the roles of state and non-state actors in shaping this emergent order. The decline of U.S. hegemony has facilitated the rise of middle powers and non-state actors, who navigate complex and fluid networks to assert influence, thus reshaping regional power dynamics and alliances. The paper argues that these changes contribute to a neo-Hobbesian state, where no single power dictates terms, creating a multi-nodal system that

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is more resilient yet unpredictable. The rise of non-state actors and the prominence of the Palestinian cause as a mobilization catalyst underscore the limitations of traditional power structures and the increasing significance of public opinion and informal networks in determining regional stability.

[Key Words: Middle East geopolitics, Gaza conflict, spontaneous order, non-state actors, U.S. hegemony, the Palestinian cause, decentralization, and power dynamics.]

I. Introduction

The Gaza conflict has profoundly impacted the Middle Eastern political landscape, accelerating a shift from a structured, U.S.-centric regional order to a more fragmented and decentralized environment. Historically, American hegemony after the Gulf War established a framework for stability, supporting authoritarian regimes that ensured regional security in exchange for international support¹. However, in the post-Arab Spring era, the resilience of these regimes is waning. At the same time, public mobilization around the Palestinian cause has surged, posing new challenges for state and non-state actors alike. This paper examines how the Gaza conflict has catalyzed an emergent, spontaneous regional order, leveraging Hayek's theory of spontaneous order to analyze the dynamics among states and non-state actors².

The literature on U.S. hegemony in the Middle East highlights its role in constructing a state-centric, hierarchical order following the Cold War. Scholars such as Gregory

¹ Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Feldman, "Examining U.S. Relations with Authoritarian Countries," December 2023, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Carother_Feldman_-_Authoritarian_Relations.pdf.

² Daniel Luban, "What Is Spontaneous Order?," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 68-80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000625>.



Gause³ and John Mearsheimer contend that American dominance, particularly after the Gulf War, was instrumental in stabilizing the region by aligning regional powers through economic, military, and diplomatic channels⁴. This stability was maintained through a web of alliances with key regional states, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan, whose security was tethered to American interests⁵ (Hudson, 2015). Yet, critics argue that this model of hegemony was inherently unsustainable, as it relied heavily on authoritarian regimes that prioritized security over liberalization, a strategy that has proven increasingly vulnerable to internal dissent and regional instability⁶.

The U.S. “pivot to Asia,” a strategic shift aimed at addressing the rise of China, as well as the U S engagement in Ukraine has further destabilized this regional order⁷. Although the United States continues to wield substantial influence in the region through its alliances, military capabilities, and economic instruments, scholars such as Friedman argue that as Washington’s attention has pivoted towards East Asia, the Middle East has become a lesser priority. This shift has led to a power vacuum where local actors, encompassing both state and non-state entities, have assumed more significant roles⁸. This shift has allowed regional middle powers, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, to pursue independent agendas that sometimes conflict with American interests,

³ F. Gregory Gause, “‘Hegemony’ Compared: Great Britain and the United States in the Middle East,” *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (May 27, 2019): 565–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604987>.

⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, “America Unhinged,” *The National Interest*, January 2, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/article/america-unhinged-9639>.

⁵ Michael C. Hudson, “16. The United States in the Middle East,” *International Relations of the Middle East*, May 5, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780198708742.003.0017>.

⁶ Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained*, Columbia University Press EBooks (Columbia University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.7312/lync15884>.

⁷ Janine Davidson, “The U.S. ‘Pivot to Asia,’” *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 21 (2014): 77–82, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44289339>.

⁸ Brandon Friedman, “The Northern Tier and Great Power Competition in West Asia,” March 12, 2019, https://mei.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Northern-Tier_BrandonFriedman_final_10Mar2019-converted-1.pdf.



revealing the limits of U.S. influence in the region⁹.

The rise of non-state actors, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, has become a focal point in discussions about Middle Eastern order. Danial Bayman¹⁰, Lawrence D. Freedman, Robert Pape, and Mia Bloom argue that these actors, including militias, insurgent groups, and religious organizations, are reshaping the region by challenging the authority of traditional states¹¹. Iran’s “Axis of Resistance”—a network of proxies and allies across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—represents a prominent example of this phenomenon, as it provides Tehran with a decentralized means of projecting influence. According to Seth G. Jones, this network model allows Iran to circumvent conventional diplomatic channels and assert control over strategic areas without direct confrontation¹².

The empowerment of non-state actors has led to what some scholars describe as a “multi-nodal” order in the Middle East, where power is dispersed across various entities rather than concentrated within state structures¹³. In particular, authors like Fawaz Gerges argue that the rise of groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis underscores

⁹ Ayman El-Dessouki and Ola Rafik Mansour, “Small States and Strategic Hedging: The United Arab Emirates’ Policy towards Iran,” *Review of Economics and Political Science* ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print (February 14, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1108/reps-09-2019-0124>.

¹⁰ Daniel Byman, “Passive Sponsors of Terrorism,” *Survival* 47, no. 4 (December 2005): 117–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330500433399>.

¹¹ Lawrence D. Freedman, Robert Pape, and Mia Bloom, “Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 172, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20031726>.

¹² Seth G. Jones, “War by Proxy Iran’s Growing Footprint in the Middle East” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep22351.pdf?acceptTC=true&coverpage=false&addFooter=false>.

¹³ Felicita Tramontana, “Facilitating, Controlling and Excluding from Movement: Religious Orders, Organizational Networks and Mobility Infrastructure in the Early Modern Mediterranean,” *Social History* 48, no. 4 (October 2, 2023): 397–425, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2023.2246800>.



the limitations of traditional military power, as these actors operate within fluid networks that are difficult for centralized states to control¹⁴. These dynamics have significant implications for state sovereignty, with scholars noting that the influence of non-state actors often undermines the authority of formal state institutions, creating a fragmented political landscape where traditional hierarchies are continually challenged¹⁵.

1. The Concept of Spontaneous Order and Hayekian Theory

The notion of spontaneous order, originally developed in economic theory by Hayek, has recently been applied to international relations to explain decentralized, ad-hoc systems that emerge in the absence of centralized authority. Luban adapts Hayek's market-oriented theory to the Middle East, arguing that order in the region increasingly resembles a spontaneous equilibrium shaped by individual and collective actions rather than by hegemonic planning¹⁶. According to Hayek, spontaneous order occurs when numerous actors engage in reciprocal actions that, over time, produce stability or equilibrium without a governing authority¹⁷.

In the Middle East, the concept of spontaneous order provides a framework for understanding how alliances, rivalries, and power structures naturally develop among state and non-state actors, regardless of whether the international system is unipolar or bipolar. The relevance of spontaneous order theory is particularly pronounced in assessing the limits of U.S. influence and in recognizing the increasing importance of

¹⁴ Fawaz A Gerges, *Making the Arab World : Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash That Shaped the Middle East*. (S.L.: Princeton Univ Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained*, Columbia University Press EBooks (Columbia University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.7312/lync15884>.

¹⁶ Daniel Luban, "What Is Spontaneous Order?," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 68–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000625>.

¹⁷ Roland Kley, "The General Idea of a Spontaneous Social Order," *Oxford University Press EBooks*, December 1, 1994, 111–31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198279167.003.0006>.



regional actors who operate within decentralized networks. Andreas Krieg posits that instead of relying on formalized alliances, entities in the region more frequently form ad-hoc collaborations that are responsive to the immediate needs and opportunities of the situation¹⁸.

Groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas exhibit varying levels of integration within state mechanisms and operate under distinct circumstances. However, a detailed examination of these specific contexts is beyond the scope of this discussion. This order model is dynamic and adaptive, enabling actors like Iran, the UAE, and Qatar to pursue flexible alliances with non-state entities, thus navigating the volatile political landscape more effectively than states reliant on rigid hierarchies.

2. Authoritarian Stability, and the Palestinian Cause

The Arab Spring significantly altered the Middle East's public opinion landscape, challenging long-standing assumptions about authoritarian stability. Marc Lynch argued that the widespread mobilization around issues of economic inequality, political freedom, and national sovereignty has exposed the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes¹⁹. Although these regimes initially retained power through coercive means, they have struggled to suppress public sentiment on certain emotive issues, particularly the Palestinian cause²⁰. Public opinion on Palestine has become a focal point for grievances against authoritarian governments, as the Palestinian struggle resonates across

¹⁸ Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January 2016): 97–113, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12506>.

¹⁹ Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained*, Columbia University Press EBooks (Columbia University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.7312/lync15884>.

²⁰ Ramzy Baroud, "'Solidarity of Action:' Is Africa Reclaiming Its Historic Role as the Center of Palestinian Solidarity?," *Insight Turkey* 26, no. Summer 2024 (October 4, 2024): 39–50, <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2024263.4>.



ideological divides, uniting different factions in opposition to perceived injustices.

Ramzy Baroud suggests that the Palestinian cause has become a channel for expressing dissatisfaction with broader state failures, turning it into a rallying point that transcends borders and political affiliations²¹. This sentiment complicates the position of authoritarian states like Egypt and Jordan, whose governments are increasingly pressured by domestic constituencies to take a stance on the Gaza conflict. For regimes built on the promise of stability, this wave of pro-Palestinian mobilization reveals a potential point of rupture, as it challenges their reliance on authoritarian resilience in the face of public demand for political accountability.

The literature also highlights the growing importance of regional middle powers, such as Qatar, Oman, and the UAE, which have carved out influential roles by leveraging informal networks and mediation capabilities. According to Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Qatar and Oman have strategically positioned themselves as mediators, enabling them to engage with both state and non-state actors, including groups like Hamas and the Houthis. By doing so, they have gained significant diplomatic influence, often filling the vacuum left by a disengaged U.S.²². This role as a mediator gives middle powers leverage in de-escalation processes, allowing them to balance between supporting U.S. interests and addressing regional concerns around the Palestinian cause.

Additionally, the UAE's strategic investments in alliances with non-state actors in Libya, Sudan, and Yemen illustrate a growing trend toward using informal networks to achieve political objectives. Christopher Davidson argues that these alliances allow the UAE to exert influence without direct military intervention, showcasing a shift toward flexible, networked power structures that bypass conventional state-centered diplomacy²³. These strategies indicate that the ability to navigate informal networks and

²¹ Ibid.

²² Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Fire and Fury in the Gulf," *IndraStra Global* 4, no. 2 (February 1, 2018): 8, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1164059>.

²³ Christopher Davidson, "Gulf States and Sharp Power: Allies to Adversaries," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 1 (January 2024): 102–17,



engage with non-state actors is becoming essential for influence in the current regional order.

The literature collectively points to a profound transformation in the Middle Eastern order, where traditional state-centric models and U.S. hegemony are giving way to a decentralized, networked environment. Scholars widely acknowledge the growing influence of non-state actors and the limitations of U.S. power, yet there is still limited research on how these dynamics converge to form a coherent, spontaneous order, as conceptualized by Hayek²⁴. Moreover, while there is considerable focus on individual actors, few studies have comprehensively analyzed the interactions among multiple state and non-state actors in shaping this emergent order. This study aims to fill this gap by applying the theory of spontaneous order to the Middle Eastern context, providing a holistic view of how recent conflicts, particularly in Gaza, have accelerated the fragmentation and decentralization of regional power.

II. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to investigate the evolving power dynamics in the Middle East, specifically focusing on the effects of the Gaza conflict on regional order. Given the complexity and fluidity of the regional context, a mixed-methods approach combining document analysis, case studies, and network analysis was applied to comprehensively analyze the roles of state and non-state actors.

Data was collected from multiple sources, including academic articles, policy papers, reports from regional think tanks, and government statements to capture a broad perspective on the shifts in regional power structures. Secondary sources, including

<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2024.a915352>.

²⁴ Daniel Luban, "What Is Spontaneous Order?," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 68–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000625>.



recent literature on Middle Eastern geopolitics and theoretical frameworks on spontaneous order, were used to contextualize these developments within existing academic discourse.

Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and Lebanon were selected for their relevance to the Gaza conflict and their varying degrees of dependence on U.S. support, vulnerability to non-state actors, and regional influence. These cases provide diverse perspectives on how traditional state actors and non-state networks interact and adapt within an increasingly decentralized regional order. Additionally, the study examines the roles of Iran’s “Axis of Resistance,” and regional middle powers such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Oman, to understand how different actors leverage non-state networks.

The analysis utilizes Hayek’s theory of spontaneous order, a framework that views order as an emergent phenomenon arising from the aggregate of individual actions rather than from central planning²⁵. By applying this concept, the study explores how individual actors—both state and non-state—contribute to a regional order shaped by reciprocal interactions rather than top-down hierarchies. Additionally, elements of Realist theory are incorporated to assess the implications for state sovereignty and power in an environment lacking a clear hegemon.

Network analysis was conducted to map the interactions and alliances between state and non-state actors, revealing the emergent patterns of influence across the region. Network analysis is a method used to study the relationships and interactions within complex systems, whether they are social, biological, technological, or organizational. By mapping out nodes (representing entities like people, computers, or genes) and edges (the connections between them), network analysis allows researchers to understand the structure, dynamics, and influence patterns within a network. This approach is valuable in identifying key players, clusters, and pathways in the network, offering insights into

²⁵ Jessica Whyte, “The Invisible Hand of Friedrich Hayek: Submission and Spontaneous Order,” *Political Theory* 47, no. 2 (November 7, 2017): 156–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591717737064>.



how information, resources, or influence flow through the system. Network analysis is applied widely in fields such as social sciences, and computer science, helping to reveal hidden structures, predict behaviors, and optimize systems²⁶.

This involved identifying the connections among actors, their reciprocal relationships, and points of contention, particularly around the Palestinian cause. The network mapping highlights how actors like Iran, Qatar, and the UAE use non-state networks while identifying how these networks function as informal levers of power within the region.

The qualitative data was coded thematically, focusing on key themes such as the decline of U.S. influence, the rise of non-state actors, and shifts in public opinion around the Palestinian cause. Patterns were identified through comparative analysis of the selected case studies, enabling a cross-case synthesis of common trends and unique contextual factors. This approach ensures a holistic understanding of the interplay between state and non-state actors and the resulting shifts in regional stability.

III. Results

1. Decline of the U.S.-Led Regional Order

The shift in U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East, specifically in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, reflects a larger trend that began with the Obama administration's pivot to Asia, resulting in the United States prioritizing other regions and urging regional partners to assume more security and diplomatic responsibilities. The concept of "leading from behind" has subtly changed to "following from behind," exemplified by the Saudi and UAE-led blockade of Qatar between 2017 and 2021. Riyadh and Abu

²⁶ Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications* (New York, Ny Cambridge University Press, 1994).



Dhabi initiated the blockade in response to Qatar's backing of revolutionary movements, a situation that complicated U.S. military interests in Qatar and was ultimately resolved by the regional actors themselves, signaling a decline in U.S. influence in the region²⁷.

Recent polling data from IIACSS and regional partners, spanning October 17-29, 2023, in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine, shows that U.S. support for Israel has severely undermined American influence in the Arab world, with trust levels at an all-time low. This has coincided with increased support for U.S. rivals such as China, Russia, and Iran.

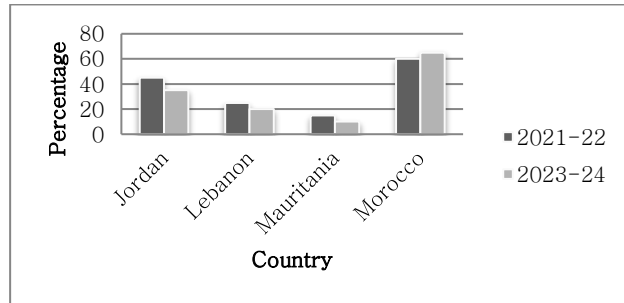
In the context of the Gaza conflict, American influence is perceived negatively, with only 7% of Arabs viewing the U.S. role positively; in Jordan, this figure drops to as low as 2%. In contrast, China is seen more favorably, with 46% in Egypt, 34% in Iraq, and 27% in Jordan endorsing its role. Russia's positive influence averages 47% across the surveyed nations, except Palestine, while Iran's favorable impact averages 40%, reaching up to 52% in Syria. Trust in the United States is notably low, with only 3% of Jordanians expressing trust in America. Egyptian trust in the U.S. is at 9%, significantly lower than the 51% for Russia and Iran, and 47% for China, marking the lowest U.S. favorability ratings observed in over two decades of regional public opinion research²⁸.

²⁷ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Implications of the Qatar Crisis for 'Post-GCC' Regional Politics," *Edinburgh University Press EBooks*, July 13, 2023, 154-73, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781399518246-010>.

²⁸ Munqith Dagher and Karl Kaltenthaler, "The United States Is Rapidly Losing Arab Hearts and Minds through Gaza War, While Competitors Benefit | the Washington Institute," www.washingtoninstitute.org, November 21, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/united-states-rapidly-losing-arab-hearts-and-minds-through-gaza-war-while>.



Fig. 3. 1 Favorable View of the United States by Country

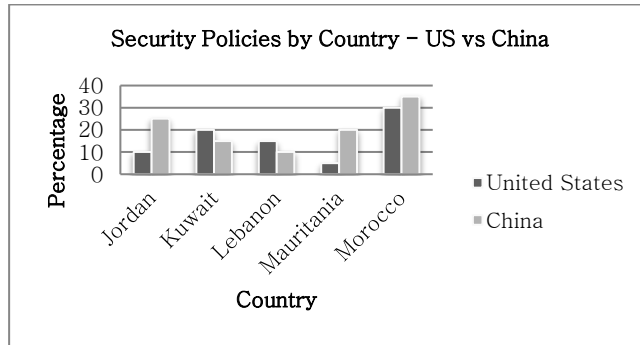


Source: Arab Barometer, Wave VII (2021-22) and Wave VIII (2023-24)

Fig. 3. 1 presents a comparative snapshot of public sentiment toward the United States over two distinct periods, 2021-22 and 2023-24, across four countries: Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, and Morocco. The data reveals a consistent decrease in favorable views of the U.S. from the first to the second period in Jordan, Lebanon, and Mauritania, with a notably sharp decline in Lebanon. Conversely, Morocco exhibits a significant increase in favorable perceptions during the same timeframe. This variation might reflect differing national responses to U.S. foreign policies, regional dynamics, or changes in U.S. engagement strategies. The marked increase in favorable views in Morocco reflects effective diplomatic and economic initiatives by the U.S. that resonate well with the Moroccan public, contrasting with the apparent disenchantment in the other surveyed nations. These perceptions indicate discontent with the broader implications for U.S. foreign policy in the region particularly regarding the response to Gaza war.



Fig. 3.2 Security Policies by Country - US vs China



Source: Arab Barometer, Wave VIII (2023-24)

Fig. 3. 2 suggests a significant variance in regional perceptions, highlighting a trend where China is increasingly viewed as having more effective security policies than the United States, particularly in Mauritania and Morocco. This shifting perception could be indicative of China’s growing diplomatic and economic influence in the region, which appears to be resonating more effectively with local security concerns. The data affirms China’s strategies in the region and their impact on U.S. interests and foreign policy²⁹.

Similarly, the Israeli situation illustrates a consistent trend of U.S. disengagement. The governments under Benjamin Netanyahu the prime minister of the state of Israel have moved increasingly to the right, often opposing U.S. policies favoring a Two-State Solution by expanding settlements and deepening the marginalization of Palestinians³⁰. Netanyahu has maintained a significant impact on U.S. policy from the Obama through

²⁹ This inclusion of different Arab countries is to illustrate the effect of Gaza war on the Arab World in general.

³⁰ Sophie Tanno Lee Kevin Liptak, MJ, “Netanyahu Again Rejects Palestinian Sovereignty amid Fresh US Push for Two-State Solution,” CNN, January 21, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/21/middleeast/netanyahu-palestinian-sovereignty-two-state-solution-intl/index.html>.



the Biden administrations, despite his moves to undermine Israel's democratic integrity, which has largely been overlooked by Washington, even amidst occasional domestic opposition within Israel³¹. The Biden administration's tepid reaction is indicative of reduced American sway in the region.

In this context, Hamas's significant assault on Israeli territory took advantage of Israel's perceived vulnerabilities, enabling Netanyahu's far-right government to justify a broad retaliation³². This act provided religious hardliners in Israel with a pretext to galvanize national security efforts that align with broader objectives, such as displacing Gazans. Given a broad mandate by the U.S., Israel's aggressive response went beyond typical self-defense measures³³, escalating regional tensions and underlining the profound consequences of the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Middle East.

2. Emergence of a Spontaneous, Networked Regional Order

The Gaza conflict has underscored the power vacuum in the Middle East, leading to the emergence of a spontaneous order marked by ad-hoc alliances and interactions among state and non-state actors. Drawing from Hayek's theory, this spontaneous order emerges through the cumulative effects of individual actions without a central authority³⁴. Iran has leveraged its "Axis of Resistance" network, composed of allied militias in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, to challenge Israel and the U.S., capitalizing

³¹ Fareed Zakaria, "The Self-Doubting Superpower," *Foreign Affairs*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/self-doubting-superpower-america-fareed-zakaria>.

³² Steven Erlanger, "Netanyahu, Defiant, Appears to Have Gone Rogue, Risking a Regional War," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2024, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/02/world/europe/israel-defiant-gaza-war.html>.

³³ Malu Cursino, "Israel Has Gone beyond Self-Defence in Gaza, Tory MP Alicia Kearns Says," *Www.bbc.com*, December 18, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-67745408>.

³⁴ Daniel Luban, "What Is Spontaneous Order?," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 68-80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000625>.



on rising anti-Israel sentiment³⁵. Meanwhile, the Houthis in Yemen have positioned themselves as defenders of the Palestinian cause, bolstering their domestic and regional support³⁶. This phenomenon highlights how non-state actors, with limited resources, can disrupt traditional power dynamics by mobilizing around issues that resonate with the public, such as the Palestinian cause.

Middle powers in the Middle East, particularly Qatar, Oman, and the UAE, have adapted to this new order by strategically engaging with non-state actors and navigating complex alliances. Qatar and Oman play crucial roles as mediators, maintaining essential backchannels with groups like Hamas and the Houthis, which enables de-escalation in the region³⁷. Qatar, for instance, has supported American mediation efforts in Gaza while firmly backing the Palestinian cause, balancing between diplomacy and public sentiment³⁸. Iran and the UAE, by fostering their own networks of non-state actors, have asserted influence over conflict zones in Libya, Yemen, and Sudan, thus reshaping regional conflicts³⁹. The UAE's alliances with factions in Libya and Sudan reflect its capacity to exercise power indirectly, while Iran's networks allow it to exert influence even in crises where its state apparatus is limited.

The Gaza conflict has highlighted the limitations of U.S. power in shaping regional

³⁵ Nicole Grajewski, "Iran Is at a Strategic Crossroads," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/10/iran-israel-missile-attack-nuclear-strategy-what-now?lang=en>.

³⁶ Baraa Shiban, "Bombing Yemen's Houthis: Not a Long-Term Strategy," Rusi.org, 2024, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/bombing-yemens-houthis-not-long-term-strategy>.

³⁷ Universidad de Navarra, "Handling Israel-Hamas War Mediation: The Role of Qatar," Global Affairs and Strategic Studies, March 2024, <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/handling-israel-hamas-war-mediation-the-role-of-qatar>.

³⁸ Ch Supervisor and Trampus, "The Brand of Peace: The Relations between Qatar, Palestine and Israel," 2015, <http://dspace.unive.it/bitstream/handle/10579/9199/855551-1202833.pdf?sequence=2>.

³⁹ Andreas Krieg, "Security Assistance to Surrogates – How the UAE Secures Its Regional Objectives," *Mediterranean Politics*, February 24, 2023, 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2183659>.



outcomes. The reliance on coercive military power, as seen in U.S. airstrikes targeting Houthi forces⁴⁰, has done little to address the underlying causes of instability. As local actors gain agency and legitimacy, the credibility of U.S.-led norms, principles, and institutions diminishes. This fragmentation reflects a neo-Hobbesian “state of nature,” where no single power—whether the U.S. or regional hegemon—can establish control⁴¹. Iran’s “Axis of Resistance” and Hezbollah’s growing influence in Lebanon serve as reminders of the challenges the U.S. and its allies face in countering decentralized, networked threats.

IV. Discussion

The findings reveal a significant transformation in the Middle Eastern regional order, where state actors struggle to contain the influence of non-state actors empowered by ideological motivations and public support for the Palestinian cause. The U.S. response, characterized by symbolic gestures rather than substantive intervention, further erodes its authority, creating space for regional middle powers to redefine their roles and alliances⁴². As states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE pursue autonomous paths, the concept of “authoritarian stability” becomes increasingly tenuous, unable to withstand public dissatisfaction and demands for accountability. Below, we examine the implications of these findings for the region’s political order, the limitations of U.S.

⁴⁰ Faris Tanyos, “U.S. Conducts New Airstrikes on Houthi Targets in Yemen with B-2 Bombers,” *Cbsnews.com* (CBS News, October 17, 2024), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/u-s-new-airstrikes-houthi-targets-yemen-b-2-bombers/>.

⁴¹ Gordon J. Schochet, “Thomas Hobbes on the Family and the State of Nature,” *Political Science Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (September 1967): 427, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2146773>.

⁴² Fareed Zakaria, “The Self-Doubting Superpower,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/self-doubting-superpower-america-fareed-zakaria>.

influence, and the evolving role of public opinion and informal networks in shaping regional stability.

The diminishing role of the United States in the Middle East has profound implications for regional stability. By “leading from behind” and prioritizing other strategic interests, such as the pivot to Asia, the U.S. has ceded ground to local and regional actors, leading to a polar environment where no single hegemon controls the order⁴³. This aligns with observations from Realist theory, which warns of the instability inherent in multipolar systems⁴⁴. The inability of the U.S. to exert a cohesive strategy, as shown in its symbolic interventions in Gaza, reveals a gap between its traditional hegemonic role and its current capacity to manage regional affairs effectively. This vacuum has enabled middle powers like Iran, Qatar, and the UAE to redefine their regional positions, often independently of U.S. interests.

This shift suggests that future U.S. policies might need to adapt to an era in which indirect engagement—via regional proxies or diplomatic backchannels—becomes the primary means of influence. However, the inconsistency of such a strategy, evident in the U.S. responses to crises in Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza, raises questions about whether the U.S. can maintain credibility as a stabilizing force in a region increasingly skeptical of its intentions. As the credibility of U.S.-established norms erodes, other powers, including China and Russia, may see opportunities to expand their influence, although they, too, will likely face the constraints of this fragmented landscape.

The rise of non-state actors, particularly those aligned with Iran’s “Axis of Resistance,” demonstrates the potency of decentralized networks in shaping Middle Eastern geopolitics. The Gaza conflict has accelerated a move toward what Hayek describes as a “spontaneous order,” where stability is not imposed by a central authority but rather emerges from the dynamic interplay of various actors. Iran’s network of militias and

⁴³ David Wilkinson, “Unipolarity without Hegemony,” *International Studies Review* 1, no. 2 (September 1999): 141–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1521-9488.00158>.

⁴⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, “America Unhinged,” *The National Interest*, January 2, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/article/america-unhinged-9639>.



alliances, spanning Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, exemplifies this decentralized power structure. These non-state entities operate independently of, and sometimes in opposition to, state policies, thus challenging the authority of states that rely on traditional power hierarchies.

This trend toward spontaneous order suggests that regional stability may increasingly hinge on the ability of states to navigate and leverage these networks rather than imposing hierarchical control. The UAE's alliances with factions in Libya and Sudan, as well as Qatar and Oman's roles as mediators with groups like Hamas and the Houthis, underscore the strategic value of flexible, network-based alliances. States that can operate within these informal networks have an advantage in navigating the fragmented regional order. Conversely, actors like the U.S. and Israel, which rely primarily on military and hierarchical power structures, face difficulties in adapting to this horizontal, decentralized model, often finding themselves outmaneuvered by agile, non-state actors.

1. The Palestinian Cause as Catalysts for Mobilization

The resurgence of the Palestinian cause has exposed the fragility of “authoritarian stability” in the region, revealing how public opinion can drive political dynamics, even in highly controlled states. Popular mobilization around Palestine acts as an outlet for broader grievances against failing state institutions, challenging authoritarian regimes that once assumed they could secure public loyalty through promises of stability and economic opportunity. The cases of Egypt and Jordan are particularly illustrative, as both countries face mounting internal pressures to respond to Israeli actions in Gaza, despite their close ties with the U.S. and reliance on American aid.

The conflict in Gaza has exacerbated Egypt's economic challenges, highlighted by disruptions in natural gas exports, tourism, and Suez Canal revenues, prompting the Egyptian government to secure emergency funding from the EU, the IMF, and a significant investment from the UAE to prevent economic collapse. However, the durability of this financial relief and President Abdelfattah al-Sisi's political standing



remain uncertain, as public frustration over the war and deteriorating living conditions could fuel protests against the government⁴⁵.

This finding underscores the limitations of authoritarian resilience when public sentiment converges on emotive issues like Palestine. For regimes long sustained by a narrative of stability and security, the current wave of pro-Palestinian sentiment signals a potential point of rupture. It also points to an evolving role for public opinion in shaping state behavior, compelling regimes to balance internal demands with external alliances—a balance that is proving increasingly difficult to maintain.

In Yemen, the Houthis have leveraged Iranian support in terms of funding and technology to boost their role as defenders of Palestine amid the Gaza conflict. Remarkably, they have implemented a quasi-naval blockade at a crucial maritime passageway⁴⁶, marking the first instance of a non-state actor taking such an action, thereby increasing their appeal both locally and across the region. Despite airstrikes by the U.S. and U.K., these have scarcely affected the Houthi militia's strength; rather, they risk deepening the wider regional conflict as Yemen's fragile statehood deteriorates further due to this expanding conflict.

Similarly, in Iraq and Syria, the Gaza conflict has incited Iran-backed militias to strike U.S. bases, prompting American airstrikes that circumvent Iraqi governmental sovereignty and structures. This recurring cycle of retaliation strengthens the position of these militias and entrenches Iranian influence, undermining Iraq's sovereignty and sidestepping the institutions that the U.S. once supported in building. In Lebanon, Hezbollah's stature as a quasi-state entity has been solidified through its confrontations

⁴⁵ Amr Hamzawy, "The Middle East's New War of Attrition," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/11/middle-east-war-attrition-israel-gaza-egypt-jordan-role?lang=en>.

⁴⁶ Harry Papachristou, "Houthis Vow to Enforce Red Sea 'Blockade' with Sold Ships Stuck on Target List," Trade Winds | Latest shipping and maritime news, November 4, 2024, <https://www.tradewindsnews.com/casualties/houthis-vow-to-enforce-red-sea-blockade-with-sold-ships-stuck-on-target-list/2-1-1733919>.



with Israel. Although its leader Hassan Nasrallah has been killed in an Israeli air strike the group's image enhanced as a protector of Lebanon, driving thousands of Israelis from the northern regions and boosting Hezbollah's domestic credibility as the primary defender of national security.

For Egypt, the Gaza war exacerbates existing economic and security challenges. The Sisi administration, which relies heavily on financial support from Gulf countries, now faces declining revenue from the Suez Canal impacted by Houthi actions in the Red Sea. Additionally, Israel's military operations near Rafah heighten the risk of a refugee surge into Egypt, potentially inciting public dissent and destabilizing the already precarious financial situation of the Sisi government, which is trying to manage fiscal issues through the sale of national assets⁴⁷.

Jordan is also under significant strain. As the guardian of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Hashemite monarchy faces internal pressures from tribes on both the east and west banks to support the Gazans more actively⁴⁸. With limited options beyond symbolic aid, Jordan struggles to counter the growing narrative of resistance propagated by Islamist groups, highlighting the regional limitations faced by states amid declining U.S. involvement and the rise of non-state actors (Taylor, 2023).

The spontaneous, networked order emerging in the Middle East suggests that stability in the region will be fluid, characterized by shifting alliances and informal power structures. This environment is likely to be unpredictable, as various actors continually renegotiate alliances based on situational interests rather than long-standing ideological or strategic commitments. Such fluidity challenges the traditional Realist expectation that stability is achieved through a balance of power or a hegemonic actor capable of

⁴⁷ Steven A. Cook, "How Sisi Ruined Egypt," *Foreign Policy*, August 9, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/09/egypt-economy-debt-imf-sisi-mega-projects/>.

⁴⁸ Tessa Talebi, "The Impact of the Gaza War on Jordan's Domestic and International Politics - Project on Middle East Political Science," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, April 18, 2024, <https://pomeps.org/the-impact-of-the-gaza-war-on-jordans-domestic-and-international-politics>.



enforcing order⁴⁹.

Moreover, this decentralized model introduces a new kind of interdependence, where both state and non-state actors hold limited but meaningful influence over specific areas, creating a “multi-nodal” system. This structure is likely to be more resilient to unilateral actions from great powers, as demonstrated by Iran’s ability to exert influence through its proxies without directly involving the Iranian state apparatus. For smaller states and non-state entities, this model presents opportunities for greater agency but also risks, as they are increasingly entangled in conflicts that transcend national borders.

V. Conclusion

The Gaza War has accelerated the decline of the traditional U.S.-led regional order, resulting in an increasingly instable Middle East where power is decentralized and fluid. In this spontaneous order, states that rely exclusively on military strength and hierarchical models, like Israel and the U.S., face significant challenges in dealing with horizontal, networked structures. Public opinion, particularly around the Palestinian cause, has emerged as a powerful force, revealing the limitations of “authoritarian stability” and signaling the need for more adaptive, flexible approaches. As regional powers recalibrate their positions, the Middle East is likely to remain a zone of shifting alliances and informal networks, with non-state actors playing a decisive role in shaping its future.

While this study provides insight into the emerging dynamics in the Middle East, it has limitations. First, the reliance on qualitative data and case studies limits the generalizability of findings. Future research could employ quantitative network analysis to map alliances and conflicts across a broader set of regional actors, providing empirical

⁴⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, “America Unhinged,” *The National Interest*, January 2, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/article/america-unhinged-9639>.



data to support qualitative observations. Additionally, this study's focus on current developments in the Gaza conflict may obscure other factors influencing the region's power dynamics, such as economic crises, climate change, and resource scarcity.

Further research could also explore the role of external actors like China and Russia in this decentralized order. As the U.S. redefines its role, understanding how these actors approach the region's new spontaneous order could reveal alternative models of influence, particularly if they succeed in navigating the networked environment where the U.S. has struggled. Finally, a closer examination of the ideological dimensions of non-state networks—especially those influenced by religious or nationalist agendas—could provide a deeper understanding of the factors driving these actors' sustained influence.

[Key Words: Middle East geopolitics, Gaza conflict, spontaneous order, non-state actors, U.S. hegemony, the Palestinian cause, decentralization, and power dynamics.]



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