

The Tragedy of Regional Powers in the Middle East

Mearsheimer's Dictums Live On

Lisa Issac

Lisa Issac, PhD in International Relations
Adyghe State University, Maikop, Russia
Associate Professor

ORCID: 0009-0005-5595-6549

E-mail: i.lisa@adygnet.ru

Tel: +798808067-70

Address: 208 Pervomayskaya Str., Maikop 385000, Republic of Adygea, Russia

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In his seminal *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer (2021) articulates his theory of Offensive Realism, according to which great powers are inexorably driven to pursue power, trapped in a perpetual cycle of competition, arms races, and conflict. Amid the inherent unpredictability of others' actions, states prioritize their own security through the accumulation of power, inevitably leading to clashes and conflicts. Great powers seek to alter the balance of power in their favor, often through force, with the ultimate goal of achieving dominance or hegemony. However, absolute hegemony is fundamentally unattainable in a global system of multiple great powers, and thus that system is condemned to perpetual competition. Hence a tragic predicament that can be escaped only through the formation of a world government, which is utopian and unachievable.

This approach is useful for understanding the enduring security dilemma (Tang, 2009) in the Middle East.

THE THEORY'S REGIONAL DIMENSION

The tragedy of offensive realism, as faced by Middle Eastern states, is intensified at three levels: internal, regional, and international.

Firstly, regional and international actors often benefit from the internal weakness of Middle Eastern states. The Arab Spring led to regime change in Tunisia and Egypt, and NATO's intervention destroyed the Libyan state. Turkey's interference was clearly evident in Assad's fall (Times of Israel, 2025). Yemen's conflict has become a proxy war in which, *inter alia*, the U.S. has targeted the Iran-backed Houthis (Blanchard, 2025; Beaumont, 2025).

Thus, the internal fragility of Middle Eastern regimes makes them vulnerable to external powers' influence, further complicating the security landscape for regional actors and deepening the security dilemma.

Secondly, the Middle East is now shaped by intense competition for regional hegemony between Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia (Ponížilová, 2016; Abdulbaki, 2023). Each seeks military superiority, political and economic influence over its neighbors, and a regional order reshaped to its advantage. Strategies range from arms races against external threats, to coordination against internal challenges, to regional and international alliances.

Resulting alignments are more complex than they appear. Turkey is closely allied with NATO; Iran with Russia; Israel with the U.S.; and Saudi Arabia seeks a degree of strategic balance between the U.S. and Russia while ultimately operating under the former's *de facto* nuclear umbrella. This intense regional rivalry, driven by offensive realism, creates a constant state of tension and the potential for conflict in the Middle East. While structural realist factors are central to this competition, it is exacerbated by deep-rooted ideological, religious, and historical differences that shape perceptions of intentions and threats.

Thirdly, the Middle East's geographic location makes it a perennial arena for great-power competition (Hamzawy and Ji, 2024), be that colonial ambitions, Cold-War proxy conflicts, or economic and geopolitical contentions. Political ramifications of great-power rivalry are often extremely violent in this region, as external powers use the

Middle East to project power and settle disputes without risking direct confrontation in their home territories.

The tragedy of the Middle East, therefore, stems from its regional powers' domestic, regional, and international vulnerability. As their interests diverge and clash, the ensuing conflicts tend to escalate in lethality and intricacy, as in the Syrian Civil War (2011-2024), the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the Gulf War (1990-1991), the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Yemeni Civil War (2014-present), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (ongoing), and the Israeli-American Twelve-Day War against Iran in June 2025.

ISRAEL AND HEGEMONY

When internal conflicts are exaggerated and exploited by regional and international powers, or when internal factions seek the support of such powers, this leads to prolonged and protracted conflicts.

Despite being the strongest regional military power, Israel, like other regional states, confronts significant internal challenges. Since its establishment in 1948, it has faced persistent difficulties in resolving the Palestinian situation and achieving a comprehensive peace with the Arabic and Islamic world. Israel positions itself as the only democratic state in the Middle East, surrounded by 'dangerous dictatorships' that want to eliminate it—not because they see it as a Western tool of colonialism, but simply because it is the only Jewish and democratic state in the region. However, various international bodies accuse Israel of operating as an apartheid state.

Israel's policies have contributed to the emergence of non-state actors, including militant 'resistance' (or 'terrorist', according to Israel) movements. These actors are utilized by regional states such as Iran, Qatar, and the former Syrian regime¹ to undermine Israeli interests, project their own influence, and possibly destroy Israel completely. Thus, the Iranian-Israeli rivalry is best understood as a zero-sum struggle for regional hegemony intensified by profound ideological

¹ Although their own relations have been and remain strategically and ideologically complex: Qatar opposed Assad's rule since 2011; Iran and Syria are allied; but Qatari-Iranian relations are tending towards rapprochement.

and religious differences, which contribute to deeper mistrust and a heightened sense of existential threat on both sides.

From an offensive realist perspective, Israel's actions, following the 7 October 2023 attack, pursue not just security but regional dominance. Primarily by decisively addressing the Palestinian issue, perceived as an impediment to the country's regional ambitions. Consequently, the Israeli Cabinet has approved a 'sustained presence' (occupation) throughout the entirety of the Gaza Strip (Burke, 2025). Israel seemingly views this as an opportunity to significantly diminish or eliminate the internal challenges posed by Palestinian militant groups (Hamas and Islamic Jihad²), while simultaneously weakening regional competitors such as Iran and Turkey by targeting their proxies and spheres of influence.

Given Israel's significant conventional military superiority, its sole possession (in the Middle East) of undeclared nuclear weapons, and its protection by the U.S., Israel is unlikely to tolerate a balance of power that challenges its security or constrains its ambitions. This means eliminating all perceived threats, including Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities. As Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said in May 2025: "The proxy system is over and the axis of evil has collapsed. You bear direct responsibility. What we did to Hezbollah in Beirut, Hamas in Gaza, Assad in Damascus, and the Houthis in Yemen, we will also do to you in Tehran. We will not allow anyone to harm Israel—and anyone who harms us will be severely harmed" (Baha, 2025). On 13 June 2025, Israel launched its military campaign against Iran.

Israel capitalized on the regional environment's hostility towards Iran and the international system's anarchy and fragility (particularly during the presidency of Donald Trump, who sought to avoid direct military confrontation with Iran and preferred negotiations (Ferragamo, 2025)—but these diplomatic efforts were halted by Netanyahu's war).

The war was launched after Iran's economy had been severely strained by sanctions, which sought to undermine funding for Iran's regional proxies and to generate economic discontent within the

² 'Islamic Jihad' is designated a terrorist organization and banned in Russia.

country. The latter facilitated Israeli intelligence operations (Serscikov, 2023), including the assassination of officers and nuclear scientists. In other words, to wage a twelve-day war against a regional power like Iran, Israel needed three things: instability within Iran; a permissive regional environment; and global chaos.

However, Israel's security dilemma did not end with the verbal ceasefire imposed by Trump on both sides. Iran demonstrated resilience by withstanding and retaliating against Israel, despite suffering disproportionate damage. But the war was primarily aimed at testing Iran's military capabilities and potential, and may become the initial phase of a broader confrontation, given favorable regional and international circumstances. The next phase might be Iran's internal destabilization.

Furthermore, on 9 September 2025, Israel targeted the Hamas negotiating delegation in Doha, Qatar—the negotiations' mediator and the U.S.'s strong ally. This came as yet another proof of Israel's desire to establish regional hegemony notwithstanding the cost. Moreover, the U.S. passivity in protecting Qatar obviously added to Saudi Arabia's feeling of insecurity about its alliance with the U.S. as it promptly signed a mutual defense pact with Pakistan, potentially expanding Pakistan's nuclear umbrella to the Middle East.

This spiral of actions and reactions, born of the countries' security concerns and apprehensions about other actors' behavior, reshapes the configuration of allied relations in the region.

ACQUIRING STRATEGIC DEPTH

Ideology, culture, and regime type inevitably influence a state's behavior. Accordingly, Israel is very unlikely to permit the consolidation of power in Syria by Ahmed al-Sharaa and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham,³ even if this can be avoided only through Syria's fragmentation or effective partition.

Israel sees Ahmed al-Sharaa's government as an extremist entity that is linked to anti-Israel terrorist groups and (perhaps more importantly) is supported by Turkey, a significant rival for regional hegemony. In

³ Designated a terrorist organization and banned in Russia.

essence, Israel seeks to prevent the rebirth of an anti-Israel axis, now including the regional power of Turkey.

This strategic reckoning explains Israel's continuation of operations within Syria, despite assurances from the Syrian Interim Government (including Ahmed al-Sharaa himself) that post-Assad Syria will not threaten Israel, and despite the new government's indirect talks with Israel to "contain tensions" (Bybelezer, 2023). Israeli operations have included strikes deep within Syrian territory, the occupation of certain areas, and support of minorities targeted by extremists. This seems less aimed at damaging Ahmed al-Sharaa's government, and more aimed at undermining Turkish proxies, curtailing Turkey's expansionist ambitions, and nipping its hegemony in the bud. (In a chaotic international system, states, fearing for their security, take actions that are perceived as threatening by others, leading to a spiral of mistrust and competition.)

This is particularly pronounced in certain areas of Syria, particularly with Druze and Alawite minority communities, which seek protection from extremist groups or the central government. Given the nature and origins of the current Syrian regime, and given the fragmentation of its affiliated militias, protection of the Druze and (potentially) Alawite minorities (Haski, 2025; Halabi, 2025) could provide Israel with strategic depth and even demographic resources. After a series of attacks on coastal Alawites (Reuters, 2025; The Syrian Observer of Human Rights, 2025), Israel intervened on behalf of the Druze, targeting the General Staff building, the Ministry of Defense, and the vicinity of the Presidential Palace (Ward and Boxerman, 2025), and forcing central government forces to withdraw from the Druze's region. This may lead to a buffer zone in southern Syria, which Israeli Defense Minister Katz has announced "will be a demilitarized zone" (The Jerusalem Post, 2025).

MAJOR MILESTONES

The case of Israel, pursuing its (perceived) security and regional dominance within this volatile landscape, exemplifies offensive realism in action: a relentless drive for relative power, the exploitation of opportunities, and a deep-seated mistrust of other actors' intentions.

Since Israel's establishment through UN Resolution 181 in 1947, it has undergone several stages as a burgeoning regional power:

Formation and consolidation of power (1947-1967): Israel's establishment and military buildup.

Internal and regional consolidation (1967-1979): Following the Six-Day War—in which Israel defeated Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and seized territory beyond its borders—Israel solidified its regional position through internal social consolidation, the achievement of strategic supremacy, and the 1973 War. After the latter, many Arab states, notably Syria, recognized that Israel could not be defeated through conventional warfare alone, and shifted towards the support of armed resistance groups.

Diplomatic engagement and regional agreements (1979-2001): The 1979 peace treaty with Egypt, the 1993 Oslo Accords with the PLO, and the 1994 Wadi Araba Treaty with Jordan. These accords did not establish lasting regional peace, but they provided Israel with security assurances from the signatories, allowing it to focus on the remaining regional threats.

Weakening opponents (2001-2025): Israel leveraged international and regional developments, such as 9/11 (2001), the U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003), and the Arab Spring (2011), which led to the fall of anti-Israeli regimes in Libya and Syria. Normalization efforts continued with the Abraham Accords, although the process has been frozen by the Gaza issue. Finally, Israel directly attacked Iranian-supported forces in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen.

Regional hegemony (2025-): The Israeli war against Iran marked a pivotal shift, signaling Israel's pursuit of military hegemony in the Middle East. Special operations have extended its influence through Syria and Lebanon. But challenges are possible from other regional powers, notably Turkey and Qatar.

Per Mearsheimer's theory, the Middle East's enduring conflict and instability are not merely the result of historical grievances or ideological differences, they are fundamentally rooted in the international system's anarchic structure and states' inherent drive to maximize their power and security. While acknowledging that other theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights into the complexities

of the Middle East, this analysis, grounded in John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, underscores the profound challenges to lasting peace and stability in the region.

Per offensive realism, the Middle East is likely to continue to feature intense competition. As regional powers relentlessly pursue relative influence and view each other's intentions with suspicion, the security dilemma is likely to remain a defining feature of the region. Absent a single dominant regional power capable of imposing order, or an end to international anarchy, the tragedy of power politics will continue, accompanied by tensions and the potential for renewed conflict.

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