The Balance of Power System of the Middle East[1]

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Since the onset of the Arab Spring, there has been a growing interest in the changing balance of power of the Middle East. The balance of power theory in global context has been extensively studied. However, little research has been dedicated to the theory's applicability solely at the regional level, especially with the contemporary Middle East in focus, while the region is suffering from armed conflicts involving virtually all the regional states as well as the great powers and many different non-state actors. This paper is an attempt to shed light on the applicability of the balance of power concept and the theory of omnibalancing in relation to the Middle East through reviewing the relevant literature.

Keywords: *balance of power, Middle East, omnibalancing, foreign intervention, proxy war*

Introduction

Recent studies have focused on the changing balance of power of the Middle East, however, the interpretation of this variously defined term/theory/concept remains a major issue for researchers. Since the end of the Cold War, many scholars have concluded that the balance of power is now outdated, and even some realists wonder if the concept still has relevance in the contemporary security environment. With regard to the balance of power of the Middle East, some argue that the balance of power theory is particularly inadequate as an explanation of developing world alignments because it does not consider specific characteristics of these regions.

According to previous studies, the competitive relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia today reflect the classical balance of power theory. However, the Middle East is currently suffering from armed conflicts involving virtually all the regional powers as well as the United States and Russia and many different non-state actors. The ongoing transformation of the region is mostly driven by local and regional factors, like the Arab Spring and the protracted civil wars as the drivers of an emerging new regional political order in the Middle East. This regional level conflict is more about establishing a balance of power,

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or about the dominance of the region, while the country-level wars are about which elites govern a given state.

Additionally, proxy wars and foreign interventions are becoming a determining phenomenon of the international relations in the 21st century, especially in the Middle East, where since the start of the Arab Spring one external military intervention follows another. One can see this happening in some countries struggling with civil wars and armed conflicts such as Libya, Iraq, Yemen and Syria. The empirical literature on the phenomenon of proxy wars and foreign military intervention has made considerable progress in the last few decades, but there is still much to learn about the subject.

This paper is an attempt to review and summarise the relevant scientific literature in order to show how the balance of power and its related theories can be applied in relation to the contemporary Middle East region. The first section covers the interpretation of the balance of power at the regional level, describing the basic conditions of a regional system/order and its way of operation. The second section discusses the theory of omnibalancing, as an alternative to the original balance of power for the developing countries with special characteristics, the third section describes the complexities of the post-Cold War power structure. The last section of the paper provides a brief concluding summary of the discussion, along with a brief mentioning of the paper's limitations.

Theory, concept, system and order

The balance of power is a variously defined and much debated theory. At the same time, it is one of the oldest and most enduring concepts of international relations. It basically suggests that security is enhanced when power is distributed relatively equally so that no single state is strong enough to dominate all others. This means, that in a regional balance of power system, the power held and exercised by states is constantly checked and somehow balanced by the power of the other actors. Simply put, as a country's power grows to the point that it threatens other powerful states, a counter-balancing coalition emerges to restrain the rising power, in order to avoid the formation of a hegemony. According to one definition 'at its essence, balance of power is a type of international order', although its normal operation as such is still unclear.[3] Nevertheless, according to classical and neoclassical realists, the balance of power is a basic value of international relations and world politics, as a 'desirable institution and a good thing to strive for because it prevents hegemonic world domination by any great power'.[4]

The minimum requirements for a balance of power system can include the existence of at least two or more actors of roughly equal power capabilities, states seeking to survive and preserve their autonomy, alliance flexibility and the ability to wage war if it is necessary. Nine conditions can be jointly sufficient to bring about an effectively performing balance of power system. These are the following: (1) at least two actors; (2) cautiousness; (3) readiness; (4) standing by the weaker or less threatening side; (5) power projection capabilities; (6) war

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[3]   Randall L Schweller, 'The Balance of Power in World Politics', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, May 9, 2016, 9.

[4]   Robert Jackson and Georg Sørensen, *Introduction to International Relations*. 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 70.

must be a legitimate tool; (7) smooth alliance formation; (8) pursuit of moderate war aims, and (9) striving for proportional compensations.[5]

Regarding the number of actors, for a balance of power to exist, obviously there must be at least two states that seek to survive under the anarchic conditions of the international relations, where the world lacks any supreme authority. States in a balance of power system act in ways that maximise their relative gains and avoid or minimise their relative losses.[6] States must be watchful and sensitive to changes in the distribution of capabilities with respect to actual or potential rivals and with regard to one's allies because the state must be able to recognise any deteriorating situation on either side and to take the necessary steps. As Gulick points out, states must not only be aware of any changes in the balance of power, they must be able to respond to them accordingly. Hence, 'policy must be continually readjusted to meet changing circumstances if an equilibrium is to be preserved'.[7] In addition, in a conflict states must join the less threatening side. States tend to flock to the weaker side, since the stronger side is what threatens them.[8] Structural realists argue that the most powerful state will always appear threatening because of the pervasive uncertainty. Thus, states flock to what they perceive as the less threatening side, whether it is the stronger or weaker.[9] It is important to note that 'it is not necessary that every state or even a majority of states balance against the stronger or more threatening side. Balancing behavior will work to maintain equilibrium or to restore a disrupted balance as long as the would-be hegemon is prevented from gaining preponderance […]. What matters is that enough power is aggregated to check preponderance'.[10]

Additionally, states must be able to project power through offensive military capabilities and war must be a legitimate tool of statecraft, since balancing behaviours are preparations for war actually.[11] It must be emphasised here, that the outbreak of war does not disconfirm, but in most cases, supports the theory, as the balancing of power rests on the expectation that states will settle their differences by fighting.[12] Furthermore, an effectively operating balance of power system requires continuous and unhindered alliance formation, which means that states must be able to align with other states freely, on the basis of power considerations, despite of the pre-existing 'alliance handicaps'.[13] For a balance of power system to operate, states should pursue moderate war aims and avoid eliminating main actors, since 'an equilibrium cannot perpetuate itself unless the major components of that equilibrium are preserved'.[14] Finally, in a balance of power system, proportional aggrandisement can maintain an existing equilibrium among the great powers through the

[5]   Schweller, 'The Balance of Power', 6–9.
[6]   Joseph M Grieco, *Cooperation among Nations: Europe, America and Non-tariff Barriers to Trade* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).
[7]   Howard E Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 68.
[8]   Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 127.
[9]   Stephen Walt, 'Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power', *International Security* 9, no 4 (1985), 3–43.
[10] Schweller, 'The Balance of Power', 7, 9.
[11] Robert Jervis, 'From Balance to Concert: A Study of International Security Cooperation', *World Politics* 38, no 1 (1985), 60.
[12] Harold Lasswell, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* (New York: Free Press, 1965).
[13] Jervis, 'From Balance to Concert', 60.
[14] Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*, 72–73.

prevention of any great power from making unfair relative gains at the expense of the others.[15]

In effect, all these conditions are met in case of the Middle East region, however, they need to be discussed further, since they can be debated or questioned. Nevertheless, there are sufficient number of regional powers under anarchic conditions.[16] States in the region are vigilant, that is, very sensitive to changes in the distribution of capabilities, and most of them are able to respond quickly and decisively to these changes in the balance of power. Additionally, states tend to flock to the weaker or less threatening side of a conflict, the regional powers are able to project power, war is a legitimate tool of statecraft, and the states in the region are pursuing moderate war aims and avoiding eliminating main actors so far. Perhaps the only problematical condition in case of the Middle East is the one which requires continuous and easy alliance formation. However, taking into consideration the warming Israel–Saudi relations – which was unthinkable a few years ago –maybe it can be concluded that today there are no alliance handicaps in the region.

Since this argument is about a regional balance of power system as an international order, it must be mentioned here how this term applies to the Greater Middle East[17] region. There are three types of balance of power systems. Structural realists believe in the 'automatic version' of the theory, whereby the balance in the system is spontaneously generated, self-regulating and basically an unintended outcome of power politics. According to the earlier 'semi-automatic' version of the theory, a 'balancer' state must throw its weight on one side of the scale or the other to regulate the system. And there is also the British School's version of a 'manually operated' system, where the state of equilibrium is the result of human contrivance.[18] It might be argued that the regional balance of power system of the Middle East region is an automatic one by default. However, when one takes into considerations the recent increase in the number of foreign interventions and the question of proxy wars, it can be considered rather a semi-automatic system.

A system exhibits order when there is an identifiable pattern in the relationship of its actors, or rather some discernible organising principle. When the operation of a system is highly predictable, order prevails, while disorder is a condition of randomness. The degree of order is partly a function of stability, which is the property of a system that causes it to return to its original condition after it has been disturbed from a state of equilibrium. Some

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[15] Schweller, 'The Balance of Power', 9.

[16] As Spykman noted: 'It is obvious that a balance of power policy is in the first place a policy for the Great Powers. The small states, unless they can successfully combine together, can only be weights in a balance used by others.' See Nicholas J Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), 20; Regional power can be defined as a power that is effective in its own region, but has limited global effect, while it can have an impact on the policies of great powers. Additionally, regional power could be defined as a state that has a hegemonic function and potential in its region. See Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: the Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 37.

[17] The Middle East has always been a very vague term, in which countries were added and removed depending on the context. Our research area as the Greater Middle East and North Africa includes countries from West Africa to India (including Iran, Israel, Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan). In this regard, we use the term Middle East not as a merely geographical term to describe a region that lies between Asia and Africa, but more as a political one, as was introduced by George W Bush in 2004.

[18] Schweller, 'The Balance of Power', 5; Inis L Claude, Jr, *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962), 43–51; Michael Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007), 67.

orders are durable, while others are unstable. Especially complex and delicately balanced systems, which may appear orderly at one moment but can become unpredictable and disorderly quiet unexpectedly.[19]

According to one definition of social order, international orders vary according to the amount of order displayed; whether the order is purposive or unintended; and the type of mechanisms that provide order.[20] On the one hand, there is rule-governed, purposive order, while on the other hand, there is an international order with entirely unintended recurrent patterns.[21] Here, in case of a regional balance of power system, international order is spontaneously generated and mainly self-regulating, since balance of power arises, though none of the actors may seek actual equality of power. All states may seek greater power than the others, but their power maximising actions produces the unintended consequence of a balance of power. As one theorist puts it, 'the actors are constrained by a system that is the unintended product of their coactions'.[22] The predictability of a social system partly depends on its degree of complexity. The operation of a balance of power system is relatively automatic and predictable, since it only requires states seeking to survive through pursuing power and security in an anarchic, self-help international system.[23] However, it is important to note here, that the balance of power systems does not function always properly and predictably, as balancing behaviour can be late, uncertain, or non-existent.[24]

Omnibalancing and foreign interventions in the Middle East

If one really intends to adapt the balance of power theory to the Middle East region, one must look at the possible balancing behaviours of the regional actors, which may serve as evidence for an operating regional balance of power system. For example, one must examine the alliance formation processes in the region. Alliances are usually viewed as a response to threats, yet there is still no agreement on what that response will be. States may either *balance*, that is, ally in opposition to the main source of danger, or ally with the state that poses the major threat, in one word, *bandwagon*.[25] Walt argues that if balancing is more common than bandwagoning, then states are more secure because aggressors will face combined opposition. But if bandwagoning is more prevalent, then security is scarce because aggression is rewarded. Walt in his Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power presents each hypothesis in its simplest form and then revises them, arguing that balancing prevails over bandwagoning.[26] On the other hand, some scholars claim that states

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[19] Schweller, 'The Balance of Power', 9.

[20] Hedley Bull, *Anarchical Society*. 3rd ed. (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 3–22.

[21] There are three types of international orders: a negotiated or rule-based order, an imposed or non-voluntary order among unequal actors, and a spontaneously or automatically generated self-regulating order, which is an unintended consequence of actors seeking only to maximise their power.

[22] Schweller, 'The Balance of Power', 10.

[23] Richard K Betts, 'Systems for Peace or Causes of War? Collective Security, Arms Control, and the New Europe', *International Security* 17, no 1 (1992), 11–12.

[24] Schweller, 'The Balance of Power', 11.

[25] Here we use the terms 'balancing' and 'bandwagoning' as Walt used them. Walt's use of these terms follows that of Kenneth Waltz. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Walt, 'Alliance Formation', 4; Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 122–124.

[26] Walt, 'Alliance Formation'.

have bandwagoned with or hid from threats far more often than they have balanced against them. Others, for instance argue that bandwagoning is more prevalent.[27] Furthermore, some find that balancing is relatively rare, since balances of power sometimes form, but there is no general tendency toward this outcome. States frequently wait, bandwagon, or, much less often, balance.[28]

As Steven R David points out in his Explaining Third World Alignment, while most of the earth's people live in developing, or, according to Cold War terminology, in Third World[29] countries, the foreign policy of these states and especially why they align as they do remains overlooked and under-researched. He argues that balance of power theory is particularly inadequate as an explanation of developing world alignments because it does not take into account specific characteristics of these regions. He suggests that the theory of 'omnibalancing' can be applied in case of the developing world, since it draws upon the key assumptions of balance of power while also correcting those elements that make it inapplicable to these regions. Thus, omnibalancing agrees with the core assumption of balance of power, that is: threats will be resisted. But, whereas balance of power focuses on the state's need to counter threats from other states, omnibalancing considers both internal and external threats to the leadership.[30] The theory of omnibalancing combines the need of leaders to appease secondary adversaries, as well as to balance against both internal and external threats in order to survive in power, taking into consideration the common conditions of the developing countries that leaders are generally weak and illegitimate and that the stakes for domestic politics are usually high. This theory assumes that the most important determinant of alignment is the drive of these weak and illegitimate leaders to ensure their political and physical survival.[31]

So, the main difference between balance of power theory and omnibalancing is that the latter asserts that realism must be broadened to examine internal threats in addition to focusing on external threats and capabilities, and that the leader of the state rather than the state itself should be used as the level of analysis. Despite important differences among the states considered developing states of the region in question, there are fundamental similarities among them, like their situation in which internal threats are far more likely to challenge their leader's hold on power than external threats from other countries. As David notes, the leaders of developing countries must pay more attention to retaining their hold on power, especially in the face of domestic challenges, while internal threats are more prevalent in these countries due to their special characteristics. We should bear in

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[27]   Schweller, 'The Balance of Power', 11–12.

[28]   Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 196.

[29]   During the Cold War, the Third World referred to the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, the nations that are not aligned with either NATO or the Communist Bloc. Since the end of the Cold War, this terminology has been used less and less, and it is being replaced with terms such as developing countries or least developed countries. Researchers normally prefer the term developing countries; however, its definition is not universally agreed upon, and there is also no clear agreement on which countries fits this category. According to the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook Database of October 2018, the following are considered developing economies of the Greater Middle East or Region: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Yemen. (International Monetary Fund, 'World Economic Outlook', October 2018.)

[30]   Steven R David, 'Explaining Third World Alignment', *World Politics* 43, no 2 (1991), 233.

[31]   Ibid. 236.

mind that the great majority of them had been colonies out of which foreign powers created states where none had existed before. Thus, many began and remain more an artificial construct than a coherent unit. In many cases the state is often simply just the representative of a group that holds power in the capital. In consideration of this, legitimacy is likely to be weaker for the leaders of developing countries. It is also important to note, that since the consequence of loss of power in the developing countries of the Middle East region is often loss of life, leaders are understandably more aggressive than other leaders in their efforts to maintain their hold on power. Most of these states are governed by authoritarian rule, which also means that decisions in foreign policy are usually made by a single individual or by a narrow elite, perhaps.[32]

One of the unique characteristics of the Middle East region is the interrelationship between internal and external threats, since leaders and insurgents in the region commonly seek outside support to advance their interests, and their requests for help are often granted by outside states.[33] As David notes, internal threats are so prevalent in these countries that they represent an ideal vehicle for advancing the interests of foreign actors and outside states. Since the leadership of these states is often determined by the outcome of internal threats and conflicts, foreign actors with a special interest in the state's affairs may seek to influence that outcome. This generalisation about the developing countries of the Greater Middle East region is not intended to suggest that all of them share these characteristics equally, since we are all aware that different states manifest different strengths and weaknesses.[34]

It is important to note that at present, there are no studies confirming the overall applicability of omnibalancing to the developing countries of the Greater Middle East, and only an in-depth analysis of the region's alignment decisions could do that. However, in our opinion, with regard to the role of proxy wars and foreign interventions in the balance of power system of the greater Middle East, the logic of omnibalancing provides a better guide or additional explanation for foreign policy decisions.

The post-Cold War regional power structure

Currently, the Middle East is suffering from armed conflicts involving virtually all the regional states as well as the United States and the Russian Federation, and many different non-state actors. It is also important to note that while the Russian Federation and the United States are still engaged in the region's conflicts, the transformation ongoing today is mostly driven by local and regional factors, like the Arab Spring and the ongoing civil wars as the drivers of an emerging new regional political order in the Middle East.[35]

The current power dynamics in the Middle East can be traced back to the onset of the Cold War and the simultaneous emergence of many of the Arab countries from the rule

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[32] Ibid. 238–240.
[33] Herbert K Tillema, 'Foreign Overt Military Intervention in the Nuclear Age', *Journal of Peace Research* 26, no 2 (1989), 179–185; Sebastian von Einsiedel et al., 'Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict', *United Nations University Centre for Policy Research*, Occasional Paper 10, March 2017.
[34] David, 'Explaining Third World Alignment', 239–242.
[35] Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

of European colonialism into independence. It was the collapse of the global Cold War system nearly four decades later that set the Middle East on its current course. The end of the Cold War, and the period of American unipolarity that followed, led to a regional power imbalance, which the Middle East still contends with today. However, the conflict in the Middle East is more than just about revisionist and status quo powers, since the civil wars turned the region into a tripartite system, consisting of a struggle for power between Iranian, Arab and Turkish nationalisms.[36]

The advent of the Cold War and the security and economic needs of independent Arab states resulted in a situation that started to mimic the bipolar structure of the international system, dividing the Arab world into two camps. The Cold War period engendered a Middle East political order that persisted from the 1940s until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, which ultimately resulted in significant global geopolitical changes that contributed to the current power struggles that can be seen in the Middle East today. This geopolitical transformation created a new power structure for the region, consisting of states tilted towards the United States like Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, U.A.E. and Egypt on one side, and a revisionist front on the other side with Iran in the lead, along with Syria tilted towards Russia, and with non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas, that have arrayed themselves to resist U.S. influence in the Middle East.[37]

Beyond doubt, the formal collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 delivered a final blow to the Cold War regional order of the Middle East. There were several important effects of this event for all states. For instance, once Soviet allies like Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen had to reconfigure their economic and political establishment, as well as their foreign policies. Additionally, former Soviet allies also lost their security umbrellas and their ideological source, while the end of the Cold War ended the regional power balance. It is no mere coincidence that these states are civil war-torn countries today.[38] After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States remained the sole superpower, pursuing the policy of dual containment towards Iraq and Iran, in effect imposing a Pax Americana on the Middle East in the absence of a global rival.[39] Years later, in the immediate wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, when the United States brooked no active resistance by Middle Eastern regimes, this unipolarity translated into military invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. By then it became more and more obvious, that the unity of the Arab world has been finally broken, if it has existed at all. These events turned out to be good opportunities for Iran to build deterrence against possible U.S. and Israeli invasions and to develop the wherewithal to push back against the regional influence of the United States.[40] The so-called Arab Spring standing for a series of pro-democracy uprisings that enveloped several largely Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, signalled a new era for the Middle East.[41] Eventually, the American unipolarity led to a new rivalrous

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[36] Ross Harrison, 'Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: A Historical Perspective', *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, September 2, 2018, 14.
[37] Ibid. 8.
[38] Ibid. 6.
[39] F Gregory Gause, 'The Illogic of Dual Containment', *Foreign Affairs* 73, no 2 (1994), 56–66.
[40] Kayhan Barzegar, 'Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Invasion Iraq', *Middle East Policy* 15, no 4 (2008), 47–58.
[41] Erzsébet N Rózsa, 'Új világrend a Közel-Keleten?', *Nemzet és Biztonság: Biztonságpolitikai Szemle* 4, no 2 (2011), 2; Erzsébet N Rózsa, *Az arab tavasz: A Közel-Kelet átalakulása* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó – Külügyi és Külgazdasági Intézet, 2015).

power structure in the region, defined by competing Sunni and Shi'i sectarian identities, and Iranian and Arab nationalisms, while during the Cold War, the Middle East reflected the simple bipolarity of the international system.[42]

After the Arab Spring: A multilayered and dysfunctional power system

The Arab Spring forced all the regional powers to manage the 'revolution' and to try to find a new Middle Eastern order. In their search for this new order, Saudi Arabia and Iran are acting on their claims to regional leadership, keeping in mind their national interests and foreign policy priorities.[43] As some point out, 'after the US invasion of Iraq, Iran's increasing power projection in the region has increased its area of influence through its support for the pro-Iranian Shia in Iraq, the Shi'ite opposition in Bahrain and the increased activity of the Shi'ite population in western Saudi Arabia, through the mobilization of the Zaydis of Yemen against the Saudi-backed Yemeni government, and the conversion of Alawites to Shi'ism in Syria'.[44] In addition, there must be mentioned the Iranian support for the Shi'ite Hazara people in Afghanistan, Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Thus, in the last two decades Iran has built its regional alliances by promoting itself as an 'axis of resistance', while also pursuing a nuclear program as a critical element to increase internal national solidarity, as well as to bolster its claim for regional leadership in a new order. At the beginning of the Arab Spring, Iran even supported the protest movements, as the reaction of Muslim peoples against 'the Western-supported secular dictators'.[45]

Saudi Arabia is, beyond doubt, one of the most important countries in the Middle East, as a close ally of the United States, a supporter of various Salafist movements, and a leading state of the 'Sunni bloc' against Iran. According to Duran and Yilmaz, the Saudi model represents a conservative Wahhabi authoritarian regime. Even though it is a pro-status quo model, it still has an important role in shaping the new regional order. Saudi Arabia provided asylum to the fallen leader of Tunisia, supported Mubarak and the *coup d'état* in Egypt, and sent troops of the Gulf Cooperation Council to Bahrain, in order to maintain the regional status quo. However, Saudi Arabia supported the forces of the Arab Spring when the revolts appeared in favour of Riyad in Libya, Syria and partially Yemen, even though they threatened the regional status quo. Saudi Arabia follows sectarian and polarising policies by utilising the Iranian threat to gain the leadership role of its Sunni bloc. Saudi Arabia's basic role, as a leading member state of the GCC, has long been the protector of the Gulf monarchies against Iraqi and Iranian influence, and Riyad still wishes to be the guardian of the status quo.[46]

The civil wars in Yemen, Syria and Iraq turned into hotly contested proxy battles between formerly coexisting regional powers, and these wars created security vacuums that presented good opportunities for Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey to project their power. These

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[42] Harrison, 'Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power', 9.
[43] Burhanettin Duran and Nuh Yilmaz, 'Islam, Models and the Middle East: The New Balance of Power Following the Arab Spring', *Perceptions* 18, no 4 (2013), 140–141.
[44] Ibid. 143.
[45] Ibid. 143–147.
[46] Duran and Yilmaz, 'Islam, Models and the Middle East', 147–148.

regional powers are pulled into these armed conflicts by 'vertical contagion', which means that conflicts do not just spread across borders horizontally to vulnerable neighbouring states, but also vertically to stronger and larger regional powers.[47] The civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya have transformed into a regional conflict among the major regional powers, where, as Harrison emphasises it, 'a vicious competition for short-term regional dominance completely overshadows longer-term shared interests of a stable and prosperous Middle East'.[48] This regional level civil war is more about establishing a balance of power, or about the dominance of the region, while the country-level wars are about which elites govern the state.

The Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War has added a new layer of complexity to the distribution of power in the Middle East, turning the region into a three-layered power system. As Harrison points out, the first layer is the battle for the state being fought between the rebels and government in each civil war in question. The second layer is the battle for regional dominance being waged between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. And the third is the competition between Washington and Moscow, in Syria and the broader region. Today the main element of the regional power politics is the contest between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, playing out in the region's civil wars along indigenous ideological lines, while this time the United States and Russia shares some common interests in the Middle East, such as regional stability, counterterrorism and the cooperative management of the refugee crisis. As Harrison notes, 'while this is a multi-layered system consisting of local, regional and international actors, it is far more complex than the Cold War system of the past'.[49]

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shed light on the applicability of the balance of power concept and the theory of omnibalancing in relation to the Greater Middle East region. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many scholars of international relations have come to believe that the balance of power theory is now obsolete. According to liberal critics, international politics has been transformed as democracy expands, as interdependence and international institutions get stronger. Even some realist thinkers wonder if balance of power still operates at the global level in our contemporary world. Balancing behaviour practically makes no sense in today's world, since nuclear arsenals assure great powers of the ultimate invulnerability of their sovereignty.[50] However, this does not necessarily mean that the theory of balance of power cannot be applied at the regional level, for instance to the Middle East.

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[47]   Harrison, 'Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power', 9; Erika Forsberg, 'Transnational Dimensions of Civil Wars: Clustering, Contagion, and Connectedness', in *What Do We Know about Civil Wars?* ed. by T. David Mason and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell (Lanham – Boulder – New York – London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 75–90.

[48]   Harrison, 'Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power', 10.

[49]   Ibid. 11.

[50]   Edward Rhodes, 'A World Not in the Balance: War, Politics, and Weapons of Mass Destruction', in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, ed. by T V Paul, James J Wirtz and Michel Fortmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

The competitive relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia today reflect the classical balance of power theory, which in the narrow and simple sense can be described as a condition and structure with no hegemonic power among states and where states have relatively equal or similar powers. Balance of power is a realist concept and a separate theory at the same time, that is, a theoretical concept.[51] Balance of power also offers a structural approach according to which bipolar or multipolar balance of power structures emerge in the international regional system. With regard to the Middle East region, it is probable to notice a multipolar structure in the region, while balance of power could be established either bilaterally or multilaterally. Balance of power is fundamentally related to the international distribution of power. If the theoretical concept is adopted to the Middle East, there is a simple balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the narrow sense, while the complex balance of power – which refers to the condition of more than two rivalries – may include Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel as regional powers.

A fundamental concept of the realist school of international relations is that states seek to maximise security by maintaining a balance of power, whether in response to a growth in capabilities[52] or a growth in threats.[53] Accordingly, in response to the growing power and perceived as threatening behaviour of Iran, realism predicts rational actors, whose security is threatened by such a shift in power capabilities, will begin to balance Iran. Thus, actions taken by states like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Israel can be considered understandable. Additionally, since Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt formulated the simple balancing and bandwagoning behaviours,[54] developments in the discipline of international relations over the past decades have identified a wider array of potential state behaviours including buck-passing (or free-riding), soft balancing, omnibalancing, underbalancing, offshore-balancing and so on. This variety of possible balancing behaviours might provide alternative theories to account for certain nations' foreign policy.

This paper focused on the applicability of the balance of power theory at the regional level as an order forming principle in case of the Middle East, offering an alternative with the introduction of the theory of omnibalancing. However, there are no studies confirming the overall applicability of omnibalancing to the developing countries of the region. Future in-depth analysis of the region's alignment decisions should provide evidence for that.

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