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Middle Eastern Studies and Theories of International Relations

As J. Bill wrote, summarizing academic research into the region, "political processes in the Middle East resist observation, discourage generalization and defy explanation".[1] Others draw the attention to the fact that if we start out from the mainstream theories of international relations and try to apply their methodology, the empirics will resist analysis. Realism and neorealism both consider the fundamental characteristics of states to be uniform, but while the former acknowledges the significance of certain national features, the latter focuses on the systemic context affecting all actors in the international system. Up to the end of the Second World War, and even into the initial period of the cold war, realist theories giving priority to the concepts of security and anarchy could be applied easily to analyzing relations between European states and to Soviet-American relations. However, these same theories proved to be less suitable as to the Middle East, since in this region inter-ethnic cooperation was historically much more intensive, the development of statehood much weaker, and until the Second World War the regional states system was still in the making. Nevertheless, the realist approach found empirical support in the ceaseless rivalry of empires for security over the 19th and in the early 20th century, as evidenced by the Ottoman Empire's attempts at alliance-building, just as in the formation of alliances between Arab and non-Arab states, such as the Arab League, the Baghdad Pact, the Gulf Cooperation Council, or the different bilateral agreements during the Cold War between the United States and Israel, or between Iran, the Soviet Union, Syria or Egypt. According to the realist approach, it is the vital interest of states to maintain their position and power, and to counter threats from others in the interest of their survival. Those planning and implementing such policies are the dominant and hegemonic powers, as they are the ones that have the necessary resources required to influence the international system. The history of Europe, Asia and America is the history of hegemonic powers, while, on the contrary, the Middle East has no such history, even if Egypt has been traditionally referred to as the 'natural' leader of the Arab world, a position which Egypt did hold at times under the charismatic leadership of Nasser. But it never had sufficient economic and military power to become the organizer of the regional system for an extended period of time, and, accordingly, establish and maintain the necessary institutions. On the basis of its claim to religious primacy and its oil resource, Saudi Arabia also possesses similar characteristics, but its population is far smaller than the size desirable for a major power. Iraq, Syria, just as pre- and post-revolutionary Iran have also tried to secure the position of regional leadership, but these attempts have repeatedly ended up in failure in terms of organizing the regional system and

[1] BILL, "The Study of Middle East Politics 1946-1996: A Stocktaking", p. 503.

stabilizing institutionalized leadership (hegemonic stability). Israel could be considered an exception, as on the basis of its military, economic and technological potential it is a regional major power, but it has failed to create a regional system that could be expected of its great power's status. It has remained isolated and a source of division in the region, while its dependence on the United States is considerable, and the internal composition of its population is no less problematic.[2]

The above explain why research into the Middle East is faced with complex theoretical and methodological puzzles. No theory or level of analysis offers a satisfactory method to analyze the changing dynamics of regional politics, the international politics of the region, or to interpret the simultaneous existence of conflict and cooperation. One of the main reasons for this lies in the fragile relationship between the states and their identities, and this fact also helps explain the relative weakness of the states, which is also caused by the weakness of regional institutions and the low level of interdependence among the states.

Regional Middle Eastern studies and the theories and methods of international relations obviously influence each other, and the deepening of the mutual influence may yield considerable profits for both disciplines. The theory of international relations must not ignore the results of case studies dealing with the region, and it is also in the interest of regional studies to rely on the elaborate theories and methodological approaches of international relations in analyzing the region. A welcome development of recent years has been that international theory and regional research, among others in the works of F. Halliday, R. Hinnebusch and L. Fawcett, have achieved a new level of integration.[3] The following analysis seeks to polemically point out what difficulties the science of international relations faces in exploring regional developmental processes, what means and instruments it has for analyzing the foreign and security policies of the Middle Eastern region. First of all, this paper tries to answer the question of how to interpret the international relations of the region, proceeding on to the question whether there is an organized Middle Eastern region, and if so, what its specific characteristics are, and what requirements regional analysis sets for theories and methods.

The Middle East as an international sub-system and as a region

Studying the international relations of the Middle Eastern region raises two questions of primary significance: one inquires about the nature of the subject, and the other refers to the theories and methods applied. We come across the first difficulty when trying to determine the region itself. Of course, this problem is not only relevant in the case of the Middle East. Research into a number of other world regions raises the problem of how to determine their borders and how to categorize their regional characteristics. For example, scientists have long been discussing the question whether Latin America can be clearly defined as a region. Similarly, the question arises today

[2] Cf. FAWCETT, "Alliance, Cooperation and Regionalism in the Middle East", pp. 189-193.

[3] HALLIDAY, *The Middle East in International Relations*; HINNEBUSCH, *The International Politics of the Middle East*, ; FAWCETT (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East*.

whether East Asia can be considered a region. The dispute has raised rather conflicting views on what constitutes a “region” as such.

The concept of the Middle East came into widespread usage after the Second World War, replacing earlier more limited definitions like the ‘Near East’. The term Middle East refers today to the region that includes the Arab states of Western Asia and North Africa (all members of the Arab League), and non-Arab states like Iran, Turkey and Israel. Some experts define a narrower region, excluding the Arab states to the west of Egypt, which may be described as Mediterranean, while others would extend the region to include Central Asian Muslim republics. The question then arises quite justifiably whether, taking extreme complexity of its history, geography and culture into consideration, the Middle East can be considered a coherent region, and whether it makes any sense to make general statements about the international relations of such a diverse group of states?

In spite of the problems of definition, it is still possible to say that the states of the region share a group of characteristics. These characteristics may include political ones (the low level of democratization, the dominance of authoritarian systems), economic ones (rentier and non-rentier economies, low level of economic liberalization), and cultural ones (Arabic, Islamic backgrounds). The former constitute characteristics that enable us to consider the Middle East as a distinguishable system or sub-system within a larger international system. It does not follow from this, however, that the whole region behaves in a uniform way. The modern states of the Arab Middle East were formed in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the peace conferences following the First World War. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, while the Turks and the Arabs were ready for state building, they were less prepared to establish contacts with the whole international system. The experience of the Ottoman reforms left to the Arab world the important heritage of statecraft: In 1919 the Arab peoples were ready to create statehood, while at the same time they did not possess any experience in the field of diplomacy, since in the Ottoman period their relations with the European powers were all maintained through the mediation of Istanbul. Under Ottoman rule, Arab countries were provinces of a single state rather than distinct states with well-defined national borders, and for this reason they could not have sufficient experience in dealing with other Arab communities as foreign states. The Arabs did not have a say in the new territorial order established under the auspices of the League of Nations, which was constructed following the First World War. In the end, their territories were entrusted to colonial powers in the form of mandates. The nationalist movements fighting against colonial rule developed within the framework of these new states/mandate territories. This heritage formed the Arab world into a region in which the nation-state-centric nationalism of the national movements fighting for independence was present simultaneously with the idealized concept of Arab unity. After gaining independence, the Arab states were divided by different political parties and infightings. This division could already be observed in the first Palestinian crisis (1947-1949), which proved to be the first test of the newly independent community of Arab states. At the same time, the new states of the Middle East have turned out to be surprisingly stable, even if their emergence had laid the foundations for several conflicts that have significantly influenced the development of the whole region up until the present.

The extended definition of the Middle East as a region rightly raises the question whether the region can be considered to exist as a coherent unit, or rather as a group of discreet parts that are nevertheless linked to each other. As long as the division of the region into sub-groups proves to be necessary, the next question to be raised remains what kind of regional subcategories are the most productive for analysis, and who is in a position to determine them. In general, these are the key questions that can be asked not only in terms of the Middle East, but also referring to other regions of the international system. The notion of 'region' can be interpreted in a lot of different ways, ranging from the concept of geopolitical reality to 'imaginary communities', whose cohesion comes from common experience, identity and traditions. According to plain common sense, a region can be described as a group of nations on the basis of geographical connections and interdependence.[4] Alternative approaches are focusing on complexes or regional types of security and conflict.[5] When considering the Middle East as a region, we can see how useful the elements of such definitions can be: It is geography, history and common issues that really "constitute" a region. It is beyond doubt that achieving lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as consolidation in Iraq require solutions involving the whole region. But security and interdependence alone are not equivalent with cooperation. The deep division of the region is evident not only in the conflict between Israel and the Arab states, the rentier and non-rentier economies, the weak and the strong states, or states and the nations without states, but also in the fact, that in spite of all the efforts by the United States and the European Union, attempts to create the "pan-regional" institutions that could comprise the whole region and that could balance against the Pan-Arab or Pan-Islamic ones, have all failed. The characteristics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the lack of mutual recognition, show that the region still possesses the characteristics of the period preceding the state-centric Westphalia system. There are also remarkable differences as to the interpretation of the state, as the types of states involved range from the establishment of the homogeneous nation state of Israel to the different versions of the Palestinian state with limited sovereignty. If there has existed any kind of cooperation within the region, it had been the result of "the interference" of external actors, and the resulting structures have often proved fragile and fragmented. Alliances formed in such a crisis-ridden region have been understandably so to foster institutional cooperation, which has progressed very slowly.

Nevertheless, interpreting the 'wider Middle East' as a region or as a system is a useful political tool or means of analysis, even though many experts regard it to be too limiting and artificial. The internal divisions of the region serve, among others, to shed light on the types of cooperation and preference formation that exist in a system. The Arab states, for example, obviously constitute a system, despite the relative absence of long term institutional cohesion, which the existence of the Arab League could alleviate only in certain periods. We can arrive at another type of classification if we follow sub-regional considerations, when groups of Arab and non-Arab states form groups from varying perspectives, as in the case of the Maghreb or the Gulf region. A major problem of determining sub-regions in the Middle East lies in the fact that they mostly reflect the operations of external powers. This is why in determining regions

[4] NYE (ed.), *International Regionalism, p.* vii.

[5] Cf. BUZAN and WAEVER, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security.*

and their components it is important to first analyze the question of regional institutions. We may arrive at different regionalisms on the basis of different layouts, there is no such thing as an ideal model. Europe is often cited as an example, but European experiences also cannot be indiscriminately transferred to the Middle Eastern region. Thus, in the debate on regionalism and regionalization, it is essential to think not only in terms of European-type institutions and structures, but to apply regionalism as a means of researching and exploring broader types of conflict and cooperation.

Regionalism is very important in the debate on Middle Eastern cooperation, as a process in which states and non-state actors pursue common objectives and strategies and develop common policies in a given region. If we think of cooperation as a continuum, its 'softer' end can be regional awareness, or progress toward a regional international society, while the 'harder' end is constituted by formal agreements and organizations. The continuum includes not only state actors, but also relationships between groups and individuals, *i.e.* transnational, non-governmental actors, which might play an important part in enhancing cooperation. Of course, these transnational relations include also networks that consist of radical, criminal and terrorist groups, among others. Regionalization means an increase in region-based interactions and activities, rather than conscious policies. At the same time, similarly to globalization, regionalization can also be the result of spontaneous forces, and, as such, may precede institutional agreements, or may arise from them. Regionalization is commonly described as the concentration of economic, societal or security activities, sometimes in anticipation of formal organizations. The regionalization of security captures how states and other actors become important suppliers of security, replacing, and sometimes complementing the role of the great powers and the United Nations.

The debate on the dual nature of regionalism and regionalization was given growing attention following the end of the cold war. This debate is important for the Middle East not because the region shows an abundance of successful regional cooperation, but because it shows the low degree of the development of regionalism.[6] In other regions of the world the significance of regional actors in peace-keeping and other areas tends to be on the rise. Regionalism has produced phenomena in Europe, America, South-East Asia and Africa unambiguously signal the emergence of new elements in the respective economic and security communities, while in this respect the Middle East is still lagging behind if compared to other regions. The reasons for this are multiple. First of all, regional institutions encompassing the whole region do not exist, free trade is still rather restricted, no security community has emerged, and the region also lacks common ideals. In spite of the hopeful advances made during the 1990s, the different regional groups and initiatives have remained constrained, some of them are still being discussed, and they have only produced a rather weak economic and political cooperation. The region is divided and held together by several simultaneous identities. This fact has been and will be influencing elections affecting the region and the results of political processes. In Europe the construction of a shared identity is still in its infancy, and this kind of development originates from a special form of regional integration. When the states of the region feel threatened by Israel,

[6] AARTS, "The Middle East: A Region without Regionalism or the End of Exceptionalism", pp. 911-925.

Iran or falling oil prices, politics of identity can hardly provide shelter. Action has other compelling reasons. European development has been dependent on American power, the security community based on the common threat, and shared economic interests. Similar reasons explain the relative success of other regional forms of cooperation, like *e.g.* in the case of Mercosur. In the Middle East, however, the trend of regionalization suffers from the same lack of legitimacy as the formation of a state. The region has been largely shaped by external powers, what is more, the external powers have contributed to the democratic deficit prevailing in the region, not least because they have been supporting, and they are still supporting, the authoritarian rentier economies of the region. As a result of the history of foreign power activity, it is understandable that from a 21st century perspective many think it productive to look at the region through the spectacles of the United States.[7] As a final conclusion we may say that neither regionalism nor regionalization can exert a significant effect in the region as yet.[8]

Transnational actors and the role of identity in the Middle East

With a view to the theories applied, we regard it as a premise that the development of the region can only be interpreted properly if the analysis is not restricted to the inter-state relations in the narrow sense of the word, but it is extended also to examining the interactions of non-state, non-territorial (non-sovereign) actors, peoples and societies, and to analyzing transnational politics and trans-governmental networks. This aspect is also justified by the fragility of the states of the region, as well as by the existence of failed states and stateless nations (Kurds, Palestinians). An international relations approach that extends to both 'sub-state' and 'super-state' actors is indispensable in analyzing the Middle Eastern region: For the historiographers of the regions, 'non-state' is often equivalent to 'normal', and succinctly captures how Middle Eastern societies should be analyzed. To briefly illustrate the above, it is enough to point out that for most of the 20th century, ideologies including Pan-Arabism and/or Islam were considered to be an important constituent of the region's international relations. Tribal and religious identities co-determining regional behaviour have, historically, preceded the emergence of state borders. The new borders, in most cases, did not put an end to tribal and religious links, but they usually continued without effective state control. It can also be established that state borders arbitrarily drawn by the colonial powers have, indeed, never fulfilled their function of dividing the different communities from each other, according to tribal or/and religious differences. Even though at the beginning of the 21st century some states have grown stronger, the question of tribal and religious belonging has remained a policy-forming factor that cannot be ignored. Several regional experts warn that in the Middle East no analyst of international politics can understand the region unless they allow for the ups and downs of identity politics.[9] The emergence of radical Islamist terrorism highlights this aspect especially well. Today, networks of radical Islamist groups have undermined the

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7 KATZENSTIEN, *A World of Regions. Asia and Europe in the American Imperium*, pp. 234-242.

8 FAWCETT, *op. cit.,* p. 195.

9 Cf. TELHAMI and BARNETT, (eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*.

fragile legitimacy of several states, and the states themselves can, sooner or later become targets for external intervention. It is well-known that in 2002 and 2003 Afghanistan and Iraq were encouraging radical Islamist networks, which eventually led to the American intervention and contributed to overthrowing the power of the governments in office.

In most Middle Eastern societies, Islam as the dominant religion has had a tremendous effect on both states and non-state actors, including norms of managing international relations and how international relations should be conceived of. The concept of national sovereignty exercised a strong enough influence – often with religious connotations – to counter European imperialisms, and leaders of the new secular states have also found it useful from time to time to explain their foreign policies also from a religious point of view, thus legitimizing them, and invoking in many cases the idea of an Islamic state. In many respects Islamism used to perform the same functions as communism during the time of the cold war, but political Islam was considered a useful ally for the West, when later developments could not yet be foreseen. The geopolitical significance of energy has made it possible for the oil-producing states of the region to integrate Islamist ideology into their international interactions. Consequently, the relationship between the foreign and security policy of the countries of the region and Islam cannot be ignored. This also means that, in analyzing the states of the region, the methods of constructivism prove productive, contrary to the assumptions of realism which rest on the pursuit of national interest defined in objective terms and identified by statesmen. Constructivism takes as its starting point intersubjective meanings which participants of international politics use to define and interpret situations. Such a perspective is more congenial to the appreciation of cultural and identitarian factors in accounting for political action. This way, culture and identity are more than 'independent variables', they are also a methodological zero point implying the assumption that the 'Islamist' factor can be recognized, determined and separated from other variables. When discussing Islam and international relations, the task is not necessarily to determine a specific cause-and-effect relationship between religious faith or dogma and a specific type of political behaviour. The task is much more to understand how questions of global politics, through state and non-state actors, become embedded in language, symbols and values permeated by Islam, and can thus become the foundation of possible patterns of action in politics.[10]

In the Middle East, studying the relations between the foreign policy of the state and transnational actors, as well as focusing on the trans-nationalization of foreign and security policy can prove especially productive, since tribal and religious groups might as well be considered to be the oldest transnational actors. It is hardly possible to analyze the processes of the region without paying attention to the Shia-Sunni conflict, the Hezbollah, the Hamas, the Mahdi Army, the Taliban and al-Qaeda etc. As to the types of activities of transnational actors, dividing them into territorial, ideological-cultural and economic actors, after Christopher Hill, is very much applicable in this

[10] MANDAVILLE, "Islam and International Relations in the Middle East: From Umma to Nation State", p. 183.

context as well.[11] The territorial group of transnational actors includes stateless nations in the region, the Kurds and the Palestinians, who pursue a *de facto* foreign policy in order to achieve their goals. The ideological-cultural groups of transnational actors commit themselves to spreading ideas, while they do not attribute special significance to territorial aspects. Aside from various non-governmental organizations, various Islamist groups also belong to this category, including militant Islamic activists seeking to integrate religion, state and civil society, a case in point being the Muslim Brotherhood. It is important to answer the question how transnational actors are able to evade governmental control and influence the domestic structures of states, how they are able to influence societies, what "linkages" can develop between transnational actors and the societies. For example, a "reactive linkage" develops when an event taking place in one society leads to a spontaneous response in another society, without any interference by the governments. "Penetrating linkage" refers to the form of connection which is initiated by a certain group in the society and is a deliberate effort to penetrate into another society and/or influence or, less frequently, manipulate the political leadership of another country. The cross-border Shia-Sunni conflicts belongs to this category, and so do private actors – private armies and terrorist organizations – that can occasionally become *de facto* state-type actors, and thus compete with actual states.

Caution is required, however, in determining the significance of transnational or sub-national actors, so that their influence is not overestimated. The character of transnational actors is often the subject of dispute, as they do not constitute solid structures. In spite of their rather 'fluid' nature, the system of the states in the Middle East has proved to be rather lasting and has avoided being taken over or captured by such actors. Components of regional identity, despite their violent manifestations in the present, have increasingly been replaced, or controlled, by the more powerful actor that is the state. Pan-Arabism as a dominant ideology has lost its one-time role, and has been replaced by political Islam as a rather fragmented force. This has taken place, however, without of the demise of the states. As has been suggested above, however, a purely state-focused approach is also inadequate to analyze the region as such an approach must be balanced with the examination of non-state actors and movements, which, along with the states, compete for power and the support of the society. Though this argument is equally applicable to any other region, it constitutes the distinctive feature of the Middle East, contributing to the peculiar relationships of its peoples and societies; this constitutive element often resists integration into a state-centric perspective.

Thus, a certain level of regional homogeneity will continue to exist in the Middle East despite the diversity of political institutions, while the simultaneity of conflict and cooperation are reflected both within the region, and in its interactions with the outside world. The common and lasting perception of the region approximates it to a sort of Hobbesian state of nature, characterized by the simultaneity of 'old' and 'new war(s)', as distinguished by Mary Kaldor.[12] In this sense, the Middle East is an 'unfinished' region, similarly to other parts of the developing world, with its weak

[11] Exposition and fine-tuning of Hill's tipology. Cf. KISS J., *Változó utak a külpolitika elméletében és elemzésében,* pp. 116-136.

[12] KALDOR, *New and Old Wars. Organized Violence in a Global Era*.

states and weak regional institutions, a region where questions of territory and borders are disputed, and where inter-state wars also survive.

Changes in international theory and research into the Middle East

The early language and vocabulary of the discipline of international relations reflected the practice and experience of the United States, its allies, and all those who had committed themselves to the American and European patterns of development. When we are extending this language and vocabulary to the Middle East and other parts of the developing world, we are bound to come across a certain degree of resonance, not least because the mainstream approach was not only reflected in the political discourse of the ruling states, other states also felt its use to be quasi-compulsory. Some researchers have disagreed with the assumption that states had certain universal characteristics, while others spared no effort in describing the behaviour of states and creating a general theoretical framework suitable to analyze every state. Such theories, however, often disregarded local conditions and the influence of those actors which were lending a special hue to the interactions of the region with the external world.

The original realist and liberal paradigms – with the decisive dividing line in international theory separating them – had a great role in fostering the approach to international relations that sought to arrive at generalizations, an ambition that has recently come under increasing scrutiny. For a long time, experts of international relations were satisfied with watching the Middle East and other parts of the world through the prism of the theory of anarchy and the balance of power. They were paying little attention to the questions of cooperation, order, and the establishment of institutions, except when a disguised attempt by a great power to establish order in a weak state started to attract attention. The aim of research was to arrive at a classification of states based on their relative power, emphasizing the importance of the distribution of power in the international system. At the same time there was little interest in exploring the special conditions under which states were developing, or which were hindering the development of the states. In his classic work on international conflicts, Joseph Nye examined how much different types of Middle Eastern conflicts can be compared to the realist model.[13] Stephen Walt used the Middle East as a case study and presented a modified balance of power, in which the behaviour of the states is based on the estimate of the threat represented by the other state.[14]

In the Middle Eastern region, explaining and anticipating state behaviours based on the balance of power between regional powers promises rather limited results. It is because in the case of Middle Eastern states there are only weak leading powers and weak 'balancers', and often there are only weak states. The reason for this is the ceaseless rivalry and the lack of lasting hierarchy between the states, as well as the existing powerful identities, which partly overlap, partly, however, are conflicting with

[13] NYE, *Understanding International Conflict,* pp. 163-173.
[14] WALT, *The Origins of Alliances*.

the existing system of the states and external influences. External powers usually made efforts to impose their own security agenda on the states of the region, just like it could be observed in the case of France and the United Kingdom before the Second World War, The United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and the United States following the Cold War. This effort led to rather mixed results in every case. The Middle Eastern region is penetrated by external influences, but it is still resistant against external pressure. A system-level approach is hardly suitable, as the behaviour the researcher encounters in the Middle East also exemplifies the power of ideas, and of common and conflicting identities. Local, regional, international and transnational effects permanently shape the international relations of the Middle East.

The difficulties involved in the realist explanations of the behaviour of states in the region can be solved only partly by importing other theories. The structuralist approaches based on the centre *vs.* periphery perspective in analyzing post-imperialist systems are also applicable to other regions with developing countries. If these theories focus on the unequal distribution of political and social power, they are doomed to fail here, too, just like realism failed in explaining the various capabilities of the states and the diverse textures of Middle Eastern peoples and societies.[15] However, for several theoreticians of international relations, rejecting the realist interpretation of state behaviour does not necessarily mean being committed to critical or constructivist theory, but merely the recognition of the significance of actors other than states, and the integration of the consideration of cooperative behaviour. More recent liberal theories have come to reject the thesis about the decreasing significance of states, or the forecast about the necessary emergence of a world government, and instead they focus on the opportunities of benefiting from cooperation under the conditions of anarchy, in which the main role is played by regime effects and institutions enforcing the observation of certain norms.[16] These theories highlight aspects of interdependence theories that emphasize the change of the states' behaviours based on shared interests, and permits coordinated work toward common goals and common policies. However, applying this theory in a Middle Eastern context is problematic, because international regimes and institutions are rather weak in the Middle East. Though states can agree on the application of certain principles and norms guiding their behaviour, trusting that these can be observed and enforced, defecting from agreements is at least as frequent as the relative security achieved in bilateral frames. At the same time, the weakness of institutions is closely linked to the low level of interdependence between the states. The functional cooperation well-known from Europe is perceivable between Arab states, mainly the Gulf states, but, compared to other regions, it is still on a low level. Theories of interdependence and institutionalism have so far not engaged the phenomena the region exhibits. Yet despite the shortcomings of other theories, the European model of functional cooperation is not transposable to the Middle Eastern region.

Nevertheless, several elements of realism are still useful, and may remain so in the future as well. The Middle East walks its own path, just like other regions, in an international system in which power and security continue to be important questions. Middle Eastern wars have characteristics similar to wars in other regions. The Arab-

[15] FAWCETT, *op.cit.,* p. 191.

[16] Cf. KEOHANE, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*.

Israeli and the Iraqi-Iranian wars can be interpreted in the context of the Cold War, and in many respects they followed the rules of the balance of power. The problem with the realist model, just like in the case of other major theories from time to time, is how the general theory can be applied to specific cases. The anarchic nature of the international system does not say too much about the given case in the analytical sense, but if we wish to stick to reality, we should start out from the fact that anarchy is not distributed 'evenly' across the international system. It means that in the Middle Eastern sub-system as well as in other parts of the world one particular regional power may be able to restrain the anarchic character of the given region, though in the Middle East the lack of a lasting leading regional power makes this possibility relatively less likely.

In spite of their theoretical and methodological knowledge, experts dealing with the Middle Eastern region often make references to the fact that the science of international relations has little relevance as to the subject of their research. While realist scholars of international relations continue to be interested in the unitary state as the primary unit of analysis, regional experts are "telling a story" focusing, besides material interests, on questions of identity and domestic policy. This behaviour is understandable in many respects, as mainstream theoreticians are prone to deal with the history of non-European regions only to the extent to which those events are important as regards the history of the West. All this means that 'exporting' dominant international theories uncritically to different parts of the world, *e.g.* to the Middle Eastern region, can be problematic. It can partly be put down to what has been said above that there are remarkable changes underway in the approaches of both theoreticians and politicians. On the one hand, studies on the Middle East increasingly criticize the tendencies of isolation from mainstream social sciences, on the other hand, however, international theory seems to increasingly break free from its original Western roots: It is slowly becoming 'globalized', paying attention to ever more critical voices, so it can no longer be considered as an exclusively 'American' science. International theory has included new areas into the scope of its analysis, thus making it possible for new theoretical approaches more 'sensitive' to examining regions to emerge in the field. It is no exaggeration to claim that the early 21st century saw a "modest Renaissance" in the integration of international theory and regional studies. Though the much talked-of crisis of Middle Eastern studies is not quite over, policy and policy implementation advice are often uncertain, new approaches have also emerged. The post-cold war 'explosion' of theories of international relations has contributed to this 'bridge-building', as the number of theories available for scholars has significantly increased. For this reason, mainstream approaches of analyzing the region, like various schools of realism and structuralism must be complemented with elements of constructivism and domestic policy-level analysis, accepting that in many respects such an innovation/extension challenges the assumption about the state system as the primary determinant of regional behaviour. The history of the Middle Eastern region is also the history of external dependencies and interventions, which explains the great appeal of both the realist and the structuralist approaches, while the artificial nature and the short-lived existence of several states, as well as the common transnational bonds of history, language and religion (at least among Arab states), strengthen the productivity of constructivist analysis.

The constructivist perspective: Identity as a peculiarity of Middle Eastern politics

Prior to the last decade of the 20th century, the theory of international relations was culture blind, it was based on the assumption of an anarchic international system and, consequently, on the hypothesis of a uniform realist logic, supposed to be true of each and every state. Contrary to this, the "cultural turn" in international relations has strengthened the concept of identity in theorizing, moreover, it has fashioned to be the chief cause of contemporary conflicts, as most famously represented by Huntington and his notion of a "clash between civilizations". If politics in the Middle East has any peculiarity, these peculiarities concern the importance of identity. It is worth noting that the Middle East as a region is easy to outline in a dual sense of the word: first of all, because religion and ethnic belonging are equally significant as focal points of political identity. The second peculiarity is the incongruity between the material and ideological, territorial/state (and ethnic or religious) identity on the one hand, and regional norms and internationally determined structures and their consequences on the other. It is not identity *per se*, but the failure of its enforcement due to material structures that makes the region so conflict-prone. Another facet of the same problem can be 'how much' the concept of identity is sufficient in the Middle East to compete with explanations based on material interests and structures as we find them in mainstream theories? Can identity explain the conflicts of the region? And does the international system constrain states to act similarly, making references to identity moot?

It was Western imperialism that acquainted the region with modern nationalism and the principle of 'one nation – one state'. But the process of becoming a nation is at least as complex here, if not even more complex, than it was in Eastern or South-Eastern Europe, due to the incongruity between the identities of the state and those of the population. Arbitrarily drawn borders and the fragmentation of the larger historical unities of different communities, as well as the incongruity involved in this process, have led to perpetual fights between the states, caused by the different prevailing identities, like Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism. In the Middle East, the process of nation-building has been accompanied by disputes about nationalism. For 'primordialists', proto-nations, which already possess a common historical memory and ethnic awareness, will provide for the cultural foundations of modern nations, consequently, the Arab, Turkish and Iranian national identities have deep pre-modern roots. 'Modernists', like Ernest Gellner, consider nationalism the product of the need for modernization, a market, and cultural and linguistic unity. From yet other points of view, the probability of successful identity construction depends on such objective factors as common historical memory and social interaction facilitated by a shared language. The most outstanding theoretician of Arab nationalism, Sati al-Husri, links up these approaches, and considers Arabic identity to be a product of collective Arabic historical achievements as well as of the standardization of modern Arabic. For 'instrumentalists', there is no single, self-evident historical identity in any country of the Middle East, instead, these identities are taken to be constructed, fluid and

diverse, and these competing identities must pass the test in debates within the elites, the intelligentsia and public opinion. According to the postmodernist approach, identity construction figures as a constitutive part of foreign policy which culminates in the construction of borders legitimizing rule over the society through pitting the identity of the group against the external other.[17]

In the case of the Middle East, the essence of the dispute about the role of identity can be summarized well with reference to two classic analyses, a realist analysis by Stephen Walt on the origin of alliances, and a constructivist study by M. N. Barnett.[18] In his argumentation Walt disputes the peculiar character of inter-Arab politics and looks at state behaviour as primarily determined by material interests and threats against its security, while the questions of identity are only secondary, and they most often figure in the analysis as a rhetorical device to sustain the legitimacy in domestic politics. In intra-Arab politics, Arabism is mainly the frequently used means of stronger states against the weaker ones, like the army, which tends to serve conflict rather than cooperation. Neo-realists acknowledge that although identity occasionally influences what states want to do, but, they believe that it is basically the forces of the systemic distribution of material factors and the structure of the system (notably the balance of power) that determine what states can or cannot do. If the states that had been socialized according to the realist rules of the game infringe these rules, they stand to pay a severe price for it. Contrary to this, for constructivism state identities constitute values, and so proponents of constructivism attribute a considerable function to the development of Arabic and Islamic identities to explain the liberation from Western dominance and the process of gaining autonomy. This way, identity, along with anti-imperialism, has become part of the interest structure of Arab states, even though it involves remarkable expenses. For Barnett, intra-Arab politics is constituted through competition in the form of normative discourses rooted in the competing norms of the state and the public opinion, Arabism and sovereignty. For an Arab state, the definitions of certain political roles, the standards of legitimate behaviour all derive from this process. Such norms are 'weapons' in inter-Arab politics, but at the same time they are barriers affecting the states' foreign policy.

Constructivism made it possible to analyze the finer shades of the role culture and identity play in international politics. Alexander Wendt, the leading theoretician of constructivism, points out that 'anarchy' and 'self-help', characteristic of international politics are not given *a priori* as constitutive features of a system, but they are constructed by the society, more precisely, they are what a society (of states or other actors) makes out of them.[19] This approach has made it significantly easier to analyze roles and identity in determining the behaviour of Middle Eastern states. A number of theoreticians have welcomed the explanations provided by the constructivist approach, while some types of constructivism have proved too moderate in their objectives, and continued to determine their function and added value as complementing the realist explanations focusing on the state and its activities. Others

[17] HINNEBUSCH, "The Politics of Identity in Middle Eastern International Relations", p. 150.

[18] BARNETT, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*. WALT, *The Origins of Alliances*.

[19] WENDT, 1992: "Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics", pp. 391,425.

are very cautious in accepting constructivist theses. Ray Hinnebusch reminds us that the dispute on how much identity "counts" has remained unsettled, so he offends up opting for a version of 'modified realism' in other questions as well. Under this concept, there is no 'Arabic' or 'Islamic' foreign policy, neither do Arab institutions like the Arab League or the Organization of Islam Conference attempt to construct such a foreign policy identity. From this it follows that though identity does have a role, this is limited to influencing perceptions and the behaviour of the state, and by no means can identity be taken to replace the state and its power as key actor or independent variable. Other researchers dealing with the region, like Fred Halliday, are similarly rather cautious regarding changes of paradigm. Halliday is critical toward the 'post-realist fetish' of culture, as he put it, and he emphatically reminds us of the fact that 'the cultural perspective' has always been present in the Middle East. For analyzing the region Halliday thinks historical sociology to be the logical starting point.[20]

Pan-Arabism and national identity

In its responses given to the effects of anarchy in a given regional system, a state can overstep the practices of mere self-help, the Hobbesian 'state of nature', if its relative power strongly and positively correlates with an efficient regional regime or a security community. In the Arab world, Arab identity has always been the potential basis of regional cooperation. But constructing the regional governance system equivalent to the supranational *umma* can only be successful, if there is sufficient correlation between identity and the material conditions of the society, i.e. if the states have enough common interests and if this process is led by a hegemonic state or a coalition of states. The liberal institutionalist solution to the problem of anarchy is the Arab League, which was founded simultaneously by the Arab states, and, as such, was trying to harmonize Westphalian type sovereignty with the belief that common Arab interests need to be protected jointly. However, the first test of the Arab League, notably the defence of Palestine in the first Arab-Israeli war, ended up with the total failure of attempts at cooperation by the Arab states. The difference between the Pan-Arab norms determined by the Arab League and the actual behaviour of the states was absolutely obvious right from the beginning. The Arab League summons statesmen to discuss all-Arab issues, but the unanimously accepted decisions are limited to finding the lowest common denominator. The League, as an intergovernmental organization, has no means to carry out collective action or to take coercive measures, and thus the implementation of its resolutions depends on the leadership of the most powerful member states and the degree of the correlation between the interests of the individual countries and the prescriptions that follow from Arab identity.

Nasser successfully promoted the ideas of Pan-Arabism in the region between 1956 and 1967, in order to counter Western dominance, and succeeded in developing a 'Pan-Arab regime'. Under Nasser's leadership it could be expected that the foreign policies of the region's states were dominated by the common Arab interests supported by Cairo, like the war of independence against imperialism, and the cause of

[20] FAWCETT, "Introduction: The Middle East and International Relations", p. 8.

the Palestinians. But for Nasser's personality, it would hardly have been possible to speak about a Pan-Arab regime. The personality of Nasser was so popular following the Suez conflict that it enabled Egypt to mobilize Arab societies 'from below' and exert pressure on obstinate governments. In a number of countries, nationalist movements encouraged by Nasser overturned the oligarchic governments, and in 1958, by the overthrow of the pro-West Iraqi regime, the Egyptian leader created a solid Pan-Arab norm against the policy of contracts signed with foreign powers and their policy of bases. Even though this Arabism was manipulated to be the means of the states' interests, and it took the form of a competition for Pan-Arab leadership, the consequence was in any case the establishment of the Pan-Arab norms of behaviour, which was in fact restricting every state. Those norms constrained even Nasser, the architect of Pan-Arab order, at least as long as he wished to maintain his Pan-Arab leadership. Nasser enabled Pan-Arabism to become a hegemonic institution in the Arab world, though favourable financial conditions also played a part in making Nasser capable of the role. First and foremost, there was a bipolar system in the making, in which the counter-balancing Soviet power provided support for the Arab world to a certain extent against direct Western intervention, and enabled Nasser to survive the Suez crisis, in sharp contrast to the British oppression between the two World Wars. Further, Nasser was able to exercise hegemony over the other Arab states, as Egypt was the largest of the Arab states, (not so much in terms of population, as in armed forces and GNP). It was also the most stable and had the most legitimate government, contrary to the oligarchies and unstable military regimes of other Arab states. The coincidence of bipolarity in the core of the system with Arab hegemony bringing relative unity on the peripheries neutralized the usual power asymmetries of the centre *versus* periphery world power structure in the region.[21]

Oil as 'strength' and as 'weakness'

Oil shapes international relations and domestic policies in many ways in the Middle East. The struggle for resources, the geopolitics of resources and the distribution of wealth are central questions for both the realist approach and economic realism, i.e. for international political economy. In a historical perspective, oil as a resource has significantly influenced the interests of the United States and Great Britain, as well as those of other powers, and, in the wake of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the whole system of the region's states. Nevertheless, even oil is no explanation to everything. First of all, however, it is important to note that a special dynamic has evolved between states with little oil but deep historical roots, and the states established relatively recently but abundant in oil. The polarization between oil-rich and oil-poor states discernible in the region is an important aspect of analyses. The simultaneous differentiation between states possessing rental revenues and states possessing no such income may be helpful in explaining how oil influences the domestic political development and the regional relations of states. In states based on rent seeking economies, the pressure for democratization is weaker than in countries with no such constraining conditions. Moreover, oil wealth may even lead to avoiding

[21] HINNEBUSCH, *op. cit*., pp. 165-166.

or giving up other forms of profitable economic activity. In the past 25 years, per capita GDP has diminished in the whole Arab world. In 1999, the total GDP of all the Arab states combined was 531.2 bn dollars, less than that of Spain. Today, the non-oil-related total export of the whole Arab world (about 300 mn people) is less than that of five-million-strong Finland. In the 1990s, 70% of the exports from the region were made up of crude oil or oil-related products.... The number of foreign-language books translated into Arabic in the whole Arab world is a mere one fifth of the number of translations published in Greece.[22]

It is also noteworthy that even in countries with no rental revenues, changing internal conditions is not easy, as, due to the weakness of the private sector, it is much more difficult to engage in economic reforms than in countries which do have rental revenues, such as the Gulf states, whose governments have always supported the private economy. This also explains why we can see only little progress in areas of democracy and economic reforms in states with no rental incomes. What we are witnessing instead is that the state is barricading itself behind its increasingly oppressive governmental apparatus. The rentier states by the Persian Gulf are taking steps toward economic reform and greater political participation, though the latter will probably not reach the level of democratization that can be considered normal.[23] The rise of oil-rich rentier states will continue, which will also be enhanced by their greater adaptability to globalization.

Oil continues to guarantee extraordinary wealth both directly and indirectly. However, the immense revenues create problems as well as benefits. Oil is power and weakness at the same time. The point is not only that wealth arising from oil strengthens autocratic governments, but that the rulers of oil-rich countries do not need to levy taxes, so they do not need to satisfy elected representatives. In the Arab world the very opposite of the well-known English saying is true: 'No participation without taxation'. Oil wealth can also impede economic development. Oilfields are bound to be exhausted sooner or later, and will be replaced by other resources, putting an end to wealth and power as well. A few far-sighted Arab governments are aware of this possibility, and they support other directions of economic development. Several Persian-Gulf-states have produced spectacular expansions, especially in the fields of tourism and international finance, but these sectors are nevertheless still lagging far behind oil revenues.

Oil is important as it influences both the balance of power within the region and the external behaviour of states. When oil prices start shooting up due to the narrowing in global supply, the impetus of the reform in the rentier states might slow down. The priority given to strengthening the private sector remains basically unchanged, but concerns about employing citizens, along with the educational reform and the worries about excessive dependence on guest labour are topping agendas. The consequences may be far-reaching, such as the changes in women's role in society, their increasing participation in the labour market, while simultaneously questions of democracy and participation fall into the background.

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[22] LEWIS: "Free at Last?", p. 82.

[23] LUCIANI, "Oil and political economy in the international relations of the Middle East", pp. 100-101.

Middle Eastern studies and security studies

The Middle East has become the 'cemetery' of several contemporary theories of international relations: theories on the origins of war, deterrence and bargaining have frequently failed when tested in the modern Middle Eastern region. The Middle East, along with Africa, has been one of the most war-stricken areas in the world, and, as things look, it will remain so.[24] In the region the permanence of war and violence is putting traditional realist concepts to a test, as the theory of the balance of power is only partly able to explain the conflicts and wars taking place in the region. Low-intensity warfare and asymmetric violence have increasing significance in the region, as an alternative to conventional warfare. While in other regions of the world the agendas of security policy are widening, and this has focused public attention on the protection of the environment and waters, support for the concept of security based on human rights, the Middle East has been rather resistant to strategies of conflict prevention and conflict management, as well as other new agendas of security. The modern history of the Middle East was repeatedly disrupted by Arab-Israeli conflicts in 1946, 1956, 1969-70, 1973, 1982, 2006 and 2009. Since the Second World War it was the Iraq-Iran war that has claimed the highest death toll. The Iraq-Iran war was followed by the aggression of Iraq against Kuwait and the Second Gulf War, which finally forced Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. In the meantime, Palestinians started the first *intifada* against Israel that lasted for about five years.

The last decade of the 20th century provided slight hope in the Middle East, inasmuch as there seemed to be a chance for preventing the escalation of violence. In 1991, following the Gulf War, the monitoring activity of the United Nations began in order to explore and eliminate Iraq's nuclear and chemical weapons program. Intensive bilateral negotiations started between the Israelis, the Palestinians and the Arab states that culminated in the establishment of the Palestine Authority, and, with a few absentees, led to debates on arms limitation, water resource management, the environment, the refugee question, and development policies in the whole of the region. But the hopes attached to the success of the Israeli-Palestinian talks were illusory. In September 2000, the second *intifada* started, and it was even more violent and claimed even more casualties. One year later, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York caused the Middle East to move even more into the focus of US foreign policy. Violence in the region could no longer be regarded as a local problem or simply as a question of oil supply security. The 'great deal' between the United States and the oil-producing countries had failed, just like the policy that was ready to ignore the governmental systems of the region. In two subsequent wars, the United States removed from power the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Washington and its allies got stuck in the vicious circle of violence, Iraq has sunk into civil war, and it seems to be difficult to find a viable 'exit strategy'. Following Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union, the United States is the fourth interventionist power in the Middle East.

[24] STEIN, "War and Security in the Middle East", p. 208.

It follows from what has been said above that in the never-ending chain of Middle Eastern violence, issues of a broader security agenda like environmental protection and support for human rights are, for many people, rather wishful thinking than reality. The focus of attention is on putting an end to violence and war, on establishing accountable governments and governance, and on establishing a legitimate Palestinian state that would be capable of solving the refugee problem. In the Middle East, peace is deeply interwoven with legitimacy and human rights: Peace without legitimacy and rights is just as impracticable as legitimacy and human rights without peace.

The question may arise how theories of international relations can help us understand the durability of war and violence, and the recurring interventions of the great powers? Realist theories have a rather narrow scope of analysis when it comes to understanding war, as military capabilities are the only variable. Realism interprets the regular recurrence of war as a function of a lack of balance and a change in the balance of military capabilities. Theories of deterrence or the prevention of war refer to the prevention of the possibility of an attack, by way of securing dominance in military abilities. Realist theories have several versions, but in each of them the outbreak of the war is due to the fatal uncertainties of military abilities and the political will to use force. Studying the Arab-Israeli conflict and the wars of the Gulf region leads to the conclusion that the superiority in military abilities and the determination to use force have rarely prevented war, trumping the power of historical grievances and passions. Domestic political pressures interwoven with the often fragile and authoritarian governmental structures have a great role in shaping offensive intent and perceptions of threat. Contrary to realistic expectations, 'learning from defeat' is a very slow, unequal and non-linear process. Saddam Hussein learnt little from the eight-year-long, very costly Iraq-Iran war, which ended in deadlock. Nevertheless, it is not enough to merely learn from defeat, remembering the very high absolute and relative costs of resorting to violence. After a while, leaders must become aware of the costs of not only defeat, but also of victory, in order to be able to stop the chain of violence, and take steps toward adaptation. The analysis of the origins of war and the periods of adaptation sheds light on the role of economic and political factors. One must learn to analyze the Middle East from the inside to the outside, not only from the outside to the inside, paying attention to domestic political struggles, but also to the changes in the more traditional balance of power. The fight for legitimacy and rights within the region is the motive that plays a part in sparking off most wars and violence. Military balance or its supposition in the region did not prevent war, rather it made it possible. If we focus our attention exclusively on military factors, we might ignore the most important part of the story.

'Securitization' of political questions and security as a social construction

Though questions of peace and war, and a high rate of conflicts dominate agendas of security policy, in this case the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School can also be applied, relying on the axiomatic claim that not only military, but any political question can become subject of security, from cartoons depicting Muhammad to water supply. In creating their theory, Barry Buzan and his companions aimed at

finding a new framework of interpretation for their study on security.[25] In their theorizing they made efforts to reconcile the old and the new. As to the object of reference of security, Buzan continues to start out with the state, but in terms of the content of security, he gives priority to the concept of multi-dimensional or multi-sectoral security. Buzan and his co-authors accept, avoiding the over-extension of the concept of security, criticism by the traditionalists, and, in order to maintain the coherence of the concept of security, they are not talking about widening the concept, but about exploring the processes taking place, in line with the logic of security, in different sectors. To achieve this goal, Buzan creates an interpretation of security that can also be interpreted outside of the military sector. Buzan links the concept of security with survival. Consequently, we can only state that a certain question belongs to the field of security if it is concerned with an existential threat and its aversion requires extraordinary measures, and if this necessity is accepted by every party. In this process, questions formerly non-political become subject of decisions, *i.e.* they assume a political character, then they may become questions of security, *i.e.* they become securitized. However, it may also happen that they lose this type of content, *i.e.* they get desecuritized. An issue that assumes a political character refers to issues on the political agenda, while a securitized issue is above politics, it allows for the infringement of rules and extraordinary measures. In this respect politics loses its public function, the authority for decision is possessed by an actor who is accepted as legitimate, and becomes privileged concerning the given issue. Securitization occurs in three steps:

- Firstly, there is an existential threat or the declaration of its fact. It is important to point out that in reality a question does not necessarily need to concern the question of survival, but functionally, the given question must perform the role of existential threat. The emphasis is on the act of speaking, on rhetoric, *i.e.* a problem can successfully be securitized without real danger. There were no nuclear weapons found in Iraq, but the discourse that developed in the American political elite and in international circles about the existence of nuclear weapons created a 'reality' that could serve as a basis for the American intervention.
- Secondly, in the wake of the existential threat, extraordinary measures are taken, or the authorization to do so is given. At this point, the theory can be interpreted in two ways, as it is not quite clear, whether the extraordinary measure must really occur, or it is enough if the question gets out of the realm of political decision-making, which means that no further consent is needed, and the issue has gained a position "above" day-to-day politics.
- Thirdly, by taking extraordinary measures, or by creating the possibility for taking them, the question also urges other states to extraordinary action, which means that the question also gets securitized on an international level.

Acknowledged legitimacy has an outstanding place in this theory. If somebody is not acknowledged as a legitimate securitizing actor in the decision-making, in vain will he find a question crucial or even an existential threat and resort to taking extraordinary measures, the issue will not become securitized, the event will only remain an attempt at securitization. A successful securitizing actor must fulfil an important position within

[25] BUZAN, WAEVER, and DE WILDE, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*.

his sector, and, as a consequence, he is 'entitled' to assign current security threats, and thus, from time to time, redefine the concept of security.

Contrary to the traditionalist approach, however, the subject of existential threat is not exclusively the state. Contrary to Buzan, aside from the state, Ole Waever also considers society to be an object of reference of security, and both arrive at the conclusion that basically anything can be transformed into a question of security. This way, the distinction between 'high politics' and 'low politics' areas, common in the traditionalist (realist) theory focusing on military security, also loses its meaning. If the definition of security is limited to existential threat, it must be determined what in the individual sectors might mean existential threats, and what we can regard as the object of reference of security. In this sense, Buzan distinguishes five sectors:

- In the military sector, endangering of the state can be considered to be existential threat, though, in exceptional cases, other entities, like a foreign army attacking a country, can be existential threat as well. Military security can also be endangered by disarmament and arms control.
- In the political sector the object of reference is sovereignty, governmental power, in certain cases ideology, moreover, the subject can assume supranational character, *e.g.* in the case of extremist political groups. The interpretation of sovereignty shows several peculiarities in the Middle East. In a number of countries, political power is divided between state actors and non-state actors (militias, religious private armies, religious factions, etc.), stateless nations that can pursue their own *de facto* foreign policy (Kurds), in weak or failed states domestic political sovereignty including the legitimate monopoly of violence does not operate. Any control over the flow of capital, goods, labour, etc. is, of course, questionable, due to disputes about borders or unmarked borders, etc.
- In the economic sector, any danger threatening the individual economies or the global market economy in its existence, its operational mechanisms or sustainability. Nevertheless, in the modern market economy the liquidation of companies and the establishment of new ones do not mean security threats, they are inherent parts of the operation of the economy.
- In the societal sector the object of reference can be nation, national or ethnic identity, religion and culture. If the language, the name or any other element constituting the identity of a nation gets questioned, the issue belongs to the realm of societal security. If the ethnic or religious distribution within a state changes, this can also mean a threat to societal security. In the Middle East, this question has utmost importance, as religion, language, ethnicity and state are not coextensive. Identities often overlap, and the questions of culture, religion and ethnicity acquire transnational character. The Shia-Sunni conflict proves that loyalty to religion and loyalty to state can become contradictory.
- In the environmental sector, we find referent objects both at the micro-level and at the macro-level, from the protection of species to the preservation of the planet. One of these questions can be large companies polluting the environment. In the Middle East this aspect draws attention to the security of oil

production or the transportation of oil, the distribution of water and the question of fresh-water reserves.

In each of the listed sectors, very different questions and processes can be declared existential threats. All this is just a question of an act of speaking and rhetoric. This way, Barry Buzan and Ole Waever do not overstretch the concept of security, but provide evidence that, for a shorter or longer period of time, any question can become part of the domain of high politics formerly monopolized by military security. If a question gets removed from its non-political environment through the mediation of the political sector, the competence of decision concerning it can be delegated to actors of another sector, such as the military.

Positivist and post-positivist perspectives

From our analysis it follows that, besides realist and positivist methods, constructivist and post-positivist methods can also be used to analyze the region.. The positivist approach considers security to be a 'natural' geopolitical game of monolithic states, a question of power and counter-power and a problem of the balance of power that can be traced back to empirical and quantifiable factors. This means that external, objective reality is assumed to be describable and 'measurable' reality, but at the same time, notions exist only as variables, *i.e.* 'measurable' empirical quantities connected with each other. It is undoubtedly possible to analyze the development of the existing power dynamics in the region by comparing the reference groups that can be formed from the states of the region and the components of their power (population, area, size of armed forces, defence expenditures, GNP, reserves of raw materials, stability of political systems, etc.). It can also be analyzed how much the individual states pursue an autonomy- or influence-oriented foreign policy. We can get an answer as to how the 'relative power' of the states can be determined, what dynamics it shows, which countries this dynamic favours and which countries it disfavours.

Nevertheless, in our analysis we have pointed out that the Middle East is an 'unfinished region', where the influence of external powers is tremendous, the region is extremely divided along fundamental economic, political, religious and ethnic fault lines, furthermore, the level of both institutionalization and interdependence is very low within the region. The applicability of realist concepts, including the balance of power, is limited, as statehood is fragile, and the effect of non-state actors, religion and identity in forming policy is remarkable, power is not distributed exclusively among states but also among several significant non-state actors, social organizations and terrorist groups, militias, etc. Besides the 'world of states', the 'world of societies' also has unavoidable influence. In the region, the characteristics of state and non-state, the Westphalian and the pre-Westphalian worlds get mixed up. The lack of the separation of state and church, the problems of mutual acknowledgement between states, the role of competing identities underline the extreme complexity of the region. Partly from this it follows that while for instance in the Iraq-Iran war the policy of regional balance can be a meaningful tool for analysis, in other cases the development of a regional balance stirs up war rather than peace. The realist approach is in such cases revealed as no longer suitable for interpreting the internal

development of the region, such as the analysis of the domestic political development in Iraq and Afghanistan and their regional effects. A more productive approach for analyzing the region can be the application of the constructivist method. The constructivist method does not consider security and foreign policy to be an external, objective characteristic, but a 'constructed reality' created in an inter-subjective manner by state and non-state actors, and certain social, religious and ethnic, etc. groups. Security as social construction means that security threats and risks do not exist in themselves, the facts are preceded by the meanings we lend to them. Theories, religion and identity are helpful in creating the reality of security policy, in determining who is friend and who is enemy, and what can be regarded as a security threat. The reality- or security construction developed in this way is then the basis on which political action can be built. This also means that 'reality' is always socially interpreted reality, and that this interpreted reality can be interpreted all over again.

In constructivist foreign and security policy, a particularly significant role is attributed to discourse analysis, and through this, to language. It is language that is used to describe reality, formulate interpretations of reality, and express intentions to change the world. Discourse analysis does not depend on facts, but on meanings. Politics is seen as a struggle for introducing concepts, for determining the dominant meanings, for discursive hegemony. Power is not merely of material nature, part of power and part of reality is also the non-material world, including the theories and ideas that help us create reality. Power is not only expressed in military and economic strength, but also in the ability to determine the meanings of things, phenomena, reality. Discourses exercise power and are factors of power themselves. Discourse and thus the discursive event are not a reflection of objective reality, but an inter-subjective interpretation of reality carried out by political groups, religious factions and governments, etc, which serves as the basis for political action and the determination of interests. The media and the media-dominated world play an important role in this process. It is beyond doubt that Middle Eastern conflicts can be interpreted not only in the positivist realm of material reality, but also in the framework of discursive events, and that it is possible to explore this way what policy-forming effects identities, traditional and international norms have.

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