



## The Political Economy of Governance in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

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### **Geopolitical Challenges in the Middle East Political Legitimacy and Regional Security**

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# Contents

1. Introduction .....	3
2. Uniqueness and Divergence: Perceptions and Preferences .....	4
3. The Geopolitical Conjuncture in the Middle East.....	5
4. The Rise of Sub-State Groups.....	11
5. The Persistence of the <i>Realpolitik</i> Mindset.....	15
6. Conclusion.....	19

# 1. Introduction

This essay aims to identify and elucidate the major determinants that shape the security perceptions and priorities of regional state actors in the Middle East. By providing a qualitative analysis of the current geopolitical conjuncture in the region, it will attempt to illustrate that threat perceptions and security priorities of local states are under the influence of the region's internal peculiarities, and explain how this impacts on the prospects for a regional security framework.

The central argument of this study is that the states of the region tend to develop their own unique interpretations on geopolitical developments and dynamics, vis-à-vis each other and the Western world, particularly with regard to their implications in terms of their evolving national security interests and objectives. This inclination complicates the creation and maintenance of a region-wide, comprehensive, sustainable security framework.

A comprehensive template to understand the geopolitical dynamics of the region has to pay attention to an intricate pattern of interactions between both objective and subjective factors. On the one hand, states are still compelled to frame their security policy choices in accordance with such materialistic concerns as capitalising on opportunities and exploiting the constraints of the regional and global balance of power. On the other hand, such normative and cognitive factors as political legitimacy, ethnic and religious identification deeply influence the way they perceive internal and external security threats and formulate their official and unofficial policy stands accordingly. As a consequence of the domestic implications of globalisation, in particular, the latter—that is, the subjective dimension—has recently acquired relatively more prominence in determining how the local states define and respond to the security challenges of the contemporary geopolitical conjuncture, both local and global.

In this context, the deficiencies of some of the key regional state actors in political legitimacy facilitate the manipulation of sub-state actors and supra-state movements as a form of exerting influence and promoting national interests. Despite the example set by the full-scale invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, this trend renders full-scale war less and less feasible, diminishing its relevance for the dynamics of the region in terms of inter-state relations. The resultant low-intensity violence persistent across the region, in turn, further complicates the prospects for the establishment and preservation of a collective security arrangement in the traditional sense, based on firmly grounded principles, rules and norms that would be shared by all relevant state-actors.

## 2. Uniqueness and Divergence: Perceptions and Preferences

One of the challenges faced by policymaking circles in determining the course of a state's official (and unofficial) policy in any realm, foreign or domestic, concerns the problem of ensuring access to "policy-relevant knowledge," as Alexander L. George puts it. In comparison to the *relatively* easy-to-comprehend nature of most domestic issues, the problem is exacerbated seriously when it comes to shaping the content and scope of relations with other states, since those responsible for making difficult foreign policy choices at the end of the day almost always have to operate with imperfect information, mainly due to the inherent uncertainties of the external domain of operation. In order to draw attention to the possibility that this challenge may result in erroneous assumptions in the conduct of foreign policy, George points out to the policymakers' need for "actor-specific behaviour models," that is, "a sophisticated, insightful understanding of each of the state-actors with whom they interact."<sup>1</sup> Since relying on some "tacit assumptions" about a certain strategy's general requirements and logic is a natural part of the decision-making process, his argument goes, it is often easy for policymakers to fall into the trap of regarding state-actors as rational, unitary players who are able to calculate their benefits, costs, and risks correctly and reasonably.<sup>2</sup>

However, states are often perceived by outsiders not to have the ability to think, understand and form opinions or judgments according to well-established facts, prudence, or "good sense." Although what differentiates "good sense" from "bad sense," "prudent" behaviour from "imprudent", is obviously a highly subjective issue; some states are precipitously labelled as "irrational," unable to assess the conjuncture and make policy choices according to certain universally accepted norms, some of which may in fact be a set of standards simply created and shared according to the unique "subjective interpretation" of a select group of states themselves. George points out that "attributing irrationality to an adversary is a questionable way of filling in the vacuum of knowledge about him, just as attributing a basic, oversimplified rationality to him is a questionable substitute for a more refined, differentiated understanding of his values, ideology, culture, and mind-set."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the idea of

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1 George also points out to the "conceptualization of strategies" and "general, or generic, knowledge of each strategy" as the other two types of knowledge needed in foreign policymaking. Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2001, p.xvii.

2 Ibid, p.118.

3 Ibid, pp.125-131.

rationality has the potential to delude policymakers into misperceptions and miscalculations about the other players in the international arena, because rationality is ultimately in the eyes of the beholder.

Therefore, the first step in understanding and trying to predict the policy preferences and choices of other states must be to acknowledge that the way a policy question is formulated and addressed is naturally unique for each state-actor, with consequential foreign policy implications from time to time. Traditionally characterised by such pessimistic metaphors as “expect-the-unexpected,”<sup>4</sup> a politically fragmented setting like the Middle East constitutes a glaring example in this regard: more often than not, local states are inclined to develop their own unique and mostly divergent interpretations on geopolitical developments and dynamics, particularly in the context of their own national security interests and objectives. A fundamental reason for such a tendency is that threat perceptions and security priorities of local states are under the influence of the region’s internal characteristics, with short- and long-term implications for a sustainable security framework in the region. Thus, key determinants that shape this uniqueness and divergence in perceptions and preferences should be identified from a cross-regional perspective.

### **3. The Geopolitical Conjecture in the Middle East**

The socio-political orientation of the Middle Eastern states in the post-9/11 era is one of the most intensely debated issues in academic and policymaking circles today. The most significant characteristic of this new era – the roots of which can be traced back to the post-World War II global order, in fact – is the quest of both major and minor players for their appropriate places in the bigger strategic picture. In the course of its evolution, the emerging global order of the 21st century compels all state and sub-state actors – from the remaining superpower to the underdeveloped members of the international community and the various groupings they entail – to search for the proper place commensurate with their founding philosophies and values as well as various materialistic interests. The fundamental stones of the global order still witness significant reshuffling, and domestic and foreign policy objectives and orientations experience an evolution in different directions and in varying degrees. It is obvious that the system hasn’t yet attained an equilibrium that would self-sustain itself in the long run.

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<sup>4</sup> This is actually a metaphor used by Milan Vesely to describe Lebanese politics but which applies to the entire Middle Eastern political context. Milan Vesely, *Expect the Unexpected*, *The Middle East*, August/September 2007, pp.12-13.

Living in a region marked by the presence of numerous religions, ethnicities and nationalities juxtaposed next to each other,<sup>5</sup> the contemporary Middle Eastern states and societies, as well, are susceptible to the challenge of having to live with this evolution. Like their counterparts around the world, they are at great pains to define properly and satisfactorily where they stand vis-à-vis the emerging global order that still hangs in the balance, and which they don't see as having much prospect of changing in their own favour as a region. In light of their increasing awareness and rising expectations – exacerbated by the intense pressures of globalisation – the Muslim societies, in particular, try to understand what went and still goes wrong vis-à-vis the stable, peaceful and developed parts of the world.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Middle Eastern states and societies themselves have historically developed a variety of explanations to this demanding question, what matters most is not those explanations per se, but that these explanations essentially reflect, among others, how they perceive the outside world itself, the players that shape it, and where they envision standing versus what roles they are forced to play. Given that the significance attached to how you are viewed by other players runs much deeper in this part of the world than usually assumed by external observers, the “subjective interpretations” of local actors regarding the relativity of their positions in comparison to “the others” have traditionally carried considerable weight in determining their stance in their external relations. Thus, in the unfolding regional and global context, the process of “perception-formation” occupies a central role in determining how states and societies perceive the evolving geopolitical conjuncture and its implications at the local and global level.

The context-based subjectivity of beliefs and perceptions must be emphasized at this point. This is a subject of particular interest in the conflict management and resolution literature to explain the maintenance of societal beliefs in intractable ethno-national conflicts, especially the way the dynamics of such conflicts are perceived at the individual level. For the purposes of this study it suffices to note that individuals that comprise a society are inclined to interpret information in selective and biased ways, especially under unfavourable and demanding circumstances affecting the society, which leads to “cognitive freezing” in perception formation:<sup>7</sup> they are almost instinctively prompted to form their perceptions in certain

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5 L. Carl Brown, Book Review for “Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007, p.180.

6 Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

7 Nadim N. Rouhana and Daniel Bar-Tal, *Psychological Dynamics of Intractable Ethnonational Conflicts: the Israeli-Palestinian Case*, *American Psychologist*, July 1998, pp.761-767.

directions, most of the time in peculiar and incomprehensible ways to the outsider, and to refrain from “critically challenging them.” This process takes place at the collective level under the influence of many factors, such as the values shared as a community, the society’s diversity in ethnic and religious composition, the nature of the mutual interaction between the individual and the society, and the inputs of leading figures and external players. Therefore, leaders and communities having to confront the challenges of modernisation, for instance, are naturally disposed to develop their perceptions subjectively, according to the particularities of the context produced by the process of modernisation—a cognitive process Stephen Stedman calls “subjective interpretation.”

A major argument of this essay is that the impact of the evolving geopolitical conjuncture on the Middle Eastern state-actors’ security perceptions and preferences must be analysed against the wider backdrop of the ongoing modernisation process in the region. As it is the case with the socio-political history of the Western societies, social and political development in the Middle Eastern context is a reflection of the evolution of the phenomenon we call “modernisation.”<sup>8</sup> The Muslim countries of the region, in particular, are currently going through the same thorny path of modernisation to which, broadly speaking, Israel and Turkey have been exposed and the West had been much earlier. They deeply feel the social, cultural, economic and political pressures of this almost never-ending process, which is exacerbated by the phenomenon called “globalisation,” a parameter whose relative absence has significantly facilitated the West’s own experiment with modernisation. In the course of its evolution, modernisation produces such intractable issues as socio-political frustration and questions of political legitimacy, which lead to defiance of state authority by various groupings and, consequently, a state’s constant concern about its survival as a sovereign entity. Therefore, the consequences of the Iranian society’s experience with modernisation after World War II, for example, which led to a deep frustration with the Shah’s regime, are perceived by many local leaders to have constituted an ominous precedent for the entire region. Perception-formation,

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<sup>8</sup> It must be noted that what we definitively refer to with “modernisation” is a very subjective issue: its meaning certainly depends on where you stand regarding what you understand from “modernity.” For example, advocating the right for *ijtihad* (individual interpretation) of Islam’s fundamental texts so that the *ulama*’s monopoly on the religious corpus can be broken may seem to be an expression of modernity for the Salafist and even for many Western observers. On the other hand, whether the Salafist’s rejection of other religions can be reconciled with the “modern” standards of Western liberal thought is dubious at best. However, what is important for the scope of this work is essentially the relevance of modernisation in terms of shaping the security perceptions of the Muslim societies in the Middle Eastern context, rather than an exhaustive discussion of whether there exists a normative definition of modernity. For a discussion of the relationship between the process of modernisation and political Islam, see Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, Harvard University Press, 1998.

that is, how one evaluates his relative standing in the existing conjuncture, is thus an indispensable parameter in any context of modernisation, be it Western or Eastern.

What is important in terms of the security perceptions, preferences and choices of states and societies in the Middle East concerns how the question of political legitimacy unleashed by the process of modernisation is perceived by state-actors as well as by various sub- and supra-state groupings that live within and across states. As noted above, the Muslim countries of the region are experiencing the tricky process of modernisation, with the same pains and travails that today's stable Western democracies had experienced long time ago. In this regard, the observations made by Samuel Huntington back in the 1960s about the dynamics of political order in societies confronting the challenge of change as a reflection of modernisation tell us a lot about what we witness in this part of the world today.<sup>9</sup> It is amazing to see the validity and relevance of his observations about the weaknesses of the variations of the European and North American political systems and their contemporary implications in terms of the sub-state groups' loyalty to the existing political systems.

Huntington points out that violence and instability prevalent in the later-modernising countries of the twentieth century is in large part a consequence of "rapid social change and rapid mobilisation of new groups into politics," which is a conspicuous characteristic of the process of modernisation, "coupled with the slow development of political institutions." Modernisation unleashes social and economic change in the form of extensive industrialisation, massive demographic flows to urban areas, rising literacy, expansion of education and development of mass media. Social forces in society are multiplied and diversified. Such changes, his argument goes, increase awareness within the society, swell the set of social, political and economic demands by people, and shake the foundations of the political supply-demand equation. A significant ramification of this transformation is the undermining of traditional sources of identity, which leads mobilised people to question their allegiance to traditional sources of authority, making it difficult to create "new bases of political association and new political institutions combining legitimacy and effectiveness." Accordingly, he concludes, the level of political institutionalization cannot keep up with social and economic change, and modernisation produces instability rather than modernity.

The problem of authority and, thus, of political legitimacy is a deleterious outcome of this process for public order. Yet, it is the most existential one for the state's survival since various groupings, ideological or interest-based, within the state constantly attempt to defy the

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.



state's *raison d'être*. In order to point out the priority of "degree of government" over "form of government," Walter Lippmann argues that "there is no greater necessity for men who live in communities than that they be governed, self-governed if possible, well-governed if they are fortunate, but in any event, governed."<sup>10</sup> Likewise, James Madison's emphasis on the vitality of authority is striking: in *Federalist*, No. 51, he notes that "[i]n framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself." Therefore, as Huntington points out over these observations, the most fundamental issue is to generate and consolidate authority, because it is the indispensable precondition for the creation of a political community and a legitimate public order. Otherwise, what Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan call the "stateness" problem is inevitable.<sup>11</sup>

At this point, the relevance of "political legitimacy" to a stable political order needs to be highlighted. Referring essentially to the cognitive process of belief-formation, Seymour Martin Lipset defines legitimacy as "the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society." Although the interpretation of what is appropriate or proper for the society apparently has the capacity to differ considerably, he correlates legitimacy with a relatively objective criterion: the "effectiveness" of the political system. Lipset notes that political effectiveness essentially represents an "instrumental dimension" within the larger system, which concerns "the actual performance of a political system, the extent to which it satisfies the basic functions of government as defined by the expectations of most members of a society, and the expectations of powerful groups within it which might threaten the system..."<sup>12</sup> Of course, the significance of the level, rate and mode of economic development for ensuring the efficiency of the entire system, and thus of the political sub-system, can hardly be overestimated.

Therefore, effectiveness and, thus, legitimacy of the political realm together constitute one set of key determinants (or "requisites" in Lipset's words) for the stability of any given political system and its capacity to command loyalty among the various groupings under its sovereignty. On the other hand, Lipset, like Huntington, draws attention to the role of

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10 Walter Lippmann, *New York Herald Tribune*, December 10, 1963, p.24, as cited in Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, p.2.

11 Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp.16-37.

12 Seymour Martin Lipset, *Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy*, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, Issue #1, 1959, pp.69-105.

modernisation in prompting crises of legitimacy, that they are primarily “a recent historical phenomenon,” and that a crisis in legitimacy is in fact “a crisis of change, and therefore its roots, as a factor affecting the stability of [political] systems, must be sought in the character of change in modern society.”<sup>13</sup> It must be noted that perception-formation, and specifically belief- and expectation-formation, by the members of a society in change according to certain subjective and objective norms occupies a central position in the building and consolidation of legitimacy, effectiveness and allegiance.

A major test of effectiveness for a political system is the extent to which the system is able to develop adaptable, complex, autonomous and coherent political institutions.<sup>14</sup> This is the case especially as the stratification of society along various lines – religious, ethnic, economic, or occupational – increases, social forces and their demands multiply, and the clash of interests among them becomes unavoidable. Mobilising support in order to formulate and execute policies grows to be a much more complicated task for a government in comparison to the straightforwardness of governing over the relative homogeneity of a traditional society. Under such circumstances, achieving a certain level of political institutionalisation in the form of well-organized political parties, efficient bureaucracies and “reasonably effective procedures for regulating succession and controlling political conflict,” as Huntington puts it, becomes imperative to found and maintain a sound socio-political order, based on a moral consensus among various social forces, and thus to promote a political community. In other words, as the composition of the society becomes more complex, the extent to which effective political institutions are created and encouraged to work efficiently determines the scope of the realisation of a “political community.” For it is ultimately the presence of such institutions that can ensure the capacity to establish and secure a common ground among mobilised individuals and groups that the modernisation process generates.

Therefore, in a complex society, there is a positive correlation between the effectiveness of political organizations and procedures, on the one hand, and the robustness of the idea of political community, on the other. From a practical point of view, the realisation of the latter depends on the scope of support for the former by social forces comprising the society. In other words, a political community cannot be created or sustained without strong and institutionalised organisations and mechanisms, the durability of which depends on the extent

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.87.

<sup>14</sup> Whether political institutions of a society are “adaptable,” “complex,” “autonomous” and “coherent” constitutes the four major criteria that comprise Huntington’s methodology of measuring the level of institutionalization in a modern society. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, pp.12-24.

to which they are upheld and viewed as legitimate by political actors. As mentioned above, the modern framework of socio-politics is marked by the multiplication and diversification of social, economic and political demands as an intrinsic aspect of modernisation. In such a demand-intensive environment, expanding political participation to various social forces, or to the masses, turns out to be the most convenient way of promoting the widest support base possible, so that political actors identify themselves with the system, and a moral consensus is established among players. That is why, together with the “rationalization of authority” and “differentiation of structures,” which concerns power and functionality in essence, Huntington names the “expansion of political participation” as the third pillar involved in political modernisation.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, it is a major theme of the democratic transition-consolidation literature, as well, which dominates debates about whether a certain political system qualifies as a consolidated democracy in light of the quality of political participation allowed by and practiced within the system.

#### **4. The Rise of Sub-State Groups**

Now the question is how this conceptual framework of modernisation-political legitimacy is relevant to the security conjuncture in the Middle East and, specifically, how state-actors form their security perceptions, preferences and choices. The argument of this paper is that the Muslim countries of the region are currently, in one way or another, proceeding along the thorny path of “modernisation” (though not necessarily towards “modernity” in the Western sense). They are directly affected by the dynamics of this process, both constructive and destructive. The challenges of modernisation inevitably shape the state-actors’ perceptions of geopolitical developments around it, and the security conjuncture associated with it, because it is ultimately the lenses of modernisation through which they are compelled to see and evaluate this demanding setting, which in turn determines both their official and unofficial policy orientation.

The argument of this paper is that, in the contemporary Middle East, state-actors’ main security concern emanates from the socio-political frustration modernisation produces within the societies they claim to embrace. Modernisation galvanises the multiplication of various

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<sup>15</sup> Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, p.93. It must be noted that the replacement of a king’s absolute authority with a harshly autocratic oligarchy can be considered as an example of expanding political participation, and thus as political modernisation, according to this formulation. In fact, it is “modernisation,” but not “modernity” according to the liberal-democratic standards of the 21st century. Once again, like the question of whether the Salafist thought is modern, what is understood with “modernity” does not have a clear-cut answer.

social forces with an inclination and capacity to question and defy the political legitimacy of the state and, worse, threaten the state's existence as a sovereign entity. Meanwhile, the persistently low level of political institutionalisation of the state leads to further socio-political fragmentation in the society, which in turn creates significant constraints on the state's policy choices. The most significant consequence of this trend is that sub-state groupings emerge as alternative sources of power to be reckoned with in the state's dealings with other actors, both internal and external. This urges the state to keep in mind the presence and the potential of such actors as a constant in its calculations. On the other hand, and more importantly from a security standpoint, as the frontiers between states grow fainter with globalisation, it becomes extremely difficult to control and limit the actions of these groupings by the state. This trend inevitably creates opportunities wide open to manipulation by state, sub-state and supra-state actors. Consequently, exploiting sub-state groups becomes a convenient way of engaging in conflictual relations with one's opponent(s), given the increasing unattractiveness of waging full-scale war at the inter-state level and the availability of sub-state groups for manipulation. Thus, all local states in the Middle East today are well aware of the rise of sub-state groupings, the dangerous opportunities this trend entails, and the constraints it imposes on their own and their opponents' policy options, which, at the end of the day, complicates the creation and maintenance of a region-wide, comprehensive, sustainable security framework that would be supported by state-actors as envisioned by traditional Western thinking.

Although significant variations exist across the Middle Eastern countries in terms of their level of socio-political development and the problem of political legitimacy, several symptoms of the predicament of political modernisation form a common pattern across the region. Regardless of the presence of a popularly-elected president, a constitutional monarch, or an autocrat, almost all countries in the region with the exception of Israel and Turkey suffer from a shortage of political community in one way or another, a direct result of low level of political institutionalisation of the state, which in turn impedes effective, authoritative and legitimate government in the long run. It is hard to mention the presence in such states of a unified civic spirit that would constitute a focal point to bring individuals and social forces around a shared vision of public interest. An expected consequence of the lack of a unified civic spirit, ineffectiveness of political institutions, and thus the deficiency of the idea of political community, is the local leaders' constant concern about political legitimacy. At first sight, ensuring political legitimacy may seem to have more urgency for a democratic government whose popularity is regularly put to test through the ballot box, which is hardly the case in most of the Middle East. However, since "institutions are the behavioral

manifestation of the moral consensus and mutual interest,”<sup>16</sup> the fragility of institutions is not only a sign of the shortage of political community, but also an ominous warning of the transience of the system’s capability to command the loyalty of the governed, even if the relationship between the governed and the state is based on certain democratic principles. In such a fragmented context, “the problem is not to hold elections but to create organizations,” as Huntington points out, because meaningful elections “presuppose a certain level of political organization” to claim substance. That is why, as we witness in Iraq, Lebanon or in those areas under the *de jure* control of the Palestinian Authority, allowing the masses to make a choice through the ballot box neither ensures the allegiance of social forces to the political system nor promotes stability and security in the region. And claiming that the real problem is the absence of full democratic rights in the Western tradition seems to be a glib and simplistic way of overlooking the region’s socio-political dynamics.

The chronic turmoil in Iraq is a good example to illustrate this point. Despite having come to power with a popular election, the new Iraqi government today suffers a serious legitimacy problem, and national disunity is one of the fundamental reasons that hinder the creation of a viable state. Many scholars like Dankwart Rustow emphasize the essentiality of “national unity” as the most basic prerequisite to democracy, though, broadly speaking, this observation applies to all forms of political systems, in fact. Rustow argues that national unity exists when “the vast majority of citizens in a democracy-to-be ... have no doubt or mental reservations as to which political community they belong to.”<sup>17</sup> It is exactly the persistence of such reservations among the constituent elements of the Iraqi society about a unified Iraqi political community that exacerbates fragmentation and provokes instability and insecurity in the country and the region. It should be noted that, although there are significant social, economic and political differences between Iraq and the other Muslim countries of the region, they share important similarities, such as diversity in ethnic and religious composition and low level of political institutionalisation in varying degrees. Therefore, what the Muslim leaders in the region witness in Iraq every day inevitably tempts them to develop uneasiness about the visible or latent reservations of the constituent elements of their own societies, the consciousness and demands of which grow rapidly thanks to modernisation in progress. This in turn compels the Middle Eastern state-actors to develop their own reservations about the utility and benefits of introducing further liberalization and democratization, if any, which is the panacea advocated by almost all Western observers for a more stable and secure region,

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16 Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, p.10.

17 Dankwart A. Rustow, *Transitions to Democracy: Toward A Dynamic Model*, New York, 1969, pp.338-352.

and of committing themselves to a common security framework: they tend to be wary of the likely provisions of such an arrangement since they may further undermine the state's standing vis-à-vis those sub-state groups posing a direct challenge to its survival, or, more importantly, vis-à-vis other state-actors who may be tempted to manipulate such groups to their own advantage under the pretence of security cooperation.

Therefore, the relevance of the process of modernisation to regional security in the Middle East centres on the rise of sub-state groups into prominence as a result of the prevailing political legitimacy problem of the existing states. One may argue, quite rightly, that some leaders in the Middle East prefer to exaggerate the existence of such a threat for their own selfish agendas, only to maintain and consolidate their grasp on power, to avoid painful reforms that might undermine their rule. Yet, the point this essay aims to emphasise is that the underlying geopolitical trend in the region for the last three decades increasingly favours sub-state groups over state-actors, and this rise creates both opportunities and constraints for states' security preferences and choices. These sub-state groups attempt to create an alternative base of legitimacy by aiming to obtain acceptance from the wider segments of the society with a claim to a capability for founding a more prosperous, just and moral order; they emerge as new sources of power with more influence on regional issues. Since most state-actors in the Middle East do not always command the loyalty of all groupings within their alleged sovereignty – Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority constitute the epitome of this condition – sub-state groups' increasing weight and their susceptibility to external manipulation generate a pressure on the local states. This inevitably complicates the prospects for a durable security framework that would be shared and supported by state-actors, whose commitment is imperative for any international arrangement to work and claim substance.

What this geopolitical trend implies in terms of inter-state relations is the increasing instrumentality of sub-state groups for the promotion of the interests and objectives of other state-actors. As opposed to the prevalent tendency of local states to resort to full scale war up until the 1990s, an aversion to war is apparently developing in regional affairs in the Middle East. It is true that this aversion is partly a reflection of war's becoming "a political taboo" in the civilized world.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the principal driving force behind the global disinclination is the assumption that war is economically devastating for the states' and societies' well-being, and, given the widespread economic backwardness of the Middle East, it is difficult to point out to

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18 Janice Gross Stein, *Taboos and Regional Security Regimes*, in Zeev Maoz, Emily B. Landau, and Tamar Malz, *Building Regional Security in the Middle East: International, Regional and Domestic Influences*, London: Frank Cass, 2004, pp.6-18.

the existence of powerful disincentives to economically destructive adventures such as war, as witnessed in Lebanon in the summer of 2006. Nevertheless, mainly due to the impact of modernisation on the political legitimacy of states, sub-state groups provide an expedient form of pursuing domestic and foreign policy objectives, though the patron-proxy relationship has been a traditional *modus operandi* in the region since well before the twentieth century.

## 5. The Persistence of the *Realpolitik* Mindset

Of course, this does not mean that if it were not for the existence and increasing potency of sub-state groups, Middle Eastern states would be willing to promote and capable of preserving security in the region. Despite the fact that political legitimacy is in essence a normative and subjective issue, attempting to take advantage of a state's vulnerability in this realm by alluring to various sub-state groups under its alleged sovereignty should be viewed as a natural extension of traditional balance of power politics. For it is essentially the same mindset that inspires *realpolitik*, "foreign policy based on calculations of power and the national interest," justifying whatever means are employed to further the well-being of the state.<sup>19</sup> In the contemporary Middle Eastern context, hard-power considerations, which form the conventional inspiration behind *realpolitik*, constitute an important parameter in shaping actors' security and foreign policy preferences and choices. The cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, on the one hand, and North Korea, on the other, clearly demonstrate that hard-power, as epitomized by such objective measures as the level of military capabilities of a state (or of a sub-state group, as we have witnessed in the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict), is still the most important asset a state can and must have so that it can claim a decent weight in international politics, or at least to ensure its survival.

In this context, the current socio-economic backwardness of the Middle East vis-à-vis the West provides an important psychological factor at the individual and collective level in shaping the perceptions of the Middle Eastern societies on where they and the rest of the world stand relatively. They are fully aware of the importance of substantial and sustainable economic development, not only to have a better life but also to close the "generational" gap with the West. Yet, the exigency of having to confront the demands and interests of superior external players as well as their long-standing distrust towards the other regional players still motivates state-actors towards placing the emphasis on the utility of hard-power means, especially military capabilities, thus desiring economic development essentially for more

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, pp.56-167.

military resources. Coupled with the perception that all state-actors in the region, openly or behind closed doors, adopt and favour a similar approach to inter-state relations, their reluctance towards binding themselves with the limitations of a regional security arrangement grows more robust. As a result, soft-power considerations that are regarded to have promoted the establishment of peaceful relations in continental Europe after so many years of violence cannot gain the upper hand in the region. Accordingly, local actors, both state and sub-state, are inclined to assess geopolitical developments and dynamics, determine their preference orderings and formulate their policy choices in accordance with the tenets of *realpolitik*, either by trying to accumulate more military power or manipulating each other's internal vulnerabilities. As expected, this contributes negatively to the quality, content and scope of inter-state relations by perpetuating traditional balance-of-power politics – a consequence that would surprise neither Cardinal Richelieu nor Bismarck, given the existence of geopolitical fault lines that cut across the region.

An important consequence of the persistence of *realpolitik* in the outlook of actors is permanent tension, chronic instability and deepening distrust – conditions with extremely unfavourable implications for the establishment of a meaningful security framework, a substantial “regime” to be shared and supported by all relevant parties. It should be remembered that a cooperative security framework in the form of a regime reflects in essence a mutually constructive and beneficial outcome of a multilateral and cooperative process of threat perception and confidence building in the security arena. Parties in such an arrangement agree to regulate their hard-power-based policy conduct within the confines of certain “principles, rules and norms” by the expectation of compliance from the other participants.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the inability of most Middle Eastern states in dictating their control over the stances of all sub-state groupings under their alleged sovereignty is likely to frustrate efforts to ensure the unconditional adherence of all state-actors to such an arrangement. This inevitably affects the quality, content and scope of the overall relationship among potential participants, exacerbating distrust towards each other, and predetermines the fate of any regional security arrangement.

After all, the most bothering question mark in the minds of the players in a security regime concerns the intentions of other players, especially when they are former adversaries with deeply entrenched distrust and suspicions. In fact, the prevalence of such feelings is a powerful motivator at the first place against binding oneself under the provisions of such an

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Jervis, *Security Regimes*, International Organization, No: 36/2, Spring 1982, pp.357-378; Stein, *Taboos and Regional Security Regimes*, p.6.



arrangement, and traditional balance-of-power politics is not very helpful in such precarious contexts. The parties' awareness of their internal vulnerabilities and their uncertainty about the other participants' hidden intentions to manipulate them further exacerbates the existent disincentives. As Janice Gross Stein succinctly points out, "it is the ever-present possibility of collapse that creates dynamic tension within a [security] regime and makes it an uncomfortable place to be."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the perception-formation process with regard to possible security threats is a major factor in how actors judge the likely benefits and costs of entering into and remaining committed to a security regime. This in turn determines whether a security regime is created, sustained towards a more advanced form of cooperation, or collapses. Stein identifies the critical obstacles to the creation of a security regime as inherently related with "the unique dangers and consequences of error, dangers that are manifest in the extraordinary difficulties of detection and the grave consequences of defection, and in the reversibility of an aversion to war as time passes and memories of suffering during war fade."<sup>22</sup> Although living under a shared security framework may create a path-dependency over time which may pave the way for a sustainable peace in the long term and with more substantial relations in other areas, the main problem is persuading parties to be a part of a security arrangement in the first place, a Sisyphean task in politically fragmented settings where actors are tempted to read each other through their vulnerabilities and the relativity of power.

Although there is apparently no agreement on the prerequisites for the creation of a security regime,<sup>23</sup> the presence of certain positive and negative incentives obviously facilitates the process of creating a durable security regime. Since threat perception is deeply influenced by how benefits and costs of past experiences are appreciated, it inherently entails a learning process on the part of the players. Therefore, would-be participants of a security regime must firstly have developed in their relations a shared disinclination to resort to violence, "a shared aversion to war and its consequences" as Stein puts it. Yet, once again, the problem is how the parties can be sure of to what extent the others share such a disinclination. Whether hard-

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21 Stein, *Taboos and Regional Security Regimes*, p.7.

22 Stein, *Taboos and Regional Security Regimes*, p.12.

23 It should be remembered that an important aspect of the debate on security regimes concerns the causal relationship between the creation of a security regime and the end of conflict. As Stein points out, numerous forms of security regimes were established well before the end of the Cold War. She argues that the end of conflict is thus not a necessary precondition for the introduction of a security regime, though many observers like Thomas Risse-Kappen highlight that the establishment and maintenance of successful security regimes accelerated the end of the Cold War. Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Ideas do not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War*, *International Organization*, No: 48/2, Spring 1994, pp.185-214; Stein, *Taboos and Regional Security Regimes*, p.11.

power means are perceived by some players to have produced favourable consequences in the past in realising certain aspirations or coping with conflicts is an important factor that frames their tendency whether or not to see violence, or manipulation of sub-state groups, as a feasible policy option in the future. Therefore, in contexts where actors have the tendency to see relations with their counterparts through a zero-sum game perspective, the problem of promoting regional security is quite complicated.

On the other hand, traditional balance of power politics is only one of several factors that shape the preferences and choices of local states and sub-state groups; *realpolitik* is certainly not enough to explain the entire picture of geopolitical dynamics and their security-wise implications in the Middle East. As implied by the prominence of sub-state groups, such cognitive factors as religious and ethnic identification, or more generally expressed as the “identity politics,”<sup>24</sup> which shape the socio-political culture, the prevalent value system at the individual and collective level, and ultimately state traditions, also come into play in shaping the nature of inter-state politics and, thus, the security conjuncture in the region. The important question that arises at this point concerns to what extent how a society and, thereof, a state defines its identity shapes foreign and security policy choices, and determines the overall nature of inter-state interactions, which brings us back to the political legitimacy problem.

As Raymond Hinnebusch points out from a constructivist standpoint, despite the relative autonomy of material and normative variables in shaping the socio-political dynamics in a society, norms and material structures together form the general framework through which “the material anchor to endure and ... the legitimacy to survive without the continual application of coercive power” are established and consolidated. By essentially referring to the local states’ political legitimacy deficit – or the “identity-sovereignty problematique,” as he puts it – as a result of the contradiction between the dominant ethnic and religious identities in the region and the externally imposed material structures, he draws attention to the clashing interaction between material structure and norms, between interests and identity, in framing the perceptions and preferences of state-, sub-state and supra-state actors.<sup>25</sup>

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24 Raymond Hinnebusch, *The Politics of Identity in the Middle East International Relations*, in Louise Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp.151-171.

25 Hinnebusch draws particular attention to the historic struggle between multiple competing identities as a part of the process of identity formation: sub-state groups’ contesting loyalty to the state and its boundaries, the influence of pervasive trans-state identity movements such as Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islam in mobilising popular loyalty and imposing normative constraints on the ability of states to conduct sovereign policies, are all reflections of the incongruity between the existing states system and the ideational realities of the region. Hinnebusch, *The Politics of Identity in the Middle East International Relations*, pp.152-153 & pp.169-170. Likewise, Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett point out to the inclination of local state elites to construct their

Therefore, the conflict between ideational and material factors fosters intra- and inter-state conflict in the Middle East by bringing the sub-state and supra-state actors into the equation, a reality no state-actor has the luxury to overlook in determining its security needs, objectives, interests and calculations.

## 6. Conclusion

In order to illustrate the traditional gap between knowledge and action in the formulation and conduct of foreign policy, George draws attention to a common complaint of practitioners about the academic world: he argues that practitioners usually have deeply entrenched reservations about “the relevance and utility of many of the theoretical generalizations and models put forward by academic researchers,” which inevitably prompts the policymaking world to question the applicability of the academia’s analyses and policy recommendations.<sup>26</sup> As he points out, this is essentially a consequence of the difference in the two cultures of academia and policymaking as well as in their professional missions.

This paper is no exception in this regard: as noted at the very beginning, its major concern is to identify and highlight the key determinants that shape the prevalent uniqueness and divergence in the perceptions and preferences of Middle Eastern state-actors, which in turn impacts on the prospects for security and stability in the region. Therefore, this study, like many other scholarly writings, simply aims to aid the judgment of the policymaker who is the one supposed to make difficult choices between competing considerations and devise a concrete Middle Eastern policy at the end of the day.

Moreover, in explaining how “policy-relevant knowledge” can aid policy analysis and the policymaker’s judgment, George argues that it contributes to two essential functions in policymaking: “the diagnostic task,” i.e. making a sound diagnosis of a policy problem, and “the prescriptive task,” i.e. devising an effective policy response for coping with the problem.<sup>27</sup> This essay has essentially endeavoured to focus on the former, mainly because, as George emphasizes, the correct diagnosis of a policy problem and of the context in which it occurs is “the” prerequisite for a sound policy choice.

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own artificial “state-centric identities” to advocate certain material interests such as security or wealth despite the entrenched ideational realities in the Middle East. Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Cornell University Press, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap*, pp. 3-18.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap*, p. xx.

On the other hand, the analysis that has been presented in this work suggests one important, relatively prescriptive perspective: the paramountcy of state authority in promoting not only certain domestic reforms but also regional security and stability in the Middle East. The Muslim societies of the region are still struggling at the initial and mid phases of modernisation. They still have a long way to go before achieving, particularly, the consolidation of the third pillar of political modernisation, that is, the expansion of meaningful political participation. After all, authority has to exist over all segments of a society prior to limiting it; effective authority is imperative to cultivate political order and, thus, political legitimacy at a reasonable level; and the stability of the system must be ensured by effective institutional mechanisms in order to structure the increasing demands of various social forces produced by modernisation and to moderate their disruptive impacts.<sup>28</sup> The current phase of modernisation that the majority of the Muslim societies in the region have arrived requires the accumulation and centralisation of power, on the one hand, and its “tempered” dispersion coupled with steps toward political institutionalisation, on the other. In light of this analysis, that more democracy is what the local states really need for a stable, secure interstate order seems to be a precipitate inference from the democratic peace theory. Therefore, the recognition of this need and reality by policymakers is paramount to the success of both exogenous and endogenous efforts to promote security and stability in the region, especially in light of the increasing prominence of disruptive sub-state groups.

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28 Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, pp.8-20.