A CRITIQUE OF WALTZ'S DEFENSIVE AND MEARSHEIMER'S OFFENSIVE REALISM

Realism on Trial in the Middle East



Power Accumulation De-escalation

Simultaneous Dual Policymaking and the Failure of Structural Theories, 2011–2026

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A Critique of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer and the Hypothesis of "Simultaneous Dual Policymaking" in the Middle East, 2011–2026

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Preface

During my years in Iran's diplomatic service, including as an expert on Turkish affairs and in the department responsible for the "Political Bulletin," I dealt with regional files and repeatedly encountered a phenomenon for which no textbook of international relations offered a convincing explanation: states that, on the same day, in one capital and in one language, spoke of peace and good neighborliness, while in another capital and in another language they drew up plans for influence and supremacy. At first I assumed this inconsistency reflected disorder in decision-making or the hypocrisy of politicians. The further I went, however, the more I understood that this "inconsistency" was, in many cases, a strategy in its own right: deliberate, calculated, and at times remarkably effective.

The past fifteen years, from the Arab Spring to the war of 2026, turned this insight into analytical certainty. In these same years Israel signed the Abraham Accords while extending the reach of its military operations deep into Iran. Azerbaijan retook Karabakh by force while presenting itself as the architect of corridors of peace. Qatar became the region's indispensable mediator while continuing to host radical figures of political Islam. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates each followed the same path in their own way. And the Islamic Republic, from whose policies my homeland suffered most, institutionalized this duality in a form whose cost was ultimately borne by the Iranian nation.

Meanwhile, the two dominant theories of structural realism, Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism and John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, which still underpin analysis of the Middle East in universities and think tanks around the world, Washington included, did not see this phenomenon. Each explained half of reality and called the other half an "anomaly." This book is the product of an effort to see both halves together.

The book is written for three groups of readers. First, students and scholars of international relations who want to know Waltz and Mearsheimer not through textbook summaries but closely and critically; Part One is for them. Second, analysts and policymakers who deal with the Middle East and need a framework for understanding the complex behavior of the region's states; Part Two is for them. Third, Iranians who think about the future of their homeland and wish to know which path a post-transition Iran should choose in a region governed by such a logic; Chapter Twenty-One is for them.

I hope this book will be a modest step toward rethinking prevailing theories and toward building a national, rational and effective foreign policy for the Iran of tomorrow. The final judgment rests with the reader.

Ebrahim Roshandel

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Contents at a Glance

Introduction

Part One: Structural Realism — Waltz and Mearsheimer

Chapter One: The Roots of Realism, from Thucydides to Morgenthau

Chapter Two: Kenneth Waltz — Life, Works and the "Three Images" of War

Chapter Three: Theory of International Politics — The Architecture of Waltz's Defensive Realism

Chapter Four: Waltz, Nuclear Weapons and Iran — and the Branches of Defensive Realism after Him

Chapter Five: John Mearsheimer and The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

Chapter Six: Mearsheimer and the Middle East — From the Israel Lobby to The Great Delusion

Chapter Seven: Comparing Defensive and Offensive Realism

Chapter Eight: Critiques of Structural Realism, with Emphasis on the Non-Western World

Part Two: Simultaneous Dual Policymaking in the Middle East (2011–2026)

Chapter Nine: The Theoretical Framework of the Hypothesis — "Simultaneous Dual Policymaking"

Chapter Ten: Historical Context — The Middle East from the Arab Spring to the War of 2026

Chapter Eleven: Israel — The "Abrahamic Peace" and Regional Supremacy

Chapter Twelve: The Islamic Republic of Iran — "Dialogue" in the Shop Window, "Strategic Depth" in the Field

Chapter Thirteen: Saudi Arabia — From "Decisive Storm" to the Beijing Reconciliation

Chapter Fourteen: Turkey — The Great Mediator, the Cross-Border Military Actor

Chapter Fifteen: Qatar — Global Mediator and Host of Political Islam

Chapter Sixteen: The Republic of Azerbaijan — Territorial Conquest and Corridor Diplomacy

Chapter Seventeen: The United Arab Emirates — "Little Sparta" and the Diplomacy of Normalization

Chapter Eighteen: Control and Supplementary Cases — Oman, Egypt and Pakistan

Chapter Nineteen: The Great Powers Facing Dual Policy — The United States, Russia and China

Chapter Twenty: Synthesis — The Illegibility of the Two Theories and the Proposal of "Dual Realism"

Chapter Twenty-One: Iran's Foreign Policy after Transition — From Institutional Duality to Smart Duality

Conclusion

Appendix One: Glossary of Key Terms

Appendix Two: Comprehensive Chronology of the Middle East (2011–2026)

Bibliography

Detailed Table of Contents

Introduction.....12
The Research Problem.....12
Research Questions.....12
The Hypothesis.....12
Significance.....13
Method.....13
Structure of the Book.....13
A Note on Terminology.....14
A Note on Sources and Limitations.....14

Part One: Structural Realism — Waltz and Mearsheimer.....

Chapter One: The Roots of Realism, from Thucydides to Morgenthau.....16
1.1. Why Begin with the Roots?.....16
1.2. Thucydides and the Logic of Fear.....16
1.3. Machiavelli and the Ethics of the State.....17
1.4. Hobbes and the State of Nature.....17
1.5. E. H. Carr and the Twenty Years' Crisis.....17
1.6. Hans Morgenthau and Classical Realism.....18
1.7. From Classical to Structural Realism.....18
1.8. Kautilya and the Arthashastra: The First Theory of Dual Policy.....19
1.9. The Iranian and Islamic Tradition of Statecraft.....20
1.10. Clausewitz: War as the Continuation of Politics.....21
1.11. Bismarck, Realpolitik and the Art of Crosscutting Alliances.....21
1.12. Kissinger and the Legitimate Order.....22
1.13. Reinhold Niebuhr and the Moral Tragedy of Power.....22
1.14. Conclusion.....23

Chapter Two: Kenneth Waltz — Life, Works and the "Three Images" of War.....24
2.1. Life and Academic Standing.....24
2.2. Man, the State, and War: The Three Images.....24
2.3. The Significance of the Three Images for the Middle East.....25
2.4. Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics.....26
2.5. Waltz in the Cold War: Defender of Bipolarity.....26
2.6. The Three Images in Detail: The Remedies Each Proposes.....26
2.7. Waltz and Rousseau; Waltz and Kant.....27
2.8. Waltz's Reply to His Critics: "International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy".....28
2.9. Waltz versus Neorealism and Its Critics.....28
2.10. The Collapse of the Soviet Union: The First Great Test.....29
2.11. Waltz's Legacy.....29
2.12. Conclusion.....29

Chapter Three: Theory of International Politics — The Architecture of Waltz's Defensive Realism.....30
3.1. What Is a Theory? Waltz's Epistemological Foundations.....30
3.2. The Critique of "Reductionist" Theories.....30
3.3. The Three Elements of Structure.....30

3.4. Self-Help and the Logic of Survival....31
3.5. The Theory of the Balance of Power....31
3.6. "Security, Not Power": The Key Sentence of Defensive Realism....32
3.7. Socialization and Competition: The Mechanisms of Structure....32
3.8. Bipolar and Nuclear Stability....33
3.9. Structure after the Cold War: Unstable Unipolarity....33
3.10. The Market Analogy: From Oligopoly to the International System....33
3.11. Schroeder's Critique: Is History Consistent with Neorealism?....34
3.12. Schweller: Bandwagoning for Profit....34
3.13. The Logic of Anarchy Revisited: Buzan, Jones and Little....34
3.14. Applying the Three Elements of Structure to the Middle East....35
3.15. Is Waltz's Theory "Defensive"?....36
3.16. A Chapter-by-Chapter Reading of Theory of International Politics....36
3.17. The Logic of the Theory at a Glance....39
3.18. First Critical Observations (for Part Two)....39
Chapter Four: Waltz, Nuclear Weapons and Iran — and the Branches of Defensive Realism after Him....41
4.1. "More May Be Better"....41
4.2. "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb" (2012)....41
4.3. Defensive Realism after Waltz: A Theoretical Family....42
4.4. The Shared Assumptions of the Defensive Realist Family....44
4.5. Glenn Snyder and the "Stability–Instability Paradox"....44
4.6. Jervis: The Spiral Model versus the Deterrence Model....45
4.7. Walt: Revolution and War....45
4.8. Taliaferro and "Security Seeking under Anarchy"....46
4.9. Kydd: Sheep in Sheep's Clothing....47
4.10. Van Evera and the Offense–Defense Hypothesis....47
4.11. Conclusion....47
Chapter Five: John Mearsheimer and The Tragedy of Great Power Politics....49
5.1. Life and Academic Standing....49
5.2. Point of Departure: The Question Waltz Did Not Answer....49
5.3. Five Bedrock Assumptions....50
5.4. Three Patterns of Behavior Derived from the Assumptions....50
5.5. The Concept of Power in Mearsheimer's Theory....50
5.6. "The Stopping Power of Water"....51
5.7. The Dual Aim of the Regional Hegemon....51
5.8. Strategies for Gaining and Keeping Power....51
5.9. The Distribution of Power and the Likelihood of War....52
5.10. Mearsheimer's Historical Evidence: Four Revisionist Powers....53
5.11. The "Potential Hegemon" and the Logic of Fear....54
5.12. Nuclear Weapons in Mearsheimer's Theory....54
5.13. The Updated Tragedy (2014) and China....55
5.14. Critics of the Tragedy....55
5.15. A Chapter-by-Chapter Reading of The Tragedy of Great Power Politics....56
5.16. The Logic of the Theory at a Glance....59

Chapter Six: Mearsheimer and the Middle East — From the Israel Lobby to The Great Delusion..... 60
6.1. Mearsheimer and the Iraq War..... 60
6.2. The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy..... 60
6.3. Mearsheimer on Israel and Palestine..... 60
6.4. Mearsheimer on Iran..... 61
6.5. The Great Delusion (2018): A Critique of Liberal Hegemony..... 61
6.6. Ukraine and the Critique of NATO Expansion..... 62
6.7. China and the Potential Hegemon..... 62
6.8. How States Think (2023)..... 62
6.9. "Offshore Balancing": Mearsheimer's Prescription for the Persian Gulf..... 63
6.10. Mearsheimer and Syria..... 63
6.11. The Problem of Scope: Does Offensive Realism Apply to Regional Powers?..... 64
6.12. Mearsheimer and the Gaza War..... 64
6.13. Criticisms of How States Think..... 65
6.14. Conclusion..... 65
Chapter Seven: Comparing Defensive and Offensive Realism..... 66
7.1. Common Ground: One Family, Two Offspring..... 66
7.2. Key Differences..... 66
7.3. A Comprehensive Comparative Table..... 67
7.4. Disagreement over the "Problem of Intentions"..... 68
7.5. Are the Two Theories Complementary?..... 68
7.6. Brooks: "Dueling Realisms" and the Question of Probability..... 68
7.7. Tang Shiping: From Offensive to Defensive Realism, a Historical Evolution..... 69
7.8. Schweller's Typology and the States of the Middle East..... 69
7.9. The Predictions of the Two Theories for the Middle East: A Thought Experiment..... 70
7.10. One Theory, Two Theories, or Neither?..... 71
7.11. How to Adjudicate between the Two Theories: Methodological Considerations..... 71
7.12. The Level of Analysis: Singer's Problem..... 73
7.13. Conclusion..... 73
Chapter Eight: Critiques of Structural Realism, with Emphasis on the Non-Western World..... 75
8.1. The Liberal and Institutionalist Critique..... 75
8.2. The Constructivist Critique..... 75
8.3. Neoclassical Realism..... 75
8.4. The Third-World Critique: Regime Security and "Omnibalancing"..... 76
8.5. Regional Security Complex Theory..... 77
8.6. Internal Critiques: Problems of Falsifiability..... 77
8.7. Soft Balancing and Hedging..... 77
8.8. The English School: The Anarchical Society..... 78
8.9. Lustick: Why Does the Middle East Have No Great Power?..... 78
8.10. Fred Halliday: The Historical Sociology of Middle Eastern International Relations..... 79
8.11. Ramazani and the Duality of the Islamic Republic's Foreign Policy..... 79
8.12. Ehteshami and Hinnebusch: Middle Powers in a Penetrated System..... 80
8.13. Curtis Ryan and Regime-Security Alliances..... 80
8.14. Valbjørn and Bank: The New Arab Cold War..... 80

8.15. Analytic Eclecticism: A Response to Theoretical Pluralism....81
8.16. Grand Theory or Middle-Range Theory?....81
8.17. Criteria for Evaluating a Good Theory....82
8.18. Conclusion to Part One....82

Part Two: Simultaneous Dual Policymaking in the Middle East (2011–2026).....

Chapter Nine: The Theoretical Framework of the Hypothesis — "Simultaneous Dual Policymaking"....85

9.1. Formulating the Hypothesis....85
9.2. Three Subsidiary Hypotheses....85
9.3. Operational Definitions of the Two Logics....85
9.4. Types of Duality....86
9.5. Why Is Duality Rational? Five Mechanisms....86
9.6. Conceptual Antecedents: From the "Two-Level Game" to "Strategic Hedging"....87
9.7. The Duality Index....88
9.8. Conceptual Boundaries: What Dual Policy Is Not....89
9.9. Case Study Method....90
9.10. Rival Predictions....90

Chapter Ten: Historical Context — The Middle East from the Arab Spring to the War of 2026....91

10.1. Why Is 2011 the Starting Point?....91
10.2. Chronology of Key Events....91
10.3. Four Waves of Transformation....92
10.4. The Structure of the Region in 2026....93
10.5. The Role of Extra-Regional Powers over the Past Fifteen Years....94
10.6. The Red Sea War: A Compressed Example of Dual Logic....95
10.7. Economic and Technological Developments....95
10.8. Conclusion....96

Chapter Eleven: Israel — The "Abrahamic Peace" and Regional Supremacy.....97

11.1. Structural Position....97
11.2. The De-escalatory Logic: Peace, Normalization and Regional Integration....97
11.3. The Power-Accumulating Logic: Military Superiority and Cross-Border Action....98
11.4. Linking the Two Logics: Peace as Strategic Depth....99
11.5. Further Examples of Israel's Dual Policy....100
11.6. The Costs of Dual Policy for Israel....101
11.7. Close Study: Summer 2020 — Annexation or Normalization?....102
11.8. Second Close Study: September 2024 — From the Pagers to the Lebanon Ceasefire....103
11.9. Testing against the Two Theories....105
11.10. Table of Israel's Dualities....105

Chapter Twelve: The Islamic Republic of Iran — "Dialogue" in the Shop Window, "Strategic Depth" in the Field....107

12.1. Structural Position....107
12.2. The Official Doctrine of Duality: From "Heroic Flexibility" to "Neither War nor Negotiation" 107
12.3. The De-escalatory Logic....108
12.4. The Power-Accumulating Logic: The Architecture of Strategic Depth....108

12.5. Linking the Two Logics: The Institutional Division of Labor....109
12.6. The Collapse of the Balance: 2024 to 2026....110
12.7. Further Examples of the Islamic Republic's Dual Policy....110
12.8. The Islamic Republic in the 2026 War: The End of Duality....112
12.9. Lessons for Post-Transition Iran....112
12.10. Close Study: The JCPOA Year (April 2015 to January 2016)....113
12.11. Second Close Study: April 2024 — An Attack Announced in Advance....114
12.12. Testing against the Two Theories....116
12.13. Table of the Islamic Republic's Dualities....116
Chapter Thirteen: Saudi Arabia — From "Decisive Storm" to the Beijing Reconciliation....118
13.1. Structural Position....118
13.2. The Power-Accumulating Logic....118
13.3. The De-escalatory Logic....119
13.4. Saudi Behavior in the 2026 War: A Pure Example of Duality....120
13.5. Further Examples of Saudi Dual Policy....120
13.6. The Domestic Logic: Mohammed bin Salman and Two Sources of Legitimacy....122
13.7. Close Study: 2023 — Beijing, Sanaa and Washington at Once....122
13.8. Second Close Study: Abqaiq 2019 — A Blow That Led to De-escalation....124
13.9. Testing against the Two Theories....125
13.10. Table of Saudi Arabia's Dualities....126
Chapter Fourteen: Turkey — The Great Mediator, the Cross-Border Military Actor 127
14.1. Structural Position....127
14.2. The Power-Accumulating Logic: Military Presence on Five Fronts....127
14.3. The De-escalatory Logic: Mediation and Normalization....128
14.4. Linking the Two Logics: The "Armed Mediator"....129
14.5. Further Examples of Turkey's Dual Policy....129
14.6. The "Century of Türkiye" and Erdoğan's Two Sources of Legitimacy....130
14.7. Close Study: Twelve Days That Transformed Syria (November–December 2024)....131
14.8. Second Close Study: 2020 — Three Fronts and One Negotiating Table....132
14.9. Testing against the Two Theories....134
14.10. Table of Turkey's Dualities....134
Chapter Fifteen: Qatar — Global Mediator and Host of Political Islam....136
15.1. Structural Position: Small State, Great Power....136
15.2. The De-escalatory Logic: The "Indispensable Mediator"....136
15.3. The Power-Accumulating Logic: Ideological and Media Influence....137
15.4. Linking the Two Logics: "Connected to Everyone"....138
15.5. Further Examples of Qatar's Dual Policy....138
15.6. Qatar as Theory: The "Over-Performing Small State"....139
15.7. Close Study: Two Years of Gaza Mediation (October 2023 to October 2025)....140
15.8. Second Close Study: The Blockade of Qatar (June 2017 to January 2021)....141
15.9. Testing against the Two Theories....143
15.10. Table of Qatar's Dualities....143
Chapter Sixteen: The Republic of Azerbaijan — Territorial Conquest and Corridor Diplomacy....145

16.1. Structural Position..... 145
16.2. The Power-Accumulating Logic: Retaking Territory by Force.....145
16.3. The De-escalatory Logic: Peace through Trade.....146
16.4. Linking the Two Logics: The Corridor as the Continuation of War by Other Means.....147
16.5. Iran and Azerbaijan: A Reflection of Mutual Duality.....147
16.6. Further Examples of Azerbaijan's Dual Policy.....147
16.7. Azerbaijan and the "Victor's Peace" Model in Theory.....148
16.8. Close Study: Forty-Four Days and One Article (September to November 2020).....149
16.9. Second Close Study: Autumn 2023 — From Total Conquest to the First Joint Statement.....150
16.10. Testing against the Two Theories.....152
16.11. Table of Azerbaijan's Dualities.....152
Chapter Seventeen: The United Arab Emirates — "Little Sparta" and the Diplomacy of Normalization..... 154
17.1. Structural Position.....154
17.2. The UAE's Strategic Ideology: Opposition to Political Islam.....154
17.3. The Power-Accumulating Logic.....155
17.4. The De-escalatory Logic.....156
17.5. Linking the Two Logics: The UAE as a "Network State".....157
17.6. Close Study: January 2022 — The Houthi Attack on Abu Dhabi.....157
17.7. The UAE in the 2026 War.....157
17.8. Second Close Study: Summer 2019 — Leaving Yemen, Talking to Iran, Confronting an Ally158
17.9. Testing against the Two Theories.....159
17.10. Table of the UAE's Dualities.....160
Chapter Eighteen: Control and Supplementary Cases — Oman, Egypt and Pakistan 161
18.1. Why Control Cases?.....161
18.2. The Control Case: Oman and "Active Neutrality".....161
18.3. Supplementary Case: Egypt and "Border Mediation".....162
18.4. Pakistan: A Nuclear Power as Mediator.....162
18.5. Common Patterns across the Seven Cases.....162
Chapter Nineteen: The Great Powers Facing Dual Policy — The United States, Russia and China..... 164
19.1. The Question of This Chapter.....164
19.2. The United States: The Patron That Made Duality Possible.....164
19.3. Russia: An Actor That Was Itself Dual.....166
19.4. China: Economic Power without Security Responsibility.....166
19.5. A Tripolar Structure and the Room for Maneuver of Middle Powers.....167
19.6. Implications for Theory.....167
19.7. Summary Table.....168
Chapter Twenty: Synthesis — The Illegibility of the Two Theories and the Proposal of "Dual Realism"..... 169
20.1. Returning to the Hypothesis.....169
20.2. Assessing the Subsidiary Hypotheses.....169
20.3. Assessing the Rival Predictions.....170
20.4. Where Does Waltz Become Illegible?.....170
20.5. Where Does Mearsheimer Become Illegible?.....170

20.6. A Theoretical Proposal: "Dual Realism"....171
20.7. The Duality Matrix: A Tool for Analysis....172
20.8. Testable Propositions for Future Research....172
20.9. Comparison with Other Regions....173
20.10. Is Realism Dead?....173
20.11. Implications for Policymaking....174
20.12. Limitations of the Study and Future Horizons....174
Chapter Twenty-One: Iran's Foreign Policy after Transition — From Institutional Duality to Smart Duality....176
21.1. Why This Chapter?....176
21.2. Lessons from the Seven Cases....176
21.3. Proposed Principles: The Doctrine of "Smart Duality"....177
21.4. The Duality Matrix for the Iran of the Future....178
21.5. Challenges of the Transition....179
21.6. Iran and Theory: A Return to Kautilya and Nizam al-Mulk....180
Conclusion....181
Appendix One: Glossary of Key Terms....182
A) Foundational Concepts of Realism....182
B) Concepts of Offensive Realism....183
C) Concepts from Critiques and Rival Theories....183
D) Concepts Proposed in This Book....184
Appendix Two: Comprehensive Chronology of the Middle East (2011–2026)....186
2011 to 2014....186
2015 to 2019....187
2020 to 2022....188
2023 to 2024....189
2025 to 2026....190
Bibliography....192
Works by Kenneth Waltz....192
Works by John Mearsheimer....192
Classical and Defensive Realism....192
Critiques and Neoclassical Realism....194
The Middle East....195
A Note on Sources for the Events of 2024–2026....195

Introduction

The Research Problem

Structural realism, founded by Kenneth Waltz's Theory of International Politics in 1979 and carried to its offensive version by John Mearsheimer's The Tragedy of Great Power Politics in 2001, has for nearly half a century been one of the most powerful frameworks for understanding international politics. Despite their differences, these two theories share a fundamental assumption: a single logic governs the behavior of states. For Waltz this logic is "security-seeking"; for Mearsheimer it is "power-seeking." In either case, a state is either defensive or offensive, either a status quo power or a revisionist one.

The experience of the Middle East over the past fifteen years challenges this assumption. In this period, the region's principal states have pursued not one of the two logics but both at once. The question is whether this behavior is a set of "anomalies" to be explained by secondary variables, or a sign of the fundamental inadequacy of both theories for understanding regional systems.

Research Questions

Main question: Can Waltz's defensive realism and Mearsheimer's offensive realism explain the foreign and security policy behavior of the principal states of the Middle East between 2011 and 2026?

Subsidiary questions:

- What are the foundations, assumptions and principal predictions of each theory, and what criticisms have been leveled against them?
- What policies have the region's principal states pursued in this period, and are these policies consistent with a defensive logic, an offensive logic, or a combination of both?
- If state behavior is combined, how is the combination organized, what mechanisms make it possible, and under what conditions does it collapse?
- What alternative theoretical framework can better explain this behavior, and what are its implications for policymaking, especially for the Iran of the future?

The Hypothesis

The central hypothesis of this book is that in the post-2011 Middle East, the region's principal states have organized their foreign and security policies not on the basis of a choice between the logic of security-seeking and the logic of power-seeking, but on the basis of a simultaneous and deliberate combination of the two. I call this pattern "simultaneous dual policymaking" and argue that it is neither an anomaly nor hypocrisy, but the rational strategy of regional powers in penetrated regional systems. The

implication is that both Waltz's and Mearsheimer's theories become "illegible" and "mismatched" at the regional level.

Significance

The significance of this study lies at three levels. At the **theoretical level**, the book challenges one of the foundational assumptions of structural realism and proposes an alternative framework, "dual realism," which may also be applied to the study of other regional systems. At the **analytical level**, it offers tools such as the "duality index" and the "duality matrix" for assessing state behavior. At the **policy level**, it warns policymakers not to mistake the de-escalatory signals of regional states for a change in their strategy, and it proposes for post-transition Iran a doctrine of "smart duality."

Method

The book's method is comparative case study using process tracing. In Part One, the two theories are reconstructed through close reading of the original texts and the critical literature surrounding them. In Part Two, seven states (Israel, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, the Republic of Azerbaijan and the United Arab Emirates) are examined as principal cases, and three (Oman, Egypt and Pakistan) as control and supplementary cases. For each principal case, de-escalatory and power-accumulating policies are identified using specified operational criteria (Chapter Nine), their simultaneity and linkage are traced, and the result is compared with the predictions of the two theories. Each case chapter contains two "close studies" of key events with detailed chronologies.

Structure of the Book

The book is organized in two parts and twenty-one chapters.

Part One (Chapters One to Eight) is devoted to the theories. Chapter One traces the roots of realism from Thucydides, Kautilya and Machiavelli to Nizam al-Mulk, Ibn Khaldun, Clausewitz, Bismarck, Kissinger and Morgenthau. Chapters Two to Four address Waltz: his life and the "three images" of war, the architecture of Theory of International Politics with a chapter-by-chapter reading, and his views on nuclear weapons and Iran together with the branches of defensive realism after him. Chapters Five and Six are devoted to Mearsheimer: the theory of the Tragedy with a chapter-by-chapter reading, and his views on the Middle East. Chapter Seven compares the two theories, and Chapter Eight reviews the criticisms leveled against them, with emphasis on the non-Western world.

Part Two (Chapters Nine to Twenty-One) tests the hypothesis. Chapter Nine presents the theoretical framework and measurement tools, and Chapter Ten sketches the historical context of the past fifteen years. Chapters Eleven to Seventeen are the seven principal case studies, and Chapter Eighteen addresses the control cases. Chapter Nineteen examines the

role of the great powers, Chapter Twenty synthesizes the findings within the framework of "dual realism," and Chapter Twenty-One applies this framework to the foreign policy of post-transition Iran. The book ends with a conclusion, two appendices (a glossary and a chronology) and a bibliography.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout the book, "de-escalatory logic" refers to policies such as normalization, reconciliation, mediation and economic cooperation, and "power-accumulating logic" refers to policies such as territorial seizure, support for proxy groups, military intervention and the expansion of armaments capacity. These two terms correspond respectively to the logics of defensive and offensive realism, but are not identical with them. A more precise definition of the two logics is given in Chapter Nine, and key terms are listed in Appendix One.

A Note on Sources and Limitations

The period under study runs from the start of the Arab Spring (2011) to the summer of 2026. The events of recent months, including the US–Israeli war against the Islamic Republic that began on February 28, 2026, the killing of Ali Khamenei and the succession of Mojtaba Khamenei, are still unfolding and it is too early for a final judgment; they are therefore used in this book as "emerging evidence." The book's quantitative assessments, including the scores of the "duality index," are the author's qualitative estimates, which future research may test with systematic data.

Part One: Structural Realism — Waltz and Mearsheimer

Chapter One: The Roots of Realism, from Thucydides to Morgenthau

1.1. Why Begin with the Roots?

Waltz and Mearsheimer both claim to have built a "scientific" and "structural" theory independent of human nature and of the internal characteristics of states. Yet neither theory can be understood without the long tradition of realist thought. Structural realism is in fact an attempt to turn the scattered insights of historians, philosophers and statesmen about fear, power and survival into a coherent theory. To criticize Waltz and Mearsheimer, therefore, one must know what they took from this tradition, what they set aside and what they redefined. This rereading also matters for Part Two of the book, because much of what appears in the Middle East as an "anomaly" for structural theories was entirely normal in classical realism.

1.2. Thucydides and the Logic of Fear

Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War, written by the Athenian historian in the fifth century BC, is usually regarded as the first realist text. Thucydides locates the "truest" cause of the war between Athens and Sparta not in its apparent occasions but in the growth of Athenian power and the fear this growth aroused in Sparta. This sentence is the core of what is today called the "Thucydides trap": a rising power and an established power may be drawn toward war even without hostile intent.

The Melian Dialogue in Book Five is the most famous statement of the logic of power in the Western tradition. The Athenians tell the people of the island of Melos, who wished to remain neutral, that justice has meaning only between equals and that, otherwise, the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. Less often noted, however, is that Thucydides does not praise this logic; he shows that the same arrogance of power drew Athens into the disastrous Sicilian expedition and its eventual defeat. In other words, Thucydides is both an "offensive realist" and its critic. He shows that states can act simultaneously out of fear (a defensive logic) and out of ambition (an offensive logic). This duality, which structural realism eliminated, is precisely what returns in the hypothesis of this book.

Thucydides identifies three main motives of state behavior: fear, honor and interest. Waltz reduces nearly everything to "fear" and the need for security, and Mearsheimer reduces everything to "power as the best guarantee of security." Neither takes "honor" or prestige seriously, whereas in the Middle East prestige, religious legitimacy and leadership of the Islamic or Arab world are among the principal motives of foreign policy.

1.3. Machiavelli and the Ethics of the State

In The Prince and the Discourses, Niccolò Machiavelli distinguishes between individual ethics and the ethics of the state. To preserve the state, the prince must sometimes learn "how not to be good." He must be both lion and fox: the lion to frighten the wolves and the fox to recognize the traps. This metaphor, perhaps better than any modern theory, describes the dual policy of Middle Eastern states. A state that mediates while building networks of influence is in fact both fox and lion.

Machiavelli also emphasized the role of fortuna (fortune) and virtù. Virtù, in the Machiavellian sense, is the leader's ability to seize opportunities and master contingency. Structural realism deliberately removed this element, considering it "reductionist," that is, dependent on the level of the individual and the state. Yet in the Middle East, where foreign policy decisions are often in the hands of a small number of leaders (Mohammed bin Salman, Erdoğan, Aliyev, Netanyahu, the Emir of Qatar, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic), virtù and the leader's personality play a decisive role.

1.4. Hobbes and the State of Nature

In Leviathan, Thomas Hobbes describes the state of nature as a war of all against all, in which human life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. For Hobbes, the three principal causes of quarrel are competition, diffidence and glory. The way out is to establish a superior power, the Leviathan, that keeps all in awe and establishes order.

Realists transferred this image to the international arena: the international system lacks a Leviathan, so states live in a state of nature. Waltz formulated this idea through the concept of "anarchy." Yet Hobbes himself noted that the condition of states is not as miserable as that of individuals in the state of nature, because states can protect themselves and do not lose everything in a single moment. This observation later became the basis of the distinction between defensive and offensive realism: is anarchy so dangerous that it forces states to maximize power (Mearsheimer), or does it leave room for relative security and coexistence (Waltz)?

1.5. E. H. Carr and the Twenty Years' Crisis

In The Twenty Years' Crisis (1939), Edward Hallett Carr attacked the liberal idealism of the inter-war years. He showed that the "harmony of interests" of which liberals spoke was in fact the ideology of dominant powers satisfied with the status quo. Every international order reflects a particular distribution of power, and every dissatisfied state regards that order as unjust. Carr, however, also found pure realism insufficient, holding that politics without ideals is sterile and ideals without power impotent.

Carr's insight is very important for the Middle East. The discourses of "resistance," "the umma," the "Abrahamic peace" or "humanitarian mediation" are each normative coverings for particular interests. But contrary to what structural realists assume, these

coverings are not merely decorative; they are instruments of power and themselves become sources of power.

1.6. Hans Morgenthau and Classical Realism

With Politics Among Nations (1948), Hans Morgenthau made realism the dominant theory of international relations in post-war America. He set out six principles of political realism, which may be summarized as follows:

- Politics, like society, is governed by objective laws rooted in human nature.
- The key concept of international politics is "interest defined in terms of power."
- The meaning of interest and power is not fixed and depends on historical and cultural context.
- Universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract form; prudence is the supreme political virtue.
- Realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.
- The political sphere is autonomous from economics, law and morality.

For Morgenthau the root of the struggle for power lay in the "lust for power" inherent in human nature (an idea he took from Augustine and Niebuhr). He distinguished three types of policy: the policy of the status quo, the policy of imperialism (changing the distribution of power), and the policy of prestige (demonstrating power). Importantly, Morgenthau accepted that a state may pursue a combination of these policies in different arenas or at different times, and he regarded identifying the type of policy pursued by a rival state as the most important and most difficult task of diplomacy.

Morgenthau also regarded "diplomacy" as a central element of national power and the principal means of preserving peace, not as an act opposed to power. This point faded in structural realism. In classical realism, de-escalation was itself an intelligent use of power, not a sign that a state was "defensive."

1.7. From Classical to Structural Realism

In the 1960s and 1970s classical realism came under pressure from two directions. On one side, the "behavioral revolution" in American social science demanded testable and precise theories and regarded Morgenthau's reliance on "human nature" as unscientific. On the other, liberals, with theories of interdependence (Keohane and Nye), showed that economics, institutions and transnational actors were playing an ever larger role. In response to both challenges, Waltz rebuilt realism: he moved the root of conflict from human nature to the structure of the international system and offered a "parsimonious" theory that explained the recurring patterns of international politics with a few variables.

This parsimony came at a price. To build an elegant theory, Waltz set aside domestic variables, ideology, leadership, identity and prestige. Mearsheimer stayed within the same framework. The central argument of this book is that what was removed returns in the Middle East and renders the theory ineffective.

1.8. Kautilya and the Arthashastra: The First Theory of Dual Policy

If we begin Western realism with Thucydides, we should recall that the Asian tradition contains an older and in some respects more systematic text: the Arthashastra, a treatise on statecraft attributed to Kautilya (Chanakya), minister to Chandragupta Maurya in fourth-century BC India. The text matters for this book because Kautilya, more than two thousand years before Waltz and Mearsheimer, regarded "dual policy" not as a deviation but as one of the six fundamental policies of the ruler.

The Mandala Theory

Kautilya depicts the world around the ruler as concentric circles (a mandala). The immediate neighbor is naturally an enemy; the neighbor's neighbor, the state beyond the enemy, is naturally a friend; and so the circles continue. This logic, today known as "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," is exactly what can be observed in the contemporary Middle East: Israel builds ties with the UAE and Azerbaijan, states beyond its nearby rivals; the Islamic Republic allies with groups in Lebanon and Yemen that lie behind the front lines of its rivals.

The Six Policies (Shadgunya)

Kautilya lists six fundamental policies for the ruler:

- **Sandhi:** peace and treaty.
- **Vigraha:** war and hostility.
- **Asana:** neutrality and waiting.
- **Yana:** marching and preparing to attack.
- **Samshraya:** seeking shelter with a greater power.
- **Dvaidhibhava:** "dual policy," that is, peace with one party and war with another at the same time.

Remarkably, Kautilya explicitly regards dual policy as one of the rational instruments of statecraft and explains the conditions for its use: when the ruler can, by making peace with one neighbor, free his resources for war with another, or when a treaty with one power creates an opportunity to weaken another. This definition corresponds almost exactly to the "geographic duality" defined in Chapter Nine.

Implications for the Critique of Structural Realism

The existence of this tradition reveals two things. First, what I call "simultaneous dual policymaking" is not a new discovery but a return to one of the oldest insights of statecraft. Second, American structural realism, by relying almost exclusively on the experience of modern Europe and great-power competition, lost this insight. The Middle East, which in its regional structure (a multiplicity of middle-sized states, unstable borders, the presence of external powers) resembles the mandala system more than nineteenth-century Europe, is precisely where this insight becomes necessary again.

1.9. The Iranian and Islamic Tradition of Statecraft

Readers familiar with classical Persian texts know that the "mirrors for princes" and books of government are full of insights that would today be called realist. This tradition is particularly important for the Iranian analyst, because it shows that a sophisticated understanding of power has deep roots in the region's political culture.

Nizam al-Mulk and the Book of Government

Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk Tusi, the celebrated Seljuk vizier of the eleventh century, emphasizes in the Siyar al-Muluk, or Siyasatnama, several principles consistent with realist logic: the need for a wide network of spies and informants to learn the intentions of others, caution in trusting officials and neighbors, and the combination of "clemency" and "siyasat" (in the sense of punishment and coercion) in governance. Nizam al-Mulk repeatedly reminds the king that he must display "justice" to have legitimacy and "awe" so that fear of him does not fade. This combination of "legitimacy and awe" is the ancient form of the duality of "de-escalation and power accumulation."

Ibn Khaldun and Asabiyya

Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth-century Tunisian historian and thinker, offered in the Muqaddimah a theory of the rise and fall of states based on the concept of asabiyya, or group solidarity. In his view, states are founded on the strong asabiyya of desert tribes, lose it in urban life and luxury, and finally fall to a fresh group with stronger asabiyya. Ibn Khaldun also believed that a religious mission could multiply asabiyya and give a state power beyond its material capacity.

This insight is very telling for the contemporary Middle East. The force that structural realism does not see, ideological and religious solidarity, played a decisive role in the experience of the Islamic Republic, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah and even ISIS. From an Ibn Khaldunian perspective, the Islamic Republic's "strategic depth" was nothing other than an attempt to extend a transnational asabiyya through a religious mission; and its erosion, examined in Chapter Twelve, coincided with the erosion of asabiyya within the regime itself.

Iranian Advice Literature

In pre-Islamic Iran, too, texts such as the Letter of Tansar and the Testament of Ardashir emphasize the bond between religion and state and the need for constant vigilance toward external and internal enemies. These texts show that in Iranian political thought security has always been understood at two levels at once, internal and external; an insight that Steven David later formulated in Western scholarship as "omnibalancing" (Chapter Eight).

1.10. Clausewitz: War as the Continuation of Politics

Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian officer and military theorist, wrote in On War (published posthumously in 1832) the famous line that war is the continuation of politics by other means. This means that war and diplomacy are not two separate realms but two instruments of a single political purpose. The commander and the statesman must think about both at once.

Clausewitz also proposed the concept of the "trinity": every war is governed by three forces, the passion and enmity of the people, the probabilities and creativity of commanders, and the political rationality of the state. This concept shows that even the greatest theorist of war did not reduce the decision for war or peace to the structure of the system, but saw it as the outcome of interaction among social, military and political forces.

If we invert Clausewitz's dictum, we arrive at one of the keys to understanding today's Middle East: peace and mediation can also be "the continuation of war by other means." Azerbaijan's Zangezur corridor, Israel's Abraham Accords and Qatar's mediation have, as Part Two will show, partly served this function.

1.11. Bismarck, Realpolitik and the Art of Crosscutting Alliances

The term Realpolitik was first used by the German writer Ludwig von Rochau in 1853, but its practical embodiment was Otto von Bismarck, chancellor of Prussia and then of Germany. Bismarck unified Germany through three short and calculated wars (against Denmark in 1864, Austria in 1866 and France in 1870–71), but after 1871 focused German foreign policy on preserving the status quo and preventing an anti-German coalition.

What matters for our discussion is Bismarck's complex alliance system of the 1870s and 1880s: the League of the Three Emperors with Russia and Austria, the Dual Alliance with Austria (1879), the Triple Alliance with Austria and Italy (1882), and finally the secret Reinsurance Treaty with Russia (1887). These alliances were at times in tension with one another: Germany had commitments simultaneously to Austria and Russia, rivals in the Balkans. Through this crosscutting network, Bismarck kept both rivals dependent on him and prevented them from allying against Germany.

Bismarck's behavior can be explained neither by a purely defensive logic (since before 1871 he launched three offensive wars) nor by a purely offensive one (since after 1871 he deliberately refrained from further expansion). He built a combination of the two into a diplomatic "system." The policies of Qatar and Turkey in Part Two of this book, especially their simultaneous ties with mutual rivals, bear a striking resemblance to this system.

1.12. Kissinger and the Legitimate Order

In his doctoral thesis, published as A World Restored (1957), Henry Kissinger examined the European order after the Congress of Vienna (1815). He distinguished between a "legitimate order" and a "revolutionary order." In a legitimate order, all the great powers accept the general framework of the order and settle their differences within it. In a revolutionary order, at least one great power does not accept the framework itself and no concession satisfies it, because its aim is not concessions but the transformation of the order.

Kissinger later extended this analysis in Diplomacy (1994) and World Order (2014), asking in particular whether the Islamic Republic was "a nation or a cause": a state with national interests with which one could bargain, or a revolutionary movement seeking to transform the regional order. This book's answer to Kissinger's question is that the Islamic Republic, at least until 2026, was both at once: a nation in its foreign ministry and a cause in its Quds Force. It was this duality that made diplomacy with it both possible and unstable.

Kissinger's distinction between "legitimacy" and "balance of power" also matters. In his view, a stable order needs both a balance of power (so that no state can overturn the order by force) and legitimacy (so that no state wishes to). Structural realism emphasizes only the first pillar and neglects the second.

1.13. Reinhold Niebuhr and the Moral Tragedy of Power

Reinhold Niebuhr, the American Protestant theologian, argued in Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932) that groups and nations are far less capable of moral behavior than individuals, because collective egoism is legitimized by "patriotism" and turned into virtue. Niebuhr deeply influenced Morgenthau, Kennan and many first-generation realists.

Niebuhr's insight has particular importance for the Middle East: when collective egoism is expressed in religious language, its legitimacy multiplies. The states of the region, from the Islamic Republic to Saudi Arabia and from Israel to Turkey, have each expressed part of their power-seeking in religious or civilisational narratives. Contrary to the assumptions of structural realism, these narratives are not decorative; they make mobilization possible, raise the cost of retreat and sometimes trap states in their own rhetoric.

1.14. Conclusion

Classical realism, from Thucydides to Morgenthau, never regarded states as forced to choose between "security" and "power." Fear and ambition, lion and fox, diplomacy and force were parts of a single whole in this tradition. By separating these parts and building two rival theories (defensive and offensive), structural realism gained precision and testability but lost the capacity to understand "combined behavior." The following chapters show how Waltz and Mearsheimer each carried out this separation.

Chapter Two: Kenneth Waltz — Life, Works and the "Three Images" of War

2.1. Life and Academic Standing

Kenneth Neal Waltz (1924–2013) was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He served in the Second World War and the Korean War, an experience that, according to many of his students, gave him a realistic and unsentimental view of war. Waltz first studied economics and then turned to political science, earning his doctorate at Columbia University. He taught for many years at Swarthmore College, Brandeis University and then the University of California, Berkeley, and in his final years was affiliated with Columbia's Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies. He also served as president of the American Political Science Association.

Waltz's training in economics profoundly shaped his theory. Just as microeconomics deduces the behavior of firms from the structure of the market (perfect competition, oligopoly and so on), Waltz sought to deduce the behavior of states from the structure of the international system. This economic analogy is the key to understanding his entire theory.

Waltz's most important works are:

- Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis (1959), based on his doctoral dissertation.
- Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience (1967).
- Theory of International Politics (1979), the foundational work of structural realism, or neorealism.
- The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better (1981), an Adelphi Paper of the International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate, with Scott Sagan (1995 and later editions).
- "Structural Realism after the Cold War" (2000), an article in International Security.
- "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb" (2012), an article in Foreign Affairs.

2.2. Man, the State, and War: The Three Images

In his first book Waltz asked: where are the principal causes of war to be found? He grouped the answers of thinkers into three "images."

The First Image: Human Nature

According to this image, war springs from human selfishness, aggressiveness or folly. Augustine, Spinoza, Niebuhr and Morgenthau belong here. If so, the path to peace lies in

reforming humanity or restraining its impulses. Waltz finds this explanation insufficient: human nature is constant while war and peace vary, and a constant cannot explain a variable. Human nature explains both war and peace, and therefore explains neither.

The Second Image: The Internal Structure of States

According to this image, war arises from the type of government. Liberals say authoritarian governments are warlike and democracies peaceful; Marxists say capitalism is the cause of war. The path to peace is to change the type of government. Waltz accepts that internal characteristics matter, but argues that states with very different domestic systems behave similarly internationally. "Good states," too, in an environment where others may be "bad," must behave like the others.

The Third Image: The International System

According to this image, which Waltz took from Rousseau, war occurs because there is nothing to prevent it. In the absence of world government, each state is the final judge of its own interests and must rely on itself for security. Waltz uses Rousseau's parable of the "stag hunt": a group of hunters must cooperate to catch a stag; but if one of them sees a hare and seizes it to satisfy his own hunger, the stag escapes and cooperation collapses. Individual logic under conditions of mistrust makes collective cooperation impossible.

Waltz concludes that the third image is the "permissive cause" of war: anarchy makes war possible, while the first and second images supply the "immediate" or "efficient" causes. In the 1959 book Waltz still regarded all three images as necessary for full understanding. In the 1979 book, however, he deliberately focused only on the third image and built a "systemic" theory.

2.3. The Significance of the Three Images for the Middle East

Before turning to structural theory, it should be recalled that Waltz himself accepted in 1959 that the third image is not sufficient to understand a particular war or the foreign policy of a particular state. This point is often forgotten in later readings. Waltz later stated explicitly that Theory of International Politics is not a theory of foreign policy; that is, it does not say what a given state will do at a given time, but what general patterns will recur in a system with a given structure.

This admission is very important for our critique. If Waltz's theory is not a theory of foreign policy, the Waltzians' defense against the Middle Eastern evidence will be that "the theory never made such a claim." This book's reply is that, in that case, defensive realism is not a useful tool for the foreign policy analyst or the regional policymaker, and that at least at the level of the Middle Eastern regional system its predicted general pattern (balancing and preservation of the status quo) has not materialized either.

2.4. Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics

Waltz's lesser-known 1967 book compared the political systems of the United States and Britain and their effects on foreign policy. Contrary to many critics of democracy, Waltz argued that democratic systems are not necessarily less effective in foreign policy than authoritarian ones. The book shows that Waltz was not indifferent to domestic institutions; he simply believed that international theory should be built independently of these variables. Later, neoclassical realists rebuilt precisely this connection.

2.5. Waltz in the Cold War: Defender of Bipolarity

In the 1960s and 1970s many American analysts spoke of a "dangerous bipolar world" and saw multipolarity as a sign of peace. In his famous article "The Stability of a Bipolar World" (1964), Waltz argued the opposite: that the bipolar system is the most stable, because:

- With only two great powers, calculating risk and response is simpler and the likelihood of miscalculation is lower.
- Each superpower relies mainly on its own internal capability (internal balancing), not on unreliable allies.
- No "periphery" is unimportant, so the superpowers are vigilant everywhere and avoid surprise.
- Nuclear weapons raise the cost of direct war so high that both sides become cautious.

This view was completed in Theory of International Politics and established Waltz's reputation. But the collapse of the Soviet Union without war in 1991, which his theory had not predicted, was the first serious blow to the credibility of neorealism.

2.6. The Three Images in Detail: The Remedies Each Proposes

The enduring value of Man, the State, and War lies not only in its classification of the causes of war but in showing that each image proposes its own remedy for peace, and that each remedy has its own limits.

Remedies of the First Image

If war springs from human nature, two paths open. The optimistic path is to reform humanity through education, ethics and religion, a path followed from Erasmus to the peace movements of the twentieth century. The pessimistic path is to accept that humanity cannot be reformed and that its evil can only be restrained by power, a path close to Augustine and Niebuhr. Waltz believes both lead to a dead end: the first because people continue to fight despite all education, the second because if everything goes back to human nature, the difference between periods of war and peace cannot be explained.

Remedies of the Second Image

If war arises from the internal structure of states, the path to peace is the "good state." But which state is good receives different answers in different traditions. Kant saw law-based republics, nineteenth-century liberals saw free-trading states, and socialists saw classless states as the path to peace. Waltz points to two problems: first, historical experience shows that "good" states also fight; second, even if all states were good, none could be sure that others would remain so. Thus the second image depends on the third.

With a critical eye, Waltz also warned of the danger of "war to make states good": those who see peace in the spread of a particular type of government may resort to war to achieve peace. Half a century later, this warning echoed in the experience of Iraq in 2003 and in Mearsheimer's critique of "liberal hegemony."

Remedies of the Third Image

If war arises from the anarchy of the international system, there are two logical paths: eliminate anarchy by creating world government, or manage it through the balance of power. Waltz regards the first as unrealistic, since no state voluntarily surrenders its sovereignty, and a world government built by force would itself become a source of global civil war. The only practical path, therefore, is to accept anarchy and manage it through balance. This conclusion became the foundation of all of Waltz's later theory.

2.7. Waltz and Rousseau; Waltz and Kant

Waltz considered himself indebted to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his scattered writings on war and peace, especially his critique of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's project for "perpetual peace," Rousseau argued that in the absence of a superior power even states with peaceful intentions must be prepared for their own security, and that this very preparedness makes others insecure. Waltz made this argument the foundation of the third image.

Kant, by contrast, set out three conditions for peace in Perpetual Peace (1795): a republican constitution in every state, a federation of free states and a "cosmopolitan right" limited to hospitality. Rather than rejecting Kant outright, Waltz saw him as a complex thinker who attended to both the second image (the republic) and the third (the federation). Later, the "democratic peace" theory that spread from the 1980s claimed Kant's legacy and became one of the most important challenges to Waltzian realism.

For the Middle East this debate has practical importance. A region in which almost no consolidated democracy exists, except with serious qualifications, is not a laboratory for testing the second image; but it shows how the type of regime, especially ideological and personalist regimes, shapes external behavior. As Chapter Eight will show, critiques centered on "regime security" are in fact a return to Waltz's second image.

2.8. Waltz's Reply to His Critics: "International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy"

In the 1990s Colin Elman published an article titled "Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?" (1996), arguing that neorealism can and should be used to explain the foreign policy of states. In the same year Waltz replied in a short article titled "International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy."

Waltz's argument was that his theory, like market theory in economics, says only what "pressures" and "constraints" structure places on units and what general outcomes emerge from their interaction. How a particular state responds to these pressures depends on many factors not included in the theory. Just as market theory does not say what a particular firm will decide tomorrow, the theory of international politics does not say what policy a particular state will pursue.

This reply is logically precise, but it comes at a price. If the theory cannot predict the behavior of states, it can only predict "systemic outcomes." The most important systemic outcome predicted by Waltz's theory is the recurrence of the balance of power. The test of the theory in the Middle East must therefore be: has the balance of power recurred in the regional system? Part Two will show that the answer is complex: no state achieved hegemony, which is consistent with Waltz's prediction; but this outcome resulted less from the "balancing" of regional states than from the intervention of an extra-regional power (the United States) and the attrition caused by proxy rivalries. In other words, the outcome was right but the mechanism was not the one the theory predicted.

2.9. Waltz versus Neorealism and Its Critics

In 1986 Robert Keohane published a collection titled Neorealism and Its Critics, in which chapters of Waltz's book appeared alongside critiques by John Ruggie, Robert Cox, Richard Ashley and Keohane himself. The book became one of the most important sources of theoretical debate in international relations. The critiques can be summarized as follows:

- **Ruggie:** Waltz assumes the second element of structure, the "differentiation of units," to be constant; yet the transition from the medieval system to the modern system of sovereign states shows that the principles of differentiation themselves can change. Waltz's theory can therefore explain only "continuity," not the "transformation" of the system.
- **Cox:** Waltz's theory is a "problem-solving theory" that takes the existing order as given and tries to manage it better, rather than asking whose interests that order serves. "Critical theory," by contrast, must explore the historical and social roots of order.

- **Ashley:** Neorealism, claiming to be scientific, in fact reproduces a state-centric and materialist ideology and ignores the possibility of change.
- **Keohane:** Neorealism is a good starting point, but to understand cooperation it must be supplemented by a theory of institutions.

Waltz replied in the final chapter of the same book, insisting that every theory must simplify and that criticizing what a theory leaves out, without offering a better theory, is fruitless. This reply is also a challenge for the present critique: critiquing Waltz and Mearsheimer is meaningful only if an alternative framework is proposed. Chapter Twenty of this book is an attempt in that direction.

2.10. The Collapse of the Soviet Union: The First Great Test

The end of the Cold War was a difficult test for Waltz. His theory predicted that the bipolar system was stable. Yet the bipolar system collapsed peacefully in 1989–91, without war between the superpowers. Critics, especially constructivists, said this transformation was explained by a "change of ideas" in the Soviet leadership (Gorbachev's New Thinking), not by structure.

Waltz replied that his theory did not predict that the bipolar system would last forever, but that it would be stable so long as it remained bipolar. The collapse of the Soviet Union happened from within, from domestic factors (an exhausted economy, a crisis of legitimacy), and structural theory does not claim to predict such developments. This reply showed once again that Waltz preserved his theory by narrowing the scope of its claims.

2.11. Waltz's Legacy

Despite all the criticism, Waltz had an unparalleled influence on the discipline of international relations. In numerous surveys of American IR scholars he has consistently ranked among the most influential scholars of recent decades. Theory of International Politics is taught in almost every graduate program in the field. Even his critics, from Wendt to Keohane, built their theories in conversation with him. Rather than an "answer," Waltz gave the discipline a "language": the language of structure, anarchy, polarity and balance. The present critique, too, is written in this language.

2.12. Conclusion

Waltz was a thinker who built a systemic theory out of economics, political philosophy and the experience of war. His "three images" remain one of the best teaching frameworks for analyzing the causes of war. But his move from "three images" to "one image" in 1979 was a methodological decision that created both the strength and the limitation of the theory. The next chapter examines this theory in detail.

Chapter Three: Theory of International Politics — The Architecture of Waltz's Defensive Realism

3.1. What Is a Theory? Waltz's Epistemological Foundations

Waltz opens the 1979 book with a discussion of what a theory is. For him a "law" is a recurring relationship between variables, whereas a "theory" explains why the law holds. A theory is not a representation of reality but a mental instrument that, through deliberate simplification, isolates part of reality in order to make it intelligible. That a theory is "unrealistic" is therefore no objection to it; the criterion of a good theory is its explanatory power.

Here Waltz drew on philosophers of science, especially Milton Friedman's instrumentalism in economics and a mild form of falsificationism. He believed a theory should be tested by questions such as: are its predictions consistent with observed behavior? Does it explain recurring patterns that rival theories do not?

3.2. The Critique of "Reductionist" Theories

Waltz calls "reductionist" those theories that deduce the behavior of the whole system from the attributes of its units (states, leaders, ideologies). His prime example is the theories of imperialism of Lenin and Hobson, which attributed war and expansionism to capitalism. Waltz's argument is that if states with very different internal structures behave similarly, and if state behavior does not change when regimes change, then the principal cause must be sought at the level of the system. A systemic theory must show how structure "presses" on units and produces similar outcomes.

3.3. The Three Elements of Structure

Waltz's most important innovation is his precise definition of the "structure" of the international system. The structure of any political system is defined by three elements:

A) The Ordering Principle

Domestic political systems are "hierarchical": units stand in relations of command and obedience, and a central authority holds the legitimate monopoly of force. The international system is "anarchic": no authority stands above states to enforce rules. Anarchy in the Waltzian sense does not mean chaos or disorder but the absence of central government.

B) The Functional Differentiation of Units

In hierarchical systems, units have different functions (judiciary, executive, army and so on) and a division of labor exists among them. In an anarchic system all states are "like units," because each must perform all the essential functions for its own survival. States cannot accept a division of labor, because dependence on others is dangerous in an

insecure environment. Waltz assumes this element to be constant in the international system and effectively removes it from the equation.

C) The Distribution of Capabilities

The only element that varies in the international system is the distribution of capabilities among units. Capabilities include population, territory, resources, economic strength, military strength, political stability and competence. Waltz stresses that capability is an attribute of units, but its "distribution" is an attribute of the system. Accordingly, systems are distinguished by the number of great powers: multipolar, bipolar and (after the Cold War) unipolar.

3.4. Self-Help and the Logic of Survival

In an anarchic system each state must rely on itself. Waltz calls this a "self-help system." He assumes that states "at a minimum" seek their own preservation and "at a maximum" universal domination. His key point, however, is that for building a theory the assumption of survival suffices. States may have other goals, but survival is the prerequisite for achieving any other goal.

From this assumption Waltz derives two important consequences:

- **Concern with relative gains:** in a self-help system, states do not ask "will both of us gain?" but "who will gain more?", because another's greater gain today may be used against me tomorrow. This concern makes cooperation difficult.
- **Concern with dependence:** states avoid excessive interdependence and prefer to be as self-sufficient as possible.

3.5. The Theory of the Balance of Power

The predictive core of Waltz's theory is the "theory of the balance of power." Waltz says that in an anarchic system whose states seek at least survival, balances of power "recurrently form." Whenever one state becomes too powerful, others turn to balancing against it and balance is restored. This outcome is not necessarily anyone's intention; it is the unintended consequence of the behavior of all, just as the equilibrium price in a market is the unintended consequence of the behavior of producers and consumers.

Waltz distinguishes two forms of balancing:

- **Internal balancing:** increasing economic capability, strengthening the military and devising smarter strategies using one's own resources.
- **External balancing:** strengthening and enlarging one's own alliances or weakening and shrinking those of the rival.

Waltz predicts that states generally "balance" rather than "bandwagon" with the stronger power. His reason is that in an anarchic system the first concern of states is to maintain

their position, not to maximize power. Joining the stronger side leaves a state defenceless against the future danger posed by that same strong side. For this reason weaker states join the weaker side to contain the dominant power.

3.6. "Security, Not Power": The Key Sentence of Defensive Realism

The most important claim separating Waltz from Mearsheimer is that the first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their position in the system. Waltz sees power as a "means" and security as the "end." He warns that a state that accumulates too much power provokes others to balance against it and thus reduces its own security. Rationality therefore dictates that states content themselves with an "appropriate amount" of power.

This argument is the foundation of what later came to be called "defensive realism." Its logic is as follows: anarchy encourages caution, not aggression; aggression is usually costly and self-defeating; states that correctly understand the logic of the system will be conservative and preserve the status quo. Revisionist and aggressive states, because they violate the logic of the system, are usually "punished," that is, confronted by a balancing coalition and eventually defeated (Napoleon, Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan).

3.7. Socialization and Competition: The Mechanisms of Structure

Waltz asks: how does structure affect states? He identifies two mechanisms:

- **Competition:** states that do not emulate the successful practices of others fall behind and may even be eliminated. States therefore converge on successful practices (modern armies, military technology, effective organization). Waltz cites Meiji Japan.
- **Socialization:** states learn the behaviors accepted in the system. Even revolutionary states, such as the Soviet Union after 1917, were eventually forced to accept conventional diplomacy.

This part of Waltz's theory is very important for the study of the Islamic Republic. The Waltzian prediction was that the Islamic Republic, too, after a revolutionary period, would be "socialized" and become a normal state. Four decades of evidence show that this socialization did not occur, at least at the level of regional strategy, or occurred in a dual form: the regime became "normal" at the level of official diplomacy and remained "revolutionary" at the level of the IRGC and the Quds Force. This duality, as Chapter Twelve will show, is one of the principal pieces of evidence for the book's hypothesis.

3.8. Bipolar and Nuclear Stability

In the final chapters of Theory of International Politics, Waltz completed his earlier argument about the stability of the bipolar system. He also treated the management of world affairs as a "public good" for which the great powers bear special responsibility. In a bipolar system, the two superpowers have both the incentive and the capacity to manage crises. Waltz also expressed his skepticism of international institutions and economic interdependence: interdependence is low in a bipolar system, and this is itself a factor of stability, since it creates less friction between the superpowers.

3.9. Structure after the Cold War: Unstable Unipolarity

In "Structural Realism after the Cold War" (2000), Waltz accepted that the world had become unipolar but predicted that this would not last. For him unipolarity is the least durable form of system, because:

- The dominant power is tempted to overextend and exhaust itself in the process.
- Other states, even allies, worry about unchecked power and sooner or later turn to balancing.
- Unchecked power, even with good intentions, appears dangerous to others.

Waltz predicted that China, the European Union, Japan or Russia would gradually become balancing poles. The rise of China and the return of Russia partly confirmed this prediction, but in a form more complex than classical balancing. In the Middle East, as we shall see, states turned not to open balancing against the United States but to a strategy of "hedging": working with the United States, China and Russia at the same time.

3.10. The Market Analogy: From Oligopoly to the International System

To understand Waltz's theory precisely, his economic analogy must be taken seriously. In microeconomics, the behavior of firms in perfect competition differs from their behavior in oligopoly. Under perfect competition, no single firm affects price and none needs to calculate the behavior of rivals. Under oligopoly, a small number of large firms dominate the market and each must factor in the reactions of the others.

Waltz likens the international system to an oligopoly: a few great powers dominate the system and their behavior is highly interdependent. The fewer the great powers, the simpler the calculation and the more predictable the behavior. Hence bipolarity, which resembles a "duopoly," is more stable than multipolarity.

But the market analogy has another important implication that has received less attention: large firms in oligopolistic markets usually compete and cooperate at the same time. They compete in one market and run joint ventures in another; they fight on price and agree on standards. Economists call this "coopetition." Had Waltz followed his analogy to its end,

he might have concluded that states, like large firms, can be rivals in one domain and partners in another at the same time. This is exactly the behavior that the present hypothesis observes in the Middle East.

3.11. Schroeder's Critique: Is History Consistent with Neorealism?

Paul Schroeder, the distinguished historian of European diplomacy, showed in "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory" (1994), surveying European history from 1648 to 1945, that in many cases states chose behaviors other than balancing. He identified four strategies:

- **Hiding:** avoiding conflict by declaring neutrality, isolation or hoping the threat would turn on someone else.
- **Transcending:** trying to rise above the logic of power by creating shared institutions, rules and norms, as in the Concert of Europe after 1815.
- **Bandwagoning:** joining the stronger side for security or spoils.
- **Balancing:** which was only one option and not necessarily the most common.

Schroeder concluded that "balancing" as a general rule is not consistent with historical evidence and that states in practice used combinations of these four strategies. This finding is of fundamental importance for the present book: if even in classical Europe, the model for Waltz's theory, states pursued combined strategies, it is hardly surprising that they do so in the Middle East.

3.12. Schweller: Bandwagoning for Profit

Randall Schweller showed in "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In" (1994) that Waltz and Walt had defined bandwagoning only as the behavior of weak and frightened states, whereas many states join the stronger side for "profit," not out of fear. States dissatisfied with the status quo may join a revisionist power to share in the spoils of changing the order.

Schweller argued that Waltz's theory has a "status quo bias": it assumes that all states think first of security, whereas some states want change. Bandwagoning for profit is widely visible in the Middle East: the Arab states that joined the Abraham Accords did so not only out of fear of Iran but also to gain access to technology, capital, advanced American weapons and a privileged standing in Washington. Morocco's accession to the accords in return for US recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara (December 2020) is an obvious example of bandwagoning for profit.

3.13. The Logic of Anarchy Revisited: Buzan, Jones and Little

In The Logic of Anarchy (1993), Barry Buzan, Charles Jones and Richard Little tried to rebuild neorealism from within. They added two concepts to Waltz's theory:

- **Interaction capacity:** the technological and institutional ability of units to communicate and interact (transport, communications, shared institutions). The higher the interaction capacity, the denser the system and the more complex the ties among units.
- **Deep structure and surface structure:** anarchy may remain constant at the deep level while major changes occur at the surface level in norms, institutions and patterns of interaction.

This reconstruction is useful for the contemporary Middle East. Interaction capacity in the region has risen sharply over the past two decades: transnational media, social networks, transport corridors, energy pipelines and investment funds bind states together with multiple threads. In such a system, security competition in one domain can coexist with interdependence in another. This coexistence is the structural foundation of dual policy.

3.14. Applying the Three Elements of Structure to the Middle East

We can now test Waltz's three elements of structure against the Middle Eastern regional system:

The Ordering Principle

The Middle East is anarchic in the sense that no regional government stands above states. The Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation have no executive power. But the permanent American presence, with bases, fleets and defense commitments, has created a kind of "partial hierarchy." David Lake showed in Hierarchy in International Relations (2009) that many states in practice cede part of their security sovereignty to the dominant power. The Gulf states are a clear example. The Middle East is therefore not "pure anarchy" but "patron-anarchy."

Functional Differentiation

Contrary to Waltz's assumption, Middle Eastern states have acquired different functions: Qatar and Oman are mediators; the UAE and Bahrain are financial hubs and bases; Saudi Arabia is the regulator of the oil market and a religious leader; Iran was, until 2024, the node of the proxy network; Turkey is the bridge to NATO and Europe; Israel is the hub of technology and the superior military power. This unwritten division of labor, which contradicts the assumption of "like units," is one of the reasons why states can be rivals in one domain and complements in another.

The Distribution of Capabilities

The distribution of capabilities in the Middle East is "unbalanced multipolarity," but different dimensions of power are concentrated in different actors. Military and technological superiority lies with Israel; demographic and geographic weight with Iran,

Turkey and Egypt; financial superiority with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar; media and diplomatic reach with Qatar. In such a distribution no state is superior in all dimensions, and each must cooperate in some and compete in others. This "heterogeneous distribution" of capabilities, which Waltz's aggregate index of power cannot see, is another structural foundation of dual policy.

3.15. Is Waltz's Theory "Defensive"?

Before closing this chapter, a subtle point should be noted. Some scholars, including Mearsheimer himself, have observed that in Theory of International Politics Waltz did not explicitly and systematically formulate a theory of "defensive realism"; rather, his book contains propositions that later became the basis of this branch. Waltz himself did not use the term "defensive realism" and preferred to call his theory "structural realism" or "neorealism."

Nevertheless, Waltz's two key propositions, the priority of maintaining position over maximizing power and the danger of excessive power accumulation, clearly laid the foundation of defensive realism. For this reason the IR literature regards Waltz as the father of defensive realism, and this book follows that tradition. The reader should know, however, that "defensive realism" is a theoretical family and not exactly the text of Theory of International Politics.

3.16. A Chapter-by-Chapter Reading of Theory of International Politics

Theory of International Politics is a short but dense book of nine chapters. Many readers know only its fifth and sixth chapters, but Waltz's argument can be understood only in the light of the whole book. This section summarizes each chapter and highlights the point that matters for the present critique.

Chapter One: Laws and Theories

Waltz begins with epistemology. He distinguishes "law" (a stable, recurring relationship between variables) from "theory" (an explanation of why the law holds). A theory, he says, is a mental picture of a bounded domain of reality, built by "isolating" that domain from the rest of the world. He warns that accumulating data and finding correlations does not by itself make a theory; theory requires a "creative leap." He also sets out the criteria for testing a theory: deducing hypotheses, testing them, and above all making the tests difficult.

Relevance to our critique: Waltz himself accepted that theory must face "hard" tests. The Middle East, with its complexity, is exactly the hard test from which a theory must emerge successfully.

Chapter Two: Reductionist Theories

Here Waltz examines and criticizes theories of imperialism, from Hobson and Lenin to dependency theorists. His central argument is that these theories deduce the behavior of the system from an attribute of the units (capitalism), whereas imperialism existed before capitalism and non-capitalist states have also been imperialist. The cause must therefore lie elsewhere.

Relevance to our critique: the same logic can be turned against Waltz. If states with different structural positions (a superior power like Israel, a small state like Qatar, a middle state like Azerbaijan) all behave dually, the cause of duality lies not in their particular structural position but in another feature of their shared environment, namely the penetrated regional system.

Chapter Three: Systemic Approaches and Theories

Waltz criticizes earlier systemic approaches, especially the work of Morton Kaplan, Stanley Hoffmann and Richard Rosecrance. In his view, despite their systemic claims, these works did not in practice separate the structure of the system from the attributes of the units. Kaplan had described six hypothetical international "systems" with their rules of behavior; Waltz regards these rules as arbitrary and not deducible from structure.

Relevance to our critique: in this chapter Waltz shows how difficult it is to define structure precisely. Our question is whether his definition of structure, with only three elements, is adequate for a regional system embedded within the global system.

Chapter Four: Reductionist and Systemic Theories

Here Waltz explains more precisely what a systemic theory is. Structure is not the "cause" of behavior but a "constraint" and "pressure" upon it. Structure works through two channels: socialization and competition. Waltz also stresses that structure explains recurring patterns, not individual events.

Relevance to our critique: if structure only exerts "pressure" and does not "determine," states have latitude in responding to structural pressure. The present hypothesis is about this very "latitude": Middle Eastern states have responded to multiple structural pressures by combining two different responses.

Chapter Five: Political Structures

This chapter, the theoretical core of the book, defines the three elements of structure: ordering principle, functional differentiation of units and distribution of capabilities. Waltz first explains these elements in domestic political structures (with the examples of Britain and the United States) and then turns to international political structure.

Relevance to our critique: as shown earlier in this chapter, the first two elements have changed in the Middle East: patron-anarchy has replaced pure anarchy, and an unwritten functional differentiation has emerged among states.

Chapter Six: Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power

In this chapter Waltz formulates the theory of the balance of power. He explains the logic of self-help, highlights the difference between "relative" and "absolute" gains, and shows that the balance of power is the unintended consequence of the behavior of states that seek at least survival. It is here that Waltz ranks balancing above bandwagoning and states his best-known proposition: the first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their position in the system.

Relevance to our critique: this chapter is the main source of defensive realism. Its test in the Middle East, carried out in Part Two, shows that states are neither pure balancers nor mere preservers of position.

Chapter Seven: Structural Causes and Economic Effects

Here Waltz criticizes theories of "interdependence." He argues that interdependence is low in a bipolar world and that this is itself a source of stability. Great powers, with large and relatively self-sufficient economies, depend less on each other and therefore experience less friction. He also shows that interdependence among unequals means the dependence of the weak on the strong.

Relevance to our critique: in the Middle East economic interdependence, especially through energy, capital and transit, has increased sharply. If Waltz is right that interdependence is a source of friction, this increase should have produced more tension. The evidence shows, however, that interdependence in the Middle East has been both a source of friction and an instrument of de-escalation; that is, it has itself worked dually.

Chapter Eight: Structural Causes and Military Effects

This chapter presents in detail Waltz's argument about the stability of the bipolar system. Waltz shows that in a bipolar system the superpowers rely mainly on "internal balancing," which reduces uncertainty. He also explains the role of nuclear weapons in strengthening stability.

Relevance to our critique: in the Middle East states depend heavily on "external balancing," that is, alliance with an extra-regional power. This dependence, in Waltz's terms, is a source of uncertainty and instability, because states never know how far their patron will go. This very uncertainty is one of the motives for dual policy: by de-escalating with rivals, states insure themselves against the possibility of abandonment by their patron.

Chapter Nine: The Management of International Affairs

In the final chapter Waltz asks how great powers manage international affairs. He argues that in a bipolar system the two superpowers have both the incentive and the capacity to manage crises and provide "public goods" such as economic stability and arms control. He is skeptical of international institutions and regards the management of world affairs as mainly the task of the great powers.

Relevance to our critique: in the post-2011 Middle East no great power consistently and coherently took on the "management" of the region. The United States oscillated between intervention and retreat, Russia confined itself to Syria and China avoided a security role. In the absence of a manager, regional powers had to manage themselves and compete with each other at the same time, the very condition in which dual policy thrives.

3.17. The Logic of the Theory at a Glance

Element	Waltz's claim
Ordering principle	Anarchy: the absence of supra-state government
Units	Functionally like states, differing only in capabilities
Basic motive	Survival and maintenance of position, not power maximization
Main mechanisms	Self-help, competition, socialization
Predicted behavior	Internal and external balancing; avoidance of bandwagoning
Systemic outcome	Recurrence of the balance of power; punishment of aggressive states
More stable system	Bipolarity; more stable with nuclear weapons
Level of analysis	The international system, not the foreign policy of individual states

3.18. First Critical Observations (for Part Two)

At this stage we record several critical questions to which Part Two will return:

- Is the "structure" of the Middle Eastern regional system anarchic, or a "penetrated" anarchy in which an extra-regional power (the United States) plays a quasi-hierarchical role?
- Are Middle Eastern states really "like units"? Do Qatar, Iran and Israel have similar functions, or has an unwritten division of labor (mediator, base, energy supplier, proxy actor) emerged among them?
- Do threats in the Middle East arise more from the "distribution of capabilities" or from ideology, identity and regime security?

- Do Middle Eastern states "balance," or do they combine "balancing," "bandwagoning" and "hedging" at the same time?
- If states behave defensively and offensively at the same time, can they be called "status quo" or "revisionist"?

Chapter Four: Waltz, Nuclear Weapons and Iran — and the Branches of Defensive Realism after Him

4.1. "More May Be Better"

In his 1981 paper Waltz made an argument against the prevailing current: the gradual spread of nuclear weapons might increase stability rather than the risk of war. His logic was as follows:

- Nuclear weapons raise the cost of war so high that no rational leader finds it worthwhile to start one.
- Nuclear deterrence is simple: a state need only have a second-strike capability, that is, the ability to deliver a devastating response after absorbing a first strike.
- Nuclear states, even radical ones, become cautious after acquiring the bomb; examples are Maoist China, the Soviet Union and Pakistan.
- "Gradual" spread gives states the opportunity to learn the doctrines and mechanisms of nuclear safety.

In his famous debate with Waltz, Scott Sagan replied that this argument rests on the assumption of "rational" and unitary states, whereas the military organizations of states have their own interests, cultures and routines and can lead to accidents, theft of weapons, coups or dangerous preventive decisions. Sagan stressed in particular the danger posed by states with weak civilian control over the military. This criticism is especially important for the Islamic Republic, in which the IRGC is a parallel and semi-autonomous institution.

4.2. "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb" (2012)

In one of his last articles, published in Foreign Affairs in the summer of 2012, Waltz argued that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would probably contribute to stability in the Middle East. His argument can be summarized as follows:

- Israel's nuclear monopoly in the region is itself a source of instability; unchecked power worries others and upsets the balance.
- A nuclear Iran would make Israel more cautious and produce a balance similar to that between India and Pakistan.
- The leaders of the Islamic Republic, despite their rhetoric, are rational actors who care about regime survival and therefore want the bomb for deterrence, not aggression.
- Sanctions and pressure push Iran further toward the bomb, because they increase insecurity.

This article is perhaps the clearest application of defensive realism to the Middle East and is therefore very instructive for our critique. Its three main weaknesses are:

First Weakness: Ignoring Proxy War

Waltz assumed that a nuclear Iran, like the Soviet Union or Pakistan, would be cautious. But the past fifteen years have shown that the Islamic Republic, even without the bomb, used "implicit deterrence" (nuclear threshold capability, ballistic missiles and a proxy network) to expand its influence and not merely to ensure survival. The "stability–instability paradox," formulated by Glenn Snyder, shows that deterrence at the strategic level may free states' hands at lower levels of violence. Pakistan displayed exactly this behavior in Kashmir after 1998. The evidence suggests that the Islamic Republic was on the same path.

Second Weakness: Assuming a Unitary State

Waltz saw the Islamic Republic as a unitary actor. But as the author's extensive research on the IRGC and the Quds Force shows, security decision-making in Iran is split between the formal government and the IRGC. The foreign ministry's diplomacy and the Quds Force's operations advanced simultaneously and at times in open contradiction. The leaked audio of Mohammad Javad Zarif in 2021, in which he spoke of the "field" and of Qassem Soleimani's role in overshadowing diplomacy, is a clear example of this split.

Third Weakness: Predicting Rivals' Responses

Waltz predicted that Israel would tolerate a nuclear Iran and that a balance would emerge. But Israel's behavior, from sabotage operations and the assassination of nuclear scientists to the twelve-day war of June 2025 and the large-scale US–Israeli attack of February 2026, shows that states sometimes choose preventive action over accepting a balance. This is exactly the behavior offensive realism predicts. On a single issue, then, Iran's behavior was consistent with the offensive pattern and so was Israel's, whereas Waltz had predicted the defensive pattern for both.

4.3. Defensive Realism after Waltz: A Theoretical Family

After Waltz, a group of scholars extended his theory and built "defensive realism" into a coherent research program. Knowing these branches is essential for precise critique, because some of them arose in response to the very problems we see in the Middle East.

A) Robert Jervis: The Security Dilemma and Perception

In "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma" (1978) and Perception and Misperception in International Politics (1976), Robert Jervis showed that many actions a state takes to increase its security reduce the security of others and provoke counter-measures. The result is a spiral of insecurity, even if neither side has aggressive intentions. Jervis regarded two variables as key:

- **Offense–defense balance:** do technology and geography favor the attacker or the defender?
- **Offense–defense distinguishability:** can others tell whether a state's weapons are for defense or attack?

If defense is dominant and distinguishable, the security dilemma is mitigated. In the Middle East neither condition holds: missiles, drones and proxy forces are instruments of both deterrence and aggression. This ambiguity is one of the reasons for the "inherent duality" of security policies in the region.

B) Stephen Van Evera and Jack Snyder: Myths of Empire

Van Evera in Causes of War (1999) and Snyder in Myths of Empire (1991) argued that war and expansion stem less from a rational response to structure than from domestic coalitions, militaries, nationalist ideologies and "myths" that present the interests of particular groups as the national interest. Snyder showed that states that "overexpanded" were usually victims of the "logic of domestic coalition-making." This view is very useful for understanding the relationship between the IRGC and Iran's economy and politics, or between far-right currents and Israel's territorial policy. But this explanation in fact steps outside Waltz's structural framework.

C) Stephen Walt: The Balance of Threat

The most important branch of defensive realism for this book is Stephen Walt's theory of the "balance of threat." In The Origins of Alliances (1987), studying Middle Eastern alliances between 1955 and 1979 (the Baghdad Pact, the United Arab Republic, the Nasser–Saudi rivalry, alliances after 1967 and the Camp David Accords), Walt showed that states balance not against "power" but against "threat." Threat derives from four factors:

- Aggregate power (population, economy, military).
- Geographic proximity.
- Offensive capability.
- Perceived aggressive intentions.

Walt found that in the Middle East ideology, especially transnational ideologies (pan-Arabism), sometimes produced division rather than alliance, because every leader who claimed leadership of the "Arab nation" threatened the sovereignty of other Arab leaders. He also showed that foreign aid and superpower political influence were secondary factors in alliance formation.

Walt's theory was a big step toward Middle Eastern reality, but it paid the price of losing structural parsimony, since "perceived intentions" is a unit-level variable. Critics, including Waltz himself, said that by introducing intentions Walt had moved the theory away from structural realism.

D) Charles Glaser: Rational Realism

In Rational Theory of International Politics (2010), Charles Glaser offered a "conditional" version of defensive realism. He argued that under certain conditions cooperation and restraint are the rational strategy, and that competition is sensible when a state faces a genuinely aggressive rival or when material conditions favor offense. Glaser also stressed the importance of "signaling": states can reveal their defensive intentions to others through costly actions.

This view helps explain why many de-escalatory steps in the Middle East (such as the Abraham Accords or the Iran–Saudi rapprochement) did not lead to real trust: they were accompanied by power-accumulating actions that discredited the defensive signal. In game-theoretic terms, the signals were "contradictory."

4.4. The Shared Assumptions of the Defensive Realist Family

Despite their differences, all branches of defensive realism share several assumptions:

- Anarchy is an insecure environment but not necessarily a "zero-sum game."
- Security is often "plentiful": states that exercise restraint can remain secure.
- Aggression is usually self-defeating, and balancing against aggressors occurs.
- A state's aggressive behavior must be explained mainly by domestic factors (misperception, domestic coalitions, ideology), not by structural pressure.
- Hence the "normal state" is defensive, and the "aggressive state" is a deviation.

This last assumption, as Part Two will show, is the main weakness of defensive realism in the Middle East. In a region where almost all major actors behave defensively and offensively at the same time, the concept of "deviation" loses its meaning; the deviation has become the rule.

4.5. Glenn Snyder and the "Stability–Instability Paradox"

In "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror" (1965), Glenn Snyder formulated a concept that is key to understanding the behavior of nuclear-threshold powers in the Middle East. His argument was that the more stable nuclear deterrence is at the strategic level, that is, the more certain both sides are that nuclear war will not occur, the greater the temptation to engage in conflict at lower levels of violence (limited conventional war, proxy war, insurgency), because each side knows the other will not risk escalation to the nuclear level.

This paradox explains why the United States and the Soviet Union, while avoiding direct war during the Cold War, engaged in proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, Angola and Afghanistan. In South Asia, too, after the 1998 nuclear tests Pakistan entered a limited conflict at Kargil in 1999 and continued to support armed groups in Kashmir.

Applying this concept to the Islamic Republic is instructive. Iran never acquired nuclear weapons, but by reaching the "nuclear threshold" and building a missile arsenal it created a kind of "implicit deterrence" that allowed it to pursue proxy expansion with less risk. In other words, Tehran exploited Snyder's logic without its principal condition, a real nuclear deterrent. The wars of 2025 and 2026 showed that this implicit deterrence was fragile: rivals, knowing that Iran did not yet have nuclear weapons, acted precisely before it crossed the threshold.

4.6. Jervis: The Spiral Model versus the Deterrence Model

One of the most enduring parts of Jervis's Perception and Misperception is the distinction between two models for understanding a rival's behavior:

- **The deterrence model:** the rival is inherently revisionist and aggressive. Any concession is seen as weakness and makes it bolder. The correct response is firmness, increased power and a demonstration of resolve. The historical model for this view is Munich (1938) and the appeasement of Hitler.
- **The spiral model:** the rival is fundamentally insecure, not aggressive. Firm and threatening actions intensify its fear and provoke counter-measures. The correct response is reassurance, threat reduction and confidence-building. The historical model is the outbreak of the First World War (1914), when a spiral of mobilizations and mutual fears led to catastrophe.

Jervis stressed that neither model is always right and that the main problem for policymakers is that they do not know which kind of rival they face. He also showed that policymakers, influenced by "lessons of history" and prior mental models, often choose one of the two models regardless of the evidence.

Almost all American debates about Iran over the past four decades have been framed in terms of these two models. Supporters of the JCPOA were close to the spiral model; supporters of "maximum pressure" to the deterrence model. The present hypothesis goes one step further: the problem was not only that policymakers did not know which kind Iran was, but that Iran was both kinds at once. Part of the system (the government and the foreign ministry) was better explained by the spiral model and part (the IRGC and the Quds Force) by the deterrence model. Any policy based on only one of the two models inevitably ignored half of reality.

4.7. Walt: Revolution and War

In his second book, Revolution and War (1996), Stephen Walt examined the relationship between domestic revolutions and international wars. He studied three principal revolutions in detail, the French, Russian and Iranian, and several others (American, Mexican, Turkish and Chinese) more briefly. The book is of particular importance to

Iranian readers because it is one of the few major works of defensive realism that directly analyses the Islamic Republic.

Walt's central argument is that revolutions increase the likelihood of war because:

- Revolution suddenly changes the balance of power and forces both the revolutionary state and its neighbors to recalculate. Neighbors may see the temporary weakness of the revolutionary state as an opportunity.
- Revolutionary ideology is usually universalist and the revolutionary state tends to export its revolution. This frightens neighbors.
- Both sides suffer from "misperception": the revolutionary state thinks revolution is easily exported and the neighbors think the revolutionary state is easily overthrown. Both are wrong.
- Revolutionary states are usually "socialized" after a period, but this process can take years and costly wars may occur in the interval.

Walt saw the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) as a clear example of this logic: Saddam saw post-revolutionary Iran's weakness as an opportunity, and Iran's leaders hoped to export their revolution to Iraq. Walt predicted that the Islamic Republic, like France and the Soviet Union, would gradually be socialized, and saw signs of this process in the 1990s.

This prediction captured part of reality and missed another. The author's hypothesis is that the Islamic Republic, to resolve the tension between "revolution" and "state," institutionalized both in two parallel institutions rather than choosing one. The result was a "half-finished socialization" that turned duality into a permanent feature of the regime. That socialization remained incomplete was because this duality was useful to the regime: the state made engagement with the world possible, and the IRGC preserved revolutionary identity and regional influence.

4.8. Taliaferro and "Security Seeking under Anarchy"

In "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited" (2000–01), Jeffrey Taliaferro tried to show that defensive realism can also explain aggressive behavior without treating it merely as a "deviation." Drawing on Kahneman and Tversky's prospect theory, he argued that leaders facing the prospect of "losses" are far more risk-acceptant than when facing the prospect of "gains."

A state that feels it is losing its position, influence or allies may therefore, to prevent this loss, take aggressive and risky action, even if its ultimate aim is security rather than expansion. Taliaferro explained cases such as Japan's behavior before Pearl Harbor and America's in Vietnam with this logic.

This view is very instructive for the Middle East. The Islamic Republic's behavior after 2024, namely direct attacks on Israel after losing commanders and allies, and Israel's behavior after October 7, a broad and pre-emptive response after the failure of deterrence,

are both consistent with Taliaferro's logic of "loss aversion." But this logic, like the other branches of defensive realism, introduces a psychological variable (leaders' perception of loss) into the theory and moves it away from Waltz's structural core.

4.9. Kydd: Sheep in Sheep's Clothing

In "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other" (1997), Andrew Kydd used game theory to show that states genuinely seeking security can reassure one another of their defensive intentions through costly signals and avoid war. The problem arises because "wolfish" states can also dress as "sheep" and send defensive signals.

The metaphorical title of Kydd's article, playing on the proverb "a wolf in sheep's clothing," has a double meaning for the Middle East. In a region where states send defensive and offensive signals simultaneously, rivals cannot tell whether they face a "sheep" or a "wolf." The result is that defensive signals lose their value and confidence-building becomes impossible. This is the phenomenon that will be formulated in Chapter Twenty as the "duality threshold."

4.10. Van Evera and the Offense–Defense Hypothesis

In Causes of War (1999), Stephen Van Evera put forward several testable hypotheses about the causes of war, the most important of which is: war is more likely when conquest is easy, or when leaders believe it is. He identified mechanisms through which offense dominance leads to war: first-strike incentives, windows of opportunity and vulnerability, firm and inflexible policies, and secrecy.

Van Evera also showed that perceptions of offense dominance are often mistaken and stem from the interests of militaries and nationalist ideologies. The "cult of the offensive" in European armies before 1914 is the classic example of such misperception.

In the Middle East new technologies, especially drones, precision missiles and cyber warfare, have reinforced the perception that a first strike can be decisive. The forty-four-day Karabakh war, the pager operation in Lebanon and the opening strikes of the 2025 and 2026 wars against Iran all confirmed this perception. From Van Evera's perspective, this should make war more likely; and so it did. But the same states simultaneously invested in de-escalation with others. Offense dominance, rather than pushing states toward an absolute choice of war, forced them to choose "with whom to fight and with whom to make peace."

4.11. Conclusion

In his 2012 article on Iran, Waltz boldly applied his theory to the Middle East. But this application showed that his structural assumptions, namely the unitary state, the priority of survival and automatic balancing, are inconsistent with the reality of divided states,

proxy networks and ideological rivalries. Later branches of defensive realism (Jervis, Snyder, Walt, Glaser) tried to fill this gap, but the closer they came to Middle Eastern reality, the further they moved from Waltz's structural core.

Chapter Five: John Mearsheimer and The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

5.1. Life and Academic Standing

John Joseph Mearsheimer was born in New York City in 1947. He joined the US Army at seventeen, then graduated from the US Military Academy at West Point and served for several years as an Air Force officer. He then earned his doctorate at Cornell University and has taught at the University of Chicago since 1982, where he holds the title of R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor. Beyond his theoretical work, Mearsheimer has been one of the loudest and most controversial voices in public debates about American foreign policy, from the Iraq war to Ukraine and Gaza.

Mearsheimer's most important works are:

- Conventional Deterrence (1983): an examination of when non-nuclear deterrence fails.
- Liddell Hart and the Weight of History (1988).
- "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War" (1990), an article predicting that the end of the Cold War would make Europe less secure.
- "The False Promise of International Institutions" (1994–95), a critique of liberal institutionalism.
- The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001; updated edition 2014), the foundational work of offensive realism.
- The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy, with Stephen Walt (article 2006, book 2007).
- Why Leaders Lie (2011).
- The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities (2018).
- How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy, with Sebastian Rosato (2023).

5.2. Point of Departure: The Question Waltz Did Not Answer

Mearsheimer regards himself as indebted to Waltz and also calls his theory "structural." But he believes Waltz erred on a fundamental point: if anarchy makes states insecure and no state can be sure of others' future intentions, why should it settle for an "appropriate amount" of power? How much is appropriate, and who decides? For Mearsheimer, the only way to be sure of survival is to be the strongest. Great powers are therefore "power maximizers," and the ultimate goal of each is "hegemony."

Mearsheimer calls his theory a "tragedy" because he believes great powers that have no reason to fight one another, and may even be benevolent, have no choice but intense

competition. This tragedy is structural, not moral; states are not to blame but are prisoners of the situation in which they find themselves.

5.3. Five Bedrock Assumptions

Mearsheimer builds his theory on five assumptions and stresses that none alone mandates aggressive behavior, but their combination does:

- **The international system is anarchic:** there is no authority above states to come to their rescue. Mearsheimer uses the image of having "no one to call": in the international system there is no emergency number to dial when danger strikes.
- **Great powers possess offensive military capability:** every state can harm another; even without an army, its people could fight with their bare hands.
- **States can never be certain about others' intentions:** intentions reside in leaders' minds and can change quickly. A state that is a friend today may be an enemy tomorrow.
- **Survival is the primary goal of states:** states seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order.
- **Great powers are rational actors:** they are aware of their environment and choose strategies that maximize their prospects of survival.

5.4. Three Patterns of Behavior Derived from the Assumptions

From these five assumptions three general patterns of behavior follow:

- **Fear:** great powers fear each other and regard one another with suspicion. The level of fear depends on the distribution of power and geography.
- **Self-help:** each state can rely only on itself. Alliances are temporary "marriages of convenience."
- **Power maximization:** the best way to guarantee survival is to have the greatest relative power. States seize every opportunity to shift the balance in their favor and stop only when they have achieved hegemony.

In a famous line, Mearsheimer says that status quo powers are rarely found in world politics, because the structure gives states incentives to look for opportunities to gain power at their rivals' expense. In other words, all great powers are "revisionist" until they become hegemons.

5.5. The Concept of Power in Mearsheimer's Theory

Mearsheimer distinguishes between "latent power" and "military power":

- **Latent power:** the socio-economic ingredients needed to build military power, especially wealth and population. Wealth is the most important indicator.

- **Military power:** especially land power. Mearsheimer holds that the army is the dominant form of military power, because only ground forces can conquer and hold territory. Naval and air forces are mainly auxiliaries to ground forces, and strategic bombing alone rarely wins wars.

This emphasis on land power merits reflection for the twenty-first-century Middle East. Recent wars in the region have been fought with missiles, drones, cyber warfare, proxy forces and targeted assassination of leaders, and less through territorial conquest. The important exception, Azerbaijan's conquest of Karabakh (2020 and 2023), is entirely consistent with Mearsheimer's model. We return to this in Chapter Sixteen.

5.6. "The Stopping Power of Water"

One of Mearsheimer's innovations is the concept of the "stopping power of water." Large oceans severely limit the ability of land forces to project power. For this reason no state can become a "global hegemon." The most a great power can hope for is "regional hegemony": domination of its own geographic region. The United States is the only regional hegemon of the modern era, having achieved this position in the Western Hemisphere.

5.7. The Dual Aim of the Regional Hegemon

Mearsheimer argues that a regional hegemon has two aims:

- To maintain dominance in its own region.
- To prevent the emergence of another regional hegemon elsewhere, since a peer hegemon could freely interfere in its backyard.

This is why the United States acted against Imperial Germany, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, and why today it has taken a stance against China. Mearsheimer sees the Middle East as a region where the United States must prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon, because its oil resources are vital to the world economy. But he believes the United States should do so through "offshore balancing," not a permanent military presence.

5.8. Strategies for Gaining and Keeping Power

Mearsheimer lists the strategies great powers use to increase their relative power or to prevent rivals from doing so:

A) Strategies for Gaining Power

- **War:** the most costly but most effective way to change the balance.
- **Blackmail:** threatening force to gain concessions without war.
- **Bait and bleed:** provoking two rivals into war with each other while the instigator stays out.

- **Bloodletting:** ensuring that a rival engaged in war fights as long and exhaustingly as possible.

B) Strategies for Checking Aggressors

- **Balancing:** the threatened state itself takes responsibility for containing the aggressor through deterrent diplomacy, alliances or increased military capability.
- **Buck-passing:** the threatened state tries to get another state to bear the burden of containment while it stays out.

Mearsheimer says states prefer buck-passing to balancing because it is cheaper. Balancing usually occurs when no other state is available to bear the burden or the threat is very close and immediate.

C) Rejected Strategies

Mearsheimer regards two strategies as irrational for great powers:

- **Bandwagoning:** this shifts the balance in the rival′s favor. Only small and weak states do it.
- **Appeasement:** conceding to a rival in the hope of changing its behavior. Mearsheimer calls this "dangerous" and a "sign of naivety."

This last point is very important for our discussion. For Mearsheimer, genuine de-escalation, in the sense of accepting a rival′s increase in power to reduce the risk of war, is irrational for great powers. Any policy of de-escalation in his theory is therefore either a temporary tactic or a mistake. The present hypothesis seeks to show that de-escalation in the Middle East is neither a temporary tactic nor a mistake, but a structural and permanent component of state strategy.

5.9. The Distribution of Power and the Likelihood of War

Mearsheimer ranks international systems by stability as follows:

Type of system	Level of fear	Likelihood of war
Bipolar	Low	Lowest
Balanced multipolar	Medium	Medium
Unbalanced multipolar (with a potential hegemon)	High	Highest

Unbalanced multipolarity, a system in which one state is strong enough to become a regional hegemon, is the most dangerous, because the potential hegemon has an incentive to fight for hegemony and others have an incentive to ally to prevent it. The post-2011 Middle East, with several claimants to hegemony (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel) and no clear hegemon, is close to this definition, but more complex.

5.10. Mearsheimer's Historical Evidence: Four Revisionist Powers

In the Tragedy Mearsheimer examined four historical cases in detail to prove that great powers are power maximizers:

Japan (1868–1945)

From the Meiji reforms to defeat in the Second World War, Japan consistently seized every opportunity to expand its territory and influence in East Asia: war with China (1894–95) and the seizure of Taiwan, war with Russia (1904–05), annexation of Korea (1910), seizure of Manchuria (1931), war with China (from 1937) and finally the attack on Pearl Harbor (1941). Mearsheimer argues that this behavior, regardless of the nature of Japan's political system in each period, is consistent with the structural logic of power maximization. Japan continued to expand even in periods when it had relatively liberal governments.

Germany (1862–1945)

From Bismarck to Hitler, Germany was for Mearsheimer a revisionist power. He interprets even Bismarck's post-1871 period, usually seen as a model of restraint, as one in which Bismarck refrained from further expansion only because he saw no suitable opportunity, not because he had enough security. This interpretation is seriously contested and many historians reject it; but it shows how Mearsheimer accommodates restraint within his theory: restraint, for him, signals not satisfaction but a calculation of cost.

The Soviet Union (1917–1991)

Mearsheimer argues that Soviet leaders, despite their revolutionary ideology, in practice acted according to the logic of power: the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (1939) and the partition of Poland, the annexation of the Baltic states, the war with Finland and, after 1945, domination of Eastern Europe. Communist ideology, in his view, was subordinate to the logic of power, not the other way round.

Italy (1861–1943)

Italy, though the weakest of the European great powers, constantly looked for opportunities to expand: Libya (1911), switching sides in the First World War to gain spoils, Ethiopia (1935) and Albania (1939). Mearsheimer considers this case important because it shows that even weaker great powers are power maximizers if they find opportunities.

The United States: The Exception That Proves the Rule

Mearsheimer regards the United States as the only power to have achieved the ultimate goal, regional hegemony. He sees American expansion in the nineteenth century, from the Louisiana Purchase to the war with Mexico and the Monroe Doctrine, as a classic example

of power maximization. That the United States, after achieving hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, no longer sought to conquer territory in Europe or Asia is in his view not a sign of "satisfaction" but a result of the "stopping power of water." In this role America became an "offshore balancer."

A Critical Observation

All of Mearsheimer's historical cases are drawn from "great powers." He says less about the behavior of middle and regional states and explicitly states that his theory is mainly about great powers. This limitation of scope, as Chapter Six and Part Two will show, is the main problem in applying his theory to the Middle East, a region in which there is no "great power" in Mearsheimer's sense.

5.11. The "Potential Hegemon" and the Logic of Fear

One of Mearsheimer's key concepts is the "potential hegemon": a state that, in wealth and population and hence military capability, is markedly stronger than the other powers of its region and could dominate it given the opportunity. Mearsheimer proposes two criteria for identifying a potential hegemon: it must have the most powerful army in the region and also the most latent power (wealth).

In the Middle East no state decisively meets both criteria. Iran has the largest population and one of the largest ground forces, but neither the greatest wealth nor the strongest army in quality. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have the greatest wealth but not the largest armies. Israel has the strongest army in quality and technology but a small population and territory. Turkey has the largest army and a large economy but is also engaged in Europe and the Caucasus. This "heterogeneous distribution" means that the logic of fear of a potential hegemon, which Mearsheimer sees as the main driver of behavior, has turned in the Middle East from a concentrated fear into multiple and crosscutting fears. Each state fears several others in different dimensions. The result is behavior that balances in one dimension and bandwagons in another.

5.12. Nuclear Weapons in Mearsheimer's Theory

Mearsheimer accepts that nuclear weapons have made direct war between nuclear powers very unlikely. But unlike Waltz, he does not believe nuclear weapons end security competition. In his view:

- Great powers still seek "nuclear superiority," a capability to destroy a rival's arsenal before it is used, although in practice such superiority is rarely achievable.
- Competition at the conventional level continues, because each side knows the other will resort to nuclear weapons only when facing an existential threat.
- Nuclear hegemony, that is, a monopoly of nuclear weapons, is an ideal every great power pursues.

This last view is very telling for the Middle East. Israel's "Begin Doctrine," preventing any regional enemy from acquiring nuclear weapons, is exactly Mearsheimer's logic of "nuclear monopoly." Israel enforced this doctrine by force in Iraq (1981), Syria (2007) and Iran (2025 and 2026). In this particular case Israel's behavior is fully consistent with Mearsheimer's theory, although Mearsheimer himself opposed military action against Iran.

5.13. The Updated Tragedy (2014) and China

In the 2014 edition of the Tragedy, Mearsheimer completely rewrote the final chapter and devoted it to the question "Can China rise peacefully?" His answer was no: if China continues to grow economically, it will try to dominate Asia, just as the United States dominated the Western Hemisphere. China will try to push the United States out of Asia and force its neighbors (India, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea, Russia) to accept its primacy. In response, the United States and China's neighbors will form a balancing coalition.

The implication of this prediction for the Middle East is that, from Mearsheimer's perspective, America's strategic priority in the twenty-first century is Asia, not the Middle East. Every resource America spends in the Middle East is a resource lost against China. This argument has been one of the theoretical foundations of the debate about "reducing the US presence in the Middle East" in recent decades. Yet the experience of 2023 to 2026 showed that the United States, despite this declared priority, once again became directly involved in the region's wars.

5.14. Critics of the Tragedy

Since its publication, the Tragedy has faced serious criticism. The most important are:

Glenn Snyder's Critique

In his review essay "Mearsheimer's World: Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security" (2002), Glenn Snyder argued that Mearsheimer draws from his assumptions a conclusion that does not logically follow from them. If survival is the main goal and aggression is risky, a rational state will not necessarily maximize power. Snyder also said that Mearsheimer read history selectively and justified cases in which states refrained from expansion with interpretations based on "lack of opportunity," an interpretation that makes the theory unfalsifiable.

The Problem of Falsifiability

If every time a state expands it is evidence for the theory, and every time a state does not expand it "lacked opportunity," then no behavior can falsify the theory. This criticism, drawn from the Lakatosian tradition (Chapter Eight), is one of the most serious methodological objections to offensive realism.

An Empirical Critique: Post-Cold War America

Some critics asked: if great powers are power maximizers, why did the United States, unrivaled after the fall of the Soviet Union, not conquer Europe or Asia? Mearsheimer replied that the "stopping power of water" made this impossible. Critics said this reply effectively reduces "maximization" to "maximization as far as possible" and brings it close to defensive realism.

A Constructivist Critique

Constructivists said Mearsheimer completely ignores identity and ideology, whereas America's behavior toward Canada and Mexico, or the behavior of EU members toward one another, can only be explained by understanding shared identities and norms. In The Great Delusion, by introducing nationalism, Mearsheimer partly answered this criticism.

5.15. A Chapter-by-Chapter Reading of The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics is a substantial book that had ten chapters in its first edition (2001); in the updated edition (2014) its final chapter was rewritten. A chapter-by-chapter account helps the reader see how Mearsheimer's argument moves from assumptions to predictions and where its strengths and weaknesses lie.

Chapter One: Introduction

Mearsheimer opens with the claim that the end of the Cold War does not mean the end of security competition among great powers. He regards liberal hopes for "perpetual peace" after 1991 as naive and predicts that great-power competition will return, especially with China's rise. In this chapter he also sets his theory against classical realism (Morgenthau) and defensive realism (Waltz) and explains their differences.

Relevance to our critique: the prediction of the return of great-power competition proved correct; but Mearsheimer saw this return only at the level of great powers and paid no attention to competition among middle powers, which took shape in the Middle East.

Chapter Two: Anarchy and the Struggle for Power

Here Mearsheimer sets out his five bedrock assumptions and shows how their combination produces three patterns of behavior (fear, self-help, power maximization). He also explains the concept of "regional hegemony" and why "global hegemony" is impossible.

Relevance to our critique: Mearsheimer stresses that states cannot be sure of others' "intentions." In the Middle East this uncertainty arises not only from hidden intentions but from openly "dual" intentions; states deliberately send two sets of contradictory signals.

Chapter Three: Wealth and Power

Mearsheimer distinguishes between "latent power" (wealth and population) and "military power." He shows that wealth is a prerequisite of military power, but not all wealthy states convert their wealth into military power. He also offers indicators for measuring latent power, such as steel production and energy consumption in historical periods.

Relevance to our critique: in the Middle East the wealthy Gulf states have converted their wealth not mainly into independent military power but into "network power" (investment, media, mediation) and "purchasable power" (imported arms and alliance with America). These forms of power have no place in Mearsheimer's conceptual apparatus.

Chapter Four: The Primacy of Land Power

Mearsheimer argues that the army is the dominant form of military power. He shows that naval and air forces alone cannot win great wars and that strategic bombing and naval blockade have rarely been decisive. He also explains the "stopping power of water" in this chapter.

Relevance to our critique: as noted, the region's wars in the last decade have been fought more with missiles, drones, intelligence operations and proxy forces. The wars of 2025 and 2026 between Israel and the United States and the Islamic Republic were mainly air and missile wars and did not aim at conquering territory. This experience calls into question the primacy of land power, at least at the regional level.

Chapter Five: Strategies for Survival

Here Mearsheimer details the strategies for gaining power (war, blackmail, bait and bleed, bloodletting) and for checking aggressors (balancing, buck-passing) and explains why bandwagoning and appeasement are irrational.

Relevance to our critique: Mearsheimer treats all these strategies as "alternatives": the state chooses one in each situation. Yet Middle Eastern states have used these strategies simultaneously. In 2026 Saudi Arabia pursued buck-passing (to the United States), balancing (the pact with Pakistan) and de-escalation (keeping its channel to Iran) at the same time.

Chapter Six: Great Powers in Action

This chapter presents historical evidence of power maximization from the experience of Japan, Germany, the Soviet Union and Italy and argues that even Britain and the United States, usually seen as restrained powers, were in fact power maximizers held back only by geographic constraints.

Relevance to our critique: all the cases in this chapter come from Europe and East Asia. None is from the Middle East.

Chapter Seven: The Offshore Balancers

Here Mearsheimer examines Britain and the United States as "offshore balancers." These two powers, secure because of their geographic separation (sea or ocean) from continental Europe and Asia, intervened on the continent only when a potential hegemon was emerging and local powers could not contain it.

Relevance to our critique: this chapter is the theoretical basis of "offshore balancing" in the Middle East (Chapter Six of this book). But the experience of 2023 to 2026 showed that the United States, despite the absence of a decisive potential hegemon in the region, once again entered war directly. Either the United States acted contrary to structural logic, or it saw Iran as a potential hegemon, or non-structural factors (the alliance with Israel, domestic politics) played a role in its decision.

Chapter Eight: Balancing versus Buck-Passing

Here Mearsheimer examines when states balance and when they pass the buck. He argues that buck-passing is more common in balanced multipolar systems and balancing in bipolar systems or those with a potential hegemon. Geography matters too: states sharing a border with the aggressor can less easily pass the buck.

Relevance to our critique: by this logic, the Gulf states, geographically close to Iran, should have balanced. But thanks to the American presence they could balance (ally with the United States) and pass the buck (avoid direct war) at the same time. The presence of an extra-regional patron made unnecessary the choice that Mearsheimer considers inevitable.

Chapter Nine: The Causes of Great Power War

Mearsheimer compares the relative stability of different systems and concludes that bipolarity is the most stable and unbalanced multipolarity the least. He tests this argument against European history from 1792 to 1990.

Relevance to our critique: the Middle East is close to "unbalanced multipolarity" and, as Mearsheimer predicts, has been unstable. But the form of instability, with proxy wars, short and intense air and missile wars, and repeated de-escalations, differs from the pattern of great European wars Mearsheimer examined.

Chapter Ten: Great Power Politics in the Twenty-First Century (2014 edition: "Can China Rise Peacefully?")

In the first edition Mearsheimer offered predictions about the future of Europe and East Asia. In the 2014 edition this chapter was devoted entirely to China, arguing that China's rise will lead to intense security competition with the United States and China's neighbors.

Relevance to our critique: Mearsheimer's focus on China had an important implication for the Middle East: if the century's main competition is in Asia, America

should reduce its presence in the Middle East and shift its resources to Asia. This prediction, reflected in the discourse of the "pivot to Asia," sent the Middle Eastern states the message that they might lose their patron. That message, as shown earlier, was one of the motives for dual policy: states tried both to benefit from America as much as possible and to prepare for a post-American era through de-escalation with rivals and ties with China.

5.16. The Logic of the Theory at a Glance

Element	Mearsheimer's claim
Basic motive	Survival, guaranteed only by maximizing relative power
Ultimate goal	Regional hegemony; global hegemony is impossible
Type of states	Great powers are all revisionist
Principal form of power	Land power, based on wealth and population
Main strategies	War, blackmail, bait and bleed, balancing, buck-passing
Rejected strategies	Bandwagoning, appeasement
Most dangerous system	Unbalanced multipolarity with a potential hegemon
Role of institutions	Reflect the distribution of power; no independent effect

Chapter Six: Mearsheimer and the Middle East — From the Israel Lobby to The Great Delusion

6.1. Mearsheimer and the Iraq War

In early 2003, before the American invasion of Iraq, Mearsheimer and Walt published an article titled "An Unnecessary War" in Foreign Policy. Their argument was that Saddam Hussein could be contained, as he had been in the past; that he would be deterrable even if he acquired nuclear weapons; and that regime change by force would lead to a costly quagmire. Interestingly, on this issue the offensive realist (Mearsheimer) and the defensive realists (Walt and Waltz) took the same position: both opposed the war.

This point has methodological importance. Mearsheimer regards his theory as a theory of the behavior of "great powers" and always distinguishes between "what states do" (explanation) and "what America should do" (prescription). He believes America, as the regional hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, should intervene in other regions only when a potential hegemon is emerging. In the Middle East no state was capable of becoming a hegemon, so America should balance from offshore.

6.2. The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy

Mearsheimer's most controversial work is the article and book he wrote with Stephen Walt. Their central argument was that America's nearly unconditional support for Israel cannot be explained by America's strategic or moral interests. In their view, after the Cold War Israel became a "strategic liability," not a "strategic asset," and this support must be explained by the influence of a loose coalition of individuals and organizations they called the "Israel lobby." They said this lobby played a role in shaping the climate before the Iraq war and in hostility toward Iran and Syria.

The book provoked fierce reactions. Critics called it empirically weak and monocausal, and some saw in it unpleasant echoes. But from a theoretical point of view, what matters for us is that Mearsheimer and Walt in this work effectively used American "domestic politics" to explain its foreign policy, the very "reductionism" structural realism rejected. In other words, when Mearsheimer reached the Middle East, his own structural theory was not enough.

6.3. Mearsheimer on Israel and Palestine

Since 2007 Mearsheimer has repeatedly argued that Israel's policy toward the Palestinians is strategically harmful to Israel itself. He predicted that the two-state solution was effectively dead and that Israel was heading toward an "apartheid state" across the whole territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. After October 7, 2023, he was also a staunch critic of the Gaza war.

These positions are theoretically interesting. If we analyze Israel through the logic of offensive realism, expanding territorial control, suppressing nearby threats and seeking unrivaled military superiority are exactly the behavior Mearsheimer's theory predicts. Yet Mearsheimer himself calls this behavior "irrational." This contradiction shows that his theory about middle regional powers is not clearly formulated: is Israel a "great power"? If not, does the logic of power maximization apply to it?

6.4. Mearsheimer on Iran

Mearsheimer's position on Iran has been close to Waltz's. He did not regard Iran as an existential threat to the United States, opposed military attack on its nuclear facilities and believed that even a nuclear Iran could be contained. He supported the JCPOA (2015) and called the US withdrawal in 2018 a mistake. He also argued that the threat of regime change was Iran's most important motive for seeking deterrence.

This position also shows that Mearsheimer, despite his "offensive" theory, is usually "defensive" in prescribing policy for the Middle East. The gap between theory and prescription in his writings is itself evidence that the offensive and defensive logics coexist even in the mind of the analyst.

6.5. The Great Delusion (2018): A Critique of Liberal Hegemony

In The Great Delusion Mearsheimer argued that after the Cold War America pursued a policy of "liberal hegemony": an attempt to spread democracy, market economics and international institutions across the world, even by force. He judged this policy doomed for three reasons:

- **Nationalism:** nations resist foreign social engineering. Nationalism is the most powerful political ideology in the world.
- **Realism:** other powers balance against the expansion of American influence.
- **Domestic liberalism:** endless wars to spread liberalism threaten civil liberties at home.

Mearsheimer sees Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria as evidence of the failure of liberal hegemony in the Middle East. This analysis is very useful for understanding the "power vacuum" after 2011 and the entry of regional powers into competition.

The important point of The Great Delusion for the present book is that Mearsheimer introduces "nationalism" as an independent variable on a par with realism. This implicitly accepts that identity and ideology, removed in the Tragedy, play a role in explaining international politics.

6.6. Ukraine and the Critique of NATO Expansion

In "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault" (2014) and in lectures after Russia's 2022 invasion, Mearsheimer argued that NATO's eastward expansion threatened Russia and that Russia's response was predictable behavior by a great power facing a rival's presence on its borders. This position provoked much debate.

The Ukraine question has two implications for the Middle East. First, the Ukraine war diverted Russia's attention and resources from Syria and was one of the factors in the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Second, the region's states (Turkey, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran) took dual positions on this war: they cooperated with the West and maintained their ties with Russia. Iran even supplied drones to Russia. This "hedging" behavior is consistent with none of the patterns of balancing or bandwagoning in their pure form.

6.7. China and the Potential Hegemon

Since the 2000s Mearsheimer has predicted that China's rise will not be "peaceful." Like nineteenth-century America, China will try to dominate Asia and America will try to prevent it. He called America's policy of "engagement" with China in the 1990s and 2000s the greatest strategic blunder in American history.

For the Middle East, China's entry as mediator of the Iran–Saudi reconciliation in Beijing in March 2023 was symbolic evidence of a change in the global distribution of power. But the region's behavior toward China is also dual: states want capital and markets from China but still seek security from America.

6.8. How States Think (2023)

In their latest theoretical book, Mearsheimer and Rosato argued that most states, most of the time, are rational. For them rationality has two criteria: decisions rest on "credible theories" (such as realism or liberalism) and are made through a deliberative, reasoned process. They even judged decisions with catastrophic outcomes (such as Germany's decision for war in 1914) to be rational.

The book matters for our discussion because it shows that Mearsheimer, to save his theory, had to define "rationality" as "following any credible theory." If liberalism is also a credible theory, then a state that acts in a liberal way is also rational. In that case, a state that simultaneously pursues de-escalation (a liberal or defensive logic) and power accumulation (an offensive logic) is applying two credible theories at once. Without intending to, Mearsheimer has opened the way for the hypothesis of this book.

6.9. "Offshore Balancing": Mearsheimer's Prescription for the Persian Gulf

In "The Case for Offshore Balancing" in Foreign Affairs (2016), Mearsheimer and Walt offered the most coherent realist prescription for American policy in the Middle East. Their argument ran in several steps:

- America has vital interests in only three regions: Europe, Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf; the first two because of concentrations of industrial power and the third because of oil.
- America's aim in all three regions is to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon.
- In the Persian Gulf, as long as there is a balance among Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, there is no need for a large American military presence. America should keep its forces "over the horizon" and intervene only when a local state is on the verge of hegemony.
- A permanent American military presence in the region provokes anti-American terrorism, allows allies to "free-ride" and drags America into unnecessary wars.
- America should establish more normal relations with Iran, because Iran, despite all its ambitions, cannot become a hegemon and can be used as a counterweight to other actors.

This article has two important implications for our discussion. First, it shows that for Mearsheimer what matters in the Middle East is "balance" among local states, not the victory of one over another. Second, this prescription, which emphasizes restraint and non-intervention, is in fact very close to the logic of defensive realism. In other words, when the theorist of offensive realism prescribes for real American policy in the Middle East, he speaks the language of defensive realism. This is another instance of the coexistence of the two logics, this time in the thinking of the theorist himself.

6.10. Mearsheimer and Syria

From the start of the Syrian civil war, Mearsheimer opposed American military intervention to overthrow Assad. His argument was that Syria had no strategic importance for American security, that overthrowing Assad would create a power vacuum and empower jihadist groups, and that America should not enter a war whose end it could not control. He also considered American support for armed opposition groups a mistake.

The fall of Assad in December 2024, which came not through direct American intervention but through a combination of Russia's attrition in Ukraine, Hezbollah's weakening by Israel and Turkey's support for the opposition, showed that Syria's fate lay above all in the hands of regional powers. This development is not inconsistent with Mearsheimer's warning about the danger of American intervention, but it shows that regional powers, even without America, could fundamentally change the balance.

6.11. The Problem of Scope: Does Offensive Realism Apply to Regional Powers?

The most important theoretical problem in applying Mearsheimer's theory to the Middle East is "scope." Mearsheimer explicitly calls his theory a theory of "great power politics." He defines a great power as a state with enough military capability to fight an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world, a war it might lose but could turn into a war of attrition that would seriously weaken the strongest state. No Middle Eastern state is a great power by this definition.

There are therefore three ways to apply the theory to the Middle East:

- **First:** declare that the theory does not apply to the Middle East. Offensive realism then has nothing to say about the behavior of regional powers and can only explain the behavior of America, Russia and China in the region.
- **Second:** extend the logic of the theory to "regional great powers," assuming that each state within its regional system behaves like a great power in the global system. Some scholars, including Eric Labs in "Beyond Victory" (1997), have moved in this direction, arguing that every state, within its means, seeks to expand its war aims.
- **Third:** accept that regional powers operate in a "two-layer system": at the regional layer they compete like great powers, and at the global layer, as smaller states, they balance, bandwagon or hedge with respect to great powers.

The present hypothesis is close to the third path and takes it one step further: the Middle East's regional powers, precisely because they operate in a two-layer system, must apply a different logic at each layer. At the regional layer, an offensive logic (competition for influence); at the global layer, a defensive and bandwagoning logic (winning the support of a great power). Because these two layers exist simultaneously, the two logics are also applied simultaneously. De-escalation with one neighbor is often aimed at pleasing the global power, and power accumulation against another neighbor at gaining regional standing.

6.12. Mearsheimer and the Gaza War

After October 7, 2023, Mearsheimer was, in numerous articles, interviews and lectures, one of the sharpest critics of Israel's military conduct in Gaza and condemned it in legal and moral terms. He also argued that Israeli policy is strategically harmful to Israel itself, because it erodes its international legitimacy and does not resolve the Palestinian question.

These positions, regardless of any judgment about their correctness, raise an important theoretical question: when Mearsheimer speaks of the cost of "legitimacy" for Israel, is he not departing from his own theoretical framework? In the Tragedy legitimacy is an irrelevant variable and only material power matters. But in Mearsheimer's analyses of

Gaza, legitimacy, global public opinion and moral standing play an important role. This shows once more that when the structural theorist reaches the Middle East, he must turn to variables his theory had set aside.

6.13. Criticisms of How States Think

Mearsheimer and Rosato's 2023 book also attracted serious criticism. The most important are:

- **An overly broad definition of rationality:** if any decision based on a "credible theory" and reached through deliberation is rational, almost all decisions are rational. Rationality then loses its explanatory value.
- **What counts as a "credible theory"?** Mearsheimer and Rosato regard realism and liberalism as credible theories but offer no clear criterion for distinguishing credible from non-credible ones. Is the ideology of "resistance" or "exporting the revolution" also a credible theory?
- **Ignoring obviously irrational decisions:** critics cited examples such as Saddam's invasion of Kuwait (1990) or the American invasion of Iraq (2003), which in their view cannot be considered rational.

For our discussion, the important point is that if states can be "rational" on the basis of realism or liberalism, then a state applying both at once can also be rational. In this book Mearsheimer, without intending to, has accepted the theoretical possibility of "dual rationality."

6.14. Conclusion

Mearsheimer is offensive in theory and usually defensive in prescribing policy for the Middle East. To explain American policy in the Middle East he turned to domestic variables (the lobby), and in The Great Delusion he added nationalism to his theory. In How States Think he defined rationality so broadly that it can cover any combined behavior. These developments show that Mearsheimer, too, when confronted with the Middle East, found the pure structural framework inadequate.

Chapter Seven: Comparing Defensive and Offensive Realism

7.1. Common Ground: One Family, Two Offspring

Before listing the differences, it should be recalled that Waltz and Mearsheimer share most of their fundamental assumptions:

- Both theories are "structural" and locate the main cause of state behavior in the structure of the international system, not in human nature or the internal features of states.
- Both regard anarchy as the ordering principle of the system.
- Both assume the state is the principal and unitary actor.
- Both regard survival as the primary goal of states.
- Both are skeptical of international institutions and economic interdependence.
- Both emphasize "relative gains" and see cooperation as fragile.
- Both treat the great powers as the main subject of their theory.

7.2. Key Differences

A) How Much Power Is Enough?

The most important difference lies in the answer to this question. Waltz says states want an "appropriate amount" of power and regard more as dangerous, because it provokes a balancing coalition. Mearsheimer says states are "never satisfied" until they reach hegemony. Some scholars summarize this difference as the "security-seeking state" versus the "power-seeking state."

B) Offense or Defense Dominance

Defensive realists usually believe that defense has been dominant in modern history: conquest is difficult and costly, nationalism strengthens popular resistance and nuclear weapons have made the conquest of great powers almost impossible. Mearsheimer rejects this dominance, saying there are many examples of successful aggression and that states cannot know in advance whether aggression will succeed.

C) Response to Aggressors

Waltz predicts that states will balance quickly and effectively against an aggressor. Mearsheimer says states prefer to pass the buck and that balancing is usually late and ineffective. This delay gives aggressors their opportunity.

D) Explaining Aggressive Behavior

In defensive realism, aggressive behavior is a "deviation" explained by domestic factors. In offensive realism, aggressive behavior is "normal" and arises from structure. Waltz therefore needs Nazi ideology to explain Hitler; Mearsheimer does not.

E) The Stable System

Waltz regards bipolarity as the most stable system. Mearsheimer also considers bipolarity more stable, but for a different reason: in bipolarity there is no potential hegemon seeking to conquer a whole region. Mearsheimer places greater emphasis on the danger of "unbalanced multipolarity."

F) Nuclear Weapons

Waltz regards the gradual spread of nuclear weapons as stabilizing. Mearsheimer, too, in the early 1990s suggested that Ukraine keep its nuclear weapons to deter Russia. Both accept nuclear deterrence as an instrument of stability, but Mearsheimer places more emphasis on the possibility of competition at the conventional level under the nuclear umbrella.

7.3. A Comprehensive Comparative Table

Criterion	Waltz (defensive realism)	Mearsheimer (offensive realism)
Foundational work	Theory of International Politics (1979)	The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001)
Goal of the state	Security and maintenance of position	Maximizing relative power and hegemony
Desired amount of power	Appropriate and sufficient	As much as possible, up to hegemony
Nature of states	Mainly status quo	Mainly revisionist
View of aggression	Usually self-defeating	Sometimes rational and beneficial
Military balance	Defense dominates	Defense dominance unproven
Response to aggressors	Rapid balancing	Buck-passing, late balancing
Explaining aggression	Domestic factors, misperception	Logic of structure
Role of institutions	Secondary	Almost none
De-escalation	Rational if security is sufficient	Dangerous; appeasement rejected
Nuclear weapons	Stabilizing; more may be better	Stabilizing at the strategic level
Position on Iran	A nuclear Iran brings stability	Iran is containable
Position on Iraq 2003	Opposed the war	Opposed the war
Level of analysis	International system	International system and great

Criterion	Waltz (defensive realism)	Mearsheimer (offensive realism)
		powers

7.4. Disagreement over the "Problem of Intentions"

Both theories accept that states' intentions are uncertain. But they draw different conclusions. Waltz and the defensive realists (especially Glaser and Walt) believe states can partly reveal their intentions through signaling and behavior. Mearsheimer believes that even if today's intentions are clear, tomorrow's cannot be known, so states must focus on "capabilities," not "intentions."

This disagreement appears in a particular form in the Middle East. The region's states deliberately display "dual intentions." Israel sends signals of peace and of supremacy simultaneously. The Islamic Republic sends signals of dialogue and of resistance simultaneously. This "strategic ambiguity" is itself a tool for managing the security dilemma: it gives the rival hope that agreement is possible while frightening it with the cost of aggression.

7.5. Are the Two Theories Complementary?

Some scholars, such as Glenn Snyder, have suggested that the two theories can be combined into a "conditional theory": under conditions in which defense is dominant and the threat low, states behave defensively; under conditions in which offense is dominant and opportunity available, offensively. Jeffrey Taliaferro has also said that state behavior depends on the "level of threat" and "opportunity."

The present hypothesis goes beyond these conditional combinations. In a conditional combination, a state chooses one of the two logics at different times or under different conditions. In the hypothesis of "simultaneous dual policymaking," a state applies both logics at the same time and on the same issue, and the two logics reinforce each other. In other words, de-escalation is an instrument of power accumulation, and power accumulation is the backing of de-escalation.

7.6. Brooks: "Dueling Realisms" and the Question of Probability

In "Dueling Realisms" (1997), Stephen Brooks formulated the difference between the two branches of realism more precisely. For him, the main disagreement is not about how much power states want but about how states think about risk:

- **Neorealism (especially offensive realism):** states decide on the basis of "possibility." Because a rival may become aggressive in the future, they must prepare for the worst case today. This is "worst-case" logic.

- **Postclassical realism (especially defensive realism):** states decide on the basis of "probability." They assess how likely a rival is to become aggressive and weigh the costs of preparing for the worst case against the benefits of cooperation.

This distinction is very important for understanding dual policy. A state that views one rival through the logic of "possibility" and another through the logic of "probability" will naturally compete with the first and cooperate with the second. But the situation is more complex when a state applies both logics to the same rival: assuming the worst case in the security domain and acting on probability in the economic domain. Saudi–Iranian relations after the Beijing agreement, or UAE–Iranian relations in trade through Dubai, are exactly such a combination.

7.7. Tang Shiping: From Offensive to Defensive Realism, a Historical Evolution

The Chinese scholar Tang Shiping, in The Social Evolution of International Politics (2013), offered a creative proposal to reconcile the two theories. In his view both theories are right, but each for a different historical period. Over history the international system has evolved from a "Mearsheimerian world" (in which conquest was easy and profitable and offensive states survived) to a "Waltzian world" (in which conquest is difficult and costly and defensive states survive better). The mechanism of this evolution was akin to natural selection: offensive states were gradually eliminated or punished, and norms such as the sanctity of sovereignty and the prohibition of conquest were institutionalized.

This theory's implication for the Middle East is interesting. If Tang is right, the Middle East may be a region in which this evolution remains incomplete: part of its regional relations (relations among the established Gulf states, or between Israel and the normalizing states) has reached a "Waltzian world," while another part (relations with fragile states and non-state actors, or competition in the Caucasus) remains in a "Mearsheimerian world." Every regional state, because it is present in both worlds at once, must behave according to the logic of both. This evolutionary interpretation provides a structural explanation for dual policy.

7.8. Schweller's Typology and the States of the Middle East

In "Bandwagoning for Profit" (1994) and Deadly Imbalances (1998), Randall Schweller classified states by two criteria, relative power and satisfaction with the status quo, into four categories, each named after an animal:

- **Lion:** a powerful state satisfied with the status quo; willing to pay to preserve order.
- **Lamb:** a weak, satisfied state; seeks protection and survival.
- **Jackal:** a weak but dissatisfied state; joins a revisionist power to share in the spoils.
- **Wolf:** a powerful, dissatisfied state; willing to take risks to change the order.

Applying this typology to the states of the Middle East yields an interesting result: none of the six states studied falls consistently into a single category.

State	In one domain	In another domain
Israel	Lion: guardian of the security order with the United States and Arab partners	Wolf: changing the territorial status quo in Syria, Lebanon and the West Bank
Islamic Republic	Lamb: seeking survival and sanctions relief	Wolf: trying to transform the regional order through the proxy network
Saudi Arabia	Lion: guardian of the oil order and Gulf stability	Small wolf: the Yemen war and the blockade of Qatar
Turkey	Lion: NATO member and guardian of the security order	Wolf: changing the status quo in Syria, Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean
Qatar	Lamb: dependent on American protection	Jackal: tied to revisionist currents of political Islam
Azerbaijan	Small lion: guardian of the energy and transit order	Wolf: changing the territorial status quo by force

This table shows that typologies defining states by a fixed "strategic identity" have limited application in the Middle East. Each state has several strategic identities that are activated in different domains.

7.9. The Predictions of the Two Theories for the Middle East: A Thought Experiment

To clarify the comparison, we can ask: if we had only one of the two theories, what behavior would we predict for each state?

State	Prediction based on Waltz	Prediction based on Mearsheimer	Observed behavior
Israel	Maintain superiority and avoid expansion	Expand influence and eliminate rivals; de-escalation only tactical	Both, simultaneously and with serious investment in both
Islamic Republic	Deterrence for survival; gradual socialization	Seek regional hegemony	Deterrence, hegemony-seeking and negotiation simultaneously
Saudi Arabia	Balance with America against Iran	Weaken Iran at every opportunity	Balancing, reconciliation with Iran and support for pressure on it simultaneously
Turkey	Balance within NATO	Expand military influence in the periphery	Military expansion and active mediation simultaneously
Qatar	Shelter under the American umbrella	Bandwagon with the stronger power	Shelter with America, ties with Iran and Turkey, and hosting

State	Prediction based on Waltz	Prediction based on Mearsheimer	Observed behavior
			Islamists simultaneously
Azerbaijan	Settle for recovering Karabakh	Impose the corridor by force	Territorial conquest and peace by agreement simultaneously

The last column of this table summarizes the book's entire hypothesis: in all six cases, the observed behavior matches neither Waltz's prediction nor Mearsheimer's, but is a combination of both.

7.10. One Theory, Two Theories, or Neither?

At the end of this comparison there are three possible positions on the relationship between the two theories:

- **The competitive position:** one theory is right and the other wrong; the evidence must decide between them. This is the position of most supporters of both theories.
- **The complementary position:** both theories are right, but for different conditions or periods. This is the position of Snyder, Taliaferro and Tang.
- **The simultaneous-combination position:** both logics are present in one state at one time, and the state's behavior is the product of their combination. This is the position of the present book.

The difference between the second and third positions is subtle but important. In the complementary position, the state chooses one logic at each moment and the theorist must specify the conditions of choice. In the simultaneous-combination position, the state never abandons either, and the theorist must explain the logic of "combination": how the two logics divide labor, reinforce or weaken each other, and at what point their balance breaks down. Part Two of this book addresses these questions.

7.11. How to Adjudicate between the Two Theories: Methodological Considerations

Comparing Waltz and Mearsheimer is meaningful only if we specify the criteria by which we wish to judge between them, or between them and the alternative framework. This section formulates the main methodological considerations used throughout Part Two.

A) The Problem of Operationalization

The first problem in testing the two theories is the difficulty of operationalizing their key concepts. "Security-seeking" and "power-seeking" are mental motives not directly observable. A single action, such as increasing military spending or establishing a base in another country, can be interpreted as a sign of security-seeking (response to threat) or of

power-seeking (bid for superiority). This is the problem Jervis formulated as the "indistinguishability of offensive and defensive weapons."

This book's solution is to focus on "behavior" rather than "motive." Instead of asking whether a state in its mind wants security or power, we ask whether it has simultaneously engaged in behaviors that each theory regards as a sign of the opposite logic. If a state simultaneously does something Waltz would call an "offensive deviation" and Mearsheimer would call "irrational appeasement," both theories have trouble explaining that behavior. The operational indicators of the two logics are given in Chapter Nine.

B) Most-Likely and Least-Likely Cases

The American methodologist Harry Eckstein, in a famous essay on case studies (1975), proposed the concept of the "crucial case": a case in which, if the theory fails, it has no chance of succeeding anywhere else (a "most-likely" case), or in which, if it succeeds, it will succeed everywhere (a "least-likely" case).

The Middle East can in several respects be considered a "most-likely case" for realism: a region with severe anarchy, serious security threats, frequent wars, weak regional institutions and a marginal role for democracy and liberal interdependence. If structural realism is to work anywhere, it is here. The failure of the two theories in the Middle East is therefore stronger evidence against them than failure in a region such as Western Europe, with its different institutional and normative structure.

C) Process Tracing

Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, in Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences (2005), introduced "process tracing" as the main tool of qualitative case study. In this method the researcher follows the causal chain between variables step by step to see whether the mechanism predicted by the theory actually occurred.

In this book process tracing is used in the "close studies." For example, in the study of the JCPOA year (Chapter Twelve), we show how a power-accumulating action by the IRGC (detaining sailors) was managed through the communication channel built by a de-escalatory action (the JCPOA). This chain reveals the "mechanism" linking the two logics, something a mere comparison of outcomes cannot show.

D) The Congruence Method

Another method used in this book is the "congruence method": comparing each theory's predictions with the observed outcomes in each case. The tables of "prediction based on Waltz, prediction based on Mearsheimer, observed behavior" in this chapter and the case chapters apply this method. The limitation of the congruence method is that agreement between prediction and outcome does not by itself prove causation; the book therefore supplements it with process tracing.

E) Counterfactuals

A useful tool for evaluating theories is the "counterfactual" question: what would have happened had a given state pursued only one of the two logics? For example: had Qatar been only an American ally and not the host of Hamas, could it have mediated the Gaza ceasefire? Had Azerbaijan relied only on force and lacked Article 9 of the 2020 statement, could it have pursued its corridor claim with legal backing? A negative answer to these questions shows that the two logics were not only simultaneous but interdependent. Scholars such as James Fearon and Philip Tetlock have stressed the need for rigor in counterfactual reasoning: the counterfactual scenario should assume the minimum possible change to reality and be consistent with existing historical knowledge.

F) The Danger of "Saving the Theory"

The final consideration is the danger Lakatos called a "degenerative problemshift": adding auxiliary assumptions to a theory to reconcile it with contrary evidence without generating new predictions. Both Waltz's defenders (adding perception, domestic coalitions and ideology) and Mearsheimer's (interpreting every restraint as "lack of opportunity") are exposed to this danger. The framework of "dual realism" must avoid the same danger. The book therefore specifies falsification criteria for the hypothesis in Chapter Nine, examines control cases in Chapter Eighteen and derives new testable propositions in Chapter Twenty.

7.12. The Level of Analysis: Singer's Problem

In his famous article "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations" (1961), David Singer showed that the analyst must consciously choose a level of analysis: the international system or the nation-state. Each level has advantages and limitations. The system level offers greater generalisability and parsimony but ignores differences among states. The state level sees more detail but makes generalization harder.

Waltz and Mearsheimer both chose the system level. This book's critique, unlike many earlier critiques, is not simply a return to the state level. The book argues that between the level of the global system and the level of the state there is a third level, the "regional system," with its own logic. Dual policy is the response of states to the simultaneous pressures of two structural levels (global and regional), not merely a product of their internal features. From this perspective, "dual realism" is still a structural theory, but of a two-layer structure.

7.13. Conclusion

Waltz and Mearsheimer gave two different answers to one question: how much power do states want in an anarchic system? Waltz's answer is "enough"; Mearsheimer's is "as much as possible." Both answers assume that states must choose one of the two paths. Part Two of the book will show that in the Middle East this assumption is not true.

Chapter Eight: Critiques of Structural Realism, with Emphasis on the Non-Western World

8.1. The Liberal and Institutionalist Critique

In Power and Interdependence (1977), Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, and Keohane in After Hegemony (1984), argued that under complex interdependence states have incentives to cooperate, and that international institutions can reduce transaction costs, provide information and make cheating costly. The institutionalists′ answer to the "relative gains" problem was that on most issues, especially economic ones, states care more about absolute gains.

In the Middle East this critique explains part of reality: trade corridors (such as the India–Middle East–Europe corridor or the Zangezur route), energy cooperation (such as the East Mediterranean Gas Forum) and the economic ties between the UAE and Israel after 2020 reflect liberal logic. Yet these same projects, as we shall see, are simultaneously instruments of power accumulation and geopolitics.

8.2. The Constructivist Critique

In "Anarchy Is What States Make of It" (1992) and Social Theory of International Politics (1999), Alexander Wendt argued that anarchy has no fixed logic. There are three "cultures of anarchy": Hobbesian (enmity), Lockean (rivalry) and Kantian (friendship). Which culture prevails depends on the identities, interactions and mutual expectations of states.

The constructivist critique is very powerful in the Middle East. Michael Barnett showed in Dialogues in Arab Politics (1998) that rivalry among Arab states was less military than "symbolic," a contest over defining the norms of Arabism. Marc Lynch and others have examined the role of transnational media, such as Al Jazeera, in shaping the Arab public sphere. Sectarian identities (Shia and Sunni), political Islam (the Muslim Brotherhood) and the ideology of "resistance" are all sources of power and threat that structural realism does not see.

8.3. Neoclassical Realism

In a well-known 1998 article, Gideon Rose gave the name "neoclassical realism" to a group of works that sought to link the structure of the international system with domestic variables. In this view, structural pressures are the "independent variable," but they pass through the filter of "intervening variables" (leaders′ perceptions, state structure, the capacity to mobilize domestic resources, strategic culture) before becoming foreign policy. Representatives of this current include:

- **Fareed Zakaria:** in From Wealth to Power (1998), he showed that a state′s capacity to extract resources from society determines its foreign policy.

- **Randall Schweller:** in Unanswered Threats (2006), he showed that states sometimes "underbalance" against threats because of elite fragmentation and weak domestic cohesion. He also classified states as "lions, lambs, jackals and wolves," which behave differently depending on their power and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the status quo.
- **Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro and Steven Lobell:** in Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics (2016), they offered a systematic framework for this current.

Neoclassical realism is the closest theoretical ally of the present hypothesis, because it lets us see how a state combines structural pressures (which may be defensive or offensive) with domestic needs (regime survival, religious legitimacy, elite economic interests) to produce dual behavior.

8.4. The Third-World Critique: Regime Security and "Omnibalancing"

The most important critique for the Middle East comes from scholars who have studied the behavior of Third World states.

A) Steven David and "Omnibalancing"

In "Explaining Third World Alignment" (1991), Steven David argued that Third World leaders balance not against external threats alone but against "all threats," domestic and external. He called this "omnibalancing." A leader may compromise with an external enemy in order to confront a domestic one. The most important goal is the survival of the regime and the leader, not the survival of the state in an abstract sense.

This concept is key to understanding many dual policies in the region. Saudi Arabia de-escalates with Israel to balance against Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, but avoids full normalization so as not to lose domestic religious legitimacy. The Islamic Republic negotiates with the West to reduce sanctions but maintains its proxy network to ensure revolutionary identity and regime survival.

B) Mohammed Ayoob and "Subaltern Realism"

In The Third World Security Predicament (1995) and his article on "subaltern realism," Mohammed Ayoob argued that Third World states are in the stage of "state-building" and that their main source of insecurity is internal: imposed borders, ethnic and religious diversity, weak legitimacy and elite rivalry. The logic of Western realism, which assumes the state to be a complete and established unit, therefore does not apply to them.

C) Gregory Gause and the New Middle East Cold War

In his studies of the international relations of the Persian Gulf and his essay "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War" (2014), Gregory Gause showed that the

Iran–Saudi rivalry after 2011 was not a direct war but a competition for influence in "weak states" (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain). Regional states use sectarian and transnational identities to penetrate these vacuums. This type of competition, conducted through non-state actors, fits neither Waltz's "balance of power" nor Mearsheimer's "regional hegemony."

D) Raymond Hinnebusch and the Penetrated Regional System

In The International Politics of the Middle East, Raymond Hinnebusch described the region as a "penetrated regional system": one in which extra-regional powers have always been actively present and regional states use these powers to advance their own aims. In such a system, the "patron–client" relationship between the United States and its allies creates a kind of hierarchy within anarchy.

8.5. Regional Security Complex Theory

In Regions and Powers (2003), Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver presented "regional security complex" theory. According to it, most threats travel more easily over short distances, so security is organized "regionally." The Middle East is a security complex with three sub-complexes: the Levant (Israel and its neighbors), the Persian Gulf and the Maghreb. The theory also introduced the concept of "securitization": issues become threats not because they are inherently threatening but because leaders present them as "security" issues.

8.6. Internal Critiques: Problems of Falsifiability

In a well-known article (1997), John Vasquez used Imre Lakatos's methodology to argue that realism's research program had become "degenerative." Each time its predictions fail (for example, states bandwagon instead of balancing), realists invent a new concept (balance of threat, buck-passing, underbalancing, soft balancing) to save the theory. As a result the theory explains every behavior and therefore predicts none.

Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik also argued in "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" (1999) that realists, in responding to anomalies, have imported so many liberal and constructivist variables that realism's distinctive core has disappeared.

8.7. Soft Balancing and Hedging

After 2003, Robert Pape, T. V. Paul and others proposed the concept of "soft balancing": states unable to balance the United States militarily constrain its power with diplomatic, institutional and economic tools. The concept of "hedging" was also used to describe states that maintain ties with two rival powers at once to reduce the risk of dependence on either.

These concepts are closer to Middle Eastern reality but still incomplete. Hedging usually describes the behavior of small states toward great powers, whereas the present hypothesis concerns the behavior of regional powers toward one another. Hedging is also a

"moderate" behavior, while the dual policy we describe includes extreme behavior in both directions: real peacemaking and real war.

8.8. The English School: The Anarchical Society

In The Anarchical Society (1977), Hedley Bull proposed a middle way between realism and liberalism. In his view, despite anarchy, states form an "international society": a set of states that consider themselves bound by common rules and institutions. Bull identified five main institutions of this society: the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war (as a regulated institution) and the special role of the great powers.

The English School distinguishes between an "international system" (states that merely interact and factor each other's behavior into their calculations) and an "international society" (states with shared interests and values). Waltz saw only the "system"; Bull saw the "society" as well.

Applying this view to the Middle East is instructive. The Gulf Cooperation Council, despite all its disputes and even the blockade of Qatar, represents a kind of "regional society" whose members observe shared rules (such as avoiding direct war with one another, preserving monarchical regimes and managing disputes through Kuwaiti and Omani mediation). The end of the Qatar blockade at Al-Ula without war showed the strength of these rules. By contrast, relations between this society and actors outside it (Iran, proxy groups) are closer to the logic of a "system." The Gulf states, being simultaneously members of a regional society and actors in a regional system, apply two logics of behavior at once.

8.9. Lustick: Why Does the Middle East Have No Great Power?

In "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers" (1997), Ian Lustick raised a fundamental question: why, in the twentieth-century Middle East, unlike in Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, did no state become a regional great power through war and conquest? His answer was that external great powers (Britain, France, the United States and the Soviet Union) intervened each time a regional state was on the verge of unifying the region by war, and prevented it. His examples included Muhammad Ali in nineteenth-century Egypt, Nasser in the 1960s and Saddam in 1990.

Lustick argued that these interventions halted the process of "state-making through war," which Charles Tilly saw as the origin of powerful European states, in the Middle East. The result was a region of middle and weak states and a permanent, unfinished rivalry.

This theory is of fundamental importance for our hypothesis. If an external power always prevents the decisive victory of a regional state, regional states cannot rely on a purely offensive Mearsheimerian strategy, because they know that if they succeed too well they will face external intervention. Nor can they settle for a purely defensive Waltzian strategy, because an unfinished rivalry never reaches a stable balance. The rational solution in such

conditions is precisely dual policy: power accumulation up to the point that does not provoke external intervention, and de-escalation to win the approval of that same external power. The experience of the Islamic Republic after 2023, which crossed this line and faced direct American intervention, is a clear example of the accuracy of Lustick's prediction.

8.10. Fred Halliday: The Historical Sociology of Middle Eastern International Relations

Fred Halliday, the Irish scholar and one of the foremost experts on the Middle East and Iran, offered in The Middle East in International Relations (2005) a comprehensive critique of structural realism from the perspective of historical sociology. Halliday highlighted three main points:

- Middle Eastern states cannot be regarded as "like units"; they are products of different histories of colonialism, revolution and state-building, and these histories shape their behavior.
- Ideologies, from Arab nationalism to political Islam, are not merely coverings for interests but independent forces shaping both domestic politics and external relations.
- Revolutions, especially the Iranian revolution, have fundamentally transformed the regional system, and this transformation cannot be explained by the mere logic of the distribution of power.

In numerous works on Iran, Halliday also stressed the permanent tension between the "logic of revolution" and the "logic of the state" in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. This view is one of the important intellectual sources of the "institutional duality" hypothesis in Chapter Twelve.

8.11. Ramazani and the Duality of the Islamic Republic's Foreign Policy

R. K. Ramazani, the Iranian-born scholar at the University of Virginia, was among the first to analyze systematically the duality of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy in Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East (1986) and later articles. He showed that this policy had from the outset oscillated between two poles: "exporting the revolution," based on the universalist ideals of revolutionary Islam, and "national interest," based on the practical considerations of the Iranian state. Ramazani also showed that in various periods, including the acceptance of Resolution 598 in 1988, this oscillation swung toward the logic of national interest.

What this book adds to Ramazani's analysis is that after the 1990s the two poles took the form not of "oscillation" but of "institutionalized coexistence." The Islamic Republic no

longer oscillated between two logics but implemented both simultaneously in two separate institutions.

8.12. Ehteshami and Hinnebusch: Middle Powers in a Penetrated System

In Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System (1997), Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch showed that the long-standing alliance between Damascus and Tehran, which seemed ideologically heterogeneous (one secular Ba′athist, the other an Islamic Republic), rested on pragmatic logic: both balanced against Saddam's Iraq, Israel and American influence. But they also showed that both states, while maintaining this alliance, kept independent relations with other actors and at times had conflicting interests.

Ehteshami and Hinnebusch proposed a multi-level framework for analyzing the foreign policy of Middle Eastern states, covering three levels: the international level (great-power pressures), the regional level (regional rivalries and alliances) and the domestic level (state structure, ideology and legitimacy needs). This framework is very close to the present hypothesis, because it shows that each level may demand a different logic and that the state must reconcile them.

8.13. Curtis Ryan and Regime-Security Alliances

In Inter-Arab Alliances: Regime Security and Jordanian Foreign Policy (2009), Curtis Ryan systematically tested Steven David's theory of "omnibalancing" in the Arab world. He showed that inter-Arab alliances are less responses to external military threats than responses to threats to regime security, including ideological threats (for example, pan-Arabism or political Islam), economic threats (the need for financial aid) and social threats (protests). Regimes build alliances that provide the resources needed for domestic survival, even if these alliances make little military sense.

Ryan's finding matters for dual policy: if alliances respond to several different threats, a regime may ally with a state to confront an ideological threat and simultaneously compete with that same state in the military domain. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, simultaneously allies against the Muslim Brotherhood and rivals in Yemen, Sudan and the oil market, is an example of this situation.

8.14. Valbjørn and Bank: The New Arab Cold War

In "The New Arab Cold War" (2012), Morten Valbjørn and André Bank returned to the concept of the "Arab Cold War" that Malcolm Kerr had used in the 1960s to describe the Nasser–Saudi rivalry, showing that regional rivalries after 2003, and especially after 2011, have similar characteristics: ideological competition over identity and legitimacy, use of

transnational media, support for aligned groups in other countries, and avoidance of direct war.

They also stressed that this "cold war," unlike the global Cold War, is not bipolar but multipolar and crosscutting: the Iranian axis, the Saudi–Emirati axis and the Qatari–Turkish axis compete with one another simultaneously, and alliances change by issue. In such a cold war, today's enemy on one issue may be tomorrow's partner on another.

8.15. Analytic Eclecticism: A Response to Theoretical Pluralism

In Beyond Paradigms: Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics (2010), Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein argued that dividing international relations into rival "paradigms" (realism, liberalism, constructivism), each trying to prove its superiority, has reduced the discipline's capacity to understand real-world problems. They proposed an approach they called "analytic eclecticism": deliberately combining mechanisms and concepts drawn from different paradigms to explain a specific problem, rather than remaining loyal to one paradigm.

Sil and Katzenstein identified three features of analytic eclecticism: openness to questions that cross paradigm boundaries, constructing causal explanations that encompass multiple mechanisms, and attention to practical implications for policymakers.

The present hypothesis is in some respects consistent with analytic eclecticism: "dual realism" combines the mechanisms of defensive and offensive realism and also draws on liberal concepts (interdependence, institutions), constructivist ones (identity, legitimacy) and Third-World security studies (regime security). But there is an important difference: analytic eclecticism is usually performed by the researcher, who combines theories. Our hypothesis is that "states themselves" combine logics. In other words, eclecticism here is not a methodological feature but an ontological feature of state behavior. A theory seeking to explain this behavior must itself be combined.

8.16. Grand Theory or Middle-Range Theory?

The American sociologist Robert Merton distinguished between "grand theories" that try to explain everything within a single framework and "middle-range theories" that explain a narrower domain with greater precision. Waltz and Mearsheimer are both grand theorists: they claim to explain the logic of international politics at all times and places.

"Dual realism," by contrast, is for now a middle-range theory: it claims to explain the behavior of "regional powers in penetrated regional systems." This modesty of scope is not a weakness but a condition of precision. As noted in Chapter Twenty, if this framework is confirmed in other regions (South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Horn of Africa), it may be developed into a more general theory of the behavior of middle powers in a multipolar system.

8.17. Criteria for Evaluating a Good Theory

To sum up the methodological discussion, we can list the criteria proposed in the philosophy of science and IR methodology for evaluating theories and measure the two theories and the alternative framework against them. Stephen Van Evera, in Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science (1997), lists criteria of this kind:

Criterion	Waltz	Mearsheimer	Dual realism (in the Middle East)
Explanatory power	Medium: explains the defensive half of behavior	Medium: explains the offensive half of behavior	Higher: explains the simultaneity of the two logics
Parsimony	Very high	Very high	Lower: has more variables
Falsifiability	Limited: defended by "not a theory of foreign policy"	Limited: defended by "lack of opportunity"	Relative: falsification criteria and a control case specified
Scope	Global	Global, focused on great powers	Regional, with potential for generalization
Policy relevance	Limited at the regional level	Limited at the regional level	High: index and matrix tools
Logical coherence	High	High, with criticisms of its deductions	Developing

This table shows that no theory is superior on all criteria. Waltz and Mearsheimer excel in parsimony and coherence; dual realism in explanatory power and policy relevance at the regional level. The choice among them depends on the analyst's purpose: if the purpose is a general understanding of the logic of the international system, Waltz and Mearsheimer remain useful; if the purpose is to understand the specific behavior of Middle Eastern powers and predict their next move, a dual framework is required.

8.18. Conclusion to Part One

Part One has shown that:

- Classical realism accepted the combination of the logics of fear and ambition, but structural realism separated them.
- Waltz formulated the logic of security-seeking and balancing, and Mearsheimer the logic of power-seeking and hegemony-seeking.
- Both, when confronting the Middle East (Waltz in his article on Iran, Mearsheimer on the Israel lobby and in his critique of liberal hegemony), had to distance themselves from the pure structural framework.

- Liberal, constructivist, neoclassical and especially Third-World critiques (regime security, omnibalancing, the penetrated system) show that structural assumptions are highly restrictive in the Middle East.

Part Two moves this critique from the theoretical to the empirical level and shows how the principal states of the Middle East have, over the past fifteen years, applied the defensive and offensive logics simultaneously.

Part Two: Simultaneous Dual Policymaking in the Middle East (2011–2026)

Chapter Nine: The Theoretical Framework of the Hypothesis — "Simultaneous Dual Policymaking"

9.1. Formulating the Hypothesis

The central hypothesis of this book can be formulated as follows:

> **In the post-2011 Middle East, the region's principal states have organized their foreign and security policies not on the basis of a choice between the logic of security-seeking (defensive realism) and the logic of power-seeking (offensive realism), but on the basis of a simultaneous and deliberate combination of the two. This combination is not a contradiction or a dysfunction but a rational strategy for managing an environment in which threats are multilayered, sources of power are plural and the regional structure is penetrated. Neither Waltz's nor Mearsheimer's theory alone can therefore explain the behavior of these states, and both become "illegible" at the regional level.**

9.2. Three Subsidiary Hypotheses

- **First subsidiary hypothesis (simultaneity):** de-escalatory and power-accumulating policies are pursued within the same time frame and sometimes on the same issue, not as successive stages.
- **Second subsidiary hypothesis (mutual reinforcement):** the two logics reinforce each other: de-escalation lowers the cost of power accumulation and brings international legitimacy; power accumulation gives de-escalation bargaining power.
- **Third subsidiary hypothesis (institutional division of labor):** in many states, the two logics are implemented by different institutions or channels (the foreign ministry versus security institutions; investment funds versus military forces; media versus diplomacy), and this division of labor makes duality durable.

9.3. Operational Definitions of the Two Logics

To test the hypothesis, clear criteria for identifying each logic must be defined.

A) Indicators of the De-escalatory (Defensive) Logic

- Concluding or pursuing peace agreements, normalization or diplomatic reconciliation.
- Mediating in others' conflicts.
- Regional economic cooperation projects (corridors, energy, free trade).

- Confidence-building measures (restoring diplomatic relations, high-level visits, halting attacks).
- Official discourse of peace, dialogue and stability.
- Accepting voluntary limits on military capability (such as the JCPOA).

B) Indicators of the Power-Accumulating (Offensive) Logic

- Seizing or controlling territory, directly or through proxies.
- Creating, equipping or supporting non-state armed actors in other countries.
- Direct military intervention or establishing bases abroad.
- Armament programs beyond defensive needs (missile, nuclear, drone).
- Cross-border operations (assassination, sabotage, attacks on infrastructure).
- Discourses of regional leadership, of the umma or of civilisational superiority.

9.4. Types of Duality

On the basis of the case studies, four types of duality can be distinguished:

Type of duality	Definition	Example
Geographic duality	De-escalation with one group of neighbors and power accumulation against another	Israel: normalization with the UAE and war with Hezbollah
Instrumental duality	Using a de-escalatory instrument for a power-accumulating goal	Azerbaijan: the Zangezur corridor as both peace and territorial link
Institutional duality	Two logics implemented by two different institutions	Iran: the foreign ministry and the Quds Force
Discursive duality	An official discourse of peace alongside power-seeking practice	Qatar: mediation and hosting Hamas

9.5. Why Is Duality Rational? Five Mechanisms

A) A Multilayered Threat Structure

Middle Eastern states face domestic threats (insurgency, coups, protests), regional threats (neighboring rivals) and extra-regional threats (sanctions, regime change) at the same time. Each threat may require a different response. De-escalation with one threat allows concentration on another (the logic of omnibalancing).

B) Ambiguity of Intentions as an Asset

In an environment where intentions are uncertain, a state that sends signals of both peace and power keeps its rival uncertain. The rival does not know whether to balance or negotiate and may therefore do neither fully. This "strategic ambiguity" is a form of power.

C) A Penetrated Structure and an Extra-Regional Patron

The presence of the United States (and recently China and Russia) as an extra-regional power allows regional states both to operate under its "security umbrella" and to compete to raise their value in its eyes. De-escalation is often a "gift" to the extra-regional patron, and power accumulation an attempt to increase one's value to it.

D) Domestic Politics and Legitimacy

The region's leaders need two different sources of domestic legitimacy: "prosperity and development" (which demands de-escalation and trade) and "prestige and identity" (which demands displays of power). Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Erdoğan's discourse of the "Century of Türkiye" both combine the two.

E) Rentier Political Economy and Sovereign Wealth Funds

Oil and gas wealth allows the Gulf states to spend simultaneously on peaceful economic investment and on supporting armed groups or buying arms. The resource constraint that forces states to choose in structural theories is less binding for these states.

9.6. Conceptual Antecedents: From the "Two-Level Game" to "Strategic Hedging"

The hypothesis of dual policymaking did not take shape in a vacuum. Several concepts in the IR literature are close to it, and knowing them helps clarify what is distinctive about the present hypothesis.

A) Putnam's Two-Level Game

In "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games" (1988), Robert Putnam showed that leaders in international negotiations play at two tables simultaneously: the international table with foreign parties and the domestic table with power groups, parliament and public opinion. Every agreement must be acceptable at both. Putnam used the concept of the "win-set" to describe the range of agreements that can be ratified domestically.

The present hypothesis draws on Putnam's logic but extends it from "two levels" to "three" (domestic, regional, global) and generalizes it from "negotiation" to "grand strategy." A Middle Eastern state must simultaneously secure the approval of a great patron (the United States, China or Russia) at the global level, balance with rivals at the regional level and secure regime legitimacy at the domestic level. Dual policy is the rational response to the need to play at these three tables at once.

B) Strategic Hedging

Kuik Cheng-Chwee and other scholars of the foreign policy of Southeast Asian states have used the concept of "hedging" to describe the behavior of states such as Malaysia,

Singapore and Vietnam toward China and the United States. Hedging means combining elements of cooperation with elements of caution and deterrence in relation to a great power, so that the state never fully commits to one side.

Middle Eastern dual policy differs from hedging in three respects. First, hedging is mainly the behavior of smaller states toward great powers, whereas dual policy is also the behavior of regional powers toward one another. Second, hedging is a "moderate" and "cautious" behavior, whereas dual policy can include "extreme" behavior in both directions: all-out war on one front and full normalization on another. Third, the aim of hedging is to reduce risk, whereas the aim of dual policy is both to reduce risk and to increase power.

C) Audience Costs and Signaling

In "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes" (1994), James Fearon showed that leaders create "audience costs" through public commitments: if they back down, they pay a price with domestic public opinion. This very cost makes their commitment credible. Middle Eastern dual policy uses this mechanism in a particular way: leaders announce offensive commitments for the domestic audience and de-escalatory commitments for the international audience. Because the audiences differ, both commitments can be credible at the same time.

9.7. The Duality Index

To move the hypothesis from description to measurement, the author proposes a "duality index" that future research may test with quantitative data. The index rests on four components:

Component	Measuring question	Scale
Simultaneity	Did both sets of policies occur within a twelve-month window?	0 to 3
Intensity	Were both policies serious and costly, or was one merely symbolic?	0 to 3
Same-issue	Did both policies concern the same party or issue?	0 to 3
Linkage	Is there evidence of a causal link or deliberate division of labor between the two policies?	0 to 3

The sum of these four components yields an index from zero to twelve. A state scoring above eight is a "strategic dual state"; a score of four to eight indicates "situational duality," and below four a state with a single dominant logic. The author's qualitative assessment of the six principal states for 2011 to 2026 is as follows:

State	Simultaneity	Intensity	Same-issue	Linkage	Total	Category
Islamic Republic	3	3	3	3	12	Strategic dual
Israel	3	3	2	3	11	Strategic dual
Qatar	3	2	3	3	11	Strategic dual
Turkey	3	3	2	2	10	Strategic dual
Azerbaijan	2	3	3	3	11	Strategic dual
UAE	3	3	2	3	11	Strategic dual
Saudi Arabia	2	3	2	2	9	Strategic dual
Oman (control case)	1	1	0	0	2	Single dominant logic

These scores are qualitative estimates, not quantitative data; but they show that the hypothesis can be measured with a clear definition. The existence of a "control case" (Oman), examined in Chapter Eighteen, shows that duality is not an inevitable feature of all the region's states but a feature of states that have both "capability" and regional "ambition."

9.8. Conceptual Boundaries: What Dual Policy Is Not

To avoid stretching the concept, it must be made clear which behaviors cannot be called "dual policy":

- **A policy change after a change of government:** if a new government reverses its predecessor's policy (for example, from confrontation to de-escalation), this is sequence, not duality. Example: the shift in US policy from the JCPOA to maximum pressure.
- **Mere hypocrisy:** if de-escalatory discourse has no practical consequence, this is discursive, not strategic, duality. Genuine dual policy requires both policies to have material consequences.
- **Legitimate defense:** a military response to a direct attack, while a state maintains its general policy of de-escalation, is not necessarily duality. The criterion is that power accumulation be "pre-emptive."
- **Unintended institutional differences:** if two institutions of a state pursue conflicting policies and the leadership is dissatisfied with this conflict and tries to resolve it, this is incoherence, not strategy. Dual policy requires at least the tacit acceptance of the leadership.

9.9. Case Study Method

Each case chapter follows a common structure:

- The context and structural position of the country in the regional system.
- Components of the de-escalatory logic with dated instances.
- Components of the power-accumulating logic with dated instances.
- Analysis of the link between the two logics (mutual reinforcement or division of labor).
- Testing against the predictions of Waltz and Mearsheimer.
- A summary table of dualities.

This method is consistent with "process tracing" in comparative studies: the aim is to show the simultaneity and causal link between the two sets of behavior, not merely to list them.

9.10. Rival Predictions

For the hypothesis to be falsifiable, we must specify what evidence would refute it:

- If states pursue only one of the two logics in a given period and then switch to the other (sequence rather than simultaneity), the first subsidiary hypothesis is refuted and the "conditional theory" of Taliaferro or Snyder offers a better explanation.
- If de-escalatory policies are merely propaganda without real consequences, the hypothesis is weakened in favor of offensive realism.
- If power-accumulating policies are merely reactive and defensive (responses to immediate threats), the hypothesis is weakened in favor of defensive realism.

The case chapters will show that in all the cases the evidence favors simultaneity, the reality of both policies and the pre-emptive character of some of the power-accumulating policies.

Chapter Ten: Historical Context — The Middle East from the Arab Spring to the War of 2026

10.1. Why Is 2011 the Starting Point?

The Arab Spring was not merely a series of domestic uprisings; it transformed the structure of the Middle Eastern regional system. Three of its structural consequences are decisive for our discussion:

- **The collapse or weakening of states:** Syria, Libya, Yemen and to some extent Iraq became "fragile states," creating power vacuums that regional powers competed to fill.
- **The erosion of the traditional Arab order:** Egypt, for decades the pillar of the Arab order, became absorbed in domestic crisis, and the center of gravity of the Arab world shifted to the Persian Gulf (Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha).
- **The relative American retreat:** the Obama administration announced the "pivot to Asia," withdrew from Iraq and avoided large-scale intervention in Syria. This retreat gave space to regional powers and other extra-regional powers (Russia).

As a result, the post-2011 Middle East became an "unbalanced multipolar" system with several claimants to leadership (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, the UAE, Qatar). This is exactly the system Mearsheimer considers the most dangerous. Yet, as we shall see, state behavior in this system was more complex than he predicted.

10.2. Chronology of Key Events

Year	Event	Significance for the hypothesis
2011	Fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak; NATO intervention in Libya; start of the Syrian civil war; Peninsula Shield forces enter Bahrain	Power vacuum and the start of proxy rivalry
2012	Mohamed Morsi's presidency in Egypt; expanding IRGC and Hezbollah presence in Syria	Rivalry between the Brotherhood axis and the resistance axis
2013	Overthrow of Morsi; start of secret US–Iran talks in Oman	Rift between Qatar–Turkey and Saudi Arabia–UAE–Egypt
2014	ISIS seizes Mosul and declares a caliphate; Gaza war	Entry of the international coalition; opportunity for Iran in Iraq
2015	Start of the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen; the JCPOA; Russian military intervention in Syria	Nuclear de-escalation simultaneous with proxy expansion
2016	Saudi Arabia cuts ties with Iran; failed coup in Turkey	Intensified regional bipolarity

Year	Event	Significance for the hypothesis
2017	Blockade of Qatar; territorial defeat of ISIS	Split within the GCC
2018	US withdrawal from the JCPOA; murder of Khashoggi	Maximum pressure; temporary isolation of Riyadh
2019	Attack on Aramco at Abqaiq; maritime attacks in the Gulf	Exposure of Gulf vulnerability
2020	Assassination of Qassem Soleimani; the Abraham Accords; the 44-day Karabakh war	The great simultaneity of peace and war
2021	Al-Ula summit and end of the Qatar blockade; start of Baghdad talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia	A wave of de-escalation
2022	Turkey normalizes with the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel; Ukraine war	Hedging toward the great powers
2023	Beijing agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia (March); Syria's return to the Arab League; full seizure of Karabakh (September); October 7 attack	Peak of de-escalation and then, suddenly, war
2024	First direct Iranian attack on Israel (April); killing of Hassan Nasrallah (September); Lebanon ceasefire (November); fall of Assad (December)	Collapse of the "axis of resistance" in the Levant
2025	Twelve-day Israel–Iran war and US strike on Fordow (June); Azerbaijan–Armenia Washington summit (August); Israeli strike on Doha and Saudi–Pakistani defense pact (September); Gaza ceasefire (October)	Coincidence of peak militarism and peak peacemaking
2026	Start of the US–Israeli war against the Islamic Republic (February 28); killing of Ali Khamenei and succession of Mojtaba Khamenei; Iranian attacks on Gulf states; mediation by Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt and Qatar; unstable ceasefires	The final test of the hypothesis

10.3. Four Waves of Transformation

To organize this chronology, the past fifteen years can be divided into four waves:

First Wave (2011–2015): Vacuum and Proxy Rivalry

In this period rivalry took shape among three axes: the resistance axis led by Iran (Syria, Hezbollah, Iraqi groups and later the Houthis), the Brotherhood axis led by Turkey and Qatar (Morsi's Egypt, Hamas, groups in Libya and Syria), and the conservative axis led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE (post-2013 Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan). Rivalry was conducted mainly in third countries and through non-state actors.

Second Wave (2015–2020): Direct Militarization

Saudi intervention in Yemen, direct Russian and Turkish intervention in Syria, the blockade of Qatar and attacks on energy infrastructure moved rivalry from proxy to direct. At the same time, the JCPOA (2015) was the first major experiment in de-escalation, which failed with the US withdrawal (2018).

Third Wave (2020–2023): The Great De-escalation

The Abraham Accords, the end of the Qatar blockade, Turkey's normalizations, the Baghdad talks and the Beijing agreement produced a period of broad de-escalation. Many analysts spoke of "the end of the regional cold war." Yet this de-escalation coincided with rapid rearmament, the expansion of Iran's nuclear program, the Karabakh war and the spread of drones.

Fourth Wave (2023–2026): Regional War and Realignment

The October 7 attack, the Gaza war, the Lebanon war, the fall of Assad, two direct wars between Israel (and the United States) and the Islamic Republic, and Iranian attacks on Gulf states brought the region into a new phase. Importantly, even at the height of these wars, de-escalatory diplomacy did not stop: the Gaza ceasefire, the Zangezur corridor, Qatari and Pakistani mediation and efforts to expand the Abraham Accords continued.

10.4. The Structure of the Region in 2026

By the summer of 2026, the regional distribution of power had changed dramatically:

- **Israel** as the region's strongest military power, able to act anywhere in the Middle East, but with growing diplomatic isolation after the Gaza war.
- **The Islamic Republic** with a weakened proxy network in the Levant, damaged nuclear facilities and a new leadership that, according to many reports, is under the extensive influence of the IRGC.
- **Saudi Arabia and the UAE**, which despite Iranian attacks avoided direct entry into the war while asking the United States to keep up pressure and keeping their diplomatic channels open.
- **Turkey**, which after the fall of Assad is the largest foreign power in Syria and played the role of mediator in the 2026 war.
- **Qatar**, which was the target of both an Israeli attack (September 2025) and Iranian attacks, yet remains the principal mediator on Gaza.
- **Azerbaijan**, which with complete victory in Karabakh and the Washington agreement has become the transit hub of the South Caucasus.

10.5. The Role of Extra-Regional Powers over the Past Fifteen Years

No analysis of the Middle East is complete without attention to the role of external powers. In the period under study, the policies of four American administrations and the growing role of Russia and China shaped the framework within which regional states designed their dual policies.

The United States: Four Administrations, Four Approaches

- **The Obama administration (2009–2017):** the "pivot to Asia," withdrawal from Iraq (2011), avoidance of large-scale intervention in Syria after retreating from the chemical weapons "red line" (2013), and a focus on the JCPOA. The message of this period to regional states was that America did not want to play "regional policeman." This message pushed America's allies (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel) toward greater self-reliance and independent power accumulation.
- **The first Trump administration (2017–2021):** withdrawal from the JCPOA (2018), "maximum pressure" on Iran, the assassination of Qassem Soleimani (January 2020) and mediation of the Abraham Accords (2020). This administration was itself an example of dual policy: military and economic pressure on Iran simultaneous with the largest wave of Arab–Israeli normalization.
- **The Biden administration (2021–2025):** a failed attempt to revive the JCPOA, pursuit of Saudi–Israeli normalization and, after October 7, broad support for Israel simultaneous with pressure for a ceasefire and humanitarian aid.
- **The second Trump administration (from 2025):** the Muscat talks with Iran, the strike on Iran's nuclear facilities (June 2025), mediation of the Gaza ceasefire (October 2025), the Washington agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia (August 2025) and finally war with the Islamic Republic from February 2026. This administration, too, pursued peacemaking and war simultaneously.

Importantly, the dual policy of regional states partly reflected the dual policy of the United States itself. When the region's main patron makes peace and wages war at the same time, its allies learn the same pattern.

Russia: From Return to Syria to Attrition in Ukraine

Russia's military intervention in Syria from September 2015 saved the Assad regime and returned Russia as a principal actor in the region. Russia simultaneously cooperated with Iran in Syria, maintained a "deconfliction" mechanism with Israel so that Israel could strike Iranian targets in Syria, partnered with Turkey in the Astana process and coordinated oil production with Saudi Arabia in "OPEC+." Russia was itself one of the most skilful practitioners of dual policy in the region. But after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia's capacity and attention for the Middle East declined, and this decline played an important role in Assad's fall in December 2024.

China: Economic Power, Occasional Mediator

China is the largest buyer of Middle Eastern oil and a leading trading partner of many regional states. In March 2021 Iran and China signed a "25-year comprehensive cooperation program," and in December 2022 Xi Jinping met Arab leaders in Riyadh. The peak of China's diplomatic role was its mediation of the Iran–Saudi agreement in March 2023. Yet in the wars of 2025 and 2026 China avoided an active security role and confined itself to calls for dialogue. This showed that China, at least so far, is a great economic power but not a security guarantor in the region.

10.6. The Red Sea War: A Compressed Example of Dual Logic

One of the most telling developments of the recent period is the Red Sea crisis after October 7. From November 2023 the Houthis, declaring solidarity with Gaza, targeted commercial ships linked to Israel and then a wider range of ships in the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb strait. In December 2023 the United States announced the multinational "Operation Prosperity Guardian," and from January 2024 the United States and Britain struck Houthi targets in Yemen. In spring 2025 the United States conducted a broader air campaign, which ended in May 2025 with an Oman-mediated ceasefire between the United States and the Houthis; a ceasefire that did not cover Houthi attacks on Israel.

This crisis revealed several layers of dual policy at once:

- **The Islamic Republic**, while maintaining diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and declaring its avoidance of tension, supported an ally that disrupted the security of the Red Sea, the vital artery of Saudi and Egyptian trade.
- **Saudi Arabia**, while directly feeling the Houthi threat, avoided openly joining the American maritime coalition in order to preserve its fragile truce with the Houthis.
- **Egypt**, while Suez Canal revenues fell sharply, avoided a direct military role and focused on mediation in Gaza.
- **The United States** made a ceasefire with the Houthis while their attacks on America's principal ally, Israel, continued.

10.7. Economic and Technological Developments

Two non-security developments also provided the structural context for dual policy:

A) Economic Restructuring and the "Visions"

From the mid-2010s, the Gulf states launched ambitious economic diversification programs: Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" (2016), "Qatar National Vision 2030" and the UAE's plans to become a global hub of finance, technology and tourism. These programs need foreign capital, regional stability and a positive international image, and so created a strong incentive for de-escalation. At the same time, the enormous wealth generated by

these economies also provided the instruments of power accumulation (arms purchases, support for allies, strategic investment).

B) The Drone and Missile Revolution

The spread of cheap drones, precision missiles and cyber tools sharply reduced the cost of power accumulation for middle states and even non-state actors. The 2019 attack on Abqaiq, Azerbaijan's use of drones in 2020, Houthi attacks on the UAE in January 2022 and Iran's large-scale attacks from 2024 to 2026 showed that the capacity to inflict harm is no longer the monopoly of great powers. From Van Evera's perspective, this situation increases offense dominance; from the perspective of our hypothesis, it lowers the cost of the "offensive share" of dual policy.

10.8. Conclusion

The past fifteen years have witnessed an astonishing simultaneity of war and peace in the Middle East. The Abraham Accords and the Karabakh war occurred in the same year (2020). The Beijing agreement and the October 7 attack in the same year (2023). The Gaza ceasefire and the strike on Doha in the same season (autumn 2025). These simultaneities at the regional level reflect simultaneities at the level of each state, which the following chapters examine.

Chapter Eleven: Israel — The "Abrahamic Peace" and Regional Supremacy

11.1. Structural Position

Israel is small in territory and population (about ten million people) but has an advanced economy, technological superiority, an undeclared nuclear arsenal and a unique strategic bond with the United States. Since Ben-Gurion's time its security doctrine has rested on three pillars: deterrence, early warning and decisive victory. In addition, the "Begin Doctrine" (1981) holds that Israel will not allow any enemy in the region to acquire nuclear weapons. After October 7, 2023, these doctrines evolved toward what some analysts have called a "doctrine of comprehensive pre-emption": eliminating threats before they materialize, anywhere in the region.

11.2. The De-escalatory Logic: Peace, Normalization and Regional Integration

A) The Abraham Accords (2020)

On September 15, 2020, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed normalization agreements at the White House. In the following months Morocco and Sudan joined the process. This was Israel's first normalization with Arab states since the peace treaty with Jordan (1994). An important feature of the accords was that, unlike the "land for peace" formula, they rested on a formula of "peace for peace" or "peace through shared interests" and did not make resolution of the Palestinian question a precondition.

B) Expanding the Network of Cooperation

- The Negev Summit (March 2022), with the foreign ministers of the United States, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Egypt on Israeli soil.
- The "I2U2" group (Israel, India, the UAE, the United States) for economic and technological cooperation.
- The announcement of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor at the G20 summit in New Delhi (September 2023), in which Israel was one of the links.
- Membership of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum and gas exports to Egypt and Jordan.
- A US-mediated maritime border agreement with Lebanon (October 2022), even though the two countries are formally at war.
- Renewed normalization with Turkey and the return of ambassadors (2022).
- Kazakhstan's accession to the Abraham Accords (November 2025), which showed that this framework could expand even after the Gaza war.

C) Negotiating Normalization with Saudi Arabia

Trilateral negotiations among the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel had reached an advanced stage in 2023, and in the view of many analysts one aim of the October 7 attack was to derail this process. These negotiations did not stop entirely after the war, and in 2025 and 2026 the Trump administration put them back on the agenda, going so far as to make a US–Saudi civil nuclear agreement conditional on Riyadh's joining the Abraham Accords.

D) Accepting the Gaza Ceasefire Plan (October 2025)

Accepting the ceasefire and hostage-exchange plan mediated by the United States, Egypt, Qatar and Turkey, accompanied by the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, however fragile, showed that Israel, even at the peak of its military power, needs diplomatic tools to turn military gains into political order.

11.3. The Power-Accumulating Logic: Military Superiority and Cross-Border Action

A) "The War between Wars" in Syria

From around 2013 Israel conducted a long campaign of air strikes in Syria against Iranian arms transfers to Hezbollah and the deployment of IRGC forces. This campaign, comprising hundreds of strikes, continued until 2024. After the fall of Assad in December 2024, Israel entered the buffer zone established by the 1974 agreement, took control of the Syrian side of Mount Hermon and destroyed much of the remaining capability of the Syrian army in extensive strikes. This is one of the clearest instances of offensive behavior in Mearsheimer's sense: exploiting an opportunity to change the balance.

B) Lebanon

In September 2024 the operation that detonated the pagers and communication devices of Hezbollah members, followed by the killing of Hassan Nasrallah and many senior commanders and then a ground operation in southern Lebanon, severely weakened Hezbollah. A ceasefire was established in November 2024, but Israel retained positions on Lebanese soil and continued strikes against Hezbollah targets.

C) Yemen

From July 2024 Israel repeatedly struck the port of Hodeidah, power stations and Sanaa airport in response to Houthi missile and drone attacks, and in 2025 it also targeted Houthi political and military leaders. This campaign extended Israel's operational reach to the south of the Arabian Peninsula.

D) The Islamic Republic of Iran

- The assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh (November 2020) and sabotage operations at Natanz.
- The killing of Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas′s political bureau, in Tehran (July 2024).
- Air strikes on Iran′s air defense systems and missile facilities (October 2024).
- The twelve-day war (June 2025), targeting nuclear facilities, senior IRGC commanders and scientists, with US participation in strikes on Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan.
- The joint war with the United States from February 28, 2026, which led to the killing of Ali Khamenei.

E) Qatar

On September 9, 2025, Israel struck Hamas leaders in Doha, in a country that was the principal mediator of ceasefire negotiations and host to the largest US military base in the region. The strike showed that Israel was prepared to act even on the territory of US allies and peace mediators to eliminate a threat.

F) The West Bank

Settlement expansion, approval of construction plans (including the E1 plan in 2025) and the official discourse of some cabinet ministers about applying sovereignty reflect the logic of territorial power accumulation.

11.4. Linking the Two Logics: Peace as Strategic Depth

The most important point about Israel is that the two logics are not parallel but intertwined:

- **Normalization made a regional air defense network possible.** Israel′s transfer from US European Command to Central Command (CENTCOM) in 2021, made possible by the Abraham Accords, laid the groundwork for air defense cooperation with Arab states. During Iran′s attack in April 2024, this cooperation played a role in intercepting missiles and drones.
- **Exports of arms and security technology consolidated the ties of peace.** Sales of air defense systems and security technologies to the UAE and Morocco took the Abraham Accords from the political to the security level.
- **Military power was the lever of peacemaking.** One motive for Arab normalization was seeing Israel as a power that could stand up to Iran. The stronger Israel became, the more attractive it was as a partner.

- **But excessive power accumulation also threatened peace.** The Gaza war and the Doha strike halted normalization with Saudi Arabia and turned Arab public opinion sharply against Israel. This is the "punishment" Waltz predicted for aggressive states, though not in the form of a military balancing coalition but in the form of diplomatic isolation.

11.5. Further Examples of Israel's Dual Policy

A) Russia: US Ally, Coordination Partner of Moscow

After Russia's military entry into Syria in September 2015, Netanyahu traveled to Moscow several times and a "deconfliction" mechanism was established between the two militaries. This mechanism allowed Israel to carry out hundreds of strikes on Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria while Russia was Assad's principal ally and Iran's partner in Syria. Israel, a close US ally, also refrained for a time after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 from sending weapons to Ukraine to preserve this coordination. This behavior combines strategic alliance with one great power and operational cooperation with its rival.

B) Egypt: Cold Peace, Warm Cooperation, Border Tension

The 1979 peace treaty with Egypt is the oldest pillar of Israel's de-escalatory policy. In the 2010s security cooperation between the two countries in Sinai against jihadist groups reached unprecedented levels, and Israel allowed Egypt to deploy forces in Sinai beyond the treaty ceiling. Israeli gas exports to Egypt began in 2020. But in the Gaza war, Israel's control of the Philadelphi Corridor on the Gaza–Egypt border (from 2024) and Cairo's fear of population displacement into Sinai created serious tension. Peace with Egypt was at once a security asset for Israel and a constraint on its military operations.

C) Kurds and Druze: An "Alliance of Minorities"

In 2017 Israel was the only state openly to support the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's independence referendum. After the fall of Assad, senior Israeli officials also spoke of the Kurds and Druze as Israel's "natural allies" in the region. In July 2025, during clashes in Suwayda in southern Syria, Israel, citing protection of the Druze, struck forces of the new Syrian government and even the general staff headquarters in Damascus, while at the same time engaging in US-mediated security talks with that same government. This is an instance of Kautilya's mandala politics: ties with minorities behind the rivals' lines.

D) China and India: Two Conflicting Partners

In the 2010s Israel developed extensive economic relations with China, including granting a Chinese company the operation of the new terminal at Haifa port, which began operating in 2021. At the same time Israel was one of the largest arms suppliers to India, China's strategic rival, and participated in projects such as I2U2 and the India–Middle East–

Europe corridor, seen as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. American pressure gradually led Israel to restrict sensitive cooperation with China.

E) "Mowing the Grass" and "The War between Wars": A Doctrine of Controlled Power Accumulation

In Israeli security literature, two concepts have described the logic of continuous power accumulation. "Mowing the grass" referred to periodic strikes on Hamas's military capability in Gaza, on the assumption that the threat could not be eliminated but could be kept at a tolerable level. "The war between wars" referred to continuous sub-threshold operations against arms transfers and enemy deployments. Both concepts rested on the assumption that Israel could maintain its de-escalatory relations with others while pursuing this continuous power accumulation. The October 7 attack showed that the logic of "mowing the grass" had failed, and Israel moved toward a logic of "elimination," from controlled to maximal power accumulation.

11.6. The Costs of Dual Policy for Israel

Israel's dual policy brought great gains, but its costs also became apparent in 2024 to 2026:

- **Diplomatic isolation:** a number of Western states, including in September 2025 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, recognized the State of Palestine, partly in reaction to the Gaza war and settlement expansion.
- **International legal proceedings:** South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (December 2023) and the International Criminal Court's arrest warrants for Israel's prime minister and former defense minister (November 2024).
- **The halt of Saudi normalization:** Riyadh made a clear pathway to a Palestinian state the condition for normalization, and the Gaza war made this condition even harder to meet.
- **The erosion of Arab public opinion:** polls in Arab countries after 2023 showed a sharp decline in support for normalization, even in countries that had signed the Abraham Accords.
- **The Doha strike and the US reaction:** the strike on Hamas leaders in Qatar, a US ally, led to the Israeli prime minister's apology to Qatar's prime minister at the end of September 2025 and a new US security commitment to Qatar. This is a case in which power accumulation put Israel's relationship with its principal patron under strain as well.

These costs show that after 2023 Israel's dual policy approached the "duality threshold": the point at which the power-accumulating share becomes so large that it erodes the de-escalatory share.

11.7. Close Study: Summer 2020 — Annexation or Normalization?

No event reveals the duality of Israeli policy as clearly as the months leading up to the Abraham Accords. In these months the Israeli government simultaneously pursued two conflicting projects: applying sovereignty over parts of the West Bank, the peak of territorial power accumulation, and normalization with Arab states, the peak of de-escalation. How this conflict was resolved is the key to understanding Israel's entire pattern of behavior.

Chronology

Date	Event
January 28, 2020	The Trump administration announces its "Peace to Prosperity" plan, envisaging Israeli sovereignty over a substantial part of the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley and the settlements.
Spring 2020	Formation of the Netanyahu–Gantz coalition government; the coalition agreement allowed annexation to be brought forward from July 1.
June 2020	Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE ambassador in Washington, warned in an unprecedented article in an Israeli newspaper, in Hebrew, that annexation would destroy hopes of normalization.
July 1, 2020	The announced date for beginning annexation passed without action.
August 13, 2020	Announcement of the Israel–UAE agreement; the joint statement said Israel would "suspend" declaring sovereignty.
September 15, 2020	Signing of the Abraham Accords with the UAE and Bahrain at the White House.
October to December 2020	Sudan and Morocco join the normalization process.

Analysis

Three points in this sequence matter for the book's hypothesis.

First, the word "suspend." Israel did not "cancel" annexation but "suspended" it. In those same days Netanyahu emphasized in interviews with Israeli media that annexation had not been taken off the agenda. The word sent two different messages to two audiences: to the UAE and the Arab world, that Israel had made a real concession; and to its right-wing domestic base, that nothing had been lost. This is the mechanism of "dual audience costs" explained in Chapter Nine.

Second, trading one power accumulation for one de-escalation. In practice Israel traded a power-accumulating step (formal annexation) for a de-escalatory gain (normalization). But settlement expansion, informal power accumulation, continued. In

other words, the de-escalation was about the "form" of power accumulation, not its "substance."

Third, the role of the UAE. Al Otaiba's article showed that the UAE also had a dual policy: it was ready to normalize, but used annexation as leverage so that it could tell Arab public opinion that normalization had "stopped annexation." Both sides built two different narratives of this deal for two different audiences.

Implications for Theory

From Waltz's perspective, the summer 2020 deal can be seen as the behavior of a state with sufficient security that can afford concessions. From Mearsheimer's, it is a tactic that lowers the cost of expansion. But neither explains why the two logics merged in a single decision and why both sides emerged relatively successful from this fusion. This study shows that dual policy, at its best, is "the art of bargaining between two logics": giving up a symbol of power accumulation in exchange for a de-escalatory gain while preserving the substance of power accumulation.

11.8. Second Close Study: September 2024 — From the Pagers to the Lebanon Ceasefire

The months of September to November 2024 were perhaps the most intense period of Israeli military power accumulation in recent decades. Yet even in this period ceasefire diplomacy did not stop, and the Lebanon war ended with an agreement that turned military gains into a political order.

Chronology

Date	Power-accumulating logic	De-escalatory logic
17–September 18	Simultaneous detonation of thousands of pagers and radios of Hezbollah members in Lebanon and Syria	
September 20	Killing of Ibrahim Aqil and several Radwan Force commanders in a strike on Beirut's Dahiyeh	
September 23	Start of large-scale air strikes in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley	
September 25		Joint statement by the United States, France and several European and Arab states calling for a 21-day ceasefire
September 27	Killing of Hassan Nasrallah in an air strike on Dahiyeh, hours after the Israeli prime minister's speech at the UN General Assembly	

Date	Power-accumulating logic	De-escalatory logic
October 1	Start of ground operations in southern Lebanon; Iranian missile attack on Israel	
October–November	Continued operations and the killing of Hashem Safieddine	Intensive negotiations mediated by the US envoy
26–November 27		Ceasefire announced with US and French mediation; phased Israeli withdrawal and deployment of the Lebanese army in the south
January–February 2025	Retention of five positions on Lebanese soil after the withdrawal deadline	Election of Joseph Aoun and formation of Nawaf Salam's government

Analysis

Diplomacy as cover and as destination. The 21-day ceasefire statement of September 25, which Israel did not initially reject outright, was issued two days before the killing of Nasrallah. For Israel, diplomacy at this stage served as "cover": it showed that Israel did not reject dialogue while the decisive operation was being prepared. But two months later the same diplomacy became a "destination": the November ceasefire, which Israel accepted, consolidated its military gains in the form of security arrangements (Hezbollah's withdrawal south of the Litani River, deployment of the Lebanese army, a US-led monitoring mechanism).

The UN speech and the order to strike. The coincidence of the Israeli prime minister's speech at the UN General Assembly, the foremost forum of multilateral diplomacy, with the order for a strike that eliminated Hezbollah's leader, is the pure symbol of duality. A single leader, on a single day, both spoke in the arena of world diplomacy and delivered the greatest military blow of the decade.

Political consequences in Lebanon. Hezbollah's weakening opened the way for a political change in Lebanon that had seemed impossible for years: the election of a president after more than two years of vacancy and the formation of a government that put the disarmament of non-state groups on the agenda. Israel's power accumulation indirectly created the conditions for a change that could, in the long term, lead to de-escalation between the two countries, although Israel's retention of positions on Lebanese soil and continued strikes have limited this possibility.

Implications for Theory

This study shows that in Israel's dual policy the two logics operate not only simultaneously but "in sequence within a single operation": maximal power accumulation to change the

balance, followed by de-escalation to consolidate the new balance. This pattern, similar to Azerbaijan's in Karabakh, can be called the "strike-and-consolidate cycle."

11.9. Testing against the Two Theories

Waltz's Prediction

According to defensive realism, Israel, having achieved sufficient security (military superiority, a nuclear umbrella, peace treaties), should settle for preserving the status quo. Israel's behavior after 2023 is inconsistent with this prediction: Israel not only repelled immediate threats but used the opportunity of Assad's fall and Hezbollah's weakness to expand territorial control and pre-emptively eliminate its rivals' capabilities. Waltzians might say this behavior stems from "a perception of acute insecurity after October 7"; but then, by introducing the variable of perception, the theory leaves the structural level.

Mearsheimer's Prediction

According to offensive realism, Israel should seek to maximize power and use de-escalation only as a tactic. The power-accumulating part of Israel's behavior is consistent with this prediction. But Mearsheimer does not explain why Israel, at the peak of its power, invested so heavily in normalization with Saudi Arabia, which offers no direct security gain. Moreover, Mearsheimer himself calls Israel's behavior "irrational," which shows that his theory is inconsistent with his prescription.

Verdict

Israel is an example of "geographic duality" and "instrumental duality": peace with distant states of the Gulf and Central Asia, war with nearby neighbors and the Iranian axis; and the use of peace to build a security architecture that supports power accumulation.

11.10. Table of Israel's Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
Persian Gulf	Abraham Accords with the UAE and Bahrain	Using the partnership for an air defense network against Iran	2020 onward
Saudi Arabia	Normalization talks mediated by the United States	Continuing the Gaza war despite its cost to these talks	2023–2026
Lebanon	Maritime border agreement; November 2024 ceasefire	The 2024 war; retaining positions on Lebanese soil	2022–2026
Syria	Security talks with the new government in Damascus	Entering the buffer zone and seizing Hermon; destroying the Syrian army	December 2024 onward
Gaza	Accepting the ceasefire and the Trump plan	Extensive destruction and military control of parts of the Strip	2023–2025
Qatar	Accepting Qatari mediation	Strike on Hamas leaders in Doha	September 2025

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
Turkey	Normalization and return of ambassadors	Competition for influence in post-Assad Syria	2022–2026
Iran	Accepting the June 2025 ceasefire	The wars of 2025 and 2026; assassination of leaders	2020–2026
Central Asia	Kazakhstan joins the Abraham Accords	Strategic ties with Azerbaijan on Iran′s border	2025
Economy	India–Middle East–Europe corridor; gas exports	Turning the gas economy into leverage over Egypt and Jordan	2023 onward

Chapter Twelve: The Islamic Republic of Iran — "Dialogue" in the Shop Window, "Strategic Depth" in the Field

12.1. Structural Position

With a population of about 90 million, a geographic position between the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, Central Asia and the Levant, and vast oil and gas resources, Iran is in terms of latent power one of the largest countries in the region. Yet since 1979 the Islamic Republic has lived in relative isolation, under mounting sanctions and in permanent confrontation with the United States and Israel. In Mearsheimer's framework, Iran is the "potential hegemon" of the Persian Gulf, and precisely for this reason the United States must prevent its hegemony. In Waltz's framework, Iran is an insecure state that must seek deterrence to survive.

Iran's distinctive feature is its dual power structure: on one side the formal state, with its foreign ministry and conventional army; on the other the revolutionary institutions, especially the IRGC and the Quds Force, which operate directly under the Supreme Leader and are responsible for regional strategy. This structure has institutionalized "institutional duality" in the constitution and institutions of the regime itself.

12.2. The Official Doctrine of Duality: From "Heroic Flexibility" to "Neither War nor Negotiation"

Iran is perhaps the only state in the region to have formulated duality at the level of official doctrine:

- **"Heroic flexibility" (2013):** in September 2013 Ali Khamenei used this concept to justify nuclear negotiations, likening it to a wrestler who shows flexibility at one point to overcome his opponent without forgetting his goal. This is precisely the official expression of "de-escalation in the service of power accumulation."
- **"Neither war nor negotiation" (2018 onward):** after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Khamenei declared that there would be neither war nor negotiation with the United States. This formula established the preservation of a state "between war and peace" as official strategy.
- **"The field and diplomacy":** a term that spread in official discourse, especially after 2020, to describe the synergy between Quds Force operations and foreign ministry diplomacy.

12.3. The De-escalatory Logic

A) Dialogue among Civilizations and Its Legacy

The initiative of "Dialogue among Civilizations," proposed by Mohammad Khatami in 1998, after which the United Nations named the year 2001, predates our period, but it shaped the Islamic Republic's official language of de-escalation over the following two decades. Later governments used similar concepts ("moderation," "constructive engagement," "neighborhood policy").

B) The JCPOA (2015)

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, signed in July 2015 between Iran and the P5+1, was the Islamic Republic's largest de-escalatory act in four decades. Iran agreed to limit enrichment, reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium and accept extensive inspections in return for the lifting of nuclear sanctions.

C) The Hormuz Peace Endeavor (2019)

At the UN General Assembly (September 2019) Hassan Rouhani proposed the "Coalition for Hope," or Hormuz Peace Endeavor, for collective security in the Persian Gulf with the participation of regional states. Notably, the proposal came days after a large-scale attack on Aramco facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, which the United States and Saudi Arabia attributed to Iran.

D) The Neighborhood Policy and the Beijing Agreement

Ebrahim Raisi's government declared the "neighborhood policy" the axis of foreign policy. The Baghdad talks with Saudi Arabia (2021–2022) and finally the Beijing agreement (March 10, 2023) led to the resumption of diplomatic relations. Relations with the UAE and Kuwait were also restored at ambassadorial level. Iran also joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (2023) and BRICS (2024).

E) The Negotiations of 2025 and 2026

In spring 2025 Iran held several rounds of indirect negotiations with the Trump administration's envoy, mediated by Oman, which were cut off by the June war. In February 2026 a new round of talks began in Muscat, but war began a few weeks later.

12.4. The Power-Accumulating Logic: The Architecture of Strategic Depth

A) "Forward Defense" and the Proxy Network

The concept of "strategic depth" in the Islamic Republic's security discourse means confronting threats beyond the borders before they reach the interior. This doctrine led to the creation and equipping of a network of armed groups called in official literature the "axis of resistance":

- **Lebanon:** Hezbollah, the oldest and strongest arm of the network.
- **Syria:** direct IRGC presence from 2012 to preserve the Assad regime and organize multinational Shia militias (Afghan, Pakistani, Iraqi).
- **Iraq:** strengthening Shia armed groups and their institutionalization in the Popular Mobilization Forces after the fatwa for collective jihad in June 2014.
- **Yemen:** support for the Ansar Allah movement (the Houthis), especially the transfer of missile and drone technology.
- **Palestine:** financial and military support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Ali Akbar Velayati and other officials spoke at times of Iran's influence in "four Arab capitals" (Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Sanaa); remarks received in Arab countries as an admission of hegemonic ambition.

B) The Missile and Drone Program

Iran built the largest and most diverse ballistic missile arsenal in the Middle East and an extensive drone industry. The sale of drones to Russia for use in Ukraine (from 2022) showed that this capability had also become an instrument of extra-regional foreign policy.

C) Expanding the Nuclear Program after the JCPOA

After the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran gradually reduced its commitments and from April 2021 raised enrichment to 60 percent, a level far beyond civilian needs and close to weapons grade. This created a "nuclear threshold" situation.

D) Direct Operations

- The attack on Ain al-Asad base in Iraq after Soleimani's assassination (January 2020).
- Missile strikes on Erbil (2022 and 2024) and on Pakistani territory (January 2024).
- The first direct missile and drone attack on Israel (April 2024) and the second (October 2024).
- The attack on Al Udeid base in Qatar in response to US strikes (June 2025).
- Extensive attacks on infrastructure, bases and population centers of Gulf states after the start of the 2026 war.

12.5. Linking the Two Logics: The Institutional Division of Labor

In Iran's case, duality is above all "institutional." The author's research on the IRGC and the Quds Force has shown that:

- **The foreign ministry** was responsible for generating international legitimacy, reducing sanctions and de-escalation.
- **The Quds Force** was responsible for building strategic depth, managing the proxy network and creating leverage.
- **The Supreme Leader** arbitrated between the two and, depending on circumstances, gave more weight to one or the other.

The leaked audio of Mohammad Javad Zarif in April 2021, in which he spoke of diplomacy being sacrificed to the "field," is rare evidence from within the regime of this division of labor and its tensions.

But the two logics were not merely parallel; they reinforced each other:

- The proxy network and the nuclear program were Iran's bargaining leverage in negotiations.
- Negotiations and de-escalation lowered the cost of proxy expansion and provided economic breathing space. Some critics of the JCPOA argued that resources freed after the agreement indirectly aided proxy expansion.
- The Beijing agreement allowed Iran, having calmed the Saudi front, to concentrate on the Israeli front.

12.6. The Collapse of the Balance: 2024 to 2026

Iran's duality was relatively successful until 2023. But from October 7 onward the power-accumulating logic spun out of control. Iran's support for the "unity of fronts" led to Israel's war with Hezbollah, the weakening of Hamas and the fall of Assad. As a result Iran lost its strategic depth in the Levant. The twelve-day war and the 2026 war also showed that the "nuclear threshold" did not provide sufficient deterrence. Iran's attacks on Gulf states in 2026 severely damaged the gains of the "neighborhood policy," to the point that Saudi Arabia expelled Iranian diplomats in March 2026, while keeping open the communication channel established in 2023.

This outcome is very important theoretically. Waltz predicted that aggressive behavior is "punished," and so it was. But Waltz saw Iran as a defensive, security-seeking state, whereas its behavior was combined. Mearsheimer predicted that the United States would prevent Iran's hegemony, and so it did. But Mearsheimer himself opposed this intervention.

12.7. Further Examples of the Islamic Republic's Dual Policy

A) The JCPOA and Terrorist Plots in Europe

One of the most telling examples of institutional duality was the coincidence of diplomatic efforts to preserve the JCPOA with terrorist operations in Europe. In June 2018, exactly

when the Rouhani government was trying to win European support for preserving the JCPOA after the US withdrawal, Belgian and German police foiled a plot to bomb a rally of the People's Mojahedin Organization in Villepinte, France. Asadollah Assadi, an Islamic Republic diplomat in Vienna, was arrested in this case and in 2021 sentenced by a court in Antwerp to twenty years in prison (he was later released in a prisoner exchange in 2023). In the same period, Denmark, the Netherlands and France also attributed other plots to the security institutions of the Islamic Republic. These cases, examined in detail in the author's earlier research on the Islamic Republic's threats in Europe, show that two institutions of the regime pursued two conflicting policies at the same time and on the same continent.

B) Riyadh 2023: Attending the Summit and Backing the Front

On November 11, 2023, less than a month after the October 7 attack, Ebrahim Raisi attended the joint extraordinary summit of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Riyadh, the first visit by an Iranian president to Saudi Arabia in more than a decade. This presence symbolized the peak of the "neighborhood policy." But in those same days, groups aligned with Iran in Iraq and Syria had begun attacks on US forces, and the Houthis were preparing their first attacks on Red Sea shipping. In January 2024 a drone attack on the "Tower 22" base in Jordan killed three US soldiers, which the United States attributed to Iranian-backed groups.

C) Pezeshkian at the UN and the October 2024 Attack

Masoud Pezeshkian, who became president in July 2024 on a platform of "constructive engagement with the world," spoke at the UN General Assembly in September 2024 of Iran's readiness for dialogue and de-escalation. About a week later, on October 1, 2024, the IRGC carried out the second direct missile attack on Israel. This rapid sequence displayed institutional duality in its starkest form.

D) The Caucasus: Supporting Armenia against Shia Azerbaijan

Ideologically, one would have expected the Islamic Republic to support Azerbaijan, a Shia-majority country. In practice, however, Tehran was closer to Christian Armenia and declared the Zangezur corridor a red line. This shows that in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy the logic of geopolitics (preventing the severing of Iran's border with Armenia and the expansion of Turkish and Israeli influence on its northern border) sometimes prevailed over the logic of ideology. This is itself a duality between the discourse of the "umma" and "geopolitical" behavior.

E) The Taliban: Yesterday's Enemy, Today's Neighbor

In 1998, after the killing of its diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif, the Islamic Republic came to the brink of war with the Taliban. After 2021, however, Tehran established working relations with the Taliban government, handed the Afghan embassy in Tehran to Taliban

representatives and negotiated with them on trade and water. At the same time, media close to the government criticized the Taliban's repression of Shia Hazaras. The relationship with the Taliban combined security pragmatism with ideological distance.

F) "Look East" and Trilateral Exercises

From 2019 the Islamic Republic held joint naval exercises with Russia and China called the "Maritime Security Belt." These exercises sent a clear message to the United States. At the same time, Tehran pursued indirect negotiations with Washington through Oman and Qatar. "Look East" was not an alternative to the West but leverage in negotiations with it.

12.8. The Islamic Republic in the 2026 War: The End of Duality

The 2026 war and the killing of Ali Khamenei subjected the regime's dual structure to an unprecedented challenge. According to numerous reports, after the succession of Mojtaba Khamenei the weight of the IRGC in decision-making increased sharply. The regime's behavior in this war remained dual: on one side extensive attacks on Israel, US bases and the infrastructure of Gulf states; on the other, acceptance of mediation by Pakistan and other countries and participation in successive ceasefires.

This time, however, duality had lost its former function. Attacks on neighboring countries, for years the target of the "neighborhood policy," tore apart the very diplomatic network the regime had built to contain American pressure. This experience confirms the "fifth principle" of the book's theoretical framework (Chapter Twenty): duality is effective up to a threshold, and beyond it the power-accumulating share destroys the de-escalatory share. It also confirms the author's analysis in earlier reports about the shift of power to the IRGC: the greater the weight of the military institution in the dual structure, the more the balance between the two logics tips in favor of power accumulation.

12.9. Lessons for Post-Transition Iran

The experience of the Islamic Republic holds three clear lessons for the future of Iran's foreign policy:

- **Institutional unity:** foreign policy must be directed from a single accountable center under the supervision of elected institutions. The existence of two parallel apparatuses, one for diplomacy and another for cross-border operations, has maximized the country's credibility costs.
- **National interest instead of transnational asabiyya:** Iran's strategic depth must be built through economic, cultural and diplomatic ties, not through non-state armed networks that violate the sovereignty of neighbors.
- **Smart duality:** this does not mean abandoning the logic of power altogether. The Iran of the future, like any regional power, needs credible deterrence. But deterrence

must be transparent, defensive and within the framework of international law so as not to discredit the country's de-escalatory signals.

12.10. Close Study: The JCPOA Year (April 2015 to January 2016)

The year in which the JCPOA was concluded and implemented is the most concentrated example of the Islamic Republic's institutional duality. In these ten months, the regime carried out its largest de-escalatory act in four decades and simultaneously advanced several major power-accumulating actions.

Chronology

Date	De-escalatory logic	Power-accumulating logic
April 2015	Announcement of the Lausanne framework (April 2)	Continued support for the Houthis after the start of the Saudi coalition's operation in Yemen (March 26)
July 2015	Signing of the JCPOA in Vienna (July 14); adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 (July 20)	According to numerous reports, Qassem Soleimani's visit to Moscow despite a travel ban, to coordinate Russia's military intervention in Syria
September 2015	Rouhani's UN speech focused on diplomacy	Start of Russia's air intervention (September 30) simultaneous with increased ground presence of the IRGC and militias in Syria
October 2015	Approval of the JCPOA by parliament and the Guardian Council	Test of the "Emad" ballistic missile (October 10)
January 2016	"Implementation Day" and lifting of nuclear sanctions (January 16); prisoner exchange with the United States	Storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran (January 2); IRGC detention of ten US sailors in the Persian Gulf (January 12)

Analysis

This table is more eloquent than any theoretical argument. In January 2016, within two weeks, three events occurred, each belonging to a different logic: the storming of the Saudi embassy, which led to the severing of Riyadh–Tehran relations; the detention of US sailors, accompanied by images of them kneeling shown in domestic media; and Implementation Day of the JCPOA, the peak of diplomacy. The US sailors were released in less than a day, through direct contact between the two countries' foreign ministers; the very channel the JCPOA had built was used to manage the consequences of the IRGC's action.

Institutional duality in practice. The storming of the Saudi embassy was condemned by the Rouhani government, and the Supreme Leader also called it wrong. But its

consequence, the severing of relations with Riyadh, lasted until 2023. The IRGC detained the sailors and the foreign ministry freed them. The IRGC conducted the missile test and the foreign ministry argued that the JCPOA did not cover missiles. In each case one institution carried out the power-accumulating action and the other managed its diplomatic consequences.

Mutual reinforcement. The JCPOA allowed the regime to regain access to part of its frozen assets and increase oil exports. At the same time, the extensive intervention in Syria, intensified in those same months in coordination with Russia, was very costly. Critics of the JCPOA in the United States and the region argued that the agreement indirectly provided the resources for this intervention. Regardless of any judgment about this claim, the simultaneity of the two policies is undeniable.

Regional consequences. The Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, interpreted the JCPOA not as "de-escalation" but as a "reward for power accumulation." In their view, America had bargained with Iran over its nuclear program and ignored its regional behavior. This perception was one factor in the rapprochement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Israel and their support for the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018. In other words, Iran's duality provoked the duality of its rivals.

Implications for Theory

Waltz's defensive realism would read the JCPOA as a sign of "socialization," and Mearsheimer's offensive realism would read the Syrian intervention as a sign of "hegemony-seeking." Each saw part of reality. But only a dual framework can explain how these two behaviors sat side by side in one month, in one regime and under one leadership, and made each other possible.

12.11. Second Close Study: April 2024 — An Attack Announced in Advance

The Islamic Republic's first direct attack on Israel from its own territory, on the night of 13–April 14, 2024, may be the only case in the region's contemporary history in which the power-accumulating and de-escalatory logics merged not in two separate policies but within a single operation.

Chronology

Date	Event
April 1	An air strike attributed to Israel on the Iranian consular building in Damascus kills Mohammad Reza Zahedi, a senior Quds Force commander, and several others.
2–April 12	Repeated public statements by Islamic Republic officials about the certainty of a "response"; extensive diplomatic contacts with regional states; open US warnings of an imminent attack.

Date	Event
April 13	IRGC seizure of an Israel-linked cargo ship in the Strait of Hormuz.
Night of 13–April 14	Launch of hundreds of drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles from Iranian territory toward Israel in an operation named "True Promise"; most were intercepted with the cooperation of Israel, the United States, Britain, France and Jordan.
April 14	The Islamic Republic's mission to the United Nations declared that with this action the matter could "be deemed concluded," unless Israel responded.
April 19	Israel's limited response against an air defense system near Isfahan; Iranian officials played down its significance.

Analysis

An announced attack. The most important feature of this operation was the extensive advance notice. The attack was publicly announced nearly two weeks before it occurred, Iran's then foreign minister said regional states had been informed in advance, and the slow drones were in flight for hours. As a result, the air defenses of Israel and its allies had ample time to prepare. In purely military terms, this attack was not designed to inflict maximum damage.

Two messages in one operation. The operation carried two messages at once. The first was power-accumulating: for the first time the Islamic Republic showed that it was prepared to strike Israel directly from its own territory and had abandoned its previous "strategic patience." The second was de-escalatory: through advance notice, limited target selection and the declaration that the "matter is concluded," it told Israel and the United States that Iran did not want a wider war. Deterrence theorists call this type of action a "symbolic strike" or "military signaling"; what makes it special for our hypothesis is that the two logics merged not in two institutions but in one operation and at the hands of one institution (the IRGC).

Regional cooperation in interception. The regional consequences of this attack were also dual. Jordan, through whose airspace the drones and missiles passed, took part in the interception. Reports of intelligence cooperation by some Arab states were also published. This cooperation showed that the Islamic Republic's neighborhood policy, despite reconciliation with Saudi Arabia, had not been able to prevent Arab states from security cooperation with Israel and the United States against Iran.

From control to loss of control. The April attack established a model of "controlled escalation." But the second attack on October 1, 2024, carried out with more ballistic missiles and less warning, and Israel's broader response on October 26, showed that this model was not sustainable. Each round of escalation raised the threshold for the next, until by June 2025 and February 2026 no trace of "control" remained.

Implications for Theory

The April 2024 attack is a case each theory can interpret in its favor: Waltzians see it as a sign of caution and war-avoidance, Mearsheimerians as a sign of readiness to display power. But only the dual framework can explain why these two features were combined in one operation and why the combination was effective in the short term and unstable in the long term.

12.12. Testing against the Two Theories

Waltz's Prediction

Waltz expected Iran to behave as a rational, survival-seeking state and that acquiring deterrence would make it cautious. But instead of caution, Iran used deterrence to expand its influence (the "stability–instability paradox"). Waltz also predicted the "socialization" of the revolutionary state, but socialization occurred in only one institution (the foreign ministry) and not in the other (the IRGC).

Mearsheimer's Prediction

Mearsheimer expected Iran, as a potential hegemon, to seek to maximize power. The proxy part of Iran's behavior is consistent with this prediction. But Mearsheimer does not explain why Iran accepted, in the JCPOA, voluntary limits on the most important source of its potential power (the nuclear program). Moreover, his theory, which emphasizes land power, does not adequately cover Iran's proxy strategy, which achieves influence without conquering territory.

Verdict

Iran is the clearest example of "institutional duality" and "discursive duality." The official doctrines of "heroic flexibility" and "the field and diplomacy" show that duality was not an accident but a deliberate design.

12.13. Table of the Islamic Republic's Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
United States and the West	The JCPOA; the Muscat talks	60 percent enrichment after the US withdrawal; attack on Al Udeid	2015–2026
Saudi Arabia	Baghdad talks; Beijing agreement	Support for the Houthis; 2026 attacks on Saudi territory	2021–2026
Persian Gulf	Hormuz Peace Endeavor; return of UAE and Kuwaiti ambassadors	Maritime attacks; 2026 attacks on the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait	2019–2026
Iraq	Support for the central government and economic ties	Institutionalizing the Popular Mobilization Forces; strikes on	2014–2026

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
		Erbil	
Syria	Participation in the Astana process	Direct military presence of the IRGC and militias	2012–2024
Lebanon	Verbal support for Lebanese stability and the state	Arming Hezbollah and the "unity of fronts"	2011–2024
World	Dialogue among civilizations; membership of the SCO and BRICS	Sale of drones to Russia for the Ukraine war	2022–2024
Pakistan	Pakistani mediation in 2026	Strike on Pakistani territory in January 2024	2024–2026
Implementing institution	The Ministry of Foreign Affairs	The IRGC and the Quds Force	Entire period

Chapter Thirteen: Saudi Arabia — From "Decisive Storm" to the Beijing Reconciliation

13.1. Structural Position

Saudi Arabia is the largest economy in the Arab world, the world's largest oil exporter and the custodian of the two holy mosques. These three sources of power, wealth, energy and religious legitimacy, have given it a special position. Yet Saudi Arabia has historically been militarily weak and dependent on the American security umbrella. The unwritten "oil for security" pact, dating back to the 1945 meeting between Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz, was the pillar of Saudi foreign policy.

The fundamental change in the period under study is the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, who became defense minister in 2015, crown prince in 2017 and prime minister in 2022. Saudi foreign policy under him has had two distinct but overlapping phases: an "offensive" phase (2015–2019) and a "de-escalatory" phase (2020 onward). The book's hypothesis is that even these two phases overlapped, and that in each phase the opposite logic was also present.

13.2. The Power-Accumulating Logic

A) Bahrain (2011)

In March 2011 Peninsula Shield forces, led by Saudi Arabia, entered Bahrain to suppress protests. This was the first overt Saudi military intervention after the Arab Spring and showed that Riyadh would not allow political change in its neighborhood to benefit Iran.

B) The Yemen War (2015 onward)

In March 2015 a Saudi-led coalition launched "Operation Decisive Storm" against the Houthis, who had seized Sanaa. This war, which lasted for years, produced one of the world's worst humanitarian crises and did not achieve its declared aim of restoring the government to Sanaa.

C) The Islamic Military Coalition

In December 2015 Saudi Arabia announced the formation of the "Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition" with dozens of countries. More than an operational institution, this coalition was a means of declaring Saudi leadership of the Sunni Islamic world.

D) The Blockade of Qatar (2017)

In June 2017 Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut ties with Qatar and closed land, sea and air borders. Their thirteen demands included closing Al Jazeera, reducing

relations with Iran and ending support for the Muslim Brotherhood. The move was an attempt to impose hierarchy within the GCC.

E) Lebanon (2017)

The episode of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's announced resignation from Riyadh in November 2017 showed that Saudi Arabia was at that point prepared to use unconventional tools to pressure Hezbollah and Iran.

F) Armaments and Nuclear Ambition

Throughout this period Saudi Arabia was consistently among the world's largest arms importers. In 2018 Mohammed bin Salman declared that if Iran acquired a nuclear bomb, Saudi Arabia would do the same as soon as possible. Negotiations with the United States on a civil nuclear program, including over the right to enrich, have continued.

G) The Defense Pact with Pakistan (2025)

In September 2025, days after Israel's strike on Doha, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed a "Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement," under which an attack on either is considered an attack on both. Since Pakistan is a nuclear power, many interpreted this pact as a step toward an alternative nuclear umbrella for Saudi Arabia.

13.3. The De-escalatory Logic

A) Ending the Qatar Blockade (2021)

The Al-Ula Declaration in January 2021 ended the blockade of Qatar without Qatar having accepted most of the thirteen demands.

B) The Yemen Truce and Talks with the Houthis

The April 2022 truce, mediated by the United Nations, though not formally extended, effectively halted large-scale attacks. A Saudi delegation went to Sanaa in April 2023 and a Houthi delegation came to Riyadh in September 2023.

C) The Beijing Agreement (2023)

On March 10, 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed, with Chinese mediation, to resume diplomatic relations. The agreement came after seven years without relations and two years of talks in Baghdad and Muscat.

D) Returning Syria to the Arab League (2023)

In May 2023 Saudi Arabia supported the return of Assad's Syria to the Arab League after years of supporting his opponents. After Assad's fall, Riyadh quickly backed the new government in Damascus.

E) Global Mediation Diplomacy

Saudi Arabia hosted the Jeddah meeting on Ukraine (August 2023), the Jeddah talks on Sudan (2023) and US–Russian negotiations in Riyadh (February 2025). With France it also led the international conference on the two-state solution at the United Nations (2025).

F) Vision 2030 as a Doctrine of De-escalation

Vision 2030, the plan to diversify the economy and attract tourism and foreign investment, requires regional stability. Projects such as NEOM and hosting the 2034 World Cup are possible only in a calm environment. This plan is the economic backbone of Saudi de-escalation.

13.4. Saudi Behavior in the 2026 War: A Pure Example of Duality

The 2026 war was an important test of the hypothesis. In response to US and Israeli attacks, Iran targeted bases, refineries and pipelines in Saudi Arabia. Saudi behavior in this war combined several logics:

- Saudi Arabia officially avoided entering the war and limited its response to defense and interception.
- At the same time, reports were published that Riyadh had privately asked the United States to continue military pressure on Iran.
- In March 2026 it expelled Iranian diplomats but kept the communication channel established in 2023.
- It hosted a meeting of Arab and Islamic foreign ministers in Riyadh to manage the crisis.
- It supported Pakistani mediation to end the war.
- In May 2026, together with Qatar and the UAE, it asked Trump to give negotiations more time.

This set of behaviors cannot be explained by a single logic. Saudi Arabia simultaneously sought to weaken Iran (an offensive, Mearsheimerian logic), to avoid direct war (a defensive, Waltzian logic), to pass the buck to the United States (Mearsheimerian buck-passing) and to lead regional diplomacy (Morgenthau's logic of prestige).

13.5. Further Examples of Saudi Dual Policy

A) OPEC+: US Security Ally, Russia's Oil Partner

Since 2016 Saudi Arabia and Russia have coordinated oil production within "OPEC+." In October 2022, months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and while the United States was calling for higher production to lower energy prices, OPEC+, led by Riyadh and Moscow,

approved a production cut. The Biden administration openly regarded the decision as hostile. Saudi Arabia was simultaneously a US security ally and an economic partner of America's main rival in Europe.

B) China: Capital and Technology alongside the American Umbrella

Xi Jinping's visit to Riyadh in December 2022 and the first China–Arab States summit strengthened economic ties. In 2023 Saudi Arabia became a "dialogue partner" of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and was invited to join BRICS, although its membership status remained ambiguous for some time. At the same time, Riyadh pursued negotiations on a defense pact and nuclear cooperation with the United States. This combination of "economy with China, security with America" has been called Saudi "strategic autonomy" by many analysts.

C) Lebanon: From Sanctions to Support

In October 2021, after a Lebanese minister's remarks about the Yemen war, Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador from Beirut and banned imports from Lebanon. This pressure was part of a strategy to counter Hezbollah's influence. But after Hezbollah's weakening in the 2024 war and the election of Joseph Aoun as president and Nawaf Salam as prime minister in early 2025, Riyadh became a principal supporter of Lebanon's new government. In Lebanon, Saudi Arabia has used the tools of pressure and support alternately and at times simultaneously (support for the state and pressure on Hezbollah).

D) Israel: Opening the Sky, Closing the Door

In July 2022 Saudi Arabia opened its airspace to all civilian flights, including those to and from Israel. This was a practical step toward normalization without formal normalization. After October 7, Riyadh became one of Israel's sharpest critics in official discourse and led the international conference on the two-state solution; but, according to numerous reports, channels of communication and informal security cooperation were not entirely cut.

E) The UAE: Ally and Rival

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been allies against Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, but rivals in Yemen (especially in the south, where the UAE backed the Southern Transitional Council), in Sudan and in oil policy (the dispute over production quotas in OPEC+ in 2021). Rivalry between the two allies for economic leadership of the region, from attracting the regional headquarters of international companies to air routes, also continues. This relationship shows that dual policy is not only about enemies but also about allies.

13.6. The Domestic Logic: Mohammed bin Salman and Two Sources of Legitimacy

Saudi dual policy cannot be understood without understanding Mohammed bin Salman's domestic project. The crown prince builds two sources of legitimacy at once:

- **The legitimacy of modernization:** social opening (allowing women to drive in 2018, expanding entertainment and tourism), reducing the role of the conservative religious establishment and promising prosperity through Vision 2030. This legitimacy requires regional stability and a positive global image, and so reinforces the logic of de-escalation.
- **The legitimacy of power and nationalism:** displaying authority against Iran, a leading role in the Arab and Islamic world, and a new Saudi nationalism replacing traditional religious identity. This legitimacy requires displays of power and so reinforces the logic of power accumulation.

The 2017 anti-corruption campaign and the detention of princes and businessmen at the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh, which coincided with the Yemen war and the Qatar blockade, showed that concentrating power at home and displaying power abroad were two sides of one project. The turn to de-escalation after 2020 was partly because the domestic concentration of power had been completed and the project of economic modernization now took priority.

13.7. Close Study: 2023 — Beijing, Sanaa and Washington at Once

2023 was an exceptional year for Saudi foreign policy. Until October 7, Riyadh pursued three major diplomatic tracks simultaneously that appeared inconsistent from a structural point of view: reconciliation with Iran, negotiation with the Houthis, and negotiation over normalization with Israel together with a defense pact with the United States.

Chronology

Date	Iran track	Yemen track	US and Israel track
March 10	Trilateral Beijing statement on resuming relations		
April 6	Meeting of the two foreign ministers in Beijing		
April		Saudi delegation visits Sanaa; large prisoner exchange	
May			Syria returns to the Arab League with Riyadh's support
June	Iranian embassy reopens in		

Date	Iran track	Yemen track	US and Israel track
	Riyadh; Saudi foreign minister visits Tehran		
August	Saudi embassy reopens in Tehran		
September		Houthi delegation visits Riyadh	The crown prince's Fox News interview speaking of normalization getting closer "every day"; reports of demands for a defense pact and a civil nuclear program with the right to enrich
October 7			Hamas attack and the effective halt of the normalization track

Analysis

Three tracks, one logic. At first sight, reconciliation with Iran and simultaneous negotiation of a defense pact with the United States and normalization with Israel, both aimed against Iran, appear contradictory. But for Riyadh the three tracks shared one logic: reducing immediate risk (Iranian and Houthi attacks on Saudi territory) while increasing long-term power (an American defense umbrella, Israeli technology and a nuclear program). Reconciliation with Iran bought "time"; the pact with America built "power."

The demand for enrichment. One of the most interesting dimensions of this period was the Saudi demand for the right to enrich uranium on its own soil as part of the normalization package. In the same year that it reconciled with Iran, Saudi Arabia sought a capability that would in the long run give it nuclear parity with Iran. This is precisely the logic of "deterrence alongside reconciliation."

Syria as a bridge. Returning Assad to the Arab League was also consistent with this logic: Riyadh sought to distance Assad from Iran and restore Arab influence in Damascus. This policy of de-escalation with Assad was in fact a tool for competing with Iran in Syria.

October 7 and the forced choice. The Hamas attack, which many analysts believe was partly aimed at derailing the Saudi normalization track, forced Saudi Arabia to suspend one of the tracks, at least in the short term. Riyadh halted the normalization track and kept the Iran channel. This choice showed that dual policy is sustainable as long as a third actor does not disrupt it by imposing a zero-sum choice. In other words, one way to counter a state's dual policy is to create a crisis that puts its two logics in direct conflict.

Implications for Theory

Defensive realism confirms the Beijing reconciliation, and offensive realism the defense pact and enrichment track. But neither explains why Riyadh pursued both at once and why both counterparts, Tehran and Washington, accepted this simultaneity. The book's answer is that in a penetrated system a regional state can exploit the rivalry between two powers (the United States and China) and between two regional rivals (Iran and Israel) and strike separate bargains with each; bargains that together improve its position in both security and power.

13.8. Second Close Study: Abqaiq 2019 — A Blow That Led to De-escalation

At dawn on September 14, 2019, Aramco's oil processing facilities at Abqaiq and the Khurais oil field were hit by a combined drone and cruise missile attack. The attack temporarily took about half of Saudi oil production offline. The Houthis claimed responsibility, but the United States and Saudi Arabia argued that the attack came from the north, from Iran or Iraq, and that the Islamic Republic was responsible. Iran denied any involvement.

Chronology

Date	Event
May–July 2019	Attacks on tankers near Fujairah and in the Gulf of Oman; Iran shoots down a US drone (June); a US retaliatory strike called off at the last minute.
September 14, 2019	Attack on Abqaiq and Khurais.
September 2019	The United States held Iran responsible; Trump said America did not want war and made no military response; additional US forces and air defense systems sent to Saudi Arabia.
September 20, 2019	The Houthis announced they would stop attacks on Saudi territory if coalition attacks stopped.
September 25, 2019	Rouhani proposes the "Hormuz Peace Endeavor" at the United Nations.
Autumn 2019	Back channels open between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis; mediation efforts by the prime ministers of Iraq and Pakistan between Riyadh and Tehran.
October 2019	Saudi production returns to pre-attack levels.
2021	Formal start of the Baghdad talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Analysis

Testing the patron. The Abqaiq attack was Saudi Arabia's "moment of truth." For decades Riyadh had relied on the assumption that the United States would defend the oil

infrastructure of the Persian Gulf. But the American response, sending forces without a military response to the perpetrator, showed that the US security umbrella had limits. From Mearsheimer's perspective, this experience was an instance of "buck-passing" by the United States: Washington did not want to go to war to defend Saudi Arabia.

Riyadh's dual response. Saudi Arabia responded with two simultaneous strategies. On one hand it intensified internal and external power accumulation: buying more air defense systems, seeking more formal security guarantees from the United States and later moving closer to Israel and finally the defense pact with Pakistan. On the other hand it opened the path of de-escalation with Iran and the Houthis, which led to the Baghdad talks, the 2022 truce and the 2023 Beijing agreement. In other words, a military blow, rather than pushing Saudi Arabia toward a purely offensive or purely defensive logic, strengthened its dual policy.

The message for Iran. From Tehran's perspective, the attack, regardless of who carried it out, showed that the Islamic Republic and its allies could strike the heart of Saudi Arabia's economy without a US military response. This experience probably figured in Tehran's later calculations, including its assessment of the cost of attacking Gulf states in 2026. But in 2026 conditions were different: the United States itself was a party to the war, and the Gulf states, this time targeted, expelled Iranian diplomats and supported continued American pressure.

Implications for Theory

Abqaiq shows that a severe threat, contrary to Waltz's prediction, does not necessarily lead to pure balancing and, contrary to Mearsheimer's, does not necessarily lead to an attempt to eliminate the threat through pure power accumulation. In a penetrated system, a state that discovers its patron's limits simultaneously increases its own power and enters into dialogue with the source of the threat. This "de-escalation from vulnerability and power accumulation to remedy vulnerability" is one of the main mechanisms by which dual policy emerges.

13.9. Testing against the Two Theories

Waltz's Prediction

Waltz expected Saudi Arabia, as a militarily weak state, to balance against the Iranian threat (through alliance with the United States and others). This prediction is partly correct. But Waltz does not explain the Yemen war and the Qatar blockade, offensive actions beyond security needs.

Mearsheimer's Prediction

Mearsheimer probably does not regard Saudi Arabia as a great power, so his theory does not apply to it directly. If we transfer his logic to the regional level, Saudi Arabia should use every opportunity to weaken Iran. But the Beijing agreement, at a time when Iran was

under the heaviest sanctions, exactly when Riyadh could have exploited Iran′s weakness, is inconsistent with Mearsheimerian logic. Passing the buck to the United States in the 2026 war is consistent with his logic, but its simultaneity with active mediation is not.

Verdict

Saudi Arabia is an example of "overlapping temporal duality" and "omnibalancing." Riyadh needs stability for regime survival and Vision 2030, but needs displays of power to maintain its leadership of the Arab and Sunni Islamic world and to contain Iran.

13.10. Table of Saudi Arabia′s Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
Iran	Baghdad talks; Beijing agreement; keeping the 2023 channel	Private support for US military pressure; expelling diplomats	2021–2026
Yemen	2022 truce; talks with the Houthis	Coalition war from 2015	2015–2023
Qatar	Al-Ula Declaration	The 2017 blockade	2017–2021
Syria	Returning Assad to the Arab League; supporting the new government	Supporting Assad′s armed opponents	2012–2025
Israel	Normalization talks; tacit participation in regional air defense	Conditioning on a Palestinian state to gain Arab leadership	2023–2026
World	Mediator on Ukraine, Sudan and US–Russia	Defense pact with nuclear Pakistan	2023–2025
Economy	Vision 2030; attracting investment	Large-scale arms purchases; demanding the right to enrich	Entire period
Region	Hosting Riyadh meetings to end the 2026 war	Leading the anti-Iran and anti-Brotherhood axis	2026

Chapter Fourteen: Turkey — The Great Mediator, the Cross-Border Military Actor

14.1. Structural Position

With more than 85 million people, NATO's second-largest army, a growing defense industry and a geographic position between Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East and the Black Sea, Turkey is one of the region's largest powers. Turkey is a NATO member, but its relationship with the West has been turbulent; it simultaneously maintains extensive ties with Russia, and its purchase of the S-400 system (2019) led to its expulsion from the F-35 fighter program.

Under the Justice and Development Party, Turkish foreign policy was shaped by two successive doctrines: Ahmet Davutoğlu's doctrine of "strategic depth" (formulated in a book of that name in 2001) and the policy of "zero problems with neighbors." In the 2000s these doctrines meant de-escalation and soft influence. After the Arab Spring, especially after the failed coup of 2016, Turkish policy shifted toward active military presence. The author's earlier articles on the hidden continuity of the Millî Görüş tradition from Erbakan to Erdoğan have shown that this shift was less a rupture than the surfacing of a layer of ambition that already existed.

14.2. The Power-Accumulating Logic: Military Presence on Five Fronts

A) Syria

From 2016 Turkey conducted several military operations in northern Syria: "Euphrates Shield" (2016–17), "Olive Branch" in Afrin (2018), "Peace Spring" east of the Euphrates (2019) and "Spring Shield" in Idlib (2020). These operations created a "safe zone" controlled by Turkey and allied Syrian armed groups. After the fall of Assad in December 2024, in which Turkish support for the opposition played a role, Turkey became the most influential foreign power in Damascus.

B) Iraq

Successive "Claw" operations against the PKK in the mountains of northern Iraq and the establishment of dozens of bases and outposts in the Kurdistan Region consolidated a permanent Turkish military presence on Iraqi territory.

C) Libya

In January 2020 Turkey sent forces and drones to support the Government of National Accord in Tripoli against the forces of Khalifa Haftar (backed by the UAE, Egypt and Russia). Before that, in November 2019, it signed a maritime boundary memorandum with Tripoli that extended Turkey's maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean.

D) The South Caucasus

Turkish military support, especially Bayraktar drones, played an important role in Azerbaijan's victory in the 44-day war (2020). The "Shusha Declaration" (June 2021) raised the strategic bond between the two countries to the level of an alliance.

E) Beyond the Region

Turkey's military base in Qatar, a large training center in Somalia and a presence in the Horn of Africa show the geographic expansion of Turkey's military footprint. The "Blue Homeland" doctrine also formulates extensive maritime claims in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean.

F) Support for Aligned Islamist Currents

Support for Mohamed Morsi's government in Egypt, hosting Muslim Brotherhood figures after 2013 and relations with Hamas were Turkey's instruments of ideological influence in the Arab world.

14.3. The De-escalatory Logic: Mediation and Normalization

A) Mediating between Russia and Ukraine

Turkey hosted the Istanbul talks between Russia and Ukraine in March 2022 and, with the United Nations, brought the "Black Sea Grain Initiative" (July 2022) to fruition. In 2025 Istanbul also hosted new rounds of direct talks.

B) The Astana Process

From 2017 Turkey, together with Russia and Iran, advanced the Astana process for de-escalation in Syria. The combination is striking: in Syria Turkey cooperated with two states on the opposite side of the war.

C) The Wave of Normalization (2021–2024)

- With the UAE: Mohammed bin Zayed's visit to Ankara (November 2021).
- With Saudi Arabia: Erdoğan's visit to Jeddah (April 2022), after setting aside the Khashoggi case.
- With Israel: the Israeli president's visit to Ankara (March 2022) and the return of ambassadors.
- With Egypt: the return of ambassadors (2023) and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's visit to Ankara (September 2024).
- With Armenia: appointment of special envoys for normalization (2022).

D) The Peace Process with the PKK

In February 2025 Abdullah Öcalan called from prison for the PKK to dissolve, and in May 2025 the PKK announced its dissolution. If completed, this process will be Turkey's greatest domestic and regional de-escalation in four decades.

E) Mediation in Gaza and in the 2026 War

Turkey was one of the guarantors of the Gaza ceasefire plan (October 2025). In the 2026 war, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan conducted intensive diplomacy to prevent the Gulf states from entering the war and to mediate between the United States and Iran. Turkey simultaneously condemned the US and Israeli strikes on Iran as violations of international law and called Iran's attacks on Gulf states unacceptable.

14.4. Linking the Two Logics: The "Armed Mediator"

Turkey is perhaps the clearest example of an "armed mediator" in the region. Turkey's mediating power is inseparable from its military power:

- Turkey can mediate between Russia and Ukraine because it has sold drones to Ukraine and has economic and energy cooperation with Russia; that is, it has "leverage" with both sides.
- Turkey can guarantee the Gaza ceasefire because it has relations with Hamas while being a NATO member.
- In post-Assad Syria Turkey can play the role of "guarantor of stability" because its military forces are deployed there.
- Normalization with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, after years of rivalry in Libya, Egypt and the Gulf, allowed Turkey to attract Gulf investment for its crisis-ridden economy without reducing its military presence in Libya, Qatar or Syria.

In the case of Israel, however, the two logics came into conflict. After the Gaza war, Turkey halted trade with Israel in May 2024, and after the fall of Assad the rivalry between the two over Syria became one of the most serious axes of regional tension.

14.5. Further Examples of Turkey's Dual Policy

A) Russia: From Downing a Jet to the S-400

In November 2015 Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter on the Syrian border and relations between the two countries hit rock bottom. Less than a year later, after Erdoğan's apology and especially after the failed coup of July 2016, the two countries quickly reconciled. Turkey received the S-400 air defense system from Russia in 2019, the TurkStream pipeline opened in 2020, and Russia continued building the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. At the same time, Turkey sold Bayraktar drones to Ukraine and, after Russia's invasion in February 2022, invoked the Montreux Convention to close the Bosphorus and

Dardanelles to warships of the belligerents. Turkey was at once Russia's energy and arms partner and an arms supplier to its enemy.

B) Greece: From the "Oruç Reis" Crisis to "Calm Waters"

In the summer of 2020 the dispatch of the exploration vessel Oruç Reis, escorted by warships, into disputed waters brought Turkey and Greece to the brink of military confrontation. Three years later, in December 2023, Erdoğan went to Athens and the two countries signed the "Athens Declaration" on friendly relations and good neighborliness, a period the media called "calm waters." But the claims of the "Blue Homeland" were not abandoned; they were merely suspended.

C) Sweden and NATO: The Veto as Leverage

From 2022 Turkey blocked Sweden's NATO membership over what it saw as Swedish support for Kurdish groups. The Turkish parliament finally approved Sweden's membership in January 2024, and shortly afterward the United States approved the sale of F-16 fighters to Turkey. Turkey used its position in a collective security institution (NATO) to obtain bilateral concessions, behavior that combined loyalty to the alliance with power-based bargaining.

D) Iran: Trading Partner, Regional Rival

Turkey and Iran are important trading partners, and Turkey has been a buyer of Iranian gas. But in Syria the two stood on opposite sides, in Iraq they competed for influence and in the Caucasus Turkey backed Azerbaijan while Iran backed Armenia. At the same time they were partners in the Astana process, and in the 2026 war Turkey condemned the US and Israeli strikes on Iran. The Turkey–Iran relationship is a pure example of the "coopetition" discussed in Chapter Three.

E) Post-Assad Syria: Supporter of the State, Partner of the Kurds?

After the fall of Assad, Turkey began extensive military and economic cooperation with the new government in Damascus. At the same time, the March 2025 agreement between the Syrian government and the Syrian Democratic Forces (whose backbone was Kurds allied with the PKK) on integrating these forces into state structures, together with the PKK dissolution process inside Turkey, showed that Ankara was pursuing the Kurdish question with both military and political tools at once.

14.6. The "Century of Türkiye" and Erdoğan's Two Sources of Legitimacy

As with Saudi Arabia, Turkey's dual policy is rooted in two domestic sources of legitimacy. In 2023, the centenary of the Republic, Erdoğan introduced the discourse of the "Century of Türkiye," combining economic growth, an independent defense industry and regional leadership. On one hand, the Turkish economy, with high inflation and a falling lira,

depends on Gulf capital, tourism and trade with Europe, which reinforces the logic of de-escalation. On the other, the ruling coalition rests on nationalism and Islamism, and displays of power in Syria, Libya, the Mediterranean and the Caucasus are necessary to sustain it. The 2021–2023 wave of normalization, coinciding with the economic crisis, and the continuation of military operations in Iraq and Syria in the same period met both needs at once.

14.7. Close Study: Twelve Days That Transformed Syria (November–December 2024)

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 was one of the greatest geopolitical developments of the decade, and Turkey played a central role in it. Ankara′s behavior in these days, simultaneously Russia′s and Iran′s diplomatic partner in the Astana process and the principal backer of Assad′s armed opponents, is a pure example of the "armed mediator."

Chronology

Date	Event	Logic
Mid-2024	Erdoğan repeatedly declared his readiness to meet Assad and normalize relations; Damascus made Turkish withdrawal a precondition.	De-escalatory
November 27	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its allies launch an offensive from Idlib, an area under Turkey′s military umbrella.	Power-accumulating (indirect)
29–November 30	Fall of Aleppo; simultaneously, armed groups directly backed by Turkey (the Syrian National Army) attack Kurdish-held areas north of Aleppo.	Power-accumulating
Early December	Fall of Hama and Homs; Turkey officially denies any role in the offensive and calls for a political solution.	De-escalatory discourse
December 7	Meeting of the foreign ministers of the Astana guarantors (Turkey, Russia, Iran) on the sidelines of the Doha Forum.	De-escalatory
December 8	Opposition forces enter Damascus and Assad flees to Russia.	Outcome of power accumulation
December	Turkish-backed groups seize Manbij from Kurdish forces; Turkey′s intelligence chief and then its foreign minister visit Damascus.	Power-accumulating and de-escalatory at once

Analysis

Deniability as an instrument. In these days Turkey made skilful use of "deniability." Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was an organization Turkey officially designated as terrorist, but it had operated for years in Idlib under the umbrella of Turkish military outposts. Ankara

could both benefit from the outcome of the offensive and avoid direct responsibility for it. This deniability allowed Turkey to sit with Russia and Iran at the Astana meeting while benefiting from the fall of their ally.

Two fronts in one operation. Less often noted is that while Hayat Tahrir al-Sham advanced on Damascus, groups directly backed by Turkey attacked Kurdish forces north of Aleppo and in Manbij. Turkey used one great development to advance two different goals: overthrowing a rival in Damascus and weakening Kurdish forces in the north.

Turning victory into influence. Immediately after Assad′s fall, Turkey was the first country to send a high-level security and then political delegation to Damascus. Ankara could now play the role of "guarantor of stability" in the new Syria, a role impossible without military victory. In the following months Turkey began extensive defense and economic cooperation with the new Syrian government and, as noted, also supported the agreement to integrate Kurdish forces into the Syrian army.

Consequences for relations with Israel and Iran. Turkey′s victory in Syria had two different consequences: for Iran, the loss of its most important Arab ally and land bridge to Hezbollah; for Israel, the replacement of one rival (Iran) by another (Turkey) on its northern borders. In the following months Turkey sought to avoid direct confrontation through technical talks with Israel mediated by Azerbaijan. A power-accumulating victory immediately created the need for new de-escalation.

Implications for Theory

Turkey′s behavior in these twelve days can be explained neither by Waltz′s logic of balancing (Turkey was not balancing against any superior power) nor by Mearsheimer′s logic of pure power maximization (Turkey was simultaneously present in de-escalatory institutions with its rivals). This study shows that in a penetrated system a regional power can exploit the simultaneous weakness of several others (Russia absorbed by Ukraine, Iran after the Lebanon war), provided it has both military instruments and diplomatic channels at its disposal.

14.8. Second Close Study: 2020 — Three Fronts and One Negotiating Table

2020 was the year of Turkey′s most extensive simultaneous military presence on several fronts. In the same year Ankara was also actively present in several multilateral diplomatic processes. This simultaneity gives a clear picture of the "armed mediator."

Chronology

Date	Front or process	Event
January	Libya	Start of the deployment of troops, advisers and drones to Tripoli after approval by the Turkish parliament

Date	Front or process	Event
January 19	Multilateral diplomacy	Participation in the Berlin conference on Libya and commitment to the arms embargo and a political solution
February–March	Syria	Direct clashes with the Syrian army in Idlib after dozens of Turkish soldiers were killed; Operation "Spring Shield"
March 5	Bilateral diplomacy	Idlib ceasefire agreement with Russia in Moscow
May–June	Libya	Haftar's forces pushed back from around Tripoli and the Sirte–Jufra line stabilized
August	Mediterranean	Dispatch of the exploration vessel Oruç Reis with warship escort into waters disputed with Greece; minor collision between the two navies' ships
September–October	NATO	Military technical talks with Greece at NATO headquarters to set up a deconfliction mechanism
September 27 – November 10	Caucasus	Political and military support for Azerbaijan in the 44-day war
November	Caucasus and Russia	Agreement with Russia to set up a joint center to monitor the Karabakh ceasefire

Analysis

Three fronts, one pattern. On all three fronts, Libya, Syria and the Caucasus, Turkey's pattern of behavior was the same: decisive military intervention to change the balance on the ground, followed by participation in a diplomatic mechanism to consolidate the new balance. In Libya, intervention pushed Haftar back and Turkey then participated in UN processes. In Idlib, clashes with the Syrian army ended with the Moscow agreement with Russia. In the Caucasus, support for Azerbaijan led to Turkey's presence in the ceasefire monitoring mechanism.

Russia: rival on three fronts, partner in three agreements. The remarkable point of 2020 is that on all three fronts Turkey stood opposite Russia: in Libya Russia backed Haftar through the Wagner forces, in Syria it backed Assad and in the Caucasus it was Armenia's treaty ally. Yet on all three fronts Turkey and Russia ultimately reached agreement. Some analysts have called this relationship "managed rivalry" or "competitive cooperation." From the perspective of our hypothesis, it is a perfect example of the dual policy of two powers toward each other: rivalry on the battlefield and coordination at the table.

NATO: member and critic. In the Mediterranean crisis with Greece, also a NATO member, Turkey simultaneously displayed its naval power and took part in NATO's

technical deconfliction talks. Turkey used NATO both as an umbrella and as a negotiating table.

Implications for Theory

The experience of 2020 shows that Turkey's dual policy rests on a strategic assumption: military power is the entry ticket to the negotiating table. Without a military presence in Libya, Syria and the Caucasus, Turkey would have had no place in the final agreements in these crises. This assumption, familiar in classical realism and in Clausewitz's thought, has less place in structural realism, because Waltz and Mearsheimer see diplomacy more as a reflection of the distribution of power than as an autonomous arena in which power is "converted."

14.9. Testing against the Two Theories

Waltz's Prediction

Waltz expected Turkey, as a middle power within NATO, to balance against its main threats (Russia, Iran or instability on its southern borders) and avoid adventurism. A military presence in Libya, Somalia and Qatar, with no direct connection to Turkey's security threats, is inconsistent with this prediction.

Mearsheimer's Prediction

Mearsheimer expected Turkey, as a potential hegemon, to seek to maximize power. Its multi-front military presence is consistent with this prediction. But Mearsheimer cannot explain why Turkey cooperated with its rivals (Russia and Iran in Astana, the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the normalization wave) and invested so much in mediation. For him cooperation with a rival is "appeasement" and irrational.

Verdict

Turkey is an example of "instrumental duality": military power is the instrument of mediation, and mediation the instrument of increasing regional and global weight. Turkey becomes "indispensable" through both logics: without it neither does war end nor does peace endure.

14.10. Table of Turkey's Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
Syria	Astana process with Russia and Iran; supporting the stability of the new government	Four military operations; controlled zone; influence in Damascus	2016–2026
Russia and Ukraine	Istanbul talks; grain initiative	Drone sales to Ukraine; control of the straits	2022–2025
Persian Gulf	Normalization with the UAE	Military base in Qatar	2017–2022

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
	and Saudi Arabia		
Egypt	Return of ambassadors; Sisi's visit to Ankara	Support for the Muslim Brotherhood after 2013	2013–2024
Israel	2022 normalization	2024 trade halt; rivalry in Syria	2022–2026
Libya	Calls for a political solution	Military intervention for the Tripoli government; maritime agreement	2019–2020
Caucasus	Normalization with Armenia	Military support for Azerbaijan in the 2020 war	2020–2025
Kurds	Peace process with the PKK and its dissolution	"Claw" operations and bases in Iraq	2019–2025
2026 war	Mediation between the United States and Iran	Proposal for a regional consortium to secure Hormuz	2026

Chapter Fifteen: Qatar — Global Mediator and Host of Political Islam

15.1. Structural Position: Small State, Great Power

With a citizen population of about 300,000 and an area of less than 12,000 square kilometers, Qatar is by traditional realist standards a "small state." Yet Qatar enjoys enormous liquefied natural gas wealth (especially from the North Dome–South Pars field shared with Iran), one of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds, the Al Jazeera media network and the hosting of the largest US air base in the region (Al Udeid).

For Waltz and Mearsheimer, small states are secondary actors whose behavior usually consists of bandwagoning with the stronger power or sheltering under a great power's umbrella. Qatar has done neither in simple form. Scholars of small-state international relations have explained Qatar's behavior with concepts such as "smart power," "nation branding" and "mediation as a survival strategy." The present hypothesis sees Qatar's behavior as a simultaneous combination of "security through being indispensable to all" (a defensive logic) and "ideological and media influence-building" (a power-accumulating logic, or soft hegemony).

15.2. The De-escalatory Logic: The "Indispensable Mediator"

A) Afghanistan

From 2013, at the request of the United States, Qatar hosted the Taliban's political office. Negotiations between the United States and the Taliban in Doha led to the "Doha Agreement" in February 2020, which paved the way for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. During the withdrawal in August 2021, Qatar played a central role in evacuating tens of thousands of people.

B) Gaza

Together with Egypt and the United States, Qatar has been the principal mediator of the Gaza ceasefires: the temporary truce and hostage exchange in November 2023, the January 2025 ceasefire and the October 2025 ceasefire. Before the war, too, Qatar transferred regular financial aid to Gaza in coordination with Israel.

C) The United States and Iran

In September 2023 Qatar played a role in the prisoner exchange between the United States and Iran and in the transfer of Iran's released funds. After Iran's attack on Al Udeid in June 2025, Qatar also took part in establishing the ceasefire between Iran and Israel.

D) Other Mediations

- Returning Ukrainian children from Russia (2023–2024).

- Mediating between the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the M23 rebel group (2025).
- Earlier mediations in Lebanon (the 2008 Doha Agreement), Darfur, Chad and Eritrea–Djibouti.

E) Security Partnership with the United States

Hosting Al Udeid, the forward headquarters of US Central Command, and designation as a "major non-NATO ally" (2022) have placed Qatar under the American security umbrella.

15.3. The Power-Accumulating Logic: Ideological and Media Influence

A) Hosting Yusuf al-Qaradawi

Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Egyptian-born cleric and one of the most prominent intellectual figures of the Muslim Brotherhood, lived in Doha for decades until his death in September 2022. His Al Jazeera program ("Sharia and Life") reached wide audiences across the Arab world. He headed the "International Union of Muslim Scholars," headquartered in Doha. Because of fatwas, including the justification of suicide operations against Israeli civilians, and harsh positions against some Arab governments, Qaradawi was seen in many countries as a radical figure and was barred from entry in some. Hosting him was a means of linking Qatar to the extensive network of Sunni political Islam.

B) Hosting Hamas Leaders

Hamas's political bureau was based in Doha from 2012. Khaled Meshaal, Ismail Haniyeh and other Hamas leaders lived in Qatar for years. Qatar argued that this hosting was at the request of the United States and to maintain a communication channel. But critics saw it as political and financial sanctuary for Hamas. Israel's strike on Hamas leaders in Doha (September 2025) showed what cost this duality could carry.

C) Support for the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring

After 2011 Qatar supported Brotherhood currents in Egypt (Morsi's government, with financial aid of several billion dollars), Tunisia (Ennahda), Libya and Syria. Qatar participated in NATO's operation in Libya (2011) and also supported Assad's armed opponents in Syria.

D) Al Jazeera as a Soft Weapon

The Al Jazeera network, especially its Arabic channel, played an important role in shaping Arab public opinion during the Arab Spring. Arab governments saw it as an instrument of Qatari foreign policy, and closing it was one of their main demands in the 2017 blockade.

E) Ties with Iran and Turkey

Because of the shared gas field, Qatar maintained working relations with Iran, and during the 2017 blockade Iranian airspace and the Turkish military base were lifelines for Qatar. This simultaneous hosting of an American base and a Turkish base, together with maintaining relations with Iran, maximized hedging.

F) Investment and Economic Influence

The extensive investments of the Qatar Investment Authority in Europe and the United States, hosting the 2022 World Cup and funding Western research and educational institutions are instruments of Qatar's soft influence. Some of these activities have also been the subject of allegations and investigations in Europe.

15.4. Linking the Two Logics: "Connected to Everyone"

Qatar's logic can be summarized as follows: Qatar's value to the great powers derives precisely from its relations with actors with whom others have no relations. Qatar can mediate between the United States and the Taliban because it hosts the Taliban. It can mediate between Israel and Hamas because it hosts Hamas. It can carry messages between the United States and Iran because it has working relations with Iran.

In Qatar's case, therefore, the two logics are not only simultaneous but "co-rooted": hosting radical actors, which from the perspective of Qatar's Arab rivals was a form of ideological hegemony-seeking, was the precondition for mediation. And mediation, which made Qatar indispensable to the United States, was a protective umbrella for continued hosting.

But this strategy has limits. The 2017 blockade, Israel's 2025 strike and Iran's 2026 attacks showed that being "connected to everyone" can sometimes become being "everyone's target."

15.5. Further Examples of Qatar's Dual Policy

A) Israel: Trade Office, Money Transfers, Hosting the Enemy

From 1996 to 2009 Qatar hosted an Israeli trade representation office in Doha and closed it after the 2008–09 Gaza war. From 2018 until October 7, 2023, with the coordination and consent of the Israeli government, Qatar transferred monthly financial aid to Gaza for salaries, fuel and assistance to needy families. This arrangement, intended to maintain relative calm in Gaza, was sharply criticized in Israel after October 7. Qatar was simultaneously in contact with the head of Israel's intelligence service and Hamas leaders. This "connectedness to everyone" is one of the purest instances of co-rooted duality.

B) After the Doha Strike: Turning Injury into Leverage

Israel's strike on Doha on September 9, 2025, could have been a strategic defeat for Qatar. But Doha quickly turned this injury into leverage: it hosted an emergency Arab–Islamic summit in Doha, received an official apology from Israel's prime minister at the end of September 2025 and obtained from the Trump administration a new security commitment treating an attack on Qatar as a threat to the United States. A few weeks later Qatar was again at the center of Gaza ceasefire mediation. This experience showed that for Qatar even being a victim can become a source of power, provided its position as an "indispensable mediator" is preserved.

C) Iran: A Warning before the Attack

In June 2025, when Iran targeted Al Udeid in Qatar with missiles in response to US strikes on its nuclear facilities, according to numerous reports it had given prior warning through diplomatic channels and damage was limited. Qatar condemned the attack but immediately took part in establishing a ceasefire. This episode showed that Qatar does not abandon its mediating role even when its own territory is targeted; and that Iran, in its relationship with Qatar, did not entirely abandon the logic of de-escalation even at the moment of attack.

D) Post-Assad Syria

Qatar, one of the earliest supporters of Assad's opponents, became after December 2024 one of the main backers of Syria's new government, including by financing part of public-sector salaries and supporting energy supplies. This support increased Qatar's influence in a Syria that had for years been an arena of Iranian, Russian and Turkish rivalry.

E) The Diplomacy of Gifts and Capital

Qatar has used investment and gifts as instruments of foreign policy. The offer in May 2025 to donate a Boeing 747 to the US government for temporary use as a presidential aircraft, which provoked much domestic controversy in the United States, is an example of this "gift diplomacy." Large investments in infrastructure, sport and media in the West have also given Qatar weight beyond its size.

15.6. Qatar as Theory: The "Over-Performing Small State"

Qatar's experience matters for international relations theory beyond the Middle East. Structural realism regards small states as "order-takers," not "order-makers." But Qatar showed that a small state, by combining wealth, media, hosting a great power's base and a network of relations with ostracized actors, can play a role far beyond its material weight.

The secret of this "over-performance" lies precisely in duality. Had Qatar been merely an American ally, it would have remained one of several small allies. Had it been merely a supporter of political Islam, it would, as in 2017, have been exposed to blockade and

pressure. The combination of the two, "an American ally that talks to America's enemies," made Qatar indispensable to all. This logic can be called "security through indispensability": a state that is indispensable to everyone is less likely to be attacked or subjected to lasting blockade. The experiences of 2017, 2025 and 2026 showed that this logic is not absolute, but in the first two cases Qatar ultimately emerged from the crisis with a more consolidated position; it is still too early to judge the outcome of the 2026 events.

15.7. Close Study: Two Years of Gaza Mediation (October 2023 to October 2025)

Qatar's role in the Gaza war is the most telling test of "security through indispensability." In these two years Qatar was simultaneously host to Hamas leaders, principal mediator of ceasefires, an American ally and the target of Israeli pressure and finally attack.

Chronology

Date	Event
October 2023	Qatar's contacts with Hamas over hostages begin days after October 7; the first hostages with US citizenship are released through Qatari mediation.
November 24 – December 1, 2023	First temporary truce; release of more than a hundred hostages in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.
2024	Successive rounds of negotiation in Doha and Cairo; growing pressure from some US and Israeli politicians on Qatar to expel Hamas leaders; Qatar repeatedly announced it was "reassessing" its mediating role.
July 2024	Killing in Tehran of Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas's political bureau and a Doha resident; Qatar's prime minister asked how mediation could succeed when one party assassinates the other side's negotiator.
November 2024	Qatar announced it was suspending mediation until the parties showed seriousness.
January 19, 2025	Start of the three-phase ceasefire mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the United States.
March 18, 2025	Collapse of the ceasefire and resumption of large-scale Israeli operations.
September 9, 2025	Israeli air strike on the residence of the Hamas negotiating delegation in Doha.
September 15, 2025	Emergency summit of Arab and Islamic leaders in Doha.
Late September 2025	Israel's prime minister apologizes to Qatar in a call from the White House; announcement of Trump's twenty-point plan for Gaza.
October 2025	Ceasefire and hostage exchange; signing of the document endorsing the plan at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit with the United States, Egypt, Qatar and Turkey.

Analysis

The inherent conflict of two roles. Throughout these two years, Qatar's two roles repeatedly collided. Israel and some US politicians said hosting Hamas made Qatar its "partner." Qatar replied that without this hosting there would be no channel for freeing hostages. Both arguments were right; and this simultaneous correctness is the essence of Qatar's dual policy.

The threat to withdraw as leverage. Several times, including in April and November 2024, Qatar spoke of "reassessing" or "suspending" mediation. This threat was leverage against both sides: it reminded Israel and the United States that without Qatar they had no channel to Hamas, and pressed Hamas to show flexibility. A mediator's value lies precisely in the possibility of withdrawal.

The Doha strike and the duality threshold. The September 9 strike showed that Qatar's duality had reached its threshold: one party (Israel) had concluded that the cost of striking the host was lower than the benefit of eliminating Hamas leaders. But the subsequent reactions, Israel's apology and the US security commitment, showed that this assessment was wrong, because the principal patron, the United States, valued Qatar as a mediator more than the elimination of Hamas leaders. In this case Qatar's dual policy, having reached the threshold, did not collapse but was consolidated with the support of an extra-regional power.

Comparison with the Islamic Republic. Comparing Qatar and Iran in this period is instructive. Both had ties with Hamas. But Iran bore the power-accumulating share (arming and training), and Qatar the de-escalatory share (political hosting and mediation). As a result Iran became a target of war, while Qatar, despite being attacked, saw its position as mediator consolidated. This difference shows that the "combination" of the two logics in each state, and which share dominates, determines its fate.

15.8. Second Close Study: The Blockade of Qatar (June 2017 to January 2021)

The blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt was the greatest test of Qatar's dual policy. The four countries sought to force Qatar to choose between two logics: full adherence to their axis and abandonment of independent ideological and regional ties, or isolation. Qatar accepted neither.

Chronology

Date	Event
June 5, 2017	The four countries sever relations and close land, sea and air borders.
June 6, 2017	Social media posts by the US president initially supporting the blockade, while the State Department and the Pentagon stressed the importance of Al Udeid and the need for dialogue.

Date	Event
June 7, 2017	The Turkish parliament fast-tracks approval of deploying more forces to the Turkish base in Qatar.
June 2017	Iran opens its airspace to Qatari aircraft and food shipments from Iran and Turkey begin.
June 22, 2017	Presentation of thirteen demands, including closing Al Jazeera, closing the Turkish base and reducing relations with Iran.
June–July 2017	Agreement to buy F-15 fighters from the United States and signing of a memorandum on combating terrorist financing with the United States.
2017–2020	Continuous Kuwaiti mediation; launch of an annual US–Qatar strategic dialogue (from January 2018); expansion of Hamad Port and domestic food production.
January 2019	Qatar leaves OPEC.
January 5, 2021	Al-Ula Declaration and end of the blockade, without acceptance of the thirteen demands.

Analysis

A dual response to dual pressure. Qatar responded to the blockade with two simultaneous moves. The first was deepening ties with the United States: arms purchases, expansion of Al Udeid, the counter-terrorism memorandum and the strategic dialogue. Its aim was to convince the United States that Qatar was an indispensable ally and not a sponsor of terrorism. The second was deepening ties with the rivals of the blockading axis, Turkey and Iran: the Turkish base was expanded and Iranian airspace became Qatar's lifeline. Qatar grew closer to America and at the same time closer to Iran and Turkey.

The demands as a mirror of duality. The list of thirteen demands was in effect a list of the instruments of Qatar's dual policy: Al Jazeera (media influence), the Turkish base (hedging), relations with Iran (connectedness to everyone) and ties with the Brotherhood (ideological influence). The blockaders wanted precisely what distinguished Qatar from an ordinary small state.

An end without surrender. The end of the blockade at Al-Ula, without Qatar accepting the demands, vindicated the strategy of "security through indispensability." The reasons for its end were also multiple: US pressure for unity among its allies against Iran, a change of administration in Washington, and the fact that the blockade had failed and pushed Qatar closer to Iran and Turkey.

A lesson for the blockaders. The blockade also held a lesson for Saudi Arabia and the UAE: pressuring a state to choose between two logics, in a penetrated system where other rivals are ready to step in, usually fails. This lesson was one factor in the two countries' turn to de-escalation after 2020.

Implications for Theory

From Waltz's perspective, a small state facing a coalition of powerful neighbors should either bandwagon with them or shelter with a great power. Qatar rejected both and relied simultaneously on three powers (the United States, Turkey, Iran). From Mearsheimer's perspective, a small state under pressure should give in. Qatar did not give in, and prevailed. This study shows that in a penetrated system a small state with a dual policy can endure even against a coalition of larger neighbors.

15.9. Testing against the Two Theories

Waltz's Prediction

Waltz says little about small states, but his logic dictates that Qatar should shelter under a great power's umbrella (the United States) for its security and avoid adventurism. The first part of this prediction is correct, but not the second: support for the Brotherhood, hosting Hamas and Al Jazeera's role set Qatar against its powerful neighbors and led to the blockade.

Mearsheimer's Prediction

Mearsheimer also regards small states as secondary actors that either bandwagon or become victims. Qatar neither simply bandwagoned nor became a victim. The blockade ended after three and a half years without its demands being met, and Qatar emerged stronger.

Verdict

Qatar is an example of "discursive duality" and "co-rooted duality": an official discourse of peace and mediation, and the practice of hosting and funding radical currents, both serving a single goal: turning a small state into an actor no power can ignore.

15.10. Table of Qatar's Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
Palestine	Mediating the Gaza ceasefires; humanitarian aid	Hosting Hamas leaders from 2012	2012–2026
Political Islam	Discourse of dialogue and moderation	Hosting Qaradawi and the International Union of Muslim Scholars	Until 2022
Afghanistan	The Doha Agreement; facilitating the US withdrawal	Hosting the Taliban office and ties with them	2013–2021
Arab Spring	Participation in Arab League diplomacy	Financial and media support for the Brotherhood in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya; support for Syrian armed	2011–2017

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
		opponents	
United States	Hosting Al Udeid; major non-NATO ally	Hosting a Turkish base; maintaining relations with Iran	Entire period
Iran	Carrying messages and prisoner exchanges	Independent exploitation of the shared field; ties with the Brotherhood axis rival to Iran	2017–2026
Media	Al Jazeera English and international image	Al Jazeera Arabic as an instrument of pressure on Arab governments	Entire period

Chapter Sixteen: The Republic of Azerbaijan — Territorial Conquest and Corridor Diplomacy

16.1. Structural Position

With a population of about ten million, Caspian oil and gas resources and a position between Russia, Iran, Turkey and Georgia, the Republic of Azerbaijan is a middle-sized country at the geopolitical knot of the South Caucasus. From independence in 1991 until 2020, Azerbaijan's central national security problem was the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven surrounding districts in the first war (1988–1994).

Although Azerbaijan is not part of the Arab Middle Eastern security system, it is examined in this book for three reasons: its deep strategic ties with Israel and Turkey; its direct rivalry with Iran; and its presence in broader regional equations, as shown by its participation in the Riyadh meeting during the 2026 war.

16.2. The Power-Accumulating Logic: Retaking Territory by Force

A) The 44-Day War (2020)

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military operation to retake Karabakh. Using Turkish Bayraktar drones and Israeli loitering munitions, the Azerbaijani army recaptured much of the occupied territory, including the symbolic city of Shusha. The ceasefire statement of November 10, 2020, mediated by Russia, provided for the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the remaining part of Karabakh.

B) Pressure on Armenia (2021–2022)

In May 2021 and September 2022 Azerbaijani forces advanced into parts of Armenian territory (not Karabakh) and established positions there. The September 2022 attacks on Armenian towns, including Jermuk, were part of a strategy of "blackmail," in Mearsheimer's sense, to gain concessions in negotiations.

C) The Blockade of the Lachin Corridor (2022–2023)

From December 2022 the Lachin corridor, Karabakh's only link to Armenia, was blocked, first by people presenting themselves as environmental activists and then by an official Azerbaijani checkpoint. The blockade lasted nearly nine months and led to severe shortages of food and medicine.

D) The September 2023 Operation

On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched an "anti-terrorist operation," and in less than twenty-four hours the Armenian forces of Karabakh surrendered. Almost the entire

Armenian population of Karabakh, more than a hundred thousand people, fled to Armenia, and the self-proclaimed Karabakh republic was dissolved at the start of 2024.

E) The Discourse of "Western Azerbaijan"

Since 2020 Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly spoken of "Western Azerbaijan" to refer to parts of present-day Armenia and the right of return of Azerbaijanis expelled from there in the Soviet era. This discourse has kept territorial claims alive even after the recovery of Karabakh.

F) The Armaments Alliance with Israel and Turkey

Azerbaijan is one of the largest buyers of Israeli weapons and supplies a significant share of Israel's oil. Its bond with Turkey reached the level of a military alliance with the Shusha Declaration (2021). From Tehran's perspective, this triangle is a direct threat on Iran's northern border.

16.3. The De-escalatory Logic: Peace through Trade

A) The Zangezur Corridor and Article 9 of the 2020 Statement

Article 9 of the November 2020 ceasefire statement provided for the unblocking of all economic and transport links in the region, including a link between mainland Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Armenian territory. Azerbaijan called this route the "Zangezur corridor" and presented it as a project of peace and regional economic integration.

B) The Washington Agreement (August 2025)

On August 8, 2025, Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, hosted by Donald Trump at the White House, signed a joint declaration and initialed the text of a peace agreement. Under this agreement, a route through Armenia's Syunik province called the "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity" will be developed with US participation. The two countries also agreed to dissolve the OSCE Minsk Group.

C) Energy Diplomacy

In 2022 Azerbaijan signed a memorandum with the European Union to double gas exports by 2027. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan, TANAP and TAP pipelines made Azerbaijan an alternative energy supplier for Europe after the Ukraine war.

D) The Middle Corridor and International Hosting

Azerbaijan has presented itself as the key link of the "Middle Corridor" (the Trans-Caspian route) between China and Europe. Hosting the UN climate conference (COP29) in November 2024 was also part of an effort to project the image of a responsible international actor.

16.4. Linking the Two Logics: The Corridor as the Continuation of War by Other Means

Azerbaijan is perhaps the purest example of "instrumental duality" in this book. The Zangezur corridor is simultaneously:

- **A peace project:** it increases trade, transit and economic interdependence among Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey and Central Asia.
- **A power project:** it establishes Azerbaijan's territorial link to Nakhchivan and from there to Turkey, and helps realize the long-held aspiration of linking the Turkic world from the Mediterranean to Central Asia. It also overshadows Iran's border with Armenia, one of Iran's few gateways to the Caucasus and Europe.

Above all, Azerbaijan's peace rests on military victory. The Washington agreement became possible after Azerbaijan retook Karabakh by force and Armenia, disappointed by Russia's support, was forced to accept the terms. This is what may be called a "victor's peace": a de-escalation that is the fruit of power accumulation and consolidates it.

16.5. Iran and Azerbaijan: A Reflection of Mutual Duality

The relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan has also been dual. Iran officially supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity but at the same time declared the Zangezur corridor a "red line" and held military exercises on the border. The attack on Azerbaijan's embassy in Tehran (January 2023) brought relations to their lowest point. Azerbaijan, for its part, while maintaining diplomatic relations, deepened its security ties with Israel, and media close to its government sometimes spoke of "South Azerbaijan." After the 2026 war, whose reach extended to some targets on Azerbaijani soil, Azerbaijan took part in regional meetings to end the war.

16.6. Further Examples of Azerbaijan's Dual Policy

A) Two Corridors at Once: Zangezur and Aras

One of the most telling examples of Azerbaijan's duality is its simultaneous pursuit of two routes to Nakhchivan. While Baku insisted on the "Zangezur corridor" through Armenian territory and Iran regarded it as its red line, Azerbaijan in 2023 agreed with Iran on an alternative route through Iranian territory along the Aras River, and construction of its border bridges began. Azerbaijan thus both relieved Iran of a monopoly over the route and pressured Armenia by threatening to use the Iranian route, while threatening to use the Armenian route gave it leverage against Iran. This is the very mandala logic Kautilya described: each partner is leverage against the other.

B) Russia: From the "Alliance Declaration" to the Air Crash Crisis

On February 22, 2022, just two days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Ilham Aliyev and Vladimir Putin signed in Moscow a "Declaration on Allied Interaction." But in the

following years Azerbaijan used Russia's weakness to push Russian peacekeepers out of Karabakh (they left ahead of schedule in 2024). The crash of an Azerbaijani passenger aircraft in Kazakhstan in December 2024, which Baku attributed to Russian air defense fire, and the diplomatic and media clashes of 2025 brought relations to their lowest point. Azerbaijan used "alliance" with Russia to reassure Moscow at a sensitive moment, and Russia's weakness to consolidate its gains.

C) Mediator between Israel and Turkey

Azerbaijan, which has strategic ties with both Israel and Turkey, hosted technical talks between the two in 2025 to prevent military clashes in Syria. According to reports, Baku also hosted contacts between Israeli and Syrian officials. A country that five years earlier had retaken its territory by war now appeared as a mediator. This shows the conversion of "hard power" into "diplomatic capital."

D) Europe: Gas in Exchange for Criticism

While becoming an important gas supplier to Europe from 2022, Azerbaijan had serious clashes with European institutions. In January 2024 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe did not ratify the credentials of Azerbaijan's delegation over concerns about democracy and human rights, and Baku suspended its participation in the Assembly in response. Azerbaijan also had a severe diplomatic and media clash with France, a supporter of Armenia. Gas allowed Azerbaijan to be both Europe's energy partner and a fierce critic of European institutions.

E) The Armenian Constitution Condition

Despite initialing the peace agreement in August 2025, Azerbaijan has made its final signature conditional on a change to Armenia's constitution, especially the removal of the reference to the declaration of independence that mentions Karabakh. This condition shows that Azerbaijan's peace is a "peace conditional on surrender": de-escalation to the extent that it fully and irreversibly consolidates the gains of power accumulation.

16.7. Azerbaijan and the "Victor's Peace" Model in Theory

Azerbaijan's experience can be understood in light of the concept of "victor's peace" in war and peace studies. Research on war termination has shown that wars ending in the decisive victory of one side sometimes lead to more durable peace than wars ending in compromise agreements, because the defeated side lacks the capacity or motive to resume the war. Knowingly or not, Azerbaijan followed this logic: first a decisive military victory, then a peace that consolidates it.

This model has an interesting implication for realist theory. From Mearsheimer's perspective, Azerbaijan after victory should look for further opportunities to expand. From Waltz's, having achieved sufficient security it should settle for preserving the status quo. But Azerbaijan's behavior must be described as "power accumulation to the point of

consolidation, then de-escalation for institutionalization," with the important proviso that the implicit threat of resuming power accumulation (the discourse of Western Azerbaijan, the constitutional condition) is still retained as leverage.

16.8. Close Study: Forty-Four Days and One Article (September to November 2020)

The 44-day war was not only a military victory but the beginning of Azerbaijan's corridor diplomacy. The ceasefire statement of November 10, 2020, which ended the war, recorded the gains of power accumulation and sowed the seeds of future de-escalation in a single document.

Chronology

Date	Event
July 2020	Border clashes in the Tovuz area, far from Karabakh; large demonstrations in Baku demanding war.
September 27, 2020	Start of Azerbaijan's large-scale operation; martial law declared in both countries.
October 2020	Three "humanitarian" ceasefires were announced with Russian, French and US mediation, and all three collapsed within hours or days; missile strikes on the city of Ganja on Azerbaijani soil; Azerbaijan advanced in the south along the Iranian border.
Early November	Battle of Shusha; capture of the symbolic city (November 8), which opened the road to Stepanakert.
9–November 10	Signing of the trilateral ceasefire statement by Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia; deployment of Russian peacekeepers.
January 2021	Trilateral meeting in Moscow and formation of a joint working group to unblock regional transport links.

Analysis

Diplomacy as buying time. The three October ceasefires, all accepted by Azerbaijan and immediately violated (each side accused the other), show that diplomacy during the war was a tool for managing international pressure, not for ending the war. Until it reached its decisive military objective, Shusha, Azerbaijan did not accept a durable ceasefire.

Article 9: peace in the service of victory. Articles 1 to 8 of the November 10 statement consolidated Azerbaijan's military gains: the return of the districts around Karabakh (Aghdam, Kalbajar and Lachin) and control of the captured areas. But Article 9, which provided for unblocking all economic and transport links and entrusted Armenia with guaranteeing the link between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, had an entirely

de-escalatory language. This same article later became the legal basis of the "Zangezur corridor" claims. Peace became an instrument for extending the gains of war.

The roles of Turkey, Israel and Russia. Three external powers played a role in this war, each pursuing its own dual policy. Turkey was Azerbaijan's open supporter but had no place in the final statement and only later took part, with Russia, in a joint monitoring center. Israel was an important arms supplier to Azerbaijan while maintaining formal relations with Armenia. Russia was Armenia's treaty ally in the Collective Security Treaty Organization but refrained from military intervention on its behalf, because the war took place in Karabakh and the surrounding areas internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan; ultimately, by mediating the ceasefire, it deployed its peacekeepers.

Iran's position. The Islamic Republic, along whose border Azerbaijan's advance continued and onto whose territory several shells and rockets fell, officially supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and offered a mediation plan that received no attention. The war showed that Iran, despite all its regional claims, had no decisive role in its immediate neighborhood; and this experience was one root of Iran's later sensitivity to the Zangezur corridor.

Implications for Theory

The 44-day war can be seen as a full instance of "Mearsheimerian power accumulation": exploiting an opportunity, relying on land power, seizing territory. But its final statement, emphasizing the unblocking of links and economic cooperation, used the language of defensive realism and even liberalism. With one document, Azerbaijan both won the war and defined the framework of future peace in its own favor. This is what we borrowed from Clausewitz and inverted in Chapter One: peace as the continuation of war by other means.

16.9. Second Close Study: Autumn 2023 — From Total Conquest to the First Joint Statement

Azerbaijan's September 2023 operation, which led to the surrender of Karabakh's Armenian forces in less than a day, ended a thirty-five-year conflict. What makes this period telling for our hypothesis is the speed with which Azerbaijan moved toward de-escalatory steps after total conquest.

Chronology

Date	Event	Logic
December 2022 – September 2023	Blockade of the Lachin corridor and severe shortages of food and medicine in Karabakh	Power-accumulating
Summer 2023	Continued peace talks in Brussels and Washington mediated by the EU and the United States	De-escalatory
19–September 20, 2023	"Anti-terrorist operation" and surrender of Karabakh's Armenian forces	Power-accumulating

Date	Event	Logic
Late September 2023	Exodus of more than a hundred thousand Armenians from Karabakh; Aliyev–Erdoğan meeting in Nakhchivan	Power-accumulating and consolidation
October 5, 2023	Aliyev skips the European Political Community summit in Granada where he was to meet Pashinyan	Distancing from Western mediation
December 7, 2023	First bilateral joint statement by Azerbaijan and Armenia without an external mediator; prisoner exchange and Armenian support for Azerbaijan's bid to host COP29	De-escalatory
2024	Start of border delimitation on parts of the common border; Armenia returns several villages to Azerbaijan	De-escalatory and consolidation
August 2025	The Washington agreement and initialing of the peace text	De-escalatory

Analysis

Changing the format of negotiation. After conquering Karabakh, Azerbaijan openly sought to change the format of negotiations: from European mediation, in which France was seen as Armenia's supporter, to direct bilateral dialogue. Skipping the Granada summit and issuing the December 2023 joint statement without a mediator demonstrated this change. After victory, Azerbaijan wanted to shape peace from a position of strength and without the interference of parties it considered biased.

De-escalation as legitimation. The December 2023 statement, in which Armenia supported Azerbaijan's hosting of the UN climate conference, had a dual function: it was a genuine step toward confidence-building, and it helped Azerbaijan, by hosting a global event, repair its image after the September operation, which had drawn widespread criticism. De-escalation became an instrument for legitimizing the outcome of power accumulation.

Armenia: accepting the new reality. Armenia's behavior in this period is also instructive. The Pashinyan government, disappointed by the lack of support from Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, moved toward accepting the new reality and defining Armenia's national interest within its internationally recognized borders. This shows that one side's dual policy can force the other side to redefine its own goals.

Implications for Theory

Autumn 2023 is another instance of the "strike-and-consolidate cycle" we saw in Israel's case. But in Azerbaijan's case the cycle is more complete: the strike achieved its ultimate objective (full control of territory) and consolidation was carried out in the language of

peace and cooperation. Theoretically, this case suggests that offensive and defensive realism may be not two rival theories but descriptions of two phases of a single cycle, with the proviso that in Azerbaijan's case the implicit threat of resuming the first phase was never abandoned.

16.10. Testing against the Two Theories

Waltz's Prediction

Waltz expected Azerbaijan, having recovered its occupied territories and thus achieved sufficient security, to settle for preserving the status quo. But the 2023 operation (beyond the 2020 agreement), the advances into Armenian territory and the discourse of "Western Azerbaijan" are inconsistent with this prediction.

Mearsheimer's Prediction

The military part of Azerbaijan's behavior is well consistent with Mearsheimer's theory: exploiting opportunity (Russia's weakness after the Ukraine war), relying on land power to seize territory and using blackmail to obtain concessions. But Mearsheimer cannot explain why Azerbaijan, at the peak of its military superiority, pursued the corridor not by force but through an agreement mediated by the United States and with acceptance of Armenian sovereignty over the route.

Verdict

Azerbaijan is an example of "compressed and overlapping sequence": war and peace not in two separate periods but in five continuous and intertwined years, in which each military phase changed the conditions of negotiation and each negotiating phase consolidated the military gains.

16.11. Table of Azerbaijan's Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
Karabakh	Accepting the 2020 Russian-brokered ceasefire	The 44-day war; the September 2023 operation	2020–2023
Armenia	The Washington agreement and initialing of the peace text	Advances into Armenian territory; the "Western Azerbaijan" discourse	2021–2025
Transit	Zangezur corridor and the Trump Route as a peace project	Territorial link with Nakhchivan and Turkey	2020–2025
Europe	Energy diplomacy and COP29	Using gas to neutralize Western criticism of the 2023 operation	2022–2024
Israel	Economic and energy cooperation	Arms purchases and security ties on Iran's border	Entire period
Iran	Maintaining diplomatic	Alliance with Israel and Turkey;	2020–2026

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
	relations and joining regional meetings	ignoring Iran's red line	
Russia	Accepting Russian peacekeepers in 2020	Peacekeepers' exit and reduced Russian influence	2020–2025

Chapter Seventeen: The United Arab Emirates — "Little Sparta" and the Diplomacy of Normalization

17.1. Structural Position

The United Arab Emirates, a federation of seven emirates formed in 1971, with a citizen population of about one million and a total population of about ten million (most of them foreign workers and residents), is by traditional realist standards a small state. Yet over the past two decades the UAE has become one of the most active and ambitious actors in the region. Its sources of power are Abu Dhabi's oil wealth and its huge investment funds, Dubai's position as the region's financial, commercial, logistical and tourism hub, a small but well-trained and well-equipped army with operational experience in several wars, and a network of ports and bases along the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

The axis of decision-making in the UAE is Mohammed bin Zayed, who for years directed foreign policy as crown prince of Abu Dhabi and has been head of state since May 2022. Jim Mattis, the former US defense secretary, called the UAE "Little Sparta" because of the combat readiness of its forces. The nickname, which carries both praise and warning, expresses the military ambition of a state far smaller than its aspirations.

The UAE has been given its own chapter in this book because perhaps no country in the region has pursued the two logics as clearly in two overlapping periods: a period of "active militarism" (roughly 2011–2019) and a period of "economic diplomacy and normalization" (from about 2019). Yet, as we shall see, even in the second period the power-accumulating share did not disappear; only its form changed.

17.2. The UAE's Strategic Ideology: Opposition to Political Islam

To understand UAE foreign policy, one must start from its ideological point of departure. The UAE leadership, especially after the Arab Spring, regards political Islam, and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, as the most important threat to regional stability and the survival of the Gulf monarchies. This view is rooted in domestic experience: in the 2010s the UAE arrested and tried a group of activists linked to "Al-Islah," the local branch of the Brotherhood.

This ideological opposition had two consequences for foreign policy. First, it set the UAE against the Qatar–Turkey axis, which supported Brotherhood currents. Second, it led the UAE to support "anti-Islamist" forces in other countries, even when these were military men or local armed groups. This ideological logic, invisible to structural realism, was one of the principal drivers of the power-accumulating share of UAE policy.

17.3. The Power-Accumulating Logic

A) Egypt (2013)

Together with Saudi Arabia, the UAE was among the main supporters of Mohamed Morsi's overthrow in July 2013 and afterward gave extensive financial aid to Egypt's new government. This support has continued to recent years, including an investment agreement of about thirty-five billion dollars in the "Ras El-Hekma" area in February 2024, which at a critical moment relieved Egypt's economy of severe foreign-exchange pressure. UAE support for Egypt has been simultaneously an instrument of ideological influence (countering the Brotherhood) and of economic influence.

B) Libya

The UAE was a principal backer of Khalifa Haftar and the "Libyan National Army" in the east of the country. UN expert reports repeatedly pointed to violations of the Libya arms embargo by several countries, including the UAE. In 2019–2020 Haftar's offensive on Tripoli was halted by Turkish intervention in support of the Tripoli government. Libya became an arena of direct rivalry between the UAE–Egypt axis and the Turkey–Qatar axis.

C) Yemen

From 2015 the UAE was the principal partner of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and, unlike Saudi Arabia, which relied mainly on air power, deployed ground forces in southern Yemen. The UAE trained and equipped extensive local forces, including those that later became the backbone of the "Southern Transitional Council," a separatist current at odds with the Saudi-backed Yemeni government. The UAE also established a presence on the islands of Socotra and Perim near the Bab el-Mandeb. In 2019 the UAE announced the withdrawal of most of its forces from Yemen, but its influence continued through local forces.

D) The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea

In the 2010s the UAE built a network of port and military facilities along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, including a base at Assab in Eritrea used in the Yemen war and later dismantled, and investment in the port of Berbera in Somaliland. Emirati port companies operate in dozens of ports in Africa and Asia. This "geopolitics of ports" combines commercial logic with the logic of strategic influence.

E) Sudan

After the outbreak of Sudan's civil war in April 2023 between the Sudanese army and the "Rapid Support Forces," numerous international reports, including those of UN experts and reputable media, accused the UAE of supplying weapons to the Rapid Support Forces. The UAE has denied these accusations. In March 2025 the Sudanese government brought

a case against the UAE at the International Court of Justice, which the Court dismissed in May 2025 for lack of jurisdiction.

17.4. The De-escalatory Logic

A) The Turn of 2019–2021

From around 2019 the UAE openly changed the priorities of its foreign policy. Reducing its military presence in Yemen, maritime talks with Iran after the 2019 tanker attacks, and then the announcement of the "Principles of the Next Fifty Years" in September 2021, emphasizing the priority of the economy and good relations with neighbors, were signs of this turn. Anwar Gargash, diplomatic adviser to the UAE president, spoke repeatedly of the need for "de-escalation" and "zero problems."

B) The Abraham Accords and the Free Trade Agreement with Israel

In August 2020 the UAE became the first Arab country since Jordan to normalize with Israel. In May 2022 the two countries signed a "Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement," Israel's first free trade agreement with an Arab country. Even after October 7 and the Gaza war, the UAE, despite sharp criticism of Israel's conduct, did not sever diplomatic relations.

C) Reconciliation with Former Rivals

- **Turkey:** Mohammed bin Zayed's visit to Ankara in November 2021 and the announcement of a ten-billion-dollar investment fund in Turkey, after years of rivalry in Libya, Syria and the Horn of Africa.
- **Qatar:** joining the Al-Ula Declaration (January 2021) and gradual normalization of relations.
- **Iran:** returning an ambassador to Tehran in August 2022 and keeping Dubai as one of Iran's most important trade gateways.
- **Syria:** reopening its embassy in Damascus in 2018 and hosting Bashar al-Assad in March 2022, his first visit to an Arab country since the start of the civil war.

D) Mediation

Since late 2022 the UAE has mediated in several rounds of prisoner-of-war exchanges between Russia and Ukraine, through which hundreds of prisoners have been released. This role, played while maintaining extensive trade and financial relations with Russia and close security cooperation with the United States, is another example of "connectedness to everyone."

E) Global Diplomacy

Hosting the UN climate conference (COP28) at the end of 2023, joining BRICS from the start of 2024 and announcing a very large investment commitment in the United States in

2025 show the UAE's effort to become a global actor with simultaneous ties to East and West.

17.5. Linking the Two Logics: The UAE as a "Network State"

In the UAE's case, the two logics are linked through a single network. The same funds, port companies, logistics networks and financial ties that are instruments of economic diplomacy and de-escalation are also instruments of strategic influence and support for local allies. A port built in the Horn of Africa is both a commercial investment and a potential base of influence. A large investment in Egypt is both economic aid and a guarantee of political loyalty.

This feature can be called the "network state": a state that derives its power not from territory or population but from its position in global financial, commercial and logistical networks. In such a state the boundary between de-escalation and power accumulation is blurred, because both draw on the same instrument, the network.

17.6. Close Study: January 2022 — The Houthi Attack on Abu Dhabi

On January 17, 2022, the Houthis attacked oil facilities in the Musaffah area and the grounds of Abu Dhabi International Airport with drones and missiles, killing three people. Further attacks followed in the next days, some of which were intercepted. This was the first time the Houthis had successfully struck the UAE capital.

The context was the advance in early January 2022 of the UAE-backed "Giants Brigades" against the Houthis in Yemen's Shabwa province. In other words, the attack was a response to the power-accumulating share of UAE policy, at a time when the UAE was trying to present itself as a country focused on the economy and de-escalation.

The UAE's response was also dual. On one hand, it asked the United States to redesignate the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization, strengthened its air defenses, and the United States sent a destroyer and fighter jets to support the UAE. On the other, the UAE did not sever relations with Iran and a few months later, in August 2022, returned its ambassador to Tehran. This episode showed that yesterday's power-accumulating share (Yemen) could become today's vulnerability (an attack on the capital), and that the state must manage this vulnerability through more de-escalation (with Iran) and greater reliance on its patron (the United States).

17.7. The UAE in the 2026 War

In the 2026 war the UAE was one of the countries that endured the largest number of Iranian attacks, with its infrastructure and residential areas targeted. According to reports, the UAE, together with Saudi Arabia, asked the United States to continue military pressure on Iran; but at the same time, in May 2026, together with Qatar and Saudi Arabia

it asked Trump to give negotiations more time. This behavior is the full embodiment of dual logic: support for weakening a rival and, simultaneously, avoidance of a war that would wreck the UAE's stability-based economy.

The 2026 war showed the UAE that the "Dubai model," an open economy based on security and international trust, is highly vulnerable to regional war. This vulnerability will probably push the UAE in future to give more weight to the logic of de-escalation, without abandoning the power-accumulating share, especially in air defense and its alliance with the United States.

17.8. Second Close Study: Summer 2019 — Leaving Yemen, Talking to Iran, Confronting an Ally

The summer of 2019 was a turning point in UAE foreign policy. In these few months the UAE made three simultaneous moves that at first sight seem inconsistent: reducing its military presence in Yemen, talking to Iran after the tanker attacks, and supporting southern Yemeni forces against the government backed by its principal ally, Saudi Arabia.

Chronology

Date	Event	Logic
May 12, 2019	Sabotage of four tankers near the port of Fujairah	Threat
June 2019	Attacks on two tankers in the Gulf of Oman and Iran's downing of a US drone; in its report to the UN on the Fujairah incident, the UAE did not name Iran directly	Caution
July 2019	Announcement of the reduction of UAE forces in Yemen	De-escalatory
July 30, 2019	UAE–Iran maritime border security meeting in Tehran, the first of its kind in several years	De-escalatory
August 10, 2019	The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council takes control of Aden and expels Yemeni government forces	Power-accumulating
August 29, 2019	UAE air strikes on Yemeni government forces near Aden; the UAE called them "terrorist groups"	Power-accumulating
November 5, 2019	The "Riyadh Agreement" between the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council, mediated by Saudi Arabia	De-escalatory

Analysis

Visible reduction, hidden retention. The UAE reduced its troop presence in Yemen but retained its influence through the local forces it had trained and equipped. The Southern Transitional Council's takeover of Aden, only weeks after the announced drawdown, showed that the UAE's "exit" meant not disengagement but a shift from direct

presence to indirect influence. This is exactly the pattern of "low-cost power accumulation" that the region's states turned to after experiencing costly direct wars.

Talking to Iran without breaking with America. The maritime border meeting with Iran in July 2019, at the height of US "maximum pressure" on Iran, showed that the UAE was willing to open a communication channel with Iran to reduce direct risk. But this channel never meant distancing from the United States. The UAE remained a US ally and a year later signed the Abraham Accords, which Tehran saw as a hostile act.

Duality within an alliance. The UAE's air strikes on Yemeni government forces, backed by Saudi Arabia, showed that dual policy is not only about rivals; within an alliance too, allies can be partners on one front and rivals on another. The "Riyadh Agreement" in November was an attempt to manage this conflict within the coalition, but the divergence of interests between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in southern Yemen continued in later years.

Implications for Theory

The summer of 2019 shows that UAE dual policy had three simultaneous levels: with a rival (Iran), limited de-escalation while maintaining the anti-Iran alliance; with an ally (Saudi Arabia), cooperation at the macro level and rivalry in southern Yemen; and on the ground (Yemen), reduced direct presence and increased indirect influence. Neither structural theory has the tools to explain this three-level combination.

17.9. Testing against the Two Theories

Waltz's Prediction

Waltz expected a small state like the UAE to secure itself by sheltering under a great power's umbrella and avoiding adventurism. The first part is correct: the UAE hosts a US base and is a close US security partner. But the interventions in Yemen, Libya and Sudan, none necessary for the UAE's survival, are inconsistent with this prediction.

Mearsheimer's Prediction

Mearsheimer regards small states as secondary actors that usually bandwagon with the stronger power. The UAE bandwagoned with the United States, but at the same time maintained extensive ties with China and Russia and behaved in its periphery like a regional power with independent projects of influence. Mearsheimer's theory has no tools to explain this "power-seeking of a small state."

Verdict

The UAE is an example of "geographic and ideological duality" and of "network duality": de-escalation with established states (Israel, Iran, Turkey, Qatar), hard rivalry in collapsed states (Yemen, Libya, Sudan) and lasting ideological confrontation with political Islam; and all this through a single network of financial, commercial and military instruments.

17.10. Table of the UAE's Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-accumulating policy	Period
Israel	The Abraham Accords; free trade agreement	Using the tie to strengthen air defense and security technology	2020 onward
Iran	Return of the ambassador; Dubai as a trade gateway	Support for US military pressure in 2026; security alliance with the United States	2022–2026
Turkey and Qatar	Reconciliation and investment	Earlier rivalry in Libya, Syria and the Horn of Africa	2017–2022
Yemen	Withdrawal of most forces in 2019	Support for southern forces and presence on islands	2015 onward
Egypt	Extensive aid and investment	Support for Morsi's overthrow and countering the Brotherhood	2013 onward
Libya	Participation in diplomatic processes	Support for Haftar	2014–2020
Sudan	Declared support for peace processes	Accusations of supporting the Rapid Support Forces (denied by the UAE)	2023 onward
Russia and Ukraine	Mediation in prisoner exchanges	Maintaining financial and trade ties with Russia	2022 onward
World	COP28; joining BRICS	Geopolitics of ports in the Red Sea and Africa	Entire period

Chapter Eighteen: Control and Supplementary Cases — Oman, Egypt and Pakistan

18.1. Why Control Cases?

The previous seven chapters showed that Israel, the Islamic Republic, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Azerbaijan and the UAE have all pursued strategic dual policy. But a hypothesis that every case confirms without exception is open to the charge of being unfalsifiable, the very charge this book leveled at Mearsheimer. This chapter therefore addresses cases in which dual policy is either absent or present only in incomplete form, and asks why. The answer clarifies the necessary conditions for dual policy and makes the hypothesis more precise.

18.2. The Control Case: Oman and "Active Neutrality"

For the book's hypothesis to be falsifiable, we must show that there is a state in the region that has not pursued dual policy and explain why. Oman is the best control case.

Since the reign of Sultan Qaboos (1970–2020) and then Sultan Haitham, Oman has pursued a policy often called "active neutrality" or "quiet diplomacy." Its main features are:

- Maintaining relations with Iran even when other GCC states severed theirs (Oman did not cut ties with Iran after 2016).
- Avoiding military participation in the Yemen coalition and maintaining a channel of dialogue with the Houthis.
- Hosting the secret US–Iran talks that led to the JCPOA (from 2013), rounds of negotiations in 2025 and February 2026, and mediating the US–Houthi ceasefire of May 2025.
- Avoiding support for armed groups in other countries and regional ambitions.
- Not joining the 2017 blockade of Qatar.

Oman scores very low on the "duality index" of Chapter Nine. The question is why. The author's answer points to three factors:

- **Limited capacity:** Oman has far less wealth than its Gulf neighbors and a small army. It lacks the resources to pursue the "power-accumulating" share of dual policy.
- **Absence of regional ambition:** Oman's leadership has never claimed leadership of the Arab or Islamic world. Ibadism, followed by most Omanis, has kept Oman away from Shia–Sunni sectarian rivalries.
- **Geographic position:** Oman lies on the margin of the region's main rivalries and beside the Strait of Hormuz. Stable relations with Iran, on the other side of the strait, are vital to Oman's security.

The important conclusion of this comparison is that dual policy is not an inevitable feature of all the region's states but a feature of states that have both regional "capability" and "ambition." This finding refines the hypothesis: dual policy is the strategy of "ambitious regional powers in a penetrated system," not of all states.

18.3. Supplementary Case: Egypt and "Border Mediation"

Egypt, the most populous Arab country, has since 2013 pursued a partially dual policy:

- **De-escalatory logic:** continuous mediation between Israel and Hamas, maintaining the peace treaty with Israel, energy cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean and hosting the Sharm el-Sheikh summit for the Gaza ceasefire (October 2025).
- **Power-accumulating logic:** participation in the blockade of Qatar, support for Khalifa Haftar in Libya and the 2020 declaration of the Sirte–Jufra "red line," which carried the threat of direct military intervention, and a hard line against Ethiopia's Grand Dam on the Nile.

But because of its deep economic crisis and dependence on Gulf and IMF financing, Egypt has lacked the capacity to pursue the power-accumulating share of dual policy at the level of other regional powers. Egypt scores in the middle on the duality index and is an example of "situational" rather than strategic duality. This case also confirms that material capacity is a necessary condition for full dual policy.

18.4. Pakistan: A Nuclear Power as Mediator

Pakistan, though not part of the Middle East in the strict sense, played a decisive role in regional equations in 2025 and 2026. In September 2025 it signed the strategic mutual defense agreement with Saudi Arabia, and in the 2026 war, because of its simultaneous relations with Tehran, Riyadh and Washington, it became the principal mediator between the United States and Iran. In January 2024, after Iran's strike on its territory, Pakistan responded with a counter-strike on targets inside Iran, and a few days later the two countries de-escalated.

Pakistan is an example of a state that is simultaneously the "security guarantor" of one party (Saudi Arabia) and a "mediator" among others. This combination, which seems contradictory from the perspective of structural realism, is entirely intelligible from the perspective of the book's hypothesis: Pakistan raised its standing in regional equations with a power-accumulating share (nuclear deterrence and the defense pact) and a de-escalatory share (mediation).

18.5. Common Patterns across the Seven Cases

Placing the seven cases side by side reveals several common patterns:

A) De-escalation with States, Power Accumulation in Vacuums

Most countries have de-escalated with rival states but continued military and proxy rivalry in collapsed or fragile states (Syria, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan). Power vacuums are the main arena of the offensive logic.

B) De-escalation with the Distant, Power Accumulation against the Near

Israel makes peace with the UAE and Kazakhstan and fights in Lebanon and Gaza. Iran reconciles with Saudi Arabia and expands its influence in Iraq and Yemen. This pattern is consistent with the factor of "geographic proximity" in Walt's theory, but contrary to his prediction, proximity leads not to balancing but to intervention.

C) Mediation as a Source of Power

Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have all used mediation to increase their international weight. Mediation in today's Middle East is not a sign of neutrality but an instrument of influence.

D) Institutional Division of Labor

In Iran (the foreign ministry and the IRGC), Turkey (the foreign ministry, the intelligence organization and the defense industry), Qatar (diplomacy, Al Jazeera and the investment fund) and the UAE (the foreign ministry, the armed forces and the security apparatus), the two logics are implemented through different institutional channels.

E) The Role of Extra-Regional Powers

Almost all major de-escalatory acts have been carried out with the mediation or support of an extra-regional power (the United States in the Abraham Accords, Washington and Gaza; China in Beijing; Russia in Karabakh 2020). This means that the "penetrated" structure of the region is a necessary condition of de-escalation, while power accumulation often occurs in the shadow of, or in spite of, the extra-regional power.

Chapter Nineteen: The Great Powers Facing Dual Policy — The United States, Russia and China

19.1. The Question of This Chapter

The previous chapters examined dual policy from the perspective of regional states. But dual policy is possible only if the great powers tolerate it, or even benefit from it. This chapter asks how the United States, Russia and China each came to terms with the dual policy of regional states, and why none of them could, or would, force regional states to choose between the two logics.

This question is especially important for the critique of structural realism. Both Waltz and Mearsheimer regard the great powers as the principal actors of the system. If great powers do not force smaller states to choose, either their power is less than the theory supposes or their interest lies in tolerating duality. This chapter shows that both are true.

19.2. The United States: The Patron That Made Duality Possible

A) Three Functions of the United States in Its Allies′ Dual Policy

The American presence in the Middle East performed three different functions in its allies′ dual policy:

- **Security umbrella:** the US military presence (bases in Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain) allowed allies to de-escalate with their rivals without fear of an existential threat. Saudi Arabia could reconcile with Iran because it was sure that if the reconciliation failed, America would not leave it alone.
- **Mediator and guarantor:** most major de-escalations (the Abraham Accords, the Gaza and Lebanon ceasefires, the Washington agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia) occurred with American mediation or guarantee. America both made the de-escalatory share possible and gave it credibility.
- **Source of power accumulation:** sales of advanced weapons (fighters, air defense systems, precision munitions) to allies supplied the instruments of the power-accumulating share of their policy. American military support for Israel in the wars of 2023 to 2026 is a clear example of this function.

The United States was therefore simultaneously the backer of both shares of its allies′ dual policy. From the perspective of structural realism this is paradoxical: why should a great power help its allies with both peace and war at once?

B) Why Did America Tolerate Duality?

Several reasons can be identified:

- **America's own duality:** as shown in Chapter Ten, US policy in the region was itself dual. A state that negotiates, sanctions and attacks at the same time cannot demand single-logic behavior from its allies.
- **Lower cost for America:** allies' dual policy reduced America's security burden. When Saudi Arabia reconciled with Iran or Qatar talked to Hamas, America was spared direct involvement. This is Mearsheimer's logic of "buck-passing," but in reverse: the great power passed responsibility to its regional allies.
- **Communication channels:** allies' duality provided channels America itself lacked. America talked with Hamas and the Taliban through Qatar, with Iran through Oman and Qatar, and with parts of the Syrian opposition through Turkey.
- **Limits of power:** even had America wanted to force its allies to choose, it lacked the full capacity to do so. The Qatar blockade showed that even when the US president initially supported pressure on Qatar, America's security institutions prevented it, because Qatar was indispensable to American interests.

C) Where Did America Impose a Choice?

In several cases America tried to force allies or rivals to choose:

- **Iran and the JCPOA:** the 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA and maximum pressure were an attempt to force Iran to choose between being a "normal state" and a "revolutionary republic." In the short term this led to an intensification of Iran's power-accumulating behavior, and in the long term, together with the wars of 2025 and 2026, it sharply reduced Iran's regional capacity.
- **Turkey and the S-400:** expelling Turkey from the F-35 program after its purchase of the Russian system was an attempt to impose a choice between NATO and Russia. Turkey did not comply and kept the Russian system, but later obtained another concession (F-16 fighters) by approving Sweden's NATO membership.
- **Saudi Arabia and the Abraham Accords:** the second Trump administration made a civil nuclear agreement with Saudi Arabia conditional on Riyadh joining the Abraham Accords. This is an attempt to force Saudi Arabia into an explicit choice. Its outcome is not yet clear.
- **Qatar and Hamas:** American political pressure on Qatar in 2024 to expel Hamas leaders, which led Qatar to announce a temporary suspension of mediation, was a short-lived attempt abandoned because of the need to continue negotiations.

These cases show that America can impose a choice only when the cost of not choosing is very high for the regional state and no alternative exists. Where the regional state had

alternatives (Russia for Turkey, China for Saudi Arabia), American pressure was less effective.

19.3. Russia: An Actor That Was Itself Dual

A) Syria as a Laboratory

After its military entry into Syria in 2015, Russia was perhaps the most skilful practitioner of dual policy in the region. Moscow was simultaneously:

- Assad's military ally and the field partner of the Islamic Republic;
- In a deconfliction arrangement with Israel, tolerating Israeli strikes on Iranian targets;
- A partner in the Astana process with Turkey, which supported Assad's opponents;
- Coordinating oil production with Saudi Arabia in "OPEC+";
- Maintaining a communication channel with the Kurds in north-east Syria.

This network of crosscutting relations made Russia the "arbiter" of many developments in Syria without paying the costs of a dominant power.

B) The Russian Model for Regional States

Russia's behavior also became a model for regional states. Turkey, the UAE and Saudi Arabia learned that one can compete with a great power on one front and cooperate with it on another. Russia not only tolerated the dual policy of regional states but welcomed it, since every state distancing itself from complete dependence on America was an opportunity for Russian influence.

C) Attrition after Ukraine

After the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia's capacity to play this role declined. Military resources were moved from Syria to Ukraine, Russian peacekeepers left Karabakh ahead of schedule and Assad finally fell in December 2024. Yet even in this period Russia benefited from its relations with regional states: it bought Iranian drones for the Ukraine war, used the UAE as a financial and trade hub to circumvent sanctions and maintained its energy and trade relationship with Turkey. Regional states, in turn, benefited from Russia's weakness: Azerbaijan to consolidate its victory in Karabakh, Turkey to expand its influence in Syria.

19.4. China: Economic Power without Security Responsibility

A) The Strategy of "Friendship with All"

China's policy in the Middle East has rested on "friendship with all." China is simultaneously the largest buyer of Iranian oil (mainly through informal channels after sanctions) and one of the largest trading partners of Saudi Arabia and the UAE; it has had

technology ties with Israel and given diplomatic support to the Palestinians. In 2016 and 2022 China signed "comprehensive strategic partnership" documents with several regional states.

B) China as a Facilitator of Duality

The presence of China as a great economic power that appears neutral provided regional states with a new option. Saudi Arabia could cooperate with China for capital and technology and with America for security at the same time. Iran could use "Look East" as leverage in negotiations with the West. The 2023 Beijing agreement also showed that China could play a role in de-escalation.

C) China's Limits

But the wars of 2025 and 2026 revealed the limits of China's role. China had no active security role in these wars and confined itself to calls for dialogue. Iran's attacks on Saudi Arabia, despite China's mediation of the Beijing agreement, showed that China's diplomatic guarantees lack security backing. Regional states learned from this that China can be an economic partner and diplomatic facilitator but not a substitute for the American security umbrella. This lesson will probably shape future dual policy: economy with China and security with America, and de-escalation with rivals with the help of both.

19.5. A Tripolar Structure and the Room for Maneuver of Middle Powers

Placing the experience of the three great powers side by side yields a theoretical conclusion. In the post-2011 period the Middle East was exposed to the simultaneous presence of three great powers, none of which alone had the capacity or will to impose regional order. This situation can be called "multiple penetration."

Under multiple penetration, regional states gain room for maneuver from great-power rivalry. Each time one great power applies pressure, a regional state can turn to another. This room for maneuver is the structural condition of dual policy. If only one great power were present in the region, it could probably force states to choose. If no great power were present, regional states would probably turn to a purely offensive logic (to fill the vacuum) or a purely defensive one (to survive in an environment without a patron).

19.6. Implications for Theory

This chapter shows that the dual policy of regional states is largely the product of a structure of "multiple penetration." On one hand, this finding confirms the structuralists' claim that structure shapes behavior; on the other, it shows that the relevant structure is neither Waltz's "anarchy" nor Mearsheimer's "unbalanced multipolarity" but a two-layer structure in which a regional system is embedded within the rivalry of several great powers.

Waltz and Mearsheimer both focused on one layer, great-power rivalry. A theory able to explain the behavior of middle powers must explain the interaction of the two layers. "Dual realism," formulated in Chapter Twenty, is an attempt in this direction.

19.7. Summary Table

Great power	Function in the de-escalatory share	Function in the power-accumulating share	Cases of imposing a choice
United States	Mediator and guarantor (Abraham, Gaza, Lebanon, Caucasus)	Supplying arms and a security umbrella; direct participation in wars	Iran (JCPOA); Turkey (F-35); Saudi Arabia (normalization condition)
Russia	Partner in the Astana process; mediator in Karabakh 2020	Military support for Assad; buying Iranian drones	Almost none; Russia benefited from others' duality
China	Mediator of the Beijing agreement	Source of capital and technology; buyer of Iranian oil	None; China avoided a security role

Chapter Twenty: Synthesis — The Illegibility of the Two Theories and the Proposal of "Dual Realism"

20.1. Returning to the Hypothesis

The book's hypothesis was that over the past fifteen years the states of the Middle East have pursued the defensive and offensive logics simultaneously and deliberately, and that neither Waltz's nor Mearsheimer's theory alone therefore explains their behavior. We can now weigh the evidence against the three subsidiary hypotheses and the three rival predictions.

20.2. Assessing the Subsidiary Hypotheses

First Subsidiary Hypothesis: Simultaneity

In all seven cases, de-escalatory and power-accumulating policies occurred in overlapping time frames. The most prominent examples: 2020 (the Abraham Accords, the Karabakh war and the assassination of Fakhrizadeh), 2023 (the Beijing agreement, the October 7 attack and the Karabakh operation), autumn 2025 (the Gaza ceasefire, the Doha strike and the Saudi–Pakistani pact). Even in Saudi Arabia's case, which appears to have two distinct phases, the de-escalatory phase overlapped with large-scale arms purchases, the defense pact with Pakistan and private support for military pressure on Iran. **The hypothesis is confirmed.**

Second Subsidiary Hypothesis: Mutual Reinforcement

In most cases the two logics reinforced each other: Israel's normalization built the air defense network; the JCPOA and the Beijing agreement gave Iran breathing space; Turkey's military power and Qatar's hosting were preconditions of their mediation; Azerbaijan's military victory was the precondition of the Washington agreement. But in some cases, especially after 2023, excessive power accumulation destroyed de-escalation (the Gaza war and the halt of Saudi normalization; Iran's attacks on the Gulf and the collapse of its neighborhood policy). **The hypothesis is confirmed with a qualification: mutual reinforcement holds up to a "threshold," beyond which the two logics destroy each other.**

Third Subsidiary Hypothesis: Institutional Division of Labor

In Iran, Turkey, Qatar and the UAE there is clear evidence of an institutional division of labor. In Israel and Azerbaijan the two logics are directed more from a single decision center (the prime minister or president). **The hypothesis is partially confirmed: institutional division of labor is one mechanism of duality, but not a necessary condition of it.**

20.3. Assessing the Rival Predictions

- **The conditional theory (sequence):** if states had applied the logics in sequence rather than simultaneously, the conditional theory would suffice. The evidence of simultaneity rejects this, although in the cases of Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia there is an element of sequence.
- **Propagandistic de-escalation:** if de-escalation were mere cover, it would have had no real consequences. But the Abraham Accords, the JCPOA, the Beijing agreement, the end of the Qatar blockade and the Washington agreement had real and lasting consequences (embassies, trade, inspections, border changes).
- **Reactive power accumulation:** if power accumulation were purely defensive, it would occur only in response to immediate threats. But the seizure of Hermon, the 2023 Karabakh operation, Turkey's presence in Libya and Somalia and the expansion of Iran's proxy network before 2023 were pre-emptive, not reactive.

20.4. Where Does Waltz Become Illegible?

Waltz's claim	Middle Eastern evidence
States settle for sufficient security	Israel, Azerbaijan and Turkey continued to expand after achieving sufficient security
States balance against the superior power	Arab states normalized with Israel, the strongest military power in the region
Aggressive behavior is a deviation	Aggressive behavior is present in all cases; the deviation has become the rule
Revolutionary states are socialized	The Islamic Republic's socialization occurred in only one institution
Nuclear deterrence brings stability	Iran's nuclear threshold brought neither stability nor protection from attack
The state is unitary	The region's states are divided or personalist

20.5. Where Does Mearsheimer Become Illegible?

Mearsheimer's claim	Middle Eastern evidence
De-escalation and appeasement are irrational	All the region's powers have de-escalated extensively and durably
Land power is the dominant form of power	The region's wars have been fought with missiles, drones, proxies and assassination (except Karabakh)
Cooperation with rivals is impossible	Turkey with Russia and Iran in Astana; Saudi Arabia with Iran in Beijing; Qatar with everyone
Small states are secondary	Qatar and the UAE became principal actors in the region

Mearsheimer's claim	Middle Eastern evidence
The hegemon seeks to dominate the region	No claimant to hegemony sought conquest or full domination; network influence replaced domination
Institutions have no effect	Multilateral agreements and frameworks (the JCPOA, Abraham, Astana) genuinely changed behavior

20.6. A Theoretical Proposal: "Dual Realism"

On the basis of the book's findings, the author proposes a framework called "dual realism," or "simultaneous combined realism," to explain the behavior of regional powers in penetrated systems. Its principles are as follows:

First Principle: Security and Power Are Complements, Not Substitutes

In regional systems where threats are multilayered, states secure themselves not by choosing between "sufficient" and "maximal" but by combining "selective de-escalation" and "selective power accumulation." The key question is not "how much power does the state want?" but "with whom, where and through which channel does the state de-escalate, and with whom, where and through which channel does it accumulate power?"

Second Principle: Strategic Ambiguity Is an Asset

States deliberately send contradictory signals to keep rivals uncertain. This ambiguity raises the cost of balancing against them and preserves the possibility of negotiation.

Third Principle: Power Vacuums Are the Arena of the Offensive Logic

In fragile states the offensive logic prevails; in relations among established states the defensive and de-escalatory logic is more feasible. The key variable is therefore not the "distribution of power" at the system level but the "distribution of fragility" at the regional level.

Fourth Principle: The Extra-Regional Power Is a Condition of De-escalation

Major de-escalations become possible through the mediation of an extra-regional power. The regional structure is therefore not pure anarchy but "patron-anarchy."

Fifth Principle: The Duality Threshold

Duality is sustainable and beneficial up to a threshold. Beyond it, that is, when power accumulation becomes so extensive that rivals see it as an existential threat, de-escalatory signals lose their credibility and the state faces Waltzian "punishment." The collapse of the Islamic Republic's axis of resistance after 2023 is an example of crossing this threshold.

Sixth Principle: Regime Security Takes Precedence over State Security

Drawing on Steven David and Mohammed Ayoob, dual realism accepts that in many states of the region the survival of the regime or leader, not of the abstract state, is the main goal. Duality is often a response to two different needs of the regime: economic legitimacy (which demands de-escalation) and identity legitimacy (which demands displays of power).

20.7. The Duality Matrix: A Tool for Analysis

To turn "dual realism" into a practical tool for analysts and policymakers, the author proposes a "duality matrix." The matrix classifies a state's behavior along two dimensions: the type of counterpart (established state, fragile state, non-state actor, extra-regional power) and the type of domain (security, economic, diplomatic, ideological). In each cell, the analyst specifies whether the dominant logic is de-escalatory or power-accumulating.

Counterpart	Security domain	Economic domain	Diplomatic domain	Ideological domain
Established rival state	Usually power-accumulating (deterrence)	Often de-escalatory (trade)	Variable (reconciliation or rupture)	Usually power-accumulating (competing narratives)
Fragile state	Power-accumulating (proxy or direct influence)	Power-accumulating (influence-seeking investment)	De-escalatory in appearance (support for the central government)	Power-accumulating (support for aligned groups)
Non-state actor	Dual (support or suppression)	Limited	De-escalatory (hosting and mediation)	Power-accumulating (identity ties)
Extra-regional power	De-escalatory (alliance or hedging)	De-escalatory (capital and markets)	De-escalatory (selective alignment)	Variable

This matrix summarizes the general pattern derived from the case studies. The main point is that no state applies a single logic in all cells. "Duality" is in fact the selective distribution of two logics across the cells of this matrix.

20.8. Testable Propositions for Future Research

From the framework of dual realism, the following testable propositions can be derived:

- **Proposition 1:** the greater a state's material capability and regional ambition, the more likely it is to pursue strategic dual policy. (Test case: comparing Oman and Qatar, or Egypt and Turkey.)

- **Proposition 2:** the greater the number of fragile states around a regional power, the larger the power-accumulating share of its policy.
- **Proposition 3:** major de-escalations among regional powers almost always occur with the mediation or guarantee of an extra-regional power.
- **Proposition 4:** the greater the weight of military and security institutions in a state's decision-making structure, the more likely it is to cross the "duality threshold."
- **Proposition 5:** states that cross the duality threshold face a coalition of rivals or intervention by an extra-regional power within two to five years.
- **Proposition 6:** in states where the two logics are directed from a single decision center, duality is more durable and less costly than in states where the two logics reside in two rival institutions.

Testing these propositions with event data (such as conflict and cooperation databases) and comparative studies of other regions could raise dual realism from a regional hypothesis to a more general theory.

20.9. Comparison with Other Regions

Although this book focuses on the Middle East, signs of dual policy can be seen in other regions:

- **India:** India's doctrine of "multi-alignment," under which Delhi simultaneously cooperates with the United States in the Quad, with Russia in arms and energy and with China in BRICS and the SCO, while in conflict with China on the Himalayan border, closely resembles dual policy.
- **Vietnam:** so-called "bamboo diplomacy," firm roots and flexible stems, in which Vietnam simultaneously maintains close party and economic ties with China and expands security cooperation with the United States, is another example.
- **Turkey across Eurasia:** as Chapter Fourteen showed, Turkey pursues dual policy not only in the Middle East but also between NATO and Russia.

These similarities suggest that dual realism may be not a feature unique to the Middle East but the general logic of the behavior of "middle powers" in an emerging multipolar international system. In a world no longer dominated by an unrivaled superpower, middle powers have ever greater opportunity and incentive to combine different logics.

20.10. Is Realism Dead?

This book's critique of Waltz and Mearsheimer should not be understood to mean that realism has been discredited. On the contrary, the Middle Eastern evidence shows that many of realism's core insights, the importance of power, the role of fear, the instability of alliances, the importance of survival and the logic of self-help, remain valid. What is wrong

is the assumption that state behavior is "single-logic," that states must be either security-seekers or power-seekers.

Dual realism can be seen as "a return to classical realism with the tools of structural realism": a return to the insight of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Kautilya and Morgenthau, who saw fear and ambition, diplomacy and force, as parts of a single whole; while retaining Waltz's and Mearsheimer's emphasis on the importance of structure, the distribution of power and environmental constraints. The result is a theory with both structural precision and historical complexity.

20.11. Implications for Policymaking

These findings have important implications for policymakers, especially in the United States and for the future of Iran:

- **First:** the de-escalatory signals of regional states should not be mistaken for a change in strategy. An agreement with a state may be part of its strategy of power accumulation.
- **Second:** to assess a state's intentions, one must look at both sets of behavior and the institutions implementing them simultaneously, not only at official diplomacy.
- **Third:** containing power vacuums in fragile states (Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Sudan) is the most important condition for reducing the offensive logic in the region.
- **Fourth:** for post-transition Iran, the main lesson is that a national and rational foreign policy must free itself from institutional duality (the foreign ministry and the IRGC). Duality directed from a single decision center in the service of national interest can be a smart strategy; duality directed from two rival centers with two different ideologies leads to the erosion of national resources and the isolation of the country.

20.12. Limitations of the Study and Future Horizons

- The events of 2026 are still unfolding, and it is too early for a final judgment on the consequences of the war and the fate of the Islamic Republic.
- Cases were selected for their strategic importance; studying other cases (Egypt, Oman, Jordan, Pakistan) in greater depth could test the generalisability of the findings.
- Quantitative measurement of duality, for example by constructing a "duality index" from events recorded in conflict and cooperation databases, could make the hypothesis more precise.

- Comparing the Middle East with other penetrated regional systems (South Asia, the Horn of Africa, the Balkans) could show whether "dual realism" is a feature of the Middle East or a more general rule about regional systems.

Chapter Twenty-One: Iran's Foreign Policy after Transition — From Institutional Duality to Smart Duality

21.1. Why This Chapter?

The previous chapters were analytical: they asked how the states of the Middle East behaved and why the theories of Waltz and Mearsheimer fail to explain that behavior. This final chapter is prescriptive. It asks what Iran, after the transition from the Islamic Republic, could learn from the region's experience of the past fifteen years and from the framework of "dual realism" if it wished to build a rational, national and effective foreign policy.

The chapter's point of departure is the diagnosis offered in Chapter Twelve. The problem of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy was not "duality" as such, since, as we have seen, almost all regional powers have acted dually. The problem was the particular form duality took in the Islamic Republic: an "institutional" duality between two rival centers of power with two different ideologies, whose power-accumulating share served not Iran's national interest but a transnational, ideological project. The result, as the wars of 2025 and 2026 showed, was the erosion of national resources, international isolation and, finally, the crossing of the "duality threshold."

The question of this chapter is how to move from this "destructive institutional duality" to "smart duality": a policy that, like those of the region's successful states, commands both the instruments of de-escalation and the instruments of deterrence, but directs both from a single accountable center in the service of the national interest.

21.2. Lessons from the Seven Cases

Each of the seven cases studied holds a lesson for the Iran of the future:

- **From Israel:** peace with distant countries can build strategic depth; but excessive power accumulation in the near neighborhood carries a heavy cost in legitimacy, even for the strongest military power in the region.
- **From the Islamic Republic (a negative lesson):** duality directed from two rival centers discredits de-escalatory signals and sooner or later crosses the threshold.
- **From Saudi Arabia:** a project of domestic economic modernization is the strongest incentive for de-escalation abroad. When a government's legitimacy is tied to prosperity, regional stability becomes a national interest.
- **From Turkey:** military power and an indigenous defense industry can be a ticket to the negotiating table, but only when they serve an active diplomacy.
- **From Qatar:** a state that is "indispensable" to everyone is safer than one that relies only on its own military force. Iran, positioned between the Persian Gulf, the Caspian

Sea, the Caucasus, Central Asia and South Asia, has a natural capacity to become "indispensable."

- **From Azerbaijan:** transit corridors are both economic and geopolitical instruments. A country at the center of a network of corridors gains durable influence.
- **From the UAE:** a "network state" that derives its power from its position in financial, commercial and logistical networks can wield influence far beyond its size.
- **From Oman (the control case):** active neutrality and a mediating role can bring durable security, provided the state avoids ideological ambitions.

21.3. Proposed Principles: The Doctrine of "Smart Duality"

On the basis of these lessons, the author proposes five principles for Iran's foreign policy after the transition:

First Principle: Unity of Command in Foreign Policy

Foreign and security policy must be directed from a single decision-making center, under the oversight of elected and accountable institutions. No military or security institution should have a parallel foreign policy. The armed forces must be placed under civilian and elected command, and any cross-border operation must require clear legal authorization. This principle is the most direct answer to the Islamic Republic's "institutional duality." Duality directed from one center is calculable and trustworthy; duality directed from two rival centers is not.

Second Principle: The National Interest as the Single Criterion

Both shares of foreign policy, de-escalation and deterrence, must be measured by a single criterion: Iran's national interest, comprising territorial security, the welfare of citizens and the country's international standing. No transnational, ideological or sectarian project should take precedence over this criterion. This does not mean abandoning cultural and historical ties with the Iranian world and with neighbors; it means defining those ties within the framework of the national interest and respect for the sovereignty of others.

Third Principle: Transparent and Defensive Deterrence

Iran, like any regional power, needs credible deterrence. But deterrence must have three characteristics:

- **Transparent:** the country's defense doctrine should be public and clear so that rivals can interpret it correctly. Strategic ambiguity, which earlier chapters treated as an asset of states, is useful only up to a point; excessive ambiguity feeds the security dilemma.

- **Defensive:** military capability should be designed to defend Iranian territory, not to project power through proxy groups. This means relying on conventional forces, air defense, naval defense and indigenous defense technologies.
- **Within international law:** the country's nuclear program must be entirely civilian, transparent and under full IAEA safeguards. Proposals such as participation in a regional nuclear fuel consortium, raised in past years, could both meet energy needs and build confidence.

Fourth Principle: Iran as an "Indispensable Node"

Instead of "military strategic depth," Iran should build "network strategic depth": a position in the region's transit, energy, trade and cultural networks that makes it indispensable to all. Examples of this potential include:

- The North–South Corridor linking India and South Asia through Iran to Russia and Europe.
- The port of Chabahar and access for Afghanistan and Central Asia to open waters.
- East–West transit routes between China, Turkey and Europe.
- Iran's role in the region's energy networks, from gas to electricity.
- Cultural and linguistic ties with the Persian-speaking world and the Iranian civilisational sphere.

A country at the center of these networks follows the same logic that Qatar and the UAE have pursued successfully, but with far greater demographic, geographic and civilisational weight.

Fifth Principle: Iran as Mediator

A future Iran with normal relations with all its neighbors could play a mediating role in the region's conflicts: in the Caucasus between Azerbaijan and Armenia, in Afghanistan, in Iraq and in the Persian Gulf. This role, impossible in the past because of the Islamic Republic's involvement in those conflicts, could greatly raise Iran's international standing.

21.4. The Duality Matrix for the Iran of the Future

Using the "duality matrix" of Chapter Twenty, the proposed policy for the Iran of the future can be mapped against each group of actors:

Counterpart	De-escalatory share	Deterrent share	Considerations
Persian Gulf states	Full normalization; a regional collective security mechanism; energy and trade cooperation	Maintaining naval defense and air defense capability	Resolving territorial disputes through dialogue and international law
Turkey	Expanding trade and transit; cooperation on corridors	Healthy competition for economic influence in the Caucasus and Iraq	Avoiding proxy rivalry

Counterpart	De-escalatory share	Deterrent share	Considerations
Azerbaijan and Armenia	Balanced relations with both; participation in corridors; a mediating role	Preserving the border with Armenia and transit rights	Cultural ties with Azerbaijan within respect for sovereignty
Iraq	Support for the central government and Iraqi sovereignty; economic and pilgrimage cooperation	No proxy armed groups	Helping to integrate or dissolve affiliated armed groups
Afghanistan and Central Asia	Transit, water, trade and a mediating role	Border security	Supporting the rights of minorities and refugees within a legal framework
Israel	A matter requiring a democratic and national decision; options range from normalization to limited relations	An end to military hostility and proxy operations	Requires a national dialogue on the Palestinian question and Iran′s interests
United States and Europe	Normalizing relations; lifting sanctions; attracting capital and technology	Preserving independence of decision-making	Avoiding one-sided security dependence
Russia and China	Balanced economic and energy cooperation	Avoiding joining military blocs	Revisiting unbalanced agreements

21.5. Challenges of the Transition

Realizing this doctrine faces serious challenges:

A) The Legacy of the Proxy Network

The armed groups the Islamic Republic built across the region will not disappear with the end of the regime. Some have independent interests, social bases and financial resources of their own. A post-transition Iranian government must work with the governments of Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen and with the international community to manage this legacy: a complete end to financial and military support, cooperation in disarmament and integration programs, and avoidance of a sudden security vacuum.

B) Inherited Security Structures

Parts of the former military and security institutions may resist change. Reforming the structure of the armed forces, integrating or dissolving parallel institutions and establishing civilian control are among the hardest tasks of the transition. The experience of countries that have moved from authoritarian to democratic systems shows that this process must be gradual, lawful and accompanied by clear guarantees for professional forces.

C) Regional Distrust

After four decades of experience with the Islamic Republic's policy, Iran's neighbors will view any Iranian government with caution. Building trust requires "costly signaling," in the sense explained by Glaser and Kydd (Chapter Four): actions that would be costly for a state with offensive intentions and therefore make defensive intentions credible. Examples include full nuclear transparency, an open and verifiable break with armed groups, and acceptance of regional monitoring mechanisms.

D) Great-Power Rivalry

Post-transition Iran will sit in the middle of the rivalry among the United States, China and Russia. All three will try to pull Iran toward themselves. The doctrine of "smart duality" proposes that Iran, like Turkey, India or the UAE, avoid complete security dependence on any great power and cooperate with each in the areas where it shares interests.

21.6. Iran and Theory: A Return to Kautilya and Nizam al-Mulk

We end this chapter by returning to the beginning of the book. In Chapter One we saw that Kautilya counted "dual policy" among the six fundamental policies of the ruler, and that Nizam al-Mulk considered the combination of "tolerance" and "awe" the condition of successful rule. These insights, rooted in the political traditions of Iran and Asia, have been confirmed by the contemporary experience of the Middle East.

The main lesson for the Iran of the future is that "duality" is in itself neither good nor bad. Three factors make it constructive or destructive: the center from which it is directed (one accountable center or several rival ones), the goal it serves (the national interest or an ideological project), and whether it respects the threshold. An Iran able to meet these three conditions could turn from an isolated and damaged country into one of the indispensable nodes of the regional order of the Middle East.

Conclusion

Waltz taught us that the structure of the international system pushes states toward caution and balance. Mearsheimer taught us that the same structure drives states toward ambition and the pursuit of power. Both were right, and for precisely that reason both are insufficient in the Middle East. For the states of this region, in an environment of multilayered threats, fragile states, transnational identities and extra-regional patrons, have learned to carry the lion and the fox within themselves at the same time.

Israel combined the Abrahamic peace with military supremacy. The Islamic Republic combined dialogue with proxy strategic depth. Saudi Arabia combined the Beijing reconciliation with the Pakistani defense pact. Turkey combined mediation with a military presence on five fronts. Qatar combined mediation with hosting radical political Islam. Azerbaijan combined a corridor of peace with the conquest of territory. This duality is not a sign of confusion but of a distinctive rationality, one that structural realism, by separating security from power, has lost the tools to understand.

A return to the insight of classical realism, from Thucydides and Machiavelli to Morgenthau, combined with the tools of neoclassical realism and Third World security studies, offers a way to build a theory capable of explaining this dual rationality. This book is a first step on that path.

Appendix One: Glossary of Key Terms

This glossary gathers the key terms used in the book with a short definition of each. Terms proposed by the author in this book are marked (N).

A) Foundational Concepts of Realism

Term	Short definition
Anarchy	The absence of a central government above states in the international system; not chaos.
Self-help	The principle that each state must rely on its own capabilities for its security.
Structure	In Waltz's theory, the combination of ordering principle, functional differentiation of units and distribution of capabilities.
Ordering principle	The principle that defines the relationship among the units of a system: hierarchy or anarchy.
Distribution of capabilities	How power is spread among the units of the system; it determines polarity.
Polarity	The number of great powers in the system: unipolar, bipolar, multipolar.
Like units	Waltz's assumption that states in an anarchic system perform similar functions.
Relative gains	A state's concern that another will gain more than it from cooperation.
Absolute gains	A state's attention to its own gain regardless of the gains of others.
Balance of power	The recurrent pattern by which the predominance of one state is prevented through the reactions of others.
Balancing	Joining the weaker side or increasing one's own capability against a superior power or threat.
Internal balancing	Increasing military and economic capability through domestic resources.
External balancing	Balancing through alliances with others.
Bandwagoning	Joining the stronger or threatening side.
Bandwagoning for profit	Joining a revisionist power to share in the spoils (Schweller).
Balance of threat	Walt's theory that states balance against threats, not merely power.
Security dilemma	A situation in which one state's efforts to secure itself reduce the security of others.
Offense–defense balance	Whether technology and geography favor the attacker or the defender.
Socialization	The process by which states learn the accepted behaviors of the system.

Term	Short definition
Reductionism	In Waltz's critique, explaining the behavior of the system through the attributes of its units.

B) Concepts of Offensive Realism

Term	Short definition
Power maximization	Mearsheimer's assumption that states seek more power until they achieve hegemony.
Regional hegemony	Domination of one's own geographic region; the highest attainable goal for Mearsheimer.
Potential hegemon	A state with enough capability to dominate its region given the opportunity.
Latent power	Wealth and population as the basis for building military power.
Stopping power of water	The inability of land forces to cross oceans; the obstacle to global hegemony.
Offshore balancing	A strategy of intervening only when a potential hegemon emerges, without a permanent presence.
Buck-passing	Shifting the burden of containing an aggressor onto another state.
Blackmail	Threatening force to win concessions without war.
Bait and bleed	Provoking two rivals into fighting each other.
Bloodletting	Prolonging a rival's war in order to wear it down.
Appeasement	Granting concessions to a rival in the hope of changing its behavior.
Unbalanced multipolarity	A multipolar system containing a potential hegemon; the most dangerous system for Mearsheimer.
Liberal hegemony	A strategy of spreading democracy and liberal institutions with American power (criticized by Mearsheimer).

C) Concepts from Critiques and Rival Theories

Term	Short definition
Neoclassical realism	Linking structural pressures with domestic variables to explain foreign policy.
Omnibalancing	Third World leaders balancing against internal and external threats simultaneously (David).
Subaltern realism	A realism concerned with states still engaged in state-building (Ayoob).
Regime security	The priority of the survival of the government and its leaders over

Term	Short definition
	the survival of the state in the abstract.
Penetrated regional system	A region in which outside powers are permanently present (Hinnebusch).
Regional security complex	A group of states whose security is bound together (Buzan and Wæver).
Securitization	Turning an issue into a security threat through political speech.
International society	States that have accepted common rules and institutions (the English School).
Soft balancing	Constraining a superior power with non-military instruments.
Hedging	Simultaneous ties with two rival powers to reduce the risk of dependence.
Stability–instability paradox	An increase in limited conflicts in the shadow of stable nuclear deterrence.
Spiral model	Interpreting a rival′s behavior as driven by insecurity (Jervis).
Deterrence model	Interpreting a rival′s behavior as driven by aggressiveness (Jervis).
Two-level game	Negotiating simultaneously at the international and domestic levels (Putnam).
Audience costs	The domestic cost of backing down from a public commitment (Fearon).
Analytic eclecticism	Combining mechanisms from different paradigms (Sil and Katzenstein).
Process tracing	Following a causal chain step by step in a case study.
Dvaidhibhava (Kautilya′s dual policy)	Peace with one party and war with another at the same time.
Mandala theory	Kautilya′s image of concentric circles of enemies and friends.

D) Concepts Proposed in This Book

Term	Short definition
Simultaneous dual policymaking (N)	The simultaneous and deliberate combination of de-escalatory and power-accumulating logics in a state′s policy.
Dual realism (N)	The proposed theoretical framework for explaining the behavior of regional powers in penetrated systems.
De-escalatory logic (N)	Policies such as normalization, reconciliation, mediation and economic cooperation.
Power-accumulating logic (N)	Policies such as territorial seizure, proxy warfare, intervention and arms build-up.

Term	Short definition
Geographic duality (N)	De-escalation with one group of states and power accumulation against another.
Instrumental duality (N)	Using de-escalatory instruments for power-accumulating ends.
Institutional duality (N)	The two logics implemented by two different institutions within one state.
Discursive duality (N)	An official discourse of peace alongside power-seeking conduct in practice.
Co-rooted duality (N)	A situation in which the power-accumulating share is the precondition of the de-escalatory share (as with Qatar).
Duality threshold (N)	The point at which the power-accumulating share destroys the credibility of the de-escalatory share.
Duality index (N)	A four-component measure (simultaneity, intensity, issue overlap, linkage) ranging from zero to twelve.
Duality matrix (N)	A table distributing the two logics by counterpart and policy domain.
Patron-anarchy (N)	A regional anarchy in which an extra-regional power plays a quasi-hierarchical role.
Multiple penetration (N)	The simultaneous presence of several rival great powers in one region.
Armed mediator (N)	A state whose military power is its ticket to the mediation table (as with Turkey).
Security through indispensability (N)	A small state′s security achieved by being indispensable to all (as with Qatar).
Over-performing small state (N)	A small state whose role far exceeds its material weight.
Network state (N)	A state that derives its power from its position in financial, commercial and logistical networks (as with the UAE).
Strike-and-consolidate cycle (N)	Maximal power accumulation followed by de-escalation to consolidate a new balance.
Victor′s peace	A peace founded on the decisive military victory of one side.
Smart duality (N)	Duality directed from a single accountable center in the service of the national interest.

Appendix Two: Comprehensive Chronology of the Middle East (2011–2026)

This chronology covers the main events relating to the book's seven principal cases and to regional developments. The last column indicates the dominant logic of each event from the perspective of the book's hypothesis: "D" for the de-escalatory logic, "P" for the power-accumulating logic and "C" for contextual events. Dates for 2026 are based on reports available up to the summer of that year and should be checked against current sources before publication.

2011 to 2014

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
January 2011	Fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia	Tunisia	C
February 2011	Resignation of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt	Egypt	C
March 2011	Peninsula Shield forces enter Bahrain	Saudi Arabia, UAE	P
March 2011	NATO intervention in Libya begins, with Qatari and Emirati participation	Qatar, UAE	P
March 2011	Protests and then civil war begin in Syria	Syria	C
2012	Large-scale IRGC and Hezbollah presence in Syria begins	Iran	P
2012	Hamas political bureau established in Doha	Qatar	P and D
June 2012	Mohamed Morsi becomes president of Egypt	Egypt	C
2013	Israeli air strikes in Syria begin (the "campaign between the wars")	Israel	P
2013	Secret US–Iran talks begin in Oman	Iran, Oman	D
June 2013	Taliban office opens in Doha	Qatar	D
July 2013	Overthrow of Morsi with Saudi and Emirati support	Saudi Arabia, UAE	P
September 2013	The concept of "heroic flexibility" introduced	Iran	D
November 2013	Geneva interim agreement on Iran's nuclear program	Iran	D
June 2014	ISIS seizes Mosul; Popular Mobilization Forces formed	Iraq, Iran	P
July–August 2014	Gaza war	Israel	P

2015 to 2019

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
March 2015	Saudi-led coalition operations in Yemen begin	Saudi Arabia, UAE	P
April 2015	Lausanne framework announced	Iran	D
July 2015	JCPOA signed in Vienna	Iran	D
September 2015	Russian military intervention in Syria begins	Russia, Iran	P
October 2015	"Emad" missile test	Iran	P
November 2015	Turkey shoots down a Russian fighter jet	Turkey	P
December 2015	Islamic Military Coalition announced	Saudi Arabia	P
January 2016	Attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran; relations severed	Iran, Saudi Arabia	P
January 2016	JCPOA Implementation Day; detention and release of US sailors	Iran	D and P
July 2016	Failed coup in Turkey; Turkish–Russian reconciliation	Turkey	C
August 2016	Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield in Syria	Turkey	P
January 2017	Astana process begins	Turkey, Russia, Iran	D
June 2017	Blockade of Qatar begins	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt	P
June 2017	Mohammed bin Salman becomes crown prince	Saudi Arabia	C
September 2017	Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum	Iraq	C
November 2017	Saad Hariri resignation episode in Riyadh	Saudi Arabia	P
January 2018	Turkey's Operation Olive Branch in Afrin	Turkey	P
May 2018	US withdrawal from the JCPOA	United States	C
June 2018	Villepinte bomb plot foiled	Iran	P
October 2018	Murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul	Saudi Arabia	C
December 2018	UAE embassy in Damascus reopens	UAE	D
May–June 2019	Attacks on tankers; downing of a US drone	Iran	P
July 2019	UAE drawdown in Yemen; UAE–Iran	UAE	D

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
	coast guard meeting		
August 2019	Southern Transitional Council takes over Aden	UAE	P
September 2019	Abqaiq attack; Hormuz Peace Endeavor proposed	Saudi Arabia, Iran	P and D
October 2019	Turkey's Operation Peace Spring	Turkey	P
November 2019	Turkey–Libya maritime agreement; Riyadh Agreement	Turkey, Saudi Arabia	P and D

2020 to 2022

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
January 2020	Assassination of Qasem Soleimani; strike on Ain al-Asad	United States, Iran	P
January 2020	Turkish forces sent to Libya; Berlin Conference	Turkey	P and D
February 2020	Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban	Qatar	D
March 2020	Operation Spring Shield in Idlib and the Moscow agreement	Turkey	P and D
August 2020	Israel–UAE agreement announced and annexation "suspended"; Oruç Reis crisis	Israel, UAE, Turkey	D and P
September 2020	Abraham Accords signed	Israel, UAE, Bahrain	D
September–November 2020	44-day Karabakh war; November 10 statement	Azerbaijan	P and D
November 2020	Assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh	Israel	P
January 2021	Al-Ula declaration and end of the Qatar blockade	Qatar and neighbors	D
March 2021	25-year Iran–China cooperation program	Iran	D
April 2021	Iran–Saudi Baghdad talks begin; 60 percent enrichment	Iran, Saudi Arabia	D and P
June 2021	Shusha Declaration between Turkey and Azerbaijan	Turkey, Azerbaijan	P
August 2021	US withdrawal from Afghanistan with Qatar's role	Qatar	D
November 2021	Mohammed bin Zayed visits Ankara	UAE, Turkey	D

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
January 2022	Houthi attack on Abu Dhabi	UAE	C
February 2022	Russian invasion of Ukraine; Azerbaijan–Russia alliance declaration	Russia, Azerbaijan	C
March 2022	Negev Summit; Assad visits the UAE; Israeli president visits Turkey	Israel, UAE, Turkey	D
April 2022	Yemen truce; Erdoğan visits Jeddah	Saudi Arabia, Turkey	D
May 2022	UAE–Israel free trade agreement	UAE	D
July 2022	Saudi airspace opened; Black Sea Grain Initiative	Saudi Arabia, Turkey	D
August 2022	UAE ambassador returns to Tehran	UAE	D
September 2022	Azerbaijani attacks on Armenian territory	Azerbaijan	P
October 2022	Israel–Lebanon maritime border agreement	Israel	D
December 2022	Lachin corridor blockade begins; Xi Jinping visits Riyadh	Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia	P and D

2023 to 2024

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
January 2023	Attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran	Iran, Azerbaijan	C
March 2023	Beijing agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia	Iran, Saudi Arabia	D
April 2023	Saudi delegation visits Sanaa; civil war begins in Sudan	Saudi Arabia	D
May 2023	Syria returns to the Arab League	Saudi Arabia	D
September 2023	Azerbaijani operation and end of Karabakh; India–Middle East–Europe Corridor announced	Azerbaijan, Israel	P and D
October 7, 2023	Hamas attack on Israel and start of the Gaza war	Hamas, Israel	P
November 2023	Raisi attends the Riyadh summit; temporary Gaza truce mediated by Qatar; Houthi Red Sea attacks begin	Iran, Qatar	D and P
December 2023	Azerbaijan–Armenia joint statement; Turkey–Greece Athens Declaration	Azerbaijan, Turkey	D
January 2024	Iranian strike on Pakistani territory and	Iran	P

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
	Pakistan's response; attack on "Tower 22"		
February 2024	UAE investment in Ras El-Hekma, Egypt	UAE	D
April 2024	Strike on Iran's consulate in Damascus; Iran's first direct attack on Israel	Israel, Iran	P
May 2024	Turkey halts trade with Israel	Turkey	P
July 2024	Ismail Haniyeh killed in Tehran	Israel	P
September 2024	Pager operation; Hassan Nasrallah killed; Pezeshkian's UN speech	Israel, Iran	P and D
October 2024	Iran's second attack and Israel's response	Iran, Israel	P
November 2024	Lebanon ceasefire; COP29 in Baku	Israel, Azerbaijan	D
December 2024	Fall of Assad; Israel enters the buffer zone; Turkish influence expands in Damascus	Turkey, Israel	P

2025 to 2026

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
January 2025	Gaza ceasefire; Joseph Aoun elected in Lebanon	Qatar, Egypt, United States	D
February–May 2025	Öcalan's call and announcement of the PKK's dissolution	Turkey	D
March 2025	Collapse of the Gaza ceasefire; Damascus–Kurdish forces agreement	Israel, Syria	P and D
April–May 2025	Indirect Iran–US talks in Oman; US–Houthi ceasefire	Iran, Oman	D
June 2025	Twelve-Day War; US strike on Fordow; strike on Al Udeid; ceasefire	Israel, Iran, United States	P and D
July 2025	Israeli strikes in Suwayda and Damascus	Israel	P
August 2025	Washington agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia	Azerbaijan	D
September 2025	Strike on Doha; Saudi–Pakistani defense pact; recognition of the State of Palestine by several Western countries	Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar	P and D
October 2025	Gaza ceasefire and the Sharm el-Sheikh summit	United States, Egypt, Qatar, Turkey	D
November 2025	Kazakhstan joins the Abraham Accords	Israel	D
February 2026	Muscat talks; US–Israeli war on the Islamic Republic begins (February 28)	Iran, United States, Israel	D and P

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
March 2026	Death of Ali Khamenei announced and succession of Mojtaba Khamenei; Iranian attacks on Persian Gulf states; foreign ministers′ meeting in Riyadh; expulsion of Iranian diplomats from Saudi Arabia	Iran, Saudi Arabia	P and D
April–May 2026	Fragile ceasefires and Pakistani mediation; Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE ask the United States to give negotiations a chance	Pakistan, Persian Gulf states	D
July 2026	Collapse of the ceasefire and resumption of US–Iran hostilities	Iran, United States	P

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A Note on Sources for the Events of 2024–2026

Events of recent years have been drawn from news agency reports (Reuters, the Associated Press, Agence France-Presse), official government statements and analyses by research centers (including the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha and Foreign Policy magazine). Before final publication, the dates and details of the 2026 events should be checked against current sources and precise references added to the text.

The Essence of the Thesis

The Middle East is the graveyard of grand theories. For half a century, structural realism, in its two dominant versions, has presented the world to us thus: states either settle for sufficient security, as Kenneth Waltz held, or never rest until they reach hegemony, as John Mearsheimer argues. This book shows that in the Middle East of the past fifteen years neither verdict survived the test of reality. Israel, even as it signed the Abrahamic peace with one hand, extended the frontiers of its power deep into the region with the other; Azerbaijan recovered its territory by the sword and consolidated peace through a corridor; Qatar was at once the world's mediator and host to the most radical figures of political Islam; Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates likewise placed peace and influence on the same scale; and the Islamic Republic put diplomacy in the shop window and "strategic depth" on the battlefield, until this duality finally turned upon itself. The author calls this pattern "simultaneous dual policymaking" and argues that it is neither anomaly nor hypocrisy, but the distinctive rationality of regional powers in a penetrated system, a rationality that Waltz would call a "deviation" and Mearsheimer a "tactic," and whose essence both failed to see. The result of this inquiry is not a rejection of realism but a call to return to the ancient wisdom of statecraft, from Kautilya to Nizam al-Mulk, which saw the lion and the fox as two faces of a single policy; and a proposal for the Iran of tomorrow: a passage from destructive duality to smart duality.

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