A Critique of Waltz's Defensive Realism and Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism

Realism on Trial

in the Middle East



Power maximisation De-escalation

Simultaneous Dual Policymaking and the Inadequacy of Structural Theories in the Middle East, 2011–2026

Ebrahim Roshandel

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A Critique of the Theories of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer and the Hypothesis of "Simultaneous Dual Policy-making" in the Middle East, 2011 to 2026

Ebrahim Roshandel

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Foreword

During the years I served as a diplomat in Iran's foreign-policy establishment, working across several political portfolios and handling the region's files, I repeatedly encountered a phenomenon for which no international relations textbook offered a convincing explanation: states that, on a single day, in one capital and in one language, spoke of peace and good neighbourliness, and on the very same day, in another capital and in another language, laid plans for influence and supremacy. At first I assumed this inconsistency was a sign of chaotic decision-making or of politicians' hypocrisy. But the further I went, the more I realised that this "inconsistency" was, in many cases, itself a strategy: a deliberate, calculated and at times highly effective one.

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 and at the same time extended the reach of its military operations deep into Iran. Azerbaijan retook Karabakh by force and at the same time presented itself as the architect of peace corridors. Qatar became the region's indispensable mediator and at the same time remained host to 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, whose policies inflicted the greatest damage on my own country, institutionalised this duality in a form whose price was ultimately paid by the Iranian nation.

Meanwhile, the two dominant theories of structural realism, Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism and John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, which remain the basis for analysing the Middle East in universities and think tanks around the world, Washington included, failed to see this phenomenon. Each explained half of reality and labelled the other half a "deviation." 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 wish to know Waltz and Mearsheimer not through textbook summaries but precisely 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 behaviour of the region's states; Part Two is for them. Third, Iranians who think about the future of their homeland and want 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 small step towards rethinking prevailing theories, and towards building a national, rational and effective foreign policy for the Iran of tomorrow. The final judgement rests with the reader.

Ebrahim Roshandel

Autumn 2026

PROLOGUE

A Word to Statesmen and Policymakers

The Middle East Cannot Be Seen with One Eye

Policymakers in the Middle East rarely enjoy the luxury of calm judgement. Every day brings news of reconciliation and mediation, and at the same time news of attacks, seizures and hidden rivalry. Whoever takes only one of these two streams of news seriously will sooner or later be taken by surprise: either optimistically investing hope in an agreement that, for the other side, was merely a means of buying time, or pessimistically squandering a historic opportunity for de-escalation because it was dismissed as nothing more than deception. This book is written to avoid both errors.

The author of these lines spent years in Iran's foreign-policy establishment, particularly in the Turkey portfolio and in the Political Bulletin department, living with the question of why the region's states speak two languages at once and mean both. The answer this book offers is simple, but its implications are far-reaching: in the Middle East, duality is not the exception but the rule. The region's successful states have learned to advance the hand of peace and the fist of power at the same time; and the states that have used this duality without restraint, from multiple centres and in the service of ideology, have ultimately paid a heavy price. The Islamic Republic is the clearest example of the second group.

Why Theory Matters to the Statesman

Statesmen are usually suspicious of theory, and rightly so; many theories are born in the library and die in the field. Yet no decision-maker decides without a theory. Every assessment of a state's intentions, every estimate of a rival's reaction and every plan for a coalition rests on assumptions about why states behave as they do. The question is not whether the policymaker has a theory; the question is whether that theory has been chosen consciously or inherited unconsciously.

The two dominant theories of structural realism, Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism and John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, are just such an inheritance. They remain the common language of many think tanks, schools of international relations and decision-making institutions in Washington, in Europe and even in Tehran. The first holds that states seek security and avoid overreach; the second holds that states seek to maximise power and that only ambition guarantees survival. But both share one assumption: a state is either one or the other. The Middle East of the past fifteen years has shattered this assumption. A policymaker who views the region through the lens of either theory sees half of reality and calls the other half "deviation" or "hypocrisy"; and in politics, the half that goes unseen is precisely the half that delivers the surprise.

Three Messages for Three Groups of Decision-Makers

To policymakers in the United States and Europe: Do not mistake the de-escalatory signals of the region's states for a change in their strategy. An agreement, a ceasefire or a diplomatic reconciliation may be a component of a power-maximising strategy, not its end. Judgements about a state's intentions should not rest solely on the conduct of its foreign ministry; one must look at the same time at its military and security institutions and its informal networks. The experience of the JCPOA showed that negotiating with a diplomatic "showcase" without bringing the "field" into the calculation can end up strengthening the very logic the agreement was designed to contain. At the same time, the opposite error is also costly: not every de-escalation is a deception, and agreements such as the Abraham Accords, the end of the blockade of Qatar and the Beijing reconciliation have had real and lasting consequences. The art of policymaking in this region lies in weighing both hands at once.

To the leaders of the region's states: Duality is an effective instrument, but it has a limit. This book shows that the mutual reinforcement of de-escalation and power maximisation holds up to a certain "threshold," beyond which the two logics destroy each other. The Gaza war and the halt to normalisation, and the Islamic Republic's attacks on its Persian Gulf neighbours and the collapse of its "neighbourhood policy," are clear examples of crossing that threshold. Regional stability depends on the regional powers recognising and respecting this threshold; and also on filling the power vacuums in fragile states such as Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Libya and Sudan, which are the principal arena of offensive logic.

To the Iranians who will build their homeland's future: In a region governed by such a logic, post-transition Iran can neither simply present itself as "peace-loving"

and defenceless nor continue the Islamic Republic's legacy of proxy networks. The third way, which this book calls "smart duality," rests on five principles: unity of command over foreign policy in a single accountable centre; the national interest as the sole criterion; transparent and defensive deterrence; turning Iran into an "indispensable node" of the region's trade, energy and transit; and playing the role of mediator instead of arsonist. The Islamic Republic's problem was not duality as such; every power in the region has acted dually. The problem was that two rival apparatuses, with two incompatible ideologies, had divided the country's foreign policy between them, and its power-maximising component served a transnational project rather than the Iranian nation.

The Moment in Which This Book Was Written

This book was completed at a time when the Middle East is passing through one of the most decisive periods of its modern history. The 2026 war, the killing of Ali Khamenei and the succession of Mojtaba Khamenei have left the regional order in a fluid state. At such moments the temptation of hasty analysis and simple prescriptions is great. The author has tried to resist this temptation: ongoing events have been treated as "evidence in formation," and final judgement has been left to the future. But one point is already clear: the order that emerges in the region after this war will be one in which the capacity to combine diplomacy and deterrence intelligently determines each state's standing. An Iran that does not learn this language will once again be pushed to the margins; an Iran that learns it can be transformed from an isolated and wounded country into one of the pillars of regional stability.

From Knowledge to Responsibility

Years of work in the diplomatic service and of accompanying movements for change in various countries have taught the author that a political transition is decided in the minds of its elites before it is decided in the street or at the negotiating table. Countries that, after the collapse of an authoritarian system, lacked a clear framework for their foreign and security policy lost the opportunity of transition to internal strife and foreign intervention. Iran must not repeat that experience. The foreign policy of tomorrow's Iran must be designed before tomorrow.

For this reason, this book is not merely an academic critique of two American theorists. It is an attempt to build a common language between the scholar and the statesman, between the Washington analyst and the regional policymaker, and between the current generation of the Iranian opposition and the generation that will tomor-

row bear responsibility for governing the country. Part One provides the theoretical tools for this dialogue; Part Two tests them in seven case studies; and the final chapter turns them into a doctrine for the Iran of the future.

Kautilya, the theorist of ancient India, counted the “dual policy” among the six fundamental policies of the ruler, and Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk, the great Persian vizier, considered the combination of “clemency” and “awe” the condition of successful government. Today’s Middle East has confirmed this ancient insight in a new language. The task of tomorrow’s Iranian statesman is to free this insight from the service of ideology and place it in the service of the Iranian nation. This book is a contribution to that task.

Introduction

The Research Problem

Structural realism, founded with Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* in 1979 and brought to its offensive version with 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, the two theories share one fundamental assumption: the behaviour of states is guided by a single logic. 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 the same time. The question is whether this behaviour consists of "anomalies" to be explained by auxiliary variables, or whether it signals a fundamental inadequacy of both theories in understanding regional systems.

Research Questions

Main question: Are Waltz's defensive realism and Mearsheimer's offensive realism capable of explaining the foreign and security policy behaviour of the principal states of the Middle East in the period 2011 to 2026?

Subsidiary questions:

- What are the foundations, assumptions and principal predictions of each theory, and what criticisms have been levelled 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 behaviour is a combination, how is this combination organised, what mechanisms make it possible, and under what conditions does it collapse?

- What alternative theoretical framework can better explain this behaviour, and what implications does it have for policymaking, especially for the Iran of the future?

The Research Hypothesis

The book's main hypothesis is that in the post-2011 Middle East, the region's principal states have organised their foreign and security policy 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. The author calls this pattern "simultaneous dual policymaking" and argues that it is not an anomaly but the rational strategy of regional powers in penetrated regional systems. The implication of this hypothesis is that both Waltz's and Mearsheimer's theories suffer from "illegibility" and "mismatch" at the regional level.

Significance of the Research

The significance of this research lies at three levels. At the **theoretical level**, the book challenges one of the fundamental assumptions of structural realism and proposes an alternative framework, "dual realism," that can also be applied to the study of other regional systems. At the **analytical level**, the book offers tools such as the "duality index" and the "duality matrix" for assessing state behaviour. At the **policy level**, the book warns policymakers not to equate the de-escalatory signals of the region's states with a change in their strategy, and proposes for post-transition Iran a doctrine called "smart duality."

Research Method

The book's method is "comparative case study" using "process tracing." In Part One, the two theories are reconstructed through a close reading of the original texts and of 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 states (Oman, Egypt and Pakistan) as control and supplementary cases. For each principal case, de-escalatory and power-maximising policies are identified using specific 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 a detailed chronology.

Structure of the Book

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

Part One (Chapters One to Eight) is devoted to the theories. Chapter One examines the roots of realism from Thucydides, Kautilya and Machiavelli to Nizam al-Mulk, Ibn Khaldun, Clausewitz, Bismarck, Kissinger and Morgenthau. Chapters Two to Four deal with Waltz: his life and the "three images" of war; the architecture of *Theory of International Politics* with a chapter-by-chapter commentary; 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 "tragedy" with a chapter-by-chapter commentary, and his views on the Middle East. Chapter Seven assesses the two theories comparatively, and Chapter Eight reviews the criticisms levelled 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 background of the past fifteen years. Chapters Eleven to Seventeen are the seven principal case studies, and Chapter Eighteen deals with the control cases. Chapter Nineteen examines the role of the great powers, Chapter Twenty synthesises 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 (glossary and chronology) and a bibliography.

A Note on Terminology

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

A Note on Sources and Limitations

The period under study runs from the beginning of the Arab Spring (2011) to the summer of 2026. The events of recent months, including the war of the United States and Israel against the Islamic Republic that began on 28 February 2026, the killing of

Ali Khamenei and the succession of Mojtaba Khamenei, are still unfolding and it is too early for final judgement; they are therefore used in this book as “evidence in formation.” The book’s quantitative assessments, including the “duality index” scores, are the author’s qualitative estimates, and future research can test them 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 criticise Waltz and Mearsheimer, therefore, one must know what they took from this tradition, what they set aside and what they redefined. This re-reading also matters for Part Two of the book, because much of what appears as an “anomaly” for structural theories in the Middle East was entirely normal in classical realism.

1.2. Thucydides and the Logic of Fear

The *History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides, the Athenian historian of 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 towards war even without hostile intent.

The Melian Dialogue in Book Five of Thucydides is the most famous expression of the logic of power in the Western tradition. The Athenians tell the inhabitants 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. But the less often noted point is that Thucydides does not praise this logic; he shows that this very arrogance of power drew Athens into the disastrous Sicilian expedition and its eventual fall. In other words, Thucydides is both

an “offensive realist” and its critic. He shows that states can act simultaneously out of fear (defensive logic) and ambition (offensive logic). This duality, which structural realism eliminated, is exactly what returns in this book’s hypothesis.

Thucydides lists three main motives of state behaviour: fear, honour and interest. Waltz reduces almost everything to “fear” and the need for security, and Mearsheimer reduces everything to “power as the best guarantee of security.” Neither takes “honour” 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 morality and the morality of the state. To preserve the state, the prince must sometimes learn “not to be good.” He must be both lion and fox: the lion to frighten the wolves and the fox to recognise the snares. This metaphor describes the dual policy of Middle Eastern states perhaps better than any modern theory. A state that mediates while building a network of influence is in fact both fox and lion.

Machiavelli also emphasises the role of fortune (*fortuna*) and virtue (*virtù*). Virtue in the Machiavellian sense is the leader’s ability to seize opportunities and master chance. Structural realism deliberately removed this element, considering it “reductionist,” that is, dependent on the level of the individual and the state. But 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 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, a condition in which the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. For Hobbes the three principal causes of quarrel are competition, diffidence and glory. The way out is the creation of a superior power, the Leviathan, that keeps all in awe and establishes order.

The realists transferred this picture to the international arena: the international system lacks a Leviathan, so states live in a state of nature. Waltz formulated this idea with the concept of “anarchy.” But Hobbes himself had stated explicitly that the con-

dition 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 consideration later became the basis of the distinction between defensive and offensive realism: is anarchy so dangerous that it forces states to maximise 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 interwar period. 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 considered pure realism inadequate, holding that politics without ideals is sterile and ideals without power are impotent.

Carr's insight is very important for the Middle East. The discourses of "resistance," the "ummah," the "Abrahamic peace" or "humanitarian mediation" are each the normative cover of particular interests. But contrary to what structural realists assume, these covers 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 turned realism into the dominant theory of international relations in post-war America. He set out six principles of political realism, which may be summarised 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 state action 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 lies 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). The important point is that Morgenthau accepted that a state could pursue a combination of these policies in different arenas or at different times, and he considered identifying the type of policy of a rival state the most important and most difficult task of diplomacy.

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

1.7. The Transition from Classical to Structural Realism

In the 1960s and 1970s classical realism came under pressure from two directions. On one side, the "behavioural revolution" in American social science demanded testable and precise theories and considered Morgenthau's reliance on "human nature" unscientific. On the other, liberals with theories of interdependence (Keohane and Nye) were showing that economics, institutions and transnational actors played a growing 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 handful of variables.

This parsimony came at a price. To build an elegant theory, Waltz set aside domestic variables, ideology, leadership, identity and prestige. Mearsheimer remained 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, it should be recalled 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. This text matters for the present 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 Theory of the "Mandala"

Kautilya pictures the world around the ruler as concentric circles (*mandala*). The immediate neighbour is naturally an enemy; the neighbour's neighbour, that is, the country beyond the enemy, is naturally a friend; and the circles continue in the same way. This logic, known today as "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," is exactly what is seen in the contemporary Middle East: Israel builds ties with the UAE and Azerbaijan, countries lying beyond its near rivals; the Islamic Republic allies with groups in Lebanon and Yemen that lie behind its rivals' front lines.

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 preparation for attack.
- *Samshraya:* seeking refuge with a greater power and seeking protection.
- *Dvaidhibhava:* "dual policy," that is, peace with one party and war with another at the same time.

The remarkable point is that Kautilya explicitly regards dual policy as one of the rational instruments of statecraft and also explains the conditions for its use: when the ruler, by making peace with one neighbour, can free his resources for war with another, or when a treaty with one power provides an opportunity to weaken another. This definition corresponds almost exactly to "geographical duality" in Chapter Nine of this book.

Implications for the Critique of Structural Realism

The existence of this tradition reveals two points. First, what the author calls "simultaneous dual policymaking" is not a new discovery but a return to one of the oldest insights of statecraft. Second, American structural realism, relying almost exclusively on the experience of modern Europe and great-power competition, has 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

A reader familiar with classical Persian texts knows that the "advice literature" (*andarz-nameh*) and "mirrors for princes" (*siyasat-nameh*) are also full of insights that would today be called realist. This tradition matters especially to 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 Siyasat-nameh

Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk Tusi, the celebrated vizier of the Seljuks in the eleventh century, emphasises in the *Siyar al-Muluk* or *Siyasat-nameh* several principles consistent with realist logic: the need for an extensive network of spies and informants to know the intentions of others, caution in trusting officials and neighbours, and the combination of "clemency" and "*siyasat*" (in the sense of punishment and coercion) in government. Nizam al-Mulk repeatedly reminds us that the king must display both "justice," in order 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 maximisation."

Ibn Khaldun and Asabiyya

Ibn Khaldun, the Tunisian historian and thinker of the fourteenth century, offered in the *Muqaddimah* a theory of the cycle of the rise and fall of states based on the concept of *asabiyya*, or group solidarity. In his view, states are founded by the strong *asabiyya* of desert tribes, lose their *asabiyya* in urban life and luxury, and are finally overthrown by a fresh group with stronger *asabiyya*. Ibn Khaldun also believed that a religious call (*da'wa*) could multiply *asabiyya* and give a state a power beyond its material capacity.

This insight is highly telling for understanding the contemporary Middle East. The force that structural realism does not see, ideological and religious solidarity, has 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 but an attempt to extend a transnational *asabiyya* through religious *da'wa*; and its erosion, examined in Chapter Twelve, coincided with the erosion of *asabiyya* within the regime itself.

Iranian Advice Literature

In pre-Islamic Iranian tradition, texts such as the *Letter of Tansar* and the *Testament of Ardashir* also emphasise the bond between religion and state and the need for

constant vigilance against external and internal enemies. These texts show that in Iranian political thought, security has always been understood simultaneously at two levels, internal and external; an insight that Steven David later formulated in Western scholarship with the concept of "omnibalancing" (Chapter Eight).

1.10. Clausewitz: War as the Continuation of Politics

Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian officer and military theorist, has a famous sentence in *On War* (published after his death in 1832): 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 aim. The commander and the statesman must think about both at once.

Clausewitz also put forward the concept of the "trinity": every war is subject to three forces, the passion and enmity of the people, the probabilities and creativity of commanders, and the political rationality of the government. 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 product of the interaction of social, military and political forces.

If we invert Clausewitz's sentence, 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 mediations, as we will see in Part Two, have to some extent served exactly this function.

1.11. Bismarck, Realpolitik and the Art of Cross-Cutting 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 later of Germany. Bismarck unified Germany through three short and calculated wars (against Denmark in 1864, Austria in 1866 and France in 1870–1871); but after 1871 he focused German foreign policy on preserving the status quo and preventing an anti-German coalition.

The important point 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 conflict with one another: Germany had simultaneously

made commitments to Austria and Russia, rivals in the Balkans. Through this cross-cutting network, Bismarck kept both rivals dependent on himself and prevented their coalition against Germany.

Bismarck's behaviour cannot be explained by a purely defensive logic (since he launched three offensive wars before 1871) nor by a purely offensive one (since after 1871 he deliberately avoided further expansion). He built the combination of the two in the form of a diplomatic "system." The policies of Qatar and Turkey in Part Two of this book, particularly their simultaneous ties with mutual rivals, bear a striking resemblance to this system.

1.12. Kissinger and Legitimate Order

In his doctoral dissertation, 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 great powers accept the general framework of the order and resolve 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 expanded this analysis in *Diplomacy* (1994) and *World Order* (2014), and asked specifically about the Islamic Republic whether Iran is "a nation" or "a cause": that is, whether it is a state with national interests with which one can deal, or a revolutionary movement whose aim is 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 the Foreign Ministry and a cause in the Quds Force. It is this very duality that made diplomacy with it both possible and unstable.

Kissinger's distinction between "legitimacy" and the "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 wants to). Structural realism emphasises only the first pillar and ignores 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 behaviour than individuals, because collective egoism is legitimised by "patriotism" and

turned into a virtue. Niebuhr had a profound influence on Morgenthau, Kennan and many first-generation realists.

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

1.14. Chapter Summary

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 greater precision and testability, but lost its ability to understand "combined behaviour." 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 military in the Second World War and the Korean War, an experience that, in the words of many of his students, gave him a realistic and unillusioned 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 associated with the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia. He also served as president of the American Political Science Association.

Waltz's training in economics had a profound effect on his theory. Just as microeconomics deduces the behaviour of firms from market structure (perfect competition, oligopoly and so on), Waltz sought to deduce the behaviour 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), derived from 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 stupidity. Augustine, Spinoza, Niebuhr and Morgenthau belong to this group. If so, the path to peace is to reform humanity or to restrain its impulses. Waltz considers this explanation inadequate: human nature is constant, but war and peace vary; a constant cannot explain a variable. Human nature explains both war and peace, and therefore in fact explains neither.

The Second Image: The Internal Structure of States

According to this image, war results from the type of government. Liberals say that despotic governments are warlike and democracies peaceful; Marxists say capitalism is the cause of war. The path to peace is to change the type of governments. Waltz accepts that internal characteristics matter, but argues that states with very different domestic systems display similar international behaviour. "Good states," too, in an environment where other states may be "bad," are forced to 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 its security. Waltz uses Rousseau's "stag hunt" parable: a group of hunters must cooperate to catch a stag; but if one of them sees a hare and does not let it go in order to fill his own stomach, the stag escapes and cooperation collapses. Individual logic under conditions of mistrust makes collective cooperation impossible.

Waltz's conclusion is that the third image is the "permissive cause" of war, anarchy makes war possible, while the first and second images are the "immediate" or "efficient" causes. In the 1959 book Waltz still considered all three images necessary for

full understanding. But in the 1979 book 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 for understanding 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 matters greatly for our critique. If Waltz's theory is not a theory of foreign policy, then the Waltzians' defence against the Middle Eastern evidence will be that "the theory never made such a claim." This book's answer is that, in that case, defensive realism is not a useful tool for the foreign-policy analyst and the regional policymaker, and that, at least at the level of the Middle Eastern regional system, the general pattern it predicts (balancing and preservation of the status quo) has not materialised 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 effect on foreign policy. In this book Waltz argued, against many critics of democracy, that democratic systems are not necessarily less effective in foreign policy than authoritarian ones. The book shows that Waltz was not indifferent to the role of domestic institutions; he merely believed that international theory had to be built independently of these variables. Later, neoclassical realists reconstructed 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 system, because:

- With only two great powers, calculating danger and response is simpler and the probability of miscalculation is lower.

- Each superpower relies mainly on its own internal capability (internal balancing), not on unreliable allies.
- No "peripheral region" 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 consolidated 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 Solutions Each Image Proposes

The lasting value of *Man, the State and War* lies not only in its classification of the causes of war, but in Waltz's demonstration that each image proposes its own solution for peace, and each solution has its own limitations.

Solutions of the First Image

If war springs from human nature, two paths lie ahead. The optimistic path is the reform of humanity through education, ethics and religion, a path followed from Erasmus to the pacifist movements of the twentieth century. The pessimistic path is to accept that humanity is incorrigible and that its evil can only be restrained by power, a path to which Augustine and Niebuhr are close. Waltz believes both paths reach a dead end: the first because people continue to fight despite all education, and the second because if everything goes back to human nature, the difference between periods of war and peace can no longer be explained.

Solutions 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 is answered differently in different traditions. Kant saw law-based republics as the path to peace, nineteenth-century liberals saw states based on free trade, and socialists saw classless states. 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 the others would remain good. The second image thus becomes dependent on the third.

Waltz also critically recalled the danger of "war to create good states": 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."

Solutions of the Third Image

If war results from the anarchy of the international system, there are two logical paths: either eliminating anarchy by creating world government, or managing it through the balance of power. Waltz considers the first path 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 Waltz's entire later theory.

2.7. Waltz and Rousseau; Waltz and Kant

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

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

For the Middle East this debate has practical significance. A region in which there is almost no consolidated democracy, except with serious qualifications, is not a laboratory for testing the second image; but it shows how regime type, especially ideological and personalist regimes, shapes external behaviour. As we will see in Chapter Eight, critiques centred 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 entitled "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 responded in a short article entitled "International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy."

Waltz's argument was that his theory, like market theory in economics, says only what "pressures" and "constraints" the structure imposes 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 decision a given firm will take tomorrow, the theory of international politics does not say what policy a given state will pursue.

This reply is logically precise, but it has a price. If the theory cannot predict state behaviour, 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 should therefore be: has the balance of power recurred in the regional system? Part Two of the book will show that the answer is complex: no state achieved hegemony, which is consistent with Waltz's prediction; but this outcome was less the product of "balancing" by the region's states than of the intervention of an extra-regional power (the United States) and of 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 entitled *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 summarised as follows:

- **Ruggie:** Waltz assumed the second element of structure, the "differentiation of units," to be constant; yet the transition from the medieval system to the system of modern sovereign states shows that the principles of differentiation themselves can change. Waltz's theory can therefore explain only "continuity," not "transformation."

- **Cox:** Waltz's theory is a "problem-solving theory": it takes the existing order for granted and tries to manage it better, rather than asking whose interests the order serves. In contrast, "critical theory" must explore the historical and social roots of order.
- **Ashley:** Neorealism, with its claim to be scientific, in fact reproduces a state-centric and materialist ideology and ignores the possibility of change.
- **Keohane:** Neorealism is a good point of departure, but to understand cooperation it must be complemented by a theory of institutions.

In the final chapter of the same book Waltz replied to his critics, insisting that every theory must simplify and that objecting to what a theory has left out, without offering a better theory, is fruitless criticism. This reply is also a challenge to the present critique: criticising Waltz and Mearsheimer is meaningful only when an alternative framework is proposed. Chapter Twenty of this book is an effort 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 1989–1991, without war between the superpowers. Critics, especially constructivists, said that 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 was eternal, only that it was stable as long as bipolarity lasted. The Soviet collapse happened from within, that is, from domestic factors (an exhausted economy, a legitimacy crisis), and structural theory does not claim to predict such developments. This reply showed once again that Waltz narrowed the scope of the theory's claims in order to preserve it.

2.11. Waltz's Legacy

Despite all the criticism, Waltz had an unparalleled influence on the discipline of international relations. In numerous surveys of international relations scholars in the United States, he has consistently ranked among the most influential scholars of recent decades. *Theory of International Politics* is taught in almost every graduate programme in the field. Even his critics, from Wendt to Keohane, built their theories in dialogue with him. Instead of an "answer," Waltz gave the discipline a "language":

the language of structure, anarchy, polarity and balance. The present critique is also written in this language.

2.12. Chapter Summary

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 analysing the causes of war. But his move from “three images” to “one image” in 1979 was a methodological decision that created both the theory’s strength and its limitation. In the next chapter we examine this theory in detail.

CHAPTER THREE

Theory of International Politics; The Architecture of Waltz's Defensive Realism

3.1. What Is Theory? Waltz's Epistemological Foundations

Waltz opens the 1979 book with a discussion of what 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.

In this section Waltz drew on philosophers of science, especially Milton Friedman's instrumentalism in economics and a mild form of falsificationism. He held that a theory should be tested by questions such as: are its predictions consistent with observed behaviour? 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 behaviour of the whole system from the characteristics of its units (states, leaders, ideologies). He regards the theories of imperialism of Lenin and Hobson, which attributed war and expansionism to capitalism, as the clearest example. Waltz's argument is that if states with very different internal structures behave similarly, and if the behaviour of states does not change when their 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 a 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 "hierarchic": units stand in relations of command and obedience, and a central authority holds the legitimate monopoly of force. The international system is "anarchic": there is no authority above states able to enforce rules. Anarchy in Waltz's sense does not mean chaos or disorder, but the absence of central government.

(b) The Functional Differentiation of Units

In hierarchic systems, units have different functions (judiciary, executive, army and so on) and there is a division of labour among them. In an anarchic system, all states are "like units," because each must perform all essential functions for its own survival. States cannot accept a division of labour, because dependence on others in an insecure environment is dangerous. Waltz assumes this element to be constant in the international system and in effect 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. Capability includes population, territory, resources, economic capability, 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 seek "at a minimum" their own preservation and "at a maximum" universal domination. But his key point is that survival is a sufficient assumption for building the theory. States may have other goals, but survival is the precondition for achieving any other goal.

From this assumption Waltz deduces 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 their survival, balances of power "recurrently form." That is, whenever one state becomes too powerful, others turn to balancing against it and balance is restored. This outcome is not necessarily intended by any state; it is the unintended consequence of the behaviour of all of them, just as the equilibrium price in a market is the unintended consequence of the behaviour of producers and consumers.

Waltz distinguishes two modes of balancing:

- **Internal balancing:** increasing economic capability, strengthening the military and devising smarter strategies, relying on 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 engage in "balancing," not "bandwagoning" with the stronger power. His reason is that in an anarchic system the first concern of states is to maintain their position, not to maximise power. Joining the stronger side leaves a state defenceless against the future danger posed by that same strong side. That is why weaker states join the weaker side in order to contain the superior power.

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

The most important sentence separating Waltz from Mearsheimer is the claim that the first concern of states is not to maximise power but to maintain their position in the system. Waltz regards 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 thereby reduces its own security. Rationality therefore dictates that states content themselves with an "appropriate amount" of power.

This argument is the basis of what was later called "defensive realism." Its logic is as follows: anarchy pushes states towards caution, not aggression; aggression is usually costly and self-defeating; states that correctly understand the logic of the system will be conservative and supportive of the status quo. Revisionist and aggressive states, because they violate the logic of the system, are usually "punished," that is, they face a balancing coalition and eventually fail (Napoleon, Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan).

3.7. Socialisation and Competition: The Mechanisms of Structure

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

- **Competition:** States that do not imitate the successful practices of others fall behind in competition and may even be eliminated. States therefore converge on successful practices (modern armies, military technology, efficient organisation). Waltz cites the example of Meiji Japan.
- **Socialisation:** States learn the behaviours accepted in the system. Even revolutionary states, such as the Soviet Union after 1917, were forced after a while 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 "socialised" and become a normal state. Four decades of evidence show that this socialisation did not happen, at least at the level of regional strategy, or happened 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 we will see in Chapter Twelve, is one of the main 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 regarded 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 motive and the capacity to manage crises. In this section Waltz also expressed his scepticism towards international institutions and economic interdependence: interdependence is low in a bipolar system, and this is itself a factor of stability, because 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 situation would not last. In his view unipolarity is the least durable form of system, because:

- The superior 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 if well-intentioned, 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 its form was more complex than classical balancing. In the Middle East, as we will see, rather than balancing transparently against the United States, states turned 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 behaviour of firms in a perfectly competitive market differs from their behaviour in an oligopolistic market. Under perfect competition, no firm alone affects the price and none needs to calculate the behaviour of its rivals. Under oligopoly, a small number of large firms control the market and each must factor the reactions of others into its calculations.

Waltz likens the international system to an oligopoly: a few great powers dominate the system and their behaviour is highly interdependent. The fewer the great powers, the simpler the calculation and the more predictable the behaviour. That is why 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 hold joint ventures in another; they fight over prices and agree on standards. Economists call this phenomenon "coopetition." Had Waltz followed his analogy to the 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 behaviour that the hypothesis of the present book observes in the Middle East.

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

Paul Schroeder, the eminent historian of European diplomacy, showed in "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory" (1994), by examining European history from 1648 to 1945, that in many cases states chose not balancing but other behaviours. He identified four strategies:

- **Hiding:** avoiding conflict by declaring neutrality, isolation or hoping that the threat would be directed at someone else.
- **Transcending:** trying to go beyond the logic of power by creating shared institutions, rules and norms, such as the "Concert of Europe" after 1815.
- **Bandwagoning:** joining the stronger side to obtain security or spoils.
- **Balancing:** which was only one of the options and not necessarily the most common.

Schroeder concluded that "balancing" as a general rule is not consistent with the historical evidence and that states have in practice used a combination 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 not surprising that the same should be true in the Middle East.

3.12. Schweller: Bandwagoning for Profit

In "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In" (1994), Randall Schweller showed that Waltz and Walt had defined "bandwagoning" only as the behaviour 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 in order 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 all about security, whereas some states want change. Bandwagoning for profit is widely visible in the Middle East: the Arab states' accession to the Abraham Accords was not only out of fear of Iran, but also to gain technology, capital, advanced American weapons and a privileged standing in Washington. Morocco's accession to the accords in exchange for American recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara (December 2020) is a clear 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 sought to rebuild neorealism from within. They added two concepts to Waltz's theory:

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

This reconstruction is useful for the contemporary Middle East. Interaction capacity in the region has increased sharply over the past two decades: transnational media, social networks, transport corridors, energy pipelines and investment funds have tied 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 background of dual policy.

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

We can now test the three elements of Waltzian structure against the Middle Eastern regional system:

The Ordering Principle

The Middle East is anarchic, in the sense that there is no regional government above states. The Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation have no enforcement power. But the permanent presence of the United States, with its bases, fleets and defence commitments, has created a kind of "partial hierarchy." David Lake showed in *Hierarchy in International Relations* (2009) that many states have in practice ceded part of their security sovereignty to a dominant power. The Persian Gulf states are a clear example of this condition. The Middle East is therefore not "pure anarchy" but "anarchy with a patron."

Functional Differentiation

Contrary to Waltz's assumption, the states of the Middle East have acquired different functions: Qatar and Oman are mediators; the UAE and Bahrain are financial centres and bases; Saudi Arabia is the regulator of the oil market and a religious

leader; Iran was, until 2024, the hub of the proxy network; Turkey is the bridge to NATO and Europe; Israel is the technology hub and superior military power. This unwritten division of labour, which conflicts with 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 the different dimensions of power are concentrated in the hands of different actors. Military and technological superiority lies with Israel; demographic and geographical superiority with Iran, Turkey and Egypt; financial superiority with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar; and media and diplomatic superiority with Qatar. In such a distribution, no state is superior in every dimension, and each state must cooperate in some dimensions and compete in others. This "heterogeneous distribution" of capabilities, which Waltz cannot see with his aggregate index of power, is another structural background of dual policy.

3.15. Is Waltz's Theory "Defensive"?

Before ending this chapter, a subtle point should be noted. Some scholars, Mearsheimer among them, have said that Waltz did not explicitly and systematically formulate a theory of "defensive realism" in *Theory of International Politics*; 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, two of Waltz's key propositions, the priority of maintaining position over maximising power and the danger of excessive power accumulation, clearly laid the foundation of defensive realism. That is why the international relations literature regards Waltz as the father of defensive realism. This book follows the same tradition, but the reader should know that "defensive realism" is a theoretical family and not precisely 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. In this section we briefly explain each chapter and highlight the point that matters for the present critique.

Chapter One: Laws and Theories

Waltz begins the book with an epistemological discussion. He distinguishes between a "law" (a stable and recurring relationship between variables) and a "theory" (an explanation of why the law holds). A theory, in his words, 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 produce theory. Theory requires a "creative leap." Waltz also sets out the criteria for testing theory: deducing hypotheses, testing them, and especially making the tests difficult.

Significance for our critique: Waltz himself accepted that a theory must be measured by "difficult" tests. The Middle East, with its complexity, is precisely the difficult test that the theory must pass.

Chapter Two: Reductionist Theories

In this chapter Waltz examines and criticises theories of imperialism, from Hobson and Lenin to dependency theorists. His main argument is that these theories deduce the behaviour of the system from the characteristics of units (capitalism), whereas imperialism existed before capitalism and non-capitalist states have also been imperialist. The cause must therefore lie elsewhere.

Significance for our critique: The same logic can be turned against Waltz himself. If states in different structural positions (a superior power like Israel, a small state like Qatar, a middle state like Azerbaijan) all display dual behaviour, then the cause of duality lies not in their particular structural position but in another feature of their shared environment: the penetrated regional system.

Chapter Three: Systemic Approaches and Theories

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

Significance for 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 sufficient for a regional system embedded within the global system.

Chapter Four: Reductionist and Systemic Theories

In this chapter Waltz explains more precisely what a systemic theory is. The structure of the system is not the "cause" of behaviour but a "constraint" and "pressure" on behaviour. Structure works in two ways: socialisation and competition. Waltz also stresses that structure explains recurring patterns, not individual events.

Significance for our critique: If structure only exerts "pressure" and does not "determine," then states have freedom of action in responding to structural pressure. The hypothesis of the present book concerns exactly this "freedom of action": that the states of the Middle East 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: the ordering principle, the functional differentiation of units and the distribution of capabilities. Waltz first explains these three elements in domestic political structures (with the examples of Britain and the United States) and then turns to international political structure.

Significance for our critique: As we showed in earlier sections of this chapter, the first two elements have changed in the Middle East: anarchy with a patron has replaced pure anarchy, and an unwritten functional differentiation has formed 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 behaviour of states that seek at least their survival. It is in this chapter that Waltz places balancing ahead of bandwagoning and states his most famous proposition: the first concern of states is not to maximise power but to maintain their position in the system.

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

Chapter Seven: Structural Causes and Economic Effects

In this chapter Waltz criticises theories of "interdependence." He argues that interdependence is low in a bipolar world and that this is itself a factor of stability. The great powers, because of their large and relatively self-sufficient economies, are less dependent on one another and therefore experience less friction. He also shows that interdependence among unequals means the dependence of the weak on the strong.

Significance for 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 led to greater tension. But the evidence shows that interdependence in the Middle East has been both a source of friction and an instrument of de-escalation; that is, it has itself functioned 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.

Significance for our critique: In the Middle East, states are heavily dependent 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 stand by them. This very uncertainty is one of the motives of dual policy: by de-escalating with a rival, states insure themselves against the possibility of abandonment by their patron.

Chapter Nine: The Management of International Affairs

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

Significance for our critique: In the post-2011 Middle East, no great power took on the "management" of the region continuously and coherently. The United States oscillated between intervention and withdrawal, Russia remained confined to Syria, and China avoided a security role. In the absence of a manager, the regional powers were forced to manage themselves and compete with one another at the same time; a situation that is the breeding ground of dual policy.

3.17. The Logic of the Theory at a Glance

Element	Waltz's claim
Ordering principle	Anarchy: absence of supra-state government
Units	Functionally like states; differing only in capability
Basic motive	Survival and maintenance of position, not power maximisation
Main mechanism	Self-help, competition, socialisation
Predicted behaviour	Internal and external balancing; avoidance of bandwagoning
Systemic outcome	Recurrence of the balance of power; punishment of aggressive states
Most stable system	Bipolarity; greater stability 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 we will return in Part Two of the book:

- 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 the states of the Middle East really "like units"? Do Qatar, Iran and Israel have similar functions, or has an unwritten division of labour (mediator, base, energy supplier, proxy actor) formed among them?
- Do threats in the Middle East stem more from the "distribution of capabilities" or from ideology, identity and regime security?

- Do states in the Middle East "balance," or do they combine "balancing," "bandwagoning" and "hedging" at the same time?
- If states display defensive and offensive behaviour simultaneously, 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 advanced 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: it is enough for a state to have second-strike capability, that is, to be able to deliver a devastating response after absorbing a first strike.
- Nuclear states, even radical ones, become cautious after acquiring the bomb; the 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 states' military organisations have their own interests, cultures and routines, and can lead to accidents, theft of weapons, coups or dangerous preventive decisions. Sagan emphasised in particular the danger of states in which civilian control over the military is weak. This critique is especially important for the Islamic Republic, in which the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps 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 summarised 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 create a balance similar to that between India and Pakistan.
- The leaders of the Islamic Republic, despite their slogans, are rational actors who care about regime survival and therefore want the bomb for deterrence, not aggression.
- Sanctions and pressure push Iran further towards the bomb, because they increase its insecurity.

This article is perhaps the clearest application of defensive realism to the Middle East, and for that reason it is highly instructive for our critique. Its three main weaknesses are as follows:

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," that is, nuclear threshold capability, ballistic missiles and a proxy network, to expand its influence and not merely to ensure its survival. The phenomenon known as 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 behaviour in Kashmir after 1998. The evidence shows 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 official government and the IRGC. The diplomacy of the Foreign Ministry and the operations of the Quds Force have advanced at the same time and have sometimes been in open conflict. The 2021 leaked audio recording of Mohammad Javad Zarif, in which he spoke of the "field" and of Qasem 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 be established. But Israel's behaviour, from sabotage operations and the assassination of nuclear scientists to the Twelve-Day War of June 2025 and the large-scale American-Israeli attack of February 2026, showed that states sometimes choose preventive action rather than accepting a balance. This is exactly the behaviour that offensive realism predicts. On a single issue, therefore, Iran's behaviour conformed to the offensive pattern and so did 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 developed his theory and built "defensive realism" into a coherent research programme. Knowing these branches is essential for a precise critique, since 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 of the measures a state takes to increase its own security reduce the security of others and drive them to countermeasures. The result is a spiral of insecurity, even if neither side has offensive intentions. Jervis regarded two variables as key:

- **The offence-defence balance:** do technology and geography favour the attacker or the defender?
- **The distinguishability of offensive and defensive weapons:** can others tell whether a state's weapons are for defence or attack?

If the defence is dominant and distinguishable, the security dilemma is eased. In the Middle East neither condition holds: missiles, drones and proxy forces are both instruments of deterrence and instruments of attack. 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 expansionism stem less from a rational response to structure than from domestic coalitions, militaries, nationalist ideologies and "myths" that pass off the in-

terests of particular groups as the national interest. Snyder showed that states that fell into "overexpansion" were usually victims of the "logic of domestic coalition-building." This view is very useful for understanding the relationship of the IRGC to Iran's economy and politics, or the relationship of far-right currents to 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 the subject of 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, the 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).
- Geographical proximity.
- Offensive capability.
- Perceived offensive intentions.

Walt found that in the Middle East ideology, and especially transnational ideologies (pan-Arabism), sometimes produced division rather than alliance, because every leader who saw himself as leader of the "Arab nation" was a threat to the sovereignty of other Arab leaders. He also showed that foreign aid and the political penetration of the superpowers were secondary factors in alliance formation.

Walt's theory was a big step towards the reality of the Middle East, but it paid for this by losing structural parsimony, since "perceived intentions" is a unit-level variable. Critics, including Waltz himself, said that by introducing intention 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 "contingent" version of defensive realism. He argued that under certain conditions cooperation and restraint are the rational strategy, and that competition makes sense when a state faces a genuinely aggressive rival or when material conditions favour the offence. Glaser also stressed the importance of "signalling": states can demonstrate their defensive intentions to others through costly measures.

This view helps us see why many de-escalatory measures in the Middle East (such as the Abraham Accords or the Iran–Saudi reconciliation) did not lead to real confidence-building: because they were accompanied by power-maximising measures 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 can remain secure if they exercise restraint.
- Aggression is usually self-defeating, and balancing against the aggressor occurs.
- A state's aggressive behaviour should be explained mainly by domestic factors (misperception, domestic coalitions, ideology), not by structural pressure.
- The "normal state" is therefore a defensive state, and the "aggressive state" is a deviation.

This last assumption, as we will see in Part Two, is the main weakness of defensive realism in the Middle East. In a region where almost all the important actors behave defensively and offensively at the same time, the concept of "deviation" no longer has 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 behaviour 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 confident 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 accept the risk of escalation to the nuclear level.

This paradox explains why the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, despite avoiding direct war, became embroiled in proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, Angola and Afghanistan. In South Asia too, after the nuclear tests of 1998,

Pakistan entered a limited conflict at Kargil in 1999 and continued its support for 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 at lower risk. In other words, Tehran exploited Snyder's logic without possessing its main condition, genuine nuclear deterrence. 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 behaviour:

- **The deterrence model:** the rival is inherently revisionist and aggressive. Any concession to it is seen as weakness and emboldens it. The right response is therefore firmness, increased power and demonstrated resolve. The historical model for this view is the experience of Munich (1938) and the appeasement of Hitler.
- **The spiral model:** the rival is fundamentally insecure, not aggressive. Firm and threatening measures intensify its fear and drive it to countermeasures. The right response is therefore reassurance, threat reduction and confidence-building. The historical model for this view is the outbreak of the First World War (1914), in which a spiral of mobilisations and mutual fears led to catastrophe.

Jervis stressed that neither model is always right and that the main problem of policymakers is that they do not know which type 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 the debates of the past four decades in the United States about Iran have taken place within these two models. Supporters of the JCPOA were close to the spiral model and supporters of "maximum pressure" to the deterrence model. The hypothesis of the present book goes one step further: the problem was not only that policymakers did not know which type Iran was; Iran was both types at once. Part of the regime (the government and the Foreign Ministry) was better explained by the spiral model and another part (the IRGC and the Quds Force) by the deterrence

model. Any policy that took only one of the two models as its basis 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 major revolutions in detail, the French, Russian and Iranian revolutions, and several others (American, Mexican, Turkish and Chinese) more briefly. This book is of particular importance to the Iranian reader, as it is one of the few major works of defensive realism that directly analyses the Islamic Republic.

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

- A revolution abruptly changes the balance of power and forces both the revolutionary state and its neighbours to recalculate. Neighbours 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 tendency frightens its neighbours.
- Both sides fall into "misperception": the revolutionary state thinks the revolution can easily be exported, and the neighbours think the revolutionary state can easily be overthrown. Both are wrong.
- Revolutionary states usually become "socialised" after a period, but this process may take years, and costly wars may occur in the interval.

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

This prediction saw part of reality correctly and part not. The author's hypothesis is that the Islamic Republic, to resolve the tension between "revolution" and "state," institutionalised both in two parallel institutions rather than choosing one. The result was a "half-finished socialisation" that turned duality into a permanent feature of the regime. That socialisation remained incomplete was because this duality was useful to the regime: the government provided the possibility of engaging with the world, and the IRGC the possibility of preserving revolutionary identity and regional influence.

4.8. Taliaferro and "Security Seeking under Anarchy"

In "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited" (2000–2001), Jeffrey Taliaferro sought to show that defensive realism can also explain aggressive behaviour without regarding it merely as a "deviation." Drawing on Kahneman and Tversky's "prospect theory" in psychology, he argued that leaders facing the prospect of "loss" behave far more riskily than when facing the prospect of "gain."

A state that feels it is losing its position, influence or allies may therefore resort to aggressive and high-risk actions to prevent this loss, even if its ultimate aim is security and not expansion. Taliaferro explained cases such as Japan's behaviour before Pearl Harbor and America's behaviour in Vietnam with this logic.

This view is very instructive for the Middle East. The behaviour of the Islamic Republic after 2024, that is, direct attacks on Israel after losing commanders and allies, and the behaviour of Israel after 7 October, that is, a broad and pre-emptive response after the failure of deterrence, are both consistent with Taliaferro's logic of "loss aversion." But this logic too, like 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 showed, using game theory, that states that genuinely seek security can reassure one another of their defensive intentions through costly signalling and thus avoid war. The problem arises when "wolf-like" states can also take on the appearance of "sheep" and send defensive signals.

The metaphorical title of Kydd's article (a play 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 at the same time, 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 Offence-Defence 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 listed the mechanisms through

which offence dominance leads to war: first-strike incentives, windows of opportunity and vulnerability, firm and inflexible policies, and secrecy.

Van Evera also showed that the perception of offence dominance is often false and stems from the interests of militaries and nationalist ideologies. The “cult of the offensive” in European armies before 1914 is the classic example of this 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 44-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 situation should make war more likely; and so it did. But these same states invested at the same time in de-escalation with others. Instead of pushing states towards an absolute choice of war, offence dominance forced them to choose “with whom to fight and with whom to make peace.”

4.11. Chapter Summary

In his 2012 article on Iran, Waltz boldly applied his theory to the Middle East. But this application showed that his structural assumptions, 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 the reality of the Middle East, 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. At seventeen he enlisted in the US Army, then graduated from the West Point military academy and served for several years as an Air Force officer. He then earned his doctorate at Cornell University and has taught since 1982 at the University of Chicago, where he holds the title of R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor. Beyond his theoretical works, Mearsheimer is one of the loudest and most controversial voices in public debates on 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" (1994–1995), 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 one fundamental point: if anarchy makes states insecure and no state can be sure of others' future intentions, why should it content itself with 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 maximisers," and the ultimate goal of each is "hegemony."

Mearsheimer calls his theory a "tragedy" because he believes that great powers, which have no reason to fight one another and may even be benign, have no choice but intense competition. This tragedy is structural, not moral; states are not to blame, but are prisoners of the situation they find themselves in.

5.3. Five Bedrock Assumptions

Mearsheimer builds his theory on five assumptions, stressing that none of them alone mandates aggressive behaviour, but that their combination does:

- **The international system is anarchic:** there is no authority above states to come to their rescue. Mearsheimer uses the image of a "number to call in an emergency": in the international system there is no one to call in times of danger.
- **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 of others' intentions:** intentions are in the minds of leaders 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 preserve 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 maximise their prospects of survival.

5.4. Three Patterns of Behaviour Derived from the Assumptions

From these five assumptions, three general patterns of behaviour are deduced:

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

In a famous sentence, 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 land 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 land forces, and strategic bombing alone rarely wins wars.

This emphasis on land power gives pause in the twenty-first-century Middle East. The region's recent wars have been fought with missiles, drones, cyber warfare, proxy forces and the targeted killing of leaders, and less through territorial conquest. The important exception is Azerbaijan's seizure of Karabakh (2020 and 2023), which fits Mearsheimer's pattern exactly. We return to this subject 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 sharply 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 "re-

gional hegemony": domination of its own geographical 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 Goal of the Regional Hegemon

Mearsheimer argues that a regional hegemon has two goals:

- Maintaining dominance in its own region.
- Preventing the emergence of another regional hegemon in other regions, 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 it has taken a stand against China today. Mearsheimer regards 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 this through "offshore balancing," not through a permanent military presence.

5.8. Strategies for Gaining and Keeping Power

Mearsheimer offers a list of strategies that great powers use to increase their relative power or prevent a rival from increasing its own:

(a) Strategies for Gaining Power

- **War:** the most costly but most effective way of changing the balance.
- **Blackmail:** threatening force to gain concessions without war.
- **Bait and bleed:** provoking two rivals into war with each other while the provoking state stays out.
- **Bloodletting:** ensuring that a rival engaged in war fights for as long and as exhaustingly as possible.

(b) Strategies for Checking Aggressors

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

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 when the threat is very close and immediate.

(c) Strategies to Avoid

Mearsheimer considers two strategies unreasonable for great powers:

- **Bandwagoning:** this shifts the balance in the rival's favour. Only small and weak states do it.
- **Appeasement:** conceding to a rival in the hope of changing its behaviour. Mearsheimer regards this as "dangerous" and "a sign of naivety."

This last point is very important for our discussion. For Mearsheimer, genuine de-escalation, meaning acceptance of a rival's increased power in order to reduce the risk of war, is unreasonable for great powers. In his theory, therefore, any policy of de-escalation is either a temporary tactic or a mistake. The hypothesis of the present book 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 states' strategy.

5.9. The Distribution of Power and the Likelihood of War

Mearsheimer ranks international systems by stability as follows:

System type	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 regional hegemon, is the most dangerous system, because the potential hegemon has an incentive to fight to achieve hegemony and the others have an incentive to coalesce to prevent it. The post-2011 Middle East, with several claimants to hegemony (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel) and no undisputed hegemon, is close to this definition, but more complex.

5.10. Mearsheimer's Historical Evidence: Four Revisionist Powers

In *Tragedy*, to demonstrate that great powers are power maximisers, Mearsheimer examined four historical cases in detail:

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 (1894–1895) and the seizure of Taiwan, war with Russia (1904–1905), the annexation of Korea (1910), the seizure of Manchuria (1931), war with China (from 1937) and finally the attack on Pearl Harbor (1941). Mearsheimer argues that this behaviour, regardless of the nature of Japan's political system in each period, is consistent with the structural logic of power maximisation. Japan continued to expand even in periods when it had relatively liberal governments.

Germany (1862–1945)

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

The Soviet Union (1917–1991)

Mearsheimer argues that Soviet leaders, despite their revolutionary ideology, in practice behaved 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 and not the other way round.

Italy (1861–1943)

Italy, although the weakest great power in Europe, consistently sought opportunities for expansion: 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 powers are power maximisers if they find the opportunity.

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 case of power maximisation. That the United States, after achieving hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, no longer sought territorial conquest in Europe or Asia is, in his view, not a sign of "satisfaction" but a consequence of the "stopping power of water." In this position the United States became an "offshore balancer."

A Critical Observation

All of Mearsheimer's historical cases are drawn from among the "great powers." He says little about the behaviour of middle and regional states and declares explicitly that his theory is mainly about great powers. This limitation of scope, as we will see in Chapter Six and Part Two, is the central 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 is markedly stronger than the other powers of its region in wealth and population, and hence in military capability, and could dominate the region given the opportunity. Mearsheimer proposes two criteria for identifying a potential hegemon: it must have the strongest army in the region and also the greatest latent power (wealth).

In the Middle East, no state decisively meets both criteria. Iran has the largest population and one of the largest land armies, but neither the greatest wealth nor the strongest army in quality. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have the greatest wealth, but not the largest army. 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 behaviour, has in the Middle East become multiple and cross-cutting fears rather than a single concentrated fear. Each state fears several others, in different dimensions. The result is behaviour 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 that nuclear weapons end security competition. In his view:

- Great powers still seek "nuclear superiority," that is, the capability to destroy a rival's arsenal before it is used, though in practice such superiority is rarely attainable.
- Competition continues at the conventional level, because each side knows the other will resort to nuclear weapons only under 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 the Mearsheimerian logic of "nuclear monopoly." Israel has enforced this doctrine by force in Iraq (1981), Syria (2007) and Iran (2025 and 2026). In this particular case Israel's behaviour is entirely 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 *Tragedy*, Mearsheimer completely rewrote the final chapter and devoted it to the question "Can China rise peacefully?" His answer was no: if China continues its economic growth, it will try to dominate Asia, just as the United States dominated the Western Hemisphere. China will seek to push the United States out of Asia and force its neighbours (India, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea, Russia) to accept its primacy. In response, the United States and China's neighbours 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 the United States spends in the Middle East is a resource lost against China. This argument has been one of the theoretical foundations of the debate on "reducing the American presence in the Middle East" in recent decades. But 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 Tragedy

Tragedy faced serious criticism from the time of its publication. The most important critiques are:

Glenn Snyder's Critique

In his review article "Mearsheimer's World: Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security" (2002), Glenn Snyder argued that Mearsheimer deduces from his assumptions a conclusion that does not follow logically from them. If survival is the primary goal and aggression is risky, a rational state will not necessarily be a power maximiser. 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 Falsifiability Critique

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

The Empirical Critique: Post-Cold War America

Some critics asked: if great powers are power maximisers, why did the United States, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when it was in an unrivalled position, not conquer Europe or Asia? Mearsheimer replied that the "stopping power of water" made this impossible. Critics said that this reply effectively reduces "maximisation" to "maximisation as far as possible" and brings it close to defensive realism.

The Constructivist Critique

Constructivists said that Mearsheimer completely ignored identity and ideology, whereas the behaviour of the United States towards Canada and Mexico, or of European Union countries towards one another, can be explained only by understanding shared identities and norms. In *The Great Delusion,* by introducing nationalism, Mearsheimer partly responded to this critique.

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 commentary helps the reader see how Mearsheimer's argument moves from assumptions to predictions and where its strengths and weaknesses lie.

Chapter One: Introduction

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

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

Chapter Two: Anarchy and the Struggle for Power

In this chapter Mearsheimer sets out his five bedrock assumptions and shows how their combination leads to three patterns of behaviour (fear, self-help, power maximisation). He also explains the concept of "regional hegemony" and why "global hegemony" is impossible.

Significance for our critique: Mearsheimer stresses in this chapter that states cannot be certain of others' "intentions." In the Middle East this uncertainty stems not only from the concealment of intentions but from their open "duality"; states deliberately send two contradictory sets of signals.

Chapter Three: Wealth and Power

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

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

Chapter Four: The Primacy of Land Power

Mearsheimer argues that the land 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 in history. He also explains the concept of the "stopping power of water" in this chapter.

Significance for our critique: As noted earlier, the Middle East's wars of the past decade have mostly been fought with missiles, drones, intelligence operations and proxy forces. The 2025 and 2026 wars of Israel and the United States against the Islamic Republic were mainly air and missile wars and did not aim at territorial conquest. This experience calls the primacy of land power into question, at least at the regional level.

Chapter Five: Strategies for Survival

In this chapter Mearsheimer sets out 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 unreasonable.

Significance for our critique: The interesting point is that Mearsheimer regards all these strategies as "alternatives" to one another: in each situation a state chooses one. But the states of the Middle East have used these strategies simultaneously. In 2026 Saudi Arabia simultaneously pursued buck-passing (to the United States), balancing (the pact with Pakistan) and de-escalation (keeping a channel open to Iran).

Chapter Six: Great Powers in Action

This chapter presents the historical evidence of power maximisation from the experience of Japan, Germany, the Soviet Union and Italy, and argues that even Britain and the United States, usually considered restrained powers, were in fact power maximisers, held in check only by geographical constraints.

Significance for our critique: All the cases in this chapter come from Europe and East Asia. There is no Middle Eastern case in it.

Chapter Seven: The Offshore Balancers

In this chapter Mearsheimer examines the behaviour of Britain and the United States as "offshore balancers." These two powers, secure because of their geographical separation (by sea or ocean) from the European and Asian continents, intervened on the continent only when a potential hegemon was emerging and local powers could not contain it.

Significance for our critique: This chapter is the theoretical basis of "offshore balancing" in the Middle East (Chapter Six of the present 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 the war directly. This means either that the United States acted contrary to structural logic, or that it saw Iran as a potential hegemon, or that non-structural factors (the alliance with Israel, domestic politics) played a role in America's decision.

Chapter Eight: Balancing versus Buck-Passing

In this chapter Mearsheimer examines under what conditions states balance and under what conditions they pass the buck to others. He argues that buck-passing is more common in balanced multipolar systems, and balancing in bipolar systems or systems with a potential hegemon. Geography also matters: states that share a border with an aggressor are less able to pass the buck.

Significance for our critique: The Persian Gulf states, facing Iran in geographical proximity, should by this logic have balanced. But because of the American presence, they were able to balance (alliance with the United States) and pass the buck (avoid direct war) at the same time. The presence of an extra-regional patron has made unnecessary the choice that Mearsheimer considers necessary.

Chapter Nine: The Causes of Great Power War

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

Significance for our critique: The Middle East is close to the definition of "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 that Mearsheimer examined.

Chapter Ten: Great Power Politics in the Twenty-First Century (in the 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, and Mearsheimer argued that China's rise would lead to intense security competition with the United States and China's neighbours.

Significance for our critique: Mearsheimer's focus on China had an important implication for the Middle East: if the century's main rivalry is in Asia, the United States should draw down in the Middle East and shift its resources to Asia. This prediction, reflected in the discourse of the "pivot to Asia," sent the states of the Middle East the message that they might lose their patron in the future. This message, as shown earlier, was one of the motives of dual policy: states tried both to benefit from the United States as much as possible and, through de-escalation with rivals and ties with China, to prepare themselves for the post-American era.

5.16. The Logic of the Theory at a Glance

Element	Mearsheimer's claim
Basic motive	Survival, guaranteed only by maximising relative power
Ultimate goal	Regional hegemony; global hegemony is impossible
Type of states	All great powers are revisionist
Main form of power	Land power, based on wealth and population
Main strategies	War, blackmail, bait and bleed, balancing, buck-passing
Strategies to avoid	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 in *Foreign Policy* entitled "An Unnecessary War." 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 significance. Mearsheimer regards his theory as a theory of the behaviour of "great powers" and always distinguishes between "what states do" (explanation) and "what America should do" (prescription). He believes that the United States, as the regional hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, should intervene in other regions only when a potential hegemon is emerging. In the Middle East, none of the states had the capacity to become hegemon, so the United States 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 main argument was that America's almost unconditional support for Israel cannot be explained by American strategic or moral interests. In their view Israel had become a "strategic liability" rather than a "strategic asset" after the Cold War, and this support must be explained by the influence of a loose coalition of individuals and organisations they called the "Israel lobby." They argued that this lobby played a role in shaping the climate before the Iraq war and in hostility towards Iran and Syria.

The book met with fierce reactions. Critics regarded it as empirically weak and monocausal, and some saw unpleasant echoes in it. But from a theoretical standpoint, the important point for us is that in this work Mearsheimer and Walt in effect used American "domestic politics" to explain its foreign policy, that is, the very "reductionism" that 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

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

From a theoretical standpoint, these positions are interesting. If we analyse Israel through the logic of offensive realism, expanding territorial control, suppressing nearby threats and seeking unrivalled military superiority are exactly the behaviour Mearsheimer's theory predicts. Yet Mearsheimer himself regards this behaviour as "unreasonable." This contradiction shows that his theory has not been clearly formulated for middle-sized regional powers: is Israel a "great power"? If not, does the logic of power maximisation apply to it?

6.4. Mearsheimer on Iran

On Iran, Mearsheimer has held a position 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 regarded the American withdrawal in 2018 as a mistake. He also argued that the threat of regime change was Iran's most important motive for seeking deterrence.

This position too shows that Mearsheimer, despite his "offensive" theory, is usually "defensive" in his policy prescriptions for the Middle East. The gap between theory and prescription, which is evident in his writings, is itself evidence for the claim that 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 the United States pursued a policy of "liberal hegemony": an effort to spread democracy, market economics and international institutions throughout the world, even by force. He judged this policy doomed to failure 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 in America itself.

Mearsheimer regards the cases of 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 amounts to an implicit acceptance that identity and ideology, which had been eliminated in *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 the Russian invasion in 2022, Mearsheimer argued that NATO's eastward expansion threatened Russia and that Russia's reaction was predictable behaviour from a great power faced with a rival's presence on its borders. This position provoked extensive 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 while preserving their ties with Russia. Iran even supplied drones to Russia. This "hedging" behaviour is not consistent with either balancing or bandwagoning in its pure form.

6.7. China and Potential Hegemony

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 the United States 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 the changing global distribution of power. But the region's states' behaviour towards China is also dual: they want capital and markets from China, but still seek their security from the United States.

6.8. How States Think (2023)

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

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

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 prescriptive version of realism for American policy in the Middle East. Their argument ran in several steps:

- The United States has vital interests in only three regions: Europe, Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf. The first two because of their concentration of industrial power, 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 a balance exists among Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, there is no need for a large American military presence. The United States 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 the United States into unnecessary wars.
- The United States should establish more normal relations with Iran, since Iran, despite all its ambitions, does not have the capacity to become hegemon and can be used as a counterweight to other actors.

This article has two important implications for our discussion. First, it shows that from Mearsheimer's perspective, what matters in the Middle East is the "balance" among local states, not the victory of one over another. Second, this prescription, with its emphasis on restraint and non-intervention, is in fact very close to the logic of defensive realism. In other words, the theorist of offensive realism, when prescribing for real American policy in the Middle East, speaks the language of defensive realism. This is yet another example of the coexistence of two logics, this time in the thought 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 has no strategic importance for American security, that Assad's overthrow would lead to a power vacuum and the rise of jihadist groups, and that the United States should not enter a war whose end it cannot 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 exhaustion in Ukraine, the weakening of Hezbollah by Israel and Turkish support for the opposition, showed that Syria's fate was above all in the hands of regional powers. This development is not inconsistent with Mearsheimer's prediction about the dangers of American intervention, but it shows that regional powers, even without the United States, had the capacity to change the balance fundamentally.

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 the problem of "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 which it could turn into a war of attrition that seriously weakens the strongest state. No Middle Eastern state is a great power by this definition.

There are therefore three ways of applying the theory to the Middle East:

- **First way:** declaring that the theory does not apply to the Middle East. In that case, offensive realism has nothing to say about the behaviour of regional powers and can only explain the behaviour of the United States, Russia and China in the region.
- **Second way:** extending the theory's logic to "regional great powers," that is, assuming that every state behaves within its regional system as a great power does in the global system. Some scholars, including Eric Labs in "Beyond Victory" (1997), have moved in this direction, arguing that every state, to the extent of its capabilities, seeks to expand its war aims.
- **Third way:** accepting that regional powers operate in a "two-layered 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 the great powers.

The present book's hypothesis is close to the third way and takes it one step further: precisely because the regional powers of the Middle East operate in a two-layered system, they are forced to apply a different logic at each layer. At the regional layer, offensive logic (competition for influence); at the global layer, defensive logic and bandwagoning (winning the support of a great power). Because the two layers exist at the same time, the two logics are also applied at the same time. De-escalation with one neighbour is often meant to win the approval of a global power, and power maximisation against another neighbour is meant to win regional standing.

6.12. Mearsheimer and the Gaza War

After 7 October 2023, in numerous articles, interviews and lectures, Mearsheimer was one of the harshest critics of Israel's military conduct in Gaza and condemned it

on legal and moral grounds. He also argued that Israel's policy was strategically harmful to Israel itself, because it erodes its international legitimacy and does not solve the Palestinian question.

These positions, regardless of any judgement about their correctness, raise an important theoretical question: when Mearsheimer speaks of the cost of "legitimacy" for Israel, is he not distancing himself from his own theoretical framework? In *Tragedy*, legitimacy is an unimportant 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 again that when the structural theorist arrives in the Middle East, he is forced to turn to variables his theory had set aside.

6.13. Critiques of How States Think

The 2023 book by Mearsheimer and Rosato also provoked serious criticism. The most important critiques are:

- **An overly broad definition of rationality:** if every decision based on a "credible theory" and taken through deliberation is rational, almost all decisions are rational. In that case the concept of rationality 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 theories. Is the ideology of "resistance" or "export of the revolution" also a credible theory?
- **Ignoring obviously irrational decisions:** critics raised cases 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 that applies both at the same time can also be rational. In this book, Mearsheimer has, without intending to, accepted the theoretical possibility of "dual rationality."

6.14. Chapter Summary

Mearsheimer is offensive in theory and usually defensive in his policy prescriptions for the Middle East. To explain American policy in the Middle East he took refuge in domestic variables (the lobby), and in *The Great Delusion* he added nationalism to the

theory. In *How States Think* he defined rationality so broadly that it can cover any combined behaviour. These developments show that Mearsheimer himself, confronted with the Middle East, has found the pure structural framework insufficient.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Comparative Assessment of Defensive and Offensive Realism

7.1. Commonalities: One Family, Two Children

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

- Both theories are "structural" and seek the principal cause of state behaviour in the structure of the international system, not in human nature or the internal characteristics of states.
- Both regard anarchy as the ordering principle of the system.
- Both assume the state to be the principal and unitary actor.
- Both regard survival as the primary goal of states.
- Both are sceptical of international institutions and economic interdependence.
- Both emphasise "relative gains" and regard cooperation as fragile.
- Both regard 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 achieve hegemony. Some scholars have summarised this difference as the "security-seeking state" versus the "power-seeking state."

(b) Offence or Defence Dominance

Defensive realists usually believe that the defence has been dominant in modern history: conquering territory 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 offence and that states cannot know in advance whether an offensive will succeed.

(c) Responding to an Aggressor

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

(d) Explaining Aggressive Behaviour

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

(e) The Stable System

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

(f) Nuclear Weapons

Waltz regards the gradual spread of nuclear weapons as stabilising. Mearsheimer too had proposed in the early 1990s that Ukraine keep its nuclear weapons to deter Russia. Both have accepted 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)

Criterion	Waltz (defensive realism)	Mearsheimer (offensive realism)
Goal of the state	Security and maintenance of position	Maximising relative power and hegemony
Desired amount of power	Appropriate and sufficient	As much as possible, up to hegemony
Nature of states	Mostly status quo	Mostly revisionist
View of aggression	Usually self-defeating	Sometimes rational and beneficial
Military advantage	Defence is dominant	Defence dominance is unproven
Response to aggressor	Rapid balancing	Buck-passing, late balancing
Explaining aggression	Domestic factors, misperception	Logic of structure
Role of institutions	Secondary	Virtually none
De-escalation	Rational if security is sufficient	Dangerous; appeasement rejected
Nuclear weapons	Stabilising; more may be better	Stabilising 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 powers

7.4. The Dispute over the “Problem of Intentions”

Both theories accept that the intentions of states are unknown. But the conclusions they draw differ. Waltz and the defensive realists (especially Glaser and Walt) believe that states can reveal their intentions to some extent through signalling and behaviour. Mearsheimer believes that even if today’s intentions are clear, tomorrow’s cannot be known, so states must focus on “capabilities,” not “intentions.”

This dispute appears in a particular form in the Middle East. The region’s states deliberately display “dual intentions.” Israel sends signals of peace and signals of supremacy at the same time. The Islamic Republic sends signals of dialogue and signals of resistance at the same time. This “strategic ambiguity” is itself an instrument for managing the security dilemma: it gives the rival hope that an agreement is possible and at the same time frightens 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 in a “contingent theory”: where defence is dominant and the threat is low, states behave defensively, and where offence is dominant and opportunity is

available, offensively. Jeffrey Taliaferro has also said that state behaviour depends on "the level of threat" and "opportunity."

The present book's hypothesis goes beyond these contingent combinations. In a contingent combination, the state chooses one of the two logics at different times or in different conditions. But in the hypothesis of "simultaneous dual policymaking," the state applies both logics simultaneously, at one time and on one issue, and the two logics reinforce each other. In other words, de-escalation is an instrument of power maximisation, and power maximisation 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. In his view, the main disagreement lies not in how much power states want, but in how states think about danger:

- **Neorealism (and 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 (and especially defensive realism):** states decide on the basis of "probability." They assess how likely it is that a rival will become aggressive and compare the costs of preparing for the worst case with the benefits of cooperation.

This distinction is of great importance for understanding dual policy. A state that looks at one rival with the logic of "possibility" and at another with the logic of "probability" will naturally compete with the first and cooperate with the second. But the situation is more complex when a state uses both logics simultaneously with a single rival: assuming the worst case in the security domain and acting on probability in the economic domain. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran after the Beijing agreement, or between the UAE and Iran in trade through Dubai, is exactly such a combination.

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

In *The Social Evolution of International Politics* (2013), the Chinese scholar Tang Shiping offered a creative proposal for reconciling the two theories. In his view both theories are right, but each for a different historical period. Over history the international system 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 resembled natural selection: offensive states were gradually eliminated or punished, and norms such as respect for sovereignty and the prohibition of territorial conquest were institutionalised.

The implication of this theory 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 the region's relations (relations among the established Persian Gulf states, or between Israel and the normalising countries) have reached the "Waltzian world," while another part (relations with fragile states and non-state actors, or competition in the Caucasus) still remains in the "Mearsheimerian world." Every state in the region, being 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 divided states by two criteria, relative power and degree of satisfaction with the status quo, into four categories, giving each an animal name:

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

If we apply this typology to the states of the Middle East, we reach 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 US 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: seeking to transform the regional order through the proxy network
Saudi Arabia	Lion: guardian of the oil order and Persian Gulf stability	Small wolf: the Yemen war and the blockade of Qatar

State	In one domain	In another domain
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: ties with 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 single 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 Two Theories' Predictions for the Middle East: A Thought Experiment

To sharpen the comparison, one can ask: if we had only one of the two theories at our disposal, what behaviour would we predict from each state?

State	Prediction based on Waltz	Prediction based on Mearsheimer	Observed behaviour
Israel	Maintain superiority and avoid expansion	Expand influence and eliminate rivals; de-escalation only tactical	Both, simultaneously, with serious investment in both
Islamic Republic	Deterrence for survival; gradual socialisation	Bid for regional hegemony	Deterrence, hegemonic ambition and negotiation simultaneously
Saudi Arabia	Balance with the US 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 its periphery	Military expansion and active mediation simultaneously
Qatar	Shelter under the American umbrella	Bandwagon with the stronger power	Shelter with the US, ties with Iran and Turkey, and hosting Islamists simultaneously
Azerbaijan	Settle for retaking Karabakh	Impose the corridor by force	Territorial conquest and peace by agreement simultaneously

The last column of this table summarises the book's entire hypothesis: in all six cases, observed behaviour 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; one must adjudicate between them with evidence. 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 behaviour 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 of the two logics at each moment, and the theorist must specify the conditions of choice. In the simultaneous combination position, the state never sets either aside, and the theorist must explain the logic of "combination": how the two logics divide labour, reinforce or weaken each other, and at what point their equilibrium breaks down. Part Two of this book answers exactly these questions.

7.11. How Should We Adjudicate between the Two Theories? Methodological Considerations

Comparing Waltz and Mearsheimer is meaningful only if we make clear by what criteria we want to adjudicate between them, or between them and an alternative framework. This section formulates the main methodological considerations used throughout Part Two of the book.

(a) The Problem of Operationalisation

The first problem in testing the two theories is the difficulty of operationalising their key concepts. "Security-seeking" and "power-seeking" are subjective motives that are not directly observable. A single action, for example increasing the military budget or establishing a base in another country, can be interpreted both as a sign

of security-seeking (a response to threat) and as a sign of power-seeking (an effort at superiority). This is the problem Jervis formulated with the concept of the "indistinguishability of offensive and defensive weapons."

This book's solution is to focus on "behaviour" instead of "motive." Rather than asking whether a state wants security or power in its own mind, we ask whether the state has simultaneously engaged in behaviours that each theory regards as a sign of the opposite logic. If a state simultaneously engages in behaviour that Waltz regards as an "offensive deviation" and Mearsheimer regards as "unreasonable appeasement," both theories have difficulty explaining that behaviour. Operational indicators of the two logics are presented in Chapter Nine.

(b) Most-Likely and Least-Likely Cases

Harry Eckstein, the American methodologist, introduced in a famous essay on case studies (1975) the concept of the "crucial case": a case in which, if the theory fails, it is unlikely to succeed 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 of intense 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, which has a different institutional and normative structure.

(c) Process Tracing

In *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (2005), Alexander George and Andrew Bennett introduced "process tracing" as the principal tool of qualitative case study. In this method the researcher follows the causal chain between variables step by step to see whether the mechanism the theory predicts 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-maximising action by the IRGC (the detention of sailors) was managed through the communication channel that a de-escalatory action (the JCPOA) had built. 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 outcomes observed in each case. The tables of "prediction based on Waltz, prediction based on Mearsheimer, observed behaviour" in this chapter and in the case chapters apply this method. The limitation of the congruence method is that congruence between prediction and outcome does not by itself prove causation; the book therefore complements it with process tracing.

(e) Counterfactual Conditions

One useful tool for assessing theories is the "counterfactual" question: what would have happened if a given state had pursued only one of the two logics? For example: if Qatar had been only an ally of the United States and not host to Hamas, could it have mediated the Gaza ceasefire? If Azerbaijan had relied only on force and had not had Article 9 of the 2020 declaration, could it have advanced its corridor claim with legal backing? A negative answer to these questions shows that the two logics were not only simultaneous but dependent on each other. Scholars such as James Fearon and Philip Tetlock have stressed the need for rigour in posing counterfactual questions: the counterfactual scenario should assume the smallest possible change in reality and be consistent with existing historical knowledge.

(f) The Danger of "Saving the Theory"

The last consideration is the danger Lakatos called a "degenerative problem shift": adding auxiliary assumptions to a theory to reconcile it with contrary evidence, without producing any new prediction. Both Waltz's defenders (by adding perception, domestic coalitions and ideology) and Mearsheimer's defenders (by interpreting every instance of restraint as "lack of opportunity") are exposed to this danger. The framework of "dual realism" must also avoid it. For this reason the book specifies criteria for falsifying the hypothesis in Chapter Nine, examines control cases in Chapter Eighteen and derives new testable propositions in Chapter Twenty.

7.12. 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 generalisation difficult.

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's argument is that between the level of the global system and the level of the state there is a third level, the "regional system," which has 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 characteristics. From this perspective "dual realism" remains a structural theory, but a two-layered one.

7.13. Chapter Summary

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

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 conditions of complex interdependence states have incentives to cooperate, and that international institutions can lower 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. But these same projects, as we will see, are at the same time instruments of power maximisation 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. In *Dialogues in Arab Politics* (1998), Michael Barnett showed that competition among Arab states was less military than a "symbolic" contest over the definition of 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 famous 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, capacity to mobilise domestic resources, strategic culture) before becoming foreign policy. Representatives of this current include:

- **Fareed Zakaria:** in *From Wealth to Power* (1998) he showed that the state's capacity to extract resources from society determines 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 divided states into "lions, lambs, jackals and wolves," which behave differently according to their satisfaction with the status quo and their power.
- **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 this book's hypothesis, since it allows us to see how a state combines structural pressures (which may be defensive or offensive) with domestic needs (regime survival, religious legitimacy, the economic interests of elites) and produces dual behaviour.

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

The most important critique for the Middle East has come from scholars who have studied the behaviour of Third World states.

(a) Steven David and "Omnibalancing"

In "Explaining Third World Alignment" (1991), Steven David argued that the leaders of Third World states balance not against external threats 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 the abstract.

This concept is the key to understanding many dual policies in the region. Saudi Arabia de-escalates with Israel in order to balance against Iran and the Muslim Broth-

erhood, but avoids full normalisation so as not to lose its domestic religious legitimacy. The Islamic Republic negotiates with the West to reduce sanctions but maintains the proxy network to guarantee its revolutionary identity and the regime's survival.

(b) Mohammed Ayoob and "Subaltern Realism"

In *The Third World Security Predicament* (1995) and the article "Subaltern Realism," Mohammed Ayoob argued that Third World states are at the stage of "state-building" and that their principal 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 the article "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War" (2014), Gregory Gause showed that the Iran–Saudi rivalry after 2011 was not direct war but competition for influence in "weak states" (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain). The region's states use sectarian and transnational identities to penetrate these vacuums. This kind of competition, conducted through non-state actors, does not fit within Waltz's "balance of power" or Mearsheimer's "regional hegemony."

(d) Raymond Hinnebusch and the Penetrated Regional System

In *The International Politics of the Middle East*, Raymond Hinnebusch described the Middle East as a "penetrated regional system": a region in which extra-regional powers have always been actively present and in which the region's states also 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 the theory of the "regional security complex." According to this theory, most threats travel more easily over short distances, so security is organised "regionally." The Middle East is a security complex with three sub-complexes: the Levant (Israel and its neighbours), the Persian Gulf and the Maghreb. The theory also introduced the concept of "secur-

itisation": 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 famous article (1997), John Vasquez argued, using Imre Lakatos's methodology, that the realist research programme had become "degenerative," because each time its predictions failed (for example, when states bandwagoned with the stronger power instead of balancing), realists created a new concept (balance of threat, buck-passing, underbalancing, soft balancing) to save the theory. As a result the theory explains any behaviour and therefore predicts none.

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

8.7. Soft Balancing and Hedging

After 2003, Robert Pape, T. V. Paul and others put forward the concept of "soft balancing": states unable to balance hard (militarily) against the United States limit its power with diplomatic, institutional and economic tools. The concept of "hedging" was also used to describe the behaviour of states that maintain ties with two rival powers at the same time in order to reduce the risk of dependence on either.

These concepts are closer to the reality of the Middle East, but still incomplete. Hedging usually describes the behaviour of small states towards great powers, whereas this book's hypothesis concerns the behaviour of regional powers towards one another. Hedging is also a "moderate" behaviour, whereas the dual policy we describe includes extreme behaviour in both directions: both real peacemaking and real war.

8.8. The English School: The Anarchical Society

In *The Anarchical Society* (1977), Hedley Bull proposed a middle path between realism and liberalism. In his view, despite anarchy, states form an "international society": a group of states that consider themselves bound by shared rules and institutions. Bull listed five principal 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 take one another's behaviour into account) and an "international society" (states that share interests and values). Waltz saw only the "system"; Bull also saw the "society."

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 ending of the Qatar blockade at Al-Ula without war demonstrated the strength of these rules. By contrast, relations between this society and actors outside it (Iran, proxy groups) are closer to the logic of the "system." The Gulf states, being simultaneously members of a regional society and actors in a regional system, apply two logics of behaviour 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 posed 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 every time a regional state was on the verge of unifying the region through war, and prevented it. His examples included Muhammad Ali Pasha in nineteenth-century Egypt, Nasser in the 1960s and Saddam in 1990.

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

This theory is of fundamental importance for our hypothesis. If an external power always prevents the decisive victory of a regional state, the region's states cannot rely on a purely offensive Mearsheimerian strategy, because they know that if they succeed too much, they will face external intervention. On the other hand, they cannot settle for a purely defensive Waltzian strategy, because unfinished competition never reaches a stable balance. The rational solution in such conditions is precisely dual policy: power maximisation 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 dir-

ect 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 most eminent 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:

- The states of the Middle East cannot be regarded as "like units"; they are the product of different histories of colonialism, revolution and state-building, and these histories shape their behaviour.
- Ideologies, from Arab nationalism to political Islam, are not merely covers for interests but independent forces in their own right, shaping both domestic politics and foreign relations.
- Revolutions, especially the Iranian revolution, have fundamentally transformed the regional system, and this transformation cannot be explained by the logic of the distribution of power alone.

In numerous works on Iran, Halliday also stressed the permanent tension between the "logic of revolution" and the "logic of the state" in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. This view is one of the important intellectual sources of the hypothesis of "institutional duality" 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 in *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (1986) and later articles one of the first to analyse systematically the duality of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. He showed that this policy had from the beginning oscillated between two poles: the "export of the revolution," based on the universal ideals of revolutionary Islam, and the "national interest," based on the practical considerations of the Iranian state. Ramazani also showed that this oscillation turned in favour of the logic of national interest in various periods, including the acceptance of Resolution 598 in 1988.

What the present book adds to Ramazani's analysis is that after the 1990s, these two poles took the form not of "oscillation" but of "institutionalised coexistence." The Islamic Republic no longer oscillated between two logics, but executed 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 appeared ideologically incongruous (one secular Ba'athist, the other an Islamic Republic), rested on a pragmatic logic: both were balancing against Saddam's Iraq, Israel and American influence. But they also showed that both states, alongside this alliance, maintained independent relations with other actors, and that in some cases their interests conflicted.

Ehteshami and Hinnebusch proposed a multi-level framework for analysing the foreign policy of Middle Eastern states, encompassing three levels: the international (pressures from the great powers), the regional (regional rivalries and alliances) and the domestic (state structure, ideology and legitimacy needs). This framework is very close to the present book's hypothesis, since 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 tested Steven David's theory of "omnibalancing" systematically in the Arab world. He showed that inter-Arab alliances are less a response to external military threats than a response 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 sense militarily.

Ryan's finding matters for dual policy: if alliances are a response to several different threats, a regime may ally with a state to counter an ideological threat and at the same time 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, returning to the concept of the "Arab Cold War" that Malcolm Kerr had used in the 1960s to describe the rivalry between Nasser and the Saudis, showed that the regional rivalries after 2003, and especially after 2011, have similar features: 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 cross-cutting: the Iranian axis, the Saudi–Emirati axis and the Qatari–Turkish axis compete with one another simultaneously, and alliances shift according to the 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 the Plurality of Theories

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

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

The present book's 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 also an important difference: analytic eclecticism is usually carried out by the researcher, that is, the researcher combines theories. Our hypothesis is that "the states themselves" combine the logics. In other words, eclecticism here is not a methodological feature but an ontological feature of state behaviour. A theory that seeks to explain this behaviour must itself be combinatory.

8.16. Grand Theory or Middle-Range Theory?

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

"Dual realism," by contrast, is for now a middle-range theory: it claims to explain the behaviour 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 also confirmed in other regions (South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Horn of Africa), it could be upgraded to a more general theory of the behaviour of middle powers in a multipolar system.

8.17. Criteria for Assessing a Good Theory

To sum up the methodological discussion, one can list the criteria proposed in the philosophy of science and the methodology of international relations for assessing 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 behaviour	Medium: explains the offensive half of behaviour	Higher: explains the simultaneity of the two logics
Parsimony	Very high	Very high	Lower: has more variables
Falsifiability	Limited: defended with "not a theory of foreign policy"	Limited: defended with "lack of opportunity"	Relative: falsification criteria and control cases specified
Scope	Global	Global, focused on great powers	Regional, with potential for generalisation
Policy relevance	Limited at the regional level	Limited at the regional level	High: index and matrix tools
Logical coherence	High	High, with critiques of its deductions	Under development

This table shows that no theory is superior on all criteria. Waltz and Mearsheimer are superior 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 aim is a general understanding of the logic of the international system, Waltz and Mearsheimer remain useful; if the aim is to understand the specific behaviour of the Middle East's powers and to predict their next step, a dual framework is needed.

8.18. Summary of 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.
- Both, when confronted with the Middle East (Waltz in his Iran article, Mearsheimer in the Israel lobby and the critique of liberal hegemony), were forced to depart from the pure structural framework.
- The liberal, constructivist and neoclassical critiques, and especially the critiques concerned with the Third World (regime security, omnibalancing, the penetrated system), show that structural assumptions are severely limiting in the Middle East.

Part Two carries 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 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 main hypothesis of this book can be formulated as follows:

> **In the post-2011 Middle East, the region's principal states have organised their foreign and security policy 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 multi-layered, sources of power are multiple and the regional structure is penetrated. Neither Waltz's nor Mearsheimer's theory alone is therefore capable of explaining the behaviour of these states, and both suffer from "illegibility" at the regional level.**

9.2. Three Subsidiary Hypotheses

- **First subsidiary hypothesis (simultaneity):** de-escalatory and power-maximising policies are pursued in the same time period 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 maximisation and brings international legitimacy; power maximisation gives de-escalation bargaining power.

- **Third subsidiary hypothesis (institutional division of labour):** in many states the two logics are executed by different institutions or channels (the foreign ministry versus the security institutions; investment funds versus military forces; media versus diplomacy), and this division of labour makes the duality durable.

9.3. Operational Definition of the Two Logics

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

(a) Indicators of De-escalatory (Defensive) Logic

- Concluding or pursuing peace agreements, normalisation or diplomatic reconciliation.
- Mediating in the conflicts of others.
- Regional economic cooperation projects (corridors, energy, free trade).
- Confidence-building measures (resumption of embassy relations, high-level visits, cessation of attacks).
- Official discourse of peace, dialogue and stability.
- Accepting voluntary limits on military capability (such as the JCPOA).

(b) Indicators of Power-Maximising (Offensive) Logic

- Seizing or controlling territory, directly or through proxies.
- Creating, equipping or supporting armed non-state actors in other countries.
- Direct military intervention or establishing bases beyond one's borders.
- Armament programmes beyond defensive needs (missile, nuclear, drone).
- Cross-border operations (assassination, sabotage, attacks on infrastructure).
- Discourse of regional leadership, the ummah, or 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
Geographical duality	De-escalation with one group of neighbours and power maximisation against another	Israel: normalisation with the UAE and war with Hezbollah
Instrumental duality	Using a de-escalatory instrument for a power-maximising end	Azerbaijan: the Zangezur corridor as both peace and territorial link
Institutional duality	Execution of the two logics by two different institutions	Iran: the Foreign Ministry and the Quds Force
Discursive duality	Official discourse of peace and power-seeking conduct in practice	Qatar: mediation and hosting Hamas

9.5. Why Is Duality Rational? Five Mechanisms

(a) The Structure of Multi-Layered Threats

The states of the Middle East face domestic threats (insurgency, coups, protests), regional threats (neighbouring rivals) and extra-regional threats (sanctions, regime change) at the same time. Each threat may call for a different response. De-escalation with one threat makes it possible to focus on another (the logic of omnibalancing).

(b) Ambiguity of Intentions as an Asset

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

(c) The Penetrated Structure and the Extra-Regional Patron

The presence of the United States (and more recently China and Russia) as an extra-regional power allows the region's states to operate under its "security umbrella" and at the same time to compete to increase their weight in its eyes. De-escalation is often a "gift" to the extra-regional patron, and power maximisation 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: "welfare and development" (which demands de-escalation and trade) and "prestige and iden-

tity" (which demands displays of power). Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Erdoğan's discourse of the "Century of Türkiye" both have this combination.

(e) Rentier Political Economy and Sovereign Wealth Funds

Oil and gas wealth allows the Persian Gulf states to spend simultaneously on peaceful economic investment and on supporting armed groups or buying weapons. Resource constraints, which in structural theories force states to choose, are less constraining for these states.

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

The hypothesis of dual policymaking did not take shape in a vacuum. Several concepts in the international relations 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 at once: the international table with foreign parties and the domestic table with power groups, parliament and public opinion. Every agreement must be accepted at both tables. Putnam used the concept of the "win-set" to describe the range of agreements that can be ratified domestically.

The present book's hypothesis draws on Putnam's logic but extends it from "two levels" to "three levels" (domestic, regional, global) and generalises it from "negotiation" to "grand strategy." A Middle Eastern state must 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 regime legitimacy at the domestic level. Dual policy is the rational response to the need to play at these three tables simultaneously.

(b) Strategic Hedging

Cheng-Chwee Kuik and other scholars of the foreign policy of Southeast Asian states have used the concept of "hedging" to describe the behaviour of states such as Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam towards China and the United States. Hedging means combining elements of cooperation with elements of caution and deterrence in relations with 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 behaviour of smaller states towards great powers, whereas dual policy is also the behaviour of regional powers towards one another. Second, hedging is a "middle" and "cautious" behaviour, whereas dual policy can include "extreme" behaviour in both directions: all-out war on one front and full normalisation 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 Signalling

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. Dual policy in the Middle East uses this mechanism in a particular way: leaders announce offensive commitments to the domestic audience and de-escalatory commitments to the international audience. Because the audiences are different, both commitments can be credible at the same time.

9.7. An Index for Measuring Duality

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

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

The sum of these four components yields an index between zero and twelve. A state scoring above eight is a "strategically dual state"; a score of four to eight indicates "situational duality," and below four a state with a single dominant logic. The au-

thor's qualitative assessment of the states studied for the period 2011 to 2026 is as follows:

State	Simultaneity	Intensity	Same subject	Linkage	Total	Category
Islamic Republic	3	3	3	3	12	Strategically dual
Israel	3	3	2	3	11	Strategically dual
Qatar	3	2	3	3	11	Strategically dual
Turkey	3	3	2	2	10	Strategically dual
Azerbaijan	2	3	3	3	11	Strategically dual
UAE	3	3	2	3	11	Strategically dual
Saudi Arabia	2	3	2	2	9	Strategically 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 regional "capability" and regional "ambition."

9.8. Conceptual Boundaries: What Is Not Dual Policy?

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

- **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 American policy from the JCPOA to maximum pressure.

- **Mere hypocrisy:** if de-escalatory discourse has no practical consequence, this is discursive duality, not strategic duality. Genuine dual policy requires that both policies have material consequences.
- **Legitimate self-defence:** a military response to a direct attack, while the state maintains its overall policy of de-escalation, is not necessarily duality. The criterion is that the power maximisation be "pre-emptive."
- **Unintended institutional differences:** if two institutions of a state pursue conflicting policies and the leadership is unhappy with this conflict and tries to resolve it, this is incoherence, not strategy. Dual policy requires at least the implicit acceptance of the leadership.

9.9. Case Study Method

Each case chapter follows a common structure:

- The background and structural position of the state in the regional system.
- Components of de-escalatory logic, with dated instances.
- Components of power-maximising logic, with dated instances.
- Analysis of the linkage of the two logics (mutual reinforcement or division of labour).
- A test against the predictions of Waltz and Mearsheimer.
- A summary table of the dualities.

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

9.10. Rival Predictions

For the hypothesis to be falsifiable, we must make clear 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 instead of simultaneity), the first subsidiary hypothesis is refuted and the "contingent theory" of Taliaferro or Snyder is a better explanation.

- If de-escalatory policies are merely propaganda cover without real consequences, the hypothesis is weakened in favour of offensive realism.
- If power-maximising policies are merely reactive and defensive (a response to an immediate threat), the hypothesis is weakened in favour of defensive realism.

The case chapters will show that in all six cases the evidence favours simultaneity, the reality of both policies and the pre-emptive character of part of the power-maximising policies.

CHAPTER TEN

Historical Background; The Middle East from the Arab Spring to the 2026 War

10.1. Why 2011 Is the Point of Departure

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," and power vacuums emerged that regional powers competed to fill.
- **The erosion of the traditional Arab order:** Egypt, for decades the pillar of the Arab order, became mired in domestic crisis, and the centre of gravity of the Arab world shifted to the Persian Gulf (Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha).
- **The relative retreat of the United States:** the Obama administration announced the "pivot to Asia," withdrew from Iraq and avoided large-scale intervention in Syria. This retreat gave room to regional powers and to 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. But as we will see, the behaviour of states 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 competition
2012	Mohamed Morsi's presidency in Egypt; expanding IRGC and Hezbollah presence in Syria	Rivalry between the Brotherhood axis and the resistance axis
2013	Morsi's removal; start of secret US–Iran talks in Oman	Rift between Qatar–Turkey and Saudi Arabia–UAE–Egypt
2014	ISIS seizes Mosul and proclaims a caliphate; Gaza war	Entry of the international coalition; Iran's opportunity in Iraq
2015	Saudi-led coalition intervenes in Yemen; the JCPOA; Russian military intervention in Syria	Nuclear de-escalation simultaneous with proxy expansion
2016	Saudi Arabia severs relations with Iran; failed coup in Turkey	Intensified regional bipolarity
2017	Blockade of Qatar; territorial defeat of ISIS	Split within the Gulf Cooperation Council
2018	US withdraws from the JCPOA; Khashoggi murder	Maximum pressure; temporary isolation of Riyadh
2019	Attack on Aramco at Abqaiq; maritime attacks in the Persian Gulf	Exposure of the Gulf's vulnerability
2020	Assassination of Qasem 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	Wave of de-escalation
2022	Turkey normalises with the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel; Ukraine war	Hedging towards the great powers
2023	Beijing agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia (March); Syria returns to the Arab League; full seizure of Karabakh (September); the 7 October attack	Peak of de-escalation and then, suddenly, war

Year	Event	Significance for the hypothesis
2024	First direct Iranian attack on Israel (April); killing of Hassan Nasrallah (September); Lebanon ceasefire (November); fall of Assad (December)	Collapse of the “resistance axis” in the Levant
2025	Twelve-Day War between Israel and Iran and US strike on Fordow (June); Washington summit of Azerbaijan and Armenia (August); Israeli strike on Doha and Saudi–Pakistani defence pact (September); Gaza ceasefire (October)	Coincidence of peak militarism and peak peacemaking
2026	Start of the US–Israeli war against the Islamic Republic (28 February); killing of Ali Khamenei and succession of Mojtaba Khamenei; Iranian attacks on Persian Gulf states; mediation by Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt and Qatar; unstable ceasefires	The final test of the hypothesis

10.3. Four Waves of Change

To bring order to this chronology, the past fifteen years can be divided into four waves:

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

In this period a rivalry formed 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). Competition proceeded mainly in third countries and through non-state actors.

Second Wave (2015–2020): Direct Militarism

The Saudi intervention in Yemen, the direct intervention of Russia and Turkey in Syria, the blockade of Qatar and attacks on energy infrastructure pushed competition from proxy to direct. At the same time the JCPOA (2015) was the first major experiment in de-escalation, and it failed with the American withdrawal (2018).

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

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

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

The 7 October 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 Iran's attacks on the Gulf states brought the region into a new phase. The important point is that even at the height of these wars, de-escalatory diplomacy did not stop: the Gaza ceasefire, the Zangezur corridor, the mediation of Qatar and Pakistan, 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 sharply:

- **Israel**, as the strongest military power in the region, 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 extensive IRGC influence.
- **Saudi Arabia and the UAE**, which despite Iranian attacks have avoided direct entry into the war, while at the same time asking the United States to keep up the pressure and keeping their diplomatic channels open.
- **Turkey**, which after the fall of Assad is the largest foreign power in Syria and played a mediating role in the 2026 war.
- **Qatar**, which has been the target both of an Israeli strike (September 2025) and of Iranian attacks, but remains the principal mediator on the Gaza file.
- **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 the region's 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 the region's states was that the United States had no desire to be the "regional policeman." This message pushed America's allies (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel) towards greater self-reliance and independent power maximisation.
- **The first Trump administration (2017–2021):** withdrawal from the JCPOA (2018), "maximum pressure" on Iran, the assassination of Qasem 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 normalisation.
- **The Biden administration (2021–2025):** an unsuccessful attempt to revive the JCPOA, pursuit of Saudi–Israeli normalisation and, after 7 October, 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 advanced peacemaking and war simultaneously.

The important point is that the dual policy of the region's states was in part a reflection of the dual policy of the United States itself. When the region's principal patron is simultaneously making peace and waging war, 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 restored 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, was a partner with Turkey in the As-

tana process and coordinated oil production with Saudi Arabia in "OPEC Plus." 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 the fall of Assad in December 2024.

China: Economic Power, Occasional Mediator

China is the largest buyer of Middle Eastern oil and the principal trading partner of many of the region's countries. In March 2021 Iran and China signed the "25-year comprehensive cooperation programme," and in December 2022 Xi Jinping met Arab leaders on a visit to Riyadh. The peak of China's diplomatic role was its mediation of the Iran–Saudi agreement in March 2023. Nevertheless, China avoided an active security role in the 2025 and 2026 wars 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 Concentrated Example of Dual Logic

One of the most telling developments of the recent period is the Red Sea crisis after 7 October. From November 2023 the Houthis, declaring solidarity with Gaza, targeted commercial vessels linked to Israel and then a broader range of ships in the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab 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 carried out a broader air campaign, which ended in May 2025 with a ceasefire between the United States and the Houthis mediated by Oman, 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 had disrupted the security of the Red Sea, the vital artery of Saudi and Egyptian trade.
- **Saudi Arabia**, while feeling the Houthi threat directly, avoided openly joining the American naval 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** concluded 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 background for dual policy:

(a) Economic Restructuring and the "Visions"

From the mid-2010s the Persian Gulf states launched ambitious programmes of economic diversification: Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" (2016), "Qatar National Vision 2030" and the UAE's programmes to become a global centre of finance, technology and tourism. These programmes need foreign capital, regional stability and a positive international image, and so created strong incentives for de-escalation. But at the same time the enormous wealth generated by these same economies also provided the instruments of power maximisation (arms purchases, support for allies, strategic investment).

(b) The Drone and Missile Revolution

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

10.8. Chapter Summary

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 7 October 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 the simultaneities occurring at the level of each state, which the following chapters examine.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Israel; The "Abrahamic Peace" and the Quest for Regional Supremacy

11.1. Structural Position

Israel is a small country in territory and population (about ten million people) but with an advanced economy, technological superiority, an undeclared nuclear arsenal and an unparalleled 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 7 October 2023 these doctrines evolved towards what some analysts have called a "doctrine of comprehensive pre-emption": eliminating threats before they materialise, anywhere in the region.

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

(a) The Abraham Accords (2020)

On 15 September 2020 Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed normalisation agreements at the White House. In the following months Morocco and Sudan joined the process. This was Israel's first normalisation 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 were based on a formula of "peace for peace" or "peace through shared interests," and did not make the resolution of the Palestinian question a precondition.

(b) Expanding the Network of Cooperation

- The Negev Summit (March 2022), attended by 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.
- The maritime border agreement with Lebanon mediated by the United States (October 2022), even though the two countries are formally at war.
- Renewed normalisation with Turkey and the return of ambassadors (2022).
- Kazakhstan's accession to the Abraham Accords (November 2025), which showed that this framework retained capacity for expansion even after the Gaza war.

(c) Negotiating Normalisation 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 of the aims of the 7 October attack was to derail this process. These negotiations did not stop completely 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 joining the Abraham Accords.

(d) Accepting the Gaza Ceasefire Plan (October 2025)

The acceptance of the ceasefire and hostage exchange plan mediated by the United States, Egypt, Qatar and Turkey, accompanied by the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, though fragile, showed that Israel, even at the height of its military power, needs diplomatic instruments to convert military achievement into political order.

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

(a) The "War between Wars" in Syria

From around 2013 Israel began 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 military capability of the Syrian army in extensive strikes. This is one of the clearest instances of offensive behaviour in Mearsheimer's sense: exploiting an opportunity to change the balance.

(b) Lebanon

In September 2024 the operation exploding 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's capability. A ceasefire was established in November 2024, but Israel retained positions on Lebanese territory and continued its 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 defence 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 28 February 2026, which led to the killing of Ali Khamenei.

(e) Qatar

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

(f) The West Bank

The expansion of settlements, the approval of construction plans (including the E1 plan in 2025) and the official discourse of some government ministers about applying sovereignty reflect a logic of territorial power maximisation.

11.4. The Linkage of the Two Logics: Peace as Strategic Depth

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

- **Normalisation made a regional air-defence 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-defence cooperation with Arab states. In Iran's attack of April 2024, this cooperation played a role in intercepting missiles and drones.
- **Exports of weapons and security technology consolidated the bonds of peace.** Sales of air-defence 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 of the Arab states' motives for normalisation was to see Israel as a power capable of standing up to Iran. The stronger Israel became, the more attractive it became as a partner.
- **But excessive power maximisation also threatened peace.** The Gaza war and the strike on Doha halted the normalisation process with Saudi Arabia and sharply turned Arab public opinion against Israel. This is the "punishment" Waltz predicted for aggressive states, 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: America's Ally, Mosco's Coordination Partner

After Russia's military entry into Syria in September 2015, Netanyahu travelled to Moscow repeatedly, 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 ally of the United States, also avoided sending weapons to Ukraine for a time after Russia's invasion in 2022 in order to preserve

this coordination. This behaviour 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 the two countries' security cooperation in Sinai against jihadist groups reached unprecedented levels, and Israel allowed Egypt to deploy forces in Sinai beyond the treaty's 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 backstop for Israel and a constraint on its military operations.

(c) Kurds and Druze: The "Alliance of Minorities"

In 2017 Israel was the only state that openly supported the independence referendum of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. 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 the clashes in Suwayda in southern Syria, Israel, citing the protection of the Druze, struck the forces of Syria's new government and even the General Staff headquarters in Damascus, while at the same time it was engaged in security talks with that same government mediated by the United States. This is an example of Kautilya's "mandala" policy: ties with minorities behind rivals' front lines.

(d) China and India: Two Conflicting Partners

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

In Israeli security literature, two concepts have been used to describe the logic of continuous power maximisation. "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 operations below the threshold of war against arms transfers and the deployment of enemy forces. Both concepts rested on the assumption that Israel could maintain its de-escalatory relations with others alongside this continuous power maximisation. The 7 October attack showed that the logic of "mowing the grass" had failed, and Israel moved towards a logic of "elimination," that is, from controlled to maximal power maximisation.

11.6. The Costs of Dual Policy for Israel

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

- **Diplomatic isolation:** a number of Western countries, including in September 2025 on the margins of the UN General Assembly, recognised 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 issuing of arrest warrants for Israel's prime minister and former defence minister (November 2024).
- **The halt of Saudi normalisation:** Riyadh declared a clear path to a Palestinian state the condition for normalisation, and the Gaza war made that condition more unattainable.
- **The erosion of Arab public opinion:** polls in Arab countries after 2023 showed a sharp fall in support for normalisation, even in countries that had signed the Abraham Accords.
- **The Doha strike and the American reaction:** the strike on Hamas leaders in Qatar, a US ally, led to an apology by Israel's prime minister to Qatar's prime minister in late September 2025 and a new American security commitment to Qatar. This is a case in which power maximisation also strained Israel's relationship with its principal patron.

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

11.7. Close Study: Summer 2020; Annexation or Normalisation?

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 the logic of territorial power maximisation, and normalisation with Arab states, the peak of the logic of de-escalation. The way this conflict was resolved is the key to understanding Israel's entire pattern of behaviour.

Chronology

Date	Event
28 January 2020	The Trump administration announces its "Peace to Prosperity" plan, which envisaged the possibility of Israeli sovereignty over a significant 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 put forward from 1 July.
June 2020	Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE ambassador in Washington, warns in an unusual article in an Israeli newspaper, in Hebrew, that annexation would destroy hopes of normalisation.
1 July 2020	The announced date for beginning the annexation process passes without practical action.
13 August 2020	Announcement of the Israel–UAE agreement; the joint statement says Israel will "suspend" the application of sovereignty.
15 September 2020	Signing of the Abraham Accords with the UAE and Bahrain at the White House.
October to December 2020	Sudan and Morocco join the normalisation 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 stressed in Israeli media interviews 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 act of power maximisation for one act of de-escalation. In practice Israel traded one power-maximising step (formal annexation) for one de-escalatory achievement (normalisation). But settlement expansion, that is, informal power maximisation, continued. In other words, de-escalation was conducted over the "form" of power maximisation, not its "substance."

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

Implications for Theory

From Waltz's perspective, the deal of summer 2020 can be seen as the behaviour of a state that has sufficient security and can make concessions. From Mearsheimer's perspective, the deal is a tactic that reduces the cost of expansion. But neither explains why the two logics were merged into a single decision and why both sides emerged from this merger with relative success. This study shows that dual policy, at its best, is "the art of trading between two logics": surrendering a symbol of power maximisation in exchange for a de-escalatory achievement, while the substance of power maximisation is preserved.

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

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

Chronology

Date	Power-maximising logic	De-escalatory logic
17 and 18 September	Simultaneous explosion of thousands of pagers and radio devices of Hezbollah members in Lebanon and Syria	
20 September	Killing of Ibrahim Aqil and several Radwan Force commanders in a strike on Beirut's Dahiyeh	

Date	Power-maximising logic	De-escalatory logic
23 September	Start of extensive air strikes on southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley	
25 September		Joint statement by the United States, France and several European and Arab states for a 21-day ceasefire
27 September	Killing of Hassan Nasrallah in an air strike on Dahiyeh, hours after the Israeli prime minister's speech at the UN General Assembly	
1 October	Start of the ground operation in southern Lebanon; Iranian missile attack on Israel	
October and November	Continued operations and killing of Hashem Safieddine	Intensive negotiations mediated by a US envoy
26 and 27 November		Ceasefire announced, mediated by the United States and France; provision for gradual Israeli withdrawal and deployment of the Lebanese army in the south
January and February 2025	Five positions retained on Lebanese territory after the withdrawal deadline	Election of Joseph Aoun and formation of the Nawaf Salam government

Analysis

Diplomacy as cover and as destination. The statement for a 21-day ceasefire on 25 September, which Israel did not initially reject outright, was issued two days before the killing of Nasrallah. For Israel, diplomacy at this stage functioned as "cover": it showed that Israel did not reject dialogue while a decisive operation was being prepared. But two months later the same diplomacy became the "destination": the November ceasefire, which Israel accepted, consolidated the 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 most important forum of multilateral diplomacy, with the order for a strike that killed Hezbollah's leader is a pure symbol of duality. In a single day one leader both spoke on the floor of global diplomacy and delivered the greatest military blow of the decade.

Political consequences in Lebanon. The weakening of Hezbollah 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 its agenda. Israel's power maximisation indirectly created conditions for a change that could in the long run lead to de-escalation between the two countries, although Israel's retention of positions on Lebanese territory 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 "sequentially within a single operation": maximal power maximisation to change the balance, and then de-escalation to consolidate the new balance. This pattern, which resembles Azerbaijan's pattern in Karabakh, can be called the "cycle of strike and consolidation."

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 content itself with preserving the status quo. Israel's behaviour 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 rivals' capabilities. Waltzians might say that this behaviour stems from "the perception of acute insecurity after 7 October"; but in that case, by introducing the variable of perception, the theory leaves the structural level.

Mearsheimer's Prediction

According to offensive realism, Israel should seek to maximise power and use de-escalation only as a tactic. The power-maximising part of Israel's behaviour is consistent with this prediction. But Mearsheimer does not explain why Israel, at the height of its power, invested so much in normalisation with Saudi Arabia, which offers no direct security advantage. Mearsheimer himself also regards Israel's behaviour as "unreasonable," which shows that his theory is inconsistent with his prescription.

Verdict

Israel is a case of "geographical duality" and "instrumental duality": peace with distant states of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, war with near neighbours and the Iranian axis; and the use of peace to build a security architecture that supports power maximisation.

11.10. Table of Israel's Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-maximising policy	Period
Persian Gulf	Abraham Accords with the UAE and Bahrain	Using the partnership for an air-defence network against Iran	2020 onwards
Saudi Arabia	Normalisation talks mediated by the United States	Continuing the Gaza war despite the cost to these talks	2023–2026
Lebanon	Maritime border agreement; November 2024 ceasefire	The 2024 war; retaining positions on Lebanese territory	2022–2026
Syria	Security talks with the new government in Damascus	Entry into the buffer zone and seizure of Hermon; destruction of the Syrian army	December 2024 onwards
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
Turkey	Normalisation and return of ambassadors	Competition for influence in post-Assad Syria	2022–2026
Iran	Accepting the June 2025 ceasefire	The 2025 and 2026 wars; assassination of leaders	2020–2026
Central Asia	Kazakhstan's accession to 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 onwards

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Islamic Republic of Iran; "Dialogue" in the Showcase, "Strategic Depth" in the Field

12.1. Structural Position

With a population of about 90 million, a geographical 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. But 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 that reason the United States must prevent its hegemony. In Waltz's framework, Iran is an insecure state forced to seek deterrence in order to survive.

Iran's distinctive feature is its dual power structure: on one side the official government with the Foreign Ministry and the conventional army, and on the other the revolutionary institutions, especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Quds Force, which operate directly under the Leader and are responsible for regional strategy. This structure has institutionalised "institutional duality" within the constitution and the 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 that has formulated duality at the level of official doctrine:

- **"Heroic flexibility" (2013):** In September 2013 Ali Khamenei used this concept to justify the nuclear negotiations, likening it to a wrestler who shows flexibility at some point in order to overcome his opponent without forgetting his goal.

This is exactly the official expression of "de-escalation in the service of power maximisation."

- **"Neither war nor negotiation" (2018 onwards):** After the American withdrawal from the JCPOA, Khamenei declared that there would be neither war nor negotiation with the United States. This formula enshrined the maintenance of a condition "between war and peace" as official strategy.
- **"The field and diplomacy":** a term that became current in official discourse, especially after 2020, to describe the synergy between Quds Force operations and Foreign Ministry diplomacy.

12.3. De-escalatory Logic

(a) The Dialogue among Civilisations and Its Legacy

The "Dialogue among Civilisations" initiative proposed by Mohammad Khatami in 1998, after which the United Nations named the year 2001, although it predates our period, shaped the Islamic Republic's official language of de-escalation over the following two decades. Later governments also used similar concepts ("moderation," "constructive engagement," "neighbourhood 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 exchange for the lifting of nuclear sanctions.

(c) The Hormuz Peace Endeavour (2019)

At the UN General Assembly (September 2019), Hassan Rouhani proposed the "Coalition of Hope," or Hormuz Peace Endeavour, for collective security in the Persian Gulf with the participation of the region's states. Interestingly, this proposal was made a few days after the large-scale attack on the Aramco facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, an attack the United States and Saudi Arabia attributed to Iran.

(d) The Neighbourhood Policy and the Beijing Agreement

Ebrahim Raisi's government declared the "neighbourhood policy" the axis of its foreign policy. The Baghdad talks with Saudi Arabia (2021–2022) and finally the Beijing agreement (10 March 2023) led to the resumption of diplomatic relations. Relations

with the UAE and Kuwait were also restored to ambassadorial level. Iran also joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (2023) and the BRICS group (2024).

(e) The 2025 and 2026 Negotiations

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 the war began a few weeks later.

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

(a) "Forward Defence" and the Proxy Network

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

- **Lebanon:** Hezbollah, the oldest and strongest arm of this network.
- **Syria:** direct IRGC presence from 2012 to preserve the Assad regime and the organisation of multinational Shia militias (Afghan, Pakistani, Iraqi).
- **Iraq:** strengthening Shia armed groups and then institutionalising them in the "Popular Mobilisation Forces" (Hashd al-Sha'bi) after the June 2014 fatwa on collective jihad.
- **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 Islamic Jihad.

Ali Akbar Velayati and other officials at times spoke 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 Programme

Iran built the largest and most diverse arsenal of ballistic missiles in the Middle East and created 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) Expansion of the Nuclear Programme after the JCPOA

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

(d) Direct Operations

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

12.5. The Linkage of the Two Logics: An Institutional Division of Labour

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 producing international legitimacy, reducing sanctions and de-escalation.
- **The Quds Force** was responsible for building strategic depth, managing the proxy network and creating leverage.
- **The Leader** arbitrated between the two and, depending on circumstances, increased the weight of one or the other.

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

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

- The proxy network and the nuclear programme were Iran's bargaining leverage in negotiations.

- Negotiations and de-escalation reduced the cost of proxy expansion and provided economic breathing space. Some critics of the JCPOA argued that resources freed up after the agreement indirectly helped proxy expansion.
- The Beijing agreement allowed Iran, having calmed the Saudi front, to focus on the Israeli front.

12.6. The Collapse of the Equilibrium: 2024 to 2026

Iran's duality was relatively successful until 2023. But from 7 October onwards, the power-maximising 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" had not provided sufficient deterrence. Iran's attacks on the Persian Gulf states in 2026 severely damaged the achievements of the "neighbourhood policy," to the point that Saudi Arabia expelled Iranian diplomats in March 2026, although it kept the communication channel of 2023 open.

This outcome is very important theoretically. Waltz predicted that aggressive behaviour would be "punished," and so it was. But Waltz regarded Iran as a defensive, security-seeking state, whereas its behaviour 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, precisely when the Rouhani government was trying to win European support for preserving the JCPOA after the American withdrawal, Belgian and German police foiled a plot to bomb a rally of the Mojahedin-e Khalq at Villepinte in France. Assadollah Assadi, an Islamic Republic diplomat in Vienna, was arrested in this case and sentenced in 2021 by a court in Antwerp to twenty years in prison (he was later released in 2023 in a prisoner exchange). In the same period, Denmark, the Netherlands and France also attributed other plots to the Islamic Republic's security institutions. These cases, examined in detail in the author's earlier research on the Is-

lamic Republic's threats in Europe, show that two institutions of the regime were pursuing two conflicting policies at the same time and on the same continent.

(b) Riyadh 2023: Attending the Summit and Supporting the Front

On 11 November 2023, less than a month after the 7 October attack, Ebrahim Raisi attended the extraordinary joint summit of the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Riyadh, the first visit by an Iranian president to Saudi Arabia in more than a decade. This presence symbolised the peak of the "neighbourhood policy." But in those same days, Iran-aligned groups in Iraq and Syria had begun attacks on American 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 American service members; the United States attributed it to Iran-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. Less than two weeks later, on 1 October 2024, the IRGC carried out the second direct missile attack on Israel. This rapid sequence displayed institutional duality in its most open form.

(d) The Caucasus: Supporting Armenia against Shia Azerbaijan

From an ideological standpoint, the Islamic Republic might have been expected to support Azerbaijan, a Shia-majority country. But in practice Tehran was closer to Christian Armenia and declared the Zangezur corridor a red line. This example shows that in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, geopolitical logic (preventing Iran's border with Armenia from being cut and the expansion of Turkish and Israeli influence on its northern border) sometimes prevailed over ideological logic. This is itself a kind of duality between the discourse of the "ummah" and "geopolitical" behaviour.

(e) The Taliban: Yesterday's Enemy, Today's Neighbour

In 1998, after its diplomats were killed 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 regime criticised 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 under the name "Maritime Security Belt." These exercises sent a clear message to the United States. But at the same time, Tehran pursued indirect negotiations with Washington through Oman and Qatar. "Look East" was not a substitute for the West but leverage in negotiating with the West.

12.8. The Islamic Republic in the 2026 War: The Fate 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 behaviour in this war remained dual: on the one hand extensive attacks on Israel, American bases and the infrastructure of the Persian Gulf states, and on the other hand acceptance of mediation by Pakistan and other countries and participation in successive ceasefires.

But this time duality had lost its former function. Attacking neighbouring countries, for years the object of the "neighbourhood 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-maximising component destroys the de-escalatory component. This experience also confirms the author's analysis in earlier reports about the transfer 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 favour of the power-maximising logic.

12.9. Lessons for Post-Transition Iran

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

- **Institutional unity:** foreign policy must be directed from a single accountable centre under the oversight of elected institutions. The existence of two parallel apparatuses, one for diplomacy and the other for cross-border operations, has maximised the cost to the country's credibility.

- **National interest instead of transnational asabiyya:** Iran's strategic depth must be built through economic, cultural and diplomatic ties, not through armed non-state networks that violate the sovereignty of neighbours.
- **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 at the same time advanced several major power-maximising actions.

Chronology

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

Analysis

This table speaks louder than any theoretical argument. In January 2016, within two weeks, three events occurred, each belonging to a different logic: the attack on the

Saudi embassy, which led to the severing of relations between Riyadh and Tehran; the detention of American sailors, accompanied by the broadcast of images of them kneeling in domestic media; and the JCPOA's Implementation Day, the high point of diplomacy. The American 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 action. The attack on the Saudi embassy was condemned by the Rouhani government, and the Leader also called it a wrong act. But its consequence, the severing of relations with Riyadh, lasted until 2023. The sailors were detained by the IRGC and released by the Foreign Ministry. The missile test was carried out by the IRGC, and the Foreign Ministry argued that the JCPOA did not cover missiles. In each case, one institution carried out the power-maximising 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, which intensified in those same months in coordination with Russia, had heavy costs. 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 judgement about this claim, the simultaneity of the two policies is undeniable.

Regional consequences. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, interpreted the JCPOA not as "de-escalation" but as a "reward for power maximisation." In their view, the United States had made a deal with Iran over its nuclear programme and ignored its regional behaviour. This perception was one of the factors in the rapprochement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Israel and their support for the American 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 interpret the JCPOA as a sign of "socialisation," and Mearsheimer's offensive realism the intervention in Syria as a sign of "hegemonic ambition." Each saw part of reality. But only a dual framework can explain how these two behaviours sat side by side in the same month, in the same regime and under the same 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 to 14 April 2024, may be the only case in the region's modern history in which power-maximising and de-escalatory logics were merged not in two separate policies but within a single operation.

Chronology

Date	Event
1 April	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 to 12 April	Repeated public statements by Islamic Republic officials about the certainty of a "response"; extensive diplomatic contacts with the region's states; open American warnings of an imminent attack.
13 April	Seizure of an Israel-linked cargo ship in the Strait of Hormuz by the IRGC.
Night of 13 to 14 April	Launch of hundreds of drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles from Iranian territory towards Israel in an operation named "True Promise"; most were intercepted with the cooperation of Israel, the United States, Britain, France and Jordan.
14 April	The Islamic Republic's mission to the United Nations declares that, with this action, "the matter can be deemed concluded," unless Israel responds.
19 April	A limited Israeli response against an air-defence system near Isfahan; Iranian officials played down its significance.

Analysis

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

Two messages in one operation. The operation carried two simultaneous messages. The first was power-maximising: for the first time the Islamic Republic showed that it was willing to attack Israel directly and from its own territory, abandoning its previous "strategic patience." The second was de-escalatory: through advance warning, the choice of limited targets and the declaration that "the matter is concluded," Israel and the United States were told that Iran did not want a wider war. Deterrence theorists call this kind of action a "symbolic strike" or "military signalling"; but what makes it special for our hypothesis is that the two logics were merged not in two institutions but in a single operation, by a single institution (the IRGC).

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

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

Implications for Theory

The April 2024 attack is a case that both theories can interpret in their favour: Waltzians see it as a sign of caution and avoidance of war, Mearsheimerians as a sign of readiness to display power. But only a dual framework can explain why these two features were combined in a single operation, and why this combination was effective in the short term and unsustainable 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 "socialisation" of the revolutionary state, but socialisation 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 maximise power. The proxy part of Iran's behaviour is consistent with this prediction. But Mearsheimer does not explain why in the JCPOA Iran accepted voluntary limits on the most important source of its potential power (the nuclear programme). Nor does his theory, with its emphasis on land power, adequately cover Iran's proxy strategy, which achieves influence without territorial conquest.

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-maximising policy	Period
United States and the West	The JCPOA; the Muscat talks	60 per cent enrichment after the US withdrawal; attack on Al Udeid	2015–2026
Saudi Arabia	The Baghdad talks; the Beijing agreement	Support for the Houthis; 2026 attacks on Saudi territory	2021–2026
Persian Gulf	Hormuz Peace Endeavour; 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 relations	Institutionalising the Hashd al-Sha'bi; attacks on Erbil	2014–2026
Syria	Participation in the Astana process	Direct military presence of the IRGC and militias	2012–2024
Lebanon	Verbal support for stability and the Lebanese state	Arming Hezbollah and the "unity of fronts"	2011–2024
World	Dialogue among Civilisations; membership of the SCO and BRICS	Sale of drones to Russia for the Ukraine war	2022–2024
Pakistan	Pakistani mediation in 2026	Attack on Pakistani territory in January 2024	2024–2026

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-maximising policy	Period
Executing institution	The Foreign Ministry	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. But Saudi Arabia has historically been militarily weak and dependent on the American security umbrella. The unwritten pact of "oil for security," dating back to the meeting of Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz in 1945, was the pillar of Saudi foreign policy.

The fundamental change in the period under study is the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, who became defence 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 onwards). This book's hypothesis is that even these two phases overlapped, and that in each phase the opposite logic was also present.

13.2. Power-Maximising Logic

(a) Bahrain (2011)

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

(b) The Yemen War (2015 onwards)

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

(c) The Islamic Military Coalition

In December 2015 Saudi Arabia announced the formation of the “Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition” with the participation of dozens of countries. This coalition was less an operational institution than an instrument for proclaiming Saudi leadership of the Sunni Islamic world.

(d) The Blockade of Qatar (2017)

In June 2017 Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt severed relations with Qatar and closed land, sea and air borders. Their list of thirteen demands included closing Al Jazeera, reducing relations with Iran and ending support for the Muslim Brotherhood. This action was an attempt to impose hierarchy within the Gulf Cooperation Council.

(e) Lebanon (2017)

The affair of the announced resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri from Riyadh in November 2017 showed that Saudi Arabia was at that point willing 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 on a civil nuclear programme with the United States, including over the right to enrichment, have continued.

(g) The Defence Pact with Pakistan (2025)

In September 2025, a few days after Israel’s strike on Doha, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed a “Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement,” under which an attack on either is regarded as an attack on both. Given that Pakistan is a nuclear power, many interpreted this pact as a step towards an alternative nuclear umbrella for Saudi Arabia.

13.3. 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, although not formally renewed, 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 10 March 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed, with Chinese mediation, to resume diplomatic relations. This agreement came after seven years of severed 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 the fall of Assad, Riyadh also quickly supported 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–Russia 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, a 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-escalatory logic.

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

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

- Saudi Arabia formally avoided entering the war and limited its response to defence and interception.
- At the same time, reports emerged that Riyadh had asked the United States behind the scenes to continue military pressure on Iran.

- In March 2026 it expelled Iranian diplomats, but preserved the communication channel established in 2023.
- It hosted a meeting of Arab and Islamic foreign ministers in Riyadh to manage the crisis.
- It supported Pakistan’s 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 behaviours cannot be explained by a single logic. Saudi Arabia simultaneously sought to weaken Iran (offensive or Mearsheimerian logic), to avoid direct war (defensive or Waltzian logic), to pass the buck to the United States (Mearsheimerian buck-passing) and to lead the region diplomatically (Morgenthau’s logic of prestige).

13.5. Further Examples of Saudi Dual Policy

(a) OPEC Plus: America’s Security Ally, Russia’s Oil Partner

Since 2016 Saudi Arabia and Russia have coordinated oil production within “OPEC Plus.” In October 2022, a few months after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and while the United States was calling for higher production to reduce energy prices, OPEC Plus, led by Riyadh and Moscow, approved a production cut. The Biden administration openly regarded this decision as a hostile act. Saudi Arabia was at the same time America’s security ally and the 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 the economic bond between the two countries. In 2023 Saudi Arabia became a “dialogue partner” of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and was invited to join BRICS, although the status of its membership remained ambiguous for some time. At the same time, Riyadh pursued negotiations on a defence pact and nuclear cooperation with the United States. Many analysts have called this combination of “economy with China, security with America” Saudi “strategic autonomy.”

(c) Lebanon: From Sanctions to Support

In October 2021, after remarks by a Lebanese minister about the Yemen war, Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador from Beirut and banned imports from Lebanon. This pressure was part of the strategy of countering Hezbollah’s influence. But after

Hezbollah was weakened in the 2024 war and Joseph Aoun was elected president and Nawaf Salam became prime minister in early 2025, Riyadh became one of the principal supporters of Lebanon’s new government. In Lebanon, Saudi Arabia has used instruments of pressure and instruments of support alternately and sometimes simultaneously (supporting the state and pressuring Hezbollah).

(d) Israel: Opening the Skies, Closing the Door

In July 2022 Saudi Arabia opened its airspace to all civilian flights, including flights to and from Israel. This was a practical step towards normalisation without formal normalisation taking place. After 7 October, Riyadh became one of Israel’s harshest critics in official discourse and took the lead in the international conference on the two-state solution; but according to numerous reports, informal communication channels and security cooperation were not completely 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 supported the Southern Transitional Council), in Sudan and in oil policy (the dispute over production quotas in OPEC Plus in 2021). The two allies’ competition for economic leadership of the region also continues, from attracting the regional headquarters of international companies to air routes. This relationship shows that dual policy exists not only in relations with enemies but also in relations with 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 is building two sources of legitimacy at once:

- **The legitimacy of modernisation:** social opening (allowing women to drive in 2018, expanding entertainment and tourism), reducing the role of the conservative religious establishment and the promise of prosperity through Vision 2030. This legitimacy needs regional stability and a positive global image and reinforces the logic of de-escalation.
- **The legitimacy of power and nationalism:** displaying authority against Iran, a leadership role in the Arab and Islamic world, and a new Saudi nationalism re-

placing traditional religious identity. This legitimacy needs displays of power and reinforces the logic of power maximisation.

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 the concentration of power at home and the display of power abroad were two sides of a single project. The turn to de-escalation after 2020 was also partly because the concentration of domestic power had been completed and the project of economic modernisation now had priority.

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

2023 was an exceptional year for Saudi foreign policy. In this year, until 7 October, Riyadh simultaneously advanced three major diplomatic tracks that appeared incompatible from the standpoint of structural logic: reconciliation with Iran, negotiations with the Houthis, and negotiations for normalisation with Israel together with a defence pact with the United States.

Chronology

Date	Iran track	Yemen track	United States and Israel track
10 March	Trilateral Beijing statement on resuming relations		
6 April	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 Riyadh; Saudi foreign minister visits Tehran		
August	Saudi embassy reopens in Tehran		

Date	Iran track	Yemen track	United States and Israel track
September		Houthi delegation visits Riyadh	Saudi crown prince’s interview with Fox News speaking of normalisation getting “closer every day”; reports of demands for a defence pact and a civil nuclear programme with enrichment rights
7 October			Hamas attack and effective halt of the normalisation track

Analysis

Three tracks, one logic. At first glance, reconciliation with Iran alongside negotiations for a defence pact with the United States and normalisation with Israel, both of which made sense against Iran, seems contradictory. But from Riyadh’s perspective, these three tracks had one logic: reducing the immediate risk (Iranian and Houthi attacks on Saudi territory) and at the same time increasing long-term power (the American defence umbrella, Israeli technology and a nuclear programme). 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 normalisation package. In the same year it reconciled with Iran, Saudi Arabia sought a capability that would in the long run bring it to nuclear parity with Iran. This is exactly 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 draw Assad away from Iran and restore Arab influence in Damascus. This policy of de-escalation with Assad was in fact an instrument for competing with Iran in Syria.

7 October and the forced choice. The Hamas attack, one of whose aims according to many analysts was to derail the Saudi normalisation track, forced Saudi Arabia to halt one of the tracks, at least in the short term. Riyadh halted normalisation and kept the Iran channel. This choice showed that dual policy is sustainable only 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 confrontation.

Implications for Theory

Defensive realism confirms the Beijing reconciliation, and offensive realism the track of the defence pact and enrichment. But neither explains why Riyadh advanced both at the same time, or why both sides, Tehran and Washington, accepted this simultaneity. The book’s answer is that in a penetrated system, a regional state can exploit the competition of two powers (the United States and China) and the competition of two regional rivals (Iran and Israel) and strike a separate deal with each; deals that together improve its position in both dimensions, security and power.

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

In the early hours of 14 September 2019, Aramco’s oil-processing facilities at Abqaiq and the Khurais oil field were hit by a combined attack of drones and cruise missiles. 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, that is, from Iran or Iraq, and that the Islamic Republic was responsible. Iran denied any involvement.

Chronology

Date	Event
May to July 2019	Attacks on tankers near the port of Fujairah and in the Sea of Oman; Iran downs an American drone (June); an American retaliatory strike is called off at the last minute.
14 September 2019	Attack on Abqaiq and Khurais.
September 2019	The United States holds Iran responsible; Trump declares that the United States does not want war and gives no military response; additional American forces and air-defence systems are sent to Saudi Arabia.
20 September 2019	The Houthis announce a halt to attacks on Saudi territory if coalition attacks stop.
25 September 2019	Rouhani proposes the “Hormuz Peace Endeavour” 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.

Date	Event
2021	Formal start of the Baghdad talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Analysis

The patron’s test. The Abqaiq attack was a “moment of truth” for Saudi Arabia. For decades Riyadh had relied on the assumption that the United States would defend the Persian Gulf’s oil infrastructure. But the American reaction, sending forces without a military response against the perpetrator, showed that the American security umbrella has 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 to this experience with two simultaneous strategies. On the one hand, it intensified internal and external power maximisation: buying more air-defence systems, seeking more formal security guarantees from the United States, later moving closer to Israel and finally the defence pact with Pakistan. On the other hand, it opened the track 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, instead of pushing Saudi Arabia towards a purely offensive or purely defensive logic, strengthened its dual policy.

A message for Iran. From Tehran’s perspective, the attack, regardless of who carried it out, showed that the Islamic Republic and its allies had the capacity to damage the heart of the Saudi economy without the United States responding militarily. This experience probably played a role in Tehran’s later calculations, including in assessing the cost of attacking the Gulf states in 2026. But in 2026 conditions were different: the United States was itself a party to the war, and the Gulf states that were attacked this time 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 prediction, does not necessarily lead to an attempt to eliminate the threat through pure power maximisation either. In a penetrated system, a state that discovers its patron has limits simultaneously increases its power and enters into dialogue with the source of the threat. This “de-escalation from a position of vulnerability and power maximisation to remedy the vulnerability” is one of the principal mechanisms by which dual policy arises.

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 other states). This prediction is partly correct. But Waltz does not explain the Yemen war and the Qatar blockade, which were offensive actions beyond security needs.

Mearsheimer’s Prediction

Mearsheimer would probably 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 harshest sanctions, that is, precisely when it could have exploited Iran’s weakness, is inconsistent with Mearsheimerian logic. Buck-passing 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 a case of “overlapping temporal duality” and “omnibalancing.” Riyadh needs stability for regime survival and the realisation of Vision 2030, but needs displays of power to maintain its leadership of the Arab world and Sunni Islam and to contain Iran.

13.10. Table of Saudi Arabia’s Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-maximising policy	Period
Iran	Baghdad talks; Beijing agreement; keeping the 2023 channel	Behind-the-scenes support for US military pressure; expelling diplomats	2021–2026
Yemen	2022 truce; talks with the Houthis	The coalition war from 2015	2015–2023
Qatar	The 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	Normalisation talks; implicit participation in regional air defence	Conditioning on a Palestinian state to win Arab leadership	2023–2026

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-maximising policy	Period
World	Mediator for Ukraine, Sudan and US–Russia	Defence pact with nuclear Pakistan	2023–2025
Economy	Vision 2030; attracting capital	Extensive arms purchases; demanding enrichment rights	Entire period
Region	Hosting Riyadh meetings to end the 2026 war	Leading the anti-Iran and anti-Brotherhood axis	2026

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Turkey; Great Mediator, Cross-Border Military Actor

14.1. Structural Position

With more than 85 million people, NATO's second-largest army, a growing defence industry and a geographical position between Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East and the Black Sea, Turkey is one of the largest powers in the region. Turkey is a member of NATO, but its relationship with the West has had many ups and downs; at the same time it has extensive ties with Russia, and its purchase of the S-400 system (2019) led to its expulsion from the F-35 fighter programme.

Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkish foreign policy was influenced 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 neighbours." In the 2000s these doctrines meant de-escalation and soft influence. After the Arab Spring, and especially after the failed coup of 2016, Turkish policy turned towards an active military presence. The author's earlier articles on the hidden continuity of the Milli Görüş tradition from Erbakan to Erdoğan have shown that this change was less a rupture than the surfacing of a layer of ambition that already existed.

14.2. Power-Maximising Logic: Military Presence on Five Fronts

(a) Syria

From 2016 Turkey carried out several military operations in northern Syria: "Euphrates Shield" (2016–2017), "Olive Branch" in Afrin (2018), "Peace Spring" east of the Euphrates (2019) and "Spring Shield" in Idlib (2020). These operations led to the creation of a "safe zone" controlled by Turkey and its allied Syrian armed groups. After the fall of Assad in December 2024, in which Turkey's support for the opposition played a part, 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 military bases and outposts in the Kurdistan Region consolidated a lasting Turkish military presence on Iraqi soil.

(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 memorandum of understanding on maritime boundaries 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 two countries’ strategic bond to the level of alliance.

(e) Beyond the Region

Turkey’s military base in Qatar, its large training centre in Somalia and its presence in the Horn of Africa show the geographical expansion of Turkey’s military presence. The “Blue Homeland” doctrine also formulates extensive maritime claims in the Aegean and the 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 instruments of Turkey’s ideological influence in the Arab world.

14.3. De-escalatory Logic: Mediation and Normalisation

(a) Mediation between Russia and Ukraine

Turkey hosted the Istanbul negotiations 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. This combination is interesting: in Syria Turkey was cooperating with two countries that were on the opposing side of the war.

(c) The Wave of Normalisation (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 the Khashoggi case was set aside.
- 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 normalisation (2022).

(d) The Peace Process with the PKK

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

(e) Mediation in Gaza and the 2026 War

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

14.4. The Linkage of the Two Logics: The "Armed Mediator"

Turkey is perhaps the clearest example of an "armed mediator" in the region. Turkey's mediating power cannot be separated from its military power:

- Turkey can mediate between Russia and Ukraine because it has both sold drones to Ukraine and has economic and energy cooperation with Russia. That is, it has "leverage" with both sides.

- Turkey can be a guarantor of the Gaza ceasefire because it has relations with Hamas but is at the same time a member of NATO.
- In post-Assad Syria Turkey can play the role of "guarantor of stability" because its military forces are deployed there.
- Normalisation with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, after years of rivalry in Libya, Egypt and the Persian Gulf, allowed Turkey to attract Gulf investment for its crisis-ridden economy without reducing its military presence in Libya, Qatar or Syria.

But in the case of Israel, 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 two countries' rivalry 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 Fighter 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 sank to their lowest level. Less than a year later, after Erdoğan's apology and especially after the failed coup of July 2016, the two countries quickly reconciled. In 2019 Turkey received the S-400 air-defence system from Russia, the TurkStream pipeline opened in 2020 and construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant by Russia continued. At the same time, Turkey sold Bayraktar drones to Ukraine and, after the Russian invasion in February 2022, closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to the warships of the belligerents under the Montreux Convention. Turkey was at one and the same time Russia's energy and arms partner and an arms supplier to its enemy.

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

In summer 2020 the dispatch of the exploration vessel "Oruç Reis," escorted by warships, to disputed waters brought Turkey and Greece to the brink of military confrontation. But three years later, in December 2023, Erdoğan went to Athens and the two countries signed the "Athens Declaration" on friendly relations and good neighbourliness, 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 membership of NATO because of what it regarded as Sweden's support for Kurdish groups. Turkey's parliament finally approved Sweden's membership in January 2024, and shortly afterwards the United States approved the sale of F-16 fighters to Turkey. Turkey used its position in a collective security institution (NATO) to gain bilateral concessions, behaviour that combined loyalty to the alliance with power-based bargaining.

(d) Iran: Trading Partner, Regional Rival

Turkey and Iran are among each other's most important trading partners, and Turkey has been one of the buyers of Iranian gas. But in Syria the two countries were on opposing fronts, in Iraq they competed for influence, and in the Caucasus Turkey supported Azerbaijan while Iran supported Armenia. At the same time they were partners in the Astana process, and in the 2026 war Turkey condemned the American and Israeli attacks on Iran. The Turkey–Iran relationship is a pure example of the "coopetition" discussed in Chapter Three.

(e) Post-Assad Syria: Patron 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 were Kurds allied with the PKK) to integrate these forces into the state structure, together with the PKK's dissolution process inside Turkey, showed that Ankara was pursuing the Kurdish question with military and political instruments at the same time.

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 sources of domestic legitimacy. In 2023, the centenary of the Republic, Erdoğan put forward the discourse of the "Century of Türkiye," combining economic growth, defence-industry independence and a regional leadership role. On the one hand, Turkey's 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 hand, the ruling coalition relies on nationalism and Islamism, and displays of power in Syria, Libya, the Mediterranean and the Caucasus are essential to maintaining this coalition. The wave of normalisation from 2021 to 2023, which coincided 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 and December 2024)

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 was one of the greatest geopolitical upheavals of the decade, and Turkey played a pivotal role in it. Ankara's behaviour in these days, when it was simultaneously a diplomatic partner of Russia and Iran 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 declares his readiness to meet Assad and normalise relations; Damascus makes the withdrawal of Turkish forces a precondition.	De-escalatory
27 November	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and its allies launch an offensive from Idlib, an area under Turkey's military umbrella.	Power-maximising (indirect)
29 and 30 November	Fall of Aleppo; at the same time, armed groups directly backed by Turkey (the Syrian National Army) attack areas held by Kurdish forces north of Aleppo.	Power-maximising
Early December	Fall of Hama and Homs; Turkey officially denies any involvement in the offensive and calls for a political solution.	De-escalatory discourse
7 December	Meeting of the foreign ministers of the Astana guarantor states (Turkey, Russia, Iran) on the sidelines of the Doha Forum.	De-escalatory
8 December	The opposition enters Damascus and Assad flees to Russia.	Outcome of power maximisation
December	Turkish-backed groups seize Manbij from Kurdish forces; the head of Turkish intelligence visits Damascus, followed by the foreign minister.	Power-maximising and de-escalatory at once

Analysis

Deniability as an instrument. In these days Turkey made skilful use of "deniability." Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham was an organisation that Turkey officially regarded as a terrorist group, yet 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 at the Astana meeting alongside Russia and Iran while profiting from the fall of their ally.

Two fronts in one operation. The less often mentioned point is that while Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham was advancing on Damascus, groups directly backed by Turkey attacked Kurdish forces north of Aleppo and in Manbij. Turkey used one great upheaval to advance two different goals: toppling a rival in Damascus and weakening Kurdish forces in the north.

Converting 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 that would not have been possible without military victory. In the following months Turkey began extensive defence and economic cooperation with the new Syrian government and at the same time, as noted above, 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; and for Israel, the replacement of one rival (Iran) by another (Turkey) on its northern borders. In the following months, through technical talks with Israel mediated by Azerbaijan, Turkey sought to avoid direct confrontation. A power-maximising victory immediately led to the need for new de-escalation.

Implications for Theory

Turkey's behaviour 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 maximisation (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 other powers (Russia tied down in Ukraine, Iran after the Lebanon war), provided it has both military instruments and diplomatic channels at its disposal at the same time.

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 an active participant 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 dispatch of forces, advisers and drones to Tripoli after approval by the Turkish parliament
19 January	Multilateral diplomacy	Participation in the Berlin Conference on Libya and commitment to respect the arms embargo and a political solution
February and March	Syria	Direct clashes with the Syrian army in Idlib after dozens of Turkish soldiers are killed; Operation "Spring Shield"
5 March	Bilateral diplomacy	Idlib ceasefire agreement with Russia in Moscow
May and June	Libya	Haftar's forces pushed back from around Tripoli and the Sirte–Jufra line stabilised
August	Mediterranean	Exploration vessel "Oruç Reis" sent with warship escort into waters disputed with Greece; minor collision between the two countries' warships
September and October	NATO	Military technical talks with Greece at NATO headquarters to create a deconfliction mechanism
27 September to 10 November	Caucasus	Political and military support for Azerbaijan in the 44-day war
November	Caucasus and Russia	Agreement with Russia to establish a joint centre to monitor the Karabakh ceasefire

Analysis

Three fronts, one pattern. On all three fronts, Libya, Syria and the Caucasus, Turkey's pattern of behaviour 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 then Turkey took part in UN processes. In Idlib, the clash 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 astonishing point of 2020 is that on all three fronts Turkey was on the opposite side to Russia: in Libya Russia supported Haftar through Wagner forces, in Syria it was Assad's patron and in the Caucasus Armenia's treaty ally. Yet on all three fronts Turkey and Russia eventually reached agreement with each other. Some analysts have called this relationship "managed rivalry" or "competitive cooperation." From the perspective of our hypothesis, this relationship is a perfect example of the dual policy of two powers towards each other: competition in the field 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 technical talks for deconfliction. 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 ticket of entry to the negotiating table. Without a military presence in Libya, Syria and the Caucasus, Turkey would have had no place in the final settlements of these crises. This assumption, familiar in the tradition of classical realism and in the thought of Clausewitz, has less place in structural realism, because Waltz and Mearsheimer regard diplomacy more as a reflection of the distribution of power than as an independent arena in which power is "converted."

14.9. Testing against the Two Theories

Waltz's Prediction

Waltz expected Turkey, as a middle power in NATO, to balance against its principal threats (Russia, Iran or insecurity on its southern borders) and to avoid adventur-

ism. A military presence in Libya, Somalia and Qatar, which has 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 maximise power. A 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 wave of normalisation) and why it invested so much in mediation. In his view, cooperation with a rival is "appeasement" and unreasonable.

Verdict

Turkey is a case of "instrumental duality": military power is an instrument of mediation, and mediation is an instrument for increasing regional and global weight. Turkey becomes "indispensable" through both logics: without it, wars do not end and peace does not last.

14.10. Table of Turkey's Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-maximising policy	Period
Syria	Astana process with Russia and Iran; support for the new government's stability	Four military operations; controlled zone; influence in Damascus	2016–2026
Russia and Ukraine	Istanbul negotiations; grain initiative	Drone sales to Ukraine; control of the straits	2022–2025
Persian Gulf	Normalisation with the UAE and Saudi Arabia	Military base in Qatar	2017–2022
Egypt	Return of ambassadors; Sisi's visit to Ankara	Support for the Muslim Brotherhood after 2013	2013–2024
Israel	2022 normalisation	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	Normalisation 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

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-maximising policy	Period
2026 war	Mediation between the United States and Iran	Proposal of a regional consortium for Hormuz security	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 three hundred thousand and an area of less than twelve thousand square kilometres, Qatar is by the traditional criteria of realism a "small state." But Qatar possesses 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 hosts the largest American air base in the region (Al Udeid).

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

15.2. 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 American withdrawal from Afghanistan. During the withdrawal of August 2021, Qatar played a pivotal 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 of November 2023, the ceasefire of January 2025 and the ceasefire of October 2025. Before the war, Qatar also 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 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).
- Mediation 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 Qatar's designation as a "Major Non-NATO Ally" (2022) have placed Qatar under the American security umbrella.

15.3. Power-Maximising Logic: Ideological and Media Influence

(a) Hosting Yusuf al-Qaradawi

Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Egyptian-born cleric and one of the leading intellectual figures of the Muslim Brotherhood, lived in Doha for decades and remained there until his death in September 2022. His Al Jazeera television programme ("Sharia and Life") had a wide audience in 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 regarded as a radical figure in many countries and was barred from entry in some. Hosting him was an instrument for linking Qatar to the broad network of Sunni political Islam.

(b) Hosting Hamas Leaders

Hamas's political bureau has been based in Doha since 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 regarded it as a political and financial safe haven for Hamas. Israel's strike on Hamas leaders in Doha (September 2025) showed what this duality can cost.

(c) Support for the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring

After 2011 Qatar supported Brotherhood currents in Egypt (Morsi's government, with several billion dollars of financial aid), Tunisia (Ennahda), Libya and Syria. Qatar took part 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 regarded it as an instrument of Qatari foreign policy, and its closure 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 helped keep Qatar alive. This simultaneity of hosting an American base and a Turkish base while maintaining relations with Iran maximised 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 financial support for Western research and educational institutions make up Qatar's instruments of soft influence. Some of these activities have also been the subject of allegations and investigations in Europe.

15.4. The Linkage of the Two Logics: "Connector to Everyone"

Qatar's logic can be summarised 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 kind of ideological hegemonism, was the precondition of mediation. And mediation, which had made Qatar indispensable to the United States, was the protective umbrella for continued hosting.

But this strategy has limits. The 2017 blockade, Israel's strike in 2025 and Iran's attacks in 2026 showed that being a "connector to everyone" sometimes turns into being a "target for everyone."

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 2008–2009 Gaza war. From 2018 until before 7 October 2023, Qatar, in coordination with and with the consent of the Israeli government, transferred monthly financial aid to Gaza to pay salaries, fuel and assistance to needy families. This arrangement, intended to maintain relative calm in Gaza, was strongly criticised in Israel after 7 October. Qatar was simultaneously in contact with the head of Israel's intelligence service and Hamas leaders. This "connector to everyone" role is one of the purest instances of co-rooted duality.

(b) After the Doha Strike: Turning Damage into Leverage

Israel's strike on Doha on 9 September 2025 could have been a strategic defeat for Qatar. But Doha quickly turned this damage into leverage: it hosted an extraordinary summit of Arab and Islamic leaders in Doha, received a formal apology from Israel's prime minister in late 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 once again at the centre of mediation of the Gaza ceasefire. This experience showed that for Qatar, even being a victim can become a source of power, provided its position as "indispensable mediator" is preserved.

(c) Iran: A Warning before the Attack

In June 2025, when Iran fired missiles at Al Udeid base in Qatar in response to American strikes on its nuclear facilities, it had, according to numerous reports, given advance warning through diplomatic channels, and damage remained limited. Qatar condemned the attack but immediately took part in establishing a ceasefire. This incident showed that Qatar does not abandon its role as mediator even when its own territory is targeted; and that Iran too, in its relations with Qatar, did not completely 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 principal supporters of Syria's new government, including by financing part of public-sector salaries and supporting energy supply. This support increased Qatar's influence in a Syria that had for years been an arena of rivalry among Iran, Russia and Turkey.

(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 considerable domestic controversy in the United States, is an example of this "gift diplomacy." Massive investments in infrastructure, sport and media in the West have also given Qatar a 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 excluded 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 everyone. This logic can be called "security through indispensability": a state indispensable to everyone is less likely to be the target of attack or sustained blockade. The experiences of 2017, 2025

and 2026 showed that this logic is not absolute, but in the first two cases Qatar eventually emerged from the crisis with a more consolidated position; it is still too early to judge the outcome of the developments of 2026.

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 the ceasefires, an ally of the United States, and the object of pressure and finally of an Israeli strike.

Chronology

Date	Event
October 2023	Qatar begins contacts with Hamas about hostages a few days after 7 October; release of the first hostages holding US citizenship through Qatari mediation.
24 November to 1 December 2023	The first temporary truce; release of more than a hundred hostages in exchange for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.
2024	Successive rounds of negotiation in Doha and Cairo; growing pressure from some American and Israeli politicians on Qatar to expel Hamas leaders; Qatar repeatedly announces that it is "reassessing" its mediating role.
July 2024	Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas's political bureau and a resident of Doha, is killed in Tehran; Qatar's prime minister asks how mediation can succeed when one party assassinates the negotiator of the other.
November 2024	Qatar announces it is suspending mediation until the parties show seriousness.
19 January 2025	Start of a three-phase ceasefire mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the United States.
18 March 2025	Collapse of the ceasefire and resumption of extensive Israeli operations.
9 September 2025	Israeli air strike on the residence of the Hamas negotiating delegation in Doha.
15 September 2025	Extraordinary summit of Arab and Islamic leaders in Doha.

Date	Event
Late September 2025	Israel's prime minister apologises to Qatar in a call from the White House; Trump's twenty-point plan for Gaza announced.
October 2025	Ceasefire and hostage exchange; signing of a document supporting the plan at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, attended by the United States, Egypt, Qatar and Turkey.

Analysis

The inherent conflict between two roles. Throughout these two years, Qatar's two roles repeatedly came into conflict. Israel and some American politicians said that hosting Hamas made Qatar its "partner." Qatar replied that without this hosting there would be no channel for freeing hostages. Both arguments were true; and this simultaneous truth is the essence of Qatar's dual policy.

The threat of withdrawal as leverage. Qatar spoke several times, including in April and November 2024, of "reassessing" or "suspending" its 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 it pressured Hamas to show flexibility. A mediator's value lies precisely in the possibility of its withdrawal.

The Doha strike and the duality threshold. The strike of 9 September showed that Qatar's duality had reached its threshold: one party (Israel) had concluded that the cost of attacking the host was lower than the benefit of eliminating Hamas leaders. But the subsequent reactions, Israel's apology and the American 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 the extra-regional power.

Comparison with the Islamic Republic. Comparing Qatar and Iran in this period is instructive. Both had ties with Hamas. But Iran carried the power-maximising component (arming and training) and Qatar the de-escalatory component (political hosting and mediation). As a result Iran became the target of war, while Qatar, despite being attacked, consolidated its position as mediator. This difference shows that the "combination" of the two logics in each state, and which component 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 states tried to force Qatar to choose between the two logics: either fully joining their axis and abandoning its independent ideological and regional ties, or isolation. Qatar accepted neither.

Chronology

Date	Event
5 June 2017	The four states sever relations and close land, sea and air borders.
6 June 2017	The US president's social media messages initially support the blockade, while the State Department and the Pentagon stress the importance of Al Udeid and the need for dialogue.
7 June 2017	The Turkish parliament fast-tracks the deployment of additional forces to the Turkish base in Qatar.
June 2017	Iran opens its airspace to Qatari aircraft and food shipments begin from Iran and Turkey.
22 June 2017	A list of thirteen demands is presented, including closing Al Jazeera, closing the Turkish base and reducing relations with Iran.
June and July 2017	Agreement to buy F-15 fighters from the United States and signing of a memorandum of understanding on combating terrorist financing with the United States.
2017 to 2020	Continuous Kuwaiti mediation; start of the annual Qatar–US strategic dialogue (from January 2018); expansion of Hamad Port and domestic food production.
January 2019	Qatar leaves OPEC.
5 January 2021	The Al-Ula declaration ends 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, expanding Al Udeid, the counter-terrorism memorandum and the strategic dialogue. The aim of this move was to convince the United States that Qatar was an indispensable ally and not a sponsor of terrorism. The second move 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 became at one and the same time closer to the United States and closer to Iran and Turkey.

The demands as a mirror of duality. The list of thirteen demands was in fact a list of the instruments of Qatar's dual policy: Al Jazeera (the instrument of media influence), the Turkish base (the instrument of hedging), relations with Iran (the instrument of connecting with everyone) and ties with the Brotherhood (the instrument of ideological influence). The blockaders wanted precisely what distinguished Qatar from an ordinary small state.

An end without surrender. The ending of the blockade at Al-Ula, without Qatar accepting the demands, confirmed the strategy of "security through indispensability." The reasons for ending the blockade were also multiple: American pressure for the unity of its allies against Iran, the change of administration in Washington, and the fact that the blockade had not achieved its aim and had brought Qatar closer to Iran and Turkey.

A lesson for the blockaders. The experience of 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 stand ready to step in, usually fails. This lesson was one of the factors in these two countries' turn to de-escalation after 2020.

Implications for Theory

From Waltz's perspective, a small state facing a coalition of powerful neighbours should either bandwagon with them or take shelter with a great power. Qatar rejected both and relied on three powers (the United States, Turkey, Iran) simultaneously. From Mearsheimer's perspective, a small state should yield under pressure. Qatar did not yield, and prevailed. This study shows that in a penetrated system, a small state with a dual policy can survive even against a coalition of its larger neighbours.

15.9. Testing against the Two Theories

Waltz's Prediction

Waltz says little about small states, but his logic dictates that Qatar should take 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 the role of Al Jazeera put Qatar in confrontation with its powerful neighbours 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 the demands being met, and Qatar emerged stronger.

Verdict

Qatar is a case of "discursive duality" and "co-rooted duality": an official discourse of peace and mediation, and the practical conduct of hosting and financing 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-maximising policy	Period
Palestine	Mediating the Gaza ceasefires; humanitarian aid	Hosting Hamas leaders since 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, Libya; support for Syrian armed opposition	2011–2017
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, Iran's rival	2017–2026

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-maximising policy	Period
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

The Republic of Azerbaijan, with about ten million people, Caspian oil and gas resources and a position between Russia, Iran, Turkey and Georgia, is a middle-sized country but sits at the geopolitical knot of the South Caucasus. From independence in 1991 until 2020, the central problem of Azerbaijan's national security was the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven surrounding districts in the first war (1988–1994).

Although Azerbaijan is not part of the security system of the Arab Middle East, 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 wider regional equations, as when it was among the participants in the Riyadh meeting during the 2026 war.

16.2. Power-Maximising Logic: Retaking Territory by Force

(a) The 44-Day War (2020)

On 27 September 2020 Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military operation to retake Karabakh. Using Turkish Bayraktar drones and Israeli loitering munitions, the Azerbaijani army seized much of the occupied territory, including the symbolic town of Shusha. The ceasefire statement of 10 November 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 areas of Armenian territory (not Karabakh) and consolidated positions there. The September 2022 attacks on Armenian towns, including Jermuk, were part of a strategy of "blackmail" in Mearsheimer's sense, aimed at extracting concessions in negotiations.

(c) The Blockade of the Lachin Corridor (2022–2023)

From December 2022 the Lachin corridor, Karabakh's only link with 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 19 September 2023 Azerbaijan launched an "anti-terrorist operation," and in less than 24 hours Karabakh's Armenian forces surrendered. Almost the entire Armenian population of Karabakh, more than one hundred thousand people, fled to Armenia, and the self-proclaimed Karabakh republic was dissolved from the start of 2024.

(e) The "Western Azerbaijan" Discourse

In the years after 2020 Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly spoken of "Western Azerbaijan" to refer to parts of Armenia's present territory and the right of return of Azerbaijanis expelled from there in the Soviet era. This discourse has kept territorial claims alive even after the recapture of Karabakh.

(f) The Armaments Coalition 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 was raised to the level of military alliance by the Shusha Declaration (2021). From Tehran's perspective, this triangle is a direct threat on Iran's northern border.

16.3. 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 reopening of all economic and transport links in the region, including a connection 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 8 August 2025, Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signed a joint declaration at the White House hosted by Donald Trump and initialled 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 created with American development participation. The two countries also agreed to the dissolution of 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 main link of the "Middle Corridor" (the Trans-Caspian route) between China and Europe. Hosting the UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) in November 2024 was also part of an effort to project an image as a responsible international actor.

16.4. The Linkage of the Two Logics: The Corridor as War by Other Means

Azerbaijan is perhaps the purest example of "instrumental duality" in this book. The Zangezur corridor is at the same time:

- **A peace project:** because it increases trade, transit and economic interdependence among Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey and Central Asia.
- **A power project:** because it establishes a territorial link between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan and from there with Turkey, helping realise the long-standing 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, despairing of Russian support, was forced to accept the terms. This is exactly what can be called a "victor's peace": de-escalation that is the fruit of power maximisation and consolidates it.

16.5. Iran and Azerbaijan: A Reflection of Mutual Duality

The relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan has also been dual. Iran formally 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 scope extended to some targets on Azerbaijani territory, Azerbaijan participated in regional meetings to end the war.

16.6. Further Examples of Azerbaijan's Dual Policy

(a) Two Corridors at Once: Zangezur and the 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 a red line, in 2023 Azerbaijan reached agreement with Iran on an alternative route through Iranian territory along the Aras River, and construction of its border bridges began. Azerbaijan thus both freed Iran from the fear of a monopoly route and pressured Armenia by threatening to use the Iranian route; and at the same time, by threatening to use the Armenian route, it had leverage over Iran. This is the "mandala" logic described by Kautilya: each partner is leverage against the other.

(b) Russia: From the "Declaration on Allied Interaction" to the Plane Crash Crisis

On 22 February 2022, just two days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Ilham Aliyev and Vladimir Putin signed the "Declaration on Allied Interaction" in Moscow. But in the following years Azerbaijan exploited Russia's weakness to remove Russian peacekeepers from 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-defence fire, and then the diplomatic and media clashes of 2025, brought relations to their lowest point. Azerbaijan used the "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 countries in 2025 to prevent military confrontation in Syria.

According to reports, Baku also hosted contacts between Israeli and Syrian officials. A country that had retaken its territory by war five years earlier now appeared in the role of mediator. This development shows the conversion of "hard power" into "diplomatic capital."

(d) Europe: Gas versus Criticism

While Azerbaijan became an important gas supplier to Europe from 2022, it 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 because of concerns about democracy and human rights, and Baku in response suspended its participation in the Assembly. Azerbaijan also had a fierce diplomatic and media clash with France, a supporter of Armenia. Gas allowed Azerbaijan to be at the same time Europe's energy partner and a harsh critic of European institutions.

(e) The Condition of Armenia's Constitution

Despite the initialling of the peace text in August 2025, Azerbaijan has made the final signature conditional on a change to Armenia's constitution, in particular removing 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 maximisation.

16.7. Azerbaijan and the Model of the "Victor's Peace" in Theory

Azerbaijan's experience can be understood in the light of the concept of the "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 a more durable peace than wars ending in compromise agreements, because the defeated side lacks the capacity or motive to resume the war. Azerbaijan, consciously or not, followed this logic: first decisive military victory, then a peace that consolidates that victory.

This pattern has an interesting implication for realist theory. From Mearsheimer's perspective, Azerbaijan after victory should seek further opportunities for expansion. From Waltz's perspective, Azerbaijan, having achieved sufficient security, should content itself with preserving the status quo. But Azerbaijan's behaviour should be described as "power maximisation up to the point of consolidation, then de-escalation for institutionalisation," with the important qualification that the im-

plicit threat to resume power maximisation (the Western Azerbaijan discourse, the constitutional condition) is still kept 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 10 November 2020, which ended the war, both recorded the gains of power maximisation and sowed the seeds of future de-escalatory policy in a single document.

Chronology

Date	Event
July 2020	Border clashes in the Tovuz area, far from Karabakh; large demonstrations in Baku demanding war.
27 September 2020	Azerbaijan begins a large-scale operation; martial law declared in both countries.
October 2020	Three "humanitarian" ceasefires announced, mediated by Russia, France and the United States, each collapsing within hours or days; missile attacks on the city of Ganja on Azerbaijani territory; Azerbaijani advance in the south along the Iranian border.
Early November	The battle of Shusha; capture of this symbolic town (8 November), opening the road to Stepanakert.
9 and 10 November	Signing of the trilateral ceasefire statement among Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia; deployment of Russian peacekeepers.
January 2021	Trilateral meeting in Moscow and formation of a joint working group to reopen 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 an instrument for managing international pressure, not for ending the war. Azerbaijan did not accept a durable ceasefire until it had reached its decisive military objective, Shusha.

Article 9: peace in the service of victory. In Articles 1 to 8, the 10 November 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 the reopening of all economic and transport links and made Armenia responsible for guaranteeing the connection between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, used entirely de-escalatory language. This very article later became the legal basis for the claims to the "Zangezur corridor." Peace became an instrument for extending the gains of war.

The role 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, only later joining the joint monitoring centre with Russia. Israel was an important arms supplier to Azerbaijan while maintaining official relations with Armenia. Russia was Armenia's treaty ally in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation but avoided military intervention on its behalf, because the war was taking place in Karabakh and the surrounding districts, internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan; and in the end, by mediating the ceasefire, it deployed its own peacekeepers.

Iran's position. The Islamic Republic, along whose border Azerbaijan's advance continued and onto whose territory several shells and rockets fell, formally supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and offered a mediation plan that received no attention. This war showed that Iran, despite all its regional claims, had no decisive role in its immediate neighbourhood; and this experience was one of the roots of Iran's later sensitivity to the Zangezur corridor.

Implications for Theory

The 44-day war can be seen as a perfect instance of "Mearsheimerian power maximisation": seizing an opportunity, relying on land power, conquering territory. But its final statement, emphasising the reopening of links and economic cooperation, used the language of defensive realism and even liberalism. With a single document, Azerbaijan both won the war and defined the framework of future peace in its own favour. This is what we borrowed from Clausewitz in Chapter One and inverted: peace as the continuation of war by other means.

16.9. Second Close Study: Autumn 2023; From Complete Conquest to the First Joint Statement

Azerbaijan's operation of September 2023, which led in less than a day to the surrender of Karabakh's Armenian forces, ended a thirty-five-year conflict. But what

makes this period telling for our hypothesis is the speed with which Azerbaijan, after complete conquest, moved towards de-escalatory steps.

Chronology

Date	Event	Logic
December 2022 to September 2023	Blockade of the Lachin corridor and severe shortages of food and medicine in Karabakh	Power-maximising
Summer 2023	Continued peace talks in Brussels and Washington mediated by the EU and the United States	De-escalatory
19 and 20 September 2023	“Anti-terrorist operation” and surrender of Karabakh’s Armenian forces	Power-maximising
Late September 2023	More than one hundred thousand Armenians leave Karabakh; Aliyev and Erdoğan meet in Nakhchivan	Power-maximising and consolidation
5 October 2023	Aliyev does not attend the European Political Community summit in Granada, where he was to meet Pashinyan	Distancing from Western mediation
7 December 2023	First bilateral joint statement of Azerbaijan and Armenia without a foreign mediator; prisoner exchange and Armenian support for Azerbaijan hosting COP29	De-escalatory
2024	Border delimitation begins on parts of the shared border; Armenia returns several villages to Azerbaijan	De-escalatory and consolidation
August 2025	The Washington agreement and initialling of the peace text	De-escalatory

Analysis

Changing the negotiating format. After conquering Karabakh, Azerbaijan clearly sought to change the format of negotiations: from European mediation, in which France was seen as Armenia’s supporter, to direct bilateral dialogue. Its absence from the Granada meeting and the issuing of the December 2023 joint statement without a mediator showed this change. After victory, Azerbaijan wanted to shape the peace from a position of strength and without the intervention of parties it regarded as 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 real step towards confidence-building, and it helped Azerbaijan, by hosting a global event, repair its image after the September operation, which had met with widespread criticism. De-escalation became an instrument for legitimising the outcome of power maximisation.

Armenia: accepting the new reality. Armenia's behaviour in this period is also instructive. The Pashinyan government, disillusioned by the lack of support from Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, moved towards accepting the new reality and defining Armenia's national interests within its internationally recognised borders. This development shows that one side's dual policy can force the other side to redefine its goals.

Implications for Theory

Autumn 2023 is another example of the "cycle of strike and consolidation" we saw in Israel's case. But in Azerbaijan's case the cycle is more complete: the strike reached its ultimate objective (complete control of the territory) and consolidation was carried out in the language of peace and cooperation. Theoretically, this case suggests that offensive and defensive realism may not be two rival theories but descriptions of two stages of a single cycle; with the difference that, in Azerbaijan's case, the implicit threat to resume the first stage was never abandoned.

16.10. Testing against the Two Theories

Waltz's Prediction

Waltz expected that Azerbaijan, after retaking its occupied territories, that is, after achieving sufficient security, would content itself with preserving the status quo. But the 2023 operation (going beyond the 2020 agreement), the advance into Armenian territory and the "Western Azerbaijan" discourse are inconsistent with this prediction.

Mearsheimer's Prediction

The military part of Azerbaijan's behaviour fits Mearsheimer's theory well: exploiting an opportunity (Russia's weakness after the Ukraine war), relying on land power to conquer territory and using blackmail to extract concessions. But Mearsheimer cannot explain why Azerbaijan, at the height of its military superiority, instead of

imposing the corridor by force, advanced it through an agreement mediated by the United States and by accepting Armenia's sovereignty over the route.

Verdict

Azerbaijan is a case of "compressed and overlapping sequence": war and peace not in two separate periods but in five continuous and intertwined years, in which each military stage changed the conditions of negotiation and each negotiating stage consolidated the military gains.

16.11. Table of Azerbaijan's Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-maximising policy	Period
Karabakh	Accepting the 2020 Russian ceasefire	The 44-day war; the September 2023 operation	2020–2023
Armenia	The Washington agreement and initialling of the peace text	Advances into Armenian territory; "Western Azerbaijan" discourse	2021–2025
Transit	The Zangezur corridor and Trump Route as a peace project	Territorial link with Nakhchivan and Turkey	2020–2025
Europe	Energy diplomacy and COP29	Using gas to neutralise 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 relations and participating in regional meetings	Alliance with Israel and Turkey; ignoring Iran's red line	2020–2026
Russia	Accepting Russian peacekeepers in 2020	Removing the peacekeepers and reducing Russian influence	2020–2025

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The United Arab Emirates; "Little Sparta" and the Diplomacy of Normalisation

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 the traditional criteria of realism a small state. But 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 the oil wealth of Abu Dhabi and its enormous investment funds, Dubai's position as the region's financial, commercial, logistical and tourism hub, a small but well-trained and well-equipped army that has gained operational experience in several wars, and a network of ports and bases along the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

The axis of UAE decision-making is Mohammed bin Zayed, who for years directed foreign policy as Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and has been President of the UAE since May 2022. Jim Mattis, the former US defence secretary, called the UAE "Little Sparta" because of the combat readiness of Emirati forces. This nickname, which holds both praise and warning, expresses the military ambition of a state whose size is far smaller than its aspirations.

The UAE has been given a separate chapter in this book because perhaps no country in the region has pursued the two logics so clearly in two overlapping periods: a period of "active militarism" (roughly 2011 to 2019) and a period of "economic diplomacy and normalisation" (from about 2019 onwards). But as we will see, even in the second period the power-maximising component 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 Is-

lam, and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, as the greatest threat to regional stability and to 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 the "Al-Islah" movement, the local branch of the Brotherhood.

This ideological opposition had two consequences for foreign policy. First, it placed the UAE in confrontation with the Qatar–Turkey axis, which supported Brotherhood currents. Second, it led the UAE to support "anti-Islamist" forces in other countries, even if these forces were military officers or local armed groups. This ideological logic, which structural realism does not see, was one of the main drivers of the power-maximising component of UAE policy.

17.3. Power-Maximising Logic

(a) Egypt (2013)

The UAE, together with Saudi Arabia, was one of the principal supporters of Mohamed Morsi's removal in July 2013 and afterwards gave extensive financial aid to Egypt's new government. This support has continued in 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 was at the same time an instrument of ideological influence (countering the Brotherhood) and of economic influence.

(b) Libya

The UAE was one of the principal supporters of Khalifa Haftar and the "Libyan National Army" in the east of the country. Reports by UN experts repeatedly pointed to violations of the Libyan arms embargo by several countries, including the UAE. In 2019–2020 the offensive Haftar launched against Tripoli was halted by Turkish intervention in support of the Tripoli government. Libya became an arena of direct competition between the UAE–Egypt axis and the Turkey–Qatar axis.

(c) Yemen

The UAE was the principal partner of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen from 2015, and unlike Saudi Arabia, which relied mainly on air power, it deployed ground forces in southern Yemen. The UAE trained and equipped extensive local forces, including forces that later became the backbone of the "Southern Transitional Council," a separatist movement in conflict with the Saudi-backed Yemeni government.

The UAE also established a presence on the islands of Socotra and Perim near the Bab al-Mandab. In 2019 the UAE announced that it was withdrawing 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 reports by UN experts and reputable media, accused the UAE of supplying arms to the Rapid Support Forces. The UAE has denied these allegations. 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. De-escalatory Logic

(a) The Turn of 2019–2021

From around 2019 the UAE openly changed the priority of its foreign policy. Reducing its military presence in Yemen, maritime talks with Iran after the tanker attacks in 2019, and then the announcement in September 2021 of the "Principles of the Next Fifty," which stressed the priority of the economy and good relations with neighbours, were signs of this turn. Anwar Gargash, diplomatic adviser to the UAE president, repeatedly spoke 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 normalise 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 7 October and the Gaza war, the UAE, despite sharply criticising 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 the gradual normalisation of relations.
- **Iran:** returning its ambassador to Tehran in August 2022 and maintaining 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 freed. This role, played while maintaining extensive commercial and financial relations with Russia and close security cooperation with the United States, is another example of being a "connector to everyone."

(e) Global Diplomacy

Hosting the UN Climate Change 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. The Linkage of 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. Massive 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 maximisation is blurred, because both use the same instrument, the network.

17.6. Close Study: January 2022; The Houthi Attack on Abu Dhabi

On 17 January 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. In the following days further attacks took place, some of them intercepted. This was the first time the Houthis had successfully targeted the UAE's capital.

The background to this attack 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-maximising component of UAE policy, at a time when the UAE was trying to present itself as a country focused on economics and de-escalation.

The UAE's reaction was also dual. On the one hand, the UAE asked the United States to redesignate the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation, strengthened its air defences, and the United States sent a destroyer and fighter aircraft to support the UAE. On the other hand, the UAE did not cut its relations with Iran and a few months later, in August 2022, returned its ambassador to Tehran. This incident showed that yesterday's power-maximising component (Yemen) can become today's vulnerability (an attack on the capital), and that the state is then forced to 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 among 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 behaviour is the complete embodiment of dual logic: supporting the weakening of a rival while avoiding a war that would ruin 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 towards giving more weight to the logic of de-escalation, without abandoning the power-maximising component, especially in air defence and alliance with the United States.

17.8. Second Close Study: Summer 2019; Withdrawal from Yemen, Dialogue with Iran, Confrontation with an Ally

Summer 2019 was the turning point of UAE foreign policy. In these few months the UAE made three moves simultaneously that at first glance seem incompatible: reducing its military presence in Yemen, dialogue with Iran after the tanker attacks, and supporting southern Yemeni forces against the government backed by its principal ally, Saudi Arabia.

Chronology

Date	Event	Logic
12 May 2019	Sabotage of four tankers near the port of Fujairah	Threat
June 2019	Attacks on two tankers in the Sea of Oman and Iran downs an American drone; in its report to the United Nations on the Fujairah incident, the UAE does not name Iran directly	Caution
July 2019	Announcement of the drawdown of Emirati forces in Yemen	De-escalatory
30 July 2019	UAE–Iran coast guard meeting in Tehran, the first of its kind in several years	De-escalatory
10 August 2019	The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council takes control of Aden and expels Yemeni government forces	Power-maximising
29 August 2019	UAE air strikes on Yemeni government forces near Aden; the UAE calls them "terrorist groups"	Power-maximising
5 November 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 forces in Yemen but retained its influence through the local forces it had trained and equipped. The Southern Transitional Council's takeover of Aden, only a few weeks after the drawdown was announced, showed that the UAE's "withdrawal" did not mean disengagement but a shift from direct presence to indirect influence. This is exactly the pattern of

"low-cost power maximisation" to which the region's states turned after the experience of costly direct wars.

Dialogue with Iran without a rift with America. The coast guard meeting with Iran in July 2019, at the height of American "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 itself from the United States. The UAE remained an American ally and a year later signed the Abraham Accords, which from Tehran's perspective was a hostile act.

Duality within an alliance. The UAE's air strikes on Yemeni government forces, which Saudi Arabia supported, showed that dual policy is not only about relations with rivals; within an alliance, allies too may 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 conflict of interests between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in southern Yemen continued in subsequent years.

Implications for Theory

Summer 2019 shows that the UAE's dual policy had three simultaneous levels: with a rival (Iran), limited de-escalation while the anti-Iran alliance was maintained; with an ally (Saudi Arabia), cooperation at the macro level and rivalry in southern Yemen; and in the field (Yemen), reduced direct presence and increased indirect influence. Neither structural theory has 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 taking shelter under a great power's umbrella and avoiding adventurism. The first part is correct: the UAE hosts American forces and is a close American security partner. But the interventions in Yemen, Libya and Sudan, none of which was 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 superior power. The UAE bandwagoned with the United States, but at the same time had extensive ties with China and Russia and behaved in its surrounding regions like a regional power, with independent projects of influence. Mearsheimer's theory has no tools to explain this "power-seeking by a small state."

Verdict

The UAE is a case of "geographical and ideological duality" as well as "network duality": de-escalation with established states (Israel, Iran, Turkey, Qatar), hard competition in fragile states (Yemen, Libya, Sudan) and lasting ideological confrontation with political Islam; and all of this through a single network of financial, commercial and military instruments.

17.10. Table of the UAE's Dualities

Domain	De-escalatory policy	Power-maximising policy	Period
Israel	The Abraham Accords; free trade agreement	Using the bond to strengthen air defence and security technology	2020 onwards
Iran	Return of the ambassador; Dubai as a trade gateway	Support for US military pressure in 2026; security alliance with the US	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 the islands	2015 onwards
Egypt	Extensive aid and investment	Backing Morsi's removal and countering the Brotherhood	2013 onwards
Libya	Participation in diplomatic processes	Support for Haftar	2014–2020
Sudan	Declared support for peace processes	Alleged support for the Rapid Support Forces (denied by the UAE)	2023 onwards
Russia and Ukraine	Mediating prisoner exchanges	Maintaining financial and commercial ties with Russia	2022 onwards
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 seven preceding chapters have shown that Israel, the Islamic Republic, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Azerbaijan and the UAE have all pursued strategic dual policy. But a hypothesis that is confirmed by every case without exception is open to the charge of being unfalsifiable, the very charge this book has levelled at Mearsheimer. This chapter therefore turns to cases in which dual policy is either absent or only partly visible, and asks why. The answer to this question clarifies the necessary conditions for dual policy and makes the hypothesis more precise.

18.2. Control Case: Oman and "Active Neutrality"

For the book's hypothesis to be falsifiable, it must be shown that there is a state in the region that has not pursued dual policy, and 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 its relations 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 negotiations that led to the JCPOA (from 2013), the rounds of negotiation in 2025 and February 2026, and mediating the US–Houthi ceasefire in May 2025.
- Avoiding support for armed groups in other countries and regional ambitions.
- Not joining the blockade of Qatar in 2017.

Oman scores very low on the "duality index" of Chapter Nine. The question is why. The author's answer points to three factors:

- **Limited capability:** Oman has far less wealth than its Gulf neighbours and a small army. It lacks the resources to pursue the "power-maximising" component of dual policy.
- **Lack of regional ambition:** Oman's leadership has never claimed leadership of the Arab or Islamic world. The Ibadi school, followed by the majority of Omanis, has kept Oman away from Shia–Sunni sectarian rivalries.
- **Geographical position:** Oman lies on the margin of the region's main rivalries, beside the Strait of Hormuz. A stable relationship with Iran, on the other side of the strait, is 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 regional "ambition." This finding sharpens 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 policy that is partially dual:

- **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-maximising logic:** participation in the blockade of Qatar, support for Khalifa Haftar in Libya and the declaration in 2020 of the Sirte–Jufra "red line," which carried the threat of direct military intervention, and a hard line on Ethiopia's great dam on the Nile.

But because of a deep economic crisis and dependence on Gulf financial aid and the International Monetary Fund, Egypt has not had the capacity to pursue the power-maximising component of dual policy to the extent of the other regional powers. Egypt scores in the middle range of the duality index and is a case of "situational" rather than "strategic" duality. This case too confirms that material capability is a necessary condition for full dual policy.

18.4. Pakistan: A Nuclear Power in the Role of Mediator

Pakistan, although not part of the Middle East in the strict sense, played a decisive role in the region's equations in 2025 and 2026. In September 2025 it signed the Strategic Mutual Defence 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 attacked 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" between other parties. This combination, which looks contradictory from the standpoint of structural realism, is entirely intelligible from the standpoint of the book's hypothesis: with a power-maximising component (nuclear deterrence and a defence pact) and a de-escalatory component (mediation), Pakistan raised its standing in the region's equations.

18.5. Common Patterns across the Seven Cases

Putting the seven cases studied side by side, several common patterns emerge:

(a) De-escalation with States, Power Maximisation in Vacuums

Most states have de-escalated with rival states but have continued military and proxy competition in collapsed or fragile states (Syria, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan). Power vacuums are the principal arena of offensive logic.

(b) De-escalation with the Distant, Power Maximisation with the Near

Israel makes peace with the UAE and Kazakhstan and fights Lebanon and Gaza. Iran reconciles with Saudi Arabia and extends its influence in Iraq and Yemen. This pattern is consistent with the factor of "geographical 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 Labour

In Iran (the Foreign Ministry and the IRGC), Turkey (the Foreign Ministry and the intelligence organisation and defence industries), 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 executed through different institutional channels.

(e) The Role of the Extra-Regional Power

Almost all major de-escalatory acts have taken place 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 in 2020). This means that the region's "penetrated" structure is a necessary condition for de-escalation, while power maximisation often occurs in the shadow of, or despite, the extra-regional power.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Great Powers and Dual Policy; The United States, Russia and China

19.1. The Question of the Chapter

The preceding chapters examined dual policy from the perspective of the region's states. But dual policy is possible only if the great powers tolerate it, or even benefit from it. The question of this chapter is how the United States, Russia and China each came to terms with the dual policy of the region's states, and why none of them could, or would, force the region's states to choose between the two logics.

This question is of particular importance for the critique of structural realism. Both Waltz and Mearsheimer regard the great powers as the principal actors of the system. If the great powers do not force smaller states to choose, then either their power is less than the theory assumes, or their interests lie 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 had three different functions in its allies' dual policy:

- **Security umbrella:** the American 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 confident that if the reconciliation failed, the United States would not leave it alone.
- **Mediator and guarantor:** most of the major de-escalations (the Abraham Accords, the Gaza and Lebanon ceasefires, the Washington agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia) took place with American mediation or guarantees.

The United States both made the de-escalatory component possible and gave it credibility.

- **Source of power maximisation:** the sale of advanced weapons (fighters, air-defence systems, precision munitions) to allies provided the instruments of the power-maximising component of their policy. American military support for Israel in the wars of 2023 to 2026 is a prominent example of this function.

The United States was thus simultaneously the backer of both components of its allies' dual policy. From the standpoint of structural realism this situation is paradoxical: why should a great power help its allies at the same time for peace and for war?

(b) Why Did the United States Tolerate Duality?

Several reasons can be identified:

- **America's own duality:** as shown in Chapter Ten, American policy in the region was itself dual. A state that is simultaneously negotiating, sanctioning and attacking cannot demand single-mindedness from its allies.
- **Lower cost for the United States:** the dual policy of allies reduced America's security burden. When Saudi Arabia reconciled with Iran or Qatar talked to Hamas, the United States was spared direct involvement. This is Mearsheimer's logic of "buck-passing," but in reverse: the great power was passing responsibility to its regional allies.
- **Communication channels:** allies' duality provided the United States with channels it did not have itself. The United States talked to Hamas and the Taliban through Qatar, to Iran through Oman and Qatar, and to parts of the Syrian opposition through Turkey.
- **Limits of power:** even if the United States had wanted to force its allies to choose, it did not fully have the capacity to do so. The experience of the Qatar blockade showed that even when the American president initially supported pressure on Qatar, America's security institutions prevented it, because Qatar was indispensable to American interests.

(c) Where Did the United States Impose a Choice?

In several cases the United States tried to force allies or rivals to choose:

- **Iran and the JCPOA:** the American withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 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 attempt led to an in-

tensification of Iran's power-maximising behaviour, and in the long term, together with the wars of 2025 and 2026, it sharply reduced Iran's regional capability.

- **Turkey and the S-400:** Turkey's expulsion from the F-35 programme after buying the Russian system was an attempt to impose a choice between NATO and Russia. Turkey did not accept and kept the Russian system, but later gained 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 to make 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 its mediation, was a short-lived attempt abandoned because of the need to continue negotiations.

The experience of these cases shows that the United States can impose a choice only when the cost of not choosing is very high for the regional state and there is no other alternative. In cases where the regional state had an alternative (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 Islamic Republic's partner on the ground;
- Party to a deconfliction mechanism with Israel and tolerant of 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 Plus";
- Maintaining a communication channel with the Kurds in north-east Syria.

This network of cross-cutting relations made Russia the "arbiter" of many developments in Syria without paying the costs of a dominant power.

(b) The Russian Model for the Region's States

Russia's behaviour also became a model for the region's 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 the region's states but welcomed it, since every state that distanced itself from complete dependence on the United States 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 transferred from Syria to Ukraine, Russian peacekeepers left Karabakh ahead of schedule, and finally Assad fell in December 2024. But even in this period Russia benefited from its relations with the region's states: it bought Iranian drones for the Ukraine war, used the UAE as a financial and commercial hub to circumvent sanctions and maintained its energy and trade relationship with Turkey. The region's states also 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 Everyone"

China's policy in the Middle East has rested on "friendship with everyone." China is at the same time 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 technological relations with Israel and has given diplomatic support to the Palestinians. In 2016 and 2022 China signed "comprehensive strategic partnership" documents with several countries in the region.

(b) China as a Facilitator of Duality

The existence of China as a great economic power that appears neutral provided a new option for the region's states. Saudi Arabia could cooperate with China for capital and technology and with the United States for security at the same time. Iran could use "Look East" as leverage in negotiating with the West. The 2023 Beijing agreement also showed that China can 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 have no security backing. The region's states learned from this experience that China can be an economic partner and a diplomatic facilitator, but not a substitute for the American security umbrella. This lesson will probably shape future dual policy: the economy with China and security with the United States, and de-escalation with rivals with the help of both.

19.5. The Tripolar Structure and the Room for Manoeuvre of Middle Powers

Putting together the experience of the three great powers yields a theoretical conclusion. In the period after 2011 the Middle East was exposed to the simultaneous presence of three great powers, none of which alone had the capacity or will to impose a regional order. This situation can be called "multiple penetration."

Under multiple penetration, the region's states gain room for manoeuvre from the competition of the great powers. Whenever one great power applies pressure, a regional state can turn to another. This room for manoeuvre is the structural condition of dual policy. Had only one great power been present in the region, it could probably have forced states to choose. Had no great power been present, the region's states would probably have turned 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 the region's states is to a large extent the product of the structure of "multiple penetration." On the one hand, this finding confirms the structuralists' claim that structure shapes behaviour; on the other hand, it shows that the structure in question is neither Waltz's "anarchy" nor Mearsheimer's "unbalanced multipolarity," but a two-layered structure in which a regional system is embedded within the competition of several great powers.

Waltz and Mearsheimer have both focused on one layer, great-power competition. A theory that can explain the behaviour of middle powers must explain the interaction of the two layers. "Dual realism," formulated in Chapter Twenty, is an effort in this direction.

19.7. Summary Table

Great power	Function in the de-escalatory component	Function in the power-maximising component	Cases of imposing a choice
United States	Mediator and guarantor (Abraham, Gaza, Lebanon, Caucasus)	Arms supply and security umbrella; direct participation in wars	Iran (JCPOA); Turkey (F-35); Saudi Arabia (normalisation condition)
Russia	Partner in the Astana process; Karabakh mediator in 2020	Military support for Assad; purchase of 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 the states of the Middle East have, over the past fifteen years, pursued defensive and offensive logics simultaneously and deliberately, and that therefore neither Waltz's nor Mearsheimer's theory alone explains their behaviour. The evidence can now be weighed 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-maximising policies occurred in overlapping time periods. The most striking examples: 2020 (the Abraham Accords, the Karabakh war and the assassination of Fakhrizadeh), 2023 (the Beijing agreement, the 7 October attack and the Karabakh operation), autumn 2025 (the Gaza ceasefire, the strike on Doha and the Saudi–Pakistani pact). Even in the case of Saudi Arabia, which appears to have two distinct phases, the de-escalatory phase overlapped with extensive arms purchases, the defence pact with Pakistan and behind-the-scenes 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 normalisation built an air-defence network; the JCPOA and the Beijing agreement gave Iran breathing space; Turkey's military power and Qatar's hosting were the conditions of their mediation; Azerbaijan's military victory was the condition of the Washington agreement. But in some cases, especially after 2023, excessive power maximisation destroyed de-escalation (the Gaza war and the halt of Saudi normalisation; Iran's at-

tacks on the Persian Gulf and the collapse of the neighbourhood policy). **The hypothesis is confirmed with one qualification: mutual reinforcement holds up to a "threshold," beyond which the two logics destroy each other.**

Third Subsidiary Hypothesis: Institutional Division of Labour

In Iran, Turkey, Qatar and the UAE there is clear evidence of an institutional division of labour. In Israel and Azerbaijan, the two logics are directed mostly from a single decision centre (the prime minister or the president). **The hypothesis is partially confirmed: the institutional division of labour is one of the mechanisms of duality, but not a necessary condition for it.**

20.3. Assessing the Rival Predictions

- **Contingent theory (sequence):** if states had applied the logics one after the other rather than simultaneously, contingent theory would have sufficed. The evidence of simultaneity rejects this, although there is an element of sequence in the cases of Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia.
- **Propaganda de-escalation:** if de-escalation were merely 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 maximisation:** if power maximisation were merely defensive, it would occur only in response to an immediate threat. 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 content themselves with sufficient security	Israel, Azerbaijan and Turkey continued to expand after achieving sufficient security
States balance against the superior power	Arab states normalised with Israel, the region's strongest military power
Aggressive behaviour is a deviation	Aggressive behaviour is present in every case; the deviation has become the rule
Revolutionary states become socialised	The Islamic Republic's socialisation occurred in only one institution

Waltz's claim	Middle Eastern evidence
Nuclear deterrence brings stability	Iran's nuclear threshold neither brought stability nor prevented 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 unreasonable	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 assassinations (except Karabakh)
Cooperation with a rival 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
The hegemon seeks to dominate the region	No claimant to hegemony sought conquest or complete domination; network influence replaced domination
Institutions have no effect	Agreements and multilateral frameworks (the JCPOA, Abraham, Astana) genuinely changed behaviour

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 combinatory realism," to explain the behaviour 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 multi-layered, states secure themselves not by choosing between "sufficient" and "maximal," but by combining "selective de-escalation" with "selective power maximisation." 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 maximise power?"

Second Principle: Strategic Ambiguity Is an Asset

States deliberately send contradictory signals to keep rivals in uncertainty. This ambiguity raises the cost of balancing against them and preserves the possibility of negotiation.

Third Principle: Power Vacuums Are the Arena of Offensive Logic

In fragile states, offensive logic prevails; in relations among established states, defensive and de-escalatory logic has more scope. The key variable is therefore not the "distribution of power" at the level of the system, but the "distribution of fragility" at the level of the region.

Fourth Principle: The Extra-Regional Power Is the Condition of De-escalation

Major de-escalations become possible with the mediation of an extra-regional power. The regional structure is therefore not pure anarchy but "anarchy with a patron."

Fifth Principle: The Duality Threshold

Duality is stable and beneficial up to a threshold. Beyond that threshold, that is, when power maximisation becomes so extensive that rivals regard 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, the framework of dual realism accepts that in many of the region's states the survival of the regime or the leader, not the survival of the abstract state, is the primary 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 behaviour 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-maximising.

Counterpart	Security domain	Economic domain	Diplomatic domain	Ideological domain
Established rival state	Usually power-maximising (deterrence)	Often de-escalatory (trade)	Variable (reconciliation or severance)	Usually power-maximising (competing narratives)
Fragile state	Power-maximising (proxy or direct influence)	Power-maximising (influence-seeking investment)	Outwardly de-escalatory (support for the central government)	Power-maximising (support for aligned groups)
Non-state actor	Dual (support or suppression)	Limited	De-escalatory (hosting and mediation)	Power-maximising (identity ties)
Extra-regional power	De-escalatory (alliance or hedging)	De-escalatory (capital and markets)	De-escalatory (selective alignment)	Variable

This matrix summarises the general pattern derived from the case studies. The main point is that no state applies a single logic in every cell. "Duality" is in fact the selective distribution of the two logics across the different cells of this matrix.

20.8. Testable Propositions for Future Research

From the framework of dual realism, the following testable propositions can be derived:

- **First proposition:** 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.)
- **Second proposition:** the greater the number of fragile states around a regional power, the larger the power-maximising component of that state's policy.
- **Third proposition:** major de-escalations among regional powers almost always occur with the mediation or guarantee of an extra-regional power.
- **Fourth proposition:** the greater the weight of military and security institutions in a state's decision-making structure, the more likely that state is to cross the "duality threshold."
- **Fifth proposition:** states that cross the duality threshold face a coalition of rivals or intervention by an extra-regional power within two to five years.

- **Sixth proposition:** in states where the two logics are directed from a single decision centre, 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 in 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 too:

- **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 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, while being 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 maintains close party and economic relations with China while expanding security cooperation with the United States, is another example.
- **Turkey across Eurasia:** as we saw in Chapter Fourteen, Turkey pursues dual policy not only in the Middle East but also between NATO and Russia.

These similarities suggest that dual realism may not be a feature unique to the Middle East, but the general logic of the behaviour of "middle powers" in the emerging multipolar international system. In a world no longer dominated by a single unrivalled superpower, middle powers increasingly have the opportunity and the incentive to combine different logics.

20.10. Is Realism Dead?

This book's critique of Waltz and Mearsheimer should not be taken to mean that realism has been discredited. On the contrary, the Middle Eastern evidence shows that many of realism's central 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 behaviour follows a "single logic," that is, the assumption 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 regarded fear and ambition, diplomacy and force, as parts of one whole; and at the same time retaining Waltz's and Mearsheimer's emphasis on the importance of structure, the distribution of power and environmental constraints. The result is a theory that has 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 the region's states should not be equated with a change of strategy. An agreement with a state may be part of its strategy of power maximisation.
- **Second:** to assess a state's intentions, one must look simultaneously at both sets of behaviour and at the institutions that execute them, not only at official diplomacy.
- **Third:** containing the power vacuums in fragile states (Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Sudan) is the most important condition for reducing 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 centre and aimed at the national interest can be a smart strategy; but duality directed from two rival centres with two different ideologies leads to the erosion of national resources and the isolation of the country.

20.12. Limitations of the Research and Future Horizons

- The events of 2026 are still unfolding, and it is too early for a final judgement on the consequences of the war and the fate of the Islamic Republic.
- The cases were selected on the basis of strategic importance; studying other cases (Egypt, Oman, Jordan, Pakistan) can test the power of generalisation.
- Quantitative measurement of duality, for example by building a "duality index" from events recorded in conflict and cooperation databases, can make the hypothesis more precise.

- Comparing the Middle East with other penetrated regional systems (South Asia, the Horn of Africa, the Balkans) can 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 the Transition; From Institutional Duality to Smart Duality

21.1. Why This Chapter?

The preceding chapters of the book were analytical: they asked how the states of the Middle East have behaved and why Waltz's and Mearsheimer's theories do not explain this behaviour. This final chapter is prescriptive: it asks what Iran, after the transition from the Islamic Republic, can learn from the region's experience of the past fifteen years and from the framework of "dual realism" if it wishes to build a rational, national and effective foreign policy.

The point of departure of this chapter is the diagnosis put forward in Chapter Twelve: the problem of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy was not "duality" as such, since, as we have seen, almost all the region's powers have acted dually. The problem was the particular form of duality in the Islamic Republic: an "institutional" duality between two rival centres of power, with two different ideologies, whose power-maximising component served not Iran's national interest but a transnational and 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 the region's successful states, has both the instruments of de-escalation and the instruments of deterrence at its disposal, but uses both from a single accountable centre and 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 maximisation in the near neighbourhood carries a heavy cost in legitimacy, even for the region's strongest military power.
- **From the Islamic Republic (a negative lesson):** duality directed from two rival centres discredits de-escalatory signals and sooner or later crosses the threshold.
- **From Saudi Arabia:** a project of domestic economic modernisation is the strongest incentive for external de-escalation. When the government's legitimacy is tied to prosperity, regional stability becomes a national interest.
- **From Turkey:** military power and a domestic defence industry can be the ticket to the negotiating table; but only when used in the service of active diplomacy.
- **From Qatar:** a state that is "indispensable" to everyone is more secure than one that relies only on its own military force. With its geographical position between the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, Central Asia and South Asia, Iran has a natural capacity to "become indispensable."
- **From Azerbaijan:** transit corridors are both economic and geopolitical instruments. A country at the centre of a network of corridors gains lasting influence.
- **From the UAE:** a "network state" that derives its power from its position in financial, commercial and logistical networks can have influence far beyond its size.
- **From Oman (the control case):** active neutrality and the role of mediator can bring lasting 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 the foreign policy of post-transition Iran:

First Principle: Unity of Command over Foreign Policy

Foreign and security policy must be directed from a single decision-making centre 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 elected civilian command, and any cross-border operation must require clear legal authorisation. This principle is the most direct answer to the Islamic Republic's "institutional duality." Duality directed from one centre is calculable and trustworthy; duality directed from two rival centres is not.

Second Principle: The National Interest as the Single Criterion

Both components 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 principle does not mean abandoning cultural and historical ties with the Iranian world and with neighbours, but defining these 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 features:

- **Transparent:** the country's defence doctrine must be public and clear so that rivals can interpret it correctly. Strategic ambiguity, which earlier chapters described as an asset for states, is useful only up to a point; excessive ambiguity fuels the security dilemma.
- **Defensive:** military capability must be designed to defend Iran's territory, not to project power through proxy groups. This means relying on conventional forces, air defence, naval defence and indigenous defence technologies.
- **Within international law:** the country's nuclear programme must be entirely civilian, transparent and under the full supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Proposals such as participation in a regional nuclear fuel consortium, which have been put forward in past years, could both meet energy needs and build confidence.

Fourth Principle: Iran as an "Indispensable Node"

Instead of "military strategic depth," Iran must build "network strategic depth": a position in the region's transit, energy, trade and cultural networks that makes it indispensable to everyone. Examples of this capacity 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 Iran's civilisational sphere.

A country at the centre of these networks follows the same logic that Qatar and the UAE have pursued successfully, but with far greater demographic, geographical and civilisational weight.

Fifth Principle: Iran as Mediator

The Iran of the future, with normal relations with all its neighbours, can play the role of mediator 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 conflicts, could greatly enhance Iran's international standing.

21.4. A Duality Chart 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 component	Deterrent component	Considerations
Persian Gulf states	Full normalisation; a regional collective security mechanism; energy and trade cooperation	Maintaining naval defence and air-defence 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 competition
Azerbaijan and Armenia	Balanced relations with both; participation in corridors; a mediating role	Maintaining the border with Armenia and transit rights	Cultural ties with Azerbaijan within respect for sovereignty

Counterpart	De-escalatory component	Deterrent component	Considerations
Iraq	Support for the central government and Iraqi sovereignty; economic and pilgrimage cooperation	No proxy armed groups	Helping 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 from normalisation to limited relations	End of military hostility and proxy operations	Requires a national dialogue on the Palestinian question and Iran's interests
United States and Europe	Normalising relations; lifting sanctions; attracting capital and technology	Maintaining independence of decision-making	Avoiding one-sided security dependence
Russia and China	Balanced economic and energy cooperation	Avoiding joining military blocs	Revisiting unbalanced contracts

21.5. The Challenges of Transition

Realising this doctrine faces serious challenges:

(a) The Legacy of the Proxy Network

The armed groups the Islamic Republic built in the region will not disappear with the end of the regime. Some of them have their own independent interests, social base and financial resources. The post-transition Iranian government must cooperate with the governments of Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen and the international community to manage this legacy: completely ending financial and military support, cooperating in disarmament and integration programmes, and avoiding the sudden creation of a 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 most difficult tasks of the transition period. The experience of countries that have made the transition from authoritarian to democratic systems shows that this process must be gradual, lawful and accompanied by clear guarantees for professional forces.

(c) Regional Mistrust

After four decades of experience of the Islamic Republic's policy, Iran's neighbours will view any Iranian government with caution. Confidence-building requires "costly signalling" 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 severing of ties with armed groups, and acceptance of regional monitoring mechanisms.

(d) Great-Power Competition

Post-transition Iran will be in the middle of the competition among the United States, China and Russia. All three powers will try to pull Iran towards 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 areas of shared interest.

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 regarded "dual policy" as one of the six fundamental policies of the ruler, and Nizam al-Mulk the combination of "clemency" and "awe" as the condition of successful government. These insights, rooted in the political tradition 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. What makes it constructive or destructive are three factors: the centre from which it is directed (a single accountable centre or several rival centres), the goal it serves (the national interest or an ideological project), and whether it respects the limit of the threshold. An Iran that can meet these three conditions can be transformed from an isolated and wounded country into one of the indispensable nodes of the Middle Eastern regional order.

Conclusion

Waltz taught us that the structure of the international system pushes states towards caution and balance. Mearsheimer taught us that the same structure drives states towards ambition and the pursuit of power. Both were right, and precisely for that reason both are insufficient in the Middle East. For the states of this region, in an environment of multi-layered threats, fragile states, transnational identities and extra-regional patrons, have learned to carry the lion and the fox within themselves at the same time.

Answering the Main Question

The book's main question was whether Waltz's defensive realism and Mearsheimer's offensive realism are capable of explaining the foreign and security policy behaviour of the principal states of the Middle East in the period 2011 to 2026. The book's answer is "not on their own." Each of the two theories correctly explains part of the behaviour of the region's states: defensive realism explains normalisations, reconciliations, mediations and the search for security umbrellas; offensive realism explains territorial conquest, the expansion of proxy networks, cross-border military interventions and arms races. But neither can explain why a single state, in a single period, pursues both sets of behaviour deliberately and in coordination. This "illegibility" is not a minor error of prediction but the consequence of a fundamental assumption: the assumption that state behaviour follows a single logic.

Israel combined the Abrahamic peace with military superiority. The Islamic Republic combined dialogue with proxy strategic depth. Saudi Arabia combined the Beijing reconciliation with a defence pact with Pakistan. Turkey combined mediation with a military presence on five fronts. Qatar combined mediation with hosting radical political Islam. Azerbaijan combined the peace corridor with territorial conquest. And the UAE combined normalisation with a network of bases and aligned forces along the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. This duality is not a sign of confusion but of a particular rationality, which structural realism, by separating security from power, has lost the tools to understand.

Answering the Subsidiary Questions

First, the close reading of Waltz's and Mearsheimer's texts in Part One showed that the dispute between the two theories, for all its importance, is a dispute within one family. Both see the state as a unitary and rational actor, both regard the structure of the system as the principal determinant of behaviour, and both, despite disagreeing over "how much power is enough," place state behaviour on a single spectrum between security-seeking and power-seeking. The criticisms levelled against structural realism, especially by neoclassical realism and security studies of the non-Western world, showed that these assumptions weaken in penetrated regional systems, with fragile states and regimes that place their own security above that of the state.

Second, the seven case studies of Part Two showed that the policies of the region's principal states are consistent neither with a purely defensive logic nor with a purely offensive one, but are a simultaneous combination of both. The subsidiary hypothesis of simultaneity was confirmed in all seven cases; the hypothesis of mutual reinforcement was confirmed with an important qualification, the existence of a "duality threshold"; and the hypothesis of the institutional division of labour was partially confirmed. The control cases, Oman, Egypt and Pakistan, also showed that duality varies in intensity and form, and that states lacking the capacity or motive for regional power maximisation tend towards "active neutrality" or "border mediation."

Third, the book identified five mechanisms that make duality possible and rational: the structure of multi-layered threats, ambiguity of intentions as an asset, the penetrated structure of the region and the presence of extra-regional patrons, the needs of domestic politics and legitimacy, and rentier political economy and sovereign wealth funds. It also became clear that duality collapses in three situations: when the power-maximising component crosses the threshold and destroys the trust needed for de-escalation; when the two logics are directed from two rival and uncoordinated centres; and when the extra-regional patron, the condition of de-escalation, leaves the scene or itself becomes a party to the conflict.

Fourth, the book proposed an alternative framework called "dual realism," resting on six principles: security and power are complements, not substitutes; strategic ambiguity is an asset; power vacuums are the arena of offensive logic; the extra-regional power is the condition of de-escalation; duality has a threshold; and in many of the region's states, regime security takes precedence over state security. The

policy implication of this framework for the Iran of the future is the doctrine of "smart duality."

The Theoretical Contribution: A Return to Realism, Not a Farewell to It

This book's critique of Waltz and Mearsheimer does not mean that realism has been discredited. The Middle Eastern evidence confirms many of realism's fundamental insights: the importance of power, the role of fear, the instability of alliances, the priority of survival and the logic of self-help. What is wrong is reducing state behaviour to a single logic. 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, is a way to build a theory that can explain this dual rationality.

This return is also a return to non-Western traditions of statecraft. In the *Arthashastra* Kautilya counted dual policy among the six fundamental policies of the ruler; in the *Siyasat-nameh* Nizam al-Mulk regarded the combination of clemency and awe as the condition of successful government; and Ibn Khaldun showed that power and legitimacy are two sides of one coin. Structural realism, which took shape in the bipolar context of the Cold War and with an eye on the Western great powers, pushed these insights to the margins. The contemporary Middle East has brought them back to the centre. Moreover, the similar behaviour of India, Vietnam and Turkey across Eurasia suggests that dual realism may not be unique to the Middle East but the general logic of the behaviour of "middle powers" in the emerging multipolar international system.

A Message for Policymaking

The findings of this book carry four clear messages for policymakers. First, de-escalatory signals must not be equated with a change of strategy; an agreement with a state may be part of its strategy of power maximisation. Second, assessing a state's intentions requires looking simultaneously at both sets of behaviour and at all the institutions that execute them, not only at official diplomacy. Third, containing power vacuums in fragile states is the most important condition for reducing offensive logic in the region. And fourth, the durability of any regional order depends on the regional powers recognising the "duality threshold"; an order built on ignoring this threshold, as the experience of 2023 to 2026 showed, sooner or later leads to war.

The Iran of Tomorrow: From Destructive Duality to Smart Duality

The main lesson of this book for Iran is that "duality" is in itself neither good nor bad. What makes it constructive or destructive are three factors: the centre from which it is directed, the goal it serves, and whether it respects the limit of the threshold. The Islamic Republic failed all three tests: its foreign policy was directed from two rival centres, its power-maximising component served an ideological and transnational project, and in the end it crossed the threshold, and the Iranian nation paid the price.

Post-transition Iran can choose another path. The doctrine of "smart duality," set out in Chapter Twenty-One, rests on unity of command over foreign policy, the national interest as the single criterion, transparent and defensive deterrence, turning Iran into an indispensable node of the region's trade, energy and transit, and playing the role of mediator. Such an Iran would be neither a threat to its neighbours nor prey for its rivals; it would be an actor with the capacity both for dialogue and for defence, using both in one language and from one accountable centre. Realising this doctrine is of course not easy: the legacy of the proxy network, inherited security structures, regional mistrust and great-power competition are challenges for which solutions must be found starting now.

Final Word

The Middle East is a graveyard of grand theories, but it is also a laboratory for new ones. This book has sought to show that if the two dominant accounts of structural realism have failed in this laboratory, the reason is not the lawless complexity of the region but a rule these theories failed to see: the rule of duality. At the same time, as noted in the note on sources and limitations, the book has dealt with events that are still unfolding; quantitative measurement of the duality index, extending the study to other cases and regions, and assessing the consequences of the 2026 war are horizons that future research must open.

A return to the insight of classical realism, combined with today's analytical tools, is a way to build a theory that can explain the dual rationality of the Middle East; and building a national, rational and effective foreign policy for the Iran of tomorrow is a way for this knowledge to travel from the library to the field. This book is a first step on both paths.

APPENDIX ONE

Glossary of Key Terms

This glossary collects the key terms used in the book with their Persian equivalents and a short definition. Terms proposed by the author in this book are marked with an asterisk (*).

(a) Foundational Concepts of Realism

Term	Persian	Short definition
Anarchy	آنارشی	Absence of central government above states in the international system; not chaos.
Self-help	خودیاری	The principle that each state must rely on its own capabilities for its security.
Structure	ساختار	In Waltz's theory, the combination of ordering principle, functional differentiation of units and distribution of capabilities.
Ordering principle	اصل سازمان‌دهنده	The principle that determines the relationship among a system's units: hierarchy or anarchy.
Distribution of capabilities	توزیع توانمندی‌ها	How power is spread among the system's units; determines polarity.
Polarity	قطبیت	The number of great powers in the system: unipolar, bipolar, multipolar.
Like units	واحدهای همانند	Waltz's assumption that states in an anarchic system have similar functions.
Relative gains	دستاوردهای نسبی	A state's concern that another will gain more from cooperation than it does.

Term	Persian	Short definition
Absolute gains	دستاوردهای مطلق	A state’s attention to its own gain regardless of others’ gains.
Balance of power	موازنهٔ قوا	The recurring pattern by which others’ reactions prevent the predominance of one state.
Balancing	موازنه‌سازی	Joining the weaker side or increasing one’s own capability against a superior power or threat.
Internal balancing	موازنهٔ درونی	Increasing military and economic capability through domestic resources.
External balancing	موازنهٔ بیرونی	Balancing through alliance with others.
Bandwagoning	همراهی با قدرت برتر	Joining the stronger or threatening side.
Bandwagoning for profit	همراهی برای سود	Joining a revisionist power to share in the spoils (Schweller).
Balance of threat	موازنهٔ تهدید	Walt’s theory that states balance against threat, not merely power.
Security dilemma	معمای امنیت	A situation in which one state’s measures for its security reduce the security of others.
Offence-defence balance	برتری تهاجم و تدافع	Whether technology and geography favour the attacker or the defender.
Socialisation	جامعه‌پذیری	The process by which states learn the behaviours accepted in the system.
Reductionism	تقلیل‌گرایی	In Waltz’s critique, explaining the behaviour of the system through the characteristics of units.

(b) Concepts of Offensive Realism

Term	Persian	Short definition
Power maximisation	بیشینه‌سازی قدرت	Mearsheimer’s assumption that states seek more power until they achieve hegemony.
Regional hegemony	هژمونی منطقه‌ای	Domination of one’s own geographical region; the highest attainable goal for Mearsheimer.

Term	Persian	Short definition
Potential hegemon	هژمون بالقوه	A state with enough capability to dominate its region given the opportunity.
Latent power	قدرت نهفته	Wealth and population, as the basis for building military power.
Stopping power of water	قدرت بازدارندهٔ آب	The inability of land forces to cross oceans; the obstacle to global hegemony.
Offshore balancing	موازنه از دور	A strategy of intervening only when a potential hegemon emerges, without a permanent presence.
Buck-passing	انتقال مسئولیت	Passing the burden of containing an aggressor to another state.
Blackmail	باج‌گیری	Threatening force to gain concessions without war.
Bait and bleed	طعمه و خون‌ریزی	Provoking two rivals into war with each other.
Bloodletting	خون‌گیری	Prolonging a rival's war to exhaust it.
Appeasement	دلجویی	Making concessions to a rival in the hope of changing its behaviour.
Unbalanced multipolarity	چندقطبی نامتوازن	A multipolar system with a potential hegemon; the most dangerous system for Mearsheimer.
Liberal hegemony	هژمونی لیبرال	The strategy of spreading democracy and liberal institutions with American power (criticised by Mearsheimer).

(c) Concepts of Critiques and Rival Theories

Term	Persian	Short definition
Neoclassical realism	رئالیسم نئوکلاسیک	Linking structural pressures with domestic variables in explaining foreign policy.
Omnibalancing	موازنهٔ همه‌جانبه	Third World leaders' balancing against domestic and external threats simultaneously (David).

Term	Persian	Short definition
Subaltern realism	رئالیسم فرودستان	Realism concerned with states still engaged in state-building (Ayoob).
Regime security	امنیت رژیم	Priority of the survival of the government and leaders over the survival of the state in the abstract.
Penetrated regional system	نظام منطقه‌ای نفوذپذیر	A region in which external powers are permanently present (Hinnebusch).
Regional security complex	مجموعهٔ امنیتی منطقه‌ای	A group of states whose security is intertwined (Buzan and Wæver).
Securitisation	امنیتی‌سازی	Turning an issue into a security threat through political speech.
International society	جامعهٔ بین‌المللی	States that have accepted shared rules and institutions (English School).
Soft balancing	موازنهٔ نرم	Constraining a superior power with non-military tools.
Hedging	پوشش ریسک	Simultaneous ties with two rival powers to reduce the risk of dependence.
Stability-instability paradox	پارادوکس ثبات-بی‌ثباتی	Increased limited conflict in the shadow of stable nuclear deterrence.
Spiral model	الگوی مارپیچ	Interpreting a rival’s behaviour as stemming from insecurity (Jervis).
Deterrence model	الگوی بازدارندگی	Interpreting a rival’s behaviour as stemming from aggressiveness (Jervis).
Two-level game	بازی دوسطحی	Negotiating simultaneously at the international and domestic levels (Putnam).
Audience costs	هزینه‌های مخاطب	The domestic cost of backing down from a public commitment (Fearon).
Analytic eclecticism	التقاط تحلیلی	Combining mechanisms from different paradigms (Sil and Katzenstein).
Process tracing	ردیابی فرایند	Following the causal chain step by step in a case study.
Dvaidhibhava (Kautilya)	سیاست دوگانه	Peace with one party and war with another at the same time.

Term	Persian	Short definition
Mandala theory	نظریهٔ مندله	Kautilya’s image of concentric circles of enemies and friends.

(d) Concepts Proposed in This Book

Term	Persian	Short definition
Simultaneous dual policymaking*	سیاست‌گذاری دوگانهٔ هم‌زمان	The simultaneous and deliberate combination of de-escalatory and power-maximising logic in a state’s policy.
Dual realism*	رئالیسم دوگانه	The proposed theoretical framework for explaining the behaviour of regional powers in penetrated systems.
De-escalatory logic*	منطق تنش‌زدا	Policies such as normalisation, reconciliation, mediation and economic cooperation.
Power-maximising logic*	منطق قدرت‌افزا	Policies such as territorial seizure, proxies, intervention and arms expansion.
Geographical duality*	دوگانگی جغرافیایی	De-escalation with one group of states and power maximisation against another.
Instrumental duality*	دوگانگی ابزاری	Using a de-escalatory instrument for a power-maximising end.
Institutional duality*	دوگانگی نهادی	Execution of the two logics by two different institutions within one state.
Discursive duality*	دوگانگی گفتمانی	An official discourse of peace alongside power-seeking conduct in practice.
Co-rooted duality*	دوگانگی هم‌ریشه	A situation in which the power-maximising component is the precondition of the de-escalatory one (e.g. Qatar).
Duality threshold*	آستانهٔ دوگانگی	The point at which the power-maximising component destroys the credibility of the de-escalatory one.
Duality index*	شاخص دوگانگی	A four-component measure (simultaneity, intensity, same subject, linkage) from zero to twelve.

Term	Persian	Short definition
Duality matrix*	ماتریس دوگانگی	A table of the distribution of the two logics by counterpart and policy domain.
Anarchy with a patron*	آنارشی با حامی	Regional anarchy in which an extra-regional power plays a quasi-hierarchical role.
Multiple penetration*	نفوذپذیری چندگانه	The simultaneous presence of several rival great powers in one region.
Armed mediator*	میانجی مسلح	A state whose military power is its ticket to the mediating table (e.g. Turkey).
Security through indispensability*	امنیت از راه ضرورت	A small state’s security through being indispensable to everyone (e.g. Qatar).
Over-performing small state*	دولت کوچک بیش‌نقش	A small state with a role far beyond its material weight.
Network state*	دولت شبکه‌ای	A state that derives its power from its position in financial, commercial and logistical networks (e.g. the UAE).
Strike-and-consolidate cycle*	چرخهٔ ضربه و تثبیت	Maximal power maximisation followed by de-escalation to consolidate the new balance.
Victor’s peace	صلح پیروزمند	A peace based on the decisive military victory of one side.
Smart duality*	دوگانگی هوشمند	Duality directed from a single accountable centre in the service of the national interest.

APPENDIX TWO

Comprehensive Chronology of the Middle East (2011 to 2026)

This chronology covers the principal events related to the book's seven main 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 de-escalatory logic, "P" for power-maximising logic and "B" for background events. The dates of events in 2026 reflect the reports available up to the summer of that year.

2011 to 2014

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
January 2011	Fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia	Tunisia	B
February 2011	Resignation of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt	Egypt	B
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	B
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's presidency in Egypt	Egypt	B
2013	Israeli air strikes in Syria begin (the "war between wars")	Israel	P

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
2013	Secret US–Iran negotiations begin in Oman	Iran, Oman	D
June 2013	Taliban office opens in Doha	Qatar	D
July 2013	Morsi removed with Saudi and Emirati support	Saudi Arabia, UAE	P
September 2013	The concept of “heroic flexibility” introduced	Iran	D
November 2013	Interim Geneva agreement on Iran’s nuclear programme	Iran	D
June 2014	ISIS seizes Mosul; Popular Mobilisation Forces formed	Iraq, Iran	P
July and August 2014	Gaza war	Israel	P

2015 to 2019

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
March 2015	Saudi-led coalition operation in Yemen begins	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	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

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
January 2016	JCPOA Implementation Day; detention and release of American sailors	Iran	D and P
July 2016	Failed coup in Turkey; Turkey–Russia reconciliation	Turkey	B
August 2016	Turkey's "Euphrates Shield" operation 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	B
September 2017	Kurdistan Region of Iraq independence referendum	Iraq	B
November 2017	Saad Hariri resignation affair in Riyadh	Saudi Arabia	P
January 2018	Turkey's "Olive Branch" operation in Afrin	Turkey	P
May 2018	US withdraws from the JCPOA	United States	B
June 2018	Villepinte bomb plot foiled	Iran	P
October 2018	Murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul	Saudi Arabia	B
December 2018	UAE embassy reopens in Damascus	UAE	D
May and June 2019	Tanker attacks; American drone downed	Iran	P
July 2019	UAE drawdown in Yemen; UAE–Iran coast guard meeting	UAE	D
August 2019	Southern Transitional Council takes control of Aden	UAE	P
September 2019	Abqaiq attack; Hormuz Peace Endeavour	Saudi Arabia, Iran	P and D
October 2019	Turkey's "Peace Spring" operation	Turkey	P

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
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; attack 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 US and the Taliban	Qatar	D
March 2020	“Spring Shield” operation in Idlib and Moscow agreement	Turkey	P and D
August 2020	Israel–UAE agreement and “suspension” of annexation; “Oruç Reis” crisis	Israel, UAE, Turkey	D and P
September 2020	Signing of the Abraham Accords	Israel, UAE, Bahrain	D
September to November 2020	The 44-day Karabakh war; the 10 November 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 neighbours	D
March 2021	Iran–China 25-year cooperation programme	Iran	D
April 2021	Baghdad talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia begin; 60 per cent enrichment	Iran, Saudi Arabia	D and P
June 2021	Shusha Declaration between Turkey and Azerbaijan	Turkey, Azerbaijan	P

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
August 2021	US withdrawal from Afghanistan with Qatar's role	Qatar	D
November 2021	Mohammed bin Zayed visits Ankara	UAE, Turkey	D
January 2022	Houthi attack on Abu Dhabi	UAE	B
February 2022	Russian invasion of Ukraine; Azerbaijan–Russia declaration of alliance	Russia, Azerbaijan	B
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	B
March 2023	Beijing agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia	Iran, Saudi Arabia	D
April 2023	Saudi delegation visits Sanaa; Sudanese civil war begins	Saudi Arabia	D

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
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
7 October 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; Athens Declaration between Turkey and Greece	Azerbaijan, Turkey	D
January 2024	Iranian attack on Pakistani territory and Pakistan's response; attack on "Tower 22"	Iran	P
February 2024	UAE investment in Egypt's Ras El-Hekma	UAE	D
April 2024	Strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus; first direct Iranian 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 to May 2025	Öcalan's call and the PKK's announced dissolution	Turkey	D
March 2025	Collapse of the Gaza ceasefire; agreement between Damascus and Kurdish forces	Israel, Syria	P and D
April and May 2025	Indirect Iran–US talks in Oman; US–Houthi ceasefire	Iran, Oman	D
June 2025	Twelve-Day War; US strike on Fordow; attack 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 defence pact; recognition of the State of Palestine by several Western states	Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar	P and D
October 2025	Gaza ceasefire and Sharm el-Sheikh summit	United States, Egypt, Qatar, Turkey	D
November 2025	Kazakhstan joins the Abraham Accords	Israel	D
February 2026	Muscat talks; start of the US–Israeli war against the Islamic Republic (28 February)	Iran, United States, Israel	D and P
March 2026	Death of Ali Khamenei announced and Mojtaba Khamenei succeeds; Iranian attacks on Persian Gulf states; foreign ministers' meeting in Riyadh; Saudi Arabia expels Iranian diplomats	Iran, Saudi Arabia	P and D

Date	Event	Actor	Logic
April and May 2026	Unstable ceasefires and Pakistani mediation; Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE ask the US to give negotiations a chance	Pakistan, Gulf states	D
July 2026	Collapse of the ceasefire and resumption of fighting between the United States and Iran	Iran, United States	P

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A Note on Sources for the Events of 2024 to 2026

The events of recent years have been drawn from the reports of news agencies (Reuters, Associated Press, Agence France-Presse), official government statements and the analyses of research centres (including the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha and *Foreign Policy* magazine). Since some of these events are still un-

folding, the data on 2026 reflect the information available at the time of writing (autumn 2026).

The Theory in Brief

The Middle East is a graveyard of grand theories. For half a century, structural realism has explained the world through two dominant accounts: states either content themselves with security, as Kenneth Waltz argued, or seek power without limit, as John Mearsheimer argued. This book shows that over the past fifteen years in the Middle East, neither account has stood the test of reality. Israel signed the Abrahamic peace with one hand while pushing the boundaries of regional power with the other; Azerbaijan retook its land by force and laid out a corridor of peace; Qatar became the world's mediator while hosting radical figures of political Islam; Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE travelled the same road; and the Islamic Republic displayed "diplomacy" in the showcase and "strategic depth" in the field, until that duality finally undid it.

The author calls this pattern "simultaneous dual policymaking" and argues that it is neither anomaly nor hypocrisy, but the particular rationality of regional powers in penetrated systems; a rationality that Waltz calls "deviation" and Mearsheimer "tactics," and that both fail to see. The result of this research is a return to the ancient insight of statecraft, from Kautilya to Nizam al-Mulk, that saw the lion and the fox as two faces of one policy; and a proposal for the Iran of tomorrow: a passage from destructive duality to smart duality.

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