**Chapter One**

**Middle Power Theory at the Regional Level: An Analytical Framework for the Middle East**

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**Abstract**

The Middle East has traditionally retained the structure of a region without a hegemon where several regional middle powers compete. Nonetheless, middle power research program has gained little attention in the study of Middle Eastern international relations. Despite the conceptual weaknesses inherent in middle power theory, the chapter sets out why, and how, this theoretical lens is nonetheless appropriate for examining the behavior of regional actors in the Middle East. The chapter critically engages with IR theories to disentangle the main assumptions in this research program from their Western origins and proposes several ways to allow the travel of this concept to non-Western regions, with a particular focus on the Middle East. The chapter further explores the application of the theory from international to regional hierarchies while outlining the difference between middle powers and regional middle powers. Finally, the chapter proposes a threefold analytical framework to bridge middle power theory and the international relations of the Middle East. Combining constructivist and realist elements from middle power theory, this framework argues that regional middle power behavior is often the result of interaction between three elements: structure, role, and orientation.

**Introduction**

The Middle East has often been characterized as a regional system without a regional hegemon. Although several Arab and non-Arab states have aspired for regional hegemony over the decades, none have succeeded.[[1]](#footnote-1) Instead, the structure of the regional system has constituted an important stimulus for the emergence of regional middle powers. The traditional contenders for regional leadership at the core of the Arab system—Egypt, Syria, and Iraq—are further domestically weakened and unable to play a leading, let alone independent, regional role. Despite their limited military capabilities, Gulf states—namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—are relentlessly using their economic and financial strength to play an influential role in regional affairs. Saudi Arabia has been struggling to exert leadership in the regional system by leading alliances of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and dependent allies, such as Jordan and Egypt. Nevertheless, such attempts at Saudi leadership have not been welcomed by other GCC states. Small states, namely Qatar and the UAE, have learned the limits of relying on financial and economic means of asserting a regional role. The non-Arab states for their part have met with little success in the drive for hegemony. Turkey’s bid for regional leadership has been undermined due to its involvement in Syria as well as its policies supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.[[2]](#footnote-3) Iran’s involvement in the Syria crisis has led to the demise of its “resistance” identity and curbed its appeal to fill a leading status in the regional order. While Israel’s military and economic capabilities enable it to play a considerable role, the lack of soft power, which denotes recognition and acceptance in the eyes of other regional actors, hinders its regional position.

The regional system is constituted both of states that have met the positional and material benchmark of a regional middle power and of other ambitious actors that aspire for a middle power position while resisting being categorized as small states. The Middle East is thus a multipolar system with no regional great power, but with several regional middle powers constantly balancing each other and preventing one another from rising to regional hegemony; this is what Noble characterizes as “the balance of weakness.”[[3]](#footnote-6) In this context, some scholars of the Middle East consider middle power theory to be a suitable tool for analysis to examine the behavior of states in the region.[[4]](#footnote-8) Nevertheless, the middle power research program has gained little attention in the study of Middle Eastern international relations.

This chapter critically discusses the core assumptions of middle power theory and proposes a way in which it may be used to compare and assess the behavior of a certain category of secondary states within regional hierarchies. Despite the conceptual weaknesses inherent in middle power theory, the chapter sets out why, and how, this theoretical lens is nonetheless appropriate for examining the behavior of regional actors in the Middle East. Furthermore, the chapter critically engages with IR theories to disentangle the main assumptions in this research program from their Western origins and proposes several ways to allow the travel of this concept to non-Western regions. Furthermore, it proposes an analytical framework that bridges Middle East international relations and the concept of middle powers through combining ideational and material elements in examining the behavior of this particular category of states.

The chapter is structured as follows. The first section surveys the development of the middle power research program and addresses its definitional and conceptual weaknesses. The second section starts by discussing the main reasons for the scarcity of scholarship adopting middle power theory in the study of Middle Eastern international relations. It then explores the transfer of the theory from international to regional hierarchies while outlining the difference between middle powers and regional middle powers. Finally, the chapter proposes a threefold analytical framework to guide the comparative analysis of middle powers in the Middle East. Combining constructivist and realist elements from middle power theory, this framework argues that regional middle power behavior is often the result of interaction between three elements: structure, role, and orientation.

**On Notions of Middlepowerness: Position, Behavior, and Identity**

International relations (IR) scholars have long focused on great powers as the force of change in world politics. In the realist view in particular, the world is divided into great powers and the rest. Conventional realist IR theories have often presented middle powers as equated to small powers. Their direct role is to respond and react to power transitions, and their options are often limited to bandwagoning with or balancing against great powers. In his seminal realist work, *Politics Among Nations,* Morgenthau describes middle powers as “traditional nation states” whose role is limited to reaction in the international system.[[5]](#footnote-9) Neorealist scholars also assume that middle powers have limited capabilities and cannot affect the course of events in the international system. Hence, their reaction is limited to either allying with or against the stronger side in a struggle between great powers.[[6]](#footnote-10) Similarly, scholars of power transition theory do not assign middle powers any agency. Organski’s power transition theory outlines the international system as a hierarchy consisting of dominant powers, great powers, middle powers, and small powers.[[7]](#footnote-11) Nevertheless, middle powers are often portrayed as a means used by great powers and rising powers to advance their position in the international system.

At its core, the middle power research program considers the role of secondary states and starts with the assumption that middle powers are capable actors that have independent roles in the international system.[[8]](#footnote-12) The literature is also based on the assumption that middle powers perform distinctive foreign policies. Middle powers are integral to maintaining peace and stability in times of war and conflict and can further challenge the rising powers in the international system. As Larsen observes, “Middle power theory starts from the assumption that certain forms of international behavior can be derived from the fact that a state can be categorized as a middle power.”[[9]](#footnote-13)

Although many scholars concur that the behavior of middle powers will diverge from that of great and small powers, there remains little consensus regarding the defining characteristics of a middle power and its behavior in the study of power hierarchies in international relations.[[10]](#footnote-14) As the literature on middle powers often seeks to explain individual foreign policy behavior as well as power structures in the international system, middle power theory lies on the borderline between foreign policy analysis (FPA) and international relations. Three theoretical strands in the middle power research program—namely, the positional, behavioral, and ideational approaches—have attempted to explain how the position, attributes, and identity of a certain category of states lead to particular foreign policy choices in the international system.[[11]](#footnote-15)

*The Positional Approach*

The first strand in the literature relates to a positional conception of middle power. This classical strand is based on a structural realist approach to international relationships. Structural realist scholars argue that the international system has an independent effect on the behavior of the units (states). In his theory of international relations, Waltz defines international structures in terms of the ordering principles, the character of the units, and the relative distribution of capabilities among them.[[12]](#footnote-16) The behavior of the units varies according to their position in the international structure. Hence, realist scholars have found it necessary to differentiate among different positions in the system. Waltz recognized two positions: great powers and secondary states.[[13]](#footnote-17) Power transition theory scholars often look at the international structure as the ground of competition among great powers. Middle and small powers, due to their position in the structure, are assigned particular roles in this power struggle, such as mediation and peace building.[[14]](#footnote-18) Due to their position and capabilities, middle powers are states that are not major global powers, but which still can play a tangible role regionally and globally beyond that of small or weak states. Middle powers are not capable of directing the system—as great powers do—but neither are they the weakest members of the international system. Thus, their foreign policy derives from this in-between status.

This positional conception of middle power assumes a basic level of material power that is required to achieve the status of middle power. According to Wight’s classical definition of the concept: “A middle power is a power with such military strength, resources and strategic position that in peacetime the great powers bid for its support, and in wartime, while it has no hope of winning a war against a great power, it can hope to inflict costs on a great power out of proportion to what the great power can hope to gain by attacking it.”[[15]](#footnote-19)

From this perspective, scholars during the Cold War saw middle powers as those states that are not entirely dependent upon great powers, in contrast to small states. Instead, middle powers can support or challenge the hegemon.[[16]](#footnote-20) Classical middle power theorists assume that middle powers are status-seeking, security-maximizing, and interest-optimizing agents in the international system. Due to the constraints of size and capabilities in the face of great powers, middle powers are likely to adopt soft power strategies, with an emphasis on multilateral efforts and niche diplomacy in the pursuit of their national interests.[[17]](#footnote-21) As Keohane puts it, “a middle power is a state whose leader considers that it cannot act effectively, but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution.”[[18]](#footnote-22) Seeking compromise or influencing a small number of functional niches in the international system allows middle powers to gain leverage to exert their national interests. In short, classical middle power theorists have located this multilateral and liberal institutional outcome within a structural realist context. Middle powers act collaboratively and multilaterally not because they believe in liberal internationalism, but because they consider it to be the best way to achieve their interests.

Nevertheless, the positional conception of middle power has been subject to criticism. The definition reveals a lack of consensus of what power attributes result in middle power status, what Cooper characterizes as the “elasticity” and “subjectivity” in middle power classifications.[[19]](#footnote-23) Scholars have often used quantifiable national attributes—such as geography, population size, military capabilities, economic resources, and diplomatic capacity—as long-term preconditions to achieving the middle power position in international hierarchies.[[20]](#footnote-24) Whereas some scholars identified Australia, Canada, and Norway as middle powers, other scholars used different sets of measurements to include other countries, such as South Africa, Germany, and Japan. More recently, second generation scholars have employed other positional measurements to identify emerging middle powers,[[21]](#footnote-25) such Argentina, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Singapore, Poland, South Korea, and Turkey.[[22]](#footnote-26) Thus, this positional approach provided some necessary conditions for identifying middle powers. Yet, the designation of middle powers by material capabilities alone limits the understanding of middle power behavior and influence. This is the case of the Middle East, for example, where Israel possesses the military capabilities of a regional hegemon but has limited political leverage to play such a role.

*The Behavioral Approach*

The second strand in the literature relies mainly on behavioral criteria in identifying middle powers and explaining their foreign policy conduct in the international system. Whereas this approach considers positional criteria to be necessary for middle power status, scholars working within this framework propose that the criteria themselves do not determine such states’ behavior. The central tenet of this literature is that middle powers have an intrinsic motivation to act as “good citizens” in international relations, conducting an altruistic, virtuous foreign policy that reflects the interest of the global community rather than their individual interest. In other words, states that have the material capabilities of middlepowermanship and choose to play an altruistic role in the international system are middle powers. Since not all states that qualify as positional middle powers share this predisposition, scholars argue that middle powers ought to be identified through behavioral patterns rather than assumptions about a country’s size or capabilities.

Centered on the idea of national role conceptions,[[23]](#footnote-27) the behavioral approach argues that states adopt a virtuous foreign policy precisely because they identify as middle powers and have in fact construed this concept of middle power to mean such activism in the international system. Through this behavioral approach, any state, great or small, can be identified as a middle power. The behavioral conception of middle powers identifies distinctive types of behavior. The first assumption is that middle powers are status-quo oriented. This hypothesis emerged after World War II, when middle powers were particularly active in the creation of the UN and actively supported the preservation of the post-WWII alliance system.[[24]](#footnote-28) From this perspective, scholars postulate that middle powers have a stake in the international system and benefit from its stability, and may therefore be considered to be self-interested and status-quo oriented. Middle powers are, consequently, identified through their embrace of and involvement in mediation efforts, peacebuilding activities, etc.

 During the post-Cold War period, the second generation of middle power scholarship identified a second type of behavior characteristic of middle powers. As new economic and security challenges emerged, middle powers came to be identified through their involvement in “niche diplomacy.”[[25]](#footnote-29) Niche diplomacy refers to the efforts by states to use their functional expertise to act as leaders or facilitators on a given international issue. Scholars have noted that, during this period, middle powers have used their capacity to build coalitions of states, NGOs, and social movements to respond to emerging international challenges. For example, Canada and Australia led international efforts to ban cluster munitions under the “human security” paradigm.[[26]](#footnote-30)

This behavioral conception of middle powers has become particularly pervasive within middle power scholarship. As Flemes observes, “most scholars have accepted a definition of middle powers that is based on their international behavior rather than on their material power.”[[27]](#footnote-31) Nonetheless, this approach has been criticized from several perspectives. First, realist scholars argue that middle power behavior during the Cold War was not driven by altruism. Instead, middle powers adopted multilateralism as a strategy for survival. Second, this behavioral viewpoint does not clarify why all middle powers should behave in the same way and conduct activist foreign policies.[[28]](#footnote-32) In other words, there does not seem to be a causal link between a state’s position in international hierarchies and its tendency towards multipolar preferences and the embrace of mediation and peace-building activities.[[29]](#footnote-33) Third, multilateralism is not a type of behavior exclusive to middle powers. Great powers, as well as small powers engage in multilateralism, leading to liberal institutional outcomes. Fourth, some scholars note that identifying middle powers based on behavioral characteristics can be inherently problematic. As Nossal argues, “middlepowermanship is how one defines middle powers, and those who engage in middlepowermanship are middle powers—a classical tautology.”[[30]](#footnote-34) The list of behavioral characteristics is often based on the behavior of states that scholars have already identified as middle powers.[[31]](#footnote-35)

*The Ideational Approach*

The third strand in the literature highlights an ideational component to middle powers. Scholars of this approach focus on the process of middle power identity construction, citing Australia, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and South Korea (as of the 1990s). Middle power is, here, a “political category that is constructed by relatively autonomous decision-making circles,”[[32]](#footnote-36) including in some instances scholars of middle power theory themselves. From this perspective, middlepowerness is a set of ideas that decision makers hold about a state’s image and role in the international system. According to the diplomats and decision-makers of these countries, middle powers are committed to the preservation of peace and stability in the international system through coalition-building, peacekeeping, and mediation. Canada and Australia are often presented as typical examples for this ideational component in middle power theory.

For some scholars working within this ideational approach, middlepowerness is nothing but a constructed identity to advance old-fashioned national interests. As Ungerer argues, “when foreign policy practitioners make declaratory statements about exercising a country’s ‘middle power’ role in the international system, they are employing a type of shorthand for a pre-defined and generally agreed set of foreign of policy behaviors . . . to achieve selected political outcomes.”[[33]](#footnote-37) For example, Japan’s material capabilities are beyond the status of middle power. Decision makers trying to advance an international agenda for Japan try to frame it as a middle power to build support for its role in the international system.[[34]](#footnote-38) Conversely, other scholars within this constructivist approach argue that even though middle power started as a status-seeking project, states have internalized the moral imperatives associated with the role and embraced its expectations through a routinized international system.[[35]](#footnote-39) Hence, middle powers are “norm-makers” and building blocks of global and regional security.

This ideational approach created further confusion in conceptualizing middle powers. As Chapnick notes, “today’s middle powers are not really middle powers, and the true middle powers do not want to be regarded as such.”[[36]](#footnote-40) Whereas some states identify themselves as middle powers, the international community might recognize them as small powers, as in the case of Qatar or the UAE. Other states that identify as middle powers can be classified as great powers according to some measurements—the example of Japan is illustrative.[[37]](#footnote-41) In short, this ideational approach remains imprecise and insufficient in identifying middle powers.

Taken together, the three approaches to the study of middle powers discussed here have left contemporary scholarship without a clear path for theory development or even explanatory value to other regions beyond the western world. Whereas the classical materialist conception of middle power remains confined to the Cold War context, behavioral and ideational approaches have yet to address some conceptual problems. While the positional dimension is criticized for its lack of conceptual rigor, the ideational approach is taken to task for often lacking an understanding of the positional factor. Although the behavioral approach considers positional criteria to be a precondition for middle power behavior, this approach implies normative assumptions about middle power behavior that cannot travel beyond the western world. Some scholars suggest that a solution lies in the hybrid application of all these three approaches.[[38]](#footnote-42) Henceforth, Hynek and Bosold argue that “the middle power category is a useful conceptual instrument . . . because it has the capacity to contain three interrelated dimensions.”[[39]](#footnote-43)

**Middle Power Theory in the Middle East: An Analytical Framework**

This section argues that despite middle power theory’s limitations, it can still be a useful tool for the study of state behavior in the Middle East. Furthermore, the Middle East provides middle power theory with an invaluable opportunity for theory development with the possibility of extending its validity to other regional hierarchies. Whereas international hierarchies refer to “the grading of states on relative capabilities” in the international system,[[40]](#footnote-44) regional hierarchies refer to the ranking of states in a particular region based on their abilities, in the sense that some states exercise authority over others.[[41]](#footnote-45) The various theoretical approaches to middle powers, dating from the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, might profit from being tested against cross-cutting sets of case studies in the Middle East regional system. This section first explores the reasons why the Middle East has been an overlooked region in the middle power research program. Then, it presents a conception of regional middle powers that allows a transfer of the concept from global to regional hierarchies. Finally, the section proposes a three-fold analytical framework to examine the behavior of middle powers in the Middle East.

As the Middle East is dominated by a number of states of which none has been able to achieve regional hegemony, several scholars of the region have considered middle power theory as an appropriate lens.[[42]](#footnote-46) Beyond these very few works, the middle power research program has struggled to maintain relevance in the study of Middle Eastern international relations for several reasons. First, as discussed above, the concept of middle power has been widely contested and debated in the IR discipline without reaching greater clarity on what constitutes middlepowermanship at both regional and global levels. To recap, classical conceptions of middlepowermanship that are inextricably related to their Cold War roots remain inherently limited and obsolete. Even the more recent behavioral and ideational conceptions of middle powers remain embryonic and limited to a few states in the international system, namely Western and newly emerging rising powers.[[43]](#footnote-47) Second, the theory’s development has been directly influenced by power shifts in the international system. Whereas middle power research has focused on traditional and emerging middle powers, scholars have hardly examined influential actors, such as Venezuela, Israel, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.[[44]](#footnote-49)

Third, most of the literature has addressed the concept of middle power with a focus on the global level of analysis. The preoccupation of the IR discipline with great powers and rising middle powers, namely the BRICS,[[45]](#footnote-50) has left regional hierarchies largely understudied. In light of this, the literature tends to equate middle powers with regional powers that have a predominant role in their region and aspire to a middle power status at the international level through challenging the superpowers.[[46]](#footnote-51) This classical view of middle powers does not allow for the consideration of middle power influence at a regional level, where middle powers are most active. In addition, the category of “regional middle powers,” where actors have a middle power status within regional hierarchies without necessarily playing a role in the international system, is paradoxically neglected. Yet, empirical cases show that middle powers may not affect the balance of power among great powers but will attempt to consolidate their regional status by resisting hegemonic efforts of external penetration in their respective regions.[[47]](#footnote-52)

Fourth, middle powers are often assumed to be mediators of disputes,[[48]](#footnote-53) builders of bridges,[[49]](#footnote-54) and promoters of “niche diplomacy,”[[50]](#footnote-55) all normative behavior that does not fit with the commonly held image of the Middle East as a region plagued with conflictual dynamics. Indeed, even though several Middle Eastern states have engaged in mediation, conflict resolution, and peace building,[[51]](#footnote-56) these efforts appear to have been largely driven by status-seeking and interest-based behavior. Furthermore, several Middle Eastern efforts at regionalism and multilateralism have failed over the decades.[[52]](#footnote-57) Institutions built on shared identities and norms, such as the League of Arab States, have contributed to further division and rivalry in this regional system.[[53]](#footnote-58) As a result, scholars of the Middle East have been long content to examine the Middle East as a conflict-prone region dominated by authoritarianism and driven by the logic of regime survival. From this perspective, middle power theory with its normative assumption about middle power behavior has led to the direct exclusion of the Middle East from the scope of middle power research. In the remainder of this section, I explore the utilization of the middle power conception in examining regional hierarchies. Furthermore, I suggest an analytical framework combining realist and constructivist elements in middle power theory to explain state behavior in the Middle East.

Several IR approaches have attempted to transfer theories and concepts from international to regional levels. Similarly, the middle power concept can be located at the regional level. Scholars have often considered regional hierarchies as sub-systems functioning according to the same logic as the overall global hierarchy—each of the regional or sub-regional systems has a dominant state at the top, along with middle and small powers. Although these regional systems exhibit independent dynamics, they remain subordinated to the global power hierarchy. Martin Wight in his seminal text *Power Politics* differentiates between two categories of states: regional great powers and middle powers.[[54]](#footnote-59) Whereas middle powers are those who play an influential role in the international system, regional great powers exercise their influence within a delimited region, and may be potential candidates for middle powers at the international level.

 Another more up-to-date approach that explicitly deals with regional hierarchies is Douglas Lemke’s model of multiple hierarchy.[[55]](#footnote-60) He argues that the international system is not a single international hierarchy of power. Instead, the international power hierarchy consists of a series of parallel sub-systemic power hierarchies. Each sub-system has its power pyramid ranging from great to small powers. These sub-systems are not entirely independent or dissociated from global dynamics. Great powers in the global hierarchy can interfere in the sub-systems, especially if a regional order is at odds with the great powers’ preferences. Similarly, Huntington in his article titled “Lonely Superpower” presents a multi-level hierarchy.[[56]](#footnote-61) Although the United States is the main superpower, he identifies a second level of “major regional powers”—including Germany and France in Europe, Russia in Eurasia, China and Japan in East Asia, India in South Asia, Iran in the Southwest Asia, Brazil in Latin America, South Africa and Nigeria in Africa. Then, he identifies a third level that is composed of “secondary regional powers” that cannot achieve the status of regional hegemony and are more powerful than small states.

 Regional power hierarchies are also central to the framework of regional security complex theory (RSCT) by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever.[[57]](#footnote-62) In their work, Buzan and Waever differentiate between great powers that act at the global level and regional powers whose influence may be large in their regions but limited at the global level.[[58]](#footnote-63) Buzan and Waever have devised this typology in order to analyze regional security policies and complexes, wherein regional powers define the structure of security in the region. Lake and Morgan present a conception of the regional security complex (RSC) as sub-systems overlapping and interacting with the global power hierarchy.[[59]](#footnote-64) Accordingly, regional orders can differ in their structure (unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar) based on the relative distribution of capabilities at the regional level.[[60]](#footnote-65) Elsewhere, Lake argues that regions characterized by the presence of a dominant state or a regional great power are likely to be more peaceful and stable.[[61]](#footnote-66)

Establishing the distinction between the concepts of *middle powers* and *regional middle powers* is the primary step towards relocating middle power theory to a regional hierarchy, such as the Middle East. For example, in their study of Syria and Iran as middle powers in the Middle East, Ehteshami and Hinnebusch attempt to transfer the concept from international to regional hierarchies.[[62]](#footnote-67) In their analysis, regional middle powers are states that may rank as middle powers in the global system, but are key actors in their regional systems. While the goals and geographical range of regional powers are more modest than those of great powers and center on regional politics, their regional behavior, determined by similar systemic rules, is likely to approximate that of larger powers in playing the “realist” game. They are distinguishable from lesser regional powers by their assertion of regional leadership in the name of general regional interests: by their centrality to the regional balance of power; their regional spheres of influence; and by their ability, from a credible deterrent capability, to resist a coalition of other regional states against them.[[63]](#footnote-68)

Hinnebusch defines regional middle powers as “those that have interests and capabilities sufficient to play a major role in regional governance and even to aspire to hegemony over a particular geographical region.”[[64]](#footnote-69) For his part, Huntington uses the term “secondary regional powers” to identify those states that are not able to rise as regional hegemons but can challenge regional hegemons.[[65]](#footnote-70) These secondary regional powers favor the interventions of superpowers to enhance their position at the regional level while constraining and challenging the regional power. In other words, these secondary regional powers have interests in limiting the role of regional powers or preventing the rise of one.

Nolte argues that regional middle powers are often important in maintaining the balance of power in the region, without being able to achieve hegemony or dominance in the region.[[66]](#footnote-71) These regional middle powers or secondary states can either ally with or challenge the regional hegemon. In some cases, they ally with the regional hegemon to construct a framework of cooperative regional hegemony. Other scholars believe that these secondary states will challenge the regional hegemon and ally with great powers at the global level to constrain the latter’s power while enhancing their own position in the regional relative power distribution.[[67]](#footnote-72)

Based, on the above discussion, I refer to the concept of “regional middle power” to account for regional powers in the Middle East. A regional middle power can be distinguished by five pivotal criteria:

* A state that is geographically a part of the delineated region and is focused on playing a role within this regional;
* A states that does not attempt to shape the structure of the international system. Instead, its interaction with the international level is limited to extracting resources to influence regional dynamics.
* A state that aims to shape the regional system through alliance formation;
* A state that indicates its self-identity and willingness to play a role in regional affairs;
* A state that is able to affect or challenge the regional penetration by great powers.

Identifying middle powers based solely on military capabilities can be misleading. Despite their material capabilities, Israel, Iran and Turkey lack the ideational appeal across the region to play a leadership role. Other states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria have had at periods of time significant military capabilities but not sufficient to grant them regional leadership. Small states, such as the UAE and Qatar, have aspired to a leadership role despite their limited military and material capabilities. At the same time, all these actors have performed roles and conducted foreign policies that have contributed to this regional order. The remainder of this section presents an analytical framework to account for the behavior of regional middle powers.

In order to adapt middle power theory to explain foreign policy choices in the Middle East, this framework first challenges the positional criterion of middle power as located between great powers, and the normative criterion, the assumption that middle powers have a more virtuous foreign policy than other states in the system. First, positional criterion, including military capabilities and the relationship with great powers, is not sufficient to explain middle power behavior. On the one hand, states in the Middle East that have accumulated tremendous military capabilities, such as Israel and Turkey, while maintaining strong relationships with the United States. On the other hand, small states, such as Qatar and the UAE, lack these military capabilities, and they have succeeded to play a significant role in regional affairs through diplomacy, mediation, and foreign aid,[[68]](#footnote-73) what Kamrava terms “subtle power.”[[69]](#footnote-74) Second, the behavior of middle powers in the Middle East challenges the normative criterion developed within the Western tradition in the middle power research program. Whereas some regional middle powers in the Middle East have played a status-quo role to preserve the existing system—such as Saudi Arabia and pre-revolutionary Iran—, other regional middle powers have often adopted revisionist foreign policies. Egypt under Nasser, Khomeini’s Iran, Syria under Assad, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, all have adopted foreign policies that aim to revise the existing regional order while resisting superpowers’ penetration of the region.[[70]](#footnote-75) Some middle powers have occasionally engaged in what appears to be normative behavior, such as building diplomatic niches, conflict mediation, etc. As Pinfari suggests, such initiatives were often driven by material interests to shape the regional structure rather than an inherently virtuous foreign policy.[[71]](#footnote-76) Mediation efforts by Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt over various regional issues were rarely driven by a normative or ideological driver. Similarly, the 2015 military intervention in Yemen illustrates that Saudi Arabia, in its endeavor to establish its status as an assertive regional power, has acted against international and Islamic norms.[[72]](#footnote-77) From this perspective, regional middle powers are not inherently virtuous or status-quo oriented.

 Accordingly, middle power behavior in the Middle East is the result of interaction between structure, role, and orientation.[[73]](#footnote-78) The first dimension is related to the material capabilities that a state possesses relative to others. These material capabilities are not determinant of middle power status. Instead, they act as pre-conditions for middle power behavior. Primary among these capabilities are military and economic strengths. Military capabilities continue to be a foundational source for a state’s influence in its regional surroundings, especially in the Middle East, a region with the highest level of militarization in the world.[[74]](#footnote-79) Turkey, Israel, and Iran play significant roles in the region due to their high military capabilities.[[75]](#footnote-80) Egypt under Sisi increased its military capabilities significantly and deployed such military power to play an influential regional role in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.[[76]](#footnote-81) Economic capabilities can also be a primary condition for middle power status. Economic capabilities can be used as means of affecting regional and international environments. Relying on their tremendous hydrocarbon resources, Gulf states have used their economic capabilities to adopt more assertive policies in the post-2011 Arab uprisings period. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE aspired to a regional power status.[[77]](#footnote-82) These Gulf states emerged as the most important foreign donors to North Africa since 2011, and outweighed the role of external actors, such as the US and the European Union in the region.[[78]](#footnote-83) Foreign aid has even transcended the boundaries of the Middle East, as in the case of Saudi Arabia[[79]](#footnote-84) and the UAE.[[80]](#footnote-85) Beyond foreign aid and financial interference, Gulf states adopted military interventionism to shape the political transition in several regional conflicts, such as Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen.[[81]](#footnote-86)

Both military and economic capabilities can provide states with opportunities to increase their influence in a regional context. Nevertheless, the possession of capabilities is not a sufficient condition to determine if a state will behave as a middle power; nor will a middle power necessarily have relatively large capabilities. While standard measures of capability can be employed to identify a state’s relative strength and its relative stance within the regional power distribution, they fall short of uncovering several dynamics that pertain to middle power behavior in the system. For example, Algeria has a large army and vast natural resources; but despite its relatively considerate capabilities it has abstained from pursuing an assertive foreign policy. Instead, Algeria has adopted a limited foreign policy and has been reluctant to behave as a middle power.[[82]](#footnote-87) In short, the relative power distribution defines the structure of regional system, which is the first step in identifying regional middle powers in the Middle East. Yet, one must also pay attention to the process and behavior of states within the system, which describes the functions that regional middle powers play.

The second dimension relates to the *functions and roles* that regional middle powers play. From a realist perspective, roles are the result of material power differences in the system. Holsti identifies three types of role in the classical balance of power: aggressors, defenders, and balancers.[[83]](#footnote-88) On the other side of the spectrum, constructivist interpretations focus on state identity as influencing its foreign policy role.[[84]](#footnote-89) Constructivists, meanwhile, posit that identity formation is the result of socialization, interaction, and learning. This identity is often twofold: how a state views itself and how others view it. States within a regional hierarchy present a narrative of themselves and their position in the system, and others either recognize it or not.[[85]](#footnote-90) From this perspective, regional middle powers go through the process of identity formation grounded in the interaction with others over position and identity in the regional system. In other words, middle powers are those that identify themselves with a middle-ranking position and other states recognize them as such. As Wohlforth et al. argue, “there will be no status without recognition.”[[86]](#footnote-91) For example, small Gulf states took an active role in regional affairs. The role that Qatar created for themselves was that of mediator.[[87]](#footnote-92) Yet, Qatar have not yet found a comfortable role in which to exercise a middle-power status. Even though Qatar became recognized for their efforts in regional disputes, their status as middle power was not recognized and it is perceived as “punching above its weight”.[[88]](#footnote-93)

Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll identify three types of national roles for regional powers in the Middle East: regional leader, protector, and custodian.[[89]](#footnote-94) A regional leader is an actor that takes initiatives in shaping regional outcomes to align with their preferences and coordinates policies and security initiatives. In the Middle East, Egypt played such a role in the Arab–Israeli conflict, in particular. Egypt coordinated policies among Arab states to align with its interests. A custodian role is one that maintains security orders, through conflict management, mediation, etc. Saudi Arabia has long played the role of the regional custodian through leading Arab proposals of peace for the Arab–Israeli conflict.[[90]](#footnote-95) The protector is one that faces external threats to the regional order. During several historical periods, several regional powers emerged to resist the international penetration of the region. Egypt, under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser attempted to protect the region from the international penetration of great powers during the Cold War. Post-1979 Iran aims to play the role of protector through sponsoring resistance movements in the region against Israel and Western penetration.

During the post-2011 order in the Middle East, regional middle powers have embraced a multiplicity of roles. Turkey has played multiple regional roles in the Middle East: regional leader, protector of regional stability, bridge between the West and the East, a model for economic achievement in the region, liberalizer supporting democratic reforms, defender of Islam, and mediator in regional conflicts.[[91]](#footnote-97) Iran, however embraced the role of an independent actor fighting against imperialism and the leader of Islamic resistance in the Middle East.[[92]](#footnote-98) Saudi Arabia has also played multiple roles in the region, such as regional leader, protector of Sunni Islam, protector of the regional order against revolutionary movements, regional leader against terrorism, etc.[[93]](#footnote-99) Egypt has performed the role of regional stabilizer, the protector of the region against terrorism and extremism, etc. In their pursuit to bigger regional roles, small states have also embraced several regional roles. Qatar portrayed itself as the supporter of moderate Islam through supporting the Brotherhood. Through military interventions and foreign aid, the UAE has played the role of a regional stabilizer, custodian of multilateralism, and protector of moderate Islam in the region.[[94]](#footnote-100)

 The third dimension in this framework is related to *foreign policy orientation*. Orientation can be understood as the preference of a state with respect to the maintenance of the regional order. This orientation is important to show how roles are likely to be performed to achieve a state’s preference in a particular regional order. This foreign policy orientation can be discerned through a regional middle power’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the regional order. In contrast to the conventional assumption that middle powers are inherently status quo and aim to preserve the existing order through multilateralism and international institutions, a closer look at middle power beyond the Western world would challenge this assumption. The Middle East regional system is constituted of regional middle powers that can be either status-quo oriented or revisionist in carrying out their roles. The satisfaction—or lack thereof—with the regional order can determine whether the states that are playing the role of regional middle powers are doing so with a view to support or revise the regional status quo. For example, Qatar and the UAE both play similar roles in the Middle East, as supporters of moderate Islam and mediators in regional issues. Yet, their foreign policy orientation led to divergence in their behavior. Qatar’s mediating role in several regional affairs can be considered a revisionist role aimed at changing the current regional structure, which led to several tensions and confrontations with the Saudi kingdom and other Gulf monarchies.[[95]](#footnote-101) The UAE, however, carries out a comparable role through a status-quo foreign policy that aims to preserve the current regional order. Iran and Israel’s nuclear efforts can also provide good illustrations for the importance of foreign policy orientation. Whereas Israel’s military capabilities and nuclear weapons are developed for status quo purposes, Iran’s capabilities are often seen as revisionist, aiming to alter the current regional order.[[96]](#footnote-102)

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter has been to review the underlying assumptions of middle power theory and explore the possibility of its transfer to regional hierarchies, with a particular focus on the Middle East. In this endeavor, the chapter has engaged critically with middle power theory to disentangle its assumptions from their Western origins. First, while middle power research program has focused on traditional and emerging middle powers, this chapter has moved beyond these geographical focus and attempted to adapt the concept of the international relations of the Middle East. Second, this chapter has opted for the concept of “regional middle power,” which examines the role of influential actors whose influence remains limited to regional boundaries. From that perspective, the chapter has transferred the level of analysis from the international to the regional. Third, the chapter has challenged the common assumption that middle power pursue normative, virtuous foreign policy behavior. Instead, evidence from the Middle East challenges this assumption and suggests that middle powers can be driven by the pursuit of status and interest.

Furthermore, the chapter has also established an analytical framework to understand the behavior of regional middle powers beyond the so-called virtuous foreign policies of middle powers in the international system. The framework has made the distinction between middle powers and regional middle powers to delineate the scope of the analysis. In accounting for regional middle power behavior, the framework has combined realist and constructivist elements. Accordingly, regional middle power behavior is the result of interaction between structure, foreign policy roles, and orientations. Structure refers to the position of the state in the relative power distribution. While states must possess a certain level of military and economic capabilities to act as regional middle powers, such power is not sufficient on its own. States must also act in a way that attains recognition of their self-ascribed status. Hence, regional middle powers play several roles, such as custodian, protector, meditator, etc. In addition, regional middle powers carry these roles following certain orientations, either status-quo or revisionist. Whereas some regional middle power can perform certain roles with the aim to maintain the current regional order, others perform roles to revise and restructure the regional system.

 While middle power theory adaptation to regional hierarchies provides novel insights about state behavior in the Middle East, the region offers invaluable opportunity for theory development within this research program. First, examining middle powers beyond the Western context provides further hypotheses about the conduct of middle power foreign policy of authoritarian regimes. In addition, middle power theory in its development during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods has focused on the role of middle powers within bipolar and unipolar structures of the international system. The regional system in the Middle East provides an invaluable opportunity to test middle power theory and its hypotheses under the conditions of multipolarity, which can extend the theory’s explanatory boundaries to include other regions in the world system and potentially lead to future cross-regional analyses.

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