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Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	ʿ
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	ʾ
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
◌َ	a		◌َا، ◌َى	an
◌ُ	u		◌ُّو	un
◌ِ	i		◌ِّي	in
◌َا، ◌َ، ◌َى،	ā		◌َوْ	aw
◌ُّو	ū		◌َيْ	ay
◌ِّي	ī		◌ُّوّ	uww, ū (in final position)
			◌ِّيّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: http://rotas.iium.edu.my

Shifting Geopolitics: The Gaza War and the Contours of a Nascent Middle East Security Community

Nath Aldalala'a*
Syaza Shukri**

Abstract: The Gaza War, though geographically contained, served as a powerful accelerant *within a pre-existing trend* for an ongoing regional transformation in Middle Eastern security dynamics. This article argues that the conflict did not merely reflect, but actively propelled a shift toward state-centric security cooperation and the systematic sidelining of non-state actors. In doing so, it catalysed the development of a nascent Middle East Security Community (MESC), drawing on Karl Deutsch's concept of security communities. Motivated by converging regime security imperatives, key regional actors including Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf monarchies have intensified institutional collaboration through mechanisms such as the Abraham Accords and normalisation initiatives. The war underscored a growing consensus around pragmatic conflict management; wherein ideological divisions are increasingly subordinated to shared interests in regional stability and counter-militancy. While structural and political obstacles to deeper integration remain, the conflict marked a pivotal moment in the consolidation of interest-driven and intergovernmental security architectures, signalling a regional realignment grounded in mutual preservation rather than ideological affinity.

Keywords: Security-Community, October 7, Arab Response, Gaza War, Israel Security, Regional Order.

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* Professor, Department of Political Science and Madani Studies, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. Email: alnath@iium.edu.my
** Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Madani Studies, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. Email: syazashukri@iium.edu.my

Abstrak: Perang Gaza, walaupun terbatas secara geografi, bertindak sebagai pemacu yang kuat *kepada arah aliran yang sedia ada* untuk transformasi serantau yang berterusan dalam dinamika keselamatan Timur Tengah. Makalah ini berhujah bahawa konflik itu bukan semata-mata mencerminkan, tetapi secara aktif mendorong peralihan ke arah kerjasama keselamatan berasaskan negara dan mengenepikan organisasi-organisasi bukan kerajaan secara sistematik. Dengan berbuat demikian, ia memangkin pembangunan Komuniti Keselamatan Timur Tengah (MESC) yang baharu, berdasarkan konsep komuniti keselamatan Karl Deutsch. Didorong oleh keperluan keselamatan rejim, negara-negara utama serantau termasuk Israel, Mesir, Jordan, dan monarki-monarki Teluk Parsi telah memperhebat kerjasama institusi melalui mekanisme seperti Perjanjian Abraham dan inisiatif normalisasi. Perang Gaza menggariskan konsensus yang semakin meningkat di sekitar pengurusan konflik secara pragmatik, di mana perpecahan ideologi semakin tunduk kepada kepentingan bersama dalam kestabilan serantau dan anti-militansi. Walaupun halangan struktur dan politik untuk integrasi yang lebih mendalam masih kekal, konflik itu menandakan detik penting dalam penyatuan kerangka keselamatan antara kerajaan yang dipacu kepentingan negara, menandakan penjajaran semula serantau yang berasaskan pemeliharaan bersama dan bukannya pertalian ideologi.

Kata kunci: Komuniti Keselamatan, 7 Oktober 2023, Tindakbalas Negara-negara Arab, Perang Gaza, Keselamatan Israel, Peraturan Serantau.

Introduction: The Security Community

The Gaza War and its parallel Lebanese front demonstrate a pattern of calibrated escalation within the region's deterrence-dominated system, where high-risk confrontations remain spatially and politically contained. Despite Israel's sustained military operations against Hamas and Hezbollah, the attritional weakening of these groups has not triggered systemic escalation involving Iran or Arab states. This restraint is particularly evident in Arab states' responses, which were limited to diplomatic condemnations while avoiding direct intervention. Their cautious approach demonstrates evolving regional security dynamics within a pre-existing trend, where Israel's security becomes increasingly intertwined with broader Middle Eastern arrangements. These developments reflect and reinforce the regional security architecture initiated by the 1991 Oslo Accords.

This article advances the argument that a nascent Middle East Security Community (MESC) is emerging, defined primarily by the

growing rapprochement and strategic convergence between Israel and various Arab states. While the Middle East does not yet have a fully-fledged, mature regional security community, it increasingly exhibits the features of a nascent one, including the reduction of interstate hostilities and the gradual institutionalisation of security cooperation. This development has significantly reduced the likelihood of warfare between regional actors, particularly a full-scale war between Arab states and Israel, while also facilitating the progressive marginalisation of non-state entities. Drawing upon Adler and Barnett's (1998) conceptualisation, a security community denotes a collective of states bound by shared norms, values, and reciprocal understandings of security threats, cultivating a diplomatic framework robust enough to supplant military confrontation as the preferred mechanism for conflict resolution. The Middle East's evolving security architecture, though still in its early stages, demonstrates the foundational elements of such a community, suggesting the potential for deeper integration, even as significant challenges remain.

According to Karl Deutsch (1957), a security community is characterised by the expectation that disputes are resolved without the use of force. Therefore, integration for Deutsch is the attainment, within a territory, of a sense of community and of institutions and practices strong enough and extensive enough to assure dependable expectations of peaceful change among its population (p. 5). Examples include the European Union (Adler & Barnett, 1998), NATO (Deutsch et al., 1957), ASEAN (Acharya, 2001), the Nordic countries (Wæver in Adler and Barnett, 1998), the U.S.-Canada relationship (Deutsch et al., 1957), and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) in South America (Hurrell in Adler & Barnett, 1998).

Since the 7 October 2023 attacks, Hamas and Hezbollah have suffered significant military and political decline, diminishing their regional influence. This weakening of non-state actors has enhanced a strategic space for states to further develop regional alignments. The Gaza War accelerated structural shifts, fostering closer cooperation among Gulf monarchies, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel; all institutionalising shared security interests through diplomacy and intelligence-sharing. While non-state actors retain localised relevance, regional security is now dictated by inter-state agreements, exemplified by the stark decline, as mentioned above, of non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah

(International Crisis Group, 2024; US Department of Defense, 2024). This trend mirrors broader transitions toward state-dominated governance, as seen in the PKK's 2025 ceasefire with Türkiye.

Karl Deutsch's foundational concept of security communities (1957, pp. 5-7; 17; 430; 434) is considered as spaces where states develop "dependable expectations of peaceful change." In the Middle East, the overriding motivation across regional actors remains regime survival, which is 'helped' by dependable expectations of peaceful change. Adler and Barnett argue that peaceful change arises not simply from shared interests, but from the social processes of identity formation, norm diffusion, and trust-building that transform interests over time (Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 34–36). In this light, the emerging Middle Eastern security architecture resembles what they term a "nascent" security community, where states begin to coordinate policies in response to shared threats but without the deep normative integration or collective identity that characterises mature communities (Adler & Barnett, 1998, p. 30). A key driver of this alignment is the shared perception of Hamas as a common threat shaped by converging security concerns, ideological opposition to Islamist militancy, and anxiety over Iranian influence. For Israel, particularly after October 7, Hamas constitutes an existential threat. For Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Bahrain, Hamas is viewed both as a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot and a destabilising Iranian proxy.

This convergence has translated into practical coordination: Egypt has tightened border controls to curb arms smuggling (Zohar, 2015), Gulf states have directed financial support to the Palestinian Authority to marginalise Hamas, and intelligence cooperation has intensified to disrupt Hamas-Iran networks. This alignment, however, predates 2023. The Abraham Accords (2020) institutionalised strategic ties, while the Negev Forum (March 2022) convened Israel, Arab states, and the U.S. to address transnational issues including Palestinian governance, health, and water security (Reuters, 2022). More recently, Arab-Israeli backing for Egypt's UN-led Gaza reconstruction plan at the Arab Summit in Cairo (March 2025) reinforces this strategic trend. These developments indicate a departure from zero-sum antagonism toward structured cooperation. They suggest that the behavioural thresholds of Deutsch's framework are increasingly evident, rendering inter-state war in the region progressively less plausible.

Scholars such as Michael Barnett (1998) and Louise Fawcett (2013) have argued that persistent tensions, intermittent wars, and weak regional institutions preclude the Middle East from constituting a fully-fledged security community. Barnett views the region's recurrent crises, from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Gulf Wars, as manifestations of deep strategic mistrust, which undermines the emergence of stable, peaceful expectations. Fawcett similarly notes that while regional organisations like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have at times fostered cooperation, they lack the institutional capacity to enforce durable conflict resolution.

The Arab–Israeli conflict has historically been defined by a succession of major interstate wars (1948–49, 1956, 1967, 1969–70, 1973, 1982) and a protracted series of lower-intensity military confrontations (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 188). This historical context makes the contemporary regional response to the 2023-24 Gaza War particularly revelatory. Despite the catastrophic human toll, with at least – as of February 2025 – 48,339 deaths in Gaza and 912 in the West Bank,[1] regional powers have demonstrated unprecedented restraint, opting for diplomatic channels. This strategic posture marks a fundamental transformation in Middle Eastern conflict dynamics: where previous eras saw violence spillover across borders, current approaches reflect a calculus favouring containment and mediated resolution, even amidst profound humanitarian catastrophe. Following this, our effort to conceptualise the Middle East as a nascent security community is informed by contemporary regional shifts, chief of which is the Gaza War.

Before engaging directly with Barnett's and Fawcett's claims, it is essential to consider Adler and Barnett's critique of Deutsch's foundational theory. They observe that "notwithstanding the tremendous admiration we have for Deutsch's scholarly and political vision, his conceptualisation of security communities was fraught with theoretical, methodological, and conceptual difficulties" (1998, p. 5). Their revival

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[1] UNOCHA, *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel – Reported Impact*, 22 February 2025, https://www.ochaopt.org; WHO, *West Bank Health Crisis* Update, 24 February 2025, https://www.emro.who.int/pse/publications-attacks.html; World Bank, Gaza Damage Assessment, 18 February 2025, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/westbankandgaza/publication/economic-monitor.

of Deutsch's concept aims "to draw attention to the concept's importance for understanding "contemporary" events and to suggest refinements of his initial formulation in order to generate a viable research program" (Adler & Barnett, 1998, p. 5). In light of this, and given the profound geopolitical transformations since Barnett's and Fawcett's analyses, including the Abraham Accords, Israel's strategic convergence with key Arab states, and the marginalisation of non-state actors, their frameworks appear increasingly outdated. Moreover, if Deutsch's original model is theoretically contested, then part of the derivative applications by Barnett and Fawcett likewise warrant critical reconsideration. While we recognise their contributions, our analysis deliberately privileges contemporary empirical developments over these earlier frameworks to more accurately reflect the emerging regional security architecture.

A similar perspective appears in Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), who designate the Middle East as a regional security complex marked by chronic insecurity, external interference, and a lack of shared normative frameworks. This characterisation has grown increasingly untenable since 2023, as the Gaza War catalysed structural transformations across the region. The structural underpinnings of the region have begun to shift, not by the eradication of traditional rivalries, but through the institutionalisation of pragmatic cooperation, strategic convergence, and emerging alignments that challenge the core assumptions of the "self-help" regional order. Moreover, this evolving pattern undermines Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett's (2002) argument that fragmented identities render a shared regional outlook unattainable. While identity fragmentation persists, it no longer functions as an absolute barrier to collective security practices. Instead, what is emerging is a conditional, interest-based convergence that mirrors the early stages of what Adler and Barnett termed a nascent security community, one in which war among core states becomes increasingly improbable.

Hamas's position in Gaza illustrates the limits of non-state governance within the emerging inter-state security framework. Lacking sovereign legitimacy, Hamas is treated as an armed entity outside the bounds of recognised authority.[2] Regional Forums in

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[2] U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism* 2023 (Washington, DC: 2023), designation of Hamas as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) since 1997, State.gov/terrorist-designations; European Union Council Decision

Amman and Cairo reaffirmed that Palestinian leadership should remain with the Palestinian National Authority, a stance supported by Arab states and the international community (*The Jordan Times*, 2025). This alignment allowed regional actors to avoid being drawn into Hamas's confrontation with Israel, preserving their focus on regime and state security over ideological entanglement.

The Gaza War illustrates a shift in regional security dynamics where the diminished role of non-state actors reinforces the primacy of sovereign states and reflects a convergence around shared threat perceptions that align with security community theory principles. Israel's dominant position reveals a structural paradox: it stabilises the regional environment through deterrence and strategic coordination, yet simultaneously reproduces asymmetries and grievances that obstruct deeper normative integration. Although certain attributes of a pluralistic security community such as sustained diplomatic engagement and limited conflict escalation are increasingly evident, the region remains deficient in institutional embeddedness and ideational convergence, both of which are essential for full consolidation. Nonetheless, the ongoing reconfiguration of alignments suggests the emergence of a regional security architecture more aligned with contemporary modalities of cooperative management, in which strategic divergence is not suppressed but instrumentalised. As argued in this article, the acceptance of political and ideological heterogeneity has become a functional asset, reinforcing regime durability while contributing to a minimally integrative, stability-oriented order.

2024/475, *Official Journal of the European Union* (2024), maintaining Hamas on the EU terrorist list. "The Council of the European Union recently extended these measures, including asset freezes and travel bans, for another year, until January 20, 2026, against individuals and entities supporting Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's violent actions. This update builds upon previous decisions, maintaining sanctions against those previously identified as responsible for financing or enabling Hamas and PIJ's activities," https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/01/13/hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad-council-extends-restrictive-measures-by-one-year/; United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-10/23, *Illegal Israeli actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory* (June 2023); Arab League, *Cairo Declaration on Palestinian Reconciliation* (2024), Doc. 419/2024, reaffirming the Palestinian Authority as the sole legitimate representative.

Key Features of the Nascent MESC

The Middle East Security Community (MESC), while ostensibly aimed at fostering collective security in the conventional sense, is also accurately characterised by a tacit and, at times, adversarial understanding among regional actors that their own security is inextricably linked to the preservation of incumbent ruling structures. In this context, the notion of "community" does not rest on normative ideals of mutual trust or shared identity, as emphasised in classical models, but rather on a functional consensus that regime stability constitutes the paramount strategic objective. The regime functions as the immediate agent of the security structure. This logic also applies to Iran, where the regime prioritises ideological commitments over interest-based alignments, setting it apart from the broader regional pattern.

The Middle Eastern political landscape remains fundamentally shaped by recurrent warfare. Conflicts increasingly pose existential threats to regional regimes, as exemplified by the fate of Saddam Hussein's government. The 2003 collapse of Iraq's Ba'athist regime established a powerful precedent that has since deterred Arab leaders from military adventurism (Hashim, 2018; Lynch, 2022). Furthermore, a shared recognition among member states is that their core security interest lies in suppressing actors that threaten the cohesion and legitimacy of the regional order. This is evident in coordinated efforts to contain disruptive non-state actors that are perceived as threats to sovereign authority. Concurrently, the MESC displays certain features that shape ongoing geopolitical realignments, including diplomatic convergence, counterterrorism cooperation, and increased security-sector engagement. It is from this premise that the defining characteristics of the MESC can now be identified:

First, the defining characteristic of the MESC is the persistent use of military force. The Middle East's regional order emerged from the Ottoman Empire's collapse and subsequent Western intervention exemplified by artificially imposed borders under agreements like Sykes-Picot (1916). This legacy has made military force indispensable for state consolidation, as evidenced by independence struggles such as Algeria (1954–1962). Modern Middle Eastern geopolitics remains fundamentally shaped by warfare. Conflicts including the Arab-Israeli Wars (1948, 1967, 1973), Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), and Gulf Wars

(1991, 2003) have directly reconfigured political alignments, borders, and regional hierarchies (Sørli, Gleditsch & Strand, 2005). Military power, thus, often supersedes diplomatic channels, as regimes frequently rely on force to maintain authority, illustrated clearly by Assad's Syria, Saddam's Iraq, and Egypt's military-backed governments, and clearly demonstrated by the outcome of the Arab Spring (2010–2012).

Yet, wars in this region seldom yield definitive Viktor's Diktat; instead, they perpetuate cycles of unresolved hostilities. The 1948 Arab-Israeli war, despite an Israeli victory, set conditions for subsequent conflicts. Likewise, the inconclusive Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War directly contributed to further instability and eventual emergence of groups like ISIS. Additionally, the Middle East's military dynamics extend beyond direct warfare into coercive diplomacy and economic sanctions, reinforcing force as a cornerstone of diplomatic engagement (Schelling, 1966; Art & Cronin, 2003). The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) exemplify this, as the U.S. combined economic sanctions and explicit military threats under a 'maximum pressure' strategy (Davari, 2020; Shalal, 2025; Holland et al., 2025).

Second, a core feature of the MESC is Israeli dominance following the post-1990–91 fragmentation of regional powers, most notably the marginalisation of Iraq and the initiation of the Peace Process. This enabled Israel's deeper integration into Middle Eastern geopolitics. The Kuwait Crisis reordered regional dynamics, loosening the pre-existing Arab consensus and allowing states to prioritise national interests. Since 2020, this shift has accelerated through normalisation (Abraham Accords), intelligence and security cooperation (e.g., Saudi-Israel overflight permissions), and economic integration. Arab silence on Gaza is marked by the erosion of Pan-Arab boycotts and a functional recognition of Israel's regional legitimacy.

Third, the MESC is shaped by divergent survival imperatives: Arab regimes prioritise regime preservation through authoritarian consolidation, patronage, and reliance on external powers (Aldalala'a, 2024), while Israel focuses on state survival via military supremacy, deterrence, and regional integration amid contested legitimacy. This asymmetry forms a paradox where divergent security logics converge. Israel's liberal-democratic façade coexists with occupation policies,

including actions labelled genocidal by the International Criminal Court (2024), aligning it structurally with authoritarian states that similarly flout human rights (Amnesty International, 2024). Following Deutsch's model, these actors foster mutual conflict-management norms and forging a pragmatic, trust-based security community that prioritises stability.

Another defining feature of the Middle East Security Community is the United States' influence on the region. From a structural realist perspective (Waltz, 1979), the U.S. influence is maintained through a combination of military deterrence, strategic alliances, and economic aid. The U.S. serves as a crucial pillar in this security architecture by providing Israel with advanced military capabilities, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic backing, ensuring that its qualitative military edge remains unchallenged (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). A feature of the security community is the application of force, which effectively renders American influence an extension of Israel's dominance. This particular feature of regional politics is likely to persist well into the future. The immediate cause lies in the deeply entrenched historical mistrust among Arab states. While a detailed examination falls beyond the scope of this article, it is worth recalling that the region's current trajectory of political transformation was catalysed by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, a moment that significantly deepened intra-Arab suspicions and fractured collective regional trust.

Despite the developments outlined above, the Palestinian issue continues to represent a major point of contention within regional politics, reflecting the enduring complexity involved in achieving lasting regional stability (Maher, 2020). Yet, the declining influence of groups like Hamas and Hezbollah marks a regional shift toward state-centric security as Iran's traditional support wanes. Tehran's ability to sustain Hezbollah has eroded due to disrupted arms routes via Damascus and crippling economic sanctions. U.S.-driven informal sanctions, in particular, forced global banks to sever ties with Iranian institutions, prompting a retreat to cash-based transactions and reducing Iran's capacity to fund proxies (Clawson, 2008). Iran's nuclear programme and its broader regional ambitions have also emerged as central concerns. Accordingly, this article will later examine how both actual and perceived Iranian threats have shaped the genesis and evolution of

the MESC against the backdrop of shifting regional geopolitics (Fakhro
& Baconi, 2022; Quamar, 2020).

Israel's Security

Israel's national security conception is fundamentally forged by
recurrent warfare. The October 7 attack fractured Israel's perceived aura
of invincibility and profoundly impacted its security sense; nevertheless,
it reaffirmed an entrenched truism within the Israeli strategic psyche:
the perception of an enduring existential threat remains permanent
(Michael, 2009). This belief originates in the nation's inception. Upon
Israel's declaration of independence on 14 May 1948, neighbouring
Arab states rejected UN Resolution 181 and invaded Israel the next day.
Israel's victory in this inaugural conflict was not merely military but
an existential prerequisite for survival. Consequently, preserving this
hard-won "triumph" against future existential defeat remains the core
principle underpinning Israel's evolving security doctrines reinforced
by the paradigm of an 'occupying force.' Israel's uncompromising
prioritisation of security and survival is inextricable from its enduring
role as an occupying power. The logic embedded in Israeli national
security discourse, marked by doctrines of pre-emptive force and
existential vigilance, implicitly acknowledges a condition of permanent
occupation as foundational to its strategic posture. Israel prioritises
overwhelming deterrence, maximalist control mechanisms, and pre-
emptive suppression of perceived threats, often entrenching the very
conditions that fuel resistance and undermine long-term stability. This,
coupled with state-centric security priorities, systematically exclude
not only non-state actors from political and economic structures, but
also any actors, including states, who could challenge the regionally
dominant-Israeli security arrangements.

Strategic calculus of occupying powers has been subject to
significant scholarly scrutiny. Roberts (2006) contends that historical
precedents demonstrate how occupying forces often employ coercive
measures not solely to suppress immediate resistance, but also to
rationalise the perpetuation of their military presence and territorial
control. Within the Israeli context, recurring military engagements
with Hamas arguably serve multiple, intertwined strategic purposes
beyond immediate retaliation. These conflicts function to underline the
perceived necessity of ongoing and robust military operations, thereby

reinforcing the legitimacy and scope of Israel's expansive domestic and regional security apparatus. Simultaneously, they fortify domestic political narratives and bolster justifications presented to Western allies, all emphasising the continuous and proximate nature of security threats facing the state.

This practice aligns with broader historical patterns observed in prolonged occupations where cyclical violence serves to perpetuate the rationale for sustained military dominance by the occupying power (Gordon, 2008). The immediate outcomes of conflicts such as the Gaza War predictably conform to a recurring regional paradigm: such wars seldom produce definitive victors capable of imposing a stable political resolution. Instead, they primarily function to reinforce entrenched security doctrines and the underlying conditions that perpetuate them.

Israel's strategic posture, epitomised by its operations against Hezbollah, reveals a defining feature of the new MESC: protracted conflicts persist without escalating into conventional interstate war. The region's paramount objective has crystallised around consolidating state control and eradicating non-state challengers via limited attacks. This paradigm, normalised through recurrence, manifests in Turkey's struggle with the PKK, Iraq's campaigns against Al-Qaeda and ISIS, Syria's multifaceted civil war, and Israel's sustained confrontations with Hamas and Hezbollah. Within this context, the Gaza War transcends mere retaliation for October 7; it embodies a regional imperative of asymmetric warfare, systematically neutralising entities operating beyond the state framework, perceived as existential threats to the established order and Israel's security.

This state-centric imperative defines the post-Kuwait Crisis regional order, explicitly structuring Arab-Israeli relations around state actors. Hedley Bull's framework (1977, p.10) crystallises this logic, defining "order" as inherently state-based, prioritising survival, security, and stability through state interactions. Iran, however, represents a critical exception to this paradigm. Deliberately leveraging asymmetric power, Tehran strategically cultivated non-state proxies, most prominently the "Axis of Resistance" (Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, pro-Assad forces, Iraqi militias). This article analyses Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis not as legitimate peers but as challengers operating outside, and deliberately

marginalised by, the dominantly state-centric MESC framework. MESC's focus on inter-state security cooperation and economic initiatives formalises the systemic sidelining of such groups, reinforcing the very conditions that perpetuate protracted, sub-conventional warfare aimed at neutralising perceived threats to the state-centric established order. The affiliation of these groups with Iran unifies the objectives of both Israel and Arab states, where Islamist organisations have been seen as a threat. The rounds of attacks and counterattacks between Israel and Iran demonstrated how regional security constellation's function: Iranian missile attacks against Israel on 14 April 2024 were thwarted with the help of Arab air forces (Arab Centre Washington DC, 2024) and similarly Iranian drones were intercepted by Jordan in the early morning attacks on 13 June 2025 (Aladam, 2025). Additionally, talk of Saudi-Israeli normalisation has persisted despite the Gaza War (The Arab Centre Washington DC, 2023).

Saudi Arabia has not rejected normalisation with Israel outright but has tied it to progress on Palestinian statehood. This approach aims to maintain U.S. support and uphold its leadership in advocating for Palestinian rights (*Al Jazeera*, 2025). Saudi Arabia's regional strategy exemplifies calibrated pragmatism in a volatile security environment, enabling Riyadh to advance its interests without overtly compromising its ideological or diplomatic positions. By fostering close ties with the Trump administration, the Saudis can secure U.S. guarantees and shape regional dynamics in ways that tacitly support normalisation with Israel without formally endorsing it. Simultaneously, by insisting that normalisation is contingent on the establishment of a Palestinian state, Saudi Arabia maintains alignment with the Palestinian cause, projecting itself as a guardian of Arab consensus. In parallel, its rapprochement with Iran allows it to distance itself from Israeli or U.S.-led escalations, reducing the risk of appearing complicit in regional aggression. This multidirectional diplomacy is particularly effective in an evolving security landscape increasingly characterised by elements of a nascent security community, where shared interests in de-escalation, regime preservation, and conflict containment among regional actors are beginning to override ideological divides. Within this emerging order, Saudi Arabia's strategy not only mitigates risks but positions the kingdom as a central broker in shaping the terms of Middle Eastern stability.

In the current regional security architecture, the protection of Israeli security has become a shared strategic interest among several Arab states, particularly those aligned with the United States and engaged in normalisation processes. While this does not imply unanimity across the region, it reflects a broader convergence around threat containment and the preservation of regional order, where Israeli stability is increasingly viewed as integral to managing wider security dynamics. This orientation was most clearly demonstrated when several Arab states coordinated efforts to intercept Iranian missiles directed at Israel (Arab Centre Washington DC, 2024). Such actions highlight an emerging willingness to contribute to regional stability through direct cooperation in safeguarding Israeli security.

The Gaza War in Security Community Context

In terms of immediate security outcomes, the Gaza War highlights several key points. First, it stresses Israel's readiness, with the U.S. and Western support, to take prolonged military actions against any threat to its security. Second, it highlights the profound fragmentation within the Palestinian leadership, with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank adopting a largely passive and detached stance regarding the situation in Gaza. Factionalism between Hamas and Fatah perpetuates instability and undermines the prospects for a sustainable peace. As Scham (2023) explains, Israel has a vested interest in maintaining the separation of Palestinian factions as unity among them would pose a strategic threat to Israel's security. Their strategic divisions, coupled with external political pressures particularly from Israel and the U.S., continue to delay the creation of a unified Palestinian front that might pave the way for a more robust and coherent peace process (Stock, 2017; Alhamdan, 2020).

Third, the factionalised nature of Palestinian politics, marked by the paralysis of the Abbas-led Palestinian Authority and its public criticism of Hamas, has deepened internal divisions and weakened collective resistance. This internal discord has enabled Israel to frame the war as a counterterrorism operation that fits within the MESC's framework of defeating non-state actors. Meanwhile, the initial protests across the Arab World have largely given way to indifference. Gaza's suffering has become a recurrent media fixture, no longer a catalyst for Arab street mobilisation. This shift reflects not only media fatigue but

also a broader strategic recalibration among Arab regimes. Stability, regime preservation, and alignment with powerful international actors increasingly take precedence over popular sentiment. The muted response of institutions such as the Arab League emphasises the declining centrality of the Palestinian issue in Arab political discourse, even as the humanitarian devastation in Gaza continues.

The Gaza War has clarified and reinforced the emergence of a nascent pluralistic security community among key Arab states and Israel. In Adler and Barnett's (1998) terms, such a community is defined by "dependable expectations of peaceful change" (p. 34), and "mutual responsiveness" (pp. 47-49; p. 134) among states that, while retaining their sovereignty, develop "a compatibility of core values derived from common institutions" (p. 7). Ironically, all peace agreements between Arab States and Israel, including major accords such as in 1979, 1994, and the Abraham Accords were a transition from "ideological Arabness" to interest-based conduct. The Arab states' preference for non-intervention and diplomatic containment over mobilisation suggests the internalisation of mutual expectations for crisis management and conflict avoidance, even in the absence of deep collective identity. As such, the Gaza War has not disrupted the process of regional security integration; rather, it has clarified its underlying structure, revealing how the inclusion or exclusion of particular actors plays a central role in shaping emerging security arrangements. This reflects Adler and Barnett's assertion that "who is inside, and who is outside, matters most" (Adler & Barnett, 1998, p. 4) in determining the normative boundaries and operational logic of security communities.

Following Donald Trump's provocative statement in early 2025 calling for the "cleaning out" of Gaza and the deportation of its residents to Egypt and Jordan, Arab states issued a unified and unequivocal rejection of the proposal. At a Cairo summit on 1 February 2025, representatives from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Palestine, and the Arab League declared that any forced displacement of Palestinians would be a violation of their "unalienable rights" and warned it would "threaten the region's stability...spread conflict and undermine prospects for peace" (*CBS News*, 2025). Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi firmly stated that such displacement "can never be tolerated or allowed" due to its implications for Egypt's national security, and cautioned that the relocation of Palestinians could

jeopardise the Camp David peace framework (*Reuters*, 2025). Similarly, Jordan's King Abdullah II reiterated his government's longstanding position: "no refugees in Jordan, no refugees in Egypt," affirming a regional consensus against resettlement schemes (Malik, 2025). On 4 March 2025, an Arab League emergency summit endorsed Egypt's $53 billion counterproposal focused on Gaza's reconstruction, advocating a technocratic transitional administration of Palestinian professionals and eventual restoration of Palestinian Authority governance, specifically to preserve Gaza's demographic integrity and thwart any attempts at mass expulsion (Doucet & Hussein, 2025). These coordinated diplomatic actions illustrate not only the rejection of external coercion but also the consolidation of a shared regional approach that defends Palestinian territorial continuity and reflects the logic of a nascent, policy-oriented security community in the Arab world.

External forces and regional security

The strategic landscape of the Middle East remains profoundly shaped by the preferences and priorities of the United States (Byman & Moller, 2016; Dunne, 2023). The origins of the contemporary U.S. role in the Middle East can be traced to the aftermath of the 1990–1991 Kuwait Crisis, when, at the formal request of Saudi Arabia, the U.S. stationed its troops on Saudi soil for the first time in the kingdom's history (Bunton, 20240). This military presence evolved into sustained regional dominance not only due to America's unique power projection capabilities, accelerated by the concurrent collapse of the Soviet Union, which cemented U.S. status as the sole superpower (Malik, 2014), but also because of the strategic legacy generated by the Kuwait Crisis. This legacy entrenched a framework of security dependency among Gulf states while exacerbating mistrust within the Arab world, particularly between U.S.-aligned monarchies and populations resentful of Western military encroachment (Nicolas, 2024).

The primary security concern for Arab states, particularly those in the Gulf, has not been the threat of military invasion or external aggression, but rather the risk of domestic instability, which is in line with the argument made by Barnett and Gause in *Security Communities (1998)*. In this context, regime survival has consistently remained the central objective guiding Arab states' security strategies (Tibi, 1998). The United States has come to be perceived as a stabilising force in

the region, simultaneously supporting incumbent regimes and deterring Iran's regional influence, thereby providing crucial security assurances to both Gulf and broader Arab states. This role is further exemplified by substantial annual U.S. military and financial aid to Egypt, amounting to approximately $1.4 billion, and to Jordan, approximately $1.1 billion (Salhani, 2025).

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 has not fundamentally altered the path or outcomes of the Gaza War. His Trump 2.0 policies are an extension of his previous administration's regional policies, particularly on the question of Iran, which remains key in understanding the formation of a regional security community. Trump's firm stance against Iran and his unwavering support for Israeli security bolstered a collective alignment among several Arab states, oriented around threat containment and the marginalisation of non-state actors (Dunne, 2023; Kelly, 2024). Although this alignment has been shaped more by strategic interests and external patronage than by deep normative integration, it has nonetheless fostered increased transnational cooperation and identity convergence. As Barnett and Gause argue in their analysis of the Gulf Cooperation Council, even alliances initially formed for regime protection can create conditions that facilitate community-building through social interaction and shared security frameworks (Barnett & Gause in Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 119-160). In this evolving context, the sustained presence of the United States continues to serve as a stabilising force, offering security guarantees that underpin the gradual emergence of regional cohesion (Byman & Moller, 2016).

Trump's objectives rest on a functional logic: an end to the Gaza War, or the beginning of any War, is only viable if it conforms to the stabilising imperatives of the emerging regional security community, which demands the systematic exclusion of destabilising actors. Within this context, if Iran is perceived as a threat to the coherence of this alignment, structured increasingly around Israeli strategic centrality, the United States, Israel, and aligned Arab states may not only endorse but also support coercive measures, including military action, to safeguard the integrity of the evolving regional security architecture.

In *Security Communities,* Adler and Barnett articulate a nuanced view of external intervention in the context of security community

development. They emphasise that the role of external actors is double-edged. On one hand, powerful states can support the emergence of security communities by acting as "cores of strength" that anchor integration and generate positive expectations of security and prosperity. These actors, through persuasion or "nudging," can encourage weaker states to converge around shared norms and interests. This supports Deutsch's observation that security communities develop around cores of strength. The United States is the "core of strength" in the emerging Middle East security community.

However, the authors caution that the effects of external intervention are contingent. When intervention is coercive, unilateral, or seen as undermining sovereignty, it can hinder the trust-building and norm-sharing essential for a security community. For instance, the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America, particularly its disregard for regional consensus and sovereignty norms, is presented as a major obstacle to regional community-building, despite the absence of major wars in the region. In contrast, where external actors act as facilitators of multilateralism and value diffusion, such as through the United Nations, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), or regional organisations, their involvement can foster the social learning and normative alignment needed for communities to emerge. The authors call such efforts "strong multilateralism," which contrasts with transactional, interest-based "weak" multilateralism and is more likely to lead to community formation. Ultimately, Adler and Barnett argue that external powers do not simply impose or prevent the emergence of security communities; rather, their influence is mediated by the degree to which their actions align with shared norms and institutional practices already present or nascent in the region, which is the precise case of American engagement in the Middle East.

Given that Iran remains a central security concern for Israel and, to a considerable extent, for Gulf Cooperation Council members, it functions as a focal point for consolidating a nascent regional security community. A key reason is that Iran lacks viable options for engaging in open warfare with Israel, a reality that highlights the effectiveness of regional security arrangements in constraining escalation. In effect, Iran had never fought a war with Israel for Palestine. Yet, Israel's posture towards Iran is not dislodged from the overall security arrangements in the region. Israel's strike capabilities depend on U.S. logistical and

diplomatic support, and Israeli defence analysts consistently caution that unilateral military action without Washington's coordination would be both strategically limited and regionally destabilising.

At the same time, Iran's regional influence through its proxy networks, particularly Hezbollah and the Assad regime in Syria, has been significantly diminished as discussed earlier. Aware of these shifts, Gulf states have increasingly favoured diplomacy and coordinated deterrence as strategies to manage Tehran's asymmetric threats, such as maritime disruption, rather than opting for direct military confrontation (Stimson Center, 2024; CSIS, 2020). These converging patterns of behaviour suggest the emergence of a regional security architecture grounded in shared threat perceptions, mutual restraint, and pragmatic cooperation, all of which align with the defining features of a nascent, pluralistic security community.

Importantly, the resilience of this emerging community lies in its capacity to manage internal fragmentation and external threats without escalating into open conflict. The region's preference for diplomatic coordination and interest-based security partnerships, exemplified by Arab states' rejection of Trump's call to displace Gazans and their assumption of reconstruction responsibilities, reinforces the notion that security communities can emerge not solely from cultural or ideological unity but through sustained social interaction and functional interdependence. As Adler and Barnett caution, the success of such communities depends on whether external powers act in ways consistent with the region's evolving norms and practices. In the case of the Middle East, the alignment between American strategic interests and regional security imperatives (Nasr, 2025) appears, for now, to support rather than obstruct the formation of a pluralistic, if nascent, security community.

As Adler and Barnett emphasise, the development of institutions within a nascent security community marks a critical shift from *ad hoc* cooperation to more structured, norm-guided interaction. In this early phase, institutions do not emerge fully formed but evolve incrementally through social processes of interaction, persuasion, and norm internalisation. These institutions function initially as mechanisms for information sharing, threat identification, and behavioural coordination, helping to reduce uncertainty and build trust among historically

adversarial actors (Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 50–53). Importantly, they also serve latent functions by fostering social learning and constructing collective identities, even when formal treaty arrangements remain absent.

The institutionalisation process is thus both instrumental and constitutive; it facilitates cooperation while gradually reconstituting state interests and identities. As interactions become routinised and expectations of peaceful change deepen, the institutions themselves transform from instruments of utility to embodiments of community norms. In the Middle East context, the emergence of shared fora, coordinated security responses, and diplomatic alignments, though still fragile, suggests that the region may be traversing this formative stage. Whether the security community in the region grows strong or remains stable depends on the same factors that create security concerns. These factors include Israel, backed by the United States, without a counterbalance to U.S. influence in the region. China's role is mainly economic, acting like the region's "factory and supermarket." Meanwhile, Iran, since 1979, has remained in conflict with other regional countries. It is unlikely, according to regional political norms, for Iran's relationships with other states to develop beyond U.S. influence.

Conclusion

The Gaza War is poised to reinforce the pre-war regional security architecture rather than disrupt it. Due to Israel's enduring presence, non-state actors within the region could consistently emerge to challenge it as an extension of the people's disapproval for normalisation with Israel as reported in the Arab Barometer (Robbins, 2025). The potential for any future conflicts to escalate into war, as seen currently, hinges on the security community's ability to contain these threats. However, eliminating such groups or preventing minor conflicts remains uncertain.

State hegemony defines the Middle East system, progressively marginalising non-state actors. While militant groups historically demonstrated disruptive capacity, their influence remains contingent on state patronage, external sponsorship, or fragile governance. The securitisation of politics (See Abrahamsen & Williams, 2006), state-centric counterterrorism, and Arab-Israeli normalisation (absent popular consensus) reinforce this paradigm. Even in conflict zones like Yemen or Syria, non-state actors' operational viability depends on sovereign

states' strategic calculus regarding material support and operational constraints. The region thus remains fundamentally structured by interstate engagement, with sovereignty and regime security as its organising principles.

The Iran-Israel conflict remains intractable. Trump's 'maximum pressure' strategy – marked by severe sanctions – may force Tehran to negotiate rather than escalate, especially given Netanyahu's persistent threats of military action. As Nephew (2024) notes, Iran's regional weakening (including Hezbollah's decline and Assad's faltering regime) could paradoxically facilitate comprehensive talks rather than preclude them.

Middle East dynamics offer Israel strategic options against Iran. Strikes on Syrian military assets, aimed at degrading defences, could precede broader action against Iran's nuclear facilities. Advocates argue the current climate favours pre-emptive strikes, citing Tehran's nearing nuclear breakout, failed diplomacy, and ongoing regional instability (Kroenig, 2024). Historical models like Israel's 1981 Osirak and 2007 Syrian reactor operations provide precedents.

Nonetheless, Israel's security apparatus would grapple with a paradoxical reality: while the neutralisation of Iran's nuclear capabilities is deemed essential for safeguarding national security, the elimination of Iran as a strategic counterbalance could, in the long run inadvertently destabilise the broader security architecture. In such a scenario, Israel might find its role in containing Iran's influence marginal, or worse, diminished. This could potentially erode the strategic leverage that underpins its regional security model. This duality highlights the complexity of Israel's calculus in confronting the multifaceted Iranian threat. The Israel-Iran relationship demonstrates the mutually reinforcing benefits that have, paradoxically, served the strategic interests of both regimes within the state-centric security community. Iran's leadership, particularly its clerical establishment, has leveraged its advocacy for the Palestinian cause as a mechanism to bolster domestic legitimacy.

Israel's regional dominance relies on two key factors: strong U.S. support and weaker neighbouring states. Therefore, the persistent weakness and fragmentation of regional counterparts further consolidate Israel's cyclic strategic advantage. The absence of a unified Arab security bloc reduces the likelihood of coordinated opposition. While Israel

remains the dominant regional actor, its hegemony requires continuous reinforcement through strategic alignment with global powers and the exploitation of regional power asymmetries. The durability of this dominance is not structurally guaranteed; it is conditioned by evolving variables such as shifts in U.S. foreign policy priorities, changes in regional threat perceptions, and potential realignments among Arab states or with external powers like China or Russia. In this sense, Israel's pre-eminence must be understood as a contingent geopolitical configuration: resilient but inherently adaptive, rather than a fixed or inevitable strategic outcome. The long-term sustainability of this dominance is, therefore, a dynamic rather than a predetermined certainty. This concludes the title of this article: shifting geopolitics.

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