

Jerzy ZDANOWSKI 

Uniwersytet Andrzeja Frycza Modrzewskiego w Krakowie

jerzyzda@gmail.com

RETHINKING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THROUGH THE MIDDLE EAST

ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving relationship between the Middle East as a region and the broader field of International Relations (IR) theory. It investigates how different IR paradigms – realism, liberalism, constructivism, post-colonialism, and critical theories – have interacted with or been challenged by the Middle East's regional dynamics. Drawing primarily from recent scholarship, this work highlights the gap between universal IR theory and region-specific complexities, ultimately proposing a more pluralistic and culturally informed theoretical synthesis.

Keywords: Middle East, Middle East Studies, IR Theories

1. INTRODUCTION: THE GAP BETWEEN REGION AND THEORY

The Middle East has frequently been portrayed in political science and international relations as an ‘exceptional’ region – an arena often defined more by its perceived instability and cultural specificity than by its integration into universal theoretical models. This constructed exceptionality has contributed to a persistent disconnect between the disciplines of Area Studies and the more abstract and systematizing field of International Relations (IR) theory. Andrea Tetti, when writing about how Middle East studies and International Relations have been ‘historically unable to build interdisciplinary bridges,’¹ points out the reasons for this state of affairs. The most significant of these was the intellectual and political struggle between Middle East studies researchers and International Relations specialists. These struggles, far from being a mere clash of theoretical standpoints, have profoundly impacted both disciplines, shaping their understanding of the Middle East region. If international relations treated the Middle East the same way as other regions, Middle East Studies would emphasize its complete distinctiveness.

This gap is not merely methodological but deeply epistemological. It reflects a historical division in which IR theory – largely developed in Western academic institutions – has universalizing ambitions, while Middle East studies have traditionally privileged thick description and contextual depth. The result has been a clear disciplinary bifurcation. While IR theorists strive to derive generalizable rules from the behavior of sovereign states in a supposedly anarchic international system, scholars of the Middle East Area Studies often resist such abstractions, emphasizing historicity, identity, and the socio-political embeddedness of state and non-state actors alike. Historically, Middle East studies have emphasized the importance of cultural specificity, historical rootedness, and the intricacies of local contexts. Scholars in this tradition often focus on language, religion, identity, and socio-political structures deeply embedded in place and time. Concepts such as the *Arab mind*, *Islamic civilisation*, or *tribalism* served as early interpretive tools for understanding regional dynamics. In contrast, IR theory was born in Western academic environments, particularly Anglo-American institutions, and built upon rationalist, positivist assumptions about the nature of international politics. It tends to prioritize systemic variables such as anarchy, balance of power, and institutional design, frequently abstracting away from cultural and historical particularities.

This divide is well documented by Andrea Tetti and Morten Valbjørn, who argue that the friction between Area Studies and IR is not just a matter of emphasis, but a consequence of fundamentally different epistemologies and academic trajectories. Valbjørn writes that if International Relations as a discipline can be termed ‘culture-blind’, then Middle East Studies can be called ‘culture-bound’. In other words, while International Relations was *aiming for ‘universal’ knowledge despite cultural traits*, Area

¹ A. Tetti, “Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies and the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy,” *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2007), p. 118.

Studies emphasized the cultural limits to generalization.² The epistemological divide between Area Studies and International Relations (IR) is one of the most persistent obstacles in integrating Middle East research into mainstream IR theory

The rise of constructivism, poststructuralism, and critical theory within IR has opened up new possibilities for bridging the gap. These approaches acknowledge the role of ideas, norms, and discourse – core concerns of Area Studies – and thus provide a conceptual bridge. Scholars such as Valbjørn, Teti, Khalidi, Bates, and Bilgin have shown how integrating regional knowledge into theoretical debates can enrich both fields.³ Bridging this gap requires more than interdisciplinary goodwill – it necessitates a re-theorization of IR from the margins, a movement toward what he terms ‘theory from the region’. Such an approach entails grounding international relations in local histories, regional dynamics, and indigenous categories of political thought, rather than retrofitting the region into preexisting Western models. The challenge, then, is to provincialize IR without abandoning the analytical rigor that theory can provide, thereby creating a space where the Middle East is not only studied but also helps shape the discipline’s conceptual vocabulary.

2. METHODOLOGY

In the literature on International Relations, a key line of division separates positivist and post-positivist approaches. Positivist perspectives, most notably realism and liberalism, assume that international reality exists independently of the observer and can be analyzed through causal explanation, hypothesis testing, and the identification of regularities in state behavior. States are typically treated as rational actors operating within an anarchic international system, and theoretical inquiry aims at producing generalizable knowledge.⁴

By contrast, post-positivist approaches, including constructivism, post-structuralism, feminism, and postcolonial theory, challenge the possibility of fully objective knowledge and emphasise the socially constructed nature of international reality. These approaches focus on meanings, identities, discourses, and power relations rather than universal laws. This distinction is particularly relevant to the study of the Middle East, where post-positivist perspectives enable a more nuanced analysis of historical memory, religion, and political narratives. The present study adopts a pluralist position, treating

² M. Valbjørn, “Toward a ‘Mesopotamian Turn’: Disciplinarity and the Study of International Relations of the Middle East,” *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1/2 (2004), p. 47-75.

³ R. Khalidi, “Is There a Future for Middle East Studies?,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1995), p. 1-6; P. Bilgin, “Is the ‘Orientalist’ Past the Future of Middle East Studies?,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2004), p. 423-433; R. Bates, “Area Studies and the Discipline: A Useful Controversy?,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1997), p. 169.

⁴ See S. Smith, K. Booth, and M. Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, Cambridge 1996; P.Th. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, London–New York 2011.

the tension between positivist and post-positivist approaches as analytically productive rather than mutually exclusive.⁵

The article employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and meta-theoretical methodology that draws from both Area Studies and International Relations (IR) theory. The text is structured as a conceptual and comparative analysis that critically engages with major IR paradigms – realism, liberalism, constructivism, postcolonialism, and critical theories – and tests their applicability to the Middle Eastern context.

The author adopts a narrative and interpretive strategy, combining textual analysis of theoretical literature with case-referenced illustrations from regional politics. The article synthesizes a broad range of secondary sources, especially contemporary IR scholarship, to trace epistemological trends and disciplinary debates. While critically evaluating the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in traditional IR theory, the text advocates for a pluralistic perspective. This aligns the work with critical methodology, which aims not only to interpret reality but also to question dominant modes of knowledge production and offer alternatives. Importantly, the article applies theory-testing through regional contextualization, exploring how the Middle East both challenges and contributes to theoretical development in IR.⁶

3. CLASSICAL IR THEORIES AND THE MIDDLE EAST: CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

3.1. Realism: Power, Security, and Its Limits

Realism remains the most commonly applied International Relations theory in the study of the Middle East, largely due to the region's long-standing instability, frequent inter- and intra-state conflicts, and the prominence of hard-power dynamics. The realist emphasis on anarchy, survival, and strategic interests resonates strongly with a region shaped by wars, authoritarian rule, and cycles of foreign intervention. Scholars such as Stephen Walt, John Mearsheimer, and Kenneth Waltz have used extensive case studies from the Middle East to explore deterrence theory, the formation and breakdown of alliances, and the logic of intervention.⁷

⁵ If Kenneth Waltz is a leading representative of the positivist approach, then Alexander Wendt represents post-positivism. R.W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1981), pp. 126-155 is an iconic post-positivist text.

⁶ The discussion of the application of International Relations theories to the analysis of Arab politics, along with a critique of their limitations, is included, among others, in M.N. Barnett's book *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*, New York 1998. F.G. Gause III also examines the possibilities of applying various International Relations theories to the analysis of the Persian Gulf region, highlighting the limitations of these theories – see F.G. Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Cambridge 2010.

⁷ K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York 1979; J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York 2001; S.M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca–London 1987.

However, the realist paradigm, while useful, is inherently limited in its ability to explain many of the Middle East's key dynamics. Its state-centric ontology and rationalist assumptions often fail to account for the influence of non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, or the Houthis – groups that wield considerable power and legitimacy but operate outside the conventional state system. These actors mobilize ideology, religion, and identity in ways that challenge the materialist logic of both classical and neorealism.

An example of this approach is Stephen M. Walt's work *The Origins of Alliances*. It is a case study of alliances in the Middle East. Walt argues that a driving force behind the political situation in the Middle East has been inter-state alliances, including the relationships between Egypt, Iraq, and Syria (pp. 145–180) – a view with which one can agree. *In anarchy, states form alliances to protect themselves*,⁸ – we read. However, Walt assumes the centrality of states and downplays the role of non-state actors.

Moreover, realism often overlooks the symbolic and ideational dimensions of regional politics. At the same time, various studies highlight how religious legitimacy, tribal affiliation, sectarian belonging, and historical narratives shape strategic behaviour in ways that are difficult to quantify but essential to understanding decision-making in places like Lebanon, Iraq, or Yemen. For instance, Saudi Arabia's regional behaviour cannot be fully explained without reference to its role as the custodian of Sunni Islam, just as Iran's foreign policy reflects both material interests and its revolutionary identity. Michael Barnett highlights this weakness of realism in his work *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*. Barnett examines the dynamics of Arab politics and criticises the excessive simplification of state interests as purely rational.⁹

In the approaches of classical realism and neorealism, the state is treated as a unitary, rational actor, while internal political systems, regime types, or societal pressures are often ignored or downplayed. What matters is anarchy in the international system and the pursuit of survival and power. Domestic politics are 'black-boxed' – they don't influence international outcomes significantly.

Realism also tends to assume a rational actor model, which is challenged by the fragmented and hybrid nature of many Middle Eastern states, where decisions are shaped by elite bargains, informal networks, and external patronage rather than by a coherent national interest. The Syrian civil war, the Gulf crisis, or the shifting alignments in Iraq illustrate how fluid and multi-level power structures challenge simplistic realist readings.

Nevertheless, realism remains highly relevant for analyzing great-power competition in the region, particularly the strategic interests of the U.S., Russia, China, and regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, and Israel. However, a more nuanced, updated realism, one that incorporates ideational variables and acknowledges the agency of non-state actors, can be suggested to provide valuable insights into the power politics of the region.

⁸ S.M. Walt, *The Origins...*, p. 10.

⁹ M.N. Barnett, "The Creation of 'Arab' Politics, 1920–1945," in M.N. Barnett, *Dialogues...*, pp. 55–84.

3.2. Liberalism: The Myth of Cooperation

Michael W. Doyle conceptualized liberalism as follows. *What we tend to call liberal resembles a family portrait of principles and institutions, recognisable by certain characteristics—for example, individual freedom, political participation, private property, and equality of opportunity – that most liberal states share.*¹⁰ Liberal theory, with its optimistic assumptions about the potential for cooperation through institutions, interdependence, and democracy, has had a more limited and often uneasy application in Middle Eastern contexts. While liberalism provides useful analytical tools for understanding economic diplomacy, trade agreements, and international law, it struggles to explain the region's persistent authoritarianism, weak institutionalization, and resistance to democratic transitions. It should be noted, however, that in liberal institutionalist approaches, regime characteristics are generally treated as independent variables rather than outcomes to be explained, which limits their applicability to the analysis of democratization processes.

The paradox of liberal institutionalism in the Middle East can be underscored: while regional organizations exist – such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) – they often function more as forums for symbolic diplomacy than as platforms for genuine cooperation. These bodies frequently reflect the power hierarchies and internal rivalries between member states, particularly the Saudi-Iranian and Saudi-Qatari divides. Rather than resolving conflicts, these institutions often serve as stages for asserting national interests and ideological dominance. Due to the lack of deeper economic ties among the region's states, it is difficult, for example, to apply Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's theory of complex interdependence (*Power and Interdependence*) to the analysis of Middle Eastern politics.¹¹

Criticism of the liberal approach to studying Middle Eastern politics was raised, among others, by Barnett, who examined the reasons for the League of Arab States' failure to create an integrated system of regional relations. Barnett pointed out that liberalism does not take into account identity conflicts, which, in his view, were the main reason for the League's failure.¹²

Liberalism also struggles to account for the repeated failures of democratization. The Arab Spring initially appeared to vindicate liberal optimism: millions across the region mobilized to demand political rights, accountable governance, and social justice. However, the lack of institutional checks and balances, combined with deep societal

¹⁰ See M.W. Doyle "Liberalism and World Politics", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 80, no. 4 (1986), p. 1152. Doyle articulates the idea that democracies rarely go to war with one another. We read: *political bonds of liberal rights and interests have proven a remarkably firm foundation for mutual nonaggression.* (p. 1162). A. Moravcsik in "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics" of 1997 emphasizes domestic societal preferences and interest groups.

¹¹ R. Keohane, J.S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, Boston 1977.

¹² M.N. Barnett, "The Ascent and Descent of Arabism, 1956–1967," in M.N. Barnett, *Dialogues...*, p. 121–160.

cleavages and external interference, meant that liberal transitions were short-lived or reversed. Egypt, Syria, and Libya illustrate how revolutionary moments gave way to renewed authoritarianism or prolonged conflict.

This issue was also addressed by Marc Lynch, who pointed out that liberalism ignores political and narrative divisions and, therefore, underestimates the potential for democratization.¹³ Similarly, F. Gregory Gause III argues that politics in the Persian Gulf is dominated by rivalry between regional states and dependence on external powers, meaning that liberal assumptions about regional cooperation do not reflect the actual state of affairs.¹⁴

Despite these shortcomings, liberal perspectives are not without value. In specific domains – such as diplomatic initiatives, international law, and norm diffusion – liberalism can illuminate aspects of regional order and external engagement. But it must be applied critically, with attention to local conditions and a recognition of the limits of normative prescriptions in deeply divided or authoritarian settings.

3. 3. Constructivism: Identity, Norms, and Symbolic Politics

Constructivism has proven to be a particularly fertile framework for analyzing the Middle East, where identity, ideology, and historical memory play outsized roles in shaping political behavior.¹⁵ Unlike realism and liberalism, constructivism does not assume that interests are fixed or material; instead, it explores how they are socially constructed through interaction, narrative, and the internalization of norms.¹⁶ Alexander Wendt, in his classic constructivist work *Social Theory of International Politics*, argues that ideas construct interests and shape state behavior and the international system. The term ‘constructivism’ was first used in International Relations scholarship by Nikolas Onuf in 1989. Onuf proposed, in *World of Our Making*, the concept of ‘social reality’ for studying norms and values. Onuf argues that the international system is socially constructed through language, rules, and norms. *People always construct, or constitute, social reality, even as their being, which can only be social, is constructed for them* – we read. The issue of how international norms evolve and influence political change was the subject of research by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, who, in their article *International*

¹³ M. Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolution of the New Middle East*, New York 2013, see “Introduction”.

¹⁴ F.G. Gause III, *The International...*, pp. 25-55.

¹⁵ See: M. Valbjørn, “Introduction: The Role of Ideas and Identities in Middle East International Relations,” in M. Valbjørn and F.H. Lawson (eds), *International Relations of the Middle East*, Vol. 3: *The Role of Ideas and Identities in Middle East International Relations*, Los Angeles–London–New Delhi 2015, pp. 7-23; S. Telhami and M. Barnett, “Introduction: Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East,” in S. Telhami and M. Barnett (eds), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Ithaca–London 2002, pp. 1-25.

¹⁶ Lapid employs the metaphor of a ‘ship of culture and identity’ arriving at the ‘port’ of international relations to highlight the critical role of culture in Middle Eastern international relations research – Y. Lapid, “Culture’s Ship: Returns and Departures in International Relations Theory,” in Y. Lapid and F. Kratochwil (eds), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory*, Boulder 1996, p. 3.

Norm Dynamics and Political Change, introduced the 'norm life cycle model' to explain the stages through which norms emerge and become institutionalized.¹⁷

A notable example of applying constructivism to the study of the Middle East is Marc Lynch's book *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*. The central focus of this work is the concept of the 'new Arab public'. Lynch examines how the emergence of satellite television in the 1990s – particularly Al Jazeera – and the proliferation of social media platforms in the 2000s transformed the Arab public sphere. This transformation enabled a more interconnected and empowered Arab population, facilitating the rapid dissemination of revolutionary ideas and the mobilization of political movements across national boundaries. Lynch contrasts the contemporary Arab public with that of the 1950s and 1960s, observing that whereas the earlier Arab public was largely an object of elite mobilization, the new Arab public has emerged as an active agent influencing power dynamics. The author argues that Middle Eastern international relations are profoundly shaped by perceptions, collective memory, and symbolic politics.¹⁸

The constructivist approach to Middle Eastern studies is further exemplified in the works of Michael Barnett. In his book *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*, Barnett explores how Arab identity and Arabism have shaped the formation and evolution of alliances among Middle Eastern states. Barnett posits that shared identities and norms, particularly Arabism, significantly shape how states perceive threats and choose their allies. This perspective challenges traditional realist views that prioritize material interests and power dynamics. Barnett's analysis spans the 1920s to the post-Gulf War era, examining how Arab states have interacted, symbolically and strategically, to define and redefine the norms of Arabism. He argues that these interactions have led to both unity and fragmentation within the region as states navigate their relationships with one another, the West, and Israel. By highlighting the role of identity in foreign policy decisions, Barnett provides a nuanced understanding of Middle Eastern international relations that goes beyond conventional theories.¹⁹

Barnett's work demonstrates that the region's most enduring rivalries, such as the one between Iran and Saudi Arabia, cannot be understood solely through the lens of material power. Rather, they are deeply embedded in competing ideational projects:

¹⁷ A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge 1999; N. Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia, SC 1989, p. 1; M. Finnemore and K. Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4 (1998), pp. 887-917.

¹⁸ M. Lynch, *The Arab Uprising ...*, p. 33. See also M. Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*, New York 2006, in which Lynch examines how satellite television networks like Al-Jazeera have transformed Arab politics by fostering a more open and dynamic public sphere.

¹⁹ M.N. Barnett, *Dialogues...* See also: M.N. Barnett, "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East," which appears as a chapter in P.J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York 1996, pp. 400-447. In this chapter, Barnett examines the factors influencing Egypt's foreign policy decisions, including its relationships with other regional powers, such as Iran during the 1970s.

Iran's identity as a revolutionary Shi'a state with aspirations to export its political model across the Muslim world, and Saudi Arabia's self-conception as the guardian of Sunni orthodoxy and the Arab status quo. Similarly, the Sunni–Shia divide is not merely a theological or doctrinal schism; it has been politicised and weaponized, evolving into a major geopolitical fault line. These identities are dynamic and performative, continuously (re)shaped by elite discourse, historical traumas, and external pressures.²⁰

Constructivism is also particularly useful in analyzing how state identities are constructed in opposition to others. Israel, for example, defines itself as a Jewish and democratic state amidst predominantly Arab and Muslim neighbours – an identity that informs its security doctrine, diplomatic choices, and narratives of existential threat. Turkey, under Erdoğan, has revived neo-Ottomanist themes, using historical memory and Islamic solidarity to reshape its regional role.²¹

Moreover, constructivist theory sheds light on the symbolic use of foreign policy. Rhetoric surrounding resistance to Western imperialism or solidarity with the Palestinian cause is frequently deployed by regimes (e.g., Iran, Hezbollah, even non-state actors like Hamas) to bolster domestic legitimacy and regional leadership claims. These discourses are not mere propaganda; they constitute political reality and shape the region's diplomacy and conflict.²²

The limitations of constructivist theory include its lack of predictive power, its tendency to underemphasize material capabilities, its overemphasis on the role of ideas, the difficulty of operationalizing core concepts, and a persistent Western-centric bias. Constructivism is often regarded as more effective at explaining events retrospectively rather than forecasting them. Since its outcomes are deeply rooted in social contexts, norms, and identities, they are contingent rather than deterministic. In discussing critical assessments of Alexander Wendt's work, Stefano Guzzini highlights Wendt's specific conception of international 'politics'. Wendt himself maintained that his contributions should be understood as a theory of the interstate system, rather than as a theory encompassing the full scope of international politics.²³

²⁰ K. Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unravelling Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East*, London 2020; P. Crepy, "Proxy Warfare's Impact on Sectarianization: The Case of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry," *FLUX: International Relations Review*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2018), pp. 23-35.

²¹ Chosen publications: A. Patten, "The Idea of Israel as a Jewish State," *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2020), pp. 531-559; E. Wastnidge, "Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Re-assessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Politics," *Middle East Critique*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2019), pp. 7-24; M.H. Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*, Oxford 2020.

²² The following authors demonstrate how ideological foundations rooted in resistance against Western influence shape regional politics in the Middle East: A.R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, Princeton, NJ 2007; M. Kamrava, *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*, Cambridge 2008; M. Calculli, "Self-Determination at All Costs: Explaining the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah Axis," in *Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Economics, History and Political Science*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2020), pp. 95-118.

²³ See S. Guzzini and A. Leander (eds), *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and His Critics*, London–New York 2006. It is a collection of critical essays on Alexander Wendt's approach, emphasizing issues related to methodological rigor. A. Wendt, *Social...*, pp. 1-8.

Proponents of realist theory argue that constructivism often downplays factors such as military and economic power, which they consider the most decisive in world politics. Core concepts such as identity, norms, and social construction are difficult to measure or operationalize in empirical research. Critics of constructivism highlight that translating social or ideational processes into testable variables presents significant methodological challenges. Furthermore, Marxist critics argue that constructivism overstates the autonomy of ideas while neglecting the role of economic structures and class interests in shaping global politics.²⁴

4. CRITICAL AND POSTCOLONIAL APPROACHES: EXPANDING THE THEORETICAL LENS

4.1. Postcolonialism: Challenging Epistemic Dominance

Postcolonial theory offers a transformative lens for understanding the persistent legacies of empire and the asymmetries of power that shape the global order. Applied to the Middle East, it uncovers the historical and ongoing effects of European and Western imperialism – not just in terms of borders and institutions, but in the very structures of knowledge and representation that define how the region is studied and understood. This theory stresses that the Middle East has not only been shaped by colonialism but continues to operate within postcolonial dynamics that affect its position in global politics. The case of Palestine, for example, illustrates how colonial mechanisms – territorial control, population regulation, and global silence – continue to operate within a modern geopolitical framework.²⁵

Postcolonialism also directs attention to discursive power – how the Middle East is narrated in global media, policy, and academic literature. Orientalist tropes such as the irrational despot, the passive victim, or the Islamic fundamentalist reduce complex societies to simplistic caricatures. As Edward Said famously demonstrated, such representations do not merely reflect misunderstanding – they enable political action by legitimizing Western superiority and paternalism.²⁶

Authors writing about the Middle East from a postcolonial perspective suggest that Western-centric international relations theory often functions as a form of epistemic

²⁴ Critical assessments of constructivism from other research approaches are presented, among others, by R. Jackson and G. Sørensen, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, Oxford 2013, pp. 225-227. Maja Zehfuss questions the ability of constructivism to adequately account for the complexities of international politics and highlights its potential Western-centric biases – see M. Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality*, Cambridge 2002. David M. McCourt proposes a revised constructivist framework, addressing previous shortcomings by integrating insights from practice theory and emphasizing the role of relational processes – D.M. McCourt, *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory*, Bristol 2023.

²⁵ See P.C. Salzman and D.D. Robinson (eds), *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, London 2008.

²⁶ E.W. Said *Orientalism*, New York 1978.

dominance, silencing alternative worldviews and reinforcing unequal hierarchies of knowledge. Their writings are not only deconstructive but also highlight resistance through subaltern narratives, indigenous thought systems, and acts of epistemic disobedience. These scholars demonstrate how Middle Eastern actors develop their own political grammars, challenging both local authoritarianism and external domination.²⁷

It can be observed that postcolonial theory demands not merely new case studies, but a reconfiguration of the very foundations of international relations. It asks whose knowledge counts, whose history is told, and whose voice defines the 'international'. In the case of the Middle East, this requires treating the region not as an anomaly or a problem to be explained, but as a central site of global modernity and theoretical production.

Postcolonial theory has significantly enriched our understanding of international relations, particularly by highlighting the legacies of colonialism, the role of discourse, and the politics of representation. It challenges dominant Western-centric paradigms and underlines the need to reconsider whose knowledge, history, and perspectives define the international system.

However, postcolonial theory is not without its limitations. One of the most common criticisms is its lack of a systematic or standardized method for empirical analysis. This stems largely from its deeply interpretive approach, which draws heavily on literature, philosophy, and cultural studies. As a result, postcolonial insights, while rich and critical, are often difficult to operationalize in comparative, cross-national research frameworks. Another important critique is that postcolonial theory may inadvertently reinforce the very Eurocentrism it seeks to overcome. By continually reacting against European narratives and colonial legacies, it risks maintaining Europe as the central reference point for analysis rather than constructing genuinely autonomous epistemologies. Consequently, some scholars argue that postcolonial theory has created a form of 'Eurocentrism in reverse', wherein the structure of Western dominance is paradoxically preserved even in critique.²⁸

These critiques do not undermine the importance of postcolonial contributions but rather point to the ongoing need for methodological innovation and the cultivation of alternative frameworks that move beyond reaction to Western hegemony.

4.2. Marxism, Neo-Gramscianism, and Structural Power

Beyond postcolonial critiques, other critical approaches have emerged that study the Middle East through different analytical lenses. Among these are the critical theories of international relations, which aim not merely to explain the world, but to

²⁷ An example of this perspective can be found in Asef Bayat's book *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford, CA 2010. The author investigates how everyday acts of resistance by ordinary citizens challenge authoritarian regimes and reshape political landscapes in the Middle East.

²⁸ For critiques of postcolonial theory, see: V. Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, London–New York 2013; and S. Seth, *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction*, London 2013.

change it.²⁹ These theories interrogate the underlying structures of power that shape international and regional dynamics. Marxist political economy and the neo-Gramscian perspective, in particular, reveal how global capitalism influences state behaviour, class hierarchies, and development trajectories within the region. They challenge mainstream IR assumptions by arguing that economic processes are not neutral or purely technical; rather, they are deeply political and reproduce global inequalities.³⁰

The rentier state model, the region's dependency on oil revenues, and the neoliberal economic reforms imposed by international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank are not simply economic phenomena. According to these critical perspectives, they function as instruments of structural power that constrain the sovereignty of Middle Eastern states and reinforce patterns of dependency and inequality in the global system.³¹

By applying Marxist and neo-Gramscian lenses, scholars uncover how the political economy of the Middle East is systematically tied to global capitalist structures, thereby deepening understanding of both internal and external sources of authoritarian resilience, social stratification, and developmental challenges.³²

4.3. Feminist, Ecological, and Poststructuralist Contributions

Feminist IR perspectives offer vital tools for analyzing how power operates not only between states but through social structures, roles, and identities.³³ Similarly, critical ecology offers theoretical pathways to understanding how environmental stress intersects with power, sovereignty, and security.³⁴ The Middle East has become a key arena for the strategic use of media and digital technologies to shape perceptions, build influence, and conduct soft power.³⁵ Traditional IR theories have often overlooked the growing impact of information operations, yet in the Middle East, narratives are powerful.

Poststructuralist IR, meanwhile, questions the discursive foundations of global politics. It asks how terms such as 'terrorist', 'failed state', and 'humanitarian intervention' are produced, who benefits from these narratives, and how they structure global power. Language is not just a medium but a mechanism of control, and Middle Eastern states and societies are often targets of these discourses, which strip them of agency and complexity.³⁶

²⁹ See R.W. Cox, "Social Forces...", pp. 126-155.

³⁰ See S. Gill, *Power and Resistance in the New World Order*, Basingstoke 2003.

³¹ See H. Beblawi, "The Rentier State in the Arab World," in G. Luciani (ed.), *The Arab State*, Routledge 1990; and A. Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States*, London 2011.

³² B. Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*, Stanford, CA 2012.

³³ See J.A. Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*, New York 1992.

³⁴ See R. Eckersley, *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*, Cambridge, MA 2004.

³⁵ See M. Lynch, *Voices...*

³⁶ See D. Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Minneapolis 1992.

5. REVISITING CORE THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Research results are often heavily influenced by the initial assumptions adopted, which prioritize certain elements while overlooking others. In Middle Eastern studies, numerous assumptions have been identified over time that ultimately proved inaccurate. Kenneth Waltz, in his book *Man, the State, and War*, assumed that states act rationally within an anarchic international system. Many studies on the Middle East were based on this assumption, but it has since been criticized for excessively simplifying state interests as purely rational.³⁷

Another influential assumption was that regional institutions are key to fostering cooperation, an idea formulated by Robert Keohane. However, this view was later critiqued in the Middle Eastern context by Shibley Telhami, who demonstrated its limited applicability there.³⁸

The assumption that conflicts in the Middle East are primarily the result of power rivalry has also been challenged. Fred Halliday emphasized the role of ideology and religion in fueling regional conflicts, highlighting dimensions beyond mere power competition. Similarly, F. Gregory Gause III criticized this narrow perspective, pointing to the complexity of conflicts in the Persian Gulf, which cannot be adequately explained by simple realist models.³⁹

A popular assumption was that modernization would lead to the democratization of the region. This assumption drew on Samuel P. Huntington's suggestion that economic development promotes democratization. Lisa Anderson highlighted the limitations of this assumption in the Arab context, pointing particularly to the persistence of authoritarianism.⁴⁰ Another widespread assumption was that conflicts in the region could be resolved through external interventions. This assumption was subsequently subject to strong criticism. Richard Haass analyzed U.S. interventions in the Middle East and pointed to their limitations in establishing a stable regional security system.⁴¹ Similarly, Marc Lynch described how external interventions – for example, in Libya and Syria – led to chaos, thereby undermining the assumption of their effectiveness.⁴²

³⁷ K. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, New York 1959. For criticism of Walt, see: M.N. Barnett, "The Creation of 'Arab' Politics, 1920–1945," in M.N. Barnett, *Dialogues...*, pp. 59–116.

³⁸ R. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* Princeton, NJ 1984; S. Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: The Path to the Camp David Accords*, New York 1990.

³⁹ F. G. Gause III, "The Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War," in F.G. Gause III, *The International Relations...*, pp. 45–87.

⁴⁰ L. Anderson, "Democracy in the Arab World: A Critique of the Political Culture Approach," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1–2 (1991), pp. 32–45.

⁴¹ R.N. Haass, "Iraq and the Persian Gulf," in R.N. Haass, *Intervention: The Use of American Military Force in the Post-Cold War World*, Washington, DC 1999, pp. 185–206.

⁴² M. Lynch, "Intervention and Civil War," *The Arab Uprising...*, pp. 161–186.

6. REGIONALISM AS AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Assuming that the starting point for constructing a theory that takes into account the specific characteristics of the Middle East is the adoption of a relevant theoretical approach or perspective, we argue that regionalism – and the concept of a regional international system – constitutes one such valuable approach. This perspective, advanced by scholars such as Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, contends that the Middle East constitutes a distinct subsystem within the broader global order.⁴³

The first scholar to pose the question of what constitutes the Middle Eastern regional system was Leonard Binder.⁴⁴ Binder identified two major tendencies in the then-current studies of international politics. The first tendency aimed at systematizing facts and assessing them through the lens of a specific theoretical framework, often variations of balance-of-power theories, with an emphasis on power rather than balance itself.⁴⁵ The second tendency was expressed through the accumulation of knowledge about the specifics of national politics within historical and social contexts – an approach typically associated with area studies.⁴⁶ Binder sought to find a middle ground between these two methodologies and formulated the hypothesis that *patterns of inter-relationship (sometimes called system) are a function of the distribution of power among states (sometimes called structure)*.⁴⁷

According to Buzan and Wæver, *regions, almost however defined, must be composed of geographically clustered sets of such units, and these clusters must be embedded in a larger system, which has a structure of its own*. Consequently, *regions have analytical, and even ontological, standing, but they do not have actor quality*. The foundational structure of the regional system is composed of four key elements: (1) boundary, delineating the region from its neighboring areas; (2) anarchic structure, indicating that the region consists of two or more autonomous units; (3) polarity, encompassing the distribution of power among these units; (4) social construction, encompassing the patterns of amity and enmity among the units.⁴⁸

Such an approach highlights that the Middle East is not merely a collection of sovereign states interacting externally – it is a deeply interconnected system where regime survival, identity formation, and domestic legitimacy are intimately tied to foreign

⁴³ B. Buzan and O. Weaver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 3.

⁴⁴ L. Binder, "The Middle East as a Subordinate International System," *World Politics*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1958), p. 408.

⁴⁵ An example of such an approach was Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York 1948.

⁴⁶ Examples of such an approach were F.A. Sondermann, "The Study of International Relations," *World Politics*, vol. X, no. 1 (1957), p. 102-112; K.W. Thompson, "Toward a New Theory of International Politics," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1955), pp. 733-746.

⁴⁷ L. Binder, "The Middle..." p. 408. About the terminology, see also W. Reitzel, M.A. Kaplan and C.G. Coblenz, *United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1955*, Washington, DC 1956, especially chapter XVI.

⁴⁸ B. Buzan, O. Weaver, *Regions...*, pp. 27, 53.

policy behaviour. The region's political structures are often fragile, legitimacy is frequently contested, and states rely heavily on external alliances or confrontations to bolster their domestic standing.

On the other hand, treating the Middle Eastern system as a subsystem within the global order enables a deeper examination of one of the region's most distinctive and often underappreciated features: the blurring of the lines between domestic and international politics. While the entanglement of domestic and foreign policy is not unique to the Middle East and is a core assumption of liberal approaches to International Relations, the region stands out for the intensity, persistence, and systemic character of this linkage. In contrast to many other regional systems, domestic political developments in the Middle East, such as regime legitimacy, identity politics, and internal power struggles, are consistently externalized and projected across borders, shaping regional alignments, conflicts, and interventions. This inside-out dynamic is not merely episodic but constitutes a structural feature of the Middle Eastern regional system. In many Middle Eastern states, domestic political decisions serve as signals of regional alignment. For instance, the normalization agreements signed by the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan with Israel (the Abraham Accords) were not merely diplomatic moves; they reflected internal calculations about regime legitimacy, economic strategy, and alignment with the U.S.-led order. Conversely, Qatar's independent foreign policy, particularly its support for Islamist movements and Al Jazeera's critical coverage, represents an assertion of internal sovereignty and a distinct identity from its neighbors, ultimately contributing to the 2017 blockade by the Saudi-led quartet. These examples illustrate how, in Middle Eastern diplomacy, the domestic and international realms are inseparable, and how internal narratives are consistently projected onto the international stage.

This persistent entanglement of domestic and international politics in the Middle East not only challenges traditional IR models that assume a strict separation between internal and external affairs but also underscores the need for region-specific theoretical frameworks that capture these complex dynamics.

Understanding the region as a systemic entity enables the integration of classical IR concepts – such as the balance of power, polarity, and alliance behavior – while also accommodating the unique political culture, identity frameworks, and historical context of the Middle East. The region operates with its own internal power dynamics, hierarchies, and conflict patterns, which cannot be fully understood through a global lens alone. In relation to the Middle East, this approach highlights at least three key elements of regional reality: (1) the asymmetry between regional actors (e.g., Saudi Arabia vs. Yemen); (2) interventions by global powers (the United States, Russia, China); and (3) the persistence of informal power structures, including militias, tribes, and ideological movements.

By adopting this regionalist perspective, we can move beyond the limitations of traditional analyses and develop a more flexible model that better reflects the specific characteristics of the Middle East. Only through such an approach can we identify the real mechanisms influencing contemporary conflicts and stabilization processes in the region.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ See J. Zdanowski, *The Middle East 2024: Decoding the Complexities of a Regional System*, Krakow 2024.

7. TOWARD A PLURALIST THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

While regionalist perspectives offer valuable tools for capturing the unique dynamics of the Middle East, they also reveal the limitations of relying exclusively on any single theoretical framework. The complexity and interconnectedness of regional and global processes demand a broader and more flexible intellectual approach. In this context, the concept of theoretical pluralism is particularly relevant. It provides a way to engage multiple theoretical traditions without forcing them into a rigid synthesis, thereby enabling a more nuanced and context-sensitive analysis of international relations in the Middle East. What emerges from this review is a clear message: no single theory sufficiently captures the complexities of Middle Eastern international relations. Each paradigm offers valuable insights, but the region demands theoretical pluralism, historical sensitivity, and interdisciplinary integration.

The call for theoretical pluralism has been articulated by scholars such as Yosef Lapid and Patrick Jackson.⁵⁰ But what exactly does theoretical pluralism mean? Yosef Lapid writes that *theoretical pluralism has been raised* alongside debates about cross-paradigmatic communication, incommensurability, reflexivity, and theory choice during what has been referred to as the ‘third debate’ in International Relations. Emerging in the 1980s, this debate sought to liberate the theoretical field of IR from the epistemological and ontological common ground shared by traditional IR theories. Scholars participating in this discussion stressed the importance of exposing alternative assumptions about social inquiry and knowledge construction – an endeavor that should be pursued through dialogue among theories rather than through their synthesis.⁵¹

In this context, Yizhou Miao advocates for theoretical pluralism through the empirical case study of realism and constructivism. Miao argues that in this way, *a pathway towards the harmonious consolidation of theories* can be built. He discusses the application of realism and constructivism in the study of International Relations and highlights their limitations when applied in isolation. Although both approaches hold prominent positions within the discipline, each has significant weaknesses and cannot provide a comprehensive account of state behavior on its own. Realism focuses on power and survival as central drivers of state action, often overlooking the role of national identity. Conversely, constructivism emphasizes the impact of national identity on state behavior, thereby often neglecting concerns about power and survival. The conclusion is clear: *If the two theories engage in dialogue with each other under the light of theoretical pluralism and therein cross-complement each other, the existing potential of complementarity can then hopefully be utilised.*⁵²

⁵⁰ P.Th. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, London–New York 2011, especially Chapter 7 “A pluralist science of IR”, p. 188-212; Y. Lapid “Through Dialogue to Engaged Pluralism: The Unfinished Business of the Third Debate,” *International Studies Review*, vol. 5, no.1 (2003), pp. 128-131.

⁵¹ Y. Lapid, “Through...,” p. 128. See Th. Balzacq and S.J. Baele, “The Third Debate and Postpositivism,” *International Studies*, 22 December 2017.

⁵² Y. Miao, “Promoting Theoretical Pluralism in International Relations: Through the Empirical Case of Realism and Constructivism,” *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, vol. 22 (2023), pp. 184-188.

Morten Valbjørn has advanced the idea that dialogue between International Relations (IR) theory and Middle East Studies (MES) is the most productive and fruitful research approach. He emphasizes the necessity of a 'dialogue about dialogue'. Valbjørn identifies three types of dialogue between specialists in the two fields: hierarchical, reflexive, and transformative. In the first type, Middle East specialists were perceived as subordinate junior partners to a superior IR discipline. In the second, a two-way conversation emerged, enabling mutual change in both academic fields. In the third, a more ambitious approach is promoted – *a radical transformation of the existing meta-boundaries in academia by establishing new fields of study*.⁵³

In relation to the Middle East, theoretical pluralism first and foremost means that the region should not be treated as an 'exception' to International Relations theory, nor should it be forced to conform to Western-centric models. Instead, the Middle East should be regarded as a laboratory for theory-building – a space where global trends manifest in localized forms, and where regional innovation may contribute to rethinking the very foundations of the discipline.⁵⁴

Second, it suggests the need for a more reflexive theoretical posture – one that does not treat theory as a fixed model to be tested against a region, but rather allows empirical complexity to reshape theoretical foundations. The Middle East, far from being an outlier, becomes a source of epistemological insight for the entire discipline. Morten Valbjørn has drawn attention to this aspect, particularly when reflecting on the consequences of the Arab Spring. The dramatic and unexpected events of 2011 stimulated a very productive and fertile dialogue between regional specialists and scholars of comparative politics who were not initially Middle East specialists.⁵⁵ The Arab Spring thus became a kind of testing ground for International Relations theories, exposing their assumptions and limitations when confronted with rapidly unfolding and complex political realities.⁵⁶

CONCLUSION: TOWARD NEW THEORETICAL TOOLS

A core conclusion of this study is the value of theoretical pluralism. No single IR paradigm is sufficient to explain the totality of Middle Eastern international relations. Realism is indispensable for understanding conflict and alliance behavior; constructivism explains identity-driven foreign policy; liberalism remains relevant in institution-building and economic diplomacy; postcolonial theory uncovers the legacies of

⁵³ M. Valbjørn "International Relations Theory and the New Middle East: Three Levels of a Debate," in M. Lynch (ed.), *POMEPS Studies 16: International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East*, Washington, DC 2015, p. 74.

⁵⁴ Telhami and Barnett argued as early as 2002 that "the Middle East provides an important reservoir for theorizing and for contributing to broader debates in international relations" – see: S. Telhami and M. Barnett "Introduction..." p. 8.

⁵⁵ M. Valbjørn "International..." p. 74.

⁵⁶ There is a substantial body of literature on this topic. See: A. Bank "Comparative Area Studies and the Study of Middle East Politics after the Arab Uprising," in A.I. Ahram, P. Köllner, R. Sil (eds), *Comparative Area Studies: Methodological Rationales and Cross-Regional Applications*, New York 2018, pp. 119-130.

imperial domination; feminist and critical approaches bring visibility to actors and dynamics that have traditionally been ignored.

Rather than competing, these approaches must be understood as complementary. The complexity of the Middle East demands a multi-theoretical lens that is responsive to changing dynamics and rooted in empirical realities. The regional system operates within intersecting layers of identity, power, and history, and thus requires methodological elasticity and analytical humility.

Future theory for the Middle East must grapple with: (1) non-linearity and hybridity among political actors (the anti-systemic model); (2) the interplay between domestic legitimacy and foreign policy (the role of external actors); and (3) the influence of culture, memory, and narrative in shaping diplomacy (the significance of non-state factors).

The anti-systemic model suggests that, rather than treating the Middle East as a unified system, we should view it as a collection of fragmented subsystems in which local conflicts and competing identities play a decisive role. Such an approach enables a more detailed analysis of regional dynamics and offers a better understanding of why classical theories often fail to capture the region's complexity.

Global powers – the United States, Russia, and China – exert substantial influence in shaping Middle Eastern politics. Their interventions not only destabilize the region but also create new configurations of power that are difficult to interpret through traditional theoretical frameworks. Thus, any robust analysis must account for both internal dynamics and external influences.

One of the central challenges to traditional IR theory in the Middle East is the prominence of non-state actors. Groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, ISIS, and Kurdish militias operate across borders, control territory, and engage in both warfare and diplomacy. Traditional state-centric theories struggle to explain these actors' influence, particularly in contexts like: Lebanon, where Hezbollah functions as both a political party and a parallel military force; Iraq and Syria, where ISIS briefly governed a 'quasi-state entity' Gaza, where Hamas controls borders, policing, and civil services independent of the Palestinian Authority. The region's experience with fragmented sovereignty, persistent external intervention, hybrid governance structures, and transnational ideologies suggests that many of the core assumptions of classical IR – especially the Westphalian state model – are inadequate. This calls for not only applying theory differently, but also developing new theoretical tools grounded in the political and historical specificity of the region.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson L., "Democracy in the Arab World: A Critique of the Political Culture Approach," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1–2 (1991), pp. 77–92.
- Balzacq Th., Baele S.J., "The Third Debate and Postpositivism," *International Studies*, 22 December 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.104>.

- Bank A., "Comparative Area Studies and the Study of Middle East Politics after the Arab Uprising," in A.I. Ahram, P. Köllner, R. Sil (eds), *Comparative Area Studies: Methodological Rationales and Cross-Regional Applications*, New York 2018, pp. 119-130, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190846374.003.0007>.
- Barnett M.N., *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*, New York 1998.
- Barnett M.N., "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East," in P.J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York 1996.
- Bates R.H., "Area Studies and the Discipline: A Useful Controversy?," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1997), pp. 166-169, <https://doi.org/10.2307/420485>.
- Bayat A., *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford, CA 2010.
- Beblawi H., "The Rentier State in the Arab World," in G. Luciani (ed.), *The Arab State*, Routledge 1990.
- Bilgin P., "Is the 'Orientalist' Past the Future of Middle East Studies?," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2004), pp. 423-433, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659042000174897>.
- Binder L., "The Middle East as a Subordinate International System," *World Politics*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1958), pp. 408-429, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009495>.
- Buzan B., Weaver O., *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, 2003.
- Calculli M., "Self-Determination at All Costs: Explaining the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah Axis," in *Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Economics, History and Political Science*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2020), pp. 95-118, <https://doi.org/10.26331/1118>.
- Campbell D., *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Minneapolis 1992.
- Chibber V., *Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital*, London–New York 2013.
- Cox R.W., "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1981), pp. 126-155, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298810100020501>.
- Crepy P., "Proxy Warfare's Impact on Sectarianization: The Case of the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry," *FLUX: International Relations Review*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2018), pp. 23-35, <https://doi.org/10.26443/firr.v9i1.6>.
- Doyle M.W., "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 80, no. 4 (1986), pp. 1151-1169, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1960861>.
- Eckersley R., *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*, Cambridge, MA 2004.
- Finnemore M., Sikkink K., "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4 (1998), pp. 887-917, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789>.
- Gause III F.G., *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Cambridge 2010.
- Ghattas K., *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry that Unravelling Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East*, London 2020.
- Gill S., *Power and Resistance in the New World Order*, Basingstoke 2003.
- Guzzini S., Leander A. (eds), *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and His Critics*, London–New York 2006.
- Haass R.N., *Intervention: The Use of American Military Force in the Post-Cold War World*, Washington, DC 1999.

- Haddad B., *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*, Stanford, CA 2012.
- Hanich A., *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States*, London 2011.
- Jackson P.Th., *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, London–New York 2011.
- Jackson R., Sørensen G., *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, Oxford 2013.
- Kamrava M., *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*, Cambridge 2008.
- Keohane R., *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton, NJ 1984.
- Keohane R., Nye J.S., *Power and Interdependence*, Boston 1977.
- Khalidi R., "Is There a Future for Middle East Studies?," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1995), pp. 1-6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23061200>.
- Lapid Y., "Culture's Ship: Returns and Departures in International Relations Theory," in Y. Lapid, F. Kratochwil (eds.), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory*, Boulder 1996.
- Lapid Y., "Through Dialogue to Engaged Pluralism: The Unfinished Business of the Third Debate," *International Studies Review*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2003), pp. 128-131, https://doi.org/10.1111/1521-9488.501019_3.
- Lynch M., *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolution of the New Middle East*, New York 2013.
- Lynch M., *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*, New York 2006.
- McCourt D.M., *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory*, Bristol 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781529217827.001.0001>.
- Mearsheimer J.J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York 2001.
- Miao Y., "Promoting Theoretical Pluralism in International Relations: Through the Empirical Case of Realism and Constructivism," *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, vol. 22 (2023), pp. 184-188, <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/22/20230279>.
- Moravcsik A., "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization*, vol. 51, no. 4 (1997), pp. 513-553, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550447>.
- Morgenthau H.J., *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York 1948.
- Norton A.R., *Hezbollah: A Short History*, Princeton, NJ 2007.
- Onuf N., *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia, SC 1989.
- Patten A., "The Idea of Israel as a Jewish State," *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2020), pp. 531-559, <https://doi.org/10.1515/til-2020-0023>.
- Reitzel W., Kaplan M.A., Coblenz C.G., *United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1955*, Washington, DC 1956.
- Said E.W., *Orientalism*, New York 1978.
- Salzman P.C., Divine Robinson D. (eds), *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, London 2008.

- Seth S., *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction*, London 2013.
- Smith S., Booth K., Zalewski M. (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, Cambridge 1996.
- Sondermann F.A., "The Study of International Relations," *World Politics*, vol. X, no. 1 (1957).
- Telhami S., *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: The Path to the Camp David Accords*, New York 1990.
- Telhami S., Barnett M., "Introduction: Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East," in S. Telhami, M. Barnett (eds), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Ithaca–London 2002.
- Tetti A., "Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies and the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2007), pp. 117-145, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066107074291>.
- Thompson K.W., "Toward a Theory of International Politics," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1955), pp. 733-746, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1951435>.
- Tickner J.A., *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*, New York 1992.
- Valbjørn M., "International Relations Theory and the New Middle East: Three Levels of a Debate," in M. Lynch (ed.), *POMEPS Studies 16: International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East*, Washington, DC, 2015, pp. 74-79.
- Valbjørn M., "Introduction: The Role of Ideas and Identities in Middle East International Relations," in M. Valbjørn, F.H. Lawson (eds), *International Relations of the Middle East*, Vol. 3: *The Role of Ideas and Identities in Middle East International Relations*, Los Angeles–London–New Delhi 2015, pp. 7-23.
- Valbjørn M., "Toward a 'Mesopotamian Turn': Disciplinarity and the Study of the International Relations of the Middle East," *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1/2 (2004), pp. 47-75, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/670360>.
- Walt S.M., *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca–London 1987.
- Waltz K., *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, New York 1959.
- Waltz K.N., *Theory of International Politics*, New York 1979.
- Wastnidge E., "Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Re-assessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Politics," *Middle East Critique*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2019), pp. 7-28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2018.1549232>.
- Wendt A., *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge 1999.
- Yavuz M.H., *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*, Oxford 2020.
- Zdanowski J., *The Middle East 2024: Decoding the Complexities of a Regional System*, Kraków 2024.
- Zehfuss M., *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality*, Cambridge 2002.

Jerzy ZDANOWSKI – professor at the Faculty of Law, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Krakow University. He is a political scientist, historian and orientalist who has specialised for many years in research on the Middle East, Islam and international relations. He is the author of over 20 books and more than 120 academic articles.