

The Middle East and International and Regional Strategic Balances After the Arab Spring



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Abstract:

The Middle East has gained significant importance in the field of international studies in general and strategic studies in particular, due to the impact that events occurring in its arena have on the level of international interactions in their various forms and fields, which in turn affect the regional interaction system in one way or another.

Any researcher in Middle Eastern affairs can observe that these interactions became apparent, especially with the wave of the Arab Spring. Regional Middle Eastern powers, which have close ties with international forces, emerged in a balance of power. The latter also entered the game of international strategic balances. In this article, the implications of strategic balances in the Middle East and its various aspects will be explored.

Keywords: Middle East; International Balances; Regional Balances; Arab Spring.

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Introduction:

The issue of international balances is considered one of the important matters in studying the foreign policies of major powers, and this is because the balances, in general, are outcomes of the interactions of the foreign policies of major powers in the international system, This issue has been known for quite some time in the pattern of relations among major powers. It is true that international relations have, for varying periods, witnessed the dominance of a particular power over international interactions. However, this state of dominance did not last long, and although it persisted in certain cases for a considerable time, countries always resorted to the issue of balance as a means to achieve parity in the nature of their relations with one another. Thus, this process continued through the dialectic of conflict and balance over time. The Middle East was not immune to this context, Accordingly, this article will address the issue of international and regional strategic balances, whether they are currently in place or in the process of formation in this region, especially after the wave of the Arab Spring.

1. The Middle East: The Concept and the Geography Problem:

It is commonly known that geographers are the first to name places and their political, economic, and social implications. However, this was not the case with the concept of the Middle East, which lacked the involvement of geographers in its naming. Traditionally, it is the stakeholders who assign names, but the opposite happened with the term Middle East. While there is agreement that its naming came from outside the region, the disagreement over the origin of the term is undeniable (Seraghni& Bounab.2019, p 15).

And if we trace the early beginnings of the term's mention in both political and academic contexts, we will notice that the term first appeared in the writings of Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, when he referred to the necessity of establishing a Middle Eastern Commonwealth led by a Jewish state. It was also used by British intelligence officer General Thomas Gordon in 1900 in his correspondence with the British government regarding the Russian threat to British interests in India. Following him, the term was used by British naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan in his 1902 article titled "The Persian Gulf and International Relations" (Ritzer.2007, p180).

As a result, the term was adopted by the British newspaper The Times through its correspondent Sir Ignatius Valentine Chirol, in his report in 1902, where he referred to the northern and western regions of the British Empire's borders in India as the Middle East. Following the same trend, Lord George Curzon—then Viceroy of India—borrowed the term in a discussion session in the British House of Commons in 1911, to denote the region that includes Iran, Turkey, and the Arabian Gulf (Seraghni& Bounab.2019, p 16).

As a continuation of the military and political use of the term, Winston Churchill established the Middle East Administration in March 1921, tasked with overseeing the affairs of Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq. During World War II, the British Royal Air Force commands were merged under a single command known as the Middle East. The United States, on the other hand, established the American Forces Middle East Command in late 1941 following the attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entry into the war (Remli.2020, Pp 117-118).

What is notable about this periodization of the term "Middle East" is its association with the military aspect of Western colonial policies, primarily by Britain and later by the United States. In less than half a century, the Middle East became a geopolitical term present on specialized maps, as well as the title of official war plans and military publications, leading to its increased prevalence in various capitals.

2. The Meaning of International Balance and Its Forms:

Any researcher who examines the writings that have delved into the topic of international balances can conclude that there are two distinct meanings of the phenomenon of international balance, which are the traditional meaning and the contemporary meaning;

The traditional meaning refers to the equality between parties in terms of military capabilities, as the fundamental nature of international relations is conflict due to the differing and contrasting national interests of states seeking to enhance their repressive capabilities at the expense of others. This leads to the threat of freedom and exploitation of one another, prompting them to counterbalance power with similar force through forming opposing blocs and alliances, until balance can be restored (Abd-almounaïm. 1998, p 102).

As for the contemporary meaning, it is formed under the term "balance of power," which refers to the equal or nearly equal distribution of all elements of economic, political, and strategic power between two or more states. This creates a type of international alliances whose effects and repercussions reach regional levels, potentially leading to a state of peace and stability, ensuring shared interests, and consequently moving away from the circle of conflicts and wars (Yamen Khaled. 2010, p16).

As for the forms of international balance, what can be said is that there is no single image or form of international balance. Although its basic idea is summarized in the distribution of power and influence among international parties, these parties can increase or decrease;

In stages of international conflict, a few parties may reach a state of relative balance of power, forming a strategic balance that relies on the multiplicity of active or influential international parties and poles in the international system. This type of strategic balance is referred to as multi-party balance or composite

balance, and sometimes it is found under the name complex balance, due to the relationship based on numerous alliances among the poles themselves (Ibrahim. 1999, p 120).

Two states may dominate the strategic balance, resulting in a bilateral balance, which specialists have termed simple balance. This type of balance is characterized by the emergence of two major powers, and its simplicity lies in the nature of the relationship imposed by this type of balance between these two powers. The lines of international relations in this type become clearer for other international parties (Inad Kazim Hussein. 2017, p 47).

That is the main picture of the international balances of the foreign policies of major powers. However, as Arsu says, there are only the northern and southern winds, and the rest of the winds are derived from them. Similarly, the strategic balance is either simple or complex (Ilyes. 2016, Pp 14-15), but these two main forms of balance produce other types such as:

- Flexible balance: It is the balance that exists between countries belonging to a unified or homogeneous political, economic, and social thought. It is sometimes referred to as the balance of homogeneous systems or the balance of moderate systems.

- Rigid balance: It is the balance that exists between countries belonging to different political, intellectual, economic, and social models, and conflicting or contradictory civilizations. Therefore, it is sometimes referred to as the balance of conflicting systems or the balance of revolutionary systems (Ali Ziad. 2017, Pp 50-51).

We note here that flexibility and rigidity are attributes that attach to the original type of balance, giving it other sub-forms; balance can be simple and flexible, or simple and rigid, as well as complex and flexible, or complex and rigid. Whenever the balance is complex and flexible, stability lasts for a long time, and whenever the balance is complex and rigid, stability lasts for a short time, because sharp contradictions drive towards alliances and coalitions and quickly tilt the balance from the nature of the complex to the dual, hastening war. The rule states that flexibility and rigidity are the spirit of strategic balance and the secret of its movement (Ilyes. 2016, Pp 16-17).

3. International Balances and New Variables:

Many developments in international relations, especially after the end of the Cold War, have led to an attempt to develop the largest theoretical field for international relations theories (the realist school) into the theory of the balance of power, with the end of the era of fixed major global alliances and the emergence of a greater role for regional structures in international power balances as follows:

- Transitioning the focus from "balance" to the process of "balancing" Traditionally, the balance of power was viewed as a distribution of power among two or more actors. Instead, the focus should be on the process through which balance is achieved, considering it a dynamic process characterized by flexibility, fluidity, and continuity. Consequently, the interactive process and competition among different powers to achieve the balance of power have become more important in its study than the final outcome of this interaction process (Ali Faris. 2018, Pp 130-131).

Specialists argue that the imposition of this dynamic perspective on international balances is that balance itself no longer occurs between units of states, but rather between units of non-state actors that have become part of a larger system. These units form a number of changing alliances, which achieve balance among themselves, even if temporarily, short-term, or for a specific purpose. It is a temporary balance that changes continuously, especially since one of the powers always seeks to enhance its strength and eliminate the status quo, even if it involves cooperation with non-state actors, which is viewed as restrictive to their movement or not advantageous for them (Ilyes. 2016, Pp 18).

- Focus on balancing mechanisms instead of measuring balance: Given the absence of an agreed-upon formula for measuring power through a quantitative equation, the focus has shifted to the mechanisms used by international actors to achieve a competitive position with other powers, the methods they follow to confront other powers, and their attempts to curb the influence and power of others (Khadhar. 2010, Pp 35-36).

- Focus on the balance of power at the regional levels: The focus of balances is no longer solely on the international structure, but regional balance has also become important. This is indicated by the experience of the past two decades, as major powers have begun to adopt their alliances on regional bases. Additionally, competing regional countries are now seeking balance within their region first, rather than solely within the international framework (Younes Moayed. 2015, Pp 44-45). In specific cases, as seen in the interactions in the Middle East region in recent years, it is noticeable that the active regional powers (Iran, Turkey, the Zionist entity) are the ones shaping the fundamental interactions and dominating regional affairs, especially the intense conflict between the Zionist entity (and its allied countries and organizations) and Iran (and its allied countries and organizations).

4. The Middle East and mechanisms Achieving international and regional balance and its strategies:

This is evident from the following:

- Hard balancing is adopted by countries that are in severe conflict with others, through policies of building and modernizing military capabilities or

purchasing weapons from a reliable source, in addition to forming official alliances and counter-alliances to balance the capabilities of their main adversaries (Ali Ziad. 2016, p80).

- Soft balancing is achieved through an implicit or secret understanding among a group of countries to counter a potential threat or balance another dominant/controlling/great power. This can involve cooperative interactions among them, which may occur through regional and international institutions. An example of this is the use of diplomacy and international institutions to restrict the movement of the United States by France, Germany, Russia, and China, and to prevent it from occupying Iraq by blocking the issuance of a Security Council resolution that would allow it (Ali Ziad. 2016, p81).

- Creating a balance of power between asymmetric actors It refers to the efforts of states to balance and contain the indirect threats posed by non-state actors and their state supporters to weaken existing states using various means such as terrorism and asymmetric warfare (Ali Ziad. 2016, p82).

If the previous mechanisms are characterized by all countries applying them in their foreign policies to achieve balance at a specific time or to confront a threat or to achieve interests and goals, then there are two important strategies that major powers follow to achieve balance, represented in the strategy of hedging to eliminate hegemony, as well as the strategy of distant balancing.

1- The strategic hedging strategy involves the second power in the international system adopting a policy that relies on avoiding confrontation with the dominant international power in the short term. However, it simultaneously works towards the development of the international system's structure towards multipolarity. This means it operates under the constraints imposed by the dominant power but hedges and prepares for the uncertainty accompanying major strategic transformations. When these transformations occur, the leading powers in the international system will weaken to the extent that the second powers will adopt hard power balancing strategies (Ali Faris. 2018, p 20).

2- The offshore balancing strategy aims to thwart attempts to change the international system and keep the dominant state as the primary actor in the international system. According to proponents of this approach (which is primarily American), it is in the interest of the United States to prevent the emergence of a dominant power in different regions of the world. Therefore, it employs offshore balancing mechanisms to prevent the rise of a competing power, through alliances with key regional powers and imposing the costs and risks of self-defense on them. This means that if the United States wants to maintain its hegemony or power in a certain region, it must play the role of an external balancer in that region when a major regional power seeks to dominate it. The advantage of this strategy lies in the fact that the dominant state can obtain the greatest concessions from its allies

as the price for its intervention in the conflict in its favour (Ali Faris. 2018, Pp 143-144).

It is worth noting that following the events of the Arab Spring, intellectual schools developed a new strategy called "leading from behind," which was implemented by Barack Obama. This strategy relies on slow movement and half-measures to deal with situations or cases that still need more time to achieve broader and greater goals. Fukuyama points out that Obama's reluctance to engage in new commitments following the Arab Spring illustrates the nature of the American stance during this period. In the Libyan case, Britain and France took the lead in military action, with the U.S. playing a supportive role through logistical and intelligence support. A similar role may have been seen in Mali, where France intervened to stop the Islamists in the south. This demonstrates the role the U.S. plays in the region, where performance is based on task distribution in exchange for shared outcomes (Ali Faris. 2018, Pp 141-142).

Conclusion:

This article examined the implications of the balance of roles of international and regional powers in the Middle East, which were incentivized to change their policies to align with the prevailing structure of gains due to the structural transformation in the regional system following the Arab Spring, even if under the pretext of maintaining the Middle Eastern system.

All the active roles in the region operate in a dual manner, either maintaining the status quo or pushing for change according to their interests. This competition between international and regional balances has produced a fundamental strategic security dilemma regarding the maintenance of the Middle Eastern system. This process is naturally coupled with the perceptions of international powers alongside the perceptions of regional powers, with only a difference in the behavior of regional powers, which entails the risk of changing the current situation and thus creating a state of instability in the existing balance.

Accordingly, the state of strategic balance shaped by regional powers in the Middle East cannot change the standards and the general situation in this region in isolation from the interactions of international strategic balances. Instead, they adopt limited corrective policies aimed at preserving the status quo in line with their regional interests. Consequently, the motivations related to revising the status quo will diminish with the capabilities of the active powers in the region and the perception of the threat posed by the situation itself.

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