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CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE ROLE OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND MULTILATERAL FRAMEWORKS

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Abstract

The Middle East has long been characterized by protracted conflicts shaped by historical grievances, geopolitical rivalries, sectarian divides, and external interventions. In recent years, scholars and policymakers have increasingly turned their attention to the potential role of regional organizations and multilateral frameworks in addressing these persistent challenges. While global institutions such as the United Nations have traditionally dominated peace efforts, regional actors, including the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), have pursued mediation of disputes, encouraging dialogue, and promoting cooperative security arrangements. However, these organizations often face structural limitations, internal divisions, and political rivalries that weaken their effectiveness. At the same time, emerging multilateral initiatives, including Track II diplomacy, joint peacekeeping arrangements, and international–regional partnerships, have highlighted new opportunities for conflict resolution. Drawing on these notion, study attempts to assess the successes, shortcomings, and prospects of regional and multilateral approaches to peace in the Middle East. The paper infers that sustainable conflict resolution requires a hybrid model–leveraging regional legitimacy and local ownership while integrating the resources and neutrality of global multilateral frameworks. With an exhaustive analysis of contemporary case studies such as the Syrian conflict, the Yemeni crisis, and normalization processes, the research contributes to an adequate level of understanding regarding how cooperative mechanisms can evolve to address the complex dynamics of Middle Eastern conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East remains one of the most conflict-prone regions of the world, shaped by a complex mix of historical grievances, geopolitical rivalries, religious divisions, and external interventions. From the Arab-Israeli wars to the more recent crises in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, conflict has become a defining feature of the region's political landscape. These conflicts have not only caused widespread human suffering but have also hindered regional development, undermined governance, and perpetuated cycles of instability. Addressing them requires more than bilateral negotiations or ad hoc agreements; it requires frameworks that combine legitimacy, inclusivity, and sustainability. In this context, both regional organizations and multilateral frameworks have

emerged as central actors in attempts to manage and resolve conflicts.

While global organizations such as the United Nations (UN) have long played a leading role in peace initiatives across the Middle East, regional bodies including the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have also sought to mediate disputes and promote dialogue. These organizations enjoy cultural legitimacy and regional ownership that external actors often lack, making them potentially powerful vehicles for peacebuilding. At the same time, their efforts are frequently undermined by structural weaknesses, divergent political interests, and deep-seated rivalries among member states. The Arab League, for example, has been criticized for its inability to enforce decisions or prevent escalation during key crises, while the GCC's involvement in Yemen has revealed both the strengths and the limitations of regional mediation efforts (Ulrichsen, 2020).

In recent years, scholars have increasingly argued that neither regional nor multilateral approaches alone are sufficient to resolve Middle Eastern conflicts. Instead, sustainable conflict resolution requires hybrid frameworks that combine the cultural legitimacy and local ownership of regional organizations with the neutrality, expertise, and resources of multilateral bodies. Such hybrid approaches have shown potential in initiatives like the UN–African Union collaboration in Africa, and similar mechanisms could be adapted to the Middle Eastern context (Acharya, 2021).

This paper seeks to examine the role of regional organizations and multilateral frameworks in conflict resolution in the Middle East, focusing on both their contributions and their limitations. It argues that while regional organizations provide essential legitimacy and proximity, their effectiveness is constrained by political rivalries and institutional weaknesses. Conversely, multilateral frameworks offer neutrality and resources but struggle with local legitimacy. The paper contends that hybrid models, which leverage the strengths of both, offer the most promising path toward sustainable peace.

2. Conceptualizing Conflict Resolution in the Middle East

Conflict resolution goes beyond the short-term management of violence, aiming instead to address root causes, transform relationships, and establish structures that sustain peace. Ramsbotham et al. (2019) describe it as a process of building positive peace through dialogue, institutional reform, and reconciliation. This distinction is critical in the Middle East, where conflicts are often protracted, deeply embedded in identity and history, and shaped by external intervention. Unlike conflict management, which may only suppress violence temporarily, conflict resolution in this region requires approaches that engage political, social, and cultural dimensions simultaneously.

2.1 Regional and Multilateral Frameworks

Regional frameworks include organizations established by Middle Eastern states, such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). These bodies derive legitimacy from shared cultural and religious ties, which can strengthen their role as mediators. For example, the Arab League's sponsorship of the 1989 Taif Agreement, which ended Lebanon's civil war, highlighted the ability of regional actors to craft solutions grounded in regional realities (Ulrichsen, 2020). However, internal rivalries, such as those between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have often undermined collective positions, weakening their credibility during crises like the Syrian conflict.

Multilateral frameworks, by contrast, involve broader institutions and coalitions beyond the region. The United Nations (UN) is the most prominent, with its Security Council resolutions and peace envoys frequently involved in Middle Eastern conflicts. The European Union (EU) has also contributed through mediation support, humanitarian aid, and post-conflict stabilization. Multilateral frameworks bring resources, technical expertise, and international legitimacy that regional organizations often lack. Still, they are frequently criticized for being instruments of great power politics, particularly when Security Council

dynamics prevent decisive action (Gowan & Dworkin, 2019).

2.2 Theoretical Approaches

Different theoretical lenses offer knowledge regard to the strengths and weaknesses of these frameworks.

From a **realist perspective**, both regional and multilateral organizations are limited by state interests. Realists argue that powerful states in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, shape the agendas of regional institutions, while global bodies like the UN are constrained by the vetoes and competing strategies of major powers (Fawcett, 2020).

Liberal institutionalism presents a more optimistic view, emphasizing that organizations provide platforms for dialogue, lower transaction costs, and establish norms that facilitate cooperation. The GCC's mediation in Yemen in 2011, which brokered President Saleh's exit, demonstrates how regional institutions can serve as credible intermediaries under certain conditions (Roberts, 2019).

Constructivist perspectives emphasize the importance of identities, narratives, and norms. Shared cultural or religious identities allow regional bodies to connect more deeply with local actors, which can increase legitimacy. However, these same identities can also reinforce divisions, as when sectarian dynamics influenced the Arab League's fragmented response to the Syrian war (Barnett, 2021).

These perspectives insinuate that both regional and multilateral frameworks bring distinct strengths and vulnerabilities. Regional organizations are close to the conflicts and resonate with local identities, but they lack enforcement capacity and are often divided. Multilateral frameworks offer neutrality and resources, but they risk alienating local actors and reproducing external power rivalries.

3. Historical Role of Regional Organizations in the Middle East

Regional organizations in the Middle East have been central actors in conflict resolution since the mid twentieth century, yet their performance has been uneven. Institutions such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) were created to foster regional solidarity, provide mechanisms for mediation, and promote collective security. In practice, however, their interventions have often been constrained by political rivalries among member states and by structural weaknesses that limit their ability to enforce decisions. Understanding their historical role helps clarify both their potential and their limitations in addressing the complex conflicts of the region.

3.1 The Arab League

The Arab League, founded in 1945, is the oldest regional organization in the Middle East. Its early years were dominated by the Arab–Israeli conflict, where it sought to coordinate member states' responses. However, divisions among Arab governments undermined collective action, particularly after the Arab defeats in the wars of 1948 and 1967 (Fawcett, 2020). Despite these setbacks, the Arab League played an important role in mediating the Lebanese civil war. Its sponsorship of the 1989 Taif Agreement, which ended fifteen years of conflict, remains one of its few notable successes. More recently, the League suspended Syria's membership in 2011 in response to the civil war, a symbolic move that demonstrated its ability to exert political pressure, but one that failed to stop the violence on the ground.

3.2 The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The GCC, established in 1981 by six Gulf monarchies, was designed to promote regional stability in the context of the Iran–Iraq war. The GCC has acted as a mediator in several disputes, most prominently in Yemen. In 2011, it brokered the transition plan that led to the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, preventing an escalation of violence at that time (Roberts, 2019).

However, the GCC's later involvement in the Yemeni conflict revealed internal fractures. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates pursued competing strategies, while Qatar's rift with other GCC members between 2017 and 2021 undermined cohesion. This case highlights how intra-regional rivalries have limited the GCC's capacity to act as a united and credible mediator (Kostiner, 2019).

3.3 The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

The OIC, founded in 1969, represents fifty seven member states and has sought to provide a broader Islamic framework for addressing political and humanitarian crises. Its large membership has given it symbolic weight, but it has struggled to act decisively in the Middle East. On issues such as Palestine, the OIC has consistently reaffirmed political solidarity, yet has failed to translate declarations into effective mediation or enforcement (Makdisi, 2021). During conflicts such as Syria and Yemen, the OIC has largely deferred to other actors, illustrating its limited institutional capacity to manage complex security crises.

A common theme across these organizations is the tension between legitimacy and capacity. Their cultural and historical ties give them a degree of legitimacy that external actors lack, but their ability to enforce agreements remains weak. Rivalries among leading states, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, and Turkey, often paralyze decision-making. Moreover, many of these institutions lack strong bureaucratic structures or independent financial resources, making them dependent on the political will of their most powerful members (Barnett, 2021).

4. The Role of the United Nations and Other Multilateral Frameworks

Multilateral frameworks have been central to attempts at conflict resolution in the Middle East, particularly because they provide resources, international legitimacy, and the appearance of neutrality that regional organizations often lack. The most prominent actor in this regard is the United Nations (UN), whose Security Council, peacekeeping operations, and special envoys have been repeatedly involved in Middle Eastern crises. Alongside the UN, the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), and ad hoc coalitions have also sought to mediate conflicts, highlighting the significance of multilateralism in addressing protracted instability.

4.1 The United Nations in the Middle East

The UN has been engaged in Middle Eastern conflicts since its inception, beginning with its role in the partition of Palestine in 1947. Over the decades, it has deployed peacekeepers in Lebanon, supervised ceasefires, and facilitated negotiations. In more recent contexts, such as Syria and Yemen, the UN has appointed special envoys to mediate dialogue between warring parties. For example, the Geneva and Astana processes on Syria reflected attempts to bring together international and regional stakeholders under a multilateral umbrella (Charbonneau, 2019). Despite these efforts, the UN's role has often been constrained by the veto power of the permanent members of the Security Council, which has paralyzed decision-making on issues where global powers are divided.

4.2 The European Union and Other Multilateral Actors

Beyond the UN, the European Union has emerged as an influential actor in the Middle East, particularly in providing humanitarian aid, supporting institution-building, and mediating through diplomacy. The EU's support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program highlighted its ability to play a stabilizing role, even when regional and global powers disagreed (Borrell, 2020). Similarly, the African Union has occasionally supported mediation processes in North Africa, while international coalitions, such as the Global Coalition Against ISIS, demonstrated how collective action can contribute to addressing specific security threats. Yet, the EU and other multilateral actors often lack the coercive power or deep cultural legitimacy needed to resolve conflicts independently.

4.3 Multilateralism and Local Legitimacy

A persistent challenge for multilateral frameworks is their difficulty in balancing global neutrality with local legitimacy. Without the support of regional actors, international initiatives struggle to gain traction. Conversely, without international resources, regional frameworks lack enforcement. As Gowan and Dworkin (2019) argue, multilateralism in the Middle East often suffers from a gap between diplomatic ambition and practical impact. This underscores the necessity of hybrid approaches, where multilateral and regional frameworks collaborate to combine their respective strengths.

Multilateral frameworks have made critical contributions to conflict resolution in the Middle East, offering neutrality, resources, and international recognition. Yet their effectiveness is limited by great power rivalries and local skepticism. Their successes, such as the JCPOA and humanitarian stabilization in Lebanon, are balanced against failures in Syria and Yemen, where global divisions have paralyzed effective intervention.

5. Case Study I: The Syrian Conflict

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011 following popular uprisings, has become one of the most devastating and complex wars of the twenty first century. What started as peaceful protests against the Assad government soon escalated into a full-scale civil war, involving a multiplicity of actors, including regional powers, international coalitions, and extremist groups. The conflict has killed hundreds of thousands of people, displaced millions, and destabilized the wider region. Given its scale, both regional organizations and multilateral frameworks have sought to mediate, though with limited success.

5.1 Regional Responses

The Arab League was among the first regional organizations to intervene in the Syrian crisis. In 2011, it suspended Syria's membership, imposed sanctions, and launched observer missions in an effort to halt violence. These steps demonstrated the League's willingness to act, but the mission collapsed within months due to government obstruction and divisions among member states. Some governments, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, supported the opposition, while others, including Algeria and Iraq, were hesitant to condemn Assad. This lack of unity severely weakened the League's ability to exert influence, reflecting the persistent challenge of intra-regional rivalries (Ulrichsen, 2020). The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also condemned the Assad government, but it was preoccupied with Yemen and internal disputes, limiting its role in Syrian mediation.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) similarly suspended Syria's membership in 2012, framing the crisis as a humanitarian and political emergency. However, like the Arab League, the OIC lacked enforcement mechanisms, and its decisions were largely symbolic. Without consensus among powerful member states, regional frameworks failed to offer a credible pathway to peace. Instead, the conflict became a battleground for proxy wars, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which backed opposing sides (Fawcett, 2020).

5.2 Multilateral Interventions

At the multilateral level, the United Nations took a central role in trying to mediate the conflict. The UN appointed special envoys, including Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Staffan de Mistura, who facilitated rounds of negotiations in Geneva. These talks, often referred to as the Geneva Process, aimed to establish a political transition but repeatedly collapsed due to disagreements over Assad's future and violations of ceasefire agreements. In parallel, Russia, Turkey, and Iran launched the Astana Process, which, although not UN-led, operated as a multilateral framework involving external powers. While it succeeded in creating de-escalation zones, these zones were often violated, limiting the process's credibility (Charbonneau, 2019).

The Security Council's role was particularly constrained. Vetoes by Russia and China repeatedly blocked resolutions condemning the Assad government or authorizing stronger action. This paralysis underscored how great power politics limit the UN's effectiveness in conflicts

where strategic interests are at stake. Meanwhile, humanitarian aid operations under the UN provided some relief to civilians, but access was often restricted by fighting on the ground (Khalaf, 2021).

Both regional and multilateral frameworks experienced significant shortcomings in Syria. The Arab League and OIC demonstrated their ability to act symbolically but lacked the cohesion and enforcement power needed for tangible outcomes. The UN, despite deploying envoys and facilitating multiple negotiation rounds, was hampered by Security Council deadlock. The Astana Process highlighted the role of external actors but sidelined Syrian civil society and opposition groups, reducing its legitimacy (Hokayem, 2019).

However, these frameworks were not without partial successes. UN humanitarian agencies delivered aid to millions of Syrians, while the Astana Process temporarily reduced fighting in some areas. The Arab League's initial sanctions denoted to regional disapproval of Assad's actions, even if they did not change behaviour. These contributions underscore that frameworks can mitigate suffering even when they fail to resolve conflicts fully.

5.3 Lessons from Syria

The Syrian case highlights three key lessons. First, regional organizations cannot resolve major conflicts when member states are divided and external powers are deeply involved. Second, multilateral frameworks, particularly the UN, provide platforms for dialogue but are vulnerable to deadlock when great powers clash. Third, hybrid approaches that integrate regional legitimacy with multilateral neutrality may offer better prospects. For instance, a coordinated effort between the Arab League and the UN could have combined cultural legitimacy with international enforcement, but such synergy was lacking. As Gowan and Dworkin (2019) argue, fragmented efforts reduce effectiveness, while coordinated frameworks stand a greater chance of influencing conflict dynamics.

6. Case Study II: The Yemeni Crisis

The Yemeni conflict, which began with the 2011 Arab Spring protests and escalated into full-scale war in 2014, represents one of the most devastating humanitarian crises in the contemporary Middle East. What started as demands for democratic reforms against President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government soon turned into a protracted war involving regional and international actors. The conflict has displaced millions, left over 70 percent of the population dependent on aid, and created conditions of famine and disease outbreaks (UN OCHA, 2022). Yemen illustrates how both regional organizations and multilateral frameworks have attempted to mediate, yet structural divisions and competing agendas have hindered peace.

6.1 Regional Interventions

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) played an important early role in Yemen by brokering the 2011 agreement that led to Saleh's resignation and a transitional government led by Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. This demonstrated the GCC's ability to leverage regional legitimacy in facilitating political change (Roberts, 2019). However, the outbreak of civil war in 2014, triggered by the Houthi movement's takeover of Sana'a, exposed deep limitations in GCC mediation. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates led a military coalition in support of Hadi, framing the intervention as necessary to counter Iranian influence. Yet, divergent interests among coalition members soon emerged, particularly as the UAE supported southern separatist forces, while Saudi Arabia remained focused on the Houthis (Salisbury, 2020). These divisions weakened the coalition's effectiveness and prolonged the conflict.

The Arab League largely supported the Saudi-led coalition, issuing resolutions condemning the Houthis and reaffirming the legitimacy of Hadi's government. However, it contributed little beyond political support, demonstrating once again its limited enforcement capacity (Makdisi, 2021). The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also condemned Houthi actions but was sidelined in actual mediation efforts. This shows how regional

frameworks, while symbolically important, were unable to function as neutral mediators when member states were directly involved in the fighting (Fawcett, 2020).

6.2 Multilateral Efforts

The United Nations has been the most visible multilateral actor in Yemen. In 2015, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2216, demanding that the Houthis withdraw from seized territories and calling for a political settlement. The UN also appointed special envoys, including Jamal Benomar, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, and Martin Griffiths, to facilitate dialogue between parties. The Stockholm Agreement of 2018, brokered under UN auspices, achieved a temporary ceasefire in the port city of Hodeidah, allowing humanitarian access (Day, 2019). However, implementation stalled, with both sides accusing each other of violations.

International humanitarian agencies, coordinated through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), have been essential in mitigating the humanitarian disaster. As of 2022, the UN classified Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with famine and cholera outbreaks exacerbated by the conflict (UN OCHA, 2022). Despite large-scale aid, delivery has been hampered by ongoing violence and blockades.

Beyond the UN, other multilateral actors such as the European Union have provided humanitarian assistance and supported political dialogue. The EU has emphasized the need for inclusive negotiations that involve civil society and women's groups, recognizing that exclusive elite bargaining has limited prospects for sustainable peace (Borrell, 2020). However, like in Syria, the influence of great powers in the Security Council has constrained decisive multilateral action.

6.3 Lessons from Yemen

Three lessons emerge from Yemen. First, regional frameworks that are also conflict parties cannot serve as neutral mediators, a problem that plagued both the GCC and Arab League (Salisbury, 2020). Second, multilateral frameworks can create temporary agreements, such as the Stockholm Agreement, but without strong enforcement and regional buy-in, they remain fragile. Third, inclusive approaches that go beyond elite actors to involve civil society, women, and local communities offer better chances for legitimacy and sustainability (Day, 2019).

The Yemeni crisis therefore reinforces the argument that hybrid approaches, combining regional legitimacy with multilateral capacity, are essential for conflict resolution in the Middle East. Neither level of intervention alone is sufficient, and without coordination, parallel frameworks often work at cross-purposes.

7. Normalization and Peace Agreements

The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, with later participation by Morocco and Sudan, marked one of the most significant shifts in Middle Eastern diplomacy in recent decades. Unlike the protracted conflicts in Syria and Yemen, the accords represented an instance of successful normalization achieved through a blend of regional agency and external facilitation. They underscore how regional organizations, bilateral ties, and multilateral frameworks can interact in unique ways to advance peace, while also revealing the limitations of such agreements when they bypass underlying conflicts.

Regional dynamics were crucial in shaping the Abraham Accords. The Gulf states, particularly the UAE and Bahrain, sought closer relations with Israel in response to shared security concerns, especially regarding Iran's regional influence. Regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were divided, as Qatar and Kuwait refrained from joining the accords, demonstrating the limits of collective frameworks in achieving consensus (Ulrichsen, 2021). The Arab League also reflected this division, with some member states supporting normalization and others rejecting it, highlighting long-standing fractures in Arab diplomacy over the Palestinian issue (Fawcett, 2020).

The role of external actors, particularly the United States, was central to the success of the Abraham Accords. The Trump administration framed the agreements as a breakthrough in Middle Eastern

peace, using diplomatic leverage and economic incentives to encourage participation. This reflects how multilateral diplomacy, backed by a global power, can facilitate regional agreements that might otherwise stall (Indyk, 2020). The European Union welcomed the accords but maintained that they should complement, not replace, efforts toward a two-state solution for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Borrell, 2020).

The Abraham Accords highlight three important lessons. First, regional organizations like the Arab League are constrained by internal divisions, making bilateral or minilateral arrangements more viable under certain conditions. Second, multilateral support from global powers, particularly the United States, can provide crucial incentives and legitimacy for regional peace efforts. Third, normalization agreements can advance diplomacy and cooperation but risk ot focusing on unresolved conflicts unless they are linked to broader frameworks of peacebuilding (Yahya, 2021).

8. The Structural and Political Limitations of Regional Frameworks

Regional organizations in the Middle East, such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), possess significant symbolic importance but remain structurally and politically constrained. Their historical record shows that while they can articulate collective aspirations and issue symbolic declarations, their ability to implement binding resolutions or enforce peace agreements has been minimal. These limitations stem from institutional weaknesses, intra-regional rivalries, and dependence on the political will of dominant states.

A major limitation of regional frameworks is their institutional fragility. Unlike organizations such as the European Union or the African Union, Middle Eastern bodies lack robust bureaucratic structures, financial independence, and enforcement mechanisms. The Arab League, for example, has a small secretariat with limited administrative power, making it reliant on member states for resources and implementation (Barnett, 2021). The GCC, although wealthier, remains an intergovernmental forum without supranational authority. As a result, decisions are often non-binding, and compliance depends on voluntary cooperation, which weakens credibility (Fawcett, 2020).

The OIC faces even greater challenges due to its large and diverse membership, which dilutes cohesion and complicates consensus. While it issues frequent statements of solidarity on Palestine, Kashmir, and other crises, it rarely translates rhetoric into concrete action. This institutional weakness reduces its relevance in managing pressing regional conflicts (Makdisi, 2021).

8.1 Rivalries Among Member States

Another critical limitation lies in the deep rivalries among powerful states in the region. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt often compete for influence, undermining collective action. During the Syrian war, for example, Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported different opposition factions, while Iran backed the Assad government, paralyzing the Arab League and OIC (Ulrichsen, 2020). Similarly, divisions within the GCC, highlighted by the 2017–2021 Qatar diplomatic crisis, made coordinated conflict resolution nearly impossible (Salisbury, 2020).

These rivalries reveal that regional organizations are often arenas for competition rather than platforms for cooperation. Instead of pooling sovereignty, states use institutions to advance national agendas, thereby eroding trust and diminishing effectiveness (Fawcett, 2020).

Legitimacy is also contested in regional frameworks. While they derive cultural and historical legitimacy from shared identity, their ability to represent all voices is limited. Smaller states often feel overshadowed by dominant powers, while civil society actors are excluded from formal processes. The Arab League, for instance, is perceived as a "club of regimes" that reflects the interests of ruling elites rather than broader populations (Barnett, 2021). This perception undermines public trust and reduces the ability of regional frameworks to serve as credible mediators.

Moreover, sectarian dynamics have affected legitimacy. Sunni-majority states dominate

institutions like the GCC and Arab League, while Shia actors, such as Iran and groups aligned with it, question their neutrality. These dynamics further constrain regional organizations' ability to mediate conflicts like Yemen and Syria (Makdisi, 2021).

8.2 Dependence on External Powers

Regional organizations in the Middle East often depend heavily on external powers for financial support, military capacity, and diplomatic backing. The Arab League and GCC frequently look to the United States and European partners to provide security guarantees, while the OIC relies on Saudi funding for much of its budget (Ulrichsen, 2021). This dependence undermines autonomy and reinforces perceptions that regional institutions are not genuine vehicles for self-reliance.

For example, the GCC's response to the Yemeni war relied heavily on U.S. logistical and intelligence support, while the Arab League's sanctions against Syria in 2011 lacked enforcement without external backing. This pattern highlights the limits of regional frameworks in pursuing independent conflict resolution strategies (Roberts, 2019).

The structural and political limitations of regional frameworks point to three key lessons. First, without institutional strengthening and financial independence, these organizations will remain weak. Second, intra-regional rivalries must be managed to prevent paralysis in times of crisis. Third, enhancing inclusivity and legitimacy, both at the state and societal level, is crucial if regional bodies are to act as credible mediators. The effectiveness of conflict resolution mechanisms depends on both political will and institutional design, and Middle Eastern frameworks often lack both (Gowan and Dworkin, 2019).

9. The Role of External Powers in Shaping Multilateral and Regional Efforts

External powers have always been decisive actors in Middle Eastern conflicts, influencing both regional and multilateral attempts at resolution. While local frameworks seek legitimacy through cultural and historical ties, global powers often bring resources, diplomatic leverage, and military capacity that shape the outcomes of peace processes. However, this involvement has been double-edged, at times facilitating breakthroughs but also prolonging conflicts when great power rivalries dominate.

The United States has historically played a dominant role in the Middle East, both as a mediator and a military power. From brokering the Camp David Accords in 1978 to facilitating the Abraham Accords in 2020, Washington has used its diplomatic clout to advance peace deals (Indyk, 2020). Yet, U.S. involvement has often been criticized as selective and interest-driven, prioritizing alliances with Israel and Gulf monarchies while neglecting broader structural reforms. This duality has made U.S. engagement indispensable but also controversial, limiting the credibility of multilateral peace initiatives where Washington plays a central role (Miller, 2021).

Regarding, Russia, it has emerged as a critical external power in the region, particularly since its military intervention in Syria in 2015. Moscow's actions decisively shifted the balance of power in favour of the Assad government, undermining UN efforts to broker a political settlement (Charbonneau, 2019). At the same time, Russia positioned itself as a mediator by launching the Astana Process alongside Turkey and Iran. This highlights how external powers can simultaneously undermine and complement multilateral frameworks. However, critics argue that Russia's role has often been self-serving, aiming to secure military bases and geopolitical influence rather than sustainable conflict resolution (Trenin, 2020).

The European Union, on the other hand, while lacking hard military power in the Middle East, has sought to shape outcomes through soft power, development aid, and diplomatic mediation. The EU was central to the negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, demonstrating its ability to act as a credible broker when U.S. policy was adversarial (Borrell, 2020). The EU has also supported humanitarian initiatives in Syria and Yemen, channelling billions of euros in aid. However, its limited security capacity means it often relies on the U.S.

or NATO to back its diplomatic efforts, which constrains its autonomy (Youngs, 2021).

China has traditionally played a secondary role in Middle Eastern diplomacy, but its growing economic presence has increased its stakes in regional stability. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has invested heavily in infrastructure, ports, and energy projects in countries such as Iran, Egypt, and the Gulf states (Fulton, 2020). Recently, China demonstrated diplomatic ambition by brokering the 2023 Saudi–Iran rapprochement, an unexpected but significant development (Wong, 2023). This indicates that China is transitioning from an economic actor to a potential diplomatic player, though its long-term impact on multilateral frameworks remains to be seen.

When it comes to hybrid arrangements between regional and external powers, they have been showcased as a common feature of Middle Eastern diplomacy. The Astana Process, though initiated by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, has overlapped with UN initiatives, while the Abraham Accords succeeded only because of U.S. facilitation combined with Gulf pragmatism (Indyk, 2020). These examples reveal that conflict resolution often requires cooperation between local actors with legitimacy and global powers with leverage. However, when external powers dominate, regional ownership is undermined, producing fragile agreements.

The role of external powers demonstrates that no peace initiative in the Middle East can succeed without their involvement. Yet, overreliance on outside actors risks eroding regional frameworks and weakening local legitimacy. A balanced approach that integrates external resources with regional ownership is essential. As Gowan and Dworkin (2019) argue, hybrid frameworks are most effective when they prevent fragmentation and align incentives across local and global actors.

10. The Emergence of Hybrid Models for Conflict Resolution

Hybrid models of conflict resolution have increasingly been recognized as necessary in the Middle East, where regional legitimacy and multilateral resources must converge to produce meaningful outcomes. Neither regional organizations nor multilateral frameworks alone have demonstrated sufficient capacity to address the region's deeply entrenched conflicts. By combining their respective strengths, hybrid models seek to overcome limitations and align local and global interests.

Hybrid models also benefit from Track II diplomacy, where non-state actors such as NGOs, think tanks, and civil society organizations complement formal negotiations. These initiatives create inclusive dialogues, bridging gaps where official processes stall. In Yemen, women's organizations supported by both the UN and EU have played important roles in peace consultations, giving voice to marginalized groups excluded from elite bargaining (Day, 2019). These approaches enhance legitimacy, making peace processes more resilient.

International–regional partnerships are another hybrid innovation. The African Union's cooperation with the UN in sub-Saharan Africa has often been cited as a model for the Middle East. While not yet fully realized, similar frameworks are being explored. For example, proposals for UN–GCC collaboration on Yemen suggest that hybrid models can combine local legitimacy with international enforcement, creating a division of labour that maximizes strengths (Henneberg, 2021). Such partnerships remain rare in the Middle East, but they represent a path forward.

Hybrid frameworks succeed when they integrate inclusivity, neutrality, and enforcement. However, they face challenges when one side dominates. The Astana Process, although technically a hybrid of regional and external powers, became skewed toward Russian objectives, reducing legitimacy (Trenin, 2020). Conversely, the EU's support for the UN-led Geneva Process in Syria illustrates how constructive hybrid support can strengthen multilateral legitimacy while retaining regional engagement (Youngs, 2021). These lessons highlight the need for balance and careful coordination to avoid duplication or competition.

11. Conclusion

Conflict resolution in the Middle East has long been shaped by the interplay of regional and multilateral actors. Regional organizations such as the Arab League, GCC, and OIC offer cultural legitimacy but suffer from structural weaknesses, political rivalries, and limited enforcement capacity. Multilateral frameworks, led by the United Nations, European Union, and other international actors, provide neutrality and resources but often falter under the weight of great power rivalries. The case studies of Syria, Yemen, and the Abraham Accords illustrate these dynamics: regional organizations struggle to act cohesively, while multilateral frameworks are constrained by geopolitics.

External powers like the United States, Russia, and China further complicate this landscape, at times enabling breakthroughs but often prolonging conflicts through proxy engagements. The role of these actors highlights the importance of integrating regional ownership with international resources, rather than allowing one to dominate the other. Without this balance, efforts risk being either illegitimate or ineffective.

Succinctly, conflict resolution in the Middle East cannot be achieved through isolated efforts. It requires synergy, coordination, and inclusivity. Hybrid models that integrate the strengths of regional and multilateral frameworks, while also involving civil society, present the best chance for durable solutions in a region where conflict has too often been the norm. The task ahead is not only to design such frameworks but to commit the political will and resources necessary to make them credible and effective.

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