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Rethinking Regional Order Concepts after October 7: Uncertainty, Non-State Agency, and the Limits of Existing IR Theories

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ABSTRACT

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Middle East scholarship has agreed since 2024 that regional order concepts are struggling, and has largely diagnosed a coverage problem: the frameworks left non-state actors out, so put them in. This article argues the trouble runs deeper and is epistemic rather than empirical. Regional security complex theory and its rivals are instruments built for a world of calculable risk. They assume units that hold their type, capability that behaves as a stock, and actors optimizing against distributions they can estimate. October 7 and the twenty-nine months that followed satisfied none of those conditions. Borrowing Katzenstein and Seybert's distinction between control power and protean power, the article shows that the pivotal effects of the period came from improvisation under radical uncertainty, which is an effect rather than a resource and therefore cannot be held, counted, or balanced against. It also identifies a second failure the debate has missed: the units themselves changed type, not merely position, and concepts that index order to relations among units cannot absorb that. Adding non-state actors as a variable will not repair either problem, because both are properties of closed-system modelling rather than of any variable list. The article specifies what a generative account would require and states the scope conditions under which existing concepts still hold.



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Introduction

Between October 2023 and March 2026 the Middle East ran through more configurations than it had managed in the preceding three decades. A non-state movement launched an attack that ended a normalization process between two states neither of which it could have defeated. Israel destroyed the leadership of Hezbollah in a fortnight, using a supply-chain operation nobody had imagined and no doctrine described. Assad's government, which had survived thirteen years of war, fell in eleven days to a coalition of forces that had been contained in Idlib. Saudi Arabia signed a mutual defence agreement with Pakistan, a state that appears on no map of this regional order. Iran lost a Supreme Leader to a foreign airstrike and installed his son inside nine days.¹

Nobody forecast any of this. That alone proves little, since forecasting is not what most theory claims to do. The harder problem is that the concepts the field uses to describe regional order could not have generated these outcomes even in retrospect, and in several cases cannot comfortably describe them now.

The field noticed quickly and has said so in print. Del Sarto, Lynch, and Mabon convened a collection on regional order making after October 7 whose framing question is whether the region has seen change of order or merely change within it.² Valbjørn, Bank, and Darwich read the Gaza

war as a critical juncture producing a multiplex region with no hegemon, and singled out non-state actors, the Houthis above all, as hybrid entities carrying diplomatic capacity alongside military capacity.³ Wastnidge and Mabon theorised the Resistance Axis as advancing a rival normative vision of regional space.⁴ Krieg argued that a networked order is displacing American hierarchy.⁵ Louise Fawcett has entered the standing objection: predicted new orders keep failing to arrive, and the region has a long record of defeating the frameworks brought to it.⁶

So the problem is well posted. What the conversation has mostly produced, though, is a coverage diagnosis. The frameworks under-weighted non-state actors, or over-weighted American hegemony, or assumed a stability the region never had, and the remedy is to widen the aperture and include what was left out. Darwich's essay on non-state actors and regional disorder goes furthest, arguing that armed movements have shown resilience, learning, and adaptation, and are rising to fill vacuums regionally as well as domestically.⁷ Learning and adaptation are mechanisms, not a request to widen a variable list, and the argument below is better understood as continuing hers than as correcting it. What it adds is a name for the conditions under which adaptation produces order-level effects, and an account of why those effects cannot be entered in

¹ On the strikes of 28 February 2026 and the killing of Ali Khamenei, see "After Khamenei Killed, Iran Set for Largely Opaque Supreme Succession," *Times of Israel*, 2026, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-khamenei-killed-iran-set-for-largely-opaque-supreme-succession/>. On the succession, see "Iran's Assembly of Experts Says Consensus Reached on Khamenei's Successor," *Al Jazeera*, 8 March 2026, <https://aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/8/irans-assembly-of-experts-says-consensus-reached-on-khameneis-successor>. On the Saudi-Pakistani agreement of September 2025, see "Pakistan's Strategic Defense Pact with Saudi Arabia: A New Security Architecture in the Wider Middle East," Middle East Institute, 2025, <https://mei.edu/publication/pakistans-strategic-defense-pact-saudi-arabia-new-security-architecture-wider-middle/>.

² Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Marc Lynch, and Simon Mabon, "Regional Order Making after October 7: Introduction," in *Regional Order Making after October 7*, *POMEPS Studies* 56 (Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, July 2025), 3-5, [https://pomeps.org/wp-](https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/POMEPS_Studies_56_Final-1.pdf)

[content/uploads/2025/07/POMEPS_Studies_56_Final-1.pdf](https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/POMEPS_Studies_56_Final-1.pdf). Cited throughout as workshop memoranda rather than refereed articles.

³ Morten Valbjørn, André Bank, and May Darwich, "Forward to the Past? Regional Repercussions of the Gaza War," *Middle East Policy* 31, no. 3 (2024): 3-17.

⁴ Edward Wastnidge and Simon Mabon, "The Resistance Axis and Regional Order in the Middle East: Nomos, Space, and Normative Alternatives," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 5 (2024): 954-71.

⁵ Andreas Krieg, "The War in Gaza, the Decline of US Leadership and the Emergence of a Networked Regional Order," *Mediterranean Politics* 30, no. 4 (2025): 892-901.

⁶ Louise Fawcett, "'New' Regional Order in the Middle East: Plus, ça change?" *APSA-MENA Newsletter* (2025), <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:49dbde77-d8b4-4136-a5c0-b19ab3813c29>.

⁷ May Darwich, "Non-State Actors and Regional Disorder in the Middle East," in *Regional Order Making after October 7*, *POMEPS Studies* 56 (Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, July 2025), 24-29.

the ledger the frameworks keep.

That diagnosis is right about the symptom. It misidentifies the disease. Regional order concepts did not fail because they omitted a category of actor. They failed because they are instruments calibrated for calculable risk, applied to a period that was not risky but uncertain in the strict sense, and because the pivotal effects of that period were produced by a kind of power those instruments cannot register. Following Katzenstein and Seybert, that kind is protean power: the effect of improvisational and innovative responses to uncertainty, which is an effect rather than a capability, cannot be accumulated or held, and is generated disproportionately by actors the frameworks classify as weak.⁸ A concept built to compare stocks of capability has nowhere to put a power that exists only in the moment of its exercise.

A second failure sits alongside the first and has attracted less notice. Across these twenty-nine months the units themselves changed type, not merely position. Hamas went from governing authority to destroyed-and-reconstituting movement. Hezbollah went from the region's most capable armed non-state actor to a party negotiating the terms of its own disarmament. Syria went from state to collapse to reconstituted state under a government drawn from a proscribed movement. Concepts that define regional order as a pattern of relations among units have no way to hold a period in which what the units are is itself the variable.

Neither problem is repaired by adding non-state actors to the list of things a framework considers.

Regional Order Theory and Its Assumptions

Regional order theory is not one thing, and the differences between its versions matter less here than what they share.

The Principal Frameworks

Regional security complex theory is the field's workhorse. Buzan and Wæver define a complex as a set of states whose securitisation processes are so interlinked that their security problems cannot be analysed apart, and they treat the resulting patterns of amity and enmity as durable structures with real explanatory weight.⁹ The theory's power comes from that durability. A complex persists across leadership changes and individual wars, and that durability is what lets it explain rather than merely describe.

Lake and Morgan built a comparative framework for regional security orders once the superpower overlay lifted, treating the region as the principal site where conflict is generated and managed.¹⁰ Solingen located the causes one level down, in the character of ruling coalitions: internationalising coalitions produce cooperative orders, inward-looking statist and confessional coalitions produce conflictual ones.¹¹ Miller found the master variable in the fit between borders and national identities, arguing that the state-to-nation balance sets a region's war-proneness, with great-power engagement as the mediating term.¹²

For the Middle East specifically the framing texts pull in a similar direction. Hinnebusch explains the region's international politics through the incongruence of an imposed state system, which generates chronic identity and sovereignty tension and with it regime insecurity.¹³ Halliday insists on the causal autonomy of ideology while rejecting exceptionalism.¹⁴ Gause finds Gulf politics driven

⁸ Lucia A. Seybert and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Protean Power and Control Power: Conceptual Analysis," in *Protean Power: Exploring the Uncertain and Unexpected in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein and Lucia A. Seybert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3-26. See also Peter J. Katzenstein and Lucia A. Seybert, "Protean Power and Uncertainty: Exploring the Unexpected in World Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2018): 80-93.

⁹ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. 40-89.

¹⁰ David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Etel Solingen, *Regional Orders at Century's Dawn: Global and Domestic Influences on Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹² Benjamin Miller, *States, Nations, and the Great Powers: The Sources of Regional War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹³ Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

less by material balance than by regimes' vulnerability to transnational ideological appeal, so that states balance against threats to regime security rather than against capability.¹⁵ Barnett recovers Arab regional order as the product of symbolic contestation, a dialogue in which norms were used strategically and the order shifted from pan-Arabism to sovereignty.¹⁶ Fawcett's comparative work on regionalism supplies the corrective that the Middle East's institutional thinness has causes rather than being a simple absence.¹⁷

Several further strands bear on the argument and have not been brought together with it. Lake's account of hierarchy holds that international politics is not flatly anarchic, and that dominant states exercise legitimate authority over subordinates with measurable behavioral effects.¹⁸ Applied to the Gulf this generates the expectation that American authority organises regional security, which makes the period after 2023 a hard case, since that authority was exercised repeatedly and did not organise much. Hazbun argues that insecurity in the region is not a background condition but is actively produced by the security practices of regional and external powers, generating turbulence rather than order.¹⁹ Ahram shows that post-2011 separatist movements were attempts to reconstitute political order on alternative territorial bases rather than mere symptoms of collapse.²⁰ Each of these loosens an assumption. None of them abandons the distributional frame.

Acharya's corrective is the closest thing in the general literature to what is needed here. Regions, he argues, are made from the inside out: they resist, socialise, and bind external power rather than being simply constructed by it.²¹ The insight transfers, but his agents are states and regional institutions, and the Middle East has thin institutions and, in this period, agents who were not states at all.

Shared Assumptions

Run these together and three assumptions carry the weight. None is incidental. Each is what lets the framework do work.

Units hold their type. A regional security complex is a complex of states. Solingen's coalitions govern states. Miller's state-to-nation balance presumes states with borders and nations with claims on them. Barnett's dialogue has state participants. The frameworks permit units to change position, gain and lose power, switch alliances, even collapse and be replaced. What they do not permit is for the question of what kind of thing a unit is to be open while the analysis runs. A movement that governs territory, fields an army, conducts foreign policy, and negotiates its own dissolution is not a hard case for these frameworks. It is an undefined input.

Capability is a stock. Regional order is inferred from distributions: of military capability, of oil rent, of alliance commitments, of normative authority. Distributions can be compared across time, which is what produces the diagnosis that an

¹⁵ F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). On the rivalry as a cold war fought through weak states' domestic arenas, see also F. Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper 11 (Doha: Brookings Institution, July 2014).

¹⁶ Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). On the post-2011 collapse into proxy war, see Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

¹⁷ Louise Fawcett, "Exploring Regional Domains: A Comparative History of Regionalism," *International Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2004): 429-46; Louise Fawcett, "Alliances and Regionalism in the Middle East," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), chap. 8.

¹⁸ David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Waleed Hazbun, "A History of Insecurity: From the Arab Uprisings to ISIS," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 3 (2015): 55-65; Waleed Hazbun, *Regional Powers and the Production of Insecurity in the Middle East*, MENARA Working Papers 11 (Barcelona: CIDOB, 2018).

²⁰ Ariel I. Ahram, *Break All the Borders: Separatism and the Reshaping of the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

²¹ Amitav Acharya, "The Emerging Regional Architecture of World Politics," *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007): 629-52. The argument is worked out at length for Southeast Asia in Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014).

order has shifted. This works only if the things distributed persist between measurements. A capability that exists solely in the act of its exercise, and disappears once exercised, cannot enter a distribution at all.

The world is calculable. This one is the deepest and the least examined. Balancing presumes actors can estimate the consequences of alignment choices. Deterrence presumes an adversary who computes expected costs. Securitisation presumes audiences that respond in patterned ways. All of it presumes a world in which the range of possible outcomes is known well enough that probabilities can be attached, a world of risk, in other words.

Risk, Uncertainty, and Protean Power

IR has handled the distinction between risk and uncertainty badly, and the distinction is old. Under risk the possible outcomes are known and probabilities can be assigned. Under uncertainty in the strict sense they cannot, either because the outcome space itself is unknown or because there is no basis on which any probability could rest.

Rathbun showed that IR's paradigms mean four incommensurable things by the word: fear for realists, ignorance in bargaining for rationalists, confusion under complexity for cognitivists, and the indeterminacy of a socially constructed world for constructivists.²² The rationalist version has been the most influential and is the narrowest. Fearon's account of war reduces rationalist explanation to private information with incentives to misrepresent, commitment problems, and issue indivisibility.²³ Every one of those is a risk problem. Actors know the structure of the game and lack a parameter within it. Kirshner's charge is that IR imported a discredited economics of calculable risk and rational expectations, and that a Keynesian conception of radical uncertainty, where probabilities cannot be formed at all, points instead toward judgement, convention, and the classical realist tradition.²⁴

Katzenstein and Seybert turn this into a theory of power. Control power is the conventional conception: the deliberate deployment of accumulated capability by actors seeking outcomes they want. It works reliably only in a world experienced as risk. Protean power is different in kind. They define it as the effect of improvisational and innovative responses to uncertainty arising from actors' creativity and agility.²⁵ Each of its features breaks something in regional order theory.

It is an effect, not a resource. Protean power cannot be stockpiled, transferred, or held in reserve. It exists in the response and not before it, which means it cannot appear in any distribution.

It is not proportional to strength. Weak and peripheral actors generate it as readily as strong ones, and frequently more readily, because agility is easier for those with less to protect and fewer procedures to follow.

It cannot be balanced against. Balancing requires knowing what one is balancing against. An adversary's protean power is unknown to the adversary as well until the moment of improvisation.

The scheme's most useful part for present purposes is a two-by-two. What matters is not only whether the context is one of risk or uncertainty but whether actors experience it as such, and the mismatches do the analytical work. Where context and experience are both risk, actors affirm existing templates and control power is reproduced. Where the context is uncertain but actors experience it as risk, they refuse the evidence and cling to templates that no longer fit. Where the context is risky but experienced as uncertain, actors improvise. Where uncertainty is both real and recognised, actors innovate, generating protean power and deepening the uncertainty for everyone else.²⁶

²² Brian C. Rathbun, "Uncertain about Uncertainty: Understanding the Multiple Meanings of a Crucial Concept in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2007): 533-57.

²³ James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379-414.

²⁴ Jonathan Kirshner, "The Economic Sins of Modern IR Theory and the Classical Realist Alternative," *World Politics* 67, no. 1 (2015): 155-83.

²⁵ Seybert and Katzenstein, "Protean Power and Control Power," 4-10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-19. The four responses are affirmation, refusal, improvisation, and innovation, generated by crossing the objective context against the actors' experience of it.

Is Protean Power Falsifiable?

Protean power invites a hard question and the article is weakened if it ducks: is the concept falsifiable, or does it merely name whatever the distributional account failed to predict? Applied loosely it is unfalsifiable, and some of its applications have been loose. Any surprising outcome can be relabeled improvisation after the fact, at which point the concept explains everything and forbids nothing.

The discipline that makes it usable is to require three things of any claim that protean power was at work, all of them checkable without access to anyone's intentions. There must be no antecedent change in the relevant distribution of capability, so that a distributional account genuinely cannot generate the outcome. The action must be of a type absent from the actor's prior repertoire and from the adversary's planning documents, so that innovation is separated from a capability that was simply undercounted. The effect must also be order-relevant, altering the relations or the standing of units rather than merely producing casualties or headlines.

Those requirements exclude a great deal, including cases this article would like to claim. The Israeli campaign in Gaza was control power at scale: the capability existed, was counted, and was applied in a doctrinally familiar way. Iran's missile exchanges with Israel were capability that appeared in every inventory. Two further episodes fail the test and are examined below anyway, because a test that never excludes anything is not a test and the exclusions are more instructive than the passes.

Set beside the sequence of the last three years, the cell that earns its keep is refusal.

The Post-October 7 Sequence

October 2023: innovation by a weak actor

The October 7 attack was not an exercise of control power and it is a mistake to score it as one. Hamas did not accumulate capability sufficient to

compel Israel, and did not believe it had. What it did was locate a set of assumptions, about barrier technology, about the reliability of surveillance, about what an organisation it had been deterring for years would attempt, and act in the space those assumptions left open. The effect was out of all proportion to the capability. Within days the Saudi normalisation track was suspended, and it has not resumed: Riyadh has continued to tie normalisation to Palestinian statehood through 2026.²⁷

No regional order framework registers that. In distributional terms nothing had changed on 8 October. Hamas had not gained capability; it had spent it. The Israeli and Saudi positions in any distribution were what they had been the week before. Yet the order-relevant outcome, the collapse of a normalisation process that would have restructured regional alignment, was produced and produced durably. This is protean power operating as specified, and it is invisible to instruments that read stocks.

September 2024: A Case that Fails the Criteria

Eleven months later Israel penetrated Hezbollah's communications supply chain, and within days of that killed Hassan Nasrallah, removing the leadership of the region's most capable armed non-state actor in under a fortnight.²⁸ The effect was enormous and the surprise was total. It is tempting to read this as protean power exercised by a strong actor, and an earlier version of this argument did. The temptation should be refused, and saying why shows the test doing its work.

A supply-chain penetration built over years is accumulated capability held in secret. Somebody counted it: the party that built it. What Hezbollah faced was private information with incentives to misrepresent, which is Fearon's first mechanism and a risk problem in the strict sense.²⁹ Concealed capability is not absent capability, and an adversary's ignorance is not the world's uncertainty.

The distinction matters past bookkeeping.

²⁷ "Israeli-Saudi Normalization: A Collateral Victim of 7 October," IEMed, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/israeli-saudi-normalization-a-collateral-victim-of-7-october/>.

²⁸ On the device attacks of 17-18 September 2024 and the strike that killed Hassan Nasrallah on 27 September

2024, see "Israel-Hezbollah War (2023-)," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Israel-Hezbollah-war>.

²⁹ Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," 381-401.

Katzenstein and Seybert are explicit that protean power is not an instrument an actor deploys but an effect arising from improvisation, which is why it cannot be stockpiled. An analysis that lets a long-planned operation by a powerful state count as protean has converted the concept back into control power and thrown away the distinction it was borrowed for. That is the failure mode the concept's critics predict, and the guard against it is the second requirement: the action must be absent from the acting party's own repertoire, not merely from the target's knowledge.

December 2024: A Case the Frameworks Explain

Assad's government fell in December 2024, eleven days after an offensive began from Idlib, having survived since 2011 with Russian and Iranian support. The proximate reason was that the support had been drawn down and dispersed by wars elsewhere, in Ukraine and in Lebanon. No actor in the sequence planned this outcome, including the actors who achieved it.

This one fails the first requirement outright, and the failure is worth stating rather than smoothing over. Patron capacity had changed before the offensive began, so a distributional account is available and it is a good one. A structural reading emphasising external patron capacity explains a great deal about why Damascus was vulnerable. What it does not explain is the timing, the speed, or the fact that the resulting government emerged from a movement that the international order had proscribed and then, within a year, was negotiating security arrangements with Israel while the United States repealed the sanctions architecture built against its predecessor.³⁰ A framework can accommodate a state changing hands. It has more trouble when the entity that takes it over was, by that framework's own classification, not the kind of thing that takes over states.

³⁰ On the lifting of secondary sanctions and the repeal of the Caesar Act in December 2025, see "The Lifting of Secondary Sanctions under the Caesar Act: A Legal Shift and Its Implications for Financial and Investment Compliance," Syrian Network for Human Rights, 19 December 2025, <https://snhr.org/blog/2025/12/19/the-lifting-of-secondary-sanctions-under-the-caesar-act-a-legal-shift-and-its-implications-for-financial-and-investment-compliance/>. On the stalled Israel-Syria

The Houthis: Improvisation into A Regional Role

The Houthis are the period's clearest case of an actor improvising itself into a position no framework assigned it. A faction in a Yemeni civil war became, through attacks on Red Sea shipping, a participant in global trade governance, drew a sustained American military campaign that did not produce durable results, and acquired a diplomatic weight its material capability does not support.³¹ Valbjørn, Bank, and Darwich are right to call this hybridity.³² The point to add is about mechanism. The Houthis did not acquire this role by accumulating anything. They found a chokepoint, discovered that the international response was slower and less effective than anyone had assumed, and expanded into the space that discovery opened. That is improvisation converting into standing.

Refusal and Repeated Surprise

The cell that explains the most is the one where actors face uncertainty and insist on treating it as risk.

Israeli deterrence doctrine before October 2023 rested on a calculable model of an adversary that could be taught costs. The model had worked for years, and that record made it hard to abandon. The normalisation track proceeded on the assumption that Palestinian political questions could be routed around, an assumption that had also held for years. American policy through 2024 and 2025 kept reaching for templates that presumed adversaries computing expected costs within a known game: deterrence by demonstration against the Houthis, pressure and negotiation with Iran.

Each of these was refusal in the technical sense: a template retained past the point where the context supported it. Refusal also has a signature, which is repeated surprise. An actor operating on a model that no longer fits is not merely wrong once. It is

security track, see "Unfinished Business Will Drive the Mid-East Agenda in 2026," Middle East Institute, <https://mei.edu/brief/unfinished-business-will-drive-the-mid-east-agenda-in-2026/>.

³¹ On the limited results of the American campaign against the Houthis, see Middle East Institute, "Unfinished Business."

³² Valbjørn, Bank, and Darwich, "Forward to the Past?" 3-17.

wrong in a pattern, surprised again and again by events its model rules out, and each surprise is met by reasserting the model more firmly. The record from October 2023 through the killing of Khamenei is a record of that pattern in several capitals at once.

The strikes of 28 February 2026 are the case in point. They were undertaken with regime change among the stated aims, on a model in which removing the apex of a system produces its collapse.³³ The Islamic Republic did not collapse. Within nine days the Assembly of Experts had installed Mojtaba Khamenei, over reformist objection, contested procedure, and pressure from the Revolutionary Guard.³⁴ The model had treated a distributed clerical and military order as though it were a hierarchy with a single load-bearing node, the sort of error a risk framework produces when it meets a system it has not correctly specified.

September 2025: An Actor from Outside the Map

One development of September 2025 fits no regional order framework at all. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement providing that aggression against either shall be treated as aggression against both.³⁵ Pakistani officials have denied that it carries a nuclear guarantee, and analysts across the spectrum agree the commitment falls well short of an Article 5.³⁶ The denials have not stopped it from changing how other capitals talk about Gulf security.

Pakistan is not a member of any Middle Eastern regional security complex on any standard mapping. Buzan and Wæver place it in South Asia. Nothing in the distribution of regional capability changed to produce this, and nobody predicted it. What produced it was a Saudi judgement, formed during a period when the American guarantee looked less certain than it had, that a nuclear-armed South Asian partner was

worth a formal commitment. Whatever else it is, that is a boundary problem for a framework whose first analytical act is to draw the region's edges.

Alternative Explanations

Several accounts explain some of this period without recourse to anything said here, and each deserves stating at its strongest.

The continuity reading, which is Fawcett's, holds that nothing fundamental has changed. New orders have been announced in the Middle East many times and have generally failed to arrive; the region remains institutionally thin, externally penetrated, and organised around regime insecurity, much as it was in 2010.³⁷ This is the most serious rival and it is partly right. Regime insecurity does still drive alignment, and the Saudi-Pakistan pact of September 2025 is in one obvious sense a familiar Middle Eastern arrangement: a hedge against an uncertain patron, dressed as an alliance. The reading struggles only where the units changed. Continuity claims are claims about the same things behaving similarly over time, and Syria in 2026 is not the same thing as Syria in 2010 in the sense the claim requires.

The retrenchment reading holds that all of this follows from American withdrawal, and that the region is filling a vacuum in the ordinary way. This explains the hedging behavior of Gulf states well, and it explains why external actors were slow to contain events. It explains the timing of nothing. American engagement over this period was not low. It included two direct military campaigns against Iran, the Twelve-Day War of June 2025 and the strikes that began on 28 February 2026, a sustained campaign against the Houthis, the sponsorship of a Security Council resolution creating a governance framework for Gaza, and the repeal of the sanctions architecture against Syria. A vacuum account of a period this interventionist has to argue that the interventions did not count, close to conceding the point made

³³ "After Khamenei Killed, Iran Set for Largely Opaque Supreme Succession," *Times of Israel*, 2026.

³⁴ "Iran's Assembly of Experts Says Consensus Reached on Khamenei's Successor," *Al Jazeera*, 8 March 2026. Reported vote tallies for the succession differ across outlets and should be treated with caution.

³⁵ Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, signed at Riyadh, 17 September 2025. See

"Pakistan's Strategic Defense Pact with Saudi Arabia," Middle East Institute, 2025.

³⁶ "Beyond the Hype: Pakistan-Saudi Defense Pact Is Not a Saudi Nuclear Umbrella," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2025, <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/beyond-hype-pakistan-saudi-defense-pact-not-saudi-nuclear-umbrella-0>.

³⁷ Fawcett, "New' Regional Order in the Middle East."

here: that control power was applied and did not produce order.

The regime-security reading, following Gause, holds that states balanced against threats to regime survival rather than against capability, which is why alignments moved as they did.³⁸ This is powerful and it is not in competition with the argument here so much as beneath it. It explains state behavior once the shocks had occurred. It has no account of the shocks. October 7 was not a threat to any regime that any state had been balancing against, and the theory's own logic, that regimes respond to transnational ideological appeal, would have counselled that Hamas's capacity to alter interstate alignment was low.

The structural reading holds that patron overstretch explains the sequence: Russia in Ukraine and Iran in Lebanon could not sustain Damascus, and the rest follows. This is the best account of Assad's fall and the article accepts it as far as it goes. It does not extend. Patron capacity was unchanged on 6 and 8 October 2023, unchanged in the week the Lebanese communications network was attacked, and irrelevant to Pakistan's appearance as a mediator.

The network reading is the last and the most serious of the four for this argument, because it is closest to it. Krieg holds that a networked order is displacing American hierarchy, and a network account handles much of what troubles the frameworks here: non-state nodes, actors that straddle regional boundaries, effects that propagate along links rather than through distributions.³⁹ It would absorb the Houthis and Pakistan without needing any new concept. Two things it does not supply. A network is still a specified set of nodes and edges, so it inherits the closed-system problem entire, and it says nothing about where new nodes come from or how a node changes type. And a network describes the topology through which an effect travelled without saying why that effect was generated rather than another. Networks are the right picture

of the medium. They are not an account of the shock.

Taken together the rivals cover much of the period and none covers the mechanism at issue: how actions that altered no distribution produced order-level effects, and what happens to a framework when its units change type. Those are the residuals, and they are what this article is about.

Unit Instability and the Problem of Categories

The second failure is ontological and the debate has largely passed over it.

Regional order is defined, in every framework surveyed above, as a pattern in the relations among units. This is a sound definition and it carries a hidden requirement: the units must be stable enough in type for relations among them to be the thing that varies. Between 2023 and 2026 that requirement failed repeatedly.

Hamas was a governing authority with territory, a bureaucracy, and a revenue base. It is now a movement without territory, negotiating against a governance framework created by a Security Council resolution and administered by a body that is neither a state nor a United Nations mission.⁴⁰ Hezbollah was an armed movement with a state within a state, capable of independent war; it is now a party negotiating the sequence of its own disarmament under an international monitoring mechanism. Syria was a state, then was not a state, then was a state again under a government drawn from a proscribed organization. Iran's leadership passed from a figure who had held it for thirty-seven years to his son, through a procedure the system's own rules did not clearly authorise.

Now the honest accounting, because three of those four are weaker than they look. The frameworks explicitly permit units to change position, lose power, collapse, and be replaced, and this article said so two sections ago. Iran's succession is a leadership change. Hezbollah's decline is a loss of

³⁸ Gause, *International Relations of the Persian Gulf*. On alliance choices driven by ideational threats to regime identity, see also May Darwich, *Threats and Alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian Policies in a Turbulent Region* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³⁹ Krieg, "The War in Gaza."

⁴⁰ On the governance framework established by Security Council Resolution 2803 (2025) and the Board of Peace, see "The Security Council as Architect? Resolution 2803, the Board of Peace, and the Limits of Transition in Gaza," *ASIL Insights* 29, no. 16 (2025), <https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/29/issue/16>.

capability. Syria's collapse and reconstitution is the replacement case, which regional order theory has handled since the 1990s and handles well. A framework does not break because a member weakens or a government falls.

What none of them permits is a unit that occupies no available category at all. That leaves one case, and one is enough if the case is real.

Sovereignty as a Variable

Gaza after November 2025 sharpens the point past the reach of any framework surveyed here. Security Council Resolution 2803 established a Board of Peace with an Office of the High Representative, paired with an international stabilisation force and a national transitional committee.⁴¹ The arrangement is Council-authorized but not run by the United Nations, chaired by a serving head of state rather than an international civil servant, and attached to a territory whose sovereign status was already contested before any of it began.

One category does fit, and an argument that ignored it would deserve the rejection it got. International transitional administration has a substantial literature: Fearon and Laitin theorised neotrusteeship as the recurring modern answer to weak states, and Chesterman's study of United Nations administration in Kosovo and East Timor set out how such arrangements constitute and legitimate authority.⁴² Resolution 2803 borrows from that tradition openly. An Office of the High Representative is the Bosnian instrument by name.

Two features nonetheless sit outside what that literature describes, and they are not cosmetic. Every case in it was administered by an international organisation or by a body accountable to one, which supplied the authority's legitimating story; the Board of Peace is Council-

authorised but not United Nations run, and is chaired by a serving head of state. Every case in it also had a stated endpoint, independence or reintegration, against which progress could be measured; this one has none. Neotrusteeship is therefore the right family and an imperfect fit, which is a smaller claim than the one this section originally made and a defensible one.

The regional order question survives the reclassification, because it was never a question about law. What kind of unit is Gaza for the purpose of locating it in a security complex? It is not a member, having no foreign policy of its own. It is not simply territory over which members contend, since it has an administration with international standing. The categories are not decoration: they determine whether the entity enters the analysis at all.

Sovereignty is behaving here as a variable rather than as the background condition of analysis, and the point is not new. Jackson showed decades ago that juridical and empirical statehood come apart. Krasner established that the norm is routinely suspended by the powerful for their own purposes, and a later literature built the vocabulary of limited statehood and hybrid political order on that foundation.⁴³ Regional order theory absorbed none of it. It went on treating the sovereign state as its unit while the neighbouring literatures dismantled the assumption, and Gaza is where the unpaid bill arrives. Ahram's account of separatist attempts to reconstitute order on alternative territorial bases is the strongest recent treatment within Middle East scholarship, and it too works at the level of the movement rather than the region.⁴⁴

Two clarifications keep this from becoming an exceptionalism argument, which would be both wrong and stale.

Unit instability is not a Middle Eastern pathology.

⁴¹ "The Security Council as Architect? Resolution 2803, the Board of Peace, and the Limits of Transition in Gaza," *ASIL Insights* 29, no. 16 (2025), <https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/29/issue/16>.

⁴² James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States," *International Security* 28, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 5-43; Simon Chesterman, *You, The People: The United Nations, Transitional Administration, and State-Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴³ Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Volker Boege, Anne Brown, Kevin Clements, and Anna Nolan, "On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of 'Fragility'," *Berghof Handbook Dialogue* 8 (Berlin: Berghof Research Center, 2008).

⁴⁴ Ahram, *Break All the Borders*.

It appears wherever state formation is contested and armed movements hold territory: in the Sahel, in the Horn, in parts of the Caucasus. What is unusual about the Middle East since 2023 is only the compression, several unit transformations within three years and within one interconnected security space.

Nor is unit instability a criticism of regional order theory so much as a scope condition it never stated. The frameworks work, and work well, where units hold their type. That covers most regions most of the time, which is why the assumption went unexamined for thirty years. It stops covering a region during periods like this one, and the honest response is to say when the instrument applies rather than to stretch it until it says nothing.

Regional Boundaries as Analytical Choices

One difficulty operates before any analysis begins, which is why it is easy to miss. Every regional order framework must first decide what the region is, and that decision is analytic rather than given.

Buzan and Wæver draw the boundary by patterns of securitisation: states belong to a complex when their security concerns are so interlinked that they cannot be considered separately.⁴⁵ They also equip the theory for exactly the difficulty raised here, and any critique that ignores this deserves to fail. They have insulator states, which sit at the seam between complexes and belong fully to neither. They have super complexes, for cases where the dynamics of adjacent regions interlock without merging. And they have external transformation, their named mechanism for a complex's outer boundary shifting through a change of membership.⁴⁶ The apparatus exists.

So the criticism has to be narrower, and it is a criticism of practice before it is one of theory. Pakistan entered a formal mutual defence commitment with the region's most consequential Arab state. External transformation is the category for that, and the honest question is not whether the theory can accommodate it but whether anyone will apply the category, on what evidence, and how soon. Boundaries drawn in 2003 have been

treated as settled for twenty years, and the theory offers no threshold for how much interlinkage over how long should trigger a redrawing. That is a real gap and a modest one: an underspecified decision rule, not a missing concept.

Under specification matters because boundary decisions determine findings. A study that admits Pakistan to the complex from 2025 finds an order with a nuclear-armed guarantor among its members. One that keeps Pakistan out finds an order disturbed from outside. Same events, different accounts, and the durability requirement the theory rightly insists on cuts against the first: a pact six months old is thin evidence for a pattern, and Pakistani security commitments to the Kingdom go back to the 1960s without having produced membership before. The prudent reading is that it is too early to call. The methodological point survives that concession. What the field does in practice is inherit its boundaries from area studies convention and then treat the resulting region as a discovered object, and for a body of theory whose central concept is the region, an inherited boundary is a poor foundation.

Why Extending the Frameworks Is Insufficient?

The natural repair is to widen the frameworks: admit non-state actors as members of regional security complexes, weight them by capability, and carry on. Much of the current conversation points this way. It will not work.

The residual category problem. Regional order concepts do not merely omit non-state actors; they define them negatively, as penetrating forces, spoilers, proxies, or symptoms of state weakness. Each of those terms locates the actor's significance in its effect on states. Reclassifying Hamas as a complex member does not undo that, because the framework's account of what makes an actor matter is still state-referential. An actor whose order-relevant effect runs through the destruction of a diplomatic process, rather than through any alteration in the distribution of capability, remains illegible.

The aggregation problem. Adding units to a

⁴⁵ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 40-49.

⁴⁶ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 41, 46-47, and 483-89, on insulators, supercomplexes, and external transformation respectively.

complex requires a common metric so that their weights can be summed and compared. There is no such metric across a state's air force, a movement's tunnel network, an armed party's political representation, and a faction's ability to raise insurance premiums on a shipping lane. Existing practice resolves this by converting everything into approximations of military capability, the very conversion that loses what matters about the actors being added.

The closed-system problem, which is the deepest. Regional order frameworks model a bounded system with specified units, specified interactions, and outcomes generated from within. Protean power is an open-system phenomenon. It arises from creativity, which by definition is not contained in a prior specification of what actors can do. A closed-system model cannot be repaired by adding units to it, because the defect is not in the roster.

What would a generative account need? Stated so they can be argued with:

It would have to treat unit type as endogenous, letting what an actor is be an outcome of the process rather than an input to it. Rebel governance scholarship already does something close, tracing how armed groups build administrations, tax, and conduct foreign relations, and Coggins has shown that rebel diplomacy is integral to insurgency rather than incidental.⁴⁷ That literature has not been brought to bear on regional order, and its unit of analysis is the group rather than the region, and that is the gap.

It would have to admit power that is an effect rather than a stock, which means giving up the ambition to state regional order as a distribution and accepting a weaker but honest claim about configurations and their instability.

It would also have to specify the mechanism by which effects cross levels: how a tactical action by a sub-state actor cascades to the system level. This is the least developed of the three. The current

literature moves between levels by assertion, and the cascade from a border operation to the suspension of an interstate normalisation process is the kind of thing an account of regional order should trace rather than merely record.

Cross-level Cascade

The third requirement is where a generative account would have to do its real work, and where nothing currently exists.

An action at one level produced effects at another. A raid across a border, tactical in scale and conducted by an organisation with no capacity to defeat the state it attacked, terminated a process of interstate alignment involving two of the region's most consequential actors and a global patron. Regional order frameworks record that. None of them traces it, and the vocabulary for tracing it does not exist.

What would such a mechanism have to specify? At least the following. It would need a transmission condition: what property of a system allows a local action to spread rather than remaining local. Tight coupling between the domestic legitimacy of a regime and its foreign alignment is the obvious candidate here, since the Saudi normalisation track was vulnerable precisely because it depended on a Palestinian question being politically quiet. It would need an amplification condition: what causes an effect to grow rather than decay as it crosses levels, which in this case involved audiences and media environments that regional order theory treats as background. A lock-in condition is needed too: why some cascades reverse and others do not. Nearly three years on, the normalisation track has not resumed, and the difference between a shock that a system absorbs and one it does not is currently explained after the fact or not at all.

None of this is beyond reach. Adjacent literatures have the pieces. Rebel governance scholarship understands how armed groups accumulate the political standing that makes their actions legible to wider audiences. Work on self-determination

⁴⁷ Zachariah Chierian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Reyko Huang, *The Wartime Origins of Democratization: Civil War, Rebel Governance, and Political Regimes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Ana Arjona,

Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly, eds., *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Bridget L. Coggins, "Rebel Diplomacy: Theorizing Violent Non-State Actors' Strategic Use of Talk," in *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, ed. Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly, 98-118.

movements has traced how fragmentation inside a movement changes what a state can concede.⁴⁸ Studies of recognition have shown that the emergence of new political units turns on the strategic decisions of major states rather than on internal viability.⁴⁹ What is missing is the assembly, and the obstacle to assembling it is that each of these literatures takes the group as its unit of analysis while regional order theory takes the region, and nobody has built the bridge.

Scope Conditions and Testable Implications

An argument that a framework fails is worth little unless it says where the framework still holds.

Regional order concepts remain the right instruments where three conditions obtain. Units hold their type over the analytic period. The dominant actors exercise control power, deploying accumulated capability toward chosen ends. The actors experience their environment as risk, whether or not it is, since a region in which everyone affirms the same templates will behave as those templates predict for as long as the affirmation lasts. Many regions satisfy all three for long stretches. South America since the 1980s does. East Asia largely does now. Western Europe did for the four decades before 1989, and conspicuously did not for the decade after, which is a useful reminder that the conditions are periodic rather than regional properties.

Where the conditions fail, the concepts should be used descriptively and not causally. That is a real restriction, and stating it is more useful than the alternative of treating every anomaly as a puzzle for future refinement.

The argument generates claims that can be checked against other cases. Regions with high unit instability should show more frequent order transitions than distributions of capability predict, and the Sahel since 2020 is the obvious test. Actors that innovate under recognised uncertainty should produce order-effects disproportionate to their capability, which is checkable wherever weak actors have generated systemic consequences. Actors in refusal should display a signature of repeated surprise followed by reassertion of the failing model, which is

observable in doctrine documents and official statements without any need for privileged access.

Each of those could fail. That is the point of stating them.

Implications for Policy and Scholarship

For policy the practical consequence is a warning against a particular error. Analysis built on distributions of capability will systematically miss the actors most likely to change a regional order, because those actors are least visible in distributions. It will also mistake conversion, an actor abandoning a threat in favour of a bargain, for escalation, and mistake improvisation for strategy. States that want to anticipate order change would do better to watch for the conditions that make improvisation likely, which are chiefly the presence of actors with little to protect facing systems whose assumptions have gone untested for a long time.

For scholarship the immediate task is less a new grand theory than an honest inventory. Which of our concepts are risk instruments, and which can survive uncertainty? Deterrence, balancing, and securitisation are all risk instruments and should be labelled as such. That is not a demand to discard them. It is a demand to say when they apply.

Pakistan's position deserves a note, both because it is the clearest anomaly the frameworks produced and because it is where the argument becomes uncomfortable for a Pakistani reader. A state outside the region's conventional boundaries acquired a formal security role inside it, and did so without any change in its regional capability. The theoretical lesson is that where an analyst draws the line decides what the analyst can see, and a study that had treated Pakistan as an insulator rather than as a neighbour would at least have been watching. The practical lesson is harder. A commitment whose value rests on ambiguity is not a position that can be banked, and a state that reads it as one will make the error this article attributes to everyone else: mistaking a template that has held so far for a description of the world.

For teaching, the consequence is more immediate

⁴⁸ Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, *Inside the Politics of Self-Determination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴⁹ Bridget Coggins, *Power Politics and State Formation in the Twentieth Century: The Dynamics of Recognition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

than it sounds. Regional order concepts are taught as descriptions of how regions work, and students learn to apply them to whatever region is in front of them. Taught instead as instruments with stated operating conditions, they become more useful rather than less: a student who can say why regional security complex theory illuminates East Asia and struggles with the Levant after 2023 understands both the theory and the region better than one who has learned to apply it everywhere with equal confidence. Much of the trouble the field is now working through comes from a generation of scholarship in which the scope conditions were implicit and therefore never taught.

Conclusion

The strongest version of the objection to all this is Fawcett's, and it should be met rather than avoided. The Middle East has seen many announcements of new orders, and most were premature. A theory that failed to predict events is not thereby refuted, since prediction is not what these theories offer.

The response is that the claim here is not about prediction. A framework may reasonably fail to see October 7 coming. What it should be able to do afterwards is trace how an attack that shifted no

national distribution of capability ended a process of interstate alignment, and here the frameworks do better than a bald failure claim would suggest: a regime-security account of the kind Gause supplies gets a long way, because the normalization track was vulnerable to the domestic pressure the attack generated. The complaint is narrower and it survives. That account was available in 2023 and nobody drew it, because regional order analysis reads distributions and this mechanism does not appear in one. The frameworks hold the parts. They are not assembled to run in this direction.

Whether the region has undergone change of order or change within it, the question Del Sarto, Lynch, and Mabon put, may be the wrong question, or at least the wrong first one. Both formulations assume an order stable enough for the distinction to bite. The twenty-nine months examined here suggest something less tidy: configurations that hold for a while, are disturbed by improvisations nobody could have counted, and reform around units that have changed into something else in the meantime. That is not a new order. It is not disorder either. It is what a region looks like when the instruments brought to read it were built for calmer conditions than the ones it is in.

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