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INTRODUCTION TO MIDDLE EAST POLITICS: LEADING FACTORS, ACTORS AND DYNAMICS

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This study has aimed at increasing familiarity of students with regard to major issues in Middle East politics, and providing a framework that would help to analyze regional politics. In this regard, there are two points to be considered. The first one is the necessity of addressing an issue regarding the region through a synchronic and comparative perspective. The second is the fact that any issue addressed in political analyses is a part of a complicated process shaped by interaction of a number of factors in a specific place and historical context. In this study, firstly main factors that are effective in Middle East politics, such as physical and human geography, economy and history are examined. In the second part, leading actors that play critical roles in regional politics, i.e. states, international organizations and extra-regional powers, and the roles of these actors in Middle East politics are discussed. Lastly, contextual factors that emerge in the Middle East, and regional and global dynamics are addressed briefly. It also addressed the question how does structural factors, actors in the region and regional and global dynamics affect each other.

The term 'Middle East' was firstly coined in the early 20th century as a subjective concept with a political content rather than a cultural or geographical expression.¹ Having invented by the British officials and used for their strategic objectives, the concept has become increasingly popular. However, the territories, geographical regions and countries covered by this concept have changed over time. For this reason, it has always been controversial where the Middle East exactly is, where does it begin and end. Nevertheless, the common tendency is inclusion of the Arabic world, Israel, Iran and Turkey to the Middle East.

The region that is now called Middle East, has hosted great civilizations throughout history and it has always been in interaction with the surrounding regions. This interaction has led to need for knowing the region closely. In this regard, oriental studies that date back to 16th century emerged in Europe in order to study people, cultures, languages etc. that lived in the region. The orientalism mostly covered the study of history, archeology, folklore, linguistics and theological studies with related to the region. Orientalists have been severely criticized in the later years due to their close cooperation with the imperialist Western countries and their methodologies. The orientalist depiction of Middle Eastern societies through stereotypes, stationary and essentialist perspectives that relies on the 'decisive' effects of the religious culture have been criticized to be misleading and manipulative narratives that serve to shape the region, rather than understanding it.²

The emergence of Middle East as a distinct region after the World War I and the rise of Cold War in the later years amplified the need to closely comprehend the

region on the side of the Western countries. That is why new and systematic approaches have been devised for a better understanding of the region. One of them is Western-centered modernist approach. The 'modernist' approach that compare social, economic and political structures in the Middle East to the 'modern West' has focused on a debate whether the region could be modernized or not. Modernist approaches analyzed politics and society in the Middle East within the framework of economy, sociology and political science. One of the prominent approaches in the Middle East studies is historical-materialist (structuralist) analyses that focus on the effects of economic and political relations between the Western imperialist and capitalist powers and the Middle East countries on social, political and economic structures in the region.³ In recent years, historical-sociological studies that focus on interactions between society, state and international system, and try to understand politics of the region within this framework have become prominent.⁴

There are two important points that should be taken into account in regional studies. The first one is that the issue should be analyzed with a synchronic and comparative perspective. Otherwise, we could figure out some outcomes that ostensibly peculiar to the region. The outcomes that are considered to be peculiar to the region could lead us towards exceptionalism, which would be mostly misleading. Likewise, while doing regional analyses the focus on a certain or few factors would necessarily be reductive and lead us to mis-conclusions. Secondly, it should be bear in mind that the politics is a process that is shaped by interactions of many factors at a specific time and in a specific place.

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We can classify components of Middle East politics under three titles: 1) structural factors, 2) political actors, and 3) contextual factors (periodical regional and global dynamics). The politics is generally deemed to be related to actors, their ideas and decisions. However, as to the politics at the regional scale, a large number of and various actors – including states, international powers, international and regional organizations, non-state actors etc. – play effective roles. Furthermore, these actors could not behave as they wish. There are structural and contextual (periodical) factors that may constrain or ease, even lead activities of certain actors. That is, the politics is an outcome of exchanges between the actors in addition to their interactions with the structural and the contextual factors.

Structural Factors

One of the most important structural factors is physical and human geography that have decisive effects on abilities and sources of the actors. Geopolitical position of states and their geographical characteristics – whether they are landlocked or not, physical characteristics, climate and natural resources etc.- affect political resolutions of decision-makers. Likewise, self-sufficiency in some sectors including defense, industry, energy, agriculture etc. may profoundly affect political decisions and constrain foreign policy options. For example, Turkey has to import oil and natural gas in order to meet its energy need, which closely affects its foreign policy.

Similarly, social structure and demographic features of nation constrain considerably means and capabilities of states. In this regard, one of the most significant points is national, ethnic or religious characteristics of dominant

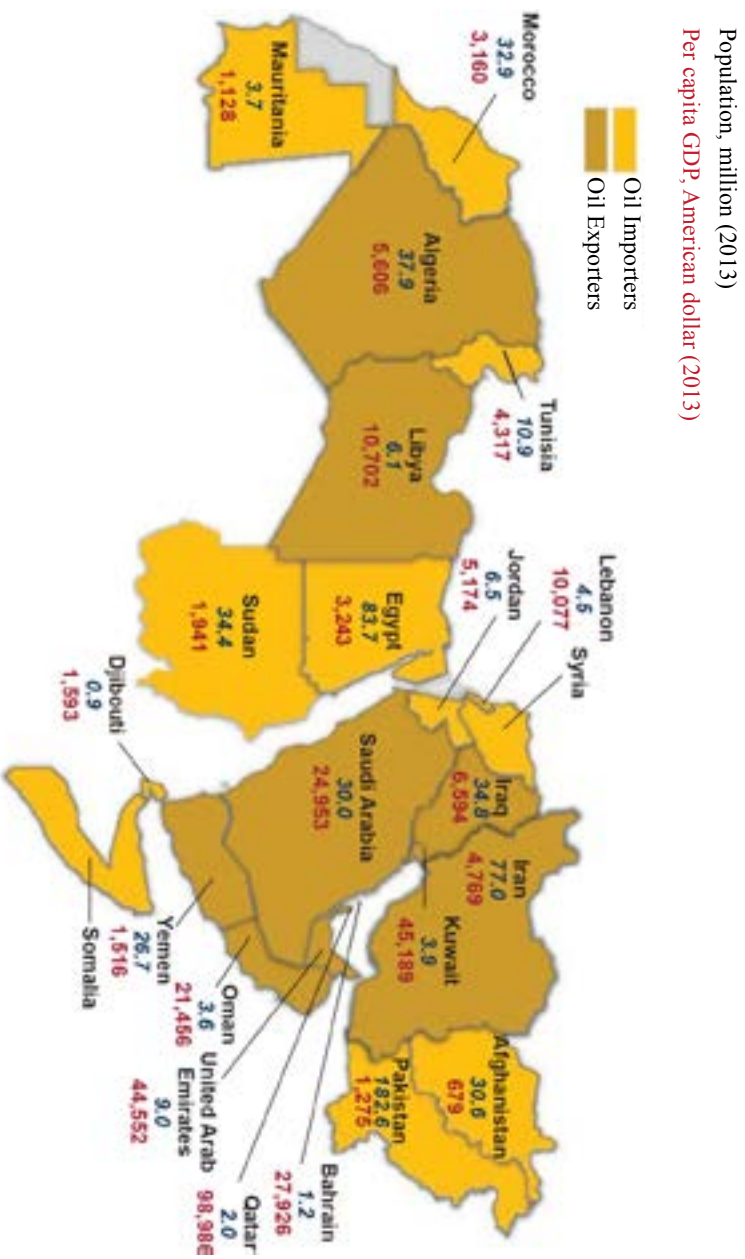
groups in a country. In the Middle East countries, with the exception of Iran, Israel and Turkey, Arab population is dominant. Israel with a large Jewish population, Iran, Iraq and Bahrain where the Shiites constitute majority of the people and Lebanon where the Christians consist almost half of the population differ from other Middle East countries in terms of religion. Nevertheless, almost all Middle East countries have considerable numbers of linguistic, ethnic or religious/sectarian minorities. Minorities' relations with the government affect domestic and foreign policies, as well as security policies of the countries. Today, Kurdish political movements in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria should be considered within the framework of this context.

Besides ethnic and religious composition of the people, quality and quantity of the human capital, average age of the population, literacy rate, education, rural-urban distribution of population etc. affect politics directly or indirectly. Another point with regard to the effects of demographic structure on politics is the power of social classes and their relations to each other. The power of capital owners, military elite or the effect of clergy over society shapes politics in numerous ways.

Economic characteristics of any country also crucially shape politics. For instance, having oil or not closely affects both domestic and foreign policies. The economic base determines what does a country need. For instance, Syria, Egypt and Yemen with large populations have considerable labor force, but limited energy sources. These countries have to import energy while sending their labor abroad. Likewise, most of the Persian Gulf countries are rich in terms of energy resources, but they do not

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The Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan



Source: IMF Regional Economic Outlook database, and Microsoft Map Land

have enough labor that necessitates the employment of foreigners.

Most of the Middle Eastern countries are considered as developing or underdeveloped ones. That is, the challenge of development has been one of the primary occupations of the ruling governments. Regional states that emerged in the 20th century engaged in establishing national economic structures in order to reinforce their authorities and built customs walls. However, they faced two economic challenges; the lack of industrial infrastructure and the lack of capital. That is why the regional states started to play a determinant role in economy, and adopted etatist development strategies. However, these strategies failed by the 1970s due to the awkwardness of bureaucracy and corruption. Then, in order to overcome their economic challenges, most Middle Eastern governments looked for credit from international financial organizations such as IMF and the World Bank. However, those institutions asked structural adjustment programs as a prerequisite for financial support. That meant the withdrawal of government from economic activities, the liberalization of economy and free trade. Thus, the liberalization process unleashed in the Middle East and became one of the most controversial issues during the 1990s. The liberalization programs were partly successful in economy in some countries but the liberalization in the sense of politics was not realized.⁵

One of the first things that come into mind regarding economy in the Middle East is oil. Having found firstly in Iran in the early 1900s, oil transformed into a strategic asset in a short time. It has been effective in the evolution of both domestic politics and international politics. Increasing oil revenues led to the emergence of 'rentier

states' in the region. The increasing amount of sums between the production cost and market value of oil that started to directly flow into state treasury after the nationalization of oil companies have become effective to determine the relations between ruling governments and people. This relationship, in which government freely or cheaply provides a large numbers of services, and almost no tax is levied on people whereas the political participation is too limited, has greatly shaped internal politics. Increasing effects of oil on international politics was clearly realized with the oil shock in 1973. At that time with the Saudi Arabia's decision to put embargo on the USA and Netherlands for their support to Israel during the Arab-Israel War, the price of oil was quadrupled. In addition to its effects on international political economy, the rising 'petro-dollars' at the time made the oil exporting countries wealthier and increased their political capacity and capabilities in the region. However, it should be bear in mind that next to the oil-rich countries in the Middle East, there are some oil-poor countries such as Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Palestine. These countries are affected negatively from increase in energy cost.

Another structural factor that has decisive effects on the regional politics is history.⁶ Historical legacy may lead some structural problems in addition to its role in building nations, states, and political culture. The Middle East was mostly under the Ottoman rule until the late 19th century. New states were founded in the region after the collapse of Ottoman Empire following the World War I.⁷ It is often stated that political map of the region was formed with the Sykes-Picot Agreement signed secretly by the Great Britain and France in 1916. However, the

political map of the region was mainly determined at the Paris Conference of 1919, and San Remo Conference of 1920. However, there were only four independent states in the region in the 1920s; Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Yemen. All other countries were under the control of European colonialists under various forms such as mandate, protectorate or colony. The political map of the Middle East took its current form only at the end of de-colonization process that began after the World War II. The state-building processes at that period shaped the types and structures of political regimes. While monarchies were installed or preserved in the countries under the British control with the exception of Israel and Palestine, republican regimes were established in Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, and Algeria where the French were influential. The state-building process directly affects political and security issues in the region even today as it was in the recent past. Relations between tribes, sectarian, and social groups that have taken control of power centers at the time of state-building, and that have certain advantages, with other social groups that have been excluded from government and power determine critical points in politics. Additionally, in some cases, political borders that have been drawn at the time of state-building process may turn into structural conflicts between the neighboring countries. Thus, many countries have border disagreements with their neighbors in the Middle East, where the boundaries were drawn ‘arbitrarily’ by the great powers.

Political Actors

The political actors that are influential in regional politics can be classified as following: regional states, great

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powers in international system, international and regional organizations and non-state actors. As stated previously, these actors attempt to develop policies within the framework of opportunities provided and constraints imposed by the structural factors. In the meantime, the actors are also continuously interacting with each other.

The principal actor of politics in the Middle East is the state. As the highest political authority reigning over a specific territory, the state is the principal power to make basic decisions with regard to political, economic and social etc. issues. Despite the existence of long-established states with their own bureaucratic traditions (such as Turkey, Iran, Egypt) in the region, some Middle Eastern states (such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Israel and Jordan) are considered as products of the colonial period. Additionally, there are some city-states (Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates) around the Persian Gulf, as well as traditional political authorities that are maintained in countries like Saudi Arabia and Oman.

The state is the main actor in politics, however, it is the political regime that forms the state and determines basic politics in a country. That is, a political regime in a country forms the type of government, its ideology, basic principles and organizational structure and represents the state. Political regimes/states in the Middle East can be categorized in different forms depending on the source of legitimacy (theocratic / secular), the form of government (republic / monarchy), the type of government (democratic / authoritarian), and depending on its approach to region and international system (revisionist / status quo), and its principal social and economic policies (revolutionary-radical / conservative). Political regimes are not everlasting. Ruling regimes may be overthrown through

different ways such as revolution, coup d'état or war that culminate in a dramatic change of basics of politics in that country. For instances, the monarchies in Egypt (1952), Iraq (1958), Libya (1969) and Iran (1979) were overthrown and replaced by republics. While Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser was radical and revisionist, it turned into a status quo power in the 1980s. Having been pro-status quo and conservative until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, after then Iran became a revisionist and radical state. Recently, long-lasting authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya were overthrown through the 'Arab Spring.'

In addition to characteristics of ruling regimes, power of the state has decisive effects to shape politics. Although their definitions and characteristics are controversial, *legitimacy*, *autonomy* and *sovereignty* could be taken as principal measurements to comprehend power of state.⁸ One of the most controversial issues regarding Middle Eastern states is the claim that the legitimacy of political regimes ruling in the region is weak. Governments that are plagued with the lack of legitimacy often tend to use sheer force and oppressive measures in order to maintain their power. For this reason, these governments are called as authoritarian or police states. Syria under the Assads, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein are primary examples of authoritarian states. Additionally, governments that face with legitimacy problem tend to bring security issues into the forefront or to adopt transnational ideologies in order to mobilize people behind them and suppress opposition.

The autonomy of state means the capability of a government to act independently from social groups inside the country or foreign powers in order to maintain their

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authority. Thus, autonomous regimes can behave easily while making policies. Foreign aids and rents like oil revenues may strengthen autonomy of government against internal power centers, but risks to increase dependence on foreign powers and international dynamics. Being independent from any social group and external factors provides the regimes with freedom of movement. However, at the same time it may weaken the government because it lacks social and/or foreign support. For this reason, the regimes who are seeking to reinforce their power tend to rely on a specific group, party, tribe etc., which may lessen autonomy of government after a while and deepens the problem of legitimacy.

Those states/governments that cannot control their territories, i.e. whose sovereignty is considerably challenged lose their power to determine politics. Lebanon that is plagued with sectarian divisions and long-time civil war, Iraq after the American occupation and Syria during the civil war, are clear examples of this phenomena. Under those circumstances, the country become open to foreign interventions as well as increasing role of non-state actors in politics.

There are some regional organizations such as the Arab League, Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Gulf Cooperation Council in the Middle East; however, they could not play influential roles in regional politics. The prospective attempts of powerful states in the region to turn those organizations into political instruments to their own benefits, have led the competing powers and weaker ones to be reluctant for further cooperation. Another reason for the weakness of regional organizations in the Middle East is the fact that they were generally emerged in reaction to some threats and incidents, rather

than to be built on inspiring and lasting ideas. Furthermore, although the Middle East is addressed as a unit of analysis, we cannot talk about the development of a regional identity and regional values. For this reason, the leading actors in the region have chosen to organize around the idea of Arab nationalism that excludes some actors, or Islam that goes beyond borders of the region instead of regionalism. Additionally, some of the states in the region, with the support of extra-regional powers have engaged in security cooperation (like the Baghdad Pact of 1955) against certain regional threats; or some countries that have specific and limited natural resources engaged in coordination in order to protect their interests (like OPEC). However, those initiatives could not turn into effective regional political organizations.⁹

One of the actors in regional politics that should be taken into account is non-state, or sub-state actors. Especially well-organized ethnic or religious minorities could become influential political actors particularly in the countries under weak governments. In fact, their influence is not limited to the countries they live in; they can affect regional politics either through looking for allies from abroad for their struggles inside the country, or through some provocative activities. For instance, Hezbollah, which is a political organization of the Lebanese Shiites, has brought Iranian influence to the country through its close relations with Tehran. In the same vein, having kidnapped two Israeli soldiers in June 2016, it provoked the Israeli attack on Lebanon. In another case, the Kurdish attempts to establish an autonomous government in the north of Iraq especially after Gulf War I (1991) raised concerns in other countries in the region like Turkey, Iran and Syria, and affected their regional

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politics.¹⁰ In this framework, at some times the tribes can also become influential actors in regional politics. It appeared that the tribes played effective roles especially at the times when central governments were weakened and where they begin to lose control. The tribes have become prominent political actors in Iraq after the American occupation in 2003, and in Libya after the Arab Spring.

As it is obvious in the historical background of the Middle East, some extra-regional states could be influential in the evolution of the region with their policies. Especially the great powers continuously strive to shape the Middle East according to their own interests.¹¹ The region mostly under the influence of British and French colonialism in the early 20th century witnessed the US-Soviet competition during the Cold War. After the end of the Cold War various powers have tried to establish their sphere of influence in the Middle East with different objectives and different means. Nonetheless, American military and political presence has considerably increased in the region in the wake of Gulf Crisis (1990-91). At that time, in parallel with the rise of ‘New World Order’

discourse at international system, the concept of the ‘New Middle East’ came into prominence.¹² The “New Middle East” vision that hinted the American leadership, peaceful resolution of regional conflicts, reduction of military expenditures, economic and social development, and regional economic integration had two pillars; the realization of Arab-Israeli peace, and the security of flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. In this context, policies for the ‘peace process’ and ‘dual containment’ came to the fore and marked the 1990s. However, by the end of the decade, the dual containment policy was declined, and the Middle East Peace Process was interrupted.

The US attempts to shape the Middle East has continued in later times, as well. One of the most remarkable examples of these attempts is called the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI).¹³ The failure of American attempts ‘to put the region in order’ after the Cold War, and the increasing radicalism in the Middle East that has directly threatened American interests as in the case of September 11, 2001 have led the United States to revise its policies towards the region.

In the aftermath of September 11 attacks, the United States and its allies have concluded that main reason behind the rise of radicalism in the Middle East that has threatened them is the backwardness of the region and lack of democracy. Then, they decided to intervene in the region in order to transform it in social, economic and political terms through comprehensive political and economic reforms. In this line, the George W. Bush administration used both the military means and the American soft power. Accordingly, the US administration would always prioritize American interests, and intervene militarily whenever and wherever it is deemed necessary.¹⁴ The

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US government that tried to use its 'soft power' through the GMEI, promoted development and democratization of the region, and encouraged regional countries to further freedoms. Thus, the conventional and pro-status quo American policy towards the Middle East was replaced by a new approach that projected liberal democracy and free market economy in the region. The GMEI, which was also supported by NATO and G-8, was viewed as a new American imposition, and welcomed neither by the ruling regimes nor by local political actors and elite in the region. Only Morocco, Jordan, Bahrain and Yemen besides Turkey involved in the process.

One of the first engagements of the Bush administration within the framework of new Middle East vision was the invasion of Iraq by the 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' in March, 2003, and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein government. The Bush administration put forward some reasons to wage war against Iraq; including the prevention of Iraq from obtaining weapons of mass destruction that may threaten the United States and its allies, the prevention of international terrorists that targeted the United States and its allies from obtaining those skills and capacity, and the removal of despotic dictator from power in order to create a region that is proper to establish stable democracies and open society. According to this policy, democratic regimes would be established in the Middle East that would begin firstly in Iraq, which eventually culminate in a decrease in radicalism, thereby, the region would no longer be regarded as a source of threat.

Contrary to its pro-status quo policies employed in the Middle East since the 1980s that was based on containment and deterrence, the United States became a revisionist power that strived for changing status quo

through its occupation of Iraq and the introduction of GMEI.¹⁵ Although the United States was successful at overthrowing the regime of Saddam Hussein in a short time, things didn't go well in Iraq. Both the rising resistance movements and disagreements among the Iraqi political leaders thwarted the establishment of a stable and strong government. That is why the wished 'wave of democracy' could not be generated in the region. Moreover, while the authoritarian regimes in the region were employing 'American methods' to neutralize their own 'terrorists', the occupation of Iraq has helped the resistance movements and radical groups recruit more militants. Additionally, although conservative regimes in the region have tried to adapt themselves to the pressure for 'democratization', the GMEI unsettled traditional allies of the United States in the region, which has come up with the worsening of relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia. Finally, the achievements of Hezbollah and Hamas, who are considered as terrorist organizations by the USA, in elections held in Lebanon (2005) and Palestine (2006) struck a heavy blow against the American attempts. Furthermore, the establishment of a 'Shiite' government after the institutionalization of new constitution in Iraq, and the political awakening among the Shiites of Lebanon and the Persian Gulf countries have led to the rise of Iranian influence in the region, which is called by some people as the rise of 'Shiite Crescent.' As a result, the GMEI was put aside and the United States has given up the idea of democratizing the region and has turned back to its conventional policy of relying on powerful and authoritarian leaders.

The advent of Arab Spring in December 2010 that overwhelmed the whole region was another challenge to

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the American policy. Despite the rhetorical support for democratic transformations, the United States has pursued different policies in different countries under the influence of the Arab Spring. In response to mass protests against the regime in Egypt, the American government asked Hosni Mubarak to resign, however, it did not backed the Morsi government that came to power through elections after the revolution. Moreover, it is claimed that the United States has implicitly supported the coup d'état against the Morsi government, on July 3, 2013. However, the United States, under the umbrella of NATO, extended military support to the opposition against the Qaddafi regime in Libya. When the Syrian government tried to suppress anti-regime demonstrations by using over violence, the American administration declared that Bashar al-Assad has lost his legitimacy, and helped his opponents to get organized.¹⁶ However, it has avoided repeating the Libyan case, that is, military intervention against the Assad regime, and has not equipped well enough the opposition to gain advantage against the regime.

Regional and Global Dynamics

Regional dynamics are the phenomena, which have emerged as a result of interaction between historical legacy, geographical position, socio-political situation in the region and political, economic, cultural and external factors, and have strong implications on regional politics. Especially high population growth rate, rapid urbanization and increase in education level are principal socio-economic factors that have effect on these dynamics. The interaction between these factors and local-cultural values unleashed some 'radical' movements. Additionally, failure of the ruling governments to cope with social,

economic and political challenges, and the exclusion of people from politics paved the way for empowerment of radical movements. Therefore, these radical movements have transformed into regional dynamics, which are effective in the whole Middle East. Arab nationalism and political Islam are the principal regional dynamics in the Middle East. We can also consider the Palestine question as one of the main regional dynamics because it has significant effects on the regional politics.

Arab nationalism emerged in late 19th century as a cultural awakening movement in reaction to the Ottoman rule.¹⁷ The establishment of numerous states instead of a single Arab state that cover all Arabic people and lands after the collapse of the Ottoman state, and, moreover, the establishment of British and French control over those countries led Arab nationalism to become a populist, radical, anti-Western and pan-Arabist movement. Particularly after the Egyptian ‘revolution’ of 1952, Arab nationalism has become one of the most effective dynamics in regional politics. Once used as a powerful instrument by some regional governments, Arab nationalism, however, gradually lost its influence after the failure of coordinated Arab efforts to struggle against Israel. The occupation of an Arab country (Kuwait) by another Arab state (Iraq) in 1990, and the cooperation of other Arab governments with the United States against the aggressor one marked the end of Arab nationalism that envisaged unification of the Arab world. However, Arab nationalism has resurfaced in the 1990s in a new form. The lack of solution for the Palestine issue, continuous American interventions in Iraq, and the development of new and independent means of communication with the rise of globalization have led to reemergence of Arab identity and nationalism in Arab

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streets. Unlike the previous one, the new form of Arab nationalism has not threatened sovereignty and borders of the states, but relied on common feelings like shared pains, culture, language and partly religion.¹⁸

One of the effective dynamics in the region is political Islam.¹⁹ The defeat of allied Arab armies against Israel in 1967 is considered as milestone for the fall of Arab nationalism and the rise of political Islam. After then, a major part of the opposition, struggling against nationalists or conservative authoritarian regimes in the region, has emerged under political Islam. Especially after Iranian Revolution of 1979, political Islam was regarded as one of the most significant threats to security of regime and regional security. While a large part of political Islamist movements transformed into political parties, which were ready to compromise with the system in the 1990s, some of them have gone to extremism.

The increasing American presence in the region in terms of economic, political and military aspects in the 1990s, the negative repercussions of globalization on the region, and the interruption of Middle East peace process have paved the way for anti-American and radical movements in the region to get stronger. Moreover, the volunteers who fought previously in Afghanistan and Bosnia have become source for recruitment for the Islamist movements. The radical groups thus became stronger, have targeted both the ruling political regimes in the region, and their local or international supporters. In fact, they have directly threatened American interests by attacking US assets both in the region and out of the region since the 1990s. Under those circumstances, the 9/11 attacks perpetrated by radicals who came from the region

led the United States and the West to engage in building a new order in the Middle East.

The Palestine issue has also become one of the most important factors that shape Middle East politics.²⁰ In fact, the Palestine question has three dimensions. First, it is considered as an Arab-Israeli issue. Most of the Arab countries do not recognize legitimacy and sovereignty of Israel because they considered the lands 'occupied' by Israel belongs to the Arabs. For this reason, three major wars and many low-profile battles have taken place between the Arab states and Israel. Among the Arab front countries, only Egypt (1978) and Jordan (1994) signed peace agreements with Israel and established diplomatic relations. The second dimension of Palestine question is the Palestine-Israeli conflict. A Palestinian identity flourished among the people living in territories occupied by Israel, and international community recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Most of the Palestinians, today, live in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, where Israel occupied in 1967. The PLO proclaimed independence of the State of Palestine in 1988, however, the state-building process has began in these territories only in 1994 with the establishment of Palestine National Authority as an interim government body within the framework of Middle East peace process. The Palestine issue is still high on the Middle East agenda because of the interruption of peace process, and the ongoing Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem and West Bank. The third dimension of Palestine issue is religious conflict. The fell of Jerusalem, one of three holiest cities of Islam, under Jewish occupation has given Palestine issue a religious dimension.

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The Palestine question as a regional issue is an important element for showing true colors of the regimes in the Middle East. The position of any regional state towards the Palestine issue, also largely dominates its wider regional perspective. Additionally, as an unresolved ‘Arab’ or ‘Islamic’ issue, the Palestine question has an important place in the development of Arab nationalism and political Islam, and the emergence of extremist movements.

Another regional dynamic that closely affects regional politics is the sectarian relations that recently comes into prominence. Majority of the population in Turkey and most of the Arab countries are Sunni, however there are considerable number of Shiite people living in Lebanon



and the Persian Gulf countries besides the Shiite-majority countries like Iran, Iraq and Bahrain. With the exception of Lebanon, where the power is shared according to confessional system, the issue of sectarian differences became prominent after the Iranian revolution of 1979. However, the establishment of a Shiite-dominated government in Iraq after the American occupation in 2003, and the rising Sunni-Shiite conflicts in that country made the sectarian differences an important regional issue. Additionally, the increasing Iranian influence in the region, and the consolidation of power of Hezbollah as a Shiite political organization in Lebanon, and the rising political demands of the Gulf Shiites have precipitated a debate on the emergence of sectarian differences as an influential factor in regional politics.²¹ It also argued that the sectarian 'linkages' between the fighting groups in Syria and their prominent supporters have amplified the influence of sectarianism at the regional level.

Middle Eastern politics are also heavily influenced by the developments in international system. Thus, the Middle East was penetrated by the Western powers in the colonial era, and closely affected by the Cold War after the World War II. Likewise, the wave of globalization has left its mark on the Middle East, as it has affected other regions, during the 1990s. Political, economic and cultural dimensions of globalization have brought new challenges and opportunities for the regional actors.²²

In terms of politics, the wave of democratization, which has accompanied globalization in other parts of world, could not flourish in the Middle East. In the meantime, the ruling regimes in the region have had to cope with economic and social challenges that arose in the late 1980s. As a reflection of global tendencies, the

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burgeoning public opinion started to question government policies. This process has been amplified due to development and spread of new communication channels that has broke the monopoly of the state over ‘information.’ In fact, most of the regimes in the region neither realized ideological ends that they promised to their people, nor increased the general level of welfare in their countries. Therefore, the legitimacy of the ruling regimes in the region was challenged further. On the other hand, international financial institutions like the IMF, the World Bank, and organizations like the European Union, whom the regional countries applied for credit and financial support, asked them to make political reforms and democratization in addition to economic reforms.

Middle Eastern states have engaged in economic and political reforms in order to resolve legitimacy crisis and please their Western collocutors who have asked liberalization, that is, as a ‘part of survival strategy.’ Although the reform process has partially led to the liberalization of politics at different levels in different countries, it has not initiated a wave of democratization in the region. Oil-rich Gulf countries, despite the decline of oil prices in the 1990s, and authoritarian regimes in Iraq and Syria have resisted to political liberalization. On the other hand, some countries like Jordan and Tunisia with structurally weak economies but lacked powerful and effective security structures have become leading countries in the process of liberalization in the region.²³

As part of the partial political reforms, however, the freedom of thought, and the right to association have broadened, power of the state was curbed to some extent, and limited political participation was allowed. Therefore, institutions for political representation were installed in the region in the 1990s and later, and elections

at different levels – presidential, parliamentary, or city councils – have occupied an important place in Middle Eastern political agenda.

Free and fair elections alongside complete political participation, however, were not tolerated in the name of the security and maintenance of regime. Thus, while the elections and political participation mechanisms served to legitimize the power of incumbent regimes to some extent, the ruling governments could thwart participation of unwelcomed political actors to elections through different tricks. There are a numbers of factors that impede the consolidation of democratization in the region including the prominence of security concerns, weakness of associations and non-governmental organizations, weakness of bourgeoisie and its hesitance to demand democratization due to its dependence on government.²⁴ The lack of transparency, rule of law, constitutional government, freedom of thought and right to association have decreased the importance of liberalization attempts.

Additionally, the power of state is relatively weakened because the communication and organization of non-state actors get easier with the globalization. Thus, non-governmental organizations are able to get organized and spread easily. Opposition movements and minorities coordinated their activities among themselves and with the outer world; thus, they acted almost beyond the control of state. In addition to mainstream political movements, extremist groups and terrorist organizations have also benefited from this process. The most remarkable example of this process is the organization of al-Qaeda terrorist network, and the September 11 attacks.²⁵

The Middle East has become the most affected region by developments after the September 11. The US attempts

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to built a new Middle East after the September 11, have increased the polarization in the region. The competition has been deepened between the states (Iran, Syria) and non-state organizations (Hezbollah and Hamas) that are against Israel and the American policies, and American allies (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Israel) that are concerned with the rise of Iranian influence and the ‘Shia crescent.’

Although Barack Obama had greater credibility than his predecessor, George W. Bush, to promote democratization, he opted for status quo in the region in the name of ending the ‘conflict’ between the ‘Islamic world’ and the United States. In this regard, in his speech in Egypt, in 2009, President Obama proclaimed his readiness to accept and interact with the Islamic world as it is; thereby, he gave up the idea to transform the Middle East and the Islamic world.²⁶ Soon after the American policy returned to its previous line, Middle Eastern peoples revolted for change in 2011.

The Arab uprisings, named as the ‘Arab Spring,’ emerged as a new regional dynamic at the end of 2010. Many people analyzed the Arab Spring in different ways. Some considered it as a movement precipitated by economic reasons, while the others viewed it as a democratization movement. Some people called Arab Spring the ‘Islamic awakening’ and underlined Islamic elements in the background of uprisings.

In fact, the lack of democracy in the region, gradually increasing educated-youth unemployment, the widening of gap between poor and rich, corruption and the reaction against the incumbent regimes led the masses into opposition demonstrations. Demands for political reform and fight against corruption were chanted at the mass demonstrations. The protest meetings rapidly turned into revolutionary movements asking the deposition of incumbent regimes. At the end of the ‘Arab Spring,’ long-lasting governments of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Qaddafi in Libya and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen that became symbols of status quo were toppled. Although the transition was realized quickly in Tunisia and Egypt, it came after internal conflicts and foreign intervention in Libya and Yemen because governments used excessive force to suppress opponents. In Bahrain, where the uprisings spread simultaneously, the government suppressed the opposition with the support of Saudi Arabia; thus, revolutionary wave was ceased in the Persian Gulf region. The Assad administration in Syria also used extreme military force to disperse protest meetings, but failed to get the opposition under control. Then, the Syrian opposition armed against the Assad government’s use of excessive violence, which transformed the ‘Arab Spring’ into a bloody civil war in Syria.

Worrying about the uprisings to spread over their countries, conservative Arab governments like Morocco, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia undertook some populist measures and partial political reforms in order to prevent opposition protests. As a consequence, although these uprisings could not have provided a complete transition to democracy, they proved the popular will and expectations for democratization. Thanks to these uprisings, Middle Eastern people came to front as an actor capable of taking political initiative, and democratization has become a new political dynamic in the region.²⁷

The mood of optimism with regard to the Arab Spring, however, has faded away in a short time for two principal reasons. First, President Mohamed Morsi was overthrown by a military coup on July 3, 2013, led by General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, who rebuilt a new authoritarian regime in Egypt. Second, the lasting civil war in Syria turned into a regional and sectarian conflict. Regional and extra-regional great-power supports given to fighting parties has led the civil war prolong in Syria, where political attempts to resolve the conflict have remained inconclusive, forced 4 million Syrians to take refugee outside the country, and displaced 7 million people inside Syria. Moreover, Syria has become a center for extremist movements. Additionally, the failure to provide stability in Libya and Yemen after the removal of Qaddafi and Saleh governments, moreover, the rise of extremist movements in these countries have dissolved the positive atmosphere of Arab Spring.

Conclusion

This study provided a framework to help analysis of Middle Eastern politics, and reviewed principal factors, leading actors and regional dynamics that are effective in regional politics. Explanations of political developments through only one factor, or role of an efficient actor is reductive and mostly misleading. Above else, it should be bear in mind that there are many actors playing regional politics, and they are always in an interaction with each other. Secondly, capabilities and abilities of actors, regardless of how much they are powerful or effective, are constrained or reinforced by structural factors. For this reason, the potential effects of historical legacy, physical and human geography, and economic structure on politics should be taken into account. Additionally, regional and global dynamics closely affect Middle Eastern politics, as well. The influential actors in regional politics and their political preferences and policies are inevitably



affected by regional and global dynamics. Therefore, while analyzing political developments in the Middle East, one should take historical and spatial context into consideration with a comprehensive perspective.

Endnotes

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