



Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East

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Great and Regional Powers in the Middle East: The Evolution of Role Conceptions

May Darwich, Durham University

In the last few years, the United States has increasingly disengaged from direct involvement in the Middle East.¹ Despite Trump's withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal, his passive approach to Middle East conflicts is perhaps surprisingly aligned with this Obama policy of increased disengagement.² Instead of playing a direct role in shaping regional politics, the US is moving toward a more indirect role in approaching Middle East conflicts. This development in US role in the region provided opportunities for powerful outside actors including Russia and China to increase their presence in the region and position themselves as alternative partners and patrons.

The perceived change in external actors' roles by regional powers in the Middle East has led to major uncertainties and changes in their behaviour. Solvent authoritarian regimes— as in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar— adopted assertive regional policies to bolster their influence and ensure regime survival at the domestic level, often outmanoeuvring Western leverage. This change in behaviour is manifest in aggressive military interventions led by Gulf and Arab states in Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria,³ the establishment of Saudi and Emirati military bases in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean,⁴ the use of repressive policies against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Houthis at the regional level,⁵ and the adoption of harsh policies against regional actors viewed as rivals.

This essay argues, based on an interactionist perspective to role theory in foreign policy analysis, that a change in the role of external actors has led to significant change in the national role conceptions of regional actors. While several foreign policy theories were adopted to explain the change in regional actors' behaviour,⁶ these explanations overlooked the interaction between global and regional levels. A role-based argument starts from the premise that the foreign policy of regional actors is not only driven by interests and physical survival, but also by social positions and standing in the system, i.e. role. A perception of

change in the role of external actors (i.e. expectations) can prompt regional actors to change their roles at the regional level. The essay is structured as follow. First, I explore the interactionist perspective in role theory as a framework to examine the interaction between global and regional levels through the lens of role theory and how this interaction can shape behaviour at the regional level. Then, I offer some insights as to how a perception of change in the role of US in the region has engendered changes in regional actors roles.

Role theory and regional politics

Theorizing about the relations between external actors and world regions has evolved in the late 1980s with a group of scholars from various intellectual traditions who attempted to explain the evolution of regions and how these were shaped by international developments, namely the end of the Cold War.⁷ Buzan and Waever⁸ argue that in the post-Cold War order, regional security complexes (RSC) are autonomous entities but remain penetrated by powerful external actors.⁹ Penetration in this context is the process of alignment-making through which an external actor engages in a region's security structure.¹⁰ Accordingly, these external actors play a significant role in the constitution of regional structures.¹¹ Katzenstein argues, for example, that the US has shaped regional patterns of conflict and cooperation.¹² He shows how the United States has significantly shaped the evolution of regional structures (especially in Europe and East Asia) through the creation and maintenance of security alliances and the promotion of economic regionalism. Archaya¹³ argues that this process resembles 'socialization' in which external actors adapt and internalize the shared role expectation of regional actors, and this interaction between regional and external actors affects and shapes the region's social structure. The existing literature has often focused on the emergence of roles in some world's regions, such as the US role in East Asia,¹⁴ China's role in Africa,¹⁵ etc. Changes in

the role of a region's external actors and their impact on the region's structure remain remarkably undertheorized and understudied in the study of IR of the Middle East. Despite the long history of penetration in the region, the interaction between global and regional levels remains surprisingly undertheorized.

Role theory can be an analytical vehicle to study how changes at the global level can affect regional dynamics of cooperation and conflict. I adopt an interactionist role theory perspective grounded in foreign policy analysis to explain how the change in the US national role conception in the Middle East has led to change in the region's social structure and, henceforth, a change in regional actors' role conceptions and behaviour. According to role theory, a role is defined as 'a pattern of recurring action that performs a function within the context of a system of interacting elements or in a situation, e.g. the role of a carpenter is defined by the pattern of actions taken to build a house.'¹⁶ In his seminal work on roles, Holsti¹⁷ defines national role conceptions as 'the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions, suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems.' The role definition in IR is taken from the metaphor of a theatre play, where role is the part played by an actor as a character in social interactions with others. A growing number of role theorists have listed a number of social roles in the international system.¹⁸ Holsti has identified at least 17 types of national role conceptions, such as regional-subsystem leader, balancer, collaborator, independent, faithful ally, mediator-integrator, regional protector and protectee.¹⁹

National role conceptions reflect the social order in which a state is living. States operate in a social structure and acquire certain roles within that structure. Accordingly, an interactionist perspective to role theory offers a conceptualisation of the origins of roles in the interaction between individual states and role expectations from outside their borders.²⁰ Thies defines this interaction as 'socialisation', or a 'role location process' that 'occurs when an actor attempts to achieve a role for itself in the

system' and leads to a bargaining process between ego and alter expectations.²¹ Recent works within role theory explicitly posit that the adoption of a role by a state (ego) implicate others (alter) who respond through role change and adaptation.²² Changes in the role by significant players in that structure drive reactions from other actors (alter). Studies on the social order of world politics — i.e. Wendt's cultures,²³ Barnett and Adler's security communities²⁴ and Lake's hierarchy²⁵ — further argue that changes in the role of a region's external actor can substantially challenge established role sets in a social structure.

How role conceptions have changed

Since the end of the Cold War, the national role conception of US in the Middle East has been that of a 'hegemon.' In a region that has been constantly characterised as a multipolar system with no regional power capable of asserting supremacy, the United States has played the role of 'protector,' 'security and stability guarantor,' 'promoter of democracy,' and 'mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict.' The United States has maintained the balance between different regional powers and prevented any regional actor to achieve hegemony through direct military interventions (such as in Iraq 1991) and security alliances with some of these regional powers, such as Israel. Furthermore, the US acted as a 'protector' of middle and small powers in the Gulf. Kenneth M. Pollack²⁶ described the US role in the Middle East until 2004 as follows: 'The United States became the ultimate guardian of the region's oil flows, the mediator of many of its disputes, the deterrent to its worst threats. The true hegemon of the Middle East.' These national roles asserted by the United States in the region have emerged as a result of the US self-description (*ego conceptions*) which coincided with regional actors' expectations of the US behaviour in the region (*alter expectations*).

Under the Obama administration, a new role conception for the US in the Middle East has evolved. The high bill of the Iraq war (2003), the cost of the intervention in Libya in 2011, the fear of bearing the costs of conflicts between regional actors, and the involvement in protracted civil wars are all factors that contributed to the change in the US national role conception toward the Middle East.

This change was manifest in the Obama doctrine, which relied on the belief that problems in the region are not amenable to solutions from the US. Instead, solutions can only be addressed by regional actors. As Obama explicitly stated, ‘The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians — which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen — requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighbourhood and institute some sort of cold peace.’²⁷ In addition, the US should not bear the costs of being engaged in the Middle East alone, and other international actors, such as European countries, India, and China, should be involved. Hence, the US reacted differently to the Arab uprisings based on costs and incentives.²⁸ This inaction was manifest in the US lack of support or protection to some long-standing allies during the 2011 uprisings, such as Mubarak in Egypt. Furthermore, its hesitation to take a firm standing against Syria’s Assad was another major decision that marked a change in the US role in the region. Despite this choice of avoiding direct involvement in the region, the US maintained other indirect involvement, including supporting regional allies through arms sale. Yet, this change from direct to indirect involvement in the US role was perceived by regional actors as a key shift. Regional powers, who relied on US involvement in the region for security, did not only oppose this disengagement, but were also confused and uncertain as the US policies did not fit well-established roles.

The change in the US role has led to a perceived vacuum in the region, and thereby, changed its social structure, which influenced regional actors’ role conceptions and behaviour. For decades, Gulf countries, for example, have played the role of ‘mediators’ and ‘stability guarantors’ in regional conflicts; diplomatic relations and financial assistance were preferred over military and aggressive means. Furthermore, they have played the role of ‘faithful allies’ with a long-standing partnership with the US. These ‘faithful allies’ project themselves as willing to guarantee a favourable, stable regional order. Following, the US disengagement from the region, Gulf countries perceived the US as ‘abandoning’ its responsibilities in the Middle East in general and the Gulf in particular.²⁹

The lack of US support for the Mubarak regime in Egypt ignited aggressive reactions in the Gulf to rely on their own resources for survival against domestic threats.³⁰ Upon threat of cutting US aid from Egypt, the Saudi Kingdom and the United Emirates provided the Egyptian regimes with financial assistance.³¹ Mistrusting Washington’s willingness to guarantee its regional partners’ security, small and middle powers in the Gulf have also been boosting their military capacity and looking for independent means to assure the regional status quo.³² Since 2011, GCC countries’ military spending rose significantly.³³ The Saudi Kingdom became the largest military spender in the region and the third largest in the world in 2017. Saudi military spending increased by 74% between 2008 and 2015. It fell by 26% in 2016, but increased again by 9.2% in 2017.³⁴ The UAE was the second largest military spender in the region in 2014.³⁵ The GCC states have developed a suspicion regarding the US willingness to protect the region. Consequently, Saudi-led forces in Bahrain and Yemen have only informed the US of their military interventions without seeking approval.

Why role theory is essential

Scholars have adopted several logics to explore how the international system affects regional dynamics. Many more scholars tried to make sense of these regional developments and the rising assertiveness of some regional actors. Some focused on the distribution of power across regional powers based on the premise of rational actors. Other scholars examined domestic factors, especially the rise of a new generation of rulers in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, as the main driver of these regional developments.³⁶ This piece has argued instead that role theory offers a conceptual repertoire and framework to examine the evolution in relations between great powers and regional dynamics based on the interaction between national role conceptions and the expectations of the alter. Role change in the region’s external actors leads to a different social structure for the regional order and a change in roles adopted by regional actors. The retrenchment of the US from Middle East conflicts and the simultaneous rise of aggressiveness by small and middle powers in the region is a story of roles and counter-roles.

Endnotes

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see <http://www.pomeps.org>.