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Regional Politics in a Highly Fragmented Region: Israel's Middle East Policies

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Abstract

The region of the Middle East is highly conflict-loaded. The absence of one distinct regional power may be considered both cause and consequence of this structural feature. At the same time, there are significant power gaps between states in the Middle East, with Israel among the most powerful actors and accordingly defined as a potential regional power. Due to the specific empirical setting of the Middle East region, an analytical design emphasizing relational and procedural dynamics is required. In attempting to develop such a design, this paper utilizes three well-established schools of thought of international relations: (neo)realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. These three schools of thought are further used for developing hypotheses on both Israeli regional policy and its effects on the Middle East. After illustrating these hypotheses in relation to four periods in the contemporary history of Israel, theoretical lessons to be learned for the analysis of regional powers in other world areas are presented.

Keywords: concept of regional power, Middle East, Israel, regional policies

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Zusammenfassung

Potenzielle regionale Führungsmacht in einer stark fragmentierten Region: Israels Politik im Vorderen Orient

Der Vordere Orient ist eine hochgradig konfliktbeladene Weltregion. Dabei erscheint die Abwesenheit einer Regionalmacht sowohl als Ursache wie auch als Folge dieses Merkmals. Gleichzeitig lassen sich starke Machtasymmetrien zwischen den Staaten des Vorderen Orients beobachten, wobei Israel zu den mächtigeren Akteuren gehört und deshalb als potenzielle regionale Führungsmacht definiert werden kann. Aufgrund der empirischen Besonderheiten des Vorderen Orients wird im vorliegenden Beitrag ein Forschungsdesign zur Untersuchung regionaler Führungsmächte entwickelt, mit Hilfe dessen sich die relationalen und prozeduralen Dynamiken regionaler Politiken analysieren lassen. Dabei erweisen sich die Einsichten dreier Denkschulen der Internationalen Beziehungen als nützlich: (Neo-)Realismus, Institutionalismus und Konstruktivismus. Im Lichte dieser drei Denkschulen lassen sich auch Hypothesen über die Regionalpolitik Israels und deren Rückwirkungen auf die Region generieren. Die solcherart abgeleiteten Hypothesen werden anhand von vier Phasen der israelischen Geschichte illustriert, wonach konzeptionelle und theoretische Schlussfolgerungen vorgestellt werden.

Regional Politics in a Highly Fragmented Region: Israel's Middle East Policies

Martin Beck

Article Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Towards a Concept of Regional Power Applicable to the Middle East
- 3 The Concept of Regional Power: Israel in the Middle East
- 4 Israeli Regional Policies in the Light of the Concept of Regional Power: Some Illustrations
- 5 Theoretical Lessons Learned
- 6 Conclusions

1 Introduction

The concept of regional power has only recently been developed, which is why it is not yet a full-fledged theoretical approach. Rather, a basic idea exists which stipulates that conflicts regarding the emergence of regional powers—that is, (state) actors whose power is based to a great degree on leadership in the world area they are situated—have been significantly increasing since the end of the twentieth century. Many researchers share the belief that the state of the international system creates a significant need for regional powers—and, therefore, scientific research should be conducted in this field, which has so far been underresearched.

Why is there a need for (research on) regional powers? Geopolitical research inspired by political realism believes that the unipolar system created through the end of the East-West conflict is challenged; emerging (regional) powers are supposedly contributing to the pro-

duction of a multipolar system. Scholars dealing with globalization argue that many of the challenges created by globalization are best met by regional powers: they are in the position to lead neighboring countries in order to pool resources and to promote regional cooperation, which is considered a prerequisite for appropriate problem solving. Theorists whose research is based on the "cultural turn" of international relations ask whether and how regional discourses may pave the way for the emergence of regional powers.

However, any functionalist argument should be dealt with carefully. In other words, research on regional powers should take into consideration that the quest for leadership by potential regional powers does not constitute a sufficient condition for their actual emergence. There are many things that we are in need of, and still they do not necessarily exist or come to exist. For instance, many if not all of us desire world peace. Yet, few would argue that there is peace on earth. At the same time, there are strong indicators that it is promising to study regional powers. For example, it is fairly obvious that actors such as China and India—as well as Brazil and South Africa, albeit to a much lesser degree—play a much more important role in international affairs than they did two decades ago. Meanwhile, regional powers have even started to establish institutions of dialogue among themselves, such as the IBSA Dialogue Forum founded in June 2003 by India, Brazil and South Africa (Flemes 2007).

From the perspective of theoretically oriented Middle Eastern studies, the question which arises is how to position this world region within the context of the emerging research on regional powers. In order to cover Middle Eastern regional policies (and potentially regional policies in other world areas), a concept emphasizing *relational* or *procedural* dynamics is necessary. This is due to the fact that in the Middle East—and potentially also in other world areas—there is no *one* single regional power. If at all, research focusing on one single actor and measuring its power capabilities would only make sense if a given actor dominated a given world region. However, the political situation in the Middle East is characterized by the fact that there are *several* actors whose power capabilities are superior to those of the weaker actors in the region. Thus, there can be hardly any doubt that Egypt, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are much more powerful than Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, and Yemen. Yet, none of the actors from the first group is superior to such a degree that its capabilities clearly outweigh those of all others. The research concept apt for analyzing a region in which power is more or less dispersed must be dynamic rather than static. Thus, the perspective developed in this paper is *not* to count and describe the power capabilities of a specific regional actor which is believed to be superior to the other actors of the region. Rather, the paper takes the approach that in order to analyze a given actor, one ought to examine its policies in the region—and beyond—as well as the dynamics triggered by it.

Thus, the present paper will first develop a theoretical framework for analyzing the regional policies of (potential) regional powers (Section 2). Three well-established schools of international relations—structural realism (or neorealism), institutionalism, and constructivism—will thereby be applied to the research issue of regional powers. Short examples taken from

Asia, the most prominent region in the research on regional powers, will serve as illustrations. The result will be a general research tool for examining regional powers—in the Middle East and elsewhere. Thus, for instance, one of the fundamental questions that could potentially be dealt with is what has caused the absence of a regional power (in the Middle East).¹ However, the present paper attempts to contribute to a better understanding of actual regional politics in the Middle East by focusing on the regional policies of one potential candidate for regional leadership: Israel.

Second, actual regional policies will be examined in the light of realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. Israel will thereby be highlighted as a case of special importance in the Middle East. On the one hand, Israel clearly shows some features that would qualify it as a regional power: Israel is the only country in the Middle East that meets OECD standards and it has by far the most advanced army in the region, including nuclear power capabilities. On the other hand, a small population and an extremely low regional reputation are factors which severely restrict Israel from playing a leadership role in the Middle East. Following a short outline of the Middle East as a major world area, Section 3 generates hypotheses on Israel's regional policies in the Middle East based on the three models outlined in the previous section.

In Section 4 the three hypotheses generated will be applied to Israeli regional policies: according to realism, it is expected that Israel aims to inhibit any other actor in the Middle East from emerging as a regional power; according to institutionalism, Israel will tend to cooperate with external rather than regional actors; finally, according to constructivism, Israel's discursive practices will focus on its national identity as well as its role in the world beyond the Middle East rather than in the region itself. *Nota bene* that, in a strict sense, this paper does not aim to test the hypotheses generated by the three schools of thought. Rather, it aims to *illustrate* the scope and the limits of the hypotheses by discussing four phases of Israeli regional policies since the foundation of the state in 1948. Moreover, it will examine the impact of Israel's policy in the regional system of the Middle East. According to realism, Israel's regional policy will account for a balanced regional system; according to institutionalism, Israel will contribute to a region which is highly cross-linked with external actors operating worldwide; according to constructivism, Israel will develop a net of strong and positive ties with actors outside the region, whereas the degree of regional integration will be low.

The present paper also claims to contribute to the theoretical debate on regional powers (Section 5). A dialectical thesis will be developed: although there is no regional power in the Middle East, the concept of regional power helps in better understanding Middle Eastern politics. For this reason, at first sight it seems that in comparison to other major world areas, the Middle East is a deviant case. From a Popperian perspective, which focuses on falsification rather than confirmation, such a result is respectable *per se*. Moreover, it will be argued

¹ A pathbreaking study on the causes for the "absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers" has been presented by Ian Lustick (1997).

that the differences in terms of regional powers between the Middle East and other world areas such as Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa might be smaller than is often believed. Thus, analyses on the Middle East may very well provide the general research on regional powers with insights of high significance. Finally, in Section 6, a conclusion will be presented.

2 Towards a Concept of Regional Power Applicable to the Middle East

2.1 Three Approaches: Structural Realism, Institutionalism, and Constructivism

The term “region” may be comprehended as denoting an arena through and in which actors may exert their power capabilities. It is used within the concept of regional power in a way that is similar to specific issue-areas in other concepts that try to avoid fruitless debates on overall power (see Baldwin 2002: 178-179). Thus, the question which arises concerns what is specific about a regional power as compared to a middle power acting on a global level.

As Detlef Nolte (2006) shows by critically assessing the scientific literature on regional powers, the debate on this fairly new concept is still heterogeneous. Different, even contradicting hypotheses are associated with the concept of regional power. Moreover, no such thing as a coherent theory on which the idea of regional power is based exists. The common ground shared by all academics dealing with the topic hardly exceeds the assumption that regional powers are actors—notably states—with significant power capabilities which are, to a comparatively great degree, exerted in their regional context.

There are two main reasons for this heterogeneity and conceptual indetermination. The rather obvious one is that major differences have been observable in terms of power distribution and exertion in and between various world regions in recent years. For instance, China and India are very dynamic emerging powers whose capabilities are comparatively high, not only in global but also in interregional terms. Some decades ago the term “developing country” usually covered the entire globe beyond the OECD countries. Currently, many scholars would doubt the utility of such a uniform label since the differences in world areas such as Asia on the one hand and Africa on the other are eye-catching. Yet, precisely because of the growing dubiousness of general terms such as “developing countries,” the idea of regional power may help to make sense of developments that otherwise appear to be chaotic. For instance, acknowledging all the differences between Asia and Africa, it may be fruitful to ask whether the regional role of South Africa in Africa might be similar to that of India or China with regard to specific policies in Asia.

Another, possibly less obvious reason for the conceptual indetermination of the idea of regional power is that—as a result of major global events—different schools of thought in international relations have developed competing ideas on regional power. There may be some basic consensus: Many scholars agree, firstly, that since the last decades of the twentieth century interactions exceeding national boundaries have been increasing to such a great

degree that it is appropriate to call the period we are witnessing the era of globalization. Also, many academic observers agree that with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989 the by then most important conflict line of the post-World War II period—the East-West conflict—vanished into thin air. Yet there is major disagreement on the question of how actors in international relations are dealing with the new challenges. What kind of structure is replacing the bipolar international system? What kind of policy patterns does globalization provoke? Moreover, what role do formerly neglected aspects of international and regional affairs play, for example, identity and culture?

Different contributions to the concept of regional power can be identified and grouped according to the various schools of thought generated by debates within the discipline of international relations. In the following, three of these schools of thought will be presented: (neo)realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. Although this list is by no means exhaustive, it covers some of the most influential approaches in international relations, thereby attempting to clarify major commonalities and differences in the recent debate on regional powers. Examples to illustrate the particularities of the schools of thought as applied to the issue of regional powers are taken from Asia since this world region generally serves as a reference area for the research on regional powers.

2.1.1 (Neo)Realism

From the theoretical perspective of neo- or structural realism, the unipolar system created as a result of the Soviet Union's dissolution is unstable. Beyond the second-strike capabilities of both the USA and the Soviet Union, the bipolar system of the Cold War was considered to be long-lasting because the competition of the two superpowers created a strong tendency for all other actors to rally behind one of them (Waltz 1979). Thus, under these special conditions, the basic tendency of the international system—balancing—created a comparatively stable system. With the transition from a bipolar to a unipolar system, however, one of the supporting pillars of the old system broke down. Contrary to its stabilizing effect in the bipolar system, balancing in the unipolar system implies a strong tendency towards instability.²

According to the logic of structural realism, regional powers are prominent among those actors who attempt to challenge US-American control of international affairs. As a result of their policies and the activities of sundry challengers, the USA could, in the long run, lose its status as the only remaining superpower. The reason regional powers are *regional* powers is explained merely by their comparatively limited capabilities. Since they do not possess sufficient power capacities of their own, which would enable them to play a significant role in the international system, they group regional actors together in order to increase their influence. In terms of realism, power appears to be the engine of both the emergence and the contain-

² See Kenneth Waltz (2000) and John Mearsheimer (2001); compare with Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke (2000).

ment of regional powers. Therefore, it must be emphasized that (neo)realism as developed by Kenneth Waltz (1979) and Joseph Grieco (1993) promotes a relational concept of power. Power is measured in relative rather than absolute terms. Thus, among the research questions of realists who deal with the concept of regional power is the issue of whether regional powers are able to acquire sufficient capabilities to challenge the USA in specific (regional) politics. According to the same perspective, the USA tends to avoid the emergence of such a regional power. One option for it to do so could be the promotion of a regional actor who is able to block the development of a regional power (Fuller/Arquilla 1996; Nolte 2006: 33). Thus, one of the main research issues is the analysis of relations in the Asian power triangle between the USA, China, and Japan.

2.1.2 *Institutionalism*

Institutionalism shares some of the basic premises of realism, especially the assumption that states are rational actors and that the international system is shaped by anarchy. In other words, actors know about their goals and are able to choose from the perceived alternatives the one that best suits their interests. The variant of rational choice, which both realism and institutionalism rely on, refers not to rationality of goals but of means. Thus, it is not assumed that the aims of an actor are rational as such or the result of a rational analysis, respectively. Rather, instrumental rationalism makes a much more modest assumption: the actors choose the best of all perceived means in order to attain their goals. Moreover, both schools of thought share the belief that the behavior of states in the international system is driven by the lack of a central agency. Thus, anarchy does not mean "chaos" but rather a state opposed to hierarchy—that is, a system that lacks a central institution that is able to find and implement binding decisions (Elster 1986).

Yet, despite this common ground, institutionalism emphasizes that cooperation in the international system is possible and actually constitutes an option for rational actors to manage and overcome many problems that are typical in the anarchical international system (Keohane 1984). To institutionalists, cooperation appears possible even in complicated games such as the prisoner's dilemma if the game played between the actors is iterated. In other words, if the actors know that their behavior of today may influence the behavior of others tomorrow, in many situations it is rational to cooperate (Axelrod 1985).

Thus, contrary to realists, who strongly emphasize the issue of power as the main engine of behavior in international relations, institutionalists primarily deal with problems of cooperation. Thereby, institutionalists take the option of cooperation far more seriously than realists. However, although there are some realists for whom cooperation does not play any significant role, (moderate) realists such as Grieco believe that cooperation may occur under favorable conditions. In fact, cooperation appears to be essential for a regional power since it is by definition not strong enough to impose desired behavior on others. Therefore, "rational" factors such as the general quality of relations with its neighbors will be crucial to whether a

potential regional power may turn into an actual one (or whether it will use its power capabilities in another way) (see Grieco 1993).

According to genuine institutionalism, cooperation with neighboring countries is a prominent tool for dealing with recent challenges in the international system. Thus, institutionalists emphasize regional integration as a major strategy for coping with problems related to globalization (Zürn 2005). As a result of increasing interactions crossing national boundaries, the state is no longer able to fulfill its classical functions, not only in the area of welfare but also in terms of providing security for its citizens. Building international or even supranational institutions equipped with surrogate state functions at the regional level may serve as a remedy. In this context, the European Union is sometimes discussed as a model for the non-OECD world also. Yet, it is disputable whether, in what way, and to what degree regional institutions such as ASEAN substantially contribute to regional integration (Jetschke 2007).

2.1.3 *Constructivism*

Theorists of constructivism have turned attention to cultural factors in international relations. Although these aspects have always been prominent among specific disciplines of social science such as anthropology, they were neglected in theoretically oriented international relations due to the triumph of realism after the Second World War. In the major debate between realism and institutionalism in the 1980s and 1990s, the discussion was also focused on “hard” material factors. Moreover, the epistemological basis of both realism and institutionalism—instrumental rationalism—was interpreted in a way that gave priority to “hard” rather than “soft” factors. It should, however, be emphasized that institutionalism does not suggest neglecting cultural factors per se. Nevertheless, it was only the “cultural turn” induced by constructivism that assigned a more prominent role to “soft” factors such as culture and shared values in the discipline of international relations.

The idea of regional power is especially attractive to constructivists because world regions are shaped by a more or less significant degree of cultural homogeneity. Accordingly, the development of regionalism is not perceived as a matter of rationally defined egoistic self-interest. In general, constructivism exceeds the limits of rationalism by thoroughly examining the formation of interests and preferences, something which rationalists either deduce from structures or take as a given.³ According to constructivism, actors' preferences are shaped by their identities. Thus, from a constructivist point of view, regions and the role of regional leadership appear to be closely connected to the identity of political actors.

³ The deduction of preferences from abstract structures as exercised by Waltz (1979) is considered to be unsatisfactory from a constructivist point of view because it is believed that actors and structures are mutually influenced by each other. Also, the self-restraint of instrumental rationalism as developed by Jon Elster (1986)—according to which the chances to analyze the emergence of preferences on the basis of rationality are limited—is not considered satisfactory by constructivism. Here is not the place to decide whether or not the gain in complexity achieved by constructivism is outweighed by its loss of parsimony (see Wendt 1987).

As constructivists point out, the identity of an actor is shaped (not only) by (preferences derived from material needs but also by) cultural factors. Since world regions are characterized not only by material factors such as geographic conditions but also by a common history, related languages, shared values, etc., a regional power will not manage to develop as such without being accepted by other actors in the region as their representative. Thus, for constructivists, the idea of regional power is truly relational. "Speech acts"⁴ and other activities of communication are decisive in making a regional power. Thus, critical discourse analysis is indispensable to the research agenda about regional powers. In Dirk Nabers' research on regional powers in Asia, which is based on the analysis of both material and "soft" factors, China appears as much less of a regional power in Asia than is often believed by realists, who sometimes tend to overestimate the country's capabilities without investigating whether they are used by China in a way that actually makes it a *regional* power. In his research, Nabers (2007) comes to the conclusion that regional activities and regional speech acts actually qualify the government in Tokyo rather than the one in Beijing to be viewed as a regional leading power.

3 The Concept of Regional Power: Israel in the Middle East

3.1 The Middle East as a Definable Region

There are countless academic books and articles proclaiming the "Middle East" as a world region. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to claim that most scholars agree that the Middle East is a distinct region which appears as such in the social sciences.⁵ However, rarely is the region clearly defined, nor does a generally accepted definition exist. To be fair, there is hardly any world region whose definition is consensual. For instance, are Russia and Turkey part of Europe, and is there one America or are there several? Yet, the problem of properly defining other world regions as such should not be used as an excuse not to define the Middle East.

Are there any intersubjectively comprehensible arguments for how to define the Middle East, that is, to include certain countries and to exclude others? According to one approach, definitions of the Middle East are based on certain commonalities in the region, be they explicitly or implicitly applied. It is obvious that in comparison to other world regions geography is a less useful criterion since the Middle East extends to Africa, Asia and possibly Europe if Turkey is included. Yet there are other criteria whose application produces more convincing results, for instance, history (former members of the Ottoman Empire), language (Semitic languages), or religion (Islam). Still, the criteria are not selective: Thus, in contrast to what is today Bulgaria and Hungary, Iran and Morocco were not part of the Ottoman Em-

⁴ The term "speech act" was coined by John L. Austin (1962) and then elaborated by John Searle (1969).

⁵ A major example of recent social science on regional studies is the analysis presented by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003: Chap. 7).

pire. Farsi and Turkish are not Semitic languages, and Israel (as well as Lebanon) is not an Islamic country. Moreover, the biggest Muslim country is Indonesia, which is not considered part of the Middle East. However, if these criteria are applied, they will produce the core actors of the Middle East, whose membership is hardly deniable, for instance, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. All are Arab countries with a clear Muslim majority and which share some common history.

An alternative approach for identifying and defining a region is to examine social interactions rather than the commonalities of the region. According to Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003: 187), the Middle East then easily qualifies as a region of its own: due to its many conflicts the Middle East constitutes a "regional security complex." At the same time, if a high level of economic interaction is applied as the main criterion, the Middle East hardly meets it: the amount of economic exchange and trade between Middle East countries themselves is much more limited than that between them and the advanced economies of the OECD. At the same time, the main economic reason for the close ties beyond the region rather than within it is related to the fact that many countries in the Middle East share a richness in oil reserves as a common feature: the main demand for Middle Eastern oil stems from OECD countries.

For a deeper understanding of the particularities of the Middle East, it is useful to apply the three schools of thought. According to structural realism, which highlights power distribution, the Middle East stands out for its high dispersion of power. Therefore, the Middle East has several subregions, all of which are structured in a multipolar manner. In North Africa, the two potential regional powers, Algeria and Morocco, are at loggerheads with one another. In the Gulf, Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia are in confrontation with each other (Fürting 2007). In the Near East, the most powerful state, namely, Israel, is surrounded by enemies.⁶ At the same time, structural realism reveals the relevance of change: there have been periods in contemporary Middle Eastern history when distinct actors were acting as regional powers, most strikingly, Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s.

What does the Middle East stand out for from the institutionalist's point of view? Despite intensive diplomatic activities inside the Middle East, regional structures are fairly underdeveloped. Firstly, the Arab League has failed to contribute to the solution of major regional issues. For instance, the organization did not play a significant role in the three Gulf Wars (1980-88, 1990/91 and 2003). Moreover, its contribution to the Oslo peace process in the 1990s was negligible. The role of subregional institutions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council is also rather limited. What appears to be even more important is that regional integration in the Middle East lags far behind that in other areas—not only Europe but also Asia and Latin America, which have developed considerable regional institutions such as ASEAN and Mercosur. Even among many regional experts of the Middle East, knowledge of MAFTA (Mediterranean Arab Free Trade Area) and GAFTA (Greater Arab Free Trade Area) is limited. It is

⁶ For an overview see James Bill and Robert Springborg (2000).

very instructive that by googling GAFTA, one ends up at the website of the Grain and Feed Trade Association rather than that of the Greater Arab Free Trade Area.

From the perspective of constructivism, it is most notable that despite the commonality of Arabic as the main language and Islam as the dominant religion in most countries of the Middle East, solidarity among Middle Eastern states and societies is limited. Moreover, there are also some obvious outsiders: in addition to Israel, non-Arab Turkey, with its decades-long tradition of laicism, is an obvious maverick. Rather, the Arab Middle East stands out for the fact that “shared” nationality and religion is more a source of confrontation than of integration and togetherness. Even in the heyday of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s, this transnational ideology was to a great degree an Egyptian instrument for dominating other Arab countries. As a result, Egypt and its adversary Saudi Arabia fought a proxy war in Yemen in the 1960s. Pan-Arab ties remained weak after Saudi-Egyptian reconciliation after the June War of 1967, and they could not prevent the “fratricidal war” between Iraq and Kuwait in 1990—nor did they provide a tool for the parties’ reconciliation. Due to the politicization of Islam, this potential source of regional adhesion has also turned more into a source of confrontation: The internal power struggle between more or less secular ruling authoritarian regimes and Islamist opposition movements has emanated into regional affairs. Traditional sectarian conflicts such as the schism between Sunna and Shia have been reinforced rather than overcome. What is left as a shared value tying together many segments of the Arab societies—as well as Iran and, to a certain degree, Turkey—is a joint identity of an outspoken negative nature: anti-Americanism (see Faath 2003). Israel’s role is of high significance, but again in a negative way: Israel, whose society is fairly pro-American, is considered by most Arab people, including the elites, to be a mere extension of Washington.

3.2 Israel in the Middle East

In a comprehensive literature review on the concept of regional power, Detlef Nolte (2006: 28) distills the basic definitional criteria of a regional power. If applied to Israel as an actor of the Middle East, the result is highly contradictory. On the one hand, Israel is part of a definable region and exerts a decisive influence on its ideological construction. Even more important, Israel possesses military, economic, and political capabilities that are significantly higher than those of *any* other Middle Eastern state. Finally, there can be no doubt that Israel defines the regional security agenda to a great degree. On the other hand, Israel’s demographic capabilities are low; it is not well integrated in the region; it is not well connected with regional and global fora; and it is certainly not appreciated as a regional power in the region (Beck 2006).

Israel is not a regional power—nor is any other actor in the Middle East (Beck 2006). Still, if context conditions in the region were different, Israel could be a regional power. In other words, Israel enjoys some features that qualify it as a potential regional power: Israel is one

of the few countries worldwide and the only one in the Middle East that has managed to transform an agrarian economy into one of the most advanced high-tech societies. In the UNDP (2007/08) published "Human Development Index" of 2005, Israel is indexed directly after Germany with a rank of 23, thereby leaving many members of the European Union, such as Portugal and Poland, behind.

When the Israeli potential to act as a regional power is viewed through the lenses of the three schools of thought, a deeper understanding of its potential and limits is disclosed. According to realism, Israel's potential to act as a regional power is considered to be fairly high, inhibited only by its low population. However, institutionalism and constructivism accent the limits: regional institutions are weak in the Middle East in general, and Israel is not particularly well integrated with them; also, Israel suffers from a severe lack of legitimacy within the region.

3.3 Research Hypotheses on Israeli Regional Policy

Since no regional powers exist in the Middle East, a concept has been designed that is sufficiently flexible to focus on the regional policies of not only an actual but also a potential regional power. Having shown that Israel meets the standards of a potential regional power, the discussion will now turn to developing research hypotheses on Israeli regional policies. Since research on regional power policies is a fairly new academic task, it makes sense to take the insights of different schools of thought into account rather than making an unsubstantiated preselection.

Some premises on the policies of a potential regional power in a region without a regional power may be shared by all three schools of thought. The connection between Israel and the region of the Middle East can be comprehended as truly relational and dynamic. Moreover, this connection is assumed to be interdependent, both active and reactive: on the one hand, Israel reacts and adapts to regional politics; on the other, it shapes regional politics through its own policy. Thus, in the following discussion both Israeli regional policy and its repercussions on the Middle East will be analyzed.

According to realism, with its focus on power, it is to be expected that Israel attempts to avoid the emergence of a regional power (Heller 2006). Although Israel lacks some capabilities necessary to become a regional power of its own, it still appears strong enough to inhibit any other regional actor from playing a dominant role in the region and thereby constraining Israel's autonomy. The prognosis derived from realism on the regional repercussions of Israel's regional policy is that this policy will exacerbate the dispersion of power in the Middle East. Another result would only be expected if Israel's policy of preventing the emergence of a regional power were effective to such a significant degree that major and/or all other regional actors would lose not only their actual but also their potential abilities to become regional powers.

Since the Middle East lacks strong regional institutions and Israel's opportunities to alter or promote them are extremely limited due to the absence of mutual trust, institutionalism expects that Israel will cooperate with only a few selected actors in the region, preferably some other outsiders. Yet, the main hypothesis derived from institutionalism is that Israel attempts to ally with (powerful) external actors and to get them involved in the regional affairs of the Middle East. The expected effect of Israel's policies on regional affairs is that the country's contribution to the strengthening of regional institutions will be negative. At the same time, the role of the USA in the Middle East will be strengthened by Israeli efforts.

According to constructivism, Israel is not expected to actively participate in a regional discourse on regional power and related issues.⁷ Rather, as a result of its pariah-like status in the region in which it is geographically situated, Israel is expected to focus on discourses both beneath and above the regional arena, that is, at the national and the global level. The prognosis on the effects of Israeli discursive practices on the region is the exacerbation of mutual alienation.

Table 1: Three Approaches of the Concept of Regional Power

School of thought	(Neo)Realism	Institutionalism	Constructivism
Basic issue/challenge	Challenge of unipolarism	Challenge of globalization	Challenge of regional identity
Engine	Power distribution	Regional cooperation	Regional discourse
Example (Asia)	Power triangle: USA, China, and Japan	Role of ASEAN	China or Japan as a regional power
Israeli regional policies: prognoses on Israeli regional policies	Preventing the emergence of a regional power	Extraregional rather than regional cooperation	Focusing on national and global discourses
Israeli regional policies: effects on the Middle East	Exacerbation of power dispersion	Strengthening the role of the USA in the Middle East	Exacerbation of Israel's alienation in the Middle East

Source: Author's compilation.

4 Israeli Regional Policies in the Light of the Concept of Regional Power: Some Illustrations

In the following, Israeli regional policies will be examined on the basis of the concept designed above. Thereby, four periods of Israeli history will be differentiated: the period of Israel's establishment in the Middle East, from 1948 to 1967; the period of active consolidation, from 1967 to 1993; the period of the peace process with the Palestinians, between 1993 and 2000; and finally, the period of dealing with new challenges at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

⁷ Rather, it is assumed that Israel will be the object rather than the subject of the regional discourse. Yet, this phenomenon is not part of Israel's regional policy.

The first period ends with the 1967 June War since this very event resolved all doubts that Israel was superior to the Arab armies, which proved to be incapable of endangering the existence of Israel as a sovereign state in the Middle East. Although Israel's regional policy was characterized by unilateralism before and after this time, this approach certainly became more prevalent after the Six Day War. The change from the second to the third period is marked by a peace process which, at first sight, appears to be more of a local event than one that covered the whole region. Yet, if the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo peace process had succeeded, it most probably would have been the breakthrough for Israel becoming a regional power. Shimon Peres (1993), who was one of the main architects of the Israeli-Palestinian agreement, envisioned this perspective in his book "The New Middle East." When the languishing Israeli-Palestinian peace process was halted by the al-Aqsa Intifada (2000) and Israel's response to it, new regional challenges were just ahead, in particular the conflict with Iran, which grew more acute after the election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as Iranian president in June 2005.

4.1 Israel in the Middle East from its War of Independence to the Six Day War

Realism

From the perspective of realism, it comes as no surprise that the General Assembly's November 1947 decision to partition Palestine by issuing Resolution 181 further destabilized the already complex Middle Eastern regional system. Israel understood the situation very well and guarded comprehensively against the war that started, as expected, immediately after it declared its independence in May 1948. On the one hand, Israel's statehood and its role in the Middle East were strengthened by its victory: Israel proved that it was militarily superior to its Arab neighbors and its borders were much easier to defend as a result of significant territorial gains made during the war. On the other hand, the anarchic situation in the Middle East nourished mutual distrust: The Arab states, particularly Egypt after the revolution of 1952, embarked on a path of modernization, the aim of which in terms of regional policies was to gain military strength in order to reverse the results of the first Arab-Israeli war. Israel for its part contributed to the precarious situation through its own armament and, particularly, by participating in the war that Great Britain and France waged on Egypt in 1956. From the Israeli point of view, the Suez War was an opportunity to constrain Egypt's modernization efforts and its ambitions to lead the Arab world. In other words, Israel's participation in the war confirms the thesis that Israel's regional policy aimed to restrict any other Middle Eastern actor from becoming a regional power. However, from the Arab perspective, Israel's behavior was just additional proof of its aggressive ambitions. As expected by realism, the result for the regional system of the Middle East was power dispersion, which in this particular case created an extremely explosive situation that erupted in the June War of 1967.⁸

⁸ For an excellent comprehensive history of Israel and its relations with the Arab Middle East see Mark Tessler (1994).

Institutionalism

Space for regional cooperation was very limited after the first Arab-Israeli war. Before the actors even had a chance to develop mutual trust, it was destroyed by the war. After the war ended, negotiations between Israel and some Arab states, especially Jordan, took place (Rabinovich 1991). However, they failed because virtually no zone of agreement existed: Israel was not ready to negotiate regarding its territory, be it the land granted by the United Nations or the areas it had conquered during the war, and even the moderate elites of the Arab states had no interest in recognizing Israel without significant border adaptations to their benefit. Thus, Israel focused on cooperation with extraregional actors. Since the USA was not yet willing to take clear sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict, European states became major partners. The Federal Republic of Germany provided Israel with financial support that was urgently needed in the 1950s to consolidate the budget. Even more important was France's readiness to equip the Israeli army; this support supplemented internal efforts to develop a highly efficient army, thus bestowing the triumph of 1967.

Constructivism

In the first two decades of its existence, the Israeli elite, supported by the majority of its population, elaborated on its claim that only a strong Zionist state could provide the Jewish people with security. The vision on the part of the political elite, who were of European origin, was shaped by the Nazi German attempt to annihilate the Jewish people and the pioneering spirit of settlers who had experienced Arab mistrust and hostility in response to their ambitions of founding a Jewish state in the Middle East. Although major waves of mass immigration from Arab countries and Iran occurred during this period, Israel did not become a "Middle Eastern" country. The European-dominated elite implemented a policy of internal assimilation rather than cultural integration into the Arab Middle East. Thus, Arabic and Arab culture mainly remained the domain of the Palestinian minority in Israel, despite the mass influx of *Mizrahi* ("Oriental Jews"). The externally directed equivalent to this internal assimilation program was a policy focusing on Western rather than Middle Eastern actors—irrespective of clandestine cooperation with King Hussein of Jordan and an alliance with another outsider in the region, Pahlavi Iran (see Zak 1996).

4.2 Between the June War of 1967 and the Oslo Peace Process

Realism

The June War of 1967 resulted in a major shift in power relations between Israel and its Arab abutters. Ever since, the distribution of military capabilities has been clear to all actors. If additional proof was needed, it was provided in the October War of 1973. For the first time since the foundation of Israel, Egypt and Syria managed to coordinate in an efficient way

and took Israel by surprise when they attacked the Israeli army during Ramadan, which coincided with Yom Kippur. The Arab aims in waging war were also much more realistic than ever: rather than attempting to destroy the state of Israel, Cairo and Damascus aimed to recapture the territories occupied by Israel six years previously. However, despite comparatively effective warfare and a gap in military capabilities that was much narrower than it has been ever since, the Arab actors failed to alter the geopolitical map of the Middle East.

Due to its growing power, Israel's policy of preventing the emergence of a regional power became more active and sophisticated. Some cooperative efforts notwithstanding, particularly the Camp David peace process, which will be described in more detail below, Israel mainly adopted a policy of regional unilateralism. First and foremost, territories of major strategic relevance that had been conquered in 1967 were fully integrated into the Israeli political system and then also formally annexed: East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Moreover, the Israeli settlement policy was not confined to these territories but also included other occupied territories, particularly the West Bank. Israel also started to interfere militarily in the Lebanese civil war in 1978, and in 1982 it moved its troops forward to the Lebanese capital, thereby destroying the bases of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Until 2000, Israel maintained a "security strip" in southern Lebanon. By doing so, it not only penetrated Lebanon but also constrained Syrian ambitions to control Lebanon. When compared to Israel's engagement in the war of 1956, it is striking that the country's presence in Lebanon was not only enduring but was also conducted without the active participation of an external power.

Institutionalism

In 1979, Israel concluded a peace treaty with thitherto major enemy Egypt, the first Israeli peace treaty with an Arab state. Still, this outcome of the Camp David peace process does not contradict the thesis that Israel's regional policy is selective and serves as a complement to rather than a pillar of its foreign policy. For Israel (as well as Egypt), the main concern during the Camp David peace process was not regional peace but the maintenance of relations with the USA (Telhami 1990). US president Jimmy Carter, who used the ever since undisputed phrase describing the US-Israeli "special relationship" for the first time on May 12, 1977, invested so heavily in the peace process that a failure would have been a debacle for him (Reich 1999: 233). Nevertheless, after only reluctantly accepted the initiative taken by Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat in 1977, Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin turned out to be a tough bargainer. By refusing to accept any major concession concerning the Palestinian issue, he left it to Carter to convince Sadat to accept a peace treaty that implied several years of regional isolation for Cairo. When Begin signed the treaty in 1979, it was already foreseeable that it was not appropriate for breaking the ice for an Israeli integration into the Middle East. Besides appeasing the USA, the main Israeli aim in the process was to tie up the forces of a former adversary, thereby also increasing Israel's room to maneuver in exercising unilateral regional policies. After neutralizing Egypt and thereby leaving Syria as

the only anti-Israeli “front state,” the Jewish state did not have to be anxious about powerful regional counteractivities against its interference in Lebanon, described above.

Constructivism

As a result of the triumph of the Six Day War, Israel's self-perception as a state in the conflict-loaded region of the Middle East became much more self-confident. Before the June War of 1967, actors promoting a Jewish state bordering the Mediterranean in the west and the Jordan in the east were hardly considered acceptable, not to mention determinative, in the political discourse. Yet in the 1970s and 1980s, expansionist concepts favoring the establishment of “Greater Israel,” that is, a state “from the sea to the river,” were asserted. Thus, the settlers' movement Gush Emunim gained considerable influence. Even more important was that for the first time in Israeli history Likud, which did not disguise its strong roots in the formerly marginalized revisionist movement of Israel, won parliamentary elections in 1977, putting the party in the position of designating its legendary leader Begin as prime minister (see Flamhaft 1996: Chap. 9).

4.3 The Oslo Peace Process and Its Failure

Realism

Cooperation at the international level is a “hard case” for realism, particularly if it is realized by decades-old enemies such as Israel and the PLO, who had not even officially recognized each other as legitimate actors when they concluded the Oslo peace process in 1993.⁹ However, realism is capable of contributing arguments to explain why Israel agreed to the deal. Firstly, after the end of the East-West conflict Israel intended to reassure the USA of its strategic value. A peace process was an appropriate means for doing so, particularly since the USA sought a policy of reconciliation in the Middle East after having waged war on Iraq in 1991. Secondly, Israel managed to get through a bargain with the PLO that could hardly have been achieved in the 1980s. By signing the Oslo “Declaration of Principles,” the PLO—which was structurally weakened and close to bankruptcy as a result of its refusal to support its main donors Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the confrontation over Kuwait in 1990/91—accepted an agreement that, for the time being, did not restrict Israeli occupation in terms of its rule in East Jerusalem and its settlement policy in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The failure of the peace process does not challenge the basic view of realism: the creation of a Palestinian state was simply a risky project for Israel (Inbar/Sandler 1997). Besides, realism sheds light on a specific aspect highly relevant in the context of the present analysis: when US president Bill Clinton blamed the PLO, notably Yasser Arafat, for the failure of the last

⁹ To be fair, successful negotiations between adversaries that mutually deny the other's legitimacy is also difficult for institutionalism and constructivism to explain.

two major Israeli-Palestinian meetings held at Camp David (2000) and in Taba (2001), Israel was no longer burdened with American pressure to invest in the peace process. The catastrophe caused by Islamic terrorism on September 11, 2001 also did its bit to release Israel from any US pressure: the American policy focus in the Middle East shifted to Afghanistan and the Gulf, and more than ever Israel was perceived as the USA's only truly reliable partner in the Middle East.

Institutionalism

Although the Israeli-Palestinian negotiation process did not bring about peace between those actors directly involved, the mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO set the stage for a more active regional policy. In 1994, the decades of good relations with the Jordanian kingdom could be formalized with a peace treaty. Moreover, in 1994 three Maghrib states—Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia—and in 1996 the two Gulf states Oman and Qatar established diplomatic ties with Israel and agreed to the opening of Trade Representation Offices in their territories. Although only the relations with Mauritania developed, in 1999, into full diplomatic relations, Israel gained considerable latitude in the region. However, in line with the assumptions of institutionalism, after the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada and the according decline of Israeli-Palestinian relations, Arab-Israeli relations deteriorated again: Morocco and Tunisia broke off diplomatic relations, and the Israeli Trade Representation Office in Oman was closed (Jewish Virtual Library 2008). Still, the ties to Qatar could be maintained. Thus, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was invited to give a keynote speech at the Eighth Annual Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade on April 14, 2008 (IHT 2008).

The increased legitimacy of Israel in the Middle East also contributed to the strategic alliance that Israel and Turkey formed in 1996. By making this alliance, Israel considerably improved its position in the region. Yet, although Israel and Turkey are the most powerful single actors in the Middle East, both of them are also outsiders (Bengio 2004: Chap. 4): by decisively cutting off its ties with the Arab world, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's republic also gave up the Ottoman tradition of leading the Middle East.

Constructivism

As a result of the victory in the Six Day War, Israeli self-confidence skyrocketed, but its underlying national identity did not change: Israel was modeled as a Jewish state whose people look back on an extremely precarious history peaking in the Holocaust, and which was still embedded in a hostile environment. Particularly when the Israeli-Palestinian peace process ran into crisis in the second half of the 1990s, a debate among Israeli intellectuals emerged on how "healthy" the national identity of Israel was. Thus, Herbert Kelman identified Israel's "pervasive sense of vulnerability" as a hindrance for peace; others such as Moshe Zimmermann (1998: 50) even accused the Israeli leadership headed by Benjamin

Netanyahu as abusing Israeli "paranoia" for a "cynical minimum-risk strategy" to contain the Palestinian people. However, Israeli mainstream perception differed: suicide attacks had a (re)traumatizing effect on Israelis, confirming the positions of "security first" and "unilateralism" advocated by two of the most prominent political leaders of contemporary Israel, Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon, respectively.

The lesson drawn by Israel from its history is particularistic in nature: The victims of the Shoah were Jews, and Israel was defined as a Jewish state. Other actors in the international system, particularly the USA, processed the Holocaust in a universalistic manner, thereby emphasizing its character as a crime against humanity (Levy/Sznaider 2006: Chap. 1, Part II). Yet, as a result of its "special relationship" with the USA, Israel also benefited from the universal understanding of the Holocaust.

4.4 New Regional Challenges in the Early Twenty-First Century

Realism

For the first time since the heyday of Gamal Abd al-Nasir's attempts at regional domination in the 1960s, Israel is now exposed to a regional actor attempting to achieve regional leadership. Ever since the Islamic Revolution headed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979, the Iranian regime has claimed to provide ideological guidance for the entire Muslim World. However, from the perspective of realism, only after Ahmadinejad's election as president did a major power conflict with Israel emerge. Not only did Ahmadinejad threaten Israel verbally, but he also announced a resumption of the Iranian nuclear program with big ado. He thereby triggered fears that Iran aimed to acquire atomic bombs. If this were to come to be, the Middle Eastern nuclear weaponry system, which has to date been monopolized by Israel, would shift from a unipolar to a bipolar regional structure. Since Israel along with its key ally—the USA—would be the main losers if such a scenario came true, Israel is considering all means possible to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power. The USA and Israel have been quite successful in convincing European actors, mainly Germany, to cease using a soft approach of "critical dialogue" and to support a sanction policy. However, when Israel demanded that the international community should also consider military means to contain Iranian ambitions, European reactions were reserved at best. At the same time, context conditions for Israeli actions are limited. Firstly, the effectiveness of the sanction regime imposed on Iran is limited, particularly due to the readiness of China—and other emerging regional powers—to undermine it. Secondly, Iran has learned from the Israeli strike against the Iraqi reactor in Tamuz in June 1981 that set back the Iraqi nuclear program for years. Thus, it has diversified its nuclear facilities and protected them much better against military attacks (see ICG 2006).

Institutionalism

From the perspective of institutionalism, the development of the current Israeli-Iranian conflict proves once again that Israel is much better connected with the West than with the Middle East. Although not only Israel but also the Arab states feel threatened by the scenario of Iran as a nuclear power, no regional cooperation has occurred; however, the Israeli government has managed to use the crisis with Iran in order to intensify external relations beyond the Middle East, especially with Germany. Thus, when Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Israel accompanied by seven German cabinet members in March 2008, the two countries established intergovernmental consultations. These consultations, to be held once a year, are of special significance since Germany maintains this instrument with only five of its closest allies (namely, France, Italy, Poland, Russia and Spain) and Israel has crossed new frontiers by establishing this kind of special relationship.¹⁰

Constructivism

After his election, Ahmadinejad frequently directed verbal attacks towards Israel, thereby vociferously denying the Holocaust. By doing so, he crossed a red line—from the perspective of Israel and the entire Western world. As a result of Ahmadinejad's flaunting of anti-Israelism and even anti-Semitism, Israel has been able to avoid the emergence of a debate that could harm its own interests. Firstly, the (potential) perspective of realism that Israel and Iran are entangled in a simple conflict over regional power does not determine the general perception. This also applies to the (potential) point of view of institutionalism that not only Iran but also Israel is endangering the effectiveness of one of the most successful international regimes established after the Second World War, namely, the restriction of nuclear weapons diffusion as prescribed by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Israel never signed the NPT since it possesses an arsenal of nuclear weapons. Still, an initiative undertaken by Muhammad Al-Baradai—the head of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency)—and several Arab countries to push for a nuclear-free Middle East in 2006 did not make it to the top of the international agenda (see WP 2006).

5 Theoretical Lessons Learned

When the concept of regional power is defined in a narrow sense, it is not applicable to the Middle East, simply because no regional power exists in the contemporary Middle East. Therefore, for the task of the present paper a more flexible concept of regional power had to be designed. The result has been a framework that is applicable not only to actual but also to potential regional powers. As a result, a decisively relational concept emphasizing the dy-

¹⁰ See the exact wording of the German and Israeli statements at www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2008/German+Chancellor+Angela+Merkel+to+visit+Israel+16-Mar-2008.htm (accessed on August 13, 2008).

dynamic relationships between major regional actors has been developed. Thereby, three distinct schools of thought in international relations have been used in order to generate hypotheses: structural realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. Four main conceptual and theoretical conclusions can be drawn from the previous sections.

Firstly, the necessity of developing a concept that is applicable both to regions with and without regional powers may turn out to be fruitful for research on the topic in general. Since such a concept must cover the relational behavior of actors and take into consideration the repercussions of regional dynamics, it is a real alternative to concepts that tend to focus on the features and capabilities of single regional powers. The latter type of focus systematically neglects the decisive question of whether capabilities are actually converted into *regional* activities.

Secondly, one of the major empirical findings of the present paper might be considered for further conceptual work: the activities of global actors are decisive for regional politics. Most probably, the Middle East is an extreme case since, as Volker Perthes (2004) claims, the USA is considered a regional power of its own in the Middle East. Still, research conducted on regional powers in Asia and other regions has determined that the influence of the USA on the emergence and development of regional power is decisive (Nolte 2006: 6, 31; Nabers 2007). If so, it should not be considered paradoxical if future research on regional powers confirms the role of global powers. Rather, a systematic integration of the global level could prove to be very fruitful.

Thirdly, there are indicators that from the comparative perspective the Middle East is less of an exception than believed at first sight. Research on states that appear to be prime examples of regional power, such as Brazil and South Africa, has proved that these actors sometimes fail to act as one. As Ian Taylor (2006) elaborates, Pretoria's agenda of spreading a liberal order in southern Africa is not well received by the elites in neighboring countries and therefore is not successfully realized. Stefan Schirm (2006) shows that Brazil makes a claim to regional leadership but very often fails to prevail due to its insistence on unilateral power and sovereignty and its neglect of economic compromise and multilateral institutions. Thus, not the fact as such but primarily the reasons for the nonexistence of regional powers may be what distinguishes the Middle East from other world regions. Thus, a conceptual framework that focuses on the regional policies of potential or actual regional powers, rather than research on regional powers in a narrow sense, appears to be more promising.

Fourthly, the application of three schools of thought proved to be of value: the main findings pointed into the same direction but emphasized different crucial aspects. Thus, it appears to be worthwhile to base future research on an extended design. Intraregional and interregional comparisons, the amendment of additional schools of thought such as liberalism, and the testing of competitive hypotheses could be especially fruitful.

6 Conclusions

In a strict sense, the concept of regional power is not useful for analyzing the Middle East: this world region does not confirm the thesis that regional powers will play an increasingly important role in managing regional conflicts. However, this paper has shown that a flexible concept of regional power focusing on regional policies and relations could be very useful in shedding light on the structural particularities of the Middle East. Moreover, the findings of the present paper have also allowed for theoretical conclusions: the application of a concept of regional power emphasizing the dynamics of regional politics rather than the capabilities of alleged regional powers appears to be fruitful. Further research may prove or disprove what is currently a conceptual idea requiring elaboration: contrary to what appears to be plausible at first sight, Asia rather than the Middle East may be an exceptional case in terms of the dynamics generated by regional powers, whereas Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa may be similar to the Middle East insofar as their regional politics are shaped to a significant degree by external actors rather than (primarily) by the autonomous policies of regional powers.

From an empirical perspective, the most striking finding of the present paper is that despite the major differences of realism, institutionalism, and constructivism in terms of the premises and foci of research, the three schools of thought produce mutually compatible results when applied to the research issue of Israel's regional policies in the Middle East. Israel has managed to develop into the single most powerful actor in the Middle East in terms of both military and economic capabilities. Yet, it is not strong enough to impose its will on all other countries of the Middle East. Still, as expected by realism, Israel has successfully used its power capabilities to prevent other actors in the Middle East from achieving the position of a regional power. At the same time, as expected by institutionalism, Israel has focused on international rather than regional cooperation efforts since the basic prerequisites for cooperation such as generally good relations and mutual trust are much better developed with Western than with Middle Eastern actors. Moreover, rather than getting involved in joint regional discourses and finding a generally accepted role in the Middle East, Israel has mainly worked on the refinement of a national identity and has aimed to take on a generally accepted role in global affairs, especially in its relations with Western actors. All illustrations based on the hypotheses derived from the three schools of thought have confirmed the significance of the American role in the Middle East. From a realist perspective, it is hardly exaggerated to characterize the USA as a regional power, and Israel has done its part to get the US administration involved in regional affairs. According to the point of view of institutionalism, it is to be stressed that Israel's external political and economic ties to Western actors are especially dense and intensive, whereas those to states in the Middle East are fairly limited. Finally, as underlined by constructivism, even in the regional discourse the USA play a major role, thereby once again confirming Israel's role as a regional outsider. Anti-Americanism is a basic attitude that is shared by all Arab societies in a more or less pronounced way, whereas the Israeli-Jewish society is predominantly pro-American.

However, major differences become apparent when the question of what conclusions can be derived from the empirical findings for policy advice is raised. If Iran acquired atomic bombs, the Middle Eastern nuclear weaponry system, which has to date been monopolized by Israel, would shift from a unipolar to a bipolar structure. From the realist perspective of mutual deterrence, such a situation could contribute to stability. However, the previous constellation is to be considered as parlous since the superior power—Israel—may see a chance to prevent the emergence of an equally powerful adversary by military means. However, taking a constructivist view, many Western observers and politicians alike doubt that the deterrence logic of the East-West conflict is applicable to the situation that would emerge if both Iran and Israel possessed nuclear weapons. Rather, due to the Islamist ideology of the regime in Tehran and Ahmadinejad's anti-Israeli propaganda, it is questionable to many whether the rational restriction of not launching weapons of mass destruction would work—even if the adversary, that is, Israel or the USA as its major ally, were in the position to massively retaliate. Thus, contrary to the realist argument presented above, the constructivist logic regarding Iran's behavior based on fanaticism suggests that the main danger would be a nuclear Iran. Finally, the major advice derived from institutionalism is that the international community should push for a nuclear-free Middle East in order to save the NPT. Such a policy would imply preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power and pressuring Israel to disarm of its nuclear weapons.

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