**Crucial Fault Lines in the Middle East: Inter-State Rivalries in Comparative Perspective**

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***Introduction***

Area specialists are advantaged in their studies by developing deep and thorough knowledge of the unique features of their region of interest. By the virtue of their training, orientation, and the extent to which they create a deep familiarization with both the historical and current features of their region, area specialists carry extensive knowledge of how such political arenas operate. At the same time, through their intense focus (and since it is virtually impossible to develop such in-depth expertise on all regions) area specialists tend to emphasize *the uniqueness*of their focus of expertise. Too often Latin American, African, East Asian, European, or Middle East area specialists argue for the distinctive nature of their geographical area.

By contrast, international relations scholars, and particularly those who focus on comparative regional analysis (a sample of such scholarship is noted in Volgy et al. 2017a, b), often lack the expertise developed by area specialists. Instead, international relations scholars bring to their analysis a search for patterns that are applicable across regions in the context of their knowledge of international politics. Comparative regional analysts approach a geopolitical area such as the Middle East by assessing variation in the commonalities regions share (rather than their unique characteristics), commonalities that should help explain patterns of cooperation or conflict within any region.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It may well be that both perspectives eventually identify a region as being unique, although they may do so for different reasons. Area specialists may focus on sets of regional characteristics not exhibited in other regions (common religious preferences; colonial heritage; topography; an unusual set of political systems or a distinct political culture, etc.). Comparative regional analysts may identify a range of variables driving political relationships within all regions; on some of those salient characteristics a region may register uniquely from others, and its placement on that variable may be strongly linked to the dependent variable in question. For example, our focus here is on regional rivalries, their densities, and how such considerations impact levels of intra-regional conflict. Regional rivalries are salient for all regions; what may be unique for the Middle East is that it “enjoys” a substantially thicker clustering of such rivalries than any other geopolitical area in international politics. This makes the Middle East unique even from the standpoint of comparative regional analysis. What is more, such uniqueness may help account for why in post-World War II international politics the Middle East has been consistently the most conflict-prone of all regions.

Both approaches have helped advance knowledge concerning how regions operate, and both approaches provide theoretically interesting answers to the question of why some regions are more conflictual than others. The approach we bring to this project is from the second school and reflects our own bias toward comparative regional analysis. In the following, we first offer a theoretical framework suggesting the variety of conditions under which regions may experience different levels of intra-regional conflict or cooperation. Applying the framework, we find that while it works relatively well in accounting for which regions are more conflictual or pacific, it also indicates that on at least one crucial dimension—the extent to which interstate rivalries dominate relations between states—the Middle East region stands out as truly unique. Once we have demonstrated that uniqueness, we explore fluctuations in the Middle East rivalry field over time, link those fluctuations to regional shocks, and suggest consequences both for the region and for other regions in world politics.

***A Conceptual and Theoretical Framework***

Our primary interest is why some regions are conflict-prone, others are pacific, and others still have moved from one category to another. Figure 1 illustrates the sets of considerations helping to explain variation in intra-regional conflict in world politics.

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| **Figure 1. A Theoretical Framework Regarding Intra-Regional Conflict and Cooperation.** |
| **Regional Conflict/Cooperation**  **Regional Characteristics**   * Fault Lines * Pacifying Conditions   **Permeability to Global Conditions**   * Structural Global Conflicts * External Intrusion   **Hierarchical Condition**   * Presence/Absence of Hierarchy * Presence of Major vs. Regional Power |

We have discussed this framework elsewhere (Volgy et al. 2017b); here we briefly summarize its dimensions. We contend that three large sets of forces account for how much interstate conflict exists in a region. The first is the argument that regions vary with respect to certain characteristics internal to the region, conditions that either exacerbate conflicts or encourage cooperation between states. *Fault lines* refer to conditions—demonstrated empirically by extant research focusing on dyadic conflicts—that exacerbate conflict. Prime candidates include: inter-state rivalries; territorial claims; and civil wars, which may spread across the region.[[2]](#footnote-2) The more these conditions exist in a region, the more likely the region will experience substantial conflict.

Additionally, regions vary with respect to a variety of *pacifying conditions*, conditions likely to encourage cooperation between states in the region. Again based on previous research, we suggest three such conditions: intra-regional trade dependence; the extent to which regional states are democracies; and the extent to which regional states share membership in intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). None of these three factors should be surprising; the literature on the Kantian peace[[3]](#footnote-3) is not uncontroversial, but much of the evidence indicates that these forces encourage cooperation between states.

There is not much originality in our specifications of either fault lines or pacifying conditions for regions; they merely reflect extant scholarship on states and dyads. However, conceptualizing these conditions as regional characteristics is more novel and raises two important points. First, regions are not created equal. Some regions are endowed with substantial fault lines (e.g., the Middle East); other regions with ample pacifying conditions (e.g., North America). Managing relations in a region riddled with fault lines is fundamentally more difficult for foreign policymakers than for those who live in regions endowed with substantial pacifying conditions.

Second, our framework places the concept and importance of interstate rivalries in a larger perspective. It is not surprising that interstate rivalries often lead to conflicts and that the presence of numerous interstate rivalries in a region would also lead to substantial intra-regional conflict. The larger issue, however, may be determining the relative salience of rivalries compared to other fault lines. Are rivalries more important in accounting for conflict between members of a region than the possible diffusion of civil wars or unresolved, festering territorial claims? Are rivalries trumped by competing pacifying conditions, such as a predominance of democracies in the region; or, the presence in the region of a dominant power seeking order; or, by external interference into a region by outside powers? Our framework is designed to probe for answers to these questions.

The second dimension of our framework draws attention to the notion that regions do not exist in a vacuum. Regions are also part of the global international system and likely vary in terms of their permeability to global forces and global powers. The “bi-polar” global conflicts of the Cold War touched, to one extent or another, virtually every region; the key to comparative regional analysis is understanding the extent to which some regions were able to resist Cold War intrusion more so than others. Similarly, in the post-Cold War environment major powers such as the U.S., China, and Russia[[4]](#footnote-4) have actively intervened in regional affairs in some regions albeit not uniformly in all; an appropriate question is to ask about the conditions that may facilitate the extent of regional resistance to such intervention, and the effects of such interventions on intra-regional relations.

The third aspect of our framework focuses on whether (and the extent to which) intra-regional relationships play out in the context of power hierarchies. Some regions contain one or more major powers with the capability (and often the willingness) to dominate relationships within the region, and/or to seek favorable regional security and economic orders. Other regions may contain a dominant regional power seeking the same. Finally, there are numerous regions in world politics containing neither regional nor major powers; the intra-regional relationships in several of those regions (including the Middle East) resemble conditions consistent with the anarchy assumption argued by neorealists.

We consider the presence or absence of hierarchy, and the type of hierarchy that may exist within a region, to be particularly salient to intra-regional relationships.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is so for two reasons. The first is that a dominant power in the region would likely find it in its interest to impose order in the region. Consistent with its own foreign policy objectives, a dominant power would formulate security and economic rules, norms, and institutions favoring it, but also with a view toward minimizing regional conflicts that may be disruptive to its interests. How much of such order a dominant power can create in its region (and to what extent it will seek conformance by other states in the region) likely depends on its capabilities, willingness, and competence to do so.

The second reason why the distinction is important is the relationship between hierarchy, regional characteristics, and regional permeability to global dynamics. Strong dominant powers in a region may seek to minimize fault lines or minimize their diffusion across the region; encourage the development of regionally pacifying trends (e.g., trade interdependencies or the creation of IGOs); or, seek to prevent the intrusion of outside powers that might take a counteractive role in the region. Presumably, these outcomes would require dominant states that have substantial capabilities and the willingness to act, capability and willingness greater than some regional powers may possess.

***A Few Key Concepts***

Before addressing the salience of rivalries, we note a few critical concepts.[[6]](#footnote-6) First, we define a region as a geopolitical space of three or more states in close proximity, and where states have the capacity to reach each other and demonstrate some unique willingness to do so at a frequency typically greater than with states outside of the region.[[7]](#footnote-7) We measure the existence of regions and state membership in those regions by aggregating our indicators at ten-year intervals. Thus, we map regions and regional membership by decades, and as a result, the primary unit of our analysis below is the region year.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Our methodology requires regional membership to be mutually exclusive: a state cannot belong to two regions at the same time. However, since both membership in a region and the very existence of a region are empirically determined, states, within geographical limits, can move from one region to another (e.g., Turkey). Further, not only can new regions emerge but existing regions can disappear.[[9]](#footnote-9) Most but not all states are classified as belonging to a region at any point in time, although some states do not fit into any region.[[10]](#footnote-10) Between 1951-2010, the number of regions varies by decade, ranging from eight in the 1950s to 11 in the 2000s.

In this context, our approach to the Middle East is somewhat different than the organizing chapter in this book, which indicates three, fixed regions in the Middle East sub-system. Our empirical indicators exclude the Maghreb as part of the Middle East and treat it as a separate region when the indicators so warrant; the states in the Levant and the Gulf are typically classified as belonging in the Middle East.

We opt for delineating rivalries as strategic rivalries consistent with the conceptualization and measurement offered by Thompson (2001, 2008) and Thompson and Dreyer (2011). We also identify rivalry fields (Thompson 2018) as the overarching, prevailing pattern of rivalries within a single region. Rivalry fields are distinct from individual rivalries in that the field is thought to condition each region member’s behaviors even if a member is not a party to any rivalries within its region. As an example, during the 1960s, Lebanon had no rivalries in the Middle East but was nonetheless conditioned by the dense rivalry field of the Middle East (see Figure 10). The density of the rivalry field refers to the extent of rivalries within said region.

As a second key concept, political shocks are defined as large, abrupt, unanticipated, major political disturbances to domestic, regional, or global environments (Diehl and Goertz 2001). Although shocks have tremendous potential to alter inter-state relations by cutting through path dependencies and policymakers’ inertia, they have not been systematically studied, nor is there a semblance of agreement over their definition and method of identification.[[11]](#footnote-11) We chose the Diehl and Goertz definition as it appears to be most consistent with common scholarly usage.

As our third key concept, whether a region contains a hierarchy is identified by the presence or absence of either a major power or a regional power in the region. Major and regional powers are identified consistent with Volgy et al. (2011), and Cline et al. (2011).

***Placing Rivalries in Context***

Why is the Middle East the most conflict-prone of all regions (Volgy et al. 2017b)? Is it due to the nature of regional inter-state rivalries? Or, does the presence of other fault lines or the absence of pacifying conditions better explain the prevalence of conflict? Consistent with our perspective and the framework outlined above, we begin by asking about the relationship between rivalries and conflict (one of three fault lines identified in our framework), regardless of the region in which those rivalries are situated.

At first glance it is clear that a close relationship exists between the numbers of rivalries and the extent of conflict within a region. The simple correlation between the number of regional rivalries and the frequency of severe regional conflict (measured as severe militarized interstate disputes, or MIDs [Palmer, D’Oranzio, Kenwick, and Lane 2015]) is .43; the relationship between frequency of regional rivalries and the diffusion of regional conflict (the numbers of states in the region involved with severe MIDs) is even stronger at .52. Nonetheless, the relationship between numbers of rivalries and the extent of conflict within a region could plausibly be mitigated by other factors in our framework, and especially the presence or absence of regional hierarchy.

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| **Table 1. Numbers of Rivalries in Regions, by Type of Region, 1951-2010.** | | | |
|  | ***Non-Hierarchical Regions*** | ***Hierarchical***  ***Regions*** | |
|  |  | Major Power | Regional Power |
| Mean Number of Rivalries  per Region | 5.17 | 2.91 | 1.42 |

Can the presence of hierarchy have a mitigating impact on the number of rivalries? Our data suggest that it may. Table 1 compares the frequency of rivalries across regions, controlling for hierarchy. There is clearly a substantial difference in the frequency of rivalries across types of regions: non-hierarchical regions experience a substantially greater frequency of rivalries than do regions containing dominant powers.[[12]](#footnote-12) Of course, such limited analysis does not allow us to tell anything about the direction of impact. It is just as likely that large numbers of rivalries in a region inhibit the rise of major or regional powers as it is that such dominant states successfully suppress or even preempt strategic rivalries from emerging in their regions. What we can tell, however, is that both the frequency of rivalries and the presence of hierarchy matter in assessing whether some regions are more conflict-prone than others.

Table 2 assesses these relationships further by integrating a broader range of considerations into the equation, consistent with our theoretical perspective. The table now contains three variables associated with what we consider to be regional fault lines (rivalries, civil wars, and territorial claims), three indicators corresponding to regionally pacifying conditions (trade interdependencies, democratic regimes, and IGO membership), and two global conditions (Cold War and external alliances with major powers), along with regional differentiation based on the presence/absence of regional hierarchies.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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| **Table 2: OLS Regression Models for Major and Regional Powers and Regional Conflict, with Number of Severe MIDs/Number of States in Region.** | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | *Base Model* | | *Major Power*  *Presence* | | | | *Regional Power Presence* | | | | |
| Hierarchy | - | - | | -0.167\*\*\* | (0.030) | | | -0.112\*\*\* | | (0.028) | | |
| # Intra-Regional Rivalries t-1 | 0.021\*\*\* | (0.003) | | 0.016\*\*\* | (0.004) | | | 0.016\*\*\* | | (0.004) | | |
| # Civil Wars t-1 | 0.020\*\* | (0.007) | | 0.007 | (0.006) | | | 0.044\*\*\* | | (0.010) | | |
| Territorial Claims t-1 | 0.169\*\* | (0.052) | | 0.264\*\*\* | (0.070) | | | 0.201\*\*\* | | (0.050) | | |
| % Regional Trade t-1 | -0.036\*\* | (0.013) | | - | - | | | 0.005 | | (0.019) | | |
| % Regional Democracies t-1 | -0.118\*\* | (0.043) | | -0.047 | (0.054) | | | -0.141\*\*\* | | (0.040) | | |
| IGO Membership t-1 | -0.169\*\*\* | (0.045) | | -0.200\*\*\* | (0.057) | | | -0.186\*\*\* | | (0.050) | | |
| External Alliances t-1 | 0.080\*\* | (0.026) | | 0.050 | (0.029) | | | 0.124\*\*\* | | (0.026) | | |
| Cold War | -0.054\*\* | (0.023) | | -0.044 | (0.024) | | | -0.081\*\* | | (0.027) | | |
| Time Counter | -0.003 | (0.004) | | -0.004 | (0.004) | | | -0.006 | | (0.004) | | |
| Constant | 0.227\*\*\* | (0.042) | | 0.202\*\*\* | (0.049) | | | 0.160\*\*\* | | (0.047) | | |
| Observations | 366 | | 261 | | | | 267 | | | | |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.322 | | 0.408 | | | | 0.445 | | | | |
| AIC | -157.1 | | -175.5 | | | | -117.7 | | | | |
| BIC | -118.0 | | -139.9 | | | | -78.26 | | | | |
| Robust standard errors reported in parentheses. | | | | | |  | | |  | |
| \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001 | | | | | |  | | |  | |

We draw a number of conclusions from Table 2. First, even in this broader context, both intra-regional rivalries and the absence of hierarchy appear to have pernicious effects on the amount of interstate conflict regions experience. Second, as important as the number of strategic rivalries are in accounting for levels of regional conflict, they are by no means the only major consideration, and at least three other factors—territorial claims, the presence of hierarchy, and alliances with major powers outside of the region—provide even stronger predictions to how much regional conflict occurs. Third, the suggestion raised by Table 1 continues in Table 2: regions with dominant powers appear to be affected less by rivalry than regions without.

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| **Figure 2: Marginal Effect of Major Power Hierarchy and Rivalries on Severe MID Frequencies** | |
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| **Figure 3: Marginal Effect of Regional Power Hierarchy and Rivalries on Severe MID Frequencies** | |
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To better evaluate the unique impact of hierarchy versus rivalries on regional conflict patterns, Figures 2 and 3 plot the marginal effects of these conditions for major power and regional power hierarchies respectively (the latter two models in Table 2). The left panel in Figure 2 plots the pacifying effect of a major power within a region, and the right panel plots the conflict exacerbating effect of an increasing number of rivalries in any given region (each level is observed in our models); the dashed line in the right panel marks 13.333 rivalries, which corresponds to the average number of rivalries in the Middle East in each of our models—a point we will revisit below. As shown in the left panel, regions without a major power are predicted to experience nearly 141% more conflict than regions with a major power in terms of severe MID frequency (0.284 versus 0.118). These effects are roughly comparable, shown in the right panel, to the predicted level of severe MID frequency in regions possessing zero intra-regional rivalries (0.158) and eight intra-regional rivalries (0.287). Thus, individually, both major power hierarchy and intra-regional rivalries condition the frequency of severe MIDs—but the conflict exacerbating effect of rivalries surpasses the pacifying effect of major power hierarchy in the upper half of our observed rivalry counts.[[14]](#footnote-14)

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| **Figure 4: Marginal Effect of Rivalries on Severe MID Frequencies by Hierarchy Types** | |
| *Major Power Hierarchy* | *Regional Power Hierarchy* |
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To better capture the effect of intra-regional rivalries on severe MID frequency patterns by hierarchy type, Figure 4 plots the predicted levels of conflict by increasing numbers of rivalries in regions with hierarchy versus regions without. In the case of major powers (left panel), regions characterized by the presence of a major power (dashed line) are always predicted to experience lower severe MID frequency than regions without such hierarchy (solid line)—no matter the number of intra-regional rivalries present. The same cannot be said of regional power hierarchies whose pacifying effect becomes indistinguishable from non-hierarchical regions as the number of intra-regional rivalries approaches the upper-third of our observed intra-regional rivalry counts.

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| **Table 3: OLS Regression Models for Major and Regional Powers and Regional Conflict with Number of States in Region Involved in Severe MIDs/Number of States in Region.** | | | | | | | |
|  | *Base Model* | | *Major Power*  *Presence* | | *Regional Power Presence* | |
| Hierarchy | - | - | -0.285\*\*\* | (0.051) | -0.141\*\* | (0.047) |
| # Intra-Regional Rivalries t-1 | 0.052\*\*\* | (0.006) | 0.045\*\*\* | (0.006) | 0.047\*\*\* | (0.008) |
| # Civil Wars t-1 | 0.027\* | (0.012) | 0.009 | (0.010) | 0.060\*\*\* | (0.017) |
| Territorial Claims t-1 | 0.247\*\* | (0.084) | 0.308\*\* | (0.113) | 0.266\*\* | (0.084) |
| % Regional Trade t-1 | -0.071\*\* | (0.021) | - | - | 0.001 | (0.032) |
| % Regional Democracies t-1 | -0.129 | (0.074) | -0.033 | (0.093) | -0.163\* | (0.076) |
| IGO Membership t-1 | -0.336\*\*\* | (0.073) | -0.360\*\*\* | (0.094) | -0.392\*\*\* | (0.083) |
| External Alliances t-1 | 0.144\*\* | (0.046) | 0.097 | (0.052) | 0.215\*\*\* | (0.047) |
| Cold War | -0.093\* | (0.038) | -0.060 | (0.042) | -0.126\*\*\* | (0.046) |
| Time Counter | -0.009 | (0.006) | -0.010 | (0.007) | -0.015 | (0.008) |
| Constant | 0.406\*\*\* | (0.072) | 0.327\*\*\* | (0.080) | 0.288\*\*\* | (0.078) |
| Observations | 366 |  | 261 |  | 267 |  |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.378 |  | 0.455 |  | 0.465 |  |
| AIC | 221.6 |  | 119.1 |  | 174.2 |  |
| BIC | 260.6 |  | 154.7 |  | 213.7 |  |
| Robust standard errors reported in parentheses. | | | | | | | |
| \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001 | | | | | | | |

As an additional test of these relationships, we change the dependent variable from the frequency of severe conflicts annually in a region (again, controlling for region size) to the number of states engaged in severe conflicts annually in the region (also controlling for region size). This was done to approximate a measure of the extent of conflict diffusion in regions, and to ascertain the extent to which rivalries create stronger diffusion effects and/or the extent to which hierarchies minimize diffusion effects. The results are displayed in Table 3. We do not learn a great deal more about the effects of rivalries on conflict diffusion than we had about conflict levels. While the rivalry coefficients are stronger, so are the coefficients for territorial claims. However, as shown in Figures 5 and 6, it appears hierarchy does seem to have a somewhat stronger impact in minimizing the diffusion of conflict than it did in minimizing levels of regional conflict.

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| **Figure 5: Marginal Effect of Major Power Hierarchy and Rivalries on Severe State MID Involvement** | |
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| **Figure 6: Marginal Effect of Regional Power Hierarchy and Rivalries on Severe State MID Involvement** | |
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Following the same structure as above, Figure 5 plots the unique effects of major power hierarchy (left panel) and intra-regional rivalries (right panel) and corresponds to the ‘Major Power Presence’ model of Table 3; Figure 6 plots the same for regional power hierarchies and corresponds to the ‘Regional Power Presence’ model of Table 3. Figure 5 suggests regions without a major power experience approximately 144% more severe MID involvement (0.484 versus 0.198) and these effects are comparable to the predicted levels of involvement for a region when it is characterized by zero intra-regional rivalries (0.197) and between six (0.470) and seven (0.515) intra-regional rivalries. Unlike our previous results, regional powers demonstrate less ability to inhibit conflict diffusion than major powers. Whereas our separate models predict similar levels of conflict diffusion in the absence of major or regional power hierarchy (0.484 and 0.456 respectively), the presence of a regional power “only” reduces this prediction to 0.315 whereas major powers reduce the prediction to 0.198. Compared to the individual effect of intra-regional rivalries on conflict diffusion, the presence of a regional power hierarchy in a region is equivalent to roughly the presence of two rivalries (0.333) and the absence of a regional power hierarchy is equivalent to roughly between four (0.426) and five (0.472) rivalries. Thus, hierarchy and rivalries both individually influence a region’s conflict diffusion patterns, but regional powers appear to be less capable of containing diffusion than major powers.

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| **Figure 7: Marginal Effect of Rivalries on Severe State MID Involvement by Hierarchy Types** | |
| *Major Power Hierarchy* | *Regional Power Hierarchy* |
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Figure 7 further elaborates on the differences between major and regional powers’ abilities to contain diffusion by plotting the effect of intra-regional rivalries on conflict diffusion by hierarchy type. Similar to previous results, major power hierarchies (left panel) are almost always distinguishable from regions without hierarchy in terms of their ability to mitigate conflict diffusion. The same cannot be said for regional power hierarchies (right panel). Regional power hierarchies are only distinguishable from non-hierarchical regions in a narrow range of intra-regional rivalries in the lower half of our observed intra-regional rivalry counts.

***What Is So Unique About the Middle East?***

Recall that we are interested in assessing why some regions (and especially the Middle East) are unusually conflict-prone. This interest requires first answering another, earlier question: what would constitute a unique region from the perspective of comparative regional analysis? From the standpoint of our framework, the Middle East ticks all the boxes associated with a high conflict region. In terms of the region’s fault lines, the Middle East ranks high on numbers of interstate rivalries, Middle Eastern states often experience civil wars, and disputed territorial claims exist among states in the Middle East. In terms of pacifying conditions, the Middle East offers few: its members do not rank high on IGO membership compared to other regions; its states are not highly interdependent in terms of their trade relationships; and there are virtually no democracies in the region. With respect to its permeability to global forces, the Middle East was an active theater during the Cold War, and remains externally penetrated by major powers today – particularly still by the U.S., and Russia – as well as by, in the least, lesser but allied participants of the U.S.-led War on Terror. With respect to the possibility that the presence of a hierarchy might dampen conflict, the Middle East contains aspirants but no dominant major or regional power.

Consistent with our theoretical framework we would expect this combination of circumstances to predict a region of ongoing, substantial intra-regional conflict. Indeed, apart from the Central African region during the 2000s, the Middle East is the most conflictual of all regions in world politics. In this sense, the Middle East is an outlier among regions, and thus unique by both its performance on our dependent variable and its performance on our key independent variables.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Being an outlier does not necessarily create uniqueness however; there may be several outliers and for similar reasons. Another way of looking at the notion of uniqueness is to ask whether the region exhibits some pattern associated with conflict that makes it distinctly different from other regions. The clear candidate in this volume is inter-state rivalries. While we caution that it is not the only, and perhaps not even necessarily the dominant driver of conflict relations (as suggested by Tables 2 and 3, and the accompanying figures), an unusually high density of inter-state regional rivalries can threaten to overwhelm a region, especially in the absence of a dominant power in the region seeking order and stability. This is precisely what we find in the Middle East.

Figure 8 illustrates the average density scores for Middle East states in rivalries, compared to the average of all other regions and the next highest region exhibiting interstate rivalries. Although these data exhibit the mean scores over a large period of time (1951-2010), and control for region size (number of states), the Middle East density scores are incomparably large compared to all other regions. Clearly, the region is unique with respect to the density of its interstate rivalries.[[16]](#footnote-16)

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| **Figure 8. Average Rivalry Density Scores for the Middle East versus Other Regions, 1951-2010.** | |
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Figure 9 further underscores the uniqueness of the region. Not only is the rivalry field density incomparably high compared to other regions, most states are also actively involved in these rivalries, ranging from a low of 55 percent of all the region’s states, to over 90 percent of all states during the late 1960s, and nearly 80 percent of all states in the region during the late 1980s through the 1990s. This was foreshadowed by the dashed line at 13.333 in Figures 2-3 and 5-6, which marks the Middle East’s average number of intra-regional rivalries in our models; the collective average of all other regions in our models hovers near two intra-regional rivalries.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Until this point we have used a comparative delineation of regions as indicated above. However, in order to focus on changes to rivalries in the Middle East only, we now keep regional membership constant for the entire period.[[18]](#footnote-18)

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| **Figure 9. Percent of Middle East States Involved in Regional Rivalries, 1951-2015.** | |
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Note however the changing nature of the Middle East rivalry field along with some key changes regarding the state actors involved with each period: the thickness of the density field yields substantial changes over time. We illustrate with three figures below.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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| **Figure 10. Middle East Rivalry Field, 1960.** |
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Figure 10 shows the region’s rivalry field in 1960; with the exception of four states (Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, and the Yemen Arab Republic), all other region members are caught in rivalries. Figure 11 maps the rivalry field for 1990; a single set of rivalries is now bifurcated into a dominant one, and a smaller one (Qatar-Bahrain), with four, slightly changed, states remaining outside of rivalries (Lebanon, Oman, Yemen, and UAE).

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| **Figure 11. Middle East Rivalry Field, 1990.** |
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Figure 12 maps the region’s rivalry field for 2015. In this latest period, two obvious differences emerge. First, the number of states involved in rivalries is smaller than in 1960, and, second, the number of non-connected states evolves slightly again such that four states remain outside of rivalries (Bahrain, Lebanon, Oman, and Yemen).

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| **Figure 12. Middle East Rivalry Field, 2015.** |
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Some obvious changes contribute to the fluctuations in the field. Egypt, which was involved in roughly 60 percent of rivalries during the 1960s is by 2015 involved with less than 10 percent of the field. Iraq’s involvement had been more prominent than even Egypt’s, with a consistent involvement in nearly half of all rivalries – until 2003, after which it nearly disappears from the field. Israel’s involvement in the rivalry field is also extensive, albeit not nearly as much as either Egypt’s or Iraq’s involvement, and Israel’s lowest rate of involvement (around 23 percent) occurs from 2004 to the present. As a result of these states’ reduced involvement in the Middle East rivalry field, we observe a pattern that is by 2015 more “normal” compared to other regions, but only when assessed in the context of the Middle East’s much denser field prior to the 21st century. However, a word of caution is due: more “normal” in the Middle East does not equate to “typical” for a region of its type (non-hierarchical). Even in its more simplified form, the density of the field in the region remains incomparable to other major regions.

Do these changes create dramatically less conflict in the Middle East? That should not be expected: after all, even when the field is substantially reduced it is still substantially denser than virtually any other region. Additionally, as we noted earlier, it is not only the rivalry field that drives intra-regional conflict, as fault lines (e.g., territorial contestation and civil wars) and external interventions continue to exacerbate conflicts. Needless to say, the absence of hierarchy does not help promote peace either, facilitating instead struggles by regional power aspirants that today include Saudi Arabia and Iran, a list that previously included Egypt and Iraq as well.[[20]](#footnote-20)

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| **Figure 13. Middle East Rivalry Density Field, 1951-2015.** | |
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Instead, what may be changing is the amount of conflict in the region that can be solely attributed to the rivalry field. Consider Figures 13 and 14. Figure 13 shows the annual fluctuations in the Middle East rivalry field’s density. Density goes beyond simply the number of states involved within rivalries by considering also the commonality of the actors within active rivalries each year. There appear to be roughly three periods: the first, from 1951-1970 is a period of growth in the field; the second, from around 1979 through 2002 is a period of stability in the field; the third represents a sharp decline in the field, following the invasion of Iraq and the dismantling of the Saddam Hussein regime.

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| **Figure 14. Average Annual Frequency of Regional Severe MIDs, by Rivalry Field Type, 1951-2010.** | |
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Figure 14 provides some limited evidence of the declining, direct contribution of rivalry density to intra-regional conflict. We know rivalries are pernicious in terms of their impacts on conflict. We expect rivalry fields would have similar consequences. We expect though different levels of rivalry field density would be associated with different levels of conflict. This is essentially what we find in terms of the changing density field in the Middle East. During the period of rivalry density growth, some 80 percent of severe MIDs occurring in the region involve rivals. During periods of stable rivalry densities, that percentage is reduced to about 54 percent, while during the period of lower densities only some 22 percent of severe MIDs are directly associated with the rivalry field. As the figure demonstrates, clearly the most conflict associated with rivalry fields is during the growth in the field. While stable and lower density eras are associated with a lower percentage of conflicts in which rivals are directly engaged, the era of lower density demonstrates the fewest direct conflicts being generated by rivalry members with each other.

***Political Shocks and Rivalry Fields***

Note however that even a dramatic decline in the rivalry field fails to augur the end of substantial conflicts in the region: although the density of the rivalry field is dramatically reduced in the period we designate as “lower density,” this most recent period still exhibits nearly 70 percent of the conflicts occurring in the previous period. Furthermore, during the era of stable density, the actual number of severe MIDs is at its highest and is not directly attributable to the density field.

Nevertheless, changes to the rivalry field appear to matter for patterns of conflict in the Middle East, and this relationship raises the larger question of under what conditions may the field change. One strong argument made in this collection concerns the potential effects of political shocks on rivalry fields, and thus on intra-regional conflict. Thompson’s (2018) chapter in this volume suggests evidence that virtually all changes in the rivalry field, either terminating or initiating rivalries, are accompanied by, or immediately preceded by substantial political shocks in the region.

We have no valid, meaningful database with which to assess the range of political shocks experienced in the Middle East or in other regions. Collecting this information is a project worthy of further pursuit but necessarily beyond our own efforts here. We suspect, however, that the Middle East is also a likely candidate for having experienced more political shocks than any other region; until an appropriate database is developed, that remains a suspicion, but many events in the region can be enumerated as appropriate political shocks with both short-term and long-term implications.

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| **Figure 15. Density of the Middle East Rivalry Field and Selected Regional Shocks, 1951-2015.** | |
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Consider a second look at the density of the Middle East rivalry field and four key political shocks in the region: two domestically driven political shocks (the Nasser and the Khomeini revolutions emanating out of Egypt and Iran respectively), one external military intrusion into the region by the U.S. eliminating the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, and the Cold War’s end. These are matched to the rivalry field’s density in Figure 15.

Three of the four shocks appear to correspond to changes in the rivalry field. The Nasser revolution parallels the commencement of a substantial increase in the rivalry field’s density, reflecting both clashes between radical and conservative regimes and the fuller entanglement of these states in the Arab-Israeli conflict; the Khomeini revolution corresponds with the beginning of a stable density field; the 2003 American invasion of Iraq immediately precedes the dramatic decline in the rivalry field’s density, as the invasion constitutes a very different shock since Iraq is pulled from the density field and the balance in power relations are tilted in the region. This case serves as a reminder that the effects of these shocks are typically to interrupt path dependencies: they can substantially increase or reduce the rivalry field’s density. If the Cold War had a substantial impact on the field, it appears that its end had an impact that is more gradual but may have minimized the Khomeini revolution’s own impact over the longer-term.

It is also plausible that political shocks may not result in substantially greater or fewer rivalries, but instead, function to realign and stabilize rivalry fields. This may be the case with the Khomeini revolution in Iran. It is followed by a significant period of stability in the density field, meaning neither more nor fewer states in the region engage in rivalries after the revolution. However, the contents of many of those rivalries are altered, paralleling growing sectarian divisions in the region.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Until we can systematically assess a fuller sample of both domestic and externally induced shocks in the Middle East (and elsewhere), much of this discussion can only be speculative. For instance, Figure 15 identifies only four political shocks, yet there are many other possible candidates, as noted in the Thompson chapter. For example, the Camp David agreements, coming shortly before the Khomeini revolution may have, in combination with that revolution, produced the stability in the rivalry field. Alternatively, the end of the Cold War, a system-wide political shock, was followed by another: the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the first U.S. led Persian Gulf war. Was it the end of the Cold War or the Persian Gulf War that led to a gradual reduction in the density of the rivalry field that can be observed during the 1990s in Figure 15? We do not have a sufficient number of observations to arrive at a systematic assessment, but it is likely that these shocks can range from being mutually reinforcing to possibly annulling one another. And whether these patterns are unique to the Middle East requires additional comparative regional analysis.

**Conclusion**

It is clear, even from a comparative regional perspective, that the Middle East is unique among the various regions in international politics. The Middle East ranks high on fault lines, low on pacifying conditions, lacks a hierarchical order, and has demonstrated substantial permeability to both global forces and intrusion from external powers. Its uniqueness is especially underscored by both the unusual number of inter-state rivalries in the region and a truly unique pattern of an extremely dense rivalry field that has at times involved nearly all state members. No wonder then that it is also, at least since the end of the second world war, the most conflictual of all regions.

Not much is static in international relations and neither are regional dynamics. While it is clear that rivalries have dominated international politics in the Middle East, three trends have emerged to suggest the relationship between rivalry and conflict may be waning. First, the density of the Middle East rivalry field, especially over the last decade, has substantially diminished. Second, the share of regional conflicts that appear to be directly attributable to regional states in rivalry has also diminished. Third, the overall level of state-to-state regional conflict as measured by severe MIDs has declined.

These trends suggest to us three salient issues about the conflicts in the regions. First, the political dimensions over which many of the rivalries are playing out have changed, from an earlier period that was driven by radical versus traditional regimes and the Arab-Israeli conflict, to the latter period where these dimensions appear to be becoming secondary to conflicts between Shia- and Sunni-based regimes. In turn, such sectarian differences may simply underscore a longer-term phenomenon of (changing) regional aspirants struggling for regional leadership in the absence of a dominant power. The Saudi-Iranian proxy-conflict in Yemen may reflect the latest round of such struggles.

Second, the reduced density in the rivalry field suggests that the Middle East is possibly becoming “more normal” compared to other regions—especially if “normalcy” means that the Middle East becomes comparable to regions lacking a hierarchy and with substantial fault lines. Of course, such a return to “normalcy” would not indicate that the region is becoming substantially more peaceful but only that considerations other than rivalries are becoming more salient in determining the level of regional conflict. As we noted earlier, the percentage of conflict directly attributed to states in rivalries during the last decade is at its lowest percentage of the time frame we sampled, even as the region remains highly conflict-prone.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Third, and to the extent the region’s highly dense rivalry field has created so much conflict, it is well worth probing the conditions under which the field can further diminish. Our exploration of political shocks and their impact on the region has been brief, but it does indicate such shocks can have a strong impact on the rivalry field, either substantially increasing its density, or, reducing it under certain circumstances. What we have failed to do, given chapter limitations and the limitations of data, is to systematically assess the conditions under which such political shocks may work in opposing directions.[[23]](#footnote-23)

What remains clear is that political shocks should be integrated into any meaningful analysis of changes in regional politics. It would be useful to know, for instance, if the Middle East is also unique in facing an onslaught of political shocks (or “shock waves”) fundamentally greater in volume and scope than other regions. Regional governance exposed to such shock waves becomes highly difficult and problematic. We would want to know as well if different types of shocks have different consequences for regional dynamics. Under what conditions (e.g., see Rasler in this volume) do domestic shocks impact the entire region? Do systemic, global shocks have the same impact in the Middle East as they do elsewhere and why? Under what conditions can certain shocks offset each other, or drive the region in different directions, as in the cases of the shocks generated by both Camp David and the Khomeini revolution? Under what conditions do shocks cease to be shocks and are perceived by foreign policymakers as a “normal” attribute of the region? Under what conditions does an event rise to the status of a shock in the first place?[[24]](#footnote-24) Can we differentiate between shocks that have an immediate impact versus those that take substantial time to weave through the region’s politics? We have answers to none of these questions, but they appear to be critical avenues worthy of further pursuit, not only for a greater understanding of the Middle East, but as well for more thorough explanations of regions that undergo substantial changes.

In this sense, it would be highly useful to try to link the concept of shocks to the growing literature on diffusion and contagion processes (e.g., Solingen 2012, Braithwaite 2006). We know for instance that the Arab Spring diffused to parts of the Middle East (e.g., Egypt) while being aggressively contained elsewhere (e.g., Qatar, Saudi Arabia). Minimizing diffusion of such shocks is more manageable in regions with a hierarchy where the dominant power can, to some extent anticipate such shocks, or to respond to them quickly to minimize their spread across the region when it is not in the interest of the dominant power to have such diffusion occur. It is far more difficult to minimize such diffusion in regions without a hierarchy. Developing a clearer understanding of conditions under which states are willing (and able) to minimize shocks by creating diffusion firewalls may be one key to a better understanding of when political shocks become more or less salient in a region.

The salience of non-state actors in both the Arab Spring and, at least regarding domestic shocks, also highlight another limitation of this analysis. Both the nature of intra-regional conflict and our key independent variables have focused on state actors and state interactions. We have not considered conflicts in the region between non-state actors nor between non-state actors and states. Yet, as the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the Syrian civil war should remind us, numerous non-state actors operate across the region (from Hezbollah and ISIS to the PKK). These actors often interact across state borders, and they often clash with state and other non-state actors. The complex interplay between shocks and rivalry fields must take them into account as well and their activities should also be part of the assessment of how much conflict exists in the Middle East and whether it is unique in this regard.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Finally, any consideration of the Middle East becoming a more peaceful region may depend in significant part on whether it can accommodate the eventual rise of a regional power. As we noted earlier from our comparative analysis, regions that contain a major power or a regional power also demonstrate substantially less intra-regional conflict, including minimizing some of the effects of intra-regional rivalries.[[26]](#footnote-26) Regional powers may, as well, be able to erect diffusion firewalls in the region to minimize the impact of political shocks. While major power hierarchies have stronger pacifying effects than regional power hierarchies, the latter type nevertheless has a significant impact on ordering relationships in the region.

If this is likely to be the case for the Middle East as well, then the question that needs exploring is what would it take to have such a regional power emerge in the Middle East? That is clearly beyond the scope of this project, but it may be a vital question to answer if there is some hope that the region may become substantially more peaceful in the future. However, we would not make that prediction for the near future: it is plausible that given the still-remaining very substantial rivalry density field, the sheer weight of rivalries in the region may mean that too many of the key regional actors will strongly oppose the emergence of any one of them as a regional power. Additionally, efforts by outside powers to balance regional power contenders against one another (e.g., Iraq versus Iran or Iran versus Saudi Arabia) have also lessened the prospects of a regional power emerging.[[27]](#footnote-27) Given all of that, we see little on the horizon inspiring hope for a substantially more peaceful Middle East.

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**Appendix A: List of Variables, Sources, and Manipulations.**

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| *Variable* | *Source* | *Manipulation* |
| State MID Involvement | COW MID v.4 (Palmer, D’Oranzio, Kenwick, & Lane 2015) | Number of states involved in level four or five MIDs/total number of states in region |
| MID Frequency | COW MID v.4 (Palmer et al. 2015) | Number of level four or five MIDs/total number of states in region |
| Major Power Presence | Volgy et al. (2011) | Dichotomous; 1 = presence, 0 = no hierarchy |
| Regional Power Presence | Cline et al. (2011) | Dichotomous; 1 = presence, 0 = no hierarchy |
| # Intra-Regional Rivalries | Thompson & Dreyer (2011) | Number of states involved in rivalry with states of the same region; lagged one year |
| Rivalry Density | Thompson & Dreyer (2011) | Number of rival-dyads within a region, multiplied by total number of connections/ total number of states within the region minus one |
| # Civil Wars | UCDP-PRIO v.4 (Pettersson & Wallensteen 2015) | Number of states involved in internal conflict with cumulative intensity of 1,000 battle-deaths or more; lagged one year |
| % Regional Trade | COW Bilateral Trade v.3[[28]](#endnote-1),[[29]](#endnote-2) | Amount of trade among states in a region/total trade of the region; logged and lagged one year |
| % Regional Democracies | Polity IV[[30]](#endnote-3) | Percent of states with Polity IV score of 7+ states/total number of states with Polity IV scores in region; lagged one year |
| External Alliances | COW Formal Alliances v.4.1[[31]](#endnote-4) | Dichotomous; 1 = presence, 0 = no defense pact between a regional state and an external major power; lagged one year |
| Territorial Claims | Gibler and Miller (2014) [[32]](#endnote-5) | Number of territorial claims in a region/total number of states in region; lagged one year |
| Regional IGO Membership | COW IGO; FIGO[[33]](#endnote-6) | Number of regional IGO memberships held by states in region/all possible regional IGO memberships; lagged one year |
| Cold War |  | Dichotomous; 1 = Cold War; 0 = post-Cold War |
| Time Counter |  | Time counter for each decade |

1. For an example of a comparative perspective explicitly rejecting Middle East “exceptionalism”, see Sorli et al. (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Either directly by diffusion/emulation, or through substantial refugee flows into the neighborhood (e.g., Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We recognize the Kantian peace (e.g., Oneill et al. 1999), and especially its democratic peace component, is challenged by the “capitalist” peace (e.g., Gartzke 2007) and the “territorial peace” (e.g., Gibler 2012), and that all three forms may be linked to prior dynamics created by dominant global powers (e.g., Rasler and Thompson 2005). However, note that all four conditions are included to some extent in our framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is difficult to dismiss, for example, the counterfactual of how different relations would look in today’s Middle East had the U.S. not engaged in the second war against Iraq, starting in 2003, or if Russia had not come to the aid of the Assad regime as it fought its civil war in Syria. Nor have researchers plotted out the cumulative impact of Chinese involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa from a regional, rather than a great power perspective (e.g., Gao 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Literature on the salience of hierarchy for international politics and inter-state relations are highlighted in Lake (2017), Milner (1991), and Bially Mattern and Zarakol (2016). The extent to which a region can fluctuate between anarchy and hierarchy is demonstrated by Butt (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The concepts, their operationalization, and sources used are detailed in Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Clearly this is not the only definition of what constitutes a region. In fact, there is no consensus nor a “gold standard” defining and empirically identifying the contours of regions (Volgy et al. 2017a), nor has there been one (Thompson 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a full list of the regions, the states they contain, and how they change across decades, see Volgy et al. (2017b). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For instance, we note the formation of a Central Asian region in the 1990s; that “region” seems to have disappeared in the first decade of the 2000s. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. These states are typically “microstates” and/or relatively inactive states in international politics. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This judgement is based on a survey of contemporary international relations literature using political shocks either as an independent or dependent variable of interest (Gordell 2017). The survey included publications in fourteen leading journals between 2005-2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The difference between the two is statistically significant. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Notes: the unit of analysis is region year; we control for region size in our dependent variable; and the independent variables are lagged by one year. The variable for trade interdependence is omitted from the ‘Major Power Presence’ model due to collinearity issues. For a greater consideration of this problem, see, Volgy et al. (2017b). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Similar, but slightly weaker, patterns are observed for the presence of a regional power in a region so we omit its discussion for the sake of brevity. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In a previous review of empirical literature over the last decade (Volgy et al. 2017a), we found that virtually all large-N empirical analyses that controlled for region in dyadic analyses found the Middle East variable, regardless of how the Middle East was delineated, to exhibit patterns that were statistically significantly different from the “base” region, and regardless of which region was used as the base. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rivalry density scores are created using the total number of rival-dyads within a region, multiplied by the total number of connections, or linkages, between rival-dyads, which is then divided by the total number of states within the region minus one. Linkages are established between rival-dyads that involve a common state-actor. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The collective average of all other regions varies between approximately 1.92 and 2.41. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. To assess the salience of a single variable over time for a region requires the regional delineation remain stable. Therefore, we utilize our delineation of the Middle East region and its state membership from the 2000s as a permanent marker for the entire time frame, making adjustments to regional membership only when a state has no legal status (e.g., Kazakhstan prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union), or when two or more states integrate or dissolve (e.g., Egypt and Syria). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Note the network figures differ from those contained in the Thompson chapter, and for two reasons. First, we conceptualize the Middle East differently than Thompson as the contours of our region do not include states from North Africa. Second, we include only those rivalries that include the region’s members (e.g., we exclude the U.S./Iran rivalry). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Turkey could be added as another regional aspirant if its primary focus of attention becomes the Middle East. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This phenomenon is also illustrated in Figures 10-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Thompson (2018) makes a similar point in arguing that domestic conflicts and especially civil wars have become more prevalent in the region as the rivalry field simplifies. We agree but our framework would suggest such a shift to intra-state conflict can ultimately result in increased intra-state conflict in others as well, and also enhanced inter-state conflict through refugee flows, greater external involvement by outside powers, and the rise of non-state actors violently participating in ongoing rivalries. Certainly the civil conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen suggest such possibilities. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For one promising direction in assessing external shocks, see Maoz and Joyce (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For example, we had some difficulty classifying regional wars. Did all such wars constitute shocks to the region? Are some wars more expected than others? Do some wars, long in duration, such as the Iran-Iraq war, begin to seem normal? [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Note that our measure of conflict is frequency of severe MIDs between states in a region, which excludes non-state actors that are not acting in behalf of a particular state. Inclusion of semi-autonomous non-state actors into the region’s rivalry field could substantially change our estimates of how much smaller that field is today, compared to previous decades. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The one exception to this generalization is the case of South Asia, where the regional power (India) is itself engaged in a long, ongoing rivalry. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In an earlier time, U.S. efforts that resulted in the Camp David accords also virtually guaranteed that Egypt would not be able to emerge as a regional power either. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Barbieri, K. & Keshk, O. (2012). Correlates of war project trade data set codebook, version 3.0. Retrieved from http://correlatesofwar.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
29. Barbieri, K., Omar, M., Keshk, G., & Pollins, B. (2009). TRADING DATA: Evaluating our assumptions and coding rules. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, *26*, 471–491. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
30. Marshall, M.G., Gurr, T.R., and Jaggers, K. (2016). Polity IV project: Political regime characteristics and transitions, 1800–2015—Annual Time-Series Dataset. Vienna, VA: Center for Systemic Peace. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
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33. Formal Intergovernmental Organizations dataset, http://www.u.arizona.edu/~volgy/FIGO.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-6)