
Reevaluating Realist Theories Through Middle Eastern Geopolitics

Yaron Katz

Holon Institute of Technology, Israel

DOI - <http://doi.org/10.37502/IJSMR.2025.81006>

Abstract

This research analyzes the influence of Hamas and Hezbollah on Middle Eastern geopolitics through the Realist theory. It examines the growing influence of non-state actors in shaping global diplomacy, security, and regional power dynamics, with a specific focus on the Middle East. Traditionally, international relations theories, particularly Realism, have centered on the power and sovereignty of states. However, the increasing prominence of non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah challenges this state-centric framework. The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel and the involvement of Hezbollah in the civil war in Syria serve as a case study in understanding how these actors, despite lacking formal state recognition, can significantly impact regional stability, international security, and diplomatic relations. This study uses Realist theory to explore how their pursuit of power, survival, and ideological objectives disrupt traditional geopolitical structures. The research highlights how non-state actors reshape regional conflicts and challenge state-driven diplomacy by analyzing their strategic goals, military capabilities, and alliances, primarily through their relationship with Iran. The study argues for re-examining existing international relations theories to account for the evolving role of non-state actors in global power dynamics and security issues.

Keywords: Realist Theories, Middle East, Geopolitics, Military, Alliances

Introduction

This research explores the growing influence of non-state actors in global diplomacy and security, with a particular focus on the Middle East. Traditional international relations theories have historically emphasized state sovereignty, positioning states as the primary actors in global politics. However, in recent decades, non-state actors such as armed groups, militias, and transnational organizations have increasingly moved from peripheral roles to central players in diplomacy, military operations, and international alliances. This shift challenges state-centric models, directly reshaping geopolitical dynamics and transforming the concepts of power and governance.

In the Middle East, non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah have fundamentally altered the region's political landscape. Their involvement in the Gaza conflict, the tensions in Lebanon, and the Syrian Civil War demonstrate their ability to reshape diplomatic frameworks traditionally dominated by state actors. These groups challenge state authority and create new diplomatic engagement and conflict resolution avenues by pursuing ideological, military, and security objectives. This research examines their role in modern diplomacy and security, arguing that traditional state-centric theories, such as Realism, cannot fully capture the complexity of these non-state actors' influence.

The study highlights the limitations of traditional approaches to conflict resolution that exclude non-state actors from formal diplomatic processes. It aims to redefine international relations and calls for more inclusive frameworks to understand global power dynamics by analyzing groups like Hamas and Hezbollah's strategies, alliances, and regional impact. The study focuses on how non-state actors' decentralized structures and ideological motivations challenge traditional state sovereignty, power, and diplomacy concepts. The involvement of state actors, particularly Iran, in leveraging non-state entities to achieve regional objectives adds another layer of complexity to the geopolitical landscape, further complicating traditional theories of international relations. Through this analysis, the study explores the evolving role of non-state actors in global diplomacy and security, advocating for the rethinking of established theories to better account for these actors' growing prominence.

Theoretical Approach

The research investigates the limitations of traditional International Relations (IR) theories in addressing the increasing influence of non-state actors in global diplomacy and security. By critiquing state-centric models, it advocates for a redefined framework to account for the roles of militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, whose actions significantly shape the political landscape in the Middle East. Using Realism as the primary theoretical framework, this study seeks to broaden the understanding of power and state sovereignty in a region where non-state actors are central players in international relations. The research argues that the traditional state-centric models of IR are insufficient to explain the complexity of current security and diplomacy, especially in regions where non-state actors challenge conventional power structures.

Historically dominant in IR, realism emphasizes state power, survival, and an anarchic international system, but it struggles to capture non-state actors' expanding roles fully. Realism posits that states are the primary actors driven by power and security within a balance-of-power framework (Brown, 2006; Sleat, 2022). However, the rise of armed groups and transnational organizations challenges this traditional state-centric view (Rossi, 2019). Non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah, despite lacking formal statehood, wield considerable power and influence, particularly in the Middle East.

This study leverages realism to analyze how these actors mirror state behaviors, such as pursuing territorial and ideological objectives while operating outside formal statecraft frameworks. Their survival strategies involve maintaining organizational integrity and securing territorial and ideological goals, exemplified by their alliances with Iran. These dynamics illustrate the interplay between state and non-state actors, reshaping traditional notions of power and diplomacy. The concepts of survival and security central to realist thought align with the motivations of non-state actors in conflict zones (Woldearegay, 2024), and these groups, through their military, ideological, and political objectives, mirror the strategic goals of state actors but operate outside the formal frameworks of statecraft.

While realist theory has traditionally centered on state sovereignty and territorial control (Prinz & Rossi, 2017), this research argues that the prominence of non-state actors necessitates an expanded understanding of power. Through asymmetric strategies, grassroots support, and external patronage, non-state actors challenge the assumption that sovereignty resides solely within recognized borders. Hamas and Hezbollah exemplify this shift by leveraging their influence in ways that complicate realist assumptions about centralized authority. Their

strategies highlight the operational similarities between state and non-state actors in pursuit of security and power, as they employ military tactics and regional influence similar to state actors, yet without the traditional support of state structures.

The rise of non-state actors complicates traditional state-centric realism. The increasing role of militias supported by Iran highlights the evolving nature of power and influence in the region since they operate outside the framework of state diplomacy, contributing to the same power struggles that realism seeks to explain (Plundrich, 2024) Levvitte (2024) explains that the October 2023 attack of Hamas on Israel exposed the vast scope and network of threats Israel and its allies face from Iran and its regional proxies and questioned the connection between realism and the single-minded leadership guided by extreme Islamist ideology from launching a brutal onslaught against Israel that would ultimately significantly harm Gazans as well. Hezbollah similarly repeatedly attacked Israel, exploring the inherent limitations of deterrence against determined adversaries willing to undertake bold actions that would seem to Western eyes to be suicidal and inimical to the interests of their people.

Extremism became more prominent since the failure of states, the rise of non-state actors, the ongoing sovereignty disputes, and the radicalization of conflicts have created a region in flux. Accordingly, the research maintains that realist frameworks are insufficient to explain the complexities introduced by non-state actors in Middle Eastern politics. It underscores the need for multidimensional approaches considering non-state actors' ideological motivations, organizational structures, and state interactions. Plundrich (2024) emphasizes the growing influence of these actors in reshaping diplomacy and calls for updated theoretical models to conceptualize their roles. Militant groups and ideological movements exploit these conditions, challenging state-centric conflict resolution strategies (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2016). As a result, despite lacking formal state recognition, these actors now wield considerable power and influence, especially in regions like the Middle East. Accordingly, in this study, realism serves as a lens for understanding the strategic behaviors of non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah and a tool to examine how their rise challenges traditional notions of power, governance, and diplomacy.

This approach should recognize that actors outside the state system play crucial roles in regional politics, challenging traditional state power and reshaping alliances and conflicts in the Middle East. The cases of Hamas and Hezbollah underscore the need to rethink traditional theories of international relations. Their roles challenge the assumption that states are the sole actors capable of shaping global politics. Instead, they demonstrate that non-state actors can significantly influence their territories and the region. The study, therefore, proposes incorporating non-state actors into IR frameworks as central players in shaping global politics. Addressing the gaps in traditional theories offers a comprehensive understanding of how these organizations navigate and influence an evolving international system, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced analysis of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The Influence of Hezbollah and Hamas

The Middle East is marked by persistent turbulence, with its geopolitical landscape shaped by nation-states and influential non-state actors. Among these, Hamas and Hezbollah stand out as powerful entities that challenge traditional paradigms of international relations. Their actions, ideologies, and regional influence expose the limitations of state-centric theories like realism, which emphasize state sovereignty and power as the core tenets of global politics. For Hamas

and Hezbollah, survival involves preserving organizational existence and securing ideological and territorial claims. Their alliance with Iran exemplifies the complex interplay between state and non-state actors in contemporary geopolitics, highlighting the significance of strategic partnerships, deterrence, and power dynamics in a region where formal state structures have ceased to dominate.

In the realist view, power is traditionally concentrated within state apparatuses (McQueen, 2017). However, Hamas and Hezbollah have acquired significant influence by leveraging asymmetric strategies, grassroots support, and external patronage from Iran. They wield power as states, challenging the notion that sovereignty and authority reside solely within recognized borders. Drevon (2024) highlights how intra-factional divisions and ideological competition among jihadist groups influence geopolitical dynamics, particularly regarding their reactions to the war in Gaza. Jihadist movements viewed Hamas as a model, emphasizing the role of political considerations over strict theological alignment. This divergence demonstrates how non-state actors prioritize audience appeal, strategic positioning, and cross-functional competition.

Non-state armed actors undermine the realist notion of sovereignty by operating across state boundaries, challenging the state's monopoly on violence, influencing policymaking, and engaging in regional conflicts. Their dual roles as resistance movements and providers of social services complicate their classification within conventional frameworks. The inadequacy of realism in fully addressing its impact underscores the need to reevaluate its applicability in contemporary geopolitics (Ajl, 2024). Krause (2024) explores the persistent challenges faced in peace negotiations with Islamist non-state groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah. He argues that even though non-state actors, Islamist groups are deeply rooted in their regional power dynamics and ideological commitments, one of the primary reasons these groups resist peace negotiations is their ideological commitment, which is rooted in religious or political objectives that cannot easily be reconciled with the interests of state actors or other external powers. From a realist perspective, these ideological positions are seen as strategic tools for gaining support, maintaining cohesion within their ranks, and projecting regional power. These groups, fragmented into cells, rely on decentralized structures that make it challenging to achieve unified negotiation strategies or recognize a singular bargaining point, which realists would argue further complicates peace efforts. These arguments show that states are unlikely to offer substantial concessions unless their strategic interests are addressed. At the same time, non-state groups often view negotiations as a means to gain leverage or achieve limited objectives rather than as an avenue for comprehensive peace.

The sustained influence of Hamas and Hezbollah directly challenges realism's state-centric assumptions. Traditional realism struggles to account for its ability to shape regional politics, as its focus on state power and sovereignty overlooks the agency of non-state actors. Their activities highlight the limitations of viewing the international system solely through the lens of state interactions. Mokhtari (2006) emphasizes the complexity of understanding and addressing terrorism, which reflects the struggle for power in the face of perceived threats to survival or strategic goals. These groups arise in regions with contested political and territorial disputes, like the Middle East, and employ tactics of violence to achieve political and ideological objectives (Raine, 2024). In this sense, terrorism is not merely an act of senseless violence but a strategic tool used by non-state actors seeking to challenge state power and shift geopolitical dynamics. Terrorism, in this view, is not inherently tied to a particular culture but

instead is shaped by the political and strategic contexts in which non-state actors operate. As such, addressing terrorism requires more than understanding its cultural or regional origins, necessitating the formulation of policies that address the underlying political motivations and grievances that drive non-state actors to resort to violence.

Hamas and Hezbollah exemplify a new paradigm in Middle Eastern geopolitics, challenging realism's state-centric focus. Rooted in ideological commitments and pragmatic alliances, their actions have reshaped the region's political landscape, complicating stability efforts (Sen, 2024). Realism's limitations in addressing its roles highlight the need for alternative theoretical frameworks that account for the complexities of non-state influence. Hezbollah's military capabilities rival those of the Lebanese Armed Forces, effectively creating a state within a state. Its transnational operations, such as involvement in the Syrian Civil War, further illustrated its ability to pursue an independent agenda. Similarly, Hamas exercised significant autonomy in Gaza, bypassing the Palestinian Authority and directly engaging regional and international actors.

Realist theory posits that states act to secure themselves, resulting in security dilemmas, and the actions of Hamas and Hezbollah intensify these dilemmas in the Middle East. Their military activities provoked responses from Israel, exacerbating regional tensions and drawing external actors like the U.S. and Iran into complex alignments. This highlights how non-state actors redefine diplomacy and power dynamics in the Middle East. As explained by Smith & Dawson (2022), based on the Ukraine war experience, while realist theory provides a foundation for understanding the pursuit of power and security, it requires adaptation to account for the profound influence of non-state organizations, challenging traditional notions of state sovereignty and underscoring the complexity of modern geopolitics.

Their influence on non-state organizations in the Middle East extends beyond their immediate territories, making them critical players in the region's intricate alliances and rivalries. Ax Rossi (2019) argues that examining their strategy in a realistic approach is impossible since their ties with Iran exemplify non-state actors' roles in proxy conflicts, serving as a counterbalance to Saudi and Israeli influence. Both organizations have established networks that parallel state functions. Hezbollah provides healthcare, education, and welfare services in Lebanon, filling gaps left by the government, while Hamas implements similar initiatives in Gaza amidst economic blockades and conflict. These efforts bolster their legitimacy among local populations and challenge the state's role as the primary provider of public goods.

These organizations redefine diplomacy and power dynamics in the Middle East. Their activities intensify security dilemmas, provoke responses from states like Israel, and draw in external actors such as the U.S. and Iran. These dynamics challenge the state-centric assumptions of realism, which struggle to account for the significant agency of non-state actors in shaping regional politics. Their strategic use of violence further complicates their classification since their actions are not merely acts of warfare but strategic moves to provoke disproportionate responses and shift power dynamics. This approach aligns with broader ideological and political goals, which defy traditional diplomatic frameworks. As a result of these geopolitical changes, the research argues that international relations theories must evolve to address the challenges posed by non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas. Incorporating these actors into theoretical frameworks requires a multidimensional approach that considers their ideological motivations, organizational structures, and interactions with states. Such an

approach will enable scholars and policymakers to develop more comprehensive strategies for navigating the complexities of modern geopolitics in the Middle East.

Hamas and the Dynamics of Non-State Power

The study concentrates on the critical role of Hamas in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through its military strategies, governance, and diplomatic engagements. Hamas's alliance with Iran and its coordination with other militant groups exemplify its influence on regional power dynamics. The unprecedented assault on Israel on October 7, 2023, marked by the massacre of approximately 1,185 Israelis and the occupation of civilian and military facilities, exposed critical vulnerabilities in Israel's socio-political and security apparatus. This attack, characterized by advanced coordination and significant Iranian support, underscores the operational capacity of non-state actors in redefining warfare.

This analysis explores the dual role of Hamas as a military force and a key player in diplomatic negotiations, illustrating the growing prominence of non-state actors in shaping regional security. Levitt (2007) argues that non-state actors act not by realism but according to their strategic interests, shaped by the regional power dynamics and the perceived threats to their survival and objectives. Cronin (2024) defines the attack as a strategy for letting the group defeat itself. Celso (2024) explains that Hamas's rise, driven by its ideological roots in the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadist warfare doctrines, demonstrates the increasing influence of non-state actors in shaping regional geopolitics. Akeuseph (2024) critiques Hamas's unjustifiable actions and relates to Israel's military response as an effort to secure its power and survival, which aligns with the realist approach.

This perspective justifies using force as a necessary means to maintain state sovereignty and deter threats. From a realist standpoint, the attack by Hamas represents a direct threat to Israel's security and sovereignty, compelling Israel to act decisively to neutralize the threat (Choudhary, 2024). Realists would argue that Israel's military response aligns with its fundamental goal of survival and power maintenance in an anarchic international system. Thus, Israeli military actions in Gaza can be seen as a demonstration of state power to reestablish deterrence. Realists justify these actions as necessary to maintain security in a hostile environment, even if they involve significant collateral damage, since realist theory prioritizes state security over ethical or humanitarian considerations (Posen, 2022).

Based on this realistic analysis, the violations of human rights in Gaza can be viewed by realists as an unfortunate but acceptable consequence of securing the state's survival. This underscores the tension between realist imperatives and international human rights norms. On the other hand, Hamas, as a non-state actor, disrupts traditional realist assumptions that focus on state-to-state conflicts. It operates as both a militant organization and a governing authority in Gaza, embodying the blurred lines between state and non-state actors. Its governance integrates Islamist ideology with nationalist objectives, fostering Palestinian support through social services while perpetuating armed resistance against Israel (Tuastad, 2023). The group's ideological foundation, rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadist warfare doctrines, links it to transnational networks, prioritizing regional resistance over nationalistic goals. This alignment has enabled Hamas to destabilize traditional power dynamics and redefine conflict in the Middle East.

Hamas's tactics, including the October 7 assault involving rockets, paragliders, and coordinated border breaches, highlight its ability to exploit asymmetry in warfare. By targeting civilian infrastructure and employing symbolic violence, Hamas not only challenges Israel's military dominance but also provokes international responses that influence regional geopolitics. Celso (2024) argues that such actions are strategic, designed to shift power balances and galvanize support by escalating tensions. Strozier (2024) argues that Hamas's actions are seen as part of a broader, long-standing tradition of apocalyptic violence aimed at triggering a disproportionate overreaction.

The violence was intended to shift the balance of power by causing an escalation that draws in global actors and potentially galvanizes support for their cause. Hamas's violence, including the targeting of civilian infrastructure, is not just a means of warfare but also a symbolic act aimed at forcing a radical shift in the power dynamics in the region. The violent actions are not seen as irrational but as strategic moves to leverage limited resources and provoke responses that might create opportunities for their political and ideological goals. This violence is tied to goals that cannot be negotiated in traditional diplomatic frameworks because they are seen as existential, beyond mere political or territorial disputes.

The group's actions reveal the limitations of traditional diplomatic approaches to conflict resolution, as exemplified by its exclusion from formal negotiations. Efforts to engage with Hamas are further complicated by its refusal to recognize Israel and reliance on armed resistance, perpetuating cycles of violence. At the same time, its role as a provider of governance and services in Gaza solidifies its influence, presenting a dual challenge to state authority and international peace efforts. Yair (2024) emphasizes Hamas's strategies' cultural and psychological dimensions, noting their impact on public sentiment, societal norms, and international narratives. Similarly, Freilich (2024) frames Hamas's actions within the broader "axis of resistance," showing the strategic use of violence by weaker actors to destabilize more powerful states. This perspective aligns with realist theories that view such conflicts as part of a larger regional struggle for power and security.

Through its militant strategies and governance role, Hamas exemplifies the evolving nature of non-state actors in modern geopolitics. Its actions demand an expanded theoretical framework to address the complexities of asymmetric warfare, ideological transnationalism, and the interplay of non-state and state power in the Middle East. Celso (2024) explains that Hamas's rise, driven by its ideological roots in the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadist warfare doctrines, demonstrates the increasing influence of non-state actors in shaping regional geopolitics.

Through its violent strategies, Hamas undermines the authority of states like Israel and complicates the balance of power dynamics in the Middle East. He argues that this ideological foundation links Hamas to transnational networks rather than purely national goals, with alignment with jihadist and extremist ideologies, which transcend national borders and foster broader anti-state movements. By employing jihadist warfare doctrines and targeting what they describe as 'Zionist occupation,' Hamas illustrates how non-state actors can redefine warfare, using asymmetric tactics that states struggle to counter effectively.

Hamas' governance of Gaza and its role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exemplify the challenges posed by non-state actors to conflict resolution. Its refusal to recognize Israel and its reliance on armed resistance have perpetuated cycles of violence. At the same time, its provision of social services has garnered support among Palestinians, solidifying its position

as a key player in the conflict. Yair (2024) highlights how Hamas's 7 October 2023 massacres transcended traditional state-centric frameworks by profoundly influencing public sentiment, cultural responses, and international narratives.

Hamas in Gaza not only operates as a militant group but also provides governance, social services, and infrastructure, creating alternative power centers that rival or even surpass state institutions. Levitt (2007) emphasizes the dual nature of Hamas as both a violent Islamist organization and a nationalist movement with a primary goal of resisting Israeli occupation. This position underscores the importance of understanding militant non-state actors not just as ideological entities but as strategic actors operating within a complex web of power relations, where their decisions are heavily influenced by regional and international power structures, making their behavior dynamic and subject to change under evolving conditions.

Hezbollah's Impact in Lebanon and the Middle East

The research highlights the role of Hezbollah, a key non-state actor in Lebanon, which has become a significant force in domestic and regional geopolitics. Hezbollah's involvement in regional conflicts, its alliance with Iran, and its ability to influence Lebanon's political system illustrate non-state actors' increasing importance in shaping national and regional security. The study's analysis of its diplomatic efforts and its participation in the broader "axis of resistance" is crucial for understanding the ongoing tensions and military engagements in Lebanon, particularly in its confrontations with Israel. It provides a deeper understanding of how Hezbollah's strategic decisions, shaped by external alliances and internal political calculations, are central to the evolving security situation in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's role as a non-state actor in Lebanon has evolved into a dominant force in domestic politics and regional geopolitics. Its involvement in regional conflicts, strategic alliance with Iran, and influence over Lebanon's political system highlight the increasing significance of non-state actors in shaping national and regional security dynamics. Its dual identity as a resistance movement and a political entity profoundly impacts Lebanon's stability. Its military strength challenges the state's authority, contributing to a fragmented power structure and compounding political, economic, and security crises – with the consequent failure of Lebanon to provide key essential services to its population (Bazzi, 2024).

Moreover, Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian Civil War exacerbated sectarian divides, further destabilizing the country. Its actions intensify the Iran-Saudi rivalry, as its support for pro-Iranian factions in Iraq and Yemen fuels ongoing conflicts, while its confrontations with Israel heighten the risk of broader instability (Assi, 2024). These dynamics illustrate how non-state actors can amplify existing geopolitical tensions, complicating efforts to achieve regional peace.

Realist theory provides a framework for understanding Hezbollah's actions, emphasizing the pursuit of power and survival in an anarchic international system. Helou and Mollica (2024) argue that Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict was a strategic opportunity to consolidate regional influence, enhance power, and ensure survival amid growing threats. This aligns with the realist perspective that non-state actors leverage identity politics, fear, and ideological narratives to strengthen their position. For Hezbollah, invoking existential threats and aligning with Shia values were key to mobilizing support and achieving its strategic goals of militant Islamism in Lebanon and Gaza. Similarly, the Syrian conflict represented a critical

opportunity to solidify its regional influence, increase its power, and advance its strategic goals while ensuring its survival in the face of regional threats (Daher, 2024).

In realist theory, states or non-states are motivated by pursuing power and survival in an anarchic international system. Fox (2024) highlights the strategic dynamics of asymmetric warfare, where power imbalances between state and non-state actors define conflict strategies. Hezbollah's lacking the military capabilities of state actors, such as the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), relies on tactics like positional warfare and wars of attrition to counterbalance their relative weakness. These approaches align with realist priorities, as non-state actors endure prolonged conflicts to achieve political objectives or weaken adversaries' resolve. It employs urban warfare, while Israel uses precision strikes, reflecting the enduring relevance of attritional strategies in modern warfare.

Hezbollah's evolution from a resistance movement to a regional actor highlights the growing prominence of non-state entities in shaping Middle Eastern geopolitics. By blending political participation with military resistance and forming strategic alliances, Hezbollah has emerged as a key player in the region. These developments underscore the need to reevaluate traditional notions of state power and sovereignty in the face of increasingly influential non-state actors.

Leonardsson (2023) critiques traditional peacebuilding notions, particularly within the Lebanese context, and can be interpreted through realist theory, which focuses on power, security, and state-centric interests. It challenges the binary view of peace versus violence, arguing that peacebuilding embodies a coexistence of peace and violence, creating "conflictual Lebanese peace." This perspective can be related to realist theory by examining how power dynamics and state interests shape such efforts. Realist theory, focusing on power, security, and state-centric politics, offers a lens to understand the inherent contradictions in peacebuilding practices, particularly in contexts like Lebanon.

Founded in 1982 in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah emerged as a resistance movement inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution. Over time, it evolved into a multifaceted organization with political, military, and social dimensions. Hezbollah's creation of the Lebanese Resistance Brigades in 1997 - a non-sectarian auxiliary force - underscored its strategic evolution. Azani (2012) explains that Hezbollah's transformation from a terrorist organization to a legitimate political entity within Lebanon exemplifies the changing role of non-state actors in volatile regions like the Middle East.

Hezbollah's role as a non-state actor in Lebanon has become a dominant force in domestic politics and regional geopolitics. Its involvement in various regional conflicts, strategic alliance with Iran, and influence over Lebanon's political system underlines the increasing significance of non-state actors in shaping national and regional security dynamics (Halawi, 2023). This analysis provides insights into Hezbollah's strategic decisions, such as its impact on Lebanon's ongoing tensions and military confrontations with Israel, despite making Lebanon one of the most severe global crisis episodes, according to the World Bank (2021).

Hezbollah's pragmatic approach to power consolidation reflects realist principles. By providing social services and security to Lebanon's Shi'ite community, it has built a loyal base, ensuring its influence. Politically, Hezbollah has navigated Lebanon's sectarian system to secure parliamentary seats and governmental roles while maintaining a strong military wing (Azani, 2012). This dual strategy of political engagement and military deterrence challenges

the Lebanese state's sovereignty and deters external threats, exemplifying the flexibility of realist statecraft (Krause, 2024). Its alliance with Iran has been critical in bolstering its regional influence since Iran's military and financial support enable Hezbollah to operate as a regional force, serving as a proxy in Iran's confrontation with Israel. This partnership highlights how non-state actors align with powerful states to shape regional power dynamics. Freilich (2024) argues that despite Israel's military victories over Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, the axis of resistance continues to challenge Israeli security, reflecting the enduring influence of such alliances.

Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian conflict aligned with its broader strategic and ideological goals. Helou and Mollica (2024) describe this involvement as part of an existential struggle, leveraging identity politics and ideological narratives to consolidate power. By supporting the Assad regime, Hezbollah sought to secure its regional influence and long-term survival. However, Hokayem (2024) suggests that the death of Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's long-standing leader, could destabilize the group's leadership legitimacy and regional coherence, particularly as Iran faces constraints in escalating confrontations with the United States. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria further underscores the complex role of non-state actors in regional geopolitics. As Hezbollah navigates this evolving landscape, its actions challenge traditional state-centric structures, redefining regional diplomacy and conflict.

Discussion

The research provides crucial insights into the growing influence of non-state actors in the Middle East, particularly groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. Once considered peripheral, these organizations are now central players in shaping regional power dynamics and international relations. Their increasing role challenges realism, which centers on the state as the primary actor in global security. This analysis argues that the rise of non-state actors necessitates re-evaluating state-centric models, which play an outsized role in influencing national security, diplomatic relations, and broader geopolitical shifts.

The rise of non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah highlights their shift from marginal entities to central figures in regional conflicts. The research points to their growing influence in military conflicts and political and ideological arenas, particularly in conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Syrian Civil War. Their involvement disrupts established power structures, challenging the assumptions of state-centric models that fail to account for the power wielded by these groups. By asserting their influence, non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah are reshaping geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East and creating new forms of political and military competition. This conclusion underscores the need for new analytical frameworks incorporating these actors' growing power and influence.

Another critical conclusion of the research is that the impact of non-state actors extends far beyond their direct military engagements. Hamas and Hezbollah exert substantial political and ideological influence, shaping public opinion and regional policies. Their ability to provide social services and governance structures, filling gaps often left by state institutions, strengthens their legitimacy and challenges the authority of traditional states. This highlights the necessity of understanding non-state actors in terms of military power and their broader governance and social roles, which significantly reshape the political landscape of the regions in which they operate.

The research underscores the interconnectedness between state and non-state actors, particularly in the Middle East. Hamas and Hezbollah's close ties with Iran illustrate the blurred lines between state and non-state entities. These actors operate as proxies for state actors, advancing strategic interests that complicate traditional IR understandings of sovereignty and diplomacy. This evolving relationship necessitates a shift in how we conceptualize state sovereignty, as non-state actors are increasingly shaping the foreign policies of regional and global powers. The growing interdependence between state and non-state actors challenges the idea of a clear distinction between these two categories, calling for a rethinking of international relations theory.

The research highlights that non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah are not mere participants in regional conflicts; they are central players in destabilizing the Middle East and driving shifts in regional power dynamics. These groups engage in proxy wars, armed resistance, and ideological conflicts, forcing neighboring states to adjust their foreign and security policies. This has broader implications for regional stability, as the actions of these non-state actors contribute to the fluid and often volatile balance of power in the Middle East. This conclusion suggests that non-state actors are pivotal in shaping geopolitical instability and highlights the growing importance of considering their actions in analyses of regional conflict.

The research highlights the complexity of modern conflicts where non-state actors wield significant influence, requiring states like Israel to adapt traditional realist strategies. It stresses the need for a multidimensional approach, combining military action with political engagement, to navigate the challenges posed by these actors in an evolving geopolitical landscape. Levite (2024) underscores that Israel's response to Hamas following the October 7, 2023, attack reveals the limitations of relying solely on military force and underscores the necessity of incorporating non-state actors into broader diplomatic and strategic frameworks. The scale, brutality, sophistication, and surprise shocked Israel and upended its entire security conception, creating deeply profound, painful new strategic and operational dilemmas for Israel. Yair (2024) argues that despite Israel's military successes against Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, it remains intensely focused on the enduring threats posed by the 'axis of resistance' – a coalition of state and non-state actors challenging Israeli security. From a realist perspective, this focus can be explained by Israel's imperative to maintain power and ensure security through military dominance. Freilich (2024) further contends that Hamas's strategy exemplifies how weaker actors employ strategic violence to challenge stronger adversaries, generating instability and leveraging international reactions to amplify their influence.

In the context of realist theory and the increasing prominence of non-state actors, Levite (2024) elaborates on how Israel's military strategy against Hamas aligns with realist principles of power and survival yet exposes the limitations of force in achieving long-term strategic objectives. As the more powerful actor, Israel aims to establish deterrence and enact retribution against Hamas. However, the challenges in securing enduring strategic gains solely through military means suggest that even within a power-centric framework, addressing non-state actors requires a combination of force and political negotiation. This perspective reflects the shifting power dynamics in the Middle East, where non-state actors complicate traditional realist assumptions about centralized political and military authority by effectively resisting and challenging state power.

The research critiques the limitations of realism in addressing the role of non-state actors in modern geopolitics. Realism, with its emphasis on state survival and the pursuit of power, falls short in explaining the behavior of non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah, who operate outside state structures. While realism can explain their pursuit of power and security, it does not fully account for their ideological motivations, governance roles, or broader influence on regional security dynamics. The research calls for expanding realist theory to incorporate the complexities introduced by non-state actors, particularly in regions like the Middle East, where these groups play an essential role in shaping military and diplomatic outcomes.

The conclusions drawn from the research reveal that non-state actors have become central figures in shaping regional and global security dynamics. Their growing influence challenges traditional state-centric models of International Relations, such as Realism. It underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding power and survival in the modern world. By recognizing the complex roles that groups like Hamas and Hezbollah play in both military and political spheres, the research calls for an expanded theoretical framework that accounts for non-state actors' influence. This approach would better reflect the evolving realities of international relations, where non-state actors are key players in shaping the future of global diplomacy and security.

Conclusion

This research has explored the transformative role of non-state actors, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, in reshaping the geopolitical and security dynamics of the Middle East. By critically analyzing the limitations of realism, the study highlights how the increasing influence of these groups challenges the state-centric frameworks that have long dominated global diplomacy and security. Realism, with its focus on state power, survival, and an anarchic international system, offers valuable insights into non-state actors' motivations but fails to capture the complexities introduced by their rise fully.

The growing prominence of non-state actors in the Middle East, particularly in conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, the Syrian Civil War, and the broader regional power struggles, underscores the need for a redefined theoretical approach to IR. Non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah rival state actors in military capability and political influence and engage in complex alliances with state and non-state entities, further complicating traditional state-based power models.

This research has shown that these groups function as influential players in regional and global diplomacy despite lacking formal state recognition. Their ability to affect national security, influence state strategies, and challenge traditional power structures demonstrates the evolving nature of international relations. The study of their role calls for a broader theoretical framework that incorporates the growing importance of non-state actors in shaping global politics.

The main finding is that the increasing significance of non-state actors demands a paradigm shift in how scholars and policymakers approach international relations. By recognizing the agency and influence of these actors, especially in volatile regions like the Middle East, the international community can develop more comprehensive and effective strategies for conflict resolution, security, and diplomacy. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of

modern geopolitical realities. It provides a foundation for future studies on the intersection of state and non-state power in the anarchic international system.

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