



Department of International and European Studies

MSc in Energy: Strategy, Law & Economy

Geopolitics, Climate Change, and Energy in the Wider Middle East

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Papathanasiou G. Timotheos', written in a cursive style.

Papathanasiou G. Timotheos

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## Abstract

The study's scope includes an in-depth analysis of political and geopolitical dynamics, focusing on the challenges and opportunities presented by climate change and global energy transitions and to the future importance of the Wider Middle East. Limited by the ongoing efforts for independence from oil and natural gas, as well as the anticipated establishment of a new maritime route via the Bering Strait and the Northeast Passage, this study seeks to navigate the complex geopolitical and energy landscape of the Wider Middle East.

This dissertation employs a qualitative analysis of geopolitical, political, and energy data, based on bibliographic sources, journals, and online newspapers. It explores the evolving political and geopolitical landscape of the region, emphasizing the critical role of chokepoints, ports, and deserts. Significantly, this importance is underscored by extensive oil and natural gas reserves in the Persian Gulf and North Africa, coupled with intricate oil and gas pipelines and the burgeoning LNG sector. However, the region faces challenges as the exploitation of hydrocarbons contributes to climate change, leading to phenomena such as drainage and floods.

In conclusion, taking the analyzed facts into consideration, the Wider Middle East is poised to maintain its significance on the world chessboard during the next decades. The critical sea passages in the region will remain of major interest, and the energy potential of the area is expected to be bolstered through the development of green energy, as well as in the context of modern state priorities, security issues will continue to be a vital factor. As a consequence, the significance of the region will be maintained on the global geopolitical chessboard.

## Key words

-Wider Middle East, -Geopolitics, -Oil and Natural Gas, -Chokepoints, -Security, -Climate Change, -International Community

## 1. Introduction

In the heart of geopolitical complexities, amidst shifting alliances and global energy dynamics, the Wider Middle East stands as a crucible where the forces of geopolitics, climate change, and energy intersect. The Wider Middle East, encompassing North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southwest Asia, holds paramount significance, driven by vital subsystems. Its geopolitical importance stems from strategic chokepoints favoring maritime activity, substantial reserves of oil and natural gas, and heightened security concerns post the events of September 11, 2001, and the asymmetric threats of the “Arab Spring.”

According to Spykman's “Rimland Theory,” a part of the Wider Middle East holds significant geopolitical and geoeconomic importance. Perennially, the region is among the most neuralgic and major areas of the world, with high importance and contribution to many sectors, able to influence the global policymaking. It is an extended geographical scope beyond the traditional boundaries of the Middle East. Many civilizations prospered into its region, while further foreign invaders attempted to control it, both in ancient and modern times. Over the past decades, the Wider Middle East has played a crucial role into the global politics, due to its strategic locations, the energy reserves and infrastructures, natural resources, and security issues, enhancing its geopolitical importance. As a result, there are regional and domestic competitions and tensions, as well as involvement from the then “Great Powers,” later the “Superpowers,” the USA, and currently the Emerging Powers.

The Wider Middle East is characterized by instability, “failed states,” tensions, ambitions, alliances, and ruptures, while the climate change makes the situation worse. Finally, the last years there was the necessity for collaboration, creating circumstances for a common and cooperating policy. As a result, certain states established warmer ties with the significant contribution of international organizations and coalitions, such as OPEC<sup>+</sup>. However, the effects of climate change have had certain impacts for the region, influencing its importance and the above-mentioned parameters, seemingly limiting her position in the global chessboard. The states of the region are trying to adapt under the new circumstances and change their domestic structure and foreign policy.

Undoubtedly, for centuries, the Wider Middle East has held a high position in the global policymaking, due to its strategic locations and the abundant energy reserves. This thesis serves as a comprehensive exploration of the intricate interplay between geopolitics, climate change, and energy dynamics in the Wider Middle East, offering valuable insights into the region's pivotal role in shaping global policies, influencing energy markets, and addressing the urgent imperatives of the environment.

## 2. The Wider Middle East

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a new geopolitical term made its appearance on the world chessboard, the Wider Middle East and the North Africa<sup>1</sup>. The former President of the United States of America, George Walker Bush, used in November of 2003 the abovementioned term for the first time and it was adopted by the G8 Summit on the next year.

However, it is more a political term, serving the interests of Washington during that period<sup>2</sup>, than a historical or geographical one. The United States of America (USA) had multiple interests in this region. Firstly, due to the energy interests that the United States held. Secondly, the crucial factor of security, given the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, along with the fourth attempted attack by the Islamist terrorist organization, al-Qaeda. This group had developed into a network based in various Wider Middle East states and beyond<sup>3</sup>. It marked the first time in centuries that the USA were hit by attacks within its borders. Lastly, there was the matter of prestige for the United States, the sole Superpower in a unipolar world following the fall of the Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics (USSR). Consequently, George Walker Bush announced the

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<sup>1</sup> Kefala, V. (2021). *International Politics in the Middle East and Unresolved Conflicts*. Athens: I. Sideris Publications, 38.

<sup>2</sup> It was a time marked by the emergence of the asymmetric threat of terrorism, notably embodied by the extremist Islamic organization al-Qaeda. It was during this era that George Walker Bush declared the "axis of evil," incorporating regimes that clandestinely supported these terrorist groups.

<sup>3</sup> Güney, A., & Gökcan, F. (2010). *The 'Greater Middle East' as a 'Modern' Geopolitical Imagination in American Foreign Policy*. *Geopolitics*, 22-38. Taylor & Francis Group.

war on terrorism, adopted the doctrine of preventive war, and championed the protection of free peoples.

The Wider Middle East is a vast subsystem of high geopolitical importance. It spans parts of the African and Asian continents and is in close proximity to Europe. It encompasses regions such as North Africa, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia and, for some scholars Central Asia and Cyprus. It includes many countries, from Mauritania in the west to Pakistan in the east and from Turkey in the north to Yemen in the south. As a result, it touches upon some of the world's most crucial geopolitical subsystems and regions, such as the Persian Gulf, a region of immense energy significance, the Straits of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandab Strait, and the Suez Canal, one of the world's most critical shipping routes. Additionally, it provides access to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, the Indian and the Atlantic Ocean. Thus, the Wider Middle East is vital for numerous reasons, including economy, strategy, policymaking, energy, security, shipping, trading, accessibility, and a variety of resources like uranium and rare earth materials. However, the Wider Middle East is also characterized by instability, marked by poverty, revolutions, extremist Islamic organizations, authoritarian rule, military coups, and both national and religious minorities.

The Maghreb and the Mashreq, or in other words North Africa and the Middle East respectively, are the main regions that form the Wider Middle East, and present so similarities as differences. The main common characteristic of the region is the racial identity, a result of the Arabic expansion in previous centuries. Starting from the Arabian Peninsula, the Arabs managed to expand their territories, culture, religion, and language from the 7th century onward. On the other hand, most states became independent after World War II, having previously been parts of the Ottoman Empire or under European Powers. Regarding political commonalities, within this vast subsystem, the army plays a decisive role in policymaking. Numerous revolutions and coups initiated by the military occurred in countries like Egypt, Iraq, and Libya. Furthermore, significant public uprisings, such as the “Arab Spring” of 2011, took place in past decades, due to the high interaction of the states. The region also witnessed lifetimes of authoritarian regimes like Qaddafi's in Libya, Hussein's in Iraq, and Mubarak's in Egypt, as well as royal dynasties like the House of Saud in Saudi Arabia, the Hashemites in Jordan, the Khalifas in Bahrain, and the Alawi Dynasty in Morocco. The Wider Middle East is riddled with unresolved disputes and claims, mainly stemming from border issues, like those between Iraq-Kuwait, Israel-Palestine, Morocco-Western Sahara,



Iran-Iraq, and Saudi Arabia-Yemen. Much of this can be traced back to the colonization and decolonization periods when France and Britain delineated the region based on operational and strategic criteria, often disregarding historical and tribal complexities. This often resulted in states with a mosaic of racial, religious, or tribal populations. Significant attention must be paid to the role of minorities, which can be leveraged by external states as destabilizing factors or even rise to power themselves, imposing policies that oppress the majority. Moreover, competition is rife within the region, with nations like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) or Algeria and Morocco often vying for dominance in various sectors. Under the post-Arab Spring, the phenomenon of proxy wars also emerged, with neighboring states embroiling themselves in conflicts and turning warzones into arenas of competition between regional powers, as seen in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Alliances within the Wider Middle East are fragile and can easily shift, with states previously in cold or hostile relations sometimes becoming allies in foreign conflicts. Finally, the national identity has, in many instances, eclipsed the broader Arabic identity.

Despite their similarities, the Wider Middle East and its subsystems also have marked differences. Although Arabic influence dominates, there are diverse racial identities. In the Maghreb, there are Berbers, Sahrawis, and smaller nomadic tribes, while in the Middle East there are Israelis, Persians, Kurds, Turks, and many local tribes and racial as well as religious minorities. Religion plays a pivotal role; although Islam predominates, divisions between Sunni and Shiite Islam are significant, with Saudi Arabia and Iran representing the Sunni and Shiite worlds, respectively. There are also other smaller Islamic sects, such as the Alawites, and different religions like Judaism and Christianity. Some regional states or Kingdoms, like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, have always been independent, contrasting with states like Iraq and Algeria. Concerning the financial sector, the disparities in natural resources among countries lead to varied economic outputs, making the revenue streams of nations like Algeria or the UAE starkly different from Tunisia or Mauritania. Furthermore, each state has its own foreign policy approach; for instance, during the Cold War, the region was split between Western and Soviet spheres of influence. Now, many regional states, such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt, vie for a leading role. Politically, the region showcases a mix of Kingdoms, military regimes, Republics under authoritarian rule, and “failed states” like Libya and Yemen. The geographical landscape is also diverse, with North Africa dominated by the Sahara Desert, in contrast to Iran's mountainous regions.

In conclusion, these differences have contributed to the instability between states. The increasing gap over recent decades has introduced new challenges to the Wider Middle East, especially with the emergence of extremist Islamic organizations, such as the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) or al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the proliferation of Political Islam, and the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, asymmetric threats have come to dominate the entire subsystem and become global threats.

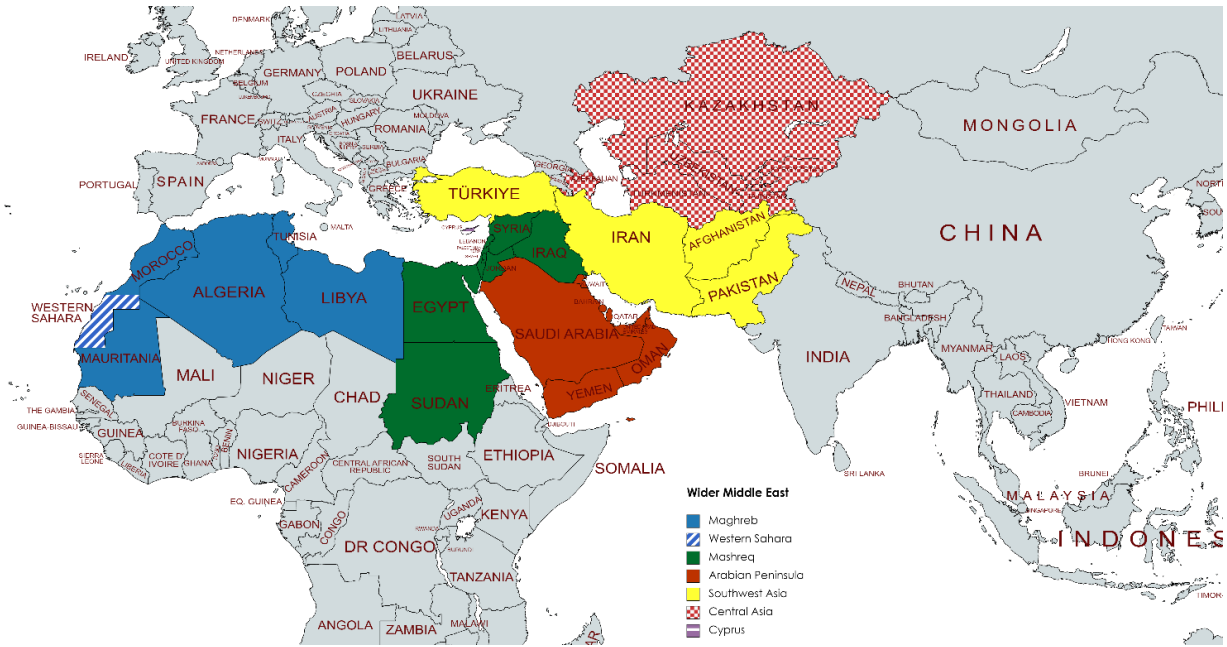


Figure 1: Wider Middle East  
 Source: <https://www.mapchart.net/index.html>

## 2.1. The Maghreb

North Africa, or Maghreb<sup>4</sup>, is one of the most important subregions within the African continent. The constituent states of the Maghreb include Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Although Egypt is geographically part of North Africa, its policies are primarily focused on issues concerning the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, except on specific occasions such as the Libyan crisis. The aforementioned subregion holds significant geopolitical and geoeconomic

<sup>4</sup> It means West in the Arabic language.

importance because it controls the southern side of the Mediterranean Sea and boasts vast hydrocarbon resources, especially in Algeria, Libya, and Egypt<sup>5</sup>. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the importance of the Maghreb got increased, due to its geological characteristics, because they could favor the spread of extreme Islamic Organizations.<sup>6</sup>

North Africa is a homogeneous region where Sunni Islam is the dominant religion and Arabs constitute the primary racial group. However, indigenous populations like the Berbers and Sahrawis also inhabit the region. Geographically, a large portion of North African territory is covered by the Sahara Desert. This expansive desert landscape results in uninhabited regions, poses challenges to agriculture, leads to infrastructure deficiencies, and restricts access to clean water resources.

Despite the racial, historic, cultural affinity and the pan-Arabism, there was not a broader Arabic political entity<sup>7</sup>. Specifically, leaders like Nasser of Egypt and Qaddafi of Libya made several attempts to merge the Arab nations into one state entity. However, these efforts at unification failed, while few short-term Arab states were established, such the United Arab Republic. The vision of a singular Arab nation was eventually replaced by organizations like the Arab League, the Arab Maghreb Union, the OAPEC and various multilateral agreements, such as the Agreement of Brotherhood and Unity between Mauritania, Algeria, and Tunisia in 1983.

To understand the Maghreb and its challenges, this dissertation will briefly examine the regional states. Beginning with the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, the westernmost Arab state, it spans an area of just under 1 million km<sup>2</sup>, largely covered by the Sahara Desert. The country has a population of approximately 4,890,600 people. Mauritania was under French colonial rule from 1858 to 1946, after which it became an overseas territory of France. In 1960, Mauritania achieved its independence. Its societal structure is predominantly tribal, with a major emphasis on the Arab-

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<sup>5</sup> Algeria and Egypt possess 159 and 63 trillion cubic feet of proven natural gas reserves, respectively. Additionally, Libya holds 48 billion barrels of proven oil reserves. This makes them the largest energy producers in the African continent.

<sup>6</sup> Kefala, V. (2015). *North Africa: Internal Policy/ Regional and International Relations*. Athens: Institute of International Economic Relations, 42.

<sup>7</sup> Kefala, V. (2015). *North Africa: Internal Policy/ Regional and International Relations*. Athens: Institute of International Economic Relations, 43.

Berber tribe, known as the Moors, as well as other African tribes. Following Spain's withdrawal from the Spanish Sahara, Mauritania, in collaboration with Morocco, annexed the territory. Historically, Mauritania has been troubled by numerous military coups. Internally, Nouakchott contends with an unstable and competitive political landscape due to various tribal affiliations. In the realm of foreign policy, Mauritania has previously encountered cross-border disputes with neighboring countries, notably with Senegal, and has had political disagreements with Libya<sup>8</sup>. However, in recent years, Nouakchott has moved towards normalizing its relations with these states. Notably, Mauritania is a member of the G5 Sahel, an institutional alliance of Sahel region countries. This alliance seeks to cooperatively and effectively address the mounting challenges within the Sahel. Mauritania currently grapples with significant threats, particularly the rise of terrorism within its borders, a concern exacerbated by the inadequate control of its frontiers and the expansive Sahara region.

Adjacent to Mauritania lies the only kingdom in the Maghreb, Morocco, where the royal Dynasty of Alawi, traces its lineage to the Prophet Muhammad. The Kingdom of Morocco covers a total area of 659,000 km<sup>2</sup>, including the Western Sahara, and has a population of 37,919,029 people. Rabat, its capital, was once a French protectorate, gaining independence in 1956 and subsequently pursuing a pro-West foreign policy. The Moroccan economy, reliant on agricultural products and tourism, isn't particularly stable. Geopolitically and geoeconomically, Morocco holds significant importance, controlling part of the Strait of Gibraltar<sup>9</sup>, one of the world's most crucial maritime passages. Through this Strait, large quantities of trade, oil, and gas move between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Rabat maintains tense relations with neighboring countries. Its annexation of Western Sahara exacerbates these tensions, leading to international criticism. In 1963, Morocco engaged in an armed conflict with Algeria over regions rich in minerals, namely Figuig and Tindouf. Algeria opposes Rabat's stance on Western Sahara and backs the rights of the indigenous Sahrawis and the Polisario Front, while in 2021, Algiers and Rabat severed their diplomatic ties. Notably, in 2020, the Trump administration recognized Western Sahara as part of Morocco, prompting Rabat to normalize its ties with Israel. Morocco also has strained relations with Libya and Spain. The dispute with Spain almost led to war in the summer of 2002 over the

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<sup>8</sup> Mauritania has recognized and established diplomatic ties with Israel, a move that Tripoli opposed.

<sup>9</sup> Approximately 120,000 ships cross through the Pillars of Hercules annually.

ownership of an island known as Leila in Morocco and Perejil in Spain. In recent years, Madrid has repeatedly accused Rabat of exacerbating migrant flows into Spanish territories. Moreover, Morocco has faced significant human rights criticism. A 2022 US Department of State's human rights report documented instances of torture, political imprisonment, freedom of expression and media restrictions, censorship, significant government corruption, and violence alongside threats thereof. While Morocco aspires to become a regional power, it contends with domestic challenges, including public protests, largely because promises made during the Arab Spring remain unfulfilled<sup>10</sup>.

Moving on to People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, the neighboring country, it is the largest state in the region<sup>11</sup> with an area of 2,381,740 km<sup>2</sup> and a total population of 45,750,077 people. Furthermore, it ranks as one of the top natural gas exporters globally. Algeria was formally a French territory<sup>12</sup>. As a result, its indigenous people were subjugated, possessing limited rights compared to the French settlers. The Paris declaration of 1954, which concerned the independence of Morocco and Tunisia, served as a catalyst for the Algerian revolution against France. This revolution culminated in 1962 with the signing of the Evian Accords and Algeria's subsequent independence. During the Cold War, Algeria was a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, but simultaneously a pro-Soviet state. Over time, the National Liberation Front emerged as the sole ruling party, governing Algeria amidst rampant corruption. This situation precipitated the Algerian civil war in 1991, pitting the government against Islamist parties. The war reversed much of the economic and technological progress Algeria had made and concluded in 2005. However, under the leadership of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who held power for two decades, corruption persisted. Protests, known as Hirak, erupted in early February 2019 after the announcement of Bouteflika's intention to seek a fifth term. He subsequently resigned, and in the post-Bouteflika period, Abdelmadjid Tebboune assumed the presidency. Moreover, Algeria's relations with its neighbors have been frosty. This culminated in 2021 when Algeria severed diplomatic ties with Morocco. In

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<sup>10</sup> Harb, I. K. (2023, June 7). *Morocco's Concerning Domestic and Foreign Policies*. Arab Center Washington DC. Available at <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/moroccos-concerning-domestic-and-foreign-policies/>

<sup>11</sup> The 2/3 of its area are covered by the Sahara Desert.

<sup>12</sup> In 1848, French National Assembly decided to convert Algeria from a colony into an official region of metropolitan France.

addition, Algeria is encircled by an increasingly unstable geopolitical environment characterized by security chaos across the Sahel and political ambiguities in neighboring Tunisia and Libya<sup>13</sup>.

On the other hand, the Republic of Tunisia is the smallest state in the region, spanning an area of 164,000 km<sup>2</sup> and boasting a population of 12,481,019 people. Tunisia became a French protectorate in 1881. During World War II, many Tunisians, seeking to oust the French, viewed Hitler's ambitions favorably. However, the Nazis' defeat prompted the Tunisians to act. In 1952, under the leadership of its future first president, Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia initiated an armed campaign against Paris, achieving autonomy by 1956<sup>14</sup>. Over time, Bourguiba's party consolidated its hold on Tunisian politics, and through the 1975 Constitution, he assumed the role of lifelong President. This lasted until he was overthrown by then Prime Minister, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. Under Ben Ali, Tunisia maintained its pro-West stance, acting as a bulwark against the pro-Soviet regimes of neighboring Algeria and Libya. Only political Islam posed a significant threat to Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. The Tunisian economy relies primarily on tourism and agriculture. Although flanked by hydrocarbon rich nations, Tunisia's own resources are limited. The end of 2010 saw a pivotal event in Arab history. The self-immolation of Tunisian citizen, Mohamed Bouazizi, in protest of rising prices, unemployment, and authoritarian policies sparked widespread protests. These protests not only led to Ben Ali's exile in January 2011 after 23 years of rule, but also toppled enduring regimes in various countries. Tunisia's transition to democracy remains fragile and stressed, with the aspirations of the 2011 revolution – rule of law, accountability, economic prosperity, and human dignity – still largely unmet. The current Tunisian President, Kais Saied, has mirrored some of Ben Ali's authoritarian tendencies, leading to recent protests<sup>15</sup>. In a haunting echo of the past, on April 10<sup>th</sup> of 2023, in the Tunisian town of Haffouz, 35-year-old footballer Nizar Issaoui self-immolated, decrying what he termed “the police state<sup>16</sup>.” Externally,

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<sup>13</sup> Ghebouli, Z. L. (2023, August 24). *Post-Bouteflika's "New Algeria": Transition in a Vicious Cycle*. Arab Reform Initiative. Available at <https://www.arab-reform.net/en/post-bouteflikas-new-algeria-transition-in-a-vicious-cycle/>

<sup>14</sup> After the autonomy, Tunisia became a Kingdom.

<sup>15</sup> United States Institute of Peace. (2023, September 27). *The Current Situation in Tunisia*. Available at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/current-situation-tunisia>

<sup>16</sup> Carbonaro, G. (2023, May 19). *Why Tunisia's political and economic crisis is Europe's problem too*. Euronews. Available at <https://www.euronews.com/2023/05/19/why-tunisia-political-and-economical-crisis-is-europes-problem-too>

the European Union, being Tunisia's largest foreign investor, seeks to bolster the country's economy, aiming to curtail migration flows to Italy. From the start of the year, nearly 18,893 migrants arrived in Italy, a significant increase from the same period the previous year, when the number was below 2,000.

The State of Libya, situated next to Tunisia, has faced numerous challenges post-Arab Spring, with the country politically and geographically split among West and East. It's the second-largest state in the region after Algeria, covering 1,750,540 km<sup>2</sup> and housing 6,904,605 people. Predominantly blanketed by the Sahara Desert, Libya's populous regions are located in the North. The country's strong tribal system consists of various tribes<sup>17</sup>, descendants of Arabs and King's Idris I lineage, Berbers, and Ottomans. Initially a part of the Ottoman Empire, Libya transitioned to an Italian colony in 1912. Rome later consolidated the regions of northwest Tripolitania, east Cyrenaica, and southwest Fezzan into what we now recognize as Libya in 1936. After World War II, Libya attained its independence in 1951, with King Idris I as its monarch. The discovery of vast oil reserves in 1958 enhanced Libya's geopolitical significance for the West. However, King Idris I's generous concessions to foreign investors paved the way for a coup in 1969, led by a young Colonel, Muammar Qaddafi. He rebranded the country as the "Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya<sup>18</sup>" and nationalized fossil fuel resources. Qaddafi's aggressive foreign policies frequently clashed with Western interests. Although he advocated for Pan-Arabism and later Pan-Africanism, achieving a short-term unification with Morocco in 1984 until 1986. Qaddafi's interventions in neighboring countries, like supporting armed groups in Angola, frequently stirred tensions. Also, to avoid the reaching of Camp David Accords and forcefully to impose the unification of Libya and Egypt, in 1977 started the "Four Day War" or the "War of Sand," which ended with the defeat of Tripoli. Libya in 1981 and 1985 got involved to the political instability and the civil war that Chad had and in 1987 Libya had war with Chad, the known "Toyota War," to obtain the uranium and other mineral resources from the Aouzou Strip and Qaddafi tried to control unofficially the Algerian Sahara. Key moments of contention with the West included skirmishes with the U.S. military and accusations of Libya orchestrating the Lockerbie airplane

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<sup>17</sup> The main tribes are the ancient Berberic tribe of Libu, the Arab tribes of al-Ashraf, Banu Hilal, and Banu Sulaym and Tuareg.

<sup>18</sup> State of the masses.

bombing. According to former President Reagan Qaddafi was the “*sponsor of international terrorism*” and “*puppet state of the Soviet Union.*” Despite the fact that Qaddafi was promoting Islam, he was not an Islamist and had not relations with the Muslim Brotherhood. Relations somewhat improved post-Cold War<sup>19</sup>, especially after Qaddafi expressed a willingness to counter extreme Islam in collaboration with the U.S. The “Arab Spring” unexpectedly swept through Libya in 2011. Protests against Qaddafi's regime escalated into a full-blown revolt<sup>20</sup>, culminating in his removal from power after 42 years and subsequent death with NATO's contribution to the conflict. Since then, Libya has spiraled into chaos. The nation grapples with a civil war, dual governments of the UN-recognized Government of National Unity of the West and Libya's Eastern-based parliament, possible trichotomy among Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan, constant postponements of elections, inability to control its oil fields and borders, and the challenge of managing refugee and migrant flows. Libya, an important oil producer which hold the 3.9% proven oil reserves, became a battleground for external powers, while was never actually unified, lacking national consciousness.

In summary, North Africa holds significant geopolitical importance. Several pivotal regional international organizations, such as the League of Arab States, the African Union, the Arab Maghreb Union, the Union for the Mediterranean, and the African Development Bank, operate within the Maghreb. Furthermore, many Western companies maintain active interests in the region. However, Western involvement isn't solely economic. Specifically, the European Union views North Africa as a barrier against unchecked migration flows. Yet, many North African countries struggle to secure their borders, primarily due to economic challenges. The Maghreb's instability significantly impacts Europe, particularly in terms of escalating terrorism and migration issues. These unstable conditions provide a conducive environment for asymmetric threats like extremist Islamic groups. While some states are in danger of becoming “failed states” and some other states are in danger to cease to be states<sup>21</sup>. Lastly, many North African countries appear ill-equipped to

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<sup>19</sup> Foremost after the second invasion in Iraq.

<sup>20</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023, December 8). *Arab Spring*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Spring>

<sup>21</sup> Kefala, V. (2015). *North Africa: Internal Policy/ Regional and International Relations*. Athens: Institute of International Economic Relations, 243.



address looming climate challenges, as evidenced by the impact of the Daniel Storm on Libya in September 2023.

## 2.2. The Middle East

The Middle East constitutes an intermediate space between Europe, East Asia and the so-called Black Africa<sup>22</sup>. However, it is difficult to accurately define the borders of the region. The Middle East is a vast region that incorporates the subsystems of the Levant or the Eastern Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf, and Southwest Asia. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, France and the then Great Britain used the term “Near East.” Through the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Paris and London divided the region, drawing a border from Haifa to Kirkuk. As a result, they later established today's borders, often ignoring many factors for political interests, and employing a “divide and conquer” strategy. For the aforementioned reason, in 2014, fighters of “ISIS” destroyed the borders between Syria and Iraq, symbolically announcing the end of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. However, the arbitrary creation of nation states, made up of peoples who were not used to living under one roof, is not the right recipe for justice, equality, and stability<sup>23</sup>. The term “Middle East” was established after World War II, incorporating all the aforementioned subsystems into one entity, while the term “Near East” is seldom used today.

A defining characteristic of the Middle East is the shared traits among most of its states, such as a common historical trajectory and recent national establishment. There's also a relative stagnation in the public, economic, and political sectors in many of these states. Sunni Islam is the dominant religion in the region, with Arabs being the predominant ethnic group. The Middle East is also home to Christians, Shia Muslims, and ethnic groups like Kurds, Turks, Persians, and Israelis. The Middle East holds significant geopolitical and geoeconomic importance, especially the Gulf, while it is part Spykman's Rimland Theory. Into the region are active important regional International Organizations such as Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and Organization

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<sup>22</sup> Kefala, V. (2021). *International Politics in the Middle East and Unresolved Conflicts*. Athens: I. Sideris Publications, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Marshall, T. (2015). *Prisoners of Geography*. The UK: Elliott & Thompson Ltd, 202.

of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). To better understand the regional dynamics, subsequent chapters of this thesis will briefly analyze the historical and political trajectories of the Middle East's subsystems.

### 2.2.1. The Mashreq

The Mashreq, which in the Arabic language means East, is a geographic region extending from the western border of Egypt to the eastern border of Iraq<sup>24</sup>. The East side of the Arab world is a very important subsystem, while it comprises a unique region, for the standards of the desert environment of the neighbor areas, the Fertile Crescent. A rich and fertile arch, begging from the Nile river valley of Egypt, and ending to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Iraq. As a result, since the ancient times plenty of civilizations prospered to the abovementioned region, leaving unexplored and with less importance the Arabian Peninsula, due to the vast Rub' al Khali<sup>25</sup>, the Dahna Desert and the Nafud Desert. The Mashreq comprises Israel and Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq including Egypt and Sudan, due to the active policy within the region. Last but not least, the political scene in Mashreq is almost the same with Maghreb, with military regimes and kingdoms, and lifelong regimes. Generally, it is an unstable region with many wars, internal conflicts, and revolutions.

Starting with the Arab Republic of Egypt, this country lies to the west and geographically isn't considered part of the Mashreq, but its main policy has been focused there for decades. Egypt spans 1,001,450 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of about 113,100,000 people. Most of its land is covered by the Sahara Desert. In 1914, Egypt became a British protectorate because of the geopolitical and geoeconomic importance of the Suez Canal. Albeit it gained independence in 1922, British influence persisted for nearly three decades. Some years later an asymmetric threat made its appearance. The Muslim Brotherhood emerged in 1928, posing a unique challenge to several Muslim nations. In 1952, the Movement of the Free Officers seized power, and by 1954, Gamal Abdel Nasser was Egypt's president. He championed Pan-Arabism, and his nationalization of the

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<sup>24</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023, November 2). *Mashriq*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mashriq>

<sup>25</sup> The Empty Quarter, as it is also known, is the largest continuous desert and spans an area equivalent to that of France.

Suez Canal<sup>26</sup> in 1956 and the establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR)<sup>27</sup> with Syria in 1958 greatly enhanced his stature. Anwar Sadat succeeded Nasser after his death and tried to update Egypt, after the Six-Day War and the consequent defeat. Egypt distanced from the Soviet Union, aimed to restore the Egyptian army, and sought to reclaim the Sinai Peninsula from Israel. After the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Egypt signed the Camp David Accords in 1978 and a peace treaty with Israel in 1979—the first Arab nation to do so, gaining back the Peninsula. Hosni Mubarak then assumed power, warming relations with the USSR and other Arab nations. His reign, which lasted until the “Arab Spring” in 2011, was followed by a short-lived governance by the Muslim Brotherhood under Mohamed Morsi, worsening economic conditions, deteriorating public services, and a string of sectarian incidents exacerbated political polarization and strengthened opposition to Morsi’s rule<sup>28</sup>. In a year, a coup led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi overthrew Morsi. Under Sisi, Egypt has grown in influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, intervened in the Libyan civil war, suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood, and made significant gas discoveries. Notably, after significant finds in Israel and Cyprus, Italy's Eni discovered Zohr in 2015, the Mediterranean's largest gas field. Coupled with other discoveries like North Alexandria and West Nile Delta Fields, Noor, and Atoll Field, Egypt has risen as a gas exporter, aided by the Suez Canal. Cairo is now investing in gas infrastructure, including LNG facilities, and planning pipelines. However, the financial sector faces challenges.

Proceeding to the Republic of the Sudan, with African roots, has evolved into an Arabic state over the centuries, while it spans 1,886,000 km<sup>2</sup> and has total population of 48,673,293. Situated south of Egypt, it shares deep historic and diplomatic ties with its northern neighbor and has access to critical waterways—the Red Sea, and the Blue and White Nile Rivers flow through its territory. Despite this, Sudan experiences extended periods of drought due to its arid environment. In the 11th century, Bedouins from Egypt migrated to Sudan, initiating the Islamization and Arabization of the North and central parts of the country. However, the south embraced Christianity and eventually gained independence in 2011 as South Sudan. During the end of 1890s British and

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<sup>26</sup> It was constructed in 1869.

<sup>27</sup> The United Arab Republic collapsed with the withdrawal of Syria in 1961.

<sup>28</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023, December 7). *Mohamed Morsi*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohamed-Morsi>

Egyptian forces invaded into Sudan and they set it under British administration, and in 1930 they separated administratively the north and the south<sup>29</sup>. Sudan achieved independence in 1956, marking the beginning of significant divisions between the north and south. This divide was marked by military coups in 1985, 1989, and 2019, accompanied by civil conflicts. Successive regimes found it difficult to win general acceptance from the diverse political constituencies<sup>30</sup>. Additionally, the nation's complex ethnic landscape, comprising several major groups and hundreds of subgroups, further complicated the situation. From 1955 to 1972, a civil war ravaged the state, marked by attempts to enforce Islamism and Arabism. Another civil war erupted in 1983 and persisted until 2005. In 1969, the Free Officers overthrew democracy, and in 1989, the Islamist Omar al-Bashir seized power. Bashir, a lifelong authoritarian leader with ties to Osama bin Laden, who sought refuge in Sudan in 1991, implemented a deep Islamist agenda. Sudan turned anti-Western and anti-USA, leading to conflicts and a 2011 referendum resulting in the independence of the south. In 2019, protests against Bashir's regime led to his overthrow by a military coup. In April 2023, conflicts emerged between the Sudan Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, despite their past cooperation in toppling Bashir. Sudan, now one of the world's poorest and least-developed countries, relies heavily on farming and animal husbandry, constituting one-third of its GDP. Additionally, Sudan discovered oil in 1977, leading to its development in the 1990s and making Khartoum dependent on oil exports. The country possesses untapped resources such as gold, uranium, and iron, along with significant hydroelectric potential.

To the northeast of Egypt lies the State of Israel and the State of Palestine. The first covers an area of 20,770 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 9,233,797, and the second is consisted of the West Bank (5,860 km<sup>2</sup>) and the Gaza Strip (365 km<sup>2</sup>), with population nearly 5,424,596. However, the ongoing conflict in October has limited their populations. Although Palestine has limited international recognition<sup>31</sup>. The conflict with Israel, stemming from 1917, is among the longest disputes of the world. The roots of this issue trace back to Britain's Middle East policies, addressing both Arab and Jewish desires for a homeland in Palestine. While Arabs support, they are descendants of the

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<sup>29</sup> They restricted the Arabic language, education, and clothing of the south.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Shahi, A. S., Unit., Economist Intelligence, Collins., Robert O., Sikainga., Ahmad Alawad, Sabr., Mohy el Din and Spaulding., Jay L. (2023, December 11). *Sudan*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sudan>

<sup>31</sup> 138 states recognize Palestine.

Philistines and Canaanites, Jews view it as the Promised Land. Post-World War I, Palestine became a British Mandate, largely due to Britain's interests leading to crown's jewel, India. In 1917, the Balfour Declaration, announced by British Foreign Minister Lord Balfour to Lord Rothschild<sup>32</sup>, supported the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1937, 28% of the population in Palestine was Jewish, while in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century they were only 15.000 against 500.000 Arabs<sup>33</sup>. Post-World War II, Britain's waning global influence and the growing Jewish population in Palestine led to the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel, after the expired British Mandate. This sparked the first Arab Israeli War, with neighboring Arab states suffering defeat, the Nakba. Later conflicts, like the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973, solidified Israel's regional position, limiting Palestinians mainly to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Despite international efforts like the Oslo Accords and the Roadmap for Peace, a resolution remains elusive. The situation further complicated post-2004 with the death of Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Internal strife between Hamas and Fatah culminated in 2007, leading to the division of control by Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank, despite their Agreement of 2011. On the other hand, Israel which was encircled by enemies achieved to become a regional power and effectively limit the elements of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran. Its economy flourished in the last decade, with significant exports in military and high-tech systems. A pivotal development was the discovery of gas fields, including Tamar in 2009, followed by Leviathan, Karish, and Tanin. Coupled with discoveries in Cyprus, this enhanced the geopolitical weight of the Eastern Mediterranean, attracting the international interest. In general, however, the Eastern Mediterranean was considered a dead sea in terms of any significant reserves of oil and gas. But then, in 2009, an American independent, Noble Energy, and its Israeli partners found Tamar, a world-class gas field<sup>34</sup>. Israel plays a key role in the potential construction of gas pipelines and the Great Sea Interconnector in the region. However, between 2019-2021, Israel grappled with political instability<sup>35</sup>. Benjamin Netanyahu, its longest-serving Prime Minister, faced accusations of fraud and bribery. The relations with the Arab states changed the previous years, after the Abraham Accords. This pact established relations with the United Arab Emirates,

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<sup>32</sup> It was a prominent figure in the Jewish community in Britain.

<sup>33</sup> Kefala, V. (2021). *International Politics in the Middle East and Unresolved Conflicts*. I. Sideris Publications, 141.

<sup>34</sup> Yergin, D. (2021). *The New Map*. The USA: Penguin Books, 254.

<sup>35</sup> Israel went through an unprecedented period of political instability with four general elections taking place.

Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, while other states will follow the same path. As a consequence, the terrorist organization Hamas, in an effort to undermine the normalization between Riyadh and Tel Aviv, attacked Israel in October of 2023. Israel, in response, seems ready to decisively target Gaza Strip and eliminate Hamas. On the other Israel has created new dynamics to the region, mainly due to the new energy and commercial potentials, its military exports, the technological development, while we should take into account the policy of “nuclear ambiguity” that Tel Aviv follows with the development of nuclear sector, without any official acknowledgement.

Syria, officially known as the Arab Republic of Syria, spans 185,000 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 23,484,233. A significant portion of its territory is made up of deserts and steppes. Positioned at the heart of the Fertile Crescent, it is watered by Orontes River from Lebanon in the West and from Euphrates River in the East<sup>36</sup>. Under the Caliphate of the Umayyads, Syria thrived, with Damascus emerging as a significant center for the Arab world. Historically referred to as Greater Syria, the region once included present-day Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan. This changed after World War I when Syria became a French Mandate, leading to significant unrest. Syrians protested, went on strikes, and carried out guerrilla attacks against French positions, especially near the Lebanese border. To consolidate its control, France divided Syria into four regions, exploiting ethnic and religious tensions. Syria gained independence in 1946, while the political turmoil paved the way for the rise of the socialist Baath Party. In March 1957, the U.S. sought to oust the Syrian government, while pro-West Turkey mobilized its military on the Syrian border. Concurrently, socialist Egypt under Nasser aimed to support Syria. Facing threats and pressure from Western-aligned neighbors, Iraq and Jordan, Syria decided to unite with Egypt in February 1958. However, by 1961, due to disagreements with Cairo's policies, Syria left the United Arab Republic after a coup. After two military coups of 1966 and 1970, the Alawite Hafez al-Assad became the leader of Syria and the Neo-Baathists. Assad centralized power and established an authoritarian regime. However, Syria couldn't reclaim the Golan Heights from Israel after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Damascus also intervened in Lebanon. Following the Camp David Accords, Syria aligned more with the Soviet Union and supported Iran during its war with Iraq in the

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<sup>36</sup> Sakkas, I. (2018). *The Arabs: in the Newer and Modern Times*. Athens: Pataki Publications, 43.

1980s<sup>37</sup>. After the Soviet Union's collapse, Assad collaborated with the U.S. on various issues, including peace talks for the Middle East in Madrid in 1992. Upon his death in 2000, his second son, Bashar al-Assad, succeeded him. Bashar's stringent domestic policies set the stage for the “Arab Spring” in 2011. Syria then became a battleground, with different areas controlled by the government, opposition, Kurds, Turks, and “ISIS.” As a result, “ISIS” internationalized the conflict, drawing in nations like the U.S., France, and Britain and the civil war became a proxy war. With support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, the Syrian government reclaimed most of its lost territories. Israel frequently launched airstrikes against pro-Iranian groups, while Turkey created a “safe zone” in northern Syria to counter the Kurds<sup>38</sup>. The Syrian crisis posed a massive challenge for the European Union due to increased refugee flows. Despite all the challenges, the Arab Spring, “ISIS,” sanctions, and global isolation and the destroyed infrastructures, Bashar al-Assad remains in power. Recently, he won national elections, is mending ties with Arab nations, rejoining the Arab League, restoring the diplomatic ties with the world and reconstruct Syria.

Southwest of Syria lies the Republic of Lebanon, known as the “Country of the Cedar.” Covering an area of 10,400 km<sup>2</sup>, it has a population of 5,319,534. Lebanon is flanked by two mountain ranges, Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon. It boasts significant Mediterranean ports: Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon, and Tyre. Lebanon presents a complex mosaic of ethnic and religious groups, which has historically caused instability. Originally an autonomous region under the Ottoman Empire, it became a French Mandate after World War I. By forming “Greater Lebanon<sup>39</sup>,” France aimed to balance the population of Christians and Muslims. This stoked tensions, with the Muslim population wanting to merge with Greater Syria. This rift led to competing nationalistic sentiments between Arabs and Maronites. The Lebanese Republic became independent in 1943 and for its governance adopted the system of religious communitarianism, due to the historical circumstances and due to its geographical relief<sup>40</sup>. The President would be a Maronite Christian, the Prime

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<sup>37</sup> Traditionally Badgat and Damascus have rival relations due to princely and ideology competition and there are disputes concerning the fair share of water and oil.

<sup>38</sup> In 2016 Turkey launched the Operation “Euphrates’ Shield” conquering Afrin, in 2018 the Operation “Olive Branch” conquering Manbij, in 2019 Operation “Peace Spring” trying to conquer Idlib.

<sup>39</sup> It is consisted of the unification of Beirut, Sidon, Tyre, South Lebanon, Bekaa valley and Plain of Akaar.

<sup>40</sup> Kefala, V. (2021). *International Politics in the Middle East and Unresolved Conflicts*. Athens: I. Sideris Publications, 189.

Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Parliament a Shia Muslim. The state primarily consists of Arabs, but there are also other minorities such as Armenians, while there are also the religious minorities of Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Melkites, Armenian Catholics and Orthodox, Protestants, Sunnis, Shias, Druzes, and Alawites. Remarkably, Lebanon recognizes 17 religious' sects, including Judaism. Due to its religious mosaic Lebanon became a field of competition between Druzes and Maronites. The Cold War saw Beirut adopt a neutral stance, fostering friendly relations with major powers, making Lebanon a financial and trading hub in the Middle East. However, with rising Muslim populations in the 1970s and the Palestinian issue, stability eroded. In 1975, a conflict between Christian nationalists and Palestinians escalated into a prolonged civil war<sup>41</sup>, inviting interventions from Syria in 1976 and Israel in 1978 and 1982. The latter fact led to the formation of Hezbollah, initially as militant group that later as a political party<sup>42</sup>. The civil war concluded in 1989 with the Taif Agreement. Still, the accord didn't ensure national unity. In 2006, Israel launched an operation against Hezbollah. The latter's resilience during "33 Days War" bolstered its reputation, marking a significant win over Israel. Furthermore, Lebanon remains a battleground for proxy war. While Hezbollah, backed by Iran's Shia arc, Saudi Arabia aims to boost its influence, particularly through financial circles in Beirut. This culminated in a 2017 incident where Prime Minister Hariri, under Saudi pressure, announced his resignation from Riyadh, only to retract it upon returning to Lebanon. The Syrian refugee crisis further strained Lebanon. By 2019, financial stagnation and rising discontent led to widespread protests<sup>43</sup>. 2020 saw a massive explosion in Beirut's port due to the ignition of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, further crippling the nation already grappling with unemployment, corruption, inflation, and the impacts of COVID-19. This disaster led some Lebanese to advocate for returning to French governance. Today, Lebanon faces multifaceted challenges: governance issues, economic distress, inability to provide for its citizens, while it forced deportations of Syrian refugees.

South of Syria lies the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the sole remaining realm of the Hashemite Dynasty. Covering an area of 98,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it has a population of 11,348,219. Jordan's early history

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<sup>41</sup> Only in 1975 10.000 were killed in the conflicts.

<sup>42</sup> It adopted the principles of Khomeini.

<sup>43</sup> During the protests it was the first time that there was a national unity to the Libanese, while they were shouting "Are you Sunnis?," "Are you Alawites?," "Are you Druzes?," "Are you Christians?" and they were answering "No, we are Lebanese."



mirrors that of its northern neighbor, Syria, being a part of it during the Ottoman era. Most of Jordan is desert, with its sole sea access through the port of Aqaba in the Red Sea. Emerging from the aftermath of World War I and the Ottoman Empire's dissolution, the Emirate of Transjordan was established under a British Mandate. In 1946, it became an independent state under British influence. In 1949, its name was changed to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, ruled by King Abdullah, son of Sharif Hussein of Mecca and descendant of Prophet Muhammad. He aspired the creation of the Greater Syria under his leadership, harkening back to the illustrious Umayyad Caliphate. After the 1948 Arab Israeli War, Jordan annexed the West Bank and East Jerusalem with the important contribution of the Arab Legion<sup>44</sup>. However, in 1951, King Abdullah was assassinated in Jerusalem, primarily because of his pro-British leanings. His son, Talal, briefly succeeded him, followed by his grandson, Hussein, in 1952. Because of Nasser's Pan-Arabism and the formation of the United Arab Republic, Jordan and the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq, in 1958 formed the Arab Federation of Iraq and Jordan<sup>45</sup>. Gradually, the decreasing influence and prestige of the Great Britain was replaced by the presence of the USA<sup>46</sup>. Post the Six-Day War in 1967, Jordan lost the West Bank and East Jerusalem to Israel, leading to an influx of Palestinian refugees<sup>47</sup>. Tensions escalated in 1970, known as Black September, when Jordan faced threats from radical Palestinian groups and an invasion from Syria. The aftermath saw martial law, strained Jordan-Palestinian relations, and the expulsion of many Palestinians from Jordan. During the Yom Kippur War, Jordan's involvement was minimal, sending a few symbolic troops to the Golan Heights. By 1988, Jordan relinquished its claims over the Palestinian territories, largely due to Palestinian reluctance and Syrian aggression. Notably, in 1994, Jordan became the second Arab country after Egypt to sign a peace treaty with Israel. After King Hussein's death in 1999, his son, Abdullah II, ascended the throne. Under his leadership, Jordan has been a key player in Middle Eastern politics, supporting anti-terrorism initiatives, contributing forces against "ISIS," and managing the influx of refugees due to the Syrian conflict. Despite its limited economic base,

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<sup>44</sup> The Arab Legion was closely associated with the British military. Unlike with other Arab armies, the Arab Legion was well-disciplined and well-led, making it a formidable force during the conflict.

<sup>45</sup> It collapsed within months due to a coup in Iraq.

<sup>46</sup> Their relationship was the closest among the Arab states.

<sup>47</sup> About 2/3 of the population is Palestinian and 1/3 is Bedouins.

reliant on tourism and phosphate exports, Jordan has largely remained a beacon of stability in the volatile region of the Mashreq.

Located to the east of the Arab world, the Republic of Iraq was once a Hashemite Kingdom. It spans an area of 438,000 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 45,744,311. Much of this population resides near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers since the ancient times. Under the Caliphate of Abbasids, Baghdad emerged as a major cultural center. During the Ottoman period, what is now Iraq was divided into three vilayets: Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. Post-World War I and the dissolution of the “Sick Man of Europe,” Mesopotamia became a British Mandate. Britain saw its strategic significance due to its proximity to South Iran's oil reserves and as a land route to the Gulf and to India. However, British rule became increasingly unpopular, leading to uprisings in 1920. In response, Britain established the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq, bringing King Faisal to power. While Iraq gained independence in 1932, having plenty of racial and religious minorities such as Kurds in the mountainous Northeast Iraq, Assyrians, Turkmans, and Jews<sup>48</sup>. The British influence remained, because during the previous years huge oil deposits were discovered in North Iraq. Concerning the religion, Sunnis are the minority to this Arab state, while the Shias are the majority. Throughout World War II, Iraq experienced political instability as factions sought alignment with either Britain or Germany. After the war, divisions grew between those favoring Pan-Arab nationalism inspired by Egypt's Nasser and those advocating a pro-Western approach. The government of Nuri adopted a pro-West policy and in 1955 created the military alliance of the Baghdad Pact in accordance with Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. In 1958, a coup abolished the Arab Federation of Iraq and Jordan and the Hashemite monarchy, marking the end of British influence. Subsequent years witnessed increased Soviet ties, recognized Communist China, but political instability remained, compounded by Kurdish uprisings in the north. Saddam Hussein rose to power in 1979 and Iraq became a personified state and a significant oil producer. His reign witnessed a brutal war with Iran<sup>49</sup>, starting in 1980, over territorial disputes and regional dominance. Despite initial support from the West and certain Gulf states, the war ended inconclusively after eight years. Facing a battered economy and debts, Saddam invaded oil-rich Kuwait in 1990, sparking international outrage. In 1991, a coalition led by the U.S. and backed by

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<sup>48</sup> The Jewish minority was one of the biggest before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

<sup>49</sup> Khomeini usually called Hussein “little Satan” and a “pig,” a blasphemy for the Islamic world.

UN 660 and 678 Resolutions intervened, launching “Operation Desert Storm” to liberate Kuwait. While the operation succeeded, Saddam remained in power<sup>50</sup>. Obviously, the West was not willing to leave an unpredictable dictator to control the 1/5 of global oil reserves. The attacks of the 11<sup>th</sup> of September were the beginning of the end for Saddam’s era. The 2003 U.S.-led invasion, without so the permission of the United Nations as the consensus of the international community, premised on Iraq's alleged possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction and suspected ties to terrorists, toppled Saddam's regime<sup>51</sup> and Iraq descended into chaos. Some years later, militias, extremist groups, exploited the power vacuum and attacked to the foreign troops, while in 2014 the “ISIS” seized vast territories including oil-rich regions of Mosul and Baiji. Currently, Iraq is influenced significantly by Iran, especially in the wake of the U.S. invasion. The country grapples with rampant corruption, high unemployment, and political instability, economic challenges, despite the fact that Iraq is the second largest oil producer of OPEC and holds the 11.7% of proven oil reserves, leading to frequent protests and unrest.

Given the aforementioned factors, the Mashreq region holds significant geopolitical and geoeconomic importance. Despite its inherent instability, conflicts, and vulnerabilities, the future may present new opportunities, especially in the energy sector. Egypt and Israel are emerging as key players, championing the development of pipelines and LNG facilities. Moreover, the Suez Canal remains a crucial global trade chokepoint. While Syria focuses on its reconstruction, Iran has carved out a Shia corridor, spanning from Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Gaza Strip, securing access to the Mediterranean Sea.

### 2.2.2. The Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf

The Arabian Peninsula, often referred to as the “Island of the Arabs,” is part of the Mashreq and is the world's largest Peninsula. It holds immense historical, cultural, and geopolitical significance. Essentially an extension of the Sahara Desert, while few oases interrupt this expanse but don't significantly alter the dry climate or the limited agricultural potential<sup>52</sup>. The Peninsula comprises

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<sup>50</sup> Facing price war for oil, sanctions, and restrictions.

<sup>51</sup> Kefala, V. (2021). *International Politics in the Middle East and Unresolved Conflicts*. Athens: I. Sideris Publications, 223.

<sup>52</sup> Only the Southwest Yemen is fertile.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen, while Iran lies across the Gulf. From a geopolitical perspective, the Arabian Peninsula provides access to the Red Sea on the West and the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf on the East. The predominant ethnic group is Arab, with Sunni Islam being the dominant religion. An essential facet of the region's significance is the presence of Mecca and Medina within Saudi Arabia. Remarkably, the area has largely been stable, largely devoid of revolutions or coups, primarily due to entrenched monarchies. However, some states, like Yemen, face challenges and do not share the prosperity seen in other Gulf nations. A defining feature of the Gulf is its paramount position in the global energy landscape, owed to vast energy reserves. The Straits of Hormuz serve as crucial channel for transporting oil and gas to the global market. Furthermore, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf are arenas of competition for regional powers. Amid these dynamics, ongoing tensions, as several states vie for regional dominance. In recent years, there has been a shift as regional states strive to diversify their economies, aiming to address climate change and reduce their reliance on energy exports.

Saudi Arabia and the Philippines are the only countries in the world named after royal dynasties<sup>53</sup>. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the only Arab state that was never a European colony. Riyadh has a total area of 2,150,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 37,174,901. For centuries, governance in Saudi Arabia has been shared between the Houses of Saud and Wahhabis, with roots dating back to the 18th century. The former is responsible for ruling the Kingdom, while the latter oversees religious matters and founded Wahhabism. The House of Saud rapidly began to dominate the Peninsula, challenging other prominent Houses like the House of Rashids<sup>54</sup> and later the Hashemites. In 1932, Ibn Saud established the Kingdom after unifying Saudi Arabia through military power<sup>55</sup> and forged strong royal dynasty ties by marrying a daughter from each defeated tribe and major religious family. While there are approximately 15,000 members in the House of Saud, only a small number are prominent. 1935 marked a milestone for the Kingdom when Standard Oil Company conducted the first oil exploration. From this point on, Saudi Arabia and the USA established close relations. Riyadh supplied oil to the USA, and Washington provided military protection to Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>53</sup> Sakkas, I. (2018). *The Arabs: in the Newer and Modern Times*. Athens: Pataki Publications, 111.

<sup>54</sup> In 1890 the Rashid House conquered Riyadh.

<sup>55</sup> Marshall, T. (2021). *The Power of Geography*. Elliott & Thompson Ltd, 113.

Gradually, with its abundant “Black Gold,” Saudi Arabia became the largest oil producer of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, having the second largest proven oil reserves in the world, approximately 21% of proven oil reserves. It emerged as a leading power in both the Arab and Islamic worlds, particularly as the Custodian of Mecca and Medina. Oil exports brought financial gains, prosperity, investments, and rapid population growth. In 1980, the Kingdom fully nationalized the Arabian American Oil Company, renaming it later Saudi Aramco, a behemoth in the energy sector. The events of 11<sup>th</sup> of September significantly affected Riyadh, as Osama bin Laden, who once held influence within the Kingdom, had relations with the royal family, masterminded behind them, and many Saudi Arabians participated<sup>56</sup>. Currently, Riyadh plays a key role in energy politics, especially following agreements with Russia and OPEC<sup>+</sup> concerning production and oil prices, forming an effective cartel, especially post-COVID-19 era. Crown Prince<sup>57</sup>, Mohammed bin Salman, has significantly boosted the Kingdom's revenues by limiting production and raising global oil prices. However, his rule has seen scandals like the forceful resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri, the murder of journalist Khashoggi in 2018, and the arrest of prominent figures, solidifying his position. On the regional front, Saudi Arabia confronts its Shia competitor, Iran. Relations between Tehran and Riyadh deteriorated after the Iranian revolution, leading to a regional Cold War. Domestically, the Kingdom promotes “Vision 2030,” a plan designed to address the effects of the climate crisis. It aims to diversify revenue sources, reduce reliance on hydrocarbons, develop renewable energies, improve public sectors, and limit domestic oil consumption. Climate change has not only prompted Saudi Arabia to reorganize its oil policy but also raised concerns about declining water resources, especially given the lack of rainfall. While ties with the U.S. appear to have waned, despite Biden's announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor to counter the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, China's growing influence is evident through missile sales to the Kingdom, increased energy consumption, technological agreements, and foremost due to Beijing's contribution to the warming of relations between Riyadh and Tehran in 2023.

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<sup>56</sup> Also, terrorist attacks took place within the Kingdom against foreign workers, mainly Christians and Hinduists.

<sup>57</sup> In 2017 King Salman announced that his son, Mohammed bin Salman, will be his successor and not his brother, changing the tradition on the hierarchy and lineage.

A stark contrast is the neighboring Republic of Yemen, a country of small communities and tribes, laden with numerous deficiencies and vulnerabilities. It has total area of 555,000 km<sup>2</sup> and population of 34,779,491. It ranks among the poorest nations, with limited agricultural activities and oil production, and low standards of public health and education. However, Yemen holds significant geopolitical importance due to the Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connect the Suez Canal with the Indian Ocean. For this reason, Great Britain conquered the port of Aden in 1839. Yemen divided into the North, which became independent in 1918 as the Kingdom of Yemen following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the South, which gained its independence as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1967 from the British. The North joined the United Arab States in 1958, a short-lived confederation with the United Arab Republic, and in 1962, a military coup precipitated the first civil war in the newly formed Yemen Arab Republic, which lasted until 1970. Meanwhile, South Yemen aligned with the Soviet bloc and experienced conflicts both with North Yemen and internally due to regime changes. In 1990, the two countries unified and formed the Republic of Yemen. However, the deep gap between the North and South persisted, leading to a civil war in 1994 that concluded nine weeks later. Additionally, in 2004, the Houthi rebel movement began conflicts with the government in the North, which escalated dramatically, especially after 2014 when the Houthis seized control of the capital, Sanaa. The situation deteriorated further after the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in 2015. Yemen turned into a battleground for Riyadh and Tehran, exacerbated by separatist movements and the emergence of radical Islamic organizations like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The country was devastated, with the UN reporting 377,000 deaths<sup>58</sup>, an ongoing humanitarian crisis, and food shortages. The Houthis, dominant in the West, have launched attacks on vessels traversing the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and on refinery facilities in Saudi Arabia. In conclusion, while the situation in Yemen may not transform rapidly, the normalization of relations between Riyadh and Tehran is a positive step towards peace.

On the southeastern side of the Peninsula, adjacent to Yemen, lies the Sultanate of Oman, with total area 309,500 km<sup>2</sup> and population of 4,673,729. The country has significant geopolitical importance due to its direct proximity to the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz. The region is characterized by a desert landscape, part of which is the “Empty Quarter,” resulting in a hot and

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<sup>58</sup> 70% of those deaths were children.

dry climate. There's also the issue of drainage, exacerbated by the ongoing climate crisis. After ousting the Portuguese in the 17th century, the area of present-day Oman gained independence and fostered close relations with Great Britain. In 1950, the coastal and inland areas unified to form the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, and by 1970, it was renamed the Sultanate of Oman. The state's official religion is Ibadism, a distinct branch of Islam separated from Sunnism and Shiism, found in Oman. The nation operates as a monarchy under the House of al-Said. There are no political parties, while the government provides benefits to its citizens in education, public health, and housing. Additionally, women enjoy greater freedoms compared to some neighboring states. Commercial quantities of oil were discovered in 1964, and it quickly became the dominant economic force. In 1996, the government embarked on a diversification initiative to reduce oil dependency, foreseeing future oil depletion. Efforts centered on the exploitation of gas and LNG, coupled with enhancing agriculture and fishing activities. Oman also aimed to diversify and privatize its economy while implementing the Omanization of its workforce. By the late 1990s, Oman's privatization plan had outpaced those in other Gulf Cooperation Council states. Notable features of the program included expanding the country's stock market, selling several government-owned companies, and creating a more liberal investment environment<sup>59</sup>. After the "Arab Spring" events, Oman significantly bolstered its social welfare initiatives. Moreover, Muscat boasts several ports, including the Salalah port, a favorite amongst international shipping companies operating in the Gulf. In terms of foreign policy, Oman maintains amicable relations with its neighbors and has often played a pivotal diplomatic role, particularly regarding Iran's nuclear program. It retained its ties with Qatar and sought a mediating role in the Yemeni civil war.

North to Oman there are the United Arab Emirates, a powerful key player within the region with total area 83,600 km<sup>2</sup> and population of 9,548,793. They are composed of seven emirates that were crucial to London's interests within the Gulf, primarily to curb piracy, while they became a British protectorate. In 1971, the seven Trucial Sheikdoms gained independence and formed the federal state of the United Arab Emirates, much of which is desert. The two most influential Emirates are Abu Dhabi, the energy hub and center of the domestic oil industry, and Dubai, a

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<sup>59</sup>Crystal, J. Ann and Peterson, J.E. (2023, December 8). *Oman*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Oman>

commercial and financial hub known for constructing the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. There have been instances where the royal families of these Emirates experienced rivalries, challenging the state's stability. Geopolitically, the UAE holds significant importance due to its direct access to both the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. However, they grapple with severe drainage issues, exacerbated by the climate crisis. Historically, the UAE had border and oil field disputes with neighboring states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Iran. Oil was discovered in Abu Dhabi in 1958, and today the UAE has among the world's largest oil and gas reserves, owning the 9.1% of proven oil reserves. This prosperity ushered in a transformative era, attracting many foreign workers, as seen in other Arabian Peninsula states. Despite their vast reserves, the UAE signed an agreement with the Korean Electric Power Company in 2009 to construct nuclear facilities. As a result, the Emirates are the only state on the Arabian Peninsula with operational nuclear reactors, and they are simultaneously investing in renewable energy sources. Along with Bahrain, the Emirates have managed to diversify their economic foundations and reduce oil dependency. Additionally, the UAE are working to curb corruption and money laundering within its borders. Concerning the governance, the highest governmental authority is the Federal Supreme Council, the leadership in each emirate falls to that emirate's most politically prominent tribe and there are no political parties in the emirates<sup>60</sup>. On public welfare, the UAE provides its citizens with free public health and education, and finances housing projects. The "Arab Spring" and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism posed threats to the UAE. Consequently, they supported their allies, participating in proxy wars in places like Libya and Yemen, often aligning with Saudi Arabia, especially on matters concerning Qatar. However, their close ties with Saudi Arabia appear to have waned, especially after diverging policies in Yemen. In 2020, the UAE became the first Arab state in decades to normalize and recognize Israel, joining the Abraham Accords. Abu Dhabi aims to enhance its standing in the Gulf, aspiring to be a key player both regionally and globally. This ambition has led to competition among Riyadh, Doha, and Abu Dhabi across various sectors, with each vying for leadership in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf.

Furthermore, to the east of Saudi Arabia lies a small desert peninsula, the State of Qatar, with 11,581 km<sup>2</sup> and population of 2,716,391. Since the 19th century, it has been under the rule of the

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<sup>60</sup> Crystal, J. Ann and Peterson, J.E. (2023, December 11). *United Arab Emirates*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Arab-Emirates>



House of al-Thani. Qatar was a British protectorate and gained independence in 1971, subsequently adopting a pro-West policy. It was once among the poorest Arabian states, with its economy based on fishing and pearl trading. Its significance soared after the discovery of vast reserves of oil and gas in the 1940s. This newfound prosperity transformed Qatar, attracting numerous foreign workers who now outnumber the indigenous descendants of the Bedouins. Meanwhile, Doha emerged as a major commercial center. Most of its citizens are Sunni Muslims, particularly of the Wahhabi branch. Qatar's economy relies on oil and gas exports, especially LNG<sup>61</sup>. The nation boasts one of the world's largest gas fields and the colossal energy company, Qatar Petroleum. Concurrently, efforts are taking place to modernize its agricultural and fishing sectors. Pearling is almost non-existent, in large part because of Japan's dominant cultured-pearl industry<sup>62</sup>. The House of Thani governs Qatar, occupying almost all major ministerial roles, and the nation doesn't have political parties. Qatar offers its citizens numerous benefits, such as free public education and healthcare. Both the leadership and the general populace are conservative, drawing heavy influence from Islam. Regarding foreign policy, in recent years, Qatar experienced strained relations with other Gulf monarchies and Arab states. Doha faced accusations over its ties with Tehran, Ankara, and the Muslim Brotherhood, and for allegedly leveraging the state-owned television network, Al-Jazeera, to amplify its influence. Conversely, Qatar has supported and continues to back rebels in Syria opposing long-standing leaders. Consequently, in 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Qatar<sup>63</sup>. They shut their airspace, seaports, and land borders to Qatari transportation, and Qatari citizens were given a brief period to leave these countries. In 2019, Qatar exited OPEC to focus on its gas industry, as well as in 2022 Qatar, despite its lack of football tradition, hosted the FIFA World Cup, an event later mired in controversy after the exposure of "Qatargate." In conclusion, Qatar maintains a formidable stance in global politics. With its vast energy reserves, Doha competes with larger actors like Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, partakes in proxy wars, seeks to enhance its influence, and has significantly expanded its financial and commercial footprint.

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<sup>61</sup> Is one of the largest exporters of LNG.

<sup>62</sup> Crystal, J. Ann, Anthony,. John Duke and Zeidan,. Adam (2023, December 12). *Qatar*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Qatar>

<sup>63</sup> Their relations normalized in 2021.

In the East of Saudi Arabia lies the smallest country of the region, the Kingdom of Bahrain, with total area 780 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 1,491,163. Ruled by the Sunni House of Khalifa since 1782, it comprises approximately thirty islands<sup>64</sup>. The Kingdom gained independence in 1971 following the departure of the British. Political activities in the nation are limited, even though most of the population is Shia. After the revolution in Iran, Saudi Arabia reorganized its policy, aiming to protect both the Sunni House of Khalifa in Bahrain and its domestic Shia population in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, the countries began constructing the King Fahd Causeway, a 25-kilometer bridge connecting the two kingdoms by land. The construction of the causeway linking Bahrain with Saudi Arabia has strengthened bilateral relations and regional defense and has helped both countries economically and politically<sup>65</sup>. Primarily, Riyadh can exert control over events in the neighboring country if circumstances escalate. During the “Arab Spring” in Bahrain, Riyadh sent troops via the King Fahd Causeway, after Manama's request and under the auspices of the GCC, aiming to safeguard the House of Khalifa and maintain the region's status quo, thus curtailing Iran's influence. Bahrain aligns pro-West and was the first emirate to discover oil reserves, though it might also be the first Gulf state to deplete them. Its economy, one of the most diversified in the Gulf, relies on oil and gas, petroleum refining, aluminum products, shipping, commerce, shipyards, and manufacturing. Bahrain, in conjunction with the UAE, has significantly expanded its financial and commercial services. In conclusion, the Kingdom is a stable nation offering numerous benefits to its residents, such as free public health, education<sup>66</sup>, and public housing projects. Moreover, Manama has begun investing in renewable energy sources, focusing on solar and wind energy projects.

North of Bahrain and between Saudi Arabia and Iraq lies a small emirate, the State of Kuwait with total area of 17,818 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 4,326,924. Kuwait possesses one of the driest environments and the least hospitable deserts in the world. It was established in 1756 by the al-Sabah tribe, which later formed an alliance with Great Britain. Following the departure of the British, Kuwait became an independent state in 1961, and since then, the House of al-Sabah is

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<sup>64</sup> The largest island is called Bahrain.

<sup>65</sup> Crystal, J. Ann and Smith, Charles Gordon (2023, December 11). *Bahrain*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bahrain>

<sup>66</sup> It has the oldest educational system in the Peninsula.

ruling. In 1930, oil fields were discovered in Kuwait, and gradually it became a major oil exporter, eventually nationalizing foreign oil companies. Kuwait holds approximately 8.2% of the global proven oil reserves and experienced financial and public prosperity. However, it faced the aggressive policies of neighboring Iraq, which claimed Kuwait as an Iraqi realm and attempted to annex it in 1961, 1973, and most notably in 1990. After liberation from Iraq, Kuwait resumed to its path of prosperity, evolving into a stable country and continuing its transformation. Its economy heavily relies on oil exports, and it boasts the oldest Sovereign Wealth Fund, but its other sectors remain underdeveloped. Consequently, from 2014 until the onset of the pandemic, its revenues decreased. While Kuwait has natural gas fields, exports are limited due to high domestic consumption. Politically, Kuwait lacks formal political parties but offers numerous public benefits to its citizens, especially in the wake of the “Arab Spring” events. Lastly, Kuwait has unveiled the “New Kuwait 2035” plan aimed at its financial transformation and reducing its dependence on oil. In conclusion, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf are of paramount importance due to various financial and geopolitical interests. Their energy reserves position this region as the most vital energy subsystem, while China's influence continues to expand. Notably, the Arabian Peninsula presents a distinct occasion in contrast to both the Maghreb and the Mashreq.

### 2.2.3. Southwest Asia

The last subsystem of the Middle East is Southwest Asia. This encompasses critical regions and the non-Arab countries of the Wider Middle East, including Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Ankara, Tehran, and Islamabad are key regional players. The Southwest Asia is also marked by deserts, water scarcity, and the pronounced impacts of climate change.

Turkey is strategically positioned at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. The Republic of Turkey has total area of 783,562 km<sup>2</sup> and population of 86,006,782. It has long held geopolitical importance, extending its influence on the Balkans, Caucasus, Middle East, and Eastern Mediterranean. It has coastlines to the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, is close to important subsystems such as the Caspian Sea, while it owns the important shipping narrows of Dardanelles, Bosphorus, and the Sea of Marmara, providing it with a great defensive advantage<sup>67</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> Marshall, T. (2015). *Prisoners of Geography*. The UK: Elliott & Thompson Ltd, 220.

Additionally, Ankara controls the flow of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which are crucial for the region. Turkey was the successor to the Ottoman Empire and was born in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, while after his death the return to Islamic roots brought the military to power<sup>68</sup>. In the initial years after its founding, Atatürk modernized Turkey, leaning it towards the West and Europe. The country joined NATO during the Cold War, serving as a buffer against the potential expansion of the Soviet Union. As the decades passed, Turkey's economy impressively shifted from being agriculture-based to an industrial<sup>69</sup>. This transformation was further accelerated after the collapse of the USSR, solidifying Turkey's role as a crucial trade and energy hub, with the construction of oil and gas pipelines, and further strengthening its military presence within NATO. However, Turkey was never recognized as part of Europe<sup>70</sup>. The dawn of the 21st century saw Turkey's trajectory shift under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. While he initially ushered in economic growth, fortifying Turkey's regional clout, his tenure also revealed a vision infused with Islamic and Neo-Ottoman sentiments. This change in direction saw Turkey entangling itself in regional conflicts in Libya, Syria, Nagorno Karabakh and supporting extreme groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Ankara provided a Neo-Ottomanism, a deeper and renewed cultural and economic engagement with territories and societies once ruled by the Ottoman state<sup>71</sup>, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, strained its relations with many neighbors, including Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt, even France, Saudi Arabia. The longstanding Cyprus occupation since 1974 remains a thorny issue, and tensions in the Aegean Sea with Hellas continue. Ankara proceeded also to the violation of the territorial integrity of Syria, because it has occupied regions of the North, to avoid the connection between the Kurds of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, while it proceeds to military operations and air strikes to the aforesaid countries and limits the flows of Tigris and Euphrates. The Kurdish issue has major importance for the Turkish sovereign territory, while Ankara will always have the Sevres Syndrome and the fear for the establishment of Kurdistan. While Erdoğan sought to position Turkey as a leading figure among Muslim nations, he encountered resistance from historically influential states, namely Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The

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<sup>68</sup> The military coups in Turkey happened in 1960, 1971, 1980 and in 2016 there was a failed military coup against Erdoğan.

<sup>69</sup> Approximately 1/3 of Turkey is utilized for agriculture.

<sup>70</sup> Marshall, T. (2015). *Prisoners of Geography*. The UK: Elliott & Thompson Ltd, 234.

<sup>71</sup> Yavuz, H. (2020). *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*. Oxford University Press, xii.

attempt of a failed coup further complicated the geopolitical landscape, pushing Turkey closer to Russia and leading to its controversial purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system. This move, combined with the aggressive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and the use of the migration issue, led to strained ties with NATO and EU allies and ensuing economic sanctions. Moreover, Turkey is trying to play a key role in energy issues, pursuing the construction of oil and gas pipelines, while at the same time is trying to become energy independent, with the research its reserves and the development of renewable energy sources and its nuclear power plants in Akkuyu. In conclusion, Turkey, once was a bridge between the East and West, finds its recent policies and assertive postures reshaping its regional and global image, often stirring more turbulence than tranquility in an already complex geopolitical arena, while the doctrine of Ahmed Davutoglu concerning the zero problems with the neighbors had a quite distance from the reality.

On the East of Turkey, there is the Islamic Republic of Iran, known as Persia in ancient times<sup>72</sup>. Iran has total area of 1,648,195 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 89,444,060, is distinguished by its vast mountains and deserts and was never colonized by European forces. No matter which way you approach it, you'll come across a hill that in many places will be inaccessible<sup>73</sup>. Additionally, Tehran's importance is highlighted also over its control to the north side of the Strait of Hormuz, the main maritime gateway for global oil and gas shipments. Globally, over one-sixth of oil and one-third of liquefied natural gas passes through the narrow Strait<sup>74</sup>. The country is diverse, with minorities making up approximately 40% of its population<sup>75</sup>. Although Iran holds the fourth-largest oil reserves, holding 16.8% of the proven oil reserves, and has the second reserves of natural gas globally, its economy is constrained, due to the strict US sanctions for the nuclear program, the damaging aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, while it faces natural challenges like water scarcity and infertile soil that limit agriculture. In 1908 the first oil discovery in the Middle East took place in Iran, drawing the attention the attention of Western powers, mainly the UK and the

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<sup>72</sup> In 1935, the country that was previously known internationally as Persia formally requested that the world community use the name "Iran" to refer to the nation.

<sup>73</sup> Marshall, T. (2021). *The Power of Geography*. The UK: Elliott & Thompson Ltd, 62.

<sup>74</sup> Baabood, A. (2023, May 24). *Why China Is Emerging as a Main Promoter of Stability in the Strait of Hormuz*. Carnegie Middle East Center. Available at <https://carnegie-mec.org/2023/05/24/why-china-is-emerging-as-main-promoter-of-stability-in-Strait-of-hormuz-pub-89829>

<sup>75</sup> Kurds and Azerbaijanis are the largest minority groups.

US. They enhanced their diplomatic and economic ties with Iran, leveraging its rich oil fields. However, extensive Western interference combined with growing domestic unrest culminated in the 1978 revolution, leading to the establishment of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This period deepened religious divides in the region, with Saudi Arabia representing Sunni Islam and Iran championing Shia Islam. Khomeini asserted that “*Islam is political, or it is nothing,*” marking the onset of a regional Cold War. During 1980-1988, Iran was in a war with Iraq, which was supported by the West and the Gulf monarchies. Subsequently, its adversarial stance against the West and Israel earned it a spot in George W. Bush's “*axis of evil.*” The Arab Spring was a significant opportunity for Iran to reinforce its influence across the Middle East by supporting Shia populations. Despite global isolation, Iran remained a central key regional actor, supporting Assad in Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, Shia governments in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and even Hamas in Gaza, pursuing the exit to the Mediterranean Sea and the creation of a Shia arc. Concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions came to the forefront in 2002 when evidence suggested they were developing nuclear weapons. The “Iran 5+1” Agreement, designed to bring Iran back into the global economic fold and regulate its nuclear ambitions, has faced challenges, particularly after the US withdrawal. Recent missile attacks on ships in the Gulf and Iran's seizure of vessels have further intensified tensions. Domestically, Tehran aims to bolster infrastructure and agriculture, but it's plagued by public dissent. This was evident in the widespread protests following the tragic death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in 2022. Although public healthcare isn't completely free, the government has shown intent by investing in housing. Still, stringent sanctions continue to hamper Iran's growth. In a broad perspective, Iran remains stable and an important regional player, but public dissent is growing. However, the recent normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023, facilitated by China, is a hopeful sign for the region's future stability.

To the western limits of the Wider Middle East lies the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, a multiethnic state<sup>76</sup> in South Asia, with total area of 881,913 km<sup>2</sup> and population of 242,510,863. It has ethnic ties with Iran, Afghanistan, and primarily India. It harbors a significant Sunni population, alongside a substantial Shia presence. Notably, Islamabad does not exercise full control over its territory, particularly in the North. Situated amidst the Himalayas and the Arabian Sea, Pakistan is

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<sup>76</sup> Most of the population are Punjabis.

traversed by the fertile Indus River. Once a British colony, it constituted, along with India, British India—an entity rich in resources vital to London's interests. Achieving independence in 1947, Pakistan aligned itself as a pro-Western state, participating in the Baghdad Pact and later the Central Treaty Organization. Until 1971, it was referred to as West Pakistan, existing as one entity with East Pakistan, which eventually became Bangladesh. Pakistan and India have engaged in four wars, with three of them—1948-49, 1965, and 1999—centered around Kashmir<sup>77</sup>. Since 1998, both nations have possessed nuclear weapons<sup>78</sup>, escalating tensions between them. Kashmir remains divided between Islamabad and New Delhi. Political coups have been a recurrent feature in Pakistan's history, with religion playing a prominent role. Subsequent to the US invasion in Afghanistan, numerous Pakistanis joined the Taliban, and Osama bin Laden was discovered and killed by US forces in Pakistan. Accusations arose that Islamabad, as a US ally and recipient of financial aid, was aware of bin Laden's presence, damaging its credibility. Economically, Pakistan has undergone significant transformations. Presently, it boasts a diversified economy, with agriculture, manufacturing, trade, and services as its main sectors. Emerging as a developing state and a nuclear power, Pakistan possesses one of the most powerful armies. Currently, Pakistan faces a resurgence of extremist groups along its border with Afghanistan, which has raised tensions with Taliban-led Afghanistan<sup>79</sup> and political instability, after the removal of ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan from the leadership in April of 2022. Furthermore, the devastating floods in 2022 caused billions in damages. Relations with Beijing have strengthened, driven by a common adversary in India. Notably, Pakistan grapples with limited resources, and a substantial part of its territory remains unexplored.

Lastly, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, situated within the Wider Middle East region, with total area 652,860 km<sup>2</sup> and population of 42,720,835, has a rich history and cultural heritage. It shares borders with Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asia, positioned as a landlocked state in the heart of Southcentral Asia. Afghanistan exhibits a multiracial identity with strong tribal connections. Its strategic geopolitical location has contributed to its historical resilience, remaining unconquered

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<sup>77</sup> Ziring, L. and Burki., Shahid Javed (2023, December 12). *Pakistan*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan>

<sup>78</sup> Saudi Arabia funded an important part for the nuclear sector of Pakistan, to limit the power of Iran.

<sup>79</sup> United States Institute of Peace. (2023, January 23). *The Current Situation in Pakistan*. Available at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/01/current-situation-pakistan>

despite various attempts. The vast territory, coupled with natural barriers like deserts and mountains, renders it a natural fortress, challenging foreign occupation, as evident in modern history. However, internal cohesion among Afghan regions and communities is limited. The modern state boundaries were established by the Russian and British Empires in the late 19th century, designating Afghanistan as a buffer state between British India and the Russian Empire. The nation has often found itself caught in regional rivalries and political ideologies, leading to invasions by foreign powers. In the 19th century, London invaded Afghanistan twice (1839–1842, 1878–1880) to secure its interests in British India and curb Russian influence. Almost a century later, the USSR invaded in 1979 to support the communist government against various Mujahideen groups<sup>80</sup> backed by the West. The Soviet Union faced a protracted conflict akin to its own Vietnam and eventually withdrew in 1989 without achieving its objectives. Post-Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan gained global geopolitical importance due to the rise of terrorism. Western support to Mujahideen groups ceased, leading to a civil war. The Taliban emerged victorious, capturing Kabul, imposing strict Islamic law, and sheltering international terrorists, including al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and tensions with Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf War, bin Laden turned against his former supporters. In 2001, al-Qaeda carried out unprecedented terrorist attacks on the US, prompting Washington to declare war on terrorism. The US established an international coalition, initiating a prolonged and costly war, toppling the Taliban regime, attempting to rebuild infrastructure, establish a modern democratic state, and eradicate terrorist groups and opium production<sup>81</sup>. However, the lack of a clear long-term plan and objectives hindered progress. As an Afghan proverb goes “*you have the watches, but we have the time.*” In 2021, US troops withdrew from Afghanistan, coinciding with the Taliban's takeover of major cities, including the capital, Kabul. The Taliban restored their rule, implemented an Islamic transformation, and established the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Currently, the regime seeks to normalize relations with other states, gain recognition, but the nation grapples with internal chaos.

All the countries of the Southwest Asia are facing plenty of challenges, while Turkey and Iran, are trying to become so regional as religious leaders. Pakistan was also trying to increase its potentials,

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<sup>80</sup> It was a coalition of guerrilla groups that opposed the invading Soviet forces.

<sup>81</sup> Afghanistan is among the largest opium producers.



but the political instability has a negative impact, as well as Afghanistan is a “failed state.” They have a great geopolitical importance, especially Iran and Turkey, but their potentials are limited due to financial factors.

### 3. Geopolitical Importance

The Wider Middle East obtains a high position because it incorporates many strategic locations that prosper in the sectors of energy, economy, shipping, and trading. Geopolitics is the analysis of the interaction between, on the one hand, geographical settings and perspectives and, on the other, political processes. Generally, it is the study of how geography affects politics and international relations. The strategic locations, such as ports, canals, and straits, have increased the importance of the region while providing many benefits. However, the discovery of oil within the region of the Wider Middle East significantly changed the circumstances. Due to high interests, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, first, the then Great Powers, and then the Superpowers, divided the region into spheres of influence to secure their interests and increase their power. The uprisings of the Arab world posed a threat to both regional and global stability, and their impacts still affect the states. For instance, Libya has reduced its oil production, and the Houthis in Yemen continue to launch missile attacks on ships entering the Bab-el-Mandeb, especially amidst the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, as well as few years ago, the Houthis attacked the oil refinery infrastructure of Saudi Arabia. Currently, the region is influenced by major geopolitical shifts such as the growing influence of the Gulf countries, the pivot to Africa of many of the countries of the region, the proliferation of regional cleavages and the volatility of alliances and rivalries<sup>82</sup>. The importance of the chokepoints increased and became key maritime passages, transporting fossil fuels, which was necessary for the development of the states. On the other hand,

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<sup>82</sup> Aras, B., & Kardaş, Ş. (2021). Introduction to Special Issue/Section: *Geopolitics of the New Middle East: Perspectives from Inside and Outside*. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 23(3), 397–402. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.1888251>

chokepoints truly are the geographical Achilles heels of the global economy<sup>83</sup>, as it was proved with the obstruction of the container ship of EverGreen in the Suez Canal. Finally, the importance of the region changed after the terrorist attacks of September 11th and the emergence of extremist Islamic groups such as “ISIS.”

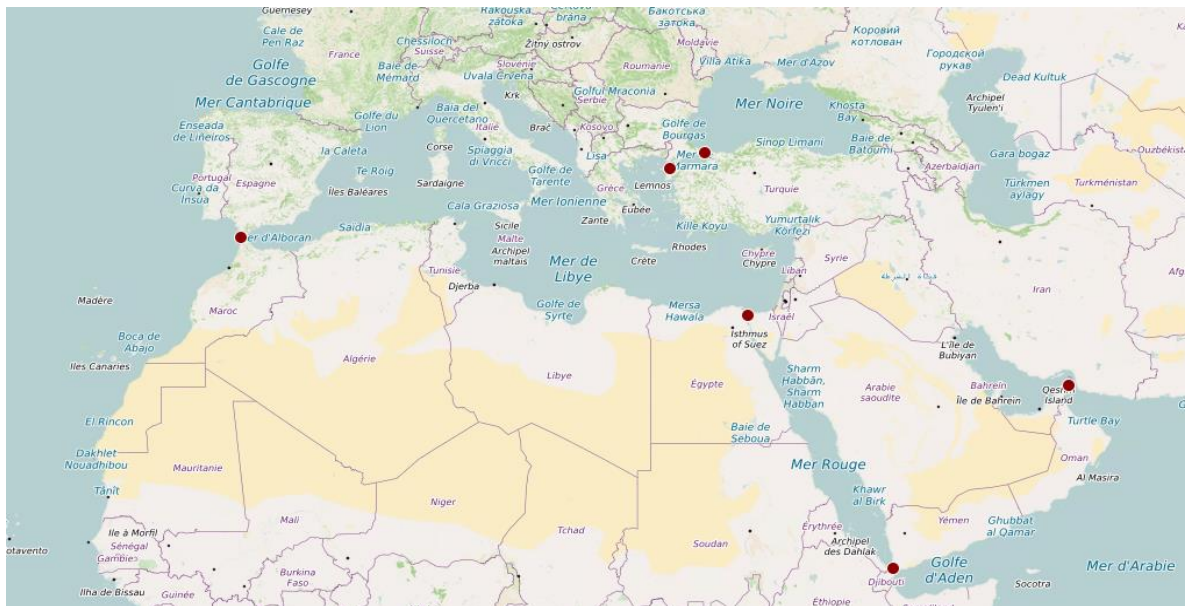


Figure 2 Major Chokepoints and deserts of the Wider Middle East

Source: <https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/el/>

### 3.1. Straits of the Region

The Wider Middle East has always garnered interest from other countries due to its geopolitical position, and the transportation of commodities, oil, and gas by sea through its straits holds great importance. Over the years, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Strait of Hormuz have significantly increased in importance, becoming major chokepoints on the global chessboard. They have evolved into vital maritime

<sup>83</sup> Rodrigue, J.-P. (2005, November 29). *Straits, Passages and Chokepoints: A Maritime Geostrategy of Petroleum Distribution*. Cahiers de géographie du Québec. Available at <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/011797ar>

passages, attracting the attention of the global community, which seeks to ensure the smooth operation of these straits. The closure of these chokepoints signals instability and crisis.

The Strait of Hormuz is perhaps one of the most important areas in the world due to the geographical location of the Persian Gulf to the Free Seas<sup>84</sup>. Its importance changed after the discovery of vast oil and gas reserves, firstly in Iran and then in the other Gulf states. The narrow waterway connects the semi-closed Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, through the Gulf of Oman and international shipping lines in the Free Seas. Members of OPEC, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and the UAE, primarily use the Strait for their oil exports. Between January and September, approximately 20.5 million barrels per day passed through this vital passage, along with 20% of global LNG, mainly from Qatar, turning the Strait of Hormuz into a financial artery for many states. Over one-sixth of oil and one-third of liquefied natural gas passes through the narrow Strait. It is an international strait located between Iran and Oman, and through the 1974 agreement between Iran and Oman, they are jointly responsible for defending the vital waterway and controlling the transit of ships. Due to its geostrategic aspects and the various sectors, it influences, the Strait of Hormuz is placed at the center of global and regional powers' rivalry and competition. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the abolition of the US Twin Pillars Policy, there was a threat of the closure of the Strait, while Western states, especially the USA in the past, attempted to reduce its importance. Additionally, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have constructed pipelines to bypass the Strait of Hormuz and reduce Iran's power. The strategic goal for the West is the protection of oil reserves and shipping lanes, which is ensured by the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain and other military bases. On the other hand, the Gulf states are also dependent on the Strait because through it, they can import commodities they cannot produce, such as food, welfare goods, and industrial products. In recent years, tensions between the USA, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE against Iran have endangered the safety of the Straits, especially after missile attacks on ships. Iran is a factor of insecurity in the region, having threatened free navigation many times in the past by harassing and threatening ships, as well as seizing them with the use of its naval forces. Therefore, global prices rapidly increased. Additionally, the imposed sanctions can

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<sup>84</sup> Mahmoudi Lamooki, M., & Seraji, S. (2018). *A survey of the Strategic Importance of the Strait of Hormuz in the Middle East, with an Emphasis on Iran's Role in Maintaining its Security*. International Journal of Political Science, 8(3), 71-78.

turn Iran into an unpredictable player. The blockage of the Strait, even attacks on ships, can provoke a crisis, and the Strait of Hormuz will continue to play a significant role in the future.

Another crucial chokepoint within the Wider Middle East is the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, located between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean. Its importance changed and increased after the construction of the Suez Canal in 1869, bringing Europe and Southeast Asia closer. Most exports of petroleum and natural gas from the Persian Gulf that transit the Suez Canal or the SUMED Pipeline pass through both the Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>85</sup> On a daily basis, 5-6 million barrels pass through the Strait, along with vast quantities of LNG. In a daily basis, 5-6 million of barrels pass through the Strait and vast quantities of LNG. From one side, the Houthi rebels, backed by Iran, and on the other hand, piracy events from Somalia, especially during previous years, have posed challenges. The rivalry for control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is part of a regional conflict between Iran and its Shiite allies on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies on the other<sup>86</sup>. Iran could take into advantage so the Strait of Hormuz, as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Furthermore, the region, due to its high importance and unstable factors, has attracted the attention of global and regional powers. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is of great importance to China as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. Gradually, the Houthis have become a global threat, engaging in naval mines and missile attacks on ships. Due to the threats that can provoke the closure of the Strait, powers such as the USA, France, and China have established military bases and invested in ports within the region to maintain the operation of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and ensure their interests. In a general point of view, is a crucial chokepoint within an unstable region, surrounded by “failed states,” a factor that influences the operation of the Strait.

Further north is the Suez Canal, which connects the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean, allowing ships to bypass the lengthy and dangerous trip around the southern tip of Africa. Construction began in 1859 and was completed 10 years later, turning the canal into a financial artery. The importance of the canal stems first and foremost from its location; it is the only place

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<sup>85</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2019, August 27). *The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic route for oil and natural gas shipments*. Today in Energy. Available at <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073>

<sup>86</sup> Alexandre, A. G. (2021). *The Strait of Bab El-Mandeb: Stage of geopolitical disputes*. Janus.net, e-journal of international relations, 12(2), 5. Available at <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.12.2.5>.

that directly connects the waters of Europe with the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and countries of the Asia-Pacific<sup>87</sup>. Its significance lies in its irreplaceable role as the shortest and most cost-effective route for global trade between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. Without the unique geography of the Red Sea, there would be no viable alternative to this critical maritime passage. It is also the most important waterway for moving petroleum between production sources and consumption markets. For the aforementioned reasons, Great Britain controlled the Suez Canal until the Egyptian nationalization of the Canal by Nasser and the crisis in the autumn of 1956. Simultaneously, there is an alternative oil transportation through two different pipelines that bypass the Canal. The first one is the Egyptian SUMED oil pipeline, connecting the Red Sea with the Mediterranean Sea and designed to pump 2.5 million barrels per day of Gulf crude oil. The second is the Israeli Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline, connecting the port of Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba to the port of Ashkelon on the Mediterranean, constructed to transport 600,000 barrels a day. Currently, approximately 12% of global trade and 9% of the world's daily seaborne oil pass through the Canal, making it the third most important chokepoint, after the Strait of Hormuz and Malacca. Last but not least, in 2015 Cairo completed a major expansion of the Canal. The New Suez Canal project allowed two-way traffic and reduced the waiting time, increasing the daily shipping transit from 49 to 98. The Suez Canal has great importance as a maritime passage, confirmed by the EverGiven incident in 2021 and the accumulation of ships outside the Canal, while the alternative passages such as the Cape of Good Hope is very distant and the Northern Sea Route across Russia's Arctic is not easily accessible.

Another crucial chokepoint is the Turkish Straits and the Sea of Marmara. The Bosphorus and Dardanelles have major geopolitical importance since ancient times, connecting Europe with Asia and providing a significant defensive advantage. The Bosphorus is a 17-mile-long waterway that connects the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara, and the Dardanelles is a 40-mile-long waterway that links the Sea of Marmara with the Aegean and the Mediterranean Sea. The Turkish Straits provide the only connection between the Black and the Mediterranean Sea, and they are among the busiest in the world, necessary for the economic prosperity of the Black Sea. Furthermore, their importance increased after the exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves in the Caspian Sea and Central

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<sup>87</sup> Salameh, M. G. (2021, April 8). *The Strategic Importance of the Suez Canal*. Energy Management Centre. Available at <https://www.energymanagementcentre.eu/views-on-energy-news/suez-canal/>

Asia at the end of the 20th century. Through the Turkish Straits, 3% of the global oil demand is transported. The Sea of Marmara does not have major ports; however, on the southern side of the Bosphorus is located the harbor of Constantinople. The Dardanelles and Bosphorus, also known as the Strait of Constantinople, have timeless vital importance for Russia, providing Moscow with access to the warm seas. Bosphorus and the Dardanelles are also important for the European Union, due to the vast quantities of fossil fuels that pass via the Straits, which are regulated by the Montreux Convention, while Turkey is responsible for ensuring free and safe passage of merchant ships in and out of the Black Sea, as well as regulating the transit of warships, including the duration of their stay<sup>88</sup>. The convention allowed Turkey to close the straits to all warships in times of war and to permit merchant ships free passage<sup>89</sup>. The traffic of the ships has been increased the last years, with approximately 48.000 vessels pass through them each year, while the Montreux Convention restricts the Turkish Republic. For the aforesaid reasons, the last years the Turkish government has announced the plan for the construction of an alternative passage, the Canal of Constantinople. A pharaonic project, that will bypass the Strait of Bosphorus, increasing ship traffic through the strait; providing safer transit conditions for dangerous ship traffic, away from densely populated areas of Constantinople; reducing waiting times for entry; and providing generous transit fees to Turkey<sup>90</sup>. However, it is a costly project and faces many difficulties. Last but not least, the TANAP gas pipeline is located nearby the Dardanelles and the Sea of Marmara, making the region more important and sensitive.

The last chokepoint of the Wider Middle East is the Strait of Gibraltar. The Pillars of Heracles are located between southernmost Spain and the northernmost side of Africa, connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Atlantic Ocean. The Pillars of Heracles marked the western end of the Classical world. The Strait is 36 miles long and narrows to less than 8 miles wide between Point Marroque, Spain and Point Cirres, Morocco<sup>91</sup>. It had great importance mainly during the colonial

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<sup>88</sup> Hamilton, D., & Mangott, G. (Eds.). (2008). *The Wider Black Sea Region in the 21st Century: Strategic, Economic and Energy Perspectives*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Transatlantic Relations.

<sup>89</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2022, March 4). *Montreux Convention*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/event/Montreux-Convention>

<sup>90</sup> Işık, Y. (2021, June 25). *Canal Istanbul: Don't believe the hype*. Middle East Institute. Available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/canal-istanbul-dont-believe-hype>

<sup>91</sup> Truver, S. (1980). *The Strait of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean*. Sijthoff & Noordhoff International Publishers, 5.

era, and it increased its significance after the construction of the Suez Canal. Consequently, foreign powers tried to control it due to its strategic location. The direct sea passage between the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait attracted the interest of the sea queen Great Britain, which conquered Gibraltar in 1704<sup>92</sup>, considering the maritime connection between the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean through the chokepoints<sup>93</sup>. The Strait has a significant contribution to the commercial sector, especially after the discovery of oil in the Middle East and the maritime transportation of oil to industrialized Europe and North America. Also, through the Pillars of Heracles, vast quantities of LNG are passing, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, through the Strait, there have been several migrations flows in recent years. Annually, 100,000 vessels transit the Strait, with approximately 300 ships passing every day, making it one of the busiest chokepoints. Lastly, the gas pipeline of Maghreb – Europe passes through the Strait, connecting Algeria with Spain through Morocco.

Taking the aforementioned facts into consideration, the Wider Middle East has many strategic locations that are vital for global maritime activity. Additionally, the construction of the Ben Gurion Canal project has been proposed, creating a new maritime route connecting the Red Sea with the Mediterranean Sea. This initiative aims to increase the importance of the Gulf of Aqaba and potentially limit the position of the Suez Canal. The chokepoints favor the transportation of energy, commodities, and even military presence. On the other hand, the world is dependent on these crucial locations, and when they are closed for a short period, crises emerge. All the aforementioned chokepoints are international straits and are regulated by the UNCLOS, serving as arteries for global trade and maritime activity.

### 3.2. Role of Ports

According to Alfred Thayer Mahan and Halford Mackinder, a country establishing itself as a port power can significantly impact the balance of regional and global power. In the context of

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<sup>92</sup> It is still a British Overseas Territory.

<sup>93</sup> To ensure its interests to India, London had proceeded to the conquering and colonization of strategic locations such as Gibraltar, Malta, Cyprus, the Suez Canal, and North Yemen.

Spykman's theory, the Middle East, with its significant ports, is considered part of the Rimland. Spykman asserted that control of this region could confer world hegemony, highlighting the interconnectedness of continental and maritime geopolitics. Although control of the seas was traditionally seen as the key to global strategy, Saul Cohen's marine ring theory introduces a more nuanced perspective. Cohen emphasizes the vital role of ports as the link between continental and maritime realms, arguing that the growth of population, industry, services, and political power along coastal areas and their ports shifts the balance towards maritime power, ultimately dominating continental interiors.

Geopolitics plays a crucial role in the significance of ports, as the construction of major ports in strategic locations can elevate the importance of a region and boost its economy, establishing commercial and energy hubs. This impact is particularly pronounced when ports are integrated with a pipeline system and a well-connected railway or road network. The efficiency of a port directly influences the economies of the countries it serves, given that over 80% of global trade is conducted by sea. The percentage is even higher for many developing countries<sup>94</sup>. On the flip side, a port can serve as a military base for naval forces, whether domestic or foreign. Ports can also be granted to foreign states, often friendly or allied ones, for both commercial and military purposes, although this arrangement may enhance the influence of the foreign state. More recently, an emphasis on geoeconomics and logistics has refocused our attention towards ports. This focus has been given further impetus by the enormous literature on China's Belt and Road Initiative, especially the Maritime Silk Road<sup>95</sup>. The control of ports, particularly those strategically located, is a key element in a country's geopolitical strategy. This is particularly evident for nations seeking to reshape the global order in their favor, as seen with China and India today, as well as historical examples such as the Dutch, British, and US in prior centuries. As a result, there is intense competition among global and regional powers to invest in and enhance the potential of crucial ports<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> Andrey Sharpilo. (2022, May 13). *Why ports are at the heart of sustainable development*. UNCTAD. Available at <https://unctad.org/news/why-ports-are-heart-sustainable-development>

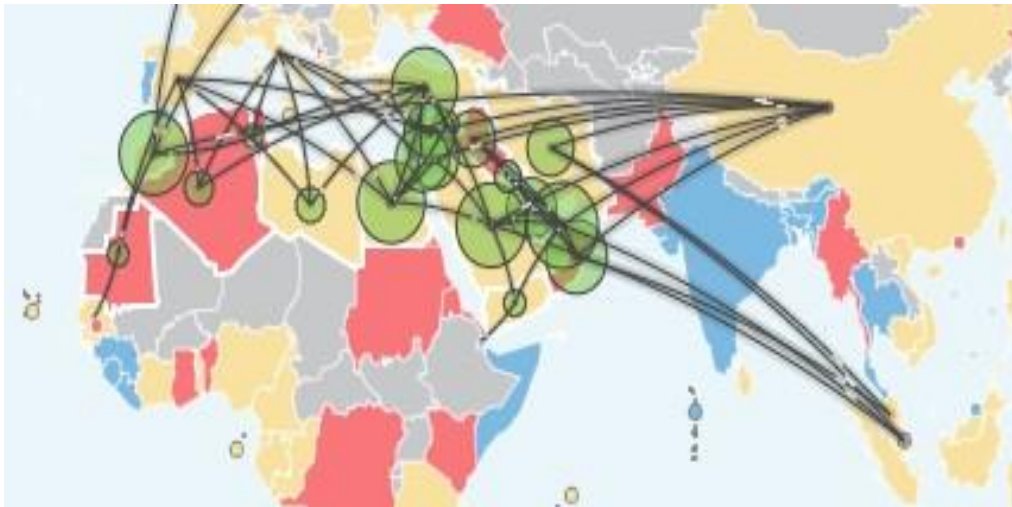
<sup>95</sup> Noorali, H., Flint, C., & Ahmadi, S. A. (2022). *Port power: Towards a new geopolitical world order*. *Journal of Transport Geography*, 105, 103483. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2022.103483>

<sup>96</sup> China dominates in the investment of ports in Asia, Africa, America, and Europe.



The Wider Middle East boasts numerous major ports, playing a crucial role on the global chessboard and attracting the interest of global powers. Meanwhile, regional rivalries create a competitive landscape. The largest port in the Wider Middle East is the Jebel Ali Port in the UAE, part of the Port of Dubai. Constructed in the 1970s, it stands as the largest man-made harbor globally. Evolving into a regional hub, it is among the world's largest and busiest ports, serving as a gateway to the Middle East. In 2022, it handled over 14 million Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit (TEU) containers. The second busiest port is found in Morocco – the Tanger Med in the Strait of Gibraltar. It has solidified its position as a vital container transshipment hub in the region, handling over 7.5 million TEU containers in 2022, with a capacity for 9 million. Saudi Arabia also boasts some of the busiest ports in the Middle East, with the Jeddah Islamic Port in the Red Sea and the King Abdul Aziz Port ranking as the largest. These ports have significant potential for further development. Additionally, the region features several promising ports. Notable examples include the Imam Khomeini Port in Iran, seamlessly connected to railways and road transport networks, strategically located near major industrial centers. Other noteworthy ports include the Port of Aqaba in Jordan, the Port of Alexandria, the Port of Constantinople, and the Port of Haifa in Israel. The Port of Aden in Yemen could play a crucial role, but regional instability currently impacts its operations.

In the military sector, the Wider Middle East hosts naval military bases, primarily concentrated in the strategically vital Gulf region. Notably, the U.S. Naval Support Activity in Bahrain stands out as one of the largest and most significant bases crucial to the interests of the USA. Bahrain also houses facilities for the British Royal Navy, and France maintains naval bases in the UAE. There are instances where Turkey hosts naval forces of NATO. In summary, the Wider Middle East holds a substantial position in global shipping, and its ports can play a crucial role. Many states in the region have the potential to expand their port facilities, but factors such as instability, financial weaknesses, and conflicts create obstacles. Conversely, major powers, aiming to extend their presence and influence, strategically invest in foreign ports within the Wider Middle East or establish significant naval bases through bilateral agreements.



*Figure 3 Shipping connectivity of the region*

Source: <https://hbs.unctad.org/maritime-transport-indicators/>

### 3.3. Importance of Deserts

Deserts, often considered barren and uninhabitable landscapes, hold significant geopolitical importance. Despite their perceived harshness, these regions play a crucial role, offering numerous strategic advantages to any state that controls them. For centuries, deserts remained largely unexplored, with colonial powers directing their attention elsewhere. However, deserts present various interests, making them key areas of focus. Firstly, deserts naturally serve as formidable and inaccessible borders. Additionally, they play a vital role in issues related to natural resources, water, security, and the production of clean energy. These vast landscapes can become sources of conflict due to resource competition and disputes over borders, especially in regions like Maghreb and Mashreq where blurry borders have led to tensions in past decades. Lastly, the significance of deserts has evolved with climate change and the expansion of desertification into new areas. This shift has expanded the reach of deserts, altering their importance. Notable among the major deserts in the Wider Middle East are the Sahara and the Arabian Desert.

Firstly, one of the largest deserts globally is the Sahara Desert, situated among the territories of the Maghreb and Sahel states. Although not densely populated, there are people who inhabit the Sahara, mainly nomadic tribes in oases and scattered settlements. Over time, numerous trading

routes have developed within the Sahara Desert. More than the arbitrary or artificial nature of Africa's borders, the lack of precision and number of historical boundary lines have fueled the border disputes of the past 50 years<sup>97</sup>. Currently, these disputes primarily involve disagreements over Saharan boundaries among Libya, Algeria, and Morocco, largely driven by the natural and underground resources within the Sahara Desert. Due to the technological progress, the Sahara Desert has attracted foreign companies and states interested in exploiting its underground resources. The Sahara boasts significant hydrocarbon resources, and intense mining activities for phosphate, iron, and uranium are underway. Disputes have arisen to control valuable uranium fields or mines in the region. Moreover, the Sahara plays a crucial role in providing a vital product for the hot and dry climate of the area. In the 1950s, Libya discovered vast oil reserves along with freshwater reserves. Later, Muammar Qaddafi initiated the Great Man-Made River project in 1983, bringing water from the south to the north through a system of wells and pipelines. The pharaonic project started its implementation in 1983 and since 1991 the project has supplied much-needed irrigation and drinking water to populous cities and farming areas in Libya's north. Despite providing essential irrigation and drinking water, the project's operation and expansion were affected by the "Arab Spring," NATO bombardment, and civil war. Also, Libya had proceeded into war with Chad, for the Aouzou Strip. The region is rich in uranium, a vital product for the nuclear power, such as Sahel. During the end of 1970s and 1980s Libya tried to incorporate the Strip and supported the rebels in Chad, facts that created the involvement of France, a nuclear power which needs uranium. Additionally, Morocco occupies Western Sahara due to its rich phosphate reserves. Additionally, important natural gas fields in Algeria, are located into the Desert. The Sahara Desert holds significance for security, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, both regionally and globally. The harsh conditions make the desert an ideal environment for the activities of terrorist and criminal organizations that are challenging for state armies to control or supervise the deserts. Moreover, the desert acts as a natural barrier, limiting migration flows to Europe. Furthermore, the Sahara contributes to the financial benefits of the state through increasing tourism.

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<sup>97</sup> An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics, and Security. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264222359-en>

The second major desert in the region is the Arabian Desert, considered a continuation of the Sahara Desert. Western Arabia formed part of the African landmass before a rift occurred in Earth's crust, as a result of which the Red Sea was formed, and Africa and the Arabian Peninsula finally became separated some five to six million years ago<sup>98</sup>. The Arabian Desert spans the entire Arabian Peninsula, including Iraq and Jordan. It is situated between the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and the Syrian Desert. Historically, the desert was inaccessible and held minimal interest for European colonial powers. Consequently, the mainland of the desert, present-day Saudi Arabia, was never conquered by foreign European forces; only the coastal areas were occupied to secure maritime interests. In contrast, Bedouins traditionally lived nomadically in various desert locations. However, since 1925, there has been a decrease in the number of Bedouins in the desert. Similar to the Sahara, the Arabian Desert harbors significant underground resources. The discovery of oil in eastern Saudi Arabia in 1936 heightened the desert's importance. Post-World War II, numerous oil discoveries occurred, and refinery infrastructures were constructed. The largest oil reserve in the region, the Al-Ghawār oil field, is located in the Rub al-Khali desert, also known as the "Empty Quarter." Gas reserves have also been exploited. Another crucial underground natural resource is freshwater, essential for the harsh environment. Arab states have employed new technologies to pump underground freshwater, although it is an unreplenished commodity. Like the Sahara, low rainfall has depleted reserves, with an estimated 4/5 of Riyadh's underground freshwater reserves being exploited. Consequently, desalination plants have been deployed, making the Peninsula a global leader in the sector, with Saudi Arabia boasting the largest desalination system through the contributions of ARAMCO. Moreover, transportation through the desert has been developed to ease and expedite transitions. Airline flights, highways, and a railroad network connecting the Gulf with Riyadh have been established<sup>99</sup>. Lastly, the desert has witnessed border disputes, primarily involving Kuwait and Iraq, Qatar and Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia and Yemen in previous decades. However, these disputes were not as extensive as those in the Maghreb region.

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<sup>98</sup> Owen, L., Ochsenwald, William L. and Holm, Donald August (2022, September 20). *Arabian Desert*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabian-Desert>

<sup>99</sup> Approximately 4/5 of the Desert is accessible to cars.

Considering the aforementioned factors, the two deserts in the Wider Middle East hold significant geopolitical importance due to their crucial positions in strategic locations and their underground resources. Their proximity to Europe, particularly in the aftermath of the war against terrorism, has elevated their importance on the global political stage, highlighting security issues. Importantly, with the impacts of climate change and the migration flows through North Africa, the Sahara Desert holds major importance for the interests of the European Union.

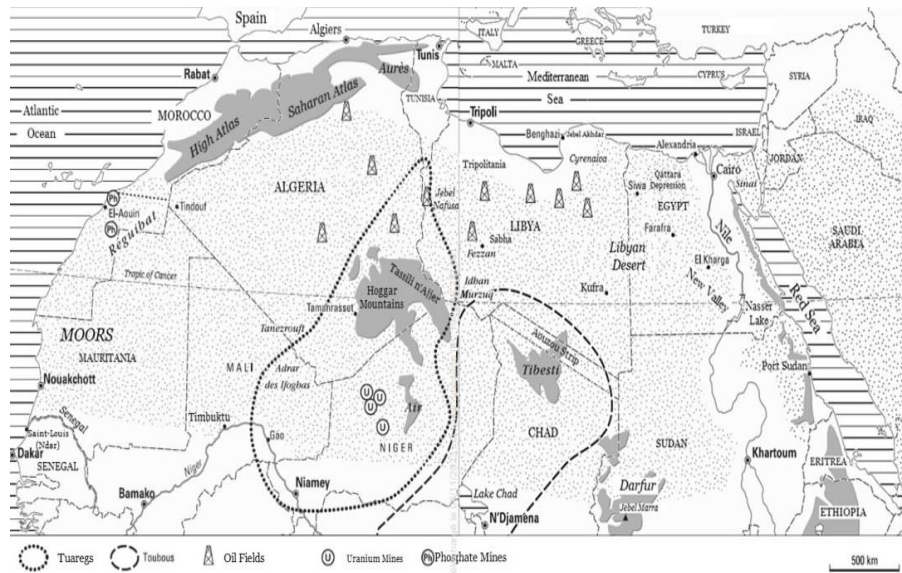


Figure 4 The Sahara Desert and its resources

Source: Lacoste, Y. (2011). *The Sahara: Geopolitical Perspectives and Illusions*. La Découverte  
[https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E\\_HER\\_142\\_0012--the-sahara-geopolitical-perspectives-and.htm?contenu=article](https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_HER_142_0012--the-sahara-geopolitical-perspectives-and.htm?contenu=article)

#### 4. Energy

During 1820, the world came into a new era, the fossil energy<sup>100</sup>. The use of new sources of energy, primarily coal, transformed established circumstances and created new potentials that were not

<sup>100</sup> Kokkinos, D. V. (2015). *Geopolitics of Energy in the System/ Europe – Asia – Middle East*. Athens: Leimon Publications, 23.

derived from human or animal activity. The Industrial Revolution marked a milestone in the utilization and establishment of energy, with the rapid spread of coal usage. The driving force behind the Industrial Revolution was the sea queen, Great Britain, which extensively exploited high quantities of coal, along with its proficient engineers. Other major powers, such as the USA and France, were quick to follow suit.

With the rise of internal combustion engines at the beginning of the 20th century, the consistent use of coal took a backseat, replaced by oil. The transportation sector thrived with the adoption of “black oil,” significantly easing and hastening the movement of people and goods. Additionally, oil played a crucial role in shaping policy decisions. Its capabilities transformed the dynamics of warfare, impacting vehicles, military ships, and later aircraft and tanks, making transportation more efficient—a realm where coal could not compete. Oil emerged as a driving force for states, both in times of peace for development and during wars, either for invasion or defense. As a consequence, the states which desire power, tried to control oil fields, developing either their own resources or fields within a foreign state, through alliances and agreements. Oil became indispensable for states, influencing their pursuit of power and development. It played a major role in the outcome of wars, prompting states to vie for control over oil fields, either by developing their own resources or forming alliances and agreements with foreign states. In the same century, another type of hydrocarbon made its appearance: natural gas. Carl von Clausewitz asserted that “*war is the continuation of politics with other means*,” a perspective reflected in the Wider Middle East. The region witnessed numerous wars, expansions of World War II, disputes, and competitions, all centered around the control of hydrocarbons. For example, Iraq's primary objective in 1990, with the occupation of Kuwait and the involvement of other states under the auspices of the UN and the USA, was to control oil reserves. Similarly, during World War II, conflicts extended to North Africa and the Caucasus to gain control over oil fields. The phenomenon of disputes over overseas reserves also exists, where states contend for exclusive control. Notably, through oil, states compete for financial and political benefits; high oil prices can lead to substantial revenues, while price wars can economically challenge opponent states. Oil has

become an important source of governed revenues, political power, and influence, and political leaders have recognized its special importance<sup>101</sup>.

The Wider Middle East boasts vast reserves of oil and gas, with exploitation being easier and the quality superior. The significance of the region escalated with the initial discovery of oil in Iran in 1908, followed by discoveries in Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Libya, Algeria, and others, securing a prominent position on the world stage. As a George H. W. Bush adviser once quipped, “*if citrus fruits were produced in the Middle East, no one would bother.*” The contribution of hydrocarbons is immense for the states, and despite concerns about climate change, the push for green energy, and the pursuit of energy independence, the demand for hydrocarbons continues to rise.

#### 4.1. History of “Black Gold”

The Industrial Revolution played a pivotal role in shaping the modern world through the utilization of fossil fuels, with states building their prosperity on coal, later transitioning to oil and natural gas. However, the discovery and exploitation of fossil fuels encounter challenges that are growing in significance. To begin with, reserves are concentrated in specific regions worldwide, and not all oil resources are easily exploitable or commercially viable. For instance, the Arabian Peninsula possesses higher quantities of oil with lower extraction costs compared to reserves in the American continent. Additionally, fossil fuel reserves are irreplaceable, underscoring their vital importance for ensuring a consistent supply to states. Last but not least, the demand for energy is increasing, while the development rates and the GDP of states are connected with the energy consumption<sup>102</sup>. Recognizing these factors, modern states have sought continuous access to oil and natural gas reserves to safeguard their interests, maintaining and enhancing their power and development. However, this dependence on hydrocarbons has rendered states vulnerable, especially during oil

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<sup>101</sup> AlMuhanna, I. (2022). *Oil Leaders: An Insider's Account of Four Decades of Saudi Arabia and OPEC's Global Energy Policy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 8.

<sup>102</sup> Kokkinos, D. V. (2015). *Geopolitics of Energy in the System/ Europe – Asia – Middle East*. Athens: Leimon Publications, 30.

shocks, leading to numerous challenges. Furthermore, the extensive consumption of fossil fuels has contributed to climate change.

In the Wider Middle East, the region possesses vast reserves of oil and gas, making them abundant, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula. In comparison, coal resources hold less significance when contrasted with the prominence of “black gold” and natural gas. Among the subsystems within this extensive region, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf stand out as the most crucial areas concerning oil, surpassing the Maghreb and the Eastern Mediterranean, which cannot compete in terms of oil importance.

The shift from coal to oil began in 1905 under the leadership of Great Britain, the sea queen, and with the influential contribution of Admiral Fisher, who recognized oil as a superior form of energy. A significant milestone in this transition was the construction of the battleship “Dreadnought,” marking a shift towards constant oil consumption, unlike previous military ships designed for coal and steam operation. Oil offered various advantages over coal, including more effective ship operation, higher performance, and reduced visibility due to less smoke. Despite London's abundance of coal reserves, it lacked oil. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, British businessman William Knox D'Arcy negotiated with the Shah of Persia for oil exploration rights. The 1908 discovery of oil in Persia changed the geopolitical landscape, and the strategic importance of “black gold” grew. Persia's oil was crucial for London, a “Great Power” at the time, seeking to strengthen its position. Consequently, Great Britain developed close relations with Persia and became deeply involved in its internal politics. The acquisition of D'Arcy's Anglo-Persian Oil Company, later reformed as British Petroleum (BP), marked the first geopolitical relationship between a state and oil, leading to the establishment of oil-related lobbies. World War I presented an opportunity for British interests to limit German influence and counter the Ottoman occupation of the Middle East, gaining access to the oil-rich and high promising region. During the war, London swiftly took control of the Shatt Al Arab, establishing itself as the leading oil power in the Middle East. In the 1930s, oil discoveries occurred in previously overlooked regions such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In the case of Saudi Arabia, it marked the first time the USA became involved in the region's oil sector, sidelining Britain. These discoveries, combined with findings in Kuwait, reshaped the region's geopolitical landscape.



The vital region initially became a field of competition among the largest oil companies, which later collaborated. The Seven Sisters—Gulf Oil Corporation, Royal Dutch Shell, Standard Oil Company of California, Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, Standard Oil Company of New York, Texaco, and Anglo-Persian Oil Company—formed the most effective and profitable cartel in history, regulating global oil prices. It also became a battleground for competition between states. The secret meeting between U.S. President Roosevelt and the King of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Saud, had a dual significance. Firstly, it officially established the USA's presence in Saudi Arabia, a close relationship based on providing weapons and security in exchange for oil. Secondly, it reflected the competition between British and American interests in the region. After the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, the USA gained control over major oil fields in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq following the overthrow of Hussein's regime and in Syria after the defeat of “ISIS.”

In the following decades, relations between the West and Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia warmed as these countries gained control over their oil sectors. Strong oil companies were established in oil-producing states, but their profits remained limited. Consequently, in the 1970s, these states moved towards the nationalization of the oil sector, taking control of foreign oil companies, and forming energy giants like Saudi Aramco. However, this led to tensions with the West, especially during the Iran crisis when Mosaddeq attempted to nationalize the oil sector<sup>103</sup>, resulting in the deep involvement of other states and his overthrow. West became totally dependent on the oil of the Middle East, while the states had major interests in that region. The Middle East has more than 58% of world oil resources<sup>104</sup>. Saudi Arabia is among the largest oil producers and owns the second-largest proven oil reserves. Iran follows, but its production potentials are limited due to sanctions and lack of modern technological access. Additionally, other Gulf states are major oil producers globally, such as Iraq and the UAE. Oil has become a critical raw material for various sectors, including industry and transportation, with fluctuations in oil prices influencing global prices. Both the developed and developing world heavily depend on oil to enhance their power.

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<sup>103</sup> Among the first nationalization of the oil sector in the region.

<sup>104</sup> Hassan, Q., Al-Hitmi, M., Sohrabi Tabar, V., Sameen, A. Z., Salman, H. M., & Jaszczur, M. (2023). *Middle East energy consumption and potential renewable sources: An overview*. *Cleaner Engineering and Technology*, 12, 100599. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clet.2023.100599>

## 4.2. Natural Gas Sector

The Wider Middle East is also rich in another kind of hydrocarbon: natural gas. In a general context, gas is considered noble because it burns more cleanly, unlike coal and oil. However, despite its advantages, its development and consumption were not widespread due to some difficulties. In contrast to oil and coal, gas could not be easily transported, and its use was limited to a regional level. Nevertheless, states viewed gas as an alternative source of energy during oil shortages and shocks. In recent decades, the construction of gas pipelines connecting gas fields with other states and, primarily, the development of the Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) sector, have changed the circumstances, increasing the importance of gas. Regarding the Wider Middle East, it possesses vast reserves of natural gas, mainly located in the Gulf, Maghreb in Algeria, and a rising power in the gas sector, the Levantine Basin, encompassing Egypt and Israel and the Gaza Strip. Consequently, new gas discoveries in the region, the development of LNG, and the war in Ukraine have heightened the importance of the Wider Middle East.

The presence of natural gas in the region has been known since ancient times, primarily in Persia. However, the discovery of natural gas in the Wider Middle East in the modern era occurred in Algeria in 1956 with the Hassi R'Mel Gas Field. Subsequently, gas discoveries took place in Iran in the 1960s and in the following decades in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Qatar, the UAE, etc. The Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf have not fully exploited their gas potentials, mainly due to the dominance of oil. Nevertheless, the region possesses vast gas reserves. Iran holds the second-largest gas reserves, with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Algeria following suit.

As mentioned earlier, transmission challenges for gas posed obstacles to the sector's development. In recent decades, technological advancements have played a crucial role in overcoming these difficulties. This progress was achieved primarily through the construction of pipelines and, secondly, with the widespread adoption of LNG. The first natural gas pipeline in the region was the Trans-Mediterranean Pipeline, linking Algeria with Italy through Tunisia and Sicily. Over time, gas pipelines in the Middle East, the Gulf, and North Africa have been constructed, directly connecting gas fields with other states. Following the events in Ukraine involving Russia, there was a rapid expansion of LNG, and the transportation of gas in its liquid form has become dominant worldwide. The idea of LNG dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the first experimental

plant designed for LNG storage in the USA in 1912. In 1964, Algeria pioneered the construction of one of the first LNG facilities, indirectly connecting gas fields with states and markets<sup>105</sup>. However, the potentials of LNG were initially limited due to the high transmission costs, the time required for shipping, and the need for proper infrastructure. Qatar stands out as a major player in the LNG sector, with vast gas reserves in the North Field making it a leading global LNG exporter. Lastly, other states, such as Egypt, particularly after its gas discoveries, have started investing in the LNG sector.

The Middle East only produces 9.6% of the world natural gas, it has 37% of the world reserves<sup>106</sup>. The importance of natural gas has grown, particularly with the war in Ukraine leading to the termination of Russian gas supply through pipelines in the European Union. This situation has resulted in increased gas exports from producing states such as Qatar, Algeria, and the UAE. Gas production in the region has risen since the Russian invasion, coinciding with emerging powers consuming substantial quantities of both gas and oil. Natural gas plays a crucial role in the Wider Middle East, and the continued development of the gas sector is expected to add further importance to the geopolitical map.

### 4.3. Crucial Energy Regions

The Wider Middle East holds a leading position in the energy sector, boasting vast reserves of gas and oil. The region possesses several comparative advantages and navigates certain challenges related to hydrocarbons. As mentioned, oil and gas fields are concentrated in specific regions worldwide, with variations in quality. In some areas of the Wider Middle East, there is a high concentration of high-quality oil and gas reserves, resulting in lower refining costs and lower exploitation costs compared to other regions such as in the American continent. Moreover, new gas fields have been discovered in the Wider Middle East in recent years, particularly in the Eastern

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<sup>105</sup> The first commercial shipment of Algerian LNG had destination Britain and France.

<sup>106</sup> Hassan, Q., Al-Hitmi, M., Sohrabi Tabar, V., Sameen, A. Z., Salman, H. M., & Jaszczur, M. (2023). *Middle East energy consumption and potential renewable sources: An overview*. *Cleaner Engineering and Technology*, 12, 100599. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clet.2023.100599>

Mediterranean. These factors, combined with the growing global need for more energy, underscore the significance of specific regions within the vast subsystem.

For many decades, the significant oil reserves of the Gulf region have rendered the region among the most important energy suppliers in the world<sup>107</sup>. This, combined with the growing consumption of gas, further solidifies the Gulf's position on the world energy map. Since the first oil discovery in Iran in 1908, the Gulf has evolved into a global supplier of oil and gas with substantial discoveries. A few years ago, the eight Gulf states collectively controlled over 50% of proven oil reserves globally. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran alone held 1/3 of these proven oil reserves. According to OPEC, Riyadh controlled 21% of the world's proven oil reserves, the largest share in the region. The Gulf's oil is of high quality, and domestic consumption is relatively low, with the majority of reserves dedicated to exports. Additionally, the Gulf possesses vast gas reserves, approximately 40% of proven global gas reserves. However, only Qatar is pursuing the fully exploitation and development of the natural gas sector. In contrast, other Gulf states primarily use gas for domestic consumption, with Iran, the UAE, and Kuwait importing gas to meet their needs, possibly as part of a strategy to preserve their reserves. Historically, oil held the leading position in the energy sector and exports, while natural gas lagged behind. Initial gas discoveries were met with disappointment, even with the significant reserves of South Pars in Iran and the North Field in Qatar, the largest proven gas reserve globally, holding 8% of the world's total gas reserves, exceeding 900 trillion standard cubic feet according to QatarEnergy. The Gulf gained dominance in global energy markets, especially with the development of the LNG sector<sup>108</sup>, primarily led by Qatar. Doha invested in and developed LNG facilities in the North Field, becoming one of the leading states in LNG exports. Currently, Qatar is aiming to increase LNG production capacity from the current 77 million tons per year to 110 million tons per year in the first phase, and from 110 million tons per year to 126 million tons per year in the second phase. There are still unexplored regions within the Gulf, with Iraq being the most unexplored. The South Pars in Iran, Saudi Arabia's Karan field, and Abu Dhabi's Shah and Bab field are under development. Moreover, the rising demand for oil and gas has prompted Gulf states to invest in renewable energy

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<sup>107</sup> El-Katiri, L. (2013). *Energy Sustainability in the Gulf States: The Why and the How*. Oxford Institute for Energy Studies.

<sup>108</sup> During 1970s UAE became the first LNG exporter of the Gulf.

sources, aiming to reduce internal consumption of hydrocarbons and increase exports. In Saudi Arabia, about 1/4 of oil is consumed internally, and through “Vision 2030,” Riyadh is working towards saving and exporting this amount. Despite the vast reserves of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, etc., some Gulf states like Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar may experience a falling production rate for oil. Nevertheless, the Gulf maintains a strong position on the global energy map, bolstered by the development of the LNG sector and untapped energy resources.

Another crucial region in the Wider Middle East is North Africa. Undoubtedly, Maghreb is rich on oil and gas, but the resources are not spread evenly among the region’s countries. Algeria, for example, possesses significant gas reserves discovered in 1956, while Libya holds important oil reserves discovered at the end of the 1950s. Tripoli accounts for 39% of proven oil reserves in the African continent and the 3.9% global proven oil reserves, while Algiers has 159 trillion cubic feet of proven natural gas reserves. However, this region is characterized by conflicts and instability, posing challenges to the energy sector. Both Algeria and Libya have experienced long-term, harsh civil wars, and Tripoli has yet to return to stability. In 2021, Algeria produced 9.9 billion cubic feet per day, while Libya produced 1.2 million barrels of oil per day. These quantities are significant for the energy-deprived Mediterranean region. Notably, Algeria has developed its LNG sector, being a pioneer since 1964. It currently operates four LNG terminals and two gas pipelines supplying Italy and Spain. North Africa holds great importance for the European Union due to its direct proximity and the scarcity of hydrocarbon reserves on the European continent. While the Maghreb countries may not match the quantities of the Gulf, they still contribute significantly to the global energy sector.

Another crucial energy region is located east of the Maghreb. The waters of the Eastern Mediterranean is a new hydrocarbon province that is rising<sup>109</sup>. In the previous decades, exploration activities yielded positive results with the discovery of gas in Israel and Gaza Strip, Egypt, and Cyprus in offshore fields. This unexpected development provided opportunities to the regional states and attracted global interest. The Eastern Mediterranean was previously considered a dead energy region, without any significant gas or oil reserves. However, circumstances changed in 1999 with the discovery of a gas field in the south of Israel. Although small, its discovery was encouraging. Offshore exploration is a costly procedure, and results are often negative, leading to

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<sup>109</sup> Yergin, D. (2021). *The New Map*. The USA: Penguin Books, 253.

a halt in activities. Twelve years later, in 2009, Noble Energy found a vast gas reserve in the north of Israel, the Tamar field. This discovery was followed by one of the largest gas discoveries of the decade, the Leviathan field. As a result, the Eastern Mediterranean Basin gained the attention of colossal companies. In 2012, Noble Energy discovered the Aphrodite gas field, and in the same year, Eni discovered the vast gas reserve of Zohr in Egypt, the largest in the region with 845 billion cubic meters. Other gas fields were also discovered, including Karish in Israel, Nour in Egypt, and Glaucus in Cyprus. These discoveries attracted the interest of further colossal energy companies such as Korea Gas Corporation, QatarEnergy, Total, and Shell, which sought to proceed with exploration activities in the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean. However, the region faces numerous challenges that impact the energy sector. Firstly, Turkish aggression against the exploration activities of Cyprus, and secondly, conflicts and political instability in the region influence energy explorations. To overcome these issues, regional states have attempted to cooperate, recognizing the opportunities in front of them. In 2019, Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, Italy, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority established the EastMed Gas Forum. Egypt and Israel are working to develop the gas sector, with Egypt being the largest gas producer and aiming to develop its gas and LNG sector. In 2021, Cairo produced 2.45 trillion cubic feet of gas. On the other hand, Israel, the second-largest gas producer, produced 626 billion cubic feet of gas in 2021. Eastern Mediterranean holds the potential to become an important area for hydrocarbon exports<sup>110</sup>. Finally, regional states are promoting the construction of gas pipelines and LNG infrastructures, with Egypt aiming to become a leading power. The Eastern Mediterranean is a new and dynamic element in the global energy industry and for geopolitics and is changing the map for both<sup>111</sup>.

To sum up, the Wider Middle East encompasses several crucial energy regions that hold vital positions on the global energy maps, influencing various sectors. The most critical region is the Gulf, while the emerging Eastern Mediterranean and the North maritime area of Libya in Maghreb have great potential, capturing the interest of foreign states and private oil companies. However, political challenges within the regions' basins impact the sector. It's important to note the significant role of the development of the LNG sector and its crucial role due to its dynamics.

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<sup>110</sup> Ellinas, C. (2022). *Energy and Geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean*. Global Energy Center.

<sup>111</sup> Yergin, D. (2021). *The New Map*. The USA: Penguin Books, 258.

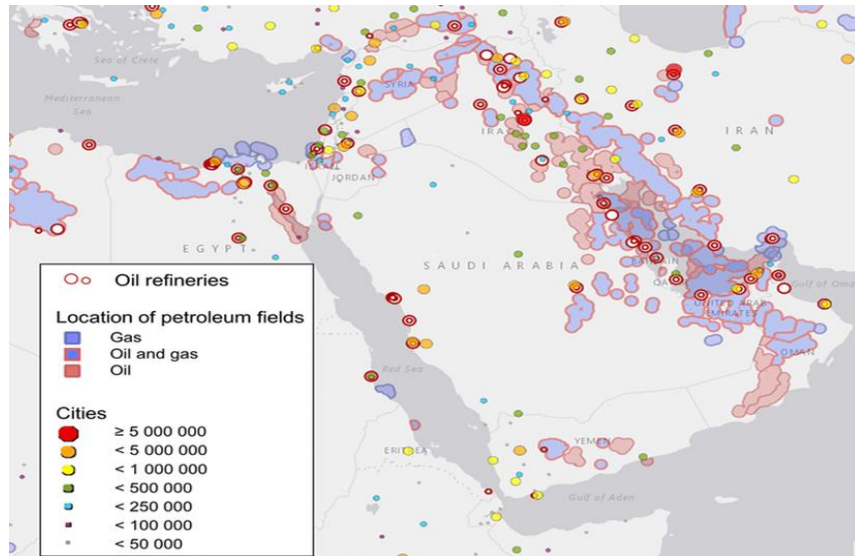


Figure 5 Figure 5 Oil refineries, petroleum and gas fields in the Arabian Basin.

Source: Harvard WorldMap Project

<https://worldmap.harvard.edu/maps/6718/dJT>

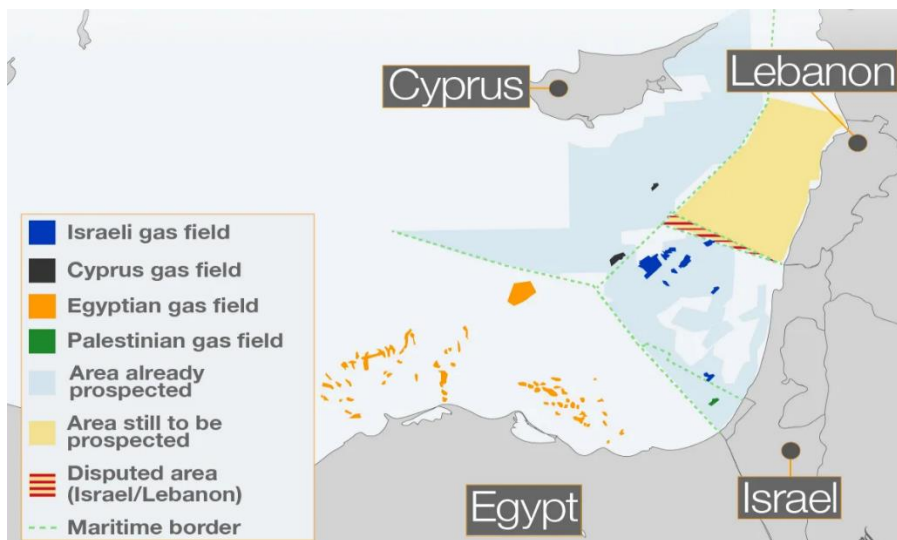


Figure 6 Gas fields into the Levantine Basin

Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/3/7/the-disputed-gas-fields-in-the-eastern-mediterranean>

#### 4.4. Pipelines, Terminals, and Energy Projects

Despite the vast reserves of hydrocarbons, natural resources, and crucial chokepoints, the Wider Middle East can further enhance its geopolitical position with the construction of energy pipelines. The building of both gas and oil pipelines is vital for the energy sector. Initially, pipelines ensure a consistent supply of energy, addressing security concerns by directly connecting the field with the market. This provides a stable and continuous flow of energy, ensuring security of supply. Additionally, their operation is regulated by a stable system defined by agreements. On the other hand, pipelines foster relations between exporter and importer states, promoting cooperation and establishing interactive relationships. From a broader perspective, pipelines serve to connect regions, nations, and economies. The transportation of energy through pipelines incurs lower costs compared to shipping transportation, and pipelines are less likely targets for attacks compared to tankers. In recent years, piracy events, mainly in the waters of the Horn of Africa and West Africa, as well as attacks by the terrorist organization Houthis on tankers, have influenced the global market, leading to increased prices. Last but not least, pipelines allow an oil or gas-exporting state to bypass a critical chokepoint controlled by an adversary. They can achieve this by constructing pipelines through a third state, as exemplified by the UAE's pipeline into Oman, effectively circumventing the need to pass through the Strait of Hormuz.

With the growing energy demands, energy pipelines emerge as key facilitators of global energy trade and distribution. A challenge with the discovery of rich oil and gas fields in the Wider Middle East was the issue of transportation and the required time for shipping travels. Additionally, the construction of long pipelines from Iran or Iraq to European markets was not an easy project. However, the connection among the fields and nearby ports, facilitated by pipelines, was an operational plan, while the tanker remains the primary oil carrier in the Middle East region. The first pipelines were constructed to transport the oil from West Iraq to the Eastern Mediterranean, ending in Haifa<sup>112</sup> in British-mandated Palestine and Tripoli in French-mandated Lebanon, passing through the states of Syria and Jordan.

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<sup>112</sup> It was abandoned with the establishment of Israel.



Despite the multitude of pipelines developed in the 1970s, due to conflicts in the region<sup>113</sup>, revolutionary regimes, the nationalization of the network, the establishment of Israel, and the abolishment of the terminal in Haifa, as well as sabotages and Arabian competitions, the Iraqi pipelines that passed through other states are currently not operational, except those that end in Turkey. The Iraq-Turkey Pipeline (ITP), constructed during the 1970s, connects the oil-rich Kirkuk with the Ceyhan port in the Eastern Mediterranean, while the KRG-Turkey pipeline, constructed in 2013, connects Kurdish oil with the ITP and the Ceyhan Port. Iraq reacted to the exports of Kurdish oil through the ITP, leading to an international court ruling concerning a dispute between Baghdad and Ankara. In March, Turkey halted the operation of the ITP and the transportation of 450,000 barrels per day because the International Court of Commerce ordered Turkey to pay Iraq approximately USD 1.5 billion and to suspend the loading and export of crude oil from Kurdistan transported through the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline. Its functionality is expected to return soon. On the other hand, Iraq has smaller domestic pipelines that are connected to the oil terminal of Basrah in the Gulf<sup>114</sup>. Lastly, Iraq is trying to revitalize its oil industry and plans the construction of pipelines, both domestically and abroad. It is planning the construction of the Iraq Strategic Pipeline, connecting oil fields in Basrah, and the construction of pipelines in Syria ending in the Mediterranean, Jordan ending at the port of Aqaba, and Saudi Arabia ending at the Red Sea. Additionally, Iraq has not increased its gas sector, while the country remains largely unexplored.

The nearby Saudi Arabia had constructed pipelines which have been closed. Initially, the pipeline with Iraq and secondly the Trans-Arabian Pipeline<sup>115</sup>, passing through Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Later, this pipeline transported Iraqi oil for a short period before the invasion of Kuwait. With the occasion of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, or in other words, the tanker war, due to the targeting of oil tankers and the turning of the Gulf into a hazardous sea, Saudi Arabia decided to construct the 747 miles long Petroline Pipeline, linking the Eastern Province with the Yanbu terminal on the Red Sea, bypassing the Strait of Hormuz. The Petroline Pipeline has a capacity of 5 million barrels per day, while Aramco is planning its expansion to 7 million. Also, the Kingdom has developed the Ras Tanura terminal, with 6.5 million b/d, and the King Fahd terminal in Yanbu on the Red Sea,

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<sup>113</sup> The wars in Iraq changed its pipeline map.

<sup>114</sup> 3.5 million b/d of oil are exported via Basrah.

<sup>115</sup> It closed in 1983.

which has a loading capacity of 6.6 million b/d. A parallel pipeline with the Petroline had been constructed, carrying natural gas, the Abqaiq-Yanbu NGL Pipeline, connecting the Eastern Province with the Red Sea. Despite having the sixth largest proven natural gas reserves in the world, Saudi Arabia's natural gas production has yet to reach its full potential<sup>116</sup>. During the last years, and with "Vision 2030," Riyadh is seeking to develop its gas sector.

Another energy giant is Iran. Despite strict sanctions, Tehran is trying to exploit its potentials, with its exports focusing on China and Asia in general. It has constructed an important pipeline, the Goreh-Jask pipeline, which can carry both oil and gas. It links the Goreh area with the port of Jask, bypassing the Strait of Hormuz and has a capacity of 1 million barrels a day. Generally, Iran has many pipelines connected to a domestic network, and it is among the largest gas consumers. It also exports gas to Iraq, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. In the latter case, the Tabriz-Ankara Pipeline plays a crucial role, transporting 10 billion cubic meters annually to Turkey. It is believed that with new pipeline projects and the connection of the network with terminals, Iran will enhance its geopolitical position, while Tehran aims to further exploit the giant South Pars. However, the Goreh-Jask Pipeline can be considered a game-changer because Iran can threaten to close the Strait of Hormuz while continuing its exports.

The UAE followed the strategy of Saudi Arabia and sought to reduce its dependence on the Strait of Hormuz. In 2011, the construction of the Habshan–Fujairah Pipeline was completed, reaching its full capacity of 1.5 million barrels per day the following year. The main characteristic of this pipeline, which starts from Habshan and ends in Fujairah, was its potential to bypass the Strait of Hormuz, reaching the Gulf of Oman. It transports crude oil from the main onshore oil operations facilities of the Abu Dhabi Company for onshore oil operations to the main oil terminal of the country, the Furaijah<sup>117</sup>, for export via its offshore loading facilities. Additionally, it helps reduce shipping traffic in the Gulf. The UAE is also constructing underground caverns to store 42 million barrels of oil. Furthermore, another pipeline network is connected to the Fujairah terminal, starting from the Ruwaiss terminal, known as the Fujairah-Ruwaiss Pipeline.

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<sup>116</sup> Shabaneh, R. (2019). *Energy Policy*. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2019.111101>

<sup>117</sup> It is the world's third-largest bunkering hub and has 17 million barrels of refined products in storage.

Concerning the neighboring Qatar, which is among the largest LNG exporters globally, Doha has significantly developed its gas sector. Through a domestic pipeline network, it connects the giant North Field with the terminals of Qatargas I LNG Liquefaction Terminal and Ras Laffan I LNG Liquefaction Terminal, which are the main terminals. The first has the potential LNG production capacity of 10 million tons per annum and started its operation in 1999, while the second has a capacity of 6.6 Mtpa and began operations in 1999 as well. Qatar is handling a vast volume of LNG carriers, and it seeks to increase its exports by 2027. According to QatarEnergy, the production will reach 126 Mtpa, up from 77 Mtpa. The North Field Expansion refers to the further exploitation of the North Field, with the development of six mega LNG trains that will ramp up Qatar's liquefaction capacity.

Important pipelines also exist in North Africa. Algeria, based on its gas reserves, has constructed major pipelines connected to the energy-deprived European markets. Algerian gas was discovered in 1956 at the Hassi R'Mel field in the Sahara Desert. Since then, Algeria has made a significant contribution to the global and European energy markets, mainly to Italy and Spain. The oldest and largest pipeline is the Trans-Mediterranean Pipeline, connecting the gas field with Italy, passing through Tunisia and Sicily. Built in 1983, the capacity of the pipeline increased from 30.2 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year to 33.5 bcm in 2012. Another crucial pipeline connects Algeria with Spain, the Medgaz Pipeline, directly linking the Hassi R'Mel field with the Spanish city of Almeria. It was planned four years after the construction and operation of the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline in 1996, which connected Algeria and Spain via Morocco. The Medgaz Pipeline started operating in 2011, with its construction targeting the abolishment of transit fees and diplomatic power that the pipeline gave to Rabat. In November 2021, Algeria halted the gas supply of the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline due to a diplomatic event between Algiers and Rabat regarding the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. This event led to the further development of the Medgaz Pipeline. The capacity increased from 283 billion cubic feet per year to 378 Bcf/y at the end of 2021 after a third turbo compressor was put into service. In 2021, Algeria supplied 22 million cubic meters to Spain. In the same year, more natural gas was produced in Algeria than in any year since record-keeping began in 1980. Additionally, Algeria has significantly developed its LNG sector, operating four LNG terminals. In February 2022, Sonatrach, the national oil company of Algeria, announced plans to modernize facilities at the Skikda LNG terminal by adding new LNG storage capacity and upgrading its export loading facilities to accommodate

larger vessels<sup>118</sup>. The Arzew Gas Terminal is the largest terminal in Algeria, with a capacity of 8.2 Mtpa. According to Algeria, during the first quarter of 2023, it exported 2.8 million tons of LNG to European countries, making it the largest LNG exporter on the African continent and among the largest globally.

Italy also imports gas from Libya. Another pipeline connecting the Maghreb to Europe is the Green Stream Pipeline, linking the Libyan Wafa field with the Italian city of Caltanissetta via Sicily. It began operating in 2004 with a capacity of 11 billion cubic meters per year. However, the “Arab Spring” and political instability in Libya have affected the pipeline's operation. Finally, Libya's energy ambitions and goals are influenced by the ongoing civil war, despite its current freeze and the political separation of West and East Libya.

Lastly, the discovery of gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean in recent years has led to the proposal of pipeline construction projects connecting to the European markets. One such energy project is the construction of the EastMed Pipeline, intended to transport gas from Israel and Cyprus to Greece and Italy. The stakeholder states proceeded to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in 2017, and in 2020, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece signed the final Agreement, making it a Project of Common Interest for the EU. The project is estimated to cost \$6.7 billion, with an initial capacity of 10 Bcm per year and a planned increase to 20 Bcm in a second phase. However, its construction faces numerous challenges. Firstly, the high cost of the ambitious project, in combination with the limit gas reserves. Secondly, Turkish objections, as Ankara claims that the pipeline will pass through Turkey's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) without its permission and exclusion. Additionally, Turkey does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus as an independent state but as a region under Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus. Furthermore, there are efforts from Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt to exploit separately their gas reserves. Cairo is promoting a pipeline construction project to transport gas from the Levantine Basin to Egyptian LNG terminals, where Egypt plans to export it as LNG. In June, the European Commission, Israel, and Egypt signed a trilateral Memorandum of Understanding on the supply of Israeli gas via Egypt's LNG export infrastructure to the EU. Currently, Cairo operates two LNG terminals: the

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<sup>118</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2023, May 23). *In 2021, Algeria produced record amounts of natural gas*. Today in Energy. Available at <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=56580>

7.2 million mt/year Shell-operated Idku facility and the smaller Eni-operated 5 million mt/year Damietta plant, with ambitions to become a regional gas hub.

The pipeline network plays a crucial role in the geopolitics and energy sectors. The Wider Middle East has many significant pipelines that supply global markets. Currently, the expansion of LNG has created new opportunities with the development of the sector and the construction of terminals. However, the discovery of new fields and technological advancements have provided fertile ground for new energy projects and the further exploitation of reserves.

## 5. Climate Change

The extensive burning of fossil fuels, established during the Industrial Revolution, has led to numerous environmental consequences. Large quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases have entered the atmosphere, overwhelming the Earth's capacity to absorb them. Despite the gradual emergence of climate change events, states continued to rely on fossil fuels as a driving force for their development. Human activities, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, contribute significantly to environmental challenges. Annually, around 30 billion tons of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere. Methane concentrations have surged to more than 2.5 times the pre-industrial level over the course of the 20th century. Additionally, nitrous oxide concentrations have increased by approximately 20% since the Industrial Revolution began. These trends underscore the substantial impact of human actions on greenhouse gas emissions, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable practices. According to the United Nations, the combustion of fossil fuels generates greenhouse gas emissions that act like a blanket encircling the Earth. This blanket traps the sun's heat, leading to elevated temperatures, impacting the climate, and setting off a chain reaction. The situation is further exacerbated by the destruction of forests, whether through fires or deforestation. This adds to the environmental challenges we face. The consequences of our reliance on fossil fuels are becoming more evident, underscoring the urgent need for sustainable alternatives to mitigate the impact on our planet.

The impacts of climate change vary, with noticeable effects in the Wider Middle East across various sectors. One of the primary consequences is the global temperature rise, leading to

prolonged periods of warmth. Since the Industrial Revolution, the global temperature has increased by 1.1 degrees Celsius. Consequently, we witness events like ice melting, the disappearance of permafrost areas, and the shrinking of glaciers. Notably, the North Pole has lost a significant portion of its area, and permafrost areas in Siberia, Greenland, Canada and no longer exist. This, in turn, has contributed to a rise in sea levels and an ongoing increase in sea temperatures. The escalating global temperatures also lead to the emergence of tropical cyclones in regions where they were previously uncommon. Additionally, climate change disrupts rainfall patterns, reducing them and causing various issues such as prolonged droughts and a decline in underground freshwater. These changes bring about social impacts, including the displacement of communities and health risks, as well as economic consequences due to financial losses. These issues have become more apparent in recent years as climate change has triggered global awareness, prompted political interventions, and raised security concerns.

The Wider Middle East has not escaped the effects of climate change. From the oases of North Africa to the coastal cities along the Arabian Gulf, communities are grappling with the tangible impacts of a warming climate. In the heart of this transformation, the Middle East, and North Africa face unique challenges.

Additionally, to address the effects of climate change, the states in the region are attempting to adopt new strategic plans and transform their economic and social sectors under the new circumstances. Simultaneously, there are efforts from developed states to reduce fossil fuel usage initially and eventually phase it out, replacing it with green energy and its derivatives.

Socially and economically, the consequences are equally profound. Displacement, whether due to extreme weather events or resource scarcity, places strain on communities and governments. The intricate geopolitics of the region are further complicated as nations navigate shared challenges and potential conflicts arising from the impacts of climate change.

### 5.1. Impacts of Climate Change to the Wider Middle East and the Energy Sector

The subsystem of the Wider Middle East, which holds one of the highest positions in the energy and hydrocarbons sector, is also grappling with the challenges of climate change. The combustion

of hydrocarbons, sourced from North Africa and the Middle East, has contributed to the increase in carbon dioxide. While the burning of natural gas has a lesser contribution to emissions compared to oil and coal, its exploitation releases significant volumes of methane, a gas that significantly contributes to climate change and lingers in the atmosphere for almost 100 years. Furthermore, there is a high usage of oil and gas in the Wider Middle East, particularly in the Gulf, where states have among the highest per capita dioxide emissions. Qatar holds the first position globally, followed by Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE in sixth position, Saudi Arabia in eighth, and Oman in ninth. Specifically, in 2021, Qatar consumed 35.59 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per capita, Bahrain 26.66, Kuwait 24.97, UAE 21.79, Saudi Arabia 18.7, and Oman 17.92. Currently, this vast subsystem is confronting numerous challenges posed by climate change, with its states endeavoring to transform their economic structure and usher in a new era.

The Wider Middle East is a highly sensitive region due to its unique characteristics. However, this subsystem is facing the harsh impacts of climate change in various forms that can significantly affect both states and the population. The countries of the region, especially Arabic-speaking ones, are among the world's most exposed states to the accelerating impacts of human-caused climate change<sup>119</sup>. Primarily, the rising global temperature is influencing the Wider Middle East, a region that has traditionally experienced extreme heat conditions. This leads to more frequent and intense heatwaves, impacting key sectors such as agriculture and tourism, which serve as the economic drivers for many states, including Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon. Specifically, in 2021, heatwaves in Oman, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Kuwait reached temperatures exceeding 50 degrees Celsius.

Additionally, the phenomenon of dust storms and droughts has intensified in recent years, exacerbating the situation. Moreover, there has been a reduction in rainfall rates, resulting in prolonged periods of drought that significantly impact the agricultural sector, as underground water resources are not being replenished. Water scarcity is a major concern in the dry and desert environment of the region. While the vast region has historically faced freshwater shortages,

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<sup>119</sup> Wehrey, F., Dargin, J., Mehdi, Z., Muasher, M., Yahya, M., Kayssi, I., Hassan, Z., Andrews, M., Madain, M., Al-Mailam, M., Hamzawy, A., Yerkes, S., Clasen, H., & Yabi, G. (2023, July 06). *Climate Change and Vulnerability in the Middle East*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/07/06/climate-change-and-vulnerability-in-middle-east-pub-90089>

climate change is creating new challenges, further complicating the situation as freshwater is a non-renewable resource. Over previous decades, states developed exploitation systems and drilled wells to tap into underground freshwater resources. Notable examples include Libya's Great Man-Made River project, which transported fresh water from the south to the north, and Saudi Arabia's efforts with the assistance of ARAMCO. However, the underground reserves of freshwater have dwindled. Wasteful and extensive water usage, particularly in Saudi Arabia, has depleted underground resources, and in Libya, resources are rapidly disappearing due to evaporation from open reservoirs and unsustainable extraction, due to the political instability and the internal conflict. On another note, some states control the waters of crucial rivers and manipulate their flow. For example, Turkey controls the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and has constructed dams that affect their flow<sup>120</sup>. After the expansion of the Kurds in Syria, Turkey proceeded to the further limitation of the stream, to weaken them. Similarly, tensions arise between Egypt and Ethiopia due to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam construction, especially as Egypt heavily depends on the Nile for 97% of its water needs. The “Arab Spring” in Egypt motivated Ethiopia to proceed to its construction. At full capacity, the huge hydroelectric dam – 1.8 kilometers long and 145 meters high – could generate more than 5,000 megawatts<sup>121</sup>. Iraq also faces a significant threat, with an estimated 25% loss of fresh water in the next ten years, potentially leading to increased deforestation, expanding deserts, and uninhabitable regions by the end of the century. This raises the likelihood of “water wars.” By 2050, the entire Gulf region could experience a 50% reduction in water availability per capita.

Another impact of climate change in the Wider Middle East is the gradual rise in sea levels. This poses a direct threat to coastal regions, including vulnerable areas in North Africa, as well as cities like Jeddah, Dammam, and Beirut. The two countries in the Middle East and North Africa region most susceptible to sea level rise are Egypt and Iraq, primarily due to their deltaic areas<sup>122</sup>. This

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<sup>120</sup> Historically, the management of water resources from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers has been a source of tension in the region.

<sup>121</sup> Al Jazeera. (2023, September 10). *Filling of Grand Renaissance Dam on the Nile complete, Ethiopia says*. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/10/filling-of-grand-renaissance-dam-on-the-nile-complete-ethiopia-says>

<sup>122</sup> Wehrey, F., Dargin, J., Mehdi, Z., Muasher, M., Yahya, M., Kayssi, I., Hassan, Z., Andrews, M., Madain, M., Al-Mailam, M., Hamzawy, A., Yerkes, S., Clasen, H., & Yabi, G. (2023, July 06). *Climate Change and Vulnerability in*



could result in saltwater intrusion, posing a threat to agriculture and freshwater sources. Coastal erosion and the risk of flooding also increase with the rise in sea levels. The elevation of sea levels will have catastrophic consequences for various sectors. It is estimated that, in Saudi Arabia alone, nearly 200,000 people are expected to be exposed to persistent coastal flooding by 2050.

Additionally, climate change brings about extreme weather events such as tropical storms, floods, and severe dust storms. In recent years, unprecedented occurrences of extreme weather events have taken place. For instance, in 2018, flash floods affected several regions in Tunisia, while in 2019, parts of Iraq, Iran, and Jordan experienced floods. Heavy rains in various regions led to rivers overflowing, and in 2020, Algeria faced similar challenges. In June 2022, Pakistan faced numerous disruptions from floods, causing billions in damage and claiming the lives of more than 1,700 people. Furthermore, on September 10, 2023, Libya was severely impacted by Hurricane Daniel. The number of confirmed deaths increased from 4,006 to 4,014, with 8,500 individuals unaccounted for. Derna and surrounding districts – the most severely hit areas after the collapse of two dams – reported damage to over 2,217 buildings, totaling to about \$19 billion in infrastructure losses<sup>123</sup>. These events highlight the escalating challenges posed by extreme weather events, underscoring the need for comprehensive strategies to address and mitigate their impacts.

The aforementioned facts highlight the main impacts of climate change into the analyzed region, which in turn create additional problems for the local population, leading to displacement. Some major issues include health problems for the population caused by heatwaves and extreme weather events, the destruction of agriculture resulting in food insecurity due to heatwaves and water scarcity, and limitations in the tourism sector, leading to economic impacts. Consequently, it is very likely that migration flows will increase. Currently, there has been an increase in flows to the Maghreb region. Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia have received thousands of migrants from Sahel and West African countries. An estimated 1.5 million Tunisians reside abroad, with 80% settled in Europe (as of 2018). In 2021, almost 2,000 people died or went missing on the central and western Mediterranean routes, while about 1,000 died or went missing on the sea route from

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*the Middle East*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/07/06/climate-change-and-vulnerability-in-middle-east-pub-90089>

<sup>123</sup> OCHA. (2023, September 28). *Libya Hurricane Daniel: Situation Report 2 - 27/09/2023*. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/libya-hurricane-daniel-situation-report-2-27092023>

northwest Africa to the Canary Islands. Hundreds of migrants also lost their lives to appalling conditions in the vast Saharan desert, even before reaching North African countries and attempting the crossing to Europe<sup>124</sup>. Notably, after the catastrophic Hurricane Daniel, nearly 7,000 migrants from Libya and Tunisia arrived at the Italian island of Lampedusa. According to Italy's Interior Ministry, more than 127,000 migrants have reached Italy by sea so far this year, nearly double the number for the same period last year.

The prevailing conditions compel states to establish effective climate resilience measures. However, as analyzed in the first chapter, there exists a significant gap between the prosperous and struggling states in the region. Prosperous states have already initiated the development of centralized plans for managing climate change, such as Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030," as they strive to enhance their sectors and infrastructure. Conversely, most states lack economic prosperity, with some, like Syria, classified as "failed states." Consequently, they suffer from a lack of proper infrastructure and possess a weak public sector that is ill-equipped to respond to new circumstances. Importantly, climate change has prompted a collective effort to reduce hydrocarbon usage. Developed states, the United Nations, and the European Union are striving to achieve independence from hydrocarbons. Petroleum and gas-exporting states have relied on hydrocarbon exports for decades to sustain their economies and prosperity. However, they are now attempting to diversify their economies and develop renewable energy sources to adapt to changing global demands and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

## 5.2. Clean Energy, Green Strategies, and New Potentials

Climate change has introduced new circumstances into the world, making it clear that the production and consumption of hydrocarbons must be limited and eventually stopped, with a shift towards renewable energy sources. Additionally, significant changes are required for both

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<sup>124</sup> Wehrey, F., Dargin, J., Mehdi, Z., Muasher, M., Yahya, M., Kayssi, I., Hassan, Z., Andrews, M., Madain, M., Al-Mailam, M., Hamzawy, A., Yerkes, S., Clasen, H., & Yabi, G. (2023, July 06). *Climate Change and Vulnerability in the Middle East*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/07/06/climate-change-and-vulnerability-in-middle-east-pub-90089>

consumer and producer states. This perspective has been reinforced by the contributions of the United Nations through agreements and voting procedures, such as the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, the Paris Agreement of 2016, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These international agreements advocate for the reduction of emissions and the curtailment of hydrocarbon usage through binding targets and climate action, aiming to mitigate the impacts of the impending crisis. The global community recognizes the urgency of transitioning towards sustainable practices to address the challenges posed by climate change and achieve a more environmentally sustainable future.

The overwhelming majority, including the oil and gas exporting states of the Wider Middle East, adopted the aforementioned goals. This had a significant impact on the oil and gas producers of the region, as they had historically based their revenues on energy exports, establishing Sovereign Wealth Funds centered around oil and gas. Exceptions to this were Bahrain, with limited oil and gas resources, and the United Arab Emirates, which had successfully diversified their economies by expanding into sectors such as services and trading, unlike some other states. To sustain their prosperity and navigate the financial impacts of new climate change terms, the states of the region devised new green strategies and plans, focusing on revenue diversification, while their reliance on oil and gas exports was proved with the catastrophic results of COVID-19. They recognized the need to reduce their dependence on oil and gas exports, moving away from an energy strategy centered on exploiting every last quantity. Simultaneously, states acknowledged the significant contribution of renewable energy sources, including nuclear energy. Renewables make use of existing geographical advantages, for example solar power can take advantage of the Gulf's sun-hours, which are comparably longer than those of many European countries where solar technology has to function with considerably fewer sun-hours per day<sup>125</sup>. Moreover, there is a push to limit domestic energy consumption, particularly in the Gulf, utilizing surplus quantities for exports. However, while these goals are on the states' agendas, they cannot be realized immediately due to the world's dependence on oil and gas. Additionally, as evidenced after the COVID-19 era and the resurgence of significant energy consumption, as long as there is demand for hydrocarbons,

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<sup>125</sup> El-Katiri, L. (2013). *Energy Sustainability in the Gulf States: The Why and the How*. Oxford Institute for Energy Studies.

the oil and gas-exporting states of the Wider Middle East will continue or even increase their production.

The UAE was among the first states to recognize the changing circumstances and took proactive measures to adopt new green principles. In January 2012, Sheikh Mohammed launched the Green Economy initiative under the slogan: A green economy for sustainable development. The UAE proceeded to implement various green plans, with “Vision 2021” aiming to transform the country into a global hub for the exports and re-exports of green products and technologies. It also sought to become a successful model of the new green economy, emphasizing environmental protection. A crucial aspect of the UAE's agenda was its transformation into a competitive regional and global player. “Vision 2021” focused on developing renewable energy sources, investing in green energy and technology, constructing environmentally efficient houses and buildings, promoting organic agriculture, and ensuring the rational use of water resources, electricity, and natural resources while also promoting waste recycling. In 2017, the UAE launched the “UAE Energy Strategy 2050” and updated its agenda for 2030. The goals include tripling the contribution of renewable and clean energy sources, creating green jobs, and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. Additionally, the Dubai Clean Energy Strategy plays a significant role in their commitment to sustainable practices. The UAE possesses abundant renewable energy sources, operates nuclear reactors, and has successfully diversified its economy.

Saudi Arabia has followed a similar green transition to the UAE, and the collapse of global oil prices during 2014-2020 played a significant role. Riyadh's revenues were reduced from \$737 billion to \$475 billion during this period. In 2016, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced, “Vision 2030,” a multidimensional initiative. “Vision 2030” is based on the admission that the economy should be diversified, targeting to the sectors of technology and services<sup>126</sup>. This shift was influenced by the high government benefits, the anticipated dependence on oil consumption, and the collapsed oil prices. The initiative also aims to gradually reduce the number of foreign workers in the Kingdom<sup>127</sup>. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced a monumental green project—the construction of Neom City on the Red Sea coast of northwest Saudi Arabia. This project, valued at \$500 billion, is characterized by its high technological progress, with its energy

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<sup>126</sup> Marshall, T. (2021). *The Power of Geography*. The UK: Elliott & Thompson Ltd, 132.

<sup>127</sup> It is estimated that nearly 12,000,000 immigrants live in Saudi Arabia.

needs covered by 100% renewable energy sources. In a broader context, these projects focus on the development of green energy sources and the reduction of domestic consumption. Sustainability is a fundamental aspect of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, with a commitment to achieving a Net Zero future by 2060. With a commitment to clean energy and sustainability, the Kingdom is leading the charge in tackling energy and climate challenges with innovative solutions such as the Circular Carbon Economy (CCE) and an increasingly diverse energy mix, in which 50% of energy will come from renewable sources by 2030<sup>128</sup>. Riyadh also possesses high solar potential, with solar radiation in the Kingdom among the highest in the world. Additionally, in 2021, Saudi Arabia announced the Saudi Green Initiative, which focuses on environmental protection, planting 10 billion trees, able to absorb carbon dioxide, improve air quality, facilitate energy transition, and enhance economic sustainability in the country.

On the other hand, Qatar has also announced the “Qatar National Vision 2030” for environmental sustainability and economic diversification. Kuwait has launched “Vision 2035” since 2010, aiming for a diversified economy and reduced dependence on oil exports<sup>129</sup>. The development of technology includes the significant construction of the smart city of South Saad Al Abdullah city. Oman has unveiled “Vision 2040,” which seeks to enhance non-oil sectors in the GDP, with a focus on green economy initiatives, strategies, and renewable energy production in new infrastructure projects. Due to its instability, Iraq cannot plan a long-term green energy project. However, in February 2023, it announced collaboration with the USA to rapidly execute gas capture projects<sup>130</sup>, working toward a goal of zero routine flaring by 2030 to fulfill the Global Methane Pledge. In 2022, Jordan adopted the “Economic Modernization Vision” focusing on the “Green Economy” and “Sustainable Resources.” Amman has developed renewable energy sources and is close to achieving the target of the “Jordan Energy Strategy (2020–2030),” aiming for 31% of green energy through solar and wind energy by 2030, currently reaching 29%. Moving to the Maghreb region, Egypt has announced “Vision 2030” and the “Sustainable Energy Strategy 2035,” aiming for a diversified, competitive, and balanced economy. It seeks to develop its green energy

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<sup>128</sup> Vision 2030. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Available at <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/progress/environment-nature/>

<sup>129</sup> It comprises nearly half of Kuwait's GDP, around 95% of exports, and approximately 90% of government revenue.

<sup>130</sup> Iraq has the second-highest level of gas flaring in the world.

supply from photovoltaic, wind, and hydropower sources from 20% to 42% by 2035. Egypt operates the giant Benban Solar Park with a 1.6 MW potential. Tunisia underwent constitutional changes in 2014 and established several government bodies to address climate change actively. The country is actively pursuing a shift toward renewable energy, given its significant potential in solar and wind energy. Currently, Tunisia operates three wind farms and one solar power plant. However, the lack of investments and capital has hindered progress toward the target of increasing the share of domestic energy from solar and wind power from 2% to 30% by 2030. Morocco has announced its “National Climate Plan” to create a green economy and reduce emissions. Significant steps have been taken, exploiting solar and wind potentials. Currently under construction are several projects with a combined capacity of roughly 4.6 gigawatts. Minister Leila Benali explained that about 203 megawatts of additional capacity from renewable sources were put into service between 2021 and 2023. Additionally, Rabat operates the other giant Noor Ouarzazate Solar Complex, and Morocco supply electricity Spain via a subsea cable.

Finally, two significant projects are set to take place in the near future. The first is a proposed project involving the connection of Israel, Cyprus, and Greece through a subsea cable, known as the Great Sea Interconnector. Initially proposed in the early 2010s, this project aims to bring green energy into European markets. With a total length of 1,208 km, it will transport 2,000 MW from green energy and gas sources in Israel and Cyprus. The second project is the electric connection between Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece, marked by the construction of the EuroAfrica Interconnector. Currently entering the construction phase, which is expected to last 12 to 24 months, it will start from the Egyptian Damietta, pass through Cypriot Kofinou, proceed to Crete, and finally reach the Hellenic mainland. This interconnector will be the longest and deepest subsea cable in the world, with a total length of 1,396 km, carrying 2,000 MW and costing an estimated €2.5 billion. It holds significant importance with the exploitation of Egyptian and Cypriot gas reserves.

As mentioned, there exists a gap between prosperous states and weaker ones facing numerous challenges and deficiencies. For example, due to its political stalemate, Libya is the only country among the 196 signatories of the 2016 Paris Agreement that has not submitted a Nationally Determined Contribution to reduce emissions and protect its society from climate impacts. Tunisia and Egypt also face significant financial limitations. There is a current trend in the Wider Middle East region towards the construction of clean energy infrastructures and the development of

renewable energy sources. Moreover, there is promotion for the construction or transformation of pipelines to transport hydrogen and ammonia, although these forms of energy are still in an initial stage. On the other hand, the oil and gas-exporting states will continue to exploit their resources as long as there is demand. Despite developed states announcing their intent to become independent from oil and gas, the emerging China and India actively seek energy resources and remain among the largest consumers.

## 6. The Power of Energy

The power of oil and gas in shaping the modern world is decisive, transcending mere economic significance as it expands into geopolitical, strategic, and societal realms. For over a century, these hydrocarbons have fueled the engines of progress, propelling industrial revolutions, driving economic growth, and underpinning the very fabric of global energy systems. The allure of power emanates not only from the vast energy potential locked within fossil fuels but also from the intricate web of influence woven across nations and continents. Many states, with proper management, have prospered by producing oil and gas, transforming into regional and global players. Their resources not only grant them economic power but also geopolitical influence. By leveraging their power, they can influence global oil prices, and when cooperating with other oil and gas exporter states on production rates, they can exert pressure on even global powers. On the other hand, great powers and global entities, to secure a constant flow of energy and stable prices vital for their development, tried to establish warm relations with oil and gas-producing states. Consequently, states such as the USA and the United Kingdom gradually became deeply involved in the domestic affairs of oil-exporting states, exerting high influence, sometimes resorting to illegal and underground actions, such as supporting coups and revolutions against unfriendly regimes. Lastly, many wars have taken place in previous decades over the energy sector, with internal coalitions forming.

As mentioned above, the discovery of oil dramatically changed the importance of some initially less significant countries. For instance, Saudi Arabia, with its vast desert, established close relations with the USA and became the world's major oil leader. Similarly, Qatar, once among the

poorest Arab states, became one of the largest LNG exporters after the exploitation of gas. Initially, the exploitation of resources provided them with financial power, enabling a complete transformation of their economies. However, proper management was a major issue. For example, during and after the first oil shock in 1973, oil prices sharply increased, providing high revenues to Arab oil exporters. However, mismanagement of these revenues created financial stalemates for these states, prompting them to improve financial management, develop Sovereign Wealth Funds, and establish oil revenue banks. Gradually, the states achieved significant prosperity due to oil and gas exports, but they also became highly dependent on the exports of “black gold.” Their prosperity empowered them to transform their social sectors, providing more public benefits to citizens, developing modern infrastructures, and implementing numerous investment plans. For instance, Libya, under Qaddafi, constructed a vast pipeline system called the Great Man-Made River to carry freshwater from the south to the north. Saudi Arabia also developed the exploitation of underground freshwater systems. These infrastructures and modern cities like Abu Dhabi or Doha could not have been realized without the development of the oil and gas sector. Additionally, during the 1970s, oil-exporting states proceeded to nationalize the oil sector. Consequently, countries like Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, etc., directly controlled their oil resources, keeping profits without intervention from other states or foreign oil companies. On the other hand, the “Resource Curse” theory<sup>131</sup> emerged, where overreliance on oil revenues hindered governance, fostered corruption, and created financial stalemates. Consequently, states with vast oil and gas reserves, having also nationalized the sectors, significantly increased their geopolitical balance, exerting power in the energy sector by controlling a major percentage of the oil and gas market. This potential allowed Arab oil-exporting states to impose their terms during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, gain diplomatic leverage for the Palestinian issue and limit assistance to Israel. Currently, strong influence is exerted by the policies of organization of OPEC and the coalition of OPEC+. Additionally, when crises occurred in major oil-exporting states, such as in Iran in 1978-1979 during and after the revolution, with its isolation and the imposition of sanctions, Iran had limited access to the oil market. Furthermore, the Gulf wars of the 1980s and 1991 resulted in the

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<sup>131</sup> The theory supports that countries with an abundance of non-renewable natural resources experience stagnant economic growth or even economic contraction.



destruction of Iraq's oil sector. Consequently, oil shortages occurred, leading to energy insecurity and high prices due to regional and internal crises.

In contrast, a consumer state can face plenty of challenges, with its main goal being to secure a constant flow of oil and gas, which are vital for its development. Initially, as well, it has no or limited resources, gradually becoming dependent on hydrocarbon imports. Main issues for this kind of state are a constant flow and stable price, which are often regulated by agreements. Consumer states are vulnerable to geopolitical disruptions in oil-producing regions. This vulnerability can shape foreign policy decisions as these nations seek to secure stable energy supplies, sometimes leading to strategic alliances or conflicts. The importing states are obligated to establish warm and close relations with the energy-exporting states and increase their influence. Moreover, foreign oil companies seek to establish close relations with rich states with oil, such as the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which later became BP and exploited the oil fields of the damaged Iraq. This fact happened with the USA and Saudi Arabia and UK with the other Gulf states after WWII. However, there were cases where a new political power of an oil-exporting state followed a threatening or aggressive policy against the consumer states. In that case, the consumer states tried to involve themselves in the domestic issues of the oil-exporting state or through sanctions they singled it out from the global chessboard. For instance, after the revolution in Iran, the West tried later to establish again a pro-Western government, without success. Also, for many decades Libya was a threat to the West, while under the auspice of the USA sanctions were imposed and Tripoli was set aside. Additionally, when the oil-exporting states tried to change the circumstances for better benefits for them, there was intervention too. When Iran under Mossadegh tried to nationalize the oil sector, rapidly the USA and Great Britain mobilized and proceeded with Operation Ajax and Operation Boot to overthrow him, because it was a threat to their interests. Last but not least, there were occasions where foreign states exploited the resources and at the same time the state that owned them had fewer profits in contrast with the foreign state, such as in Libya under King Idris. Furthermore, there were cases when the consumer states found the proper opportunity to set aside regimes through war. In August of 1990, yet another of the century's dictators, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, invaded the neighboring country of Kuwait. His goal was not only the conquest of a sovereign state but also the capture of its riches. The prize was enormous. If successful, Iraq would become the world's leading oil power controlling 20% of proven oil reserves, and it would dominate both the Arab world and the Persian Gulf, where the bulk of the

planet's oil reserves is concentrated<sup>132</sup>. Despite the silent acceptance of the USA and the obvious support during the war with Iran during the 1980s, Washington mobilized and under the auspice of the UN, an international coalition liberated Kuwait, ousting Iraqi forces in January of 1991. As a result, Iraq, which was a major oil player, went out of the market. Additionally, another major oil player that is out of the market is Iran, which is a hostile state against the USA. As it has been discovered, there are cases of supporting rebels, militias, or coups when the regime follows an aggressive policy and sets in danger the oil market and global prices. On the other hand, in the last decades and after conflicts that set in danger the energy supply, the states are seeking to diversify their energy supplies, with both non-renewable and renewable energy sources. Finally, the consumer states often develop high technology, which is necessary for the exploration and exploitation of resources, a fact that the exporting states do not have. As a result, the first category states provide technological equipment to the second.

The ownership of oil carries great power, impacting not only the financial sector but also influencing the global political and social landscapes. The supply of oil and gas is necessary for the development of consumer states, while producer states have built their economies around them. The use of energy can also influence the geopolitics of a region and the energy security of many states, a fact that was evident during the two oil shocks in the 1970s. The oil and gas sectors are a vast and complicated markets, especially in recent years with the cooperation of OPEC and OPEC<sup>+</sup>, where the oil and gas industry has gained new potentials.

### 6.1. Role of OPEC, OAPEC, and OPEC<sup>+</sup>

The oil and gas sectors are not regulated solely by individual states or bilateral/multilateral agreements; instead, it is influenced by international organizations and coalitions, particularly in recent years. OPEC, OAPEC, and OPEC<sup>+</sup> have emerged in response to the challenges faced by oil-producing nations. Furthermore, their establishment aims to secure the interests of member nations and create stable price conditions.

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<sup>132</sup> Yergin, D. (1991). *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*. The USA: Simon & Schuster Ltd, 12.

After the oil discovery in the Middle East, foreign states began to deeply involve. Gradually, giant private oil companies entered into exploitation agreements with the rich oil states. In a general context, these agreements did not provide many benefits to the states, in contrast to the private companies, which earned high revenues. From the post-WWII period until the 1970s, seven giant private oil companies dominated the industry. The “Seven Sisters,” as they were referred to by Enrico Mattei, included the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (worked between 1908-1954, later becoming BP), Gulf Oil (active from 1901-1985, later acquired by Chevron), Royal Dutch Shell, Chevron, Exxon (later joined with Mobil), and Texaco (1901-2000, acquired by Chevron in 2001)<sup>133</sup>. Despite their initial competition, they managed to cooperate and regulate the oil sector, engaging in exploration and production activities. By the end of the 1950s, the Seven Sisters controlled over 98% of global oil production, forming an oligopoly and an effective cartel for the industry. In 1960, another major player, the Soviet Union, became more active in the oil market. The USSR increased its oil production and exports to Europe. Needing imports from abroad, the Soviet Union sold oil barrels at half the price compared to oil from the Middle East. The Seven Sisters lowered the prices affecting the global oil market and had a significant impact on the economies of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq. The revival of morale in Arab states, following the Suez Crisis and the rise of Nasser, the targeted continuous increase in oil production from USSR, prompted the oil-exporting countries to consider changing the circumstances. In 1960, under Kassem, Baathist Iraq proposed the creation of an international oil organization to secure the interests of the states. In September 1960, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Venezuela established the Organization of Oil Exporting States (OPEC). The main goals of OPEC were to form a common policy against private oil companies, increase diplomatic power, and secure more interests<sup>134</sup>. Other states later joined OPEC, including Indonesia in 1962, Libya in 1962, the United Arab Emirates in 1967, Algeria in 1969, Nigeria in 1971, Gabon in 1975, Angola in 2007, Equatorial Guinea in 2017, and Congo in 2018<sup>135</sup>. Additionally, Qatar became a member in 1962,

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<sup>133</sup> Yücel, B. C. (2019, October 7). *History of the Seven Sisters*. SYNERGY: Bilkent Energy Policy Research Center Newsletter. Available at <https://www.bilkenteprc.com/post/history-of-the-seven-sisters-baran-can-y%C3%BCcel>

<sup>134</sup> Naskou-Perraki, P., & Antonopoulos, K., & Sarigiannidis, M. (2019). *International Organizations*. Athens: Sakkoula Publications, 577.

<sup>135</sup> Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). (1960). OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves. Available at [https://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/data\\_graphs/330.htm](https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm)

and Ecuador in 1973, later withdrawing in 2019 and 2020. Gradually, OPEC became the most effective cartel, influencing the oil sector and playing a major role in global geopolitics and the economy due to oil dependence. OPEC controls 40% of global oil production and has vast reserves, with over 80% of global deposits belonging to its member states. Through its financial power, OPEC can influence the global energy landscape, as discussed further below.

Another international organization that has expanded into the oil sector is OAPEC, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries. OAPEC is a regional international organization for Arab oil-exporting states. In January 1968, Kuwait, the Kingdom of Libya at that time, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia established the organization in Beirut. The founding states recognized the significance of oil in the modern world, given the dependence on oil as the main source of revenues for Arab states. The establishment aimed at fostering close cooperation and coordination among the members, formulating a common policy, securing their interests, developing Arab national economies, and exploring potential joint ventures in the oil sector. By 1982 the membership of the Organization increased to eleven Arab oil exporting countries. Algeria, the Kingdom of Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE joined in 1970, following by Iraq and Syria in 1972, Egypt in 1973 and Tunisia in 1982<sup>136</sup>. OAPEC played a major and unpredictable role a few years after its establishment, particularly during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the last major conflict between Arabs and Israel. The war significantly enhanced the power of OAPEC and bestowed significant potential and importance on OPEC for the next decades. In response to the support from Western states, especially the United States, to Israel during the war, OAPEC declared an oil embargo on each state that supported Israel. The embargo was imposed on the USA, the Netherlands, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Subsequently, OAPEC announced a monthly cut in oil production by 5% and an increase in global oil prices to achieve their political goals. This led to the first oil shock the world experienced, with the production cut and increased prices quadrupling the price of a barrel. The oil crisis had a profound impact on the world, with Europe covering 80% of its energy needs from the Arab world<sup>137</sup>. It also adversely affected the US economy, which had become dependent on foreign oil, coinciding with the devaluation of the

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<sup>136</sup> Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). (1968). Available at <https://www.oapecorg.org/Home/About-Us/History>

<sup>137</sup> Sakkas, I. (2012). *Greece, Cyprus, and the Arab World 1947-1974*. Athens: Pataki Publications, 178.

dollar. This event was significant for the modern world, marking the first instance of oil being used as a weapon and Arab states adopting a common policy, setting aside their domestic competitions. OAPEC member states significantly increased their geopolitical importance and diplomatic and political potentials. On the other hand, consumer states recognized the importance of oil, their dependence on it, and the influence it granted to producer states. OAPEC's actions triggered a global energy crisis with far-reaching impacts on the global economy, altering the prevailing circumstances.

Lastly, a crucial factor that deeply influences the oil sector, along with OPEC, is the newly established coalition of OPEC<sup>+</sup>. The shale revolution in the USA changed the energy map. For many decades, the USA imported energy from other states. During the 2010s, the USA reached record levels of oil production, with the shale oil boom contributing significantly to overall output. Consequently, they not only became energy independent but also a major oil and gas exporter. The constant production and flow into the energy markets resulted in a continuous reduction of prices. In 2014, the price per barrel decreased from \$100 to \$77. This had a direct impact on the revenues of other petroleum-exporting states. OPEC, during these changed circumstances, struggled to stabilize prices, given the addition of many petroleum-exporter states to the energy map. Only Saudi Arabia, followed by the UAE and Kuwait, had the potential to reduce production and increase prices. The absence of oil from Venezuela had a major impact on OPEC, as Caracas was producing 3.3 million barrels per day at the end of the 1990s and less than 600,000 in 2019. In 2014, the Petroleum Minister of Saudi Arabia, Ali al-Naimi, recognized the importance of non-OPEC petroleum-exporting states and called for their cooperation and coordination<sup>138</sup>. However, the prices continue to fall, as well *the Economists* were described it as an oil war against “*Sheikhs and Shale*.” Shale gas and oil had many advantages, creating new dynamics in the industry. It was described as “short cycle” due to its low exploration and production costs, in contrast to the “long cycle” of traditional wells, which incurred higher costs and required more time. In 2016, the price of a barrel fell below \$30. There was not another option from the approach among Saudi Arabia and Russia, which were among the largest oil producers. Traditionally, they were rivals concerning

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<sup>138</sup> In November of 2014 he with Venezuelan minister Rafael Ramirez proceeded to private discussions with Mexican and Russian delegations.

the oil, but now it had brought them together<sup>139</sup>. In 2016, during the G20 meeting in China, Vladimir Putin discussed oil policy with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. At the end of 2016, OPEC members led by Saudi Arabia and 11 non-OPEC members, led by Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Oman, Mexico, Canada, Malaysia, Bahrain, Sudan, South Sudan, and Brunei, representing almost 10% of proven oil reserves, agreed on a new energy map. The agreement involved a production cut of 1.2 million barrels per day for OPEC and 558,000 for non-OPEC states. This arrangement became known as OPEC<sup>+</sup> or the Vienna Alliance. The cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Russia was vital for the oil industry. Saudi Arabia, a traditional ally of the USA started to have warmer relations with its traditional rival. When a Saudi official was asked about the warmer relations among Moscow and Riyadh and the reaction of Washington, he replied that “*Saudi Arabia had its own interests.*” In 2018 the global oil prices had been increased to 80\$ per barrel. Frequently, the coalition proceeds to meetings. OPEC and OPEC<sup>+</sup> countries combined produced about 59% of global oil production, 48 million b/d in 2022, and so influence global oil market balances and oil prices now more than ever<sup>140</sup>. During the COVID-19 era, there was a constant fall in oil prices, and after the pandemic's limitation, the coalition is attempting to stabilize and gain revenues by cutting production. More recently, on April 2, 2023, OPEC<sup>+</sup> members agreed to cut oil production by 1.2 million b/d until the end of 2023, which is in addition to production cuts already in place<sup>141</sup>. OPEC and OPEC<sup>+</sup> wield significant power in the oil industry, influencing almost every sector, and together they control 90% of the global proven oil reserves.

The aforementioned organizations and coalition play a major role in the oil industry. Through OPEC, the first oil shock took place, while the earlier OPEC regulated oil production and prices. However, the arrival of more petroleum-exporting states and the shale revolution created new circumstances. The shale revolution in the USA, with its energy independence and its increased hydrocarbon exports, and the collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Russia, played a significant

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<sup>139</sup> Yergin, D. (2021). *The New Map*. The USA: Penguin Books, 281.

<sup>140</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2023, May 9). *What is OPEC<sup>+</sup> and how is it different from OPEC?* Today in Energy. Available at <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=56420>

<sup>141</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2023, May 9). *What is OPEC<sup>+</sup> and how is it different from OPEC?* Today in Energy. Available at <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=56420>

role. This established cooperation and coordination among OPEC and non-OPEC states, forming OPEC<sup>+</sup>, which currently controls prices and production rates in the industry.

## 7. Importance of Wider Middle East for the International Community

The Wider Middle East holds great importance for the world, and the international community has numerous interests in the region. Perpetually, states on the global or regional chessboard seek power and strive to increase it by securing their interests. These interests vary, and the extensive subsystem of the Wider Middle East offers many opportunities due to its significant position. Taking into consideration the aforementioned chapters, the international community has numerous interests and benefits in the region. Consequently, many regional powers, including historical actors like the then Great Britain and France through the Mandate regimes after WWI, the USA and the USSR during the Cold War and the era of spheres of influence, and regional powers like Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia post the Arab Spring instability, have been involved in the region. Currently, China is also attempting to enhance its influence through infrastructure projects and addressing its energy needs.

Initially, vast oil and gas reserves are in the Wider Middle East, primarily in the Persian Gulf. The 12 largest oil fields in the Middle East are situated in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Iran, Oman, and the UAE, producing more than 15 million barrels of oil daily<sup>142</sup>. Riyadh, Tehran, and Baghdad possess some of the largest proven oil reserves globally. Generally, the Middle East holds 48.3% of the world's oil reserves, a significant percentage. On the other hand, North Africa is also an important energy region, especially considering Libya's oil reserves. The vast region also has significant gas reserves, primarily located in the Persian Gulf, with Iran and Qatar holding among the world's largest gas reserves through the North Dome/South Pars fields, which represent 8% of the world's total gas reserves. Algeria contributes 2% to the global gas reserves. Lastly, in the Eastern Mediterranean, often referred to as a dead energy sea, important discoveries of gas reserves

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<sup>142</sup> Biceroglu, E., Canik, M. E., & Dursun, A. (2023, August 11). *Middle East plays vital role in global oil production*. Anadolu Agency. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/middle-east-plays-vital-role-in-global-oil-production/2965593>

have occurred in Israel and Egypt in recent decades, with ongoing exploration activities. Specifically, Cairo is the fifth-largest holder of proven natural gas reserves in Africa, with 77.2 trillion cubic feet, while Tel Aviv holds 1,087 billion cubic feet. The importance of energy is increasing with the construction of pipelines connecting fields directly to markets and the use of oil tankers and LNG carriers, allowing transportation by sea to global destinations. Despite efforts to address climate change and adopt measures to reduce it, many states, especially major powers like the USA, China, Russia, and other emerging powers, are not yet ready for a green transition, with renewable energy sources playing a complementary role. Consequently, these states have numerous energy needs, and China and India have announced plans to limit hydrocarbon consumption after 2060. Lastly, North Africa possesses significant uranium reserves, generating substantial interest for nuclear powers, and other major natural resources.

Also, the Wider Middle East serves as a geographical crossroads connecting Europe, Africa, and Asia. Its geographical position provides many advantages favoring the maritime sector, with major chokepoints that directly offer access to the Atlantic and Indian Ocean through the Mediterranean, Black, Red, and Arabian Seas. The Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Suez Canal, the Turkish Straits, and the Strait of Gibraltar enhance maritime activity, avoiding circumnavigation around the Cape of Good Hope. Many important ports have emerged in the region. Finally, the sea routes that the region provides have been established as main maritime pathways, making the region vital for maritime interests.

The Wider Middle East is marked by financial weaknesses, humanitarian crises, and numerous conflicts, some of which are long-term. Civil wars, militias, local warlords, terrorist organizations, and competition among regional and global powers contribute to instability. Many countries of the region are not act real control of their territories. Failed states pose security issues for the international community, leading to increased refugee and migration flows to nearby prosperous states. The presence of terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, the Houthis, and “ISIS,” has significant implications for global security, affecting energy, maritime, and commercial sectors. The expansion of these organizations into North Africa, the Sinai Peninsula, and South Yemen further compounds the security challenges, impacting vital interests. The deserts, previously of lesser strategic importance, have gained significance due to difficulties in control, providing opportunities for terrorist organizations and irregular trade. The events of September 11, 2001



marked a significant shift in the region's importance, particularly in relation to the rise and support of terrorist organizations in the Wider Middle East.

Considering the aforementioned facts, the international community has a vested interest in the region, which is pivotal for energy, other natural resources, maritime, and security concerns. Moreover, it represents a vast trading market capable of importing products, technological equipment, and, given the conflict zones and regional competition, military equipment. The proliferation of nuclear weapons is another critical issue, especially concerning Iran's nuclear program. The international community advocates for the limitation of nuclear weapons, recognizing the interconnected relations within the region. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia and Turkey may follow suit. The region stands as a sensitive subsystem with nuclear ambitions and regional competitions.

### 7.1. The USA

The United States of America has a strong and long-term presence in the region of the Wider Middle East due to strategic, economic, security, and energy reasons. Their presence intensified during WWII, and after the war, Washington expanded its influence in many states. The main goals of U.S. policy were to secure spheres of influence, limit Soviet expansion, and ensure energy imports from the region. After the collapse of the USSR, the USA became the sole superpower, and rival states in the region, such as Libya and Syria, shifted their policies. The vast subsystem holds great importance for the USA, but in recent years, there has been a shift in Washington's policy.

For many decades, the USA imported huge quantities of oil from the Wider Middle East, primarily from Saudi Arabia and Iraq, building a strategic relationship with Riyadh for the constant flow of oil. However, the USA achieved energy independence in recent years due to the shale revolution, bringing new dynamics to the energy sector. In 2020, the United States became a net exporter of petroleum for the first time since 1949. Currently, only about 12% of total U.S. petroleum imports

and 12% of U.S. crude oil imports come from Persian Gulf countries in 2022<sup>143</sup>. Specifically, Saudi Arabia represents 7%, and Iraq represents 4%. Imports of oil from the region have been limited due to the shale revolution, and the constant production and export of US shale oil led to a collapse in oil prices. This competition between the USA, the Gulf monarchies, and Russia influenced relations, as Russia aimed to further lower oil prices to limit US production. The “*Shale vs. Sheiks*” oil war impacted the relations of the USA and their Gulf allies. Additionally, after the COVID-19 era, the USA dominated in the gas sector, surpassing Doha to become the largest LNG producer. Despite reducing their dependence on hydrocarbons from the Wider Middle East, the USA still maintains energy interests in the region. Many private oil companies, such as ExxonMobil, Chevron, and ConocoPhillips, are active in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, despite the US withdrawal from Northern Syria, some troops remain in the oil fields. The USA retains a strong presence in the energy sector of the Broader Middle East.

Additionally, after the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, the region gained importance due to security issues. Failed states, militias, and deserts could create conditions conducive to the establishment of terrorist organizations. The al-Qaeda attack prompted a reaction from the USA, leading to the war on terrorism and any state supporting it. The USA initiated campaigns in Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011, aiming to establish modern states under democratic auspices, eliminating long-standing authoritarian and terrorist regimes. The USA established military bases in various regions and deployed more troops and military equipment. However, these campaigns yielded opposite results, catalyzing these states. The efforts to promote democratic governance in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya failed, leading to the resurgence of armed conflicts. Meanwhile, the USA incurred significant financial losses, military equipment, and troop casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq without achieving the intended results. As an Afghan proverb goes regarding the US occupation, “*You have the watches. We have the time.*” In August of 2021, the US military left Kabul in a state of confusion whose images recall those disastrous withdrawals from Saigon in 1975, when the situation turned painfully upside down<sup>144</sup>. Discussions about US withdrawal from

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<sup>143</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2023, October 2). *Oil and petroleum products explained: Oil imports and exports*. Available at <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/oil-and-petroleum-products/imports-and-exports.php>

<sup>144</sup> Kepel, G. (2021). *Le Prophète et la Pandémie*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 50.

long-term conflict zones occurred under the Obama administration, but actual withdrawals did not materialize. The Trump administration withdrew US troops from Iraq, Syria, and later Afghanistan, allowing the Taliban to gain control of the abandoned regions. Viral images of Afghan people at Kabul airport, some clinging to the wheels of planes to leave Afghanistan, highlighted the desperation. Despite withdrawal from certain areas, the region remains vital for the USA due to security and financial reasons. The USA maintains an active presence through military bases, naval facilities, and air facilities, along with alliances with regional states such as Pakistan, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iraq.

Currently, among the primary objectives of the US agenda is limiting Iranian and Chinese influence in the region, especially the latter. The Iranian revolution introduced new dynamics to US policy in the region, as Iran was a fundamental part of the Two Pillars Policy of the US. However, it evolved into a rival state. Initially, US policy concerning Iraq and the Palestinian issue, followed by the Arab Spring in the region, created instability that Iran exploited. Tehran, through the Shia populations of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and its support for Hamas, created a Shia Arc with access to the Mediterranean Sea, posing a threat to the interests of the USA and Israel. Additionally, Iran's nuclear program influences its relations with these countries, and Washington has imposed strict sanctions on Tehran, aiming to limit its presence in the region and prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power. The USA advocates for restricting nuclear proliferation in the region, as mentioned earlier; if Iran obtains nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are likely to follow suit, with Riyadh having declared its intentions. Furthermore, there have been assassinations of prominent scientists to impede Iran's nuclear progress. In 2020, one of Iran's most powerful figures and top generals, Qasem Soleimani, was killed by a US airstrike ordered by President Donald Trump at Baghdad International Airport. These US actions degraded its standing in the eyes of its regional allies. Coupled with congressional holds on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, several regional states chose to diversify their security relationships with countries such as China<sup>145</sup>. Beijing capitalized on the US's perceived inaction and the tensions created during the oil war and the formation of OPEC<sup>+</sup>. It is promoting the Belt and Road Initiative

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<sup>145</sup> Mouton, D. E. (2023, November 21). *The post-October 7 US strategy in the Middle East is coming into focus*. New Atlanticist. Atlantic Council. Available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-post-october-7-us-strategy-in-the-middle-east-is-coming-into-focus/>

and various infrastructure projects that facilitate trade. Additionally, China has increased its commercial activities, military engagements, and technological relations with the region. One of its significant achievements was an agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023, limiting the presence of the USA. On the other side, the USA is seeking to restore its relations and promote alternative solutions for Chinese projects and investments. For instance, during the G20 Summit of 2023, a new India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor was proposed, connecting India with Europe through the Arabian Peninsula and the Mediterranean Sea. According to a White House statement, leaders from the United States, India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, Italy, and the European Union signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish this corridor. Lastly, the USA has as a key goal the promotion of the Abraham Accords and peaceful relations between Arabs and Israelis. In 2020, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco normalized their relations with Israel, and other Arab states are expected to follow suit. Currently, the USA is working towards the normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. However, the recent attack by Hamas on Israel in October 2023 prompted Riyadh, the Custodian of the Arab and Muslim world, to temporarily freeze discussions with Israel.

The Wider Middle East holds vital interests for the USA, encompassing strategic, trading, energy, political, and security issues. Their seemingly idle policy should not be equated with a withdrawal. Moreover, Washington reaps significant financial benefits through commercial activities, US investments, and arms sales in the region. However, relations between Riyadh and Washington have been influenced, with the Kingdom aspiring to become the leading regional player. The hegemony of the USA in the region has been curtailed. China has taken advantage of the gaps in US foreign policy, expanding its relations with regional states, and emerging as a threat to US interests.

## 7.2. Emerging Powers

In recent years, there has been a shift in the policy of emerging powers as they strengthen their relations and unify their stance against the USA and the developed states of the West. The BRICS is evolving into an important player, with more states expected to join its ranks. Currently, Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have been invited

to become full members starting January 2024. Consequently, major states in the Wider Middle East will join the coalition of emerging powers. Additionally, the region holds great importance for the emerging powers of the world, especially for the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and the Republic of India. These states are in direct proximity to the vast subsystem and, at the same time, have numerous interests and concerns. For Beijing and New Delhi, the energy resources of the Wider Middle East, particularly the Gulf, are more than vital, and the US policy has created gaps that these three emerging states will exploit.

Russia's reappearance as a player in the Middle East under President Vladimir Putin has the aim of restoring the country's position as a great power outside of the former USSR. With the start of the military intervention in Syria in 2015, and the U.S.-Russian diplomatic effort that accompanied it, the Middle East has become a key testing ground for Russia's attempt to return to the global stage<sup>146</sup>. Moscow derives numerous strategic and financial benefits from the Wider Middle East. In terms of geopolitical factors, one of the primary goals of the Kremlin is to expand pro-Russian regimes in the region. This is evident from the presence that the Wagner mercenary group had in conflict zones like Syria and Libya. However, this presence declined following the invasion of Ukraine and the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin. Traditionally, both the USSR and the Russian Federation have maintained a strong presence and relations with the states of North Africa, excluding Morocco and Tunisia, and the Middle East, excluding the Gulf. Notably, Moscow's relations with Damascus, Ankara, and Tehran stand out as particularly strong. The Kremlin aims to create an axis of partners extending from Tehran to Cairo and establish warm relations with the Gulf, recognizing that tension in the region could influence the Muslim population within the Russian Federation<sup>147</sup>. Russia's longstanding desire to gain access to warm seas has been partially realized, especially through its increased military presence in Syria after the Arab Spring in 2015. The failed coup in Turkey in 2016 also influenced Moscow's relations with Ankara. The Turkish Straits provide Russia with access to the Aegean Sea, and the military naval base in Tartus, Syria, further enhances its presence. As a result, the Kremlin supports politically and militarily friendly

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<sup>146</sup> Trenin, D. (2016). *Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's objectives, priorities, and policy drivers*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16\\_Trenin\\_Middle\\_East\\_Moscow\\_clean.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf)

<sup>147</sup> The Russian Muslim population represents 12% of total population and is located to Chechnya, Dagestan, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan.

regimes or militias in the region to expand its influence. Additionally, Russian access to the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait provides access to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, enhancing its strategic importance. Russia encourages investments from wealthy Gulf states into its territory and seeks to enhance commercial activities with the region. In 2015, the Middle East accounted for 36% of Russia's defense deliveries, with Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Syria being consistent importers of Russian arms. In the energy sector, cooperation between major oil producers Saudi Arabia and Russia led to the establishment of OPEC+, stabilizing global oil prices and avoiding the oil competition of previous decades. Russia has significant energy interests in the region and coordinated moves have strengthened its energy and financial sectors, benefiting petroleum-exporting states. Furthermore, Russia seeks energy investments in the Wider Middle East and nuclear plant investments, exemplified by projects in Bushehr (Iran), Akkuyu (Turkey), and Jordan under the auspices of ROSATOM. Additionally, the Russian oil company Lukoil is active in Iraq, while Russian pipelines, Blue Stream and TurkStream, traverse Turkey, terminating in Europe. Currently, isolated Vladimir Putin had an official visit to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where he is receiving a warm reception.

The Middle East and North Africa have traditionally been outside China's sphere of interest. Consequently, the rapidly developing, wide variety of relations China has established throughout the region are relatively new<sup>148</sup>. During the two last decades, its presence into the region was regarding only the financial sector<sup>149</sup>. Chinese investment in key infrastructure in the region has increased, as shown by the construction of a terminal in the Israeli port of Haifa or a new capital planned by Egypt. In terms of digital infrastructure, China's Huawei has been involved in building 5G networks in most Middle Eastern countries<sup>150</sup>. Currently, Beijing is trying to expand its influence in the military, commercial, and infrastructure sectors, while it also has vital energy interests. China's rapid development has provoked new worries concerning the adequate and constant energy supply, as well as China having limited oil and gas reserves for its standards.

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<sup>148</sup> Rózsa, E. N. (2021). *China's Interests in the Middle East and North Africa*. IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2021. Available at <https://www.iemed.org/publication/chinas-interests-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

<sup>149</sup> Kepel, G. (2021). *Le Prophète et la Pandémie*. Editions Gallimard, 84.

<sup>150</sup> Scazzieri, L. (2023, October 5). *Europe and a New Middle East. Insight*. Centre for European Reform. Available at <https://www.cer.eu/insights/europe-and-new-middle-east>

China consumes 11,750,000 oil barrels per day, making it the second-largest oil consumer and the third-largest gas consumer with 364.6 billion cubic meters of gas in 2022. The supply of a stable and constant energy flow is among the top issues on Beijing's agenda. Record volumes of crude oil were imported into China during the first half. Concerning the Wider Middle East, China imports oil from Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman. Additionally, China imports vast gas quantities from Qatar, making Beijing among the largest LNG consumers. The two states have proceeded with bilateral long-term agreements concerning the gas supply. In 2022, the Chinese firm signed a 27-year supply deal with Qatar for the supply of four million tons of LNG annually, and in June 2023, a second similar long-term agreement for three million tons of gas a year. China has vast energy needs, and the potentials of the Wider Middle East will secure its energy agenda and ambitions. Additionally, concerning the financial and investment sector, China has been promoting the Belt and Road Initiative since 2013, expanding its commercial activities through the connectivity of commercial projects and infrastructures such as ports, railways, highways, and airports. Its implementation entails Chinese capital and loans, Chinese technology, Chinese companies, and even Chinese labor, raising tensions in some places and contributing to local development in others. The subsystem is also vital for the aforementioned reason. By 2021, however, most of the states in the region have been included in some way in the project<sup>151</sup>. Currently, China has strategic relations with Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, while it has proceeded with a multilateral long-term agreement with Iran. The current power of China, the gaps in US policy, and the withdrawal from conflict zones made China start a campaign to expand its influence, enhance regional security and stability to become a global power, supporting friendly regimes. China sets aside the character of the regime and human rights, in contrast to the USA. A milestone in the aforementioned fact was the agreement between the two major states in the region, Saudi Arabia and Iran, which had started a regional Cold War after the revolution. In March 2023, Riyadh and Tehran agreed to resume diplomatic relations under the auspice of Beijing, which is playing a growing role. Finally, China exports large volumes of arms to the Wider Middle East, becoming one of the largest exporters in the region, while it also needs the maritime routes for the security of its interests. The vast region absorbs huge Chinese capitals

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<sup>151</sup> Rózsa, E. N. (2021). *China's Interests in the Middle East and North Africa*. IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2021. Available at <https://www.iemed.org/publication/chinas-interests-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

for infrastructure projects, while many constructive Chinese companies are active in Algeria, Sudan, and Yemen.

In recent years, India has emerged as a significant player in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly under the leadership of Narendra Modi. Geographically close to the Wider Middle East and with tense relations with Pakistan, India has actively pursued its interests in the region, focusing on commercial ties, energy, and strategic partnerships. Regarding the energy sector, India imports huge quantities, as well it needs 4.7 million barrels of oil per day. India is the world's third-largest oil consumer and fourth-largest LNG consumer, faces high energy demands with low domestic production. To meet its needs, India has developed strong energy relations with countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran, relying on the Persian Gulf for oil and gas supplies. In February of 2018, India and the UAE signed an oil agreement, while the Emirate supply India with renewable energy too. Additionally, India contributed around \$599 million for a period of 40 years for Indian oil and gas companies to exploit Arab hydrocarbons<sup>152</sup>. India has also invested in the region's economic development. The Chabahar Port in Iran provides India with strategic access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. Additionally, India contributed \$599 million to Indian oil and gas companies for a 40-year period to exploit hydrocarbons in the Arab region. India has actively participated in the reconstruction efforts in Syria, demonstrating its commitment to regional stability. In 2015, India and Syria signed an agreement covering reconstruction, as well as the trade of oil, gas, and mineral resources. In terms of international partnerships, India has cultivated strong relations with Israel, while it operates a part of port of Haifa. A significant milestone occurred in 2019 when leaders Netanyahu and Modi signed multiple agreements, reinforcing collaboration across various sectors such as trade, agriculture, science, technology, security, oil, gas, and computer security. The bilateral trade relationship extends to the arms sector and missile industry, with Tel Aviv exporting 41% of its arm production to India. India's trading activities are particularly robust with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and it maintains strong ties with Iraq, Iran, Qatar, and Kuwait. However, India's presence in North Africa is relatively limited, with trading activities focused on Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. India sees the Wider Middle East as a crucial bridge to Europe, and its participation in the proposed USA project, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, aligns with its interests in enhancing connectivity with Europe. In

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<sup>152</sup> Chávez S., G. (2021). *The Republic of India: Ties with the Middle East and North Africa*. Middle East Monitor.



summary, India's engagement in the vast subsystem spans energy, trade, and strategic partnerships, with a focus on diplomatic ties and economic development initiatives.

In conclusion, the Wider Middle East holds significant importance for the emerging powers in the region, with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE set to join their ranks. The region is marked by geopolitical, financial, commercial, and energy interests crucial for the development of Russia, China, and India. Both Beijing and New Delhi stand out as major importers of energy from the Middle East, collectively consuming 18% of the global oil production. Projections indicate that their energy needs are expected to double in the coming years. However, there's uncertainty about the availability of such resources due to their sheer volume. Moreover, both countries are committed to reducing oil and gas consumption by 2060. While these emerging powers work to secure their energy future, the United States' influence in the region raises concerns about control over energy reserves. This dynamic introduces potential energy insecurity issues for China and India. As long as the need for foreign oil for China and India is increasing, the USA's is decreasing. The growing involvement of Russia, China, and India in the region presents a geopolitical challenge to U.S. interests.

### 7.3. The European Union

Finally, the extensive subsystem under examination holds great importance for the European Union. It serves as a pivotal player in shaping international politics, economics, and security. The relationship between the European Union and the Wider Middle East is characterized by multifaceted considerations, encompassing energy security, economic interests, and addressing shared challenges like migration, terrorism, and political instability. Historically, the region has played a significant role in shaping European policy, and recent events have further heightened its importance. The Arab Spring and its repercussions, along with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are notable factors influencing the evolving dynamics between the European Union and the Wider Middle East.

The region holds critical importance for Brussels, primarily due to two key reasons: energy resources and migration and refugee flows. The European continent relies on limited energy

resources, mainly from the North Sea countries like Norway, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Romania. However, Europe is in close proximity to vast energy reserves in the Russian Federation, Libya, Algeria, and now Egypt. Given the energy shortages, the EU meets its energy needs through various means, including oil tankers, LNG carriers, and pipelines. Notable examples include the Trans-Mediterranean Pipeline connecting Algeria and Italy, the Medgaz Pipeline linking Algeria and Spain, and the Green Stream Pipeline facilitating gas connection between Libya and Italy. Additionally, Russian gas flows through pipelines like Blue Stream and TurkStream via Turkey, while the proposed EastMed pipeline aims to carry gas from the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly from the gas fields of Israel and Cyprus, with EU support as a Project of Common Interest. The importance of energy reserves from the Wider Middle East increased significantly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as the flow of Russian gas was abruptly cut off, posing a threat to the EU's energy security. In response, Brussels turned its attention to the reserves of the Wider Middle East and initiated efforts toward green transition, simultaneously increasing gas imports from Qatar, Egypt, and Algeria. Despite its considerable economic and political partnerships with regional players, Europe has been unable to influence the major shifts that have taken place. For oil-producing countries such as the Gulf Cooperation Council members and Algeria, the increase in hydrocarbon prices has been a bonus, and the socio-economic impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been limited so far<sup>153</sup>. Lastly, the EU encourages the supply of green energy from the North Africa and Middle East regions.

Additionally, the region is crucial for Brussels due to security concerns and migration/refugee flows. These issues gained prominence on the European agenda following the al-Qaeda attacks in 2001 and, more significantly, during the Arab Spring and the rise of "ISIS." The first event led to terrorist attacks abroad, while the second resulted in long-term civil wars and regional instability. The emergence of "ISIS" further complicated the situation, forcing Europe to confront an unpredictable and unprecedented challenge. The conflicts and the prevalence of failed states in the region led to the influx of thousands of refugees and immigrants along the Mediterranean coast.

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<sup>153</sup> Amirah-Fernandez, H. (2023, October 5). *EU-MENA Relations Since the Ukraine War*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. Available at <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/eu-mena-relations-since-the-ukraine-war-146482>

They attempted to reach Europe through routes such as Turkey to Greece, Tunisia to Italy, and Morocco to Spain, creating a humanitarian crisis. A major ongoing issue is the migration flows from Turkey to the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. Additionally, countries like France, Germany, Belgium, Britain, and Spain experienced terrorist attacks by extreme Islamists. In response, the European Union implemented measures to curb these flows, including strengthening the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, and providing funding to Turkey to halt the migrations. Financial aid was also directed to European states affected by the crisis.

Brussels also has significant financial and commercial interests in the Wider Middle East, owing to strong trading ties developed with many states in the region, especially Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Morocco, and Israel. However, the democratic principles promoted by the EU influence its relations with the authoritarian regimes in the area. The region is undergoing transformation, and the influence of the EU is diminishing. The strategic aspirations of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, and Egypt to become regional powers, along with the growing role of China, impact Brussels' policies. While the EU maintains robust financial and economic ties with many states, its commercial agreements with Tunisia and Morocco differ from those of previous years.

The Wider Middle East holds a position of paramount importance in the geopolitical landscape, with its strategic relevance extending far beyond its borders. US and EU interests face threats from Chinese influence, pro-Russian policies, and the autonomy asserted by the most powerful states in the region. In summary, various interests are at stake, particularly in the sectors of energy, security, and trade.

## 8. Conclusion

To summarize, the Wider Middle East has emerged as a vast and geopolitically crucial subsystem, rich in energy resources and strategic infrastructures, holding a pivotal position on the global chessboard. The outbreak of terrorism has further increased its importance. However, simultaneously, climate change has introduced new dynamics into the analyzed region, influencing geopolitics and the energy sector. Additionally, the Wider Middle East is characterized by instability and “failed states.” Consequently, many of them are unable to confront the challenges posed by climate change. Conversely, prosperous states are attempting to transform their domestic and external structures to adapt to new circumstances and address climate change.

Undoubtedly, climate change and its impacts affect the world in various ways, including the analyzed region. The answer to the research question regarding how its effects influence and limit the importance of the Wider Middle East is not absolute, given the uncertainties surrounding climate change. For instance, gradual ice melting may open new maritime routes, such as through the Arctic zone, allowing ships to travel from China to the Netherlands or London via the Bering Strait and the Northeast Passage. This could significantly reduce travel time, fuel consumption, emissions, and capital and impact the traditional sea routes like the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandab Strait, reshaping global trade dynamics. Simultaneously, it poses security challenges through extreme weather conditions, triggering migration flows. Additionally, in response of climate change impacts many states, especially developed ones, have declared that the burning of fossil fuels must cease immediately. They have also entered into international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement. However, numerous states in the region have structured their financial sectors around the exploitation of oil and natural gas. Consequently, the gradual abolition of these resources will have negative consequences for their economies. Climate change has compelled oil and natural gas exporting states to revise their policies and adapt to new circumstances

Climate change is not immediately able to influence the importance of the Wider Middle East. The use of the Northeast Passage is limited, while its access and transit are difficult and is necessary the escort of an icebreaker. Additionally, the Russian role will be crucial, while Moscow has provided plenty of ambitions into the region, such as the renaming of Arctic Ocean to Russian Ocean, as well as the symbolic placement of a Russian flag into the bottom of the Arctic Ocean.

Traditional sea routes can maintain their importance as major chokepoints, and proposed projects like the Ben Gurion Canal and the Canal of Constantinople could increase the region's value. Additionally, migration resulting from climate change and the influx of refugees due to conflicts play a significant role, heightening the importance of the Wider Middle East. Furthermore, the region possesses vast reserves of high-quality, low-cost oil and natural gas. Moreover, oil and natural gas exports from the Wider Middle East remain unrestricted, with ongoing exploration activities and energy projects. The world is not yet ready for a green transition, especially considering that China and India continue to absorb large quantities of hydrocarbons, while the USA seek to maintain their primacy. Consequently, the Wider Middle East retains high importance and unrivaled potential. The aforementioned fact was substantiated during COP28 in December 2023 in the UAE. Despite the historical agreement to a transition away from fossil fuels, the CEO of ADNOC, the national oil company of the UAE, and Summit chairman, Sultan Ahmed al-Jaber, announced a \$150 billion investment in hydrocarbons.

In conclusion, the research into the geopolitics, climate change, and energy landscape of the Wider Middle East has not only revealed vulnerabilities but also highlighted great potential for transformative solutions. The region's role in shipping, security, and energy remains pivotal, ensuring its continued prominence on the global stage, where nations leverage its strategic position to enhance their power and influence.

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