

EVALUATING MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICAL INSTABILITY THROUGH INTERNAL DYNAMICS, EXTERNAL INTERVENTION, POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

The research examines Middle Eastern political instability through a comprehensive framework, which connects internal factors, external military actions, and political leadership to investigate both Syria and Iraq as primary research examples. The study demonstrates that political leadership acts as a control mechanism, which determines how sectarian divisions, economic inequality and institutional weaknesses lead to either conflict or authoritarian rule or social division. The study uses qualitative comparative analysis to show that domestic pressure on leaders determines their political response, which produces three distinct paths for political development. External intervention establishes a relationship with domestic leadership, which results in leaders increasing their personal power while creating ongoing instability in their positions. The research demonstrates that regime survival or removal does not guarantee political stability, because institutional resilience together with leadership accountability are the main factors that maintain stability. The study investigates Middle Eastern instability through leadership analysis as its main research element, which results in better understanding of the issue and the practical value of the study lies in the possibility of applying these insights for governance improvement and conflict resolution in the Middle East and across the globe. The study opens prospects for further research into the political instability in other countries like the South East Asian countries, East European countries, South American countries, etc. considering the factors involving internal dynamics, external intervention, and political leadership in those countries requiring an expanded evaluation and the application of mixed research methods. The current article is evaluative in nature.

Key words: Middle East; Political Instability; Political Leadership; External Intervention; Governance; State Fragility.

Introduction

The Middle East continues to represent one of the most politically unstable regions in the contemporary international system. Despite its strategic geographic position linking Asia, Africa, and Europe, and despite possessing some of the world's largest reserves of oil and natural gas, the region has experienced persistent cycles of political unrest, civil war, authoritarian entrenchment, and state fragility. Political instability in the Middle East is neither temporary nor isolated; rather, it has become a structural and enduring condition shaping both domestic governance and regional order. Prolonged conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen illustrate how instability has evolved into chronic crises marked by institutional breakdown, humanitarian catastrophe, and fragmented sovereignty (Rahman, 2008).

Political instability in this context is described as the situation where governments cannot maintain political legitimacy and manage social conflict without using violence or force. Middle Eastern countries frequently face problems like insufficiently strong institutional structures, limited participation in politics, unequal distribution of wealth and disputes about the authority of the state. Although these factors are not exclusive to the area, their interaction and persistence have resulted in outstandingly severe and long-lasting instability (Rashid, 2024). What is more, the turmoil in the region has not been restricted to individual countries; it has brought about insecurity in the region and global consequences such as refugee flows, terrorism, and fluctuations in global oil prices.

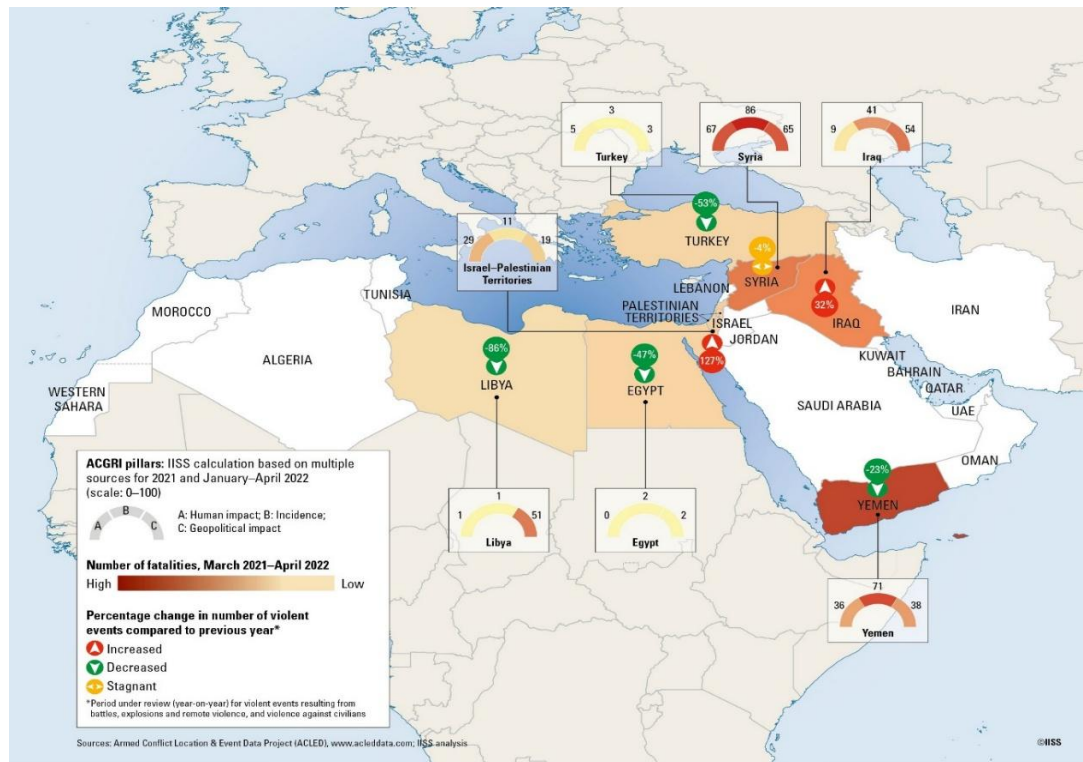


Figure1: Middle East

Source: (International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2022, November 18))

The aim of this study is to develop an integrated analytical framework for explaining political instability in the Middle East by examining the interaction between internal dynamics, external intervention, and political leadership, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of political leadership in shaping political outcomes.

Literature Review

A substantial body of literature explains Middle Eastern instability through internal structural factors, particularly weak state institutions, authoritarian governance, socio-economic inequality, and identity-based divisions. Scholars such as Bellin (2012) argue that the durability of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East is linked to coercive apparatuses and elite cohesion rather than popular legitimacy. While this work offers important insights into regime persistence, it simultaneously illustrates how political order is heavily dependent on leadership strategies that prioritize repression over institutional development. Similarly, analyses of rentier state theory emphasize how oil revenues enable ruling elites to bypass social contracts, reinforcing personalized leadership and weakening accountability (Ross, 2012). These studies implicitly acknowledge leadership dominance but stop short of conceptualizing leadership behavior as a causal mechanism shaping instability outcomes.

Another major strand of literature focuses on sectarianism and identity politics as drivers of political instability. Scholars such as Gause (2014) caution against treating sectarianism as an inherent or primordial cause, instead emphasizing how political elites actively instrumentalize sectarian identities to consolidate power. This literature is particularly relevant to leadership-centered analysis, as it demonstrates that identity divisions often become politically salient through leadership choices rather than structural inevitability. Leadership decisions to mobilize sectarian narratives frequently exacerbate polarization, undermine national cohesion, and transform political competition into violent conflict. However, even in this strand, leadership tends to appear as a tactical actor rather than a central analytical category.

The Arab uprisings generated a new wave of scholarship that directly exposed the importance of leadership responses to political crises. Studies by Lynch (2022) show that leadership reactions, ranging from repression to selective reform, played a decisive role in determining whether uprisings resulted in regime survival, civil war, or state collapse. This literature demonstrates that similar protest movements across the region produced vastly different outcomes, not because of structural differences alone, but because of divergent leadership strategies. Nevertheless, much of this scholarship remains event-driven, focusing on crisis moments rather than offering a sustained leadership-centered framework for understanding long-term instability.

A second major body of literature emphasizes external intervention and international geopolitics as central drivers of Middle Eastern instability. Scholars such as Hinnebusch (2003) and Fawcett (2016) argue that the Middle East is uniquely vulnerable to external intervention due to its strategic importance, unresolved conflicts, and regional rivalries. Military interventions, proxy wars, sanctions, and diplomatic manipulation are frequently cited as factors that intensify domestic conflicts and prolong instability. While these analyses are indispensable, they often treat domestic leadership as either passive recipients of external pressure or as obstacles to international peace efforts.

More recent scholarship complicates this view by highlighting how leaders actively shape the form and impact of external intervention. Phillips (2020) demonstrates that in conflicts such as Syria, leadership decisions regarding alliance formation and external patronage fundamentally altered the balance of power and conflict duration. Similarly, Dodge (2017) shows that post-intervention instability in Iraq cannot be explained solely by foreign occupation but must be understood in relation to leadership fragmentation and elite competition. These studies move closer to a leadership-centered approach, yet leadership remains embedded within broader geopolitical narratives rather than being theorized as a mediating variable.

A third strand of literature focuses on governance, state fragility, and authoritarian resilience, offering the most direct engagement with leadership-related issues. Heydemann (2018) argues that authoritarian governance in the Arab world has adapted rather than collapsed, with leaders restructuring control mechanisms to survive political challenges. This literature highlights how leadership strategies such as institutional manipulation, selective repression, and elite co-optation shape political outcomes. Importantly, it links leadership behavior to long-term state fragility, demonstrating that survival-oriented leadership often undermines governance capacity and social trust.

However, even within governance-focused studies, leadership is frequently analyzed as part of elite structures rather than as a distinct analytical category. Leadership agency—how individual or collective leadership choices actively shape political trajectories—remains insufficiently theorized. Comparative politics literature outside the Middle East has shown that leadership quality and decision-making are critical to understanding regime outcomes, but such insights have not been systematically incorporated into Middle East instability research.

A growing but still limited body of work explicitly examines leadership failure and state collapse in the region. Studies on Libya and Yemen highlight how the absence of institutionalized

leadership produced power vacuums, militia proliferation, and prolonged conflict (Lacher, 2020; Salisbury, 2015). These analyses underscore that instability is not only a result of oppressive leadership but also of leadership breakdown without institutional continuity. This perspective is crucial, as it demonstrates that leadership absence can be as destabilizing as leadership repression.

Despite these contributions, the literature remains fragmented. Internal dynamics, external intervention, and leadership are often studied in isolation, leading to partial explanations of instability. Few studies integrate these dimensions into a single analytical framework that recognizes leadership as the key mechanism linking domestic pressures and international influences. This gap is particularly evident in policy-oriented research, where leadership legitimacy and governance capacity are frequently subordinated to short-term security or geopolitical objectives.

Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarly attention to political instability in the Middle East, several important gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies explain instability primarily through structural determinants, including colonial legacies, rentier-state dynamics, sectarian divisions, and weak state institutions, or through external drivers such as foreign intervention, proxy warfare, and geopolitical rivalries. Although these perspectives have significantly advanced scholarly understanding of the region, they often treat political outcomes as largely predetermined by structural conditions and pay insufficient attention to the role of political leadership in shaping instability trajectories.

While political leadership is frequently discussed in studies of authoritarianism, regime survival, and state collapse, it is rarely conceptualized as a mediating variable that systematically links internal dynamics and external intervention to political outcomes. Existing research typically examines domestic factors, leadership behaviour, and external intervention separately, resulting in fragmented explanations that fail to capture their complex interrelationships. Furthermore, political leadership is commonly analysed either as part of elite structures or as a consequence of instability rather than as an independent factor influencing governance capacity, political legitimacy, and conflict escalation.

Another important gap concerns the explanation of divergent political outcomes among Middle Eastern states that share similar structural conditions. Existing scholarship provides only limited insight into why some states experience authoritarian consolidation, whereas others descend into prolonged conflict, institutional fragmentation, or state failure. To address these shortcomings, this study develops an integrated leadership-centred analytical framework that conceptualises political leadership as the principal mediating mechanism through which internal pressures and external interventions shape diverse political trajectories. In doing so, the study offers a more comprehensive and explanatory perspective on political instability in the Middle East.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What internal political, social, and economic factors contribute to persistent political instability in Middle Eastern states?
2. How do political leaders respond to internal pressures during periods of political crisis?
3. Why do Middle Eastern states with comparable structural conditions experience divergent political outcomes?
4. How does external intervention interact with domestic political leadership to influence political instability?

Research Objectives

To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To identify the principal internal political, social, and economic factors contributing to political instability in Middle Eastern states.
2. To examine the role of political leadership in mitigating or exacerbating domestic political instability.

3. To analyse the influence of external intervention on domestic political leadership and political outcomes.

4. To investigate the interaction between internal dynamics, political leadership, and external intervention within a unified analytical framework.

5. To explain why states with similar structural characteristics follow different trajectories of political development, ranging from authoritarian consolidation to prolonged conflict and state fragmentation.

Materials and methods

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and interpretive research design to examine political instability in the Middle East through the interconnected dimensions of internal dynamics, external intervention, and political leadership. Given the complex, context-specific, and historically embedded nature of political instability in the region, a qualitative approach is particularly well suited to exploring leadership behaviour, decision-making processes, and governance outcomes that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone.

The research is based primarily on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, and publications issued by international organisations and research institutions. Particular attention is given to studies addressing governance, authoritarianism, external intervention, state fragility, and political leadership in the Middle East. The literature is critically reviewed to identify the principal explanatory approaches, theoretical debates, and unresolved research gaps.

The study employs a comparative multiple-case study design. Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen were selected because they exhibit comparable structural vulnerabilities—including weak institutions, socio-economic inequality, and external intervention—while demonstrating markedly different political trajectories. The comparative analysis focuses on leadership styles, sources of political legitimacy, strategies of regime survival, responses to domestic crises, and patterns of interaction with external actors. This case selection enables the identification of both common mechanisms and context-specific variations in the evolution of political instability.

To analyse the empirical material, the study applies thematic analysis. The collected evidence was systematically coded and organised into recurring analytical themes, including leadership rigidity, reform avoidance, external dependency, institutional erosion, and governance failure. These themes were subsequently compared across the selected cases to identify recurring patterns and explain differences in political outcomes.

Rather than seeking universal causal generalisations, the study adopts an explanatory qualitative approach aimed at developing an integrated analytical framework. The findings demonstrate how political leadership mediates the relationship between domestic structural pressures and external intervention, thereby shaping divergent trajectories of political instability across Middle Eastern states.

Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to reconceptualize Middle Eastern political instability by placing leadership at the center of analysis, rather than treating it as a secondary or derivative outcome of structural forces. Much of the existing scholarship on the Middle East has been dominated by explanations rooted in colonial legacies, sectarian divisions, rentier state economics, and geopolitical rivalries. While these perspectives have substantially advanced understanding of the region, they often suffer from a form of structural determinism that underestimates political agency. This study is significant because it challenges that limitation by arguing that leadership choices decisively shape how internal vulnerabilities and external pressures translate into concrete political outcomes.

A key contribution of this research is that it addresses a persistent analytical gap in Middle East studies: the lack of a coherent framework that systematically integrates leadership behavior with political instability. Although leadership is frequently mentioned in descriptive accounts of conflict and governance failure, it is rarely theorized as a mediating variable that actively conditions the effects of internal dynamics and foreign intervention. By foregrounding leadership, this study offers a more nuanced explanation for why states with similar socio-economic profiles experience vastly different instability trajectories. For instance, variations in leadership responses help explain why some regimes collapse into prolonged civil wars while others maintain relative political order despite facing comparable structural challenges.

The study is also significant because it enhances explanatory power in understanding divergent political outcomes within the same regional context. Middle Eastern states share many common characteristics, including centralized authority, weak institutionalization, youth-dominated demographics, and exposure to external intervention. Yet outcomes range from authoritarian consolidation to total state fragmentation. This variation cannot be sufficiently explained through structural factors alone. Leadership decisions—such as whether to pursue repression or accommodation, whether to institutionalize power or personalize it, and whether to rely on domestic legitimacy or external support, play a decisive role in shaping these outcomes. By systematically analyzing leadership within the context of instability, the study provides a more refined analytical lens capable of accounting for such divergence.

Another major significance of the study lies in its contribution to understanding the interaction between domestic leadership and external intervention. The Middle East has been one of the most intervention-prone regions in the world, with sustained involvement by global and regional powers. However, external intervention does not operate in a political vacuum. Leaders actively negotiate, invite, manipulate, or resist foreign involvement based on regime survival strategies. This study highlights how leadership choices condition the impact of intervention, showing that foreign involvement often reinforces personalized rule, weakens institutions, and prolongs instability when leadership legitimacy is already fragile. By emphasizing this interaction, the study moves beyond simplistic narratives that portray external actors as sole drivers of instability.

The research is also significant in terms of policy relevance. International actors, including states and multilateral organizations, often design policies based on assumptions that stabilizing regimes or removing leaders will automatically lead to political order. Such assumptions have repeatedly proven flawed in the Middle Eastern context. This study demonstrates that leadership-centered instability requires leadership-sensitive solutions. Policies that prioritize short-term regime stability without addressing leadership legitimacy, governance capacity, and institutional development may inadvertently entrench authoritarianism or fuel long-term conflict. By identifying leadership as a critical variable, the study provides a conceptual foundation for more informed and context-sensitive policy interventions.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is designed to explain Middle Eastern political instability as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between internal dynamics, external intervention, and political leadership, with leadership functioning as a mediating variable. Unlike traditional models that treat leadership as either an outcome of structural forces or a background condition, this framework positions leadership at the analytical core, shaping how pressures are translated into political outcomes. At the first level, internal dynamics constitute the foundational conditions of political instability. These include weak state institutions, authoritarian governance structures, economic inequality, unemployment (particularly among youth), sectarian and ethnic polarization, corruption, and deficits in political participation. These internal factors generate persistent political stress and legitimacy challenges within Middle Eastern states. However, the

framework assumes that internal pressures alone do not automatically produce instability; rather, they create conditions that require strategic leadership responses.

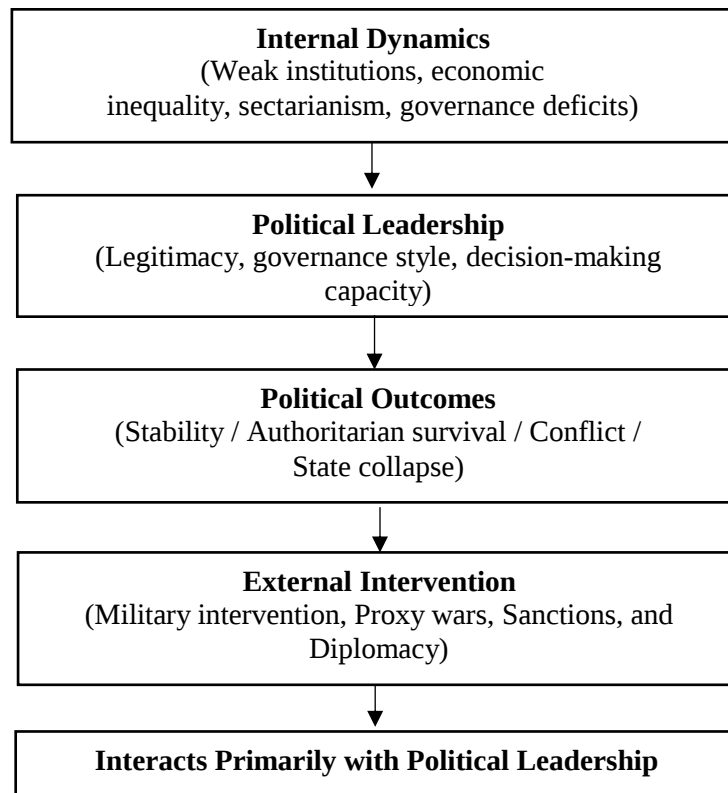


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Political leadership occupies the central mediating position in the framework. Leadership is conceptualized in terms of governance style (authoritarian, reformist, or fragmented), legitimacy sources (coercion, patronage, identity politics, or limited consent), and decision-making capacity. Leadership mediates internal dynamics by determining whether grievances are addressed through reform, managed through institutional adaptation, or suppressed through coercion. Leadership choices directly influence state capacity, elite cohesion, and societal trust, thereby shaping the trajectory of political stability or instability.

At the same time, leadership mediates the effects of external intervention, which constitutes the second major explanatory dimension of the framework. External intervention includes military involvement, diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, proxy support, and political backing by global and regional powers. Rather than acting independently, external interventions interact with domestic leadership strategies. Leaders may invite foreign support to enhance regime survival, resist intervention to preserve autonomy, or manipulate external rivalries to consolidate power. These interactions often reinforce personalized rule, weaken institutions, and prolong instability when leadership legitimacy is fragile.

The interaction between internal dynamics, leadership mediation, and external intervention produces political outcomes that range from relative stability and authoritarian consolidation to prolonged conflict, state fragmentation, or collapse. These outcomes then generate global consequences, including regional insecurity, refugee flows, terrorism, and disruptions to global energy markets. Thus, the framework captures not only domestic instability but also its international spillover effects.

Internal Dynamics

Internal dynamics refer to the domestic political, social, economic, and institutional forces that originate within a state and shape its stability, governance patterns, and conflict trajectories. The Middle East finds its political instability in Syria and Iraq through internal dynamics which serve as its fundamental building blocks. The system operates through a combination of weak institutionalization and centralized leadership which relies on personal authority together with sectarian and ethnic divisions and economic disparities and corrupt practices and demographic changes and inadequate governance systems. The elements function as a single force because they establish multiple pressures which will lead to a gradual decline of state legitimacy and resilience when the system fails to maintain proper control of its components (Clements, 2009).

The political situation in Syria experienced transformation through central executive control which operated for multiple decades together with restrictions on political party activities. The state had official institutional frameworks which existed but actual authority stayed with a small group of leaders who received backing from security forces and patronage systems. The process of authority becoming personal to leaders resulted in the loss of institutional independence together with a reduction in the ability of organizations to handle disputes through nonviolent methods (Khalaf 2015). The Arab uprisings brought public complaints which developed into a major crisis because the political system failed to establish paths which could manage opposing views. The internal governance systems which existed at the time could not handle negotiated political participation because they were not developed for such situations thus causing local protests to develop into a nationwide crisis. The centralized authority system created a situation where community complaints turned into a complete crisis of legitimacy for the government system.

Iraq shows a distinct pattern of internal dynamics which provides educational value to observers. The 2003 regime change brought to Iraq the task of building new institutions within a society that suffered from severe sectarian and ethnic divisions. Political competition developed into a system which structured itself through sectarian divisions instead of creating a system that allowed all citizens to participate in government. The power-sharing system established by the government system made identity-based politics an official part of the political system, which created deeper divisions among Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish groups. The combination of internal divisions and low administrative capacity and corrupt practices created a situation where governance stopped functioning, and state power became distributed unevenly. Public trust in institutions remained fragile, and political legitimacy became contested across different segments of society. The internal fragmentation of Iraq demonstrates how identity politics create dangerous political conditions when they become part of official institutional systems which operate without a single central authoritarian authority.

Economic internal dynamics have emerged as essential components for both states. The economic liberalization measures which Syria implemented throughout its history created advantages for regime-associated elites while causing greater economic disparity which affected rural citizens. The combination of drought conditions and diminished agricultural output led to increased rural population movement and joblessness. The economic forces built up behind the facade of political stability which existed at that time, which created social unrest that eventually resulted in large-scale protests. Iraq has abundant oil resources, but economic development remains uneven because of mismanagement practices and corruption and patronage systems. The high rate of youth unemployment together with inadequate service delivery, created conditions which caused people to protest because their economic hardships directly affected their trust in government.

The internal pressures of an organization become more intense when its members experience social disintegration. The conflict in Syria brought about a rise of sectarian political narratives which created deeper rifts between groups and established an electoral battle framework between political parties who were competing for power. Sectarian identity became embedded

within Iraq's governance system after the US-led invasion in 2003, which made it harder for different groups to reach agreement. The internal dynamics of both states demonstrate that social diversity creates instability only when governments fail to handle diversity in an acceptable way. Leadership responds to dissent by using identity-based frameworks according to Walther (2020).

The demographic pressures which exist in this area make the existing challenges more difficult to solve. The populations of both Syria and Iraq are comprised of young people who achieve better educational outcomes although the economy cannot absorb their increased educational achievements. The youth bulges which occur in society create fundamental disruptions to labor markets while people demand more opportunities to participate in politics. People experience mounting frustration when political systems create participation barriers and fail to deliver economic opportunities.

The internal system creates a legitimacy deficit with three components which include weak institutions that decrease accountability, economic difficulties that diminish performance legitimacy, and social divisions which damage national unity. Internal dynamics present no automatic path toward system failure. Many states experience economic hardship or social diversity without descending into prolonged conflict. The combination of centralized authority together with weak institutions and economic inequality and identity politicization created conditions in Syria and Iraq which became extremely dangerous. The internal pressures which existed at that time created the fundamental framework which allowed the conflict to develop into a more serious situation. The situation allowed non-state armed groups to gain access to areas which helped to diminish the power of central governance.

The internal dynamics of Syria and Iraq demonstrate how their domestic political structure and their methods of economic management and their social unity determine their instability patterns. Political systems that lack institutional adaptability and inclusive governance mechanisms become vulnerable to rapid escalation once pressures intensify. The internal dynamics of a system represent its fundamental structure which determines how deep legitimacy extends and how well the state can handle emergencies.

External Intervention

External intervention refers to the involvement of foreign states, regional powers, or international coalitions in the domestic political and security affairs of a sovereign state. External intervention in Syria and Iraq has operated as a decisive element which determines the leadership power in these nations while extending the length of conflicts and determining their political results. External intervention creates its effects through geopolitical interests and strategic rivalries which combine military operations with economic sanctions and diplomatic influence and proxy support. The existing condition reacts to its effects because it depends on how domestic leadership and institutional stability create their relationship with the system.

In Iraq, the 2003 intervention led by the United States fundamentally restructured the state. The regime was removed from power which resulted in the complete destruction of central government authority because no strong transitional institutions were established. The rapid disbandment of security forces and administrative structures created a vacuum that facilitated insurgency, militia formation, and sectarian violence. External intervention reshaped Iraq's leadership situation through its ability to divide power among various leaders who fought for control of the nation. The international military mission sought to establish democratic governance in Iraq, but its outcome showed that democracy failed to persist because the country lacked any functioning governmental institutions (Al-Kharusi, 2019). External actors became embedded in domestic political competition, influencing leadership coalitions and governance arrangements.

Syria shows a different pattern of foreign intervention which has similar effects to other historical patterns of intervention. The civil war began after internal protests turned into armed

conflict between different groups. Russia started to send military forces to support the Syrian army from 2015 onward which changed the military situation in Syria. Iran provided the Syrian government with financial and military support together with advisory services for their operations that protected their power. Western nations and regional powers provided military assistance to different groups fighting against the government. The system of foreign intervention created Syria's internal conflict which developed into a complicated battle between warring factions. The government increased its power to use force through external support which created a situation that made peace talks impossible and caused the war to continue (Walther, 2020).

The process of outside nations entering a conflict tends to increase the power of individual leaders. External powers prefer to interact with national leaders or the most powerful groups in a country instead of working with its independent bodies. International support in Syria helped strengthen executive power while military operations got centralized under one commander. Foreign countries intervened in Iraq to affect how political alliances formed and which groups would receive power in the government. When governments develop relationships with international leaders they reduce their responsibility to their citizens and create systems that rely on foreign support for their governance. The process of intervention creates new patterns which establish different legitimacy standards. Domestic backing from foreign allies creates legitimacy issues for leaders because citizens see their military operations as foreign control. The Iraqi population used their perception of foreign power to react against foreign presence through both nationalist movements and protest activities. The Syrian regime maintained its power through external assistance, which created deeper social divisions because people understood the conflict as an international battle instead of a local need for change.

Political results become more difficult to achieve because economic interventions, which include sanctions, create additional challenges. Sanctions designed to force government change result in widespread economic distress, which impacts ordinary citizens while increasing internal discontent. The economic pressure creates a situation where existing social inequalities and unemployment rates rise, which causes more internal problems that result in unstable conditions. Economic tools which countries use from abroad will lead to increased domestic pressure because they create more problems instead of solving existing disputes. The internationalization of internal conflicts ranks as essential aspect of external intervention. Foreign powers in Syria and Iraq supported the development and ongoing existence of non-governmental military groups. International coalitions formed to combat extremist organizations which brought worldwide security interests into local warfare. The internationalization process created a situation where internal and external conflicts became indistinguishable which made political settlement more difficult and increased the duration of instability.

External intervention functions as a destabilizing force which operates according to different patterns. The impact of this element depends on how strong domestic institutions are and which leadership approach they adopt. Weak institutions in combination with disputed leadership authority make it necessary to remain distant from the situation because this approach will result in increased internal division. Interventions provide temporary power to leaders who succeed at managing international relations while keeping local unity. The weak institutional base in Syria and Iraq led to a situation where intervention partnering with internal weaknesses resulted in increased instability which remained unresolved.

Results

Political Leadership as a Region-Specific Variable

Political leadership in the Middle East functions as a decisive, region-specific variable shaping patterns of governance, stability, and conflict. Unlike institutionalized democratic systems, where

authority is distributed across formal checks and balances, leadership in much of the Middle East is highly centralized and personalized. Executive power is frequently concentrated in monarchs, presidents-for-life, or dominant ruling elites, often reinforced by security apparatuses, military institutions, and entrenched patronage networks. In such contexts, political leadership is not simply a managerial role but the primary mechanism through which power is exercised, maintained, and contested (Ganis,2024).

In Middle Eastern countries, legitimacy is usually gained by the leaders through non-democratic ways, such as using the power of the state, religious or sectarian narrative, historical symbols, and support from outside. This very much hinders the establishment of new independent institutions and at the same time undermines the monitoring of government actions, so the political situation becomes very much dependent on the individual leaders rather than the strength of the institutions. Thus, the change of the ruler, be it a succession, coup, or public revolt, usually results in unrest due to the lack of a clear, rule-based power transfer that is not only possible but also predictable.

The behavior of the leaders is affecting the internal stability directly. The rulers decide whether dissent will be handled through the means of reform and dialogue or by force and securitization. Decisions on political participation, resource allocation, and civil rights influence the people's views on the legitimacy of the government. The case of the Arab Spring showed this: the regimes that went for hard repression not only lost control over the situation but also turned the protests into long-lasting conflicts; on the other hand, the regimes that used selective reforms, co-optation, or power-sharing worked towards controlling the discontent.

Thus, political leadership in the Middle East operates as a critical independent variable influencing state fragility or durability. The concentration of authority amplifies both the capacity for decisive governance and the risk of systemic collapse, making leadership choices central to understanding regional political instability.

Leadership Responses to Internal Political and Socio-Economic Pressures

Middle Eastern political systems operate under persistent internal pressures arising from structural economic weaknesses, widespread corruption, demographic stress, youth unemployment, sectarian fragmentation, and declining state capacity. While these factors generate latent instability, they do not by themselves determine political outcomes. Rather, it is leadership perception, interpretation, and response that mediate whether such pressures translate into reform, stagnation, or conflict. Political leadership thus functions as a critical filter through which socio-economic challenges are either managed or intensified (Cammatt,2018).

Often, those in power have turned to labeling the socio-economic issues and the discontent of the citizens as the very reason for their continued existence. That interpretation of reality has given rise to the use of non-democratic methods such as the creation of the opposition's surveillance network, and the military taking charge of police operations against the protesters and going as far as the outright banning of opposition parties and public meetings. The inevitable result of these actions is that the leaders may temporarily succeed in controlling the situation, but in the long run, they will have created even more chaos. The constant use of repression causes society to divide into opposing camps, the already disadvantaged people become more isolated, and the public becomes less trusting of the government. When security takes precedence over everything else, the bureaucracy that governs the country becomes less effective in managing conflicts and less equipped to handle the administration's power and authority over the people's lives.

Leadership that is solely concerned with the elite remaining in power and exclusionary governance inevitably results in economic inequalities. The distribution of resources based on personal connections, provision of welfare to selected groups, and uneven development lead to the feeling of injustice being most profound among the youth and the rural areas. Repression and protests are the result of these dynamics; thus, state legitimacy is eroded further. On that note, a

leadership's reaction can turn an economic problem that is manageable into a political crisis that is multi-faceted and deep-rooted (Ullah, 2023).

Conversely, some leaders have adopted limited but strategic reform measures to manage internal pressures. Administrative restructuring controlled political participation, targeted economic diversification, and selective anti-corruption initiatives have, in certain contexts, reduced social tensions and enhanced regime resilience. Although such reforms often fall short of systemic transformation, they demonstrate that adaptive leadership can mitigate instability without fundamentally dismantling existing power structures.

Leadership and External Intervention

External intervention has long been a defining feature of Middle Eastern politics, driven by the region's strategic location, energy resources, and security significance. However, the impact of external involvement cannot be understood independently of domestic political leadership. Political leaders are not passive recipients of foreign influence; rather, they actively invite, negotiate, resist, or instrumentalize external intervention to consolidate power, counter domestic opposition, or enhance regime survival. As a result, leadership serves as the primary interface through which international and regional forces shape internal political trajectories.

Global powers such as the United States and Russia, alongside regional actors including Iran and Saudi Arabia, typically engage with specific ruling elites, military factions, or dominant leaders rather than with autonomous state institutions. This leader-centric engagement reinforces personalized governance structures and weakens institutional accountability. External military aid, financial assistance, or diplomatic backing often strengthens incumbent leaders' coercive capacities, allowing them to suppress dissent and resist domestic reform pressures.

Such external support can significantly distort internal political dynamics. Leaders who enjoy strong foreign backing face reduced incentives to pursue inclusive governance or political compromise, as regime survival becomes less dependent on domestic legitimacy. In conflict settings, external sponsorship of rival leadership factions has frequently prolonged violence, entrenched elite fragmentation, and transformed internal disputes into proxy struggles. Consequently, leadership choices regarding alliance formation and external alignment play a central role in determining conflict duration and intensity (Russell, 2007).

Conversely, externally driven leadership change, particularly when imposed through military intervention, has often produced destabilizing outcomes. The removal of entrenched leaders without credible institutional transition mechanisms has generated power vacuums, weakened state authority, and intensified competition among elites and armed groups. These outcomes highlight that leadership removal alone does not guarantee political stabilization.

Internal Dynamics as Structural Drivers of Instability

Internal dynamics describe domestic forces which operate through political institutions and social-economic systems and identity creation processes. The dynamics in Syria and Iraq developed over a period starting from the 1950s which resulted in structural instability before the beginning of open conflict. The political landscape demonstrated weak institutionalization as its primary characteristic. Bellin (2012) asserts that authoritarian regimes in the Middle East managed to survive because their coercive systems maintained power, which proved more effective than their institutional-based authority. The Ba'athist regime in Syria established centralized control through executive powers and security forces, which restricted political diversity and prevented governmental bodies from operating independently (Heydemann, 2018). The Ba'athist regime in Iraq established centralized control through executive authority, which resulted in administrative systems becoming dependent on presidential power.

The system attained visible stability through centralization yet lost all operational capacity because its central institutions became disabled. The organization's institutions required leaders

who would help them develop new abilities while establishing basic organizational trust. The situation provided no trustworthy options for nonviolent resolution when crises arose. Social fragmentation further intensified vulnerability. The historical existence of sectarian and ethnic divisions in Syria and Iraq became politically significant when elite groups used these divisions for their own purposes (Gause, 2017). The Sunni-Shia-Kurd divisions in Iraq became more rigid during the time of authoritarian governance and later became formalized through the power-sharing systems that were established after 2003.

The ruling elites in Syria established a social divide that operated as a hidden conflict between their group and the rest of society. Economic internal dynamics brought about additional conflicts to the existing problems. The existence of oil wealth in Iraq and the partial implementation of market reforms in Syria led to economic performance declines which resulted in increased inequality and youth unemployment and corruption (Cammett, 2018; Ross, 2012). The rural drought in Syria during the period from 2006 to 2010 created conditions that increased displacement and unemployment while Iraq relied on its oil resources to establish patronage networks instead of building various economic sectors.

Demographic pressures and youth populations created greater risks of instability. The educated population of the country faced political and economic systems that failed to develop. The public expressed their growing dissatisfaction because institutional participation paths had been blocked (Ullah et al., 2023). The internal dynamics of the organization created collapse requirements which did not exist. The processes created continuous legitimacy problems which produced increasing validity issues. The leadership chose between three options which included reforming the system, co-opting, or using repression as their strategy against incoming pressures. The system in Syria and Iraq suffered from personalized authority which blocked institutional mechanisms from stopping crisis development during periods of rising structural stress.

External Intervention as a Transformative Force

External intervention has been a defining feature of Middle Eastern politics since the Cold War. The domestic institutional strength and leadership strategy determine how external forces destabilize a nation. The 2003 U.S.-led invasion in Iraq destroyed the entire governmental system (Dodge, 2017). The establishment of de-Ba'athification policies and Iraqi army dissolution created a situation that resulted in an institutional void. The intervention started with the goal to create a democratic system but it failed to recognize how weak the Iraqi institutions were. The outcome produced three major conflicts which included sectarian division and insurgency and militia expansion.

Intervention from outside sources changed how leaders made their decisions. Political leaders in the country relied on international support which resulted in them losing their responsibility to their citizens. Iranian power increased through its control of military groups and its establishment of political partnerships. Iraq's national independence became dependent on the power struggle between Middle Eastern nations (Gause, 2017).

The course of foreign intervention in Syria developed through its own unique path. Foreign powers conducted their military operations to either protect or dismantle the existing government system. The Russian military began its operations in 2015 which changed the battlefield conditions to support the Assad government (Phillips, 2020). The Iranian military provided support which helped the executive branch of the government to maintain its power. The Western and regional powers supported opposition groups which resulted in the division of opposition forces (Walther & Pedersen 2020).

The conflict became international when external powers intervened to support their interests in the domestic uprising which turned into a proxy warfare. Heydemann (2018) observes that the civil wars which occur throughout the region show increasing evidence of transnational conflicts that combine with local grievances. The political economy situation underwent significant

changes because of the sanctions which created new economic conditions. The 1990s sanctions in Iraq and the post-2011 sanctions in Syria created social damage which helped the government to maintain its power. Intervention created new power structures which enabled leaders to establish control over their territories through the use of personal power while creating fake authority and persistent unrest. Internal conflicts existed before external forces intervened but external forces succeeded in amplifying and transforming those conflicts.

Syria: Internal Dynamics and External Intervention Since 1950

The present crisis in Syria exists because of two factors which are permanent structural deficiencies and major foreign interventions. The Syrian government has experienced periods of political instability since 1950 which led to authoritarian governance that created a system which seemed secure yet operated with hidden vulnerabilities. The period from 1950 until 1970 saw Syria experience multiple military coups which demonstrated the weak capacity of civilian institutions and the political involvement of military personnel.

Political parties developed into weak organizations which struggled to control their members while intense ideological conflicts created unstable governmental systems. The Ba'ath Party emerged as the dominant power because it wanted to establish centralized control through its Arab nationalist and socialist system. Hafez al-Assad achieved total power after the 1970 "Corrective Movement," which marked the critical turning point in Syrian history. Hafez al-Assad established a time of peace in Syria, but the country maintained order through violence and he established commoners and officials who answered only to him whom he controlled through his power over government institutions (Hinnebusch, 2003).

Assad established an authoritarian regime that permitted no political opposition. The regime operated its systems by using security forces and emergency regulations and monitoring activities to silence any opposition. The regime used sectarian balancing through military and security forces to maintain control while presenting an appearance of national unity. The elite management system which operated inside the organization concealed the social exclusion which affected the entire society. The 1982 Hama crackdown which the regime used to violently suppress an Islamist uprising showed how the state would use extreme force for control purposes. The event confirmed that the government would not permit political opposition to exist but instead planned to complete political systems through forceful elimination. The 1990s began a process of economic liberalization which promoted market reforms but these reforms created an exclusionary economic system which operated at different speeds. The market-oriented policies created advantages for urban elites and businesses that operated under government protection while they created disadvantages for rural residents.

Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000 and his administration introduced limited modernization through controlled economic changes and small-scale technology improvements. The political system maintained its existing structure without any substantial changes. (Heydemann 2018) National Leader Bashar al-Assad used crony capitalism to create inequality which forced members of rural communities who already faced economic difficulties from decreased agricultural funding to experience further economic decline. The 2006 to 2010 drought created extreme drought conditions which worsened economic problems and led to high rates of rural residents moving to cities while social economic tensions grew.

The Syrian leadership had to decide their response to the 2011 protests which started during the Arab uprisings. The regime chose to use military force for its repression. The initial protests which started in one area became a nationwide armed conflict because of this decision (Lynch et al., 2022). The state used violent methods to suppress opposition groups which resulted in increased defections and loss of territorial control by the government.

The external powers that became involved in the conflict introduced new elements which changed its development. The Iranian government provided financial support to the regime while

sending military advisors and their allied militias to help fight during the initial stages of the conflict. The Russian military intervention in 2015 created a major shift in the conflict because it enabled the regime to survive through airpower and diplomatic protection at the United Nations. The opposition groups received different levels of assistance from both regional and Western powers which led to their internal divisions and extended duration of the conflict. Syria became a battleground for geopolitical struggles between Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and Gulf states (Phillips, 2020).

The Syrian case demonstrates how entrenched authoritarian systems together with social and economic disparities and institutional discrimination brought hidden state vulnerability. The government maintained its power through foreign military support but lost its ability to control the country. The nation suffered from territorial division and a humanitarian disaster and experienced ongoing political unrest. The Syrian case shows that a government which remains in power does not lead to national recovery thereby demonstrating how internal system forces and outside military actions work together to create extended warfare.

Iraq: Internal Dynamics and External Intervention Since 1950

The political development of Iraq in modern times shows how its internal authoritarianism combines with foreign powers shape its political system. Iraq and Syria share a similar pattern of state centralization and government repression but the Iraqi crisis evolved through different events because foreign powers forced the regime to collapse without any internal developments.

The 1958 revolution which removed the Hashemite monarchy represents the critical juncture that defined Iraq's contemporary historical path. The revolution ended monarchical rule and ushered in an era of military dominance in politics. Iraq faced ongoing political instability due to multiple military coups and battles between different elite groups which resulted in the military becoming the primary decision-making authority. The Ba'ath party established its control over Iraq which led to the eventual emergence of Saddam Hussein as ruler. Saddam established an authoritarian system in Iraq which centralized power through control of oil wealth and patronage networks and violent state repression (Dodge, 2017).

The regime built a large security system with its oil riches because it needed to win the support of powerful people in the country. The system appeared stable but it concealed serious basic structural problems and it operated with sectarian discrimination. The government system of Iraq functioned under Saddam's control because all state bodies existed to support his regime. The Kurdish people who lived in northern areas and the Shia people who lived in southern areas faced both direct discrimination and violent attacks against them. The organization of internal operations depended more on distributing resources and creating fear than on developing institutional structures which included all members.

The government system developed military power through external conflicts. The Iranian-Iraqi war which lasted from 1980 until 1988 created a situation where the government depended on security forces while emergency powers became common in society. The Gulf War which occurred in 1991 along with international sanctions destroyed Iraq's economic system and its ability to govern. The sanctions destroyed public services which increased social problems and weakened institutional power. The government system continued to exist because it used stronger methods of control which made state structures more fragile.

The internal protest movement within Syria started the process which created a total systemic crisis, while Iraq started its crisis through the 2003 United States invasion. The United States-led invasion of Iraq resulted in Saddam's regime collapse which destroyed the existing power structure. The de-Ba'athification policy removed from public office all experienced administrators and military officers and civil servants. The decision established an administrative vacuum because it destroyed all bureaucratic procedures. The Iraqi army disbandment created additional security

problems because many former officers joined insurgent groups. The regime change process did not support democratization because it resulted in political divisions and violence.

The post-2003 political reconstruction created power-sharing agreements which allocated governmental authority among various religious factions. The new governance system assigned power distribution based on ethnic and sectarian identities, which established identity politics as a fundamental element of state functions. The system was designed to provide representation, but it created elite competition which resulted in the distribution of patronage and the collapse of governmental operations. Through its control of Shia political groups and militia organizations Iran expanded its power because these groups operated as Iranian proxies in Iraq (Gause, 2017). The external actors became fully intertwined with the domestic political processes of the country.

Conclusions

The research investigates Middle Eastern political instability through an analytical framework that uses political leadership as its central element to study internal political forces and external political forces. The research uses Syria and Iraq as case studies to show that structural factors are insufficient to explain instability problems in the region. The combination of weak institutions and economic inequality and sectarian divisions and youth unemployment and governance deficits creates a base for vulnerability, but these factors do not cause state collapse or extended violent conflict. The leadership decisions of an organization determine the way pressure develops into operational breakdowns.

The internal factors in Syria and Iraq developed through multiple decades until they reached their current state. Political systems in these countries developed stable appearances through centralized executive power but they failed to endure special circumstances. The economy suffered from mismanagement and uneven development which decreased performance-based legitimacy while identity politics created deeper social divides. The structural pressures developed into the primary cause of instability. The leadership response through different methods established the path which led to more severe crises. The Syrian case demonstrates how authoritarian governments and militarized forces turned local demonstrations into an extended civil conflict. The leadership used coercive power together with sectarian support and economic exclusion which resulted in reduced ability for institutions to adapt. The Russian and Iranian forces which intervened in the conflict supported regime power yet they created international conflict which made the situation worse. The Syrian government demonstrates that a regime can remain in power yet the state fails to recover because its survival depends on external support which creates more internal divisions and humanitarian disasters.

Iraq functions as an example of an externally driven regime change which results in complete governmental collapse. The United States led the 2003 invasion which destroyed Iraq's central government system. The removal of leaders from their positions did not lead to democratic development because it created competition among elites together with the growth of militias and the establishment of political parties based on ethnic backgrounds. The regional power struggle between external forces creates new opportunities for domestic authorities to alter their political strategies. Iraq demonstrates that successful leadership transitions require two essential elements: institutional reform and complete government system reconstruction.

Political leadership works as an intermediary factor which affects how internal forces and external pressures interact with each other. Leadership strategies determine whether organizations will handle grievances through reform processes or whether they will use coercive methods to silence complaints or whether they will generate greater conflict through their existing programs. The domestic leadership framework of an organization affects how external intervention functions

because it gives more power to individual leaders while decreasing their responsibility to maintain institutional standards.

The research shows that Middle Eastern political instability stems from two sources which include internal structural elements and external forces. The situation results from ongoing interactions between domestic weaknesses and international power struggles and the decisions made by leaders. Policies which aim to stabilize the region need to shift their focus from supporting specific regimes or conducting military operations about to strengthening institutional capacities and implementing fair governance systems and establishing systems for holding leaders responsible.

The cases of Syria and Iraq show that countries need more than their leaders to remain in power to achieve permanent political stability. The process requires institutions to maintain their strength while establishing governance systems that involve all citizens and leaders who can address various challenges without using oppressive methods or becoming dependent on others. This study analyzes leadership as its primary focus to create a deeper and broader comprehension of Middle Eastern political instability which continues to affect worldwide relations.

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