SSR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (SSRJAHSS)

Homepage: https://ssrpublisher.com/ssrjahss

Volume 3, Issue 11, 2026 ISSN: 3049-0391 (Online)

Reconfiguring Sovereignty and Territorial Authority in the Middle East: A Critical Geopolitical Analysis

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Received: 10.10.2026 | **Accepted:** 18.10.2026 | **Published:** 21.11.2026

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DOI: *10.5281/zenodo.24413266*

Abstract **Review Article**

The processes taking place in the Middle East have significantly changed the nature of sovereignty, territory, and political authority. Various wars, outside interventions, and the growing role of non-state actors have broken existing patterns of territorial control and produced overlapping authorities in several countries. This paper is aimed at analyzing the discussion of the above-mentioned developments in the literature on geopolitics and political geography, in particular, their impact on interpretations of sovereignty and political space. A systematic review of 30 academic sources was conducted, in which the main theoretical approaches and recurrent topics in the literature were identified. The research reveals three dimensions of geopolitical change, which are closely related to each other: regional power rivalry, redistribution of territorial authority, and increasing role of non-state actors in shaping political space. The results indicate that the borders of formal states do not always coincide with the geography of political control in conflict-affected regions and areas with outside intervention. Moreover, there is a necessity of combining geopolitical studies with the study of political space. It can be concluded that the analysis of sovereignty in terms of interrelations between states, territory, and political actors contributes to the understanding of geopolitical change in the Middle East.

Keywords: Geopolitics; Political Geography; Middle East; Territorial Sovereignty; Non-State Actors; Political Space.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there have been numerous changes in the political geography of the Middle East. It is the type of geographical space which is determined by wars, rivalries, and foreign interventions, which affect the exercise of political authority and the relations between states and their territories. In some regions, it became hard to exercise political control because state institutions are engaged in interaction and rivalry with local actors, armed forces, and foreign powers. One should consider whether traditional approaches to sovereignty can be used for describing the current geopolitical situation in the Middle East (Fawcett, 2016).

The link between geographical space and political power has been widely discussed in the science of geopolitics. Geopolitical theories of classical tradition pay attention to geographical location, strategic resources, territorial boundaries, and the state as the main unit of political analysis (Agnew, 2003). These theories fail to cover the issue of exercising political power by different actors in the same territory.

Critical geopolitics involves consideration of political power and space as the concepts constructed by politics (Ó Tuathail, 1996).

These questions have special relevance to the Middle East where the long-term wars and competition among regional powers result in the transformation of territorial control and political governance. In some situations, the state is recognized as the formal sovereign of the country, but other actors are able to influence some territories. This results in blurring the relation between officially recognized borders and political authority. It also means that regional and international actors should be involved in analysis of the political situation along with internal political forces (Hinnebusch, 2015).

Concerning political geography, the concept of sovereignty cannot be discussed in terms of its legal meaning only. It is also important to discuss this concept from the geographical organization and political power perspectives. Territorial control may vary depending on the space, and the limits of political influence may be different from existing state borders. In order to understand territory as a political and historical construct, it is necessary to examine how sovereignty and political authority are shaped by geopolitical processes and spatial relations.

2. Research Methodology

The present research is carried out through qualitative methods based on the theory of critical geopolitics and political geography with the goal of studying changes in sovereign structures and territorial authority in the Middle East region. In this regard, the research does not only consider the legal aspect of the state as an embodiment of the sovereignty, but it also pays a lot of attention to the exercise of the political authority and its redistribution in space.

The theoretical framework of the research will be based on the critical geopolitics and political geography which will be analyzed in detail based on such sources as Agnew (2003), Ó Tuathail (1996), and Elden) 2013.(

The research is structured according to three interrelated analytical dimensions: the first one is related to the geopolitical competition and its impact on regional political relations; the second one is dedicated to the changes in territorial sovereignty and the geographical distribution of the political authority, and the third one deals with the role of non-state actors in the matter under discussion.

Thus, employing these analytical dimensions, it will be important to trace the link between geopolitical changes and spatial rearrangement of the authority.

2.1. Selection of Academic Sources

Academic literature is used in political geography, critical geopolitics, and regional politics of the Middle East. In particular, literature sources are selected according to their relevance to the relationship between sovereignty, territory, and political authority. The attention will be paid to scholarly articles that cover regional geopolitical competition, control over territory and impact of state and non-state actors.

Foundational theoretical works are combined with studies of political events in the Middle East. It helps to provide an opportunity to analyze geopolitical transformations in terms of debates about territory and sovereignty.

2.2. Analytical Approach

Qualitative geopolitical analysis serves as the methodological basis of the paper. Concepts elaborated in critical geopolitics and political geography will be used as the basis for investigation of the relationship between sovereignty, territory, and political authority in cases when there is competition or distribution of territorial control among several political actors.

Three main analytical dimensions include:

1. Geopolitical transformations in the Middle East and power shifts in the region.
2. Redefined relations of sovereignty and territorial authority.
3. The impact of non-state actors on

political space organization and territorial control.

Such dimensions provide the same ground for the analysis of the relationship between geopolitical developments in the Middle East and geographical distribution of political authority.

2.3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework of the research will be based on the theories of critical geopolitics and approaches to the study of political geography. The ideas of Agnew (2003) can be used to criticize conventional interpretation of geopolitical power in terms of state-centered politics. The importance of political discourse and geographical representation in geopolitical analysis is highlighted by Ó Tuathail (1996). Territory as a political and historical phenomenon is discussed by Elden (2013).

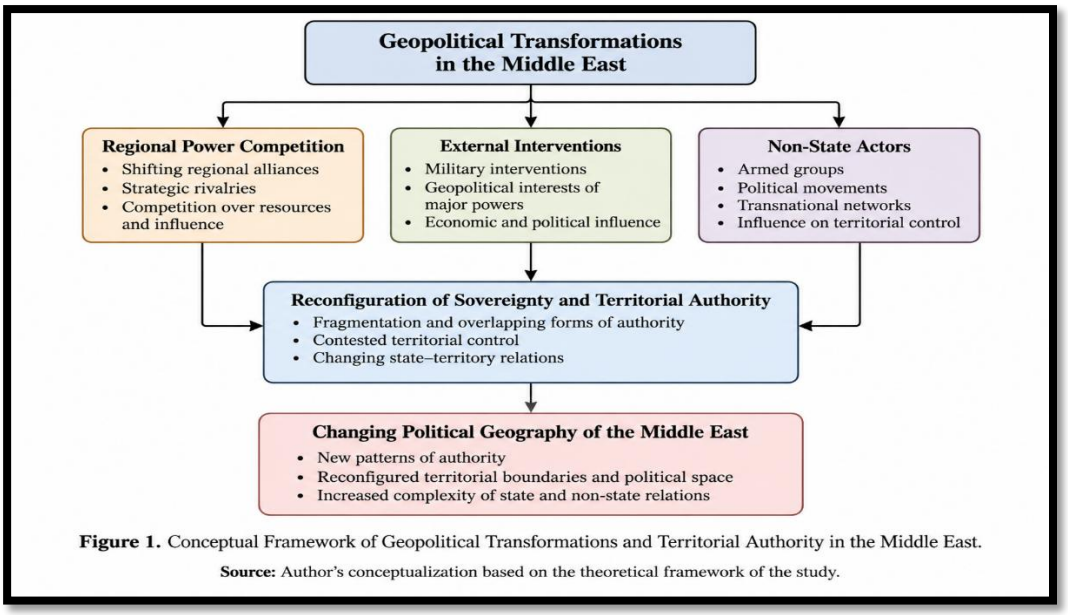
These perspectives help to reconsider the concept of sovereignty. The study will focus on the differences between officially recognized territorial sovereignty and exercising of political authority in geographical space. Such question is especially important for the Middle East because of numerous political and military conflicts and overlapping territorial control.

2.4. Scope and Limitations of the Analysis

The research project concentrates on the connections that exist between geopolitical changes, sovereignty, and territorial authority in the Middle East. The approach used by the researcher is largely theoretical and interpretive in nature; the information analyzed comes from secondary literature on the topic.

The research does not attempt to give a quantitative evaluation of territorial control in individual countries. It aims to explore the implications of altered authority relationships. The findings of the research must thus be seen as confined by the nature of the qualitative literature-based analysis approach.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Geopolitical Transformations and the Reconfiguration of Sovereignty and Territorial Authority in the Middle East



Source: Author's conceptualization based on the theoretical framework of the study (Agnew, 2003; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Elden, 2013).

3. Results

In regard to theoretical framework, the paper provides an overview of the latest findings in the study of the relation of sovereignty, territory and political authority in the Middle East region. The factors that lead to more complicated territorial relations in the region are regional wars and conflicts, foreign intervention and emergence of non-state actors. It raises questions about the validity of state-centric theories of sovereignty and territoriality.

All of the theories of Agnew (2003), Ó Tuathail (1996), and Elden (2013) provide different perspectives of how geographical space and political power interact. While the first author doubts the state-centered approaches to geopolitics, the second one is interested in political discourse of geopolitical perceptions. However, the political and historical theory of territory allows to understand the connection of territorial organization and political authority.

Research on the Middle Eastern politics highlights the role of regional competition and foreign interventions in political relations building (Fawcett, 2016; Hinnebusch, 2015). Moreover, research dedicated to territoriality and borderlands proves that the borders of states do not reflect the division of political power (Newman, 2006; Paasi, 2011; Murphy, 2013).

To sum up, the perspectives listed above suggest studying the geopolitical changes in the Middle East from the following aspects: regional power competition, new forms of territorial sovereignty and actions of non-state actors.

Table 1. Selected Theoretical Contributions to Geopolitics and Political Geography

Author	Year	Analytical Focus
Agnew	2003	Geopolitical power and state sovereignty
Ó Tuathail	1996	Critical geopolitics and political discourse
Elden	2013	Territory and political authority
Fawcett	2016	Regional politics in the Middle East
Hinnebusch	2015	Regional geopolitical relations
Newman	2006	Political borders and territorial divisions

Source: Compiled by the author from the cited academic literature.

Table 1 presents the main theoretical perspectives supporting the study's geopolitical analysis. These contributions highlight the relationship between sovereignty, territory, and political power, providing a conceptual basis for examining changes in territorial authority and the role of state and non-state actors in the Middle East.

3.1. Regional Geopolitical Transformations

In the twenty-first century, geopolitical changes in the Middle East became evident in terms of shifting regional balance of power and the relationship between domestic disputes and foreign interference. The political instability and warfare in the region led to the creation of conditions when developments in individual states become subject to the influence of both regional and international actors. According to Fawcett (2016), the political reality of the Middle East is tightly connected with the interplay between domestic politics and regional or international politics.

The first element of the transformation in question is connected with the changing geographical scale of political competition. Domestic disputes can turn into regional conflicts due to the political, economic, or military support from outside provided to rival parties. As a result, the geographic boundaries of the conflict do not necessarily coincide with the boundaries of the state where it takes place. The described connection between domestic instability and regional competition explains why developments in one country can have implications for security arrangements and political relations in neighboring territories (Hinnebusch, 2015).

From the political-geographical point of view, the described processes mean that the geopolitical influence is exercised not only via direct territorial control. Geopolitical networks include the relationships between countries based on political, economic, military, or ideological grounds and other types of ties between different entities. It means that the political-geographic picture of geopolitical influence should reflect different geographical scales of political relationships.

As it was mentioned above, these transformations demonstrate the close connection between the territorial state and geopolitical network in the political geography of the Middle East. Despite the importance of the state as a political institution, its ability to exercise political authority can be limited by external intervention and rivalry of regional powers and by the internal problems of fragmentation. The described facts provide an important background for the analysis of the relationship between geopolitical changes and the territorial organization of political authority.

3.2 Changing Forms of Territorial Sovereignty

The traditional definition of sovereignty assumes the existence of the sovereign state having the authority over certain territory and people. However, sometimes the exercise of political authority is different from the above-mentioned notion. In case of some regions in the Middle East experiencing protracted warfare, the connection between sovereignty of the government recognized internationally and the extent of its control over the territory becomes especially essential. The state may retain its sovereignty over its territory while having different levels of authority in various regions of the country.

For the examination of the connection between sovereignty and territorial control, it is useful to use the theoretical approach suggested by Elden (2013). In the given context, it is important to perceive territory not only as a geographical entity but also as a result of political processes. The exercise of political authority is dependent not only on the borders of the territory but also on the political instruments used to govern the space. Thus, any changes in the distribution of political power can lead to the reshaping of territorial relations without the alteration of borders.

At the same time, the distinction between recognized sovereignty and territorial control leads to the questions regarding the geographical organization of the exercise of political authority. In case of conflict-affected territories, the political authority can be different in different regions. Central governments, local administrations, and different armed organizations can have control over the territory. As a result, the regions can have several centers of political authority, administration, and territorial control.

The described situation can be analyzed using the approach offered by Agnew (2003). It contradicts the idea that the territory of the state is a closed geographical entity of political power. Nevertheless, the overlapping political authority should not be perceived as an evidence of the existence of several sovereign states. It demonstrates the discrepancy between the formal recognition of sovereignty and the geographical distribution of power.

In such a way, the changes in territorial sovereignty should be analyzed according to the exercise of authority in the territory in question. The described approach does not assume that the sovereignty of the state has ceased to exist.

3.3. The Role of Non-State Actors in Reshaping Political Space

As an emerging player on the political arena, non-state actors have taken part in the political and territorial processes of the region. Non-state actors refer to various armed organizations, political movements, transnational communities whose activities may affect security, governance, and distribution of authority. The importance of non-state actors is not limited by their political or military power but also by the capacity to build relationships with local population and influence particular territories.

The increase in the influence of non-state actors has complicated traditional dichotomy between state authority and territorial control. In some areas affected by conflicts, non-state organizations perform duties related to providing security, administering locally and controlling movements. Such structures may build up the systems of territorial governance which work simultaneously with, compete against or challenge the institutions of the legitimate state. In order to understand the regional political situation in the area, Hinnebusch (2015) provides a comprehensive overview of the region.

As far as critical geopolitics goes, the role of non-state actors as players in the game includes not only their capacity to take control of territory but also the impact of their activities on the representation of political space, territorial identity and claims to authority. According to critical geopolitics approach, the geographical power not only relates to material power but also includes political practices and representations. Dalby (2010) expands the scope of knowledge about such interconnection between geopolitical power, politics and space relations.

Non-state actors may develop relationships with regional and international powers thus building up the political links that go beyond the borders of one country. Such links may affect the balance of power at the local level and make the restoration of centralized authority difficult. However, the influence of non-state actors is different in various political contexts and cannot be considered a regional phenomenon.

The geographical consequences of all these processes are very relevant because political space may be organized by means of multiple overlapping networks of authority rather than by one territorially consolidated system of governance. It does not mean that state borders have lost their meaning. On the contrary, it shows that the distribution of power may be different from its territorial organization.

In general, the analysis of the above-mentioned three perspectives indicates that the geopolitical changes in the Middle East are related not only to the change of power balance in the region but also to the geographical organization of sovereignty, territorial power distribution and the relationships between state and non-state actors. All these aspects become the base for further discussion of theoretical implications of the research.

4. Discussion

Thus, the analysis shows that changes in geopolitics of the Middle East should not be explained by approaches that consider state to be a single political authority with an equal control over its territory. While geographic borders play an important role in international relations, the distribution of political power is more complicated because of regional conflicts, foreign interventions, and the activity of non-state actors. It means that the distinction between political power and sovereignty should be taken into account (Agnew, 2003; Flint & Taylor, 2011).

The traditional perspective on geopolitics focuses on such issues as geographical location, resource availability, strategic significance of territories, and territorial borders as the main determinants of political relationships. In the Middle East, the influence of these aspects is obvious, but the exclusive consideration of relations between states can neglect the diversity of political power in national borders. Fawcett (2016) gives a good regional perspective for the consideration of the interrelationship between domestic political developments and international interests.

Critical geopolitics offers another perspective

that involves the consideration of the political meanings of the territory, borders, and security. In contrast to traditional approach, it takes into account not only geographical space as the background of political activities, but also the interpretation of spatial relations. At the same time, the political discourse is not enough for the explanation of the practical exercise of territorial power. Military capabilities, economic resources, and administration infrastructure should be taken into account as well (Dalby, 2010; Harvey, 2001).

One of the main problems that arise during the analysis of the geopolitics of the region is the difference between legal sovereignty and the distribution of territorial authority. While the international recognition determines the legal borders and the legal sovereignty of the state, it does not mean that the power of the state is equally distributed over its territory. In the areas of the armed conflict, there are several institutions and political actors who have influence over different geographical areas. The concept of Elden (2013) provides a good basis for the analysis of territory as political formation, and the idea of Murphy (2013) demonstrates that territoriality is still relevant for the consideration of political organization.

The activity of non-state actors adds complexity to the relationship between sovereignty and the geographical space. Non-state armed organizations, political movements, and local authorities can influence the security, administration, and access to territory, but they lack international recognition of the sovereignty. Interaction between state institutions and other countries produces overlapping arrangements of the political power. It is in agreement with the broader discussions about political instability and regional intervention in the Middle East (Hinnebusch, 2015; Yom, 2015).

It does not mean that the disappearance of the territorial state occurs, but it means that the geographical structure of the state sovereignty differs from the distribution of political power over its territory. The state is one of the central political institution, but it can negotiate, challenge, or distribute the authority over the territory differently.

The main advantage of the current analysis is the consideration of the relationship between regional geopolitical competition and the spatial arrangement of the political power. They are usually considered separately, even though they are connected. The influence of regional interventions can result in the changes in the arrangements of the territorial authority, and vice versa. Thus, it provides the theoretical basis for the examination of the changing political geography of the region.

The proposed conceptual framework involves three interconnected aspects: regional power competition, foreign intervention, and the activity of non-state actors. The interaction between them is considered in the context of the changes in the arrangement of sovereignty and territorial power. It does not suggest any causal relationship that applies to all states in the region, but it provides a good structure for the interpretation of the ways of the impact of geopolitical processes on the political space organization.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the current discussion has demonstrated the importance of the analysis of the sovereignty as both the legal principle and the geographically changing form of the political power. The combination of the critical geopolitics with the focus on the material aspect and territorial practices is useful in this situation. Further research with the basis of the comparative analysis of country cases and spatial data is required.

Limitations of the Study

This paper is based on qualitative analysis of theoretical research on geopolitics and political geography of the Middle East. The limitation of this work lies in the use of secondary literature instead of field investigation and independently gathered spatial data. Additionally, the paper does not provide an analysis of individual conditions of political and territorial situation in every particular Middle Eastern country. Therefore, the suggested conceptual framework can be considered to be a theoretical interpretation of the dynamics of sovereignty and territorial control, and not an empirical study.

5 .Conclusion

The transformation of the geopolitical situation in the Middle East raises numerous questions regarding the interaction between state sovereignty, territorial control, and political authority. According to the analysis presented above, the factors such as regional competition, intervention of foreign states, and increasing activity of non-state actors lead to the development of new patterns of political control.

One of the key statements of this research is that state sovereignty does not imply the effective exercise of power within the territorial boundaries of one state. While the state still remains a crucial element of the political processes in the region, the geographical division of power may include multiple agents who operate at local, national, and regional levels.

The combination of approaches used in geopolitics and political geography enables us to suggest the conceptual framework for the analysis of the aforementioned issues. This conceptual framework implies the necessity to analyze not only the state sovereignty as a legal concept but also the geographical aspects of its realization.

Therefore, it becomes obvious that the application of a critical geopolitical perspective can help to understand the political changes in the Middle East in a more detailed way. Comparative country studies and geographical evidence should be applied to test the validity of the theoretical framework.

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