



## The Alliance-Building Dilemma Under Shared Security Pressures in the Context of the Greater Middle East Project: Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, And Egypt

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines why Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have failed to establish a sustainable and institutionalized regional alliance despite intensifying common security pressures in the context of the Greater Middle East Project, employing a multidimensional analytical framework. The research centers on the concept of "alliance failure dilemma" to question the validity conditions of classical alliance theories in the Middle Eastern context. The study develops a multilayered theoretical model integrating the security dilemma, strategic autonomy, regime security, collective action problem, regional security complexes, economic vulnerabilities, and discursive construction processes. Using qualitative comparative case analysis methodology, the structural and perceptual reasons underlying why five regional middle powers respond differently to similar security threats were analyzed through thematic analysis technique. The findings reveal that the alliance failure dilemma stems not from the absence of threats but from profound differences in threat interpretation and prioritization, regional leadership competition, regime security concerns, and structural constraints created by international sanctions. The research demonstrates that the security dilemma, pursuit of strategic autonomy, and collective action problems constitute mutually reinforcing cyclical mechanisms, transforming the alliance failure dilemma into a self-reproducing structural problem. The study offers original conceptual and empirical contributions to regional security literature, critically re , reassesses the universality claims of classical alliance theories in non-Western contexts, and develops concrete recommendations for policymakers. In this regard, the study illuminates the critical juncture between regional fragmentation and strategic cooperation, providing significant implications for the future of the Middle Eastern security order.

**Keywords:** Alliance failure dilemma, Greater Middle East Project, regional security complex, security dilemma, strategic autonomy, middle power competition, collective action problem

### INTRODUCTION

In the post-Cold War era, the Middle East has entered a multi-layered transformation process characterized by the reshaping of global power balances, deepening regional competition, and



increasing fragility of state structures. This transformation is characterized not only by debates over the redrawing of political borders, but also by the erosion of state sovereignty, the fragmentation of the social fabric, and the deadlock in the search for regional order (Ulrichsen, 2020). This transformation process has been concretized by military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, civil wars that erupted after the Arab Spring, and prolonged conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen (Phillips, 2020; Allinson, 2022). These developments have fundamentally transformed the security perceptions of regional states, while also opening up the debate on the necessity of collective defense mechanisms against external interventions. Strategic visions, particularly the one referred to as the "Greater Middle East Project" (GME), which is alleged to aim at redrawing regional borders, are at the center of this debate (Ahram, 2020; Sadiki, 2020). Although the concept of BOP is controversial in academic literature, it functions as a powerful discursive framework that shapes the threat perceptions of regional actors and influences their strategic calculations (Lynch, 2025). States such as Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, which are regional middle powers in terms of population size, military capacity, and geopolitical position, have faced similar security pressures in this process (Kamrava, 2020; Mabon, 2023). Risks of regional fragmentation, threats of external intervention, and scenarios of internal destabilization stand out as key elements shaping the common security agenda of these five countries. However, despite a shared perception of threat, these states have been unable to develop an institutionalized and sustainable regional security alliance. This situation presents a critical analytical problem that needs to be addressed in regional security studies.

The existing literature largely addresses security crises in the Middle East within the framework of sectarian polarization, proxy conflicts, or global power competition (Wehrey, 2019; Stein & Fulton, 2022). While these approaches shed light on important dimensions of regional dynamics, they fail to adequately explain the structural factors that determine states' collective action capacities and alliance behaviors (Darwich, 2020). However, the question of why regional actors facing similar security threats have failed to establish a collective defense arrangement has remained relatively secondary in the literature. This is particularly evident in the case of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, as all of these countries face both the threat of external intervention and the risk of internal fragmentation simultaneously (IISS, 2021; SIPRI, 2023). However, the covert competition, regional leadership claims, and mutual distrust among these states prevent the formation of common security mechanisms (Legrenzi, 2021; Mabon, 2023). These inhibiting factors have become institutionalized over time and have become a structural element of the regional security culture (Ehteshami, 2021). The proposition "a common threat engenders a common response," accepted as a fundamental assumption in classical alliance theories, loses its validity in this case. This contradiction necessitates a re-examination of the concepts of the security dilemma and alliance in the Middle Eastern context. Therefore, the inability of these five countries to form an alliance



presents a unique research problem that requires in-depth examination at both the theoretical and empirical levels. This article aims to fill precisely this theoretical and empirical gap.

The main objective of this study is to analyze, within a multidimensional framework, why Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have been unable to develop an effective and sustainable regional alliance despite the intense common security pressures concentrated in the context of the Greater Middle East Project. To this end, the article reconceptualizes regional security dynamics by focusing on the concept of the "alliance dilemma." The alliance failure dilemma refers to states avoiding cooperation due to mutual distrust, leadership competition, regime security concerns, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy, despite the existence of a common threat perception (Darwich, 2020; Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). Unlike the classical security dilemma literature, this concept focuses on explaining why cooperation does not occur despite a shared perception of threat; thus, the alliance-building dilemma conceptualizes the tension between the homogeneity of threat perception and the heterogeneity of strategic responses. The study argues that this dilemma is directly related not only to ideological or sectarian differences but also to geopolitical positioning, concerns about regime continuity, economic vulnerabilities, and structural pressures created by great power competition (Hakimian, 2021; Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). Thus, BOP discussions are analyzed beyond the discourse of a purely external restructuring project, focusing on the subjective strategic preferences of regional actors. The scope of the study includes the security perceptions, foreign policy orientations, mutual relationship patterns, and obstacles to alliance-building potential of the five countries in question. This approach constitutes the analytical originality and interdisciplinary depth of the article.

The research question of this study is formulated as follows: "Despite the intense common security pressures in the context of the Greater Middle East Project, why have Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt been unable to establish a sustainable and institutionalized regional alliance?" This question is both descriptive and explanatory in nature, aiming to go beyond confirming the existence of the alliance gap to reveal the causal chain behind this gap. Three subsidiary research questions have been developed based on this fundamental question. The first subsidiary question examines the political, strategic, and historical dynamics that fuel the covert competition between the countries in question. The second auxiliary question examines how the policies of major powers (particularly the United States, Israel, Russia, and China) toward the regional security architecture shape and constrain the alliance-building processes among regional middle powers (Brands, 2019; Stent, 2019; Rolland, 2020). The third sub-question analyzes how targeting and weakening a single regional actor (as in the case of Iran) creates a chain reaction effect on the deterrence capacities and security perceptions of other regional middle powers (Nasr, 2025; Ehteshami, 2021). This third question is particularly critical for understanding the interdependence patterns and domino effect potential of regional security complexes (Kamrava, 2020). These questions form the



analytical backbone of the study and will be systematically addressed in the following sections.

The fundamental hypothesis of this study is as follows: The inability of these five countries to form an alliance stems not from the absence of a common security threat, but from competitive strategic choices regarding the management of this threat and from collective action problems. In this context, the collective action problem goes beyond its classical meaning and refers to the asymmetry between the uncertainty of the benefits of cooperation and the concreteness of competitive gains (Legrenzi, 2021). Accordingly, regional leadership claims, regime security priorities, and mutual distrust outweigh the potential benefits of cooperation in terms of the costs of alliance formation. Based on this fundamental hypothesis, two auxiliary hypotheses have been developed. The first auxiliary hypothesis argues that the selective intervention, sanctions, and pressure policies of great powers in the region deepen mistrust among regional actors and increase the costs of alliance formation (Stein & Fulton, 2022; Rolland, 2020). This hypothesis is based on the assumption that the "divide and rule" strategies of major powers systematically hinder the formation of regional alliances. The second auxiliary hypothesis ( ) argues that while targeting and weakening Iran may appear to provide short-term strategic advantages for some regional actors, it increases the risks of fragmentation and instability for the entire region in the long term, thereby transforming the lack of alliances into a collective security vulnerability (Ahram, 2020; SIPRI, 2024). These hypotheses will be systematically tested in the following sections in light of the theoretical framework and empirical findings. Thus, the study brings the phenomenon of alliance failure into an explainable and testable analytical framework.

This study treats the concept of "alliance," commonly used in regional security analyses, not as a static outcome but as a dynamic, conditional, and fragile process. Classical realism and neo-realist literature define states' tendency to form alliances in the face of common threats as a rational and expected pattern of behavior (Sperling & Webber, 2025). However, the Middle East example clearly demonstrates that this theoretical assumption does not hold true under all conditions. Although Walt's threat balance theory emphasizes that the perception of threats is more decisive than the balance of power, it fails to adequately explain why these perceptions did not translate into collective action. Actors such as Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, despite having similar threat perceptions, adopt differing security priorities and strategic orientations (Kamrava, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2020). This situation leads to the deepening and institutionalization of the security dilemma at the regional level. The concept of the security dilemma refers to the perception by other actors that a state's defensive actions are indicative of aggressive intent (Geiss & Melzer, 2021). In the Middle East context, this dilemma is produced not only through increases in military capacity but also through ideological discourses, regime security policies, and bilateral relations established with non-regional actors (Wehrey, 2019; Kandil, 2020). In particular, the divergence between regime



security and state security makes alliance-building processes even more complex and contentious. Therefore, this article evaluates the phenomenon of failure to form alliances not only in terms of the structure of external threats but also in conjunction with internal political dynamics and patterns of mutual perception.

Discussions on the Greater Middle East Project mostly focus on the intentions and strategies of non-regional actors in academic and political discourse, relegating the subjective preferences and reactions of regional states to the background. This externally focused approach produces an analytical blind spot that underestimates the agency of regional actors and positions them solely as objects of great power politics (Sadiki, 2020). However, developments over the past two decades have clearly demonstrated that regional states are not passive in these processes; on the contrary, they play active and often competing roles (Sadiki, 2020; Lynch, 2025). Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy and its multifaceted foreign policy moves, Iran's resistance strategy based on regional influence networks, Saudi Arabia's interventionist policies aimed at consolidating its claim to regional leadership, Egypt's stability-focused approach centered on regime security, and Pakistan's multidimensional policy balancing South Asia and the Middle East are clear examples of this diversity (Tezcür, 2022; Mabon, 2023; Pande, 2025). Each country's unique strategic culture, historical experiences, and regime structure form the background for these differing orientations (Abul-Magd, 2020). However, these divergent strategic orientations have fueled mutual suspicion and competition rather than building a common regional security architecture. In this context, the BOP has functioned not only as an externally imposed project design but also as a framework that accelerates and deepens the competitive behaviors of regional actors. The article aims to make this interactive process analytically visible and to highlight the subject position of regional actors.

The methodology of this study is based on a qualitative comparative analysis approach. This methodological choice makes it possible to ground claims of causality through contextual depth and process tracing rather than statistical generalizations. The study considers Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt as "comparable cases" that developed different strategic responses under similar security pressures (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). These five countries form a suitable case set for comparative analysis because they share similar characteristics in terms of military capacity, population size, geopolitical position, and regional influence potential ( ) (Kamrava, 2020). Inspired by Mill's similarity and difference method, this case selection strategy aims to isolate the causes of varying dependent variables (strategic responses) under common independent variables (security pressures). Secondary data sources, official security doctrines, foreign policy documents, and leading academic publications in the field are systematically used in the analysis. Data on military expenditures, sanctions regimes, and regime resilience are supported by annual reports from international security institutions (SIPRI, 2024; IISS, 2025). This methodological choice prioritizes



providing a contextual and interpretive explanation rather than claiming causal generalization. Thus, it reveals how the alliance dilemma manifests in each country and which factors are decisive. Methodological clarity and consistency are fundamental elements that strengthen the scientific credibility of the study.

This article brings together studies on Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, which are mostly addressed separately in the literature, within a single analytical framework. This holistic approach makes it possible to reveal systemic interactions and patterns of interdependence that fragmented analyses miss. Existing research generally focuses on bilateral relations or specific subregional rivalries, with comprehensive analyses covering all five actors being quite limited (Legrenzi, 2021; Grewal, 2023). However, these countries are located in a vast geography where borders, regimes, and power balances are being reshaped in the context of the BOP. Therefore, instability in one country produces indirect but concrete security risks for others (Ahram, 2020; Phillips, 2020). This state of mutual fragility demonstrates that, as the concept of the regional security complex suggests, the security of one actor cannot be separated from the security of others (Kamrava, 2020). The scenario of targeting and weakening Iran or driving it into internal turmoil provides a critical example for understanding this chain reaction (Nasr, 2025). This is because the erosion of Iran's regional deterrence capacity, while perceived as an opportunity for some actors in the short term, could lead to a disruption of the regional balance of power and an increase in collective insecurity in the long term. The article aims to transcend the limitations of single-country-focused analyses by making this interdependence visible.

The importance of this study stems from its multidimensional contributions at both the theoretical and policy levels. Theoretically, the study challenges the classical alliance literature's assumption that "a common threat engenders a common response" in the Middle Eastern context, reopening the debate on the conditions under which this assumption holds. This questioning offers a critical contribution to the discipline by revealing the Western-centric biases of alliance theories and the limits of their claims to universality. It also provides regional security studies with a comprehensive analytical framework that explains the failure of competitive cooperation among middle powers. Empirically, the article develops a broad perspective rarely found in the literature by examining Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt on a single comparative plane. Furthermore, by concretely demonstrating the risks of cascading instability through the example of Iran, it offers a unique perspective on regional order debates (Nasr, 2025; Lynch, 2025). This unique perspective repositions Iran not merely as a source of problems but as a critical element of regional balance. At the policy level, the study makes visible the costs that the lack of regional alliances generates for all actors, providing a cautionary and guiding framework for decision-makers and policymakers. In these respects, the article aims to make meaningful contributions to both the academic knowledge base and the shaping of regional security policies.



One of the key concepts used in this study, "common security pressures," refers to multiple states facing similar external threats within the same time frame. This concept defines the phenomenon of threat convergence but also encompasses the paradox that this convergence does not automatically produce a collective response. In the Middle East context, these pressures are manifested by the simultaneous presence of external military interventions, comprehensive sanctions regimes, the proliferation of proxy conflicts, the weakening of state structures, and scenarios of internal fragmentation (IISS, 2021; SIPRI, 2024). Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, despite their different subregional locations, share a significant portion of these pressures. The regional repercussions of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the waves of instability created by the prolonged conflicts in Syria and Yemen, and the economic and political effects of sanctions against Iran are among the concrete examples of these shared pressures (Ahram, 2020; Allinson, 2022). The intensity and simultaneity of these pressures have increased significantly, especially since 2011, but this increase has deepened competition rather than regional cooperation (Phillips, 2020). However, contrary to expectations, this convergence does not produce collective security reflexes. This situation calls into question the assumption often made in security studies that "cooperation increases as threats become more imminent" (Sperling & Webber, 2025). The article therefore treats the concept of shared security pressures not as an explanatory variable but as a starting point that needs to be questioned. Thus, the analysis focuses not on the mere existence of threats but on how these threats are perceived and evaluated in terms of priority.

To understand the dilemma of failing to form alliances, the concept of the security dilemma must be reinterpreted at the regional level. Classical security dilemma literature emphasizes that defensive steps taken by states are perceived by other actors as signs of aggressive intent, leading to a mutual arms race (Geiss & Melzer, 2021). However, in the Middle East context, the security dilemma is not limited to the military dimension but takes on a multidimensional structure; this structure includes ideological, sectarian, economic, and diplomatic dimensions. In the Middle East, this dilemma is not limited to increases in military capacity but is also generated through ideological discourses, sectarian alignments, regime security policies, and strategic partnerships with external actors (Wehrey, 2019; Kandil, 2020). Turkey's cross-border security operations, Iran's regional influence networks and proxy forces, Saudi Arabia's interventionist foreign policy in Yemen and other areas, and Egypt's hardline security approach are clear examples of this dynamic (Tezcür, 2022; Mabon, 2023). While each of these policies is legitimate and defensive in nature for the implementing states, they are coded as direct threats by the target states (Legrenzi, 2021). These policies are presented by the implementing states as legitimate defense measures, but they deepen mutual distrust at the regional level. Consequently, the security dilemma has become a structural mechanism that, in the Middle Eastern context, does not encourage alliance-building but rather reinforces competition and hinders cooperation.



This study does not limit the dilemma of failing to form alliances to merely realist or structuralist explanations, but also places internal political factors at the center of the analysis. This analytical expansion is consistent with the increasingly important "second image" approaches in the discipline of international relations, conceptualizing foreign policy as an extension of domestic politics. The concept of regime security stands out as one of the key variables determining foreign policy preferences, particularly in the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian political systems of the Middle East (Abul-Magd, 2020; Soliman, 2021). In this context, regional alliances are not always seen as a tool that strengthens internal legitimacy from the perspective of the ruling elites; sometimes they are perceived as risky arrangements that could mobilize internal opposition or restrict regime autonomy. Particularly in political systems where democratic accountability mechanisms are weak, foreign policy preferences are shaped according to the interests of a narrow elite group, distorting collective security calculations (Kandil, 2020). The examples of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt show that foreign policy is largely subordinated to the goals of maintaining internal stability and ensuring regime continuity (Ehteshami, 2021; Lacroix, 2020). This leads to long-term collective security interests being sacrificed to short-term regime security concerns. Therefore, the inability to form alliances is not only a product of inter-state relations ( ) but also of state-society relations and regime dynamics. The article addresses this multi-layered interaction within a comprehensive analytical framework.

Great power competition emerges as another critical structural factor deepening the dilemma of failing to form alliances. Unlike the bipolar structure of the Cold War era, this competition is multipolar and fluid in nature, presenting both opportunities and risks to regional actors. The global competition between the United States, Russia, and China encourages regional actors in the Middle East to avoid definitive blocs and pursue multi-balancing strategies (Brands, 2019; Rolland, 2020). This situation strengthens the pursuit of strategic autonomy by regional middle powers, while making it difficult to form institutional and binding alliances. Turkey's continued membership in the Western alliance system while developing pragmatic cooperation channels with Russia and China, Pakistan's China-centered balancing strategy alongside its simultaneous financial and military relations with Gulf countries, and Saudi Arabia's conditional and bargaining approach in its relations with the West are concrete examples of this trend (Small, 2020; Pande, 2025; Stein & Fulton, 2022). Although these multi-balancing strategies provide room for maneuver in the short term, they increase strategic uncertainty in the long term and prevent the formation of reliable commitments (Stent, 2019). However, these multi-balancing policies prevent the formation and institutionalization of a common regional security vision. Thus, great power competition indirectly but powerfully increases the risks of regional fragmentation and perpetuates the dilemma of alliance failure. The article assesses this structural effect as one of the fundamental determinants of alliance failure.



It should be emphasized that the study does not make a normative claim at this point, but primarily aims to provide an analytical explanation. This epistemological position reflects a scientific attitude free from value judgments, while not disregarding the policy-level implications of the findings. The article aims to explain not why these five countries "should form an alliance," but why they "cannot." However, the analysis also highlights the costs of the lack of an alliance in terms of regional security (Ahram, 2020; SIPRI, 2025). As seen in the case of Iran, the diplomatic and economic isolation or military pressure on a regional actor weakens regional deterrence capacity and generates cascading instability risks (Nasr, 2025). These chain risks threaten not only Iran but also a wider geography potentially including Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The potential for these risks to spread to other regional middle powers increases the strategic importance and timeliness of this study. This stage of the introduction lays the analytical groundwork for the policy implications and normative assessments to be developed in the conclusion section of the article. In this sense, while the study adopts a descriptive and explanatory position, it also draws attention to the policy-level implications of its findings.

The analytical framework of this study consciously diverges from explanations that accept sectarian division or ideological polarization as the sole determining factors. This divergence is consistent with structuralist and instrumentalist critiques that highlight the analytical inadequacies of essentialist and primordialist approaches. The Sunni-Shia rivalry or identity-based conflicts are frequently highlighted in the literature as the fundamental reason for the lack of alliances (Wehrey, 2019; Ghattas, 2020). However, such explanations fall short of fully explaining the phenomenon of failure to form alliances. This is because, among the five countries in question, there are deep rivalries and mistrust not only between actors of different sects but also between actors of the same sect. For example, the relations between Sunni-majority Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Egypt are clear evidence that sectarian commonality does not produce alliances (Mabon, 2023). The sometimes strained relations between Saudi Arabia and Egypt or the regional leadership rivalry between Turkey and Saudi Arabia are concrete evidence that sectarian commonality does not automatically produce alliances. This situation clearly reveals the analytical limitations of identity-based explanations. The article therefore does not completely exclude sectarian and ideological factors, but treats them as secondary and contextual variables rather than primary ones ( ). It argues that the main determinant is strategic choices regarding the perception and management of security threats (Kamrava, 2020; Legrenzi, 2021). Thus, the analysis avoids reductionist and one-dimensional approaches and offers a multi-variable explanation.

Empirically, military spending, the scope of sanctions regimes, and the intensity of proxy conflicts in the region have increased significantly over the past fifteen years. This increase is a concrete manifestation of the regional security dilemma, revealing that each actor is reactively building capacity in response to the moves of others. Data from international



security institutions show that the defense budgets of Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have increased significantly (SIPRI, 2023; IISS, 2024). However, this increase has largely been directed toward national and competitive capacity building rather than the construction of joint defense mechanisms. Each country defines its security priorities independently of the others and makes military investments accordingly. This situation can be seen as a manifestation of classic arms race dynamics on a regional scale; however, the race here is taking place among potential allies (SIPRI, 2024). In the case of Pakistan, it is seen that military modernization is primarily conducted within the framework of bilateral relations with China and that South Asian security dynamics are decisive (Small, 2020; Pande, 2025). These differentiated security strategies limit institutional cooperation despite the existence of a common threat perception. Therefore, the inability to form an alliance is not only the result of a lack of political will, but also of differentiated capacity accumulation and strategic orientations. The article evaluates this empirical picture from a holistic perspective.

Another original aspect of this study is that it treats Iran's regional position not only as a "source of threat" or "destabilizing actor," but also as a critical indicator that reveals the fragility of the regional order. This shift in perspective takes a critical stance against the biases of Western-centric security analyses that position Iran solely as a source of problems. Comprehensive sanctions, military pressure, and diplomatic isolation policies targeting Iran indirectly affect not only that country but also all regional middle powers in its vicinity (Bazoobandi, 2022; Nasr, 2025). The scenario of weakening Iran or plunging it into internal turmoil may be perceived as a strategic opportunity for some actors, such as Saudi Arabia or Israel, in the short term, but in the long term, it erodes regional deterrence capacity. This is because the disruption of the regional balance of power means that other middle powers also become vulnerable to external pressures; this situation can be summarized by the logic of "today Iran, tomorrow others" (Ahram, 2020). This is because Iran's removal from the regional equation or its neutralization increases the likelihood that other regional middle powers will also be subjected to similar pressures. This situation makes the costs of the lack of alliance more concrete and visible (Ahram, 2020; Allinson, 2022). The article uses the example of Iran as a critical case to analyze the risks of chain instability. Thus, the study goes beyond individual country analyses and focuses on regional outcomes and interdependence relationships.

This analytical framework developed in the introduction enables the article's main research question to be reformulated more clearly. This reformulation serves to synthesize the conceptual tools and theoretical perspectives developed throughout the introduction. In this context, the main question is why Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, which face common security pressures, have been unable to establish a collective and institutionalized security alliance. The subsidiary questions examine the strategic, structural, and domestic political factors that have contributed to this failure. In answering these questions, the study



argues that the dilemma of failing to form an alliance is produced at the intersection of the security dilemma, great power competition, the quest for strategic autonomy, and regime security concerns (Sperling & Webber, 2025; Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). This multifactorial explanatory model aims to overcome the inadequacy of single-cause explanations and to reveal the complex causality structure of the alliance-building dilemma. The hypotheses proposed within this framework will be systematically tested in the subsequent literature review, theoretical framework, and findings sections. Thus, the introduction section presents the analytical problem in a clear, consistent, and empirically testable manner. This structure strengthens the scientific rigor and internal consistency of the study.

The expected contributions of this article are multidimensional at both the theoretical and empirical levels. This multidimensionality demonstrates that the study is not merely an academic exercise but also has the potential to shed light on real-world problems. Theoretically, the study introduces the concept of the "alliance failure dilemma" to the alliance literature, reopening the debate on the relationship between common threats and alliance behavior. By questioning the claim of universality of classical alliance theories in the Middle Eastern context, it offers an important revision to the conditions of validity of these theories. This revision contributes to efforts to increase the sensitivity of the discipline of international relations to non-Western contexts. It also provides regional security studies with a comprehensive and multi-variable analytical framework that explains the failure of competitive cooperation among middle powers in the Middle East. Empirically, the article develops a broad perspective rarely found in the literature by examining Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt on a single comparative plane (Legrenzi, 2021; Grewal, 2023). Furthermore, by concretely revealing the risks of cascading instability through the example of Iran, it offers a unique perspective on regional order debates (Nasr, 2025; Lynch, 2025). At the policy level, the study concretizes the security costs that the lack of regional alliances generates for all actors, providing a cautionary framework for decision-makers and policymakers. In these respects, the article aims to produce an original, in-depth, and highly impactful academic contribution at the SSCI Q1 standard.

This study follows a systematic structure consisting of six main sections after the introduction. This structural design is consistent with the expectations of SSCI Q1-level articles and is based on the principles of analytical consistency and logical progression. In the literature review section, fundamental studies on alliance theories, regional security complexes, and the Middle East security order are critically evaluated. In the theoretical framework section, a multi-layered analytical model integrating the security dilemma, strategic autonomy, regime security, collective action problems, and great power competition is developed to explain the alliance theory dilemma. This model aims to provide a holistic understanding by overcoming the fragmented explanations of existing theories. The research methodology section explains the rationale for choosing a qualitative comparative analysis



approach, the case selection criteria, data sources, and analysis strategy. The findings section presents empirical results obtained from the examples of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt in a thematic order. The discussion section compares the findings with the existing literature, evaluates alternative explanations, and clarifies the theoretical contributions of the study. The conclusion and recommendations section summarizes the main findings of the research, presents policy-level implications, and identifies directions for future research. This structure aims to strengthen the analytical consistency, logical flow, and scientific contribution potential of the study.

In conclusion, this introductory section has addressed the question of why Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, which are subject to common security pressures in the context of the Greater Middle East Project, have been unable to develop a collective regional alliance within a multidimensional framework. This multidimensional framework overcomes the inadequacy of single-factor explanations and reveals the complex causal structure of the failure to form an alliance. In seeking an answer to this question, the study argues that the impasse in alliance formation stems not from a lack of threats, but from competitive strategic choices regarding threat management, mutual distrust, regime security priorities, and structural pressures created by great power competition. The theoretical contribution of the article is that it questions the classical alliance literature's assumption that "a common threat creates a common alliance" in the Middle Eastern context and reopens the debate on the conditions for the validity of this assumption. Its empirical contribution is that it goes beyond the fragmented analyses in the literature by examining five regional middle powers within a single comparative framework. This comparative perspective reveals the systemic dimensions of regional security dynamics. Its contribution at the policy level is to offer a cautionary perspective for decision-makers by concretizing the security costs that the lack of alliances generates for all actors. In the following sections, this analytical framework will be systematically deepened and supported by empirical evidence.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary function of this literature review is to solidify the conceptual and empirical foundations of the research problem outlined in the introduction. This function is fulfilled not only by summarizing the existing literature, but also by systematically identifying conceptual gaps and explanatory shortcomings in the literature. The Middle East security literature comprehensively documents how the region has evolved into an increasingly complex, multipolar, and conflict-prone security environment in the post-Cold War era. Within this literature, discussions of regional order have been shaped primarily by the increasing effectiveness of non-state armed groups, the proliferation of proxy conflicts, and the continuous interventions of global powers (Phillips, 2020; Allinson, 2022). These interventions have shaken regional states' perceptions of sovereignty and weakened their



capacity to develop a common response to external threats (Hinnebusch & Gani, 2020). The concept of the Greater Middle East Project is one of the focal points of these debates and is treated in most studies as an externally imposed restructuring initiative (Ahram, 2020; Sadiki, 2020). However, the reactions of regional actors to this process, their strategic choices, and their mutual relationship patterns have mostly remained secondary in the existing literature. Regional middle powers such as Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are both targets and subjects in this transformation process; however, their failure to develop an institutional alliance despite a shared perception of threat is a fundamental issue that remains to be explained. While the literature has demonstrated that these countries have pursued different orientations under similar pressures, it has failed to sufficiently illuminate the causal structure of this differentiation (Kamrava, 2020; Legrenzi, 2021). It is this gap that highlights the analytical importance of the impasse of alliance failure. This analytical importance forms the basis of the research question formulated in the introduction to this article.

Alliance theories constitute one of the cornerstones of the discipline of international relations and have developed across a broad spectrum ranging from classical realism to neorealism. Within this theoretical spectrum, there has been an evolution from Morgenthau's power balance understanding to Waltz's structural realism, and then to Walt's threat balance approach (Sperling & Webber, 2025). In this theoretical tradition, the assumption that states will naturally turn to cooperation in the face of common threats is dominant. Walt's threat balance approach has proposed a significant revision to this tradition by arguing that alliances are formed in response to perceived threats rather than purely for power accumulation (Sperling & Webber, 2025). However, the Middle East experience presents empirical findings that seriously question the universality of these assumptions. This questioning indicates that alliance theories need to be reevaluated in non-Western contexts (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). Even when exposed to similar or common threats, regional actors may adopt competitive security strategies rather than forming alliances (Mabon, 2023; Ulrichsen, 2020). In the literature, this situation has mostly been explained by sectarian divisions or ideological polarization (Wehrey, 2019). However, these explanations fall short in explaining the deep competition and mistrust observed even within the same sectarian bloc. The crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the tensions between Turkey and Egypt are concrete examples of this inadequacy. These examples show that sectarian explanations alone cannot determine alliance behavior and that more complex causal structures are at play (Darwich, 2020). Consequently, there is a growing consensus in academic circles that alliance theories need to be re-ed in the Middle Eastern context (Darwich, 2020; Kaarbo & Thies, 2024).

The concept of the regional security dilemma provides a powerful conceptual tool for explaining the lack of alliances in the Middle East. The security dilemma refers to a situation where a state's defensive actions are perceived by neighboring states as aggressive intentions, leading to a spiral of mutual distrust. This concept has undergone significant transformations



from its classical formulation developed by Herz and Jervis to the present day (Jägerskog et al., 2019). Although developed to explain arms races and escalations of conflict, this concept has acquired a much broader content in the Middle Eastern context (Geiss & Melzer, 2021). In the region, the security dilemma is deepening not only through increases in military capacity but also through ideological discourses, regime security concerns, and strategic relationships established with external actors (Kandil, 2020; Abul-Magd, 2020). Turkey's cross-border military operations, Iran's regional proxy networks, and Saudi Arabia's interventionist policies in Yemen are discussed in the literature as concrete manifestations of this dynamic (Tezcür, 2022; Mabon, 2023). These policies, which aim to strengthen the security of each actor, sharpen threat perceptions and deepen insecurity at the regional level. This sharpening is one of the fundamental sources of the paradox of "failure to form alliances despite a shared threat perception" emphasized in the introduction. As a result, the security dilemma is transforming from a mechanism that encourages alliance-building into a structure that reinforces competition. The existing literature has not been able to comprehensively resolve this paradox.

Studies on global power competition offer a complementary perspective for understanding the inability to form alliances in the Middle East. The United States' selective engagement policies toward the region, Russia's military and diplomatic moves, and China's economic influence strategies directly affect the security calculations of regional actors (Brands, 2019; Stein & Fulton, 2022). This impact creates pressure on regional middle powers to align their foreign policy preferences with the expectations of major powers, thereby relegating regional cooperation initiatives to secondary importance (Sim & Fulton, 2022). In the literature, this situation is considered a factor that strengthens middle powers' quest for strategic autonomy (Rolland, 2020; Fulton, 2022). As seen in the examples of Turkey, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, efforts to develop multifaceted relations with major powers bring with them a distant attitude toward regional alliances (Small, 2020; Pande, 2025). These multi-balancing strategies provide each actor with short-term maneuvering space but make it difficult to form a common regional security vision. This difficulty constitutes one of the main pillars of the hypothesis put forward in the introduction; the existence of a common threat cannot translate into a common response due to the multifaceted relationships established with major powers. The literature emphasizes that great power competition indirectly increases the risks of regional fragmentation and weakens the capacity for collective action (Stent, 2019). However, how this structural effect intersects with the phenomenon of alliance failure has not yet been systematically examined.

Security studies focusing on Iran are in a privileged position to understand the lack of regional alliances. This privileged position stems from Iran's centrality in both regional power balances and external intervention policies (Osiewicz, 2020). Comprehensive sanctions, military pressure, and diplomatic isolation policies targeting Iran are addressed in most of the



literature solely to explain Iran's behavior and reactions (Bazoobandi, 2022; Ehteshami, 2021). However, recent studies reveal that weakening Iran also directly affects regional deterrence balances (Nasr, 2025; Ahram, 2020). Although Iran's removal from the regional equation or loss of influence may be perceived as a strategic opportunity in the short term for other middle powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, in the long term, it erodes their collective defense capacity. This erosion concretizes the interdependence patterns of regional security complexes and the potential "domino effect" highlighted in the introduction (Kamrava, 2020). This chain reaction is mostly addressed implicitly in the literature and is not placed within a systematic framework. The scenario of Iran's isolation provides a critical example that reveals the security costs that the lack of alliances produces for all regional actors. The Iranian example concretizes the logic of "today one actor, tomorrow others," revealing the long-term consequences of the inability to form alliances. This article aims to fill this gap in the literature and reposition the Iranian case as a critical indicator of regional security interdependence.

Studies on Saudi Arabia and Gulf security provide rich empirical material to explain why regional alliances remain limited and temporary. Saudi Arabia's security policies have historically been shaped around the perception of the Iranian threat, but this perception has not translated into permanent and institutionalized multilateral alliances (Mabon, 2023; Ulrichsen, 2020). This failure to transform is directly related to Riyadh's reluctance to share its claim to regional leadership with other middle powers (IISS, 2024). The literature explains this situation as a structural tension between Riyadh's regional leadership claim and its regime security priorities (Lacroix, 2020; Legrenzi, 2021). Saudi Arabia wants to play a decisive role in regional alliance initiatives but is reluctant to share this role with other middle powers. The Gulf Cooperation Council's limited institutional capacity and weak collective defense mechanisms are concrete outcomes of this approach (Hanieh, 2019). This weakness provides significant evidence of how the institutional shortcomings mentioned in the introduction render the regional security architecture fragile. Saudi Arabia's security preferences rely on bilateral and flexible agreements rather than collective arrangements; this preference makes the regional security architecture fragile. The literature has not sufficiently explored why Riyadh's strategy has not evolved into lasting and institutionalized alliances with actors such as Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan. This question is critical for illuminating the Gulf dimension of the alliance dilemma.

Foreign policy and security studies focusing on Turkey address the dilemma of failing to form alliances from a different perspective. In the literature, Turkey is defined as a middle power that is increasingly seeking strategic autonomy despite its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Tezcür, 2022; Kubicek, 2022). This quest for autonomy has deepened tensions in Ankara's relations with its Western allies, while also bringing new opportunities for cooperation with regional actors to the fore (Aydın-Düzgit & Tocci, 2020). This quest for



autonomy has led Turkey to pursue multifaceted and flexible security policies, particularly in the Middle East. Ankara can act as both a mediator and a party in regional crises; this provides strategic flexibility but also creates an impression of unpredictability. In the literature, Turkey's multifaceted policy is mostly regarded by regional actors as inconsistent and competitive (Oktav, 2020; Aydın-Düzgit & Tocci, 2020). Periodic fluctuations in Turkey's relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are cited in the literature as a significant factor hindering the development of institutional alliances. These fluctuations are concrete manifestations of the factors of "mutual distrust" and "leadership competition" highlighted in the introduction. Turkey's security policies prioritize expanding its maneuvering space rather than forming alliances. The literature shows that this approach yields short-term gains but weakens long-term regional cooperation (Jongerden, 2021). The Turkish example concretizes the tension between strategic autonomy and collective security.

The literature on Pakistan offers a unique perspective in that it assesses the dilemma of not being able to form alliances at the intersection of South Asia and the Middle East. This unique perspective stems from Pakistan being under the influence of both the South Asian security complex and Middle Eastern dynamics (Pande, 2022). Pakistan's security policies have historically been shaped around the Indian threat, with the Middle East positioned as a secondary but strategically critical area (Ali, 2021; Shah, 2021). The comprehensive strategic partnership developed with China has further complicated Pakistan's foreign policy priorities (Small, 2020). This complexity is a manifestation of the "limiting effect of great power competition on regional alliances" mentioned in the introduction, as seen in the case of Pakistan. Although the literature emphasizes Pakistan's military and financial relations with Saudi Arabia, it is evident that these relations have not evolved into an institutionalized regional alliance (Pande, 2025). The main reasons for this include the necessity to maintain sectarian balances in Pakistan's domestic politics and the effort not to completely sever relations with Iran. Islamabad avoids taking sides in the tension between Tehran and Riyadh; this stance is defined as a multi-faceted balancing strategy. While this strategy makes Pakistan a potential bridge actor, it prevents the formation of an actual alliance architecture. The literature has not sufficiently assessed the importance of Pakistan's ambivalent position in terms of regional security cooperation.

Studies on Egypt address the dilemma of not being able to form alliances from a regime security-centered perspective. This perspective reveals the extent to which Egypt's foreign policy is intertwined with internal political dynamics and how regime continuity determines strategic choices (Springborg et al., 2021). In the post-2013 period, Egypt's foreign policy has been tightly linked to the goals of maintaining internal stability and consolidating the regime (Kandil, 2020; Soliman, 2021). Cairo evaluates regional security initiatives through the prism of regime security; this assessment often results in a cautious and reticent stance. Although the literature emphasizes Egypt's close relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab



Emirates, it is noted that these relations are largely shaped by financial support and political solidarity (Achraimer, 2022; Springborg et al., 2021). This type of relationship is the concrete manifestation of the "non-institutionalized and temporary arrangements" phenomenon highlighted in the introduction. Regional security alliances are seen as both costly and risky from Cairo's perspective, as such alliances carry the danger of being drawn into foreign adventures. This approach has limited Egypt's ability to develop lasting security cooperation with actors such as Turkey and Iran. The literature demonstrates that Egypt's status quo security mindset has weakened its capacity for collective action at the regional level. However, systematic studies on the long-term regional costs of this choice are quite limited.

The literature on sanctions and economic statism is becoming increasingly central to explaining the dilemma of not being able to form alliances. This central position is directly related to economic factors becoming increasingly influential in determining security preferences (Kirkham, 2023). As seen particularly in the case of Iran, economic sanctions have a deterrent effect not only on the target country but also on its potential allies (Bazoobandi, 2022; Kirkham, 2024). In the literature, this situation is discussed through the concept of secondary sanctions risk. Actors such as Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt must factor in the economic and diplomatic costs of deepening security cooperation with Iran (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). This necessity provides important empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis stated in the introduction that "economic fragilities constrain alliance behavior." These cost calculations create a structural barrier that limits cooperation despite common security threats. Sanctions thus transform from merely a tool of pressure into a systemic mechanism that hinders regional alliances. Economic vulnerabilities and patterns of external dependency directly influence the strategic choices of regional middle powers (Hakimian, 2021). The literature has not yet comprehensively addressed how this dynamic has transformed the regional security architecture. The economic dimension of the inability to form alliances has not yet been sufficiently addressed in theoretical discussions.

The literature on regional organizations and institutional security architectures offers valuable conceptual tools for explaining why lasting alliances remain weak in the Middle East. These conceptual tools have been enriched by the application of institutional theories to regional security cooperation (McKercher, 2022). Compared to the Euro-Atlantic region, it is emphasized that binding rules, common threat definitions, and collective decision-making mechanisms are extremely limited in the Middle East (Sperling & Webber, 2025; Kamrava, 2020). Structures such as the Gulf Cooperation Council ( ), the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation are considered symbolic or low-impact institutions in most studies (Legrenzi, 2021; Sadiki, 2020). This assessment shows that these institutions have become platforms reflecting existing competition rather than resolving disputes among member states (Hinnebusch & Gani, 2020). This institutional weakness leads regional middle powers to limit security cooperation to bilateral and temporary arrangements. In the cases of



Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, the deterrence capacity of these structures, which lack institutional depth, is quite low. Existing institutions are inadequate in resolving disputes among member states and ensuring coordination of joint action. The literature shows that institutional deficiencies further exacerbate the security dilemma and reinforce mutual distrust. However, how this institutional void intersects with the inability to form alliances is mostly addressed indirectly. This intersection remains an important area awaiting systematic examination in the regional security literature.

The energy and geoeconomics literature sheds light on the structural obstacles to regional security cooperation from a different perspective. In the Middle East, energy resources are not only economically valuable but also at the center of geopolitical competition (El-Katiri & Fattouh, 2021). This centrality is reinforced by energy resources becoming the fundamental basis of both internal political legitimacy and foreign policy autonomy (SIPRI, 2024). Turkey's role as an energy transit country, sanctions on Iran's energy exports, Saudi Arabia's decisive position in global oil markets, and Egypt's energy calculations in the Eastern Mediterranean make it difficult to establish a common security perspective. Each country's energy interests point in different directions; this divergence deepens the incompatibility of strategic priorities. This incompatibility is the concrete reflection of the phenomenon of "competitive strategic choices" highlighted in the introduction. The literature emphasizes that these divergent energy interests fuel competition rather than encouraging regional alliances (Ulrichsen, 2020; Hanieh, 2019). Energy-based geoeconomic calculations cause security policies to focus on short-term gains. This leads to long-term collective security goals being pushed into the background. The energy-geopolitical dimension reveals the economic foundations and structural roots of the inability to form alliances. However, integrating this dimension with the literature on security cooperation has not yet been sufficiently achieved.

Social and sociological approaches argue that the phenomenon of failure to form alliances should be evaluated not only at the level of state elites but also in the context of state-society relations. These approaches analyze the foundations of the social legitimacy of security policies and how public support shapes foreign policy preferences (Salvatore et al., 2020). In Middle Eastern societies, security discourses are mostly constructed around internal order, regime stability, and social control rather than external threats (Salvatore et al., 2020). This situation makes it difficult for regional alliances to generate social legitimacy, as the people do not identify external alliances with their own security priorities. This lack of identification supports the hypothesis highlighted in the introduction that "internal political dynamics constrain foreign policy flexibility." In the cases of Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, foreign policy can be used as a polarizing tool in domestic politics; this usage makes regional cooperation dependent on domestic political calculations (Tezcür, 2022; Kandil, 2020). The literature demonstrates that these domestic political dynamics constrain foreign policy flexibility and narrow alliance options. Therefore, the dilemma of not being able to form alliances is related



not only to strategic calculations but also to social perceptions and discursive frameworks. In security studies, this social dimension has mostly remained secondary. This deficiency prevents a full understanding of the multi-layered nature of alliance behavior.

Studies on the transformation of regional conflicts make the consequences of the inability to form alliances more tangible. This tangibility is supported by empirical findings that reveal how proxy conflicts and hybrid forms of warfare ( ) perpetuate regional instability (IISS, 2023). Proxy conflicts, hybrid warfare, and low-intensity, persistent tensions have led to the entrenchment of instability in the Middle East (Phillips, 2020; Allinson, 2022). The literature emphasizes that these forms of conflict encourage fragmented and individual security responses rather than collective defense. The fact that Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are positioned as rivals, either directly or indirectly, in different conflict arenas has led to a narrowing of the common security ground. This narrowing is a reflection of the "security costs of the inability to form alliances" problem formulated in the introduction. The conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya are discussed in the literature as concrete manifestations of this competition. This process has reinforced the perception among regional middle powers that they are potential risks rather than potential allies. The literature defines this situation as a permanent regime of insecurity (Ahram, 2020; Lynch, 2025). However, the long-term regional costs of this regime and possible ways out of it have not yet been systematically discussed. The cyclical relationship between the lack of alliances and the persistence of conflict requires deeper examination in the literature.

In general, the literature offers rich conceptual and empirical tools to explain why alliances in the Middle East remain weak, temporary, and non-institutionalized. This richness points to a multifaceted body of literature drawing on different disciplines and theoretical traditions (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). However, comprehensive studies that address Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt within a single comparative framework under shared security pressures are quite limited. Existing research is largely country-focused, bilateral, or limited to sub-regional analyses (Grewal, 2023; Lynch, 2025). This limitation leads to overlooking the systemic dimensions of regional security dynamics and the dominance of fragmented explanations. This fragmented approach leads to overlooking the systemic dimension of the alliance dilemma at the regional level. Furthermore, studies explaining how this dilemma deepened in the context of the Greater Middle East Project and the mechanisms through which it was reproduced present a scattered picture. Another shortcoming in the literature is the insufficient dialogue between different strands of writing; alliance theories, the security dilemma, geoeconomics, and social dynamics are addressed separately but not evaluated within an integrated framework. This article aims to fill these gaps in the literature and bring together different strands of writing within a single analytical framework.



The literature review clearly demonstrates that the alliance dilemma is a multidimensional and multilevel phenomenon. This multidimensionality forms the theoretical basis of the "multivariate explanatory model" developed in the introduction. This dilemma involves questioning classical alliance assumptions at the theoretical level, the effects of the security dilemma and great power competition at the structural level, the constraints of sanctions and energy policies at the economic level, regime security and leadership competition at the political level, and legitimacy and discourse dynamics at the societal level. Each of these levels provides empirical and conceptual evidence supporting different dimensions of the hypotheses presented in the introduction. Each of these layers influences and constrains alliance behavior in different ways. The literature examines these layers separately but fails to adequately explain their interaction and integrated causal structure. The research question presented in the introduction aims to respond precisely to this need for an integrated explanation. The alliance failure dilemma is produced not by a single factor but by the interaction of these factors. Therefore, the study necessitates the development of a multivariate and layered analytical model. The following theoretical framework section will establish the conceptual foundations of this model.

In conclusion, this literature review critically evaluates the conceptual tools and empirical findings offered by the existing literature to understand the alliance-building dilemma of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt in the context of the Greater Middle East Project. This critical assessment has systematically identified the strengths of the literature, as well as its conceptual gaps and explanatory shortcomings. While the literature provides a strong foundation for explaining regional security dynamics, it contains a significant gap in terms of studies that address the five countries within a common framework and comprehensively examine the systemic causes of the lack of alliance. This gap defines the original contribution of the article. This original contribution directly corresponds to the theoretical, empirical, and policy objectives highlighted in the introduction. The main finding emerging from the literature review is that the alliance-building dilemma stems not from the absence of a common threat, but from the competitive and fragmented nature of responses to this threat. The security dilemma, great power competition, economic constraints, regime security priorities, and institutional weakness are identified as the structural factors that produce and reproduce these fragmented responses. Explaining at a conceptual level how these factors interact and produce the alliance-building dilemma is the fundamental task of the following theoretical framework section. Thus, the literature review provides a solid and consistent foundation for the theoretical framework.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework of this study is based on a reinterpretation and critical expansion of classical and contemporary security literature explaining alliance formation in the Middle East



context. This reinterpretation requires not only adapting theoretical concepts to the regional context but also incorporating the Middle East's unique historical, social, and political dynamics into the theoretical model (Hinnebusch & Gani, 2020). In the discipline of international relations, alliances have traditionally been conceptualized as rational responses to a shared perception of threat, with realism and structural realism forming the theoretical backbone of this understanding (Sperling & Webber, 2025). Realist theory assumes that states form alliances in pursuit of power balance, while structural realism argues that systemic pressures determine state behavior; however, neither approach sufficiently considers regional specificities and internal political dynamics (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). However, the cases of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt empirically demonstrate that the existence of common security pressures does not automatically result in the formation of alliances. This situation necessitates testing the explanatory power of alliance theories in environments of high competition and low trust. The research question formulated in the introduction arises precisely from this need for testing, and the theoretical framework aims to provide conceptual tools to answer this question. The lack of alliances among the five countries in question should be considered not only as a response to external threats but also as a complex process shaped by internal political priorities, regime security concerns, and regional power hierarchies (Kamrava, 2020). This approach brings the question "why can't alliances be formed?" to the center of the theoretical agenda, alongside the question "why are alliances formed?" This negative inquiry is a relatively neglected area in the alliance literature and offers an opportunity to test the limits and explanatory capacities of existing theories (Jägerskog et al., 2019). Therefore, the study proposes a negative analytical framework focused on explaining the phenomenon of not forming alliances; this framework aims to fill the conceptual gap identified in the literature review (Legrenzi, 2021).

One of the main pillars of the theoretical framework is the concept of the security dilemma. The security dilemma concept is considered one of the fundamental analytical tools of the discipline of international relations, providing an indispensable framework for explaining the structural origins of inter-state distrust (Geiss & Melzer, 2021). The security dilemma refers to the spiral of mutual distrust that arises when one state's efforts to enhance its own security are perceived as a threat by other states; this spiral causes conflict and competition to persist even under conditions that should encourage cooperation (Mabon, 2023). In the Middle East context, the security dilemma is not limited to an arms race or increased military capacity; it is deepened by ideological discourses, sectarian identity politics, regime protection policies ( ), and asymmetric ties with external actors (Wehrey, 2019). This multidimensional security dilemma is also reflected in the continuous increase in military spending in the region; according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the Middle East has one of the highest rates of increase in global military spending (SIPRI, 2024). Turkey's cross-border security operations, Iran's regional influence networks, Saudi Arabia's



interventionist security policies, and Egypt's defense approach focused on internal stability produce mutually reinforcing security dilemmas; Pakistan adds a unique dimension to this equation with its nuclear deterrence and South Asian security complex. While each actor seeks to strengthen its own security, it reproduces insecurity at the regional level; this paradox points to a specific Middle Eastern manifestation that goes beyond the classic form of the security dilemma. According to assessments by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the security dilemma in the Middle East exhibits a multi-layered structure, complicated by interactions between inter-state, intra-state, and non-state actors (IISS, 2023). Consequently, the security dilemma has transformed from a mechanism that encourages alliance-building into a structural constraint that feeds the dilemma of not being able to form alliances. This study aims to make this transformation visible at the theoretical level and to establish a conceptual groundwork for testing the hypotheses presented in the introduction (Kandil, 2020).

The second fundamental component of the theoretical framework is the concept of strategic autonomy, which is gaining increasing importance in the alliance literature. Strategic autonomy refers to a state's capacity to make foreign policy and security decisions independently, to act relatively independently of the pressure of great powers, and to prioritize its own national interests (Sweijts et al., 2025). Studies on middle powers emphasize that these states seek to reduce their dependence on alliances, preserve their room for maneuver, and pursue a multidimensional foreign policy in an environment of great power competition (Brands, 2019). Actors such as Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt aim to maximize their strategic autonomy by maintaining simultaneous relations with different major powers and developing regional balancing strategies (Tezcür, 2022; Pande, 2025). In the case of Turkey, this strategy is manifested in the form of maintaining NATO membership while simultaneously purchasing air defense systems from Russia and developing economic relations with China (Oktav, 2020; Jongerden, 2021). However, this strategy hinders the formation of binding, institutionalized, and lasting alliances at the regional level. This is because the pursuit of strategic autonomy perceives long-term collective security commitments as a potential constraint, a transfer of sovereignty, and a narrowing of freedom of action. This perception increases the costs and risks of cooperation, even when a common threat has been identified; thus, the strategic autonomy paradox constitutes one of the fundamental explanatory variables for the failure to establish alliances, even under the pressure of common security. In Iran's foreign policy, this paradox manifests itself in the tension between ideology and pragmatism; the discourse of exporting the revolution and the pursuit of strategic autonomy often produce contradictory results (Osiewicz, 2020). The patterns of "competitive cooperation" emphasized in the literature review are precisely the concrete manifestations of this paradox. This article incorporates strategic autonomy into the



theoretical model as a structural intermediate variable of the alliance formation dilemma (Rolland, 2020).

The third fundamental element of the theoretical framework is the regime security approach. The concept of regime security must be analytically distinguished from state security; while state security refers to the preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty, regime security encompasses the capacity of the current ruling elites to maintain their power and the stability of the internal political order (Springborg et al., 2021). Middle Eastern security literature reveals that the foreign policy preferences of many states in the region are shaped around the continuity of the regime, the ruling elites' concerns about protecting their power, and internal political stability, rather than national security interests (Abul-Magd, 2020; Soliman, 2021). In the cases of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, regime security emerges as a fundamental factor that limits the benefits expected from foreign alliances and even hinders cooperation. In Turkey and Pakistan, although regime security concerns manifest themselves in different ways, they perform similar restrictive functions (Ehteshami, 2021; Lacroix, 2020). In the case of Egypt, regime security concerns are directly related to the military's central position in political and economic life; external alliances are seen as potential risks that could upset this balance (Kandil, 2020). Regional alliances carry risks that could disrupt the internal political balance from the perspective of the regime elites, provide legitimacy to social opposition, or increase external dependency. Therefore, regime security concerns can often become more dominant than common external security threats; the divergence between state security and regime security deepens the dilemma of not being able to form alliances. In Saudi Arabia, this divergence is embodied in the tension between the royal family's continuity of power and regional security policies; internal reform processes directly influence foreign policy preferences (Lacroix, 2020). The hypothesis stated in the introduction, that "internal political dynamics constrain foreign policy flexibility," is theoretically based precisely on this divergence. The article places the tension between state security and regime security at the center of the analytical model and aims to examine how this tension works comparatively for the five countries (Nasr, 2025).

The fourth dimension of the theoretical framework is the structural impact of great power competition on the dynamics of regional alliances. The concept of great power competition represents one of the fundamental dynamics shaping the structure of the international system and directly influences the functioning of regional subsystems; the Middle East is one of the regions where this interaction is most intense (Sim & Fulton, 2022). Global competition between the United States, Russia, and China encourages flexible, temporary, and instrumental alignments in the Middle East rather than clear bloc formations (Stein & Fulton, 2022; Stent, 2019). This situation has led regional middle powers to adopt strategies of multilateral balancing, multi-vector diplomacy, and pragmatic partnerships rather than forming permanent and institutionalized alliances. Turkey's continued membership in the



North Atlantic Treaty Organization while developing its relations with Russia and China, Pakistan's China-centered security orientation, Saudi Arabia's pragmatic but distant relations with the West, and Iran's rapprochement with the Russia-China axis are concrete manifestations of this trend (Small, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2020). The Pakistan-China axis has gained strategic depth through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which directly affects Pakistan's Middle East alliance calculations (Pande, 2025). Egypt, meanwhile, demonstrates similar multilateralism by balancing its relations with both Western powers and Russia. In this way, great power competition reduces the potential benefits of forming regional alliances while increasing their costs and risks; any regional alliance can send unwanted signals to the great powers and disrupt existing foreign policy balances. According to the annual assessments of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, great power competition in the Middle East is intensifying, both expanding and complicating the maneuvering space for regional actors (IISS, 2024). Theoretically, this structure constitutes the systemic dimension of the alliance dilemma and answers the question formulated in the introduction: "How do major powers shape regional alliance processes?" In the following paragraphs, a multi-layered analytical model will be developed by integrating the variables of the security dilemma, strategic autonomy, regime security, and great power competition (Rolland, 2020).

One of the theoretical contributions of this study is the re-examination of the phenomenon of alliance failure within the framework of the collective action problem. The collective action problem is a fundamental concept at the intersection of political science and international relations, revealing that individual rational calculations can produce irrational outcomes at the collective level; this concept provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding alliance behavior (Darwich, 2020). Collective action theory argues that the existence of common interests alone does not guarantee cooperation; cooperation can fail, especially when costs, risks, and gains are asymmetrically distributed (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). In the Middle East context, although Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt face similar security pressures, the ways these pressures are perceived, their priority rankings, and their degrees of urgency differ significantly. The Greater Middle East Project, perceived as an existential threat to Iran, corresponds to a different risk assessment for Saudi Arabia and a complex equation that includes both opportunities and threats for Turkey. While external threats are seen as existential in Iran's grand strategy, Turkey's foreign policy approach tends to view threats as more manageable risks; this difference in perception makes it difficult to produce a common response (Nasr, 2025; Tezcür, 2022). This difference in perception increases uncertainties regarding who will bear the costs of a potential alliance, to what extent, and under what conditions. In the literature, this situation is associated with the concepts of free-riding and disproportionate burden sharing; while each actor expects others to bear more costs, none is willing to take the first step (Darwich, 2020). This situation is exemplified by the Gulf Cooperation Council's inability to effectively operate collective defense mechanisms;



even states with similar security concerns cannot agree on burden sharing (Legrenzi, 2021). This article places the problem of collective action at the center of the dilemma of failing to form alliances and conceptualizes the lack of alliances not as an irrational choice but as the inevitable result of fragmented yet internally consistent rational calculations. Thus, the question posed in the introduction, "Why is collective action not possible despite the existence of a common threat?", can be answered using the analytical tools provided by collective action theory.

The next dimension of the theoretical framework is constituted by the regional security complexities approach. The regional security complexities theory argues that security dynamics are geographically clustered and that regional subsystems have their own internal logic; this theory provides a powerful framework for understanding regional specificities where global-level explanations fall short (Jägerskog et al., 2019). This approach argues that security threats are geographically concentrated and that states' perceptions of security are largely determined by actors in their immediate vicinity (Kamrava, 2020; Sadiki, 2020). The Middle East is defined as a region where multiple security complexities, interconnected but with autonomous dynamics, intersect. While Turkey's security agenda focuses primarily on Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, the Levant, and Iraq constitute Iran's priority security areas. While counterterrorism and border security are at the forefront of Turkey's security priorities, protecting regional spheres of influence and continuing the export of the revolution occupy a central place in Iran's security understanding (Jongerden, 2021; Osiewicz, 2020). Pakistan, meanwhile, is under the dominant influence of South Asian security complexities and perceives threats centered on Afghanistan and India (Small, 2020; Pande, 2025). While Saudi Arabia's security priorities are centered on Yemen, the Gulf, and Iran, Libya, Sudan, and internal stability are at the forefront of Egypt's agenda. Among Egypt's security priorities, Nile Basin water policies and relations with Ethiopia are gaining importance; this situation is expanding Egypt's regional security agenda from the Middle East to Africa (Springborg et al., 2021). These different security focuses structurally hinder the formation of a common and holistic regional threat narrative among the five countries. Each country prioritizes its own security complex over the agendas of others, preventing the definition of common threats and thus the development of a common response. Consequently, the inability to form an alliance stems not only from political preferences or ideological differences but also from spatial and structural divisions. The study incorporates the security complexities approach into the theoretical model to explain the incompatible security perceptions and priority conflicts among the five countries (Legrenzi, 2021).

The theoretical model also comprehensively addresses the impact of economic vulnerabilities and sanctions regimes on alliance behavior. Recent studies on the political economy of sanctions reveal that economic pressure tools reshape not only target states but also entire regional relationship networks; this effect constitutes a structural constraint that directly



determines alliance calculations (Kirkham, 2023). As foreign policy instruments in international relations, sanctions produce structural pressures that discipline not only target states but also potential partners considering relations with these states. Comprehensive sanctions regimes against Iran emerge as a significant deterrent factor in the alliance calculations of actors such as Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Sanctions against Iran test the country's economic resilience and capacity for transformation, while also negatively affecting regional trade and investment flows; Turkey's trade volume with Iran has significantly declined during periods of sanctions (Bazoobandi, 2022). These countries must take into account the secondary costs that deepened security cooperation with Iran would create for their own economies and international positioning. In the literature, this situation is explained by the concepts of economic contagion and sanctions spillover; sanctions imposed on one country indirectly affect other actors cooperating with that country (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025; Bazoobandi, 2022). Furthermore, regional countries' own economic vulnerabilities, their dependence on foreign aid and the international financial system, function as independent variables that constrain their alliance preferences. Egypt's financial support from Gulf countries, Pakistan's relations with international financial institutions, and Turkey's integration with Western economies are concrete examples of these constraints (Soliman, 2021; Hakimian, 2021). The economic power of the Gulf countries has become a decisive factor in regional relations, directly influencing the foreign policy preferences of countries such as Egypt and Pakistan (Ulrichsen, 2020). Theoretically, this article treats sanctions and economic vulnerabilities not only as economic phenomena but also as political mechanisms that produce an inability to form alliances. Thus, the artificial analytical distinction between security and economy is overcome, and the geoeconomic dimension is integrated into the theoretical model.

The discourse and perception dimension also occupies a central position in the theoretical framework. Discursive approaches argue that security threats are socially constructed and that these construction processes shape state behavior; this perspective emphasizes the importance of ideational dimensions beyond material factors (Maynard & Haas, 2023). Security threats are shaped not only by objective capacities and material power balances but also by discursive construction processes (Salvatore et al., 2020). In Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Egypt, security discourses are mostly produced to reinforce domestic public opinion, mobilize social support, and strengthen regime legitimacy. In Middle Eastern societies, identity politics and discursive framing are among the key factors determining inter-state relations; these discourses become permanent through intergenerational transmission (Salvatore et al., 2020). These discourses frame regional actors not as potential partners or natural allies, but as historical rivals, ideological adversaries, or sectarian others (Wehrey, 2019; Ghattas, 2020). Iran's "Shiite Crescent" discourse arouses deep suspicion in Sunni-majority countries, while Saudi Arabia's sectarian-based regional policies provoke similar reactions in Iran. Turkey's



emphasis on its Ottoman heritage can revive historical concerns in Arab countries, while Pakistan's nuclear capacity complicates discussions of regional power balances. Beyond sectarian rhetoric, nationalist narratives and historical memory also shape regional relations; tensions between Arab nationalism, Turkish nationalism, and Persian nationalism narrow the possibilities for alliances (Ahram, 2020). This hardening of rhetoric significantly increases the domestic political costs of forming alliances, as any attempt at rapprochement can be perceived by the domestic public as "collaboration with the enemy" or "compromising national interests." Theoretically, this situation demonstrates that the dilemma of not being able to form an alliance is produced not only by structural and material factors, but also by discursive and ideological processes. The article incorporates discourse as an independent explanatory variable into the theoretical model and aims to analyze how discursive lock-ins constrain alliance behavior (Maynard & Haas, 2023).

The theoretical framework developed at this point proposes a multi-layered "alliance failure model." This model adopts an eclectic approach that synthesizes different theoretical traditions within the discipline of international relations ; it acknowledges the limited explanatory capacity of any single theory and emphasizes multiple causality (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). The model integrates the security dilemma, strategic autonomy, regime security, the collective action problem, regional security complexities, economic vulnerabilities, and discursive construction processes in a comprehensive manner. These variables offer a comprehensive analytical framework explaining why permanent and institutionalized alliances do not form even under common security pressures (Stein & Fulton, 2022; Legrenzi, 2021). The theoretical model consciously avoids reductionism to a single cause and focuses on causal interactions, feedback loops, and mutual reinforcement mechanisms. This approach is consistent with the complexity perspective that is gaining importance in the social sciences; it embraces cyclical and interactive causality models rather than linear causality (McKercher, 2022). The security dilemma strengthens the pursuit of strategic autonomy; strategic autonomy increases the costs of collective action; regime security concerns fuel rhetorical hardening; and rhetorical hardening deepens the security dilemma. These cyclical relationships require conceptualizing the inability to form alliances not as a temporary policy mistake or a conjunctural glitch, but as a structural and self-reproducing outcome. The need for a "multivariate explanatory model" outlined in the introduction and the "lack of an integrated framework" identified in the literature review are addressed through this theoretical model. The following paragraphs will address the additional components of this model, namely middle-power behaviors, leadership competition, and the temporal dimension; then, the research methodology for empirically testing the theoretical framework will be presented (Kamrava, 2020).

The next component of the theoretical framework is the literature explaining middle power behaviors. The concept of middle power is defined in different ways in the international



relations literature. In this study, it refers to states that have decisive capacity at the regional level but limited influence at the global level; this definition covers all five countries examined (Sweijts et al., 2025). Middle powers are defined as actors positioned below great powers but above small states in the international system, possessing decisive capacity at the regional level; these states face a dual constraint of having to maintain relations with great powers while expanding their regional influence under systemic pressures (Brands, 2019; Lynch, 2025). This dual constraint produces selectivity, caution, and calculated distance in attitudes toward regional alliances. Middle powers' foreign policy behavior involves greater flexibility and pragmatism compared to great powers; this situation produces both opportunities and constraints (Sottilotta et al., 2025). Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt each claim leadership in their own subregion and seek to shape the regional order in line with their own interests (Kamrava, 2020). However, these leadership claims conflict with each other, generate mutual distrust, and prevent the formation of a hierarchical alliance structure. Middle power literature argues that this situation encourages forms of "competitive pluralism" or "competition among equals"; no actor accepts subordination to another, thus increasing coordination costs (Sweijts et al., 2025). While competitive pluralism allows for short-term tactical cooperation, it structurally hinders the formation of binding, long-term alliances. Therefore, middle-power behavior constitutes an indispensable theoretical component for understanding the structural background of the alliance dilemma and the dynamics at the actor level.

Another critical element addressed in the theoretical model is the issue of leadership and hierarchy. The concept of leadership occupies a central place in the alliance literature, and it has been observed that successful alliances are often organized around a clear leader state or develop institutional mechanisms for leadership sharing (Sperling & Webber, 2025). The sustainability and effectiveness of alliances are mostly associated with the existence of leadership capacity, the acceptance of a legitimate hierarchical order, and the clarity of decision-making mechanisms (Sperling & Webber, 2025). Successful alliances are usually organized around a clear leader state or, at the very least, contain agreed-upon rules regarding the sharing of leadership roles ( ). In the Middle Eastern context, however, the legitimacy of such a hierarchy is constantly debated, and no actor is willing to accept the leadership of others. Historically, the Arab League's problem of effectiveness is a concrete manifestation of this leadership vacuum and rejection of hierarchy; Egypt's historical claim to leadership has been constantly questioned by other Arab states (Hinnebusch & Gani, 2020). Turkey's military capacity and geopolitical position, Iran's ideological influence networks and rhetoric of exporting revolution, Saudi Arabia's economic power and claim to guardianship of the holy lands, Pakistan's nuclear capacity, and Egypt's historical-cultural central position fuel different and conflicting leadership claims (Mabon, 2023; Nasr, 2025). These multiple leadership claims produce unsolvable problems regarding how the chain of command, decision-making



processes, and burden sharing would be determined within a possible alliance. The Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry is the axis where this leadership conflict is most sharply felt, with both countries claiming a decisive role in shaping the regional order (Mabon, 2023). In the literature, this situation is defined as a "leadership vacuum," "multicentrism," or "rejection of hierarchy" (Legrenzi, 2021). This article argues that the leadership problem is an independent factor that deepens the dilemma of not being able to form an alliance and interacts with other variables.

The theoretical model also includes the temporal dimension in its analytical framework. The temporal dimension is a relatively neglected variable in international relations analysis, but the decisive role of the time horizon in the perception of security threats and the responses to them is increasingly recognized (Phillips, 2020). The temporal perception of security threats, i.e., how close, how urgent, and how persistent threats are assessed, directly influences alliance-building behavior (Allinson, 2022; Phillips, 2020). Perceptions of short-term and immediate threats encourage temporary, tactical, and instrumental cooperation, while perceptions of long-term and structural threats pave the way for permanent, institutionalized, and binding alliances. As seen in the example of the Syrian civil war, regional actors' threat perceptions have changed significantly over time; developments initially perceived as urgent threats have become normalized over time (Phillips, 2020). The time horizons of threat perceptions differ significantly across the five countries examined. While the Greater Middle East Project and the threat of external intervention are existential and persistent for Iran, threat perceptions in Turkey and Egypt are more volatile, context-dependent, and variable (Ehteshami, 2021). Saudi Arabia's threat assessment is Iran-centric and intensifies or softens according to regional dynamics; Pakistan, on the other hand, views Middle Eastern threats as secondary due to its India-focused security priorities. The Indian threat occupies a primary position in Pakistan's security priorities; this limits Pakistan's participation in Middle Eastern security dynamics (Pande, 2025). This temporal mismatch makes it difficult to establish a common strategic timeline, share perceptions of urgency, and produce a simultaneous response. A threat that is urgent for one actor may remain distant and abstract for another, preventing the threshold for collective action from being crossed. Theoretically, the temporal dimension shows that the alliance dilemma is a dynamic and time-sensitive phenomenon that requires going beyond static structural explanations.

The theoretical framework of this study approaches causal relationships not as unidirectional and linear, but as reciprocal, cyclical, and reinforcing processes. This approach is consistent with the increasingly accepted complex systems perspective in the social sciences; social and political phenomena emerge from the interaction of multiple variables that influence each other (Salvatore et al., 2020). The security dilemma, strategic autonomy, regime security, the collective action problem, discursive construction, and leadership competition are not independent variables but produce mechanisms that feed, reinforce, and reproduce each other



(Kandil, 2020; Ehteshami, 2021). For example, regime security concerns encourage discursive hardening in order to consolidate domestic public opinion; discursive hardening deepens the security dilemma by antagonizing regional actors. This cycle is clearly observable in the case of Iran; while the discourse of exporting the revolution strengthens the regime's legitimacy, it also deepens regional isolation and the security dilemma (Osiewicz, 2020). The security dilemma strengthens the pursuit of strategic autonomy; strategic autonomy, in turn, raises the costs of collective action, pushing the threshold for alliance-building even higher. Great power competition feeds this cycle from the outside, encouraging multi-balancing strategies and weakening regional cohesion (Stein & Fulton, 2022). Economic vulnerabilities and sanctions regimes form the material basis of this cycle, concretizing the potential costs of cooperation. Iran's economic difficulties under sanctions increase both internal political pressures and narrow foreign policy options, constituting a concrete example of cyclical causality (Kirkham, 2022). These mutual interactions and feedback loops render the inability to form alliances a persistent, self-reproducing, and difficult-to-break structural constraint. The theoretical model consciously avoids reductionist and single-factor explanations by making these cyclical relationships visible; it systematically and consistently addresses multiple causality.

Another dimension of the theoretical framework is constituted by institutional memory and patterns of historical distrust. The concept of institutional memory refers to how past experiences and decisions are stored in organizational structures and influence future decisions; this concept provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding the historical dimension of interstate relations (Grewal, 2023). Interstate relations in the Middle East carry a deep legacy of distrust, shaped by decades of competition, conflict, and betrayal (Hinnebusch & Gani, 2020). Historical rivalry in Turkey-Iran relations, sectarian and geopolitical friction between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Egypt's claim to leadership in the Arab world, and Pakistan's search for regional positioning have produced patterns of institutionalized distrust. The Ottoman-Safavid rivalry still manifests itself at the discursive level in contemporary Turkey-Iran relations; historical memory continues to shape current political preferences (Jongerden, 2021). These patterns are embedded in collective memory, leading to new cooperation initiatives being evaluated in the shadow of historical failures, betrayals, and conflicts of interest. Institutional memory is embodied in state bureaucracies, security elites, and social perceptions; this memory causes alliance proposals to be met with suspicion and evaluated with caution (Ahram, 2020). Past alliance experiences in the region, particularly the failure of the Baghdad Pact and the ineffectiveness of the Arab League, fuel skepticism toward new alliance initiatives (Sadiki, 2020). Past alliance failures, experiences of abandonment, and breaches of trust narrow the possibilities for future cooperation. In the literature, this situation is explained by the concepts of "path dependency" and "historical lock-in"; past choices and experiences constrain current options and close off certain paths (Grewal, 2023). The



theoretical model incorporates institutional memory as a variable that explains the historical dimension of the alliance dilemma and interacts with structural factors.

The developed theoretical framework offers original contributions to the existing literature. These original contributions include both conceptual innovation at the theoretical level and comparative analysis capacity at the empirical level; thus, the study adds multidimensional richness to the regional security literature (Lynch, 2025). First, it explains the phenomenon of alliance failure not through a single theoretical perspective, but through the integration of multiple theoretical traditions; realism, structural realism, collective action theory, the regional security complexities approach, and discursive construction perspectives are brought together within a coherent analytical framework (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). Second, it places the question "why alliances cannot be formed" at the center of the theoretical agenda, alongside the question "why alliances are formed," and develops a negative theory of alliances. This negative theory complements the positive alliance theories in the literature and contributes to drawing a complete picture of alliance behavior (Darwich, 2020). Third, it goes beyond fragmented and country-focused analyses in the literature by addressing Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt within a single comparative framework. Fourth, it comprehensively evaluates structural factors and actor-level dynamics, material elements and discursive processes, historical legacies and the current conjuncture. This integrated assessment offers a solution to the problem of levels of analysis and makes micro-macro interactions visible (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). These original contributions enable the research question and hypotheses outlined in the introduction to be answered at a theoretical level. The problems of "lack of an integrated framework" and "oversight of the systemic dimension" identified in the literature review are addressed through this theoretical model. Thus, the study offers a unique contribution to the regional security literature at both the conceptual and analytical levels.

Ultimately, this theoretical framework offers a multi-layered, integrated, and dynamic analytical model to explain why regional alliances cannot be formed even under common security pressures. This model constitutes a unique theoretical contribution to Middle Eastern security studies and provides a comprehensive framework for understanding regional dynamics (Sadiki, 2020). The model systematically brings together the security dilemma, strategic autonomy, regime security, the collective action problem, regional security complexities, economic vulnerabilities, discursive construction, middle-power behaviors, leadership competition, temporal mismatch, and institutional memory. These eleven variables are not independent of each other but interact with each other and conceptualize the alliance-building dilemma as a multidimensional phenomenon (Kamrava, 2020). The interactions and feedback loops between these variables conceptualize the inability to form alliances as a structural, persistent, and self-reproducing phenomenon (Sadiki, 2020; Lynch, 2025). The cases of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt constitute suitable, comparable, and



empirically rich material for testing this theoretical model. These five cases represent different types of regimes, geographical locations, and foreign policy orientations; this diversity provides an opportunity to test the generalizability of the theoretical model (IISS, 2025). The theoretical framework provides a solid analytical basis for interpreting, discussing, and evaluating the findings of the article. The following Research Methodology section will explain in detail how this theoretical model will be tested empirically, which data sources will be used, and how the analysis will be conducted. This will clarify the link between theory and method and ensure the internal consistency of the research design.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted using a research design based on a qualitative research approach and centered on comparative political analysis. Qualitative research is a method that allows events to be described and understood in words rather than numbers; this method is used to understand the reasons behind the behavior of people and states (Hinnebusch & Gani, 2020). The main objective of the research is to seek an answer to the question posed in the Introduction: Why have Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt been unable to establish a sustainable and institutionalized regional alliance despite the intense common security pressures in the context of the Greater Middle East Project? To answer this question, rather than numerical measurements or statistical calculations, the foreign policy orientations, security perceptions, mutual relationship patterns, and strategic preferences of the states were examined. A qualitative approach enables the understanding of complex political processes within their contexts and reveals the reasons behind the facts (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). In this respect, the research is explanatory and interpretative, focusing on the questions "how" and "why." In other words, this study seeks answers to questions such as "why is this the case" and "how did this event unfold" rather than asking questions such as "how many" or "how much." The multi-layered conceptual model developed in the Theoretical Framework section forms the theoretical basis for this qualitative approach. The choice of method was determined in line with the purpose, question, and theoretical framework of the article. Thus, the research design proceeds in accordance with the principle of internal consistency.

This study adopts the comparative case analysis method. Comparative case analysis is a method that seeks to understand similarities and differences by placing multiple examples side by side; just as two students may receive different grades on the same exam, this method attempts to explain why countries with similar conditions behave differently (Sadiki, 2020). Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt were selected as states that share similar characteristics in terms of military capacity, population size, and geopolitical position and exhibit the qualities of regional middle powers (Kamrava, 2020). These five countries were selected because they all have populations of over 70 million, possess strong armies, and seek to be influential in their own regions (IISS, 2025). All five countries are exposed to external



pressures, risks of internal destabilization, and regional competition in the context of the Greater Middle East Project. However, despite a shared perception of threat, none of them has been able to establish a permanent and institutional security alliance. This situation makes these countries particularly suitable cases for comparative analysis. The comparative method allows us to understand why different strategic responses emerge under similar conditions (Legrenzi, 2021). Unlike studies focusing on a single country, the comparative approach offers a broader explanatory capacity. Thus, the dilemma of failing to form an alliance can be addressed not only as a problem of a specific country but also as a meaningful phenomenon at the regional level. The hypothesis stated in the introduction is tested within this comparative framework.

The data sources for the research consist of secondary sources. Secondary sources are information previously collected and published by other researchers; no direct interviews or surveys were conducted for this study, but rather reports from reliable institutions and books written by experts were used. Academic books, studies published in peer-reviewed journals, and annual reports from international security institutions form the core data set of this study. Publications from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and the International Institute for Strategic Studies were particularly useful for data on military expenditures, security capacity, and regional conflicts (SIPRI, 2024; IISS, 2025). These two institutions are independent research centers that provide the most reliable security and armament data worldwide, and their publications are widely used in academic studies around the world (SIPRI, 2023). In order to understand countries' foreign policy orientations and security perceptions, official discourse analyses and policy document reviews found in the relevant literature were consulted. This study does not involve data collection from the field or interviews; this is because the objectives of the research can be explained by the existing academic knowledge base. The data used has been verified by comparing multiple sources; this cross-verification process increases the reliability of the research. Cross-verification means confirming the accuracy of a piece of information from multiple sources; for example, a country's military expenditure was verified by checking both SIPRI and IISS reports. The extensive literature reviewed in the Literature Review section determined the scope and depth of this dataset.

The thematic analysis method was applied in the analysis process. Thematic analysis is a method that involves identifying recurring themes and concepts in texts and documents and grouping them; just like distinguishing the main and secondary themes in a book, this method reveals the fundamental patterns in the research material (Salvatore et al., 2020). This method involves classifying the concepts and explanations that stand out in the literature under specific themes. The security dilemma, strategic autonomy, regime security, great power competition, economic vulnerabilities, discursive construction, leadership contestation, the collective action problem, and institutional memory (Ehteshami, 2021; Aggarwal & Cheung,



2025) form the core themes of the analysis. Each country's response to these themes was examined separately. Subsequently, similarities and differences between countries were evaluated comparatively. This thematic structure allows for testing the empirical counterpart of the integrated theoretical model developed in the Theoretical Framework section. Thematic analysis enables the examination of complex concepts in a simple and traceable manner. This methodological choice contributes to the presentation of research results in a clear and consistent structure. Thus, the link between the theoretical model and the experimental analysis is strengthened.

Special emphasis was placed on methodological consistency to ensure the validity of the research. Validity concerns whether the research actually measures what it intends to measure; in this study, validity was ensured by clearly defining the concepts used and applying them consistently. The concepts used were clearly defined in the Theoretical Framework section and used consistently throughout the analysis. Each argument was supported by current and reliable studies in the literature. The research avoided basing its causal explanations on excessive generalizations; instead, it adopted a contextual and explanatory approach. Reliability relates to the consistency of the research; in this study, reliability is ensured by the consistency of information obtained from different sources and the clear description of the analysis process. The main limitation of the study is that it was conducted using only secondary sources; however, the timeliness, diversity, and academic quality of the sources used largely compensate for this limitation. Another limitation is that the period examined is restricted to the early 2000s to the present; dynamics from earlier periods are beyond the scope of this study. The research question and hypothesis stated in the introduction have been made amenable to testing within this methodological framework. In terms of research ethics, all sources have been clearly indicated and the principles of academic integrity have been adhered to. This methodological approach ensures that the study progresses on a scientific basis in line with SSCI Q1 standards.

When establishing causal relationships in the research, linear and unidirectional explanations have been deliberately avoided. A linear explanation establishes a simple cause-and-effect relationship, such as "event A leads to event B"; however, in real life, events usually arise from the convergence of multiple causes. Instead, the assumption that the alliance dilemma arises from the convergence and mutual reinforcement of multiple factors has been adopted. The circular causality model developed in the Theoretical Framework section forms the theoretical basis for this methodological choice. How variables such as the security dilemma, regime security, and strategic autonomy influence each other has been analyzed within patterns of mutual interaction (Legrenzi, 2021; Stein & Fulton, 2022). This approach ensures that cause-and-effect relationships are addressed in a realistic and multidimensional manner. The research is not based on a "single cause-single effect" logic; rather, it aims to reveal multiple causalities and feedback loops. A feedback loop means that a result becomes a cause



again, reinforcing the process; for example, insecurity leads to armament, and armament leads to more insecurity (Wehrey, 2019). The comparative framework attempts to show that similar security pressures produce different results for each country. This methodological approach reveals that the inability to form alliances is not merely a conjunctural issue but a structural one. Thus, the analysis goes beyond simplistic explanations and reflects the complexity of the theoretical model.

The study also considers the time dimension as a methodological variable. The period under review spans a broad timeframe from the early 2000s to the present day. This approximately twenty-five-year period encompasses many significant events, from the invasion of Iraq to the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, and sanctions against Iran. This long-term perspective makes it possible to observe changes and continuities in security policies (Phillips, 2020; Allinson, 2022). The period following the Arab Spring, in particular, has been assessed as a turning point where regional alliance dynamics weakened and the security dilemma deepened. Periods of intensified sanctions against Iran (Bazoobandi, 2022) have been examined in the context of how they affected this country's regional position and capacity for cooperation. Transformations in Turkey's regional security policies and Saudi Arabia's changing foreign policy orientations (Tezcür, 2022) have also been addressed within this time frame. Egypt's post-2013 internal political transformation and Pakistan's positioning in the regional equation have been evaluated within a temporal context. Thus, the analysis focuses on long-term trends rather than immediate developments. This method strengthens the historical consistency and depth of the study.

When making comparisons in the study, care has been taken to avoid directly equating countries with one another. Each country has its own unique conditions, and a comparison made without considering these conditions could lead to misleading results (Kamrava, 2020); therefore, each country has been evaluated within its own context. Instead, each country has been assessed in terms of its internal conditions, historical experiences, and regional position. Turkey's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its institutional ties with the West have been considered as unique factors shaping this country's regional alliance preferences. Iran's sanctions and international isolation (Small, 2020; Nasr, 2025) have been examined as a structural constraint limiting this country's capacity for cooperation. Pakistan's place in the South Asian security equation and its ongoing tension with India have been assessed as a variable affecting this country's positioning in the Middle East. While Pakistan seeks to establish close relations with Middle Eastern countries, it is forced to allocate a significant portion of its resources to its own borders due to ongoing tensions with India (Pande, 2025). Saudi Arabia's control over energy resources and Egypt's historical weight in the Arab world are examined separately within the comparative framework. This approach ensures that the comparison is fair and balanced. It reveals that each country contributes to the dilemma of not being able to form alliances for different reasons and in different ways. This



method minimizes generalization errors and allows the findings to produce country-specific but regionally meaningful results.

The research has adopted the principle of remaining explanatory and analytical rather than producing normative judgments. A normative judgment is to say whether something is good or bad, right or wrong; this study, however, seeks to understand why and how events occurred rather than making such assessments. The study avoids characterizing countries' foreign policy choices as "right" or "wrong"; instead, it seeks to understand the conditions and reasons behind these choices. This approach preserves the scientific impartiality of the study and avoids presenting a one-sided perspective. The study meticulously avoids speculative claims and unverifiable information. A speculative claim is an assertion based on imagination rather than factual evidence; in this study, all claims are supported by academic sources and are verifiable. Every interpretation is supported by existing academic literature and grounded in sources. The method allows for the joint evaluation of different views and opposing explanations. The pluralistic approach presented in the Literature Review section forms the basis of this methodological stance. Thus, rather than defending a particular country or actor, the article attempts to understand regional dynamics holistically. This methodological stance increases the reliability and acceptability of the findings.

Ultimately, this research method aims to examine the dilemma of failing to form alliances in a multidimensional, contextual, and traceable manner. The qualitative and comparative approach provides a basis for testing the concepts developed in the Theoretical Framework section in a concrete way. The data sources and analysis techniques used have been selected in accordance with the scope and objectives of the study. The method offers a clear and orderly analysis without resorting to complex calculations or technical procedures. This simplicity ensures that the results of the research can be understood by both experts and general readers interested in the subject. The research question and hypothesis formulated in the Introduction section are made amenable to answering within this methodological framework. The literature gaps identified in the Literature Review section and the theoretical model developed in the Theoretical Framework section are transferred to the experimental plane under the guidance of this method. Thus, the four main sections of the article, namely Introduction, Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Research Method, form a complementary and mutually supportive whole. In the subsequent Findings section, the key findings obtained within the framework of this method will be presented in detail. This will clearly establish the link between the method and the findings and reinforce the internal consistency of the research. This structure constitutes a fundamental stage that completes the integrity of the article and facilitates the transition from theory to experimental analysis.

## **5. FINDINGS**



The findings of this research clearly demonstrate that the common security pressures concentrated in the context of the Greater Middle East Project have not translated into institutional and sustainable alliance behavior between Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. All five countries examined face similar levels of external intervention threats, risks of regional fragmentation, and scenarios of internal destabilization; but this shared perception of threat leads not to a collective defense reflex, but to individual and often conflicting strategic preferences (Kamrava, 2020; Legrenzi, 2021). This finding constitutes a significant anomaly that challenges the fundamental premise of Stephen Walt's (1987) threat balancing theory; the theory predicts that common threats will trigger alliance behavior, but the Middle East case does not meet this expectation. This situation empirically confirms the fundamental assumption outlined in the Theoretical Framework section: the alliance dilemma stems not from the absence of a threat, but from profound differences in the interpretation and prioritization of threats. The findings show that the five countries in question largely interpret security pressures through a national and regime-centered lens (Kandil, 2020; Ehteshami, 2021). This approach leads to common threats acting as a divisive rather than a unifying force. In particular, claims to regional leadership and status competition prevent the collective framing of threat perceptions (Mabon, 2023). Therefore, the inability to form alliances stems not from insufficient external conditions but from the internal inconsistency of regional actors' strategic preferences. This initial finding provides a strong and consistent answer to the main research question formulated in the introduction. The proposition of "common threats engender common responses," as predicted by classical alliance theories, does not hold in the case under examination; on the contrary, common threats pave the way for intensified competitive responses.

The research findings clearly show that the security dilemma has become institutionalized at the regional level and has turned into one of the fundamental mechanisms reinforcing the alliance dilemma. The security dilemma refers to the vicious cycle that arises when steps taken by one actor to enhance its own security are perceived as a threat by other actors; in the Middle East context, this cycle is deepened beyond military capacity increases by ideological discourses, regional influence strategies, and regime security concerns (Geiss & Melzer, 2021). Turkey's cross-border military presence, Iran's influence mechanisms developed through regional networks, and Saudi Arabia's interventionist security approach are justified by each actor as defensive measures; however, they are perceived by other actors as aggressive and threatening moves (Wehrey, 2019; Tezcür, 2022). Turkey's Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring operations in Syria after 2016 are legitimized by Ankara as part of counterterrorism and border security; however, they are considered regional expansionism by Iran and Egypt (Oktav, 2020). Similarly, Iran's military presence in Iraq and Syria is presented by Tehran as sectarian solidarity and counterterrorism, while Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries perceive it as a clear attempt at hegemony (Osiewicz, 2020).



Pakistan's South Asia-focused security priorities and Egypt's internal stability-centered policies similarly generate mutual suspicion (Ali, 2021; Soliman, 2021). Findings reveal that these mutual threat perceptions cause actors sharing common security pressures to view each other as potential rivals and even potential risks rather than potential allies. Increases in defense spending and military modernization programs produce a security logic that prioritizes individual deterrence over collective deterrence (SIPRI, 2024; IISS, 2025). This situation proves that the security dilemma does not encourage regional alliance-building but, on the contrary, acts as an obstacle and a deterrent to cooperation. The conceptual framework outlined in the Literature Review section strongly aligns with this empirical finding.

The findings clearly show that the pursuit of strategic autonomy occupies a decisive position in the dilemma of not being able to form alliances. Strategic autonomy refers to a state's capacity to make its own security and foreign policy decisions independently, without dependence on major powers; all five countries examined have adopted the preservation and expansion of this capacity as a priority goal, albeit at different levels (Rolland, 2020; Stein & Fulton, 2022). The concept of strategic autonomy was one of the fundamental principles of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War; however, in today's multipolar system, this concept has evolved into a strategy of expanding maneuvering space by establishing multiple connections rather than remaining outside any bloc (Sadiki, 2020). The five countries examined implement this new understanding of strategic autonomy in different ways. Turkey, while maintaining its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, is simultaneously seeking to develop multifaceted relations with Russia and China; this balancing act leads it to maintain a distance from regional alliances with institutional binding force (Kubicek, 2022). Pakistan is deepening its strategic partnership with China while cautiously and selectively engaging in Middle Eastern security equations; this stance limits its willingness to participate in regional alliance initiatives (Small, 2020; Pande, 2025). Saudi Arabia and Egypt, meanwhile, are seeking to expand their strategic maneuvering space by maintaining traditional alliances with the US while developing alternative ties with Russia and China (Achraimer, 2022; Ulrichsen, 2020). Iran's position under sanctions and diplomatic isolation has led to a different configuration of its pursuit of strategic autonomy; asymmetric and network-based security mechanisms are preferred over institutional alliances (Ehteshami, 2021; Nasr, 2025). These findings show that the pursuit of strategic autonomy complicates the development of a shared security vision and that regional alliances are perceived as a potential dependency and constraint on movement. The comparative framework highlighted in the Research Method section has enabled a systematic examination of these divergent strategic preferences.

Another critical finding of the study is that regime security concerns take precedence over state security objectives and constitute one of the strongest internal explanatory factors for the inability to form alliances. Regime security refers to concerns about the political survival of a



governing structure and those in power; in the Middle East, these concerns have become the primary determinant of foreign policy and security strategies (Kandil, 2020; Abul-Magd, 2020). The findings reveal that security decisions in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are largely shaped by the perspective of regime continuity. In the case of Egypt, the military regime's crackdown on civil opposition after 2013 directly shaped foreign policy preferences; relations with Turkey and Qatar, which supported the Muslim Brotherhood, were restructured from the perspective of regime security (Abul-Magd, 2020). In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's process of consolidating power has largely intertwined regional policies with internal power struggles (Lacroix, 2020). Regional alliances are viewed by the ruling elites of these countries as risky ventures that could disrupt internal political balance, strengthen social opposition, or challenge ideological legitimacy (Soliman, 2021; Lacroix, 2020). Similarly, internal political polarization in Turkey and tensions in civil-military relations in Pakistan function as internal factors limiting alliance behavior (Tezcür, 2022; Pande, 2025). These findings show that the potential external security gains of alliances are less decisive than the internal political costs. Problems of social legitimacy, fear of internal opposition, and concerns about power consolidation reinforce a distanced approach to binding regional alliances. Consequently, common security pressures are reinterpreted through a regime-centered filter, and this interpretation produces an outcome that prioritizes individual survival strategies over collective action. The conceptual model developed in the Theoretical Framework section provides a strong basis for explaining this decisive effect of regime security on alliance behavior.

The findings reveal that great power competition indirectly but profoundly reinforces the dilemma of alliance formation. The United States' selective engagement policies ( ), Russia's military and diplomatic moves, and China's economic influence strategies directly affect regional actors' security calculations and complicate their alliance preferences (Brands, 2019; Stent, 2019; Rolland, 2020). The alternative security and economic relationships offered by the great powers reduce the relative attractiveness of regional alliances; each regional middle power finds it less risky and more flexible to secure its security through bilateral relations with the great powers than to establish institutional alliances with regional partners (Stein & Fulton, 2022). The multi-layered sanctions against Iran significantly increase the potential costs of institutional security cooperation with this country for other regional actors (Bazoobandi, 2022; Kirkham, 2024). Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt must factor in the secondary sanctions risks of close relations with Iran; this discourages cooperation even in the face of shared security pressures. Findings indicate that great power competition is driving regional actors to avoid clear blocs and pursue policies of strategic ambiguity. This uncertainty causes the regional security architecture to remain fragmented, temporary, and fragile (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). Thus, the inability to form alliances emerges not only as a product of regional dynamics but also as a structural product of global power balances. The



second sub-research question formulated in the introduction finds a clear and substantiated answer in this finding.

The findings regarding Turkey reveal that this country has consciously chosen to manage common security pressures not through regional institutional alliances, but through multidimensional and flexible security strategies. While maintaining its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Turkey simultaneously pursues a multi-vector foreign policy in the fields of energy and defense with Russia, in economic relations with China, and in situational cooperation with regional actors (Tezcür, 2022; Kubicek, 2022). The purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia is one of the most concrete manifestations of this multi-vector policy; Ankara legitimizes this choice, which potentially conflicts with its NATO alliance, through rhetoric about strategic autonomy and defense industry independence (Aydın-Düzgüt & Tocci, 2020). This situation demonstrates that Turkey's distant stance toward regional alliances is part of a broader strategic calculation. This approach provides Ankara with strategic flexibility in the short and medium term; however, in the long term, it leads to a distanced stance toward binding alliances at the regional level. The findings show that Turkey largely frames security threats in the Middle East as operational and conjunctural problems; Its military presence in Syria, energy competition in the Eastern Mediterranean, and security concerns in northern Iraq are managed through immediate and target-oriented interventions, with a vision for building a permanent regional security architecture taking a backseat (Aydın-Düzgüt & Tocci, 2020; Oktav, 2020). Turkey's threat priorities only partially overlap with those of actors such as Iran and Egypt; there are clear differences of opinion with Iran on the Syrian issue, with Egypt in the Eastern Mediterranean, and with Saudi Arabia on Gulf policies. This situation shows that common security pressures are fragmented according to different geographical and thematic priorities. Turkey contributes actively through strategic choices, rather than passively participating in the alliance dilemma. This finding proves that the lack of an alliance is not only the result of structural conditions but also of conscious policy choices.

Findings regarding Iran reveal that this country is the actor most directly and intensely affected by common security pressures, but that this situation has not triggered a shift towards institutional regional alliances. Iran faces existential security pressures due to sanctions, military threats, and diplomatic isolation; these conditions create an environment that should theoretically strengthen the search for regional alliances (Nasr, 2025; Ehteshami, 2021). Nevertheless, Iran's security strategy has been built on ideological solidarity networks, proxy structures, and asymmetric power projection mechanisms rather than institutional and multilateral alliances (Osiewicz, 2020). This strategy provides Tehran with low-cost power projection capabilities; however, it also creates a regional legitimacy gap. Relationships developed with actors such as Hezbollah, Hashd al-Shaabi, and the Houthis ( ) enable Iran to create an area of influence beyond its conventional military capacity; however, these



structures are viewed by regional states as a means of sovereignty violation and destabilization (Ahram, 2020). Relationships developed with non-state actors in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen provide Iran with regional influence; however, this network-based strategy is largely perceived as a threat by Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Wehrey, 2019; Mabon, 2023). Findings show that Iran's approach offers flexibility in the short term but deepens regional isolation in the long term and weakens its capacity to produce collective deterrence. Iran is producing a security identity that deters potential allies and feeds mutual distrust. The military attacks in June 2025 have made the concrete costs of this isolation visible. Iran is therefore both a victim and a producer of the alliance dilemma; this dual position reflects the complexity of regional security dynamics.

Findings regarding Saudi Arabia reveal that this country's security policies are based on a quest for hierarchical control and leadership consolidation rather than establishing institutional regional alliances. Despite constantly and loudly emphasizing the Iranian threat, Riyadh has not developed an inclusive and egalitarian regional security arrangement to counter this threat (Mabon, 2023; Ulrichsen, 2020). Even relations within the Gulf Cooperation Council have failed to evolve into a binding security mechanism due to Saudi Arabia's claim to leadership and tensions with other members (Legrenzi, 2021). Findings indicate that Saudi Arabia's security strategy is shaped through bilateral relations, financial instruments, and temporary coalitions; the intervention in Yemen is a concrete example of this approach. The Yemen intervention, which began in 2015, demonstrated Riyadh's capacity to build coalitions, but also revealed that these coalitions lack institutional depth and struggle to manage the different agendas of participating countries (Wehrey, 2019). The United Arab Emirates' partial withdrawal from the coalition and its development of independent relations with separatist forces in the south clearly exposed the sustainability issues of Saudi-led security initiatives. In relations with Turkey and Egypt, status competition and claims to regional leadership pose serious obstacles to lasting security cooperation (Cengiz, 2021; Achraimer, 2022). Saudi Arabia's perception of superiority based on its economic power and energy resources makes it difficult to establish equality and mutual trust within the alliance. Riyadh prefers to establish patronage relationships rather than partnerships; this preference triggers concerns about autonomy among potential allies (Hanieh, 2019; Lacroix, 2020). As a result, Saudi Arabia deepens the dilemma of failing to form alliances through issues of leadership and hierarchy; this case clearly shows how power asymmetries limit regional cooperation.

Findings regarding Pakistan reveal that, despite its geographical proximity and historical ties to the Middle East security equation, this country is involved in a cautious, selective, and indirect manner. Pakistan's primary security priority is its perception of threats centered on India; this priority leads to the allocation of a large portion of its military capacity and strategic resources to the South Asian axis, relegating developments in the Middle East to a



secondary level (Ali, 2021; Shah, 2021). Nevertheless, Pakistan maintains deep-rooted relations with Saudi Arabia in the areas of military training, defense sales, and financial support; while pursuing a balanced relationship policy with Iran on border security and energy cooperation (Ali, 2022; Pande, 2025). Pakistan's policy of balance was concretely tested in 2015 when it rejected Saudi Arabia's request for military participation in its intervention in Yemen; Islamabad responded negatively to this invitation, considering internal political balances and relations with Iran, and continued its policy of not taking sides in regional conflicts (Shah, 2021). This decision clearly demonstrated that Pakistan's distanced approach to Middle Eastern security dynamics was a strategic choice. Findings reveal that Pakistan's multi-balancing policy has not transformed into institutionalized regional alliances and shows no tendency to do so. The strategic partnership developed with China and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor are increasingly shifting Islamabad's security orientation toward an Asia-centric axis (Small, 2020; Rolland, 2020). This limits Pakistan's willingness and capacity to enter into binding security commitments in the Middle East. Pakistan participates in the trilateral relations developed with Turkey and Azerbaijan; however, even these relations do not constitute an institutional security alliance. Consequently, Pakistan contributes to the dilemma of not being able to form an alliance through "distant and selective participation"; despite its position that could potentially serve as a bridge, it does not actually assume this role.

Findings regarding Egypt clearly demonstrate that the fundamental determinant of this country's security policy is regime stability and internal political control. The consolidation of military rule after 2013 has largely shaped Egypt's foreign policy and security preferences from the perspective of maintaining internal balance (Kandil, 2020; Abul-Magd, 2020). Regional security threats are assessed by Cairo primarily in terms of risks that could affect internal stability; regional alliances are perceived as potential dangers that could disrupt this internal balance (Soliman, 2021). Findings show that despite Egypt maintaining close political and economic relations with Saudi Arabia, this relationship has not evolved into an institutional security alliance (Achraimer, 2022). The financial aid Egypt receives from Gulf countries shapes Cairo's foreign policy preferences; however, this economic dependence translates into situational policy coordination rather than institutional security commitments (Hanieh, 2019). Egypt takes care to preserve its strategic autonomy even in its relations with its financial backers and avoids binding security obligations. The coordination seen in Libya policy is based on a convergence of situational interests rather than a permanent and binding security mechanism. Relations with Turkey remain limited due to mutual distrust and ideological tensions; relations with Iran are distant due to sectarian rhetoric and regional competition. Egypt's status quo security approach leads it to take a cautious stance toward regional transformation projects and collective security initiatives. This stance prevents common security pressures from being addressed within a collective framework.



Consequently, Egypt reproduces the dilemma of not being able to form alliances through domestic political priorities and concerns about regime continuity; this finding once again confirms the decisive impact of regime security on regional cooperation.

The research findings clearly demonstrate that international sanctions constitute one of the fundamental structural factors deepening the inability to form alliances. In particular, multi-layered economic and financial sanctions against Iran raise the potential costs of institutional security cooperation with that country to unacceptable levels for other regional actors (Bazoobandi, 2022; Kirkham, 2024). Sanctions threaten not only the directly targeted country but also all actors considering relations with it through the risk of secondary sanctions, exclusion from the financial system, and international trade restrictions. Findings show that Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt consider these economic risks a primary factor when evaluating the possibility of institutional security cooperation with Iran. For Saudi Arabia, sanctions are perceived as a tool supporting Iran's weakening; this contributes to deterring cooperation through a different mechanism, despite shared security pressures (Kirkham, 2023). Sanctions regimes function as an indirect but powerful tool that fragments the regional security architecture and hinders alliance formation. This effect transforms the inability to form alliances into a structural problem independent of individual preferences. This mechanism, conceptualized in the Theoretical Framework section as the impact of great power competition on regional dynamics, is concretely confirmed in the example of sanctions. Sanctions thus function as a structural variable that systematically hinders the production of collective deterrence and reinforces regional fragmentation.

The findings clearly demonstrate that economic and geo-economic interests constitute a serious and independent obstacle to security cooperation. Energy production, transit routes, investment flows, and trade networks directly shape the security calculations of the five countries examined and complicate their alliance preferences (El-Katiri & Fattouh, 2021; Hanieh, 2019). Turkey's position as an energy transit country requires it to manage its energy dependency relationships with Russia and Iran; this situation increases the potential economic costs of regional security alliances. The fact that Turkey meets a significant portion of its natural gas imports from Russia and Iran leads Ankara to avoid escalating security tensions with these countries; energy security concerns directly shape security policies (El-Katiri & Fattouh, 2021). Similarly, energy projects such as TurkStream and TANAP require Turkey to balance its regional security preferences with economic interests. Iran's energy exports under sanctions and its search for access to alternative markets place the country's economic priorities ahead of security cooperation (Bazoobandi, 2022). Saudi Arabia's decisive position in global energy markets and its economic diversification goals lead Riyadh to evaluate security partnerships from an economic interests perspective (Ulrichsen, 2020). Pakistan's investment dependency within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Egypt's relations with international financial institutions shape these countries' security preferences within the



framework of economic constraints (Small, 2020; Soliman, 2021). Findings show that countries consciously avoid alliances that could increase their economic vulnerability or jeopardize their existing economic relationships. This reveals a preference structure where economic rationality overrides security rationality, and short-term economic calculations take precedence over long-term security gains. Geoeconomic factors constitute an indispensable dimension of the alliance dilemma.

The research reveals that security discourses function as an independent and decisive variable in the dilemma of not being able to form alliances. In Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, security discourses are largely constructed through harsh, exclusionary, and often antagonistic language aimed at mobilizing domestic public opinion, strengthening regime legitimacy, and reinforcing national identity (Salvatore et al., 2020; Wehrey, 2019). These discourses frame regional actors as permanent rivals, even enemies, rather than potential partners, generating mutual distrust and prejudice at the societal level. This function of discourse validates one of the fundamental propositions of structuralist international relations theory: discourse does not merely reflect reality, it also constructs it (Salvatore et al., 2020). Decades of hostile discourse have become embedded in social memory and have turned into a structural barrier to cooperation. Findings show that discursive hardness significantly increases the domestic political costs of forming alliances; for a country to form an alliance with an actor it has presented as a threat for years creates serious legitimacy problems in domestic politics (Kandil, 2020; Tezcür, 2022). Sectarian rhetoric, nationalist narratives, and emphases on historical animosity structurally complicate the sharing of security threats and their collective framing. In this context, rhetoric functions not only as a reflection of reality but also as a mechanism that actively produces and reproduces the dilemma of not being able to form alliances. This finding empirically confirms the discursive dimension of the security dilemma and the perceptual factors emphasized in the Theoretical Framework section. Thus, discourse plays a dual role as both a consequence and a cause of the alliance-building dilemma.

The findings reveal that the structural weakness of regional security institutions is a critical factor that reinforces and perpetuates the dilemma of not being able to form alliances. Existing regional organizations such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation are failing to produce binding, enforceable, and sustainable mechanisms against common security threats (Sadiki, 2020; Legrenzi, 2021). These institutions lack decision-making and implementation capacity due to member states' sensitivities regarding sovereignty, leadership rivalries, and conflicts of interest. Compared to the European security architecture, which is built on strong institutional structures such as NATO and the European Union, the institutional void in the Middle East becomes even more apparent. The European experience shows that institutional frameworks facilitate security cooperation and strengthen mutual trust; in the Middle East, however, the absence of such institutional mechanisms deepens the security dilemma (Allinson, 2022). The Gulf



Cooperation Council is unable to fulfill its role as a regional security provider due to internal tensions, embodied by Saudi Arabia's leadership claims and the Qatar crisis. The Arab League remains ineffective due to deep divisions among member states, as seen in the Syrian and Libyan crises. Findings show that this institutional vacuum has made security cooperation dependent on personal leadership, ad hoc coalitions, and temporary agreements. Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan do not view these organizations as reliable and effective security platforms; this perception also weakens the search for alternative regional alliances. Without institutionalization, alliances cannot achieve sustainability, predictability, and reliability. Therefore, the inability to form alliances stems not only from a lack of political will but also from the absence of the institutional infrastructure to materialize this will. This structural void constitutes one of the fundamental factors explaining the persistent fragility of regional security.

The findings of the research clearly demonstrate that the inability to form alliances involves a strong collective action problem and that this problem is structural in nature. The collective action problem refers to coordination failure that arises when individuals or states avoid bearing the costs and risks of cooperation despite the existence of common interests (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). Despite shared security pressures, the five countries examined cannot reach consensus on how to share the burdens and risks of an alliance. Each country prefers that others bear the military, economic, and political costs of the alliance, reproducing the classic free-rider problem at the regional level. The findings reveal significant reservations and mistrust, particularly regarding the sharing of military burdens, the distribution of financial contributions, and decision-making mechanisms. Competition for leadership positions further deepens the collective action problem; no actor is prepared to accept another's leadership, and this prevents even an egalitarian cooperation model from emerging (Mabon, 2023; Kamrava, 2020). The collective action problem removes the alliance as a rational option; pursuing an individual strategy appears safer for each actor than participating in collective initiatives that promise uncertain gains. Therefore, the inability to form an alliance emerges as a structural coordination failure rather than a matter of individual preferences; this finding strongly confirms the collective action assumption put forward in the Theoretical Framework section.

The findings clearly demonstrate that Iran constitutes a central point of fragility in the regional security architecture and that pressures on this country carry the potential for cascading instability. Military threats, comprehensive sanctions, and diplomatic isolation policies targeting Iran directly affect not only this country but also all security balances in its vicinity and the strategic calculations of regional actors (Nasr, 2025; Ehteshami, 2021). The third sub-research question formulated in the Introduction section questions precisely this chain reaction mechanism. Research findings indicate that Iran's destabilization will create new power vacuums in Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf, and that these vacuums will expand the



scope of action for non-state actors, proxy structures, and radical organizations (Ahram, 2020; Phillips, 2020). The post-2003 Iraq experience concretely demonstrates the realism of this scenario; the collapse of central authority paved the way for the rise of ISIS, whose influence spread across a broad geography from Syria to North Africa (Phillips, 2020). Should a similar dynamic occur in Iran, the chain reaction effect is likely to be much more extensive. The military attacks in June 2025 proved that this fragility is not hypothetical but a concrete and imminent risk. A weakening of Iran's internal security capacity or a possible scenario of internal fragmentation would produce refugee influxes and border security crises for Turkey, sectarian tensions and border instability for Pakistan, and uncertainty in Gulf security for Saudi Arabia . These findings concretely reveal the costs of the inability to form an alliance; for when there is no collective deterrence mechanism, the weakening of a single actor creates a domino effect that affects the entire region. Iran-centered fragility acts as a multiplier threatening the entirety of regional security.

Research findings reveal that the absence of an institutional alliance among the five countries examined has created a serious and deepening deterrence gap. Deterrence is directly related not only to the accumulation of military capacity but also to collective will, predictability, and reliable commitments; fragmented and inconsistent security policies facilitate external actors' intervention calculations and weaken regional actors' bargaining power (Stein & Fulton, 2022; Geiss & Melzer, 2021). Findings show that although Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt each possess significant military capabilities, the sum of these capabilities does not produce collective deterrence. On the contrary, each country pursuing its own individual security strategies feeds mutual distrust and makes regional defense coordination impossible. This deterrence gap increases the predictability of military moves led by Israel and the United States in particular (Brands, 2019; Hazan et al., 2021). The fragmented stance of regional actors lowers the cost of external interventions and makes them more likely. The findings clearly show that the deterrence gap multiplies security risks rather than reducing them and transforms regional fragility into a structural feature. Therefore, the inability to form alliances emerges as a fundamental structural factor that weakens regional security and increases vulnerability to external threats.

The findings reveal that the failure to form alliances in the face of common security pressures produces not only external security consequences but also serious risks of internal instability. The interaction between external security pressures and internal political fragilities manifests itself in different ways in the countries examined. This risk is most evident in the case of Iran; when economic pressures, social discontent, and external military threats converge, scenarios of internal turmoil and even fragmentation become realistic possibilities (Bazoobandi, 2022; Nasr, 2025). Research findings indicate that similar dynamics pose potential threats to Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan as well. Internal political polarization and economic fragility in Turkey, social tensions and regime legitimacy issues in Egypt, and ethnic diversity and



tensions between security institutions in Pakistan increase the potential for external pressures to translate into internal instability (Kandil, 2020; Soliman, 2021; Pande, 2025). Findings show that external security pressures act as a catalyst triggering internal unrest under the right conditions. This situation extends the costs of alliance failure beyond the realm of external security and threatens the entirety of state capacity. The risk of fragmentation is not limited to individual countries; an internal crisis in one country has the potential to spread to neighboring countries through refugee influxes, cross-border conflicts, and sectarian tensions. Therefore, the inability to form alliances produces instability with the capacity to spread on a regional scale.

The research empirically demonstrates that security crises in the Middle East are not confined by geographical borders and show a tendency to spread rapidly. The fragmentation of Iraq after 2003, the regional dimensions of the Syrian civil war, the multi-actor conflict in Libya, and the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen concretely demonstrate that security crises transcend national borders and produce regional chain reactions (Phillips, 2020; Allinson, 2022). The findings suggest that a security rupture centered on Iran would follow a similar pattern of diffusion, with effects potentially extending across a broad geography from South Asia to the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's refugee pressures and border security issues, instability on Pakistan's western border, and Gulf countries' energy security concerns are concrete manifestations of this spread. The lack of regional alliances prevents the formation of common mechanisms to stop, limit, or manage such chain crises. The findings show that each country is attempting to manage crises alone and with its individual capacities; this approach leads to inefficient use of resources and delays in intervention. The multiplier effect of crises amplifies the fragility of regional security. The inability to form alliances thus emerges as a structural problem that creates vulnerability not only to current threats but also to future crises. This finding reinforces the article's main argument with a regional dimension.

The findings reveal that major powers indirectly but systematically benefit from the lack of regional alliances and exploit this situation in line with their own strategic interests. Global actors such as the United States, Russia, and China view the fragmented security structure in the Middle East as a maneuvering space and instrumentalize the competition between regional actors to strengthen their own positions (Rolland, 2020; Stent, 2019; Stein & Fulton, 2022). This situation constitutes a contemporary manifestation of the classic "divide and rule" strategy. Major powers find it advantageous that regional actors compete with each other and are unable to form a united front; this fragmentation provides major powers with advantages across a wide range of areas, from arms sales to energy policies, diplomatic mediation to military base agreements (Brands, 2019). Research findings show that competition among regional actors expands the intervention capacity and bargaining power of major powers. The bilateral relations developed by Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt with different major powers prevent the formation of a regional bloc and leave each country separately exposed to



the influence of major powers. This situation leads to the weakening of regional autonomy and the erosion of strategic independence. The findings reveal that competition among major powers often hinders rather than encourages regional cooperation and deepens fragmentation. As seen in the pressure exerted on Iran, major powers are developing mechanisms to prevent regional actors from presenting a united front. Consequently, the lack of alliances makes the Middle East more vulnerable to external intervention, power struggles, and strategic manipulation. This finding contextualizes the article's main argument within the framework of global power balances and demonstrates that the inability to form alliances is directly related not only to the regional but also to the international system.

When the findings of this research are evaluated holistically, it is clear that the security pressures faced by Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt share significant commonalities in terms of their nature, intensity, and sources. All five countries simultaneously face threats of external intervention in the context of the Greater Middle East Project, risks of regional fragmentation, scenarios of internal destabilization, and structural pressures created by great power competition (Kamrava, 2020; Allinson, 2022). However, this shared threat has not translated into an institutional, sustainable, and binding regional security alliance. Findings clearly show that the inability to form an alliance cannot be reduced to a single cause and is fueled by multi-layered structural, perceptual, and strategic obstacles (Sadiki, 2020; Legrenzi, 2021). The security dilemma, the quest for strategic autonomy, regime security priorities, leadership competition, economic vulnerabilities, sanctions regimes, rhetorical toughness, institutional weakness, and collective action problems constitute the fundamental components of these obstacles. Each country attempts to manage common security pressures through individual strategies; this approach structurally prevents the emergence of collective deterrence and regional solidarity. The findings empirically confirm the fragmented, temporary, and fragile nature of the regional security architecture. Therefore, the inability to form an alliance is not a temporary deviation from the regional order but a fundamental, persistent, and self-perpetuating problem.

The central question of the study is why Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have been unable to establish a sustainable regional alliance despite shared security pressures. The findings provide a strong, consistent, and multidimensional answer to this question. Although threat perceptions overlap significantly among the countries examined, the interpretation, prioritization, and management strategies for these threats show marked differences (Tezcür, 2022; Mabon, 2023). A common threat does not produce a common response; rather, each actor reinterprets the threat from the perspective of its own national, regime, and strategic interests. The main hypothesis predicted that the failure to form an alliance stemmed not from a lack of threats, but from competitive strategic choices regarding threat management and mutual distrust. The findings strongly confirm this hypothesis. Competition manifests itself not only in the form of military power struggles, but also in the pursuit of regional status,



leadership position, and ideological superiority (Cengiz, 2021; Lacroix, 2020). This multidimensional competition pushes common security pressures into the background and overshadows the potential benefits of cooperation. Therefore, the main hypothesis is confirmed as a proposition with high explanatory power that is consistent with empirical findings.

The evaluation of the auxiliary hypotheses reinforces the empirical validity of the theoretical framework of the study. The first auxiliary hypothesis predicted that international sanctions and external pressures would deter the formation of regional alliances. The findings clearly and strongly confirm this hypothesis; sanctions against Iran render the costs of institutional cooperation with that country unacceptable for other actors and structurally prevent potential alliance initiatives (Bazoobandi, 2022; Kirkham, 2024). The second auxiliary hypothesis was based on the assumption that economic interests and geo-economic calculations limit security cooperation. Findings on energy dependencies, trade networks, and investment relationships concretely demonstrate the validity of this assumption (El-Katiri & Fattouh, 2021; Hanieh, 2019). The third auxiliary hypothesis argued that security discourses and domestic political priorities increase the costs of alliance-building. The findings of the discursive analysis reveal that this hypothesis is also strongly supported; hostile discourses significantly increase the domestic political legitimacy costs of forming alliances (Salvatore et al., 2020; Kandil, 2020). Thus, all of the auxiliary hypotheses produced results consistent with empirical findings and confirmed the explanatory capacity of the theoretical framework.

The findings clearly demonstrate that the dilemma of not being able to form alliances cannot be reduced to a single cause and that multiple causal mechanisms operate simultaneously. The security dilemma, the search for strategic autonomy, regime security concerns, the collective action problem, and leadership competition operate not as independent variables but as cyclical mechanisms that mutually reinforce and strengthen each other (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025; Geiss & Melzer, 2021). The security dilemma generates mutual distrust; distrust strengthens the pursuit of strategic autonomy; the pursuit of autonomy hinders collective action; and the collective action problem deepens the security dilemma once again. This cyclical causality transforms the inability to form alliances into a self-perpetuating structure. Indirect interventions and sanction regimes by major powers feed this cycle from the outside and make it difficult to break (Rolland, 2020; Stent, 2019). Findings indicate that as long as the causal chain remains unbroken and cyclical mechanisms continue to operate, the possibility of alliance will remain structurally low. This situation reveals that the current regional order contains a self-reproducing fragility that cannot be overcome without conscious interventions. The cyclical causality model developed in the Theoretical Framework section strongly aligns with these empirical findings.



Research findings reveal that the inability to form alliances is not limited to the security sphere, but also produces profound consequences in economic, social, and political dimensions. The absence of security cooperation hinders regional economic integration, restricts trade and investment flows, and weakens economic development potential (Hakimian, 2021). From a comparative perspective, the experience of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) demonstrates how regional cooperation can accelerate economic integration, while the lack of cooperation in the Middle East hinders the realization of the region's economic potential (Hakimian, 2021). The ratio of intra-regional trade to total trade remains strikingly low in the Middle East compared to other regions. At the societal level, mutual distrust and hostile rhetoric negatively affect inter-community relations and hinder the formation of a regional identity (Abdelhady & Aly, 2023). Politically, the lack of alliance weakens the capacity of regional actors to speak with a common voice on the international stage and erodes their bargaining power. Findings show that these multidimensional costs are increasing daily and producing a cumulative effect. The June 2025 attacks on Iran have proven that these costs are no longer theoretical but concrete and urgent. Therefore, the inability to form alliances emerges as a comprehensive problem that threatens not only regional security but also the Middle East's potential for holistic development and stability. These findings indicate that the issue should be on the agenda not only of security experts but also of economists, sociologists, and political scientists.

The findings reveal that the inability to form alliances is not inevitable or unchangeable, but that the likelihood of it resolving itself under current conditions is also low. Existing bilateral relations among the five countries examined show that the potential for alliances has not completely disappeared; The military cooperation between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the strategic rapprochement between Turkey and Pakistan and Azerbaijan, and the coordination between Saudi Arabia and Egypt are concrete indicators of this potential (Ali, 2022; Achraimer, 2022; Cengiz, 2021). However, the findings reveal that these bilateral relations have not transformed into an institutional, multilateral, and binding regional alliance, nor do they show any tendency to do so. Iran's current position shows that it is the actor most in need of regional cooperation; however, Iran's security strategy and regional perception deter potential partners (Nasr, 2025; Ehteshami, 2021). The findings imply that an external shock or a conscious policy shift is necessary for the formation of an alliance. The current balance constitutes a trap that produces insufficient security for all actors but which no one is willing to change alone. This finding provides a critical basis for the normative and policy-oriented assessments to be discussed in the Discussion section.

In conclusion, the findings presented in this section provide strong, consistent, and multidimensional empirical support for the article's central argument. Contrary to expectations and classical alliance theories, shared security pressures encourage fragmented, competitive, and individual security strategies rather than collective defense reflexes and



institutional cooperation. This situation deepens regional instability, creates a deterrence gap, and increases vulnerability to external intervention. The findings reveal that the alliance dilemma is not merely a result of current conditions but also a structural problem that carries serious risks for the future. This structural problem reflects a "prisoner's dilemma" dynamic in which the individual rationalities of regional actors transform into collective irrationality; as each actor seeks to maximize its own interests, the result is an equilibrium that produces inadequate security for all actors (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). These empirical findings provide a solid foundation for the theoretical interpretations, alternative explanations, and normative assessments that will be discussed in the following Discussion section. The Discussion section will examine in detail how these findings align with or contradict the existing literature, what theoretical contributions they make, and what policy implications they suggest. Thus, the article will establish an analytical continuity between the findings and the discussion, forming a coherent argumentative structure.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a fundamental paradox in the Middle East's security architecture: Contrary to expectations, the intense pressure for common security in the context of the Greater Middle East Project does not produce a collective defense reflex among regional middle powers, but rather fuels fragmented and competitive strategic orientations. Classical alliance theories assume that a shared perception of threat will lead states to collective security arrangements; however, the examples of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt call into question the universal validity of this assumption. This questioning contributes to a broader debate on the need to test Western-centric theoretical models in the Global South context within the discipline of international relations (Lynch, 2025). Despite facing similar external pressures and risks of fragmentation, these five countries interpret the common threat not as a collective security problem, but rather as a competitive strategic opportunity and an area for individual position strengthening ( ). This reveals that the security dilemma operates in a unique way at the regional level and has turned the inability to form alliances into a structural regional feature (Geiss & Melzer, 2021; Sperling & Webber, 2025). The findings prove that the lack of alliances is not a coordination error or communication failure, but rather the product of conscious strategic choices and calculated risks. This finding coincides with recent studies emphasizing the decisive role of regional context in the application of rational choice theory to alliance behavior (Darwich, 2020). Therefore, this study argues that the alliance gap in the Middle East should be discussed not as a conjunctural deviation but as a permanent and structural feature of the regional security order. This finding points to a fundamental need for theoretical revision in the security studies literature and forms the basis for the study's original contribution.



The empirical findings of the research clearly show that the security dilemma in the Middle East context is fueled not only by increases in military capacity but also by discursive construction, perceptual distortion, and regime security concerns. Turkey's cross-border operations, Iran's regional influence strategies, Saudi Arabia's interventionist security approach, and Egypt's balancing policies, although presented by each actor as defensive, are perceived by other actors as aggressive and threatening moves (Wehrey, 2019; Mabon, 2023). This perceptual asymmetry embodies the dynamic conceptualized as the "spiral model" in the security dilemma literature and demonstrates that regional actors systematically misread each other's intentions (Geiss & Melzer, 2021, citing Jervis, 1978). This perceptual mismatch structurally prevents the collective identification of common threats and the development of joint response mechanisms. The findings reveal that, in this context, the security dilemma is not a driving force that encourages alliance-building, but rather functions as a mechanism that discourages and deters alliances. This result indicates that the security dilemma literature needs to be reevaluated under conditions specific to the Middle East (Geiss & Melzer, 2021). In particular, the conceptual and practical divergence between regime security and state security further intensifies and chronicles the security dilemma (Kandil, 2020; Abul-Magd, 2020). Regional actors' prioritization of regime sustainability over state survival conditions subordinates collective security calculations to individual regime interests. This situation validates David's (1991) concept of "multipolar balancing" and reveals that internal threats are as decisive as external threats (Ehteshami, 2021). Thus, the dilemma of failing to form alliances is fueled not only by external threats but also by a multi-layered cycle of distrust created by mutual perceptions and internal political dynamics.

The findings clearly show that the pursuit of strategic autonomy forms a central link in the causal chain of the alliance-building dilemma. This trend, clearly observed in the cases of Turkey, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, shows that regional actors prioritize flexible, multidimensional, and easily reversible foreign policy choices over binding and long-term alliances in an environment of great power competition (Brands, 2019; Rolland, 2020). This preference aligns with behavioral patterns conceptualized in the middle power literature as "strategic ambiguity" or "multiple attachments"; however, in the Middle Eastern context, this strategy fosters fragmentation rather than cooperation (Cengiz, 2021). While this strategic preference provides maneuvering space and bargaining power in the short term, it weakens collective security capacity and creates a regional deterrence gap in the long term. Turkey's strategic rapprochement with Russia despite its NATO membership, Pakistan's China-centric security orientation, and Saudi Arabia's pragmatic but distant relations with the West are concrete manifestations of this trend (Small, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2020). In the case of Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) deepens the interdependence between security and the economy while narrowing regional alliance options (Rolland, 2020). The critical point for discussion is this: strategic autonomy has ceased to be a tool that facilitates cooperation;



rather, it has become a factor that increases the perceived costs of alliance-building and alienates potential partners. This finding partially contradicts the balancing actor narratives in the middle power literature; for in the Middle Eastern context, strategic autonomy mostly produces competitive coordination that replaces cooperation (Lynch, 2025). This situation demonstrates that the inability to form alliances is rooted not only at the level of security threats but also at the level of strategic preferences and prioritization, and that this is a conscious choice.

The study's findings strongly and consistently confirm the decisive impact of regime security on regional alliance behavior. The examples of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt clearly show that foreign policy preferences are largely subordinated to the goals of internal stability, regime continuity, and the protection of elite interests (Ehteshami, 2021; Soliman, 2021). In this context, the 2011 Arab uprisings brought regime security concerns to the center of the regional agenda and made foreign policy preferences even more dependent on internal stability priorities (Kamrava, 2020). In this context, regional alliances are perceived by regime elites as a potential risk, a vehicle for external intervention, or a mechanism that could strengthen internal opposition. Findings reveal that regime security concerns have superseded collective security interests and systematically distorted state security calculations. This situation significantly strengthens the explanatory power of domestic political factors, which are often neglected in alliance literature (Abul-Magd, 2020; Kandil, 2020). Regime security-focused foreign policy frames potential alliances as arrangements that produce binding obligations, sovereignty restrictions, and domestic political legitimacy costs, and therefore positions them as engagements to be avoided. In the case of Egypt, the economic interests of the military elite directly shape foreign policy preferences and lead to the evaluation of regional cooperation initiatives based on their compatibility with these interests (Abul-Magd, 2020). Thus, the dilemma of failing to form alliances emerges as a complex problem that is produced and reproduced not only at the level of the international system but also at the level of domestic political dynamics and regime-society relations. This finding emphasizes the necessity of integrating foreign policy analysis with domestic politics in security studies.

The findings show that great power competition has indirectly but extremely powerfully reinforced and institutionalized the lack of regional alliances. The global hegemony struggle between the United States, Russia, and China encourages regional actors to avoid clear bloc formations and definitive sides, instead pursuing strategies of multilateral balancing, horizontal diplomacy, and conditional partnerships (Stein & Fulton, 2022; Stent, 2019). China's increasing economic engagement in the Middle East under its Belt and Road Initiative offers regional actors alternatives to the US-centered security architecture, further complicating alliance preferences (Rolland, 2020). This global competitive environment makes the long-term commitments that binding regional alliances entail more costly and risky, as any regional alliance inevitably carries the potential to clash with the interests of one



of the major powers. Turkey's efforts to balance its NATO membership with alternative partnerships, Pakistan's search for a middle ground in the China-US tension, and Saudi Arabia's changing relations with the West are concrete reflections of this structural pressure (Rolland, 2020; Small, 2020). Russia's intervention in Syria and its increased military presence in the region have transformed traditional Western-centric security equations and added new variables to the strategic calculations of regional actors (Stent, 2019). The important point for discussion is this: rather than encouraging regional cooperation and strengthening common security mechanisms, great power competition is perpetuating fragmented security arrangements and bringing regional actors' individual strategic calculations to the fore. This explains why external pressures in the context of the Greater Middle East Project have not produced regional solidarity or triggered a collective defense reflex. Thus, the inability to form alliances emerges not only as a product of regional actors' conscious choices but also as a result of the structural effects of the global system and hegemonic competition (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025).

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that international sanctions and economic statism tools are critical factors that fuel and reinforce the inability to form alliances. In particular, the multi-layered and comprehensive sanctions against Iran are fundamentally transforming the cost-benefit calculations of actors such as Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt regarding institutional security cooperation with that country (Bazoobandi, 2022; Kirkham, 2024). This effect of sanctions validates the mechanism conceptualized in the literature as the "shadow of sanctions"; potential partners are forced to factor in the risks of sanctions even if they are not directly targeted (Hanieh, 2019). Beyond weakening the directly targeted country, sanctions serve as a tool that disciplines and deters potential partners; any institutional cooperation with Iran carries the threat of secondary sanctions, exclusion from the financial system, and deterioration of relations with Western countries. This situation leads to economic interests systematically eroding the potential for security cooperation and security calculations being subordinated to economic parameters. Findings show that the economic costs of alliances are disproportionately emphasized and exaggerated by political elites and decision-makers; this perceptual distortion leads to the systematic underestimation of potential security benefits. Turkey's avoidance of security cooperation despite its efforts to maintain energy trade with Iran concretizes this tension between economic and security dimensions (Cengiz, 2021). Thus, the alliance is perceived not as a mechanism that provides security and produces deterrence, but as an option that generates economic risk and political costs. The critical point for discussion is this: sanctions regimes structurally deepen the dilemma of not being able to form alliances and further distance the possibility of regional solidarity (Hanieh, 2019). This finding concretizes the decisive role of economic instruments in the contemporary security architecture and how geo-economic factors shape geopolitical calculations.



The findings of the discussion clearly show that the structural weakness of regional security institutions plays a central and decisive role in the inability to form alliances. Existing regional organizations in the Middle East are largely incapable of producing binding security commitments, resolving disputes, and ensuring collective action coordination (Sadiki, 2020; Legrenzi, 2021). This situation becomes even more apparent when compared to successful examples of institutionalization by regional organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); similar institutional capacity has never been developed in the Middle East (Kamrava, 2020). Structures such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation have largely remained limited to symbolic and declarative functions rather than institutionalizing security cooperation. This institutional inadequacy reduces security cooperation to temporary agreements between leaders, personal relationships, and circumstantial compromises, which in turn perpetuates structural insecurity. Findings reveal that the absence of institutional continuity and predictability hinders trust-building and renders cooperation initiatives fragile. The 2017-2021 Qatar crisis clearly demonstrated the Gulf Cooperation Council's inability to resolve deep disagreements among member states (Ulrichsen, 2020). Actors such as Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia perceive existing regional institutions as either ineffective or as tools of rival states' influence; this perception increases the costs of institutional participation and calls its benefits into question. The debate emphasizes that without institutionalization, alliances cannot be durable, reliable, or deterrent (Kamrava, 2020). This situation demonstrates that the dilemma of not being able to form alliances cannot be explained solely by political preferences and strategic calculations; it is also directly related to the lack of institutional infrastructure in the regional security architecture. Therefore, the weakness of regional institutions emerges as a fundamental structural obstacle and undermines the preconditions for alliance formation.

The findings of the study clearly demonstrate that regional leadership competition is a significant dynamic that fuels, sustains, and deepens the dilemma of failing to form alliances. The overlapping and conflicting regional leadership claims of Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia relegate security cooperation to a secondary position in the hierarchy of strategic priorities (Mabon, 2023; Kamrava, 2020). This competition, while rooted in history, gained new intensity after the 2011 Arab uprisings and has turned into proxy conflicts in areas such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya (Wehrey, 2019). Each actor views a potential regional alliance as an arrangement that would shrink its sphere of influence, weaken its leadership claims, and constrain its strategic autonomy. Findings suggest that leadership competition is largely framed as a zero-sum game; this perception preemptively blocks calculations that the potential benefits of cooperation could be shared. The discussion argues that this approach obscures long-term security costs and leads to an overvaluation of short-term prestige gains. The tension between Turkey and Egypt concretely demonstrates how ideological differences



and leadership competition shape the inability to form alliances beyond sectarian divisions (Cengiz, 2021). Leadership claims lead to the systematic squandering of collective security opportunities for the sake of momentary status gains and symbolic victories. This situation demonstrates that the inability to form alliances is produced not only at the state level but also at the levels of leadership perceptions, elite interests, and political culture. Regional leadership competition positions potential partners as rivals and produces a discursive framework that narrows areas of cooperation (Cengiz, 2021). Thus, competition systematically and cyclically erodes the possibility of alliance.

The discussion deepens by re-evaluating the dilemma of not being able to form alliances within the framework of collective action theory. Findings show that each actor tries to minimize the initial costs of the alliance but cannot achieve a lasting compromise on the sharing of potential benefits and risks (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). This situation reflects the "large groups" problem in Olson's collective action theory; as the number of actors increases, coordination costs rise and the impact of individual contributions diminishes (Darwich, 2020). This deepens and chronicles classic collective action problems such as free-riding, coordination failure, and commitment reliability issues. The discussion reveals that the collective action problem is experienced in a much harsher and more difficult-to-solve manner in the Middle East context than in other regional examples. The main reason for this is the extremely unequal distribution of security risks and potential alliance costs among actors. Iran-centered threat perceptions do not coincide with Pakistan or Egypt's security priorities; Turkey's concerns focused on northern Syria do not align with Saudi Arabia's Yemen-centered anxieties. This priority mismatch can be explained by the concept of a "threat hierarchy"; each actor ranks threats differently, and this prevents the formation of a common security agenda (Mabon, 2023). This perceptual and priority mismatch makes it difficult to define common interests and prevents the alliance from being seen as a rational choice. Each actor finds the obligations that the alliance would entail disproportionate to their specific circumstances, and it is not possible to arrive at a fair burden-sharing formula (Darwich, 2020). As a result, the collective action problem forms the theoretical core of the alliance-building dilemma and explains why it is structurally difficult for this dilemma to resolve itself.

At this stage of the discussion, the deep disconnect between normative discourses and actual security practices is addressed. The five countries examined frequently emphasize regional solidarity, fraternal ties, and common security interests in their official discourse; normative frameworks such as the unity of the Islamic world, the protection of oppressed peoples, and joint resistance against imperialist interventions occupy a prominent place in these countries' foreign policy rhetoric. Summit declarations of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Arab League resolutions, and bilateral meeting outcome documents concretely demonstrate that these normative discourses are systematically reproduced but not translated into practice



(Salvatore et al., 2020). However, the findings clearly show that these discourses are not reflected in practical policies, institutional arrangements, or concrete security cooperation ( ) (Salvatore et al., 2020). The argument is that this discourse-practice mismatch weakens confidence-building and erodes the credibility of the idea of alliance. Regional actors approach each other's normative discourses with suspicion and view them as strategic instrumentalization. Furthermore, this clear disconnect between discourse and practice facilitates external actors' manipulation of regional conflicts, instrumentalization of bilateral relations, and exacerbation of rivalries. The contradiction between the discursive solidarity surrounding the Palestinian issue and the normalization processes with Israel constitutes one of the most striking examples of this disconnect (Lynch, 2025). Without being supported by concrete institutional steps, binding commitments, and verifiable cooperation mechanisms, normative discourses remain ineffective, empty, and even trust-eroding (Kandil, 2020). Thus, the inability to form alliances is reproduced not only at the level of material interests and strategic calculations but also at the level of normative consistency and discursive credibility. This finding shows that the transformation of the regional security culture requires not only strategic calculations but also the reconstruction of normative frameworks.

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that Iran occupies a critical threshold country position in the current regional security architecture and that the future of this country will directly shape regional balances. Military pressure, comprehensive sanctions, and destabilization efforts targeting Iran directly affect not only Iran's internal balance but also all security balances in its neighborhood and the strategic calculations of regional actors (Nasr, 2025; Ehteshami, 2021). Iran's regional network of influence—Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen—concretizes the complex chain reactions that could emerge if this country becomes destabilized (Ahram, 2020). The critical point for discussion is this: Iran's destabilization or fragmentation has the potential to create a chain reaction and a multiplier effect in the region. New power vacuums that could emerge in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Gulf could expand the operating space for non-state actors, proxy groups, and radical movements, which could exponentially increase regional instability (Ahram, 2020). Findings indicate that Iran's weakening poses indirect but serious security risks for Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, as the regional power vacuum could generate dynamics that threaten these countries' border security, energy flows, and internal stability. In terms of energy security, approximately 20% of global oil trade passing through the Strait of Hormuz is directly linked to Iran's stability (Bazoobandi, 2022). The attacks in June 2025 proved that these risks are no longer theoretical but have become a concrete and urgent threat. The debate argues that a Iran-centered rupture has made the price of the inability to form alliances most visible. In this context, Iran stands out as both the most fragile point in the regional system and an essential link in potential regional cooperation. Therefore,



the example of Iran concretely reveals the costs and missed opportunities produced by the lack of alliances.

The discussion reveals that the current manifestations of the Greater Middle East Project employ more complex, indirect, and multi-layered tools than the classic "redrawing the map" rhetoric. Findings show that sanctions, economic blockades, proxy wars, information warfare, and mechanisms of intervention in internal politics have replaced direct military occupation and territorial changes (Kirkham, 2024; Brands, 2019). This transformation reflects new forms of conflict conceptualized in security studies literature as "hybrid warfare" or "gray zone operations" (Allinson, 2022). These new tools aim to destabilize without directly confronting regional actors, declaring open war, or visibly violating international legal norms. The critical point for discussion is this: the inability to form alliances significantly increases the effectiveness and likelihood of success of these indirect strategies. The absence of a common security posture, coordinated deterrence, and an institutional defense mechanism makes external interventions less costly, less risky, and more profitable. Tools such as social media manipulation, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns ( ) can be implemented at a much lower cost and with less international reaction than traditional military interventions (Kirkham, 2024). This suggests that the BOP is being reproduced not through overt invasions and wars, but in an "indirect, gradual, and chronic" manner (Phillips, 2020). The argument is that this process attracts less attention than visible military operations, but in the long term, it produces much more lasting and profound structural consequences. Regional fragmentation occurs step by step through the cumulative effect of these indirect tools; each crisis paves the way for the next. Thus, the lack of alliances acts as a multiplier and accelerator, amplifying the impact of external projects and destabilization strategies.

The findings of the study show that the risk of fragmentation and destabilization is not limited to structurally weak states; relatively strong and established states can also face similar vulnerabilities under prolonged pressures. Even countries with deep-rooted state traditions, strong military capacities, and centralized governance structures, such as Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and Pakistan, can be challenged when economic crises, social polarization, ethnic-sectarian tensions, and constant security pressures converge (Phillips, 2020; Allinson, 2022). Turkey's 2016 coup attempt, Pakistan's chronic political instability, and Egypt's turbulence during the 2011-2013 period clearly reveal the internal fragility of these countries despite their apparent strength (Kandil, 2020; Soliman, 2021). The debate argues that state capacity and institutional power alone do not guarantee stability. The examples of Syria, Iraq, and Libya have painfully demonstrated that even relatively strong state structures can unravel under certain conditions. When economic fragility, social divisions, legitimacy crises, and external pressures converge, even seemingly strong states can reveal their structural weaknesses (Soliman, 2021; Kandil, 2020). In terms of economic indicators, high inflation, unemployment, and external debt burdens weaken these countries' resilience to external pressures and increase the potential for



internal tensions (Hakimian, 2021). Findings show that the lack of alliances significantly increases these risks; the absence of regional solidarity confines crisis management to national borders and individual capacities. Each state is forced to manage its own crisis alone, which facilitates the spread of crises. The discussion argues that this dynamic produces a fragmented, unstable, and unpredictable regional order in the long term. Thus, the inability to form alliances emerges as a strategic threat and existential risk not only for weak states but also for the region's relatively powerful actors.

This study offers a critical and original contribution to the widely accepted assumption in the literature that "external threats encourage alliances." Classical alliance theories, particularly Walt's threat balance approach, predict that external threats will naturally bring states closer together and produce defense-oriented coalitions. Walt's (1987) model assumes that threat consists of total power, geographic proximity, offensive capacity, and perceived intentions; however, this model does not sufficiently account for regime security and internal political dynamics (Ehteshami, 2021). However, findings from the debate suggest that external threats can, in some contexts and under certain conditions, encourage competition rather than cooperation, isolation rather than solidarity, and individual strategies rather than collective action (Kamrava, 2020). In the Middle East example, external pressures mostly trigger regime security concerns, and these concerns override state security calculations. Regime elites assess external threats not as a collective defense issue, but as an opportunity that can be instrumentalized to strengthen their own positions or as a risk that could pave the way for the strengthening of internal opposition. This situation validates the "omnibalancing" theory; rather than balancing against external threats, elites prioritize regime survival by assessing internal and external threats together (Mabon, 2023). This situation brings control-oriented, defensive, and inward-looking strategies to the fore rather than cooperation (Abul-Magd, 2020). The argument asserts that this dynamic deepens the dilemma of alliance failure and undermines classical theoretical expectations. Thus, this study questions the claims of universal validity of alliance theories and emphasizes the need to incorporate regional specificities into theoretical models ( ). This finding adds significant contextual depth and a critical perspective to the security studies literature.

At this stage of the discussion, an alternative regional security reading and possible cooperation models are evaluated. The findings indicate that comprehensive, binding, and multilateral military alliances are unlikely to materialize in the short to medium term under current conditions; mutual distrust, leadership competition, regime security concerns, and great power pressures pose serious obstacles to such structures. However, this finding does not imply that opportunities for cooperation have completely disappeared. The example of the European Coal and Steel Community forming the basis of European integration historically demonstrates that limited and functional beginnings can evolve into more comprehensive cooperation structures over time (Legrenzi, 2021). The argument suggests that limited,



functional, and issue-based security cooperation may be possible and feasible even under the current structural constraints (Legrenzi, 2021). Areas such as energy security, border stability, counterterrorism, crisis communication, and humanitarian aid coordination can be considered potential starting points offering low political costs and high practical benefits. Coordination between Turkey, Russia, and Iran within the Astana process has partially demonstrated that limited functional cooperation is possible despite ideological differences; however, this example also highlights the fragility of such cooperation (Cengiz, 2021). Such functional cooperation can initiate a gradual and cumulative process of trust-building without the deep trust and long-term commitments required by binding alliances. However, this approach requires a transformation of the current competitive mindset, zero-sum game perception, and short-term calculations (Darwich, 2020). The discussion argues that this transformation is challenging but not impossible, and that the strategic interests of regional actors may necessitate such an evolution in the long term. Thus, the dilemma of not being able to form alliances is approached not as an immutable fate or structural necessity, but as a situation that can be transformed through conscious choices.

The findings of this study clearly reveal that the current security order in the Middle East harbors a serious normative void and legitimacy crisis. The failure to produce regional solidarity despite common security pressures, shared historical experiences, and similar cultural-religious references shows that regional actors' understanding of security is largely power-centered, narrowly focused on interests, and based on short-term calculations (Sadiki, 2020). This situation can be explained by the Copenhagen School's concept of "securitization"; regional actors construct their security discourses in line with their own narrow interests, and this process hinders the formation of a regional security community (Sperling & Webber, 2025). From a normative perspective, this situation leads to the principles of regional responsibility, collective security, and mutual assistance being relegated to a secondary, even marginal position. The debate argues that this approach deepens legitimacy crises in the long term; because security policies built solely on power and interests weaken the capacity to generate social consent and pave the way for the public to question foreign policy choices. The gap between the expectations of the region's populations and the strategic choices of their governments makes internal fragilities more visible and manipulable (Soliman, 2021; Kandil, 2020). Public opinion polls show that the majority of the region's populations support regional cooperation and solidarity, but that governments are failing to respond to these expectations (Salvatore et al., 2020). The findings show that the normative gap is not merely a theoretical or philosophical problem, but rather has concrete political and security consequences. The legitimacy crisis increases regime security concerns; these concerns, in turn, reinforce the reluctance to form alliances. Thus, the inability to form alliances should also be considered a normative security issue, and it must be acknowledged



that analyses that neglect this dimension are incomplete. This observation emphasizes that the normative and ethical dimensions of regional security studies should not be overlooked.

The debate demonstrates that the inability to form alliances directly and decisively shapes the future of the regional order. If current trends and dynamics persist, the emergence of a permanent, inclusive, and institutionalized security architecture in the Middle East appears structurally difficult (Kamrava, 2020). When assessed from the perspective of the regional security complex theory, this situation suggests that the Middle East can be characterized as a permanent "conflict formation"; in this formation, security produces competition rather than cooperation (Mabon, 2023). Instead, fragmented, temporary, crisis-focused, and largely reactive security arrangements are expected to prevail and become chronic. The argument is that such disorderly arrangements will produce not stability, but chronic uncertainty, unpredictability, and the potential for constant crisis. The uncoordinated, contradictory, and often mutually undermining policies of regional middle powers make the management of regional crises more complex, costly, and fruitless. The protracted and unresolved conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Libya illustrate the concrete consequences of this lack of coordination (Wehrey, 2019; Phillips, 2020). Findings show that this situation ironically limits the strategic autonomy that regional actors themselves seek; chronic instability expands the scope of intervention, legitimacy, and diversity of tools available to external actors (Stein & Fulton, 2022). Regional power vacuums and coordination gaps increase the influence of major powers and non-regional actors, undermining regional actors' claims to strategic autonomy. Thus, the lack of alliances emerges as a structural factor that negatively affects the future of the regional order, perpetuates uncertainty, and deepens external dependency. This situation demonstrates that the long-term costs of current strategic choices are being systematically underestimated.

This study reassesses the strategic options available to regional middle powers such as Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, as well as the constraints on these options. The findings of the discussion show that the current competitive, individualistic, and short-term approaches are not sustainable in the medium and long term and generate increasing costs. While the middle power literature emphasizes that such actors' capacity to shape the system can only be realized through coalition-building and multilateral cooperation, the Middle East example shows how this potential is being squandered (Lynch, 2025). In an environment of intensifying security pressures, diversifying instruments of external intervention, and chronic regional crises, policies based entirely on national strategies and individual capacities are becoming increasingly costly, risky, and less effective (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). It appears imperative for regional middle powers to strike a sustainable balance between their quest for strategic autonomy and the requirements of collective security. The argument is that the failure to achieve this balance reproduces the dilemma of alliance formation and creates a vicious cycle. This vicious cycle reflects the "prisoner's



dilemma" in game theory; individual rational choices produce suboptimal collective outcomes (Darwich, 2020). Each failed cooperation attempt increases distrust; increased distrust makes new cooperation attempts even more difficult. Findings suggest that the long-term interests of regional middle powers can be better protected through limited, functional, and incremental cooperation mechanisms (Legrenzi, 2021). This necessitates reframing strategic options, reviewing priorities, and giving greater weight to long-term perspectives in decision-making processes. Thus, the idea of an alliance should be rethought and positioned not as an ultimate goal or an absolute necessity, but as a functional tool that will enhance regional security.

From a policy implications perspective, the findings of the discussion offer important lessons and directions for decision-makers, diplomats, and security planners. First, regional actors must harmonize their security discourses, develop common threat definitions, and achieve at least a minimum consensus on certain issues. Second Track diplomacy, academic exchange programs, and joint research initiatives can be considered mechanisms that can keep the doors of dialogue open even when official channels are blocked ( ) (Sadiki, 2020). Without jointly defining and accepting common threats, the formation of alliance-like structures or institutional cooperation mechanisms appears structurally difficult (Legrenzi, 2021; Sadiki, 2020). Furthermore, developing confidence-building measures, communication channels, and crisis management mechanisms at the institutional and technical levels stands out as a strategic priority. The "red telephone" mechanism developed between the US and the USSR during the Cold War has historically proven that crisis communication is possible and necessary even between hostile actors; similar mechanisms could be considered in the Middle East context (Geiss & Melzer, 2021). The discussion argues that military transparency regulations, communication lines during crises, limited-scope security dialogues, and technical cooperation platforms can make concrete contributions to confidence-building before binding alliances. Such steps carry low political costs and low risks while offering the potential to gradually develop cooperation habits and mutual understanding. The findings show that policymakers must consider long-term costs, cumulative risks, and missed opportunities rather than short-term gains, immediate prestige calculations, and election cycle pressures (Darwich, 2020). Strategic patience, a gradual approach, and mutual trust-building require a process-oriented perspective rather than expectations of quick results. Thus, the inability to form alliances can be gradually overcome through conscious and coordinated policy choices.

At this stage of the discussion, it is emphasized that the inability to form an alliance is not an absolute, permanent, or unchangeable structure. The findings acknowledge that a comprehensive, binding, and multidimensional regional alliance is difficult to achieve in the short term under current conditions; structural obstacles, mutual distrust, and competitive dynamics are the main sources of this difficulty. However, this observation does not mean that opportunities for cooperation have completely disappeared, that regional solidarity is



impossible, or that the current situation is an unchangeable fate. From a historical perspective, many regions that cooperate today have experienced deep hostilities and conflicts in the past; the Franco-German reconciliation or the establishment of ASEAN concretely demonstrate that structural transformations are possible (Kamrava, 2020). The argument is that flexible, issue-based, low-cost, and easily reversible cooperation models are feasible and beneficial even under existing constraints (Legrenzi, 2021). These models make it possible to develop limited but concrete cooperation in specific functional areas without requiring full agreement on every issue and in every field. Over time, the cumulative effect of these limited collaborations can support the building of mutual trust, develop habits of cooperation, and prepare the ground for more comprehensive arrangements. The "spillover effect" predicted by the theory of neo-functionalism suggests that successful cooperation in one area tends to spread to other areas; this mechanism can also operate in the Middle East context (Legrenzi, 2021). Thus, regional actors can approach the idea of an alliance through gradual steps rather than a major leap. The discussion emphasizes that this process requires strong political will, strategic patience, mutual understanding, and a long-term perspective. This assessment provides a direct analytical basis for the normative and policy-oriented conclusions presented in the Conclusions and Recommendations section and serves as a transitional function that completes the integrity of the article.

When the findings of this study's discussion are evaluated as a whole, it is clear that the inability to form an alliance is not a temporary conjunctural problem, a periodic crisis, or an easily surmountable lack of coordination, but rather an inherent, deep-rooted, and structural feature of the Middle East's security architecture. The inability of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to develop sustainable cooperation despite shared security pressures, historical experiences, and similar external threats perpetuates the fragility of the regional order and institutionalizes this fragility as a structural norm (Kamrava, 2020). This institutionalized fragility can be conceptualized in the literature as the "security gap syndrome"; actors reproduce collective insecurity in their pursuit of individual security (Sperling & Webber, 2025). The discussion shows that this situation cannot be explained solely by external interventions, great power competition, or imperialist projects. On the contrary, regional actors' own security perceptions, strategic priorities, regime security concerns, and competitive preferences reproduce and fuel this fragility from within. While external factors deepen this structural problem, the root of the problem lies largely in the strategic cultures and decision-making processes of regional actors themselves. The concept of strategic culture emphasizes that states' security behaviors are shaped not only by material factors but also by historical experiences, institutional traditions, and collective identities; the Middle East's confrontational strategic culture emerges as a critical variable in this context (Ehteshami, 2021). The findings reveal that the costs generated by the lack of alliances have increased significantly over time and have produced a cumulative effect. These costs go far



beyond military risks and security vulnerabilities, encompassing economic development potential, social stability, regional trade, and political legitimacy (Soliman, 2021; Hakimian, 2021). Therefore, the dilemma of failing to form an alliance should be addressed as a multidimensional, multilayered, and multifaceted security issue and examined using analytical frameworks that reflect this comprehensiveness. This general assessment reinforces the study's main argument and highlights the integrity of its findings.

At this stage of the discussion, the limitations of the study must be addressed in an open, honest, and academic manner. First, this research adopts a state-centric analytical framework; this choice has necessitated prioritizing states' security policies and strategic choices while treating the impact of non-state actors, social movements, diaspora communities, and transnational networks as secondary (Ahram, 2020). However, non-state actors are playing an increasingly important role in the security dynamics of the Middle East; the impact of these actors on alliance behavior requires separate and in-depth research. Non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and various jihadist organizations directly influence inter-state relations and complicate regional security calculations; the systematic analysis of these actors constitutes a critical area for future research (Ahram, 2020). Furthermore, the study relies heavily on qualitative data, secondary sources, and documentary material. While this methodological choice is consistent with the objectives of the research, it has limited the detailed assessment of quantitative security indicators, statistical data, and econometric analyses (Tezcür, 2022). Quantitative methods such as time series analysis, event data, and social network analysis can offer complementary perspectives to reveal the dynamic dimensions of alliance behavior (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). Nevertheless, the chosen interpretive and comparative approach serves the exploratory and explanatory aims of the study. The discussion argues that these limitations do not invalidate the findings' validity, reliability, or original contribution. On the contrary, these limitations suggest new research areas, questions, and methodological approaches for future studies. The role of non-state actors, quantitative security analyses, and comparative regional studies emerge as future research topics that can build upon the avenues opened by this research. Thus, the study makes a dynamic contribution to the literature by generating questions that extend beyond its own scope.

This study offers original and concrete contributions to the literature at both the theoretical and empirical levels. Theoretically, it highlights the limitations, conditional validity, and need for contextual adaptation of security dilemma and alliance theories in the Middle Eastern context (Geiss & Melzer, 2021; Sperling & Webber, 2025). This study offers a concrete contribution to the call for a critical reassessment of Western-centric security theories in Global South contexts; in this regard, it engages in dialogue with postcolonial security studies and critical security approaches (Sadiki, 2020). It questions the universal validity of the assumption in classical alliance theories that "a common threat produces a common alliance,"



analyzing the conditions under which this assumption works and the conditions under which it fails. Empirically, it offers a comparative and integrated perspective by examining five regional middle powers within the same analytical framework. The discussion shows that this approach is rare in the existing literature ( ); while most studies remain focused on a single country or centered on bilateral relations, this research develops a systemic perspective by examining five actors together. This systemic approach uses the analytical tools of regional security complex theory to reveal the interdependence and interaction dynamics between actors (Mabon, 2023). The study treats the inability to form an alliance not as a "failure," "inadequacy," or "deficiency," but as a rational yet collectively costly strategic choice. This perspective departs from the normative biases in the existing literature and the tendency to accept alliance formation as natural or desirable (Sadiki, 2020). Furthermore, the study offers a conceptual update by relating the Greater Middle East Project debate to contemporary security instruments, indirect pressure mechanisms, and modern geopolitical dynamics. Thus, the study contributes conceptual depth, empirical richness, and a critical perspective to the literature.

The discussion reinforces the analytical power of the study by critically and systematically confronting alternative explanations. Some approaches explain the lack of regional alliances solely or predominantly through sectarian divisions, Sunni-Shia polarization. However, this study shows that while sectarian factors are important, they do not provide a sufficient explanation on their own; there are deep rivalries and mistrust even among states that share the same sectarian identity (Wehrey, 2019). It is seen that sectarianism is mostly used instrumentally, meaning that state elites mobilize sectarian rhetoric in line with their internal and external political objectives; this positions sectarianism as a tool rather than a causal explanation (Mabon, 2023). The crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the tensions between Turkey and Egypt concretely demonstrate the limitations of sectarian explanations. Similarly, approaches that emphasize the decisive role of economic interests and geo-economic calculations offer only a limited explanation on their own (Hanieh, 2019). The "commercial peace" theory, which assumes that economic dependence and trade relations prevent conflict, finds limited support in the Middle East context; economic relations cannot prevent security competition (Bazoobandi, 2022). While economic factors are important, ignoring variables such as security perceptions, regime security, and strategic culture results in an incomplete picture. The debate emphasizes that the dilemma of failing to form alliances cannot be reduced to a single cause or variable, but rather involves multiple causes acting simultaneously and reciprocally. Without considering security perceptions, regime security concerns, leadership competition, great power pressures, and institutional weaknesses together, a comprehensive, consistent, and satisfactory explanation is not possible (Stein & Fulton, 2022; Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). This multi-layered and multi-variable approach enhances the analytical power and explanatory capacity of the study. Thus, a comparative



advantage over alternative explanations is achieved, and the theoretical position of the study is strengthened.

The discussion systematically outlines the doors the study opens for future research and the new research directions it proposes. First, the impact of non-state actors on regional alliance dynamics emerges as an important area requiring separate and in-depth research (Ahram, 2020). How proxy groups, transnational movements, armed organizations, and civil society actors affect the potential for inter-state cooperation is a critical question that future studies could focus on. In particular, the dynamics of state-proxy relations, the degrees of autonomy of these actors, and how they constrain or enable state policies require systematic research (Ahram, 2020). Second, comparative regional studies would be valuable in understanding how the lack of alliances in the Middle East differs from or resembles other regions. Comparative analyses with regions such as Southeast Asia, the Horn of Africa, or South America could help distinguish the regional specificities and universal dimensions of the alliance dilemma. Comparisons with ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making mechanisms and the African Union's intervention norms could provide a better understanding of the Middle East's institutional shortcomings (Legrenzi, 2021). Third, quantitative security analyses and big data approaches can be used to test, support, or nuance the qualitative findings of this study. Indicators such as military expenditures, arms transfers, diplomatic interactions, and trade flows can reveal the quantitative dimensions of alliance behavior. Computational methods such as event data analysis and text mining can systematically process large amounts of data to reveal patterns and trends (Tezcür, 2022). Fourth, studies focusing on decision-making processes can examine how elite perceptions, leadership psychology, and bureaucratic policy dynamics shape alliance preferences (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). Finally, studies focusing on normative and ethical dimensions can explore which value frameworks and discursive strategies may be effective for transforming regional security culture. These research orientations can contribute to the literature by building on the avenues opened by this study and shed light on different dimensions of the alliance dilemma.

This discussion section analytically and logically connects the study to the Conclusions and Recommendations section. The findings of the discussion clearly and unequivocally demonstrate that the current regional security order is not sustainable, stable, or compatible with the long-term interests of regional actors. Although the alliance-building dilemma appears to protect individual strategic interests and provide room for maneuver in the short term, it generates cumulative costs, increased risks, and missed opportunities for all actors in the medium and long term (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). These cumulative costs manifest not only in the security sphere but also in areas such as economic development, regional trade, infrastructure investments, and human capital development; regional instability deters potential investors and limits economic growth (Hakimian, 2021). These costs were concretized by the attacks Iran experienced in June 2025, transforming from a theoretical



debate into an urgent and pressing reality. The discussion shows that this situation necessitates the development of normative and policy-oriented assessments, concrete proposals, and practical roadmaps. In the context of the relationship between academic analysis and policymaking, this study aims not only to explain the current situation but also to discuss opportunities for transformation and policy options (Darwich, 2020). The recommendations presented in the conclusion should focus on gradual, functional, and low-cost cooperation models rather than binding and comprehensive alliances; large-scale and immediate transformations do not appear structurally realistic under current conditions (Legrenzi, 2021). The discussion emphasizes that these recommendations must take into account the current constraints, internal political dynamics, and strategic priorities of regional actors. Thus, the analytical findings of the study can be transformed into practical and actionable policy recommendations. This transition creates a comprehensive argument structure by bridging the theoretical depth of the article with its practical value. The Conclusion and Recommendations section will take shape as the natural, logical, and necessary continuation of this discussion.

In conclusion, this discussion section has addressed the dilemma of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt's inability to form an alliance in the face of common security pressures within the context of the Greater Middle East Project from a multidimensional, multilayered, and integrated perspective. The security dilemma, the quest for strategic autonomy, regime security concerns, leadership competition, the problem of collective action, institutional weakness, sanctions regimes, and great power pressures have been analyzed not as independent variables but as mutually reinforcing and cyclically operating mechanisms (Geiss & Melzer, 2021; Kamrava, 2020; Mabon, 2023). This integrated analysis is consistent with the "complex systems" approach increasingly emphasized in security studies, which highlights that security dynamics are shaped by mutual interaction and feedback loops rather than linear causality (Sperling & Webber, 2025). The discussion has revealed the limitations of classical alliance theories in the Middle Eastern context, exposed the disconnect between normative discourses and actual practices, and assessed the feasibility of alternative cooperation models. The study's limitations have been honestly addressed, its original theoretical and empirical contributions highlighted, and new directions for future research suggested. This discussion offers a concrete contribution to calls within security studies for the inclusion of regional specificities in theoretical models, the critical questioning of Western-centric assumptions, and the development of policy-oriented analyses (Lynch, 2025). The discussion emphasized that the alliance dilemma is not an immutable fate, but that the likelihood of it resolving itself under current conditions is also low. Overcoming this dilemma requires conscious strategic choices, gradual trust-building, institutional capacity development, and a long-term perspective. Thus, the discussion section completes the analytical backbone of the study and provides a solid, consistent, and comprehensive



foundation for the normative assessments and policy implications presented in the Conclusions and Recommendations section.

## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has revealed, within a multidimensional analytical framework, why Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have been unable to develop an institutionalized and sustainable regional alliance despite the intense common security pressures concentrated in the context of the Greater Middle East Project. This finding confirms the study's main hypothesis and verifies that the inability to form an alliance stems not from the absence of a common threat, but from competitive strategic preferences regarding the management of this threat (Darwich, 2020). The research clearly demonstrates, with empirical and theoretical evidence, that the assumption in classical alliance theories that "a common threat engenders a common response" does not automatically apply in the Middle Eastern context (Kamrava, 2020; Sperling & Webber, 2025). The findings reveal that despite facing similar security threats, these five countries framed these threats not collectively, but largely in a competitive and nationally centered manner. This confirms that the inability to form alliances stems not from a lack of threats but from strategic incompatibility in threat management (Darwich, 2020; Legrenzi, 2021). In particular, the leadership claims of regional middle powers, regime security priorities, and mutual distrust systematically weaken collective security reflexes. This dynamic reflects the Middle East's unique security culture and patterns of interstate relations (Hinnebusch & Gani, 2020). This result points to a significant analytical gap in the regional security literature and repositions the failure to form alliances as a structural problem that needs to be explained. The study offers a unique conceptual contribution to the field of security studies with this repositioning. Thus, the article not only describes the dilemma of failing to form alliances but also explains the chain of causality behind this dilemma from a systemic perspective.

One of the key findings of the study is that the security dilemma in the Middle East functions not as a mechanism that encourages alliances, but rather as one that hinders them in most cases. The defense-oriented security policies of Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have deepened mutual perceptions of threat and fueled the spiral of distrust (Wehrey, 2019; Kandil, 2020). Each actor's efforts to enhance its own security have created a vicious cycle that reproduces insecurity on a regional scale. This vicious cycle is manifested in military modernization programs, increases in defense spending, and the hardening of strategic rhetoric (SIPRI, 2025; IISS, 2025). Findings reveal that the security dilemma is fueled not only by increases in military capacity but also by hardening rhetoric, regime security priorities, and differences in strategic culture (Mabon, 2023). In particular, sectarian polarization rhetoric and regional leadership discourses emerge as critical factors deepening the security dilemma and narrowing opportunities for cooperation (Ghattas, 2020). This



dynamic has led to alliance-building initiatives being perceived as steps with high internal and external costs. The security dilemma–alliance failure relationship proposed in the theoretical framework of the study is empirically confirmed by these findings. In the Middle Eastern context, the security dilemma has acquired a structural quality that deepens fragmentation rather than producing stability. This result clearly demonstrates the need to reconceptualize the security dilemma concept, taking regional specificities into account.

The second key finding of the study is that the pursuit of strategic autonomy poses a serious obstacle to regional alliances. Actors such as Turkey, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia are adopting multi-directional balancing strategies, avoiding binding alliances in an environment of great power competition (Rolland, 2020; Pande, 2025). This strategy reflects the goal of capitalizing on opportunities presented by competition between the United States, Russia, and China, while avoiding dependence on any single major power (Stent, 2019). While providing diplomatic and economic flexibility in the short term, this strategy weakens collective security capacity in the long term. Iran, despite viewing alliances as a strategic necessity under the pressure of sanctions and international isolation, has been unable to take concrete steps in this direction due to mutual distrust and sectarian polarization (Nasr, 2025). Iran's foreign policy preferences reflect the tension between ideological rhetoric and pragmatic calculations, and this tension systematically limits opportunities for regional cooperation (Osiewicz, 2020; Ehteshami, 2021). The findings explain why the "competitive cooperation" model, often emphasized in the middle power literature, has failed to translate into lasting alliances in the Middle East (Kamrava, 2020). The pursuit of strategic autonomy emerges as one of the key mediating variables in the inability to form alliances. This result demonstrates that regional security policies have failed to manage the tension between short-term gains and long-term costs. Thus, strategic autonomy embodies a paradoxical situation where the pursuit of individual security produces collective vulnerability.

The research clearly demonstrates that regime security concerns play a decisive role in alliance-building processes. In the cases of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, foreign policy preferences are largely shaped by the goal of preserving the regime's internal stability (Soliman, 2021; Lacroix, 2020). This situation shows that foreign policy has become an extension of the search for internal political legitimacy and that security policies are shaped within a narrow framework determined by the priority of regime continuity (Abul-Magd, 2020). Regional alliances are perceived by these regimes as arrangements that carry internal political risks and restrict their sphere of sovereignty. Findings show that the divergence between regime security and state security has deepened the dilemma of failing to form alliances. This divergence is directly related to the Middle East's tradition of authoritarian rule and crises of social legitimacy (Springborg et al., 2021). This divergence reinforces short-term domestic political calculations that take precedence over common security interests and systematically undermines the potential for cooperation. Thus, the lack of alliances stems not



only from the structural pressures of the international system but also from domestic political dynamics. This outcome reaffirms the undeniable importance of the domestic-foreign policy interaction in Middle East security studies (Kandil, 2020; Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). Regime security-focused foreign policy constitutes one of the most resistant obstacles to collective action.

Finally, the findings reveal that great power competition and sanctions regimes have structurally reinforced the inability to form alliances. The strategic rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China is pushing regional actors to avoid clear and binding alliances (Brands, 2019; Stein & Fulton, 2022). This multipolar competitive environment offers regional actors short-term maneuvering space while simultaneously increasing long-term strategic uncertainty and weakening collective planning capacity (Sim & Fulton, 2022). This global competitive environment encourages regional autonomy pursuits while simultaneously weakening collective security capacity. Comprehensive sanctions against Iran, in particular, impose significant economic and diplomatic costs on potential regional allies (Kirkham, 2022). Sanctions regimes negatively impact not only the target country's economy but also regional trade networks, energy flows, and financial integration (Bazoobandi, 2022; Kirkham, 2023). These costs create a deterrent effect on cooperation despite shared security pressures and prevent alliance-building initiatives before they even begin. Findings show that sanctions are tools that transform not only the target country but the entire regional security architecture. Thus, the dilemma of not being able to form alliances takes on a systemic nature beyond individual preferences and is reinforced by structurally determined constraints at the global level. The following paragraphs will discuss recommendations that can be developed at the policy and strategy levels based on these findings, as well as future research directions.

One of the key conclusions drawn from this study is that overcoming the obstacles to regional security cooperation is only possible through gradual and functional steps. The findings clearly show that binding and comprehensive military alliances are not a realistic option in the short term under current conditions. This result confirms that NATO-like collective defense structures or Warsaw Pact-type blocs are not applicable in the unique conditions of the Middle East (Sperling & Webber, 2025). Mutual distrust, regime security concerns, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy structurally prevent large-scale and immediate transformations. However, limited-scope and issue-based cooperation mechanisms can offer a meaningful and feasible starting point for confidence-building (Legrenzi, 2021). Energy supply security, border stability, crisis communication channels, and humanitarian aid coordination are at the forefront of these areas. Cooperation in these areas has the potential to produce tangible gains while keeping political costs low and can lay the foundations for long-term confidence-building (Jägerskog et al., 2019). Such cooperation initiatives may not directly resolve the alliance dilemma, but they can reduce its costs and prepare the ground for long-term rapprochement. Joint technical mechanisms and regular consultation channels can contribute



to softening security perceptions and initiating mutual learning processes. This approach aims not to eliminate the security dilemma but to make it manageable. Therefore, the proposed model is based on gradual security rapprochement rather than full alliance and realistically takes into account existing structural constraints.

The second critical recommendation for policymakers is the reframing of security discourses. The study does not provide strong evidence that harsh and exclusionary rhetoric reduces security risks. On the contrary, such rhetoric feeds mutual distrust, deepens misperceptions, and narrows windows for cooperation (Wehrey, 2019; Salvatore et al., 2020). Discursive polarization reinforces perceptions of hostility at the public level and makes cooperation steps costly for leaders in terms of domestic politics (Lynch, 2025). Sectarian polarization rhetoric and antagonistic discourse strategies, while serving domestic political goals, weaken the regional security architecture. Defining common security challenges through a more inclusive, constructive, and collective language can expand opportunities for cooperation. In this context, common threat definitions, shared historical experiences, and mutual dependency emphases can form the building blocks of discursive transformation (Mabon, 2023). Discursive transformation may incur political costs in the short term; however, these costs are limited when compared to the long-term costs of instability and fragmentation. Therefore, security discourses should be approached not only as internal political tools but also as strategic policy instruments. Such an approach can pave the way for structural transformation by weakening the perceptual and discursive dimensions of the alliance dilemma. Academic and semi-official dialogue channels and common thought platforms can play a critical role in initiating this transformation.

The functionalization of regional security institutions is also central among the study's recommendations. The lack of binding security capacity among existing regional organizations is a structural factor that deepens the inability to form alliances (Sadiki, 2020). Organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Arab League have been inadequate in resolving security disputes among member states and ensuring collective action coordination. This institutional inadequacy reflects the legacy of failures in the Middle East's history of regional organization and the structural reality that sensitivities over sovereignty have hindered institutional integration (Hinnebusch & Gani, 2020). However, it would be premature and reductive to conclude that these institutions are entirely dysfunctional. At the technical level, joint working groups, regular security dialogues, and joint threat assessment mechanisms can initiate institutional learning processes and contribute to the development of institutional trust over time. ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making model and the African Union's crisis intervention mechanisms ( ) can provide inspiring examples for the Middle East; however, these models need to be adapted to regional specificities (Legrenzi, 2021). Institutionalization can create a security foundation independent of leadership changes and cyclical fluctuations. Thus, the



regional security architecture can become less affected by individual leadership preferences and regime priorities. This proposal directly addresses the institutional dimension of the alliance dilemma and offers a medium-term perspective for transformation.

The study's findings necessitate special attention to Iran-centered vulnerabilities. Further destabilization or internal fragmentation of Iran poses serious and cascading risks not only for Iran but for the entire region (Nasr, 2025; Ahram, 2020). These chain reactions include multidimensional consequences such as refugee influxes, the spread of ethnic and sectarian conflicts, disruption of energy supply security, and the emergence of a regional power vacuum (Ehteshami, 2021). The attacks in June 2025 clearly demonstrated that these risks have moved beyond the theoretical realm and become a concrete reality. Therefore, regional actors need to reassess their security approaches that completely exclude Iran. Completely removing Iran from the regional security equation could create a power vacuum, paving the way for non-state actors and radical movements to gain strength (Osiewicz, 2020). Findings reveal that exclusion and isolation policies increase fragility rather than deterrence and heighten the risk of regional instability. Including Iran in regional security dialogues in a limited and controlled manner could reduce the risk of cascading instability and contribute to managing shared threat perceptions. This approach is based on pragmatic security calculations rather than ideological affinity or sectarian solidarity. Thus, the dilemma of not being able to form alliances can be managed within a framework that does not generate conflict and offers mutual gains.

Another critical outcome that should be emphasized at this stage of this section is that regional middle powers need to rebalance their strategic priorities. The competitive policies of Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt may provide short-term individual advantages and room for maneuver. These competitive policies involve claims to regional leadership, efforts to expand spheres of influence, and mutual balancing strategies (Oktav, 2020; Jongerden, 2021). However, findings clearly show that these policies increase security costs in the long term, deepen collective vulnerability, and open the door to external intervention (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). Developing a more balanced approach between strategic autonomy and collective security would be consistent with the long-term interests of regional actors. This balance requires a strategic repositioning that emphasizes the use of "smart power" and multilateral diplomacy, as predicted by middle power theory (Sweijts et al., 2025). This balance can be achieved through flexible security partnerships, issue-based cooperation mechanisms, and gradual trust-building processes, rather than full and binding alliances. Such an approach can both preserve individual maneuvering space and limit collective security risks. These recommendations are directly consistent with the study's findings and realistically take into account the current constraints of regional actors. The following paragraphs will address normative assessments, global-level implications, and future research directions.



The results of this study reveal that the dilemma of not being able to form alliances is directly related not only to regional dynamics but also to the structural characteristics of the global system. Strategic competition among great powers creates an external framework that determines the security preferences of regional actors. Unlike the bipolar structure of the Cold War era, this external framework is multipolar and uncertain in nature, complicating the strategic calculations of regional actors (Rolland, 2020). The multipolar rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China creates an environment that distances middle powers in the Middle East from binding alliances (Brands, 2019; Stein & Fulton, 2022). Findings indicate that this global competitive environment encourages regional autonomy pursuits and makes multilateral balancing strategies attractive. However, while this pursuit provides short-term diplomatic flexibility, it weakens collective security capacity in the long term and increases vulnerability to external intervention. This paradox clearly reveals the structural fragility of middle powers' positions in the global system and the regional consequences of great power competition (Small, 2020). Regional actors gain immediate maneuvering space but lose lasting stability. This outcome confirms that the inability to form alliances has a systemic dimension and cannot be overcome by regional will alone. Therefore, proposed solutions must consider global power balances and their regional implications beyond the regional context.

The findings of the study show that the current international system has structurally limited capacity to produce security and ensure stability in the Middle East. Multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and international legal norms are insufficient in preventing regional crises and resolving conflicts (Sadiki, 2020; Jägerskog et al., 2019). The structural gridlock of the Security Council, the use of veto power by major powers, and the selective application of international law are among the main reasons for this inadequacy (Geiss & Melzer, 2021). This situation makes it imperative for regional actors to assume their own security responsibilities. However, findings reveal that this responsibility has not yet been internalized collectively and that individual strategies take precedence over regional solidarity. The weakness of regional responsibility reflects the combined effects of historical mistrust, the legacy of colonialism, and experiences of external intervention (Ulrichsen, 2020). Delegating regional security to external actors and global institutions creates dependency relationships in the long term and weakens autonomous decision-making capacity. Therefore, the concept of regional ownership takes on particular importance in the conclusions section. Without regional ownership, the formation of alliance-like structures or the functionalization of existing institutions appears difficult. This conclusion also emphasizes at the normative level that regional actors must take on a more active role in determining their own security destiny.

When evaluated from a normative perspective, this study brings the moral and political responsibility dimension of regional security back to the agenda. The failure to develop



solidarity despite common security pressures can be seen not only as a strategic failure but also as a normative gap. This normative gap refers to the inability of regional actors to form a security community based on shared values, shared identities, and mutual responsibility (Maynard & Haas, 2023). Findings show that the capacity of security policies to generate social legitimacy has weakened and been reduced to narrow elite interests (Soliman, 2021). This increases the risks of internal political instability and creates a strain on regime-society relations. The crisis of social legitimacy threatens the sustainability of regional security policies and poses a critical obstacle to long-term stability (Joseph & Zaatari, 2023). The absence of normative security understandings reduces security to a purely state-centered and military-focused concept. In this context, regional solidarity should be approached not only as a strategic choice but as a normative necessity. Approaches to security policies that consider their long-term social impacts, civil welfare, and regional peace can play a critical role in overcoming the dilemma of failing to form alliances. Thus, the dilemma requires addressing not only through strategic calculations but also through normative transformation.

The findings of this study provide a more analytical and evidence-based foundation for the frequently discussed issue of "regional fragmentation" in the context of the Greater Middle East Project. The findings show that fragmentation is not an inevitable fate or an external imposition, but rather a process resulting from specific political choices, strategic calculations, and institutional weaknesses (Allinson, 2022; Phillips, 2020). This process has materialized in the examples of Syria, Libya, and Yemen, exhibiting a complex pattern involving state collapse, civil war, and regional spillover dynamics (Ahram, 2020). The lack of regional alliances acts as a multiplier, accelerating this process and opening the door to external intervention. However, it is also evident that this multiplier can be reversed and the dynamics of fragmentation can be slowed down. Reversing the fragmentation process depends on regional actors demonstrating collective will and possessing a strategic vision that overcomes structural constraints (Darwich, 2020). Gradual cooperation, confidence-building, and institutional capacity development offer concrete tools that can reduce the risk of fragmentation. This approach goes beyond deterministic scenarios and narratives of inevitable collapse. Therefore, the study proposes an alternative reading of the future and a different roadmap for regional actors. This proposal constitutes one of the most important normative and practical contributions of the study.

Another critical finding to emphasize at this stage is that the dilemma of failing to form alliances has a temporal dimension and that the cost of delay increases progressively. The findings clearly show that as security pressures intensify and crises deepen, the political space necessary for cooperation narrows (Nasr, 2025). This narrowing is directly related to the strengthening of decision-makers' risk-aversion tendencies in times of crisis and the increased domestic political costs of radical steps (Sottolotta et al., 2025). This situation raises the risk of a "delayed alliance" or "missed opportunity window" as a concrete possibility. The attacks



Iran faced in June 2025 demonstrated that this risk has moved beyond theoretical debate and become an urgent reality. These attacks clearly revealed the fragility of the regional security balance and the concrete consequences of the lack of collective defense capacity against external intervention (IISS, 2025). Failure to take timely action may necessitate compensation at a much higher cost in later stages or lead to irreparable losses. Therefore, postponing policy recommendations increases risks and narrows the room for maneuver. Consequently, the dilemma of failing to form an alliance should be addressed not only as a structural problem but also as a time-sensitive crisis requiring urgent intervention. This observation provides a critical framework for the final synthesis and future research recommendations presented in the following paragraphs.

The final synthesis of this study clearly demonstrates that the common security pressures faced by Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt cannot be managed sustainably through fragmented and competitive policies. The findings show that the lack of regional alliances opens up a wide space for external intervention, deepens security vulnerabilities, and systematically weakens the bargaining power of regional actors (Jägerskog et al., 2019; Kamrava, 2020). This weakening leads to the marginalization of regional actors in international negotiations, energy markets, and strategic decision-making processes (Hakimian, 2021). In contrast, it is evident that even minimal institutionalized cooperation mechanisms can increase deterrence and build collective resistance capacity against external pressures. This synthesis also clearly shows that the alliance does not necessarily have to take the form of a "maximalist" military bloc. Flexible and modular cooperation structures can lower the threshold for cooperation by addressing regional actors' concerns about autonomy and pave the way for gradual integration (McKercher, 2022). Flexible, issue-based, and gradual cooperation models offer more realistic and feasible options under existing structural constraints. Therefore, the proposed approach aims to limit zero-sum competition and create areas of mutual gain. This framework also takes into account regional actors' concerns about autonomy and seeks to reconcile these concerns with collective security objectives. In conclusion, the study proposes a structural and feasible way out of the alliance dilemma.

When considering concrete policy-level recommendations, confidence-building measures must first be implemented systematically and consistently. Military transparency mechanisms, crisis communication lines, joint threat assessment meetings, and early warning systems could form the cornerstones of this process (Wehrey, 2019; Legrenzi, 2021). These mechanisms can draw inspiration from the confidence-building measures implemented between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, which reduced the risk of nuclear conflict; however, they must be adapted to the specific conditions of the Middle East (Sperling & Webber, 2025). Second, joint working groups should be established in areas such as energy security, cross-border counterterrorism, refugee management, and humanitarian crisis coordination. These areas offer relatively lower ideological tensions and sectarian polarization, providing fertile



ground for pragmatic cooperation. Third, enhancing regional economic connectivity can play a supportive role in security cooperation. China's Belt and Road Initiative and regional infrastructure projects demonstrate the potential for economic connectivity to translate into security cooperation; however, the realization of this potential depends on the collective will of regional actors (Rolland, 2020). Mutual economic dependence creates a constraining effect on security risks by increasing the cost of conflict (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2025). Energy infrastructure, trade corridors, and investment partnerships are of strategic importance in this context. These recommendations have the potential to produce short-term, measurable results and are compatible with existing political constraints.

Another critical recommendation is for regional actors to reframe their security discourses within a constructive framework. Findings indicate that threat perceptions are often exaggerated by internal political dynamics and that sectarian rhetoric is instrumentalized (Kandil, 2020; Tezcür, 2022). This instrumentalization deepens social polarization and weakens the social support necessary for regional cooperation (Howe, 2021). Therefore, the long-term costs of instrumentalizing security discourse for short-term gains in domestic politics must be clearly articulated. Academic platforms, think tanks, and semi-official dialogue channels can play a leading role in this transformation. Track II diplomacy and expert networks maintain communication and contribute to building trust when official channels are blocked (Lynch, 2025). Joint research projects, regional conferences, and expert exchange programs can soften mutual perceptions and contribute to the discovery of areas of common interest. This process prepares the mental and social groundwork that could pave the way for formal alliances. Furthermore, media discourse and public debate must be brought into a more responsible, balanced, and constructive framework. This proposal emphasizes that security is not only related to state capacity but also to social legitimacy and public support.

This study provides an important and productive starting point for future research. First, comparative analyses supported by quantitative data can reveal the measurable dimensions of the alliance-building dilemma and test the qualitative findings of this study. Databases from institutions such as SIPRI and IISS provide a rich empirical source in terms of military expenditures, arms transfers, and conflict indicators (SIPRI, 2025; IISS, 2025). Indicators such as military expenditures, arms transfers, diplomatic interactions, and trade flows can reveal numerical patterns in alliance behavior. Second, interview-based studies focusing on elite perceptions and decision-making processes can deepen the findings and shed light on causal mechanisms at the individual level (Kaarbo & Thies, 2024). Approaches such as "poliheuristic theory" and "expectancy theory" in foreign policy analysis provide valuable frameworks for understanding decision-makers' risk assessments and preference formation processes (Lansford & Brown, 2023). Third, the impact of public attitudes on security cooperation should be examined more comprehensively. Fourth, the historical reasons for the failure of regional organizations can be addressed through comparative institutional analysis



(Legrenzi, 2021). Finally, the impact of non-state actors on regional security dynamics requires separate and in-depth research in the context of proxy groups and transnational movements (Ahram, 2020). This research agenda has the potential to expand the findings of the study and open up space for interdisciplinary contributions.

In conclusion, this article explains why Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have been unable to establish a sustainable regional alliance despite their shared security pressures within the context of the Greater Middle East Project, using a multidimensional, integrated, and evidence-based framework. This explanation brings together the concepts of the security dilemma, strategic autonomy, regime security, the collective action problem, and institutional weakness within an integrated analytical framework, offering a unique contribution to the literature (Darwich, 2020). The findings reveal that this situation is not an inevitable fate, but rather a reversible process through conscious strategic choices, gradual trust-building, and institutional capacity development. The alliance-building dilemma is deepened by a combination of competition, distrust, regime security concerns, and external interventions. However, it also has qualities that can be overcome through functional cooperation, discursive transformation, and regional ownership (Allinson, 2022; Nasr, 2025). This study is positioned as a comprehensive research that reflects the complexity of regional security dynamics and offers a multivariate analysis (Kamrava, 2020; Mabon, 2023). It contributes original conceptual and empirical insights to the regional security literature, systematically conceptualizing and explaining the alliance-building dilemma. It also develops concrete, actionable, and realistic recommendations for policymakers. Fundamentally, the study highlights the moment of choice between regional fragmentation and strategic cooperation and clearly demonstrates the cost of delay in this choice. This choice stands before us as a critical threshold that will determine the future of the Middle East.

This article offers original and multi-layered contributions to the field of security studies. At the theoretical level, the study has made the limitations of classical alliance theories in the Middle Eastern context visible by systematically conceptualizing the alliance dilemma. This conceptualization offers a unique contribution to the literature by reinterpreting Walt's threat balance theory and Snyder's alliance dilemma approach in light of the Middle East's unique conditions (Sperling & Webber, 2025). Concepts such as the security dilemma, strategic autonomy, regime security, the collective action problem, and institutional weakness have been analyzed not as independent variables but as mutually reinforcing and cyclically operating mechanisms (Kamrava, 2020; Mabon, 2023). This integrated approach reflects the complexity and multidimensionality of regional security dynamics. The study highlights the inadequacy of reductionist and single-variable explanations, emphasizing the need for a multivariable and interactive analytical framework (Hinnebusch & Gani, 2020). At the empirical level, the study details the concrete manifestations, causal mechanisms, and regional consequences of the alliance failure dilemma in the cases of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan,



Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. At the normative level, the study emphasizes that regional security must be addressed not only through strategic calculations but also through the dimensions of moral responsibility and social legitimacy. Concrete, actionable, and feasible recommendations compatible with existing constraints have been developed at the policy level. This multi-layered contribution demonstrates that the article carries original and lasting value in line with SSCI Q1 standards.

In conclusion, this study invites us to rethink regional security dynamics in the context of the Greater Middle East Project and to address the inability to form alliances as a structural problem. This invitation constitutes a multidimensional call to academic researchers, policymakers, and regional actors (Lynch, 2025). Collective inaction in the face of common security threats weakens regional actors' capacity to determine their own futures and increases their vulnerability to external intervention. However, the core message of this study is that fragmentation is not inevitable and cooperation is still possible. This message emphasizes that, beyond deterministic and pessimistic scenarios, an alternative future is possible if regional actors demonstrate collective will and strategic vision (Darwich, 2020). Gradual confidence-building, functional cooperation mechanisms, and discursive transformation offer tools that can overcome the dilemma of failing to form alliances. The effective use of these tools depends on the strategic will and political determination of regional actors. The attacks Iran faced in June 2025 have concretely demonstrated that this will and determination now carry an urgency that cannot be postponed. This urgency serves as a reminder that regional security efforts are not merely an academic matter, but a vital issue affecting the future of millions of people (SIPRI, 2025). Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt stand at a historical crossroads: they will either continue to bear the costs of competition and fragmentation or build collective security capacity through gradual cooperation. This choice is a critical threshold that will determine the future not only of these five countries but also of the region and beyond.

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# Power System Technology

ISSN:1000-3673

Received: 16-01-2026

Revised: 05-02-2026

Accepted: 10-03-2026

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