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RECONSIDERING THE CONCEPT OF THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST: PATTERNS OF REGIONAL AND SUBREGIONAL DEVELOPMENT DYNAMIC**

Abstract: *The Greater Middle East region is one of the main trend makers both in the context of geopolitical processes and in terms of geo-economic and regional shifts in the global economic situation. Rapid economic growth and high involvement in major geopolitical processes make the study of the regional aspect of this issue extremely relevant. The author analyzes the economic, demographic, and logistical aspects of the formation of this region and its current state, as well as the perception of a group of these countries as a separate region by both external players and internal actors. The author concludes that by all the identified criteria, the region is extremely heterogeneous; therefore, both in terms of academic study and in the issue of foreign policy formation, more attention should be paid to sub-regional processes and transformations, which can lead to the development of more effective approaches to understanding the ways of productive communication with the countries of the region.*

Keywords: *Greater Middle East; regional cooperation; sub-regional cooperation; demographics; population; geopolitics.*

Introduction

The Greater Middle East region remains a hub of substantial geopolitical and economic activity, driven by its strategic energy resources, critical trade routes, and burgeoning emerging markets. Its diverse interpretations of borders underscore not only the region's geographic and cultural richness but also its pivotal economic significance. The evolving dynamics of the Greater Middle East—characterized by strong economic growth, shifting political alliances, and emerging security concerns—highlight its expanding role as a critical player in global trade and investment. By encompassing a broader region that includes the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, this concept emphasizes the interconnectedness of economies and the potential for diversified economic relationships. The region's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, coupled with its wealth of energy and natural resources, positions it as a key gateway for trade and commerce. Additionally, its emerging markets offer fertile ground for investment and innovation, enabling stronger integration into the global economy. The Greater Middle East's geoeconomic role is further enhanced by its ability to

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serve as a bridge between major economic blocks, fostering connectivity, regional cooperation, and expanded market access. By leveraging these dynamics, the region has the potential to solidify its position as a cornerstone of international economic and geopolitical strategy.

Along with the vision of the Greater Middle East, with its significant geopolitical, economic, and cultural importance, the concept of this region demands a nuanced and comprehensive understanding. While its broad characterization is widely acknowledged, a more precise definition is crucial for effective research and analysis. To fully grasp the complexities of the region, it is necessary to clearly delineate its geographical and substantive attributes, addressing key questions: What exactly defines this region? What are its boundaries? And, perhaps most importantly, what are the critical trends that shape its development?

Furthermore, exploring the Greater Middle East is not only of theoretical interest but also has profound practical significance. In the realm of foreign policy, understanding the dynamics within and between its constituent sub-regions is essential for crafting effective strategies. This understanding can influence how countries in the region respond to external political, economic, and diplomatic signals. Equally important is recognizing whether these responses are unified across the region or whether distinct sub-regional contexts produce divergent reactions and priorities. A clear understanding of these patterns is indispensable for shaping and refining foreign policy initiatives aimed at the region.

Some aspects of the term “Greater Middle East”

Defining the geographical boundaries of the Greater Middle East is a complex and multifaceted endeavor, as its delineation varies depending on the context in which it is applied. The boundaries of this region are interpreted in different ways in academic, geopolitical, and cultural discourses, reflecting its diversity and complexity. However, physical boundaries are only one aspect of defining the region. Political, historical, and cultural factors also play an important role, complicating the precise boundaries of the Greater Middle East. These aspects highlight the close interconnectedness of the peoples and states of the region, as well as their importance to global economics, politics, and security.

The concept of the "Middle East" is historically rooted in a European perspective, which has significantly shaped Western perceptions and classifications of the region. The term was first popularized in 1902 by Alfred Thayer Mahan, an influential American naval strategist, in his article on strategic issues related to India and the Indian Ocean (Adelson, 1995). Mahan used the term to describe a geographic region of great strategic importance for shipping and trade routes, particularly to India, then a key British colony. His definition of the “Middle East” encompassed the area from the Ottoman Empire in the west to the western borders of India, including the Persian Gulf and other key areas of maritime and commercial control. This understanding of the Middle East reflects the Eurocentric view that dominated geopolitical thinking in the early 20th century. It highlights that the colonial powers viewed the region primarily through the prism of their strategic and economic interests. This perspective influenced not only how the Middle East was perceived and portrayed in Western discourse, but also the formation of its borders and political structures, especially after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the end of World War I.

A statistical framework commonly used to define the region is the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) classification, as reflected in World Bank studies. According to this definition, MENA encompasses 21 countries in the Middle East and North Africa (World Bank, 2003). This definition does not clearly reflect the real economic component of the region; in particular, it excludes such important countries as Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, despite their obvious religious, cultural, political, and economic connections with the Middle East.

In 2003, International Monetary Fund (IMF) economists Hamid Reza Davoudi and George T. Abed defined the MENA region as follows: “The MENA region includes the Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa—Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen—as well as the Islamic State of Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, the West Bank, and Gaza.” The authors emphasize that the “24 MENA countries (...) are grouped together for analytical purposes only” (Abed & Davoodi, 2003). Despite the claim that the countries of the region “face common challenges and have cultural ties that distinguish them from neighboring economies” such as Israel and Turkey, the authors acknowledge significant religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity within the region, highlighting the presence of non-Arab nations such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, where Arabic is not the primary language. This illustrates the limitations of the MENA framework, as it struggles to encompass the full range of political, economic, and cultural factors that shape the region. However, the definition excludes Turkey, despite its significant influence on the political, economic, and military processes of the region. Turkey is actively involved in conflicts in the Middle East and is also strengthening economic ties with many MENA countries, making it an important regional player. A similar situation is observed with Israel, which, despite political differences, is an important economic and technological partner for several countries in the region.

According to the regional classification of UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region includes 19 countries. At the same time, this classification is focused on epidemiological analysis and HIV/AIDS programs and considers countries through the prism of common socio-economic and health challenges characteristic of the region, excluding Israel, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (UNAIDS, 2023).

Similarly, the MENA region, as defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), includes 18 countries, excluding several nations that play critical roles in regional migration dynamics, such as Israel, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (UNHCR, 2010). These countries are pivotal sources of migration and serve as transit hubs for refugees, influencing the socio-economic and humanitarian landscape of the region. The exclusion of these countries from the UNHCR's MENA definition has been criticized, as it overlooks the significant role, they play in regional migration patterns and their broader impact on regional stability.

The traditional division of the region into categories like the “Middle East” and “Near East” reflects a deeply Eurocentric perspective. From a Western cultural standpoint, such terms can be seen as an attempt to organize the world according to a framework that aligns with European geographic and strategic interests, often disregarding the internal complexity and diversity of cultures, religions, and political systems in the region. As Osman Nuri Özalp argues in his article “Where is the Middle East? The definition and classification problem of the Middle East as a regional subsystem in international relations,” these terms are products of 19th-century Western imperialism (Özalp, 2011).

Over time, the term “Middle East” has evolved into a modern political concept that has entered international relations discourse, becoming widely adopted by the countries of the region themselves. In the post-Cold War era, and particularly after the events of September 11, 2001, new terms such as “Greater Middle East,” “Broader Middle East,” and “Islamic Middle East” emerged. These new definitions, especially those formulated by the United States in the context of the democratization of the Islamic world, are of particular importance for Turkey, which is considered a model country in the region.

Another alternative to the Eurocentric term “Middle East” is the designation “West Asia.” This geographic term refers to the western part of Asia and is increasingly preferred in academic and analytical contexts due to its neutrality and precision. Unlike the term “Middle East,” “West Asia” avoids the colonial connotations often associated with the former, offering a more geographically accurate and inclusive classification. Interestingly, the definition of “West Asia” varies depending on the context in which it is used. For instance, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) includes countries such as Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan in its 2015 Industrial Development Yearbook, reflecting their geographic location in the western part of Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union (UNIDO, 2015). However, countries like Turkey and Israel, traditionally associated with the Middle East, are not included in this classification by UNIDO, likely due to their distinct political, economic, and institutional interactions with Europe and the West. This reflects a broader trend of defining regions based on industrial, economic, or geopolitical criteria, rather than purely cultural or historical factors.

In the context of defining the region in the framework of geopolitical and economic aspects, the prominent definition comes from Adam Garfinkle of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, who characterizes the Greater Middle East as a region that extends beyond the traditional Middle East to include the countries of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, as well as the Caucasus and Central Asia (Garfinkle, 1999). This broader definition captures a geographically expansive and interconnected area of nations that share economic, energy, and security concerns, making it a pivotal region in global economic and political discourse. This definition is significant because it highlights how economic dynamics in the region are not confined to the Middle East alone but stretch across multiple regions with growing interdependencies.

Another interpretation of the Greater Middle East in the context of geopolitical dynamics emerged in the early 21st century, often associated with the "New Middle East" concept introduced by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2006 (Al Tamimi, 2013). Rice's vision of a restructured region was characterized by what she called "constructive chaos," which suggested that instability and conflict could serve to realign political forces and foster democratic governance.

While this idea has been widely debated and criticized, it led to the framing of what is known as the "Great Middle East Project." This term was used to describe the U.S. and Western-led efforts to reshape the political dynamics of the region. The concept of the "New Middle East" was intended to replace the earlier and broader "Greater Middle East" term, which had been introduced by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2004, during a G-8 Summit (Wittes, 2004). The Greater Middle East under Bush's vision included not only the traditional Middle Eastern countries but also other Asian countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The "New Middle East" project, however, was marked by instability and met with skepticism as it sought to impose changes through strategic realignment and the use of chaos. As Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya of Global Research notes (Nazemroaya, 2014), the United States and Israel expected Lebanon to be a pivotal pressure point in realigning the entire region, but the result was not as planned. The geopolitical and economic consequences of this vision continue to shape regional policies today, revealing the inherent risks of pursuing instability as a means of political transformation.

Further adding to the complexity, former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski referred to the Greater Middle East as the "Global Balkans," emphasizing its strategic significance as a critical region for Eurasia’s stability and as a geopolitical focal point (Brzezinski, 1998). Brzezinski highlighted the "political awakening" in the region, suggesting that these changes signal a shift toward a multipolar world order that is reshaping the global balance of power. This evolution in the region offers new opportunities and challenges for countries like Armenia, which may need to rethink its foreign economic policy.

In conclusion, the concept of the Greater Middle East remains fluid and contested, shaped by historical, geopolitical, and cultural factors that complicate its precise definition. While frameworks like MENA and the "Greater Middle East" initiative highlight the region's strategic importance, they also reveal significant gaps in capturing its diversity, particularly regarding countries like Turkey, Israel, and Iran. Understanding these complexities is crucial for crafting effective foreign policies and addressing the region's interconnected challenges in security, economics, and diplomacy.

National self-perception within regional contexts: motivations and strategic visions

In addition to external actors in world politics and economics, it is also important to consider the self-determination of regional players in the context of the vision of the borders of the Greater Middle East region, since it is this aspect that will allow us to better understand the motivation for the actions and strategic plans of these countries.

For Iran, the Greater Middle East is not only a geopolitical space but also a key arena for the implementation of cultural, strategic, and ideological goals. In this context, Iran seeks to strengthen its influence in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf, considering them as important elements of its strategy. Iran actively supports various political and armed groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis, not only to strengthen its regional power but also to position itself as a leader of resistance to Western interference and Israeli expansion. Iran also views Afghanistan as an important part of its geopolitical influence, especially given its ethnic and cultural ties with the Tajiks and other Shia groups, which allows it to strengthen its presence in Central Asia. Iran’s influence also extends to Pakistan, where the country maintains close relations with the Shia minority and is involved in a strategic partnership with Pakistani military and political forces. Iran thus sees the region as a space where its ideological and cultural affinity with its neighboring Muslim countries allows it not only to expand its influence but also to counter strategic competitors such as the United States and Israel (Akbarzadeh & Azizi, 2024).

Saudi Arabia sees the Greater Middle East as a key arena for its strategic influence and development. As part of Vision 2030, the country seeks to strengthen its position as an economic and political leader in the region by diversifying its economy, reducing its dependence on oil, and developing high-tech industries. Saudi Arabia is actively working to improve relations with neighboring countries, including Iran and Qatar, in order to stabilize the region. At the same time, it continues to maintain its traditional leadership in the Islamic world, actively participating in Arab and Muslim issues. The country also sees itself as a mediator in regional conflicts, seeking to act as a peacemaker, for example, in the conflict in Yemen and the negotiations on Sudan. However, Saudi Arabia faces challenges such as the need to balance its interests with the UAE, as well as tensions with Iran, which leaves open the question of the future stability and security of the region (Jakobs, 2023).

For Turkey, the Greater Middle East is seen as a natural area of influence, which is due to the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire. This perspective extends beyond the traditional Middle East, including the Balkans, with Turkey positioning itself as a central power capable of promoting peacemaking in the region. Recent reconciliation efforts with countries such as Syria, Egypt, the UAE, Israel, and Saudi Arabia reflect Turkey's desire to reassert its influence and stabilize the region, which is important for both its national interests and its broader geopolitical strategy. For Turkey, the Middle East remains a vital sphere of influence, and the country seeks to reassert its leadership role as it did during the Ottoman Empire. Turkey also views Pakistan as part of the region, given its strategic location vis-à-vis Iran, as well as shared security and counter-extremism interests. Turkey actively pursues ties with Pakistan, viewing it as an important partner in the context of regional security and geopolitical balances. Turkey also includes the Central Asian countries in its sphere of influence, as these states are of Turkic origin and share cultural and historical ties. Engaging with these countries, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, allows Turkey to strengthen its role as an important player in the Eurasian region and develop cooperation in various areas, from economics to security (Çevik, 2024).

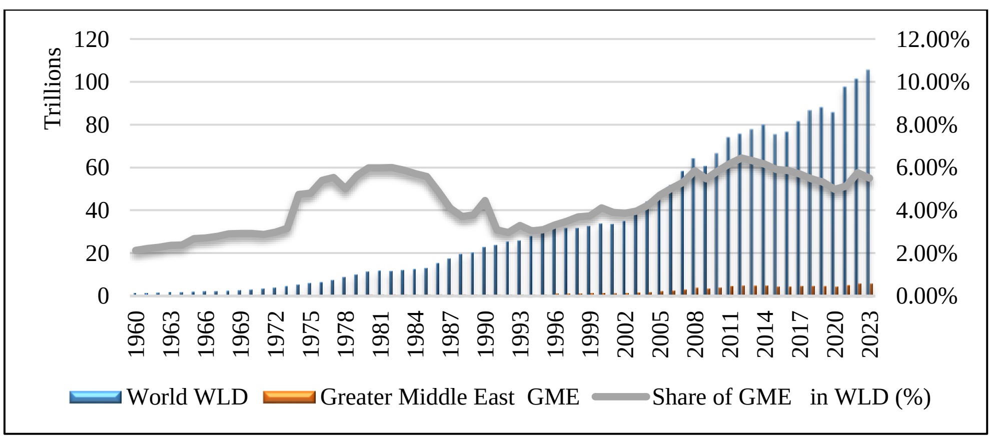
For Israel, the Greater Middle East is primarily defined by security issues and the changing forces in the region. Israel views the region as a place filled with existential threats, especially from Iran and its allies. The focus is on securing borders, countering Iranian expansion, and ensuring regional stability through military power and strategic alliances. Israel sees itself as an important player in reshaping the region, especially through cooperation with Sunni Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE to counter common threats. While the Palestinian issue remains important, Israel tends to take a more gradual approach to resolving it. Ultimately, the Middle East for Israel is a region of both challenges and opportunities, where security and military alliances are critical to the country's survival and influence (Yadlin & Golov, 2024)

Thus, it can be argued that the concept of the "Greater Middle East" remains ambiguous and polysemantic, as its perception varies depending on the approaches of international organizations, academic circles, and individual regional players. In the context of international politics, for example, the United States and the European Union often view this term as an area covering the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, while countries such as Iran, Turkey, and the Arab states may interpret it in a narrower or, conversely, broader sense. This leads to the fact that there are many versions and interpretations of this concept, each of which carries historical, cultural, and political connotations. The basis for understanding this region is most often a Eurocentric concept, which is based on the geopolitical interests of the West and its ideas about the strategic importance of these territories. Such a concept, to a certain extent, limits the perception of the region, not considering, for example, the influence of Asian and Central Asian countries, as well as the role of religious and cultural ties that exist between the states of the region and its neighbors. In this study, a more extensive definition of the "Greater Middle East" will be used, which includes not only the traditional Middle East but also the countries of North Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Cyprus, and Israel. This definition is based on a combination of geographical, cultural, political, and religious factors, which allows for a more complete consideration of the interaction and interdependence of various actors in the region. This approach allows not only to expand the boundaries of the region but also to identify new mechanisms and drivers of its development, which play a key role in modern geopolitical processes.

Economies of the countries of the Greater Middle East

The Greater Middle East has increasingly become a crucial player in the global economy. Its economic importance has grown significantly over recent decades, which is evident from its rising share of global GDP. In 1960, the region accounted for just 2.13% of the world's total GDP. By 2023, however, this share had increased to 5.5% (Figure 1), marking a substantial growth of 3.37 percentage points over the course of more than 60 years. This increase reflects the growing integration of the Greater Middle East into global economic frameworks and its expanding role in global trade, finance, and resource markets. The driving force behind this economic expansion has been primarily the region's rich natural resources, particularly oil and gas, which have historically played a dominant role in shaping its economic landscape. Oil-exporting countries within the Middle East have witnessed substantial economic growth, with revenues from energy exports fueling infrastructure development, industrialization, and diversification efforts.

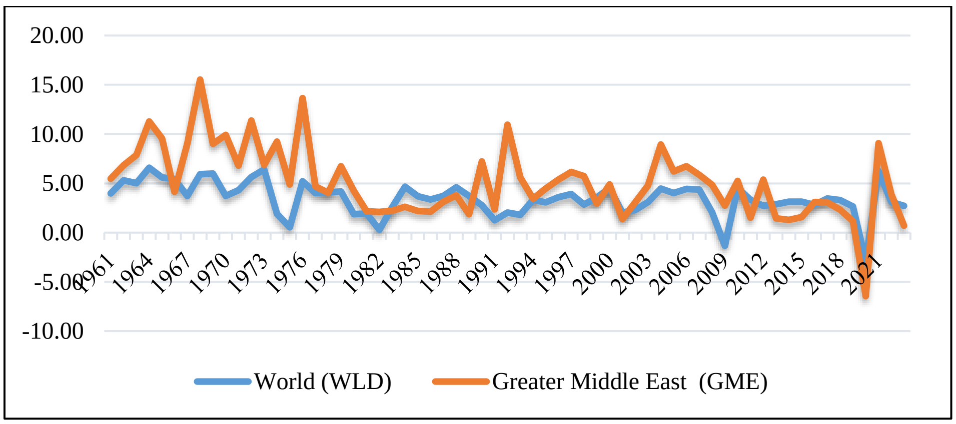
Figure 1. GDP of the world and Greater Middle East countries (Trillions USD) and share of Greater Middle East countries in World GDP (%), 1960-2023 (World Bank Open Data)



The average economic growth of the Greater Middle East region from 1961 to 2023 has consistently outpaced the global average, reflecting the region's growing influence in the world economy (Figure 2).

Over the past six decades, the region has experienced significant economic expansion, largely driven by its vast energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas. The revenue generated from oil exports has been a primary engine of growth, propelling the economies of key players like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and others in the region. This growth has allowed the region to increase its contribution to global GDP, as discussed earlier. However, this growth trajectory is not without its challenges. The heavy reliance on oil production has created a structural vulnerability in the region's economy. While oil has been the driving force behind economic expansion, it has also made the region susceptible to fluctuations in global oil prices. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 exposed these vulnerabilities, as the region's economic decline was sharper than the global average. In many countries, the pandemic led to significant disruptions in trade, a slowdown in demand for oil, and a sharp drop in oil prices, all of which severely impacted the region's economic performance.

Figure 2. World's and Greater Middle East countries' average economic growth (%), 1961-2023 (World Bank Open Data)



Despite the noticeable changes in the share of GDP of the GME countries in the world economy, it is necessary to note the different levels of contribution of individual regions. One of the drivers of economic development of most countries in the region has become the raw material base (oil and gas), but the division of countries on this basis into 2 groups, oil exporters and non-exporters, is not acceptable since it does not consider the political system, cultural, historical, and religious characteristics of the countries. Therefore, it is important to analyze the total contribution of countries grouped by regions based on the stated principles.

GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council)

The Arab Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain) play a key role in the economy of the Greater Middle East and have a formed economic and political union in the person of the GCC. Their share in the region's GDP began to grow in the 1970s thanks to the oil boom, which allowed them to become global economic centers. The gradual diversification of their economies through infrastructure, finance, tourism and technology has allowed the Gulf countries to strengthen their positions. Today, they are the region's main investment donors and trade hubs, playing a leading role in global energy markets and economic development.

Mashreq (Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq)

The Mashreq economies, despite their historical and cultural importance, are experiencing structural difficulties. Conflicts, political instability and a lack of reforms have led to a decline in their share of regional GDP. Iraq remains an important player due to its oil resources, but its economy is vulnerable to instability. Egypt, the region's largest economy, has shown slow but steady growth due to investment in infrastructure and industry. Overall, the Mashreq remains a vulnerable link requiring reforms to stabilize the economy.

Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya)

The Maghreb countries also have an economic and political union, the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), and occupy a moderate position in the regional economy. Algeria and Libya rely on oil and gas exports, which makes them dependent on world energy prices. At the same time, Morocco and Tunisia are developing agriculture, tourism, and industry. Despite its potential, the Maghreb faces problems of regional integration, political instability, internal disagreements (e.g., the Western Sahara issue from the point of view of Morocco and Algeria), and economic difficulties. Reform and cooperation can make the region more competitive, using its geographical location as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East.

Turkey

Turkey is one of the leading economies of the Greater Middle East, occupying a stable and growing share of GDP. Its strategic location and industrial base allow it to serve as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. The country is actively investing in infrastructure, export-oriented industries and technology. Turkey is also increasing its geopolitical influence, which emphasizes its role as a regional leader. Turkey's economic resilience confirms its ability to maintain stable growth even in the face of external challenges. Iran Iran's economic potential remains untapped due to sanctions and internal problems. With rich oil and gas reserves, the country could play a key role in the regional economy, but its share in the region's GDP remains stable but low. Restrictions on trade and investment are holding back growth, making the economy dependent on domestic resources. The lifting of sanctions and reforms will allow Iran to regain its position and join global markets, which will affect the economic structure of the entire region.

Israel

Israel has demonstrated rapid growth in economic share due to its focus on high technology and innovation. Despite its small size and complex geopolitical environment, the country is a leader in scientific and technological development in the region. Innovative industries such as information technology, the defense industry, and aggrotech provide Israel with stable growth and global competitiveness. Israel serves as an example of how investment in science and knowledge can become the basis for economic success.

Cyprus

Cyprus plays a minor role in the regional economy due to the small size of its economy. The country focuses on tourism, shipping, and financial services, taking advantage of its strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, its contribution to the GDP of the Greater Middle East remains small and stable. Cyprus maintains its role as a trade and financial hub, providing a link between Europe and the Middle East.

Other regions (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Yemen)

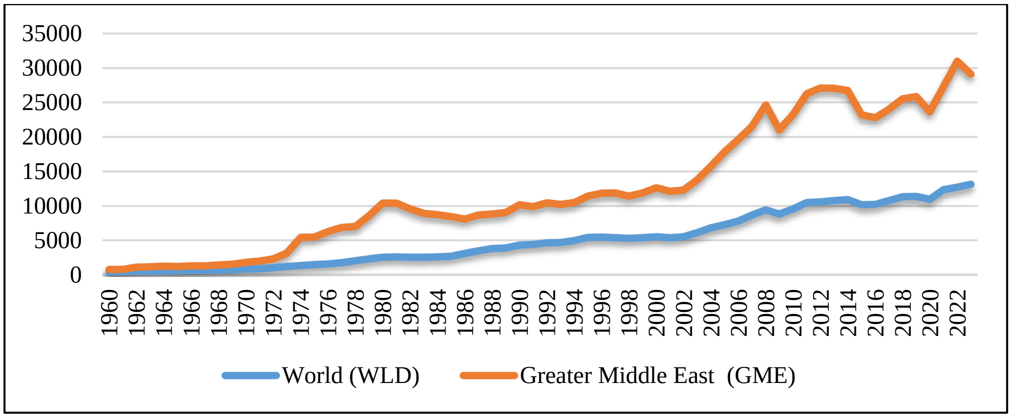
The economies of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Yemen have the smallest share of the region's GDP. These countries face military conflicts, political instability, poverty, and weak economic bases. Pakistan, for example, has potential due to its strategic location and population size but faces economic crises and a lack of investment. Afghanistan suffers from chronic instability and reliance on international aid. Sudan and Yemen suffer from protracted wars and economic collapse, making them the least developed regions. These countries remain peripheral players, unable to realize their potential without significant reforms, stabilization, and international support.

The economic structure of the Greater Middle East is characterized by a significant concentration of growth in the GCC countries, Turkey, and Israel. At the same time, the Maghreb, Mashreq, Iran, and the “other region” countries face structural development problems and political instability. Key trends include:

- The economic dominance of the GCC, secured by resource wealth and diversification.
- The successful modernization of Turkey and the innovative development of Israel.
- Iran's limited potential and the economic difficulties of the Mashreq and Maghreb.
- Marginalization of peripheral countries such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Sudan.

Another important indicator of the region's economic performance is GDP per capita. The average GDP per capita in the Greater Middle East has demonstrated a remarkable upward trajectory over the past several decades, reflecting the region's growing economic importance. In 1960, the average GDP per capita in the region was approximately 328.47 USD, while the global average stood at 450 USD. This suggests that, in the early years, the region's wealth was significantly lower than the global average. However, by 2023, the situation had dramatically changed. The region’s average GDP per capita had risen to 15,546.42 USD, while the global average reached 13,138.33 USD (Figure 3).

Figure 3. GDP per capita (USD), average of the world and average of the Greater Middle East Countries, 1960-2023 (World Bank Open Data)



This substantial increase of more than 15 times over the period, far outpacing the global average, highlights the significant economic growth that has occurred in the region, largely driven by the oil and gas sector. Oil wealth, alongside efforts to diversify economies into sectors such as finance, construction, tourism, and services, has propelled the region's rise in economic stature. Despite this impressive growth, it is crucial to acknowledge the disparity within the region itself. While countries like Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE have seen their GDP per capita soar, placing them among the highest in the world, other countries in the region, especially those affected by conflict or political instability, still lag. For example, nations such as Yemen and Iraq continue to struggle with lower GDP per capita levels, impacted by ongoing unrest, conflict, and underdeveloped infrastructures. The increase in GDP per capita within the Greater Middle East region signifies not only the wealth generated by oil exports but also the effects of diversification efforts and modernization initiatives. However, it also points to the uneven distribution of wealth, as the region's prosperity is concentrated in a few key nations, raising important questions about the need for policies that promote broader economic growth and stability.

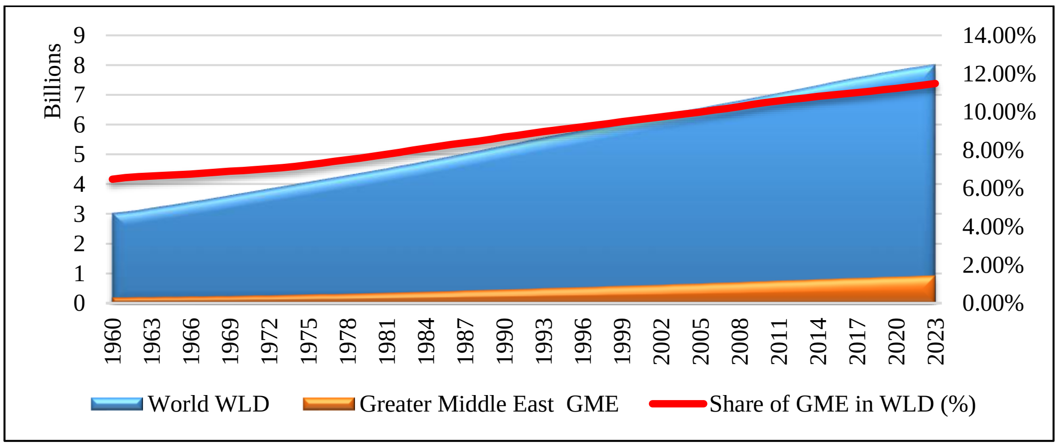
The presented data shows how uneven the level of economic development is in the countries of the Greater Middle East. The leader in GDP per capita in 2022 is Qatar with an impressive figure of 87,480.4 USD, which is almost 7 times higher than the world average (12,730.2 USD). This success is explained by huge revenues from oil and gas, a small population, and efficient resource management. Qatar is followed by the Gulf countries such as the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain. Their economic position is also based on resources and active diversification of economies. Among the countries outside the GCC, Israel and Cyprus stand out. Israel shows a high level due to advanced technologies, the export of knowledge-intensive products, and attracting foreign investment. Cyprus, taking advantage of its status as an EU member, relies on tourism and the service sector, which helps maintain income at a fairly high level. Turkey occupies a special place. Even though its economy remains one of the largest in the region, the level of GDP per capita is still slightly below the world average. This is due to domestic economic problems: high inflation, the devaluation of the lira, and an unstable political situation. However, thanks to its strong industry and advantageous geographic location, Turkey still has potential for growth. In comparison, the rest of the region lags significantly behind. The countries of North Africa—Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, as well as the Mashreq states, including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq—are experiencing serious economic difficulties. The situation is even more difficult in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Sudan, where GDP per capita figures are extremely low. The reasons are obvious: wars, political instability, weak economic diversification, high dependence on agriculture, poor infrastructure, and rapid population growth. All this seriously hinders their development. Thus, a clear pattern can be seen in the grouping of countries in the region by GDP per capita. The Gulf States remain the leaders, with their success largely based on their rich natural resources and active diversification of their economies. They are joined by Israel and Cyprus, which demonstrate sustainable development thanks to technological progress and integration into global markets. Turkey occupies an intermediate position, remaining below the global average but retaining the potential for growth due to industry and trade. At the same time, the countries of North Africa, the Mashreq, as well as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sudan are at the opposite pole, where economic indicators remain low due to structural problems, political instability, and limited resources. These differences emphasize that the economic position of the countries of the region is determined by their natural resources, political stability, and successful integration into global economic processes.

Demographic aspect of differences within the region

Another important indicator of economic opportunity is the demographic landscape. A region's population size, growth rate, age distribution, and urbanization trends play a crucial role in shaping its economic potential. Youthful and growing populations, in particular, create opportunities for workforce expansion, innovation, and consumer market development. The demographic trajectory of the Greater Middle East over the last six decades illustrates the region's rising significance in the global context. Between 1960 and 2023, the region's share of the global population increased markedly from 6.48% to 11.48% (Figure 4). This growth underscores a profound shift in the region's demographic weight, with far-reaching economic implications. The substantial population growth presents opportunities to capitalize on an expanding consumer market, positioning the region as an attractive destination for investment in sectors such as technology, healthcare, education, and consumer goods. Urbanization accompanying this growth drives demand for infrastructure development, creating additional avenues for economic engagement. Moreover, the region's enlarging labor force provides a comparative advantage in industries requiring abundant manpower, with the potential to transition into higher-value sectors through investments in education and workforce development.

However, demographic expansion also poses challenges. Rapid population growth necessitates increased investment in social infrastructure, including education, healthcare, and housing, to sustain equitable development. Structural issues, such as disparities in economic development across countries in the region and rising unemployment rates in certain areas, highlight the need for robust labor market policies and governance reforms. In addition to economic implications, the demographic shift enhances the region's geopolitical influence. A larger population base increases its representation and bargaining power in international forums, enabling greater participation in shaping global trade and political alliances.

Figure 4. World and the Greater Middle East countries' population (billions of people) and share of GME in world population (%), 1960-2023 (World Bank Open Data)



The population of the Greater Middle East is distributed extremely unevenly, creating significant demographic and economic differences between countries. Several groups of countries can be distinguished by population size. Sparsely populated countries with populations of up to 5 million people include Cyprus, Mauritania, Palestine, and Lebanon, as well as Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain. Medium-populated countries with populations of 6 to 20 million people include the UAE, Israel, Jordan, Tunisia, and Libya. Countries with populations of 21 to 50 million people include Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Morocco, Afghanistan, Iraq, Algeria, and Sudan. Large countries with populations of over 50 million people include Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. The share of sparsely populated countries in the total population of the region is 3.2%, medium-populated countries - 5.4%, countries with a population of 21 to 50 million people - 34.1%, and large countries - 57.3%. This distribution demonstrates significant differences in the scale of demographic potential, which directly affects the economic role of countries in the region. At the same time, the dynamics of population growth are also uneven. Some countries, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Egypt, demonstrate growth due to high natural increase. At the same time, the

Gulf states are actively increasing their population due to the influx of migrants. The structure of migration flows in the region varies: from Pakistan, Egypt, and Afghanistan, mainly low-skilled labor comes to the Gulf countries, while highly skilled specialists are sent to the same countries from Lebanon and Jordan. Refugees from Syria and Palestine most often find refuge in Turkey, which becomes a transit point on the way to the European Union. Thus, the region's population not only varies in size but is also subject to different growth factors, which shape its economic and social dynamics.

An analysis of population density dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa since 1960 reveals significant differences between regions with high population density and areas with low population density, due to both natural-geographical and socio-economic factors. This heterogeneity is particularly noticeable when comparing countries with large but sparsely populated desert areas and states where limited territorial resources are combined with rapid demographic growth and urbanization processes. Countries with low population density, such as Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria, and Oman, are characterized by the presence of large territories, most of which are desert or semi-desert zones, which limits the possibilities for settlement and economic activity. In these countries, the population is concentrated in certain, more favorable regions for life, such as coastal zones, oases, or large cities. Nevertheless, even in conditions of relatively low density, population growth has been observed in recent decades, which in the future may increase pressure on resources and infrastructure. At the same time, countries with smaller territories and historically high population concentrations show a steady trend towards further growth in density, due to the population boom of the 20th century and active urbanization processes. Notable examples are Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories, where population density reaches extremely high values. In Egypt, the population is traditionally concentrated in the Nile Valley and Delta, which leads to significant pressure on these areas in the context of continuing population growth. In Lebanon, high population concentrations are characteristic of urbanized regions such as Beirut and its suburbs, where migration and urbanization processes exacerbate the uneven distribution of resources. Israel and the Palestinian Territories, especially the Gaza Strip, are among the most densely populated areas in the world, which creates significant socio-economic and political challenges, aggravated by limited land resources and demographic growth. The Maghreb countries, including Tunisia and Morocco, show a similar trend: despite the presence of large unpopulated areas, population density increases significantly in coastal and economically developed areas as a result of internal migration and rapid urban growth. This contrasts with neighboring Algeria and Libya, where large areas remain underdeveloped despite overall population growth. Of particular note are the resource-rich Gulf States, such as the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait, where population density growth is due not only to natural growth but also to a significant influx of labor migrants against the backdrop of economic growth and urbanization. These processes are contributing to the formation of new demographic structures characterized by high population concentrations in certain urban centers. Thus, the dynamics of population density in the region since 1960 reflect profound socioeconomic and demographic transformations that intensify the contrast between densely populated and sparsely populated areas. High population density in countries with limited land resources and intensive urbanization creates significant challenges related to resource management, infrastructure development, and ecological balance. In contrast, countries with low population density face the need to effectively develop their territory and create conditions for sustainable growth. These trends require a comprehensive approach to solving emerging problems and long-term planning aimed at balanced development of the region.

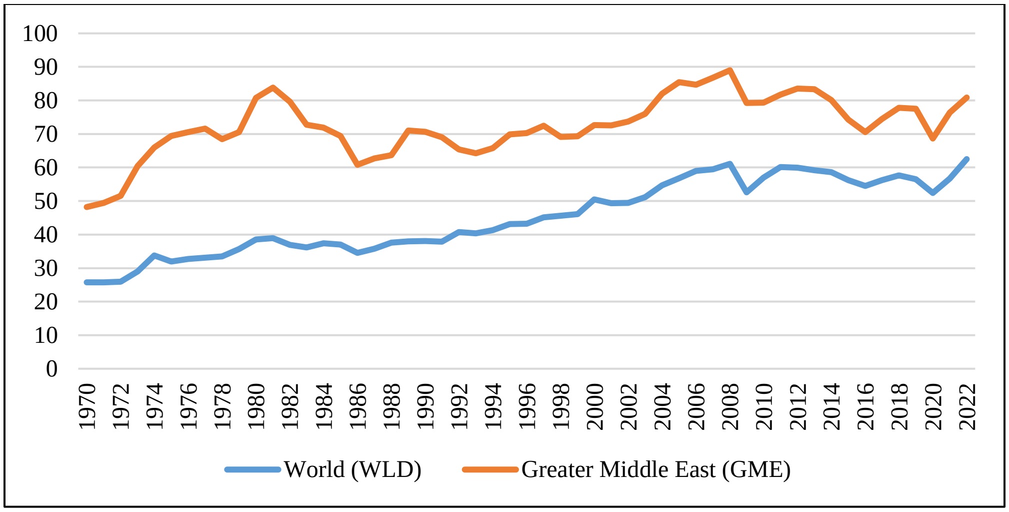
Migration processes play a key role in shaping the socio-economic and political landscape of the region. These processes can be divided into several types: emigration from the countries of the region, labor migration, internal migration, and the movement of refugees through transit countries. North Africa has traditionally been one of the major migrant-donor regions, with a noticeable population flow to Europe and the GCC countries. For example, Saudi Arabia, where about a million Egyptians lived in 2020, is an important migration destination. At the same time, countries such as Egypt receive huge volumes of international remittances, which have become even more significant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Labor migration remains a key aspect, especially in the GCC countries. States such as the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar, where the share of migrants in the total population is 70-80%, are significantly dependent on foreign labor in construction, services, and other sectors. This creates complex migration challenges related to the protection of migrants' rights, especially in the context of these countries' increasing role on the global stage. Particular attention should be paid to internal migration processes and displacement within the region. For example, a significant number of Egyptians are resettled in other countries in North Africa and the Middle East, including internal displacement caused by socio-economic crises or climate change. For example, in the context of Palestinian migration, many displaced persons have found refuge in Egypt. Climate change also has a significant impact on migration in the region, although there are differences in the approaches of countries. Poorer states such as Libya, Algeria, and Morocco face a lack of resources to adapt to climate change, which is already leading to internal displacement caused by droughts and wildfires. In contrast, GCC countries are actively investing in infrastructure and climate change adaptation projects. Such differences in approaches create an additional incentive for migration to the Gulf countries, in addition to traditional labor migration. Against this background, similar interaction between the countries of the region can be identified, which allows them to be divided into groups. The GCC countries play the role of the main migration centers-recipients, while North Africa, the countries of the Fertile Crescent, Afghanistan, and Pakistan remain large donors of labor and refugees. Egypt, Morocco, and other countries of North Africa and Turkey also play the role of transit points through which migrants and refugees move to Europe or the Gulf countries.

The demographic dynamics of the Greater Middle East play a pivotal role in shaping regional and subregional development patterns. The rapid population growth and urbanization trends present both opportunities for economic growth, such as expanding labor forces and consumer markets, and challenges, including the need for substantial investments in infrastructure and social services. Moreover, the uneven distribution of populations across the region, with varying levels of urbanization and development, underscores the complexity of addressing socioeconomic disparities. Migration patterns, influenced by labor demands and geopolitical factors, further complicate the region’s development dynamics, highlighting the need for nuanced policies to manage these demographic shifts and promote sustainable regional growth.

Trade and logistics

Another crucial indicator of economic opportunity is the trade dynamics. The patterns of imports and exports, along with trade partnerships, reflect a region's economic connectivity and growth prospects. Strong trade relations with diverse markets can open up new avenues for investment and development, while dependency on limited markets or products can expose vulnerabilities. Additionally, trade policies, logistical infrastructure, and the ability to adapt to global market trends play a vital role in determining the region's potential for economic expansion. Thus, understanding the trade landscape is essential for identifying opportunities for growth and diversification. Trade as a percentage of GDP is a crucial indicator for understanding the economic importance of a region, as it reflects the extent to which a country or region is integrated into the global economy through trade activities. In the case of the Greater Middle East, the growing share of trade in GDP highlights the region's increasing reliance on and contribution to international trade networks. In 1970, the average trade-to-GDP ratio in the Greater Middle East stood at 48.2%, a figure already indicative of substantial trade activity. By 2022, this ratio had risen to 80.9% (Figure 5), underscoring a significant expansion in the region’s trade volume relative to its economic output. This growth demonstrates not only the region's enhanced role in global trade but also its diversification into various economic sectors, including energy, manufacturing, and services.

Figure 5. Trade (% of GDP), average of the world and average of the Greater Middle East, 1970-2022 (World Bank Open Data)



Moreover, the trade-to-GDP ratio in the Greater Middle East has increased at a faster pace than the global average over the same period. This trend signifies the region's growing importance as a trade hub and its strategic position in global supply chains. Factors such as abundant natural resources, investments in infrastructure, and proactive trade agreements have contributed to this remarkable growth. The rapid development of ports, free zones, and logistical corridors has further solidified the region's status as a critical nexus for global commerce. Understanding the trade-to-GDP ratio is essential for grasping the economic dynamics of the Greater Middle East. A high and growing ratio suggests an open economy that is well-positioned to leverage globalization for economic growth. It also highlights the interdependence of the region's economies with global markets, making trade a vital component of their economic resilience and development. Consequently, the rising trade-to-GDP ratio in the Greater Middle East underscores its expanding economic influence and underscores the necessity for strategies to enhance cooperation with this pivotal region.

In the context of export and import, it's important to also consider the effects of logistical systems and initiatives of the region. The Greater Middle East plays a key role in global logistics due to its strategic location connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa. It is therefore worth noting that logistics routes are developing in both a regional and international context. Regional logistics routes include seaports, railways, pipelines, and air corridors, ensuring the transportation of goods both within the region and beyond. Within the region, transport hubs are actively developing. For example, Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are implementing multimodal hub projects combining seaports, airports, and land routes. Oil and gas pipelines play a significant role, connecting key exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE. Egypt is a key hub due to the Suez Canal, which remains one of the main routes for trade between Europe and Asia. Turkey connects Eastern Europe and the Caucasus with the Middle East, actively developing rail and road routes. The region is also integrated into global logistics chains. The Suez Canal carries up to 12% of global cargo turnover, linking the Mediterranean and Red Seas. Key routes of the Belt and Road Initiative, which connect China and Europe, pass through the countries of the region. Turkey plays an important role in the Middle Corridor, which links Central Asia and Europe. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which links India, Iran, Russia, and Europe, is becoming increasingly important. Iran provides access to the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, making it an important link in this chain. The region's logistics also depend on the migration of goods and services between the Gulf countries and South Asia. India, Oman, and the UAE are actively developing sea and air corridors for the mutual exchange of products. However, the region's logistics face challenges, including political instability, military conflicts, and sanctions. These factors put pressure on the sustainability of routes, but the countries of the region are actively investing in infrastructure modernization to strengthen their positions in the global logistics system. Thus, the logistics routes of the Greater Middle East provide important links both within the region and with external markets, highlighting its role as a global transport hub.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the entire analysis, it should be noted that despite the fact that the Greater Middle East region has registered high rates of economic growth both in terms of the entire economy and in terms of GDP per capita, the region's economic development is uneven: on the one hand, this is due to the issue of development sources, since a number of countries in the region have the opportunity to develop through energy exports, while others do not have such an opportunity, and on the other hand, it is also due to the structure of these economies and their foreign economic cooperation within the region. It is important to note that the GDP per capita indicator is also affected by the population level in the countries of the region, which in turn is distributed extremely unevenly: in some countries, both the population and the population density are extremely high, while in others there is a decline.

It is also important to note the perception of the region as an integral actor in foreign policy and economic processes. External players, both countries and international organizations, such as the UN and its structures, perceive the region differently, depending on the goals and visions of these players. If the UN structures the involvement of these countries in certain global processes, such as the fight against HIV or poverty, is important, then for individual world players the issue is more about plans for geopolitical influence and questions of choosing mechanisms for establishing relations with these countries.

In the context of self-perception of the countries of the Greater Middle East region as an integral region, it is also necessary to note significant differences: based on the level of development, political plans and strategies, as well as geographical location and cultural and religious aspects, countries within the region see the borders of the region differently.

Thus, it can be established that the Greater Middle East region is extremely heterogeneous in terms of the level of development, volumes and rates of population change, foreign economic relations and involvement in integration processes. In this context, studying the entire region within the framework of common metrics and methods may not give the desired result: both in the context of academic research and practical development of foreign policy, it is important to consider sub-regional processes and developments for a more effective understanding of this region.

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