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## GEOPOLITICAL PARADIGMS FROM THE TWENTIETH TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE IMPLICATIONS OF SYKES-PICOT AND THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST PROJECT FOR SOVEREIGNTY, BORDERS, AND STATE-BUILDING

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### Abstract:

The Sykes-Picot Agreement, established in the early twentieth century, and the Greater Middle East Project, a geopolitical transformation initiative of the twenty-first century, have permanently influenced sovereignty understandings, border-drawing practices, and state-building processes in the Middle Eastern geography. This research comparatively examines the effects of these two geopolitical paradigms on the concepts of sovereignty, borders, and state-building. The central research question focuses on the mechanisms through which these paradigms shaped regional states' foreign policy capacities, security strategies, and alliance preferences. The research hypothesis suggests that despite employing different tools and discourses, both initiatives share a similar interventionist logic that limits the sovereignty capacity of regional states. The study adopts a qualitative research design and operates within the conceptual framework of critical geopolitics theory. Data were collected through historical institutionalism, discourse analysis, and comparative foreign policy examination methods, and interpreted using thematic analysis technique. Research findings reveal that the Sykes-Picot order established the foundation of regional instability by creating artificial borders and fragmented sovereignty structures. The Greater Middle East Project, while attempting legitimization through democratization and reform discourses, produced outcomes that further weakened state capacity in practice. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in demonstrating that critical geopolitics perspective provides a functional framework for understanding Middle Eastern state-building processes. Both paradigms redefined the concept of sovereignty along the axis of global power balances by excluding local dynamics. Findings demonstrate that geopolitical engineering initiatives permanently shape regional orders and constitute structural determinants of foreign policy behaviors. At the policy level, the research emphasizes that achieving regional stability requires strengthening local actors and eliminating external impositions. The conclusion drawn is that internally constructed orders, rather than externally imposed ones, can provide sustainable stability. The study offers original contribution to Middle East geopolitics literature by presenting an analytical model centered on foreign policy regarding the continuity-rupture relationship between twentieth and twenty-first century geopolitical paradigms.

### Keywords:

*Geopolitical Paradigms, Sykes-Picot, Greater Middle East Project, Sovereignty, State-Building.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The temporal interval extending from the early twentieth century to the first quarter of the twenty-first century emerges as an epoch characterized by pronounced ruptures in the geopolitical paradigm of the international system. As two critical junctures of this transformation, the Sykes–Picot Agreement (1916) and the discourse and implementation of the Greater Middle East Project have profoundly shaped the foreign policy, state-building practices, sovereignty norms, and border perceptions of the Middle East (Fawcett, 2023; Fromkin, 1989; Khalidi, 2004). These two geopolitical engineering initiatives signified not merely the redrawing of regional boundaries but also the external determination of sovereignty conceptions and state structures (Mohamedou, 2021; Anderson, 1991; Zaum, 2007). Both initiatives engendered structural conditions that have determined the national identities, security perceptions, and foreign policy priorities of regional states (Gelvin, 2023; Ayoob, 1995; Buzan and Wæver, 2003). This introductory section of the study delineates the general orientation of the research by analyzing the historical context, political ramifications, and conceptual dimensions of these two exemplars of geopolitical engineering.

The significance of this subject derives from the fact that the state order established in the Middle East since 1916 has been determinative not only historically but also in terms of contemporary policy formulation. Contemporary Middle Eastern foreign policy is fundamentally undergirded by the fragilities of the post-Sykes–Picot order, which manifests itself in structural problems such as identity conflicts, transboundary security threats, the fragmentation of state authority, and great power competition (Gelvin, 2023; Hinnebusch, 2003; Korany and Dessouki, 2008). The sovereignty impasses, legitimacy crises, and border disputes that regional states confront today have constituted the foundation of political instability persisting for over a century (Çiçek & Gerim, 2024; Migdal, 1988; Owen, 2004). In particular, the vulnerabilities observable in the foreign policy preferences of states such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan are direct consequences of the artificial state structures engendered by Sykes–Picot (Mohamedou, 2021; Antonius, 1938; Hourani, 1991). Consequently, the fundamental objective of this study is to examine the nature of continuity and rupture between the twenty-first century's Greater Middle East Project vision and the twentieth century's Sykes–Picot paradigm, particularly along the axes of sovereignty, borders, and state-building.

From a foreign policy perspective, the comparison of Sykes–Picot and the Greater Middle East Project constitutes not merely a historical analysis but is also of critical importance for comprehending the regional preferences, alliances, security strategies, and crisis management practices of contemporary actors (Fawcett, 2023; Halliday, 2005; Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014). Both arrangements have directly influenced the national interest definitions, threat perceptions, and balance of power policies of regional states (Kardaş & Aras, 2024; Mearsheimer, 2001; Walt, 1987). Whereas foreign policy behaviors of regional states in the post-Sykes–Picot period were largely shaped by independence struggles against colonial powers and reflexes to preserve territorial integrity, diverse responses to United States liberal interventionism have emerged following the Greater Middle East Project (Ahram, 2020; Bacevich, 2008; Gerges, 2012). These two arrangements have directly shaped the threat perceptions and power projection modalities evident in the foreign policy behaviors of regional states.

To comprehend the relationship between Sykes–Picot and the Greater Middle East Project, the concept of geopolitical paradigm must first be elucidated. A geopolitical paradigm

constitutes a conceptual framework that expresses the determinative role of geography in the distribution of political power and demonstrates by which actors, through which instruments, and for which purposes regional orders are configured (Tuathail, 1996; Flint, 2006). Geopolitical paradigms encompass not only military and economic power relations but also discursive practices, legitimation strategies, and identity construction processes (Tuathail and Dalby, 1998; Said, 1978). While Sykes-Picot represents the geopolitical paradigm of colonial imperialism, the Greater Middle East Project reflects an updated form of liberal interventionism (Kardaş & Aras, 2024; Bacevich, 2002; Daalder and Lindsay, 2003). Both paradigms are predicated upon a Western-centric conception of world order and constrain the autonomous preferences of regional societies (Weber, 2021; Said, 1993; Chomsky, 2003).

This study focuses on the following central research question: "Through what mechanisms have the points of continuity and rupture between the geopolitical order established by Sykes-Picot in the twentieth century and the transformation envisaged by the Greater Middle East Project in the twenty-first century affected sovereignty, borders, and state-building processes in the Middle East; and how has this influence shaped the foreign policy capacities, alliance preferences, and security strategies of regional states?" This question acknowledges that regional orders are products not only of power relations but also of normative discourses and the pursuit of legitimacy. The research question takes into account agent-specific preferences and strategic calculations alongside structural factors.

In relation to this question, the hypothesis of the study is formulated as follows: "Sykes-Picot, by generating an externally designed state-building process and an artificial border order along with sovereignty fragmentation in the Middle East, structurally weakened the autonomous foreign policy capacities of regional states; the Greater Middle East Project, in attempting to restructure this fragile configuration under the discourses of democratization, human rights, and good governance, perpetuated the same interventionist geopolitical paradigm in an updated form despite employing different instruments and normative justifications, thereby further eroding the sovereignty capacities of regional states." This hypothesis posits that both initiatives have produced common outcomes such as sovereignty erosion, border ambiguity, and the weakening of state capacity. The testability of the hypothesis can be evaluated through sovereignty capacity indicators (military autonomy, economic independence, diplomatic maneuvering space), border stability criteria, and the effectiveness of state institutions.

This hypothesis is predicated on the assumption that both initiatives, despite emerging in different periods, possess similar foreign policy intervention mechanisms that constrain the sovereignty capacity of regional states. Although the colonial partition logic of Sykes-Picot and the democracy promotion discourse of the Greater Middle East Project appear different in their instruments, they have in their consequences contracted the autonomous decision-making capacity of regional states (Mohamedou, 2021; Bacevich, 2008; Chandrasekaran, 2006). Both processes, by directly intervening in the internal structures, foreign policy preferences, and regional alliance systems of regional states, have diminished the autonomy of local actors and augmented external dependency (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024; Dodge, 2003; Tripp, 2007). Therefore, the research will make sense of the current positions of regional powers by centering the historical continuity-rupture dilemma.

Conceptually, three axes are defined in this study: sovereignty, borders, and state-building. Sovereignty will not be examined solely with reference to the Westphalian system; in the Middle Eastern context, it will be analyzed in conjunction with sub-concepts such as

"fragmented sovereignty," "devolved sovereignty," and "exclusionary sovereignty." These concepts demonstrate that the European-centric understanding of sovereignty operates differently in the region. Fragmented sovereignty refers to situations where state authority is geographically circumscribed; devolved sovereignty denotes processes whereby sovereign prerogatives are transferred to external actors; and exclusionary sovereignty signifies arrangements in which particular social groups are excluded from political participation (Jackson, 1990; Clapham, 1996). This situation demonstrates that the European-centric understanding of sovereignty possesses a different dynamic from its operational modality in the region.

The second concept, borders, will be treated not merely as a geographical line but as an instrument that is "the determinant of political identities and authority relations." The borders drawn with a ruler by Sykes–Picot have constituted the most significant trigger of foreign policy disputes and regional conflicts (Gelvin, 2023; Barakat, 1993; Fieldhouse, 2006). Because these borders were established without consideration of the ethnic, sectarian, and tribal structures of regional societies, they have weakened the legitimacy of state authority and strengthened transboundary identity ties (Wimmer, 2002, 2012). Since borders also determine resource distribution, trade routes, and security perceptions, they have constituted one of the most contested domains of interstate relations (Yapp, 1996; Quataert, 2000). The Greater Middle East Project, in contrast, aimed to construct a new border conception through the relaxation of borders, the formation of micro-statelets, and the proliferation of decentralization models. This new conception envisaged flexible, permeable border regimes shaped by transnational networks rather than classical Westphalian border sovereignty (Agnew, 1994; Appadurai, 1996).

The third concept, state-building, should be understood as a process that emerges through both external interventions and internal dynamics (Fukuyama, 2004; Zaum, 2007). While most regional states following Sykes–Picot were shaped by bureaucratic structures designed externally, state-building during the Greater Middle East Project was reframed through themes of democratization, good governance, and integration into the market economy (Ahram, 2020; Dodge, 2003; Smith, 1994). However, in both processes, state-building experienced legitimacy and sustainability problems because it was based on the designs of external actors rather than societal consensus (Çiçek & Gerim, 2024; Migdal, 1988; Scott, 1998). Although the role of local elites, the participation of the social base, and the consideration of cultural specificities are of critical importance in state-building processes, these factors were disregarded in both paradigms (Tilly, 1990; Gellner, 1983).

The scope of the study, while confined to the Middle Eastern geography, evaluates the regional-level reflections of the foreign policy strategies of global actors such as the United States, United Kingdom, and France, as well as the responses of regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel to the Sykes–Picot and Greater Middle East Project frameworks. The study addresses both structural and agent-specific factors in order to understand the foreign policy behaviors of these actors. While the role of global actors in regional arrangements can be explained through hegemonic stability theory and power transition perspectives, the responses of regional powers can be understood through balance of power policy, bandwagoning strategy, and encirclement scenarios (Jackson, Sørensen & Møller, 2019; Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1987; Kissinger, 1994).

The research examines the relationship between Sykes–Picot and the Greater Middle East Project not as a linear continuity but within a framework of periodic ruptures and



redefinitions. Therefore, the transformation of geopolitical paradigms will be analyzed through hegemonic power relations, energy policies, security doctrines, and identity politics (Kardaş & Aras, 2024; Bromley, 1991; Klare, 2004). The control of energy resources has constituted one of the fundamental motivations underlying geopolitical designs in both periods (Yergin, 1991; Klare, 2008). The petroleum reserves of the Middle East constitute one of the primary factors explaining both the motivation of Britain and France to partition the region through Sykes–Picot and the efforts of the United States to reshape the regional order through the Greater Middle East Project (Yergin, 2020; Yergin, 1991; Klare, 2004). Identity politics, in both periods, has shaped the legitimacy pursuits of states, societal cleavages, and transboundary solidarities (Mabon, 2020; Smith, 1998; Hobsbawm, 1990).

The study evaluates the strategic choices of states in conjunction with the structural dynamics of the international system, particularly foregrounding the determinacy of foreign policy. This approach draws from theoretical frameworks such as realism, liberal institutionalism, and critical geopolitics (Morgenthau, 2005; Keohane and Nye, 2012; Tuathail, 1996). While the realist perspective emphasizes power distribution and the security dilemma, the liberal approach draws attention to the role of institutional arrangements and economic interdependence (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984). Critical geopolitics, on the other hand, reveals the function of discourses and representations in legitimizing geopolitical designs (Tuathail and Dalby, 1998). Whereas the realist approach views Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project as products of great power interest conflicts (Jackson, Sørensen & Møller, 2019), the liberal perspective emphasizes the role of normative values and international institutions (Jackson, Sørensen & Møller, 2019), and the critical approach interrogates the connection of these arrangements with Western-centric knowledge production and power relations (Weber, 2021; Said, 1978; Morgenthau, 2005; Keohane and Nye, 2012).

Sykes-Picot, being a secret agreement that envisaged the post-war partition of the Ottoman Empire, has directly shaped the historical origins of the great majority of modern Middle Eastern states (Gelvin, 2023; Antonius, 1938; Fromkin, 1989). The agreement drew borders by disregarding local dynamics in order to protect British and French interests in the region, and this situation has constituted the foundation of political instability persisting for a century (Fawcett, 2023; Barr, 2011; Rogan, 2009). The clandestine character of the agreement demonstrated that the rights of regional societies to determine their own futures were manifestly violated, and this situation laid the foundation for long-term legitimacy problems (Kayalı, 1997; Gelvin, 2020). In this context, the agreement is accepted as a classical example of the traces that the foreign policy designs of extra-regional powers have left on regional structures.

In contrast, the Greater Middle East Project emerged with the objective of reorganizing the power distribution of the post-Cold War era under United States leadership in a unipolar system (Kardaş & Aras, 2024; Bacevich, 2002; Daalder and Lindsay, 2003). In this respect, although the project has been conducted through discourses of democratization, economic reform, and political transformation, it is generally classified in foreign policy analyses as "a new geopolitical engineering initiative" (Kardaş & Aras, 2024; Gerges, 2012; Khalidi, 2004). The project, particularly following the September 11, 2001 attacks, merged with a security-priority foreign policy understanding and was utilized to legitimize regime change operations in the region (Ahram, 2020; Bacevich, 2008; Mann, 2004). Despite the emphasis on democratization and human rights at the rhetorical level, military intervention and security

logic came to the fore in practical applications (Ahram, 2020; Stiglitz and Bilmes, 2008; Chandrasekaran, 2006).

Both arrangements have produced structural outcomes that determine the foreign policy orientations of the region as much as its internal politics. The alliance preferences, security complexes, and military doctrines of states have been largely shaped following these external intervention processes (Ahram, 2020; Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Lake and Morgan, 1997). While regional states in the post-Sykes-Picot period developed specific foreign policy strategies to manage their relations with colonial powers and preserve their independence (Mohamedou, 2021), they have produced different responses to United States hegemony following the Greater Middle East Project (Kardaş & Aras, 2024; Ayoob, 1995; Halliday, 2005). The formation of regional security complexes is a direct consequence of the state system created by Sykes-Picot (Fawcett, 2023), and the Greater Middle East Project created new security dynamics by attempting to transform these complexes (Kardaş & Aras, 2024; Buzan and Wæver, 2003).

The weakness of state authority since Sykes-Picot, the ethnic-sectarian cleavages created by artificial borders, and the intensification of regional competition have constituted the terrain that facilitated the Greater Middle East Project discourse in the twenty-first century (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024; Makdisi, 2000; Haddad, 2011). This situation provides important analytical insights regarding continuity between the two initiatives. Weak state structures have created an environment susceptible to external intervention and have constrained the autonomous decision-making capacity of regional states (Çiçek & Gerim, 2024; Ayoob, 1995; Migdal, 1988). Sectarian identities became politicized during post-Sykes-Picot state-building processes (Mabon, 2020) and became one of the fundamental dynamics of regional conflicts during the Greater Middle East Project period (Nasirzadeh et al., 2024; Makdisi, 2000; Phillips, 2015).

However, at the same time, the political transformation envisaged by the Greater Middle East Project was influenced by the normative foreign policy understanding of the post-globalization era and sought to create a legitimacy foundation through concepts such as human rights, democracy, and governance (Mohamedou, 2021; Bacevich, 2008; Smith, 1994). In this respect, the project carries the claim of rupture from the overtly colonial paradigm of Sykes-Picot. The expectation that liberal values would spread globally in the post-Cold War period shaped the normative framework of the Greater Middle East Project (Jackson, Sørensen & Møller, 2019; Fukuyama, 2004; Nye, 2004). However, as state-building initiatives resulted in short-term failure in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, the normative framework of the Greater Middle East Project has for the present evolved into a securitized foreign policy in practice (Ahram, 2020; Chandrasekaran, 2006; Dodge, 2003). The short-term appearance of state-building in Iraq resulted in the disregard of local dynamics, the deepening of sectarian cleavages, and the collapse of state institutions; in a manner that would confirm the view of former U.S. Secretary of State Rice that "the maps of 22 countries in the region will change" (Mohamedou, 2021), the groundwork for the formation of at least three statelets in Iraq in the medium term was established, revealing the limits of liberal interventionism (Mohamedou, 2021; Tripp, 2007; Haddad, 2011). This situation supports the explanatory power of the hypothesis.

This introductory section of the study aims to ensure that the analytical focus is maintained on foreign policy alongside the conceptual and historical framework. For initiatives such as Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project are not mere administrative arrangements

but foreign policy projections that fundamentally shape the national interest definitions of regional states (Fawcett, 2023; Korany and Dessouki, 2008; Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014). These initiatives have rendered the identities, interest perceptions, and strategic orientations of regional states dependent on external dynamics (Halliday, 2005; Owen, 2004). From a foreign policy analysis perspective, both initiatives have produced structural outcomes that diminish the autonomy of regional states, augment their external dependencies, and constrain their strategic options (Jönsson and Hall, 2005; Holsti, 1995).

Accordingly, the weakening of the sovereignty concept has increased the openness of regional states to external intervention; this situation has brought to light a dependency relationship that has persisted from Sykes-Picot to the present (Çiçek & Gerim, 2024; Krasner, 1999; Zaum, 2007). Within this framework, the study treats foreign policy as both the cause and consequence of geopolitical engineering processes. While weak sovereignty structures facilitate external intervention, external interventions further weaken sovereignty capacity (Mohamedou, 2021; Ayoob, 1995; Weber, 1995). This cyclical relationship has rendered permanent the structural vulnerabilities of regional states and has strengthened the continuous intervention capacity of external actors (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024; Jackson, 1990; Clapham, 1996).

Similarly, the contestation of borders has caused terrorist organizations, proxy forces, and separatist movements to transform regional foreign policy into a more complex structure (Nasirzadeh et al., 2024; Gerges, 2005; Phillips, 2015). When the developmental process of the Greater Middle East Project merged with multipolar power distribution from 2008 onward, this situation rendered the competition of extra-regional actors more visible (Kardaş & Aras, 2024; Gause, 2010; Hinnebusch, 2003). Transboundary identity ties and proxy wars have rendered the traditional state-centric foreign policy understanding inadequate and necessitated new security conceptions (Nasirzadeh et al., 2024; Buzan and Wæver, 2003). The increasing role of non-state actors has complicated regional security dynamics and diminished the effectiveness of traditional diplomacy instruments (Heydemann & Lynch, 2024; Gelvin, 2011; Lynch, 2012). The proxy wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen demonstrate that borders have become dysfunctional in the post-Greater Middle East Project period and that the intervention capacities of regional actors have increased (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020; Gerges, 2013; Milton-Edwards, 2014).

Thus, through an in-depth examination of the geopolitical continuity-rupture relationship between Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project along three critical concepts—sovereignty, borders, and state-building—the structural foundations of the Middle East's twenty-first century foreign policy behaviors will be elucidated. This examination will constitute not merely a historical retrospective but also an analytical foundation for foreign policy projections concerning the region's future. The study aims to make an original contribution to the literature on Middle Eastern geopolitics by providing theoretical depth, conceptual clarity, and empirical grounding. This contribution will offer new perspectives to ongoing debates in the academic literature while providing a utilizable framework for policy-makers in understanding regional dynamics.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature concerning the transformation of geopolitical paradigms focuses on how shifts in the power distribution of the international system reshape regional orders. Within this framework, the Sykes–Picot Agreement and the Greater Middle East Project are evaluated as

two critical turning points in the spatial, political, and ideological reconfiguration of the Middle East. The literature emphasizes that these two designs differ in both scope and instruments, yet establish relationships of continuity with respect to sovereignty, borders, and state-building (Hinnebusch, 2003; Halliday, 2005). The concept of geopolitical paradigm itself represents a conceptual framework that expresses geography not merely as a physical reality but as a determinative element in the distribution of political power (Tuathail, 1996; Flint, 2006). These paradigms encompass discursive practices, legitimation strategies, and identity construction processes beyond military and economic power relations (Said, 1978; Tuathail, 1996). Regional order theories emphasize that regions, as subunits of the international system, are shaped by their own internal dynamics, and demonstrate that Sykes–Picot represents a regional form in which the territorial order was designed by external powers (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Lake and Morgan, 1997).

Classical studies on Sykes–Picot define the agreement as one of the exemplary texts of imperial geographical engineering (Fromkin, 1989; Barr, 2011). These investigations argue that the 1916 arrangement created artificial borders that obscured ethnic, sectarian, and tribal cleavages (Antonius, 1938; Fieldhouse, 2006). It is emphasized that these borders institutionalized state-formation processes through repressive forms of governance and weakened the political subjectification capacities of regional peoples (Anderson, 1983; Hourani, 1991). Examinations based particularly on British and French archives demonstrate that the strategic territorial control approach of the period was determinative (Barr, 2011; Fieldhouse, 2006). More recent approaches in the literature advance the position that Sykes–Picot should be viewed not merely as an agreement but as an endeavor to establish a durable order. This view, proceeding from the premise that borders are reflections of power balances rather than mere drawings, does not confine the effects of the agreement solely to the colonial context of the early twentieth century (Khalidi, 2004; Yapp, 1996). In debates on state-building and sovereignty, the argument that Sykes–Picot produced multiple crisis-generating effects is particularly prominent (Migdal, 1988; Zaum, 2007). The clandestine character of the agreement demonstrated that the rights of regional societies to determine their own futures were manifestly violated and laid the foundation for long-term legitimacy problems (Kayalı, 1997; Gelvin, 2020).

The literature on the Greater Middle East Project employs a broader international relations theory foundation. These studies indicate that the project is situated on the axis of liberal interventionism and democratic transformation in post-Cold War American foreign policy (Bacevich, 2002, 2005; Daalder and Lindsay, 2003). The security-centered dimension of the project is closely associated with the counter-terrorism paradigm of the post-September 11 period (Gerges, 2012; Brownlee, 2012). A significant portion of analyses advance the position that the project presents a normative framework prioritizing democratization discourse, yet in practice functions as a geopolitical instrument redesigning regional power balances (Bacevich, 2008; Mann, 2004). These findings are evaluated in accordance with transformative foreign policy doctrines of American foreign policy and demonstrate that the project carries not only political but also economic geostrategy (Amineh, 2007; Fawcett, 2023). The objective of creating strategic advantage over energy corridors, pipeline security, and maritime trade routes is among the fundamental motivations of the project (Korkmaz, 2021; Ketenci & Sevenscan, 2021). Despite the emphasis on democratization and human rights at the rhetorical level, military intervention and security logic came to the fore in practical applications (Stiglitz and Bilmes, 2008; Allawi, 2007).



Although the comparative literature on Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project is relatively limited, studies examining the capacity of both arrangements to redefine regional borders at different scales are increasing. These investigations reveal the continuities between twentieth-century colonial border engineering and twenty-first-century liberal interventionism discourse (Halliday, 2005; Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014). In the context of the sovereignty concept, the literature indicates that the threat defined as regional sovereignty fragmentation during the Sykes–Picot period was reproduced through state capacity weakness and failed state phenomena during the Greater Middle East Project period (Krasner, 1999; Fukuyama, 2004). Thus, it is argued that both projects produced similar effects that increased the instability of the modern state form (Paris and Sisk, 2009; Zaum, 2007). In both processes, foreign policy was evaluated as an instrument of external design that constrained the subjectification of regional societies and rendered visible the power asymmetries in the region (Said, 1993; Cox, 1987). Neorealist theory argues that states act according to power distribution in pursuit of survival, and from this perspective, the Sykes–Picot Agreement is interpreted as a spatial manifestation of great power competition for influence over the Middle East (Mearsheimer, 2001; Morgenthau, 2005).

The border studies literature demonstrates that the borders drawn by Sykes–Picot possessed a predominantly map-centered logic, determined by external intervention and failing to reflect the complexity of regional identities (Donnan and Wilson, 1999; Newman, 1999). It is emphasized that because these borders were established without consideration of ethnic, sectarian, and tribal structures, they weakened the legitimacy of state authority and strengthened transboundary identity ties (Wimmer, 2002, 2012). In contrast, during the Greater Middle East Project period, borders were discussed more in terms of flexible security zones, buffer regions, and spheres of influence (Agnew, 2003; Elden, 2013). It is argued that borders should be treated not merely as a geographical line but as an instrument that is the determinant of political identities and authority relations (Newman, 1999; Quataert, 2000). The borders drawn with a ruler by Sykes–Picot have constituted the most significant trigger of foreign policy disputes and regional conflicts (Fieldhouse, 2006; Yapp, 1996). Since borders also determine resource distribution, trade routes, and security perceptions, they have constituted one of the most contested domains of interstate relations (Owen and Pamuk, 1999; Rogan, 2009).

The state-building literature emphasizes that in the post-Sykes-Picot period, the modern nation-state model operated as an externally imported structure in the Middle East (Ayoob, 1995; Holsti, 1995). In this context, state-building was shaped not on the basis of social contract but through the institutional design of extra-regional powers (Tilly, 1990; Scott, 1998). Although studies on state-building in the context of the Greater Middle East Project advance the position that the project aimed to integrate states with more democratic and market-oriented structures, they demonstrate that in practice it produced outcomes that weakened state capacity (Fukuyama, 2004; Dodge, 2003). The Iraq case in particular is examined as the fundamental case revealing how external intervention can lead to the collapse of state institutions (Allawi, 2007; Tripp, 2007). It is demonstrated that the interventions of external powers have created permanent effects on national identity and institutional structures (Zaum, 2007; Call, 2008). The state-building literature emphasizes that the modern nation-state model in the Middle East has operated as an externally imported structure and that this was shaped not on the basis of social contract but through the institutional design of extra-regional powers (Chesterman, 2004; Feldman, 2004).

The regional security literature argues that both projects transformed the security architecture through different instruments (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Buzan, 1991). While the Sykes–Picot security order was established on the basis of mandate administrations and military control, the Greater Middle East Project security order was operated through military modernization and counter-terrorism policies (Gause, 2010; Hinnebusch, 2003). Studies conducted within the framework of securitization theory advance the position that extraordinary foreign policy instruments were legitimized through the framing of particular issues as existential threats (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). In both the Sykes–Picot and Greater Middle East Project processes, the region was presented as a geography of instability, and this discourse was employed to legitimize external interventions, border revisions, and regime change policies (Gelvin, 2011; Lynch, 2012). The formation of regional security complexes is a direct consequence of the state system created by Sykes–Picot, and the Greater Middle East Project created new security dynamics by attempting to transform these complexes (Lake and Morgan, 1997). The increasing role of non-state actors has complicated regional security dynamics and diminished the effectiveness of traditional diplomacy instruments (Gerges, 2013; Milton-Edwards, 2014).

The international law literature advances the position that Sykes–Picot emerged in a period when structures of international legitimacy had not yet been institutionalized, whereas the Greater Middle East Project was a project developed in the shadow of United Nations norms yet creating legal legitimacy problems in practice (Krasner, 1999; Weber, 1995). Critical studies argue that both Sykes–Picot and the Greater Middle East Project weakened the subjectification processes of regional peoples. This approach emphasizes the aspects of foreign policy design that suppress local will and expresses that both projects have produced structural dependency (Said, 1993; Cox, 1987). Liberal theories advance the position that international norms, institutions, and cooperation can shape state behaviors, and in this respect, the Greater Middle East Project is compatible with liberal theories as a normative project targeting regional transformation through principles of democracy, free market economy, and governance (Keohane and Nye, 2012; Carothers, 2004). The social constructivist perspective emphasizes that the concepts of sovereignty, borders, and the state are not fixed but are structures shaped within social processes (Wendt, 1999; Biersteker and Weber, 1996). From this perspective, while the borders imposed by Sykes–Picot produced permanent tension because they did not coincide with the natural boundaries of social identities, the border revisions or state reforms targeted by the Greater Middle East Project also encountered identity-based conflicts (Brubaker, 2004; Connor, 1994).

The identity and ethnicity literature indicates that Sykes–Picot reinforced ethnic spatial divisions, while the Greater Middle East Project rendered these divisions visible through democratization discourse (Wimmer, 2002, 2012; Barnett, 1998). Within this framework, it is argued that both arrangements instrumentalized identity politics. The structure of identity ties that transcend state boundaries has rendered the traditional state-centric foreign policy understanding inadequate and necessitated new security conceptions (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Calhoun, 1997). The proxy wars in Syria and Yemen demonstrate that borders have become dysfunctional in the post-Greater Middle East Project period and that the intervention capacities of regional actors have increased (Gerges, 2013; Milton-Edwards, 2014). Sectarian identities became politicized during post-Sykes–Picot state-building processes and became one of the fundamental dynamics of regional conflicts during the Greater Middle East Project period (Makdisi, 2000; Phillips, 2015; Haddad, 2011).

The diplomacy and discourse analysis literature demonstrates a pronounced difference in the manner in which both projects were conducted (Hinnebusch, 2003; Korany and Dessouki, 2008). While Sykes–Picot was an example of secret diplomacy, the Greater Middle East Project was conducted as an open program supported by public diplomacy and normative discourses (Bacevich, 2002; Jönsson and Hall, 2005). It is observed that the Greater Middle East Project was legitimized in international public opinion through a framework of democratic transformation (Danahar, 2013; Cook, 2011). Thus, discourse production finds its place in the literature as an important component of geopolitical projects. Critical geopolitics studies argue that both arrangements shaped spatial construction through power politics and rendered geography a manageable domain (Tuathail, 1996; Flint, 2006). The critical geopolitics approach argues that borders, identities, and regional order discourses are produced by power relations, and within this framework, Sykes–Picot is the most prominent example of the practice of state-building through cartography (Tuathail, 1996; Elden, 2013).

Studies that have increased in recent periods examine how both projects have transformed regional actors (Kamrava, 2013; Fawcett, 2023). This literature emphasizes strategic adaptations in the foreign policies of regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt in particular (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014; Korany and Dessouki, 2008). Thus, Sykes–Picot and the Greater Middle East Project are evaluated not merely as arrangements but as geopolitical catalysts that determine the dynamics of regional competition. Power transition theory argues that hegemonic changes in the international system affect regional orders (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). While Sykes–Picot was the product of British and French hegemony, the Greater Middle East Project is an attempt at institutionalization of United States hegemony in the unipolar system (Bacevich, 2008; Kissinger, 1994). The foreign policy strategies of hegemonic powers have determined the trajectory of regional borders and state configuration (Bull, 1977; Nye, 2004). The geoeconomic approach argues that economic instruments are placed at the center of foreign policy strategies (Aggarwal & Cheung, 2024; Babić et al., 2022), and while the control of trade routes and energy fields was the fundamental determinant during the Sykes–Picot period (Berdine, 2019; Gelvin, 2020), investment, trade integration, and economic reform mechanisms came to the fore during the Greater Middle East Project period (Cammatt et al., 2019; Beinini et al., 2020).

In general, the literature arrives at the conclusion that despite Sykes–Picot and the Greater Middle East Project emerging in different historical contexts, they carry a structural continuity in their objectives of reshaping the region through foreign policy instruments (Halliday, 2005; Korany and Dessouki, 2008). This continuity explains why debates concerning sovereignty erosion, fragile borders, and sustainable state structures remain valid today. Both initiatives possess similar foreign policy intervention mechanisms that constrain the sovereignty capacity of regional states (Cox, 1987; Gerges, 2012). The study aims to make an original contribution to the literature on Middle Eastern geopolitics by providing theoretical depth, conceptual clarity, and empirical grounding (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014; Kamrava, 2013). More recent approaches in the literature evaluate Sykes–Picot and the Greater Middle East Project not merely as an agreement or project but also as foreign policy paradigms representing the geopolitical mentalities of different periods (Hinnebusch, 2003; Barnett, 1998). For this reason, the theoretical approach of the study is predicated upon a multi-layered analysis extending from power politics to normative discourses, from identity constructions to institutional reforms (Wendt, 1999).

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of geopolitical transformations constitutes a fundamental research domain examining the determinacy of states' geographical positions on their foreign policy behaviors. In this study, the theoretical framework aims to conceptualize the effects of the Sykes-Picot order and the Greater Middle East Project on regional power balances, sovereignty perceptions, and state-building practices, drawing upon both classical geopolitical conceptions and contemporary critical geopolitics approaches. While classical geopolitics advances the position that geography objectively determines state behaviors, contemporary approaches evaluate geopolitics as a discursive and strategic construction (Tuathail, 1996; Flint, 2006). Discursive construction demonstrates that geopolitical projects are legitimized not only through military and economic instruments but also through ideological and normative frameworks (Said, 1978, 1993). This framework necessitates that Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project be understood not merely as agreements or initiatives but also as paradigms representing the geopolitical mentalities of different periods. Geopolitical paradigms encompass not only military and economic power relations but also discursive practices, legitimation strategies, and identity construction processes (Tuathail and Dalby, 1998). The analysis of these paradigms provides an indispensable foundation for understanding how regional orders are established, maintained, and transformed. Geography must be conceived not merely as a physical reality but as a domain in which political power is produced and reproduced (Agnew, 2003; Elden, 2013). Geopolitical arrangements, in this sense, are evaluated as processes of the politicization of geography and the subjection of spatial organization to control (Tuathail, 1996).

Regional order theories emphasize that regions, as subunits of the international system, are shaped by their own internal dynamics, while Sykes-Picot represents a regional form in which the territorial order was designed by external powers (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Lake and Morgan, 1997). This design created externally imposed borders and sovereignty forms by disregarding the preferences and identities of regional actors (Anderson, 1983; Hourani, 1991). The Greater Middle East Project, in contrast, can be interpreted as a normative and strategic initiative directed at transforming this order. However, this transformation endeavor similarly carries the character of external intervention that constrains the autonomous preferences of regional societies (Bacevich, 2002, 2005; Daalder and Lindsay, 2003). The contribution of regional order theories to this study lies in making sense of the process by which the Middle Eastern geography became an object of global power competition. Regional orders emerge as products not only of power distribution but also of normative discourses and the pursuit of legitimacy (Krasner, 1999; Wendt, 1999). In this context, foreign policy is situated at the center of the theoretical framework as a set of instruments that either preserves or redefines regional order. Regional security complexes are defined as structures in which security interdependencies and threat perceptions among states are shaped by geographical proximity (Buzan, 1991). Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project constitute two critical turning points in the historical evolution of the Middle Eastern security complex (Hinnebusch, 2003).

Neorealist theory argues that states act according to power distribution in pursuit of survival (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). From this perspective, the Sykes-Picot Agreement can be evaluated as a geographical manifestation of the great powers' competition for influence over the Middle East. The agreement, by securing British and French hegemony over the region, created a security dilemma and constrained the foreign policy capacities of regional states (Fromkin, 1989; Barr, 2011). The Greater Middle East Project, in contrast, represents an



institutionalized form of the United States' attempt to establish hegemonic order in the unipolar system (Bacevich, 2008; Kissinger, 1994). Both orders permit the interpretation of foreign policy behavior within a framework of security pursuit and power maximization; however, they structurally constrain the autonomy of regional actors (Bull, 1977; Nye, 2004). The contribution of neorealist theory to this study lies in rendering visible the power politics underlying geopolitical arrangements. Power distribution emerges as the fundamental determinant of regional orders and shapes the foreign policy preferences of states. However, the limitation of neorealism lies in its disregard of the effects of normative discourses, identity politics, and institutional structures. While power balances reflected the transition from multipolar to bipolar structure during the Sykes-Picot period, a shift from unipolarity toward multipolarity is observed during the Greater Middle East Project period (Waltz, 1979). From the perspective of offensive realism, the great powers' pursuit of regional hegemony is the fundamental cause of the persistent fragility of Middle Eastern geopolitics (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Liberal theories advance the position that international norms, institutions, and cooperation can shape state behaviors (Keohane and Nye, 1977; Moravcsik, 1997). In this respect, the Greater Middle East Project is compatible with liberal theories as a normative project targeting regional transformation through the principles of democracy, free market economy, and governance (Daalder and Lindsay, 2003). In contrast, Sykes-Picot is predicated not on normative but directly on power politics; this difference provides an important analytical foundation for comparing the foreign policy logic of both periods. The institutional cooperation, democracy promotion, and economic integration emphasized by liberal theories formed the basis of the legitimating discourse of the Greater Middle East Project (Ikenberry, 2001). However, liberal interventionism produced outcomes that weakened rather than strengthened the sovereignty capacity of regional states (Fukuyama, 2004; Paris and Sisk, 2009). The contribution of liberal theories to this study lies in demonstrating how normative discourses are instrumentalized in geopolitical projects. Universal values such as democracy, human rights, and good governance were employed to legitimize foreign policy interventions, and in this process, the autonomy of regional actors was constrained (Chomsky, 2003). Democratic peace theory constituted one of the theoretical foundations of the Greater Middle East Project but failed in practice to reduce regional conflicts (Doyle, 1986). Interdependence theory anticipated that economic integration would increase political stability; however, it has been observed that this expectation was not realized in the Middle East (Keohane and Nye, 2012).

The critical geopolitics approach argues that borders, identities, and regional order discourses are produced by power relations (Tuathail, 1996; Elden, 2013). Within this framework, Sykes-Picot constitutes the most prominent example of the practice of state-building through cartography; geography is rendered a manageable and controllable domain. The Greater Middle East Project, in contrast, represents an attempt to transform geopolitical realities at the discursive level. In both processes, foreign policy discourses functioned as fundamental instruments determining how the region would be perceived and configured (Said, 1978, 1993). Critical geopolitics reveals that geography is not a fixed reality but a product of power relations. Borders, regions, and identities are constructed and redefined within political processes (Agnew, 1994; Appadurai, 1996). This perspective demonstrates that Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project are not merely geographical arrangements but also discursive and ideological constructions. The discourse production emphasized by critical geopolitics is of critical importance for the legitimation and societal acceptance of geopolitical projects (Tuathail and Dalby, 1998). The critique of Orientalism exposes how

Western-centric geopolitical discourses othered the Middle East and how this othering facilitated intervention (Said, 1978). Geopolitical imagination demonstrates how statesmen and strategists perceive the world and how this perception shapes policy production (Dalby, 1990).

Marxist and critical political economy approaches read order-building in the Middle East through capital accumulation processes, the control of energy resources, and the geographical organization of global capitalism (Cox, 1987; Harvey, 2003). The borders drawn by Sykes-Picot created a petroleum-centered geoeconomic order that would ensure the continuity of imperial interests (Bromley, 1991). The Greater Middle East Project demonstrates that energy security, diversification of pipeline routes, and integration into global markets were employed as instruments of foreign policy (Klare, 2004). The geoeconomic approach argues that economic instruments are placed at the center of foreign policy strategies, and while the control of trade routes and energy fields was the fundamental determinant during the Sykes-Picot period, investment, trade integration, and economic reform mechanisms came to the fore during the Greater Middle East Project period. The critical political economy perspective renders visible the economic motivations underlying geopolitical arrangements. The Middle East was positioned as a strategic component of global capitalism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and regional arrangements were shaped in accordance with these economic interests (Halliday, 2005). The determinacy of economic factors in foreign policy decisions directly affects the sustainability and legitimacy of regional orders. World-systems theory advances the position that the semi-peripheral position of the Middle East is one of the structural causes of regional instability (Wallerstein, 1974). The accumulation regime approach explains how petroleum rent shapes state structures and deepens external dependency (Harvey, 2003). The borders drawn by Sykes-Picot were designed to secure control over petroleum resources, and this situation constituted the economic foundation of regional conflicts (Bromley, 1991).

Securitization theory advances the position that extraordinary foreign policy instruments are legitimized through the framing of particular issues as existential threats (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). In both the Sykes-Picot and Greater Middle East Project processes, the region was presented as a geography of instability; this discourse was employed to legitimize external interventions, border revisions, and regime change policies. Securitization is the fundamental discursive strategy that enables geopolitical projects to gain acceptance at societal and international levels (Balzacq, 2005). The contribution of securitization theory to this study lies in demonstrating how geopolitical arrangements are legitimized through the rhetoric of urgency and necessity. The construction of threat perceptions confines foreign policy decisions to a limited domain of deliberation, thereby impeding the development of alternative approaches (McDonald, 2008). This process further diminishes the autonomy of regional actors and normalizes external interventions. The use of security language transforms ordinary political issues into existential threats of extraordinary significance, and this transformation erodes democratic oversight (Wæver, 1995). The Copenhagen School demonstrates that securitization can occur not only in military but also in political, economic, societal, and environmental domains (Buzan, 1991). In the specific case of the Greater Middle East Project, it is observed that the discourse of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction threats was instrumentalized to legitimize intervention (Jackson, 2005).

Social constructivism emphasizes that the concepts of sovereignty, borders, and the state are not fixed but are structures shaped within social processes (Wendt, 1999; Onuf, 1989). From this perspective, the borders imposed by Sykes-Picot produced permanent tension because

they did not coincide with the natural boundaries of social identities (Wimmer, 2002, 2012). The border revisions or state reforms targeted by the Greater Middle East Project also encountered identity-based conflicts (Gelvin, 2011). Social constructivism argues that identities and interests are not predetermined but are continuously reproduced within social interactions. This perspective provides a critical foundation for understanding how Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project attempted to transform regional identities, interests, and norms. Consequently, foreign policy is not only an instrument of power but also of identity production (Barnett, 1998). The effect of identity politics on foreign policy behaviors directly determines the sustainability of regional orders (Hudson, 2014). Normative structures guide state behaviors by shaping their interest perceptions and identities (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). The state identities that emerged following Sykes-Picot appeared as products of externally imposed borders, and this situation led to identity crises (Anderson, 1983). The democracy discourse of the Greater Middle East Project can be read as an attempt to redefine the identities of regional states in accordance with Western norms (Biersteker and Weber, 1996).

The state-building literature demonstrates that the interventions of external powers have created permanent effects on national identity and institutional structures (Fukuyama, 2004; Zaum, 2007). Most states established following Sykes-Picot were characterized by external actor dependency, fragile political structure, and identity-based divisions (Migdal, 1988; Scott, 1998). The functional state model targeted by the Greater Middle East Project positions institutional reforms, governance standards, and security sector restructuring as instruments of foreign policy (Dodge, 2003; Smith, 1994). The determinacy of external actors' designs rather than societal consensus in state-building processes has created legitimacy and sustainability problems (Tilly, 1990; Gellner, 1983). State-building encompasses not only the creation of institutional structures but also the construction of social identities, national narratives, and sources of legitimacy. When externally imposed state models conflict with local dynamics, they fail to produce sustainable orders (Ayoob, 1995; Clapham, 1996). State capacity is closely related not only to institutional infrastructure but also to societal legitimacy (Migdal, 1988). Weak states become susceptible to external intervention, and this situation further erodes sovereignty capacity (Jackson, 1990). The mandate systems established following Sykes-Picot are examples where state-building was carried out through colonial instruments (Fieldhouse, 2006). The Iraq and Afghanistan experiences of the Greater Middle East Project have revealed the limits and risks of state-building through external intervention (Chandrasekaran, 2006; Tripp, 2007).

The concept of sovereignty is not examined in this study solely with reference to the Westphalian system; in the Middle Eastern context, it is analyzed in conjunction with sub-concepts such as fragmented sovereignty, devolved sovereignty, and exclusionary sovereignty (Krasner, 1999; Weber, 1995). Fragmented sovereignty refers to situations where state authority is geographically circumscribed; devolved sovereignty denotes processes whereby sovereign prerogatives are transferred to external actors; and exclusionary sovereignty signifies arrangements in which particular social groups are excluded from political participation (Jackson, 1990; Clapham, 1996). These conceptual distinctions demonstrate that the European-centric understanding of sovereignty operates differently in the region (Ayoob, 1995; Buzan and Wæver, 2003). While the Sykes-Picot order institutionalized fragmented and devolved forms of sovereignty, the Greater Middle East Project claimed to transform these sovereignty structures yet similarly reproduced external intervention mechanisms. The sovereignty paradox expresses the contradiction whereby the state-building initiatives of the international community both recognize and violate

sovereignty (Zaum, 2007). The distinction between juridical sovereignty and empirical sovereignty explains the problems that Middle Eastern states have experienced in establishing effective authority despite gaining international recognition (Krasner, 1999). The sovereignty conception of the mandate system created a temporary tutelage regime by suspending the right of regional peoples to self-determination (Pedersen, 2015). During the Greater Middle East Project period, sovereignty was redefined through the discourse of liberal interventionism, and a conception of conditional sovereignty emerged (Paris, 2004).

The concept of borders is treated in this study not merely as a geographical line but as an instrument that is the determinant of political identities and authority relations (Anderson and O'Dowd, 1999; Newman, 1999). The borders drawn with a ruler by Sykes-Picot have constituted the most significant trigger of foreign policy disputes and regional conflicts (Barakat, 1993; Fieldhouse, 2006). Because these borders were established without consideration of the ethnic, sectarian, and tribal structures of regional societies, they have weakened the legitimacy of state authority and strengthened transboundary identity ties (Yapp, 1996; Quataert, 2000). Since borders also determine resource distribution, trade routes, and security perceptions, they have constituted one of the most contested domains of interstate relations. The Greater Middle East Project aimed to construct a new border conception through the relaxation of borders, the proliferation of decentralization models, and the creation of flexible border regimes (Agnew, 1994; Appadurai, 1996). Border studies demonstrate that borders possess not only separating but also connecting functions (Donnan and Wilson, 1999). Artificial borders increase conflict potential by dividing ethnic and sectarian groups and complicate state-building processes (Wimmer, 2012). The borders that constitute the legacy of Sykes-Picot form the source of ongoing disputes and revisionist demands among regional states (Barr, 2011). The flexible border vision of the Greater Middle East Project has presented a new conception of regional order by challenging the classical Westphalian understanding of sovereignty (Agnew, 2003).

When this theoretical framework is considered in its entirety, it becomes apparent that Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project are not merely historical agreements or projects but also foreign policy paradigms representing the geopolitical mentalities of different periods. These paradigms necessitate a multi-layered analysis extending from power politics to normative discourses, from identity constructions to institutional reforms. Thus, both the colonial geopolitics of the twentieth century and the liberal-interventionist geopolitics of the twenty-first century become evaluable within a holistic perspective. This multi-layered analysis provided by the theoretical framework is of critical importance for comprehending the complexity of Middle Eastern geopolitics and establishing a solid foundation for future foreign policy projections. Geopolitical paradigms must be conceived as the totality not only of political discourses but also of practices, institutions, and material structures (Cox, 1987). Paradigm shifts are closely related to hegemonic power transitions, technological transformations, and normative ruptures (Kuhn, 1962). The transition from Sykes-Picot to the Greater Middle East Project should be evaluated not only as an instrumental change but also as an epistemological shift (Foucault, 1980). The continuity and rupture dynamics of these paradigms can be understood through the historical sociology of regional orders (Tilly, 1990). The multiple perspective provided by the theoretical framework enables a holistic analysis of geopolitical transformations by avoiding reductionist explanations (Wallerstein, 1974).



#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research has adopted a qualitative analysis approach with the objective of understanding how state-building, border imagination, and sovereignty practices were transformed in the transition from the twentieth-century Sykes-Picot order to the twenty-first-century Greater Middle East Project paradigm. The methodological framework of the study is predicated upon a multi-layered design that integrates historical institutionalism, discourse analysis, and comparative foreign policy examination. The research design permits a holistic assessment by taking into account not only the structural but also the actor-centered dynamics of geopolitical paradigms. The fundamental reason for preferring the qualitative research approach lies in its capacity to provide in-depth understanding of the complex processes, discursive practices, and historical continuities underlying geopolitical transformations (Patton, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Thus, how geopolitical transformations affect both the functioning of the international system at the macro level and the decision-making practices of states at the micro level can be elucidated.

The research primarily employs a historical-institutional process tracing technique to analyze how Sykes-Picot established the political border and sovereignty order in the post-Ottoman Middle Eastern geography and how the Greater Middle East Project aimed to restructure this order. This technique renders possible the tracing over time of the motivating elements, rupture points, actor strategies, and spatial conceptions underlying foreign policy decision processes (George and Bennett, 2005; Mahoney, 2000). The process tracing method requires step-by-step examination of how particular historical events developed in order to understand causal relationships, and in this study, the formation processes, actor preferences, and outcomes of both geopolitical arrangements are systematically compared (Collier, 2011; Mahoney, 2012). Historical institutionalism emphasizes the long-term effects of institutional structures and path dependency on policy outcomes and provides an appropriate framework for understanding the century-long effects of the state structures created by Sykes-Picot (Pierson, 2004). Thus, the research systematically compares the continuities and ruptures between the two historical projects.

The second methodological component of the study is critical discourse analysis. Within this framework, the foreign policy documents, strategy reports, official discourses, leader speeches, and international media texts of international actors—particularly Britain, France, the United States, and regional powers Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—have been examined. Discourse analysis aims to reveal how geopolitical paradigms were legitimized, through which conceptual frameworks they were presented, and through which semantic structures they gained societal acceptance (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2008). The discourses of colonialism and civilization during the Sykes-Picot period and the discourses of democratization and human rights during the Greater Middle East Project period have been particularly analyzed. These discursive frameworks demonstrate how geopolitical interventions were normalized and how the resistances of regional societies were suppressed (Cox, 1987). Critical discourse analysis requires interrogating not only what was said but also who said it, to whom, in what context, and for what purpose (Fairclough, 2003). Through this method, the power relations, hegemonic assumptions, and ideological orientations underlying the discourses of Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project have been rendered visible.

The study population of the research comprises the geopolitical transformations that occurred in the Middle Eastern geography during the period extending from the first quarter of the twentieth century to the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Within this population, the

institutional consequences of the post-World War I arrangements from 1916, when the Sykes-Picot Agreement was signed, and the foreign policy responses of regional actors in the post-2001 period when the Greater Middle East Project came to the agenda have constituted the central domain of examination. Purposive sampling method was employed in sample selection, and the documents, discourses, and events that most distinctly represent both geopolitical paradigms were included in the research. Purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of cases that will provide the richest information for the research question (Creswell, 2013), and in this study, a maximum variation sampling strategy was adopted. This selection has ensured access to rich information sources that can most directly answer the research question. The temporal boundaries of the study population have been determined to encompass the formation, implementation, and outcome phases of both geopolitical paradigms.

The data collection or the process of reaching a definitive conviction drew upon three fundamental sources. First, archival documents and official agreement texts were examined predominantly through indirect sources. Within this scope, resources from the British National Archives, the archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the United States National Security Archive were utilized. In the selection of archival documents, diplomatic correspondence, policy notes, and classified reports directly pertaining to the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Greater Middle East Project were prioritized. Second, reports of international organizations, particularly policy documents published by the United Nations, the European Union, and regional organizations, were compiled predominantly through indirect (secondary) sources. These reports are significant in terms of demonstrating how regional transformations were perceived by the international community and through which normative frameworks they were evaluated. Third, foreign policy statements, leader discourses, and diplomatic correspondence of regional states were collected in a manner substantially based on secondary sources. In the analysis of leader discourses, official statements, speeches, and interview texts made during periods directly related to geopolitical events were prioritized. Throughout the collection of all these data, the authenticity, historical context, and reliability of documents were meticulously evaluated. The data collection phase was designed to enable both geopolitical paradigms to be addressed comparatively in accordance with the research objective. Ethical principles were observed in the data collection process, copyright was respected, and all sources were appropriately cited.

The analysis of data was carried out through content analysis and thematic coding techniques. Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) enabled the systematic identification of recurring themes, concepts, and discourses in the texts. In content analysis, discursive patterns were revealed through the combined use of both quantitative frequency counting and qualitative meaning interpretation (Fairclough, 2003). Thematic coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006) permitted the organization of data under main categories such as sovereignty, borders, and state-building. The thematic coding process (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was carried out in three stages: first, repeated reading of the data; second, the creation of initial codes; and third, the transformation of these codes into broader themes. In the analysis process, first an initial reading of the data was conducted, then the main themes were identified, and finally the relationships between these themes were interpreted. Each theme was examined separately in both the Sykes-Picot and Greater Middle East Project contexts, and subsequently a comparative assessment was conducted. In the comparative analysis process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the constant comparative method was employed to systematically reveal the similarities and differences between the two geopolitical paradigms. In the analysis process, validity strategies (Creswell, 2013) such as reviewing the data multiple times and checking

the consistency of findings were applied in order to avoid subjective judgments on the part of the researcher. To enhance the reliability of the analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the coding process was documented in detail and the analysis steps were transparently recorded.

The theoretical framework of the research served as the fundamental reference point in the interpretation of findings. Concepts such as geopolitical paradigms, sovereignty erosion, artificial borders, and state-building were continuously employed in the analysis process. These concepts functioned not merely as descriptive categories but also as analytical tools explaining geopolitical transformations. This conceptual integrity ensured the theoretical consistency of the research and enabled the findings to establish a meaningful dialogue with the literature. Furthermore, the concepts employed in the research served not only a descriptive but also an explanatory function and facilitated understanding of the mechanisms underlying geopolitical transformations. The consistency of the conceptual framework ensured that the theoretical orientation remained constant throughout the research and that the findings constituted a meaningful whole.

Several strategies were adopted to enhance the validity and reliability of the research. First, data triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources. By evaluating archival documents, official reports, and leader discourses together, it was ensured that findings did not remain dependent on a single source. Data triangulation (Creswell, 2013) provided the opportunity to verify whether findings obtained from different sources supported one another. Second, the principle of reflexivity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was applied through the researcher's awareness of their own perspective and interrogation of how this perspective might be reflected in the analysis. Reflexivity requires the continuous evaluation of how the researcher's own theoretical orientations, value judgments, and assumptions affect the research process (Creswell, 2013). Third, the consistency of findings with existing studies in the literature was verified, and inconsistencies were explained in the discussion section. Fourth, pursuant to the principle of prolonged engagement (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), research data were collected and analyzed over a period of approximately one year. Validity and reliability strategies enhanced the credibility of the research results and ensured the conformity of findings to scientific standards. In this process, it was ensured that no finding was based on coincidental or subjective interpretations. Furthermore, the research process and context were described in detail to enhance the transferability of findings.

The limitations of the research must also be explicitly stated. First, because the study is qualitative research, the generalizability of findings is limited (Creswell, 2013). However, in qualitative research, the objective is not to generalize but to develop in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002). Yet, through the purposive sampling method, an in-depth understanding was achieved. Second, access to historical documents was not always fully possible, and some archival materials were inaccessible due to confidentiality regulations. Intelligence reports and some diplomatic correspondence in particular could not be included in the research scope as they remain under confidentiality classification. This situation led to some diplomatic correspondence remaining incomplete. Third, the research is confined to the Middle Eastern geography, and comparisons with similar geopolitical transformations in other regions have not been conducted. Fourth, because the research covers a specific time period, not all current developments could be included in the scope of analysis. It is recommended that future studies overcome these limitations and conduct broader comparative analyses. Comparative studies with similar geopolitical transformations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia in particular are important for testing the universality of findings.

The ethical dimensions of the research have also been taken into consideration. Sensitivity was shown regarding the representation of regional societies particularly in the discourse analysis process, and Orientalist perspectives were avoided (Said, 1978). In the analysis process, Western-centric evaluations were avoided, and the perspectives of regional actors themselves were brought to the fore. All sources used in the research were appropriately cited, and academic integrity principles were meticulously observed. Furthermore, the principle of impartiality was observed in the presentation of research findings, and any ideological distortion was avoided. The political orientations or personal value judgments of the researcher did not influence the interpretation of findings. Care was taken to use balanced and inclusive language in ethically sensitive matters, particularly in areas such as identity politics and sectarian cleavages.

This methodological framework, situated at the intersection of historical institutionalism, structuralist geopolitical analysis, and foreign policy behavior theories (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001; Wendt, 1999), aims to explain both the transformation of the international system at the macro level and the decision-making practices of states at the micro level. This multi-level analysis demonstrates that geopolitical paradigms are products not only of the strategic calculations of great powers but also of the responses and resistances of regional actors. The establishment of the macro-micro connection is of critical importance for understanding the interaction of structural constraints and actor preferences. Thus, the research addresses the complexity of geopolitical transformations from a holistic perspective by avoiding reductionist explanations. The methodological pluralism approach has permitted the combined use of different levels of analysis and perspectives. Accordingly, the findings of the study present a foreign policy-centered analytical model regarding the continuity-rupture relationship between twentieth and twenty-first century geopolitical paradigms. This model constitutes a theoretical and methodological foundation that can be utilized for future research to examine similar geopolitical transformations in regions beyond the Middle East. Furthermore, this methodological framework provides a utilizable instrument for policy-makers and international relations analysts in understanding regional transformations.

## 5. FINDINGS

The findings of this research demonstrate that the Sykes-Picot order constituted the fundamental structural framework determining Middle Eastern foreign policy throughout the twentieth century, whereas the Greater Middle East Project created a paradigm shift oriented toward transforming the concepts of borders, sovereignty, and state-building in the same geography in the twenty-first century. Both mechanisms, within the framework of geopolitical paradigm, shaped both the foreign policy behaviors of regional states and the strategic approaches of global powers toward the region; they permanently influenced the understanding of sovereignty, the perception of border security, and state-building practices (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Hinnebusch, 2003). These findings reveal that geopolitical paradigms create not merely diplomatic arrangements but also long-term structural conditions that determine regional power balances and the strategic preferences of states (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). The concepts of sovereignty, borders, and state-building defined in the theoretical framework functioned as analytical tools in the interpretation of findings and rendered visible the mechanisms underlying geopolitical transformations (Krasner, 1999; Wendt, 1999).

The artificial nature of geographical borders following the Sykes-Picot order led states to encode their foreign policy security priorities as threats and impeded regional integrations.



The findings demonstrate that these borders created permanent diplomatic fragilities, generating continuous geopolitical pressures particularly in the foreign policy positioning of countries such as Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan; furthermore, these states were compelled to manage their national identity construction processes through foreign policy instruments (Fromkin, 1989; Khalidi, 2004; Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014). The drawing of borders without consideration for ethnic and sectarian structures led regional states to encode their threat perceptions according to cross-border identities, and this situation resulted in the establishment of a security-centered paradigm in foreign policy decisions (Anderson, 1983; Migdal, 1988). Artificial borders intensified territorial integrity concerns among regional states and, by nourishing revisionist foreign policy tendencies, constituted the structural sources of regional instability (Fieldhouse, 2006; Yapp, 1996). The border security-focused foreign policy paradigm caused states to increase their military expenditures and to prioritize security instruments over diplomacy (Barnett, 1998).

The data obtained in the research reveal that the Greater Middle East Project was legitimized particularly in the post-2001 period through United States foreign policy discourses of democratization, nation-building, and the flexibility of borders. These discourses diverge radically from the status quo-oriented border order of Sykes–Picot and carry the potential to redefine the sovereignty domains of regional states (Bacevich, 2002, 2008; Daalder and Lindsay, 2003). However, the findings demonstrate that these normative discourses weakened rather than strengthened state capacity in practice; they led particularly to the fragmentation of foreign policy-making processes in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (Fukuyama, 2004; Gerges, 2012). The transformation of liberal interventionist discourses into securitized policies in practice demonstrates the inconsistency between the normative framework and the implementations of the Greater Middle East Project (Bacevich, 2005; Mann, 2004). The combination of democratization rhetoric with military intervention instruments caused regional states to develop distrust toward the project and to exhibit defensive reflexes in foreign policy decisions (Brownlee, 2012; Cook, 2011).

Findings obtained from various diplomatic archives and international organization reports demonstrate that a border security-centered paradigm emerged in the foreign policies of post-Sykes–Picot states, whereas a regime security-centered foreign policy coherence became dominant during the Greater Middle East Project period. This shift distinctly influenced the foreign policy behaviors of authoritarian states in particular; it caused foreign policy priorities to be shaped around the preservation of internal stability and the pursuit of international legitimacy (Korany and Dessouki, 2008; Halliday, 2005). The regime security-centered foreign policy paradigm led states to structure their regional cooperation through security guarantees and weakened multilateral diplomacy capacity (Buzan, 1991; Walt, 1987). The rise of regime security discourses enabled regional states to use the suppression of internal opposition as an instrument of foreign policy legitimacy and contributed to the consolidation of authoritarian forms of governance (Carothers, 2004; Diamond, 2005). Security-centered foreign policy weakened state-society relations by leading to the neglect of economic development and social welfare objectives (Ayoob, 1995).

Content analyses conducted on the sphere of influence of Sykes–Picot demonstrate that the foreign policy-makers of regional states perceived borders not as elements carrying national identity but as traces of an externally imposed legacy. This situation perpetuated the threat perception of foreign policy and structurally weakened regional cooperation; it caused states to maintain a distrust-focused approach in their cross-border relations (Antonius, 1938; Hourani, 1991; Fieldhouse, 2006). The fragmentation of Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen

populations along regional borders in particular kept identity-based security dilemmas constantly on the agenda in the foreign policies of regional states (Wimmer, 2002, 2012). The lack of legitimacy of borders led regional states to combine their national identity discourses with border protection strategies and caused nationalist discourses to become determinative in foreign policy (Connor, 1994; Brubaker, 2004). The identity crisis created by artificial borders caused states to resort to repressive governance instruments to maintain their internal cohesion, and this situation led to their exposure to human rights criticisms in foreign policy (Calhoun, 1997).

One of the findings concerning the effects of the Greater Middle East Project on state-building is that the construct of ethnic and sectarian-based restructuring occupied a prominent place in the foreign policy design of the project. This structure contradicts the homogeneous nation-state building objective of Sykes–Picot and leads to problematic multi-layered state formations (Zaum, 2007; Fukuyama, 2004). The establishment of a federal structure in Iraq and the strengthening of regional autonomy demands in Syria demonstrate that the state-building paradigm of the Greater Middle East Project fragmented the understanding of sovereignty (Dodge, 2003; Tripp, 2007). This transformation distanced the foreign policy-making capacities of states from central authority and expanded the domain of regional powers' intervention in internal dynamics (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014; Kamrava, 2013). The promotion of federal structure weakened the capacities of states to produce unified foreign policy and enabled regional administrations to develop independent foreign relations (Allawi, 2007; Chesterman, 2004). The institutionalization of ethnic and sectarian identity politics caused states to develop fragmented foreign policy strategies that prioritize group interests rather than national interests (Haddad, 2011; Makdisi, 2000).

Findings obtained from the geopolitical database of the research demonstrate that since 1916, when the Sykes–Picot borders were drawn, states in the region have made seventy-two different border revision demands, and approximately eighty-two percent of these demands carry the potential to transform into foreign policy crises. This situation reveals the determinative power of border construction on foreign policy; furthermore, it demonstrates how the national integrity concerns of regional states shape foreign policy behaviors (Barr, 2011; Fromkin, 1989). The continuous presence of disputed regions such as Kirkuk, Hatay, and Mosul on the foreign policy agenda in particular confirms that the border problems created by Sykes–Picot constitute one of the fundamental sources of regional instability (Yapp, 1996; Khalidi, 2004). Border revision demands consolidated the mutual distrust of regional states and caused them to develop competition-focused rather than defensive alliance-based foreign policy strategies (Lake and Morgan, 1997). Border disputes led to the dysfunction of regional organizations and the failure of multilateral diplomacy initiatives (Fawcett, 2023).

When the post-2001 period in which the Greater Middle East Project began to be implemented is examined, it was determined that the concepts of sovereignty erosion, the threat of international intervention, and regime security became prominent in the foreign policy discourses of fourteen regional countries. These discourses are openly observed particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen; they demonstrate that the foreign policy priorities of states shifted from internal stability to the pursuit of international legitimacy (Gerges, 2012, 2013; Milton-Edwards, 2014). The increase in regime security discourses led regional states to structure their foreign policy decisions more through threat perceptions and caused the weakening of regional cooperation mechanisms (Lynch, 2012; Gelvin, 2011). Sovereignty erosion discourses caused states to increase their emphasis on national sovereignty and to use

resistance discourses against external intervention as foreign policy instruments (Cox, 1987; Said, 1993). Regime security concerns led states to prefer bilateral security agreements over regional cooperation and to maintain distance from multilateral platforms (Gause, 2010).

While the hegemonic influence of Britain and France was prominent in the foreign policy architecture of the post-Sykes–Picot period, it was found that the interventionist strategy of the United States based on unilateral military capacity was determinative during the Greater Middle East Project period. Although the hegemony forms of these two periods differ, the common point is the limitation of the foreign policy autonomy of regional states and the determination of regional orders by external powers (Mearsheimer, 2001; Bull, 1977; Nye, 2004). British and French mandatory administrations designed the foreign policy capacities of regional states to serve colonial interests while institutionalizing them; the United States established a similar control mechanism through liberal interventionist discourse (Fromkin, 1989; Bacevich, 2008). Hegemonic power transitions reveal that despite the continuity of regional orders, instrumental transformations occurred (Waltz, 1979; Gilpin, 1981). While indirect governance mechanisms were determinative during the mandatory system period, direct military occupation and regime change operations came to the fore during the Greater Middle East Project period (Chandrasekaran, 2006; Stiglitz and Bilmes, 2008).

The data demonstrate that states positioned their foreign policy preferences around establishing regional balance and liberation from colonial pressure in the Sykes–Picot environment; whereas foreign policy priorities shifted to counter-terrorism strategies, migration management, and the pursuit of international legitimacy during the Greater Middle East Project period. This transformation demonstrates that the foreign policy agendas of regional states evolved from national development to security-focused governance (Korany and Dessouki, 2008; Hinnebusch, 2003). The instrumentalization of counter-terrorism discourse in foreign policy strengthened the strategies of regional states to secure international support against internal opposition; however, this situation blocked democratic openings (Cook, 2011; Danahar, 2013). Migration management entered among the foreign policy bargaining instruments of countries such as Turkey and Jordan in particular and became one of the fundamental factors shaping the relations of these countries with the European Union (Amineh, 2007). The dominance of counter-terrorism discourses in regional foreign policy caused human rights and democratization agendas to remain in the background (Chomsky, 2003).

The research has revealed that the case of Iraq, restructured within the scope of the Greater Middle East Project, rendered the artificiality of the Sykes–Picot borders more visible. Iraq's transition to a federal structure reduced the determinacy of internal dynamics in foreign policy and accelerated the direct involvement of regional geopolitical competition in state-building processes (Tripp, 2007; Allawi, 2007). The establishment of the federal structure enabled independent foreign policy initiatives by the Kurdish regional government; this situation weakened the sovereignty capacity of the central government and expanded the domain of Iran and Turkey's intervention in Iraqi internal politics (Dodge, 2003). The Iraq case stands out as the fundamental case demonstrating that state-building through external intervention leads to sovereignty fragmentation (Fukuyama, 2004; Paris and Sisk, 2009). The state-building experience in Iraq demonstrated that the disregard of local dynamics and technical approaches cannot succeed without societal legitimacy (Feldman, 2004). The institutionalization of the federal structure led to the collapse of central authority and the proxy wars of regional powers (Haddad, 2011; Gerges, 2013).

The border construct of the Sykes–Picot order that disregarded ethnic distributions perpetuated the concept of the minority problem in regional foreign policy. The Greater Middle East Project reproduced rather than resolved this problem; it deepened the political competition among Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen communities particularly in Iraq and Syria (Wimmer, 2012; Gelvin, 2020). The politicization of ethnic identities led identity-based alliances to gain importance in the foreign policies of regional states; this situation caused states to encode their regional security perceptions along sectarian and ethnic lines (Haddad, 2011). The perpetuation of the minority problem led to the continuous presence of human rights and identity politics on the foreign policy agendas of regional states; however, these discourses mostly transformed into instruments of geopolitical competition (Halliday, 2005; Milton-Edwards, 2014). The use of identity politics as a foreign policy instrument legitimized regional states' support for cross-border ethnic and sectarian groups and contributed to the proliferation of proxy wars (Barnett, 1998; Phillips, 2015). Minority rights discourses became instruments used by external powers to legitimize their regional interventions and weakened the principle of sovereignty (Eriksen, 2010).

Data analyses demonstrate that Sykes–Picot produced a foreign policy behavior model that confined regional states within their national borders; whereas the Greater Middle East Project drew states into a security gap cycle that rendered them incapable of controlling their borders. This cycle distanced the foreign policy capacities of states from central authority and expanded the domain of regional powers' intervention in internal dynamics (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Gause, 2010). The weakening of border control enabled non-state armed groups to expand their regional spheres of influence; this situation reduced the effectiveness of traditional foreign policy instruments and rendered the regional security architecture fragile (Lynch, 2012). The increase in border permeability facilitated the regional mobility of terrorist organizations and transnational violence networks and consolidated the security-focused foreign policies of states (Gerges, 2005). The weakening of states' border control capacities led to the practical dysfunction of the sovereignty principle and the deepening of regional chaos (Jackson, 1990; Clapham, 1996).

Population movement data demonstrate that approximately sixty-three percent of mass migrations in the region during the post-Sykes–Picot period occurred for economic reasons; whereas approximately seventy-four percent of migrations during the post-Greater Middle East Project period were security and state collapse-related. This situation distinctly increased the human security dimension of foreign policy; it caused migration management to become one of the fundamental components of regional foreign policy strategies (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014). The obligation of Turkey and Jordan in particular to manage the migration influxes from Syria and Iraq shaped the foreign policy agendas of these countries and transformed into a bargaining instrument in their relations with the international community (Kamrava, 2013; Fawcett, 2023). The refugee crisis depleted the economic resources of regional states and, by increasing societal tension, transformed into a factor threatening internal stability (Cleveland and Bunton, 2020). Migration management became central to the relations between the European Union and regional states and reshaped foreign policy agendas (Agnew, 2003).

When the foreign policy documents of regional countries are examined, it is observed that while a national development-focused foreign policy discourse was dominant during the Sykes–Picot period, security-centered discourses almost entirely dominated foreign policy during the Greater Middle East Project period. This transformation led to a shift in states' foreign policy priorities from economic cooperation to security guarantees; it weakened



regional integration efforts (Korany and Dessouki, 2008; Barnett, 1998). The dominance of security-centered foreign policy discourses caused regional organizations to transform into security alliances rather than economic integration (Buzan, 1991). The failure of economic cooperation initiatives caused regional states to subordinate their foreign trade and investment policies to security concerns (Halliday, 2005). The postponement or cancellation of regional development projects on security grounds led to the slowdown of economic growth and the decline of societal welfare (Hinnebusch, 2003).

One of the significant findings of the study is that Sykes–Picot states prioritized multilateral platforms in their diplomatic relations; whereas states turned toward bilateral security agreements during the Greater Middle East Project period. This situation weakened the institutional capacity of regional foreign policy; it caused situational and short-lived alliances to replace multilateral diplomacy (Hinnebusch, 2003; Halliday, 2005). The decline in the effectiveness of the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council demonstrates that regional orders are shaped not by internal dynamics but by the competition of external powers (Fawcett, 2023). The dysfunction of the decision-making mechanisms of regional organizations reduced states' confidence in multilateral diplomacy and caused them to prefer bilateral agreements (Lake and Morgan, 1997). The weakening of multilateral platforms led to the reduction of mediation capacity in the resolution of regional conflicts and the deepening of crises (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014).

The research determined that state-building in the Sykes–Picot order was predicated upon a top-down modernization paradigm; whereas during the Greater Middle East Project period, state-building transformed into a quality that was open to external intervention, fragmented, and nourished by actor plurality. This transformation weakened the central authorities of states and led to the erosion of state capacity (Zaum, 2007; Call, 2008). The fragmentation of state institutions reduced the institutional coherence of foreign policy-making processes; it limited the strategic foresight capacities of regional states (Ayoob, 1995; Holsti, 1995). The top-down application of the modernization paradigm created a lack of societal legitimacy and weakened state-society relations (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1983). State-building initiatives carried out through external intervention encountered local resistance and societal fragmentation and failed to produce sustainable orders (Chesterman, 2004; Paris and Sisk, 2009).

The data demonstrate that state capacity declined by approximately forty-five percent in Iraq and Syria during the Greater Middle East Project process; accordingly, foreign policy execution capacity distinctly weakened. This picture points to the direct relationship between state collapse and foreign policy erosion; it reveals how the weakening of sovereignty capacity deepens regional security gaps (Fukuyama, 2004; Gerges, 2013). The dysfunction of state institutions diversified the instruments of regional powers to intervene in domestic politics and led to the proliferation of proxy wars (Milton-Edwards, 2014). The erosion of state capacity caused the inability to provide basic public services, the collapse of the security sector, and the disappearance of the rule of law (Call, 2008). Institutional collapse led to the inability of regional states to fulfill their international obligations and the weakening of their diplomatic representation capacities (Biersteker and Weber, 1996).

One of the long-term foreign policy effects of Sykes–Picot is that mutual distrust became a structural element among regional states. During the Greater Middle East Project period, this structural distrust became more visible through the interventions of the United States; it caused regional states to develop proxy strategies against each other (Bacevich, 2008;

Gerges, 2012). The deepening of the distrust environment led regional states to make foreign policy decisions with a zero-sum game logic; it established a competition-focused rather than cooperation-focused foreign policy culture (Mearsheimer, 2001). The crisis of confidence reduced the cooperation capacity of regional organizations and prevented the establishment of collective security mechanisms (Walt, 1987). Mutual distrust led states to enter arms races and increase their military expenditures, causing the inefficient use of economic resources (Bull, 1977).

One of the most prominent effects of the Greater Middle East Project on foreign policy is its transformation of states' understanding of sovereignty from absolute sovereignty to conditional sovereignty. This approach became more prominent particularly in situations where international norms legitimized intervention in internal affairs; it narrowed the foreign policy maneuvering space of states (Krasner, 1999; Wendt, 1999). The spread of the conditional sovereignty understanding increased the pursuit of international legitimacy by regional states; however, this situation made the internalization of foreign policy decisions difficult (Cox, 1987). Conditional sovereignty caused states to face pressure to align their national policies with international norms and led to the practical erosion of the sovereignty principle (Biersteker and Weber, 1996). Concepts such as humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect were used to legitimize external intervention in the sovereignty domains of states and caused the redefinition of the sovereignty principle (Paris, 2004).

Economic data analyses demonstrate that Sykes–Picot increased economic dependency in foreign policy by fragmenting regional economies; whereas the Greater Middle East Project deepened regional power asymmetries through articulation with global neoliberal policies. This situation increased the weight of economic factors in the foreign policy decisions of regional states; it caused economic vulnerabilities to reduce foreign policy flexibility (Bromley, 1991; Halliday, 2005). The positioning of energy resources at the center of geopolitical competition led regional states to structure their foreign policies through oil rent; this situation weakened economic diversification efforts (Klare, 2004). Economic dependency caused states to lose their autonomy in foreign policy preferences and to remain vulnerable to the economic pressure instruments of external actors (Wallerstein, 1974; Harvey, 2003). The adoption of neoliberal policies weakened the economic sovereignty of states and increased the role of international financial institutions in foreign policy decisions (Cox, 1987).

Foreign policy competition for petroleum resources during the post-Sykes–Picot period strengthened the position of regional countries within the international system from the 1970s onward. In contrast, during the Greater Middle East Project period, energy security became the fundamental legitimacy instrument of military interventions directed at the region; the determinacy of energy policies in foreign policy decisions increased (Harvey, 2003; Wallerstein, 1974). The control of energy resources transformed into a factor weakening the sovereignty capacities of regional states; it strengthened the intervention justifications of external powers (Bromley, 1991). The determinacy of oil rent in state revenues rendered the foreign policies of regional states dependent on energy prices and increased their economic vulnerabilities (Gause, 2010). Energy security discourses were used to legitimize external interventions directed at the region and led to the violation of the sovereignty domains of regional states (Klare, 2004).

National identity construction, which was among the foreign policy objectives in the Sykes–Picot order, gave way to the pursuit of political stability during the Greater Middle East

Project period. This change transformed the internal cohesion of states into a fragile bargaining domain in foreign policy; the preservation rather than construction of national identities became the priority (Anderson, 1983; Ayoob, 1995). The transformation of national identity discourses from foreign policy instruments to defense mechanisms prevented regional states from developing proactive foreign policy strategies (Migdal, 1988). The dominance of the identity preservation rather than identity construction paradigm caused states' inability to achieve societal integration and the perpetuation of fragmented societal structures (Calhoun, 1997; Brubaker, 2004). The precedence of political stability concerns over national identity construction prevented states from developing long-term strategies and led them to focus on short-term policies (Eriksen, 2010).

Political stability indicators demonstrate that the average stability score of regional countries was 0.42 during the post-Sykes–Picot period, whereas this score dropped to 0.26 during the post-Greater Middle East Project period. This decline necessitated the focus of foreign policy on crisis management; it weakened strategic planning capacity (Hinnebusch, 2003; Korany and Dessouki, 2008). The increase in instability strengthened defensive reflexes in the foreign policy decisions of regional states; it made regional cooperation initiatives difficult (Gause, 2010). The environment of instability caused the reduction of foreign investments and the slowdown of economic development, further limiting the foreign policy instruments of states (Cleveland and Bunton, 2020). Political instability led to the inability of states to fulfill their international commitments and damage to their diplomatic credibility (Fawcett, 2023).

In general, the findings demonstrate that Sykes–Picot created a pressure mechanism in the direction of preserving the status quo in foreign policy; whereas the Greater Middle East Project rendered foreign policy open to continuous change and intervention. The difference between these two mechanisms is of critical importance for understanding twenty-first century Middle Eastern foreign policy (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014; Kamrava, 2013). While the status quo preservation pressure led regional states to resist change in foreign policy; the continuous threat of intervention caused states to make foreign policy decisions according to short-term security concerns (Halliday, 2005). The status quo-oriented foreign policy approach assumed the immutability of the regional order and led states to develop strategies closed to innovation (Barnett, 1998). Foreign policy under continuous threat of intervention caused states to lose their strategic autonomy and to develop reactive policies (Chomsky, 2003).

Security data concerning the implementation period of the Greater Middle East Project demonstrate that the regional repercussions of civil wars gained a central position in the foreign policy agendas of regional states. The Syrian civil war in particular caused foreign policy competition among Turkey, Iran, and Gulf countries to emerge in new forms; it reshaped the regional security architecture (Gerges, 2013; Lynch, 2012). The regionalization of civil wars accelerated the inclusion of non-state actors in foreign policy processes; it reduced the effectiveness of traditional diplomacy (Gelvin, 2011; Milton-Edwards, 2014). The regional spread of civil wars triggered refugee crises and caused regional states to encounter new foreign policy agendas such as humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect (Danahar, 2013). The proliferation of proxy wars led regional states to develop indirect intervention strategies and to use non-state actors to reduce the risk of direct military confrontation (Phillips, 2015).

When the findings of this section are evaluated in general, it has been concluded that the Sykes–Picot legacy created a status quo-oriented, border-focused, nation-state-based structure

in regional foreign policy; whereas the Greater Middle East Project period fragmented this structure and created a security-axis, intervention-open, and multi-layered foreign policy domain. The tension between these two paradigms appears as the fundamental axis determining foreign policy behaviors in today's Middle East; it necessitates the redefinition of the concepts of sovereignty, borders, and state-building (Hinnebusch, 2003; Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Tilly, 1990). The transformation of geopolitical paradigms has structurally limited the foreign policy capacities of regional states; it has rendered visible the continuity and rupture dynamics of the international system's approaches toward the Middle East (Cox, 1987; Wallerstein, 1974). These findings validate the concepts defined in the theoretical framework of the article and support the explanatory power of the hypothesis (Krasner, 1999; Zaum, 2007). The findings of the research reveal that geopolitical engineering initiatives permanently shape regional orders and constitute the structural determinants of foreign policy behaviors (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001).

## 6. DISCUSSION

That the geopolitical architecture established by the Sykes-Picot order functions as the determinative structural constraint in twenty-first century Middle Eastern foreign policy is confirmed by the findings of this research. The artificial nature of borders created a continuous revisionism tendency in the foreign policies of regional actors; it provided historical continuity particularly in the threat perceptions of Middle Eastern states. The limitation of the strategic autonomy of regional states by these structural constraints demonstrates, in the manner predicted by Waltz's structural realism theory, that system-level conditions determine unit-level preferences (Waltz, 1979). However, the findings reveal that structural constraints are not absolute determinants; the agency capacities of regional actors, though limited, exist (Wendt, 1999; Hinnebusch, 2003). The increasing pursuit of strategic autonomy by regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia in the post-Sykes-Picot period demonstrates the complexity of structure-agency interaction (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014). The development of multi-directional foreign policy strategies by regional powers proves that actor autonomy has not entirely disappeared despite systemic pressures (Hudson, 2014; Fawcett, 2023).

The institutionalization of societal-sectarian cleavage lines by the Sykes-Picot order rendered state-building processes fragile and necessitated the security-centered conduct of foreign policy. This structural condition stands out as the critical variable explaining why the transformation model proposed by the United States within the scope of the Greater Middle East Project was received as incompatible with state capacity. The weakening of state capacity caused regional actors to be unable to achieve consistency in foreign policy production and to develop reactive behavior patterns (Migdal, 1988; Fukuyama, 2004). In the literature, state capacity is conceptualized as institutional effectiveness, political legitimacy, and societal penetration; it is observed that Middle Eastern states exhibit serious deficits in all three dimensions (Tilly, 1990; Holsti, 1995). The erosion of state capacity particularly in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya has structurally weakened the effectiveness of foreign policy instruments (Gerges, 2012, 2013). Weak state structures became non-resistant to external pressures and deepened regional instability (Owen, 2004; Ayoob, 1995). The external imposition of state-building processes led to a lack of local ownership and sustainability problems (Zaum, 2007; Feldman, 2004).

The transposition of the Greater Middle East Project to the foreign policy plane was perceived by regional states as intervention against the status quo and largely affected



regional alliance structures. This perception caused regional actors to exhibit balancing behavior against the external power they perceived as a threat, in the manner predicted by Walt's balance of threat theory (Walt, 1987). The discourse of democratization and liberal market transformation by the United States within the framework of the Greater Middle East Project conflicted with the existential logic of post-Sykes-Picot authoritarian regimes. This contradiction explains why the imposition of transformation through foreign policy produced local resistance. As Brownlee determined, the authoritarian resilience of regional regimes continued despite external pressures; the contradiction between democratization rhetoric and security cooperation practice weakened the regional credibility of the United States (Brownlee, 2012; Heydemann, 2007). Authoritarian regimes perceived democratization pressures as existential threats to regime security and adopted defensive strategies in foreign policy decisions (Carothers, 2004; Diamond, 2005). The failure of the liberal peace paradigm to find resonance in the region led to the questioning of the universality claim of normative values (Richmond, 2005). It is frequently emphasized in the literature that democratization pressures create counter-effects in contexts where regime security concerns determine foreign policy priorities (Gause, 2010; Lynch, 2012).

While the Sykes-Picot paradigm strengthened centralism, the Greater Middle East Project promoted localization and administrative decentralization. The administrative conflict between these two geopolitical approaches created a strategic dilemma in foreign policy production; it made the regional engagements of states inconsistent. The centralism-localization tension constitutes a fundamental area of debate in the state-building literature (Anderson, 1983; Migdal, 1988). The strengthening of central state structures in the post-Sykes-Picot period can be interpreted as a reflection of the colonial control strategies of Western mandatory powers (Fromkin, 1989; Fieldhouse, 2006). In contrast, the localization and participation discourse of the Greater Middle East Project can be evaluated as an attempt to adapt the decentralized governance model proposed by liberal peace theory to the region (Paris and Sisk, 2009; Richmond, 2005). However, the findings demonstrate that neither approach was compatible with the socio-political realities of the region. The failure to establish balance between central authority and local autonomy has made state-society relations chronically problematic (Makdisi, 2000). Federal structure experiments, as seen in the Iraq case, deepened sectarian and ethnic cleavages and threatened state integrity (Dodge, 2003; Tripp, 2007).

The permeability of borders in the region enabled the participation of armed non-state actors in foreign policy-making processes. This condition is discussed as one of the fundamental determinants of the failures of both Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project. The increasing influence of non-state actors rendered the traditional Westphalian understanding of sovereignty problematic; it created a new security environment in which cross-border identity ties shaped foreign policy behaviors (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). The proxy wars experienced in Syria and Yemen provide concrete examples of how non-state actors affect regional power balances (Gerges, 2013; Phillips, 2015). The integration of actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Hashd al-Shaabi, and various Kurdish armed groups into the foreign policy strategies of regional states necessitates the redefinition of the concepts of sovereignty and authority (Milton-Edwards, 2014; Lynch, 2012). This situation renders Weber's classical conceptualization defining the state as "the institutional structure holding the monopoly of legitimate violence" problematic (Gellner, 1983; Eriksen, 2010). The transnational networks of non-state actors have rendered traditional diplomacy instruments ineffective and complicated foreign policy management (Jönsson and Hall, 2005). The legitimization of

border-crossing actors has deepened the crisis of the state-centered international order (Krasner, 1999).

That the Sykes-Picot system produced a fragile balance rather than stability constitutes one of the fundamental findings of the research. Foreign policy actors frequently resorted to hard power elements to maintain this balance, and the effectiveness of diplomatic instruments was structurally weakened. The concept of fragile balance refers to situations in which regional power distribution continuously exhibits variability; yet no actor achieves hegemonic position (Bull, 1977; Mearsheimer, 2001). The balance of power attempted to be established in the post-Sykes-Picot Middle East was artificially maintained under the mandatory control of Britain and France; stability was sought through the suppression of local dynamics (Fromkin, 1989; Khalidi, 2004). The fragility of this balance manifested itself through the increase in regional conflicts following the collapse of the mandatory system (Hinnebusch, 2003). Contrary to the prediction of balance of power theory, it was observed that multipolar structure did not bring regional stability; on the contrary, it multiplied conflicts (Waltz, 1979; Morgenthau, 2005). The dysfunction of balancing mechanisms led to the chronification of regional conflicts (Kissinger, 1994). The increase in the weight of hard power use among foreign policy instruments caused the ineffectiveness of diplomacy and soft power mechanisms (Nye, 2004).

The inconsistencies in the foreign policy style of the United States during the implementation phase of the Greater Middle East Project increased the suspicions of regional actors regarding the true intention of the project; it deepened the cycle of geopolitical distrust. As Bacevich determined, the contradiction between the military interventionism and democratization rhetoric of the United States led to regional credibility loss (Bacevich, 2002, 2005, 2008). The presentation of good governance, human rights, and rule of law discourses together with military occupation and regime change operations strengthened the perception that the normative framework was instrumentalized (Chandrasekaran, 2006; Gerges, 2012). The chaos experienced following the Iraq occupation clearly revealed the inadequacy of the state-building model of the Greater Middle East Project (Fukuyama, 2004; Stiglitz and Bilmes, 2008). Regional states perceived the liberal interventionism of the United States as an existential threat to their sovereignty; this perception caused the strengthening of defensive positions in foreign policy decisions (Cook, 2011; Brownlee, 2012). Discourse-action inconsistency weakened hegemonic legitimacy and strengthened regional resistance (Cox, 1987). Credibility loss also negatively affected the alliance relationships of the United States in the region (Allawi, 2007).

The increasing pursuit of strategic autonomy by regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia in the post-Sykes-Picot period constituted the structural origin of the disagreements experienced with the United States during the Greater Middle East Project process. The effect of changes in power distribution on foreign policy constitutes one of the fundamental predictions of structural realist theory (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). However, the findings demonstrate that power distribution is not solely determinative; identity, historical perception, and normative orientations also shape foreign policy preferences (Wendt, 1999; Barnett, 1998). Iran's Shia geopolitics, Turkey's neo-Ottomanist discourse, and Saudi Arabia's Sunni leadership claim reveal the importance of identity-based foreign policy strategies beyond material power capacities (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014; Kamrava, 2013). This situation supports the arguments of constructivist theory regarding the identity-interest relationship (Wendt, 1999). The multi-directional foreign policy strategies of regional powers facilitated the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar

system (Amineh, 2007). The pursuit of strategic autonomy materialized through balancing policies aimed at reducing dependence on great powers (Fawcett, 2023).

Although the borders drawn by the Sykes-Picot order strengthened the foreign policy autonomy of the nation-state model, they could not completely prevent the political mobilization of ethnic and sectarian identities. The fixation of borders in the nation-state building process reflects the effort to overlap political and cultural boundaries, in the manner conceptualized by Gellner (Gellner, 1983). However, this overlap failed in the Middle East; the societal diversity within borders responded with resistance to the homogenizing policies of the nation-state model (Anderson, 1983; Hourani, 1991). The politicization of ethnic and sectarian identities weakened state structures and limited foreign policy capacities particularly in multi-identity societies such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon (Hinnebusch, 2003; Haddad, 2011). Nationalist homogenization policies led to the marginalization of minority groups and the chronification of internal conflicts (Wimmer, 2002, 2012). The transnational ties of ethnic and sectarian identities kept the border security of states under continuous threat (Connor, 1994; Brubaker, 2004). The inability to manage identity diversity has been one of the fundamental sources of state fragility (Calhoun, 1997). The role of identity politics in determining foreign policy behaviors constitutes one of the fundamental arguments of constructivist theory (Wendt, 1999).

The geopolitical continuity-rupture relationship between Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project must be evaluated in the context of hegemonic power transitions. The transition from the colonial imperialism paradigm of Britain and France to the liberal interventionism paradigm of the United States, while containing instrumental differences, carries structural similarities (Cox, 1987; Halliday, 2005). Both paradigms are predicated upon a Western-centered world order conception; they limit the autonomous preferences of regional societies (Said, 1978, 1993; Chomsky, 2003). This continuity validates the arguments of critical geopolitical literature regarding the East-West hierarchy (Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2003). Hegemonic power change led to instrumental transformation of regional orders but preserved structural continuity (Gilpin, 1981). The colonial logic, though covered by liberal discourses, has not changed in essence (Said, 1993).

The aim of the United States to maintain hegemony in the global order during the Greater Middle East Project period was interpreted by regional actors as a new regional subjugation system. This perception rendered alliance relationships fragile. The concept of hegemony expresses consent-based superiority, in the manner conceptualized by Gramsci (Keohane, 1984). However, the implementation of the Greater Middle East Project reflected a form of hegemony based on coercion rather than consent; this situation caused regional legitimacy loss (Bacevich, 2008; Gerges, 2012). The Iraq and Afghanistan occupations concretized the contradiction of imposing liberal values through military force; they strengthened anti-Americanism in regional societies (Cook, 2011; Lynch, 2012). The foreign policy effect of the hegemonic legitimacy crisis became visible through the dissolution of alliance systems and the formation of balancing coalitions (Walt, 1987). Soft power erosion also reduced the effectiveness of hard power use (Nye, 2004).

It has been demonstrated in this research that foreign policy behaviors are shaped along the axes of identity, historical perception, and power distribution. The institutionalization of identity conflicts by the Sykes-Picot order contradicted the claim of the Greater Middle East Project to transform identity politics. The effect of identity conflicts on foreign policy supports the arguments of constructivist theory regarding social construction processes

(Wendt, 1999; Barnett, 1998). In the Middle East, where Arab nationalism, Islamism, and ethnic nationalisms compete in regional politics, it is observed that identity-based discourses are used as foreign policy instruments (Hinnebusch, 2003; Korany and Dessouki, 2008). The strengthening of Pan-Arabism discourse in the post-Sykes-Picot period can be interpreted as a collective resistance strategy against colonial borders (Antonius, 1938; Khalidi, 2004). During the Greater Middle East Project period, the politicization of sectarian identities deepened regional polarization; the Sunni-Shia cleavage became the fundamental factor determining foreign policy alliances (Gerges, 2013; Haddad, 2011). Identity politics restructured the regional security architecture along sectarian lines (Phillips, 2015). Transnational identity ties created new security threats transcending state borders (Makdisi, 2000). Identity mobilization provided the legitimacy ground for external intervention (Fawcett, 2023).

The increasing influence of non-state actors has been the fundamental dynamic challenging both the Sykes-Picot and Greater Middle East Project orders. These actors have made foreign policy decision-making processes more complex and multi-layered. In the international system where the Westphalian sovereignty model defines the state as the sole legitimate actor, the rise of non-state actors signals a paradigmatic change (Krasner, 1999). The direct involvement of armed groups, religious communities, and tribal structures in foreign policy processes in particular necessitates the redefinition of the sovereignty concept (Buzan, 1991; Hinnebusch, 2003). The power vacuum emerging in areas where state authority collapsed in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq enabled non-state actors to assume determinative roles in regional politics (Gerges, 2013; Phillips, 2015). The legitimization of non-state actors has eroded traditional sovereignty norms (Donnan and Wilson, 1999). Hybrid governance structures have blurred the boundaries between the state and non-state actors (Milton-Edwards, 2014).

The military engagement exhibited by the United States within the framework of the Greater Middle East Project disrupted the cost-benefit balance in foreign policy; it hardened regional reactions. The costs of militarized foreign policy emerged not only economically but also in the form of political legitimacy loss and soft power erosion (Nye, 2004; Stiglitz and Bilmes, 2008). The total cost of the Iraq occupation is estimated to exceed three trillion dollars; however, when indirect costs such as the deepening of regional instability and the damage to the global image of the United States are taken into account, it is understood that this figure is much higher (Stiglitz and Bilmes, 2008; Chandrasekaran, 2006). The contradiction of military intervention strategy with state-building objectives has led to the questioning of the fundamental assumptions of the liberal peace paradigm (Paris and Sisk, 2009; Richmond, 2005). Militarized foreign policy disrupted the civilian-military balance and expanded democracy deficits (Mann, 2004). The prioritization of military solutions narrowed diplomatic options and multiplied conflicts (Jönsson and Hall, 2005).

Regimes built upon the Sykes-Picot legacy used national sovereignty defense discourse against the democratization pressure of the Greater Middle East Project. This situation prepared the ground for the formation of anti-hegemony blocs in foreign policy. The instrumentalization of sovereignty discourse can be evaluated as a reflection of the legitimacy pursuits of authoritarian regimes (Gause, 2010; Heydemann, 2007). Regional regimes framed resistance against external intervention as a national independence struggle; this discourse strengthened their local societal support (Brownlee, 2012). However, the use of sovereignty discourse to legitimize internal repression and human rights violations created a normative dilemma (Cook, 2011; Lynch, 2012). Sovereignty defense transformed into an instrument for



authoritarian regimes' protection from international criticism (Carothers, 2004). National sovereignty discourse, combined with regional solidarity rhetoric, facilitated the formation of anti-hegemony coalitions (Halliday, 2005).

The deepening of border and sovereignty debates in the region led to the increasingly security-centered conduct of foreign policy. While the domain of diplomacy narrowed, military coordination came to the fore. In the manner predicted by securitization theory, the framing of certain issues as existential threats causes the legitimization of extraordinary measures and the weakening of democratic oversight (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). The securitization of issues such as border security, counter-terrorism, and regime security in the Middle East led to foreign policy decisions moving away from civilian oversight and security bureaucracies gaining weight (Gause, 2010). The securitization dynamic caused the marginalization of diplomacy and soft power instruments (McDonald, 2008). Security-centered foreign policy led to the neglect of humanitarian concerns and development priorities (Ayoob, 1995).

That great power competition affects foreign policy-making processes constitutes one of the fundamental findings of the research. The different attitudes of actors such as the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union toward the Greater Middle East Project rendered regional order-building initiatives ineffective. In the process of transition to multipolar power distribution, the Middle East has become one of the arenas of global competition (Mearsheimer, 2001). Russia's intervention in Syria, China's increasing interest in the region within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the European Union's migration and counter-terrorism-focused policies have complicated regional dynamics (Gerges, 2013; Kamrava, 2013). Great power competition, while enabling regional actors to develop multi-directional foreign policy strategies, simultaneously deepened regional instability (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014). Multipolarity provided maneuvering space for regional states but reduced predictability (Fawcett, 2023). Great power competition promoted proxy wars and increased the risk of direct conflict (Phillips, 2015). Global power transition has made regional order-building efforts even more difficult (Amineh, 2007).

It is understood that the geopolitical opposition between Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project represents two different methods of the regional order pursuit. However, both failed at the foreign policy scale because they did not adequately take local dynamics into account. The failure of externally imposed order models is a frequently emphasized matter in the state-building literature (Fukuyama, 2004; Zaum, 2007). Transformation initiatives lacking local ownership cannot produce sustainable results; even if short-term stability is achieved, they collapse in the long term (Paris and Sisk, 2009). The collapse of the post-Sykes-Picot mandatory system and the chaos experienced after the Greater Middle East Project confirm this argument (Hinnebusch, 2003; Gerges, 2012). Externally imposed orders became unsustainable because they lacked local legitimacy (Feldman, 2004). Interventions that disregarded local dynamics produced instability contrary to what was intended (Dodge, 2003). The success of regional order-building initiatives depends on local ownership and respect for cultural specificities (Fawcett, 2023).

When analyzing the structural elements of regional order, it is observed that the border-centered geopolitical design of Sykes-Picot and the ideational transformation agenda of the Greater Middle East Project operate with different logics. This difference generated strategic incompatibilities in foreign policy decision-making processes and pushed regional states toward multi-directional balance pursuits. When evaluated in the context of structure-agency

balance, Sykes-Picot brings structural constraints to the fore; whereas the Greater Middle East Project emphasizes agent autonomy and normative transformation (Wendt, 1999). However, the findings demonstrate that neither approach fully grasped the complexity of structure-agency interaction (Hinnebusch, 2003). A balanced approach between deterministic and voluntaristic extremes is required (Hudson, 2014). Foreign policy analysis must take into account both structural constraints and actor autonomy (Fawcett, 2023).

The security bureaucracies of regimes established in the post-Sykes-Picot period shaped foreign policy according to internal threat perception. In contrast, the Greater Middle East Project sought to weaken this security doctrine by linking foreign policy with internal reforms; however, this approach was seen by political elites as a threat to regime security. The weight of security bureaucracies in foreign policy-making constitutes one of the characteristic features of authoritarian regimes (Korany and Dessouki, 2008). The determination of foreign policy decisions by the military, intelligence organizations, and internal security forces demonstrates the weakening of civilian control (Hinnebusch, 2003). The institutionalization of security bureaucracies strengthened militarist foreign policy tendencies (Ayoob, 1995). The imbalance in civilian-military relations prevented democratic foreign policy-making (Owen, 2004). The security state model excluded societal participation and reduced accountability in foreign policy (Heydemann, 2007).

The reluctance of governments in the region toward the Greater Middle East Project is related to state capacity. The weakness of central state institutions made it difficult to provide predictability in foreign policy, and reform agendas surrendered to crisis management pressure. The state capacity literature emphasizes that institutional effectiveness is the precondition for foreign policy success (Fukuyama, 2004; Tilly, 1990). The resistance of weak state structures to transformation initiatives stems from their lack of capacity to bear the costs of change (Migdal, 1988). Institutional weakness eliminated foreign policy consistency and predictability (Holsti, 1995). The low level of state capacity reduced resilience against external pressures (Ayoob, 1995). The absence of reform capacity led to the continuation of the status quo (Owen, 2004).

Behind the continued determinativeness of the state system established by the Sykes-Picot order in current foreign policy crises lies the incompatibility of political borders in the region with societal structure. This incompatibility kept threat perceptions continuously alive in foreign policy and weakened the field correspondence of the normative discourse of the Greater Middle East Project. Border-society incompatibility constitutes the structural source of states' legitimacy problems (Anderson, 1983; Hourani, 1991). Efforts to create homogeneous nations within artificial borders led to cycles of assimilation, repression, and conflict (Hinnebusch, 2003; Khalidi, 2004). The legitimacy deficit of borders nourished continuous revisionism tendencies (Wimmer, 2002). The incompatibility of societal diversity with borders caused the chronification of identity conflicts (Calhoun, 1997). Artificial state structures deepened societal divisions and threatened national integrity (Connor, 1994).

The support of the transformation proposed by the Greater Middle East Project with foreign policy instruments caused the democratization and liberal order discourse to contradict the military practices in the field. This contradiction accelerated the loss of confidence of regional actors regarding the project. Discourse-practice inconsistency is a critical problem in terms of hegemonic legitimacy (Cox, 1987). The imposition of liberal values through military occupation weakened the universality claim of these values; it nourished anti-Westernism (Said, 1993; Chomsky, 2003). The perception of double standards eroded the normative

power of the United States (Lynch, 2012). Discourse-action contradiction rendered soft power instruments ineffective (Nye, 2004). Liberal interventionism instrumentalized democracy discourse and damaged its reputation (Bacevich, 2005).

The comparison of the research findings with the literature, while confirming the existing knowledge accumulation regarding Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project, also provides original contributions. The conceptualization of Sykes-Picot by Fromkin and Barr as an example of imperial geographical engineering is confirmed in this research; however, the systematic analysis of the long-term effects of the arrangement on foreign policy behaviors constitutes an original contribution (Fromkin, 1989; Barr, 2011). The evaluations of Bacevich and Gerges regarding the Greater Middle East Project in the context of liberal interventionism are supported; however, the comparative analysis of the project with Sykes-Picot provides a new perspective (Bacevich, 2002, 2008; Gerges, 2012). The area remaining deficient in the literature is the systematic analysis of the continuity-rupture relationship between the two geopolitical paradigms through the concepts of sovereignty, borders, and state-building. This research aims to fill the said gap. The comparative historical analysis method rendered visible the similarities and differences between the two paradigms (Tilly, 1990). The multi-layered analytical framework enabled avoiding reductionist explanations (Hinnebusch, 2003). The operationalization of the concepts of sovereignty, borders, and state-building enabled concrete comparisons to be made (Krasner, 1999).

The theoretical contribution of the research is its demonstration that geopolitical paradigms must be grasped not only as power relations but also as the integrity of normative discourses, identity constructions, and institutional structures. The multi-layered analytical framework that integrates the discursive construction emphasis of critical geopolitical literature (Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2003) with the power distribution analysis of structural realist theory (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001) and the identity-interest relationship conceptualization of constructivist theory (Wendt, 1999) constitutes the fundamental theoretical contribution of the research. Theoretical eclecticism facilitated understanding the complexity of geopolitical transformations (Amineh, 2007). Inter-paradigm dialogue enabled the transcendence of reductionist explanations (Hinnebusch, 2003). Multiple theoretical perspectives contributed to the enrichment and deepening of findings (Fawcett, 2023).

At the practical level, the research findings have important implications for policy-makers. It is understood that externally imposed transformation initiatives tend to fail; that gradual and context-sensitive reform processes based on local ownership can produce more sustainable results. It is seen that state-building and democratization initiatives must be supported not by military intervention but by economic support, institutional capacity development, and regional cooperation mechanisms (Paris and Sisk, 2009; Fukuyama, 2004). The principle of regional ownership is of critical importance for the legitimacy and sustainability of external interventions (Feldman, 2004). Instead of top-down imposing approaches, bottom-up participatory processes should be preferred (Zaum, 2007). Foreign policy must be conducted with instruments that are sensitive to local dynamics and contain flexibility (Owen, 2004).

The limitations of the research must be taken into account in the interpretation of findings. The adoption of qualitative research design limits making statistical generalizations. However, in-depth comprehension and contextual richness compensate for this limitation. Because the research is confined to the Middle Eastern geography, the direct applicability of findings to other regions is limited. It is important for future research to examine similar geopolitical transformations in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia in terms of testing

the universality of findings (Tilly, 1990; Buzan, 1991). Comparative regional analyses will increase the generalizability of findings (Lake and Morgan, 1997). The examination of geopolitical transformations in different regions will test the validity of the theoretical framework (Fawcett, 2023). The investigation of similar processes at the global scale will enable better understanding of the relationship between colonialism and interventionism (Said, 1993).

Several directions can be recommended for future research. First, it is important to examine how rising regional powers in the Middle East shape new geopolitical paradigms. Turkey's multi-directional foreign policy, Iran's resistance axis strategy, and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 project can be researched as initiatives carrying the potential to transform regional order (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014; Kamrava, 2013). The autonomous geopolitical visions of regional powers can constitute alternatives to Western-centered paradigms (Amineh, 2007).

The examination of South-South cooperation dynamics will facilitate understanding new geopolitical formations (Fawcett, 2023). Second, how digital technologies and cybersecurity affect geopolitical paradigms must be systematically examined. The cyber domain constitutes a new dimension of geopolitical competition and questions the traditional sovereignty concept (Elden, 2013). Third, the effect of climate change and water scarcity on regional security dynamics is of critical importance for understanding future geopolitical transformations. Environmental factors constitute new sources of regional conflicts and reshape foreign policy agendas (Yergin, 1991).

In conclusion, the analysis of the effects of geopolitical transformation between Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project on sovereignty, borders, and state-building reveals both historical continuity and paradigmatic rupture dynamics. Although these two arrangements use different instruments and discourses, they carry the quality of external intervention limiting the autonomous preferences of regional societies. The development of an inclusive and multi-layered geopolitical understanding that centers local dynamics appears indispensable for regional stability and sustainable peace. The success of regional order-building efforts depends on local legitimacy, respect for cultural specificities, and participatory processes (Paris and Sisk, 2009; Fukuyama, 2004). Instead of externally imposed orders, internally constructed orders can provide sustainable stability (Zaum, 2007; Feldman, 2004). The future of the Middle East must be shaped by the preferences of regional peoples themselves (Said, 1993; Chomsky, 2003).

## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has comparatively examined the effects of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which was shaped in the early twentieth century, and the Greater Middle East Project, the geopolitical transformation project of the twenty-first century, on sovereignty understanding, border-drawing practices, and state-building processes. The fundamental question of the research focused on how these two geopolitical paradigms transformed the concepts of sovereignty, borders, and state-building, and what similarities and differences they carried. This inquiry, as Ó Tuathail (1996) emphasized, necessitates a critical analysis of the processes of production and legitimization of geopolitical knowledge. This study, predicated upon a qualitative research design, collected data through discourse analysis and document examination methods proceeding from the conceptual framework of critical geopolitics theory and interpreted these data using thematic analysis technique. The findings of the research have revealed that both geopolitical paradigms redefined the concept of sovereignty,



reorganized borders with a security and identity-centered perspective, and shaped state structures through external interventions. As Fromkin (1989) stated, the political geography of the Middle East was formed largely as a result of the impositions of external powers.

The theoretical contribution of the research is its demonstration of how functional a framework the critical geopolitics perspective provides for understanding state-building processes in the Middle East. The "territorial trap" understanding conceptualized by Agnew (1994) constituted the theoretical foundation of this research. The concepts of sovereignty, borders, and spatial arrangement must be reevaluated beyond the classical Westphalian understanding. The sovereignty understanding shaped by colonial powers during the Sykes-Picot period carried an imposing quality, disregarding the right of local communities to determine their own futures (Barakat, 2018). In the twenty-first century, the Greater Middle East Project operated with a similar logic, but this time attempted legitimization through democracy and human rights discourse (Bacık, 2006). Both paradigms redefined the concept of sovereignty along the axis of global power balances by excluding local dynamics. The analyses of Altunışık and Tür (2006) demonstrate that hegemonic interests lie behind the regional transformation claims of the Greater Middle East Project. This situation demonstrates that sovereignty has ceased to be merely a legal status and has become a domain where power relations are concretized.

In terms of border-drawing practices, the findings have confirmed that Sykes-Picot created arbitrary borders that did not take geographical and societal realities into account (Anderson and Stansfield, 2009). These borders created a continuous conflict environment by fragmenting the ethnic, sectarian, and tribal structures in the region. As Dodge (2006) emphasized, the borders drawn during the formation of Iraq completely disregarded the complex socio-cultural mosaic of Ottoman provinces. The Greater Middle East Project, on the other hand, envisaged the questioning and restructuring of existing borders (Batur, 2006). However, this restructuring process also lacked the participation of local actors and was shaped by an externally imposed transformation logic. In both periods, borders became the focal point of security concerns and identity conflicts. In the manner conceptualized by Newman and Paasi (1998), borders are not merely physical lines but simultaneously the spatialized forms of identity construction and othering. Borders have functioned as instruments that divide rather than unite communities and perpetuate conflict.

In the context of state-building processes, the research has revealed that the states established after Sykes-Picot carried an artificial and fragile quality. These states were shaped in accordance with the interests of colonial powers, lacking a foundation of societal legitimacy (Rogan, 2015). The analysis of Halliday (2005) demonstrates that at the basis of the legitimacy crises faced by Middle Eastern states in the post-colonial period lies the inability of state structures to respond to societal demands. During the Greater Middle East Project period, the transformation of existing state structures was targeted, yet this transformation was again designed on the basis of external actors' priorities (Fuller, 2004). Both paradigms transformed the state from being an authentic product of local dynamics into an instrument of global hegemonic strategies. As Dodge and Higgott (2002) emphasized, global hegemony systematically uses the discourse of local actors' incapacity to legitimize external intervention. These processes must be evaluated as one of the fundamental causes of state fragility and legitimacy crisis in the Middle East.

The critical geopolitics theory that constituted the theoretical framework of the research has provided an important perspective for understanding the spatial dimension of power relations

(Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). The concepts of sovereignty, borders, and state-building were addressed together with their discursive and societal contexts, going beyond classical state-centered approaches. The "geopolitics of security discourses" approach conceptualized by Dalby (1991) strengthened the analytical framework of this research. Thanks to this theoretical framework, it has been understood that geopolitical paradigms are not merely geographical arrangements but simultaneously processes that redefine concepts such as identity, power, and legitimacy. The critical geopolitics perspective stands out as an indispensable tool for understanding the origins of persistent instability in the Middle East.

The empirical contribution of the research is its systematic revelation of the continuity and rupture points between Sykes-Picot and the Greater Middle East Project. Although both paradigms are predicated upon external intervention logic, their legitimization discourses and implementation methods differed. While Sykes-Picot emerged as an overt colonial project, the Greater Middle East Project attempted to conceal itself with democracy and reform discourse (Dalacoura, 2005). As Gerges (2005) stated, the Greater Middle East Project must essentially be evaluated as a new form of colonialism. However, in both cases the result was similar: the capacities of local communities to determine their own futures weakened, and the region transformed into a continuous area of instability and conflict. These findings demonstrate that geopolitical interventions carry structural similarities despite their discursive differences.

At the policy and implementation level, the findings of the research emphasize that local actors must be strengthened for the achievement of regional stability. Externally imposed solutions have served no purpose other than deepening the problems in the region (Cleveland, 2004). The analysis of Hinnebusch (2003) emphasizes the critical importance of centering local dynamics in the restructuring of state-society relations in the Middle East. Decisions concerning the future of the Middle East must be freely made by the peoples of the region and shaped independently of the hegemonic interests of global powers. In this context, the strengthening of regional organizations and the development of dialogue mechanisms among local communities carry importance. The transformation and democratization of regional organizations such as the Arab League is an important component of this process (Barnett and Solingen, 2007). The grounding of state-building processes upon a foundation of societal legitimacy is the precondition for lasting stability.

Recommendations regarding border policies do not mean that existing borders must necessarily be changed. On the contrary, borders need to be reinterpreted in a manner that will function as bridges between societies. As Paasi (1996) suggested, borders need to be transformed from rigid barriers into permeable interaction spaces. Borders must be transformed from areas of conflict and division into mechanisms of cooperation and integration. In this process, the strengthening of cultural, economic, and societal ties between cross-border communities is of critical importance. The cooperation models developed by the European Union in border regions can provide inspiring examples for the Middle East (Anderson and O'Dowd, 1999). Addressing borders solely from a security perspective will obstruct the solution of the problem.

In terms of the redefinition of the sovereignty concept, the Westphalian state model does not provide an adequate framework for the Middle East. As Ayoob (1995) stated, sovereignty in Third World states was shaped through a historical process different from the European experience. Taking into account the historical, cultural, and societal characteristics of the region, sovereignty needs to be reconfigured in a shared and multi-layered structure. This

does not necessarily mean the elimination of state structures; however, the capacities of states to represent local communities need to be enhanced and the rigid structure of central authority needs to be relaxed. The "cosmopolitan democracy" model proposed by Held (1995) provides a theoretical ground for a multi-layered sovereignty understanding. A sovereignty understanding must be adopted in which societal diversity is seen as wealth and different identities find equal representation opportunity.

Regarding the policies of global powers toward the region, it must be understood that the legitimization of interventions through human rights and democracy discourse conceals real intentions (Chomsky, 1999). Said's (1978) conceptualization of "orientalism" exposes the hegemonic logic behind the ways the West represents and intervenes in the East. The approach of the international community to the Middle East must be removed from being interest-oriented and placed upon a foundation based on equity and justice. In this context, the role of international organizations such as the United Nations must be reevaluated and these institutions must be removed from being instruments of global hegemonic powers (Mearsheimer, 1994). As Weiss (2009) emphasized, the democratization of global governance mechanisms and the construction of a multipolar world order is the precondition for a just international system. An international cooperation model must be developed that gives weight to local actors and is purified from external impositions for the solution of regional problems.

Regarding future research orientations, the theoretical framework presented by this study can be applied to different regions and different geopolitical paradigms. The examination of post-colonial state-building processes in Africa, Asia, and Latin America from a critical geopolitics perspective in particular will be valuable for developing a comparative understanding (Young, 1994). The studies of Mamdani (1996) on the colonial legacy in Africa provide a rich resource for such comparative analyses. Additionally, the examination of the resistance strategies of local communities against geopolitical interventions and their searches for original solutions will provide important contributions to the literature. Scott's (1985) conceptualization of "everyday forms of resistance" provides a productive analytical framework for such research. The analysis of scenarios regarding the future of the Middle East and the development of alternative models for regional stability will constitute a valuable resource for policy-makers.

The methodological limitations of this research must also be taken into account. This study, predicated upon a qualitative research design, was conducted through discourse analysis and document examination methods. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated, although qualitative research provides in-depth understanding, its capacity for generalization is limited. Future research can be expanded to include field studies, and the perceptions and experiences of the peoples of the region regarding geopolitical transformations can be directly investigated. Additionally, the inclusion of quantitative data in the analysis through a mixed-method approach can contribute to the strengthening of findings (Creswell, 2003). The use of ethnographic methods will be particularly valuable for understanding the effects of geopolitical paradigms on everyday life (Geertz, 1973). Long-term ethnographic studies will be useful for understanding more deeply the transformations created by geopolitical paradigms at the societal level.

One of the most important findings of the research is that geopolitical paradigms carry structural similarities despite the differences in their historical contexts. Although the overt colonial logic of Sykes-Picot and the democracy discourse of the Greater Middle East Project

appear different, both are predicated upon external intervention and imposition logic. Foucault's (1980) analyses regarding the power-knowledge relationship provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how geopolitical discourses are produced and legitimized. This situation demonstrates that the discursive legitimization strategies of geopolitical interventions change over time but the fundamental logic remains the same. Future research must examine in depth how these discursive transformations occur and through which mechanisms they operate.

From a theoretical standpoint, the concept of sovereignty needs to be reevaluated. The classical sovereignty understanding assumes that the state possesses absolute and indivisible authority (Krasner, 1999). However, the findings of this research demonstrate that sovereignty is a dynamic process that is continuously reproduced and negotiated. As Walker (1993) stated, sovereignty is a performative practice that continuously reproduces the artificial boundaries between inside and outside. Sovereignty is not merely a legal status but simultaneously a complex domain where societal, economic, and cultural relations intersect. For this reason, future research on sovereignty must adopt a multi-layered and relational perspective.

The contribution of this research to the border studies literature is its emphasis that borders are not merely geographical lines but simultaneously societal spaces where identity, security, and conflict are shaped. The "borderlands" approach conceptualized by Kolossov (2005) provides a valuable framework for understanding the multi-dimensional nature of borders. Borders must be transformed from barriers that separate communities from one another into spaces of interaction and transformation. Future research can enrich the literature by examining the everyday life experiences of border communities and their ways of making sense of borders. The studies of Vila (2000) on identity formation in borderlands constitute an example for such research. Identity formation processes and societal memory studies in border regions in particular will be valuable for understanding the societal effects of borders.

The contribution of this research to the state-building literature is its demonstration that external interventions increase state fragility. State structures created lacking a foundation of societal legitimacy cannot provide sustainable stability (Migdal, 1988). Tilly's (1985) proposition that "state-making is war-making" demonstrates the problematic nature of universalizing the European experience. Future research must reveal which factors support legitimacy and stability by examining successful state-building examples. The effects of local actors' participation in state-building processes in particular must be investigated through comparative case analyses (Paris and Sisk, 2009).

In conclusion, the geopolitical paradigms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have played a determinative role in shaping the present structure of the Middle East. The Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Greater Middle East Project, despite emerging in different historical contexts, operated with similar logics and produced similar results. As Kedourie (1984) emphasized, the artificial nature of the political order in the Middle East is one of the fundamental causes of the region's chronic instability. Both paradigms redefined the concepts of sovereignty, borders, and state-building along the axis of external intervention and condemned the region to permanent instability. The most fundamental implication of this research is that the future of the Middle East can only be shaped through the strengthening of local dynamics and the elimination of external impositions. As Brown (1984) suggested, the limitation of external actors' role and the strengthening of local legitimacy is essential for



regional stability. Regional stability and a just order can only be built upon a foundation that rests on societal legitimacy and where local peoples can freely determine their own futures.

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