

# The Israeli-Arab Conflict from a Systems Approach

## A Japanese Perspective on International Studies

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### 1. Introduction

International System is a popular concept to describe a rough picture of international relations. In a systems approach for international politics, much attention has been paid to the system's structures. For example, in the expression "the bipolar structure composed of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War era," we identify a typology of the system. Most of those researching war and peace have recognized that the structures of the systems somewhat determine conflict escalation and stability in a region. The structures are defined by the principle of anarchy and the number of strong powers: unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. International systems are stable if they have the flexibility to absorb crises among the states. We are used to thinking about foreign affairs by using the systems approach as a starting point.

The systems approach provides a theoretical explanation for international affairs without contextual dependence on a history. The theoretical explanation is easily understandable to people without knowledge of Middle East political contexts, especially ordinary students in Japan. The systems approach may be also helpful for the electorates in Israel. It is common not only in discussions in IR studies or classrooms but in speeches of politicians. Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor mentioned the bipolar structure of the region in the keynote speech at the Institute for National Security Studies international conference on January 31, 2011. He said the "Middle East has one axis that wants stability (an axis that includes Israel and the moderate Sunni states) and a more radical axis that is seeking change through violent or diplomatic means..." (Meridor 2011: 14). Former Foreign

Minister MK Tzipi Livni, who also gave a speech after Meridor, highlighted a division in the region between the militant Islamic radicals and the pragmatic moderates. The radical bloc includes Iran, Hizbullah, and Hamas; the moderates include Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the free world led by the United States (Livni 2011: 21).

## 2. Problems with the systems approach

Despite the widespread use of the systems approach, it contains some problems. The main problem is that there is no consensus among IR analysts about the relationship between the distribution of capabilities and order in the systems. Some experts believe a system of two superpowers makes peace and stability possible, while others contend that a large number of significant states would surely prevent major wars. Otherwise, the existence of a hegemon is deemed to maintain order in the anarchic world. The IR community wonders if bipolarity contributes to a long period of political stability and if multipolar systems are able to provide flexibility to absorb a shock such as war; otherwise the hegemonic stability theory is true. Nye and Welch's *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation*, a standard IR textbook, argues that multipolar systems could not control the likelihood of war, but most wars fought in a multipolar-system context were short and geographically limited; bipolar structures can control the outbreak of war, but the wars that have been fought in a bipolar-system context have been long and disastrous.

What is the contemporary structure of the system around Israel in the Middle East? According to Meridor and Livni, it seems to be a bipolar system in which a moderate bloc faces anti-Israel radicals. If Nye and Welch are correct, the bipolar structure might be able to prevent an eruption. If a country releases itself from the restriction of the system and launches a war, hostilities would spread through the system and involve many people. However, the literature of the systems approach to Middle East politics regards the region as a multipolar subsystem under the influence of the post-Cold War system of U.S. hegemony. If the true system of the region is the multipolar structure, the system would permit sporadic and small conflicts with flexibility.

The purpose of this work is to redesign the concept of international systems to be a useful tool for every student interested in the Israeli-Arab conflict. Our method makes the concept more explicit, yet more intuitive, and less arbitrary. In this study, we focus on people's awareness of international politics in the region, since it seems that a political situation has created public attitudes. Professor Hiroyuki Aoyama (at Tokyo University for Foreign Studies) and I developed the "Political Mental Map" method to visualize the international system of the Middle East from a Syrian viewpoint (Aoyama and Hamanaka 2009). The map is a comprehensive overview describing public attitudes on how countries in the Middle East, the West, and the East contribute to stability in the region. It is shown as a scatter plot created from the statistics of poll survey data. We explore what an Israeli picture is of the Middle East or the balance of power in the region. The study tries to obtain the picture by using the Political Mental Map, not just a schematic diagram.

### 3. How do Israelis think about the Middle East system?

The national poll survey in the Middle East (Israel 2011) was conducted in the fall of last year among a representative sample of Israeli residents, including Arabs with Israeli citizenship. Our questionnaire asked the following: "For each of the following countries, please specify to what extent the way the country tackles the political issues contributes to establishing political stability in the Middle East." The five options were (1) very much, (2) quite much, (3) moderately, (4) not very much, and (5) not at all. This is an ordinal scale. I recorded the response in reverse order, and thus a better-evaluated country gets a higher value. Figure 1 shows the mean of the 15 country evaluations of stabilization in the region.

Figure 1. Israeli evaluation of how 15 countries contribute to political stability in the region

Israelis think that the United States and the state of Israel are tackling the political issues in a way that contributes to political stability in the Middle East. Israel ranks second-highest on the evaluation, averaging 4.05 on a five-point scale. This result is unexpected, since in the previous Arab polls (specifically Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq), citizens usually regarded their home country as the highest contributor to regional stability. The result gives

the impression that the state of Israel is dependent on the United States in Middle Eastern politics. Given that a score of three means “moderately,” only five countries—the United States, Israel, France, the United Kingdom, and Egypt—have a positive evaluation, receiving an average of more than three points. Israeli citizens are concerned with Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and the Palestinians (PA) as threats to regional stability. Japan takes a position behind the four destabilizing actors with an average 2.52 points. The assessment of Japan contains the largest number of missing values—144 people do not reply to the question among the total 801 cases—which means that Japan has almost no impact on the politics in the area.

To create the Political Mental Map, we performed a factor analysis run on the 15 countries evaluation items. It gave two distinct dimensions loaded in a pattern matrix. One of them appears to be the degree to which countries have a revisionist policy to change the regional order in the Middle East. The factor represents revisionism in the political process. The other concerns the direction of U.S. policy in the Middle East, because the score of the United States is the highest and higher scores are generally given to the governments cooperating with the United States. Figure 2 shows the Political Mental Map of Israeli citizens, consisting of the dimension of the revisionist process and the direction of U.S. policy in the area. Furthermore, we used cluster analysis to classify the 15 countries into five groups. Additionally, four of them were categorized into two larger groups.

Figure 2. Political Mental Map of Israeli citizens

Israel occupies the position in the ellipse containing the outside powers: the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. This group is close to that containing Jordan and Egypt; both countries seem to follow U.S. policy in the Middle East. Both Jordan and Egypt—perhaps because of their peace treaties with Israel—are inside the larger ellipse in the upper right-hand corner of the map, which can be called the pro-American “peace camp.” By contrast, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and the Palestinians form a cluster in the lower left-hand corner, which can be called the anti-Israel and anti-American “radical camp” or the enemy states.

It should be noted that, in the eyes of Israeli citizens, Japan seems to have a conservative stance and to remain independent from the United States on Middle East policy. Though Japanese diplomacy has supported the status quo in the region, Japan has its own national interests and does not follow American diplomacy. Japanese Middle East policy looks unique because Japan has not stopped importing oil from Iran and does not necessarily support Israel. Due to the evaluation containing the largest number of missing values (144 respondents did not reply), some Israelis may have no image of Japan as tackling the political issues contributing to regional stability.

#### 4. Description and interpretation

We should consider whether the Middle East is a bipolar system or instead has multipolarity. Israeli politicians describe it as a bipolar structure. Benjamin Miller, an Israeli political scientist, argued in his publication that the multipolar structure of the Middle East is composed of Egypt, Iran, Turkey, pre-2003 Iraq, Israel, post-1970 Syria, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The Political Mental Map shows that the regional system has not only the bipolar structure consisting of the peace camp and the radical camp, but also a multipolar character, with Jordan and Egypt adopting moderate foreign policies and Saudi Arabia in a unique conservative stance. During the Cold War the Israeli-Arab conflict was the result of a bipolar system consisting of Israel and nationalist, anti-Zionist Arab countries with no regular pattern of interaction. After the Camp David agreement, the system took on a multipolar structure. The system changed to obtain a flexible structure to permit small conflicts and the ability to control an escalation of fighting through diplomatic ties.

Figure 2 shows that Israelis do not seem to believe in the self-help principle, since they put the state of Israel in the position in the “peace camp” of the free world. In the case of Arab countries, the assessment of Egypt is higher than that of Jordan in Figure 1. The distance from Israel, however, means that Egypt retains strong power but is not a state with close partnership with Israel because of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Former president Hosni Mubarak avoided to take an anti-Israel policy but lost his political power. The next government will adopt a new foreign policy after a president is democratically elected. The Political Mental Map suggests that Turkey is involved in the anti-Israel and anti-American group composed of

Lebanon, Syrian, Iran, and the Palestinians. Turkish-Israeli relations deteriorated after Operation Cast Lead, also known as the Gaza War. The Gaza flotilla raid, an Israeli operation against six ships with Turkish and Muslim volunteers in international waters, strained relations further.

The “radical camp” is an isolated group and holds only minor power in the Political Mental Map. From the perspective of the systems approach, it makes sense for the Islamic Republic of Iran to increase its power and resist the threat from Israel. Therefore, Iran has a strong incentive to develop a nuclear device and is forced to do it under current circumstances; its ally, Syria, has been left weak from the domestic unrest it has experienced over the last year. The Iranian nuclear strategy is only a balancing act, but it has worried Israeli leaders and prompted arguments over air strikes on the nuclear facilities after the publication of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report on Iran in November 2011. Israel has no free hand to launch a pre-emptive strike unilaterally due to the constraint of the global system—the U.S. hegemonic system. From the standpoint of the systems approach or a Japanese perspective, the systemic constraint has forced the government of Israel to rethink its plan to attack Iran.

#### References

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