

# CHANGING SECURITY PARADIGM IN WEST ASIA

Regional and International Responses



*Editors*

MEENA SINGH ROY

MD. MUDDASSIR QUAMAR

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# Foreword

Today, we still live in an interconnected world, but one that is undergoing a profound transformation. There is uncertainty amidst growing nationalism, regionalism and diminishing multilateralism. There is a fracturing of power. States and non-states actors have the means to bridge asymmetry. Trade and technology are being weaponised and developmental finance is being used by some for strategic ends.

Traditional and non-traditional security challenges have grown in magnitude. The spectre of terrorism, especially cross-border terrorism, casts a long shadow on peace and progress.

The fragile international compact has been rendered a huge blow by COVID-19 – a fast-spreading and silent killer – which has quickly spread from China to the rest of the world. The pandemic has exposed flaws in multilateral structures and highlighted the lacunae in national capacities, particularly in healthcare.

Worryingly, the global economy is beginning to reel under the unexpected effects of COVID-19, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicting an impending recession. Global supply chains have been disrupted, including energy exports from West Asia. One wonders if the current situation will strengthen the trend towards protectionism with emphasis on domestic manufacturing even if it is against the principles of market forces.

The very notion of critical infrastructure in the cyber domain is changing with the growing dependence on webinars and online tasks, including for hospitals, banks and providers of essential services. The notion of national or global security is also being reshaped by COVID-19. Armed forces everywhere, often deployed in confined spaces, are facing tough choices in stemming the spread of the coronavirus without compromising national security. Beyond hard power and the threats of hybrid warfare,



nations will have to rethink possible future scenarios and create numerically adequate forces of well-equipped pandemic experts, doctors and healthcare workers, to be the new foot soldiers in this battle. The 21st century is likely to be determined by our experience of COVID-19.

Amidst these developments, the geopolitical situation in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) continues to remain fluid. The process of transition from authoritarianism to participatory politics has been painful and inconclusive.

A power struggle among the key regional stakeholders has complicated the regional security situation in the Gulf. The unravelling of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as well as the drone attacks on two Aramco oil facilities in September 2019 and the unexpected killing of General Qassem Soleimani have complicated the situation.

The situation in Syria, Libya and Yemen continues to deteriorate amidst growing sectarian, ethnic and tribal divisions. Thousands of people have been killed while many more have been displaced.

Iraq is yet to recover from the devastating civil war in the aftermath of the US intervention in 2003. The developments in Iran's domestic and foreign policy have a direct bearing on Iraq's future. The threat of ISIS has not completely disappeared. In fact, the militant group has metamorphosed into a 'cyber-Caliphate' through which it has been instigating lone-wolf attacks in Europe, the US and other parts of the world.

The regional disarray has led to new power dynamics. The role of the US as the dominant security and stabilising actor is being challenged by a combination of other powers – a renascent Russia, a resurgent Iran, and an economic powerhouse in China. In fact, Russia has emerged as a *de facto* major player in the Eurasian landmass. The rise of the Kurds, especially in Iraq and Syria, is a significant development, triggering the return of Turkey's military presence in West Asia. The formation of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFIT), an inter-governmental counter-terrorist alliance of 41 Sunni countries led by Saudi Arabia, can have far-reaching implications.

The sharpening regional rivalry has created a complex web of alignments and realignments between regional, international and non-state actors, including serious fissures among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

These upheavals have put an enormous strain on international and regional organisations such as the United Nations, UNHCR, the International Red Cross, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab League, in their efforts to resolve and mitigate strife. Arguably, the conflicts in the region have become the “long war” in a region full of faultlines.

The ongoing uncertainty has undermined WANA’s economic progress. The region’s economic growth is now almost half of what it was before the unrest began in 2011. Today, WANA has one of the world’s highest unemployment rates as well as the slowest GDP per capita growth. Given the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the region, the economic projections continue to remain grim.

Amidst the continuing instability and violence, the issue of energy security has assumed enormous significance for the oil importing countries of India, Japan, South Korea and China. Production and supply of oil have been frequently disrupted. The emergence of non-OPEC oil suppliers, such as the US as the world’s largest producer and a major exporter, has undermined the traditional energy dominance of Gulf States.

Given the fact that the Gulf is part of India’s extended neighbourhood, India remains concerned about the emerging developments. Today, the neighbourhood is being redefined not through geography but through reach.

In this context, India’s policy of ‘Look West’ has been transformed into a ‘Link and Act West’ policy. This is reflected in PM Modi’s unprecedented visits to all the major states of West Asia, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Oman, the UAE, Bahrain and Qatar. Some of these countries were not visited by an Indian Prime Minister in over three decades.

This transformation in India’s historical ties is anchored in shared interests and prosperity. India values its strategic autonomy. This has permitted India to have friendly relations with both Israel

and Palestine and balance its ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia as also Iran and the US.

The OIC's invitation to India to participate as the guest country and to address the inaugural plenary of the OIC Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Abu Dhabi in March 2019, is a reflection of the growing acceptance of India's as a key regional stakeholder. India's stakes in Chabahar continue to be acknowledged even by the US.

The Gulf is now one of India's largest markets, supplier of energy and source of remittances. There are about 9 million Indians living in the Gulf alone. Energy supplies, and the safety and security of India's large diaspora in the region are of utmost importance to India. At the same time, India's reliance on Gulf energy supplies has declined as it off-takes about US\$ 10 billion of oil and gas from the US in 2019-2020.

Defence Diplomacy is now a key pillar of India's 'Link and Act West' policy. It is predicated on countering terrorism and ensuring maritime and cyber security, investing in defence manufacturing, promoting greater interaction between armed forces, including joint exercises and military training, and capacity-building.

There is ample scope for strengthening ties and elevating relations to the next level. At a time when the fight against COVID-19 has become a global priority, India's offers to assist countries in West Asia have been welcomed. Looking ahead, India and West Asia will both have to face the economic fallout of the pandemic. India should help maintain the equilibrium in the region while strengthening relations with all.

To assess, analyse and deliberate on some of these issues, MP-IDSA organised the Third West Asia Conference on the theme *Changing Security Paradigm in West Asia: Regional and International Responses* in September 2018. With participation of over 35 scholars, practitioners and analysts representing over 15 nationalities, the conference deliberated on some of these issues over two days. As an outcome of the proceedings, the MP-IDSA is pleased to publish the contributions of the participants in this edited volume.

I compliment the editors and the authors, and hope that the contents of the volume will augment the existing body of literature available on the subject.

**Sujan R. Chinoy**  
Director General  
Manohar Parrikar Institute for  
Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi



# Acknowledgements

This book is based on the proceedings of the third West Asia Conference (WAC) organised by the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in September 2018. The Conference aimed to deliberate on the emerging security trends in West Asia and elicit views of experts from India and the region. In addition, the WAC discussed the challenges faced by India in devising its policies towards West Asia.

First and foremost, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to all the Indian and foreign contributors for their scholarly insights adding immense value to this volume. Most of the presentations during the conference were duly updated by the authors. We are immensely grateful to Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General, MP-IDSA for his wholehearted support for compiling this volume.

We would also take this opportunity to express our gratitude to former Director General, Ambassador Jayant Prasad and former Deputy Director General, Major General Alok Deb (Retd.), for their support in organising the third WAC and encouraging us to compile the proceedings in the form of an edited volume. We acknowledge the support extended by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India for organising the Conference.

This volume would not have been completed without the unconditional support and feedback from our colleagues – Dr. Adil Rasheed, Dr. P.K. Pradhan, Dr. Lakshmi Priya, Jatin Kumar and Nagapushpa Devendra. Prabhat Jawla deserves special thanks for helping us in coming up with an elegant cover design for the volume.

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Views expressed in the book are those of the authors in their individual capacity.

July 15, 2020

**Meena Singh Roy**  
**Md. Muddassir Quamar**

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### ***Contributors***

Shri M. J. Akbar is a Member of Parliament in Rajya Sabha. Between 2016 and 2018, he served as India's Minister of State for External Affairs. Shri Akbar is a distinguished writer who has authored several internationally acclaimed books, mainly on the Indian subcontinent's complex history and the turbulent interaction between faith and definitions of nationalism. His latest book *Gandhi's Hinduism: The Struggle against Jinnah's Islam* was published by Bloomsbury in 2020. His other books include *India: The Siege Within*; *Nehru: The Making of India*; *Kashmir: Behind the Vale*; *The Shade of Swords: Jihad and the Conflict between Islam and Christianity*; *Tinderbox: the Past and Future of Pakistan*; and *Blood Brothers*, a novel. In addition, there have been four collections of his columns, reportage and essays. His books have been translated into many languages. Shri M. J. Akbar's contribution to contemporary debate has been widely acknowledged. Among other things, in 2004, he was named a

member of the Forum of Islamic Scholars and Intellectuals set up by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah to draft a ten-year charter for Muslim nations at a special conference in Mecca. In March 2006, he joined The Brookings Institution in Washington, as a Visiting Fellow in the Brookings Project on U.S. Policy towards the Islamic world. He also serves as Chairman of the trust for the Calcutta Muslim Orphanage. Shri M. J. Akbar has also had an illustrious career as a journalist and editor. In 1976, he launched, as an Editor, India's first weekly political news magazine, *Sunday*, which quickly became a household presence. He started two daily newspapers, *The Telegraph* in 1982 and *The Asian Age* in 1994. He has served as the Editorial Director of *India Today*, *Headlines Today* and as the editor of the *Deccan Chronicle* and *The Sunday Guardian*. Shri M. J. Akbar entered public life in 1989, when he was elected to the Lok Sabha from Kishanganj, Bihar. He went back to media in 1993, and returned to public life in March 2014, when he joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and became the party's national spokesperson. He was elected as MP to the Rajya Sabha from Jharkhand in July 2015. In July 2016, he was elected for another term as MP from Madhya Pradesh.

His Excellency **Amine Gemayel** served as president of the Lebanese Republic between 1982 and 1988. He obtained a law degree from the French Faculty of Law at Saint Joseph University in 1965. In 1970, he was elected as a member of the National Assembly and served as MP till his election to the presidency. Apart from his political activities, President Amine Gemayel established in 1975 the French daily *Le Réveil* and in 1976 *La Maison du Futur* (MDF), a think tank with focus on Lebanese and Middle Eastern issues including the Arab-Israeli conflict. He is till the chairman and CEO of MDF. After his term in office ended on September 23, 1988, he joined the Center for International Affairs (Harvard University) till 1991. He afterward lectured at universities, research centres and political clubs on various topics tackling problems of contemporary societies. From 1999 till 2000, he joined the University of Maryland, College Park as distinguished visiting professor. Between 2001 and 2004 he joined Jean Monet faculty at Paris XI University as professor. In

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(1999). The last book, advocating unilateral disengagement, had a considerable effect on Israeli policy makers. Schueftan's recent books are *Palestinians in Israel – the Arab Minority and the Jewish State* (2011) and *The Israel-Arab Reader – A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict* (co-edited with Walter Laqueur, 2016).

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## **Address by Shri M. J. Akbar**

### *West Asia and India: The Power of Balance*

West Asia has become the most complex and inflammatory region in today's world. The ebb and flow of its geopolitics, schisms, conflicts, and aspirations through the past hundred-odd years has seeped far beyond the immediate region. Borders seem ineffective against this seepage. Indeed, conflict has become a virus that incubates in other wars as easily as it breeds in its own space.

There are, broadly, three reasons for conflict: geographical, ideological and geological. All three are at dangerous play in the region, from Pakistan to Lebanon, spawning multiple wars that sometimes interconnect and sometimes spiral on a trajectory of their own. We are also witnessing a new phenomenon: the 'long war', which is continuous rather than contiguous, and merely somersaults across any pause. Two good examples are epochal mistakes made exactly four decades ago: Saddam Hussain's invasion of Iran, and the Soviet march into Afghanistan. Neither has ended, although today's violence may be unrecognisable from the original cause.

Any analysis must find its way through the mirrors of history. Alas, there are far too many chances of being led astray, or indeed ending up in a dead end. I recall a seminar organised by a famous London think tank on the "Middle East" in which I raised what one hoped was a valid question: Which East is the Middle East in the Middle of? The geopolitical middle of Asia is, in fact, India, which has now become what should be described as a "pivotal state", for India's rise as a powerful democracy over the first half of the 21st century will impact developments in its expanded neighbourhood.

The "Middle East" of current usage echoes a western orientation, where an imagined east starts in Asia Minor which gets progressively major as new worlds appear on the horizon of navigators and strategists, ending with China in the "Far East". Far from whom?

If you do not get your geography correct, you are unlikely to get your geopolitics right.

A useful starting point for our present deliberations would be 1918. One dramatic consequence of the First World War was the collapse of three empires: the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Tsarist. These had ensured the comparative stability of a vast region from north Africa and Central Europe to the borders of China and India. The Bolsheviks quickly reasserted Tsarist boundaries, and imposed Moscow's rule under the deceptive garb of socialist Soviets. But the Balkans turned seismic. In the east, China's gradual self-destruction opened space for Japanese imperialism.

The biggest prize for the victors of World War I, however, was the space vacated by the Ottoman retreat in West Asia, with its untold wealth of liquid gold. Britain and France rushed to carve up this territory between them, using terms like 'mandate' as a thin disguise for their greed. But colonial cynicism could not subvert the rise of nationalism. Mahatma Gandhi symbolised the radical spirit of a new age when he demanded freedom and a new, just world order, shaped by the unique power of a mass movement propelled by a non-violent moral force.

Europe's superpowers, however, thought that their control over the world and its resources had strengthened rather than weakened. From the podium they proclaimed that the First World War had been a war to end all wars; but all they achieved was a peace to end all peace. Their war objectives were clear as early as in the winter of 1914–1915, when British and French imperialists moved to kill the "sick man of Europe", Turkey, and impose their domination on the Arab regions and, as a final and bleeding wound, partition Turkey itself.

Winston Churchill, Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty in 1914, persuaded his Cabinet that the Allies could seize oil-rich 'Mesopotamia' through a pincer attack. A naval armada through the sea of Marmara would wrench Turkey by the head, taking Constantinople; while a follow-up land invasion through Basra, and up the Tigris by the British Indian Army, wrapped up Iraq. Instead of glory, there was catastrophe. His "invincible" armada suffered a devastating defeat at Gallipoli, while the British army was

humiliated at Kut along the Tigris between December 7, 1915 and April 29, 1916.

The Anglo-French alliance reinvented its war plans. By 1917, it had obtained the support of both the Arabs and the Jews, in exchange for a dual commitment perforated with contradictions that would exact a price three decades later. But, the immediate rewards were handsome. After 1918, France took Syria and Lebanon, while a British mandate ruled Trans-Jordan and Iraq. It took another World War to force out the exhausted Europeans from West Asia, but they honoured their commitment to a Jewish national home before departure: Israel was born before the British mandate ended on 15 May 1948.

A division of Arab lands in 1918 was insufficient to appease the British-French appetite; they then tried to cut Turkey to their preferred size. On May 15, 1919, a Greek army, equipped principally by Britain, landed in Izmir [then Smyrna], and moved rapidly to capture most of Anatolia until checked at the battle of Sakarya in 1921. Despite an abysmal lack of resources Turkey's war hero, Mustafa Kemal, fought back from the edge of Ankara until Greece was driven out of Izmir in 1922. Kemal proved that he was genuinely an Atatürk by leading his country on an even greater mission – reform and modernity. He dismantled the barren Caliphate, thereby abandoning Turkey's claim to the spiritual and temporal leadership of the Muslim world. He also thereby closed the chapter on Muslim empires.

European superpowers stretched their colonial sinews to dominate the acquisition and supply of petroleum, and impose their will through direct rule or proxies. They were still strong enough to contain mass uprisings in India, Iraq, and Egypt, which Britain neutralised with repression, patience, and by co-opting local elites.

America, a new presence at the table but still in some ways the odd man out, made a feeble attempt to project a new world order through support for nationalism; but such incipient good intentions quickly faltered amidst cynical temptations: oil was certainly more attractive than idealism, and has remained so, even after the arrival of shale in the 21st century. [By the 2010s America had become a net exporter of oil.]

The transition of conflict from the 20th to the 21st century took many routes. If Germany's ambition, fuelled by resentment against reparations after defeat in 1918, linked the first two World Wars, then the true victors of the Second World War – America and the Soviet Union – quickly set up a scramble for “influence” in Europe, and competition for natural resources on the emerging post-colonial map. This confrontation may have been cold in Europe, but was certainly incendiary in other geographies, with Vietnam taking an iconic place in history. The Cold War entered its final phase after the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan; and Afghanistan was where a fourth international conflict – the war against terrorism – germinated. The 21st century opened with the terrorist destruction of New York's twin towers, signalling the potential of the consequential damage it could generate.

The principal challenge today for both diplomats and the security apparatus in West Asia, and indeed beyond, is the management of hostility in a mercurial environment. Governments are constantly measuring an adversary's pain threshold to ensure that any response to provocation does not raise conflict to conflagration.

The sudden – as measured by the snail-pace of history – expansion of nation states has led to its own set of tremors, particularly since a nation's contours are no longer determined by feudal dynasts but by the will of the people. It is estimated that there were around 55 national entities in 1919; there are nearly 200 members of the United Nations now.

Theory and practice were not always in harmony. ‘Popular will’ bred its own contentions, even as old imperialists found new ways of manipulation to extend their influence over regions they were forced to abandon. They often divided the liberated with almost as much felicity as they had once divided the conquered. Sovereignty in post-colonial nations was not necessarily accompanied by independence in decision-making.

For the six decades between 1915 and 1975, Iran proved easier to control than its neighbourhood. The discovery of oil in the first decade of the 20th century moved Iran to the top of imperial attention. In 1907, Iran was divided into three zones: British, Russian and neutral. This neutrality was hopeless. Iran also became

part of the battleground between the Allies and the Ottomans. The Russian Revolution of 1917 left Britain as the dominant presence and, in 1925, the British institutionalised their hegemony through a coup that brought Mohammad Shah Pahlavi to power.

In September 1941, an Anglo-Soviet invasion punished Pahlavi with dismissal for being insufficiently obedient. His son, of the same name but more pliant, survived a populist challenge in 1953 with the help of the CIA. In October 1971, puffed up by borrowed confidence, the second Pahlavi celebrated 2,500 years of continuous monarchy in Iran, starting his calendar with the coronation of Cyrus the Great. Eight years later, this fantasy was terminated by the Islamic revolution. America could do nothing to save its protégé, and was further humiliated when a military mission to rescue American diplomats, held hostage by young insurgents, floundered.

Iran entered an era of radicalism which challenged America's geopolitical strategy for West Asia, bookended by Arab co-existence alongside Israel, and tacit cooperation between the Sunni Saudis and the Shah's Iran, where its Shia identity had been subsumed by a place under the American umbrella. Iran cut the American cord. Riyadh acted immediately, using Saddam Hussain, a dictator with more bluster than ability, to try and abort the Iranian revolution. They expected Tehran's patchwork government – still dismantling the previous monarchy's institutions and disabling the Shah's armed forces – to crumble under Iraqi pressure. In the event, the war lasted eight futile years, drained the region's resources, ruptured the alliance between Baghdad and Riyadh, provoked a vengeful Saddam to seize Kuwait, and thereby write the death warrant of his regime. In Iran, the war enabled the Ayatollahs to emerge as the symbol of nationalism, and fertilise the soil for a new Shia arc of influence that now extends from the border of Afghanistan to Lebanon.

Iran became Shia only in the 16th century, with the ascendancy of the Safavids who established the Twelver School as the official religion of the realm from their first capital, Tabriz, and reasserted Iranian identity after centuries of Arab supremacy followed by Mongol devastation. Like so many Asian nations, Iran lost its way

in the 19th and 20th centuries; but its return to centre stage also revived an ancient aspect of the Iranian strategic perspective: its desire for influence towards its west, and the Mediterranean. Under the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini and his heir, Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran created a Shia state with well-defined strategic interests, and the ability to safeguard them with military muscle.

The Shia-Sunni divide was not the only schism deepening fracture lines. The Sunni regions were lit by incendiary flashpoints that included the dream of reviving the “legitimate” concept of a Caliphate. For these Jihadis, the abdication of a Turkish Caliphate did not mean the disappearance of the idea. It remained embedded in some part of the political consciousness, awaiting resurrection at some future conjunction of events.

One fire stoked by Caliphate ideologues was that elite vested interests in Muslim countries had subverted the people’s welfare, and perpetuated economic and cultural neo-colonisation; that the *isms* which succeeded Islamism – socialism, capitalism, or the myriad forms of autocracy under different labels – had failed to deliver; and that a revival of Islamic governance was the only means to salvation, both on this earth and in the Paradise that beckoned believers. The distance of time lent some enchantment to what I have elsewhere described as the “romance of regression”. Discontent joined malcontent to create magnets from imagined or artificial history. The past slid away from reality and into romance; in Friday sermons and in the more cloistered space of *madrassas*, the Caliphate became the “golden age” when Muslims were a “world power” instead of pawns at the mercy of the West.

The enemy acquired two faces: the foreign invader, and the local collaborator. The logic of terrorism against the infidel-hypocrite alliance elided across the conditions laid down even in the Holy Quran, like the specific injunction against the killing of innocents. It also rationalised ethnic cleansing of communities like the Yazidis, who had lived through more than a millennium of Sultans and Caliphs before they were brutalised, raped, and massacred by ISIS.

1979 was a swivel year due to three seminal events, of which the Iranian revolution of February was the first. In March, Egypt's Anwar Sadat completed a strategic swerve by signing a peace treaty with Israel, brokered by America. With this, the only Arab country with the military capability of establishing an independent Palestine alongside an independent Israel had been neutralised, opening up space for another nation to stand at the vanguard of the Palestinian cause. In December 1979, Soviet troops marched into Kabul.

While the revolution in Iran destabilised the status quo to its west, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan inspired a Sunni mobilisation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Pakistan became the principal sanctuary for both the ideological and military response, but the Jihad was not content with defeating the Russians alone. It sought the giddy "liberation" of Muslims from all kinds of "infidel oppression", lighting myriad fires. On the other hand, Washington forgot that those it was using might, covertly, be using America. All sides were playing with fire.

The most dangerous contemporary conflagration has been lit by Islamic-mould ideological terrorism. One critical threat comes from the fact that it rejects the very concept of a nation state.

Over the last century, after the rapid corrosion of colonialism, the nation state has become a central building block in the architecture of international stability. If European colonisation reached its apogee in India, then India also ended this era with an unprecedented mass movement led by Mahatma Gandhi, who successfully mobilised people on the basis of national identity rather than class, and the moral power of justice rather than weapons. Once India won freedom in 1947, the whole colonial project unravelled within another three decades.

The challenge before the post-colonial world can be measured in two questions: Do we know what to do with freedom? Do we understand the meaning of independence?

We can take some comfort in pre-colonial achievement: in 1750 India produced some 24 per cent of the world manufacturing output, while China had 30 per cent. Britain had just 2 per cent. By 1947, Britain had over 20 per cent, and India had been reduced



to 2 per cent. Without exception, colonialism nurtured local elites and created an infrastructure for its rule, but devastated the people. However, after many decades of freedom, such statistics are cold comfort to the people. They are tired of escapism and alibis.

We did not win freedom from our colonial masters in order to deny freedom to our own people. Freedom must include the right to democracy and speech; it must mean freedom from hunger, from unemployment, from thatched huts and the misery of medieval life. A modern nation state is defined by values like pluralism, freedom of faith, gender equality and economic emancipation.

India believes that the pluralist welfare state is the foundation of modernity in a world which can thrive only through the mutual co-operation inherent in a successful family. All countries are equal; there are no 'big' or 'small' nations. Obviously different countries have different capacities, but the era of aggression and exploitation, direct or indirect, is dead. This, in turn, becomes the basis of mutually beneficial bilateral relations, that can fit without friction into the cobweb of a multilateral framework. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India thereby has the best of relations across binaries. An example will explain.

In the first half of January 2018, Benjamin Netanyahu became the first Israeli Prime Minister to come on a state visit to India. Prime Minister Modi then went to Davos to deliver the opening speech. He returned to host all ten heads of ASEAN governments, who were special guests for India's Republic Day. Immediately thereafter, he left for Palestine – the first Indian Prime Minister to do so. After receiving Palestine's highest civilian award, Prime Minister Modi flew to UAE to inaugurate an international conference on governance. His next visit was to Oman. In between, India hosted Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Jawad Zarif. Then came visits by President Emmanuel Macron and Jordan's King Abdullah II. It is the same philosophy which enables Prime Minister Modi to maintain equally good relations with America, Russia, and China.

India's approach to China is based on the mature principle that differences should not be allowed to become disputes, and disputes

must not degenerate into conflict. Despite the occasional bout of tension, India and China have ensured that their border conflict is contained within the common commitment to a peaceful resolution. It is remarkable that not a single bullet has been fired across the border for over four decades.

India has clarity: the objective of its defence forces is defence. India does not have an offense force. On the other hand, India understands the meaning of defence: not a single inch of land will be vulnerable to aggression, and there is accountability if any Indian becomes a casualty to cross-border terrorism.

In West Asia, the storms of two World Wars were followed by tempests of regional turbulence. Economic growth, spurred by more equitable energy prices, proved less of a salve than might have been expected. Instead, it often fuelled, literally, volatility compounded by foreign intervention. West Asia remains of exceptional importance to India for high-value reasons, not the least of them being proximity: Delhi is only as far from Dubai as Dubai is from Cairo. The bridge between India and West Asia is durable because it was constructed first and primarily by the people. Governments tread where people have gone.

The world has long been in thrall to empirical theories like ‘balance of power’. It is time for the world to discover the power of balance.



## Speech by H.E. Amine Gemayel

*Former President of the Lebanese Republic*

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I would like first to express heartfelt thanks to Director General Jayant Prasad and his colleagues at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (later renamed Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses; MP-IDSA) for organising and hosting this conference. I would like also to thank Mr. Peter Rimmele and the India office of Konrad-Adanaeur-Stiftung (KAS) for facilitating my visit to India. I believe that a dialogue of this kind and especially those focussed on MP-IDSA's theme of the 'Changing Regional Dynamics in West Asia and North Africa' are urgent and significant. First, they are important because India is a leading player both on the global stage as well as within what we call the Eastern theatre. India is well-positioned to act as a decisive weight in the looming contest between China and the West. Therefore, we need every opportunity like MP-IDSA's biannual West Asia Conference to circulate the Indian strategic assessment among the wider audience and at the same time to bring diverse perspectives on regional and world affairs to the attention of key Indian policymakers and to all leaders.

Second, dialogues of this kind are important in terms of regional security. India's active engagement on the strategic, diplomatic and economic levels is essential for the stabilisation and development of WANA, meaning of course West Asia and North Africa. In short, India's intimate connections to WANA in terms of economic ties, strategic ties, and human and cultural ties lend a degree of unavoidability to its regional role. Unfortunately, this unavoidability also features some negative aspects. For example, India like the WANA region has been subject to a rising tide of extremist violence, including violence perpetrated by terrorists claiming the sanction of religion.

Third, dialogues of this kind are important from a country-specific perspective. Speaking as a Lebanese I deserve measurable affinities and parallels between India and my country. Both India and Lebanon are leading examples of non-Western democracy in action. Both embrace their role as a bridge power mediating between the East and the West.

Ladies and gentlemen, if I may, I would now like to survey briefly the strategic landscape of WANA. I will do so by sketching some prevailing and emerging strategic trends and by offering selected prescriptions for maladies afflicting the region. Given our format, I don't want to be long. My remarks are no more than brief forays into geopolitical and strategic vantage points.

The most important strategic dynamic within the WANA region is in my view the longstanding confrontation between the rival axis led by Saudi Arabia and Iran and behind Saudi Arabia and Iran a lot of other superpowers. This enmity is related to the ancient Sunni-Shia division within Islam but religion is more an instrument than a driver of the conflict. How do relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia play out? This play out will help determine the fate of WANA for the next half a century and beyond. Regional concerns such as nuclear weapons, state-sponsored terrorism and the geopolitics of oil will find no solutions in the absence of the Saudi Arabia-Iran accommodation. Likewise, the former leading states of Iraq and Syria are prisoners of the mutually hostile sentinels that stand watch in Riyadh and Tehran. Also, perhaps secondary in significance to disastrous external interventions, the power confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia has helped create ungoverned spaces that have been seized by extremist sectarian forces. The meteoric rise of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is the most dramatic manifestation of this phenomenon. Although every civilised person is reassured by the apparent demise of ISIS as a territorial state, we must guard against the danger that it may reinvent itself into an unbounded global jihadi movement, similar to its predecessor and rival Al-Qaeda. Here I agree with what I have listened to this morning from Mr. M. J. Akbar concerning the same phenomenon and the same issue.

Another key challenge destabilising the WANA region has been a succession of internal wars and state failures in Iraq, Syria, Libya and most recently Yemen. As of today, none of these countries enjoy sovereignty or even a semblance of it. Restoration of these sovereignties is a project that will span decades. Failing and failed states have created two burgeoning communities of misery, namely internally displaced people and cross-border refugees. The refugee flow from the WANA region has been of biblical proportion, catastrophic in humanitarian impact and shattering in geopolitical effect. If you take just one example, refugees fleeing from Syria's war march towards and across the frontiers of the EU have brokered bitter dissention within and among European governments and helped drive Britain out of the EU.

The geopolitical tremors coursing through WANA have been magnified by the impact of America's strategic withdrawal from the region which began under the Barack Obama administration and has accelerated under his successor. Recently, a former senior US diplomat offered this diagnosis of US policy in the region. He said, Putin is out to undermine the entire US security system in the Middle East and Trump keeps allowing him to do this as Obama did before but in different ways. Perhaps, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is determined to reverse this trend. He subsequently named the same retired diplomat James Jeffrey as his envoy to Syria. If the United States is in the process of a fitful and partial withdrawal from the WANA region, then it can also be asserted that Russian and Turkish military interventions in Syria have laid the foundations for a new strategic era. In expanding their strategic footprints in WANA, both Russia and Turkey are reclaiming historic roles. For Russia, it is a revival of the Soviet strategic posture of the Cold War; for Turkey, it is harkening back to an idealised Ottoman past. In the coming years and decades if Russia and Turkey maintain their strategic forward bearing in WANA, they will exercise enormous sway in the region. To take one example, the Russian military presence in Syria – especially the maintenance of significant air assets – may force the United States to accept the emergence of a potent alliance comprising Syria, Iraq, Iran and the Hezbollah and maybe Turkey.

I would like to conclude my *tour d'horizon* or general survey of the strategic landscape of WANA by some prescriptions that may perhaps serve as a basis for further discussions. A few moments ago I remarked that the Saudi-Iran contest is not in my view religious at its base. Therefore, the solution to this confrontation would be found through negotiation and a workable and sustainable balance of power. One that will, if not govern, at least discipline the Iran-Saudi rivalry and the strategic vertex it generates. By balance of power, I mean the construction of a power dynamic under which no single actor or a coalition of actors judges itself as powerful enough either to impose its preferred version of international order by force or oppose the emergence of a new order by force.

Of course, WANA has no regional security machinery to mediate or even ameliorate conflicts. But led by Saudi Arabia and Iran, a step in this direction could be achieved by launching a comprehensive security dialogue to address region-wide issues such as nuclear weapons as well as specific flashpoints like Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen.

After a WANA-wide security dialogue is regularised, it could be expressed into a standing forum that includes representatives not only of government but also of civil society, the private sector, ethnic groups and religious communities. In my view, amidst the reality of an unfocussed United States and an EU striving to preserve itself, India enjoys an opportunity to take the lead by helping to launch a new development initiative for the WANA region. Within the Arab world such an initiative could focus on good governance, educational improvements designed to foster, in particular a culture of tolerance, civil liberties and peace.

I have called Lebanon the Crucible of the Middle East meaning it is a place where WANA's trends, whether positive or negative, establish a presence and interact in a dynamic and not always positive way. Lebanon has direct relevance to the state and society-rebuilding projects that must be undertaken across the troubled region because it has been able, despite internal war and relentless external pressure, to prevent the collapse of our national institutions. Today all Lebanese parties and movements even if they trace their

origin to the militia era of the 1970s and 1980s, are attuned to the importance of national institutions as pillars of the state and society and that is what we need to rebuild in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and other Arab countries.

The Lebanese were experts in building bridges across sectarian and political spaces and that approach has allowed us against all odds and in the face of relentless pressures to preserve measurable degrees of democracy, personal freedom and national and community-level tolerance. I think the same could be said of India's remarkable achievement in preserving its status as the world's largest democracy. Primary to this lesson is I believe that India is well-positioned to assume a leading role in the WANA region. India as a natural WANA leader can draw on the traditions of reasoned statesmanship and dialogue that are associated with modern India's founding fathers. Thank you.





## Speech by Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour

### *Iran and the Region*<sup>1</sup>

Being part of West Asia and the Persian Gulf, Iran cannot remain isolated from regional developments. It shares land borders with Iraq and Turkey and maritime borders with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In that context, the important question that needs to be asked is, how does one analyse and understand the relationship between Iran and the region.

First, to be able to come up with an answer, some of the previously-held assumptions need to be revisited. One assumption is that Iran is an expansionist power and that it wishes to dominate the region; that Iran is a hegemon. In all these categories of assumptions there are clusters of sub-assumptions. For example, when one talks of Iranian “desire” for dominating the region, there is inherent assumption that it includes ideological domination of the region. So, the ideology of the Iranian revolution is brought into the picture. As far as ideological dominance is concerned, it is formulated both in terms of territorial and non-territorial dominance. It is also assumed that Iran is for sectarian conflict. That Iran is at the heart of widening sectarian divisions in West Asia. Finally, it is argued that Iran is a danger for the region. The alarmist idea that Iran is a danger for the region is the basis of policies of the United States and its regional allies.

These are extremely simplistic and reductionist assumptions. They reduce the totality and complexity of the Iranian position and policies to one single notion and they are very selectively used to isolate Iran. They are projected to create fear and stoke conflicts. Nothing in these assumptions is weighed on the Iranian capacity for shaping a better and more stable West Asia. So, it starts with creating fear, and a war environment and hence, endangers regional peace and security.

These assumptions are then used by individuals, think tanks and policy centres to securitise the study of Iran, making Iran a security issue. The peak of this process was reached when Iran's nuclear file was brought to the United Nations Security Council.

Second, it is important to understand the building blocks of Iranian regional positioning, or, in other words, what are the components of Iran's regional posturing and outlook. The first element of Iran's regional outlook is geography that leads to geopolitics. Geopolitics is clearly there and it is certainly a continuous process, if not permanent. It is the logic of geopolitics that sets Iran's relationship with its region and the geopolitical events. Iran is at the heart of at least five regions and connecting these regions together without being a part of those sub-regions. Iran is neighbouring the Arab world but it is not Arab. Iran is neighbouring Central Asia, but it is not a Central Asian nation. Iran is neighbouring the Caucasus but it is not a Caucasian nation. Iran is a neighbour to the Eastern Mediterranean countries and Turkey but it is not a Mediterranean country. Iran is bordering the Indian subcontinent but it is not a subcontinent country. The logic of geography and geopolitics determines how Iran is placed in the region.

Furthermore, there are a few important strategic and geopolitical shifts which have brought Iran to the present situation in its geographical position. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the most significant geo-strategic change in relationship between Iran and its surroundings. Why, because before that, there was an asymmetrical relationship between Iran and its northern neighbour for more than two centuries. But it really shifted after the disintegration of the USSR and the change in Iran's power position. The collapse of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2002 was also a very important shift, but more importantly, the collapse of Saddam Hussein's rule in Baghdad, which initiated a war in Iraq, changed the geopolitical dynamics in which Iran existed. So, it is not overnight that Iranian power projections in the neighbourhood happened. They happened due to the strategic shifts that took place through actions of other countries and Iran was forced to take steps to secure its borders.

Nonetheless, the anti-Iranian posturing and plans have all failed. The war in Syria had, and still has, a human dimension, but strategically at least one aim was to kick Iran out of the Levant. It failed and what is called a “push back” policy – pushing back Iran from the region – is doomed to be a failure as Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran failed. On the contrary, it created a different setting. Therefore, such geopolitics and its evolution is significant in understanding Iran and its relationship with the region.

But it is not only about geopolitics. It is also about the decisions and policy thinking. Iran takes its decisions by consensus, a lot of debate, a lot of interaction takes place before arriving at a mature decision on any issue. It is not just ‘go and take this’. On all strategic issues there is debate and the decisions that Iran takes – be it the negotiations on the nuclear programme, the signing of the JCPOA, Iran’s neutrality in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait – the list goes on. Unarguably, Iranian responses even to provocations to draw Iran to conflictual positions are measured. Iran evades the provocations meticulously. So, the human dimension, the bureaucratic dimension, should also be taken into account to understand the Iranian engagements with its neighbourhood.

Third, Iran is the only country in that region which is capable of providing its own security. It does not need to borrow security. It does not need to rely on others for security. All other countries in West Asia have to rely and borrow security from the United States. So, even a sneeze in the White House causes concerns and tensions in the regional capitals, but Iran does not need to because it is self-reliant. What is notable here is that Iran, both in terms of software and hardware, is not a proxy of the United States.

Iran relies on domestically produced security for both domestic security and regional security. So, for example, if one asks a question; who defeated ISIS? Was it just aerial bombardment? Just suppose for a second, Damascus was on the verge of collapse a few years ago. If Damascus was in the hands of ISIS and other groups which were supported by some of the proxies, what would have been the situation in the region? Iran certainly has to face certain challenges;

for example, it has economic challenges and there are other issues. But what is interesting is, the challenges are managed by Iranians and whatever is achieved is the achievement of the Iranians.

Finally, it goes without saying that Iran is a genuine regional power. Before the revolution, Iran was a regional power but dependent on the United States; but after the revolution that dependence ended. The building blocks of Iran's approach to the region are based in geopolitics. Iran is the connector for many regions and external events change the geopolitics in favour of Iran. And, despite efforts by external powers, Iran will not be pushed back from the region including all its neighbourhoods.

### **Note**

1. Adapted from the speech delivered on Day 1 of the Third West Asia Conference held at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, September 5-6, 2018.

# 1. Introduction

## Conflict and Instability in the West Asian Region: Multiple Narratives

*Meena Singh Roy*

The states of West Asia and North Africa (WANA) continue to grapple with dramatic changes taking place in the domestic and regional environment. Security has emerged as a significant concern. The political upheavals, civil strife, sectarian violence, and terrorism have regional and global implications. As the region deals with myriad socio-economic problems, many extra-regional players and non-state actors, and a few regional ones, are attempting to carve out their own areas of influence. These developments across WANA demand constant monitoring, careful analyses and more frequent exchanges among the members of the strategic community to chart a course towards enduring regional and global security.

The breakdown of central authority in states such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya followed by tumultuous civil wars underscores the volatility that post-‘Arab Spring’ West Asian states suffer from. Further, the transnational nature of ‘third generation’ Islamist terrorism, its regional potency and global reach underline the fragility WANA endures. The 2003 US attack on Iraq and the security vacuum it created in the country were filled by sectarian militias that took advantage of the 2011 uprising in the neighbouring countries and expanded their activities, especially taking control of territories in Syria and Iraq. Islamist terrorism has

become a potent and destructive regional threat that stands against all global, regional and local players. The terrorists, in their most gory manifestation, regrouped as the Islamic State (IS) or Da'esh, which in 2014-15 threatened to reorient regional boundaries and established a *khilafah* in the Levant. Though militarily defeated, the ISIS remains a potent threat. Its ability to continue inspiring lone-wolf attacks and attract youth from across the globe continues to be a major security threat for all countries. More importantly, the ISIS has metamorphosed into a 'cyber-Caliphate' through which it inspired lone-wolf attacks in Europe, the United States and other parts of the world. Many regional experts are of the opinion that religion is more an instrument rather than a driver of the conflict in the region.

In today's context, the most important strategic challenge in the WANA region is the Iran-Saudi divide, and the involvement of extra-regional powers competing for enhancing their influence in the region. Internal wars and state failures are significant characteristics of the region, prominent examples being Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria today. Failing and failed states have created internally displaced refugees as well as extra-territorial refugees. From the regional perspective, geopolitical tremors in WANA have been magnified by American policies towards the region, especially since the time of the Obama presidency. The reluctance of the Obama administration to fight regional wars and its indecisiveness in dealing with emergent situations, especially in Syria and Iraq, created a void. The Trump administration's shifting focus to the Indo-Pacific to counter Chinese influence has resulted in partial if not complete withdrawal from the WANA region. Similarly, divided EU has been striving to deal with its own internal economic issues and refugee problems. The present state of regional disarray has led to a new power dynamic, whereby the role of the United States as the predominant force for security and stability is being challenged by a combination of other powers – a renascent Russia, a resurgent Iran, and economically influential China. Russia and Iran have backed the Syrian regime which has reassured and strengthened their position, but has undermined the role of many regional players, especially the Gulf monarchies led by

Saudi Arabia. This has created a complex web of alignments and realignments between regional, international and non-state actors, including fissures among the Gulf Cooperation Council States. In this changed geopolitical situation, Turkey, Russia, Iran and China have been jostling for their own strategic space and influence in the region. Russian and Turkish military interventions in Syria have laid the foundations for a new strategic era in the region, with Turkey harking back to an idealised Ottoman past.

For one, Turkey under Erdogan has adopted an aggressive foreign policy, particularly with its neighbours. Its interference in the internal affairs of Syria, Egypt and Libya has been termed as Erdogan's quest for "neo-Ottomanism". With its recent military involvement in Libya, Ankara has locked horns with Egypt and the UAE. Similarly, its relations with Saudi Arabia have been damaged seriously in the light of the handling of the Khashoggi murder, and statements questioning the Saudi custodianship of the Kaaba and the Prophet's Mosque. Erdogan's ambition of creating its place in the Islamic World is driving its aggressive foreign policy. In this new strategic environment, Turkey has started building new equations with Russia, Qatar, Iran and China, even if they are going to be for the short term until Ankara's interests are served. Simultaneously, it is trying to mend fences with Europe and the US, given the economic and trade links.

Similarly, the concern over growing Iranian influence in the region has brought Arab states and Israel closer without any formal acknowledgement. Egypt, while continuing to face internal disturbances, has engaged with both the United States and Russia to contain the effects of the Libyan crisis from spilling over to Maghreb. Although recent developments – especially the Government of National Accord's (GNA) military gain over General Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army (LNA) – have weakened Egypt's position in Libya, since there is involvement of the external powers in the Libyan crisis, this has only aggravated the situation. Conflict in Libya is far from any solution because of geostrategic competition between Egypt, Russia, and the UAE on the one side and Qatar and Turkey on the other. As of now, there are no signs



of finding peace and stability in Libya. The impact of terrorism and the refugee crisis in Europe – both originating from WANA – and the response by European society and leadership to these threats, open newer dynamics in global and regional politics and threaten to revive older fault lines between Turkey and Europe. With civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya emerging as the major theatres of conflict, the entire region has been adversely affected by the regional tumult.

The Russian involvement in Syria and its ability to alter the power dynamics back in favour of the regime has made it a *de facto* regional player. Its influence and role in the region has increased immensely. President Vladimir Putin, with his aggressive involvement and active diplomacy has been able to secure Russia's long-term eminence in the WANA region. Moscow's military intervention in Syria in 2015 was the turning point, officially restoring Russia as a key player in regional geopolitics. Thereafter, its presence and involvement continued to grow. In 2019, Moscow's strategies signalled its continued desire to sustain its strategic space in Syria and build stronger ties with other Gulf partners. Its policies were focused on maximising opportunities in the region with a minimum of commitment or potential for losses.

Throughout WANA, Russia has been ubiquitous, with its growing political, security and military linkages. Russia's growing involvement was in many ways facilitated by the lack of any comprehensive US strategy towards the region. Some believe that "Russia has made inroads in the Middle East at the expense of US power".<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, its role in Syria was acknowledged by President Trump. He thanked Putin for facilitating the operation to kill Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISIS leader. Despite Moscow's strong ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia gave a red-carpet welcome to President Putin. More importantly, Russia's role in the region in general and Syria in particular, has made Moscow a crucial actor for regional countries including the US allies. Some of the examples are those of Turkey, the Kurds and the Bashar Al-Assad regime. All three have engaged Russia to protect their security interests. Turkey has fallen deep into Moscow's sphere of influence, not only enhancing political

ties but also buying the S-400 system, a deal opposed by the Trump administration.<sup>2</sup>

The Arab Gulf countries have been equally welcoming about deepening their ties with Moscow. Growing Arab-Russia ties are viewed by the Gulf leadership as a counterbalance to the Iran-Russia partnership. This perception becomes more important in the light of the shifting focus of the Trump administration towards East Asia as compared to West Asia. President Putin's first visit since 2007 in October 2019 to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, highlighted his desire to build stronger ties with these two vital Gulf states assuring its Gulf partners that Russia-Iran relations were not against them.

Major regional players like Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt as brought out earlier have been involved in conflict zones in more than one country. While the entry of Russia is notable, the rise of the Kurds and a resurgent Kurdish nationalism, especially in Iraq and Syria and its impact on regional politics, cannot be ignored even though their main ally the US has in many ways abandoned them. Kurdish militias have proved to be a major force in fighting the ISIS and in return were looking to stake claim to the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. This unnerved Turkey which is struggling with a resurgent PKK (Kurdish: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*) at home and hence intervened militarily in northern Syria to prevent Syrian Kurds from achieving Iraq-like autonomy. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq is weighing its chances of pushing for larger autonomy. Competing interests of major players like Turkey, Iran, Russia and the US have complicated the situation in Syria. A recently held virtual meeting on the Astana peace process indicated that, despite their differences, Russia, Iran and Turkey are looking at accommodating each other's interests. Besides, the signing of the "Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019" (The Caesar Act) by President Trump on December 20, 2019 has subjected the war-torn country to crippling economic sanctions at a time when the Bashar al-Assad regime has established its control over 60 per cent of the country and needs financial resources to rebuild.<sup>3</sup> Given the complicated situation and external interventions, the Syrian crisis is far from being resolved.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are locked in rivalry. Iran has significantly enhanced its footprints through allies and powerful non-state actors such as the Hezbollah, Hamas, Ansarallah (Houthi militia in Yemen) and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has been vocal in condemning Iran for the regional turmoil. The formation of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFI), an inter-governmental counter-terrorist alliance of 41 Sunni countries led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is a significant development with possibly far-reaching implications. Among some independent observers, this Sunni grouping of militaries is viewed to be as much a front against terrorist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda, as it is against the growing Shiite ascendance in the region, led by Iran. The mainly geopolitical rivalry has been punctuated by deeply entrenched sectarian animosity, through proxies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. This rivalry is only getting intensified. The Iran-Saudi rivalry which manifested itself through the contestation in Yemen also became pronounced during 2019 with attacks on Aramco facilities. In September, a missile hit the Aramco facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, sending oil prices soaring to a seasonal high of US\$ 71.95 a barrel as the markets opened. Even though the Houthis in Yemen took responsibility for the attack, Riyadh alleged a clear Iranian involvement. The brewing conflict reached a flashpoint when two suspected rockets hit an Iranian oil tanker in the Red Sea, off the coast of the Saudi city of Jeddah.

The US policy in the region has been disruptive and full of uncertainty. It has created greater confusion even amongst its regional allies. In WANA, its policy has been focussed on containing and limiting the Iranian influence. To achieve this Washington pursued its “maximum pressure” policy against Iran, resulting in the rise of rhetorical exchanges between the two nations, particularly on Twitter. The year 2019 was marked by posturing and brinkmanship, not seen since decades between two nation-states. In April 2019, the US Department of State branded the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). In response, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), the apex decision-making body on security and foreign policy issues in Iran, designated the US’ Central Command

(CENTCOM) as a terrorist organisation. One of the key issues central to Iran-US relations was the Nuclear Deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In 2019, the JCPOA was one of the major casualties of deteriorating Iran-US relations. The US withdrawal and the Trump administration's increasing sanctions on Iran and the EU's inability to save the nuclear deal resulted in Tehran gradually scaling back on its commitment to the JCPOA. The second important issue that received attention of the Trump administration was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and finding a solution to this longstanding problem. This got manifested in his recently announced "deal of the century", notwithstanding the fact that it was unacceptable not only to the Palestinians but also to many in the Arab world. The other important issue pertaining to the Trump administration's Gulf policy was the signing of major defence deals with its Gulf partners. Despite Washington's desire to scale down its presence in the region its military presence continues.

Trump's Iran policy, which is also known as the "maximum pressure" policy, has not only failed to force Tehran to change course, but also pushed Iranian policymakers from both ends of the political spectrum to speak in one voice when it comes to Iran's strategic positioning in the region. The course of events in the past few months demonstrates how Iran's entrenchment in the region is a direct response to the US' provocative behaviour. As the assassination of Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani took America's maximum pressure campaign to the next level Iran has increased its support to militia groups in Iraq. In less than a week after Soleimani's death, the Iranian parliament allocated €200 million as additional budget to the Quds Force branch of IRGC.<sup>4</sup> From an Iranian perspective, the Trump Administration's "Iran policy has resulted in a dismal outcome for both the US and Iran – and indeed the whole world".<sup>5</sup> The imposition of new sanctions is considered unhelpful in finding any solution to the Iranian nuclear issue. It is argued that:

Recent developments suggest the White House and Israel are trying to confront Iran before the US presidential election in November, a path destined to escalate instability across the Middle

East. Forcing the return of UN sanctions on Iran against the will of the rest of the council would tarnish the body's credibility, undermine multilateralism and sabotage the role of the UN. The "maximum pressure" strategy employed by the US has created a lose-lose outcome for both the US and Iran, along with the entire Middle East region and the international community. This vicious cycle needs to end, and it is high time the Trump administration recognises the folly of pursuing it.<sup>6</sup>

Other regional experts have argued that, "... while economic sanctions could reduce Iran's influence, they cannot eliminate it as a key player in the Middle East".<sup>7</sup> Looking at the great power rivalries and competitions in the region the fact remains that balance of power needs to be maintained. Experts like James M. Dorsey are of the opinion that, "No matter how the tug of war in the Middle East evolves, the silver lining is that, like China, the United States despite its desire to reduce its commitment cannot afford a power void in the region."<sup>8</sup>

An important regional narrative was articulated by the former President of Lebanon Amine Gemayel, who recommended some suggestions for conduct in the region in his address during the West Asia conference in September 2018. These were mainly: (a) the solution to the Iran-Saudi Arabian divide can be found in having sustainable balance of power. There has to be construction of a power dynamic where no actor or group(s) of actors can impose their version of order by force. (b) There is a need to work towards launching a series of dialogues between Iran and Saudi Arabia and addressing the key regional issues that impact all. (c) India enjoys an opportunity to launch a new development initiative for countries in the region, especially on issues such as good governance practices.

An interesting narrative on North Africa has been articulated by Mohammed Benhammou in the 'New Security Challenges in North Africa and Sahel Region: A Moroccan Approach'. According to him the Arab uprising was not a spring but the beginning of turmoil in the region. The Sahel (Sahara region) has weak and failed states and is riddled with intra-state conflicts and porous borders. These complex issues make the region more vulnerable when it comes to

the issue of security and defence. The main reasons for instability in the region are political instability and bad governance in the region. After the decline and defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq many terrorist fighters entered the Sahel and their proliferation and fragmentation continues. Transnational terrorism includes transnational organised crime, illegal immigration and drug trafficking are key challenges in the region. When it comes to drug trafficking, cocaine coming from the Latin America is a big concern for the region which needs to be dealt with tactfully. About 21 per cent of the cocaine in the market originates from Western Africa and Sahel-Sahara region. A complex situation that is unfolding in North Africa makes it vulnerable to instability. For example, economic uncertainty and the proliferation of militia and tribes in Libya further complicate the issues of the region. Its leaders act more as peace breakers than peace makers. Other weak states in the region include Tunisia and Algeria. Although Morocco wants to have stability and peace in its neighbouring region, the closed border between Algeria and Morocco adds to the complexity of the situation. While Morocco is the most peaceful state and can play a pivotal role in bringing peace in the Sahel and North Africa, and is therefore working to find a way to work with the neighbours. The Moroccan approach to resolve the issues of the region are based on three pillars: (a) The response towards terrorism and terrorist attacks: the country has developed a set of security governance as a unique set of responses, especially after the Casablanca attack; (b) Human Development, which started with the programme, 'National Initiative for Human Development' for the backward regions; and (c) The rebuilding of the religious space of prayer that started two decades ago. Through this space there is training of the imams and rebuilding of right narratives. The success of this programme can be gauged from the fact that African, Arab and European countries have started sending their imams for this training to bring positive change in their society. And last but not the least is the regional and international cooperation which starts by building confidence between countries, especially when it pertains to sharing intelligence to fight terrorism. What is significant to note is that, from the Moroccan perspective, the defeat of ISIS is

not the end of the story; there are many other transnational groups that need to be tackled.

Amidst these developments, the role of militaries and their relations with various regimes has been crucial in determining the stability and integrity of several states and is an important facet of regional security. Similarly, the role of international and regional organizations such as the United Nations, the UNHCR, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Arab League, the International Red Cross, etc. goes largely unnoticed. The conflict-ridden areas of WANA – from Syria, Iraq and Libya to Yemen – have put a strain on these organisations in working constructively for conflict resolution and crisis mitigation.

In addition to the aforesaid challenges and uncertainties, today the WANA region has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic like other parts of the world. However, being fragile and conflict-ridden, the threats for the region are amplified. Conflicts, civil wars, failing states and refugee and humanitarian crises coupled with instability in the international oil market and the severity of economic stress make the spread of COVID-19 one of the worst challenges for the region. Besides being a threat to public health, the pandemic is a regional strategic challenge that demands an urgent and collective response. However, geopolitical competitions have limited the ability of the West Asian countries to take collective action so far. As a result, the region will be exposed to a new set of challenges and threats in future.

India has expressed its concerns about recent developments taking place in the region. The spread of the ISIS remains a major worry with some Indian youth having joined the organisation. The execution of some Indian citizens by the ISIS in Iraq was also a matter of concern. It has huge stakes in the region because of its energy dependence, increasing trade and commerce, as also the safety of around 9 million Indian expatriates and workers. With a large Indian expatriate population in the GCC alone, deep human links exist between the two sides. The sovereign wealth funds of these countries are already investing in India's infrastructure sector. Trade relations and security partnerships

particularly in counter-terrorism, are other facets of cooperation between India and several states of the region. However, there is ample scope for strengthening ties and taking relations to higher levels, even as India walks a diplomatic tightrope in a highly fractious regional setting. India has links with the Gulf but rising security concerns have created a situation where it cannot remain indifferent. Hence, India has intensified its engagements with the region and has remained neutral on complex regional issues while being sensitive to threats emanating from terrorism.

In the light of the foregoing, the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) organised the Third West Asia Conference in September 2018 to deliberate on the above-mentioned issues and emerging trends. An important reason for organising this international conference has been to get varied narratives from experts, officials and researchers from the region, which has also been a part of the Institute's outreach activity with the think tanks based in the WANA region. The present volume is a collection of articles and speeches presented at the Conference and subsequently updated by the authors. The authors have covered wide-ranging regional issues, major security trends, the impact of ongoing civil wars and conflicts, the role of regional and external players and bilateral relations. The book includes three important speeches by eminent personalities from India, Lebanon and Iran followed by twelve chapters.

Seyed Hossein Mousavian in his chapter titled "Iran-Saudi Arabia Conflict and the Path to Peace" elucidates various dimensions of Iran-Saudi rivalry as manifested in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar and elsewhere in the region. In an era of uncertainty in West Asia driven by Iran-Saudi competition, he offers options for both rivals to "pursue avenues of cooperation". This in his view is the only way forward for peace in the region.

Another important narrative from the region is provided by the eminent Israeli scholar Dan Schueftan in his chapter, "Arab Hopelessness and its Strategic Consequences". In his opinion, the region is infected with violence and instability for many decades but never before were the objective realities so depressing, the chances of



recovery so low and the people so disheartened as now. In his opinion “Arab West Asia is all but hopeless for the foreseeable future”. He argues that the failings of the Arab societies are the major cause of problems and challenges prevalent in the region. Therefore the Arab failure to meet the challenges of 21st century cannot be blamed either on external intervention and influence, or on specific dictators and authoritarian regimes. Interestingly, he appreciates Iran stating that “The position of Iran as a regional power is encored in a proud people who have proved their ability to meet the challenges of the modern world.” The author goes on to argue that despite being confronted with serious problems the basic qualities of the society remain intact even after two generations of fanatic religiosity with a radical and aggressive regime.

Mustafa Aydin and Cihan Dizdaroglu provide a deep insight into Turkey’s Middle East Policies in the context of global geopolitical and domestic political changes since the end of the Cold War. They argue that Ankara started paying more attention to the region after the rise of the Justice and Development Party (PDP) to power in 2002. The chapter mainly focusses on the regional and international developments that have influenced Turkey’s policies towards the region. Although in recent years developments have provided some space for Ankara to seek a more active and assertive role in the region, but its own limitations, policy choices and regional dynamics have somewhat restricted its ability to do so.

Abdelhamid Abdeljaber gives a detailed account of Israel-Palestine conflict since 1945 and examines the role of the United Nations, mainly its failure to address this long-standing conflict. The author is of the opinion that the UN has failed to implement its major resolutions pertaining to Palestine beginning with the Partition Plan (UNSCR 181) and the “Right of Return” (UNSCR 194), and has been unsuccessful in holding Israel responsible for the ongoing violation of international law, which generated and sustained an imbalanced power struggle resulting in regional and international crisis. The author concludes that the UN has so far not been able to produce a durable and just solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. More importantly, so long as the question of Palestine remains

unaddressed, security and peace in West Asia or internationally, cannot be guaranteed.

Elsayed Ali Abofarha presents an Egyptian narrative. He explores the main geo-strategic transformations in the region after 2011. It is in this context that he attempts to analyse the Egyptian position on these key strategic transformations in the region using terrorism, alliances and political changes as the main parameters. It is argued that post-2013, Egypt has undertaken major steps towards repositioning its regional role. This repositioning is based on the following foreign policy principles: rejecting the policy of military alliances; the refusal to send troops beyond the border; maintaining the security of the Gulf States; and preserving the unity of the state and its territorial integrity. In addition, Cairo has kept its position separate from that of Saudi Arabia, particularly when it comes to Yemen and Syria. For Egypt, the Palestinian issue and the Libyan crisis have been the priority, both driven by geographical factors and border security issues.

Uri Resnick, provides a detailed overview of India-Israel bilateral relations outlining the main pillars of cooperation between the countries. Naming the India-Israel partnership as ‘entirely natural’, he offers innovation, agriculture, water, health, the film industry and people-to-people contact as potential areas of cooperation. These areas need to be nurtured in the years ahead to build stronger ties between the two strategic partners.

In the chapter titled “Great Powers Challenge India’s Middle East Strategy”, P. R. Kumaraswamy looks at three main issues: explaining status of India’s relations with West Asia since 2014, lessons that India can learn from the experience of three great powers – the US, Russia and China and finally, the policy challenges faced by India vis-à-vis other actors in the region. He argues that India need not bandwagon with other great powers, nor should it compete with them; rather it should build strong economic ties – especially non-energy ties – with the Persian Gulf region.

The US narrative on the naval strategy in the Western Indian Ocean has been examined by Jeffrey Payne in his chapter. He looks into the US role in West Asia and how its policy has evolved over the

years. The attempt is to provide answers to the common perception that exists within West Asia, that the power of the US is declining in the region. It is argued that when it comes to diplomatic engagement, security cooperation and capacity-building efforts of the US, there has been very little change over the last twenty years. However, for the US, the yardstick has changed for analysing regional security affairs in the present-day context. He argues that the Red Sea is an emerging area of maritime competition and China, France, Japan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE are countries that either seek to build or have built port facilities in or around the Red Sea region to gain control and influence in the Red Sea and the waters surrounding the Horn of Africa/Arabian Peninsula. These trends are emerging as challenges to the existing rules of the game, especially for the US. In such a changed scenario it is likely that the US will be challenged in the maritime domain. Therefore, the Indo-Pacific will become a focus for the US, which means that broader West Asia will remain a priority for it, but maritime engagements will more regularly take it beyond the Gulf, the Arab Sea, and the Red Sea. The larger Indian Ocean and the building of partnerships and cooperative efforts among the wider Indian Ocean littorals will become a feature of US engagement.

Jin Liangxiang brings forth China's new dynamic policy in West Asia. The author believes that China has not only stepped up its engagement with the region but has been consistent as well. Beijing's policy approach has been different as compared to the US, as it adheres to established principles regarding major regional issues. China's West Asia policy is driven mainly by four important principles: natural respect among civilisations, non-interference, justice and fairness and finally, development. From the Chinese perspective the root cause of turmoil in the region is 'development deficiency' and therefore development should be the solution to the problems. Promoting economic development is a primary Chinese task in its policy towards the region. The other important aspect is the scope and possibility of India-China cooperation in the region. The author argues that the two important Asian powers are seriously concerned about stability in the region because of their economic and strategic interests. China

and India have similar if not the same position on important regional issues. There are many issues on which both countries can cooperate and therefore there is a need on the part of both countries to discuss the areas and ways to cooperate on West Asia.

The European dilemmas in West Asia have been examined by Gidon Windecker. The author provides an in-depth analysis of European foreign policy, its values, interests and challenges in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. The chapter focusses on a few case studies that exemplify the European dilemma when it comes to the lack of unity on the one hand, and the dichotomy of establishing a foreign policy based on democratic values versus pragmatic interests, on the other. In order to explain the European position and security challenges in the WANA region, the case study of Egypt, Syria and Turkey has been taken up. In addition a critical analysis of European strategy in the WANA region, its successes and failures have been examined in detail. It is argued that the Syrian refugee crisis triggered a major split among Europeans on matters such as the refugee and asylum policy and due to mismanagement and lack of unity European governments lost their citizens' trust and confidence in problem-solving abilities. In the current situation the author questions how Europe can be a beacon of stability in West Asia when the region's instability may spill over onto the continent and undermine its democratic foundations.

Prasanta Kumar Pradhan in his chapter, "Protracted Transition in West Asia" captures the process of transition in West Asia and its various facets. He examines this process taking up the cases of Yemen, Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. It is argued that, transitions in non-democratic political systems have always been complicated, violent, and disruptive. The social polarisation in the Arab world, increasing extremism and terrorism, and external interventions make the process even more complicated and difficult. The author fears that if the process of transition is not managed properly, the situation might return to the old authoritarianism that existed before the protests began in the region. Besides, political and diplomatic efforts have so far failed, resulting in the process of transition being painful, convulsive and protracted.

Md. Muddassir Quamar provides an in-depth analysis of multi-layered conflicts in the region which are intertwined at internal, regional and international levels, making them much more complex. It is argued that any attempt at durable peace and stability in West Asia cannot succeed without understanding these layers. He examines the unfolding situation in major hotspots – Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq – and the security developments in Egypt and Tunisia. An overview of the regional geopolitical competition covering mainly, the Iran-Saudi rivalry, intra-GCC rift, Turkey's growing regional aspiration and increasing Israel-Iran tensions are explored in the chapter. Besides, the role of the US, Russia, China and the EU in WANA has been examined.

From India's perspective, the region is undergoing internal and external transformation. For instance, the US has unveiled its new policy for the region while Russia is emerging as an assertive actor. The US' withdrawal from JCPOA, the Qatar crisis, the softening Saudi stand towards Israel, emerging Saudi-UAE security cooperation and the increasing engagement of Asian players such as India and China in the region are some of the defining features. In such a situation an inclusive regional security dialogue focussed on politico-economic cooperation and constructive engagement among regional and extra-regional actors can be the only viable option for the region. In this new situation, India needs to secure its energy, trade, economic and security interests while fighting extremism and terrorism. India's key 'mantra' has been to balance, cooperate, connect and build strong economic and security partnerships (BCC & BESP). In the past few years India has moved from Look West, to Think West to Link West and a now to 'Act West' dynamism. Based on its strengths and limitations, New Delhi will have to craft an independent and realistic policy keeping in view regional sensitivities. India has pursued a very active diplomacy focussed on building strong strategic and economic ties with its Gulf partners. It is time for New Delhi to strengthen stronger partnerships with other WANA countries in the following areas: (a) Develop a Regional Centre of Excellence for countering extremism and terrorism based in any city in India; (b) Organise an annual West Asia Summit

bringing experts, policy makers, officials and academics from the region, which could be a platform for dialogue on how to address the threat of extremism and terrorism as well as strategic and economic issues; (c) Build a West Asia University similar to the existing South Asian University; (d) Water and food security are extremely significant issues in the West Asian region where India can play an important role; it could constitute a working group on food and water security to share India's experience with the regional countries; (e) and initiate an annual regional energy dialogue, which will bring all energy-producing West Asian countries and India together; (f) Built stronger partnerships in the health sector. The aforementioned initiatives will provide a platform for all regional countries for dialogue on both economic and strategic issues. These steps will help India and the countries of the region co-manage and co-develop a stable and secure region through economic diplomacy. Besides, there are major opportunities opening in the economic sector – in agriculture, information technology, infrastructure, maritime security, the health sector, tourism, service sector and education – which are mutually beneficial for India and the countries of the region. In an era of globalisation and economic integration, zero-sum games will only push the region to greater instability and conflicts. India could be a partner in bringing greater harmony in the region through its realistic economic diplomacy without getting sucked into regional conflicts.<sup>9</sup>

The book is yet another attempt by the MP-IDSA to bring forth ideas, views and varied narratives from the WANA region and India, Russia, China, Europe and the Americas on major issues affecting the region. It is hoped that, this book will contribute to the ongoing debate on the subject and disseminate information and opinions expressed by eminent experts and scholars and would be a useful resource for policymakers to calibrate an effective strategy towards the region.

## Notes

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## 2. Iran-Saudi Arabia Conflict and the Path to Peace

*Seyed Hossein Mousavian*

West Asia is in the midst of a historic tumult. As conflicts and terrorism have spread, some historic regional powers have collapsed, and the geopolitical landscape that underpinned the regional order for decades, has been upended. This has created space for radical ideologies to spread their tentacles in West Asia and beyond. Terrorism has become widespread, and has threatened the unravelling of countries such as Iraq, Syria and Libya. Among the factors contributing to regional instability and the spread of radicalization are the continuing Israeli occupation of Palestine, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990, the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the outbreak of the "Arab Spring" in 2011, the NATO-GCC intervention in Libya in 2011, the Saudi-US intervention in Yemen in 2015, and the recruitment of tens of thousands of terrorists from across the world to bring about a regime change in Syria.

These developments have effectively torn up much of the Arab world, dragging major Arab powers such as Iraq, Libya, and Syria into a civil war and on the verge of collapse. It has further caused instability in the regional allies of the USA such as Egypt and Tunisia. Further, these developments have led to the advent and spread of ISIS and other terrorist groups in the region, and beyond. As traditional Arab powers including Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Syria have fallen into disarray, Saudi Arabia – led by the 33-year-old Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman – is attempting to take on the mantle of leadership of the Arab world.



The new regional power dynamics has, in effect, seen the formation of two major blocs: one comprised of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Israel, and the USA under President Donald Trump; and the other which includes Iran, Russia, Syria, Hezbollah, Iraq, and other popularly-mobilized militias such as the *Hashd al-Sha'abi* in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> While the USA and Russia are the two most consequential global powers affecting the fate of the Middle East, at the regional level Iran and Saudi Arabia are the main actors. Saudi Arabia has, in recent years, veered away from its traditionally conservative and behind-the-scenes foreign policy approach to become far more assertive, which is openly hostile to Iran. It is a fact that Saudi-Iran rivalry has influence on the crises in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar, and elsewhere in the region. However, the USA, Israel, and Saudi Arabia blame Iran for the discord in the Arab world and instability in the region despite the success of the negotiations in alleviating international concerns of Iran's potential pathways to nuclear weapons.

However, from the Iranian point of view, the real reasons behind failing Arab states and the crises in the region have little to do with Iran. It is mainly because of dysfunctional domestic political systems, decades of dictatorship and corruption, the spread of Wahhabism, and intra-Arab conflicts – such as Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the GCC intervention in Libya, and the Saudi-UAE intervention in Yemen – that Arab states today are faced with instability even as many among them are staring at becoming failed states.

Riyadh's intervention in many domestic and regional issues has also caused serious damage. For instance, the Palestinian issue, which for decades was the top source of angst and unity in the Arab and Muslim world, has today lost its significance to such a degree that Saudi Arabia is pressuring Palestinians to accept maximalist Israeli demands. In December 2017, the *New York Times*, citing "Palestinian, Arab, and European officials," stated that Mohammad bin Salman had presented Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas with "a plan that would be more tilted toward the Israelis than any ever embraced by the American government."<sup>2</sup> On 6 December 2017, President Trump formally recognised<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, reversing nearly seven decades of American foreign policy

because he was sure Bin Salman is committed to confronting Iran and to pushing the Palestinians to agree to Israeli demands. In short, the reality is that the Arab world, led by Saudi Arabia, is seemingly on the verge of a historic capitulation to Israel.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is, for all intents and purposes, now also defunct. This too does not have anything to do with Iran; it is chiefly due to the smaller Persian Gulf states' perennial fear of falling victim to hegemonic Saudi aspirations – as exemplified by Saudi Arabia effectively turning Bahrain into its own province<sup>4</sup> and, most recently, with the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar. Doha officials now regularly proclaim before the world that Saudi Arabia seeks to turn them into a puppet state.<sup>5</sup> The chaos that has engulfed Libya also has nothing to do with Iran; it is due to the military operation for regime change that overthrew Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. This was led by NATO and US Arab allies, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, the narrative of “Iran-backed” Houthis instigating a civil war is simplistic, and ignores any historic context. The fact is that the Saudi assault on Yemen has resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, triggered an unprecedented cholera epidemic, and taken the country to the edge of widespread famine in what has become the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe.<sup>6</sup>

### **Saudi Arabia's Regional Strategy**

Saudi Arabia's regional strategy can be encapsulated in five points. One, its foreign policy endeavours towards the maintenance of American military, security, political, and economic dominance over the region. Two, Saudi Arabia wants to ally with Israel to gain the support of the powerful international Zionist movement. Three, Saudi policy is geared towards confronting Iran and its regional allies, and eventually instigate a US war with Iran. Four, Saudi Arabia is putting pressure on the Palestinians into accepting Israeli demands, effectively eliminating the issue of Palestine and marking the official recognition of Israel by the Arab world. Finally, Saudi Arabia wishes to establish its dominance over the smaller Persian Gulf states and muster an Arab coalition in the form of an “Arab NATO”, or other means to isolate Iran.<sup>7</sup>

## Iran's Regional Strategy

In response, Iranian regional strategy has adhered to its longstanding policy of a stable Middle East, and a Persian Gulf free from US hegemony. The Iranian strategy can also be summarised in five points. One, resist US hegemony in the Persian Gulf and strengthen relations with other global powers. Two, resist Israeli occupation, and support Palestinians and resistance groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Three, an all-out confrontation with the *takfiri* terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, whose root ideology is Wahhabism. Four, act as a counterbalance to Saudi efforts to impose hegemony over the smaller Gulf sheikhdoms. After the Saudi blockade of Qatar, the small state's only access to the outside world was through its air and sea border with Iran – which Iran kept open for its use. To this end, Iran has sought to maintain normal ties with the GCC states that have no appetite for Saudi hegemony, including Oman and Kuwait. Five, confront Israel's strategic aim to disintegrate four Islamic countries – Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran – by supporting Kurdish separatist aspirations. All four of these countries share many interests and, with the resolution of the Syrian crisis, the grounds will be created for broader cooperation between them.

## The Way Forward for Iran and Saudi Arabia

Given these conflicting strategies, Saudi Arabia and Iran have two choices. The first is to continue the status quo of confrontation. The chief implications of this will be that the unstable regional situation will continue to deteriorate, any prospect of eliminating terrorist groups in the vein of ISIS will be diminished; sectarianism will increase, and there will be a real risk of a disastrous war that will not only engulf the regional powers, but also the global powers – especially the USA and Russia. The alternative is for Saudi Arabia and Iran to pursue avenues of cooperation. To do this, Riyadh and Tehran must first gain a substantive and sincere understanding of each other's security threats and concerns, and then explore mutually acceptable paths to alleviating them.

The second option should entail that Riyadh and Tehran openly, and without preconditions, enter into a bilateral dialogue and put all of their security concerns and aims on the negotiations table. This should be followed by the organisation of forums for Iranian-Arab dialogue to include figures with technocratic backgrounds ranging from scientists to diplomats. Further, efforts need to be made to decrease sectarianism in the Muslim world. For this, Sunni-Shia dialogue forums should take place, with the participation of Sunni scholars from Al-Azhar in Cairo and religious leaders from Saudi Arabia and other Sunni countries, as well as Shia clerics from the Qom and Najaf seminaries. Finally, there is a need for Foreign Minister level dialogue between the six GCC states, Iraq, and Iran. This should take place without any preconditions, and with the aim of creating an institutionalised security and cooperation system in the Persian Gulf. The Foreign Ministers should hear each other's concerns in a constructive dialogue, and take steps towards producing tangible and fair solutions.

A potential model can be the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union (EU). One foundation for immediate negotiations can be the United Nations Security Council Resolution 598, which laid the basis for the end of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, and requested the UN secretary-general "to examine, in consultation with Iran and Iraq and with other states of the region, measures to enhance the security and stability of the region."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, any sustainable cooperation mechanism among the Persian Gulf states must address eight principles: respect for sovereignty; no use of force; respect for borders and territorial integrity; the peaceful settlement of disputes; non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries; commitment to the UN Charter and its principles; refraining from exacerbating sectarian differences; and respecting each other's political systems.

Over time, a gradual process that begins with simply holding regular meetings wherein all countries can communicate their security grievances can result in more institutionalised cooperative relationships, and lead to peace and stability in the Persian Gulf and Middle East.

## Notes

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### 3. Arab Hopelessness and its Strategic Consequences

*Dan Schueftan*

Arab West Asia is all but hopeless for the foreseeable future. Admittedly, this is a very radical but, unfortunately, true statement. The Arabs in the region have endured many crises and suffered for generations from consistent violence and instability; but never before were the objective realities so depressing, the chances of recovery so low, and the people so disheartened.

It is only in the last decade, following the unquestionable miscarriage of the “Arab Spring”, that mainstream Arab thinkers have fully realised what many already suspected in the last quarter of the previous century: that the cause of their predicament is the failings of Arab society itself. They were presented with irrefutable evidence demonstrating that the resounding Arab failure to meet the challenges of the 21st century cannot be blamed primarily either on external domination and interventions, or on specific dictators and authoritarian regimes. A short reference to the reasons for this failure is essential to the main purpose of this essay – the broader discussion of the mechanisms of recovery, and the strategic consequences of the widespread conclusion in the region that the Arab political, economic and, to some extent, even the social systems have reached an impasse.

#### **A Century of Dysfunction**

For about a century after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the decades-later demise of colonialism, Arabs gradually gained control over their affairs, first limited and supervised, but soon

comprehensive and fully sovereign, in more than 20 Arab states in the Fertile Crescent, the Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa. In three-four generations of independence, they have invested little in nation-building and society-building to adjust themselves to the modern world. Oil-rich countries and their less lucky neighbours (that received billions of petrodollars from them) squandered almost all of it on wars, corruption, and on artificially sustaining ineffective traditional economic and social structures that cannot cope with changing global realities. While other post-colonial societies in Asia adjusted – and often scored breath-taking success – Arabs focused on exogenous excuses for their perpetual failure.

Some Arab regimes and societies did invest, with some noticeable success, in incorporating a variety of religious, ethnic, tribal, and other sections into a single national identity of people who developed a genuine interest in states that were put together in the colonial period without much regard to their indigenous human composition. Jordan, the Arab part of Iraq, and even Syria can claim different measures of achievement. Other Arab regimes, paradoxically “revolutionary” dictatorships and authoritarian leaders, have done a lot to dramatically diminish illiteracy, promote public health, and (though rarely) even to advance the position of women. Three Arab countries in particular – Jordan, Morocco, and Lebanon – offered their citizens a unique opportunity of a life that is relatively tolerant, and mostly free of regime persecution – as long as they refrain from real subversion. It is not a coincidence that Jordan stands out in most positive categories. A moderate and responsible dynasty has ruled in Amman for almost a century, and yet is always the target of domestic and regional radicals for just these responsible policies.

Positive as all this may be, it cannot, however, substitute for comprehensive society building that could have helped Arab societies to meet the challenges of modernity, and to give them a chance to find their place in the 20th and 21st centuries. This would have meant a developed web of civil society, made up of independent members of a self-confident middle class, with a “live and let live” tolerant attitude, a pluralistic *weltanschauung*, and a

spirit of entrepreneurship. If this is an excessively tall order, a clear leaning in this direction would have been a good beginning. But in the mainstream, with only minor and random exceptions, Arab societies have moved in the opposite direction.

The awareness of Arab thinkers to the challenges of Western modernity dominated the regional discourse for more than two centuries, and expressions of frustration with Arab responses were frequent. With only a few exceptions, notably the decade of Gamal Abdul Nasser's messianic heydays in the 1950s and 1960s, discomfort was always more pervasive than enthusiasm. In the beginning of the millennium, the publication of the United Nations Human Development Report already sounded the alarm.<sup>1</sup> In the report, Arab scholars identified a cultural deficit in dealing with modernity in their own society, and Arab thinkers drew particular attention to the deficit in political and civil liberties and gender equality – all reflecting the fundamental rejection of pluralism.

While the warning was noticed, and even the Arab elites took it seriously; however, they typically preferred to assume that these shortcomings were essentially a product of autocratic and corrupt regimes, and could be effectively addressed if and when these regimes were replaced by freely elected governments. The Arab Spring demonstrated that even when popular resentment and outrage replaced or challenged these regimes, Arab society not only failed to offer a democratic alternative, but mostly did not even promise, let alone deliver, a pluralistic horizon that would extract the Arabs from their backward inability to catch up with the modern world. Arabs are coming to terms with the unbelievable reality of a Libya which is even worse off without Muammar Gaddafi; Syria even more oppressive after the rebellion against Bashar al-Assad, and Egypt under tighter military rule after the Egyptian people had their say twice.

What is new since this recent Arab Spring debacle is the prominent streak of utter desperation – the recognition of the historic dimension of the Arab writing on the proverbial wall: “we were weighed in the balance and found wanting.” Those who actually try to move to developed countries in the West, or stay only because they



cannot move as professionally unqualified and culturally unwanted immigrants do not seek just an overnight shelter. They know that their children do not have a future in their home countries. The historical experience of the last hundred years has only deepened their frustration. The hopes of evolutionary adjustments in the first half of the 20th century collapsed mid-century with Nasser's movement and his copycats. The messianic promise of the radicals reached a humiliating and often violent dead-end in the second half. The short lived mirage of the petro dollar power has faded. What seemed to some (for a while) as the new dynamism of political Islam soon proved to enfeeble Arabs rather than strengthen them.

With unprecedented and striking candour, Egypt's President Abdul Fattah el-Sisi not only admitted the colossal magnitude of the problem, but also identified its deep-rooted cultural causes. Speaking at the World Youth Forum held in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, on November 2018, Sisi responded to a young Afghan asking about Western countries closing their doors to immigration, directly referring to the failure not only Afghans but of Arab societies, to offer their people a better life. He said,

Why, for the last 40 years, have they been killing each other and self-destructing? This situation also applies to other countries like Pakistan and Egypt, too – and Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen and Somalia. Why are they doing this? We are tearing ourselves apart in our own countries. We then [have the nerve to] ask from countries that are toiling night and day to make progress in their countries, protect their people and maintain a certain standard of living to let us in and share the fruit of their labours – simply because we are at each other's throats in our own countries!

[...] You are mad at the leaders of the European countries - the leaders of England, Germany, Italy, etc., who close their borders to protect the fruit of many long years of hard work and effort that went into building their evolved society. You want them to open their doors so we can go there and demand [that they accommodate] our own culture there? [Should we think we have the right to] demand our own [work ethic] culture [there] which is different from the work ethic and [culture] upon which these

countries were built on? Of course not! Our work ethic is different from theirs. They are hard workers and they are committed to this rigorous work ethic ... In contrast, we are always making allowances [asking for privileges] in an exaggerated way. Do you want to go with this culture?

Let's talk about my Egyptian culture, so no one will be offended. I want to have all my needs satisfied without contributing anything. Isn't that our culture, I ask you? ... For example, one of the high-ranking officials [from Europe] came and asked me, 'Why is your labour force so underutilized? It seems like you people don't understand your own interests.' I told him we can't use our labour force more [than we already are]. Why can't we? [Because of our customs/work ethic.] If an idea would be in line with the customs of our people, it will succeed. If not, we will have a clash among ourselves ... Do you want to [emigrate] with your culture and do you consider that to be non-negotiable? You are saying, 'This is who we are and you have to accept us.' "No! If you go to a country that agrees to host you, you must have complete respect for its laws, customs, traditions and culture. But you aren't ready to do this; we are not ready to do this."<sup>2</sup>

While the widespread recognition of this cumulative failure among mainstream Arabs is the most important consequence of this reality, the much delayed admission among Western scholars, diplomats, and decision makers concerning these Arab structural weaknesses and dubious prospects should not be ignored. Arab (and Third World) excuses, and the ever growing ideologically-motivated eagerness of Western observers to adopt and disseminate them have, for generations, obscured Middle Eastern realities, and decisively contributed to the miscalculation of the regional balance of power. These, in turn, have often resulted in misguided and counterproductive policies – as early as Dwight Eisenhower's Suez policy in 1956 and as late as the Franco-British intervention in Libya in 2011.

An honest examination of these excuses for Arab protracted failures – chiefly colonialism, occupation, and poverty – could have easily exposed their dubious validity. Three decades of colonialism

in the Fertile Crescent are no match to centuries of direct and indirect foreign domination, subjugation, and intervention in the affairs of nations that are doing dramatically better, such as India, China, and Singapore. Arab societies that were not colonised (Saudi Arabia and Yemen) have not exhibited more aptitude to the modern world (indeed even less) than those who were exposed to British or French rule. Iraq and Libya are exceptionally rich in oil and gas. The poverty and human misery there is exclusively the product of their own violent and unproductive political culture.

This culture is the feature that Arab states have in common. The variety of these states is very wide: small and big, rich and poor, with and without colonial history, densely and thinly populated, widely educated or largely illiterate, associated with the West and with the East in the Cold War, pro- and anti-American after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in direct confrontation and conflict with Israel or not. The shared features of their non-pluralistic and tribal political culture beyond this variety better explains their failure to meet the challenges of the 21st century than any of the exogenous excuses. Specific progress on the periphery of the region (primarily in Tunisia and in some Gulf States) only highlights the hopelessness of the major centres.

### **Dysfunctional Recovery Mechanisms**

As bad as things are now, the prospects for the short and intermediate future are even worse. In times of acute crisis, social and cultural mechanisms can kick in to extract societies out of protracted failure and set them again on the path of recovery, hope, and accomplishment. The most devastating product of the consistent Arab failure is, however, the disheartenment in those who could offer an effective response, and potentially deliver success.

To be extracted from centuries of insufficiency, with only brief moments of eventually disappointed hope (primarily in the 1950s and 1960s), Arab societies need a social stratum of dedicated believers that can take on the burden of profound change. Not only do a great many Arab elite recognise the depth of the failure, but many in the mainstream also know what is needed to begin to heal

their society, and set it on a course that will help it catch up with the 21st century – that is, nothing less than a cultural revolution. The problem is that the motivation and the enthusiasm needed to propel such a drive has been exhausted by generations of botched attempts, and recently crushed in the Arab Spring. Those who believe it can be done, and are prepared to take a leading role in it, are isolated on the margins of Arab societies, lacking the legitimacy and the support of a robust social stratum that is willing to take a chance on the revolutionary measures that are necessary to extract the Arabs from their faulty political culture.

Cultural revolutions are difficult and painful, yet they are demonstrably possible. Turkey, a Muslim country in the Middle East, had two of them in the last century – that of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s, and that of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the beginning of the millennium. In Arab societies, it must involve a profound change towards pluralism, both social and political; the embracement of innovation; a transformation of the attitude towards women; and a dramatic departure from violent traditions. While this kind of change is not impossible, the record in the last three generations of Arab change shows that it has shifted the centre of gravity in the opposite direction – towards political and religious radicalism; away from civil freedoms; and towards rampant violence – in a way that has widened the gap between Arab societies and the developed world.

This experience breeds protracted stagnation, ever-deepening frustration, chronic regional instability, massive economic hardships, and extensive domestic and regional violence. The weakening of Arab societies and states invites hegemonic intervention and takeover by Iran, which is led by a radical and aggressive regime that threatens to bring havoc to the whole region. The diminishing importance of the Middle East, primarily because of the waning US dependence on Arab oil, but also following Western realisation of the region's hopelessness, erodes the motivation of Western powers to assist moderate local forces to introduce structural changes. The region is increasingly perceived almost exclusively as a source of trouble and misfortune, producing immigrants and terrorism

rather than hopeful anticipation. On top of the structural problems discussed above, this attitude serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The combination of the despair of the indigenous societies and the low expectations of outsiders who were previously eager to help, serves to exacerbate the predicament.

What is missing is not only a social stratum that can carry the long journey towards an Arab renaissance and Westerners who are willing to lend a helping hand, but also a regional anchor of stability and responsible leadership. Unfortunately, the four most stable and important countries in the region – Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Israel – are either unable to deliver such a leadership, or worse: they present a threat to the region's recovery.

Since the 1940s, Egypt provided such a leadership, both in Nasser's radical period and in Anwar Sadat's and his successor's era of responsible retraction from political, economic, and military adventurism. It could have been the natural candidate for the extraction of the Arabs from the present calamity, were it not for the dire situation of Egypt itself. Unlike the rest of the Arab states, Egypt has always been there, with a functioning central authority on the Nile, with a relatively homogenous society, perceived by many far beyond its borders as *Umm al Dunia* – a major political and cultural regional capital. Alas, today Egypt is not even in a position to extract itself, let alone lead the region out of its dismal state. With a population approaching 100 million, it is too big to be helped from the outside, and suffers from a political culture that precludes, for the foreseeable future, effective participation in the modern economic global structure. It can hardly sustain even the present miserable state of its economic and social affairs on its own steam. Were it not for the legendary resilience of the Egyptian people, the frightening prospect of anarchy, and the strict measures employed by President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, one would have seen violent eruptions and widespread anarchy much worse than those witnessed in Cairo at the beginning of this decade.

But even if Egypt could find a way out of its socio-economic quagmire, the Egyptian society suffers from a deep political fault that rules out, for now, leadership towards what they need the

most. The gloomy choice between religious fanaticism and military dictatorship has demonstrated the inconsequential weight in the Egyptian society of the stratum committed to democratic, pluralistic and constructive values. Surely those that so recently proved a structural inability to help themselves at home cannot help the so many others in the whole region.

Turkey could have been another option for regional leadership. This potential rests on its being a large Sunni state, with an imperial record that came to recognise the failures of the last stages of its Muslim heritage, and sustained for a few generations a revolution that considerably narrowed the gaps with the modern world. The problem is, of course, Erdogan's counter revolution that threatens to abolish this progress, and steer Turkey back to the culture the Arabs need to abandon: away from social and political pluralism, as well as gender equality and move back towards despotic traditions. The oppressive and radical Muslim Brotherhood regime in Ankara is justifiably frightening those in Cairo, Amman, Riyadh, and those throughout the Arab world who are seeking a way out of the present predicament. They want somebody to defend them against Erdogan, not to join him.

Iran is not a candidate for regional leadership not only because they are Shiite in a predominantly Sunni environment and Farsi (Persian) in a predominantly Arab region, but also because the present regime in Tehran is fanatic and aggressive, and is bent on benefitting from the Arab weaknesses, not mending them. A good deal of the destabilisation and human tragedies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen can be attributed to Iranian involvement. A profoundly different regime in Iran could potentially, one day, use the impressive qualities of Iranian society to help stabilise the region. But, for the present, these qualities are being harnessed for war and subversion. At this stage, the danger is imminent, and the promise is purely theoretical.

Israel may have all the formal qualifications of a modern, pluralistic, stable and dynamic society; but is, of course, disqualified for regional leadership by virtue of being culturally alien to the region, and even perceived by most as an illegitimate and brutal

entity, guilty of usurping Arab rights. Whereas Israel is, of course, no candidate for the regional position of a social and political role model, it occasionally plays a significant and, sometimes, even crucial role by discreetly assisting Arab states against their radical enemies or with their infrastructural problems. In the Fall of 1970, Israel saved the existence of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan from a Syrian takeover after a long period of less dramatic assistance to “moderate” Arab states against radicals inspired by Nasser’s regime.

There is a widespread recognition among the Sunni Arab regimes that only Israel can stand up to Iran’s hegemonic ambitions, and a de-facto loosely-bonded strategic alliance ties these Sunni states in this regard to Israel and the USA. A case of prominent Israeli assistance beyond the Iranian context is that extended to Egypt in fighting Islamic State (ISIS) in the Sinai Peninsula, at the expense of Israel’s demilitarisation assurances embedded in the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. A good example of critical infrastructure assistance is the constant Israeli water supply to Jordan, far beyond its commitments under the terms of the peace treaty, in spite of five years of drought that depleted Israel’s own water supply. All this helps with the outer perimeter of regional stability, but can do almost nothing for the critical core issues.

### **The Strategic Consequences of Arab Hopelessness**

With neither a stratum that can shoulder a recovery, nor substantial external help or a credible regional leadership in sight, without even a strong hopeful public sentiment concerning this recovery, any expectation of salvaging the region from an ever worsening Arab predicament should be extremely modest in the foreseeable future. More likely prospects are protracted instability, violence, dysfunctional institutions, some overspill thereof into modern and developed countries, and a negative effect on the global scene.

Whereas ethnic confrontations, even civil wars, can very well be initiated or rekindled, by far the most serious immediate danger to the region is the combustive mixture of Iranian hegemonic ambitions, Arab weakness, hopelessness, and endemic tribal feuds. The position of Iran as a regional power is encored in a proud people who have

proved their ability to meet the challenges of the modern world. In spite of serious problems in Iranian society – prevalent prostitution and drug abuse being the most outstanding symptoms<sup>3</sup> – the basic qualities of this society remain impressive even after two generations of fanatic religiosity, with a radical and an aggressive regime. Iran is taking advantage of not just the weak structures of failing Arab states but also of the widespread regional hopelessness and the conspicuous absence of leadership in the region. Both undermine the resilience and weaken potential Arab resistance to the Iranian takeover efforts.

The Iranian attempt could not be half as effective were it not for the tribal political structure of Arab societies which it is effectively trying to undermine and infiltrate. Those who do Iran's bidding are neither just proxies, nor necessarily Shiites. They are essentially tribal, religious, or ethnic groups, with a primordial loyalty system that always supersedes their commitment to the state they live in, let alone to their pan-Arab affiliation. By furnishing money, arms, and training, as well as skilfully using local feuds, Iran has proved again and again its power to destabilise Arab regimes, help Iranian proxies take control, intimidate its regional enemies, and blackmail Western powers.

These hegemonic ambitions explain the broad strategic logic of the Iranian military nuclear project. It has never been simply about getting a bomb, let alone dropping it on Israel. It is about possessing a nuclear arsenal with the appropriate ballistic delivery system which is designed not only to prevent regime change in Teheran but also to provide an umbrella that will secure the flanks of the Iranian conventional hegemony project at the expense of the weak, hopeless, and sometimes disintegrating Arab regimes and states. In the more distant future, it is also designed to establish Iran as a significant power on the global scene. As long as President Barack Obama was in power, this strategy was working well: the mastery of the entire enrichment circle was secured before the JCPOA was concluded, and Iran was granted a pressure-free decade to deal with practically unsupervised weaponisation and ballistic delivery.



Since the American withdrawal from the agreement, and the official designation of Iran as the most dangerous enemy of US interests in the Middle East,<sup>4</sup> the Iranian strategic project is facing major obstacles. The re-imposed American sanctions have proved to be so biting and effective that the Iranian regime seems to have panicked, and resorted to military provocations. The new administration has understood that the radical and destructive essence of Iranian strategy can only be matched by a Sunni-Israeli-American coalition, and acted on it. Since Iran is determined not to abandon this strategy, which reflects the core mission of its regime, a confrontation that will affect the whole region is very likely. Iran may seek to postpone it for a year or so, hoping for an Obama-like president that will again appease the mullahs in Tehran; but the test of resilience between the two camps is already happening, not only in Syria Lebanon and Yemen, but recently even in the Gulf.

The second regional peril, that relating to physical infrastructure, is often underestimated – even overlooked – in the shadow of the violent, political, and cultural crises. It deserves serious attention, both due to its enormous objective significance and to the strong interrelationship between the two. The most ominous part of this is regional drying, which is dramatically affecting not only its most important source of livelihood alongside oil, but also its traditional way of life. Whereas the climatic phenomenon is global and developed, or dynamic societies have shown that they can successfully address unparalleled water shortage, most Arab states have demonstrated a striking inability to employ some of the most important mechanisms that have proved to be effective. Massive urbanisation by peasants who can no longer make a living in primitive agriculture could be painful only in its first stage, and actually beneficial in the long run, if it is coupled with extensive industrialisation. In the Arab lands, these peasants can find no other living, and often lose some of the support system of their traditional way of life; they have no modern alternative to lean on, and typically become a frustrated, disgruntled, social and political powder keg. In such circumstances, violence becomes even more common than usual, and massive confrontations – and even civil war – becomes more likely.

The worst aspect about the chance of effectively dealing with this is the hopelessness so prevalent in this society practically precludes any major constructive efforts needed to meet these challenges in the way other more dynamic and optimistic societies have. It is the proverbial vicious circle: decades of abstention from productive nation and society building, and twisted national priorities, produce failure and hopelessness; massive environmental problems drive living conditions and social structures from bad to worse; the same hopelessness, in its turn, undermines the motivation to work on a way out; this new and additional failure, in its turn, be gets more hopelessness.

With a few noted exceptions, the Arab Middle East is a failed region. A failed region, like failed states (or failed families), can continue to exist indefinitely in its own dysfunctional way, with the inevitable negative, even tragic, consequences to its inhabitants, and some damage to its neighbours, near and far. If and when a way out is to be possible, the indispensable precondition is hope. Without it, there will be no motivation for the prospective healers to shoulder a massive cultural revolution, and no motivation for key elements in this society to accept the painful changes that will be required in the most fundamental segments of their way of life. Without the rekindling of hope, substantial change cannot even begin.

## Notes

1. Human Development Report, UNDP, 2002 at [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/263/hdr\\_2002\\_en\\_complete.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/263/hdr_2002_en_complete.pdf).
2. President Al-Sisi's comments aired on Ten TV (Egypt) on November 4, 2018 at <https://www.memri.org/tv/egyptian-president-sis-muslims-fight-selves-expect-west-open-doors-no/transcript>.
3. Ali Alfoneh, "The other Tehran behind the Veil of Chastity", *The Arab Weekly*, October 29, 2017 at <https://thearabweekly.com/other-tehran-behind-veil-chastity>; Parvaneh Masoumi, "Iran's Failure to Combat Prostitution", *IranWire*, February 27, 2018 at <https://iranwire.com/en/features/5196>; Parto Parvin and Arash Ahmadi, "Iran sets sights on tackling prostitution", *BBC*, July 26, 2012 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18966982>; "Iran Faces Severe Drug Crisis, Says UN Drug Abuse Watchdog, Radio Farda, October 6, 2018" at <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-faces-severe-drug-crisis-says-un-drug-abuse-watchdog/29529293.html>; Narconon, "Iran Drug Addiction" n.d. at

<https://www.narconon.org/drug-information/iran-heroin-drug-addiction.html>; “Iran’s drug problem: Addicts “more than double” in six years”, BBC, 25 June 2017 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40397727>. “When you lose hope, nothing else is important,” Golara, 20, told *Mardomsalari*,” The daily newspaper published by Iran’s centrist Democracy Party; “Iranian society: The Islamic Republic has a drug problem”, Qantara.de at <https://en.qantara.de/content/iranian-society-the-islamic-republic-has-a-drug-problem>; A Shahi, A Saleh, “Andalusiation: Is Iran on the Trajectory of De-Islamisation?” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42 (4), pp. 500-519; Shahi, Afshin, “Erotic Republic; Iran is in the throes of an unprecedented sexual revolution. Could it eventually shake the regime?”, *Foreign Policy* (2013).

4. In the most important document defining American strategy, the Trump administration states its position on Iran in no uncertain terms: “Iran supports terrorist groups and openly calls for our destruction”; “Iran, the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism, has taken advantage of instability to expand its influence through partners and proxies, weapon proliferation, and funding. It continues to develop more capable ballistic missiles and intelligence capabilities, and it undertakes malicious cyber activities. These activities have continued unabated since the 2015 nuclear deal. Iran continues to perpetuate the cycle of violence in the region, causing grievous harm to civilian populations. Rival states are filling vacuums created by state collapse and prolonged regional conflict”; “We will work with partners to deny the Iranian regime all paths to a nuclear weapon and neutralize Iranian malign influence”; “The United States also works with allies and partners to deter and disrupt other foreign terrorist groups that threaten the home land including Iranian-backed groups such as Lebanese Hizballah”; “The Iranian regime sponsors terrorism around the world. It is developing more capable ballistic missiles and has the potential to resume its work on nuclear weapons that could threaten the United States and our partners.” See The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 18 December 2017 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

## 4. Turkey's Middle East Policies<sup>1</sup>

*Mustafa Aydın and Cihan Dizdaroglu*

Turkey has consistently avoided being part of the regional politics of the Middle East during most of the 20th century and, thus, has not had a holistic approach towards the region. However, global geopolitical and domestic political changes since the end of the Cold War have brought Turkey increasingly closer to the region. Besides, although unwilling, Turkey has been an important player in Middle Eastern politics, and has occasionally attempted to play an active role, creating the Saadabad Pact in 1937 and the Baghdad Pact in 1955. Though these efforts mostly backfired, these intermittent attempts were never transformed into a fully developed regional policy, and Turkey perceived the Middle East during the Cold War only within the context of East-West rivalry.<sup>2</sup>

However, the end of the Cold War, enabled Turkey to redefine its priorities in international politics, and allowed it to prioritize its economic connections within its neighbourhood instead of focusing on global security issues.<sup>3</sup> While refraining from depicting itself as a Middle Eastern country, Turkey began paying more attention to the region, especially after the rise of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) to power in 2002. The JDP preferred new policy tools to improve Turkey's relations with its neighbours instead of focusing on its long-standing disputes in the region. Especially after its 2nd election victory in 2007, the JDP started to focus more closely on the region, and spearheaded several initiatives with the regional countries.<sup>4</sup>

However, the outbreak of the Arab Spring in late 2010 distorted regional dynamics and produced new security challenges for Turkey, which was caught unprepared by the widespread political instability

in the region. While it had been able to establish a certain *modus operandi* with the existing regimes prior to the Arab Spring events, the developments since then disrupted these connections. While its connection with the autocratic regimes undermined its ambition to become a regional leader, its later policy of supporting opposition forces created further problems and uncertainties.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, this essay looks at the recent history of Turkey's policies in the Middle East, focusing on the regional and international developments that influence its policies towards the region. It argues that developments in recent years have provided space for Turkey to seek a more active and assertive role in the region, though Turkey's own limitations, policy choices, and regional dynamics have somewhat restricted its ability to do so.

### **Economic and Political Relations**

After decades of tense relations with some of the regional countries, primarily with Syria and occasionally with Israel and Iraq, Turkey became eager, in the early 2000s, to move beyond its problematic relations in the region. Focusing more on the economic dimension as a result of the economic liberalisation the country underwent in the 1980s, Turkey has gradually developed a new policy line in its foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> By the time the JDP came to power, the economic aspects of Turkey's foreign policy was already weighing heavily on decision-makers. The new policy line, exemplified by the "zero problems with neighbours" motto, put forward by the then Chief Foreign Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, mainly aimed at developing closer relations with neighbours to further economic prosperity.<sup>7</sup>

There emerged several divergences from Turkey's traditional policy line. One of the earlier results was moving away from the exclusive determinacy of security concerns. In its first term (2002-07), the JDP mainly focused on Turkey's approximation with Europe and domestic reforms related to it. This led to beginning of the accession negotiations with the EU in October 2005 which, in general, strengthened political stability, supported economic growth, enabled further democratisation, decreased the role of the military in politics, and helped change the foreign policy decision-making process.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the newly emerging Anatolian bourgeoisie also pushed for closer economic relations with the countries in the Middle East, and penetrated into the regional markets utilising Turkey's geographical proximity and their cultural affinity, forcing the government to follow their initiatives.<sup>9</sup> As a result, until disrupted by the Arab Spring, Turkey expanded its relations with neighbouring countries using new tools such as visa-liberalisation, mediation, establishing free trade-zones, and conducting joint cabinet level meetings. The slowing down of negotiations with the EU after 2007 also paved the way for diversification in foreign policy, and increased engagement with the Middle East.

The most dramatic change was seen in the transformation of problematic relations with Syria. Following the signature of the Adana Agreement between Turkey and Syria on 20 October 1998, after a near-war crisis,<sup>10</sup> the relations began to improve. The two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in December 2004, and established the Turkish-Syrian Business Council to expand economic relations.<sup>11</sup>

Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) were also signed with Egypt in 2005, Lebanon in 2010, and Jordan in 2011. High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils were established, and visa requirements were lifted for Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon in 2009. Under Turkey's initiative, the "Close Neighbours Economic and Trade Association Council" was established in July 2010 with Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, and the idea to establish a "Levant Business Forum" to encourage greater economic integration between Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan was floated.<sup>12</sup> With these, Turkey's economic relations with the region expanded and trade volumes increased, especially after the FTA s became operational. As a result, Turkey's overall trade with Syria and Egypt reached to US\$ 5.5 million by 2010.

The closer relationship with Israel, which was established during the second part of the 1990s on the basis of security cooperation, was also expanded with Turkey's attempt to play a facilitator role between Israel, Syria, and Palestine.<sup>13</sup> However, relations deteriorated after Turkish criticism of the *Operation Cast Lead* in Gaza in 2008.<sup>14</sup>

While the strong criticism of Israel increased the popularity of the JDP in Turkey and in the Arab Middle East, it led to the sliding of relations between the two countries. Following the clash between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009, and Turkey's suspension of the Israeli participation to the Anatolian Eagle military exercises in October 2009,<sup>15</sup> the relations came to a breaking point with the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010, when Israeli troops attacked an international flotilla, aiming to break Israeli blockade on Gaza, and killed eight Turkish citizens. Though diplomatic relations came to an end, economic relations continued, and trade volumes continued to grow, thanks to the FTA signed in 1996.

Turkey also contributed to international efforts to bring peace to the region, sending a frigate to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon in 2006, and later, together with Qatar, brokering the Doha Agreement that ended the political stalemate in Lebanese politics in 2008. Turkey played a mediator role between Israel and Syria, bringing them together in May 2008 with indirect peace talks under Turkish auspices.<sup>16</sup> In addition, it played a third-party role between Israel and Palestine, launching its "Industry for Peace Initiative" in 2005, and establishing the Ankara Forum to enable the tripartite dialogue mechanism between Turkish, Israeli, and Palestinian business communities.<sup>17</sup> All these initiatives, however, collapsed after the *Operation Cast Lead* in December 2008.

### **Energy Dimension**

The discovery of offshore hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean added a new dimension to Turkey's regional policies. Despite the region's potential as an additional energy supplier to Europe, the existing disputes over the maritime borders and sovereign rights constitute an important barrier to its realisation. Specifically, Turkey has not yet concluded delimitation agreements in the region, while the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) signed Exclusive Economic Zone agreements with Egypt, on February 17, 2003, with Lebanon on January 17, 2007, and with Israel on December 17, 2010. In response, Turkey protested its exclusion from the negotiations.

**Table 1: Turkey's Trade Volumes with the Levant Countries (Thousand Dollars)**

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013**
Egypt	444.561	535.175	728.387	954.545	1.101.876	1.555.690	2.312.687	3.240.582	3.177.053	4.141.527	5.021.245	4.831.422
Lebanon	229.260	219.836	381.755	340.883	367.284	509.230	843.835	797.481	846.854	1.001.001	1.022.363	1.006.452
Syria	581.641	671.947	642.334	694.212	796.666	1.057.048	1.438.709	1.643.090	2.297.098	1.946.507	565.408	1.112.202
Israel	1.405.900	1.542.486	2.029.435	2.271.603	2.311.307	2.739.048	3.383.153	2.597.162	3.439.786	4.448.462	3.039.941	5.069.372
Palestine	4.742	6.943	9.570	9.705	21.654	22.008	21.118	29.796	40.881	49.363	63.159	76.847
Jordan	135.032	166.468	243.629	316.969	330.979	400.902	486.026	475.706	613.783	573.318	866.977	815.306
Cyprus*	-	-	-	5.750	12.179	7.965	11.056	1.265	917	1.998	4.076	2.128
TRNC	242.743	354.352	501.768	799.267	925.079	992.617	1.124.315	813.701	1.033.318	1.103.674	1.085.106	1.181.903

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute, [www.tuik.gov.tr](http://www.tuik.gov.tr)

\* These figures indicate trade volume only with the Republic of Cyprus.

\*\* 2013 figure are tentative.



As a pipeline connecting the regional countries might offer strategic opportunities, it was hoped that the energy discoveries in the region might help resolve some of the regional conflicts. Although it is still early to foresee the final impact of the reserves on regional peace and co-operation, discoveries have already affected regional alliances as well as Turkey's energy strategy.<sup>18</sup> The alignment between the positions of Israel, RoC, and Greece constitutes a shift in the regional balance of power.

In terms of Turkey's energy strategy, the possibility of a new pipeline through Turkey to Europe would contribute to its hope of becoming an energy hub in the region. As Turkey is situated at the centre of the transport routes from the Middle East to Europe, it hopes that any discoveries would move through Turkey, even though the discoveries have occurred at a time when Turkey's relations with Israel were deteriorating, and which, among others, paved the way for the rapprochement between Israel, RoC and Greece.

### **Arab Spring and Regional Instability**

The chain of events that triggered popular unrests throughout the Middle East and North Africa at the end of 2010 created serious challenges for the entire region and, naturally, affected Turkey's relations with the countries in its neighbourhood.

As mentioned earlier, Turkey had developed good political and economic relations with existing regimes during the previous decade. While the Arab Spring disrupted these connections, it became clear that supporting autocratic regimes could, in the long run, undermine Turkey's regional positioning. Thus, Turkey immediately welcomed the collapse of the regime in Egypt, and supported both the interim government and the following election of Mohammed Morsi.<sup>19</sup> However, his removal in a military coup adversely affected Turkey's position, and strong condemnation of the coup by the Turkish leaders resulted in the expulsion of the Turkish Ambassador on November 23, 2013. In response, Turkey declared the Egyptian Ambassador to Ankara *persona non grata*, and downgraded its diplomatic relations with Egypt.<sup>20</sup> Since then, despite attempts to restore ties between them, the relations have not recovered.

In Libya, Turkey was initially cautious, and opposed international intervention, mainly due to its economic interests. As the situation deteriorated, Turkey's top priority was the evacuation of around 25,000 Turkish workers residing in the country. However, after it evacuated Turkish citizens from Libya, and the UNSC adopted resolution 1973 on March 17, 2011 authorising members to take "all necessary measures" to protect civilians,<sup>21</sup> Turkey changed its position, calling for Gadhafi's resignation and supporting the NATO operation. It also recognised the results of the election of General National Congress (GNC) in July 2012, and continued to send humanitarian aid. Yet, as the GNC ceased to be functioning in later months, and two governments emerged instead – one in Tripoli and another in Tobruk – Turkey again found itself in a difficult situation. Nevertheless, the signing of the Libyan Political Agreement on December 17, 2015 with the mediation of the UN eased the tension in the country, allowing Turkey to support the agreement.<sup>22</sup> During the ensuing political uncertainty, Turkey emphasised its support to the government, and refrained from working with other groups.

The biggest challenge the Arab Spring created for Turkey has been the unrest in Syria. In fact, it became a litmus test for Turkey's active foreign policy in the Middle East. Although it was initially thought that the personal rapport between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during the previous decade, would give Turkey leverage to convince the latter to ease the tension with reforms, he did not respond to please the protesters and reacted with force when faced with popular demands. When this led to an uprising in the north of the country, Turkey reversed its policy, and started to support the opposition groups.

It seemed that Turkey, having seen the regime changing powers of popular uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, underestimated the power of the Assad regime in Syria, as well as the role of third parties' such as Russia and Iran. While Turkey initially tried to persuade the international community to intervene, global actors were not willing to get involved. This led to a situation where Turkey found itself on the same side with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in aiding the opposition groups, while its inability to organise

them into a workable alternative contributed to the reluctance of other countries to get involved. Moreover, Turkey's active involvement in the crisis created a negative narrative and failing international image, including accusations of pursuing a sectarian foreign policy.<sup>23</sup>

Subsequently, the humanitarian side of the crisis became Turkey's major concern, as it has received more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees.<sup>24</sup> Besides the obvious difficulties in taking care of such numbers without much international support, the fact that the Turkish-Syrian border almost ceased to function and became an open line for all sorts of movements, including radicals going to fight in Syria, has complicated the issue for Turkey.

Moreover, the threat level in Turkey in connection with radical groups operating in the region rose considerably due to the Syrian civil war which, entangled with the conflict in Iraq, caused the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS) from 2011 onwards. The involvement of international forces to support various groups complicated the situation even further.

The destructive impact of the conflict extended into Turkey, with several terror attacks in Reyhanlı (May 2013), Diyarbakır (June 2015), Suruç (July 2015), Ankara (October 2015), İstanbul (January and March 2016), and Gaziantep (August 2016) by ISIS affiliated individuals. Moreover, when ISIS forces, coming out of Iraq and occupying a sizeable chunk of northern Syria, clashed with Kurdish groups over the control of the town of Ayn al-Arab (or *Kobane* in Kurdish), Turkey found itself under heavy international pressure to help out the Kurds, while no other international actor was willing to send ground forces.<sup>25</sup>

The Syrian crisis, intertwined with the conflict in Iraq, impacted Turkey's domestic politics as well. The fighting between Kurdish groups and ISIS forces along the border with Turkey, sparked unrest inside Turkey in October 2014 when Turkey refused to get involved on behalf of the Kurds.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the ISIS became a direct threat for Turkey in Iraq when it seized the city of Mosul, and captured 49 Turkish Consulate staff as hostage on June 11, 2014.<sup>27</sup> In response,

Turkey gradually aligned itself with the US-led coalition against ISIS, and agreed (February 19, 2015) with the USA to “train and equip” the Syrian opposition groups. The agreement provided manoeuvring space for Turkey, and it intensified its contribution to the US-led coalition forces by allowing the use of İncirlik and Diyarbakır airbases in Turkey for the airstrikes against ISIS on July 23, 2015.

The active involvement of Russia in the Syrian civil war in late September 2015 impacted Turkey's strategic interests in the region. While Russian operations targeted Syrian opposition rather than the ISIS, the increased Iranian activity in Syria alongside Russia, and the substantial support received by the Kurdish groups both from Russia and the USA, weakened Turkey's hand in the regional balance of power. Moreover, Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet when it violated Turkish airspace (November 24, 2015) led to the suspension of its flights over Syria.<sup>28</sup> The later thaw, however, again changed the equation, allowing Turkey to return to the Syrian theatre. Since then, Turkey has been playing an active role in Syria, both in terms of active military operations and through its contribution to a political solution.

The USA's preference to cooperate with the Kurdish groups on the ground against the ISIS since autumn 2015 strained Turkey's relations with the USA, and resulted in Turkey's *Euphrates Shield* and *Olive Branch* operations in northern Syria to eliminate perceived threats from the region. It also sent troops to the Idlib province to monitor the de-escalation zone agreed with Russia and Iran within the Astana Process. Eventually, a combination of factors ranging from regional dynamics to disagreements between Turkey and its Western allies, as well as the thaw in Turkish-Russian relations eased Turkey's insistence on the removal of Bashar al-Assad, and gradually aligned Turkey with the Russia-Iran bloc in Syria, leading to the Russia-led Astana process.

### **The Changing Balance of Power**

The developments in the Middle East over the last decade – the failure of Israel-Palestine peace process; the US invasion of Iraq;

the discovery of offshore hydrocarbons; the Arab Spring; and the emergence of new players, including non-state actors – have had a serious impact on the regional balance of power.

In addition to regional countries, extra-regional powers – chief among them the USA and Russia – have been seeking to maintain and/or increase their influence throughout the region via military presence and political alignments. The USA has had strategic advantages in the region since the days of the Cold War, and has been able to consolidate its status after the end of the Cold War, while Russia has had to withdraw.<sup>29</sup> Nearly all the countries along the southern shores of the Mediterranean are a part of the NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue Programme, and the USA has access to their ports. In contrast, the military presence of the Soviet Union came to an end with the end of the Cold War, though the Russian Federation has been trying to re-establish it.<sup>30</sup> The Syrian crisis paved the way for Russia to do so within a rather short time.

The US strategy in the Levant part of the Middle East has been based on two triangular partnerships: US-Turkey-Israel and US-Egypt-Israel.<sup>31</sup> The emergence of several disagreements within these partnerships, and their changing geometries over the last decade, have affected the US policy in the region, and resulted in independent moves by Turkey, Egypt and Israel, sometimes clashing with the US priorities.<sup>32</sup>

There have been problems especially in the US-Turkey-Israel triangle. The bilateral relations between the USA and Turkey were severely damaged by the refusal of the Turkish Parliament in 2003 to grant permission to US troops to pass through Turkey *en route* to Iraq prior to the invasion, and later, the internment of Turkish soldiers in Sulaymania, northern Iraq, by US soldiers. These developments led to the rise of persistent anti-American sentiments in Turkey.<sup>33</sup> Though tension between the two countries eased somewhat after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, the divergent policy lines remained, and took a downturn after the 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the rise of ISIS and its rapid advance in Iraq and Syria from the summer of 2014 onwards created a dangerous

security vacuum at the core of the region. To prevent further advance by the ISIS, the USA started air strikes in early August, along with the “coalition of the willing.” While the USA sought an increase in the Turkish contribution, along with permission to use the İncirlik airbase, Turkey insisted on prioritising the removal of Bashar al-Assad and the creation of a buffer zone in northern Syria. It allowed İncirlik to be used only for logistical and humanitarian support. The alignment of positions between Turkey and the USA took some time. Even after the two countries signed a protocol on the “train-and-equip” program for the Syrian opposition on February 19, 2015 (which was shelved because of failure after a while), and an agreement that allowed coalition forces the use of İncirlik and Diyarbakir airbases for airstrikes on July 23, 2015, they continue to diverge on the priorities of the operation and over the final outcome. Particularly, starting from autumn 2015, the US support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD), paved the way for Kurdish groups to become de-facto ground forces for the USA's effort to fight against the ISIS, and put the two allies at loggerheads.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, the Turkey-Israel part of the US-Israel-Turkey triangle suffered heavily since 2010. After Israeli soldiers killed Turkish activist in the *Mavi Marmara* raid, Turkey recalled its ambassador, cancelled joint military exercises, called for an emergency meeting of the UNSC, and expelled Israel's ambassador, reducing diplomatic representation. Despite several attempts to patch up the relations, the gridlock remained until US President Obama brokered an apology from the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on March 22, 2013 with a phone call to Prime Minister Erdoğan, and the much sought-after re-connection came with an agreement on June 26, 2016 to normalise the diplomatic relations.<sup>36</sup> The problems in the US-Turkey-Israeli triangle naturally affected regional calculations.

As the recent discoveries of offshore energy resources have heightened competition in the region, traditional alliances are being replaced by new partnerships in line with the changing interests. One of the more significant changes has occurred in connection with

Israel. While it was previously closely allied with Turkey on many international issues, with the downturn in the relations, it has moved to cultivate closer relations with Greece and RoC.<sup>37</sup>

Russia, too, has been trying to increase its military presence in the region, particularly in Syria. The hands-off policy of the Obama administration in Syria gave Russia a chance to return to the Middle East where it had been absent since the end of the Cold War. Although Russia had been supporting the Syrian regime through diplomacy and arms supplies since the beginning of the crisis, the direct involvement of Russian troops came on September 30, 2015, when the regime weakened to a point where the loss of the Russian naval base in Tartus became possible. The active involvement of Russia in the Syrian civil war with a military build-up changed the balances not only in Syria but also in the region. The intense Russian airstrikes which did not distinguish between the ISIS forces and other rebel groups strengthened the regime, and halted the advance of rebel groups and ISIS forces. Furthermore, Turkey's downing of a Russian jet in November 2015 provided Russia with an excuse to strengthen its forces with missiles and an additional airbase in Hmeimim, near the city of Latakia.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In addition to its long-standing problems, the outbreak of the Arab Spring created new challenges for the entire Middle East. New actors, such as radical groups like ISIS, emerged which triggered a realignment in regional structures. Under such conditions, Turkey's relations with the region started to transform in the late 1990s, and continued during the JDP governments. The political transformation of the country and the emergence of new business communities, eager to operate in the region, encouraged such change.

However, the emergence of new challenges especially following the Arab Spring, limited Turkey's actions in the region significantly, and its policies came under attack for a lack of understanding of the regional dynamics. While the increased instability in the region affected Turkey's political relations the most, sustained crises have also undermined its economic connections. Moreover, Turkey's

over-activism in the region before and after the Arab Spring led to domestic and international charges of ‘neo-Ottomanism’, eventually leading to collapse of its regional policy. Its earlier attraction to local populations and leverage over the countries mainly stemmed from its democratic features and connection with the EU. However, as its democratic credentials increasingly came under suspicion and the EU connection got damaged, Turkey’s appeal and leverage in the region has weakened.

So much so that Turkey’s political relations today with the Middle Eastern countries are not even at the level of pre-Arab Spring era, with negligible or decreased diplomatic representation in Syria, Egypt, and Israel. This diplomatic and political disconnect has undermined Turkey’s economic connections. While its geographic position at the centre of the transportation routes might in future assist Turkey in its ambition to become an energy hub, existing tensions hinder its realisation.

## Notes

1. This is an earlier draft of a longer paper (M. Aydın and C. Dizdaroglu, “Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy”) published in a Special Issue of *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 16, No. 60, November 2018 and reprinted in M. Aydın (ed.) *The Levant; Search for a Regional Order*, Tunis, KAS, December 2018, pp. 184-213. I would like to thank C. Dizdaroglu for allowing me to use this draft for my presentation at the Third West Asia Conference (New Delhi, September 2018), which gave rise to these proceedings.
2. Meliha Benli Altunişik, “Turkey as a ‘Mediterranean Power’”, in Altunişik, Kirişci and Tocci (eds.) *Turkey: Reluctant Mediterranean Power*, p. 9.
3. Kemal Kirişci, “The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State”, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40, 2009, pp. 29-57.
4. The JDP government expanded Turkey’s relations with neighbouring countries using new tools such as visa-liberalization, free trade-zones, and joint cabinet meetings.
5. Öniş summarised Turkey’s dilemma in the region as ‘ethics versus interest’. See Ziya Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East”, *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2014, pp. 1-17.
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## 5. The UN and the Palestine Question: Security and Conflict in the Middle East

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The United Nations (UN) was established in 1945 as a beacon of hope dedicated to “saving future generations from the scourges of war”,<sup>1</sup> and to ensure justice, equality, and human rights for all people. Merely two years after its creation, the UN was faced with its most difficult mission to date: resolving the deeply-rooted conflict in Palestine that was fast developing between the indigenous Palestinian Arabs and the Jewish militias made up mostly of East European immigrants. The UN’s first attempt to settle the conflict resulted in the Partition Plan, which proposed partitioning the piece of land called Palestine into two unequal shares linked by an economic condominium as enshrined in the UN General Assembly Resolution 181 adopted on November 29, 1947, while Jerusalem would remain “Corpus Separatum” under the supervision of the Trusteeship Council.<sup>2</sup> The adoption of this resolution and the British withdrawal from Palestine after unrightfully transferring ownership of the land to the Jewish Agency, under a promise that emanated in the Balfour Declarations of 1917, caused conflict to erupt as Israel declared independence on May 14, 1948.

This declaration was met with resistance by five Arab armies who attempted to liberate Palestine in the first Arab-Israeli war, but fell short of Israel claiming victory, forcibly removed an estimated 8,00,000 Palestinians in what is known today as the *Nakba* or “catastrophe”. Palestinians were made into refugees and scattered into neighbouring countries following this war. The UN General Assembly’s second

attempt to resolve the conflict by passing Resolution 194 on December 11, 1948, which demanded all refugees who fled their homes in the light of the Arab-Israeli war were to be allowed the right to return<sup>3</sup>. However, the UN again failed to implement this resolution and refugees were denied re-entry into their homeland.

This UN failure to achieve justice for dispossessed Palestinians led to intense feelings of frustration, despair, and rage which manifested into being the main source of grievances, frustration, incursions, conflict, and wars in the Middle East globally termed as the “Arab-Israeli” conflict. As the conflict began to take different forms in the 1950s and 1960s, the Suez crisis of 1956 unfolded as the first confrontation between Egypt and Israel caused by the emergence and organisation of Palestinian political and guerrilla movements dedicated to armed struggle against Israel. The Palestine National Liberation Movement, known as Fatah, began to vex Israel as early as 1965 through repeated border infiltrations from Jordan and Syria. However, numerous scholars attribute the rise of guerrilla movements that undermined Israel’s national security to the 1967 war which was a catastrophic setback for the Arab armies ultimately leading to the fragmentation of the pan-Arab struggle for Palestine.

Seventy years later, it is undeniable that the UN’s failure to quell the escalating conflict has stained the region with violence, and presented immense security challenges and riddled the Middle East with instability. All resolutions meant to contain the situation have done the opposite; exacerbated and sustained the conflict due to a lack of mobilisation to enforce them. This essay examines the role of the UN’s failure to implement its major resolutions regarding the Question of Palestine starting with the Partition Plan (UNSCR 181) and the “Right of Return” (UNSCR 194), and its subsequent failure to hold Israel accountable for ongoing violations of international laws, which generated and sustained an imbalanced power struggle creating a regional and international crisis.

### **The United Nation’s Special Committee on Palestine**

The United Nation’s Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) was established in 1948 to subdue the imminent conflict, and find a fair

solution which would allow for the peaceful coexistence of both the Palestinians and the European Jewish immigrants. This 11-member committee was sent to Palestine to observe the situation on the ground. It is important to note that no Arab state was assigned to this committee despite regional proximity and an increased understanding of the situation. Israeli Historian Ilan Pappé states that these member states were ill informed about the situation on the ground.<sup>4</sup> Evidently, this was reflected in the partial proposal of the UN General Assembly Resolution 181 and, despite the UNSCOP report acknowledging the numerical discrepancy between the ethnic populations, this proposal gave 55 per cent of Palestine to the one third minority Jewish population. The intense Zionist campaign to garner UNSCOP support for their cause elucidates this biased outcome. This resolution also recommended an economic condominium between the two states, and the designation of Jerusalem, the most contentious factor, as “Corpus Separatum” that is, a separate entity to be overseen by the Trusteeship Council.

Arabs rejected this proposal as it utterly disregarded their rights to their land which was unseemly signed away by an outside entity.<sup>5</sup> The proposal was perceived by Arabs as an international conspiracy driven by Western forces that stemmed from their group guilt feeling of passivity during the Holocaust. It transferred the responsibility of solving the European quagmire of discrimination against and segregation of European Jews to the Arab world. On the contrary, while the Jewish Agency was not fully satisfied with the amount of land designated for the state of Israel, they accepted the resolution, viewing it as a stepping stone to their ultimate vision of conquering all of Palestine (Adams, 1988).<sup>6</sup> Despite the efforts of the Arabs to stop the adoption of Resolution 181, it was passed in the General Assembly (GA) by a barely two-thirds majority.

However, General Assembly resolutions bear no legal obligation, and are merely recommendations. Regardless, the British withdrew their forces to allow the Israeli de facto leader, David Ben Gurion, to declare the independence of Israel on May 14, 1948. Subsequently, Jewish forces took control of the land they were granted by the UN according to Resolution 181.

This event angered the Arab world, and compelled Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon to infiltrate the border in the first Arab-Israeli war in order to liberate Palestine. However, the Zionist militias were more organised, disciplined, better armed, and outnumbered all Arab armies. The first war ended in favour of Israeli militias. Consequently, 8,00,000 Palestinians were forced to flee their homes as they took shelter in what was left unoccupied in Palestine in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and in the neighbouring three Arab countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. This defeat infuriated Arab nationalists who abhorred years of colonial rule in the Middle East; the creation of Israel marked a new chapter of settler colonialism. Unfortunately, many of the Arab regimes then in power were complicit or even coordinated their steps with England such as King Abdullah of Jordan who sacrificed the rights of Palestinians in order to assume control of the West Bank and annexed it to his Jordanian territory.

In 1948, King Abdullah I of Jordan accepted a compromise allowing Israel's creation in return for Zionist and British approval of the continuity of the Hashemite Kingdom on the East Bank of the River Jordan. His presumed collaboration with Israeli leaders and England led to his assassination in 1951 at the hands of Palestinians.<sup>7</sup> His death resulted in a domino effect across the Middle East, causing civil eruptions in multiple Arab countries. Thereafter, Gamal Abdel Nasser spearheaded a coup in Egypt that ended in the overthrow of King Farouk on July 23, 1952, marking the beginning of a pan-Arab movement devoted to standing against colonialism, liberating Palestine, and creating a Pan-Arab united country. Nasser's vision renewed hope in the region that Arab unity would prevail, and lead to triumph over colonial powers and their puppets in the Middle East.

The UN's first failed attempt at mediating a peaceful solution through implementing a fair and just partition plan laid the foundation for the radicalisation of Arab nationalists, creating an environment for challenging the status quo, and shaking the security dimensions in the Middle East. It can be argued that the Security Council should have acted in accordance with Chapter VII of the UN

charter which gives the UN the right to intervene, with armed forces if needed, to establish peace where there is believed to be a threat to international peace and security, in anticipation of the *Nakba*.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the UN stood by as Israel conducted its long-awaited ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.<sup>9</sup> The second failed attempt, the non-implementation of General Assembly Resolution 194 adopted on December 11, 1948 as a result of the *Nakba*, further intensified frustrations. This Resolution called for the return of all Palestinian refugees to their homes. While this was not legally binding, it was the premise on which Israel was admitted into the UN. The UN granted Israel membership under the condition that both Resolutions 181 and 194 be implemented. However, no substantial efforts were made to execute these Resolutions, and provide some justice for the dispossessed Palestinians.

Israel's defiance was met with no consequences, increasing the illegal annexation of Palestinian lands and the ethnic cleansing of indigenous Palestinians. The paralysis in implementing Resolution 194 prompted the adoption of Resolution 302 in 1949, creating the UN Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA),<sup>10</sup> and reinforcing the fact that the UN was an eyewitness to the exile of the Palestinians from their homeland. Arabs again opposed this Resolution, demanding that the UN implement the previous Resolutions in order to attack the issue at the root. The creation of UNRWA was merely a bandage solution for a festering situation. Lebanese Ambassador Charles Habib warned that granting Israel membership while overlooking its extremely problematic behaviour and lack of compliance, would create social, political, and economic consequences not only for the region but internationally, for years to come. This it has done.

### **From the Suez Crisis to the 1967 War**

The most crucial implications of the UN failure to enforce its own Resolutions had its implication on the region's overall security situation. The denial of refugees the right to return to their homes and land led to the establishment of the first Palestinian guerrilla groups in Gaza, better known as *fedayeen*. The *fedayeen* mobilised disenfranchised Palestinians to retaliate against Israel. *Fedayeen*



bases in Sinai and Gaza provided strategic locations for launching attacks on Israel in order to disturb national security. On 26 July 1956, President Nasser decided to reclaim the Suez Canal from its long occupation by Britain, and nationalise it. This led to blocking marine shipments to Israel. In addition, President Nasser was accused by Israel and the Western powers that he was behind the *fedayeen* activities or, at least, was looking the other way. This major development led to the trilateral aggression.<sup>11</sup>

Israel claimed these incursions were intolerable, and used them as justification for attacking Egypt in 1956, along with the UK and France, in the Second Arab-Israeli war known as the “Suez Crisis”. The UN responded to this event by establishing the first full-fledged peacekeeping operation called “UN Emergency Force (UNEF)” stationed on the Egyptian side of the border. The UN General Assembly, under the “United for Peace Resolution of 1950” adopted Resolutions 997, 998, 999 and 1000 (1956) in efforts to deal with this attack. The ceasefire demanded by Resolution 997 (November 2, 1956) also called on parties involved in the conflict to “withdraw all forces behind the armistice lines, to desist from raids across the armistice lines into neighbouring territory, and to observe scrupulously the provisions of the armistice agreements”. The UNEF was responsible for observing the ceasefire, securing the withdrawal of all attacking powers as well as maintaining peace between the nations involved.

Tension continued to escalate between Israel and its neighbours as Palestinian guerrilla movements became active after 1965, attacking Israel from Jordan and Syria. Israel launched an attack on the West Bank village of Al Samou’ (which was part of Jordan at the time) on 13 November 1966, killing dozens of civilians and a number of Jordanian soldiers.<sup>12</sup> This led to cross border raids from the West Bank by the first organized Palestinian Guerrilla group, the Palestine National Liberation Movement, known as Fatah. This movement was established as a Palestinian national guerrilla group committed to liberate Palestine through armed struggle. Tensions continued to rise when a cross border conflict between Israel and Syria (April 7, 1967) resulted in Israel threatening Syria with all-

out war. Egypt pledged its support to Syria, along with Jordan, who seized this opportunity to reconcile with President Nasser of Egypt and absorb the resentment of its own population, dominantly Palestinians, following the attack on Al Samou'.

On May 16, 1967, President Nasser closed the Strait of Tiran, once again blocking Israeli shipments, and ordered the UNEF to evacuate Sinai.<sup>13</sup> With a military alliance in place, Nasser's actions were interpreted by Israel as a declaration of war. Israel, in a pre-emptive devastating strike attacked Egypt, Syria and Jordan on June 5, 1967. The war lasted only a few days since Arab armies were not prepared for such a surprise attack. Israel declared victory as it assumed control over Sinai, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. This crushing defeat was the largest loss for the Arab armies; it discredited the secular leaders and their capabilities to ever defeat Israel, ultimately changing the course of history. Most importantly, millions of Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip came under the control of Israel in a prolonged occupation that continues to loom over the lives of Palestinians till today.

While it was obvious that the Jewish Agency had no intention of confining the state of Israel within the proposed borders of Resolution 181, the war of 1967 made this a reality. However, Israel's acquisition of land through force was not tolerated by UN Security Council which unanimously adopted Resolution 242 on November 22, 1967.<sup>14</sup> This Resolution demanded the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the "territories" it conquered during the war. Additionally, it emphasized the urgency for a just solution, for both the conflict and the "refugee problem." The adoption of Resolution 242 was not implemented, even after UN Special Envoy Gunnar Jarring shuttled the region for four years. The failure was attributed to multitude of reasons. Firstly, the ambiguous language of Resolution 242 as it did not specify the exact borders of the Israeli state to which it was supposed to withdraw. This ambiguity enabled Israel to ignore the Resolution on the premise that the "territories" were undefined. Additionally, the UN again failed to act in accordance with the enforcement mechanism of Chapter VII of the UN Charter

which authorises the use of any means necessary for maintaining or restoring international peace and security if an aggressor is not heeding the call for ceasefire.

Despite witnessing tensions rising to the point of eruption prior to the war, the UN failed to prevent the war by, for example, insisting on keeping UNEF deployed in the border area rather than accepting to withdraw it, as demanded by Egypt. This acquiescence resulted in the occupation of land from three Arab countries: Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Furthermore, this Resolution also failed to address the Question of Palestine, the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The vague language merely referred to Palestinians as refugees for whom a solution must be sought. This discarded the previously established view on displaced Palestinians as per Resolution 194 in which the UN had affirmed their right to return to their homes and properties. Inadvertence towards the Palestinian cause unveiled in Resolution 242 resulted in a strong rejection of the Resolution by enraged Palestinians and Syrians. This incited the determination of Palestinian nationalists to wage armed struggle to liberate Palestine, and establish a democratic state for all its inhabitants, regardless of religion or ethnicity, free of discrimination or oppression as illustrated in the Fatah Charter.

Israel's occupation of the whole of Palestine opened the door for a new era of armed resistance. The disastrous results of the 1967 war were qualified as the downfall of the pan-Arab movement which was plagued with disunity and disorganisation. Following the loss of the Jordanian control of the West Bank, the newly formed Fatah movement established itself in Jordan, and "emerged as the richest, most successful and structurally complex guerrilla movement".<sup>15</sup> The threat of Fatah to Israel's security prompted Israel to destroy *fedayeen* camps in Jordan in the Battle of Karameh in 1968. This battle was the first confrontation face to face between the Palestinian guerrilla movements with the IDF. The guerrillas inflicted substantial damage to the invading units in a show of symbolic strength of the Palestinian determination to fight back, thus erasing the narrative that Palestinians were just passive refugees. While the Israelis succeeded in their mission, this moral victory of Fatah increased

Arab support for the *fedayeen*, and resulted in an upsurge of Fatah recruits in Jordan.

Meanwhile, the second largest group within the PLO, the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP), took the lead in bringing their cause to the international forefront. PLFP leader, Wadi' Haddad, orchestrated the first hijacking of a civilian plane flying from Tel Aviv to Rome on July 23, 1968.<sup>16</sup> Although Israel affirmed that it would not negotiate with the terrorists, the hijacking successfully resulted in the release of Palestinian prisoners. This strategy grabbed international attention, and demanded Israel's desperate cooperation. All other measures to reach a solution and garner attention for the Palestinian cause had failed. This sentiment was echoed by the PLO UN chief observer, Zuhdi Terzi, who stated that "hijackings aroused the consciousness of the world and awakened media and world opinion much more – and more effectively than 20 years of pleading at the UN".<sup>17</sup>

Consciousness rose from the understanding that the effects of this conflict were not just reserved to the Middle East. The results yielded by these tactics reinforced the belief that armed struggle was going to be the only way to liberate Palestine. After all, it brought the mighty Israel to its knees when the UN could not.

The growing numbers of *fedayeen* in Jordan created a state within a state, a reality which led PLO to control Jordanian territory. The *fedayeen* utilised locations under their control to launch attacks on Israel, eventually provoking King Hussein's attention. Hussein's secret friendly relationship with Israel, and his fear of being overthrown, provoked a massive attack aimed at guerrilla bases throughout Jordan to rid the nation of Palestinian *fedayeen*. This attack took place on September 17, 1970 in what was coined as "Black September". While successful in removing the PLO from Jordan, thousands of Palestinians civilians were killed in this tragic civil war. Syria entered Jordan to save the Palestinian guerrillas, while the Jordanian army was supported by Israel and the USA. This was the last nail in the coffin of the Pan-Arab movement led by President Nasser who paid for his life in exhaustion while trying to stop the Jordanian onslaught on the Palestinian movement through

an emergency Summit meeting in Cairo. He did stop the war, but his heart also stopped beating as he was bidding farewell to the last leader returning home on September 28, 1970.

Syria and Egypt went back to war with Israel after all attempts to convince Israel to withdraw from the territories it occupied in 1967 war failed. On the morning of October 6, 1973, both countries launched a surprise attack on Israel known as the Ramadan War/Yom Kippur war. Israel was caught unprepared, and it took her a few days to absorb the surprise attack and launch its counter attack. The 1973 War created new facts in the Middle East. Israel realised it is vulnerable. A new window of opportunity was created. A new hope was established that progress in implementing the “land for peace” equation, or even ending the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was there, and was possible. The UN adopted Resolution 338 (October 22, 1973) demanding that Resolution 242 (1967) be implemented.<sup>18</sup> Once again, this Resolution fell on deaf ears, and very minimal efforts were taken by the UN to subdue the escalation of this power struggle as the Question of Palestine continued to be circumvented by the international body.

Following the 1973 war, a Pan-Arab solidarity movement has emerged following the backing of Syria and Egypt by the oil exporting Gulf States. The issue of Palestine became a centre of attention, and the Arab backing of the PLO was translated into global recognition of the Palestinian dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The issue came back in full force to the UN after almost a quarter of century of marginalisation.

### **Stage 1: The Proactive Period (1974-1982)**

The re-emergence of the Question of Palestine took centre stage following the war of 1973 as the UN began passing numerous seminal resolutions regarding the conflict. This shift in priorities in the UN was a result of the General Assembly Resolution 2535 which acknowledged that the unresolved issue of the Question of Palestine had immense implications for the region.<sup>19</sup> In September 1974, 56-member states drafted a proposal to include the Question of Palestine as an agenda item. On November 13, 1974, Yasser Arafat

stood before the General Assembly in New York City to present his famous “gun and olive branch” speech, in which he expressed his hope that the UN had evolved into a powerful organization that would not abandon the Palestinian cause anymore. Following Arafat’s speech, Resolution 3236 was adopted on November 22, 1974, affirming the Palestinian right to self-determination without external interference, the right to national independence and sovereignty, the right of refugees to return to their homes; it also requested the inclusion of the Question of Palestine on the agenda of the UN.<sup>20</sup> The following year, the UN General Assembly passed the landmark Resolution 3379 (November 10, 1975),<sup>21</sup> stating that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination”.

The General Assembly Resolution 3379 infuriated Israel, and was labelled as an anti-Semite scheme orchestrated by the new powerful Arab Group. However, it marked an important milestone for the emergence of the Palestinians on the world stage. It exposed the root of their problem for what it truly was a racist endeavour that brutalised and exterminated an indigenous population in order to establish a home exclusively for Jewish people. The USA and Israel waged a fight against this Resolution, putting pressure on the countries that had supported it to call for an annulment which eventually occurred in 1991 per Resolution 46/86.<sup>22</sup> The campaign against this Resolution did not stop the UN from continuing to show its support for the Palestinian people as multiple resolutions by the Security Council such as Resolutions 446 (1979), 452 (1979), 465 (1980), 471 (1980) were passed to declare and reaffirm the illegality of Israeli settlements according to the Fourth Geneva Conventions of 1949. Additionally, Resolutions 476 and 478, both adopted in 1980, condemned Israel’s illegal occupation and annexation of Jerusalem, and declared all its measures in the city null and void. The fight to bringing Israel’s violations of international law to light resulted in the creation of a division in the Secretariat on Palestinian Rights to investigate those violations. This proactive period instilled hope in the Palestinian community that their cause was being acknowledged by the world. It seemed as though the international community was finally fulfilling its obligation towards the Palestinians, an obligation they had long disregarded.

## Stage 2: The Reaction Period (1982-2004)

The assassination of Sadat following the signing of the first peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Iran-Iraq war 1980-1988, and the invasion and occupation of Kuwait by Iraqi forces on August 2, 1990 all reflected a weak and divided Arab world wherein the Question of Palestine was no longer the central issue. Resolutions during this period passed in the UN with regard to Palestine were initiated mostly by non-Arab states, or in response to rising hostilities. This era reflected a reactive UN which responded to every act of violence with censure, starting with the adoption of Resolution 573 to condemn Israel's air raid on Tunisia in targeting PLO headquarters in 1985.<sup>23</sup> As the occupation persisted, the suffocation of Palestinians under occupation led to the eruption of the first *intifada* on December 9, 1987. As tensions rose in the region, the UN Security Council passed multiple resolutions in response to the *intifada*. The first of these was Resolution 605 (1987)<sup>24</sup> which recalled resolutions 446, 465, 497, 592 as well as the Fourth Geneva Conventions. Resolution 605 condemned Israel's violations of Palestinian human rights after the IDF opened fire on protesting civilians. This was followed by Resolutions 607 (1988), 608 (1988), 636 (1989), and 641 (1989) which called on Israel to abide by the Fourth Geneva Convention to protect civilians during the time of war, and to cease the deportation of Palestinians. All mentioned Resolutions were adopted 14 to none, with the USA abstaining from voting.

On the Israeli decision to deport 400 Palestinian leaders in 1992 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 799, condemning the brutal attacks on Palestinian civilians, and calling on the occupying power to allow those deportees to go back to their homes<sup>25</sup> One of the most tragic brutal attacks was "the Hebron massacre", on March 18, 1994, when an Israeli-American extremist, Baruch Goldstein, opened fire on Palestinian worshippers in the Cave of Patriarchs during the holy month of Ramadan, killing over 29 people and wounding 150 others. Once again, the UN Security Council responded by passing Resolution 904 expressing shock about the situation, and again citing the Fourth Geneva Conventions affirming

that Israel remains responsible for the safety of the occupied civilian population.

Hostilities evoked by Israeli brutality, the failure of the Oslo Accords of 1993 signed between the PLO and Israel, and the Camp David summit in July 2000 between Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak under the auspice of US President Bill Clinton, all led to more frustration and desperation amongst the Palestinian people. The Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Temple Mount, on September 28, 2000, was the ignition that generated an intense response from Palestinian civilians, resulting in the launch of the second *intifada*.<sup>26</sup> The second *intifada* was exponentially more violent, and the deteriorating psyche of the occupied Palestinian population explained this phenomenon. Unlike the first *intifada*, which was mostly peaceful comprising of mass protests, this *intifada* witnessed the rise of suicide bombings which were no longer reserved for militant groups like HAMAS but spread to include secular groups and ordinary civilians.<sup>27</sup>

These types of attacks became popular because they were unexpected and extremely disturbing to the Israeli public. These attacks relayed the message that as long as Palestinians were subjected to occupation and denied self-determination, the security of Israel would not be guaranteed. They were also a testament to how horribly the international community had failed the Palestinian people. The UN Security Council responded to these developments through the adoption of Resolution 1322 on October 7, 2000, deploring Sharon's actions and expressing concern about the situation, and recalled Resolutions 242 and 338 to expedite negotiations in order to reach a peaceful solution.<sup>28</sup> However, the violence raged on for five years, resulting in the death of roughly 5000 Palestinians.<sup>29</sup> The UN responded again by adopting Resolution 1397 on March 12, 2002, which was co-sponsored by the USA expressing concern about the intensifying situation. It called for end to the violence, and expressed a vision of a two-state solution for the first time.<sup>30</sup> This idea was the cornerstone of the Road Map to Peace which was again reiterated in Resolution 1515 on November 19, 2003, as the second *intifada* continued.<sup>31</sup>



### Stage 3: Marginalisation Period (2005-present)

After the second *intifada*, the weakening image of the Fatah-led PLO, stemming from their inability to improve conditions within occupied Palestine, and accusations of selling out, resulted in increasing support for HAMAS that firmly stood against Israel. HAMAS provided aid to disenfranchised Palestinians through social welfare programmes when UNRWA and the PLO failed to do so. Their popularity eventually led to their election in 2006 as Palestinian desperation for relief increased. This election was controversial due to the classification of HAMAS as a terrorist organisation by Israel and the USA on the premise of their violent resistance through rocket launches into Israel as well as suicide bombings. HAMAS assumed a de facto rule in Gaza after being pushed underground in the West Bank, inducing the air, land, and maritime siege of Gaza by Israel and Egypt which began in 2007.

Furthermore, Israel used the HAMAS election to subject Palestinians to collective punishment and relentless assaults, thus maintaining further the vicious cycle of insecurity; it resulted in the more and more hopeless Palestinians to resort to extremism as a way out. Israel's first assault on Gaza, "Operation Cast Lead" started on December 27, 2008, and lasted till January 18, 2009. It was conducted with the alleged goal of ending indiscriminate rocket launches on Israeli towns and settlements, and ending the smuggling of weapons into the strip. While Israel claims that it was targeting HAMAS militants, at least 1,400 civilians were killed.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, according to the UN-compiled Goldstone's reports, war crimes were committed by the IDF wherein soldiers intentionally targeted civilians waving white flags to indicate their status, and uncovered the use of white phosphorous by Israel on civilians. After 13 days, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1860 on January 8, 2009,<sup>33</sup> calling for a ceasefire. In addition, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2334 on December 13, 2016, on settlement activities during the final days of the Obama administration.<sup>34</sup>

The UN has failed to pass any other resolutions regarding Palestine since Resolution 1860. The Israeli assault on Gaza in 2012,

known as Operation Pillar of Defense aimed at HAMAS, resulted in the death of almost 200 civilians. The UN held an emergency meeting in response to this attack on the 14th and 15th of November 2012, but failed to pass any resolution. In 2014, Israel waged a brutal 51-day assault on Gaza known as Operation Protective Edge. The UN watched as, at least 2131 Palestinians were murdered, including 550 children. Following this brutal onslaught, UN investigations produced a report which cited that 11,100 people were wounded, including 3,374 children; and 480,000 Palestinians were displaced.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, no resolution was passed as Israel conducted this assault against the two million Palestinians confined in the open-air prison of Gaza, leaving thousands of innocent civilians killed or wounded. Presently, the population of Gaza remains under siege as Israel continues to curtail the movement of people and merchandise. This inhuman condition is leading to the slow collapse of civil infrastructure in the whole Gaza Strip, making life almost impossible according to UN Reports. Yet, Palestinians in the strip continue to show determination towards acquiring their rights as displayed in the recent weekly “March of Return” demonstrations that started on March 30, 2018, in which thousands engage in peaceful civil protest every Friday, subjected to violence by Israeli snipers that have killed hundreds of civilians. This vicious act has yielded no substantial reaction by the international body. The US vetoed the Kuwaiti draft resolution calling for Protection of Palestinian civilians in the Security Council on June 1, 2018. Yet, the same draft resolution was adopted by the General Assembly on June 13, 2018 by a majority of 120 votes to 8 against.

## **Conclusion**

In examining the last seventy years, and observing the current situation on the ground in the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is clear that the UN had failed in its mission to produce a durable and just solution. The question still remains why the UN felt it had the legal or moral right to propose a biased and impartial Resolution such as Resolution 181 that infringes on the rights of Palestinians to self-determination that they continuously affirm. Furthermore, the legitimisation of

Israel despite its illegal conquest and forced population transfer has only conveyed UN indifference towards the Palestinians. This has angered Arab nationalists, resulting in the radicalisation of the Arab people and created the atmosphere of violence in the Middle East. The destabilisation of the region and intensified security challenges caused by the emergence of guerrilla warfare, plane hijackings, and suicide bombings are rooted in the UN failure to diffuse the situation.

These unconventional acts go far beyond the realm of normality in terms of the human psyche, and they “signal the collapse of dialogue and [the] resort to unconventional means of communication”.<sup>36</sup> As the occupation persists decades later, the UN continues to aimlessly watch the collective punishment and state sanctioned violence imposed upon the Palestinians by Israel, illustrating this very principle. Israel continues to expand settlements on Palestinian land, regardless of the fact that they have been declared illegal and in violation of international law as per the UN Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016). Settlements portray the most violent aspect of this imbalanced power struggle as their expansion hinders the reality of a two-state solution, and provides concrete evidence for classifying Israel as a functioning apartheid regime, inviting more resentment and security fragility. The international failure to curb Israel’s violations of international law, under the protection of a superpower, the USA, continues to plague the region with insecurity. History delineates that as long as the question of Palestine remains unresolved, security, whether in Middle East or internationally, cannot be guaranteed.

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## 6. Egypt and Geostrategic Challenges in the Middle East: Terrorism, Alliances, and Political Changes

*Elsayed Ali Abofarha*

The nation-state formula was adopted as a form of maintaining the power of the existing elite after the end of colonisation in the 1950s. Despite the distortions and shortcomings of the new nation-state in West Asia and the Arab region, it was able to continue in one way or another, until the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> In the more recent past, the nation-state has faced serious challenges such as the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the September 2001 attacks, the war on terror, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq<sup>2</sup> as well as what, in the beginning, was termed the Arab Spring, in which wide waves of popular uprisings were directed towards authoritarian rulers in a number of Arab countries. The results of these waves varied from one country to another. There were countries in which these waves ended in civil war and international intervention, as in Yemen and Syria; or in the failure of the state, as in Libya; or in negotiations that preserved the structure of the state, as in Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

The Arab Spring raised many questions about the shape and direction of the geostrategic transformations in the Middle East on the one hand, and the nature of the positions of the leading countries on the other. Thus, the main issue of this essay is to attempt an analysis of the Egyptian position on these strategic transformations in the region. The parameters used in the discussion are terrorism, alliances, and political changes.

## Features of the Geostrategic Shifts in the Middle East after 2011

The transformations taking place in the Middle East are characterised by extreme complexity and excessive overlap. Some of the reasons for this complexity and overlap are: the multilateralism of the international stakeholders in the region; the ambiguity of the positions of some regional parties; the complexity of the local map as well as the actors involved in the domestic landscapes; and the engagement of local parties with external parties. Thus, it is difficult to understand the map of the geostrategic transformations in the region and to predict their course, especially in the light of the status of deconstruction in the roles of many regional and local actors. Perhaps one of the most important features of the transformations ensuing from the Arab Spring is the fragility of the Arab regional system. No regional country could present itself as a leader, quite in contrast to the 1960s when Egypt played that role. Saudi Arabia tried to do that in the 1970s, and an axe of countries led by Saudi Arabia tried that for the two decades of 1980s, and 1990s.<sup>4</sup> But, with the first decade of the new century, the faltering of this pack began to appear under the pressures of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. At this time, most regimes were on their own to carry out reforms under the pretext of promoting democracy. As in December 2002, the US Secretary of State Colin Powell, announced the so-called Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which was aimed to promote reform in the Arab region.<sup>5</sup>

The US pressure on Arab regimes at this time was reflected in the growing talk about human rights and freedoms issues, as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed her deep concern about the detention of Ayman Nour by the Egyptian authorities during a joint press conference with her Egyptian counterpart, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, on February 15, 2005, in Washington.<sup>6</sup> The calamity resulting from the absence of a leader began to emerge at this time, but there were signs of the beginnings of the overt role of Iran and Turkey in the Arab world.

This status of fragility has been clearly observed after 2011, especially with violence shaking the foundations of ruling regimes

in Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Tunisia, and Syria and, to a lesser extent, in other Arab countries. The Egyptian role, whether independent or in collaboration with Saudi Arabia, disappeared completely from the regional scene because of its own internal crises. Saudi Arabia tried to stabilise the internal situation in various friendly countries affected by the so called Arab Spring, but with not too much success.

The second feature of the changes in the region is the emergence of important roles being played by regional non-Arab parties in the Arab scene. Although non-Arab actors playing significant roles in the Arab region is not new, it saw a remarkable acceleration after 2011, especially in Turkey and Iran. The Turkish intervention began from Syria, northward to Somalia, through Libya, and Sudan. Turkey intervened directly in Syria through military hardware, and indirectly by influencing the parties regarding the conflict and its future paths by dealing with the Syrian case as a national security issue. For Turkey, Syria represents the backyard, and the crossing of Kurdish militia towards the west of the River Euphrates was considered a security threat.<sup>7</sup> The “Kurdish threat” was perceived to be spreading as the militias took control of approximately 60 per cent of the territory in Aleppo and Raqqa comprising the border regions of Turkey.<sup>8</sup>

In Libya, the Turkish President appointed a special envoy to follow up the Libyan crisis, and declared his support for the internationally recognised Government of Accord in Sudan, where there are no vital Turkish national interests. In 2017, an agreement was signed between the Turkish and Sudanese Presidents on the development of the strategic island of Suakin in the Red Sea, and the construction of a military and civilian port. In addition, Turkish activity in Somalia declared the establishment of the largest Turkish military base. The base was supposed to consist of three military schools, in addition to other military buildings, and the main purpose of its establishment was to help the rebuilding of the formal Somali army, and develop their capabilities to fight armed extremist groups. Iranian activities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen were considered interventions in Arab affairs. The Iranian role in Lebanon has continued through Hezbollah, and also in Syria through the unlimited support of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in the conflict.



The third feature of the large changes in the Arab arena after 2011 is the revitalisation of Russian presence in the Middle East that was absent since the 1970s. It is represented in the direct military intervention in Syria. The fourth feature of these transformations in the Arab scene was the relative decline of the question of Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

### **Egyptian Position on Geostrategic Transformations**

The main determinants of Egyptian foreign policy under President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi can be seen in his inaugural speech, delivered on June 8, 2014. The first feature of this policy is “work and construction at home” as the main path to “restore traditional status”. The second anchor in the Egyptian policy towards the Middle East is “a point of balance and stability in the Middle East”. Here, President El Sisi recalled a historical statement about the Egyptian belief about the extent of the conditional link between internal Egyptian stability and the stability of the Arab world. He did this by using a contemporary formula of replacing the term of the Arab homeland in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

The most important determinant reflects the clear procedural dimension in the presidential discourse which is about “containment of threat sources”. He emphasized the non-ideological dimension of the current Egyptian foreign policy towards Middle East. This dimension has clearly emerged in the Egyptian position on the Syrian, Libyan, and Yemeni crises. In his first speech, the President avoided mentioning specific countries, groups, or organisations. However, subsequent Egyptian action underlined the threat perception from Turkey, Qatar, and Hamas.<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, Egyptian foreign policy priorities can be arranged in five concentric circles: two global, two Arab circles, one African circle, and a clear absence of the previous Islamic circle. The two global circles are the balance in international relations, especially with the great powers, and the “war on terror”. As for the two Arab circles, they are a growing strategic alliance with the Arab Gulf states, and include the priority of the Palestinian cause, and the revitalisation of the frozen African circle.<sup>11</sup>

The global circle represents a new and unconventional addition to current Egyptian foreign policy. After decades of unilateral relations between Egypt and the USA, a balanced perspective has been adopted in relation to the great powers. The Egyptian President has maintained the vital strategic relations between Egypt and the USA since 1979. He is keen to attend the annual meetings of the national assembly of the United Nations, and meet US officials during it. He is also clear about ensuring Egypt's continued access to US annual military and economic aid since 1979, in spite of the obstacles experienced because of the conditionality of the American Congress on some issues. At the same time, Egypt has been trying to rebuild its relations with Russia, France, China, and Germany.

The Egyptian-Russian relationship is focused on military cooperation that has been going on for decades, especially in the deals regarding spare parts of some Russian weapons that have been in service since the 1970s. However, these relations have undergone a qualitative transformation under President El Sisi. The shift began with his visit to Moscow as Defence Minister in February 2014, and his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Russian presidential visit to Egypt in December 2017 witnessed the signing of an agreement to establish the first peaceful nuclear power plant in north western Egypt. Then, the Egyptian presidential visit in October 2018 aimed to overcome the crisis of the Russian plane crash in Sharm El Sheikh in October 2015, and an attempt was made to restore direct flights between the Egyptian tourist cities and Russia. The important arms deals between Egypt and Russia during President El Sisi's term include: R-32 missile ship in 2016; the signing of a contract for the purchase of 50 MiG-35s in early 2017; the signing of a contract for the supply of 50 C-52 war helicopters in August 2015; and, in the same year, Egypt got the S-300VM "Antey-2500" – which is a Russian anti-ballistic missile system. The latest deal is the signing of a contract for supply of 20 Sukhoi Su-35s in 2019.<sup>12</sup>

Egypt's relationship with France is on the path of reshaping the Egyptian relations with the international power on the one hand, and reintroducing itself as "a point of balance and stability in the

Middle East” on the other. France supplied Egypt four helicopter carriers and 24 Rafale fighter aircraft between 2014 and 2018.<sup>13</sup> Egypt also signed arms deals with other European countries such as four submarines from Germany, eight missile systems from Italy, and 14 military transport aircraft from Spain.<sup>14</sup>

Relations with China are clearly evident in the economic dimension. China is a major investor in most major projects in Egypt such as the construction of the new capital. However, an important feature in the relationship between the two countries at the regional and international levels is Egypt’s keen participation in the China’s Silk Road Initiative, and the accompanying financial and economic institutions, such as the Asian Investment Bank that was established in 2016, which a delegation from Cairo visited in November 2018.<sup>15</sup>

Despite American reservations regarding Egyptian relations with major powers such as Russia and China, especially in the field of defence, Egypt has succeeded in achieving these and restoring ties with other great powers. Cairo has been able to get out of the cloak of US unilateral relations without any significant internal instability in the process. As a result, Cairo can play a more influential and balanced role in Arab issues in the future, especially in the light of the balance of relations with these great powers.

### **The Egyptian Position on Terrorism**

There is no definitive definition of the phenomenon of terrorism, and it is not possible to limit all forms of terrorist activities in one definition. It is impossible to clearly identify ways to combat it – and thus the difficulty of analysing some of the dimensions of the phenomenon.

Post-2011, terrorism emerged as a major phenomenon in the Arab region. There was a sudden rise in the number of individuals involved in it as also in terms of the area of land that witnessed intensive terrorist activity. A qualitative shift in the nature of the terrorist activity was also witnessed whereby terrorist groups were able to take control of territories, even if temporarily, in Iraq, Syria, and Libya as well as in Sinai. According to media and military reports, the ISIS took over nearly 50 per cent of the territory of

Syria from 2014 to 2016, and about 40 per cent of the territory of Iraq in 2014. In fact, most of these lands are uninhabited, but that control has a significant symbolic value for the potential of terrorist organisations.<sup>16</sup>

Egypt has suffered from terrorist activities after 2011. This new wave of terrorism in Egypt is more violent than that of the 1980s and the early 1990s. The rate of terrorist activity rose significantly between 2013 and 2017, peaking in 2015, surpassing 600 incidents, in comparison to less than 540 incidents in Syria, approximately 4,200 incidents in Iraq, and over 700 incidents in Libya in the same period.<sup>17</sup> It is, therefore, possible to read the issue of the war on terrorism as the driving force of Egyptian foreign policy after 2013. This is what the Egyptian President emphasized in most of his official speeches and international visits. The attention of the Egyptian foreign agenda to terrorism coincided with its internal interest as the Egyptian authorities launched a large-scale military operation on the terrorist organisations in Sinai on 9 February 2018.

Regionally, Egypt's stance on the war on terrorism comes with a number of key features. The first is that the Egyptian state believes that there is a direct relationship between the spread of terrorism and the status of political instability in a country and its weakness, especially the weakness of its military capabilities. The second is that the Egyptian state believes in the close relationship between terrorist organisations and political Islam in the Arab region. This Egyptian understanding is supported by the announcement of the organisation of *Ansar Bayt Almuqadas* which was the activist terrorist group in Sinai in November 2014, and which pledged allegiance to the ISIS, and changed its name to "the Sinai state".<sup>18</sup>

Egypt's declared position on terrorism, especially in what the Egyptian president described as the "containment of threat sources", is reflected in its behaviour at the regional level. On the western front, the Egyptian air force raided some sites of terrorist groups as the *Shura Council of Fighters of Derna* in some areas of Libya like Derna, Jafra, and al-Jabal al-Akhdar in eastern Libya, in May 2017. This was done within the framework of what Egypt called the right of self-defence.<sup>19</sup> In terms of terrorism in Syria, Egypt joined the

Global Coalition against Daesh/ISIS which was formed in September 2014.<sup>20</sup> However, the Egyptian authorities announced their refusal to send any military forces outside their borders, especially in Syrian or Yemeni lands, even though news reports reported plans for the deployment of Egyptian troops on the Saudi-Iraqi border, or inside Syria in the context of the war on terror. Therefore, Egypt's regional position on the war on terror does not extend to military action, especially in areas other than the border areas. Talking about sending Egyptian forces outside the border usually recalls, in the Egyptian collective mind, previous negative experiences such as the Yemen war in the 1960s as well as the Second Gulf War, and the significant Egyptian sacrifices made at that time.

This may explain the conservative Egyptian behaviour regarding military action, whether individual or collective, outside its borders in the context of the war on terror. However, this does not undermine the importance of the war on terrorism as a leading issue in the Egyptian foreign policy agenda in the Middle East.

### **The Egyptian Position on the Issue of Alliances**

The policy of military alliance is one of the most important tools of international politics since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. It is undeniable that military pacts have affected the equilibrium of international powers during major events, such as the First and Second World Wars, and the Cold War.<sup>21</sup> Even during the First, Second, and Third Gulf Wars, it was necessary to establish an international coalition even if it was a formal one. Therefore, the USA and some of its regional allies have adopted a restructuring of the strategic balance in the region through the formation of new military alliances – especially since NATO (founded on April 4, 1949)<sup>22</sup> is not effective in dealing with the events of the region on the one hand; neither does it possess a popular or official acceptance of its presence in the region. And, with the increasing scramble of Russian and Iranian involvement in the Arab affairs after 2011 through Syria and Yemen, the USA and its allies (such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries) have started to feel threatened.

## The Arab NATO

It is not known exactly when or how this idea started, though some observers see it beginning with the Obama administration when the President hosted the Gulf leaders in Camp David, decided to repeat this meeting, and agreed with them to work on establishing one front to meet common challenges. However, when Donald Trump became the President, he adopted the doctrine of “America First”, which led to a status of ambiguity about the idea of this planned front, until it was adopted by the Trump administration – after the growing Russian-Iranian influence in the region – when the USA found out that its influence is likely to be eroded. The current US administration is talking about founding a “Middle East Strategic Alliance” which is referred to as “MESA”. It was named by the media and by some analysts as “the Arab NATO”. It is planned to consist of the six GCC countries, plus Jordan and Egypt.<sup>23</sup>

The Egyptian position on the alliance has been a careful one. For many reasons (one of them historic), Egypt has publicly and privately refused to join any military alliances since the royal era. Britain’s negotiations with Egypt in 1946 failed to push Egypt into joining a military alliance. Also, Egypt rejected the idea of joining the “Organization for the Defence of the Middle East” in 1950 – which was called for by the USA with the participation of the French and the British – for the same reason. Egypt also rejected the Baghdad Pact in 1955. In addition, there are memories of the negative Egyptian experience in Yemen in 1962, and the great cost paid by Egypt due to the military intervention, which began with the simple sending of a small group of soldiers but ended with the despatch of 55,000 Egyptian troops in Yemen. This was one of the major reasons for Egypt’s inability to react swiftly, causing the setback in 1967.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, although Egypt regards Gulf security as a major point in Egyptian national security, it does not see the Iranian threat from the Saudi Arabian perspective; the ideological dimension especially does not affect current Egyptian foreign policy as it does Saudi foreign policy. Thirdly, the planned alliance spoke of the six Gulf States, which means that Qatar would be a part of it. This foreshadows

the failure of this pact to divide the current Gulf between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the one hand, and Qatar on the other. And, there is also the Egyptian-Qatari dispute over the latter's support for political Islam in the region. The fourth reason for Egypt's lack of keenness to engage in this alliance is the involvement in sending ground troops away from Egyptian borders in the Saudi, Syrian or Yemeni theatres, which reinforces the recall of the abovementioned mental image of the great Egyptian sacrifices made on those fronts in the past.

In the light of the previous challenges facing the idea of this alliance and the Egyptian lack of keenness for it, the holding of the founding meeting of the Alliance was postponed several times. The last was to be held in October 2018. However, a preliminary meeting of the proposed Arab NATO member states (except Egypt) was held on April 11, 2019 in the Saudi capital in the presence of the USA. Here, news sources quoted Egypt as informing the USA of its withdrawal from the planned alliance, and therefore also, it did not send an Egyptian delegation. Thus, the US and Gulf pressure on Egypt was not enough to change a traditional determinant in Egyptian foreign policy of not rushing into any military alliances.

### **The Egyptian Position on “Regime Change”**

“Regime change” and its subtitle “democratization” still occupy a large concern as a science and practice of politics since the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> This took on more momentum after the change coincided with widespread popular uprisings against the ruling regimes in the so-called Arab Spring. The official Egyptian discourse on foreign policy after 2013 does not differ from its usual regional behaviour, especially with regard to the issue of regime change. During his speech at the UN General Assembly's 73rd session in September 2018, the Egyptian President stressed the necessity of committing to a comprehensive political solution in the Syrian, Libyan, and Yemeni crises. Also, during the joint summit of leaders of the Arab League and the European Union held in Sharm el-Sheikh in February 2019, he emphasized the continuation of partial solutions which were

exacerbating the situation not only in those countries but also in the whole region.

Indeed, the current strategic shifts in the region are expected to lead to fundamental changes in the force structure of a new regional balance. These changes reflect the current shift in the international regime formula to the disadvantage of the USA. And, after 2013, Egypt has taken significant steps towards repositioning the Egyptian role regionally. This repositioning is based on the process of the revitalisation of the historical constants of Egyptian foreign policy: that is, rejecting the policy of military alliances; the refusal to send troops beyond the border; maintaining the security of the Gulf States; and preserving the unity of the state and its territorial integrity. In addition, the relative separation from Saudi regional positions – especially in the crises of Yemen and Syria – and giving priority to the Palestinian issue and the Libyan crisis, both of which relate directly to Egyptian border security. However, the Egyptian role has not crystallised significantly in Arab issues to date.

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## 7. Israel-India Relations: An Evolving Synergy<sup>1</sup>

*Uri Resnick*

“If you will it, it is no dream.”

– Theodor Herzl, *The Old New Land*, 1897

“Strength does not come from physical capacity.

It comes from an indomitable will.”

– Mahatma Gandhi, *The Doctrine of the Sword*, 1920

Despite their vastly different geographic, economic, and demographic size, as well as distinct cultural and historical circumstances, Israel and India share some key commonalities. Both are hubs of scientific and technological advancement. Both serve as instances of vibrant liberal democracies in challenging geostrategic surroundings. Both are rooted in ancient civilisations, with an illustrious cultural and intellectual legacy. Both are committed to serving as constructive members of the international community in the advancement of global development goals, and a more peaceful and secure global order.

Since the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992, the two countries have cultivated a steadily expanding political and economic partnership. Looking ahead, key synergies and complementarities suggest significant scope for expansion of this cooperation. This essay presents a brief overview of Israel-India relations, and outlines the existing pillars of their bilateral cooperation. It then outlines some possibilities for the development of cooperation in the future.

## Emergence of a Partnership

The establishment of full diplomatic relations between Israel and India, on January 29, 1992, was a sharp departure from some four decades of aversion and, at times, outright acrimony on the part of successive Indian governments towards Israel. Owing, in part, to India's complex relations with Pakistan as these reflected on its posture towards the Arab world, and in part, to the Cold War bifurcation between the respective spheres of American and Soviet influence, and the emergence since the 1950s of the Non-Aligned Movement, India traditionally eschewed developing its relations with Israel.<sup>2</sup>

The expansion of relations since that inflection point is apparent in a range of fields, including a long list of bilateral agreements; an expanded volume of trade a prominent Israeli development presence, especially in agriculture; growing tourism; and a steadily increasing exchange of private and public sector delegations, including official visits at the most senior level.

Recent years have seen numerous agreements between the countries in fields as diverse as culture, cinema, petroleum, agriculture, air transport, telecommunications, investments, customs, technological R&D, space research, and many others.<sup>3</sup> The overall volume of trade has increased twenty-fold since 1992, from roughly US\$ 200 million to about US\$ 4 billion in 2018.<sup>4</sup> Though the trade has seen ups and downs, the long-term trend is one of considerable expansion.

Tourism between the two countries has steadily grown. The number of Indian tourists visiting Israel was 58,700 in 2017, up from 16,000 in 2000.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, 58,000 Israeli tourists visited India in 2017, up from under 10,000 in 1992.<sup>6</sup> Direct flights between Tel Aviv and Mumbai by El Al, and the recently inaugurated direct flights between New Delhi and Tel Aviv by Air India have no doubt played an important role in boosting tourism in both directions. The fact that the latter flights pass over Saudi airspace is an important reflection of the changing dynamics within the Middle East and a testament to India's good ties throughout the region.

In 2017, a formal Israeli Government decision to “Strengthen Ties with the Republic of India” earmarked considerable funds to boosting trade, investment, tourism, and innovation cooperation between the two countries.<sup>7</sup> The deepening bilateral ties were given notable impetus through reciprocal visits by the Indian President Pranab Mukherjee and Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in 2016, and then by Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu in 2017 and 2018, respectively.

### **Pillars of Cooperation**

The overall trend in Indo-Israeli relations over the last three decades has clearly been one of expansion. Several specific domains stand out as tangible cornerstones of this growing partnership.

#### ***Innovation and Technology***

The Israeli and Indian governments have established institutional structures to foster increased technological cooperation. For example, in 2017 a number of agreements were signed, including the India-Israel Industrial R&D and Technological Innovation Fund, a five-year US\$ 40 million fund designed to foster bilateral partnerships between innovators on both sides. Another example is the India-Israel Innovation Bridge, a mechanism designed to foster collaboration between Israeli and Indian entrepreneurs and start-ups on projects related to water, agriculture, and health.

Recent years have seen the signing of a several agreements on space cooperation. Three agreements on space technology were signed during Prime Minister Modi’s 2017 visit to Israel. These were followed by a Space Exploration Cooperation Agreement signed during Prime Minister Netanyahu’s 2018 visit to India, which included a memorandum of understanding between the Technion, Israel’s Institute of Technology, and the Indian Institute of Space Science and Space Technology to establish cooperation in the field of space exploration.

Efforts to spawn increased commercial ties have had results. Since 2015, a number of major Indian IT corporations have made notable investments in Israeli tech companies. In 2017, a leading Israeli equity

crowd funding platform established an innovation incubator in Jerusalem, in partnership with one of India's largest conglomerates and additional Israeli partners. The incubator, which is the largest of its kind, aims to support the growth of start-ups in Jerusalem, and encourage business cooperation between Israeli and Indian start-ups, venture capitalists, and tech companies.<sup>8</sup> The flexibility of Israeli companies to adapt and engage with India's Make in India model is a facilitating factor in promoting expanded commerce.

### *Agriculture*

Agriculture has been a central avenue for bilateral cooperation. The flagship project in this regard is the Indo-Israel Agriculture Project (IIAP), formulated in the context of the Indo-Israel Action Plan, which was based on an MOU signed by Agricultural ministers of India and Israel in 2006. Aimed, inter alia, at introducing crop diversity, increasing productivity and water-usage efficiency, IIAP has seen the establishment to date of 25 currently functioning Centres of Excellence (CoE) throughout India, thus serving to disseminate state-of-the-art Israeli agro-industrial knowhow directly to Indian farmers.<sup>9</sup> These and other agricultural initiatives, at the inter-governmental and private sector levels, have turned agriculture into a key pillar of Israel and India's bilateral cooperation.

### *Academia*

At the core of Israel's scientific and technological prowess are its world-class universities. Dubbed by some as Israel's "IT League" schools, Israel's academic institutions regularly rank among the top research institutions in the world.<sup>10</sup> Cognizant of the potential for fostering academic cooperation and exchange with the elite of India's aspiring young population, who enjoy the benefits of the Indian educational system, one of the best in Asia, including leading proficiency in English and engineering skills, the two countries have made efforts to boost such ties through a series of joint academic and educational partnerships. Significantly, the initially modest academic cooperation which centred mostly on the fields of culture and language has expanded to include scientific and technological domains.

For example, in 2017 Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) opened an Israel Centre on its campus, which serves as a hub for research, business strategy, technological innovation, and academic collaboration. Moreover, numerous Israeli universities have agreements on academic cooperation and exchange with Indian counterparts. In 2018, Israel's Council for Higher Education initiated an ambitious multi-year plan to stimulate the internationality of Israeli academia, allocating some US\$ 120 million to foster increased student exchanges, increased English language curricula, and additional international scientific conferences. India is among the few countries targeted for specific promotion in this regard.<sup>11</sup>

### *Defence*

Much has been written on the development of Israeli-Indo defence cooperation.<sup>12</sup> Though limited ties between the defence establishments of the two countries date back to the 1960s, the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1992 opened up new avenues for significant defence cooperation in numerous fields. Withstanding seven decades of acute, and at times existential, security threats has resulted in an extremely versatile and competitive industrial base for Israel's defence industries, earning them a global reputation for developing cutting edge technologies.

Moreover, Israel's unique educational, governmental, and industrial ecosystem, which is geared to fostering heightened innovation, has no doubt been a significant factor in turning the Israeli defence sector into a globally competitive player, which makes Israel an attractive partner for other countries.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as Israel and India cultivate additional domains of cooperation, strong defence ties continue to play an important role in undergirding their burgeoning partnership.

### *Pragmatism Replaces Ideology*

Perhaps more than any other factor, the driving force behind the expanding partnership between Israel and India has been a shift in mindset on the Indian side. During the Cold War, ideological predilections critical of the West (associated with the Non-Aligned

Movement), coupled with persistent, if exaggerated, concerns of alienating the Arab and Muslim world, played a key role in underpinning India's reserved attitude towards Israel.<sup>14</sup> These factors have since been replaced by a focus on those tangible domains in which Israel can contribute to India's development.

Despite clear differences in the tone of discourse concerning Israel among different stakeholders in India, this development transcends partisan politics. Notably, in this regard, formal diplomatic ties with Israel were established by Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao of the Indian National Congress (INC) party, rather than by the openly sympathetic Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).<sup>15</sup> The recent re-election of the BJP in the May 2019 elections no doubt augurs well for a further expansion of the bilateral ties between the two countries. Yet, there are grounds for seeing the positive trajectory in Israeli-Indian relations as a resilient feature of Indian politics, which is likely to continue irrespective of possible future political developments in either country.

## **Looking Ahead**

The Modi government elected in May 2019 has made its priorities clear, setting the ambitious target of turning India's US\$ 2.9 trillion economy into a US\$ 5 trillion economy. Notably, in his comments on the matter, former Indian Minister of Commerce & Industry and Civil Aviation, Suresh Prabhu, specified a number of prioritized fields which reflect some of Israel's clear comparative strengths. He said that, "Some of the initiatives to make India a \$5 trillion dollar economy will be pursued hard. The next government will follow up initiatives such as Start-Up India, Agri-Export policy, Ease of Doing Business."<sup>16</sup> With this in mind, it is useful to consider some of the specific domains which hold particular potential for fruitful cooperation in the years ahead.

## ***Innovation***

The overriding source of Israel's dramatic economic development since 1948 has been innovation, rooted in educational investment and the gradual construction of a world-class scientific and



technological infrastructure.<sup>17</sup> Yet, given Israel's limited size, Israel's entrepreneurial and industrial sectors naturally require additional outlets to invest in and develop. The development challenges which India is addressing will unavoidably require innovative solutions. Israel is, therefore, well-placed to play a key role in working with Indian counterparts to identify and implement them. In short, many of India's central goals and Israel's comparative advantages are well-matched to the potential benefit of both sides.

### *Agriculture*

As put by the IMF, "Agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy," comprising about 20 per cent of GDP and 50 per cent of India's workforce. Moreover, there is an identified need for enhanced productivity if India is to overcome one of the key obstacles hindering the development of the sector.<sup>18</sup> Notably, Israel's agricultural history is a portrait of innovation as a driver of productivity. Also, starting from a weak starting point, within a span of decades, a land of barren soil and an acutely inhospitable climate was transformed into one of the world's leading agricultural success stories: "Millennia of overgrazing [...] and deforestation had denuded a country whose modest precipitation leaves it almost entirely in a semi-arid/arid classification."<sup>19</sup>

The initial conditions of local agriculture in pre-independence Israel were poor even by regional standards, with milk production providing a good example. Average lactation yields under the British Mandate in the 1930s were between 412 and 824 kg a year, compared with the comparable figure for neighbouring Lebanon of between 2,000 and 3,000 kg.<sup>20</sup> By comparison, Israel's dairy sector has long produced the highest average milk yields in the world, with annual production yields reaching 12,546 kg, well above the world average.<sup>21</sup> Israel owes this development to advanced technologies, including computerised milking and feeding systems, cow-cooling systems, and milk processing equipment, combined with unique breeding and farm management techniques.

India, for its part, is currently the world's largest milk producer, with about 20 per cent of the global market.<sup>22</sup> Yet, average lactation

yields are still sub-optimal: at 1,643 kg, they are 13 per cent that of Israel's.<sup>23</sup> It requires little imagination, therefore, to contemplate how existing Israeli knowhow could help revolutionize India's dairy sector, as is true in other agricultural sectors.<sup>24</sup> In general, engagement between Israeli and Indian agricultural scientists holds the promise of providing mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and expertise, enriching opportunities for fruitful research. Of equal importance, the forecast growth of India's agricultural sector opens vast market opportunities for Israel's agro-industries. The complementarities and potential for mutually beneficial cooperation are clear.

### *Water*

Water management is one of India's key challenges, touching on questions of food security, urbanisation, sustainable rural development, disaster risk management, adaptation to climate change, and equitable allocation of natural resources. A World Bank study specified some of the challenges India faces in this area, including water scarcity, depletion of ground-water, problems with service delivery, policy formulation, and management.<sup>25</sup> The strategy formulated by the Indian government to address these challenges includes such steps as promoting conservation and preservation, increasing water use efficiency, and devising better water resources management.<sup>26</sup> Desalination plants have also come to play an increasing role in addressing water scarcity in India.

The measures listed above play an important role in Israel's national water-management policies which include desalination, regular high quality water supply, a percentage of reused sewage effluents among the highest in the world, low non-revenue water, and the development of water technologies as successful export industries. The Israeli water sector has also undergone a structural and infrastructural transformation that has included the establishment of water and sewage corporations for the maintenance of municipal water supply. Israel houses some of the world's largest desalination facilities and the largest sewage effluents facilities that collect and treat most of Israel's wastewater so that it may be used for agriculture.<sup>27</sup>

In short, despite its small size, Israel is a world leader in the field of water-resource management, with a thriving industrial and entrepreneurial sector eager to access new markets. India is one of the world's largest such markets, in keen need of investment and innovative solutions. The potential for fruitful cooperation in this field is manifest.

### *Health*

The mission statement of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare states the following objectives as forming its mission.<sup>28</sup>

- To ensure the availability of quality healthcare on an equitable, accessible, and affordable basis across regions and communities [...]
- To establish a comprehensive primary healthcare delivery system [...]
- To develop the training capacity for providing human resources for health (medical, paramedical and managerial) [...]
- To regulate health service delivery [...]
- To progressively achieve Universal Health Coverage

While India's national health system has taken considerable strides over the years, the extant challenges remain daunting. Some basic figures give a sense of how India compares globally in the field: India has 0.78 physicians per 1,000 people, and 0.7 hospital beds per 1,000 people, compared with the world average of 2.7; it spends 4.7 percent of its GDP on health (149th in the world); has a life-expectancy of 69.1 (163rd in the world); with infant mortality at 37.8/1,000 (46th in the world); and maternal mortality at 174/100,000 (56th in the world).<sup>29</sup> Indian governments have prioritized health reform among their key goals. Notable in this regard is Prime Minister Modi's "Modicare" programme which aims to extend health insurance to the some 100 million of India's lowest income families – the lowest 40 percent of the population.<sup>30</sup>

Israel has one of the most effective health systems in the world, ranking 6th in 2018 for Health Care Efficiency by the Bloomberg's annual index.<sup>31</sup> The comparable figures for Israel reveal a highly advanced health care system: 3.22 physicians and 3.1 hospital beds per

1,000 people; health expenditures amounting to 7.8 percent of GDP (61st in the world); life expectancy of 82.7 (10th in the world); infant mortality at 3.4/1,000 (204th in the world); and maternal mortality at 5/100,000 (170th in the world).<sup>32</sup> Israel has been particularly successful in extending health-care to peripheral areas of the country, a key priority of India's health-care strategy. Most importantly, from the perspective of potential collaboration in the health domain, Israel achieved these results from modest beginnings, and despite considerable geostrategic and demographic challenges. As in other domains, innovation has been central to its success, and could be similarly instrumental in advancing India towards its goals in the health sector.

### *The Film Industry*

India's rich cultural heritage has long been greatly admired in Israel. One domain which has garnered increasing interest is the film industry. Indeed, Bollywood is rapidly growing into one of the important global players in cinema, reaching increasingly large international audiences. For example, in 2017, the Indian film industry grew by 27 per cent, with overseas revenues tripling from US\$ 125 million in 2016 to US\$ 367 million in 2017.<sup>33</sup> Among India's most important foreign markets is China, with an Indian film becoming the highest-earning non-Hollywood film in 2017.<sup>34</sup> Given the strong growth of the global theatrical and home entertainment market, reaching US\$ 96.8 billion in 2018, up 9 per cent since 2017, such cultural exports are both a significant source of revenue and a key pillar of soft power.<sup>35</sup>

Israel's film industry is also on the rise, with Israeli screenwriters, directors, and actors gaining increasing prominence in Hollywood through such blockbuster productions as 'Homeland' (Showtime), 'Fauda' (Netflix), and global celebrities such as Gal Gadot in the role of Wonder Woman. Cognizant of the potential for fruitful collaboration, and with the aim of Israel learning from India's experience and large-scale success in this field, including filming Bollywood productions on location in Israel, there has been interest on both sides in exploring ways to cooperate. Such cooperation would also be a boon for reciprocal tourism, and would be a

gratifying complement to the little-known legacy of Jewish actresses who were prominent in the early years of Bollywood.<sup>36</sup>

### *Mobilizing Diaspora Relations*

Given an increasingly globalised world, Israel and India should contemplate harnessing the two countries' considerable diasporas in advancing their bilateral relations. Jewish communities outside Israel have long played a key role in the country's development, both prior to and since independence. Expatriate Indian communities, too, have traditionally exhibited a strong connection to India, with remittances estimated to have grown from roughly US\$ 2 billion in 1992 to over US\$ 69 billion in 2017.<sup>37</sup>

Considerable resources exist within these communities, coupled with a keen interest in increasing prosperity in the two countries.<sup>38</sup> There is every reason, therefore, to seek ways of marshalling these resources to advance cooperation between Israel and India, and to further enhance the overall geostrategic partnership of the two countries.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, in both the USA and the UK, such inter-communal cooperation has been developing for many years, and could serve as a model for duplication elsewhere.

A glance at the size of Indian diaspora communities in countries with large Jewish communities suggests locations where such cooperation might best be fostered. Remittances data give some indication of the scope of these expatriate Indian communities' connections to India.

**Table 1: Key Jewish and Indian Diaspora Communities and Remittances to India**

	Jewish population <sup>40</sup>	Indian population <sup>41</sup>	Remittances to India (2017) <sup>42</sup>
United States	5,700,000	3,180,000	\$11.7 billion
United Kingdom	390,000	1,500,000	\$3.9 billion
France	456,000	90,000	\$251 million
Canada	289,000	831,000	\$2.9 billion
Germany	116,500	37,000	\$332 million
Australia	113,000	255,000	\$1.94 billion

Source: See footnotes 39-41.

Thus, cooperation between the Jewish and the Indian diaspora communities presents an additional dimension for advancing Indo-Israeli relations. Israelis of Indian origin, hailing from different regions of India, primarily Maharashtra, Kerala, and Kolkata, have traditionally played a role in bringing the countries closer together. Together with India's small but vibrant Jewish population, these two communities can continue to serve as a symbolic bridge between the two sides.

## **Conclusion**

The definitive attribute of a synergetic relationship is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In similar fashion, the details of Indo-Israeli cooperation specified above are each small parts of a larger whole. Taken together, they paint a picture of two very different countries fostering an increasingly meaningful and intimate partnership. At its root, this partnership is one of will and predilection, not merely expediency. The similarity in the attitudes of the two countries' founders, as illustrated in the opening quotes presented above, is striking. Gandhi was stirring the soul of a sleeping giant. Herzl was awakening the dormant will of a dispossessed diaspora. Both were in effect rejecting challenges manifest in their respective nations' current conditions, emphasizing the overriding importance of human will as an instrument for shaping, rather than succumbing to, circumstance. With the waning of anachronistic ideological obstacles, and absent history of anti-Semitism in India, the emergence of a close partnership between these two ancient nations has been entirely natural.

Insofar as the path of Israel-India relations up to the present serves as a guide, the complementarities between the two countries hold promise of opening new vistas for mutually beneficial cooperation in the years ahead. Moreover, both countries are committed to values which have underpinned the surge in global prosperity of the last century – democracy, rule of law, human rights, tolerance, free enterprise, and prioritisation of science and technology as engines of modernity, to name several. As many of these values face increasing challenges across the globe, the fundamentally ethical and

benevolent outlook which guides the Israeli and Indian approach to global affairs will also ensure that a strong Indo-Israeli partnership remains a force for good internationally.

## Notes

1. My thanks to colleagues at Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay, namely: Ambassadors Michael Ronen, Yaron Meir, and Ms. Ruth Zakh.
2. See, P. R. Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2010; and P. R. Kumaraswamy, "India and Israel: Emerging Partnership", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 25(4), 2002, pp. 192-206 for detailed analyses of India's foreign policy considerations during this period. While Indian Prime Minister Nehru recognised Israel de jure in 1950, India avoided the establishment of diplomatic relations. Israel's representation in India was limited to a consul in Mumbai, a situation which was further circumscribed in the period 1982-1989, during which time the position of Consul was left unstaffed. With the inauguration of Israel's embassy in New Delhi in 1992, the Mumbai mission was upgraded to the status of a Consulate General. Since 2013, Israel has operated three diplomatic missions in India, with a Consulate General in Bengaluru working in tandem with the Delhi and Mumbai missions, and an honorary consul serving in Kolkata. India is one of only seven countries in which Israel operates Consulates General, in addition to an Embassy.
3. See the website of Israel's Embassy in New Delhi for a detailed list at <https://embassies.gov.il/delhi/AboutTheEmbassy/Pages/Bilateral-Treaties-and-Agreements.aspx>, accessed on May 28, 19.
4. These figures, drawn from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, include diamonds. See, <https://www.cbs.gov.il>.
5. *Tourism to Israel, Statistical Report*, 2017, Jerusalem: Israel Ministry of Tourism, p. 24; Wald, Shalom Salomon and Arielle Kandel, *Israel, India and the Jewish People: Looking Ahead, Looking Back, 20 Years after Normalization*, The Jewish People Policy Institute, Jerusalem, 2017.
6. *India Tourism Statistics*, 2018, Ministry of Tourism, Market Research Division, Government of India.
7. Prime Minister's Office, Strengthening ties with the Republic of India, June 25, 2017 at [https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/policies/2017\\_dec2783](https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/policies/2017_dec2783) [Hebrew].
8. For details, see, "Israel and India: 26 Years of Friendship, Innovation, and Prosperity", 14 January 2018, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs at <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2018/Pages/Israel-India-26-years-of-friendship-innovation-prosperity-14-Jan-2018.aspx>, accessed on May 29, 2019.

9. Embassy of Israel, New Delhi, "India-Israel Relations" at <https://embassies.gov.il/delhi/AboutTheEmbassy/India-Israel-Relations/Pages/default.aspx>.
10. 'IT' signifies 'Innovation Technology'. See, for example: "Israel IT League Spawning Innovations", *San Diego Union Tribune*, 10 January 2013. The highly respected Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) for 2018 ranked Technion, Israel's Institute of Technology, 77 out of 500 ranked institutions, with Hebrew University ranked 95. In specific fields, such as computer science and engineering, the rankings are even higher, with The Weizmann Institute of Science ranked 21st in the world, Tel Aviv University ranked 37th, and Technion ranked 51-75th. See, <http://www.shanghairanking.com/World-University-Rankings-2018/Israel.html>, accessed on May 29, 2019.
11. See Council for Higher Education, Israel, "Strengthening internationalism in Higher Education" at <https://che.org.il/en/strengthening-internationalism-higher-education/>, accessed on May 29, 2019.
12. See, for example, P. R. Kumaraswamy, *India and Israel: Evolving Security Partnership*, Ramat Gan: BESA Centre for Strategic Studies; and Nicolas Blarel, 2017, "India-Israel at 25: Defense Ties", Middle East Institute, 4 April 2017 at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-israel-25-defense-ties>, accessed on May 28, 2019.
13. For an analysis of this ecosystem which has since become iconic, see, Senor, Dan and Saul Singer, *Start-up Nation*. Hachette Book Group, New York, 2009.
14. The significant changes of tenor in the attitudes within the Arab world towards Israel have no doubt played an equally important role. Thus, Israel's peace agreements with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), and the signed agreements (1994, 1995, 1998) and intermittent negotiations with the Palestinian Authority, have altered India's calculus in weighing the implications of its policy towards Israel. The increasingly open contacts between Israel and some of the Arab countries, notably Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman underscore that enhanced ties with Israel are confluent with India's other Middle East interests.
15. P. R. Kumaraswamy, "India and Israel: Emerging Partnership", 2002, op. cit., p. 197.
16. Quoted in, Sharma, Shantanu Nandan, "Blueprint 2.0: Here's what the new government's first big decisions are likely to be," *ET Magazine*, 2019, updated 26 May 2019 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/india/blueprint-2-0-heres-what-the-new-governments-first-big-decisions-are-likely-to-be/articleshow/69499379.cms>.
17. Israel's achievements in this regard are reflected in such facts as having the second largest number of startups in the world and the third largest number of companies listed on the NASDAQ, as well as topping multiple



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## 8. Great Powers Challenge India's Middle East Strategy

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The politically expanding relations with the principal countries of the broader Middle East offer India an opportunity to observe and learn from the experiences of the great powers that have strategic interests and stakes in the region. Even if the competition is unavoidable, being a late and cautious entrant to power politics, India could learn from the experiences of the USA, Russia, China, and the European Union, to both maximise its gains and minimise the pitfalls. While examining the challenges faced by India, this chapter looks at three main issues: what is the status of India's Middle East relations, especially since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in May 2014? What are the lessons to be learnt by India from the policies of the great powers towards the region? And, what are the challenges facing India while facing the policies of other players in the region, especially in the hydrocarbon-rich Persian Gulf?

### **India and the Middle East**

India's relations with the broader Middle Eastern region have been peculiar and uneventful. The profession of historical-civilisational ties, geographic proximity, and religio-cultural influences were not accompanied by bilateral ties. While anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, Third World solidarity, or secularism provided political avenues for Indo-Middle Eastern engagements, their usefulness was limited, especially during India's conflicts with China and Pakistan. The Nehru-Nasser bonhomie of the 1950s limited India's understanding of anti-Nasserite forces and conservative monarchies.

The emergence of Saudi Arabia as the preeminent player in the wake of the Arab defeat in the June War and the end of pan-Arabism turned regional fortunes against India. Without sufficient political leverage, especially after the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Palestinian cause became the prime instrument through which New Delhi sought to promote its interest in the Arab-Islamic Middle East. The prolonged absence of Indo-Israeli diplomatic relations was primarily the outcome of the Indo-Pakistani rivalry for the support of Arab countries over the Kashmir dispute. As a result, during the Cold War, India's engagements with the Middle East were limited; they centred on the competition with Pakistan, revolved around the Palestine question, and were devoid of any politico-strategic or economic components.

The end of the Cold War not only brought about a new international order dominated by the USA but also witnessed the ushering in of India's economic reforms (1991) and its nuclear test (1998). The former contributed to growth, which accelerated the demand for energy resources, especially oil and gas from the Persian Gulf countries; and the latter contributed to its appetite for great powers status. The post-Cold War era also witnessed a fundamental Indian shift towards the USA. The heralding of a new phase, which began with the civil nuclear cooperation in 2005, presented an image of India being a strategic partner of the USA, especially in the emerging Indo-Pacific region. While these developments opened many doors and avenues, the Middle East did not figure prominently in India's strategic calculations. If the Atal Behari Vajpayee-led NDA government (1998-2004) delinked Pakistan from its Middle East policy, the Arab Spring protests resulted in the second Manmohan Singh-led UPA government completely ignoring the Arab world. Political visits during 2010-2014 were confined only to the three non-Arab countries: namely, Iran, Israel and Turkey. In short, the rhetoric of the region being India's 'extended neighbourhood' was accompanied by prolonged political indifference, diplomatic neglect, and a transactional approach.

The arrival of Narendra Modi on the Indian national scene signalled a remarkable departure, with high-level political engagements with the leading players of the region becoming integral

to his summit-centric foreign policy style. Despite a full-time Foreign Minister in Sushma Swaraj, the Prime Minister himself set the foreign policy tone and the agenda.<sup>1</sup> His fondness for foreign travel for bilateral and multilateral summits proved helpful in bridging the prolonged indifference towards the region. His maiden visit to the region was to the UAE in August 2015, and this was followed by his visits to Saudi Arabia (April 2016); Iran (May 2016); Qatar (June 2016); Israel (July 2017); Jordan, Palestine, Oman and UAE (February 2018); and UAE and Bahrain (August 2019). Indeed, between May 2014 and October 2019, Prime Minister Modi had undertaken 56 foreign visits, which took him to over 60 countries, many for more than once. However, he never attended any meeting associated with the Non-aligned Movement, the stronghold of India's diplomacy during the Cold War.

There has been a perceptible shift in India's approach towards the Middle East and its key players.<sup>2</sup> Since his summit meeting at Brisbane in November 2014, Prime Minister Modi has been using the G-20 gatherings to forge a personal bonding with the Saudi leadership; and even the Khashoggi controversy did not impede him meeting the Saudi crown prince in the Buenos Aires summit in November 2018. He has met the Saudi leaderships as many as seven times, and the Emirati Crown Prince as many as five times. Furthermore, by skilfully positioning the economic agenda, he has been able to establish closer ties with conflicting parties in the region and its tensions: namely, the Israel-Palestine, the Turkey-Syria, the Iran-Saudi, and the Saudi-Qatar binaries. Even the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution over Kashmir did not result in the region siding with Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> Saudi Arabia and the UAE are partnering in mega petrochemical projects and in the strategic reserves of India. Both have also expressed interest in investing in infrastructure projects in the country. When they materialise, they would constitute some of the largest single-country investments in India. During the first Modi term (2014-2019), Indian officials had visited all the countries of the region, including war-torn Syria and Yemen. Only the deeply divided Libya is the one country that has not hosted an Indian official since 2013.

Transforming growing political engagements into tangible diplomatic assets and economic gains would require strategic planning at the top and follow-up actions at the bottom. Failure to walk-the-talk will make Prime Minister Modi's diplomatic offensive a futile photo-ops. By paying greater attention to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, and Israel, New Delhi is breaking away from past indifference and expanding its diplomatic footprints.

India's forays into the Middle East, especially into the highly contested Persian Gulf, will not be easy or smooth. For long, the area remained under American hegemony; now gradually other countries are showing signs of engaging with its key players, especially in the economic and strategic arena. If Iran sees the Persian Gulf as its exclusive domain and influence, under Recep Tayyip Erdogan Turkey is also seeking to capitalise on intra-Arab differences to engage and expand its presence. If one excludes the Middle Eastern powers such as Iran and Turkey, New Delhi's influence in the Persian Gulf region will be tested by the policies and interests of four major players: the USA, Russia, China and, to a lesser extent, the EU.

## **The USA**

Since the end of World War II, the well being of Israel and the energy security of its European allies have influenced, shaped, and determined American policy vis-à-vis the Persian Gulf. The US-Israeli convergence on a host of issues, including the Soviet influence, resulted in the Persian Gulf being transformed into an American lake. The dependence of conservative monarchies for American political support and security guarantees meant that the USA has been a de facto Gulf power even after the oil crisis, which wrought havoc on international oil prices and supplies. The Islamic revolution of 1979 undermined the twin-pillar strategy enunciated under the Nixon Doctrine and, since then, Washington has been unable to evolve a viable and effective policy vis-à-vis the increasingly assertive and often defiant Islamic Republic. For Democrats and Republicans alike, Iran has remained an enigmatic puzzle, leading to policy oscillation between containment and engagement, with both proving to be ineffective.

Under such circumstances, in June 2015, the Obama administration crafted the nuclear deal that sought to end the decade-long controversy over the Iranian nuclear programme. In its eagerness to close the nuclear file, the USA played down, even ignored, the concerns of its long-term regional allies, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia and, in the process, appeared to endorse Iranian regional pre-eminence. While Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not hide his anger over the JCPOA, the Saudi leadership was more cautious and less forgiving of President Barack Obama letting them down. Hence, when Donald Trump convincingly defeated Hillary Clinton, there was palpable relief in many Arab capitals, despite the anti-Islamic campaign rhetoric of Trump.

Limited experience and exposure to international diplomacy resulted in the Trump Administration unsettling the global order through a host of measures and shifts that had a profound impact on the Middle East. Seeking to ‘reverse’ the policies pursued by his predecessor, President Trump took actions that placed the USA in confrontation with many European allies, and unnerved many of its friends. In a significant policy shift, the USA recognised Jerusalem as Israel’s capital (December 6, 2017); withdrew from the JCPOA (May 8, 2018); moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (May 14, 2018); and recognised the Golan Heights as Israeli territory (March 25, 2019).

These developments, in turn, precipitated a spate of regional tensions and decreased the possibilities of resolving the century-old Arab-Israeli conflict and made the much-hyped ‘Deal of the Century’ elusive – like all other previous peace plans. Unlike his predecessors, President Trump did not try to be a mediator, and even went to the extent of being a tacit campaign manager for Netanyahu when Israel went to polls in April 2019. He was more circumspect during the second Knesset election in September which again resulted in a fractured mandate. He observed, “... our relationship is with Israel”,<sup>4</sup> and did not even call Prime Minister Netanyahu after the polls.<sup>5</sup>

Pulling out of the nuclear deal, President Trump imposed a host of unilateral sanctions against Iran and its oil industry, and

managed to prevent a host of friends and allies from importing oil from Iran.<sup>6</sup> The limited exemption granted to countries like India in November 2018 came to an end in May 2019, thereby forcing them to halt oil trade with Iran.<sup>7</sup> Countries like Saudi Arabia offered to step in and help with any shortage that India might face over Iran.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the assurances were reiterated after the drone attacks on the Aramco facility on 14 September 2019.<sup>9</sup> The EU, which invested considerable political and diplomatic capital in reaching the JCPOA, is no mood to abandon Iran, and unveiled INSTEX (Instrument in support of trade exchange) in January 2019 towards circumventing the American sanctions.<sup>10</sup> The special purpose vehicle has not been effective as many private sector firms are apprehensive of them losing the lucrative American market.

Far from resolving regional tensions and conflicts, President Trump has exasperated them through his unpredictable, ill-conceived, and less debated moves and statements. By not seeking to address the Qatar crisis,<sup>11</sup> the Trump Administration allowed the intra-GCC discord to elongate. Likewise, his October 2019 decision to unilaterally pull out elite American forces from Syria<sup>12</sup> is fraught with the further marginalisation of the Kurds in Syria and, perhaps, elsewhere as well.

Above all, towards the end of the Bush administration (2001-2009), there was a perceptible shift in American focus away from the Middle East, which became more pronounced under the Obama administration (2009-2017). The September 11 attacks and two costly military campaigns in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) weakened the American resolve for overseas commitment and military campaigns. The Obama administration's policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iranian nuclear controversy, and the Arab Spring protests further weakened American influence; its friends were disappointed and its adversaries were emboldened by American policy choices. The disappointments with the Middle East partly contributed to the "pivot" to Asia outlined by Secretary of State Clinton in 2011.<sup>13</sup> While American interests in the region are considerable – and even irreplaceable in the short run – its diminishing influence (and hence interests) in the Middle East are palpable. American policies are



fuelling regional tensions and exposing the fault lines among principal stakeholders; in the process this has made the region more volatile than in January 2017 when Donald Trump assumed office.

### **Putin's Russia**

Traditionally, the Soviet/Russian involvement in the broader Middle East witnessed two major setbacks, both being internal to Moscow. Being the second country to recognise Israel on May 17, 1948, the Soviet Union was instrumental in Israel's emergence as a state,<sup>14</sup> and the socialist orientation of Israel's founding leaders resulted in the USSR actively supporting Israel's entry into the UN in May 1949. Despite Israel gravitating towards Washington in the wake of the Korean War, Israeli-Soviet relations continued until the June War. The decisive Israeli military victory compelled Moscow to exhibit its commitment to the Arabs and, on June 10, broke off relations with Israel; and this was followed by other east European countries. Though dramatic and symbolic, the disruption proved counter-productive as the USSR became irrelevant in the various events and peace efforts in the Middle East.

The normalisation of relations on October 18, 1991, paved the way for the Madrid conference two weeks later; it was co-sponsored by the USA and the USSR. Even this proved to be temporary, as the end of the year witnessed the disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of Russia as a successor state. Internal political disorder and economic anarchy compelled Boris Yeltsin to prioritise nation-building over external affairs. It was only after the emergence of Vladimir Putin in May 2000 – which also coincided with the rising oil prices – that one could witness the return of Russia in Middle Eastern affairs.<sup>15</sup> In re-engaging with the region, Russia has been using its traditional tool of arms trade, accompanied by its emergence as a significant natural gas power.

Russian diplomatic efforts were helped by the omissions and commissions of the USA, especially by Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump on a host of regional issues. If the Iranian nuclear crisis brought Russia to the global diplomatic table, the ineffective US strategy vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict

brought the Palestinians closer to Moscow. The Arab Spring protests provided new opportunities to Putin. The Soviet support, especially in the UNSC, was critical for the France-initiated but US-led efforts to oust Muammar Qaddafi from Libya, while Moscow realised the Western desire for a regime change in other parts of the Middle East, especially in Syria.

The Russian willingness to commit troops in support of the beleaguered President Bashar al-Assad not only transformed the Syrian situation<sup>16</sup> but exposed the contrast with the dithering response of the Obama administration to the anti-regime protests in different parts of the Arab world, including Syria.<sup>17</sup> While its involvement was costly in terms of human and material resources, Russia was rewarded in the form of the Tartus military base on the Mediterranean coast and increased military supplies to Syria. Above all, Russian politico-military support for Assad was in contrast to President Obama quickly abandoning long-term American ally Mubarak in the wake of widespread protests. It is safe to conclude that, but for Russian intervention which began in September 2015, the Assad regime would have collapsed against the weight of various opposition groups – secular, Islamist and *jihadi* alike – who were supported by various external powers, including the USA, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The clearheaded, assertive and effective Russian strategy in Syria had a cascading effect on other countries that began to view Moscow as a credible player. This paved the way for Russian forays in other regional issues and tensions and, before long, Moscow emerged as the only player willing and able to engage with all the parties in the conflict. The success of Russian engagements included various problematic binaries: Israel-PNA, Hamas-Fatah, Syria-Turkey, Iran-Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia-Qatar. After a gap of over four decades, it concluded arms sales agreement with Egypt in March 2019, which included 20 Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets.<sup>18</sup>

The Syrian and Iranian crises resulted in Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu making as many as 11 visits to Russia between May 2015 and October 2019. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – which was always sceptical about Moscow – has shifted its position and, in February 2007, Putin became the first

Russian President to visit the Kingdom. And, in October 2017, King Salman became the first Saudi monarch to visit Russia ever since the USSR became the first external power to recognise the Kingdom of Hijaz and Nejd in 1926 – that is, even before the formation of the Saudi state in 1932.<sup>19</sup> Troubled by his relations with the USA as well as the EU, even Turkish leader Erdogan has come around to accepting Russian pre-eminence in the Syrian crisis and beyond.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, firmly in control of events in Syria, Russia under Putin has emerged as a key player in resolving many crises in the Middle East. While it is yet to transform its engagements into brokering a peace agreement, reducing the various tensions in the region – especially in the Fertile Crescent and northern Gulf – will not be possible without a role for Russia. Its growing engagements with Saudi Arabia (oil power), Qatar (gas power), and Iran (oil and gas power) will also have a critical impact on the international energy trade.

## **China**

The People's Republic of China, a late entrant in the Middle East, has been following a policy which is driven by energy security considerations (especially since 1993 when it became a net importer) and an economy-centric foreign policy. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) unveiled by President Xi Jinping in late 2013<sup>21</sup> has emerged as the driving force and template of its engagement with the energy-rich countries along the Persian Gulf. Like other parts of the world, China has a huge trade surplus with the region, and its trade with the GCC countries in 2016 stood at US\$ 117.5 billion. The FTA negotiations which began in April 2004 have been delayed due to trade in services.<sup>22</sup> Both sides are trying to synchronise their economic policies as China seeks to include its infrastructure plans for road, rail, and shipping networks with regional plans such as Vision 2030 (Saudi Arabia).<sup>23</sup> Within the ambit of BRI, it has been expanding its investments in Israel's infrastructure plans, including the Ashdod-Eilat high speed rail network.<sup>24</sup>

In the political arena, China has been somewhat cautious. On the Iranian nuclear controversy, it was second fiddling

Russia, and impeded and diluted various attempts by the USA in its unilateral sanction-driven approach towards Iran. Beijing has been apprehensive of the Arab Spring protests mainly due to their cascading effect upon its internal conditions, and has been seeking to support regime stability and survival.<sup>25</sup> Its abstention paved the way for the Western campaign against Libya and the eventual overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. However, similar American attempts for a regime change in Syria were throttled when China joined hands with Russia in the UNSC. While politically more in line with Russia, its economic clout (China is the second largest economy since 2010) offers China an immense opportunity to shape and influence the policies of the Middle East. It has been using Middle Eastern crises to extract political and economic concessions from Washington.<sup>26</sup>

Under such circumstances, what are the challenges facing India in expanding its role and influence in the Persian Gulf region?

### **Challenges for India**

Ironically, the improvement in Indo-US relations coincides with the declining influence of the USA in the region. The post-September 11 American policies towards the region have been controversial, counter-productive, and have contributed to growing anti-Americanism. If the friends (Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia) were disappointed, adversaries (Iran and Syria) were emboldened by the policies of Washington. On prominent regional issues – such as the Iranian nuclear controversy, the Arab Spring, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Qatar crisis – the USA has been ineffective, indifferent or, under President Trump, even incendiary. Therefore, piggybacking on the USA is not an option for India. There are also interest divergence on issues like isolating Iran, and preventing oil imports from that country. As a result, maintaining a safe distance from the USA on various regional issues would be sensible for India.

With over an eight million expatriate work force in the region, the prolongation of the intra-GCC crisis does not serve Indian interests. It relies on Qatar for natural gas, and on others for oil; hence, a long-term standoff within the GCC will harm India's ability

to enhance its economic ties with the regional group. While it lacks the diplomatic capital to mediate, India needs to work towards reducing tension.

The Indo-Russian interest convergence on Syria and Iran is rather limited, and primarily revolves around opposition to external interference or regime change. Both do not agree on the lack of flexibility on the part of the Assad regime toward political openness. Seen from New Delhi, both the regime and the opposition have ruined the prospects of a peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis by adopting rigid and inflexible positions. Having committed to ensuring the survival of the Assad regime, the Russian room for manoeuvre is limited. The Russian influence in the Persian Gulf region is also limited; but when it does materialise, Russia could be a challenge to India's role as it has better leverage in the form of arms sales and energy resources.

The challenge from China comes primarily from its economic clout, and it has a far higher volume of trade with the Persian Gulf countries than India: with GCC in 2016, it was US\$ 117.5 billion vs US\$ 97.5 billion, and with Iran, it is US\$ 33.8 billion vs US\$ 9.06 billion in favour of China. The BRI offers a new avenue to China to expand and integrate its ambitious designs with the desire of the GCC countries to move away from their excessive oil dependency. Above all, in terms of the scale and size of projects as well as their efficient and timely execution, China has a significant edge over India.

Interestingly, India has one significant advantage over the USA, Russia, or China: Islam. Even though Muslims constitute a significant portion of their population, the attitude and actions of these three powers towards their Muslim citizens have not always been friendly. Their policies towards their domestic Muslim community have been controversial, even hostile. This has not been the case with India traditionally. Even Prime Minister Modi has been aware of Islam as a diplomatic instrument in furthering India's foreign policy interests. Since assuming office in 2014, he has been promoting ties with the Muslim-majority countries, with Pakistan being the one exception. In so doing, he also presents a contrasting picture: a

hard-line politician within the country but an inclusive statesman outside. Sooner or later, this dichotomy would have to be bridged by internalising his external inclusivity. The Middle East is the ideal place for baptism by fire for an inclusive Modi.

## Notes

1. This is in contrast to the decade-long UPA government under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when India had four fulltime foreign ministers, namely, Natwar Singh (May 2004-November 2005); Pranab Mukherjee (October 2006-May 2009); S M Krishna (May 2009-October 2012), and Salman Khurshid (October 2012-May 2014). Besides, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh held the position during November 2005-October 2006.
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## 9. Crowded Horizons: A View on the Naval Strategy of the United States of America in the Western Indian Ocean<sup>1</sup>

*Jeffrey Payne*

The Red Sea is an emerging area of maritime competition. Historically a major maritime transit point, the Red Sea littoral is today a site of numerous port construction projects, revealing both an increased willingness by maritime powers to project influence in these waters and a signal of how important the countries bordering this region have become. China, France, Japan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE are countries that either seek to build or have built port facilities in or near the Red Sea region. The interest in the Red Sea and the waters surrounding the Horn of Africa/Arabian Peninsula are representative of larger maritime trends throughout much of the global commons. These trends point to a period of increased challenges to the existing rules of the game, and potentially mark the start of a more complex environment for the established maritime power in these waters, namely, the United States of America (USA).

Understanding the nature of competition and ensuring the continuation of the international system is both a challenge and an opportunity for the USA. The strategy for navigating a period of global change will require a new perspective and new tools to be used by the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the other institutions within the US government. As the 2018 US National Defense Strategy states, today sees "... the re-emergence of

long-term, strategic competition.”<sup>2</sup> The maritime domain will define, as it has for much of the modern era, a considerable amount of the language through which strategic competition shall occur. But how intense will this strategic competition be in the end? And, in what way will the challenges emerge? This essay posits that challenges to the established order, and thus towards the USA, will occur in the maritime domain.

By examining the waters of the Western Indian Ocean, analysis can focus on a particularly critical area of maritime competition that will reveal larger patterns. In these waters, competition is taking the form of gray zone tactics, a form of challenge that changes established patterns to gain advantage over competitors without antagonising them into conflict. Comprehensively, a strategy for dealing with gray zone tactics at sea will become a priority for the USA, and the Western Indian Ocean will be pinpointed as a critical zone.

### **Changing Global Conditions, New Regional Dynamics**

As General Votel, former Commander of United States Central Command (or CENTCOM), stated in recent testimony before the US Senate Armed Services Committee,

There is no other region in the world as dynamic, hopeful, challenging and dangerous as the CENTCOM area of responsibility, made up of the areas we typically refer to as the Levant, the Middle East and Central and South Asia.... It is an area rich in history, culture and resources, but also an area pulsing with sectarianism, violence, poor governance, corruption, disenfranchisement, profound human suffering and economic disparity. It is also an area where we retain vital interests, preventing attacks on our homeland, countering malign and destabilizing influence[s], containing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ensuring freedom of navigation and commerce through critical international waterways.<sup>3</sup>

The area called the Middle East is economically and politically important for the entire world due to its proximity to key trade

routes; its location at Asia's meeting point with Africa and Europe; and its ample natural resource wealth that determines pricing for a host of commodities. The USA is deeply engaged in this region for these reasons. In fact, it is the most visible non-regional power in the broader Middle East. Key partners and allies of the USA include Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, among others.<sup>4</sup> The region is a major focus of the USA's global effort to destroy violent extremist organisations, an effort begun nearly twenty years ago after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Among non-regional actors, there is no country that equals the scale and depth of the USA's relationship with much of the region, and this focus on Middle Eastern affairs is reflected in part by the leading role enjoyed by the US Navy throughout the region's waters.

The unmatched position of the US Navy is the result of efforts made during the Cold War. The US intended to ensure that the Soviet Union would not create a sphere of influence in the region, nor any other actor that would act against US interests.<sup>5</sup> The one way in which this was accomplished by the USA was to use its relative advantages over its competitors in the maritime domain. The USA used naval power to signal strategic strength in the Middle East, and to develop relationships through the use of port visits, military exchanges, and joint training exercises. The Soviets, always more dominant on land than at sea, could not compete.<sup>6</sup> Yet, US maritime power in the Middle East, while not challenged directly by the Soviet Union, did face hurdles during the Cold War era. Regional rivalries that transitioned into conflict, particularly the Iran-Iraq War during the 1980s, eventually threatened commercial transport at sea, and required US naval intervention to protect commerce in the Gulf.<sup>7</sup> Maintaining security for energy exports out of the Gulf became one of the costs of US naval leadership in the region, and led to a sustained naval presence ever after.

Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, the strategic importance of the Middle East diminished temporarily as the USA fixated on the after effects of the Cold War in Europe. Yet, the Cold War ended with the USA as the only superpower and, when bolstered by its partners and allies around the world, there were no countries equipped to

provide the components necessary for maintaining security at sea in the same fashion as the USA. Likewise, there was no other actor prepared to maintain security for commercial vessels operating in a region that had become essential to the health of the global economy. Naval power proved useful for various military operations that took place within the Middle East, including bombardments and aerial missions within Operation Desert Storm in 1991, and the continuous patrols of the Gulf that became a buffer to disarm threats made by Iran against other Gulf States.

In 1995, upon recognising that its continuous presence and larger security aims required a dedicated maritime force in the region, the USA reconstituted the Fifth Fleet, and positioned its headquarters on the island state of Bahrain. The US Fifth Fleet became the maritime work horse for the USA in the region. It was active in ensuring that the Strait of Hormuz remained open and unimpeded amongst regional tensions, while also contributing to Operation Iraqi Freedom as well as monitoring regional waters to counter potential threats posed by violent extremist organisations. Amidst its operations, the Fifth Fleet also created Combined Maritime Forces, “... a multinational naval partnership, which exists to promote security, stability and prosperity across approximately 3.2 million square miles of international waters, which encompass some of the world’s most important shipping lanes.”<sup>8</sup>

Combined Maritime Forces serve larger naval aims in the region, namely by assisting in the development of regional maritime capacity, encouraging the sharing of information and operational experience, and maintaining the security of sea lines of communication.<sup>9</sup>

While the USA became more interested in Middle Eastern affairs through much of the post-Cold War era, developments elsewhere also signalled the coming of a new era for both the USA and its Navy. Various states acquired the material wealth necessary to become more active in global affairs, and one of these, the People’s Republic of China, became intent on reforming the current international system in order to create advantageous conditions for itself. A part of the story of China’s meteoric economic rise was the accompanying, if delayed, foreign policy adventurism implemented by China’s

leaders. The particular thrust of China's energies became directed towards achieving regional hegemony in the Asia Pacific.<sup>10</sup> Since the conclusion of World War II, the USA had enjoyed hegemony in the region, with the US Navy being the dominant maritime force in the Asia Pacific. Efforts by China today are inherently a challenge to the US led system, and the rising tensions between the two maritime powers are a likely signal for greater bilateral competition that will substantially impact regional states.<sup>11</sup>

However, China is not merely a regional power. Its economic interests are global and its political influence, propelled by such programs as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is on the rise throughout much of the developing world.<sup>12</sup> In the Middle East, China has followed every other major global power in recent history by seeking to spread its influence throughout the region. Not only does Beijing recognise the strategic importance of the Middle East for global trade and commercial logistics, but also continues to rely on the resource rich states of the region to provide the natural resources necessary to fuel its economy. Long standing relations with Tehran have provided China with access to Iran's economy to a degree unmatched among other major powers, and China's leadership has taken care to maintain these ties. Added to relations with Iran, China has deepened its footprint in recent years in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Israel, to name but a few.<sup>13</sup> In July 2018, China signed a series of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with the United Arab Emirates to develop joint projects in finance, shipping, and energy.<sup>14</sup> In February of 2019, the Saudi Crown Prince signed a series of MoUs with China to develop petrochemical and refining facilities.<sup>15</sup> Each of these efforts by Beijing is representative of China's methodology throughout the Middle East – to develop relationships through economic diplomacy.

China's BRI, its ongoing economic diplomacy, and the increasing amount of trade between China and regional states are clear signs of the Middle East's importance to Beijing. According to *The Economist*, China has invested substantially in the Middle East.

In 2008 the region got less than 1 per cent of China's net outbound foreign direct investment (FDI). Skip ahead a decade and

Chinese money is everywhere: ports in Oman, factories in Algeria, skyscrapers in Egypt's new capital. Last year it pledged \$ 23 billion in loans and aid to Arab states and signed another \$ 28 billion in investment and construction deals.<sup>16</sup>

China has shown little interest or willingness to become involved in regional rivalries or the various conflicts that speckle the region; but its growing familiarity with the region has lessened the barriers keeping China from becoming more engaged in the security arena.

Since 2008, China has maintained a rotating deployment of the People's Liberation Army Navy vessels within the waters surrounding the Horn of Africa. These military resources have been used to conduct counter piracy operations and to safeguard commercial shipping in the region.<sup>17</sup> China's peacekeeping forces have been deployed as a part of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Sudan, Lebanon, and elsewhere throughout the larger Middle East.<sup>18</sup> Evacuations of Chinese nationals were successfully conducted by China's security and military forces in both Libya and Yemen at the breakout of conflict. Most importantly, in 2017, China completed its first overseas military installation in the strategically located country of Djibouti. The base is used to support a variety of military operations, and is the clearest signal to date of China's interest in acquiring a permanent influence in the waters surrounding the Middle East.

China is the most prominent of several regional and global powers that are investing greater resources in the waters of the Middle East. As mentioned in the introduction, a port construction boom is ongoing in the Red Sea. The United Arab Emirates has built, or is building, a series of port facilities along the African coast of the Red Sea, and its ongoing military operations inside Yemen are supported by a steady Emirati naval presence in the Red Sea.<sup>19</sup> Qatar and Turkey are jointly investing in a Sudanese port meant to anchor their regional influence, and to bolster regional trade.<sup>20</sup> In Djibouti, the USA, Japan, and France each have installations, in addition to China. Strategically located but lacking substantial material wealth, Djibouti has leveraged its location amidst renewed interest in the Red Sea to attract foreign investment. While not involved in base or

port construction currently, India has also become interested in the security of the Western Indian Ocean, and has amplified diplomatic outreach among states in East Africa, invested in projects in the island states of the Western Indian Ocean, and maintains its own counter piracy operations near the Horn of Africa.

More states have the logistical depth and financial resources to become involved in the maritime domain in the Western Indian Ocean and, given the importance of these waters, it is unsurprising that once relatively empty seas are more crowded than ever. Yet, it cannot be ignored that perceptions are also fuelling more states to become involved in the Western Indian Ocean.<sup>21</sup> Perceptions are rarely based on facts and, when it comes to the Western Indian Ocean, perception does not mirror reality. One common perception that exists within the larger Middle East – and in turn influences regional politics – is that the power of the USA in this region, and throughout the wider world, is declining. If the dominant power is perceived to be weakening, then the security guarantees provided by that power are at risk, and such an environment would encourage states to hedge their bets by either taking on greater responsibilities themselves or to look for new partners.

When it comes to diplomatic engagement, security cooperation, and capacity building efforts by the USA in the Middle East, there has been little or no change over the past twenty years. Military assets have shifted based upon needs; but the USA's naval forces have remained constant in their mission to protect the region's waterways.<sup>22</sup> The USA's Fifth Fleet remains in Bahrain, and continues to protect the waters of the Gulf while leading international efforts focused on the various components of maritime security. What then fuels the perception that the power of the USA is declining? There are many ways to examine such a question, but one answer is this: what fuels the perceptions of a weakening USA in the maritime domain are the rise of new powers as well as a reshaping of the regional dynamics of the Middle East. It is not a change in the operational depth, regional footprint, or outreach of the USA.

The Middle East is still in the middle of a period of immense and disruptive change. Turmoil within the Gulf Cooperation Council

(GCC) is altering the political realities of the Gulf region. Iranian power projection throughout the Middle East is increasing tensions with its competitors. Even the demographic trends of the region's population are signalling a Middle East that will transform into a region different than the one that existed through much of the post-Cold War period. When you factor in that the USA is competing against other major powers throughout the world, then a picture emerges where the dominant power faces multiple challenges. For the USA, the measuring stick has changed for analysing Middle Eastern security affairs. However, none of the various challengers that overtly, or even inadvertently, stoke the perception of a declining USA want to replace the USA in the role it has been serving throughout the Middle East. The aim of challenges is to gain strategic space for their own interests, and not replace the established power and thereafter be burdened with larger responsibilities.

### **Identifying the Gray Zone**

Frustration, hindrance, and annoyance are the hallmarks of gray zone tactics. They are antagonistic without reaching a scale that warrants military action in response.<sup>23</sup> Such tactics also possess a communicative function by calling into question the power of those that they are used against. Most importantly, gray zone tactics serve a larger strategic aim – to gain influence over a people or area, to push back a competitor, or to even signal a change to institutions or entire systems. To put it more bluntly, the point is to use ungoverned space or alter existing structures to create disorder that serves your aims. As defined by the State Department's International Security Advisory Board, "the term Gray Zone (GZ) denotes the use of techniques to achieve a nation's goals, and frustrate those of its rivals by employing instruments of power – often asymmetric and ambiguous in character – that are not direct use of acknowledged regular military forces."<sup>24</sup> The use of gray zone tactics in the maritime domain is discussed globally with greater frequency today due to their commonality in the South China Sea; but these tactics have long existed in the Western Indian Ocean to challenge the existing security structure in the waters surrounding the Persian



Gulf as well as to impede the operations of the US Navy and its partnering maritime forces.<sup>25</sup> Given trend lines in the region, it is highly probable that the gray zone challenge in the Middle East will only increase.

Gray zone tactics are designed to not cross red lines of those they are used against. As such, the logic of their use is to increase the potential cost on an opponent to convince them that a response is more trouble than it is worth. A common example outside the Middle East that is discussed regularly is the actions of China's maritime militia, a fleet of vessels that operates normally in the commercial maritime community but has the additional purpose of enforcing China's territorial water claims in the South China Seas. This militia has created tensions among the actors involved in the South China Seas but not to the point of warranting military action in response. Using this militia allows China to signal to other regional powers, and the USA a specific political message, and to initiate a cycle that seeks to change the behaviour of all other vessels in the region as it pertains to China's maritime claims.<sup>26</sup>

In the Middle East, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy regularly employs gray zone tactics. These maritime units have threatened commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf for decades, and proven to be resilient in adopting new methods in the emergence of changing conditions. As Abhijit Singh argues, “[i]n the case of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGC) too, the asymmetric threat is buttressed by the official power of the Islamic state.”<sup>27</sup> Analysts such as Singh point out that successful maritime gray zone tactics succeed in environments where the actions by militias or other professionalised security forces are backed by the existence of more traditional naval forces. In other words, for those opposed to the IRGC to act against these units would increase the risk of the Iranian navy becoming involved in direct, kinetic actions at sea. Such an escalatory act would have region-wide consequences beyond the risk of conflict. Potentially, the disruption to SLOCs would increase energy costs worldwide, increase the cost of operating commercial vessels, and even impact the long-term stability of regional regimes that depend on maritime trade.

The information age also influences the gray zone. In an age where established media sources are questioned more than ever and information is commonly passed directly from person to person rather than intermediaries, it is more difficult for states to counter hostile information operations enacted by a competitor.<sup>28</sup> Being cheaper to use than other forms of tactics in the gray zone, manipulating information can do a considerable amount of damage.<sup>29</sup> Take, for instance, the extremely complex information campaigns undertaken by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates against Iran (and vice versa). To serve a larger regional rivalry, information is disseminated through social media and traditional media outlets that point to existing problems in the maritime domain, such as human trafficking and various forms of smuggling, as the result of the instability created by the actions of opponents. In the case of Yemen, information campaigns have clouded the intense and overlapping challenges that exist in this conflict-ridden country.<sup>30</sup>

The USA must navigate such complexity regularly in order to maintain maritime security. The situation in Yemen creates a host of questions regarding human rights, regional balances of power, and foreign interference in a sovereign state. Each of these questions is important and immensely complicated. Yet, amidst these complex questions it is also necessary to ensure that the conflict in Yemen does not bleed into the Red Sea, and disrupt a vital trade route.

The current state of a floating storage offloading terminal off the coast of Yemen, called SAFER, has reached a regional crisis point. If the SAFER exploded, which it could easily do for a variety of reasons, it would endanger both nearby vessels and the local environment.<sup>31</sup> The vessel is controlled by the Houthis who, in their conflict against Yemeni government forces, allied with the Saudis and Emiratis, have threatened oil tankers and other commercial shipping in the region. Tied to the conflict in Yemen, this vessel's status violates several regional maritime agreements and established patterns of maritime conduct. It is an ever-present headache for the United Nations and other international organisations seeking to remedy the crisis. The situation also requires constant monitoring and analysis by the USA.

## **The Global Commons and the Middle East: Sustaining the US-led System**

A part of the complexity facing the USA in the Middle East today is the increased focus by multiple nations on the natural seams that define the waters of the Western Indian Ocean. This is where the Gray Zone and the depth of strategic competition come into focus.<sup>32</sup> “Straits and seams” is a colloquial way to refer to the flash points of future maritime competition. The USA still retains its established role as the primary maritime power in the Western Indian Ocean, and continues to operate as the key guardian of maritime security. Yet, perceptions of the USA are changing: more powers are raising their flags in these waters, and both regional and global competition amongst powers is increasing. The USA cannot operate at sea in the same way that it did two decades ago.

So, what can be expected of the USA if we look at the horizon in the future?

First, what the USA does well, it will continue to do well. The US Navy will continue to lead its allies and partners in the maritime domain. This system helped to facilitate the era of globalisation that we all now live in, and making sure that the global commons are as safe as possible is something the USA knows how to do. Tied to this function are the hundreds of port visits, training operations, professional military education courses, and site visits that the US Navy, the US Coast Guard, and the Defense Attaché Offices in US Embassies conduct annually. Such programs and visits build familiarity among sailors in the region, and provide operational knowledge that helps not only the USA but also all the states that take part. Senior leader engagements, information sharing, and other communicative measures are also entrenched, and should continue. All of this builds the mainstay of US naval power: burden sharing.

Second, it is probable that the USA will reprioritise how it deploys naval forces. The Indo-Pacific will become a focus for the USA, reflecting the reality of Asia’s economic power and serving as the focus of where the USA’s primary competitors are investing their own resources. This age of competition does not equate to an age of conflict, but the USA will become more vocal in pointing out

the differences between its actions and its competitors. This means that the broader Middle East will remain a priority for the USA, but maritime engagements with Middle Eastern powers will more regularly look beyond the Gulf, the Arab Sea, and the Red Sea. The larger Indian Ocean and the building of partnerships and cooperative efforts among the wider Indian Ocean littoral will become a feature of US engagement.

Third, to counter the intensifying challenges posed by the gray zone, the USA will look to maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean as a whole-of-government effort. It will not be the Navy or the Coast Guard alone working to counter these challenges, but the US government interagency. The Gray Zone presents a set of complex challenges, and not all of the dangers to the global commons are best addressed by anchoring discussions to the seas. Just as the events of September 11, 2001 created greater awareness of the need to develop diverse methods to counter violent extremism, so too will the greater potential risks in the waters of the Western Indian Ocean create a new commitment to think creatively to solve problems. Traditional naval resources, diplomatic energies, technological tools, and cooperative resources offered amongst partners and allies will all be component parts of the answers the USA provides for the challenges emerging today in the waters surrounding the larger Middle East.

## Notes

1. This paper's views are of the author's alone, and do not reflect the official position or policy of the United States government, the United States Department of Defense, or the NESACenter.
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# 10. China and the Middle East: New Dynamics but Consistent Policy

*Jin Liangxiang*

The last two decades have witnessed a major but gradual change in the Middle East regional order. The competition between regional powers rather than external ones for geopolitical influence has become the defining feature of regional politics. Despite these changes, China's policy toward the region has not changed much as China adheres to established principles regarding major regional issues. It is these principles, as explained in this essay, that have maintained the continuity of China's policy. As far as cooperation between China and India is concerned, it has not been given sufficient importance though the two share a lot of common interests in the region, and have similar positions regarding regional affairs. As two major Asian powers, China and India need to discuss the areas and ways to cooperate on Middle East issues.

## **New Dynamics Defined by the Rising of Regional Powers**

For many decades, Middle East regional politics have been defined by external powers competing for influence in the region. This has been the driving force behind the interactions of regional and external actors. In the Cold War period, the Middle East was mainly characterised by competition between the USA and the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War era beginning the early 1990s, the Middle East witnessed the dominance of the USA after the US-led alliance's victory in the Gulf War in 1991, which marked the beginning of America's unilateral order in the region.



The beginning of the second ten years of the new century saw a change in the regional dynamics of the Middle East. While it is true that major external powers were still playing critical roles in regional affairs, their role has been declining, either because of a lack of capacity or the lack of willingness, or both. The USA has been clear regarding its withdrawal from the Middle East since Barack Obama's administration. President Obama announced that the USA would withdraw troops from Iraq shortly after taking office in 2009 and later also expressed the plan to withdraw from Afghanistan. President Donald Trump has also been clear about withdrawing from the Middle East, which is out of both his "America First" mentality and the thinking that strategic involvement in the region is waste of resources.<sup>1</sup> Europe regards the Middle East as its immediate neighbour; but the European Union has proved to be too much dependent on the USA for realising its objectives in the Middle East. Russia has been actively involved in Middle East affairs in the last couple of years; but it seems that Russia's objective was not beyond protecting its major ally in the region. Russia does not have sufficient economic resources for further involvement.

In contrast to the declining roles of external powers, regional powers have become more and more ambitious in regional affairs. The rising of regional powers does not necessarily mean their growing GDPs or hard power in other forms. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia, nor Israel, nor Turkey has experienced any rapid growth in their economies. The rising of Middle East regional powers is more about their growing influence in regional affairs.

Iran's increasing influence in regional affairs should be the first example. This has taken place in three stages. The first stage emerged out of the strategic mistake made by the USA instead of Iran's proactive behaviour. The war the USA launched against the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 eliminated for Iran an enemy in the east while the war in 2003 against Saddam Hussein's Iraq removed Iran's other arch enemy. As a result, Iran's geographical situation improved greatly. The removal of Sunni rule in Iraq in particular has made it possible for Iran to form the Shiite Arc from Iran to Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. The second stage began in 2011 when Iran was

able to push its influence into some Arab countries as well as with the Shiite communities in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Bahrain by taking advantage of the internal turmoil of these countries in the so-called Arab Spring.<sup>2</sup> The third stage was marked by Iran's involvement in Syria. By supporting Bashar al-Assad's government, Iran was able to establish its military presence in Syria – which means that Iran's strategic presence is just on the border of Israel.

The growing regional activism of Saudi Arabia is another case in this regard. In many ways, the rise of Saudi Arabia has been in response to Iran's growing regional influence. On 14 March 2011, Saudi Arabia rallied and dispatched troops within the GCC framework to help Bahrain to put down the uprisings within the context of the Arab Spring. This action primarily was to protect the political security of GCC monarchies, including Saudi Arabia itself. But it was also to resist Iran's influence in Bahrain. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia worked to form a coalition among Arab countries, which launched military action named Decisive Storm in Yemen. In December 2015, Saudi Arabia launched the coalition of 34 states among the Islamic world in the name of fighting terrorism; but it was actually targeted at Iran since Iran is regarded by Saudi Arabia as the primary state sponsor of terrorism.

The competition among regional powers was also marked by the proactive diplomacy of Israel. Israel used to enjoy being protected by the USA. But the last decade has seen Israel actively pushing forward its own regional agenda. Israel has been able to construct Iran as the primary threat to regional security. It has been able to push the USA to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; it has been able to get political recognition from Arab countries; and has even formed a tacit alliance with Gulf Arab countries against Iran.

Further, Turkey's growing influence and active involvement in regional politics is noticeable. It has expanded its influence in Iraq's and Syria's Kurdish regions, taking advantage of the turmoil ensuing from the Arab Spring in the two countries. Turkey also put 2,000 of its troops in Qatar during the Qatar diplomatic crisis in 2017. It was the first time that Turkey was able to realise its military presence in the Arabian Peninsula since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Various Middle East regional powers are striving to increase their roles in regional affairs, and expand their influence in the region. The reasons are numerous. All the major regional powers have had either a history of empire or have been great civilisations, both of which still serve as a great momentum in the desire to play bigger roles in the region. Moreover, there is the declining role of the USA in the region.<sup>3</sup> The decline of the USA has left a power vacuum for regional powers like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey on the one hand; on the other hand, some regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel, feel pressed to take proactive actions to protect their own interests and security.

It is true that external powers like the USA and Russia are still visible in the region; but they are no longer active players. To put it another way, the USA has intended to leave the Middle East for a long time, but regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Israel do not want USA to leave.

The regional powers are seriously undermining regional security as a result of the fierce competition among them for influence. The last decade has witnessed tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia in a large variety of regional conflicts in Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria. While Iran was standing with one side, Saudi Arabia was standing with the opposite. Turkey's troops crossed its own border to neighbouring countries. Israel's aircraft were frequent visitors in the air space of other countries. Such conflicts not only undermine the sovereignty of Middle Eastern states but also undermine the regional order as a whole. Though it is well understood that the competition among regional powers has been detrimental, there is little evidence that they are willing to reach solutions through dialogue in the near future.

### **China's Middle East Policy: Principles and Practices**

China's policy toward the Middle East, unlike that of many other countries, remains consistent despite changes in the region. The reasons are that China's policy is guided and restricted by well-established principles of Chinese foreign policy. Within the new context, it is even more important for China to adhere to these

principles. The principles are numerous, but the most important are the following four.

### ***Mutual Respect among Civilisations***

The Chinese civilisation is inclusive, and is always ready to learn from other civilisations. All along, China has been adhering to the principle of mutual respect among civilisations in history as well as in modern times. In history, the relationship between the Islamic world and the West was conflictual and bloody as they exchanged aggressions and invasions. But later, the Chinese and Islamic worlds enjoyed a rather peaceful relationship, with the Silk Road witnessing the friendly exchange and integration of the two civilisations. As the Islamic world learned the four Chinese great inventions and passed them on to Europe, the Chinese planted many kinds of vegetables and fruits having learned about them from the Islamic world; they also acquired other scientific and cultural attributes emerging in the Islamic world.

In recent times, the Islamic world, particularly the Arab world, has been frustrated in its modernisation, and its religious values have been frequently distorted and misinterpreted. Various kinds of incidents in the West relating to the desecration of Islam and its symbols have taken place. These include the incident of the *Satanic Verses*, the maltreatment of the prisoners in post-war Iraq, the burning of the Quran in Afghanistan by American soldiers, the Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons, as also those of Charlie Hebdo. But in China, no such incidents have happened. China has been very clear that it opposes any form of terrorism, and also opposes the unreasonable link of terrorism with any religion.

### ***Non-Interference***

China has been upholding the principle of non-interference in its overall foreign policy, and the Middle East has been the region that has most frequently and actively witnessed such a principle because the countries in this region have witnessed significant other external interference. Chinese mainstream scholars understand that, in modern times, countries should not just keep silent when

a humanitarian crisis happens in another country, rather they should argue that human rights should be protected in a responsible way. By this principle, China clearly and strongly opposes military interventions in Iraq, Libya and Syria since turmoil and chaos on the ground have been the consequence of these interventions.

### *Justice and Fairness*

The principle of justice and fairness is one of the major principles defining China's position regarding the Middle East. This is particularly evident in China's policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Though the Middle East peace process has stalled, and many believe that the Palestine-Israel issue has been marginalised, China believes that the peace process is critical for peace in the region as a whole, and that the peace process should be pushed forward with fairness and justice. In January 2016, while addressing the Arab League, President Xi Jinping clearly stated that, "Without fairness and justice, the peace accord can only bring about a cold peace. The international community should stick to the principle of fairness and justice, and address historical injustice as soon as possible."<sup>4</sup>

### *Development*

The West likes to attribute various problems – such as terrorism, conflicts and modernisation deficiency – to lack of democracy in the region. Therefore, the West likes to promote democracy even by military means in the region. China's perceptions of the turmoil in the region are quite, if not completely, different from the West. China believes that development deficiency is the root cause of regional turmoil, and development should be the solutions to the problems. President Xi Jinping in 2016 said that turmoil in the Middle East stems from the lack of development, and the ultimate solution will depend on development. And only when young people are able to live a fulfilled life with dignity through development can hope prevail in their heart. Only then will they voluntarily reject violence, extremist ideologies, and terrorism.<sup>5</sup> It is based on this principle that China regards promoting economic development as a primary task of its overall relations with the region. Many of the

projects within the framework of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are actually targeting at reducing unemployment.

## **Latest Developments in China-Middle East relations**

The relations between China and the Middle East have been moving steadily in all the major areas in the last decade, most visibly in political and economic relations.

### ***Political Relations***<sup>6</sup>

Instead of choosing sides, China has developed friendly relations with all Middle Eastern countries, and prefers to push for dialogue among major conflicting parties. China wishes to develop long-term political relations with all the major regional countries.

China established a comprehensive strategic partnership with Egypt in December 2014, and is committed to enhancing a comprehensive strategic partnership in January 2016. China and Saudi Arabia established strategic and friendly relationship in 2008, and elevated it to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership in January 2016. China also established a comprehensive strategic partnership with Algeria in February 2014 and with the United Arab Emirates in July 2018 when President Xi Jinping visited the UAE. China also established a strategic partnership with Qatar in 2014, with Jordan in 2015, with Morocco in May 2016, with Djibouti in 2017, with Oman in May 2018, and with Kuwait in July 2018.

China's political relations with non-Arab countries have also been defined. China and Iran formally established a comprehensive strategic partnership in January 2016 during President Xi Jinping's visit to Tehran. China and Turkey declared to construct and develop strategic cooperation in 2010. China and Israel redefined their relations as comprehensive partnership of innovation in 2017.

In addition to redefining relationships between China and regional countries, the exchange of visits of high-level government officials has become more frequent than ever in the last couple of years. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran in January 2016, and the UAE in July 2018. And, the leaders of Middle Eastern countries, including the Egyptian President

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and a number of other leaders of Middle Eastern countries have paid one or more visits to China.

### ***Economic Relations***

Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the BRI in 2013 and 2014, and the Middle East is most closely associated with the initiative since the region is the convergence of the Belt on the land and the sea. Within the framework of BRI, China's economic relationship with the Middle East has witnessed a great diversification.

Importing energy from the Middle East used to be an essential part, sometimes even the single most important area, of China's economic relations with the region. It still is – and will be – a significant part. But, in the last five years, China's economic cooperation with the region has gone far beyond energy. Chinese companies won a number of bids in infrastructure construction in Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Israel. China's cooperation with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Oman in industrial capacity building has materialised in a big way. China has also established RMB clearing centres in Qatar and the UAE.<sup>7</sup> Seven Arab States, namely the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and Egypt as well as Israel, Turkey and Iran are founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

The diversification of the China-Middle East economic relationship could also mean that China has already updated its relations with the region to a new version. While China looks at the region as an important partner, the Middle East is also looking for opportunities in the east, of which China is certainly an important part, together with India.

### **China-Indian Cooperation in the Middle East**

China and India have many reasons to cooperate in Middle East. Among the major global powers, China and India are most seriously concerned about stability in the region. The two are well aware that their futures are very closely intertwined with the Middle East. Both

regard the Middle East as their inevitable source of oil import as well as an important market for its products. Besides, China has cooperation agreements with the Middle East in a variety of areas from infrastructure construction to financial cooperation; India has the largest number of expatriates working in the region. China and India also have similar, if not totally the same, positions on important regional issues. In fact, no other countries have such similarities in their outlook towards the Middle East. Both countries have upheld the idea of non-violence and non-interference as important principles of their foreign policy behaviour.

There are a lot of areas in which the two parties can work together. China and India can jointly work for justice and fairness in the Middle East. The Palestine-Israel issue has been marginalised for many years, but will continue to affect peace and stability in the region as a whole. In whatever ways the Middle East changes, the people will strongly identify with the cause of Palestinian nationhood. Both China and India strongly stand for the legitimate rights of Palestinian nationhood, and justice and fairness as well. The two working together can make their voices and positions more widely heard. Currently, the USA is working for the so-called deal of the century, which is believed to be sacrificing Palestinians' rights.<sup>8</sup> China and India could work for a fair solution of the Palestine-Israel issue.

China and India can also work for the stable flow of energy to Asian markets at reasonable prices. China and India have become major importers of Middle East oil as their economies are booming while American dependence on the region has declined. China and India can work for a reasonable price of oil to Asia which is acceptable to both importers and exporters. To secure the safe flow, the two can also work to promote dialogue among major oil exporters in the region, like Saudi Arabia and Iran. The two can also work for the smooth implementation of the Iran nuclear deal. The American withdrawal from the deal in May 2018, and the restoration of the sanctions undermined the interests not only of China but also of India. China and India could explore ways either to press for extending exemptions or guaranteeing import in other ways.



China and India can further work together for solutions or crisis management in other major Middle East conflicts. The conflicts or geopolitical competition in Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria pose long-term security threats to the region. China and India are two major powers that are concerned about regional stability, and are not standing with either side of the conflicts, and the two can work together to make their positions more significant, and a part of the solution. Hence, there are abundant avenues for cooperation between the two. This kind of cooperation can be put in bilateral mechanisms or in multi-lateral mechanisms of which both China and India are a part. Last but not least, Middle East issues are the areas in which China and India share common grounds, and cooperation in Middle East issues will not only serve to promote the interests and positions of the two but also promote confidence building between the two in other areas.

## Conclusion

China's relationship with the Middle East has witnessed significant growth, both economically and politically. Chinese policy towards the region has been consistent with its foreign policy principles, and this has helped it maintain stable but incremental relations with Middle Eastern countries. The emergence of regional powers, however, poses challenges to all major players inside and outside the region. In future, China and India will grow to be more important actors in international arena and in the Middle East as well. As two responsible global players, they can cooperate on a variety of issues in the Middle East for the future of the region and for the shared Chinese and Indian interests and for justice as well.

## Notes

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2. See Anthony Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia, Iran and 'the clash within civilization'", CSIS, February 3, 2014 at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/saudi-arabia-iran-and-clash-within-civilization>.

3. For America's declining role in the region, see Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, pp. 2-10; see also, Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville, "Bringing the United States Back into the Middle East", *The Washington Quarterly*, Fall 2013, pp. 95-105.
4. Xi Jinping, "Work Together for a Bright Future of China-Arab Relations", Cairo, January 21, 2016. Full text can be accessed at the emabsssy of China in UK website at <http://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk/eng/zgyw/t1335484.htm>.
5. Ibid.
6. China has established a variety of partnerships with the Middle East countries, including comprehensive strategic partnerships, strategic partnerships, and partnerships of innovation. The relevant information is available on the website of China's Foreign Ministry.
7. See, "Declaration of Action on China-Arab States Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative", China-Arab States Cooperation Forum July 13, 2018 at <http://www.chinaarabcf.org/chn/lthyjwx/bzjhy/dbjbzjhy/t1577010.htm>.
8. Bill Law, "Trump's 'ultimate deal' faces ultimate failure", Al Jazeera, March 5, 2019 at <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/trump-ultimate-deal-faces-ultimate-failure-190303130838617.html>.

# 11. European Dilemmas in the Middle East: Conflicting Paradigms and Shifting Dynamics

*Gidon Windecker*

The last few years have confronted the countries of the European Union (EU) with a number of major internal and external conflicts. The peak of the Greek debt crisis in summer 2015 grasped the world's attention at a time when the wave of Syrian refugees was at Europe's doorstep. Europeans soon came to realise that the conflicts in the Middle East were no longer beyond the continent's horizon. The ensuing refugee crisis, and how it was handled by European governments, changed the face of Europe. For the first time in decades, a conflict that originated outside European borders profoundly influenced political developments at the domestic level. Whereas the Greek debt crisis deepened cleavages on matters such as globalisation and international economic policies, the Syrian refugee crisis triggered a major split among Europeans on matters such as refugee and asylum policy.

Due to mismanagement and lack of unity, European governments lost many of their citizens' trust and confidence in problem-solving abilities. The decision to open the borders on September 4, 2015, allowing thousands of refugees into Germany without due registration, turned out to be the result of the lack of political coordination between Berlin, Vienna, and the state government of Bavaria. Although the refugees were initially greeted by enthusiastic citizens, the move sent shock waves throughout Europe and, in the long-run, confused and frustrated even many of those Europeans who supported a refugee-friendly policy.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the terror

attacks in France, Germany, Belgium, England, and other European countries, and the fact that in some cases, economic refugees from North Africa abused the Syrians' tragedy, led to a distrust of refugees and a rise of anti-Muslim sentiment.<sup>2</sup>

The disagreement on how to handle the refugee crisis has politicised large parts of the European population, and given rise to right-wing parties across the Continent.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in this environment of increasing insecurity, the regional and international setting changed in unpredictable ways. The future of UK-EU relations remains uncertain due to the continuous stalemate in the Brexit negotiations and, under the current US administration, the trans-Atlantic relationship is no longer considered reliable. Moreover, the global order of trade and diplomacy has also been shaken. Alternative allies on the international floor are long-established players, such as Russia, Turkey, and China, with whom Europe differs considerably in terms of values, but with whom it has, nevertheless, carefully maintained political and economic ties for the sake of balance and stability.

European leaders are only starting to grasp and assess the new level of entanglement of domestic, European, foreign, and security policy, and how much they have come to impact each other. Especially in the face of nearly a decade into the war in Syria, with 13 million refugees seeking shelter, Europe's inability to put forth a political solution leaves many pressing questions unanswered, and mirrors the failed policies since the Arab revolts of 2011.

This essay discusses some of the dilemmas the EU is facing in dealing with the challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It does not offer a comprehensive analysis of specific policy cases, or even deal with all relevant MENA countries. Neither does it present the totality of European instruments applied in the region. It focuses rather on a few cases that, in my opinion, exemplify the European dilemma when it comes to the lack of unity on the one hand, and the dichotomy of establishing a foreign policy based on democratic values vs pragmatic interests, on the other. The essay starts with a brief discussion of the foundations of European foreign policy and its challenges, and then sketches how these

dilemmas have crystallised in the post-2011 environment, with a special focus on Egypt and Syria. Given Turkey's strategic role in the Syrian refugee crisis, it also sheds some light on Turkish-European relations.

### **European Foreign Policy: Values and Interests**

Among the big global players, the EU continues to play a particular role when it comes to foreign and security policy in the MENA region. Unlike the USA and Russia, with their long history of interference in the region, the EU has not been able to establish itself as a decisive factor in shaping regional politics. This is first and foremost due to its institutional complexity and bureaucratic outlook, with the three major institutions (the Commission, the Council, and the Parliament) representing the interests of all its member states. Moreover, the European Union is known as a soft power player, rather than for hard power and military interference. Also, the bilateral approach towards single countries still outweighs an overall regional strategy. In addition, critics have pointed out that the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) obstructs the shaping of a unified strategy since it singles out mainly the Mediterranean states, while excluding other MENA countries, such as Iraq, for which a specific strategy was put into place in early 2018.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, more importantly, foreign and security policies are still domains largely determined on the national, not the European level. Different member states have different positions on relevant issues, based on their political calculations and economic interests. This counts especially for France, Germany, and the UK, as well as other former colonial powers, and can be seen in the fact that the EU did not have a unified stand on the war in Iraq in 2003, or the strike against Gaddafi's forces in 2011. In fact, a mandate to intervene was given to NATO, after EU member states could not agree on a joint action based on the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).<sup>5</sup>

However, there is another essential challenge to European foreign policy, which has contributed to its lack of a decisive position in many cases. It is a challenge that is based on the very foundation

of the European post-World War II vision. This foundation rests on the core values of freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and respect for human rights and dignity. The dilemma lies in the fact that the EU applies these core values not only at the domestic and European level, but also to foreign policy and international relations, often in an environment where these values are neither respected nor appreciated. On the other hand, an additional dilemma arises from the fact that at the inner-European level, the governments of Hungary, and to an extent Poland, have defied the EU and its value system, and have established their own soft-authoritarian rule. The European Parliament's vote for sanctions against Prime Minister Victor Orbán and his government in September 2018 have, thus, become the litmus test for the EU's democratic *wehrbarkeit* (ability to defend its democratic character).

In line with its value-based approach, the European Union has presented its policies towards its neighbours as being guided by the principles of democratisation and socio-economic development. Through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) since 1995, and the European Neighbourhood Policy since 2004, the EU has aimed “to achieve the closest possible political association and the greatest possible degree of economic integration” in and with its southern neighbourhood.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, European foreign policy, like any other foreign policy, is guided by economic and security interests which may, at times, contradict the value-based approach. Scholars have argued that at the end of the day, in foreign policy, interest comes before value and “possession goals” (goals with a focus on self-interest), often dominate “milieu goals” (goals taking into account the good of the neighbourhood). Their criticism is not directed against the fact that European countries pursue legitimate pragmatic interests, but rather the normative language with which the EU emphasizes its values towards its partners, which has, at times, led to a lack of a clear-pointed strategy. Moreover, it is claimed that European countries have often presented their self-interest in the region (for instance avoiding a spill-over of conflicts) as milieu goals.<sup>7</sup>

## Egypt and the European Neighbourhood Policy

One of the first major cases of the European predicament emerged during the Arab uprisings in early 2011. Since the 1990s, European partnership mechanisms had ensured the support of autocratic regimes through financial, economic, and technical support, while the success of their mission for more democratic structures and human rights was at best questionable. However, with the revolts, the tides seemed to be shifting and, for the first time, an actual democratic transformation seemed to be possible. European leaders enthusiastically embraced what they considered “so much of our Neighbourhood in a process of democratic change”, as Catherine Ashton, former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy expressed it.<sup>8</sup> Especially concerning Egypt, European analysts often drew a rather optimistic picture on the constructive role the Muslim Brotherhood could play in a future government. Some of them saw an alliance between the Brotherhood and more liberal forces as a potential conduit to transform the country, and hoped Egypt, together with Tunisia, would serve as an example to guide Middle Eastern countries into a potential era of democracy.<sup>9</sup>

In May 2011, just two months after the fall of President Mubarak and three months after the ousting of President Ben Ali, the EU presented a revised version of its Neighbourhood Policy to “respond to partner countries’ quests for more freedom and a better life”. Ashton spoke of a “new approach” that aimed at “promoting and supporting the development of Deep Democracy and economic prosperity”.<sup>10</sup> Deep Democracy is a concept developed by Arnold Mindell, an American physicist from MIT and a Jungian Analyst, whose research focused on the awareness of different frameworks of reality. Mindell referred to Deep Democracy as being inclusive of all voices and all reality frameworks.<sup>11</sup> For the EU, this translated into free and fair elections, freedom of expression and a free press, rule of law, and a democratic framework for security forces.<sup>12</sup> Besides an increase in funds amounting to US\$ 5.7 billion to almost US\$ 7 billion for the period of 2011-13, the major new element in the region was the so called “more-for-more” policy, according to which “the more and the faster a country progresses in its internal reforms,

the more support it will get from the EU.”<sup>13</sup> With this carrot-and-stick policy, Europe attempted to boost a democratic order in an environment of transition after the fall of the autocratic regimes.

However, this strategy did not achieve the anticipated outcome. The short intermezzo of President Morsi, whom Europeans initially celebrated as the “first democratically elected President in Egypt”, brought about deterioration in democratic development, human rights, and security cooperation. When General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi launched a military coup in July 2013, the EU showed itself concerned over this development; however at the same time, it “did not shed a tear over Morsi”, as the *EU Observer* put it.<sup>14</sup>

President Sisi consolidated his power by banning the Muslim Brotherhood and arresting an estimated 60,000 Egyptians (as compared to about 5-10,000 political prisoners under Mubarak).<sup>15</sup> Among them were, besides Brotherhood activists and more radical Islamists, a considerable number of liberal civil society actors, media figures, and intellectuals. Moreover, 1,300 Egyptians were killed by security forces, and over a thousand people were sentenced to death. When Sisi won the presidential elections in May 2014 with over 96 per cent of the votes, the EU criticised that “respect for rights falls short of constitutional principles” and that “freedoms of association, assembly and expression are areas of concern.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the relief that the unsuccessful Brotherhood experiment was over could not be overheard. In the same document, the EU congratulated Sisi, and described the election as “an important step” towards democracy. Similar to the USA, European leaders stated that they were looking forward to a “constructive partnership” with the new ruler.<sup>17</sup>

From a Western perspective, it was obvious that the democratic experiment in Egypt was over. Given the failure of the Arab revolts to usher in democracy (with the notable exception of Tunisia), and in the wake of the turmoil of the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015, the EU presented yet another revised version of its Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Although it emphasized that its principles had not changed, it became clear that the priority had shifted back towards security and stability. The dominant terms of the 2011 version, such



as the concept of Deep Democracy, did not make it into the 2015 document.<sup>18</sup> The 2011 version of the ENP became an anathema, which was mentioned neither in the joint communication, nor in the corresponding press release.<sup>19</sup> The new policy was linked to the “Global Strategy on Foreign & Security Policy”, which was launched in June 2016 in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris. The Global Policy replaces the European Security Strategy of 2003, and its goal is to facilitate closer cooperation in fighting terrorism, the prevention of radicalisation, the promotion of cyber security mechanisms, and interventions in crisis regions.<sup>20</sup>

In Egypt, this strategic shift translated into a partnership that focuses on socio-economic growth and job creation, security challenges, and confronting illegal immigration.<sup>21</sup> As one of the EU’s most important development partner, Egypt has received grants over €1.3 billion since 2017.<sup>22</sup> Although the EU keeps emphasizing its commitment to “democracy and human rights” in its priorities, the strategic partnership with Sisi was able to unfold in the midst of increasing human rights violations and the systematic dismantling of civil society organisations and human rights work.<sup>23</sup> Not even the severe verdict against 43 employees of German and American NGOs altered the strategic course.<sup>24</sup>

Looking at the broader picture, especially in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis, this shift towards interest-based priorities should not come as a surprise. With a population of almost 100 million, long borders with Libya, Sudan, and the Mediterranean Sea facing Europe, as well as the ongoing battle with Islamist insurgents in the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt plays a key role when it comes to securing European borders, and protecting Israel. And this means fostering stability and security through collaboration with an autocratic regime, despite its poor democratic performance.

### **Turkey: European Values and the Refugee Crisis**

Europe faces an even more precarious dilemma in the case of Turkey. The relationship with the south-eastern neighbour has always been particular, and does not fall under the ENP. Turkey has been an aspirant to the EU (back then EEC) membership since 1987, and was

officially recognised as a potential candidate in 1999. The country long enjoyed a “privileged partnership”. However, negotiations were slow, and over half of the 35 chapters that are a prerequisite for joining the Union were never even opened. President Erdogan has continually accused the EU of hypocrisy. In response to its criticism against the brutal police force used against demonstrators in the Gezi Protests in June 2013, he openly expressed his furore.<sup>25</sup> Finally, after the attempted coup in July 2016, relations turned entirely sour. Following the arrest of hundreds of opposition figures, journalists, activists, academics, and civil society actors, the EU considered suspending membership negotiations, which has heightened tensions even further. Whereas up to this point, the dynamics had often been of a nature that Turkey would bow to European pressure in order not to jeopardise its membership application, President Erdogan now turned the tables.<sup>26</sup> He used Europe’s carrot and stick policy to portray Turkey as a victim, and to promote his nationalist discourse among his voters. Moreover, he threatened to allow more Syrian refugees to cross the Turkish border into Europe in case the membership talks were blocked.<sup>27</sup>

The dilemma for the EU, and especially for German Chancellor Angela Merkel, consisted in the fact that the fall-out came at a time when Europeans were strongly dependent on a close cooperation with Turkey. Only a few months earlier, in March 2016, the EU had struck a highly controversial deal with President Erdogan, according to which they would send illegal immigrants back to Turkey, in exchange for a legal transfer of refugees. Moreover, Turkey would receive €6 billion to assist the nearly 3.5 million Syrian refugees on its territory and keep its borders closed. Turkish nationals would further be granted visa-free travel to Europe.<sup>28</sup> This put European leaders once more into the dilemma of a value-based policy, remaining firm in dealing with President Erdogan, and an interest-based approach of ensuring that the influx of refugees would end, to curtail the worrying rise of right-wing parties. At this point of time, especially Germany, which had accepted the majority of the Syrian refugees among European countries, needed to alleviate pressure. To this day, Turkey maintains that only a

small portion of the money has been transferred, and the visa-free travel has not yet been implemented.<sup>29</sup>

### **Europe's Dilemma in the Syrian War**

As one of the worst humanitarian crises in decades, the war in Syria is not only a horrendous tragedy for its people, it also continues to de-stabilise the entire region and poses a major dilemma for the EU. Especially through the refugee crisis, the war and its consequences have impacted internal European policy as no other regional conflict.

When demonstrators marched in Damascus and Aleppo on March 15, 2011, demanding democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners, which resulted in violent confrontations, it seemed that Bashar al-Assad's days were counted. After all, by then, both Tunisia's Zein El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had been toppled. European leaders adopted a value-based approach to the crisis, which meant essentially that pro-democracy forces should be supported against the regime and that, in the aftermath, negotiations between the different opposition groups would lead, in the best case scenario, to a transitory opposition government on the path to free elections and the establishment of democratic institutions. However, Syria had never been a priority for Europe, and vice versa; President Assad had never much looked to Europe in his foreign relations. This partially explains why it took rather long for European governments to realise the conflict's immense implications, and why the refugee crisis hit the continent almost by surprise.<sup>30</sup>

Just like their American allies, Europeans started to support local councils in rebel-held areas through stabilisation measures to improve local governance mechanisms, and to prepare them for a post-Assad Syria. From 2012 to 2013, the overall amount of Official Development Aid more than quadrupled – from €28 to 137 million.<sup>31</sup> This did not include the over €2 billion of humanitarian assistance to the affected population (at that time estimated as 9.3 million people). European countries closed their embassies in Damascus in 2012, and expelled the Syrian diplomatic missions in protest against the massacre of Houla, in which over a hundred people were killed, amongst them many children.<sup>32</sup>

Europe's initial approach to President Assad's violence was to impose sanctions, with the main goals of cutting him off from resources and increasing domestic pressure for his removal. However, neither of these goals was attained. Tragically, the sanctions mainly harmed civilians and, as a consequence, the EU stepped up its humanitarian support to strengthen the opposition and help the civilian population in general.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, under the leading role of France, the EU supported the launch of the "Friends of Syria Group" (later "International Syria Support Group"), a conglomerate of Syrian and international diplomats, politicians, and other relevant figures, who were preparing for a post-Assad order. The initiative came as a response to Russia's and China's veto to a UN-Security Council resolution, which urged President Assad to implement a peace plan drafted by the Arab League.<sup>34</sup> The EU also played an active role in the Geneva peace talks, and supported the implementation of UN Resolution 2118 for the elimination of chemical weapons. To Brussels, the tracks were set for a swift removal of the Assad Regime and the rise of a new, democratic Syria.

On the military side, an arms embargo had been put into place as early as May 2011. However, France and the UK argued that, in order to topple Assad, which was their declared goal, military support of "moderate" opposition forces such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was a necessity. Despite major disagreements among European states, with the increasing violence and American calls to train and arm the FSA, the embargo was lapsed in May 2013. At the same time, no decision to send arms from the European side was taken.<sup>35</sup> When President Assad used chemical weapons near Damascus in August 2013, France was the only European country to support a much debated potential military intervention. Cameron's plans to join US forces, on the other hand, were turned down by the British parliament.<sup>36</sup> On a global level, President Obama's subsequent backing down on his "red line" policy became another critical factor in the loss of credibility of Western powers.

Although the American-led anti-Assad alliance did not become active militarily, the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria in 2014 shifted US policies from toppling President Assad to fighting ISIS.

Both Britain and France followed this strategy, and joined the USA in expanding its anti-ISIS air raids from Iraq into Syria in September 2015.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, punitive air raids against President Assad's chemical weapon arsenal were eventually backed by NATO, and carried out as late as April 2018, when the regime was suspected to have launched yet another chemical attack against civilians.<sup>38</sup>

After President Assad had suffered major losses to both Syrian rebels and ISIS, Russia entered the war in late 2015 to assist him in returning the country back under his control. When regime troops and their allies captured Aleppo in December 2016, there could be no more talk of a regime change. It was rather a question of time until he would quell the rebellion with Iranian and Russian help, and eventually regain the remaining territory from ISIS. The dilemma for the EU was multi-faceted. While supporting local councils and providing aid in rebel-held areas had seemed to be a rational choice initially, it became clear over time that the distinction between "pro-democracy" rebels and radical Islamists was not as straightforward. Radical groups knew how to brand themselves as civilian organisations towards Western donors, in order to acquire funds for their military campaigns. Moreover, many Syrians started supporting radical groups when they saw that they were more successful in engaging President Assad's troops – and were potentially less corrupt than so-called "moderate" groups. When it became clear that the distinction between "moderate" and "radical" groups was dubious, and that ISIS as a new, even more radical entity was on the rise, the entire support system became questionable. This dilemma played out even more for the US, when President Obama shifted his strategy from toppling President Assad to fighting ISIS, which led to contradictory goals in parallel interventions.<sup>39</sup> Given the numerous local and international actors in the war, Syria had become a quagmire, and none of the possible solutions seemed to be in line with European values or interests.

In the aftermath of the December 2016 developments, the new US administration consolidated its strategy from regime change to supporting "moderate" rebels against ISIS and hence renounced its initial approach of toppling President Assad. Europeans, on the

other hand, kept insisting that President Assad would have to make room for a new post-war order. While maintaining this position, the reality on the ground followed its own rationale, guided by the political interests of Turkey, Russia, and Iran. President Erdogan came to terms with the fact that Syria would be ruled by Assad's powerful allies, and co-sponsored the Astana Peace Talks with its adversaries. The UN-led Geneva process had stalled, and the three countries took the fate of Syria into their own hands, consolidating a ceasefire agreement, discussing solutions for refugees and a new constitution, and committing to a political solution under UN Security Council Resolution 2254.<sup>40</sup> Even though the latest talks have not been successful, what remains essential is that the European Union and other relevant players have not been part of these meetings. When, in September 2018, Turkey, Iran, and Russia negotiated President Assad's potential offensive against Idlib, the last rebel stronghold, all the EU could do was to appeal to Turkey to bargain a postponement in order to guarantee the security of the city's 3 million civilians.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, European powers have debated a possible military involvement, in case chemical weapons are used in Idlib. However, its nature and effect has hardly been clarified. Moreover, the social-democrats in Germany's ruling coalition have made it clear that they would not support such an advance.<sup>42</sup>

As a matter of fact, with the EU increasingly marginalised and the withdrawal of American troops, Western powers have de facto lost their authority and influence when it comes to the political fate of Syria. The latest developments not only leave room for ISIS to partially recover from its setbacks and prolong the violence, they also lend a free hand to Russia and Iran to pursue their strategic interests in Syria and the region at large. Europe's weakness and a US troop removal are likely to strengthen the Assad Regime, and make his aspiration to regain control over the entire Syrian territory more realistic. Moreover, with the Kurds having been abandoned by their American allies into the mercy of President Erdogan's troops, an alliance between President Assad and the Kurds has become all the more likely. Europe's genuine interest in a stable and prosperous future for Syria goes hand in hand with a

sustainable resolution of the refugee problem. However, Europe's calls to uphold the Geneva Peace Process will depend even more on Turkish channels which will, in effect, increase Erdogan's leeway in his dealings with the EU.

This dire situation poses a severe dilemma since, by now, Europeans have hardly any leeway left when it comes to putting their credo of "no military solution" into practice, and to making their calls for "peace, democracy, equal citizenship and the rule of law" heard.<sup>43</sup> There are indeed many good reasons to insist on a post-war order without President Assad; his regime has committed atrocious crimes and murdered countless Syrians civilians. President Assad is a war criminal who should be tried and punished. A peaceful post-war order with him is hardly possible, not only in terms of national reconciliation and political and economic rehabilitation, but also when it comes to his dealings with minorities or political players that pose a threat to his power. There is no doubt that, as long as President Assad rules Syria, no sustainable, democratic solution is possible, leave alone a solution for the over 13 million refugees, almost half of them internally displaced (IDPs). Moreover, at the regional level, Iran has been able to establish its long sought after Tehran-Beirut axis, and the precarious Israeli-Iranian front on the Golan Heights can easily lead to a new level of escalation, as long as Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah have the blessings of the Syrian government.

However, as Federica Mogherini, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, admits, "Everything depends on the political will in Moscow and Ankara. And yet, even if this will were present, she maintains, how could one be certain that Assad would listen to them?"<sup>44</sup> Hence, Europe's dilemma in Syria is not a conflict of values versus pragmatic interests. Both clearly point towards a trial of President Assad and his henchmen. However, what should be done in a situation where the reality on the ground is at odds with both values and interests? No doubt, with €10.8 billion in humanitarian, development, and stabilisation assistance to Syria, the EU remains the leading international donor.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Europe's strength lies in its capabilities of comprehensive and efficient post-

war reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes. The European soft power arsenal in crisis management, humanitarian assistance, security training, and political and economic development is outstanding on a global scale, and will certainly play an important role in Syria's future. And yet, how can this translate on a political level, when the Western powers have lost their leverage at the negotiation table? How can the refugee crisis be solved, now that President Assad and his allies have won the war, and will determine the fate of the country? How can Europe be a beacon of stability in the Middle East, rather than allowing the region's instability to spill onto the continent and undermine its democratic foundations? These seem to be the crucial questions that currently face Brussels and other European capitals.

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## 12. Protracted Transition in West Asia

*Prasanta Kumar Pradhan*

### **Introduction**

Since 2011, the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region is undergoing a transition. The regime changes in the region, triggered by the popular unrests, have resulted in enormous uncertainties. The removal of long-standing rulers did not result in peace and stability, as was expected by the people. Rather, the process of transition has been protracted, violent and painful. New forces have emerged in the aftermath of the removal of the old leaders, while the remnants of the old regimes are not completely wiped out. Supporters of the old regimes are now coming out, and trying to take control of the process of transition. They are also trying to spoil the political process if it is not suitable to their interests. This creates hurdles in the process of a transition towards a better and stable political system. In the absence of strong central governments, terrorists and extremist elements have found a favourable environment to flourish. They have captured spaces, expanded their activities, and launched terrorist attacks in several places, thereby creating further instability and insecurity.

Four long-standing rulers – Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen – were removed as a result of the mass protests against them. Some other leaders have survived the wave of popular protests, but the turbulence created by the unrests has been affecting the whole region for the last ten years. The impact of the Arab Spring and the hiccups of the subsequent transition process has been felt by all countries. Though most of the countries in the region

share similar political, social, and economic systems, they have traversed different paths in the face of the protests. The region has been witnessing a vicious cycle of protests, violence, civil war, and humanitarian crises. Even after ten years, the situation continues to deteriorate.

### **The Cases of Yemen, Libya, Egypt and Tunisia**

The unrest that started in December 2010 in Tunisia toppled four long-standing regional rulers, namely in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. All these countries witnessed major violence and political instability following the overthrow of their respective rulers. However, the processes of transition in each of them have followed different routes.

#### ***Yemen***

In Yemen, the removal of Saleh could not bring peace and stability. The ‘GCC Initiative’<sup>1</sup> that was intended to achieve a smooth political transition and to maintain political stability, failed to do so. As per the GCC Initiative, a National Dialogue Conference was held, bringing together different political and societal groups to deliberate on a future roadmap. In January 2014, the National Dialogue Conference concluded after ten months of deliberations. The Houthis, who had reservations on some issues, after some flip-flops, rejected the outcome of the NDC, and started mobilising supporters against the transition government led by Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. By the end of the year, the Houthis captured large parts of Sanaa and the port city of Hodeida, and in February 2015, took control of the government, forcing President Hadi flee and take refuge in Aden.

As the Houthis took control over the government in Sanaa, President Hadi was left with no choice but to invite help from the international community. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia, along with a number of other countries, began the Operation Decisive Storm intended to push the Houthis out of the capital Sanaa. Among others, the coalition forces launched air strikes and imposed a naval blockade. In April 2015, the coalition declared an end to Operation

Decisive Storm, and announced the beginning of the Operation Restoring Hope. However, nearly five years after the coalition military operation started, the original objective of forcing the Houthis out of Sanaa and the restoration of the Hadi government remains unfulfilled.

At present, the situation in Yemen is in flux. There is no military solution to the conflict even after five years of the coalition-led military operation. In December 2018, both the parties met for talks in Sweden. An agreement for a ceasefire on both sides, the withdrawal of troops from the port city of Hodeida, and prisoner swaps were the key issues of discussion. But these have not yet materialised as violence has continued unabated from both the sides, and there is a huge trust deficit between the two key parties.

### *Libya*

The post-Gaddafi situation in Libya has remained tense, violent, and unstable. Libya held elections for its parliament in the 2012 and 2014. The aftermath of the 2014 elections witnessed the two main political factions forming two parallel governments: one based in the capital Tripoli, and another based in the eastern city of Tobruk. To make matters worse, both these political factions have their own armed forces. Further, hundreds of armed militia groups emerged which have been formed on the basis of their tribal or ethnic affinities. Some of them are linked to the political factions while others function independently. The emergence of such a situation has heightened the already fragile security situation.

The Tripoli-based General National Congress was recognised by many countries in the international community. On the other hand, in Tobruk, General Khalifa Haftar launched Operation Dignity to purge Islamist elements from the country. He believes that the Tripoli based government is dominated by Islamists, and backed by a number of Islamist militia groups. He is particularly concerned about the presence and dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the post-Gaddafi Libya.

In December 2015, with the mediation by the UN, both the political factions agreed to integrate, form one central authority, and

form the Government of National Accord (GNA). But, only months later, the Haftar-led Tobruk faction refused to accept the GNA. This has further widened the gap between the two rival political factions, thus prolonging the transition even further.

A number of efforts have been made by the international community to break the stalemate. A key meeting was held in Paris in March 2018 where the GNA Prime Minister, Fayez Al-Sarraj, and General Khalifa Haftar met, along with a number of other leaders. In the meeting, facilitated by France, and some UN representatives, the leaders agreed to hold the parliamentary and presidential elections on December 10, 2018, and more importantly, to accept the results of the elections. They also agreed to the unification of the central bank, establishing a unified national army, and abolishing parallel governments and institutions.<sup>2</sup> In November 2018, another meeting was convened in Palermo, Italy, with the mediation of Italy.<sup>3</sup> All the parties reiterated their support for holding elections, to respect the election results, to the reunification of financial and security systems, and so on. Both factions agreed to participate in the transition process in a democratic manner. However, because of escalating violence in the country, the proposed elections could not be held. In February 2019, Haftar and Sarraj met in Abu Dhabi, and agreed to hold elections for a smooth transition,<sup>4</sup> but due to the continued violence holding elections and the transition process have been deferred indefinitely.

### *Tunisia*

The Arab Spring protests began in Tunisia in December 2010, with the self-immolation of the vegetable seller Mohamed Bouazizi. Following weeks of protests by the people, President Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia in January 2011. A National Constituent Assembly was elected that adopted a new constitution in 2014; following this presidential and parliamentary elections were held. In December 2014, Beji Caid Essebsi became Tunisia's first President after winning the elections. In 2019, fresh parliamentary and presidential elections were held. There has been a constant tussle between the Islamists and the secular parties in the country. The country is still



in a nascent stage of democratic experiments. Like other countries undergoing transition, Tunisia also faces challenges from extremists and terrorist groups, though the situation is not as acute as in neighbouring Libya or Egypt.

### *Egypt*

After Hosni Mubarak stepped down on February 11, 2011, the Egyptian military took over power in the country. In the elections held in 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood won most of the seats in parliament and, in the direct presidential election, the Muslim Brotherhood-backed candidate, Mohammed Morsi, emerged victorious. However, the democratic experiment in Egypt could not continue for long. He was removed from power by the military chief, Abdel Fattah El Sisi, who took control of the government and eventually became President. This was followed by protests and violence by the pro-Morsi supporters, and a number of people were killed during the violence. In September 2013, an Egyptian court banned the Muslim Brotherhood and, in December, the Egyptian government designated it as a terrorist organisation. In May 2014, El Sisi won the presidential election with a huge margin of 96.9 percent of votes. Meanwhile Morsi, along with a large number of Muslim Brotherhood leaders and supporters, were sentenced to prison. In February 2016, El Sisi declared that Egypt has completed the process of transition to democratic rule in the post-Mubarak era. Speaking in parliament, El Sisi stated, “From this place, under parliament’s dome, the Egyptian people declare to the entire world that they have laid the foundation of a democratic system and rebuilt constitutional institutions.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Terror Amid Transition**

The protracted transition in the region has resulted in the rise in terrorist activities. Several new terrorist groups have emerged amidst the prevailing lawlessness and anarchy. The terrorist groups who were already present in the region prior to the unrest have further consolidated their positions, and have expanded their areas of control. As a whole, the situation has become messy and

chaotic, thereby conducive for the survival and growth of terrorist organisations. Terrorist groups in the region are heavily armed, and get a continuous supply of arms and weapons. Porous borders have facilitated the smuggling of weapons further. The continuing violence and instability has led to more and more ungoverned spaces that have been taken over by terrorists.

Taking advantage of the prevailing protests and political instability, the ISIS emerged in Iraq and Syria. Its emergence has been an unprecedented episode in the region's history as it declared the establishment of a 'Caliphate' in June 2014, with Abu Baqr al-Baghdadi as the new Caliph. Since then, it captured a large swathe of territories in Iraq and Syria, including the border areas and controlled the entry points. It behaved like a proto-state by providing basic services to the people and imposing taxes on them as well. ISIS not only challenged the governments of Iraq and Syria, it also emerged as a bigger menace for regional security as well. ISIS indulged itself in all kinds of atrocities on people and at the same time it attracted a large number of foreign fighters from across the globe, thus, raising a global concern.

After a long fight, in December 2017, the then Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider Al Abadi, declared the end of the ISIS in Iraq, stating that, "Our forces are in complete control of the Iraqi-Syrian border and I therefore announce the end of the war against Daesh."<sup>6</sup> Baghdadi was eventually killed in an operation by the US forces in Syria in October 2019. Even after the death of its leader, the threat of ISIS has not completely disappeared. Reports suggest that the remnants of the ISIS in Iraq and Syria are trying to reorganise themselves,<sup>7</sup> and they may re-surface at any opportune time in the future. The ISIS may have been defeated in the very place where it declared its caliphate; but before it was defeated, it spread its radical ideology to many countries in the Middle East and in Africa, Europe, and South Asia as well. A number of countries in these regions are now faced with the threat of local radicals being influenced by the ISIS and its ideology.

In Libya, both the Al Qaeda and the ISIS have deeply entrenched themselves in large parts of the country. In 2014, ISIS terrorists took

control of the port of Derna; and in February 2015, ISIS captured Sirte. Further, in January 2016, the ISIS attacked the Ras Lanuf oil terminal. While ongoing political instability and infighting have allowed them a fertile ground to thrive in, the absence of a strong centralised military has allowed the space to launch attacks with impunity. The terrorists are so emboldened that they even target government buildings, government officials, policemen and military officials as well as oil installations.

Many countries and organisations have offered their support to Libya to fight against terrorism. In February 2017, the NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, expressed his readiness to support Libya in building its military and security institutions. He stated that, “NATO stands ready to assist Libya in building effective security and defence institutions, strengthening [its] ability to fight terrorism and create conditions for peace.”<sup>8</sup> The USA has also conducted drone strikes on the ISIS in Libya.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Libya’s neighbouring countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, officials from neighbouring Chad and Niger, and representatives of the UN, the Arab League, and the African Union Commission have also committed themselves for the unity and integrity of Libya, and its fight against terrorism.<sup>10</sup>

Yemen has, traditionally, remained a safe haven for the Al-Qaeda. The Al-Qaeda has been involved in several deadly terrorist attacks in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). As the protests intensified and the central government weakened, AQAP became a suitable environment for the Al-Qaeda to spread its activities, and moving beyond its traditional strongholds. It launched attacks on the Yemeni military, expanded the territory under its control and has steadily been strengthening its grip. The AQAP has now penetrated several strategically important areas, particularly in southern Yemen.

Emboldened by the establishment of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria, the ISIS also made inroads into Yemen. In Yemen, it faced a number of challenges to establish itself in this new territory. It has not been very successful in capturing any territory, and is confined to a few patches. Importantly, it has been confronted by the AQAP that fears a loss of ground to its offshoot, and the two have also

engaged in occasional violent clashes.<sup>11</sup> The ISIS has also launched some deadly attacks in Yemen. In March 2015, the ISIS carried out two suicide bombings, targeting Shia mosques in Sanaa, that killed 137 people. The ISIS has been targeting Yemeni police and military personnel as well as members of the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The ISIS is trying to take advantage of the political instability and civil war to establish its presence in the impoverished country. If it manages to consolidate its present gains in Yemen, and does not receive any strong military challenge, the ISIS may pose a bigger security threat to the region in the future.

### **Failure of the National Dialogues**

In the aftermath of the popular protests and the ensuing violence and political instability, a number of countries have experimented with nation-wide dialogues, with the participation of all important political and social stakeholders. Strikingly, however, almost all have ended in a failure to reach a consensus, and accommodate the aspirations of the people.

In Bahrain, King Hamad faced huge protests from the people, called for a national dialogue in 2011, and appointed Parliament's Speaker, Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Dhahrani, to chair the National Dialogue. Around 300 members from the government, opposition political groups, civil society, and the media were invited to participate in the dialogue on four important themes – political, economic, social and legal – with the slogan, “Our Bahrain, Our Unity”.<sup>12</sup> King Hamad assured that “it will be a true dialogue in every respect and no section of Bahrain’s wide and diverse society will be ignored”.<sup>13</sup> But, the opposition was sceptical regarding the intention of the regime. The opposition believed that the dialogue was an eyewash, and doubted the intention of the monarchy. Though the opposition groups did join the dialogue, they later withdrew and, as a result, the national dialogue remains suspended.

In Yemen, the GCC Initiative called for holding the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) to discuss the critical issues of drafting the constitution, constitutional reforms, the Southern Movement, the Houthis, democratic reforms, national reconciliation, the

protection of the rights of the vulnerable groups, and sustainable economic development.<sup>14</sup> The NDC was held from March 2013 to January 2014, and involved all the major political parties, groups, and stakeholders. The NDC's outcome document was handed over to a Constitution Drafting Committee; but the Houthis and the Southerners were not in agreement with all the decisions made. Later, the Houthis captured capital Sanaa, thereby reversing all the achievements of the NDC.

Similarly, in Libya, there have been several political and national dialogues among different political and social groups. Yet, no consensus on a future roadmap could be achieved. The UN is actively facilitating the bringing together of all political factions and social groups; but the unregulated violence by the militias, terrorists, and the armed groups affiliated to the two political factions has remained a major hurdle in the way of reaching a political consensus.

### **The Politics of Military and Security Alliances**

The prolonged uncertainty in the region has made the countries join hands in the form of military and security alliances. On the face of unprecedented changes and the emergence of new challenges, forming military alliances was seen as creating a credible deterrence against the existing and emerging threats and challenges. Increasing threat perceptions regarding the security of the different regimes was the primary reason for establishing the military alliances. These alliances were also intended to jointly face challenges not only from adversarial neighbours but also from emerging non-state actors who have become emboldened, and are taking advantage of existing lawlessness and anarchy as well as of the absence of a central authority in some countries.

#### ***Proposal for a Joint Arab Military Force***

Amidst growing political instability and insecurity, there was a call by some countries to form a joint Arab military force to face the security challenges. Key regional countries, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are in the forefront of supporting such a joint Arab military force. Iraq, however, is not in favour of this as it believes that it may

create further insecurity in the region.<sup>15</sup> A proposal in this regard was discussed in the 2015 Arab League summit in Sharm El Sheikh. Though the majority of the members of the organisation were in favour of establishing such a force, it has remained unsuccessful as of now because of the differences among members.

### ***The Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)***

The IMCTC is a Saudi-led military coalition which was established in December 2015. The stated objective of the IMCTC is “to form a unified pan-Islamic front against terrorism”,<sup>16</sup> and it has committed itself to operate under the UN and OIC provisions on counter-terrorism. There are 41 members in the coalition from across West Asia, Africa, and South Asia. Critics of this move feel that it is intended to form a coalition against the arch rival Iran, as the latter has been proactively pursuing its regional policy in the aftermath of the Arab unrest.

### ***The Russia-Syria-Iran-Iraq Coalition (RSII Coalition)***

The formation of this coalition is a reflection of the underlying geopolitical fault lines in the region. Contrary to the IMCTC, this coalition includes three key regional players: Iran, Syria and Iraq, with the support of Russia. This coalition was established in 2015 with the objective of helping and cooperating in the collection of information about the ISIS in order to combat its advances throughout the region. The coalition was involved in sharing and analysing information as well as monitoring the movements of terrorists.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Regional Security Challenges***

The protracted transition to normalcy is bringing security challenges for the whole region. Prolonged conflicts allow the terrorists, extremist elements, and other militia groups to get time to establish themselves, and to further consolidate their positions. During the last ten years, this trend has been witnessed in several places, including Yemen, Libya, and Syria. New terrorist groups have emerged, and

the old ones have consolidated their positions and expanded their areas of operation. A number of other local militia groups are also operating, leading to unabated violence. Lingering political instability, along with the absence of a strong central political authority, creates ungoverned spaces which are quickly filled up by non-state actors.

Besides, the domino effects of the transition are felt in the wider geopolitics of the region which has its impact on regional security. The Saudi-Iran tension and rivalry has aggravated further, and is reflected in several places such as Yemen, Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon. The GCC, which was a symbol of unity in the volatile region, has developed cracks due to internal differences. The intra-GCC conflict in 2017, which led to isolation of Qatar by its GCC neighbours (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain), has added another dimension to the security challenge. As a result, a new informal alliance between Iran, Qatar and Turkey has begun to consolidate.

## **Humanitarian Crises**

### ***Yemen***

Violence and armed conflict increased sharply in Yemen in the aftermath of the protests. The country has witnessed a severe humanitarian crisis since the beginning of the coalition-led military strikes in Yemen. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), around 24.1 million people are in the need of humanitarian support, and about 20 million people are facing food insecurity in the country.<sup>18</sup> Facing acute food shortages and physical insecurity, more than 3.3 million people remain internally displaced. Access to safe water supply is a major challenge for the people, and half the medical facilities are non-functional.<sup>19</sup> In the absence of these, there has been a severe outbreak of cholera which killed hundreds of people. According to a November 2019 report of the World Health Organisation (WHO), from January 1, 2018 to November 10, 2019, 1,154,292 Cholera cases were reported, with 1,507 associated deaths.<sup>20</sup> Because of

the worsening situation in the country, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, declared that the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is the worst in the world.<sup>21</sup>

### *Libya*

According to the UN, in Libya, around 0.8 million people are in need of some kind of assistance. Around 554,000 are in need of assistance in healthcare, 298,000 require food security, 292,000 are in need of shelter, and 267,000 are in need of water sanitation and hygiene.<sup>22</sup> The continuing violence in the country increases the vulnerability of the people. Therefore, protection is a key humanitarian need for the people in Libya, along with other basic and critical services, such as healthcare, safe drinking water, food, and sanitation.<sup>23</sup> The UN has expressed concern over the attack on civilian areas, the attack on health facilities, schools, and civilian infrastructure.<sup>24</sup>

### *Syria*

In Syria, around 13.1 million people are in need of some assistance, 6.6 million people are internally displaced, and another 2.98 million people live in hard-to-reach areas.<sup>25</sup> Since the beginning of the protests, more than 5.6 million people have fled the country,<sup>26</sup> and are living in neighbouring countries like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan as well as in other countries. Approximately 3.3 million registered Syrian refugees are now living in Turkey alone. Despite the prevailing disturbing political instability and insecurity, violence continues to escalate, both from the government as well as the opposition forces. Continuous violence and bombardments makes the life of civilians difficult. The increase in hostilities adds to further the sufferings of the people. Continuous fighting and bombardments make the humanitarian operations by the international agencies even more difficult. This has prompted the UNHCR High Commissioner, Filippo Grandi, to state that, “Syria is the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time, a continuing cause of suffering for millions which should be garnering a groundswell of support around the world.”<sup>27</sup>



## Conclusion

Transitions in non-democratic political systems have always been complicated, violent, and disruptive. Old issues remain unresolved and, at the same time, new challenges crop up. The social polarisation in the Arab world, increasing extremism and terrorism, and external interventions make the process even more complicated and difficult. After decades of authoritarian rule, the rulers and their affiliates have become deeply entrenched in the political system. Therefore, even though the authoritarian rulers have been overthrown by the people, the remnants of old regimes remain active, and remain as the main hurdles in the way of transition. Taking advantage of the existing political instability and chaos, terrorists, extremists, and local militia groups have become active. They are major hurdles in the way of transition.

The UN and many other international players are involved in facilitating a smooth transition; but the deep political and social divide coupled with unabated violence and armed conflict hinder the process of dialogue and negotiation. If the process of transition is not managed properly, there is a fear that the situation might return to the old authoritarianism that existed before the beginning of the protests. Given the complicated nature of political and social divisions and polarisation in these countries, it is clear that there is no military solution to these conflicts. At the same time, political and diplomatic efforts have remained unsuccessful as of now, resulting in the process of transition becoming painful, convulsive, and protracted.

## Notes

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## 13. Finding the Elusive Peace and Stability: An Overview

*Md. Muddassir Quamar*

The Middle East today is witness to one of the worst phases of conflicts and instability in its modern history. This is reminiscent of the conflicts and wars the region experienced historically during the two World Wars and during the peak of the Cold War. World War I ended in the defeat of the Quadruple Alliance which eventually led to the end of the Ottoman Empire, and this along with the colonial interventions of the victorious Allied Powers created mayhem in the Middle East that continued until World War II. The expectation of an end to conflicts with the end of the war could not be realised due to the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict. During the Cold War, the region witnessed an unprecedented arms race and alignments that left the regional countries divided into camps. The end of the Cold War and the relative stability in the world order again created hopes for regional peace and stability, but the rise of global terrorism and the American “war on terror” created another round of violence and instabilities.

However, the violence, conflicts and wars, breached by relative phases of peace, as was witnessed during most of the 12th century, had remained confined to pockets, and seldom had the regional instability been as widespread as it is today. Since the Arab Spring, the regional security situation has drastically deteriorated with each country grappling with multiple security threats, and the region as a whole facing unprecedented instability. The inability or unwillingness of the US, which for long has been the lone security guarantor in the Middle East, to commit more resources to keep

the conflicts under control has added to the confusion. Though the US remains the dominant military power, the changing geopolitical dynamics have forced the countries of the region to diversify their international relations by hedging their bets with other important global powers such as the European Union, Russia and China. This has led to a situation of a multiplicity of external actors being involved in the regional conflicts.

The problem has been magnified due to growing geopolitical competition among regional actors. Major regional powers, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, are competing to enhance their influence by not only meddling in domestic affairs of the neighbouring countries but also fuelling internal disturbances by financing and arming proxies to undermine the influence of the competing powers. Smaller actors, such as Israel, Egypt, the UAE and Qatar, too have adopted an active foreign policy and have not hesitated from intervening in neighbouring countries to ensure their national security or to advance their national interests. There are transnational non-state actors, both armed and unarmed, who contribute to the sharpening geopolitical tensions.

Geopolitical competition has contributed to deterioration of the ongoing internal conflicts, and in some cases fuelled new ones. The civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen are raging and turning into the worst humanitarian crises in recent history. Iraq remains on the edge despite the military defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS) with political uncertainties, poor governance and corruption adding to the already fragile ethnic and sectarian faultlines. The internal situation in countries like Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria, and to some extent even in Tunisia, is festering due to political divisions, protests, terrorism and economic and financial problems. The Palestinian issue remains unresolved, and even though it is no longer a priority for regional powers, it remains one of the central regional conflicts. All attempts, including the latest “deal of the century” proposed in parts in 2019-20 by the Donald Trump administration, have proved ineffective to bring back the parties to the negotiating table.

The multiple layers of the conflicts are intertwined at internal, regional and international levels, which make them complex, and

any attempt at finding a durable peace and stability in the Middle East cannot succeed without understanding these layers.

## **Internal Conflicts**

The region is facing unprecedented civil wars, humanitarian crises, political turmoil and economic challenges. While some are on the verge of collapse or are becoming failed states, others have suffered due to an irresponsive or authoritarian regime.

### ***Syria***

The conflict in Syria has been raging since 2011, when the protests first started. While initially, the protesters demanded accountability in governance, the response of the regime escalated the situation to violent confrontation, and eventually it turned into a civil war. The interventions of regional and extra-regional powers and the rise of ISIS made the Syrian crisis an international issue, and currently, despite signs of the war culminating into a victory for the regime, the violent conflicts continue. After the defeat of the ISIS, the principle players remaining in the civil war include the Bashar al-Assad regime backed by Iran and Russia as well as the Lebanese Hezbollah, the loose coalition of Islamist and secular opposition groups in the form of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was earlier supported by multiple external and regional actors including the US and Saudi Arabia, are now supported only by Turkey and Qatar, and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) supported by the US. There are fringe groups, such as the secular opposition and remnants of jihadist Islamists, who on different occasions received support from various regional actors, but have increasingly been internally divided, and hence have lost relevance and support.

While the regime has taken control of a majority of the Syrian territories, the northwest Idlib region remains under the FSA and northeast Rojava region, including the important cities of Raqqa, Qamishli and Hasakah, remain under the control of the PYD and its armed wing the People's Protection Unit (YPG).<sup>1</sup>

After Turkish military incursions, most importantly in October 2019 named *Operation Peace Spring*, a safe zone along the Turkey-

Syria border in the northeast, stretching mainly between Afrin and Jarablus, is now under Turkish control. The Turkish military, in accordance with the agreement reached during the Astana process, has also been guarding a demilitarised zone between FSA and the regime forces in Idlib. The situation in Idlib has become increasingly critical with the regime forces advancing against Turkish military posts in a bid to oust the FSA, renewing fears of another refugee crisis hitting Turkey and Europe, which has prompted Turkey to send reinforcements to Idlib. This has led to tensions between Russia and Turkey, who otherwise have cooperated in Syria.

Though unlikely anytime soon, as and when the crisis in Syria comes to an end and the political process takes over, the biggest questions that will confront the country will be the rehabilitation of the remnants of the opposition, the fate of the Syrian Kurds who were instrumental in fighting the ISIS and the question about the right of return for Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries. Russia, Iran and Turkey are the important external players who have been playing the most important roles to safeguard the interests of the various principle players. Therefore, any future reconciliation will be based on the terms and conditions agreed upon by these three countries.

### *Yemen*

The situation in Yemen remains a stalemate after five years of the Saudi-led military intervention to restore the government headed by Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi that was ousted from Sanaa by the Ansar Allah, the Houthi militant group supported by Iran. With increasing civilian casualties, and a majority of the poor population affected, the humanitarian situation in Yemen has been described as one of the worst in recent history, and is worsening due to continued belligerence of all the parties involved. Among the principle Yemeni players are the Ansar Allah (Houthis) aided by Iran, the Yemeni government led by Hadi and backed by Saudi Arabia, and the Southern Transition Council (STC) which is supported by the UAE. The raging conflict has provided an opportunity for the Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to

revive its strongholds in Yemen, and they have received support from several local tribes.

In fact, the continuing stalemate has caused huge embarrassment for the Saudi-led Arab coalition which failed to not only dislodge a provincial insurgent group from Sanaa, but has also been accused of worsening the humanitarian crisis and killing of several thousands of civilians due to indiscriminate air bombings. The issue became the subject of an international debate after the gory details of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, killed inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by Saudi government agents, were gradually made public by Turkey. It led to the US and the UK scaling down their commitments in the war against the Houthis and increased calls for end of weapon supplies to Saudi Arabia by the US Congress. To add to the worries, differences have emerged within the coalition, with the UAE backing the STC which has increasingly called for secession from Yemen to form South Yemen. The Houthis have been targeting civilian and commercial installations deep inside Saudi Arabia, including Aramco's oil facilities in Khurais and Abqaiq in September 2019.<sup>2</sup> This has not only heightened security threats for Saudi Arabia, but has raised international worries regarding security and smooth flow of oil.

Given that the Houthis have refused to honour the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), and all subsequent efforts to mediate between the Houthis and Hadi-government have failed, it is unlikely that the stalemate in Yemen will break anytime soon. On the other hand, the differences between Hadi-government and STC has further complicated the situation. For Saudi Arabia, Yemen has become a conundrum where it has not been able to find a respectable exit, and the failure of the Saudi-led coalition to dislodge the Houthis has become an embarrassment for the kingdom. The first step for beginning of the negotiation towards a resolution would be seizing of attacks and counter attacks by both Houthis and the coalition forces. Assurances of safeguarding of the interests of all Yemeni parties and non-intervention of regional powers including Iran and Saudi Arabia should follow, and eventually give way to a wider UN-mediated but Yemeni-led dialogue to find a solution.



## *Libya*

The situation in Libya has turned worse since May 2014 when the Libyan National Army (LNA) commanded by General Khalifa Haftar, and supported by the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), decided to launch a military mission to extend the control of the HoR over the whole of Libya. The LNA has succeeded in taking over most of the territory in Libya but faces strong resistance from the Government of National Accord (GNA) based in the capital Tripoli and led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. While the HoR and LNA are principally supported by Egypt and the UAE, the GNA has the support of Turkey and Qatar.

Since 2019, the LNA has intensified its push to take over the capital Tripoli, and all international attempts at mediation or ceasefire have failed to de-escalate the situation. In January 2020, for example, despite a ceasefire signed earlier that month, the fighting escalated, causing several civilian deaths. Turkey and Russia have been trying to mediate a ceasefire but the escalation in violence has rendered any talks meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

The GNA signed a defence agreement with Turkey in November 2019 to provide land and maritime security to the UN-recognised government. Accordingly, Turkey started sending troops to Libya to safeguard the GNA from the continuous military push by the LNA. With Turkey's direct involvement, regional capitals in the Middle East are increasingly concerned about Ankara's intentions, bringing Egypt and Turkey on the verge of direct military confrontation over Libya.

The situation is unlikely to improve until the two sides agree to end hostilities and start working on a national government with the participation of all factions and representation of various tribes, to evolve an inclusive system of governance that upholds the rule of law above any sectarian, ethnic, ideological and tribal affiliation. In the current situation, however, this looks like a pipe dream especially with the involvement of regional players and the free flow of funds and arms to the warring parties.

## *Iraq*

Iraq has struggled to attain normalcy since the US attack on the country in 2003 that led to the end of the Saddam Hussein regime. Sectarian and ethnic violence have kept the country divided, and despite the rich oil resources, economic development has eluded Iraq. The country's experiments with elections have been full of complications, and the inability of leaders and political groups to arrive at a consensus towards nation-building has rendered the political institutions meaningless.

The rise of the ISIS in the wake of the Arab Spring, and the establishment of the Islamic State and the Caliphate, with vast territorial control created serious doubt about the ability of the current political class to ensure the territorial integrity and security of Iraq. Though the ISIS has been defeated with the help of international military interventions, the threat from extremist ideology and its remnants remains.

Iraq has witnessed several rounds of protests in 2019 that culminated in the eventual killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in a US attack in Baghdad.<sup>4</sup> This has further raised fears of Iraq becoming a theatre of a proxy war between the US and Iran. Though the situation has de-escalated for now, Iraq's trouble is far from over, and without a national consensus among various stakeholders, Iraq and its people will continue to suffer. The growing influence of Iran in the political, economic and security affairs of Iraq has empowered sectarian forces, and made it impossible for the emergence of a national discourse for peace and stability.

## *Egypt, Tunisia and Others*

Tunisia and Egypt were the two most important countries directly affected by the Arab Spring protests. In both, the long-standing authoritarian rulers Zein El-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt were forced to resign. Both marched on the path of political transition and democracy by conducting free and fair elections and choosing a moderate Islamist government to lead the

transition. However, their fates diverged afterwards with Tunisia continuing on the path of electoral democracy and Egypt reversing the process through military intervention within a year in 2013.<sup>5</sup> Despite the divergent political paths the two have chosen, their economic trajectory and security situation have not been entirely different. Both have struggled to revive the economy and solve the problem of growing unemployment among the youth. Terrorist attacks have affected their economies, as tourism – the mainstay of both – has been affected due to security fears. Their problem with extremist ideologies has continued, with both using force to counter extremism, with only limited success.

The fresh waves of protests across the region, including in Iran, Lebanon, Algeria and Sudan, during 2019-20 underline the growing frustration among the people in the region against the political class. The continued malaise of crony capitalism, corruption, lack of governance and accountability, despicable civic amenities and unemployment among the educated youth have made the people again take to the streets to demand an end to political squabbling and better governance, economic opportunities and political rights looking beyond the ethnic, sectarian and political divisions. This has led to many speculating whether this is Arab Spring 2.0.<sup>6</sup> However, given the apathy of the political class to heed to the demands of the people and work towards inclusive governments and economic development, it is unlikely that the internal troubles in the countries of the region will abate anytime soon.

### **Regional Geopolitical Competition**

The internal conflicts have been complicated due to regional rivalries and geopolitical competitions. The change in regional balance of power due to gradual decline of Egyptian military power over the past decades and the fall of Saddam regime in Iraq, together with the growing regional perception of declining US interest or willingness to commit military resources in the Middle East, has led to renewed squabbling for influence among regional powers, namely Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Additionally, smaller powers including Israel, Egypt, the UAE and Qatar that have been involved in regional affairs

at various levels to leverage their advantages and gain influence and safeguard interests, and this has created new regional tensions. Besides, there are non-state actors that have increasingly become transnational to challenge and undermine the authority of the states.

### **Iran-Saudi Rivalry**

The most pronounced regional competition is between Iran and Saudi Arabia both of whom claim global Islamic leadership. While the Saudi Arabian claim is based on the custodianship of the Two Holy Mosques and as the birthplace of Islam as well as its economic prowess and leadership position in the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), Iran's claims are legitimised by its Islamic revolution and the idea of resistance to gain justice for the oppressed Muslims all over the world. The rivalry is primarily played out in the Persian Gulf, especially in war-torn Iraq and poverty-ridden Yemen, but has increasingly gone beyond gaining a foothold in the Levant region of Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. The civil wars and internal strife in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain as well as among the Palestinian factions have intensified due to the direct and indirect involvement of these two Persian Gulf giants.

Iran has an advantage over Saudi Arabia because of its comparatively superior military prowess. This is visible in the way Iran has gained and advanced its influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Palestine. Through the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), until January 2, 2020 commanded by General Qassem Soleimani, Iran has established and/or nourished proxies in these countries who have proved to be strong militias loyal to Iran. In the case of Lebanon and Yemen, these militias either by wielding power or through gradual increase in political clout have taken control of the state, and in the case of Syria and Iraq, these proxies have helped a sectarian government to remain in power. In the Palestinian territories as well, especially in the Gaza Strip, IRGC has built strong links with Hamas and Islamic Jihad who are both armed resistance groups fighting against Israel.

Saudi Arabia because of its traditional influence and financial prowess has from time to time tried to enhance its influence in

Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Palestinian territories. However, it has achieved only limited success; its quest for the dismissal of the Assad regime in Syria failed because of Iranian and Russian military involvement on behalf of the regime, and also the rise of the ISIS that put those countries backing the Islamist and secular opposition on the back foot. In Iraq and Lebanon too despite occasional success to influence the political process, Saudi Arabia has largely been outmanoeuvred due to Iranian counter-moves. In Yemen, the failure of the Saudi-led military coalition exposed the Saudi military weakness vis-à-vis Iran, and this has increasingly led to the debate about the Saudi overture to Israel as a precautionary measure against Iran. The only country where Saudi Arabia was able to contain the tide against an ally is in Bahrain; nonetheless, the Al Khalifa monarchy has continued to face internal problems due to a restive Shia population. Saudi Arabia's own minority Shia population, which has in the past shown signs of unrest, has made the Al Saud monarchy anxious of Iranian designs.

### **Intra-GCC Rift**

In June 2017, three Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, along with Egypt, announced a diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar accusing it of supporting terrorist groups and interfering in internal matters of neighbouring Arab countries through its media empire. The Qatar crisis, as it came to be known, is the first full-blown internal division among the GCC countries that until then was considered the strongest bloc among the Arab world. The blockade was soon joined by other countries including Morocco and Jordan, and for the first few weeks Qatar faced a serious challenge to its survival.

However, because of its strong finances, deft handling of the immediate challenges, outreach to neighbours, especially Iran and Turkey, and most importantly security ties with the US, Doha was able to tide over the initial shock. After the initial tough talks and public announcement of conditions for any negotiations, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – the two architects behind the boycott – have taken some reconciliatory steps including the invitation to the

Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamd al-Thani to attend the GCC summit in Riyadh in December 2019. Qatar, however, has taken a strong stand, and has refused to accept any preconditions to end the crisis, which has resulted in a stalemate.<sup>7</sup>

The differences between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE were in fact rankling intra-GCC ties for a long time, with relations with Iran and support to Muslim Brotherhood being the main sticking points. Al-Jazeera's coverage of the Arab Spring protests has created further anger among the regimes in Saudi Arabia and the UAE that are considered to be the strongest counter-revolution and status-quoist powers in the region. Qatar has, since the late 1990s, been following an independent foreign policy of cultivating ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and a more reconciliatory approach towards Iran. During the Arab Spring it supported the Islamist opposition movements in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. For the Saudis and Emiratis, this was a problem as the transnational Islamist group demands republican Islamic states all over the region, and hence poses a threat to regime security in the monarchies both in the Gulf and beyond.

The Qatari policy of not allowing any internal Islamist opposition within while supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates in the region, and actively and effectively help them disseminate their ideas through Al-Jazeera was disliked by the older leaders. However, the emergence of younger generation to leadership positions in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar led to the removal of all restraints. All efforts by Kuwait and Oman – that remained neutral throughout the crisis – have failed to end the crisis, forcing regional and international actors including India, to balance ties among the GCC countries.

### **Turkey's Regional Quest**

Since the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan (as Prime Minister between 2003 and 2014 and as President since 2014), Ankara has considerably recalibrated its foreign policy to focus on the Middle East. Initially, Ankara adopted a friendly approach

towards the Arab neighbours with the objective of improving trade and economic ties. Ahmet Davutoglu's doctrine of "strategic depth" which led to the formation of "zero-problem with neighbours" policy led to considerable improvement in Turkey's ties with Syria and Iraq as well as the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) between 2003 and 2010.

The Arab Spring Protests, however, tested Ankara's new foreign policy approach for the first time, and for the AKP and Erdogan it became extremely difficult to maintain a balance between the *realpolitik* approaches of continued engagements with the governments in Cairo, Damascus, Tripoli, Tunis and Sanaa and the ideological compulsion of supporting the protesters in these capitals who were demanding end of authoritarian regimes and democratisation. Ankara chose the latter, and it initially made the AKP and Erdogan popular on the Arab streets especially among the Islamists, who advocated the idea of emulating the "Turkish model" in the Arab world for democratisation and better governance.<sup>8</sup>

The turning of the tide against the protesters, and the eventual turnaround in the fate of the regimes in Syria and Egypt, changed the dynamics for Turkey. However, Ankara failed to act accordingly and continued to support the Islamist opposition in these and other Arab countries which created strong antagonism with respective countries. Some even termed the continued quest of the AKP and Erdogan to dislodge the regimes in Damascus and Cairo as "neo-Ottomanism."<sup>9</sup> Despite the change in the dynamics, Turkey has continued to follow an aggressive neighbourhood policy trying to increase its diplomatic, business and military presence in the region.

In Syria, this has led to serious tensions between Turkey and Iran with Russia playing the middleman to keep the two from coming to direct blows. Similarly, Turkey's military involvement in Libya has increasingly put it at odds with Egypt and the UAE. Turkey's handling of the Khashoggi murder, and statements questioning the Saudi custodianship of the Kaaba and the Prophet's Mosque have created serious wedges between Ankara and Riyadh. Turkey sees these as parts of its larger quest for greater influence in the Muslim world, and gaining the status of a middle power in the increasingly

multipolar global order. This is also seen by some as a quest for regaining Turkey's lost Ottoman glory. This has nonetheless sharpened the regional divide and geopolitical competition.

### **Israel-Iran Tensions**

The other significant regional problem that has been brewing for some time is between Iran and Israel. Due to Iran's growing military presence in countries bordering Israel including Lebanon and Syria, and Iraq, with which it does not share a border, either directly or through proxies, Israel has become increasingly concerned about its security. Israel takes its security very seriously precisely because of the nature of the region and its size as well as the animosity it shares with the countries of the region because of the conflict with the Palestinians. This has led to an increase in direct confrontation between Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and IRGC and its proxies in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. IDF drones and fighter jets have on numerous occasions targeted Iranian defence personnel, warehouses and transport convoys carrying weapons to neutralise the threat it feels from the expanding Iranian military footprints in the region.

Iran has tried to respond to some of these IDF strikes but has tactically refrained from engaging in a larger conflict because of Israel's superior military capability. In Syria, Russia has played a role of an unseen mediator ensuring Israel safeguards its legitimate security interests. It has also convinced Iran not to deploy IRGC personnel and Iranian defence equipment near the Israeli border in the Golan, and as a result there is an uneasy calm between the two. The same is true in Iraq, where most of Israeli military incursions on Iran have gone unanswered and mostly unnoticed. Iran has preferred to frame the Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Iraq as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty and warned of retaliation, knowing fully well that they might not be able to withstand the advanced IDF weapons and military might.

### **External Interventions**

In addition to the internal conflicts and the regional geopolitical competition, regional peace and stability is affected, worsened and destroyed by the interventions of international powers.



## *The US*

The most important external regional power is the US, which has the largest regional presence, and that has historically played a significant role in regional affairs. The US has extensive military presence in the region including the Persian Gulf. It has security alliances with many countries in the region, most importantly with Israel. The GCC countries depend on the US for their security and have housed US naval and air bases. In recent times, due to increasing tension with Iran, Saudi Arabia has invited US troops for training and capacity-building. The region shares a love-hate relationship with the US, whereby it is unable to find any dependable external power to maintain the regional balance of power, and at the same time, many accuse the US of bringing instability and turmoil to the region due to its interventions such as the 2003 attack on Iraq and unconditional support to Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians.

During the Barack Obama administration, with the growing debate over “pivot to Asia” and declining US interest to commit resources in the Middle East, there were concerns about the US scaling down its presence in the region. Obama did withdraw from Iraq, which partly contributed to the ability of the ISIS to thrive and spread its wings in Iraq. The inability of the Obama administration to act against the Assad regime despite the breach in the red-line of the use of using chemical weapons and the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) gave the impression of the US is preparing the ground for becoming less involved in regional affairs.<sup>10</sup> However, the Donald Trump administration has made a significant departure from the Obama-era policy; despite conflicting statements, the US has continued to engage more actively in regional conflicts, especially to defeat the ISIS and to put “maximum pressure” on Iran through unilateral withdrawal from JCPOA, economic sanctions and the killing of General Qassem Soleimani to scale down its military expansion in the region.

## *Russia*

Russia, which had remained absent from regional affairs since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, has made a comeback to the region after the Arab Spring through its military intervention in Syria in September 2015. This not only changed the dynamics of the conflict in Syria but also created a new scenario whereby Russia has enhanced its military, diplomatic and political profile in the region at the expense of the US. This has led to all important regional players including Israel, Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and others enhancing their political and diplomatic engagements with Moscow to be able to safeguard their national interests. While Russia has been cautious in not getting drawn into any other regional conflict, it has been eager to engage with all important regional states and even non-state players to be able to maximise its incentive as far as its return to regional affairs is concerned. The core Russian interests are finding a market for its weapons and defence equipment. Russia, unlike the US, lacks the economic resources to back its political intent, and hence might not be able to match the US in terms of regional influence.

## *China*

Though China does not have any notable military presence in the region, it has in a short span built strong economic ties with all major countries and through projects like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is gradually developing a deeper regional presence. Given the economic progress of China and its ability to bring mega development projects to developing countries, it has emerged as an important player in regional affairs. China has continued to follow its foreign policy *mantra* of economic engagement, and hence Beijing's political and military engagements with the region have remained bilateral. There are, however, signs that China might be preparing to change that, and this is visible from its growing forays in the western Indian Ocean as well as the organisation of the first security conclave on the Middle East in November 2019.<sup>11</sup>

## *The EU*

The other notable international player is the European Union (EU), the members of which, especially the UK (ended in January 2020), Germany, France and Italy, have extensive trade and historical links with the region. After Brexit, both the UK and EU are looking to expand trade links with the Persian Gulf and other countries but depend on others for ensuring regional peace and stability. The EU-3 had played an important role in starting the international negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme in 2003 and was instrumental in signing of the JCPOA in 2015. The EU countries were looking forward to harness the opening with Iran to develop trade and energy ties with Iran but were shocked by the US withdrawal from the deal in 2018 and imposition of sanctions on Iran. They were also trying to develop trade links with the GCC States and the internal rift within the GCC abruptly changed the dynamics, which they have not been able to circumvent. Further, the Brexit has created new challenges for the EU and UK, including in their engagement with the Middle East, the full extent of which will only be known in future.

## **Summing Up**

Undoubtedly, the Middle East has suffered from the inherent faultlines that have remained pervasive since World War I. The multiple layers of the pan-region turmoil have gradually metamorphosed into geopolitical instability and have challenged the regional security scenario. The Arab Spring protests, while acknowledging the problems facing the region, failed to provide any solution, on the contrary it dragged the region into much deeper conflict and turmoil. The rise of Islamists and terrorists brought many of the regional and international foes on the same platform to defeat these groups but it has also created deeper faultlines within many countries such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Tunisia and others. At the same time this has sharpened the regional geopolitical divide whereby different regional actors have come out in support of different actors based on their interests and convictions. This has made the Middle East a playing field for geopolitical competition between global

powers and regional actors muddling the search for the elusive peace and stability in the Middle East.

The third West Asia Conference organised by MP-IDSA in September 2018 came up with a number of important suggestions for solutions to the problems facing the Middle East. The five most important include:

- A commitment to diplomacy and eschewing violence in all circumstances, and collectively fighting all non-state actors fuelling violence;
- A need to focus on economic progress and development, and working towards bringing the population out of poverty and economic misery;
- A deeper self-reflection by the leaders and the people to be able to chart a course for inclusive growth both internally and throughout the region;
- A commitment to fundamental human rights and providing dignified lives to all citizens;
- An urgent need to develop efficient and effective crisis management mechanisms to overcome mutual differences based on the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all the stakeholders in the region.

The Middle East can only come out of its turmoil and instabilities if the people and their leaders make a fundamental commitment to focus on collectively dealing with the problems while not disrespecting the faiths, identities and human rights of others, and it is only through this that the elusive peace and stability could be achieved.

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The states of West Asia continue to grapple with dramatic changes taking place in the domestic and regional environment. Security has emerged as a significant concern for them. The political upheavals, civil strife, sectarian violence and terrorism in the area have implications for the regional and global order. As the region grapples with myriad socio-economic problems, many extra-regional players and non-state actors, and a few regional ones, are attempting to carve out their own areas of influence. These developments across West Asia demand constant monitoring and careful analyses. This book is a collection of essays exploring various aspects of the changing security paradigm in West Asia and the regional and international responses.

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