



NIAS Global Politics Brief

The Middle East in 2021: Protraction of never-ending wars and conflicts

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Introduction

The Middle Eastern region has been undergoing rapid changes with significant developments in regional security and stability. While some of these changes have emanated within the region, others are a result of the broader shifts and global upheavals occurring around the world. The region has witnessed some positive developments such as the diplomatic normalization following the signing of Abraham Peace Accords and the resumption of nuclear talks with Iran, which have ushered new opportunities for regional peace and security. Furthermore, the year 2021 in the Middle East has been eventful with the impactful elections taking place in Iran, Israel, Iraq as well as the democratic backsliding in Tunisia and Sudan. Despite these significant changes, the Middle East remains an arena of conflict with “political instability, civil wars, territorial threats, economic crises, the proliferation of unconventional weaponry, external military involvement and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic”.¹ This paper will examine the key issues and developments that have shaped Middle East in 2021. The paper will further seek to forecast some new trends and challenges for the year 2022.

Some of the key issues and developments in the Middle East in the year 2021 are:

Regime Change in the United States

The regime change in the US with Joe Biden being sworn as the US President in 2021 brought in some significant changes and continuity in the Middle East. The US being the biggest player in the Middle east since the Cold War period also saw some major changes and continuity in its foreign policy towards the region pursued by the earlier Trump administration. The Biden administration adopted less confrontational and significant diplomatic approach in the region such as the recommencement of the nuclear talks with Iran and continuation of Abraham Accords.

¹ Congressional Research Service (CRS) 2021, “Middle East: Key Issues for the 117th Congress”, (Online Web) Accessed on 13 December 2021, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2021-01_13_IF11726_dcb476fd54db3cfd20b65735fdcf6d7ddf7b28a4.pdf.

United States exit from Afghanistan and its impact on Middle East

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan was one of the significant geopolitical events in the region, signalling a shift in US foreign policy toward other priority issues such as China. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan resulted in the Taliban's resounding victory and return to power, reigniting concerns about the jihadist narrative and the re-emergence of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Furthermore, the US exit from Afghanistan raised serious concerns among its allies and partners in the Middle East shaking their confidence and reliance on the US. These countries relied on the US to strengthen their national security strategies, further the US apathy towards the increasing violence in the region encouraged states like Iran to reinforce their view that the "US is a paper tiger that will buckle if enough pressure is applied".² Concerns about the US' inability to contain either Iran or the Taliban have been one of the reasons for the rapprochement between Israel and Gulf countries sharing their common fear of Iran. There have been increasing contacts between some Middle Eastern states and external players such as Russia and China; however, both Russia and China are not considered as viable strategic alternatives for US partners in the region as they may remain as US allies finding areas of common security and economic interests.

Regional Diplomacy and New Partnerships

After decades of hostility and the looming threat of war, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain signed a 'solidarity and stability' agreement aimed at resolving the diplomatic rift and rapprochement with Qatar. These states had earlier severed their diplomatic ties with Qatar over a range of issues. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have emphasized upon the importance of resolving regional conflicts through dialogue and negotiations. The GCC countries have further expanded their dialogue towards Iran, Turkey and pursued diplomatic resolution to the Yemen conflict and have also reintegrated Syria into the Arab League. Talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran have resulted in building more confidence towards regional de-escalation and stability in the region. These developments have been an indication and reflection of the changing attitudes and strategies among these states towards addressing these complex challenges and to reduce friction among the regional policies. There also seems to be an overall improvement of relations between Egypt and Turkey.

During the 42 meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit on 14 December 2021, the Gulf states reaffirmed the need for further discussion on regional challenges, emphasising intra-GCC coordination on important political, economic and social issues.

This rapprochement has been made possible by the Gulf states' changing attitudes toward regional conflicts; many regional leaders have expressed their dissatisfaction with decades of conflict, which has resulted in regional instability, failure to improve regional security or benefit the population. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other non-traditional security challenges such as poverty, economic inequality, resource

² Salem, P et. al (2021), "10 Key Events and trends in the Middle East and North Africa in 2021", Middle East Institute, (Online Web) Accessed 24 December 2021 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/10-key-events-and-trends-middle-east-and-north-africa-2021>.

scarcity, and climate change have increased regional leaders focus on developmental issues and strengthening of domestic institutions.

Israel-Palestinian Conflict: Gaza War

The Israel-Palestinian conflict created major headlines in April 2021, when tensions erupted following the eviction of Sheikh Jarrah residents in Gaza. Soon after, this was followed by the ensuing violence at the al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem. Israel, Hamas (the militant group ruling Gaza), and other Palestinian groups used both lethal and non-lethal force during the conflict. Hamas and other Palestinian groups launched rockets into Israeli territory to which Israel responded with air strikes. Several of Palestinians were killed and injured as a result of the violence. On May 21, 2021 both Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire brokered by Egypt.

The Gaza war demonstrated Washington's complicated approach to the situation. As noted by Khaled Elgindy (2021) that the Gaza war showed Biden administration "steering away from the conflict offering blanket statements of support for Israel's right to defend itself while blocking attempts by the United Nation Security Council's to secure an immediate ceasefire. This ambiguity in US position highlighted the Biden administration's reluctance to challenge the status quo".³ Whether the US remains to be disengaged from an issue that it has been invested for decades long needs to be something to watch for in the next coming few months.

Elections in Middle East: Israel, Iran, and Iraq

The Middle East in 2021 saw few countries in the region holding elections and heralding a new change with the change in leadership. In June 2021, Israel's elections ousted Netanyahu who held the record of 12 years as Israel's Prime Minister and Naftali Bennett being elected as the new Prime Minister of Israel with the parliament approving the 'new government of change'. The Bennett government has refrained from undertaking any major initiatives and has some challenges in the coming few years such as Israel-Palestinian conflict, relations with Palestinians, the two-state solution, Israel's relations with the other regional players such as the Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran and others in the region. The year 2022 will remain an important year to witness if the new government makes any breakthrough in any of the challenges mentioned above. Similarly, elections also took place in Iran wherein Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's top judge, an ultra-conservative won the Iran's presidential elections. The elections were harshly criticized from various sectors as being engineered by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and hardliners recapture of power in Iran, the elections also witnessed the lowest turnout since 1979. On the other hand, the elections in Iraq in October 2021 wherein the Sadrist movement led by populist Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr won gaining majority. While Iranian backed parties decried the elections as fraudulent and appealed against the irregularities in the election results. This resulted in violent protests across Iraq, in December 2021, the Supreme court of Iraq ratified the Parliamentary elections paving way for the new parliament to hold its inaugural session. The elections also were an indication of the diminishing Iranian influence.

Climate Change challenges facing the Middle East

³ Khaled Elgindy in Salem, P et. Al (2021), "10 Key Events and trends in the Middle East and North Africa in 2021", Middle East Institute, (Online Web) Accessed 24 December 2021
<https://www.mei.edu/publications/10-key-events-and-trends-middle-east-and-north-africa-2021>.

The global implications of the ongoing climate change have been acute in the Middle East. The region has been already been vulnerable to extreme weather conditions and dry conditions with the shift of pattern of climate change bringing additional environmental challenges. The Middle East in 2021 was a year of extreme climate changes with extreme heat, drought and water scarcity with many areas in the region experiencing climate change challenges; Dead Sea in Jordan facing severe aridity, Kuwait witnessing heavy rainfall and other parts of Middle East such as Saudi Arabia witnessing record breaking extreme heat, water scarcity in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Mashreq. These environmental challenges such as heavy rain, floods, sandstorms and heatwaves have adverse impacts on agriculture, food production affecting people's livelihood and causing displacement and mass migration in search of better environmental conditions.

Resumption of Iran's Nuclear Talks in Vienna (JCPOA)

Since the Biden administration took office, there have been optimistic efforts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) designed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. The previous Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA agreement in May 2018, which further led to European Union (EU) mediated eight rounds of indirect talks between Iran and the US that have yet to yield any results. The Iranian delegation has stated that it is willing to remain in Vienna until a deal acceptable to Iran is reached. Iran's demands have been to fully lift the sanctions, a guarantee that the US will not leave the deal again, and finally that sanctions imposed are effectively lifted. Iran maintains that it wants the talks to end successfully, but it wants to do so on its own terms. If the deal fails in the near future or the terms are not accepted by the US, the Biden administration will need to come up with alternative approaches or new deal terms to limit Iran's nuclear development such as international sanctions which may require support or consensus from Russia and China.

Since Iran's new President took office, Iran has intensified its uranium enrichment and restricted international inspections of its nuclear facilities. Iran's nuclear advancement has created anxieties in the region particularly in Israel which has openly discussed military options to prevent the development of Iranian nuclear weapons under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership. Over the last few years, Israel has launched numerous attempts to thwart Iran's nuclear programme, including a series of cyberattacks and targeted killings, assassination of Iranian top scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. In response, to these attacks, Iran has launched cyberattacks on Israel as well as kinetic attacks on Persian Gulf tankers. Following the assassination of an Iranian scientist, Iran's parliament passed legislation to enrich higher levels of uranium and accelerate the country's nuclear programme.

Conflicts and Humanitarian Crises

Since the beginning of the Arab Revolutions in 2010 onwards, the Middle East has seen a constant spurt of protests and revolutions which have continued posing a threat to the regional peace and security by causing massive population displacements and resulting in humanitarian crises. Syria, Libya and Yemen are among the civil wars that are yet to see peaceful resolutions. Syria has not witnessed any major battles in recent months, owing to political impasse and divisions among the actors involved in dialogue and negotiations. There has been no change in the status quo, and the conflict in Syria has remained frozen. On the bright side, a number of Arab countries have opened up to the Assad regime, bringing Syria into the fold of the Arab League. Similarly, in Yemen despite

multiple attempts by Saudi Arabia, the United States, and the United Nations (UN), the Houthis in Yemen have refused to engage in negotiations or any form of compromise. The Houthis are making military gains as they continue their fight in southern Yemen. The Middle Eastern conflicts in Libya, Yemen, Syria, Libya and Lebanon as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appear to be protracted and likely to continue in the near future. These conflicts have had far reaching humanitarian consequences in the region, including the proliferation of non-state actors, an increase in terrorist groups, new conflicts in the Mediterranean and the acceleration of remote warfare (drones, cyber-attacks). The region has also seen setbacks in the transition to democracy most notably in Sudan and Tunisia.

Trends in Middle East 2021

US's Broader Middle Eastern Policy

The Biden administration has emphasised on Middle East being critical to US and is deeply committed to the region. US has been focussing on building, maintaining, and strengthening its regional alliances using diplomacy to de-escalate tensions and further integrating countries in the region that did not previously have ties. Furthermore, the US has stated that Israel is a top priority and is central to US policy in the region. The Biden administration has also 'restored previously severed contact with Palestine and is committed to a two-state solution'. In the Syrian conflict, the US is committed to maintaining a military presence in Syria, despite the fact that ISIS remains a serious problem and there is a risk of its resurgence. The United States has not removed any sanctions against the Assad regime and is also working with the United Nations Security Council to find a political solution in Syria. The US administration has also encouraged regional integration and cross-border cooperation by initiating the Abraham Accords and 'Build Back Better World', with a focus on future investments in rare earth minerals, renewable energy, semiconductors, health and climate, technology, and building partnerships in the Middle East which will continue to be an important theme in 2022. A major hurdle for the US remains the perennial problem of Iran and the JCPOA talks with Iran which are currently in their eighth round in Vienna. The US is particularly concerned about Iran's rapid acceleration of its nuclear programme and has been working diplomatically to ensure Iran's return to nuclear compliance, gaining support from the P5+1 countries.

Non-Conventional Military Systems in the Middle East

The Middle East region has been characterized by deepening fragmentation, social unrest and persistent volatility. This is the result of decades of geopolitical rivalry, competition, and assertiveness among regional actors manifesting into the region turning to a warzone. Since 2010, the region has seen a spate of violent protests as a result of Arab revolutions, which have resulted in deeply divisive wars particularly in Libya, Iraq and Syria. Many regimes in the region have prioritised internal security, prompting them to strengthen their warfare capabilities. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are procuring multi-domain military capabilities, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) as seen during the Yemen conflict. The Yemen conflict is an important example of this shift, with the Iranians and Houthis using precision guided weapons to target Saudi industrial establishments, demonstrating 'how force with limited technology' can have a significant impact. Similarly, Hezbollah's use of anti-ship missiles against Israeli combat ships, as well as the increasing use of remote warfare and drones in Libya, Syria and

Yemen demonstrate the region's changing nature of warfare. To counter Hamas and Iran, Israel has frequently used multi-layered defence systems. As witnessed in the Yemen civil war, there has been an increase in the remote character of warfare. The last few years have illustrated how remote warfare has been used in the Middle East, with states such as Israel employing remote tactics like airstrikes, drone technologies, targeted assassinations in response to Iran and Hamas in Palestine. Turkey has developed advanced aerial capabilities and is deploying them in Syria and Armenia. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been using Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UMVs) in Yemen, including the targeted assassination of Houthi leader Saleh al Sammad in 2018. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE face security threats from Iran, and operating remotely reduces the casualties among soldiers while also allowing them to reserve military forces in the event of a major conflict with Iran. This new age warfare is seen as a way for regional players to strengthen their power projection at a time when US foreign policy has a limited footprint in the region. Finally, the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has increased defence spending and pushed regional players towards unmanned defence platforms.

Regional Initiatives to counter Climate Change Challenges

Climate change has impacted the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries causing hardship and vulnerabilities in the region. The region faces a number of systematic risks, including desertification, food insecurity, forced displacement and extreme heat waves. (United Nations 2021). In this regard, Saudi Arabia has launched the 'Saudi Green Initiative and the Middle East Green Initiative' in October 2021, with the stated goal of transforming Saudi Arabia into a global leader in forging a greener world'. The Saudi Green Initiative seeks to decrease emissions by three times the amount of Saudi Arabia's annual emissions, implying an unprecedented aspiration for carbon-negative development. Saudi Arabia is increasingly incorporating environmental sustainability into its national transformation programme, improving its environmental regulations and integrating high environmental sustainability aspirations into state-led projects. The UAE convened a regional dialogue in Abu Dhabi and launched an agenda to combat methane and carbon emissions in the oil and gas industries. Turkey is rapidly expanding its renewable energy capacity and is one of the few countries that has yet to ratify the Paris Agreement, and constantly emphasises its limited historical responsibility for climate change. Israel appears to favour using newly discovered offshore natural gas to replace imported coal, delaying its transition to renewables. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, and Israel were the four Middle East and North African (MENA) countries who attended the US Leaders' Summit on Climate Change; Iran was not invited. US President Biden, urged the leaders to "use the summit to outline how their countries could contribute to stronger climate ambition".⁴

⁴ Elgendy, E (2021), "Competition hots up for climate leadership in MENA", Chatham House 10 May 2021 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/competition-hots-climate-leadership-mena>.

Energy Transitions in Middle East towards Cleaner Sustainable Renewable Energy

The Middle East is witnessing a global energy transition aimed at limiting global average temperature rise to less than 2 degrees Celsius and achieving net zero emissions energy systems by 2050. This transition has been significant as hydrocarbons becoming a major driving force for most of the Middle Eastern countries particularly GCC economies opening towards cleaner hydrocarbon production and investing in non-carbon energy carriers such as green hydrogen. In recent years, GCC states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have prioritised and forged renewable energy projects with the goal of achieving low carbon energy levels in power generation. China has keen interest in the Middle East's renewable projects acquiring stakes and expanding its role in the region's 'green finance' expansion. In October 2021, two companies China Energy Engineering Corp Ltd and Xian Electric Engineering Co. Ltd, signed consortium contracts with Orascom Construction and Hitachi ABB Power Grid to implement the Egypt-Saudi electricity power grid linkage project. The global energy transition is having a significant impact on the Middle Eastern region, as these countries attempt to transition away from their 'economic reliance on hydrocarbon exports'. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have emerged as important players in the energy transition as both seek global leadership in energy transition. While UAE has established a clear sense of energy leadership, Saudi Arabia lacks centralised planning for the transition to cleaner energy. Abu Dhabi has a considerable success in terms of developing clean energy. Dubai is bringing the region's first coal-fired power plant, prioritising energy security over carbon reduction. John Calabrese (2021) notes that in order to establish themselves as regional and global leaders in greener energy sectors, "Saudi Arabia and the UAE must take the following steps; promote greater transparency in government agencies, strengthen the private sector, invest in clean technologies with a focus on local content of renewables, encourage national companies such as ADNOC and Saudi's Aramco to achieve zero net emissions and address internal issues before taking global leadership"⁵. The region's major energy exporters must strive to maintain their energy exports in a post-oil world.

Democracy in Middle East

US President Joe Biden opened the first White House Summit for Democracy, the summit was a result of the alarming concern about the global decline of democratic institutions, he further urged world leaders to 'lock arms and demonstrate that democracies can deliver'. Several regional analysts have expressed concerns about the summit, questioning whether it will bring about change in the Middle East, a region that has failed to embark on successful democratic transitions in the past such as Iraq and Libya. Elie Abouaoun, (2021) director of the MENA programme at the US Institute Peace adds that "there is a clear tendency by international community to focus on the technical aspects of democratic transition such as holding elections and expediting the process of adopting a constitution. When elections are rushed in a sharply divided society going through conflict, the outcome is usually further deterioration and civil wars".⁶ Only two countries

⁵ Calabrese, J (2021), "Sustainable Momentum? China in the Mideast Solar Market", October 19, 2021, Middle East Institute, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/sustainable-momentum-china-and-mideast-solar-market>.

⁶ Abouaoun, E (2021), "Biden's Summit for Democracy sparks question in Middle East", The Arab Weekly, 10 December 2021, <https://theArabweekly.com/bidens-summit-democracy-sparks-questions-middle-east>.

from the region were invited to the US- hosted democracy summit; Israel and Iraq, both flawed democracies. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates all repressive regimes were left out and barely mentioned during the summit by the US. Due to the summit's failure to invite countries from the region, the US has largely ignored the regions acknowledge the democracy deficit in the region and the practical policies to address it. If the Biden administration wants the Summit of Democracy to result in significant global progress in both democracy and human rights, the Middle East must be included and given adequate attention.

Conclusion

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has signalled to its Middle Eastern partners that the US may not be a reliable, long-term ally prompting them to diversify their alliances and partnerships looking towards Russia and China for a broader role in the region. Many countries are concerned about a possible resurgence of extremism and radical groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS as a result of the Taliban's victory and takeover of Afghanistan. Future prospects and trends will be shaped by the changes in US policy in some areas and continuity in others with a primary focus on de-escalation through diplomacy. The US defence strategy will remain 'deterrence by denial' in order to counter some of the region's pertinent challenges particularly Iran's nuclear ambitions. The United States can play an important role in improving relations among the countries in the region to develop a robust regional security architecture and conflict resolution system.

Other key players particularly Russia and China will continue to play an important role in the Middle East. Russia intends to be a key actor in the Middle Eastern peace Process and establish itself as a major player in the region. While Russia's stance on the Syrian conflict has determined and strengthened its position in the region, Moscow's success in re-establishing itself as an important player in the Middle East requires Russia to project and sustain power in the military, diplomatic and economic spheres. As it stands, Russia's resources in the region appear to be limited in terms of what it can offer Middle Eastern states in terms of addressing the region's critical challenges in security, economics and diplomacy. Russia faces the challenge and limitation of its position in the region as well. Russia must work hard to become a true power broker in the Middle East, which would necessitate taking sides. Escalations of tensions will continue to rise as key regional actors compete for power and influence across the region adopting new means of force, enhanced weapons and technologies such as drones, remote warfare, artificial intelligence and cyber-attacks.

The key issues and developments of 2021 have continued to shape the region with Middle Eastern countries reacting differently to these new geopolitical shifts and realities which continue to reverberate across the region. Some of these significant trends in the region include the potential improvement of relations between Egypt and Turkey, Israel's admission to the GCC club, which has created opportunities to strengthen relations and naval and military drills between Israel, Bahrain and the UAE which has raised hopes for future cooperation in the region.

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