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# HORIZONS

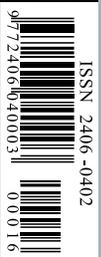
JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
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## PANDEMICS & GEOPOLITICS THE QUICKENING



**UNLOCKING  
THE MIDDLE EAST**

**SUSTAINABLE  
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# A WAY OUT OF THE MIDDLE EAST?

Andrey Fedorov

**E**VEN before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Middle East, the situation in that part of the world was already full of multi-layer problems and contradictions, with very few positive steps having been made to overcome them.

It should be recognized that previous mechanisms attempting to solve regional problems, especially those designed within United Nations, are not working and mainly left on paper. And various adopted resolutions and decisions are used only as reference point in political discussions and official negotiations, but have low value in everyday life.

The depth of the interweaving crises besetting the Middle East is enormous. Any attempt to craft a sort of universal solution is bound to fail. A novel approach is warranted more than ever, with the emphasis placed on building dialogue between Middle Easterners

themselves—with far less interference from traditional out-of-area players like Russia and the United States.

## MOSCOW AND WASHINGTON

**E**vidently, Moscow, Washington, and other outside actors continue their attempts to play influential roles in the region amidst changing circumstances on the ground.

Russia, for its part, has been the recipient of a more positive attitude conferred by a number of key Middle Eastern states regarding its attempts to serve as a broker in difficult situations over the past few years. Nonetheless, its inability to find a reasonable and relatively rapid exit from the Syrian theatre is presently weakening Russia whilst also limiting its ability to engage with the region as a whole.

To wit: Russia's foreign policy attention in the Middle East is too narrowly focused on Syria and the everyday

management of relations with Turkey and Iran over operational disagreements (the recent example of Idlib is a good illustration of this last).

American foreign policy in the Middle East has been less active, to say the least. Even a cursory examination of the Trump Administration's peace plan—officially titled *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*—reveals it to be nothing other than an attempt at a “buy-out” instead of being the basis for a long-term solution.

In addition, Moscow and Washington are less cooperative with each other, for well-known reasons; one of the strategic consequences of this state of affairs is the fact that the Middle East is no longer a first-tier issue in the context of the bilateral relations between Russia and America.

And there are no indications that this situation will improve in the time ahead—both in the context of the Middle East and in general. The basic reason is not complicated: both Putin and Trump are likely to remain wedded to their respective courses of action and underlying assumptions about one another's worldviews.

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**A** further impediment to achieving some sort of improvement in bilateral relations—with direct repercussions on Middle East issues—is the fact that both administrations are undergoing a generational changing of the guard. It is of course perfectly natural for younger regional specialists to rise as older ones conclude their service. However, the present crop of experts appear to sometimes lack sufficient historical background to fully grasp the context of existing problems and challenges.

**V**ery few words need to be devoted to the role of the European Union in the Middle East. Simply put, Brussels is too weak today to make a serious impact. The EU is more like a simple mirror: reflecting events in the region without any opportunity to frame them in an effective way.

There would be a chance for the EU to make a greater impact if the national leaders of some of the more prominent of its member states did not subscribe to the view that the Middle East is more of a burden and less of a theatre for the conduct of an active foreign policy.

**P**otential tactical exceptions loom over the horizon. A new crisis wave—say, military conflict in the

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Gulf area—may galvanize everyone concerned to come together to calm tensions. Even if successful, it seems unlikely that such a tactical rapprochement would be anything other than temporary and born out of necessity.

Once whatever crisis ends up being averted, the major players would almost certainly revert back to their respective pre-crisis dispositions.

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**NOVEL VARIABLES, DANGEROUS EQUATION**

Virtually all crisis points in the Middle East are well known and are principally the same as they have been for quite a while, although present circumstances indicate a greater likelihood for these to burn more actively. That being said, there does seem to be something relatively novel taking place, namely the fact that two important states, Iraq and Iran, are experiencing growing internal tension more or less simultaneously.

The internal situation in Iran, which has gotten worse since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, is of particular concern. A truly serious domestic crisis in Iran could not only represent a sort of “death challenge” to the current regime; it could also significantly alter the balance of power in the region. Such a change in the geopolitical situation of

the Middle East could set the scene for the entry of new, perhaps even more unpredictable players onto the stage.

One would be hard pressed to predict with any degree of confidence what a transition would look like in Iran. It could be a smooth one or it could be—to understate, perhaps significantly—less smooth.

A severe deterioration in the country’s already less than stellar economic situation, due in large part to the effects of the American sanctions regime—further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the radical fall in oil prices—could either transform Iran into a more a more democratic system or propel it into an even more authoritarian direction, where the possession of nuclear weapons as a defense mechanism of last resort is viewed as *the* strategic imperative.

However that may be, it should be clear that with every passing month Iran is finding it increasingly difficult to continue its regional game, which presupposes the continuation of trying to keep control over a number of states by various political, military, and financial means.

Of course, one needs to keep in mind the fact that the leadership in Tehran is loathe to abandon the positions it holds (or held until quite recently), or to

acknowledge that its strength is waning. We can see this in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as in Yemen where the situation is changing with less resources being supplied by Teheran to support its adherents in that country.

This cursory survey would be incomplete without at least a brief discussion of Israel. Notwithstanding the electoral stalemate, which as of this writing seems to have been overcome, Israel has remained stable and its policy positions and priorities towards neighbors and other states in the Middle East have remained large unchanging. No good will towards Palestine has been forthcoming—nor can it be expected in the time ahead.

All the latest moves from Israel and the United States are simply adding additional fuel to an already well-burning fire. The consequences—both to them and every other Middle Eastern state—could begin to be felt in the very near future.

**AGAIN SYRIA, AGAIN REGIONAL PEACE**

Already touched upon is the fact that the Syrian crisis has not only dragged on for nearly a decade

whilst becoming “too traditional” for, say, the Gulf states to engage seriously in resolving it.

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And to think that some are even beginning to ask whether it’s even going to be worth spending billions of dollars on the restoration of Syria. At the same time, all continue to speak about the necessity of bringing peace and stability to the Middle East as a whole.

Is regional peace possible? Not at the moment, at least, but the groundwork can begin to be laid given the new situation that seems to be emerging. Here are a few basic ideas on possible general approach to improve the current situation and initiate follow-up steps.

First, it should be recognized once and for all that it is both naïve and irresponsible to expect any solution coming from outside, whether it be from the UN, America, Russia, or the EU. What these and other external actors could

and should do is to conduct themselves in such a way that does not make the existing situation worse. They can also help incentivize countries like Israel and Iran to limit their ambitions.

*Second*, the practical prevention of any military conflict in the region is now much more important than an attempt to achieve a broader resolution or settlement. If a military

conflict were to occur under present circumstances, it would not be likely limited to the region itself and could trigger a global geopolitical crisis of perhaps even greater consequence than the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to turn out to be.

*Third*, every Middle Eastern country, as well as key outside players, must update their plans for dealing with any number of worst-case scenarios, including a package of urgent measures to limit possible damage.

*Fourth*, set aside Kantian notions of perpetual peace and focus instead on how to go about securing a minimum level of stability for the next four to five years, having in mind the possibility of a second term for Donald Trump and the continuity this would represent in terms of American policy towards the Middle East—a policy that’s hard to

describe as a genuine (or at least, a traditional) foreign policy but rather a sort of “family deal.”

*Fifth*, to understand that new technological processes are transformative and that the next stage of globalization (whatever it ends up being) and the dramatic social changes that will inevitably result will need to be embraced by states like Saudi Arabia if

they deem it in their interest to remain effective regionally and beyond.

**THE COMING DECADE**

The Middle East will look quite different in the coming decade and I believe these changes should find reflection in the respective foreign policies of the region’s countries. Oil is not the most effective tool of influence anymore and old approaches are not working as they did in decades past.

All told, we should all brace ourselves for the debut of a *new Middle East* characterized by the continuing presence of many of the region’s old problems compounded by the onset of deep political and economic change that will take place in many of the countries of the region.

Such changes ought to give grounds to reevaluate nations’ previous political

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Whatever else the mechanism that ends up being agreed by the Middle Eastern states themselves, it should not copy the features particular to the UN Security Council, which as we all know is currently deadlocked

experience and take the opportunity to uncover some new approaches.

One of the cornerstone, basic principles that may very well need to be embraced is that there will be no peace in the Middle East brought from outside. Stability and security will likely be achieved on the basis of intensive intra-regional dialogue; it’s more than possible that this will require nearly all Middle Eastern countries to take a limited number of steps back from previous positions and policies. Collective responsibility is an imperative.

It follows from this, in my view, that a main task for the region’s diplomats operating in the not-too-distant future will be to begin the construction of a regional security system that presupposes inclusion: the involvement of all—friends and enemies, neutrals and rivals alike.

A more constricted version of such system—a “friends only” club, so to speak—would not work at all.

Obviously, it would be very difficult to bring everyone together at the same table today and expect them to come to terms on the new rules of the game, given the existence of so

many regional contradictions. But it will need to be done—if not today, then tomorrow and not the day after tomorrow. There is no other way.

on virtually every issue of significance.

Rather, the regional mechanism should reflect the specificities of the Middle East and be free of veto power.

Most probably, discussions on establishing such a mechanism should concentrate not on current problems (however important they may be), but instead focus on the rules of the game of the future.

If a basic momentum for the commencement of preparations for such talks could be generated, I am confident that both Russia and United States would be interested enough in the process to help to bring all possible participants together. After all, Moscow and Washington seem to have a common interest in wanting the region’s countries to themselves shoulder more responsibility for finding a way to move beyond the

constant state of crisis that characterizes the politics of the Middle East. Certainly, both Moscow and Washington would have the power to persuade certain regional powerhouses to exercise a greater degree of flexibility in how these interpret what a more stable region should look like.

Isn't it time to speak without recourse to too much diplomatic rhetoric and name in a plain and unadorned way what constitute the region's burning issues? In that spirit, I suggest that it is more important to identify a sort of "negative agenda" as a priority over a "positive" one, with the idea of making the former much shorter than it is today.

Peace in the Middle East is not absence of war, but a constant system of its prevention. Such a regional security mechanism should be stable; have a strong legal basis; be open to all states in the region; operate on the principle of sovereign equality of representation; work on permanent basis; have effective connections with the outside world (by accepting to have, perhaps, special outside observers on permanent basis); include both political and military dimensions in its work; and forgo dealing with economic projects.

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Naturally, such a mechanism would not replace existing regional and sub-regional networks and organizations that deal with various issues and problems. It must really concentrate on burning political topics. One might say that it should come to be seen as the Middle East's "permanent safety belt."

No one should expect this body to produce quick and easy solutions. It will be tough going, especially at the beginning. Frankly, I am not sure

that, at this stage, a majority of the region's political and religious leaders are prepared to engage in the long-term work that would be required to achieve success. For some of them, parochial interests are still prevalent in the manner in which they conceive their respective foreign policies.

Thus, it may be necessary to apply a certain amount of pressure on them to make the necessary adjustments to their existing approaches and to make them more cooperative. And such pressure should come both from inside and outside and have the necessary consistency.

Of course, the Middle East does not operate in a geopolitical vacuum. The

question is how and in which way will it be integrated into the broader international agenda in the future, and what will be the Middle East's role in the global technological and sustainable development transformations to come.

### RUSSIA'S ROLE

For Russia, the Middle East remains on its list of priorities, but it's not at the top of the list. Russia is capable of making a number of political steps, but is quite limited in the economic area due to its lack of significant financial resources. Arms deliveries to regional states do play a certain role, but even in this area we have seen that drones are becoming more important than tanks or even missiles.

Russia has quite a difficult task to balance its policy in the region, as it seems to be constantly dancing on thin ice: the recent oil conflict between Russia and Saudi Arabia makes this evident to all. Even Putin's tradition of personal

engagement with fellow leaders does not seem to work as well in parts of the Middle East as it does in other regions.

For Russia today, political pragmatism in the region is, or least may become, more important than traditional ties and experiences. Enough time has passed since the Berlin Wall came down for a reduction in the emphasis on historical relations from the Cold War period: Russia's contemporary national interests are very different today from those of the Soviet Union.

Moscow's main task in the Middle East today, it seems to me, is to maintain Russia's presence in the region as an element of general stability without attempting to be the sole architect of future scenarios for the region. Contemporary Russia should not overvalue its influence in the Middle East and ought to conduct itself in such a manner as to be ready to institute changes in its foreign policy as well. ●

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