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Russian President Vladimir Putin & Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan hold talks over Syria, October 22, 2019, Source: The New York Times

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The Burning Middle East

by

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Introduction

As the birthplace of ancient civilizations like Egypt and Mesopotamia as well as the three monotheistic religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Middle East (West Asia-North Africa) has for centuries been a centre of knowledge and ideas. However, this western part of Asia has witnessed immense chaos and destruction in the past 100 years, with numerous wars involving the Arab states (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq) and Russia on one side and Israel, the United States, Britain and France on the other. Throughout the history of the last 2000 years, various empires and great powers have been dragged into major conflicts in this region. Some of the biggest empires in world history such as Byzantine (Roman), Persian, Ottoman (Turkey), French and British have ruled the Middle East and shaped it the way it is today.

At the end of World War I, Britain and France occupied much of the territory of the Ottoman Empire that ruled this region for many centuries and divided it among themselves through the 'Sykes-Picot Agreement' of 1916. It is often argued that through this agreement, Britain and France introduced the "artificial nation-state system" in the Middle East that has till date failed to reflect the religious and socio-cultural identities of the varied communities that had lived under Ottoman rule for centuries.¹ Since that time, the Middle East has witnessed tremendous violence, death and destruction. This paper examines some of the recent geopolitical events in this region, i.e. the cruise missile attack on two major Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq-Khurais, the Turkish invasion of North-East Syria and the objectives of Iran, and analyses the long term consequences of the deteriorating security situation in the Middle East.

Attack on Abqaiq-Khurais Oilfields of Saudi Arabia

On September 14, 2019, 25 drones and cruise missiles were used to attack two major oil fields (Abqaiq and Khurais) owned by Saudi Aramco in Eastern Saudi Arabia. This had a major impact on oil supplies as Saudi Arabia had to shut down half of its oil production.¹ Abqaiq is the largest oil processing facility in

¹Reid, D. (2019, September 21). *Saudi Aramco reveals attack damage at oil production plants*. Retrieved October 10, 2019, from CNBC : <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/20/oil-drone-attack-damage-revealed-at-saudi-aramco-facility.html>

the world, with a processing capacity of 7 million barrels per day, while, Khurais has a oil processing capacity of 1.5 million barrels per day.²



Damage to Saudi oil facilities due to the missile attack claimed by the Houthis rebels, September 14, 2019 Source: Evening Standard

In general, Saudi Arabia as a country has the capacity to produce 12.42 million barrels of oil per day.³ The United States and Saudi Arabia have blamed Iran for this attack on the Saudi oil facilities; however, Iran has denied any involvement in the attack and warned Saudi Arabia that any retaliatory attack on Iran will lead to an all-out war in the Middle East.⁴ Earlier, the Iranian backed Houthi rebels from Yemen had claimed responsibility for this attack on the Saudi Kingdom. A key fact that has to be highlighted here is that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia were caught off guard and a worrying factor for these nations is that the attack was not detected and demonstrated the effective utilisation of low

² Ibid.

³US Energy Information Administration (EIA), April 2019.<https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=709&t=6>

⁴Karimi, N. (2019, September 30). *Iran says Saudi attack claimed by Yemen rebels justified*. Retrieved October 10, 2019, from Washington Post: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iran-defends-yemeni-rebel-attack-on-saudi-arabias-oil-sites/2019/09/30/afdef2ae-e365-11e9-b0a6-3d03721b85ef_story.html

altitude cruise missiles that are difficult to intercept.⁵ This attack is believed to be part of the larger Iranian goal of achieving regional hegemony in the Middle East that will challenge the United States, Israel and Sunni Arab nations. The strategic implications of the attack on Saudi oilfields are analyzed later in the paper.

The Iran Factor in the Geopolitics of the Middle East

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iranian regime under the leadership of Shiite cleric Ayatollah Khomeini and now Ayatollah Khamenei considers the United States to be Iran's number one national security threat and a principal geopolitical and ideological enemy.⁶ The Iranian leadership firmly believes that the United States remains opposed to the Islamic revolution that overthrew the Shah regime in 1979 which was an ally of the U.S. and aims to replace it with a pro-American secular regime.⁷ Iran believes that U.S. hostility towards it is based on cultural and ideological factors, where the main objective is to keep the Middle East under U.S. control. U.S. support and protection of Israel and Saudi Arabia is viewed as prolonging the U.S. domination of the Middle East and preventing Iran from assuming its role as the pre-eminent power in the Persian Gulf.⁸ Iranian actions are influenced by some of the following considerations:

1) Exporting the Iranian form of Islamic revolution across the Middle East

Ayatollah Khomeini, the father of the Islamic revolution, believed that Islam had been corrupted by pro-Western states in the Middle East. The Iranian leadership has been openly hostile to the Sunni rulers of Saudi Arabia who are the guardians (custodians) of the holiest sites of Islam, Mecca and Medina.⁹ Iran has also assisted Shia groups in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and a number of other Sunni Arab nations to rise up against the rulers in these nations. The Iranian intention of exporting its form of Islamic revolution across the Middle East and its appeal to the global Islamic community to challenge the Saudi ruler's

⁵Itzchakov, D. D. (2019, September 23). *Iran Escalates: The Attack on the Saudi Oilfields*. Retrieved October 17, 2019, from BESA Center Perspectives No. 1,297: <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/iran-attack-saudi-oil/>

⁶James Dobbins, A. N. (2011). *Coping with a Nuclearizing Iran*, pp.11. Santa Monica, California : Rand Corporation .

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹Seib, G. F. (2019, March 01). *The Wall Street Journal* . Retrieved July 08, 2019, from A Regime Still Fighting the 'Great Satan': <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-regime-still-fighting-the-great-satan-11551454517>

oversight of the holy mosques in Mecca and Medina leads to a state of constant friction with Sunni Arab nations of Saudi Arabia and UAE.¹⁰ Some Iranian leaders have bragged about Iran already ruling four major Arab capitals, i.e. Baghdad (Iraq), Damascus (Syria), Beirut (Lebanon) and Sana'a (Yemen).¹¹ Such statements further strengthen the view that Iran is indeed pursuing aggressive policies with a long term goal of establishing Iranian regional hegemony on Arab lands. Considering Iran's regional aggression, Sunni Arab nations in the gulf such as Saudi Arabia, Oman and UAE are now not just closer to the United States but they are also inching closer to Israel, both arch enemies of Iran.¹²

2) Iranian View of the United States and Israel – Great Satan and Little Satan

The Iranian regime projects the United States as 'Great Satan' and Israel as 'Little Satan'. The term great satan has dominated the Iranian political scene since the time of the Islamic revolution in 1979. For Muslims, the term Great Satan is a literal translation of the Arabic "shaitan ar-rajim" that is evoked at every prayer, in which God is entreated to protect the believer from evil.¹³ The image of the United States as a Great Satan is an attempt to show Iranians that the U.S. is a force alien to Iran and its ancient civilization - a force that is attempting to corrupt the Iranian people. Ayatollah Khomeini had labelled the United States as immoral and ungodly.¹⁴ Since 1948, the Arab countries have fought numerous wars with Israel with the intention of annihilating the Jewish state, but Israel has survived and emerged as a major power in the Middle East. The defeat of Egypt and Syria in the 1973 Yom Kippur War convinced the Arab states and Israel's other enemies in the Middle East that Israel cannot be defeated in conventional warfare. Thus, Egypt and Jordan signed peace treaties with Israel. However, Iran continues military hostilities with Israel till date and the Islamic

¹⁰Asa Fitch, M. S. (2016, September 4). Iran Urges Muslims to Challenge Saudi Arabia's Oversight of Holy Sites. Retrieved October 18, 2019, from Wall Street Journal (Online): <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-urges-muslims-to-challenge-saudi-arabias-oversight-of-holy-sites-1473081759>

¹¹Bishara, M. (2019, April 30). Arrogance, fanaticism and the prospect of a US-Iranian war. Retrieved July 17, 2019, from Al Jazeera : <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/arrogance-fanaticism-prospect-iranian-war-190430085736682.html>

¹² Ibid.

¹³Beeman, W. O. (2005). *The Great Satan Vs The Mad Mullahs*, pp.49. Connecticut: Praeger Publishers.

¹⁴ Ibid.

regime in Iran believes that Israel has no right to exist.¹⁵ Iran also believes that the Palestinians have a legitimate right to the holy land and the only reason for Israel's continuous existence on the land of Palestine is American support. The Islamic regime in Iran refers to Israel as 'Little Satan' that can be fully eliminated if the U.S. – 'Great Satan' – withdraws from the Middle East and stops providing military aid to Israel. The Iranian nuclear program has to be understood from this perspective. Iran can change the balance of power in the Middle East with nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles that threaten the security of the gulf nations and Israel. The P5 of the United Nations Security Council and Germany had signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to curb Iran's nuclear program in 2015. However, the United States has walked away from this deal, complicating U.S.-Iran relations further.

Turkish Invasion of North-Eastern Syria

On October 9, 2019, Turkey launched a major military campaign inside northern Syria. The primary goal of the Turks is to undermine the Kurdish People's Defence Unit (YPG).¹⁶ The YPG is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that has Marxist-Leninist roots and has been fighting the Turkish state since the 1970s with the goal of establishing an independent Kurdish state.¹⁷ The recent military offensive of Turkey in north Syria is influenced by two crucial factors: the Turkish public opinion against the PKK and an ongoing Syrian refugee crisis that has resulted in the sharp rise in anti-refugee sentiment in Turkey.¹⁸ A vast majority of the Turkish people, with the exception of its left-leaning Kurdish nationalist constituency, view the PKK as a terrorist group.

¹⁵Times of Israel . (2015, September 09). Khamenei: Israel won't survive next 25 years. Retrieved October 18, 2019, from Times of Israel

(Online):<https://www.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-israel-wont-survive-next-25-years/>

¹⁶Cagaptay, S. (2019, October 11). *Turkey's Syria Incursion: What Spurred It, and What's Next?* Retrieved October 18, 2019, from Washington Institute for Near East Policy : <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-syria-incursion-what-spurred-it-and-whats-next>

¹⁷BBC News . (2016, November 4). Who are Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) rebels? Retrieved October 18, 2019, from BBC News (Online): <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100>

¹⁸Cagaptay, S. (2019, October 11). *Turkey's Syria Incursion: What Spurred It, and What's Next?* Retrieved October 18, 2019, from Washington Institute for Near East Policy : <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-syria-incursion-what-spurred-it-and-whats-next>



Turkish troops enter North-Eastern Syria as the U.S. withdraws, October 9, 2019, Source: The Daily Beast

Hence, President Erdogan enjoys strong support at home for the military action against the Syrian branch of PKK.¹⁹ For the past few years, Turkey has hosted four million refugees from Syria; the economic slowdown that has gripped Turkey since 2018 has generated a strong anti-refugee sentiment in Turkey.²⁰ Many of President Erdogan's supporters have blamed Syrian refugees for stealing jobs meant for Turks and invading Turkey with conservative cultural values. The Turkish government is well aware of this public opinion against the PKK and the Syrian refugees; thus, it plans to move some of the Syrian refugees in Turkey to areas in north-east Syria captured through its military offensive against YPG.²¹ Even if the Turkish government is able to settle a few hundred thousand refugees in Syria, it will help lower domestic tensions.

Strategic Ramifications of Recent Geopolitical Events in the Middle East

Iran has denied any role in the missile attack on Saudi Aramco oilfields; however, the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel have held it responsible for

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Cagaptay, S. (2019, October 11). *Turkey's Syria Incursion: What Spurred It, and What's Next?* Retrieved October 18, 2019, from Washington Institute for Near East Policy : <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-syria-incursion-what-spurred-it-and-whats-next>

²¹ Ibid.

it.²² This attack shows Iranian willingness to take greater military risks in the gulf region to extricate itself from the crippling sanctions imposed on its oil exports by the United States.²³ The attack on Saudi oilfields and the earlier downing of an American drone indicates increasing Iranian military and technological capability which is eroding American deterrence in the Middle East.²⁴ It raises the question whether the gulf nations can rely on the US for their security. Iran is taking greater military risks as it believes that the United States, Saudi Arabia and other gulf nations are not interested in an escalation of the conflict and imposing yet another war in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is a major US ally, has the third largest defence budget in the world and possesses advanced American defence technology; yet, it was unable to defend itself against the cruise missile attack. This highlights both the vulnerability of the gulf nations vis-a-vis Iran and the advanced military capability of Iran. It is also an indirect signal for Israel with regard to its confrontation with the Iranian backed Hezbollah group on the Israel-Lebanon border.

Iran and the Russian Federation have played a crucial role in stabilizing the Assad regime in Syria. Meanwhile, Iran has also assisted the Houthi (Ansar Allah) rebels in Yemen. This experience of fighting in Yemen and Syria has helped Iran to improve the navigation and strike capabilities of its cruise missiles and UAVs. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has already voiced his views regarding Iran reducing its commitments under the nuclear deal (JCPOA), from which the U.S. has walked away and re-imposed unilateral sanctions on Iran.²⁵ This is a dangerous precedent for the region, as it could lead to more attacks by Iran on targets in the Persian Gulf.

The Growing Strategic Influence of Russia

Russia has become a key strategic player in the region since 2015. The United States continues to be Saudi Arabia's prime security partner; but the Saudis are today hesitant to repose complete trust in the U.S. and the West as they had in

²²Roberta Rampton, A. M. (2019, September 16). *U.S. blames Iran for Saudi oil attack, Trump says 'locked and loaded'*. Retrieved October 17, 2019, from Reuters World News : <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks/u-s-blames-iran-for-saudi-oil-attack-trump-says-locked-and-loaded-idUSKBN1W00SA>

²³Yoel Guzansky, E. S. (2019, September 19). *The Attack on the Saudi Oil Facilities: A New Level of Iranian Audacity*. Retrieved October 26, 2019, from INSS : <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-attack-on-the-saudi-oil-facilities-a-new-level-of-iranian-audacity/>

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Hindu Business Line. (2019, July 16). *Khamenei: Iran to continue to cut nuclear deal commitments*. Retrieved October 29, 2019, from The Hindu Business Line :<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/world/khamenei-iran-to-continue-to-cut-nuclear-deal-commitments/article28482327.ece>

the past. This has provided Russia with a golden opportunity to expand its zone of influence in the Middle East. Some of the key drivers of the growing Russian presence in the region are as follows:

- The US withdrawal of troops from northern Syria leading to the Turkish invasion has undermined Saudi confidence in the American leadership and US interest in ensuring the security of Arab nations. Recent negotiations between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have cemented Russia's strategic advantage further. Russian and Turkish troops will now take joint control of vast swaths of formerly Kurdish-held territory in northern Syria. This strengthens the expansion of Russian influence in Syria at the expense of the United States and its Kurdish allies.²⁶ The United States military still has a substantial presence in the Gulf. However, it is quite evident that nations such as Saudi Arabia are focusing more on diversifying their alliances and reducing dependence on the U.S.



Russian President Vladimir Putin & Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan hold talks over Syria, October 22, 2019, Source: The New York Times

²⁶Kingsley, A. T. (2019, October 22). *Putin and Erdogan Announce Plan for Northeast Syria, Bolstering Russian Influence*. Retrieved October 29, 2019, from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/22/world/europe/erdogan-putin-syria-cease-fire.html>

- Since the Arab spring of 2011, Russia has stood by its allies such as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while the US and the West have dumped their long standing allies, such as President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and more recently the Kurdish allies in northern Syria. Russia is thus looked upon as a reliable partner and security guarantor by a number of nations in the region. This has helped Russia re-establish a strategic foothold in the Middle East. Russia's military involvement in Syria was driven by the belief that without Russian military assistance, the Assad regime would fall leading to the total collapse of Syria as a state, similar to that of Iraq and Libya.²⁷ Besides that, the ongoing confrontation with the West is an important factor leading to the growing Russian activities in the Middle East.
- As western sanctions are taking their toll, Russia wants to avoid further international isolation. With improved long term relations with Middle Eastern nations, Russia is looking to compensate for the negative effects of US-led sanctions and in the process put additional pressure on the western powers.²⁸ The terrorist organisations operating from Syria and Iraq and the broader security situation in the Middle East also pose a threat to Russia and the post-Soviet space in Central Asia. These threats can also be mitigated by a strong Russian presence in the Middle East.

Consequences of the Deteriorating Security Situation in the Middle East for India

The Trump administration has imposed unprecedented sanctions on Iranian oil exports. During some of the earlier confrontations with the United States, Iran had benefitted from the fact that oil supplies were tight and prices were high. As a result, countries such as India and China were not in favour of abandoning a major oil supplier like Iran. However, today there is an abundant supply of crude oil in the international market.²⁹ Therefore, very few countries are willing to risk US sanctions to buy Iranian crude. India, which enjoys good relations with Iran, is no exception to this. India has stopped importing oil from Iran as a result of the US sanctions.³⁰ The attack on Saudi Arabia was not only

²⁷Kozhanov, N. (February 2018). *Russian Policy Across the Middle East Motivations and Methods*. Chatham House. London

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹Henry Rome, R. J. (2019, September 19). *The logic of Iran's attack on Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved October 29, 2019, from Atlantic Council : <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-logic-of-irans-attack-on-saudi-arabia/>

³⁰The Economic Times . (2019, May 24). *US deadline ends, India stops purchasing Iranian oil*. Retrieved October 28, 2019, from The Economic Times :

aimed at the U.S. Iran has in effect shown India and China that it will not allow Saudi Arabia to grab its share of the oil market. India is willing to comply with the US sanctions as Saudi Arabia has assured that there would be no shortage of supplies of crude oil to India.³¹ Considering the potency of US sanctions on Iran, India is unlikely to reverse its decision of not buying crude oil from Iran; rather, it is likely that the latest attack on Saudi Aramco facilities will further accelerate efforts in India to diversify oil supply and invest more on clean and renewable energy.³²

The growing instability in the Middle East and weakening of regional states is also likely to affect the large Indian diaspora in this region. During the First Gulf War, India had evacuated 200,000 Indians from Kuwait.³³ Such a situation may once again emerge in the future, where the security and safety of Indians may be affected by the growing conflict between Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Most of the world's "fragile" states under risk of failure are Muslim-majority states located in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa.³⁴ Since the beginning of the U.S. War on Terror in 2001, five states have failed, i.e. Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Libya. The UN Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) published in November 2016 had determined that the Middle East presently encompasses "the largest number of countries that have become failed states." This report further predicts that close to three out of four Arabs will live in "countries with high risk of conflict" by 2020.³⁵ This trend of state failure and emergence of terrorist organizations that are opposed to the idea of the nation-state and secular polity is also likely to affect India's security in the future. Organisations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda continue to attract recruits from

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/us-deadline-ends-india-stops-purchasing-iranian-oil/articleshow/69475495.cms>

³¹The Economic Times. (2019, September 16). *Saudi Arabia assures India of no oil supply shortage: Oil Ministry*. Retrieved October 27, 2019, from The Economic Times :

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/saudi-arabia-assures-india-of-no-oil-supply-shortage-oil-ministry/articleshow/71148649.cms?from=mdr>

³²Henry Rome, R. J. (2019, September 19). *The logic of Iran's attack on Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved October 29, 2019, from Atlantic Council: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-logic-of-irans-attack-on-saudi-arabia/>

³³Pethiyagoda, K. (2017, April 28). *India's shifting role in the Middle East*. Retrieved October 28, 2019, from Brookings Institution : <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/04/28/indias-shifting-role-in-the-middle-east/>

³⁴Kobi Michael, Y. G. (2018, Spring). *The Dangers of Failing Middle East States*. Retrieved October 29, 2019, from Middle East Forum : <https://www.meforum.org/7222/failing-middle-east-states>

³⁵ Ibid.

various countries. The failure of state system in the Middle East and North Africa region is only going to increase the number of non-state actors who are opposed to the norms of secular nationhood.

Conclusion

So far, President Trump has resisted the temptation to take direct military action against Iran. However, the US walkout from the nuclear deal and re-imposition of crippling oil sanctions on Iran is a dangerous precedent for the region as it could lead to even more Iranian sponsored attacks against targets in the Persian Gulf. This could eventually lead to a direct military conflict between the United States and Iran. A war between the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel on one side and Iran on the other would be disastrous for the global economy, especially for countries in the Indo-Pacific that are reliant on the crude oil and natural gas reserves of the Middle East which account for 30 per cent of global energy supplies. For India, with its near 84 percent dependence on imported crude and a regional diaspora of nearly 8 million migrant workers, the economic and social consequences of another Middle East conflict will be catastrophic.



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