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# ME101 Series Introduction | Q&A with MEI Chairman Bilahari Kausikan

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Prepared by Saddiq Basha and Izzah Aqilah

## **Q: How will new developments and geopolitics in the Middle East, such as the China–Iran deal, affect the region?**

A: These new developments will not have much impact and there is much less to this China–Iran deal than meets the eye. Chinese interest in the Middle East has been quite complicated, with interests in Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, and these interests are not naturally compatible with those in Iran. China might have to soon face the dilemmas of the contradictions of these relationships. There are also no signs of the geopolitical contest between Israel and the Gulf states on one side and Iran on the other side easing off. Furthermore, China's interest in Iran would primarily be in energy. And unlike Saudi Arabia, which is in good economic state and is in a condition to purchase goods from China, that is unlikely to be the case for Iran. Thus, we should not get too impressed by the slogans attached to these relationships because whether they will develop into something truly strategic remains to be seen.

## **Q: Trump's sanctions on Iran have actually forced Iran into China's arms. Will this actually affect the amount of tools that the US can use in the future to pressure small regional states to comply with these terms?**

A: China is a huge back door for Iran but, China is far from a charitable organisation while Iran is in a terrible economic condition because of the sanctions and the mismanagement of its own economy. This means that the officials in Beijing would eventually expect Iran to pay one way or the other. Furthermore, although China and the US are in geopolitical competition, they would not admit that they are mutually interested in the energy security of the Middle East, especially for China who is highly reliant on it.

China would also not be terribly overjoyed over Iran's use of its proxies to threaten the disruption of the tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz or the proxy attack on Saudi refineries. Thus, such a dilemma has to be confronted eventually, especially since no major power has been able to confine its engagement in the Middle East to just economics without getting entangled in the geopolitics.

## **Q: In Saudi Arabia, MBS (Muhammad bin Salman) has been trying to pivot Saudi Arabia's economy away from oil and into a different direction. How effective is this and how will this affect Middle Eastern politics?**

A: This attempt at shifting away from reliance on oil is not unique to Saudi Arabia and has been attempted by other Gulf states such as the UAE, Oman and Qatar. It is especially important for Saudi Arabia because it has a very large and young population. Saudi Arabia's process of weaning itself from its dependence on one single commodity happened quite some time ago and it involved not just economic changes but also included social changes in the role of women and youth in society. Any failure will bring about drastic effects that will be felt not just in the Gulf but also in the Muslim communities around the world.

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For example, Saudi Arabia is currently liberalising many of its social norms and even cutting back the power of the imams. Therefore, if it should fail, there could be a complete backlash. Furthermore, it is

uncertain if Saudi Arabia has the skilled manpower or an education system that can develop a relevant manpower in order to develop other kinds of industries.

**Q: Pertaining to the recent strategy which we have seen being made by countries like Turkey, Iran and Malaysia to form some sort of an alliance in the region that serves to run parallelly to the OIC, what are your views on that?**

A: The individual responsible for that initiative was a 95-year-old who is no longer the prime minister of Malaysia. I am not sure whether the present prime minister, or any future prime minister, will take the same attitude towards this. I believe that the meeting in Kuala Lumpur was overstated since it was held only once. Furthermore, given the fluidity of alignments in the Middle East, it is not unusual for Middle Eastern states to align themselves simultaneously with two adversaries. Thus, the best thing to do is to “wait and see what's going to happen”.

**Q: There is a growing military cooperation between Israel and some of the Asean countries. What are the factors that have led to the strengthening of this cooperation?**

A: We need to look at this in perspective. Under Suharto, Israel and Indonesia had a good security relationship, albeit under the radar. However, when Reformasi broke out and political Islam became a bigger factor, this cooperation was severely affected. But now, that relationship is just being rebuilt.

For Singapore, we have a good relationship with Israel, which I see as a good thing because political attitudes and geopolitical alignment in the Middle East have fundamentally shifted. As an example, the Palestinian issue is no longer a big deal. Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and recognition of the annexed Golan Heights did not affect the Arab world as much as expected and that is significant.

In comparison, the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia are behind the curve as they place much more emphasis on the Palestinian issue and hold more sceptical views towards Israel, than most of the Arab governments these days.

It is an evolving situation and that the military dimension is only one form of cooperation. Ultimately, I believe these developments with Israel are generally positive.

**Q: The Middle East is profoundly complex, but what is one development you’re watching the most right now? Is it the US–China rivalry or is it the pandemic?**

A: Saudi Arabia’s attempt to reform itself and to reorient its economy away from its dependency on fossil fuel is one to observe as such an attempt will bring about numerous social developments. This would include changes in the role women and youth, changes in conceiving Islam and even bring about the willingness to open itself to Israel and the West.

Furthermore, the relations between Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states are part of these changes. I think that Saudi Arabia should stop its war in Yemen and its confrontation with Qatar.

The future of the House of Saud depends on the ability to develop certain economic outcomes, which means changing its society. Furthermore, such changes would allow Saudi Arabia to compete with Iran, which is a source of concern.

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**Q: What changes would you expect to see in America's Middle Eastern policy under the Biden-Harris administration and what do you expect the world to do about China's treatment of the Uighurs?**

A: For the first question, there will not be significant substantial changes in the substance of American foreign policy in the Middle East.

With regards to Iran, Biden might take a less harsh approach but not entirely because he would not want to seem weak. Even if he wanted to change America's policy towards Iran through the reestablishment of the JCPOA, it is not that simple. This is especially so with the presence of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party which places a strong emphasis on human rights, which are not wonderfully protected in Iran.

With regards to his attitude towards Israel, it would not be very different from that of Trump since he has a good record of supporting Israel. As an example, look at Biden's silence on the possibility of the annexation of the West Bank. However, it would also depend on the influence of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party if there is a Biden presidency.

Ultimately, with a Biden presidency, there will be a change in process, as opposed to substance, particularly a more orderly and traditional way of decision making and a "less dramatic way of conveying decisions" and I welcome that.

As for the Uyghur issue, China has stirred a lot of trouble for itself. No Muslim-majority country has condemned the issue, which I am not surprised by since these countries are not entirely tolerant of their own political Islamists. However, it is the people who are quite aware of this issue, especially in Central Asia, where they share a similar language and ethnicity in their own right.

This is similar to the Salman Rushdie affair and the Danish cartoon incident where no Muslim-majority state would make a commotion about it until it was sparked by discontent from below. Thus, I am very uncertain on the possibility of it becoming a global issue, especially since states such as Malaysia and Indonesia do not want to make a big fuss about it because they want a stable relationship with China. However, the situation might change if a spark is lit in the form of an imam issuing a fatwa against it.

The Uighur Muslims are also part of a global Muslim community or ummah and with their presence online, people will be aware no matter how great China's great firewall is at censoring information. Through my experience travelling, I realised that such an awareness has manifested in certain Central Asian countries as seen in the delay of various One Belt, One Road projects which have been rejected by the local populace who are unhappy with the treatment of the Uighur Muslims.

Lastly, despite it being a very volatile situation, the Middle East seems less effected since the Arab Muslims are much more detached from Central Asia although they are aware of what's happening.

**Q: As far as political Islam is concerned, do you think that we should be refocusing our attention from the developments and influences in the Middle East to Malaysia or Indonesia instead? This is especially so since the mediated form of Islam in Singapore is linked to the developments in Malaysia and Indonesia?**

A: I agree with the stated opinion but why is Islam in the Islamic world influenced by a stricter and more fundamentalist interpretation as opposed to the more enlightened, progressive ideas which also exists? This is due to the role of money and how the enlightened philosophers of Islam lack financial backing.

Furthermore, there might be a more profound reason for the existence of Islamist ideas. For example, Singapore does not allow Muslim organisations to take money from external sources and yet, such ideas

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and influences are present. This has, to an extent, come from Malaysia and Indonesia, including a “poisonous” radio station in Batam.

After several consultations with Muslim scholars, I realised that the inability for Southeast Asian Muslims to understand Arabic results in the loss of more nuanced interpretations of Islam and instead in a more straightforward Salafi interpretation where a simpler “A or B” answer is deemed more attractive. Thus, there is no way to cut one’s self from the effects of globalisation but instead one can manage it.

As for political Islam in Malaysia, the political establishment has used Islam for political reasons as opposed to religious reason itself. Ultimately, it has to do with the role of the government and how it conceives its role when handling such religious influences. Contrast Malaysia with Singapore, for example, the Singapore government conceives itself as the defender of common spaces for all faiths, whereas in Malaysia, certain groups of Malaysians believe that it is haram to wish a non-Muslim friend a “Happy Chinese New Year” or “Merry Christmas”. This development was not the case many years ago.

Ultimately it is not the intrinsic attraction to one theology over another or one interpretation of Islamic law for another but rather, it is the role of money and how it is used by people in power.

**Q: About the most recent happening in Lebanon which resulted in a large outpouring of anger, what would you say is the best course of action or the best possible outcome for Lebanon?**

A: I do not foresee any great prospects in reforming Lebanon because it is broken and it is difficult to imagine of a situation where Lebanon can be fixed. Hezbollah remains the de-facto power despite not being proficient in governing. The crumbling of Lebanon is yet another source of instability in the northern tier of the Middle East, joining the ranks of Iraq, Libya and Syria.

The best course of action would mirror those of Israel, which is to insulate and protect itself from external influences from neighbouring states, especially since Israel is the most stable country in that part of the world.

With regards to Lebanon, if I were in such a position, I would leave because there is no hope.

**Q: If you were appointed as the advisor to President Xi Jinping, how would you advise China to change its engagements in the Middle East in order to further its interest, especially in energy security and its One Belt, One Road project? Assuming China follows your advice, how would this impact Singapore?**

A: If put in such a position, I would advise him to work with the Americans instead of competing with them since both of them share a common interest, and that is stability. Regardless of one’s interest, stability is needed and unfortunately, there is no intrinsic sort of stability within the Middle East. To make things worse, regional powers such as Israel, Iran, Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are sources of instability themselves given their complex relationship with one another. More often than not, stability comes when it is imposed from outside. Although these major powers cannot control the dynamics of the Middle East, they can work together towards bringing stability to the region and this would be ideal for Singapore and beyond.

**Q: I have a prediction that in the near future, the Middle East will be more cooperative. What are your comments on that?**

A: I hope that such a situation would be a reality but I do not see an end to the conflict in Yemen or the conflict between Israel and Syria or the internal crisis in Lebanon. I also do not foresee any end to the confrontation between Iran and the Gulf or Saudi Arabia. I only hope that these conflicts can be managed so that they don’t get into our heads.

**Q: If the United States would seek your advice on three strategic options for their political, military posture in the Middle East, what would those options be?**

A: I would advise the United States to return to their traditional role as a offshore balancer, which they are already doing now.

Secondly, I would advise them to abandon the illusion that they can influence internal political dynamics in any of the Middle Eastern countries or make them democracies of a Western model as opposed to a democracy that emerges organically. Ironically, the countries with the most stability in the Middle East are monarchies and not in the more republican forms of government.

Lastly, I would advise them to work together with other major powers such as China and Russia, despite differences in opinion or political rivalries in other regions of the world, as they share a common interest. Stability in the Middle East can only be assured if all the major powers work together.

**Q: I would like to ask about the way Singapore played a role in the conflict between the United States and North Korea. Would you suggest that a similar role could be played in the context of the Middle East?**

A: Singapore did not play a role in the conflict between the US and North Korea; it merely provided a relatively neutral location for them to talk to each other. The conflicts in the Middle East are in a different category from that of US and North Korea.

The conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen are internal tensions and there is no outsider who can play a role in that. For interstate conflicts such as the one between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, both sides are not willing to set aside their differences and come to a conclusion. Until they choose to compromise, there is no way any outsider could mediate the conflict.

This is true for most conflicts in the Middle East, including the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Such a conflict would take a miracle to resolve especially since any settlement would not be favourable to neither Hamas nor the Israelis. I see no solution for the Palestinian conflict or all other interstate and internal conflicts in the Middle East. Thus, I do not see a role for Singapore since it is a small country and does not really want to get involved in such things.

**Q: With the recent growth of African economies, such as Nigeria, which is an oil-exporting economy, will the major superpowers (US and China) shift their focus to Africa?**

A: I believe that the major powers are quite capable of “walking and chewing gum at the same time”, which means that a greater focus on Africa will not translate into less focus on the Middle East. Thus, I do not see it as an “either/or” situation.

**Q: You mentioned that being in a state of conflict suits the regime in Iran. Which regime in particular?**

A: It doesn’t really matter who is in charge of Iran since the Islamic Republic is essentially run by the mullahs. The complicated internal system in Iran is under immense pressure, especially with its economy in shambles. Thus, conflict with an external enemy would stir a sense of extreme patriotism and rally the Iranian people towards supporting the state, despite not favouring their leaders.

**Q: Since Rouhani was elected on the basis of reconciling with the Western powers, are we expecting to see any development?**

A: Rouhani is in power because the Supreme Leader allowed him to be in power and he will be in power as long as the Supreme Leader thinks it is useful to have a more moderate leader.

**Q: You mentioned that there are problems that comes with Arabisation, or more precisely, religious exclusivism. Do you think there are solutions that Singapore can learn from the Middle East, since they've been grappling with these issues in the first place?**

A: The Middle East has not been grappling with such issues very well in the first place and existing “solutions” to deal with political Islam tended to be brutal; these are practices that Singapore would not adopt since the system of governments are fundamentally different. Comparing Saudi Arabia and Singapore, the former’s legitimacy stems from its status as the custodian of the two holy mosques, whereas the Singapore government’s legitimacy comes from its ability to create and protect common space between all religious groups. Thus, that there is nothing to learn from the Middle East except for what not to do.