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# ME101: Series Introduction | Developments in the Middle East: Why Singapore Should Care

**By Mr Bilahari Kausikan, MEI chairman**

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**Moderator Michelle Teo:** This is one of our annual flagship events, and I want to welcome all of you today. Let me just start off, before I introduce our speaker, with the question — why the Middle East matters for us in Singapore? I think we have to remember that we are largely an immigrant society and we're multi-ethnic, multicultural, multireligious and we all hail from somewhere. More importantly the ties between the Middle East, or more accurately what we call West Asia, the ties between West Asia and Asia, particularly South and Southeast Asia go far back. So, therefore, the relevance, I think, of this series that we start to kick off today. I welcome all of you, and I hope that you will join us through all 12 sessions in this series.

Now let me talk a little bit about our speaker who needs little introduction. He's controversial but forthright honest for not sugar coating the truth. Bilahari Kausikan is the chairman of the Middle East Institute and until he retired, a senior civil servant. He was permanent secretary of Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2013, having served the second permanent secretaries since 2001. He was subsequently ambassador at large until May 2018 and his earlier appointments at the ministry include deputy secretary for Southeast Asia, permanent representative to the United Nations in New York and ambassador to the Russian Federation. Please join me in welcoming Bilahari. Bilahari, the floor is yours.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Okay, thanks. Michelle. I want to leave as much time as possible for questions, so I will get straight to the topic. Why should Singapore care about the Middle East? Well, the short answer is, despite our very best efforts over quite some time to ignore the Middle East, the Middle East refused to ignore us. And I don't mean that facetiously, I mean that literally.

My very first job in MFA when I joined the service in 1981 to be precise, my very first job was to be desk officer for the Middle East. And I held that august position for all of 40 minutes before our then permanent secretary, Mr SR Nathan, the late SR Nathan, our former president, found out about it and, as it was reported to me, which I later confirmed with him, he said: "Give the boy a proper job." And that pretty much sums up our attitude to the Middle East for a long time.

We had at that time, only two diplomatic missions in the Middle East and the reasons for setting them up had very little to do with the Middle East per se. We had a mission in Cairo, Egypt, not because we were particularly interested in Egypt or North Africa or the Middle East but because when we were unceremoniously removed from Malaysia, we needed diplomatic recognition and Egypt was one of the leading lights of the non-aligned movement. And we thought we'd better have a presence there so we could, if necessary, make contact with other members of the non-aligned movement and get their diplomatic recognition. We also had, and this is the only other mission we had in the Middle East, a consulate in Jeddah and it was not because we are particularly interested in Saudi Arabia. It's only to serve

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Singaporean Muslims who went on the Hajj, in other words, for most of the year, they didn't have very much to do.

This doesn't mean that we didn't have anything to do with the Middle East, but it was very gentle, very marginal. We, of course, interacted with Middle Eastern countries in places like the UN, the non-aligned meeting and other international organisations; we dealt with Middle East issues in the UN. But many of you who know the UN will know that it is a very artificial environment. What happens in the UN is only peripherally connected to what happens in the real world. We are, of course, an oil refining centre but the oil supplies were secured by the oil major so we didn't really have to worry about it. And the closest relationship we had in the Middle East was with Israel. I'll talk a bit more about Israel later on. And we had to balance our relations with the Arab countries with Israel but by and large, this was not a deep relationship. It is not something we spent a lot of time on and Mr S R Nathan, the late Mr Nathan, was not wrong when he said to my boss then to give the boy a proper job and I did something else. But this was pretty much the situation of our relationship with the Middle East, until the late 1990s and the early 2000s when we discovered, despite all these efforts to ignore the Middle East, the Middle East refused to ignore us.

Around that time, the late 1990s, early 2000s, we began to recognise that something was happening all around us in Singapore and all around us in Southeast Asia that was connected to the Middle East, and what we began to notice was that Islam as traditionally conceived of and practised in Southeast Asia was being transformed by influencers from the Middle East. Now, Islam, of course, comes from the Middle East originally but the Islam that was practised in Southeast Asia, as it had evolved over centuries in Southeast Asia, was a very open syncretic one, very Sufist, incorporating elements of Hinduism, Buddhism and you know traditional culture — the *adat* of the indigenous peoples of this region. But it was being transformed almost without us noticing it.

And by the time we started to notice it, it had substantially changed. This is a phenomenon that I and some others have called the Arabisation of Islam in Southeast Asia. It really should be called a Wahabisation or the Salafisation of Islam in Southeast Asia, whereas this traditional, open, syncretic way of practising Islam was being replaced by something that was more purist in focus, narrower in focus, and more exclusive in its focus. And this was a matter of concern, not a religious concern per se because how anybody wants to practise any religion is their own business, but because every society in Southeast Asia, certainly Singapore, is a plural society. There is no homogeneous society in Southeast Asia. Even Thailand and Vietnam, which seemed to be homogeneous, on closer look are less homogeneous, but they are mainland countries. In maritime Southeast Asia in Malaysia, in Indonesia, in the Philippines, there are no homogeneous societies and there are substantial Muslim communities in these all these countries, and if they were becoming more inward-looking, this had profound implications for the social stability of these countries and the politics of these countries and including ourselves, of course.

It was around this time that in Malaysia, Dr Mahathir Muhammad challenged PAS, the Islamist party, by telling them, you know, why are you asking for Malaysia to become a Muslim state, we are already a Muslim state. Now that was not, strictly speaking, correct, because if you look at the Malaysian constitution, the role of religion is a much more nuanced but it started a dynamic in which if you, as a Muslim, are inclined to moderation, to openness, you're bound to lose. Because now if he has considered that Malaysia is a Muslim country, then the only question that remains to be settled is how Muslim are you and if you are a Muslim party, you are definitely able to outbid a secular party, a secular nationalist party, which UMNO used to be. And notice, I use the past tense.

Around the same time, we discovered a terrorist plot in Southeast Asia. Jemaah Islamiya (JI), whose goal was to through means of terror to establish a caliphate in Southeast Asia, comprised mainly of the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia. Singapore was irrelevant. We were just in between and it was assumed, we would disappear when the Caliphate was established. Now the connection between what I call the Arabisation of Southeast Asia or the Wahhabisation of Islam in Southeast Asia, and this terror plot is not

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a direct one. Of course, it is not a direct one. Irrespective of how they choose to practise their religion, the majority of Muslims in Southeast Asia are not interested in terrorism, it is a religion of peace; they want to live peacefully.

However, it defies the imagination to think that there is no broad or loose correlation between these two phenomena, particularly since JI was linked to Al Qaeda. It's not just Muslims, by the way, that have been influenced by the Middle East. Christianity is also a Middle Eastern religion in its origins and around the same time, various strains of Evangelical Christianity, whose political and social attitudes were coloured by events in the Middle East, began to influence Southeast Asia through the modality of mainly American Evangelical movement. In any case, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, decided that we needed to understand more about this phenomenon and the source of this phenomenon and began our engagement of the Middle East.

Mr Goh personally led several missions to the Middle Eastern countries to establish deeper relationships. And that is also the origins of the Middle East Institute because he thought in this complicated region, it was necessary for the government to have a more independent source of assessments and that was why the Middle East Institute was formed in the first place. Now I don't want you to get the impression that it's only because of this Arabisation phenomenon that we are interested in the Middle East. It's not possible to study the Middle East, without taking religion into consideration, but more often than not religion is only a cover for geopolitical interests, geopolitical dynamics that have actually nothing to do with Singapore or Southeast Asia, but nonetheless influenced us.

For example, in so far as Saudi Arabia or the other Gulf States began to propagate their versions or their ideas on Islam, in Southeast Asia and other regions of the world, it was after the Iranian revolution when they saw themselves as the champions of the Sunni version of Islam, a particular type of the Sunni version of Islam vis-a-vis Iran, which was claiming a greater authenticity for the Shia religion because they had conducted an Islamic revolution, the first one, they say. And, you know, the number of Shia in Southeast Asia is minuscule but because of the geopolitical dynamics, the origins of which have got nothing to do with Singapore or Southeast Asia, a certain degree of sectarian tension has been introduced into countries like Indonesia and Malaysia and I don't think Singapore is free of it either. Although it is a very, very, very mild form in Singapore.

Now, and this sectarian tensions in say, Malaysia, Indonesia have really nothing to do with the religion. They are being used by politicians for political advantage, as they are being used in the Middle East for geopolitical advantage and it is necessary, I think, for Singaporeans to understand that while religion, which is supposed to be universal, is only in the Middle East, more often than not, a cover, an excuse for geopolitical interests that have nothing to do with our region. It changes your attitude towards things to happen. That's why we need to understand the Middle East in greater depth.

Now, that is the reason why we began to engage the Middle East in the first place. It was essentially a defensive interest. To understand better something that was influencing our environment around us and to some degree in Singapore too. But as we began to engage the Middle East, more deeply, we found that while we were ignoring them, they were not ignoring us. In the Gulf, in particular, they were studying Singapore's experience to see what lessons they could take for their own economic development for their own social-cultural development. And of course, we were happy to help them. And in the process, we found that there were positive interests, economic interest mainly, that we could tap into.

We made mistakes because we were so ignorant. We made mistakes as we began to deeply engage the Middle East with this positive agenda of sharing our experience. I'll give you just one example, which sounds very stupid when I articulate it. One of the Gulf states were very interested in our Civil Service College and wanted us to help them to start a civil service college of their own because they greatly admired the efficiency of the Singapore civil service and wanted to know how we trained our civil service and so on.

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We were happy to help and they were willing to pay us, to give us a contract and help establish the civil service college in that Gulf State. What did we do in our infinite wisdom? We sent a very young woman to go and engage that country, which was a totally culturally insensitive thing to do. Now, this young woman, who is no longer young because it was quite some time ago, was a very competent person. She

was probably the best person, from a purely technocratic point of view, to go and help these people, first of all, conceptualise exactly how they wanted to do the civil service college. But of course, when she met in a big patriarchal society like as this particular Gulf state was and still is to a large extent, she didn't get very far. And, you know, it was a complete mess. Now, that's just one small example of the kinds of mistakes we made as we began to more deeply engage the Middle East.

So by the mid-2000s, we had both a defensive agenda and a positive agenda. The weight between the defensive and positive agenda is not equal, they vary over time. It started with a very defensive agenda, it became a very positive agenda. The positive agenda has kind of plateaued I think for now at least because the Middle East and the Gulf, in particular, have other preoccupations but it has not disappeared entirely and now that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are looking more insistently than the past to diversify their economies away from total dependence on just one commodity, energy. I think the positive agenda will become more prominent once again. Without, but of course, neglecting the other part of the agenda.

At the heart of this effort to change their economy, which will entail some degree of changing their society, particularly with regard to the role of women in the world of young people in their societies is Saudi Arabia. The other Gulf states, the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, were a bit more advanced, but they are essentially quite small countries and what they do will have a very limited impact. What Saudi Arabia does, whether it succeeds in its reform efforts or it fails, will have a profound effect on the entire Muslim world. It's a bit early to say whether they will succeed or fail, but it's something that we should watch very carefully, both for our defensive agenda and our positive agenda.

Last September, I and another member of the Middle East Institute went to Saudi Arabia. I hadn't been there for some years and I was quite pleasantly surprised by what I saw. For example, I saw a number of Saudi women. I wouldn't say is a huge number, but a discernible number of Saudi women no longer covered their head. It is now not an obligation, the religious police have been cut down to size and it's now up to the individual whether she wants to cover her head or not. Some of them wore colourful abayas, in the past it's all black. Again, not a huge amount, but in that context, it was very striking to me and I think quite significant. And of course, you know now entertainment is allowed. People can go to the cinema, people can listen to music, women are allowed to drive and much more important than women being allowed to drive is, I saw in the places I visited in Saudi Arabia, women working. And I don't mean working by serving tea or coffee or something like that. I mean, we recently visited, for example, the diplomatic institute of Saudi Arabia (Institute of Diplomatic Studies), which is a department of the foreign ministry and there are quite a number of the researchers were women. And these are all very good signs.

But it's an early stage of the Saudi reform process and whether they will succeed or not is an open question. Of course, it is in our interest and the interest of actually every country in the world to hope and do what we can to help the Saudis succeed, but in the end, it is up to them and the challenges are great. Any case, we are now committed to the long term engagement of the Middle East. And, you know, our presence, our footprint in the Middle East has increased exponentially. I began by telling you that we have only we had only two missions in the Middle East, in Cairo and a consulate in Jeddah, now we have full embassies in Saudi Arabia, in the UAE, in Egypt, in Turkey. We have consul-generals in Oman, in Muscat in Oman, in Dubai, in Jeddah and we have non-resident ambassadors to Kuwait, to Jordan, to Israel and to Iraq.

One of our first free trade agreements, by the way, was with Jordan is a kind of practice. Is not that the economic relationship was so great or so deep or so important, but when we were beginning to learn how to negotiate free trade agreements, we began learning through with Jordan and we had a very interesting Technical Assistance Programme in conjunction with Japan for Jordan, for the entire Middle East.

Let me say a few words about Israel. Our main interest, the Middle East, can be divided into two sectors: kind of northern tier, or what used to be called the Levant, which includes Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, the North African countries, and the southern tier, which is basically the Gulf. Our main interests, whether defensive or positive, are with the Gulf. Of course, we have a growing interest in Turkey, mainly economic, but our relationship with Israel in the northern tier is an old one.

I don't know how many of you know, it used to be a deep deadly secret, but no longer is a deep deadly secret that when we became unexpectedly independent, shall we say, politely. One of the most urgent tasks, because relations with both our neighbours north and south were rather fraught in those days, was to establish an armed force, a credible arm force. And we went around the world, asking many countries, whether they would help us do so.

The entire might of the Singapore Armed Forces at that time was two battalions of infantry. 1 SIR and 2 SIR (Singapore Infantry Regiment) and to our horror, we found that the majority of the soldiers were Malaysians and back they went to Malaysia. So we went around the world, asking people; we asked the British, we asked the Australians, we asked the Indians, we even asked the Egyptians among others: "Will you help us form an armed force?". And they all turned us down. For very good reason, because nobody thought we would survive. So why antagonise two big countries, Malaysia and Indonesia, to help Singapore when Singapore is not going to be around for much longer.

Israel, however, did help us and that was a very crucial assistance at a very crucial time of our history and the foundation of that relationship. If not for the help, I am not sure that we would be, that I'll be here talking to you today. And certainly, all you see around us in Singapore probably would not exist. Now the relationship with Israel has grown since then, it's not a purely defence or security relationship, it encompasses research and development, it encompasses education, a number of fields.

I visit Israel quite often, at least once or twice a year, since I retired, more often twice a year, and I have often run into groups of Singaporean students who are studying in Israel, mainly from NUS, they have some kind of programme that allows them to spend an academic year in Israel, and they all enjoy themselves. So it is a broad relationship and it is not one that has ever really proved to be an obstacle to developing our deeper engagement of the Arab countries.

Let me tell you a story. Some years ago when I was still in the foreign ministry. I visited a certain Gulf state, which shall remain anonymous, for bilateral consultations. So I went there. I arrived there. And the next morning I woke up and opened the English language newspaper and I found that the Israelis had started Operation Cast Lead to go into Gaza to stop rocket attacks on Israel. And I said to myself, oh shit, you know, because I'm going to get an ear full from my counterpart. So I went to see him and I had an earful, for five minutes about Israel. Most of the long meeting we had was him telling me how the real threat was Iran. Now, we don't have to buy that wholesale because we have a good relationship with Iran. It's not an easy relationship all the time, but it's one that we value in wanted to develop, but it just showed you that Israel is no longer a very sensitive issue for most of the Arab world, at least for Arab governments. Palestine is still there as an issue, but it is not one that really exercises Arab governments anymore and many of the Gulf States, in particular, have developed their own ties with Israel. Used to be very secret but now it has hardly secret anymore. This gives us more room actually to develop a relationship with both Israel and the Arab countries, and that's a good thing.

Now, Israel is a very complicated society, which is in itself in a process of rapid change. There are all kinds of tensions within Israel. Between the ultra-Orthodox Jews and the more secular Jews, between the Arab Israelis and the Jewish Israelis, but I see in my own experience, and from what I've read, the Arab Israelis are becoming more integrated into the mainstream of at least the secular part of Israeli society. If you go to the University of Haifa, Haifa is in the northern, middle northern part of Israel, and it's a traditionally Arab area. If you go to the University of Haifa, you really can't tell a male Arab student from a Jewish student. Females you can tell because many of them still cover their head right, but they all speak



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Hebrew quite fluently to my ears. They all study there together and young people, they dress alike, apart from the hijab or the tudung. And more important, recently they are more and more Arabs from East Jerusalem, who are joining Hebrew University in Jerusalem because they want to learn Hebrew, they want to get good jobs, they want to be more integrated into Israeli society.

Anyway, enough about that. Let me just turn to my last point about why we should be interested in the Middle East. The Middle East is in a state of geopolitical flux. I mean, you could say the Middle East is always in a state of geopolitical flux because it's not the most stable region in the world, but it is in a more than usual state of instability and flux. Now, how geopolitics plays out in the Middle East will have an indirect impact on how things are regarded in other parts of the world.

The US is recalibrating its role in the Middle East. This is sometimes described in the media as the US retreating from the Middle East. I think that's a very simplistic way of looking at it. The US made a serious mistake when it got involved in ground wars in the Middle East after 2003. It is now recalibrating its presence, to play its traditional role of an offshore balancer, it is running down its ground presence and this began under President Obama; it's not something that Trump thought up for himself. But I see no sign of the US 5th fleet leaving Bahrain, I see no sign of the US Air Force leaving Qatar where it has a very huge base. At the same time, Russia has dealt itself into the Middle East equation, mainly because of mistakes made by Secretary John Kerry I think in the second Obama administration but Russia's ability to operate in the Middle East is limited because don't forget, Russia has an economy, about the size of South Korea.

China is also trying to engage the Middle East, more closely, but trying to limit its engagement to economics, largely economics. Trade, investment and so on, whether it will succeed or not remains to be seen, because there is no major power that has been able to avoid getting sucked into the geopolitics of the Middle East. And how this plays out will have an indirect impact on our own region. And let me just give you two examples.

You remember, only some of you will remember, who follow these things, that President Obama drew a red line in the sand over Syrian use of chemical weapons in its civil war, but he did nothing to enforce that red line, and when he drew a red line and did nothing to enforce it, the credibility of American power was eroded globally, including in our own region.

On the other hand, when Mr Trump drew a red line and decided to bomb Syria over its use of chemical weapons, while having dinner with Xi Jinping, he did a lot to restore the credibility of American power in our region and globally. There are other examples I can give you, but I promise that I don't want to speak too long. I will now stop at this point and I would welcome your questions. Let's have a dialogue. I don't want this to just be a monologue.

We have got a record audience for this Middle East 101 series; I see there are 175 or so participants. Which isn't bad, so please let's have a dialogue we have we have about half an hour or so.