
ME101 Lecture 2: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | Iran, Turkey, Russia — Allies, Foes or Marriages of Convenience.

Speakers: Dr Asif Shuja and Dr Serkan Yolacan

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By Sadiq Basha, Intern, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

Any discussion on geopolitics within the Middle East would be incomplete if it is merely focused on the Arab Gulf states. There is a need to expand our scope to the Greater Middle East, which include not only Turkey and Iran, but also their traditional neighbours such as Russia. Hence it begs the question: what are the ambitions and capabilities of these three countries, especially with their seemingly expansionist agenda as they become major players in the Middle East and Northern Africa? How do they navigate their relationships between one another as their relationships shift according to their interests, making them simultaneously partners and foes? In this lecture, MEI Senior Research Fellow Asif Shuja and MEI Research Fellow Serkan Yolacan led the discussion of this dynamic geopolitical competition in the Middle East.

The Historical Roots of a Reemergent and Expansionist Turkey

Dr Yolacan started off by providing a general overview of Turkey and its re-emergence in the 21st century as a state with an expansionist outlook — which he clarified is not manifested in the form of territorial annexation or colonial intervention, but as a political agenda to build cultural and economic influence, which is derived from a sense of moral obligation or a form of historical entitlement to be involved in the affairs of other states. This was evident from Turkey's involvement in various military conflicts, energy rivalries and peace process etc, which spanned from North Africa to even Southeast Asia.

With this in mind, Dr Yolacan highlighted how this image of Turkey was rather unthinkable even during the Cold War, where it was inward looking and had minimal ambition beyond its borders. He asked: what explains this transformation of Turkey from an inward looking state to one with newfound confidence? Although some might be quick to point to the role and rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Dr Yolacan argued that the root to Mr Erdogan's vision, confidence and tools are embedded in several key turning points in Turkey's history, which provided it with the foundations for an expansionist agenda.

One such turning point, he argued, was the economic liberalisation of Turkey, which enabled small enterprises in provincial towns of Turkey to participate in the export economy, consequently allowing them to accumulate significant wealth and build capacity in key sectors such as manufacturing and construction. This had namely two significant consequences.

Firstly, these provincial entrepreneurs from conservative Muslim backgrounds were able to threaten monopolies of big business, which had been protected by state subsidies up till that point.

Secondly, and more importantly, these Muslims entrepreneurs grew wealthy without the support and protection of the Turkish state. Thus, they did not feel obliged to uphold the official ideology of the state — specifically one of hardline secularism.

Hence, this new social force consisting of Muslim entrepreneurs, which became known as the Anatolian Tigers, created solidarity networks which not only enabled further economic cooperation among themselves but also created an alternative channel for the dissemination of ideas. These channels largely remained at the periphery of cultural and intellectual production in the country and were often critical of state policies. These dissenting ideas specifically called for a new social contract that would respect the sentiments and aspirations of the Muslim majority. Furthermore, and more importantly, it targeted the inward looking logic of the state and sought to reconnect with and revive the imperial past of the country.

Thus, the circulation of such ideas through these solidarity networks resulted in the rise of a new right-wing ideology known as the Turkish Islamic synthesis — particularly one which views Islam as indispensable to Turkish identity and sees the Turks as having a privileged role in spreading Islam. Dr Yolacan argued that this new ideological mission and the growing wealth in the hands of these Anatolian Tigers made these Muslim networks especially interested in the developments of other Muslim communities, especially those living under colonial or oppressive regimes.

According to Dr Yolacan, these developments became especially salient after the second turning point — the collapse of the communist bloc in 1991. It provided these mercantile networks with the opportunity to bring these former communist countries, including states in the Caucasus, Balkans and Central Asia, to the fold of Islam and that of global capitalism. In other words, it propelled them into a transnational force, a force which married Turkey's economic liberalisation to the post-Cold War dynamism of its neighbourhood. Subsequently, it expanded its operations beyond former communist spaces, including sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Americas.

Hence, by following the footsteps of these networks, Mr Erdogan was able to win major political points, both domestically and in foreign affairs. Domestically, he became the political voice of these provincial networks and thus could portray himself as a democratic reformer. By bringing the Muslim majority in the periphery to the political centre, he was able to build a new international profile for Turkey as an outward looking and assertive country that defends the interest in the neighbourhood and beyond.

Dr Yolacan reminded us that this network perspective will enable us to understand the social and ideological basis of Mr Erdogan's political assertiveness and avoid the mistake of seeing these imperial symbols and historical and religious narrative as mere tools of deception employed by the strongmen. In fact, they are the very language of communication between the leader and the networks, and also Turkey's engagement with other states and societies.

An example can be seen in Turkey's foreign policy, when Mr Erdogan visited the Pakistani parliament early this year. He gave a rousing speech where he invoked the Muslim empire of the Mughals and the Ghaznavid, which emphasised the shared Turkic heritage in South Asia. In effect, this offered an alternative historical imagination which envisaged the Pakistanis as partners in empire building.

In return, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan also injected history into the bilateral relation by promoting the widely popular Turkish TV series — *Resurrection*, which was set in 13th century Anatolia, in which Turkish Muslim heroes waged a religious war against the Byzantines. To Dr Yolacan, this portrayed Turkey's effective use of soft power through its imperial history to communicate religious and imperial symbols to other parts of the world. In contrast, the Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and Egypt were quite wary of Muslim networks and less enamoured by its imperial glory or histories. Dr Yolacan said this highlighted one key difference between states with long imperial histories such as Turkey and Iran and that of the other Arab states — namely a historically constructed Muslim sensibility.

Hence he argued that this difference, combined with the ongoing Iran Gulf rivalry, resulted in a broader geopolitical realignment in the region in recent years as evident by the recent Kuala Lumpur Summit in 2019, which was attended by Turkey, Iran, Qatar among others, and was not attended by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Although such exchanges might have no real outcome in the short run, Dr Yolacan predicted that it might have a long term impact instead.

In conclusion, he stressed how long imperial histories gives countries like Turkey, Iran and even Russia a language, which is largely absent in the Arab world, to mobilise networks, discourses and build partnerships around the world.

The Battle of Perspectives: Iran

Carrying on from where Dr Yolacan left off, Dr Shuja spoke about the equal importance of historical narration in shaping Iran's trajectory, which he argued went beyond merely the 1979 revolution and should include its imperial past. To Dr Shuja, the imperial historical experience of Iran, Turkey and Russia had imbibed in them a particular set of strategic culture, which in turn shaped the mentality of their respective leaders. Similarly, he highlighted the way Iran's domestic politics continue to hinge around the US stemmed from a certain historical perspective. This is especially evident with the killing of General Qasem Soleimani, which resulted in the US embassy, the focal point of the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, being converted into a shrine of sorts for pilgrims to do their mourning. He showed the importance of the historical perspective in the understanding of the present.

According to Dr Shuja, Iran has been portrayed by the United States to be a rogue state with "malign" behaviour. Though he did not dispute this description, he argued that if one does not understand Iran's perspective and imperatives, one will not be able to benefit from the potential trading opportunities, especially since Iran has one of the largest hydrocarbon reserves in the world, with whom trade has been stopped since the implementations of the sanctions.

How the World Sees Iran

In an attempt to explain how the world perceives Iran, Dr Shuja divided these shifting perspective into four historical phases.

The first phase was the first decade after the Iranian revolution in 1979 under the leadership of supreme leader Sayyid Ruhollah Khomeini. Dr Shuja explained the establishment of the first Islamic republic created the image of an expansionist Iran and this notion was confirmed by the concept of the exportation of the revolution, which was enshrined in Iran's constitution. After Iran's Islamic revolution, countries in its neighbourhood were worried that this revolution would eventually spread and affect them — creating the initial conflict and hostility towards Iran. However, Iran's expansionist mentality or approach resided with the death of Khomeini and as the Iran–Iraq War took a toll on Iran. In other words, Iran distanced itself from such ideologies as it refocused on rebuilding its country.

The second phase was the post-9/11 period. According to Dr Shuja, this was a turning point for Iran because its identity as a Shia country and the leader of the Shia community allowed it to differentiate itself from the predominantly Sunni-based acts of terrorism. Thus during this period, Iran was viewed differently by the United States and even allowed for short-lived cooperation between the two before the presidency of Mr George W Bush. This was a stark contrast from the US perception of Iran today.

The third phase coincided with the resurgence of IS, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, in 2014. Similar to the second phase, Iran was again viewed as the leader of the Shia community and hence, was naturally perceived as a threat to IS. Dr Shuja pointed out that it was no coincidence that the Iran nuclear deal was concretised about a year later. Furthermore, he argued that the deal was not merely the brainchild of President Barack Obama in an attempt to solely address Iran's nuclear proliferation and regional expansionism, but it was also due to the crucial role that Iran played in the greater scheme of things.

The last phase was the period after the nuclear deal and the presidency of Mr Donald Trump. Dr Shuja argued that the United States' and Iran's conflicting relationship resurfaced and this provided revisionist powers like Russia and China to undermine America's pervasive power in the Middle East as they attempted to utilise Iran as an instrument to revise the entire game plan or dynamics in the region.

How Iran Sees the world

Dr Shuja began by elaborating two changes which explain how Iran perceives the world that it resides in. Firstly, Iran initially felt shackled after confronting the big threat in the form of its neighbour Iraq under Saddam Hussein, which it fought a war with for eight years. However, with the invasion of Iraq by the US, which led to the defeat of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein, Dr Shuja said Iran was reinvigorated and felt compelled to reassert its influence in the region.

Secondly, the Iraq war changed the dynamics of the region as it brought American military forces closer to the Iranian border. To Iran, the US government conceiving different policies from a remote area was one thing but to have actual boots on the ground approaching its borders brought in immediate concerns.

To explain Iran's subsequent reaction, Dr Shuja drew a parallel with the Battle of the Trench, which was one of the wars led by Prophet Muhammad. This 'Shia Crescent' as Dr Shuja termed it, was an attempt by Iran to create 'trenches' out of its neighbouring states, including Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. This historically tried and tested strategy essentially allowed Iran to face off any asymmetric power. Hence, what the US referred to as "malign" behaviour was what Iran regarded as statecraft. This strategy was complemented with Iran's missile power, which could be seen as a "stone you can throw on the enemy" from the trenches. Thus, Iran's idea of security, which came in the form of building 'trenches' and consolidating missile power, would allow it to defeat its enemies with patience.

Iran and Russia Relationship

Contrary to popular perception, Dr Shuja explained that Russia and Iran have a complicated relationship — one which was not always on the best of terms. Although Russia and Iran enjoyed moments of cooperation, as evident by the Iranian procurement of the Russian S-300 Missile System and the collaborative effort on the Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran, conflicts did arise from their relationship. This was evident when Russia was bombarding Syria from Iran's Hamadan Airbase, which although marked the height of their cooperation since it was the first time since the Second World War that Iran had provided such access to another country, it also revealed the underlying tensions when Iran criticised Russia for what it saw as an unnecessary measure. Hence, Dr Shuja emphasised the shifting nature of the relationship between Iran and Russia. Another layer of complexity was added when Russia attempted to forge an equally good relationship with other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and even with Israel. Another instance of a conflict between Iran and Russia was evident when the latter, along with China, sided with the United States in 2010 to impose a wide scale of sanctions on Iran.

In conclusion, Dr Shuja stressed that there are no permanent frames when we focus on the geopolitics of a particular region. Hence, we should instead study a particular country or region during a particular time. Only then will we understand and can better predict the development in Iran's relationship with other states whether it be Turkey, Russia or China.

Highlights of the Question & Answer Session

Q: What are the interests of Turkey and Iran vis-a-vis the Kurdistan region of Iraq?

A: Dr Yolacan explained that Turkey's relationship with the Kurdistan region of Iraq has partly been a function of the Turkish state's relationship with its own Kurdish population. As an example, he elaborated on the possible peace process between PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the Turkish state. There was hope that much of the mediation could be sought through the Kurds in Iraq. However, this attempt failed when the relationship between Turkey and its own Kurdish population deteriorated. Inversely, when the relationship between the PKK and the Kurdistan government in Iraq soured, Turkey stepped in and improved its relationship with the Kurdistan region. Hence, Dr Yolacan explained that when observing the history of their relations over the past two decades, there was no clear pattern and rather, their relationship is always a function of the geopolitics of the moment.

Adding on, Dr Shuja mentioned how if one was to talk about the Kurdish issue, one has to consider the Kurdish population across countries such as Iran, Syria, Iraq and Turkey, and how it impacts them. He highlighted how when Kurdistan President Masoud Barzani hailed the Kurdish referendum in Iraq, it was swiftly rejected by the Iraqi government and subsequently, the momentum of the referendum died down. As for Turkey, Dr Shuja explained how the Kurdish issue was critical since further conflict in the region could bring about an influx of Kurdish refugees and even the successionist activities.

Q: How would Turkey's involvement with the recent Mediterranean energy crisis against Greece and Egypt impact its position in or stake in the region?

A: Dr Yolacan explained that a country like Turkey has been involved in a lot of conflicts and that often, its various stakes and interests may come into conflict with those of other countries, like its conflict with Russia over Libya, but converge in other areas. To him, all these stakes provided Turkey with some room to negotiate. As an example, he pointed out that if Turkey is able to forward its interest in Libya, it could potentially strengthen its position against Russia in Syria. Hence to Dr Yolacan, the region resembles a chess game that is stretched across large geography, where an individual conflict, whether it be Yemen between Iran and Saudi Arabia or Libya between many actors, will not resolve on its own. He elaborated further and highlighted how the fate of each conflict is increasingly dependent on one another through these major actors, the most important of which would be the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Russia.

Q: What is the perspective that the proposed alliance that was discussed during the KL summit last year could serve as a potential alternative to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)?

A: Dr Yolacan said Turkey is seriously invested in this alliance and there have been interesting developments. The first, he acknowledged, was indeed the KL Summit in 2019. The second development was when Dr Mahathir Mohammad, Mr Imran Khan and Mr Erdogan announced they would finance a new international English language Muslim channel to correct the misconceptions about Muslims.

More recently, Mr Imran Khan has been defiant towards their traditional ally, Saudi Arabia, which has remained silent on the Kashmiri issue, an issue that Turkey uses as a way to show Pakistan that Turkey will be on its side when any possible conflict occurs in Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

In terms of the viability of these predominantly non-Arab countries save Qatar, Dr Yolacan said politically, they stand to benefit from the tacit political patronage of Russia and potentially China. Financially, having the major oil producer Qatar on its side drastically improves the viability of this alliance. Hence, he concluded that this alliance is here to stay for a while and though he has doubts about its efficiency in bringing about geopolitical change, it is definitely worth watching.