

## **ME 101 Lecture Series 2021**

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

Date: Thursday, 26 August

Speaker: Ms Michelle Teo, Executive Director, Middle East Institute, NUS

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### **Lecture #01: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | The Gulf States – The Competition for Influence**

Date: Thursday, 2 September

Speaker: Dr Clemens Chay

2021 marks the 40th anniversary of the Gulf Cooperation Council as well as the organisation's landmark Al-Ula summit held in January, signalling the end of a diplomatic crisis that began in June 2017. While many lauded the initiative towards rapprochement, sceptics have viewed the move as a Track I reconciliation – between elites – with unresolved grievances on the ground. Since Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain removed the blockade they had imposed on Qatar, only Riyadh has displayed zeal for the restoration of full bilateral ties with Doha.

Other pivotal events happening in and outside of the Gulf must be considered when measuring competition and co-operation in the region. Is rapprochement truly the overarching theme for the Gulf states this year? Does the recent Saudi-Emirati OPEC spat signify an underlying geopolitical clash? Will the courtship of Israel continue among the Gulf states that have yet to normalise relations? This lecture will address these questions and more.

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### **Lecture #02: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | Iran, Turkey, Russia – Allies, Foes or Marriages of Convenience**

Date: Thursday, 9 September

Speakers: Dr Asif Shuja and Dr Serkan Yolaçan

A series of crises have reshaped the Middle East since the end of the Cold War. The Gulf War, the Arab Spring and the prolonged conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya have created a complex geopolitical map of rivalries and interdependence among major powers. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its pivot to Asia have only added to the emerging outlook.

One striking feature of this changing landscape is the newfound geopolitical weight of Turkey, Iran and Russia in the Middle East and Asia. The continuous recalibration of their regional and bilateral policies is further motivated by China's rapidly increasing inroads into West Asia. While describing this post-Cold War regional outlook in their lecture, Dr Asif Shuja and Dr Serkan Yolaçan will explain the dynamics and implications of the growing interplay between Iran, Turkey and Russia.

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### **Lecture #03: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | China – Can the Dragon Tame the Middle East or will the Middle East Tame the Dragon?**

Date: Thursday, 16 September

Speaker: Dr Alessandro Arduino

China is not a new actor in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Beijing's relationship with the Middle East does not exclusively revolve around energy. While the Belt and Road Initiative is intended to increase trade, communication and infrastructure development, Beijing is still not interested in getting entangled in the MENA quagmire.

While the US security umbrella is shifting, China is not eager to increase its security footprint as Beijing aims to support the status quo. China's growing geopolitical influence in the region is still characterised by a very cautious approach. Nevertheless, the security needs related to the protection of personnel and infrastructures along the Belt and Road as well as the national energy security along the maritime routes are forcing Beijing to take an active stance.

Beijing's geopolitical competition in the Middle East is also related to the race for ICT infrastructure implementation and space co-operation (Digital Silk Road) and the fight against Covid-19 (Health Silk Road). Thus far, Middle Eastern states are conscious of the Chinese limits as security providers but at the same time, they consider the need for Chinese capitals and infrastructure investments in a post-Covid-19 world.

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## **Lecture #04: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | The US and Its Allies – Boots on the Ground or Off Platforms**

Date: Thursday, 23 September

Speaker: Dr Jonah Blank

The US has played a dominant role in the Middle East for about seven decades, spending much of that time trying to decrease its presence. Each of the past five presidents has at least sporadically viewed the Middle East as a quagmire and publicly sought increased international involvement to enable the US to redirect its attention to Asia. However, leaving the Middle East has always proven far more difficult than it might seem.

How do the protestations of America's leaders square with persistent involvement by their nation in nearly every issue shaping the politics of the Middle East? Does the US truly welcome greater international engagement, even if that means sharing the stage with geopolitical rivals such as China and Russia? Is there a coherent strategy shaping US policy in the Middle East regardless of the administration or is the American policy one of vacillation and whim? What lessons does the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan hold for US actions towards nations in the larger neighbourhood?

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## **Lecture #05: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | Israel – More than Just Palestine**

Date: Thursday, 30 September

Speaker: Dr Kevjn Lim

In the 1940s to 1970s, Israel waged wars of survival against combined Arab armies many times its size but now, it co-operates with many of them. It has also formed a de facto front with major Sunni governments particularly in the Persian Gulf against a heavily-Shia "Axis of Resistance" fronted by Iran. Against the simmering backdrop of an elusive Israeli-Palestinian peace and a recent, fourth round of armed hostilities with militants in Gaza, what are Israel's current regional axes of co-operation and competition?

This session focuses on the Israel-Iran conflict. A key Israeli focus over much of the past decade has been in the context of the civil war across the northeastern border in Syria, where Iran seeks to entrench itself and Russia continues to acquire influence. Israel's shadow war against the Islamic Republic of Iran has, however, expanded into multiple arenas. What do the recent leadership transitions in both Israel and Iran mean for the continuation of this rivalry?

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## **Lecture #06: The Politics of Economic Reform**

Date: Wednesday, 6 October

Speaker: Ms Rana Karadsheh-Haddad

This presentation will profile the economic development needs of the region and the impact of several events - such as COVID, climate and regional conflict - on the Middle East's ability to address these economic challenges. As the importance of developing human capital and diversifying economic activity has also been heightened as a result of these events, this talk will turn to highlighting this effort. In particular, the GCC countries have been making a concerted effort to diversify their economies away from a high dependence on natural resources and are looking to increasingly develop other industries and economic activities. This talk will highlight the progress made thus far as well as note some of the key initiatives undertaken to help achieve this objective.

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## **Lecture #07: The Challenge Beyond Economics | Renewables as the New Oil or the Geopolitics of Carrots**

Date: Thursday, 14 October

Speaker: Mr Philippe Rose

Gulf countries have enjoyed a dominant position over world crude production and export for decades. However, major structural changes are under way. After a century of growth, global primary energy demand is set to plateau. Furthermore, electricity demand is surging by 80% in the region, with power generation absorbing an ever-increasing share of the Gulf's oil and gas production. As producers of conventional energy scramble to pivot to renewables, will we see the emergence of a new kind of geopolitics or is renewables inherently apolitical, like carrots (in the words of Paul Stevens)? This presentation will explore various dimensions of potential friction from the energy transition.

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## **Lecture #08: The Challenge Beyond Economics | Climate Change in a Desert**

Date: Thursday, 21 October

Speaker: Dr Aisha Al-Sarihi

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) sixth report re-emphasised the fact that we have already caused more than one degree Celsius of heating compared to pre-industrial levels and within the next two decades, are likely to get closer to the 1.5 degree Celsius mark. The document also emphasises that the warming we've experienced to date is affecting the land, air and sea. Furthermore, extreme weather events like heatwaves, floods and droughts have become more frequent and intense since the 1950s. What the Middle East experiences is no exception.

Given its already arid weather conditions, climate change brings additional challenges to the Middle East's water scarcity and security. The region has already seen increasing economic, social and political tensions resulting from water scarcity not only because of the countries' limited availability of freshwater but due to sharing of water resources across some of the Middle Eastern nations. This lecture aims to portray the current status of water scarcity and security issues in the Middle East; explain the potential impacts of these on the region's food, human and energy security and bring examples of solutions adopted by the Middle East to address the ongoing water-related issues.

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## **Lecture #09: The Challenge Beyond Economics | Women and Youth – A Force for Change**

Date: Thursday, 28 October

Speaker: Dr Sharifa Al-Yahyai

When talking about youth and women in the GCC States (Oman, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait), topics like population, unemployment rates and women representation must be discussed and examined.

Women and youth in the MENA region have been the most absent elements in any development process for at least three decades until alerts of poverty and crime rates emerged. Most human development policies and regulations are about human rights in general, with no divisions for young people or women.

The majority of the GCC's population is young and half of them are women and hence, there is no chance of leaving them out from being represented or involved in any national strategies. Education system, labour, healthcare and economy are the milestones of any nation and such systems are built mainly for young people who will sustain the country's developments and progressions which will lead the nation a higher rank globally.

Today, the GCC governments are in a very tough situation – controversial challenges in the context of employment and youth with lack of diversification in economy coupled with the total closure of businesses and nearly half a million migrant workers and investors leaving the countries due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Such challenges also can be seen as a huge opportunity for youth and women to take over and change job markets and business sectors.

Finally, this talk will focus on challenges as well as opportunities for youth and women, mainly in the business and labour markets, as well as the various governments' efforts to reduce the unemployment rate by creating new chances for growth among young citizens and implementing nationalisations policies.

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## **Lecture #10: Religion and Political Islam in the Middle East and Its Impact on Our Region**

**Date:** Friday, 5 November

**Speaker:** Dr Norshahril bin Saat

The 9/11 attacks have refocused the analysis of Islam in Southeast Asia towards the area of security. Concerns about terrorism and radicalism dominate academic and journalistic writings, creating many academic positions in universities and think tanks and promoting Muslim theologians as the spokespersons for "moderate" Islam. Examination of other equally pressing concerns that can also impede Muslims' progress and development, such as non-violent extremism and quality religious education, are neglected.

This lecture examines critically dominant images of Southeast Asian Islam focusing on three countries – Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. In highlight, interaction between the region and the Middle East. Applying the socio-historical approach, the lecture makes three arguments:

- (1) While Islam originated from the Middle East, the type of Islam brought to Southeast Asia was predominantly the Sufi one.
- (2) The heterogeneity of Islam in the Middle East also shapes Southeast Asia differently, depending on which era is discussed and the country of focus.
- (3) Islam and politics take many forms in Southeast Asia, and they adopt and adapt to global and local dynamics, such as capitalism, feudalism, socialism and revivalism.

The impact of Middle East movements such as Sufism, Shiism, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi-Wahhabism, Hizmet and reformism will also be discussed.

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## **Lecture #11: From Fake News to Fake Journalists: Gulf Disinformation that Fooled the World**

**Date:** Thursday, 11 November

**Speaker:** Dr Marc Owen Jones

Using original research garnered from content analysis and open source-research, this presentation highlights how comparatively simple deception tricks fooled dozens of newspaper editors in numerous countries into publishing UAE state-aligned propaganda in 2020. From The Washington Times to the South China Morning Post, hoax journalists used fake profiles and biographies, along with Artificial Intelligence-generated images, to submit op-eds to news outlets around the world. The stories, broadly speaking, aligned with the foreign policy of the blockading states during the Gulf crisis.

This lecture will elaborate on the dangers of social media deception, along with the growing 'export' of disinformation from the Middle East to the rest of the world. In doing so, it emphasises the risks in growing borderless digital authoritarianism enabled by social media, as well as Gulf states' ability to adopt new strategies to disseminate propaganda in increasingly sophisticated ways.

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## **Lecture #12: The Centrality of Central Asia**

**Date:** Thursday, 18 November

**Speaker:** Dr Alessandro Arduino

Central Asia, located at the heart of Eurasia, is one region of particular importance. Previously, with a history of primarily Russian influence, it is increasingly a destination for Chinese investment and a critical bridging point not only between China, Russia and Europe's East-West axis but also in the North-South axis related to South Asia and the Middle East. There are significant opportunities within the economies of Central Asia.

While Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan each pursue their own individual development paths, they share similar challenges concerning national identity, close proximity to major powers, cross-border resource management, underinvestment in sustainable infrastructure, as well as the challenges of economic diversification, job creation and growth. The US and NATO's troops withdrawal from Afghanistan increased Central Asian countries' anxiety over regional stability and possible violence spillover.

Nevertheless, recent important advances in Central Asian regional co-operation mechanisms and economic growth have attracted the interest of a new wave of international investors.

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## **Closing Session: Everything You Wanted to Know about the Middle East but were Afraid to Ask**

Date: Thursday, 25 November

Speaker: Mr Bilahari Kausikan, Chairman, Middle East Institute, NUS