

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

**By Ms Michelle Teo, Executive Director, MEI**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome everyone to our 2021 series and thank you all one, for signing up, and two, for your continuing support of MEI's events.

My name is Michelle Teo and I am the Executive Director at MEI. For those of you wondering what has happened to our Chairman, Bilahari Kausikan, he is currently away but will be back to close our series. Join us then as well and come with the burning questions you've had through this series. You can ask them of our chairman.

A few very quick words about myself. I am not an academic either by training or inclination. I'm a former civil servant and I served in Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for many years before entering the private sector and working at IBM. Coming to MEI is almost full circle for me as I was part of the team that set up the Middle East directorate in MFA all those years ago and worked on the establishment of this Institute.

## **DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: WHY SHOULD SINGAPORE CARE?**

### How the Middle East is Perceived

While I was writing my opening statement, I browsed a few websites just to see what common perceptions and word associations came up about the Middle East. More often than not, the association was negative. People associated the Middle East with crisis, terrorism, beheadings, instability, intolerance and restrictions for minorities and women.

In 2004, I was part of then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's delegation to Iran. There were only two women in the delegation at the time – one from MTI and one from MFA. I'd had to go up in advance with the Protocol and PMO team and before that, I'd been told over and over again that I had to wear a

shapeless overcoat and keep my head covered at all times. Needless to say I ignored the instruction about a shapeless overcoat but I did carry the headscarf in my hand luggage. We arrived in Tehran, and it surprised me. I felt as if I had entered an old world southern European city – there was an air of vibrancy and breeziness, the women were beautiful, their headscarves barely covered their heads, their dress was conservative but hardly shapeless and they all wore Jackie O style sunglasses. It was an eye-opening experience and threw many misconceptions out of the window.

Having said that, the Middle East IS conservative and there are pockets of instability across the region. But it is also far more than just the crises we read of everyday. Or the images of sombre dress we associate with the Middle East. No one tells you that the sombre dress is often topped by exquisitely made-up and rather lovely faces. There is stability in much of the region, whether you consider Saudi Arabia, Iran or Turkey. Economically, the Gulf in particular, has been very successful. The region has a young, educated and Internet-savvy population.

And the region is changing in response to how the world is changing, whether or not the more conservative elements within their societies want it to. There are knock-on effects: greater awareness of climate change and the impact it will have on one of the most arid regions in the world, the realisation that they must diversify economies away from an over-reliance on oil and gas, a desire among young people in the region for more job opportunities, and greater openness that would allow them to voice their opinions, dress as they would like, and generally live lives without constraints.

### What is the Middle East?

Let me start with what the Middle East is. Geographically, we really ought to refer to it as West Asia as the region includes not just the Arab states but non-Arab states like Iran and Turkey.

At MEI, we consider this region in two tiers: a Northern Tier and a Southern Tier.

In the Northern Tier, we include Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and North Africa. Iran and Turkey are old civilisations, Muslim but not Arab. Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are struggling states. Jordan is the one monarchy in this tier. And then there is Israel which for the most part, is stable and economically successful. And yet, Israel is undergoing remarkable social changes with chasms opening between secular and ultra-Orthodox Israelis.

In the Southern Tier, we speak primarily of the Gulf States. These have been successful and for the most part, stable. The exception is Yemen. But the Gulf States are also undergoing changes – the most significant, in my view being Saudi Arabia. The economic diversification that many of the Gulf States

seek cannot come without some sort of social transformation and infrastructural changes. Flux is to be expected.

My explanation of these tiers may seem a little simplistic, but this approach has given us better insights into how the Middle East is evolving, and the challenges countries face domestically and regionally.

### Why Should Singapore Care?

Singapore can't ignore the Middle East nor should we. In a world that is so connected, we in Southeast Asia are impacted by the Middle East and in turn, have an impact on them. And we should recognise that the Middle East is both different and yet in some ways similar to us in Southeast Asia. Family, faith, and a conservative value system make both our parts of the world quite similar.

Across multi-ethnic and multi-religious Southeast Asia, the ties with the Middle East are old. Travellers from the Hadhramaut in Yemen made the long journey across the Indian Ocean centuries ago, bringing with them religion, trade, culture and learning. Along the way they married local women and raised families with them. If you want a sense of what that must have been like, one of my favourites is *Travels with a Tangerine* by Tim Mackintosh-Smith where he replicated the travels of Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan scholar and explorer who travelled extensively in the 14th century and is said to have clocked more kilometres than either Admiral Zheng He or Marco Polo.

Here in Singapore, Arab Street is not called Arab Street for no reason and the wonderful network of roads and little backways bear names like Muscat Street, Baghdad Street, Bussorah Street, to name a few. Several old families in Singapore trace their roots back to the Hadhramaut.

And yet, for a long time, our interest in the Middle East was limited and focused only on a few countries:

1. Egypt, because they had been one of the first to recognise Singapore's independence and because they were, in the 1960s, one of the leading lights in the Non-Aligned Movement and as a fledgling state, we needed all the support that we could muster.
2. Saudi Arabia – primarily Jeddah - because of the haj and the Singapore Muslims who made the annual pilgrimage.
3. Israel, which helped us to build our defences in the early days of our independence, and with whom we continue to share close ties. Beyond defence, we have worked together with Israel in research and development, and in start-ups, with both countries quickly becoming known as start-up giants.

Jump forward to today and Singapore is represented in many countries in the Gulf and other parts of the Middle East. Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong started the process in the early 2000s of encouraging interest in and engagement with countries in the Middle East.

Since then, ties have continued to grow and develop at the ground level. What has changed?

1. For one, Singaporeans now know more about the Middle East and they are much more adventurous. You will find Singaporeans working in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha, and studying in Cairo, Jeddah, and Tel Aviv.
2. Singaporeans are also more aware of developments in the Middle East whether it is the plight of the Palestinians, Syrians or Iraqis or the assertiveness of Turkey and Iran. And they have opinions.
3. Multi-religious Singapore has a Muslim community who make the annual pilgrimage to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia and stay on to visit other parts of the region if they can. Moreover, as the Custodian of the Holy Places, Saudi Arabia is influential in how many view their faith and the practice of their faith.
4. Singapore businesses continue to view the Gulf with interest and to look for opportunities to “pitch a tent” and establish lasting business partnerships.

For their part, Middle East countries look to Singapore with interest. They have learned from our successes, used their resources well and are keen competitors. Hamad International Airport in Doha is now ranked the Number One airport in the world, having toppled Changi Airport’s eight-year run as the world’s number one. The Changi Airport Group will have taken note and you can bet there will be a comeback from Singapore. Singapore Airlines now watches Qatar Airways and Emirates closely – today their names frequently come up together with SIA’s as the best airlines in the world.

The Gulf States are also focused on diversifying their economies away from an over-reliance on oil and gas. Their sovereign wealth funds have quietly set up a presence in Singapore as they explore investment opportunities. Played well, this diversification effort and the Gulf’s renewed focus on our region offers opportunities not just for them but also for Singapore, and Southeast Asia.

This is not to say that the region is an easy one either to understand or navigate. Long an arena of geopolitical jostling, the region has seen the British and Americans compete when oil was first discovered, the former USSR and America compete for influence during the Cold War, and today, a potent mix of the US seeking to rebalance its role in the region, a more confident and assertive China seeking to make inroads in the Middle East, and a very visible Russian presence.

From Turkey and Iran in the Northern Tier, to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in the Southern Tier, the need and the timeline for necessary change is picking up pace. Having put their eggs in one basket for so long, they recognise the need for greater self-reliance, and for a hedging of bets. All this is very visible, whether it was the signing of the Abraham Accords, a high-profile, six-country visit to the Middle East by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi or the rolling out of ambitious Vision plans.

China's presence in the Middle East has been written about extensively by many China observers and so I won't say too much beyond it being something worth watching closely. FM Wang's visit to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the UAE, Oman and Bahrain, caught my eye in March this year. While Chinese interest in the Middle East is driven largely by economic opportunities – new sources as well as new markets – the choice of countries visited intrigued me and seemed directed more at the US as a message than anything else. That said, China has made some huge strides economically, especially in the Gulf, and they could well become a tough competitor for Singapore business interests.

So should we in Singapore care about developments in the Middle East? Yes. We don't understand the Middle East as well as we think we do. But as Mr Goh Chok Tong observed in a 2007 interview prior to his second visit to Iran, we should engage one another, explore opportunities for cooperation, and listen to each other's views.

I could talk for a very long time about the Middle East as so much has happened even through the ongoing Covid situation and I have probably taken a very simple perspective on the region. But let me end here, make a pitch for our ME101 Series and then open the floor to questions.

As you know, today's session is a kick-off to our series which will run to the end of November. There are thirteen sessions in all, and we have tried to cover as many subjects as we could within this series:

1. In September, our focus is on Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East and our five sessions consider the dynamics within the region as well as the role of external parties with vested interests.
2. In October, we consider the Politics of Economic Reform as well as the Challenges Beyond Economics. We wanted to look beyond oil and gas, address the hoary issue of climate change, and consider the roles of Women and Youth in the Middle East. Demographically, the Middle East has one of the youngest populations, and women are an untapped resource in a region where there has been a long reliance on overseas talent and skills.

3. Finally, in November, we look at Religion and Political Islam in the Middle East, the role of Social Media and we address Central Asia. A seemingly mixed bag of topics but religion for one cannot be ignored when we talk of the Middle East. The three oldest religions were formed in this region. And it would be foolish of me to talk of a connected world and an Internet-savvy youth population without us also addressing the impact of social media in what remains a very conservative society.

I hope you will therefore stay the course and attend as many of these sessions as you can. The topics are as interesting as they are varied.

Okay. Let's take some questions.