

ME 101 Lecture Series 2022

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

Date: Thursday, 18 August

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

There are many reasons not to ignore the Middle East. Its impact can be felt across the globe especially when the world faces an energy crisis. Yet the Middle East is so much more than oil and gas. It lies at the centre of the world's oldest religions, drawing believers from all walks of life. And the region is changing, investing far beyond its shores, looking to adapt economically and socially, and embracing new technologies as it faces the challenges of climate change, green technology, food security and supply chain disruptions. However it adapts to its changing environment, the Middle East remains a region to watch.

Lecture #01: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | Competition within Cooperation: The Gulf States in Conciliatory Mood

Date: Thursday, 25 August

Speaker: Dr Clemens Chay

Since the Al-Ula summit in January 2021, a climate of rapprochement has ensued, with Saudi-Qatar relations at the heart of warmer geopolitical ties among Gulf Cooperation Council countries. While many were initially skeptical about the extent of reconciliation, the Gulf states have shown not only an appetite for intra-regional coordination, but also a willingness to diplomatically court countries – including long-time adversaries – both within and outside the Middle East. From cooperation agreements between Egypt and the Gulf states to Saudi-Iranian talks, we are witnessing a shifting regional landscape.

Other pivotal events happening in and outside the Gulf must be considered when measuring competition and co-operation in the region. How was the US withdrawal from Afghanistan perceived by the Gulf states? Has the Russia-Ukraine crisis underscored the importance of the oil monarchies? What was the significance of President Joe Biden's trip to the Middle East, in particular to Saudi Arabia?

Crucially, how can we understand the aspirations of the Gulf states through concepts such as "Middle Powerhood"? And how are countries in the region competing in a bid to diversify their oil-based economies? This lecture will address these questions and more.

Lecture #02: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | Iran & Turkey – Spoilers of the Regional System?

Date: Thursday, 1 September

Speakers: Dr Asif Shuja and Dr Gyorgy Busztin

While cordial on the surface, Turkish-Iranian ties are essentially competitive, as both countries seek to expand their influence in their respective border areas at each other's expense. In Syria and Iraq, a proxy war between them is a distinct possibility, with Tehran backing Kurdish opposition forces and Ankara engaging in a policy of territorial control to remove the PKK/PYD from its borders. Iran shuns direct confrontation with Turkey, a Nato member, but seeks to neutralise its ambitions, both in Syria/Iraq and the "Nowrooz countries" of Central Asia. In charting these salient features in Turkey-Iran relations, MEI scholars Ambassador Gyorgy Busztin and Dr Asif Shuja will detail the policies of the two countries to explain how two important non-Arab powers are challenging the primarily Arab-dominated regional system.

Lecture #03: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | The US and its Allies – Boots on the Ground or Off Platforms

Date: Thursday, 8 September

Speaker: Dr Jean-Loup Samaan

The United States remains by far the undisputed military power in the region. But for the past decade, the perception of a US decline, or at least a reluctance to intervene, has grown among its partners, whether Israel or the Gulf states. President Joe Biden's

tour in July 2022 laid bare the contradictions of America's Middle East policy: Despite all the talk of a US retreat, Washington's policy is determined by regional politics. To understand the US' current desire (and difficulties) to distance itself from the region, a historical perspective of how and why American regional primacy came about in the first place is needed.

Lecture #04: Geopolitical Competition In the Middle East | China – Can the Dragon Tame the Middle East or will the Middle East Tame the Dragon?

Date: Thursday, 15 September

Speaker: Dr Alessandro Arduino

Over the last decade, China has increased its economic and political reach in the Middle East. China is not a new actor in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Beijing has forged comprehensive strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Egypt, and Algeria. While China's energy security is deeply linked to Middle Eastern hydrocarbon reserves, this is not the only factor driving its push for closer involvement. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), coupled with the Digital Silk Road, is expanding in the region despite Covid-19. But despite greater involvement, Beijing is wary of getting entangled in the "MENA quagmire". While China supports the status quo in the region and is thus not eager to increase its security footprint, protection of its personnel and infrastructure in the BRI, as well as the need for energy security along maritime routes, is forcing it to take an active stance.

Beijing has thus far balanced its relationship with the United States, Israel, the Gulf states and its growing interests in Iran adroitly, valuing stability and non-interference above all else, but this balancing act is getting increasingly complex.

Lecture #05: Geopolitical Competition In the Middle East | Russia's Engagement with the Middle East, and why It Matters for Asia

Date: Thursday, 22 September

Speaker: Dr Li-Chen Sim

Sir Winston Churchill's characterisation of Russia as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma" continues to ring true for many people today. This lecture seeks to demystify Russia's objectives and statecraft, as well as provide an assessment of its contemporary influence in the Middle East. It also examines the extent to which the Russia-Ukraine conflict impacts on Russia's carefully-cultivated relations in the Middle East. Finally, it suggests how and why Russia's footprint in the Middle East impacts Singapore and Asia.

Lecture #06: Economics and Social Changes in the Middle East | What to Expect from Egypt, Host of Upcoming UN Climate Conference (COP 27)

Date: Thursday, 29 Sept

Speaker: Dr Aisha Al-Sarihi

In November this year, the pivotal United Nations climate conference, or COP 27, will take place in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. Leaders from all over the world will come together to discuss how to collectively tackle climate change. COP 27 will be the fourth such conference hosted by an Arab country - Morocco hosted COP-7 in 2001, and COP 22 in 2016, while Qatar hosted COP 18 in 2012. This lecture aims to provide a deeper understanding of the main climate change challenges faced by the Arab states, which have similarly arid conditions but diverse wealth: The region is home to barely-functioning fragile states, emerging economies, and hydrocarbon-rich countries with some of the highest GDP per capita rates in the world. It will also tackle some key questions: What are the main issues to be negotiated at COP 27? How will Egypt use the opportunity to address the unique climate challenges faced by Arab countries? Will COP 27 be more effective in enacting actions to mitigate climate change compared to the previous Arab conferences?

Lecture #07: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | The Centrality of Central Asia

Date: Thursday, 6 October

Speaker: Mr Raffaello Pantucci

Central Asia, located at the heart of Eurasia, is a region of particular importance. It was a region with a primarily Russian influence in the past, but 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.

After the fall of Kabul to the Taliban and the ongoing war in Ukraine, the region faces geopolitical challenges. Central Asia's socio-economic transitions and energy and security relationships are also in flux. While Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan each pursue their development paths, they share similar challenges concerning national identity, proximity to major powers, cross-border resource management, under-investment in sustainable infrastructure, as well as the challenges of economic diversification, job creation and growth.

Lecture #08: Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East | Israel – More than Just Palestine

Date: Thursday, 13 October

Speaker: Dr Jean-Loup Samaan

Israeli politics tends to be read through the exclusive lens of its conflict with the Palestinians, and, more broadly, with the Arab world. However, it has for decades developed an ambitious foreign policy that transcends this security issue: From Africa to Asia, Israel has cultivated ties, at both military and economic levels, that are too often neglected. More specifically, the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 highlighted the new role Tel Aviv sees itself playing in the Middle East and beyond. This lecture will explore the history, current trends, and challenges of Israel's foreign policy.
