

Lecture for 17 August 2023 – Dr Jean-Loup Samaan

a) Great Power Competition: US, China, and Russia in the Middle East

Learning objectives

- China and the US priorities in the Middle East
- China's evolving role in the Middle East – beyond economic and diplomatic relations?
- Have the US left a security void in the Middle East and can China replace it?

Implications of Ukraine's war on Russia's relationship with great powers and implications to the Middle East

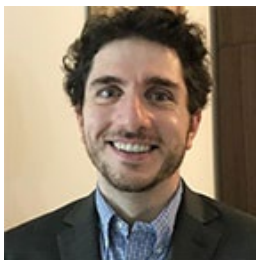
Abstract

This lecture will cover the latest developments in the great power competition – namely between the US, Russia, and China – and its effects on the Middle East. It will study the current foreign policy agenda of Washington, Beijing, and Moscow towards the Middle East and assess how this rivalry takes different forms, be it military, diplomatic, economic, or informational. Meanwhile, it will discuss how regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, or the UAE, have been revising their own strategies in light of this new “cold war” environment.

Recommended readings

- Steven Simon, *Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East*, New York: Penguin Press, 2023.
- Dawn Murphy, *China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022, (chaps 3 & 9).
- Jonathan Fulton, Li-Chen Sim, “Great power projection in the Middle East: The China-Russia relationship as a force multiplier”, Atlantic Council, Report, 16 March 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/great-power-projection-in-the-middle-east-the-china-russia-relationship-as-a-force-multiplier/>

Bio



Dr Jean-Loup Samaan

*Senior Research Fellow
Middle East Institute, NUS*

Dr Jean-Loup Samaan is a Senior Research Fellow specialising in Middle East strategic affairs, with a particular focus on the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, and the evolution of the Gulf security system. Prior to joining MEI, he held various positions in the policy sector. He worked as a visiting scholar with the Rand Corporation (2007-2008) and as an adviser at the Directorate for Strategic Affairs of the French Ministry of Defence (2008-2011).

He then gained extensive experience in the domain of military education and training, first as a deputy director for the Middle East Faculty of the NATO Defense College (2011-2016) and as an associate professor in strategic studies with the UAE National Defense College (2016-2021).

Lecture for 24 August 2023 - Dr Asif Shuja, MEI and Dr Jacopo Scita, Bourse & Bazaar Foundation (Online)

b) Regional Realignment: Iran-Arab relations: from rivalry to rapprochement

Learning objectives

- Iran Regional Outreach
- China's brokered Iran-Saudi agreement: implications to regional architecture.
- China's brokered Iran-Saudi agreement and US brokered Abraham Accords: do they converge?

Abstract

China's growing footprint in the Middle East culminated in March 2023 when Saudi Arabia and Iran announced a historic rapprochement in Beijing. The PRC was not just the host but directly mediated the final rounds of talks between the two Persian Gulf rivals. Only a few months later, building on the momentum of the KSA-Iran diplomatic success, China doubled down, proposing itself as a mediator between Israel and Palestine. Although Beijing's unprecedented diplomatic boldness in the region surprised many, it hardly represents a substantial change in the PRC's strategy in the Middle East. Nor it represents the inception of a new regional security architecture with Chinese characteristics. This presentation will elucidate what is behind China's diplomatic push, reflecting on how it might or might not interplay with other regional initiatives such as the Abraham Accords and if it is set to change the balance of (external) power in the Middle East.

Recommended readings

- United States Institute of Peace, "The Iran Primer: Iran and Saudi Arabia Restore Ties", June 2023. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/mar/10/iran-and-saudi-arabia-restore-ties>
- Mehran Haghiri and Jacopo Scita, "The Broader Context Behind China's Mediation Between Iran and Saudi Arabia", The Diplomat, March 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/the-broader-context-behind-chinas-mediation-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia/>
- Andrea Ghiselli, "Interpreting China's Changing Approach to Security issues in the Middle East", China Trends, July 2023. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/ressources/pdfs/publications/china-trends-16-chinas-diplomatic-coup-middle-east-facts-behind-hype.pdf#page=14>

Bios



Dr Jacopo Scita

Policy Fellow

Bourse & Bazaar Foundation

Dr Jacopo Scita is a Policy Fellow at the Bourse & Bazaar Foundation. Jacopo focuses on China's relations with the countries of the Middle East and Central Asia, especially Iran. Jacopo's research traces the security, economic, and social dynamics generated by China's growing presence in the region. He obtained his doctorate in October 2022 at the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University, where he was an Al-Sabah doctoral fellow. His thesis is titled Role

Theory and China's Relations with Iran: All-Weather Friends on Beijing's Terms. Jacopo has published extensively on China-MENA relations, Iran's foreign policy, and Persian Gulf security.



Dr Asif Shuja

Senior Research Fellow

Middle East Institute, NUS

Dr Asif Shuja is an Iran expert whose research focus include Iranian domestic politics, the Iranian nuclear issue, Iran's foreign policy and Iran's regional role. He was previously associated with the International Center for Strategic Studies, Abu Dhabi, as a non-resident fellow. His other research affiliations include the Indian Council of World Affairs, where he worked as a research fellow and the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi where he was attached with the Nuclear Security Project of the Department of Atomic Energy. Asif obtained his PhD on Iran's political power struggle from the Centre for West Asian (Middle East) Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is the author of the book, *India-Iran Relations under the Shadow of the Iranian Nuclear Issue*.

Lecture for 31 August 2023 – Dr Jean-Loup Samaan

c) Regional Realignment: Israel and Turkey: Non-Arab regional powerhouses in changing Middle East

Learning objectives

- Israel domestic politics and implications to its regional outreach
- Emerging Israel-Turkey thaw: implications to regional architecture?
- Emerging Middle East architecture and implications to Israel regional policy

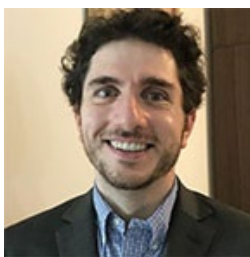
Abstract

This lecture will study and compare the evolution of the foreign policies of Israel and Turkey. As two non-Arab Middle Eastern countries, Israel and Turkey historically built a bilateral partnership that went through multiple crises in the past decade. However, the recent warming-up of ties between both governments suggest a restoration of the bilateral military and economic cooperation. Against that backdrop, the lecture will explore the regional drivers of the Israeli-Turkish partnership, its implications for the Middle East security architecture, and the ways domestic politics in both countries could derail strategic plans.

Recommended readings

- Galip Dalay, “Turkey’s Middle East Reset: A Precursor for Re-Escalation?”, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, Policy Paper, August 2022. <https://mecouncil.org/publication/turkeys-middle-east-reset-a-precursor-for-re-escalation/>
- M. Hakan Yavuz, “The motives behind the AKP’s foreign policy: neo-Ottomanism and strategic autonomy”, Turkish Studies, vol.23, no.5, 2022, pp.659-680. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2022.2100700>
- Emmanuel Navon, *The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020.
- Jean-Loup Samaan, *Israel’s Foreign Policy Beyond the Arab World: Engaging the Periphery*, New York: Routledge, 2017.

Bio



Dr Jean-Loup Samaan

*Senior Research Fellow
Middle East Institute, NUS*

Dr Jean-Loup Samaan is a Senior Research Fellow specialising in Middle East strategic affairs, with a particular focus on the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, and the evolution of the Gulf security system. Prior to joining MEI, he held various positions in the policy sector. He worked as a visiting scholar with the Rand Corporation (2007-2008) and as an adviser at the Directorate for Strategic Affairs of the French Ministry of Defence (2008-2011).

He then gained extensive experience in the domain of military education and training, first as a deputy director for the Middle East Faculty of the NATO Defense College (2011-2016) and as an associate professor in strategic studies with the UAE National Defense College (2016-2021).

Lecture for 7 September 2023 – Dr Aisha Al-Sarihi

d) Climate Change In a Desert

Learning objectives

- Climate challenges facing the Gulf and the Arab World
- Current policies meant to mitigate the effects of climate change in the region

Abstract

Marked by hot and arid climate and vast disparities of security and wealth, climate change brings unique challenges to the Middle East. The region is already battling with common challenges of water scarcity, desertification, biodiversity loss and low levels of food self-sufficiency, aggravated by climate change. Temperatures in the region have already risen by 1.5°C — twice the global increase over the past three decades — and climate models for the region until the end of the century estimate a continuous rise. Rainfall in the region has become more variable and the intensity and frequency of climate-related hazards such as extreme temperatures, storms, floods and droughts have become more visible and are likely to increase because of climate change, exacerbating existing environmental, socio-economic and security challenges. The objectives of this lecture are twofold: provide an overview of climate change challenges facing the Middle East region and discuss current policies meant to mitigate the effects of climate change in the region.

Recommended readings

- Frederic Wehrey, et al. 2023. *Climate Change and Vulnerability in the Middle East*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
- Hussein A. Amery et al. 2023. *Enhancing Water Security in the Middle East*. Al Sharq Task Force on the MENA Water Security.
- Tobias Zumbraegel (2022). *Political Power and Environmental Sustainability in Gulf Monarchies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Al-Sarihi, Aisha (2022). *COP 27 and Climate Action in the Middle East*. Insights. Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore.
- Al-Sarihi, A. and Luomi, M. (2019). *Climate Change Governance and Cooperation in the Arab Region. Part of: New Governance for the Environment in the Arab Region*. EDA Insight, Emirates Diplomatic Academy, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. July 2019

Bio



Dr Aisha Al-Sarihi

Research Fellow

Middle East Institute, NUS

Dr Aisha Al-Sarihi's areas of research expertise and interest include clean energy policy and climate economics, policies and governance, with a focus on the Arab region. Following her PhD, from 2016 to 2017, she was a research officer at the London School of Economics and Political Science's Middle East Centre. She was also a former visiting scholar at Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (2017) and Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (2018). Before joining MEI, Dr Al-Sarihi was a research associate in the Climate and Environment Program at King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center (KAPSARC) from 2019 to 2021. She holds a PhD from the Centre for Environmental Policy at Imperial College London and a MSc and a BSc, with distinction, in environmental science from Sultan Qaboos University.

Lecture for 14 September 2023 – Dr Clemens Chay

e) The Changing Gulf: Domestic policies and social reforms

Learning objectives

- Monarchism and the family unit in the Gulf Arab States
- The relevance of kinship, tribal ties, and rentier theory
- Citizenship and demographics over the years
- The dynamic dance between civil liberties, economic competitiveness, and modernity

Abstract

This lecture will provide insights into the latest developments in the socio-cultural landscape of the Gulf Arab states. Conceptually, the long-held rentier model in academic scholarship no longer has the same purchase that it once did, owing to a slew of domestic reforms implemented notably in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Economic diversification and urbanisation have also altered societal attitudes in a region where the family unit has been a social anchor. The presentation will also examine social demographics, including the need for professional foreign talent and low-skilled labour. The reassertion of kinship ties, among other preserved traditions, is equally an indication that national, if not, localised identity is a priority against the forces of modernisation.

Recommended readings

- Al-Suwaidi, Khalifa. *The UAE after the Arab Spring: Strategy for Survival*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2023.
- Crystal, Jill. *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Herb, Michael. *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle East*. New York: SUNY Press, 1999.
- Moritz, Jessie. “Re-conceptualizing civil society in rentier states.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 47:1 (2020), pp. 136-151.
- Thompson, Mark. *Being Young, Male and Saudi: Identity and Politics in a Globalized Kingdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Weiner, Scott. “Rethinking Patriarchy and Kinship in the Arab Gulf States.” POMEPS Memo, 2016. Available at: <https://pomeps.org/rethinking-patriarchy-and-kinship-in-the-arab-gulf-states>

Bio



Dr Clemens Chay
Research Fellow
Middle East Institute, NUS

Dr Clemens Chay is a research fellow at the National University of Singapore’s Middle East Institute. His research focuses on the history and politics of the Gulf states, with a particular emphasis on Kuwait, Oman and Qatar. At MEI he spearheads a public education series entitled

“Bridging the Gulf”. His recent academic publications include a chapter that examines Kuwait’s parliamentary politics in *The Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics* (2020), a chapter in the edited volume *Informal Politics in the Middle East* (Hurst, 2021), and a study appearing in the *Journal of Arabian Studies*, titled “The Dīwāniyya Tradition in Modern Kuwait: An Interlinked Space and Practice.” His commentaries also feature across different outlets, including ISPI, KFCRIS, and AGSIW. He is currently working on a book project related to Kuwait’s *diwaniyas* (affectionately known as *diwanin*, and more widely known as *majalis* outside Kuwait), the reception rooms for informal meetings that have implications for society, politics and diplomacy.

Prior to joining MEI, Dr Chay was the Al-Sabah fellow at Durham University, where he taught and completed his PhD in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, and where he also received an MSc in defence, development and diplomacy. He is also a Sciences Po Paris alumnus, having read his BA at the Menton campus.

Lecture for 21 September 2023 – Dr Li-Chen Sim

f) Whither Oil and Gas

Learning objectives

- The state of energy rent in the Middle East
- The prospects for a post-oil Middle East

Abstract

This talk offers a lively discussion of five common stereotypes of oil/gas in the Middle East including ‘Oil and gas is just about the only thing the Middle East exports’; ‘The decline of oil demand in future is bad for the Middle East’, ‘The oil and gas exporting states in the Middle East are climate deniers’. Participants should come away with a clearer understanding of the role of hydrocarbons in the past, present, and future of the Middle East.

Recommended readings

- Li-Chen Sim and Robin Mill (2022), “Low Carbon Energy in the Middle East and North Africa: Panacea or Placebo”, Chapter 1, pp.1-17 https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59554-8_1
- Martin Hvidt (2021), “Reaching for the Stars: How and Why do the Gulf States Aim to Transform Their Economies to ‘Knowledge-Based Economies?’”, LSE. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/08/19/reaching-for-the-stars-how-and-why-do-the-gulf-states-aim-to-transform-their-economies-to-knowledge-based-economies/>
- Carole Nakhle (2021), “The hydrogen craze hits the Middle East” GIS Reports. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/middle-east-hydrogen/>
- Nikolay Kozhanov (2021), “Geopolitics of Qatar Natural Gas in the era of Hydrocarbon Markets Transformation: Small State Approach”, Ideology and Politics Journal. <https://www.ideopol.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/7.-Kozhanov-IPJ-3-2021.pdf>

Bio



Dr Li-Chen Sim
Assistant Professor
Khalifa University

Dr Li-Chen Sim is a specialist on Russian and Gulf energy and its intersection with international relations. Her interests include the political economy of hydrocarbon and renewable energy in the Middle East, Gulf-Asia exchanges, and Russia-Middle East interactions. Her most recently published books include *Asian Perceptions of Gulf Security* (Routledge, 2023), *Low Carbon Energy in the Middle East and North Africa* (Palgrave 2021), and *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies* (Routledge, 2018). Her articles have appeared in leading academic journals such as *Russian Review*, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *Energy Research & Social Science*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and *Asian Security*; on forums hosted by the Atlantic Council and Harvard University’s Belfer Center; and in popular media like the *South China Morning Post* and *Al-Monitor*. She is active on the speaking circuit, having been a guest at Chatham House London, Middle East Institute Singapore, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington DC, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies & Research, Foreign Service Institute in Washington DC, and INSEAD Abu Dhabi among others.

Lecture for 28 September - Dr Hanaa Almoaibed **g) Women and Youth: A Force for Change**

Learning objectives

- What are the Gender policies in today's Arab world?
- Understanding the “Youth Bulge” and the coming challenges for Arab Governments

Abstract

The lecture will discuss shifting patterns of further and higher education choices of young people in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030 and how these shifts influence and are influenced by new labour market trends in the Kingdom.

Recommended readings

- Thompson, M. C., & Almoaibed, H. (2023). *Better Jobs Tomorrow: The Appeal and Increasing Relevance of Alternative Credentials in Saudi Arabia*. Kfcris.com.
<https://www.kfcris.com/en/view/post/407>
- Thompson, M. C., & Almoaibed, H. (2021). “Good Jobs and Bad Jobs”: *Employment Attitudes, Perceptions, and Priorities in Saudi Arabia*. Kfcris.com.
<https://www.kfcris.com/en/view/post/350>
- Almoaibed, H. (2020). *Education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Opportunities*. Kas.de.
<https://www.kas.de/en/web/rpg/detail/-/content/education-in-saudi-arabia>
- Almoaibed, H. (2021, April 16). Women Without Wasta: The Importance of Increasing Saudi Women’s Leadership Roles. Blogs.ise.ac.uk.
<https://blogs.ise.ac.uk/mec/2021/04/16/women-without-wasta-the-importance-of-increasing-saudi-womens-leadership-roles/>

Bio



Dr Hanaa Almoaibed

*Research Fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies
Visiting Fellow at London School of Economics (LSE)*

Hanaa Almoaibed is a Research Fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. Her research explores the influence of social dynamics on attitudes toward work, education and career choices and youth transitions in the GCC, with a particular emphasis on vocational education in Saudi Arabia.

She was awarded her PhD from UCL’s Institute of Education where her thesis explored the role of structure and agency in young people’s choices in Saudi Arabia. She has worked with several private, public, and not-for-profit entities, managing multi-stakeholder research projects related to youth, careers entrepreneurship and education. She has over 15 years of experience consulting for different academic institutes, businesses, think tanks and consultancies such as Chatham House, SOAS, UCL Consultants and various entities within the Middle East.

Lecture for 5 October – Norshahril Saat (PhD)

h) Religion and Political Islam in the Middle East and Its Impact on Southeast Asia

Learning objectives

- Evolution of religion's place in the Arab world
- Southeast Asia regional policies to prevent religious radicalisation

Abstract

Are Islam and Malay culture in Southeast Asia becoming more Arabised? Several academics and policymakers reckon that Muslims in Southeast Asia, whom they once regarded as the “smiling face of Islam”, are now alienating their cultural practices by mimicking Middle Eastern fashion and lifestyle. They shun Malay words, dressing, and food, in favour of Middle Eastern lifestyles in the name of being better Muslims. This lecture examines critically dominant images of Southeast Asian Islam, focussing on three countries, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. It highlights the 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 type; (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; and (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 Sufism, Shiism, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi-Wahhabism, Hizmet and reformism will also be discussed. It argues that evolving Muslim lifestyles in Southeast Asia intersect with changing socio-economic structures of Southeast Asian societies, the use of English in religious transmission throughout the Islamic worlds (rather than Arabic), and Southeast Asian religious elites themselves being the agents of cultural transformation.

Recommended readings

- Norshahril Saat and Nur Diyana Zait. Al-Azhar University and the Strengths of Informal Learning on Singapore Graduates. ISEAS Perspective No 20. 2 April 2019 Link (Available Online, Free)
- Norshahril Saat, Azhar Ibrahim, and Noor Aisha AR. Reaching for the Crescent: Aspirations of Singapore Islamic Studies Graduates and the Challenges. (Singapore: ISEAS, 2021) Chapter 3, pp 36-80. (E-chapter available for purchase)
- David H. Warren. Rivals in the Gulf: Yusof al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest Over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis (London and New York: Routledge, 2021). Introduction: Rivals in the Gulf, pp1-16
- Eric Trager. Arab Fall: How the Muslim Brotherhood Won and Lost Egypt in 891 Days (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2016). Chapter 2, pp37-56
- Birol Baskan. The Politics of Islam: The Muslim Brothers and the State in the Arab Gulf (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023) Chapter 5, pp134-170

Selective readings:

- Madawi Al-Rasheed. Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia. (London: Hurst & Co, 2018)

- Asef Bayat. *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (California: Stanford, 2017)

Bio



Norshahril Saat (PhD)

Senior Fellow

ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute

Norshahril Saat (PhD) is Senior Fellow at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. He is Coordinator of the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Program at the institute. In June 2015, he was awarded his International, Political and Strategic Studies doctorate by the Australian National University (ANU). He received his BA (Hons) in Political Science and MA in Malay Studies from the National University of Singapore. His research interests are mainly on Southeast Asian politics and contemporary Islamic thought. He is the author of *The State, Ulama, and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia* (Amsterdam University Press), *Tradition and Islamic Learning: Singapore Students in the Al-Azhar University* (ISEAS Publishing) and *Reaching for the Crescent: Aspirations of Singapore Islamic Studies Graduates and the Challenges*. His articles have been published in journals such as the *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life*, *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, *Muslim Politics Review*, and *Studia Islamika*.