

THE MIDDLE EAST AND GEOPOLITICS

Today's Middle East is characterised by instability and conflict in the form of the geopolitics of oil, prevalence of extremist groups, Western military intervention, escalating Sunni-Shia tensions, and the Arab Spring. According to US-based counterterrorism expert **Lydia Khalil**, who spoke to defence analyst **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe**, the Middle East is in a period of rapid and substantial change and is headed for an uncertain future that will continue to affect world geopolitics

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: How strategically important is the Middle East in geopolitics?

Lydia Khalil: The Middle East is critically important to geopolitics. Although we are hearing more and more about the 'Asian Century,' the Middle East will continue to be a strategically important region and its goings on will continue to reverberate around the globe.

The region is experiencing an exciting yet treacherous transformation after the Arab Spring. It is an incredibly dynamic period and we do not yet know the future trajectory of the region. Will the region turn to democracy? Will Islamists dominate politics and society? Will we see a return to neo-dictatorships in the region? The answers to those questions will determine not only the fate of the region but how the new Middle East fits into the global order.

The Middle East shall remain vitally important because of its geography that straddles important global supply routes, its energy resources, and its complex mix of politics, ethnicity and religion that contributes to instability within and outside the region.

The potential for Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon is also a game changer.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: The United States claims to have caused serious damage to al Qaeda and its affiliated networks in the Middle East. How far is this true, and in the decade ahead,

how is the al Qaeda and its networks likely to shape the region's evolving geopolitics?

Lydia Khalil: Al Qaeda has been in decline for quite some time. Some of that has to do with US counterterrorism measures, but most of it is because the organisation has struggled to resonate with its target audience—Muslims in the Middle East and in the diaspora. Although al Qaeda retains its hard core adherents, it has utterly failed to gain a foothold in the heart, minds and politics of the majority of Muslims in the region.

Its ideology and methods are not appealing to most Muslims. The most transformative event in the region—the Arab Spring—blindsided al Qaeda. Despite its many efforts to bring about political change and topple dictatorships through terrorism, it was peaceful protests that did it. However, we are starting to see some disturbing signs of an al Qaeda influence in the Syrian conflict, and it remains a threat and presence in Yemen.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: To what extent are Salafist/Wahabist groups influencing the Arab Spring? What are the likely consequences for the region, especially in relation to countries like Egypt and Libya and their future relations with the West?

Lydia Khalil: Islamist parties, the more mainstream Muslim Brotherhood and newer Salafist parties

have deftly inserted themselves into the political opening that has arisen from the toppling of long-time dictators. Although these parties did not begin the protests that started the Arab Spring, and were in fact late to participate, they quickly entered the political fray after the dictators were toppled. They are the most organised opposition forces in the Middle East, and the liberal and youth-led parties at the forefront of the protests were no match for them.

Islamist parties are here to stay and will continue to influence the future of politics in the region. This is not necessarily a negative thing as they represent a significant portion of the population. However, it will be vitally important for more alternative political parties—more secular, liberal, socialist—to become stronger in order to balance Islamists and blunt some of their more illiberal tendencies. Minority representation is also critically important to the functioning of healthy democracies.

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: How are Sunni-Shia tensions affecting the Middle East? What are the likely future implications of the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry on the region's future stability?

Lydia Khalil: The Sunni-Shia conflict received a lot of attention a few years back. Scholars like Vali Nasr wrote about the 'rise of the Shia crescent' and the ascendancy of Shia majority countries like Iran and Iraq and their conflict with the Sunni majority Gulf monarchies and stalwarts like Egypt and Syria. Now the attention is more focused on the fallout of the Arab Spring, but Shia-Sunni tensions are still a factor in the region's new politics.

Syria is threatening to devolve into a civil war on sectarian lines, Iraq continues to struggle with its sectarian tensions, and Bahrain's minority Sunni monarchy has been seriously destabilised after protests by its majority Shia population last year. These internal sectarian tensions will no doubt be exploited by regional neighbours. The Iranian nuclear issue also plays into the

Shia-Sunni tensions. Iran becoming a nuclear power will instigate significant opposition from majority Sunni countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, adding another layer to conflict in the region.

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Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Since the US military intervention in Iraq, the advent of the Arab Spring and the ongoing Shia unrest, there is a growing sense among certain academic and journalistic circles that US influence in the Middle East is in steady decline. How accurate is this perception and what is your prognosis on the state of US power in the Middle East in the decade ahead?

Lydia Khalil: As a general statement, you can say that US influence in the region has indeed declined, but that is not to say the United States has little or no influence in the region. It is still a major player, but the rules of engagement have changed after the Arab Spring. Gone are many of the ruthless but reliable dictators of the past with whom the United States knew more or less how to engage. They have been replaced by a motley crew of political forces who are still finding their feet.

The transition period has proven challenging for the United States as its traditional levers of influence and its previous partners have disappeared from the scene. But because the transition period post Arab Spring has been so dynamic, we cannot accurately predict the future of US power and influence in the region. A lot depends on what type of governance structures are in place, the character of emerging leaders, and whether the United States can figure out how to deftly engage with them.