

International Affairs virtual issue on the Middle East
Revised

International Affairs has compiled a virtual issue on some major political developments and events in the Middle East, comprising articles published in the journal over the course of the last 96 years – from 1922-2018. This virtual issue is now freely available at www.internationalaffairsjournal.com

Introduction

The Middle East region has long attracted and continues to attract very high levels of interest among scholars and policy makers. The continuing fall-out from the Arab uprisings, currently centred on events in Syria and Yemen, is one recent reminder. Its politics and international relations have also occupied a central place in the history of this journal reflecting both the importance of British interests in the region and the significance of the region in wider international relations more generally. A quick tally of published articles verifies this. Those with an explicit reference to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) or at least including a Middle Eastern country in the title number 240. A good number of other articles touch upon Middle Eastern topics in less direct ways. And, a number of journal issues have included up to half a dozen or so pieces of a topic of contemporary importance. And when special issues became a feature of the journal, the Middle East has also featured prominently: the first was in 1974 featuring the 1973 Arab-Israeli (Yom Kippur) War; the next in 2009 was dedicated to the region of North Africa; in 2010 the topic was 'Post-American Iraq'; in 2013 the legacy of the Iraq War, and finally, in 2017, 'Contentious borders' the special issue from which this idea of a 'virtual issue' derived. The first 'virtual issue' on MENA was published in 2013.

This high level of interest is unsurprising for reasons which relate also to the very timing of journal's appearance. Its establishment, in 1922, coincided with an intense period of British involvement in MENA though its role in finalizing treaty arrangements and involvement in the system of mandates that was established after World War I. This is captured in the first article by Arnold Wilson, published in the aftermath of these treaties in 1926. Though the previous decade was infamous in its association with two agreements that are widely, if somewhat inaccurately, held to define the contemporary contours of MENA: the Sykes Picot Treaty (1916) and the Balfour Declaration (1917), it was in fact the 1920s that were the key era of post-war treaty making in respect of the region then becoming known as the Middle East. The San Remo Treaty (1920) formally defined the mandates - governance structures with League of Nations oversight which gave Britain and France unprecedented roles in defining regional territory, politics, economics and society.¹ The mandate period itself was relatively short: with few exceptions, independent states emerged either before or soon after World War II, but its legacy proved long lasting. Direct British interests and involvement may have thereafter declined, accelerated further by the 'ill-conceived' Suez intervention,² but interest and involvement in the region has not. And the legacy of British (and French) involvement has impacted upon the region's international relations both in Cold War and post-Cold War eras in many ways. Involvement in the 1991 Gulf War, the Middle East Peace Process and, the 2003 Iraq War, and 2011 intervention in Libya are just some recent examples. The significance of that legacy remains highly topical – a theme picked up in the last special issue (2017), which focused precisely on topic of 'contentious' post-colonial borders. Border contestation and territorial disputes, and the controversial legacy of Western influence, have been an ever-present feature in the nearly 100-year history of MENA and have been brought into sharp relief by the spill-overs from the Arab uprisings which started late in 2010 and whose effects continue to unfold. It is easy, therefore, to justify a virtual issue on the Middle East at the start of 2018

¹ Louise Fawcett, 'States and Sovereignty in the Middle East: Myths and Realities' *International Affairs*, 93: 4, 2017, pp. 789-807.

² Anthony Adamthwaite, 'Suez Revisited', *International Affairs*, Vol 64, No. 3, 1988: 449-464.

marking 100 years of Middle East and nearly 100 years of the journal's history. It is hardly an overstatement to observe that the region continues to attract enormous interest - for its record of conflict and instability, its wealth – albeit unevenly distributed – and its governance challenges.

This introductory piece sets the scene for this virtual issue by locating the chosen articles in the history of the journal and in highlighting their enduring salience for contemporary questions about the region's politics and international relations broadly conceived. The selection is less directly focused on immediate events but more on longer term patterns and trends, or those issues whose consequences continue to resonate in today's MENA. The choices include several critical studies on relations between the MENA and West; on the evolving and varied influences of Islam; the refugee crisis; the nature of Iranian (or Saudi) foreign policy; the rise of 'new' states; the roles of external powers over time including both the colonial, Cold War and post-Cold war periods. As such this selection reflects not only some of the most important issues surrounding MENA but also try to capture some of the important 'moments' in its history, particularly those moments or events which continue to have contemporary relevance. It is therefore very much in the spirit of the comment by historian Bernardo Croce that 'all history is contemporary history'.³

The selection also draws upon the expertise of individuals that have taken part in the making of or writing about modern Middle East politics and history. Alongside contemporary commentators of and from the region, some of the authors are notable scholars and policy makers of the 20th Century Middle East whose influences were written into regional histories: HAR Gibb, Abba Eban, Charles Issawi, Elizabeth Monroe and Arnold Toynbee. Otherwise the selection is not guided by a particular logic of time or place. There is no quota for specific questions or topics. Apart from avoiding articles and topics that were addressed in the last virtual issue in 2013, it is broadly informed by those and themes articles which seem apposite or interesting for today's readers and offer some useful background and context for informing contemporary regional politics and International Relations.

³ Bernadetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, New York, WW Norton (1941)

Britain's 'moment' in the Middle East

The articles discussed here mostly date from the experience of the Middle East since the Second World War where the relevance of contemporary issues to the present international order is particularly apparent. However, a number of pieces from the earliest editions of the journal are of interest in marking out the future terrain, particularly from a British perspective, for this was, as Elizabeth Monroe aptly called it, 'Britain's moment in the Middle East'.⁴ Some of these are not academic articles as such, rather discussion pieces by policy makers, but they are nonetheless revealing in their content. The first article (1), by Arnold Wilson, a British official who served as civil commissioner in Iraq from 1918-1920, is a case in point. Published in 1926, and simply called the 'Middle East' – an indication of the region's new designation by Western powers - was first read out at Chatham House. It duly captures the different aspects of Britain's moment with its attendant contradictions.⁵ Though Wilson was a somewhat controversial figure, whose views did not always align with those of fellow policy makers – he opposed, for example, the independence of Iraq - it reveals those elements of pride and prejudice of British policy makers in interpreting regional events in the mid-1920s. Promising a 'brief survey of Arabia, Palestine and Syria', it flits from state to state, expressing doubts about Ibn Saud's leadership, and the capabilities of the new-born Saudi Arabia to join the League of Nations (pp. 96-97); a quiet satisfaction at the state of affairs of Iraq where King Faisal is hailed for his success in uniting Iraqi peoples (p100); suspicion regarding Turkey (as former war time enemy) and praise for Reza Shah Pahlevi's (sic) 'reforming zeal' in Persia (Iran) with the help of a 'large and increasing staff of US citizens' (p.106). There is a certain irony today in attributing the rise of the Pahlavi Shahs to US support, given that US involvement in Iran was evidently one factor in the monarchy's downfall in 1979. Finally, on Palestine and what was then Trans-Jordan, while admitting that Lord Balfour's recent visit to Palestine had been 'a mistake', the speaker stated his belief that, broadly

⁴ Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East: 1914-1971*, (London: Chatto and Windus 1981)

⁵ Arnold T. Wilson, 'The Middle East', *International Affairs*, Vol 5, No 2 1926, pp 96-110

speaking, 'the policy now being followed is the best possible in the circumstances' (p.97). It is easy to choose quotes to score points against British policy, and to be wise after events, but one cannot but be struck by the extent to which British officials simply got things wrong.

Rising powers

On the emergence of Saudi Arabia, however, another article from the same decade is more persuasive. Written in 1929 by the renowned British historian, Arnold Toynbee, it tackles the topic of 'Arab statesmanship' and takes a much more positive stand on the House of Saud, one which foreshadows its contemporary role as a regional great power.⁶ Toynbee ranks Ibn Saud as 'already one of the great statesmen' of Arabian history (p.367). He also warns of the opportunities and challenges posed by the rise and containment of Wahhabi Islam both regionally and internationally (pp.372-73).

If the rise of Saudi Arabia is foregrounded in the two pieces mentioned above, the next article (2) signals the emergence of another major power, later to become the Saudi's main regional rival: Iran.⁷ Not that Iran in the mid-1940s is the challenger state it would become. Rather it is a state debilitated by the allied occupation in the Second World War. However, the writer, the Press Attaché at the Iranian Embassy in London, is at pains to portray Iran's potential as a modernizing state and valuable friend of the West (p.197). Taking the opportunity presented by the Tehran Conference, where allied wartime leaders gathered in 1944, Hamzawi's aim is to demonstrate the place of Iran at the centre of international politics: by virtue of its geography and history Iran was a pivot state. Indeed, the conference is described as a 'fitting gesture' for a country whose contemporary history had been intermingled with those of its allies (p. 199). Without shirking from a candid appraisal of the Reza Shah period, and huge challenges that Iran faced as a result of the allied invasion in 1941, Hamzavi nonetheless portrays this as a moment of opportunity for Iran as a rising power in a competitive international

⁶ Arnold J Toynbee 'A Problem of Arabian Statesmanship', *International Affairs*, Vol 8, No 4, 1929 (p. 367)

⁷ A.H. Hamzavi, 'Iran and the Tehran Conference', *International Affairs*, Vol. 20, No 4, 1944, pp. 192-203.

system. He also signalled that war and occupation notwithstanding, Iran's history had shown 'fundamentally' that her people are fully capable of running their own affairs (p.195).

Simmering regional tensions

If the above article is deliberately upbeat on Iran's prospects – offering a wish list for the emerging Iranian regime and its relationship with the West – it is not without warning undertones about Iran's self-sufficiency and desire for independence. This independence, underwritten by the Allied Declaration on Iran (pp. 200-201), but would be asserted far more insistently after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Far starker are the warnings in another article (3) written in the same year by the British historian HAR Gibb. In it some of the simmering region-wide troubles to which earlier articles have alluded rise to the surface.⁸ Gibb an eminent historian of Arabism and Islam, surveys the region in 1944, observing the widespread regional 'disquiet and foreboding'. He points to the new orientations produced by the war in particular the severity of economic conditions (p.458) and speculates on possible future regional options including the rise of army-based dictatorships; a 'Moslem revolution' or an anti-Western movement appealing to the 'old Moslem sense of solidarity' (p.462). All these outcomes have subsequently emerged: whether military coups in the 1950 and 1960s to replace the regimes installed by former colonial powers and the persistence of high level military influence; an Islamic revolution (in Iran) with spill-overs elsewhere; and an anti-Western movement appealing to Islamic solidarity which has characterized different periods of the region's history – right through to the present. Commenting also on the evolving roles of US and Russia, Gibb also urges collaboration between the wartime allies (p.268). His wisdom on international politics (as on domestic politics) and how to avert a regional crisis, goes largely unheeded as Cold War ensues in the Middle East and other regional theatres as explored further below.

The fourth article (4), written a few years later by the Israeli diplomat and politician Abba Eban, though more optimistic in tone, tackles a related

⁸ HAR Gibb 'Middle East perplexities' *International Affairs* 20: 4, 1944, pp. 458-472

theme. Entitled somewhat blandly 'Some social and cultural problems of the Middle East' it provides a description, prescription and a warning.⁹ He reflects on the limits and pitfalls to processes of Westernization, which for Eban, were the key to regional development. In elegant prose, he describes an 'uncomfortable intermediate stage, where men have cut themselves adrift from a complete and unified culture which was their own and merely touched the surface of another world which they aspire to enter' (p.369). Some have resisted: he describes the Wahhabi movement as an 'affirmation of Islamic self-sufficiency and a refusal to attempt the Westernizing revolution at all' (p.369). The Western vision, he believes, can prevail but only under certain conditions: 'if the Middle East wishes to import the West into its reviving life, the attempt can only prosper if the West is accepted as an indivisible whole - a unified system of culture and society' (pp. 373-374).

Eban's focus is on the Arab world, but this was not only an Arab issue. Many of the tensions he alludes to are as relevant to a country like Iran – where both an affirmation of self-sufficiency (already noted in 1944) and rejection of the West accompanied the Iranian Revolution of 1979. They are also relevant to the case of Turkey which has found itself similarly caught between different tendencies. These are captured in the following article (5) in which historian Bernard Lewis explores three tendencies in Turkey which have coexisted and competed over time: Islam, Ottomanism and Turkism (p. 38).¹⁰ He observes how the newly established Turkish Republic adopted the idea of the Turkish nation but that its underlying secularity was 'never quite as complete as was sometimes believed' (p.39). Lewis then points to a 'number of signs of increasing religious activity' (p.42). Writing of the early 1950s he notes how it is 'not easy to assess this role of religious revival in modern Turkey' (p.45), hinting at future challenges that are particularly apposite for a study of Turkey today where the ideals of Kemalism and Political Islam stand in evident tension. This same theme is addressed more than six decades later in a 2017 review essay on the paradoxes of the 'new' Turkey,¹¹ where Ayla Göl shows that 'the persistence of Islam as part of the country's history,

⁹ Abba Eban, 'Some social and cultural problems of the Middle East', IA 23:3 1947: pp 369-75

¹⁰ Bernard Lewis, 'Islamic Revival in Turkey', IA 28:1, 1952, pp. 38-48.

¹¹ Ayla Göl, 'The paradoxes of 'new' Turkey: Islam, illiberal democracy and republicanism', IA 93, No 4 (2017) 957-966.

culture and society has created Turkey's first paradox in state-society relations' (p.960). With constitutional liberalism endangered, Turkey today is 'in turmoil (p.957). 'The question', she concludes, 'is whether the majority of people in Turkey will decide to celebrate the centenary of the Turkish republic in 2023 as a secular republic or an Islamic one' (p. 966).

Still on the theme of simmering tensions and symptomatic of ongoing regional problems, Owen Tweedy's article, in 1952, paints a doleful picture of the region's refugee tragedy in the wake of the first Arab-Israel War of 1948.¹² That war saw the displacement of 800,000 Arabs from what became Israel. For those who have followed the history and more recent refugee and humanitarian crises of the region, Tweedy's piece (6) on the refugees of the 1950s makes for compelling reading. Tweedy, an Anglo-Irish Arabist and journalist lays bare the state of the camps, portraying some haunting images of refugees and critiquing the international agency designated to care for them (UNWRAA). He identifies other causes of Arab resentment: against Israel, on whose very successes the refugee crisis is based and whose banks had frozen Arab refugee assets; Britain – that 'cynically abandoned those for whose interests, as mandatory of Palestine, we had been responsible'; and finally, the United Nations and America: 'And it is astonishing how they are almost automatically bracketed together' (p. 341). He links this resentment to a 'widespread growth of anti-Western feeling – a sort of colour-bar in reverse' (p. 381).

Tweedy's accompanying recommendations for the UN, Britain and other powers mostly went unheeded, but his description of the region's refugee tragedy retains all its relevance at a time when Arab refugees from the region's many wars have generated grave humanitarian crises, placing burdens on neighbouring states and revealing the lukewarm commitment to humanitarianism of states further afield.

In contrast to the gloomy warnings above, no immediate tensions are foreseen in the subject matter of the next article (7) on Kuwait, which not only envisages the ascent of that small state but also the emergence of the soon to

¹² Owen Tweedy, 'The Arab Refugees. Report on a Middle East Journey', *International Affairs*, No. 28 Vol. 3 1952, pp 338-43.

be prosperous Gulf region.¹³ While such 'small' states in the 1950s had little agency, caught between an attempt to fast-track state building and resist the predation of outside powers, Kuwait's story is an interesting one as this article shows. Written by the historian and regional expert, Elizabeth Monroe, this piece offers a penetrating insight on the opportunities and challenges facing such state picked up again in the later article on Qatar. She starts with the anecdote of a traveller to Kuwait who thanks his host for providing him with 'a ringside seat for the Creation', going on to describe in frank terms the conditions surrounding the rapid growth of a 'sturdy little town' (p.271). While the Kuwait of 1954 is a far cry from the prosperous emerging city of the late 20th century, Monroe hails the successes of its leaders and the enthusiasm of the people for purposefully converting their new-found oil wealth. She also points to the upcoming challenges: the need for economic diversification to reduce oil dependence, and 'the unanswerable question of the future... whether so covetable a place can retain the independence that has in this century been preserved chiefly thanks to unobtrusive but steady British protection' (p.284). The Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990, leading to international intervention the following year, provided an answer.

International Relations and regional crises

States like Kuwait (or Qatar, discussed below) were evidently not key players in international relations though their roles would come to impact upon the behaviour of other regional states, whether in the Gulf War, Iraq War or Arab uprisings. The next two pieces reflect more directly upon regional dynamics and the challenges facing external powers and their ultimately mixed record in supplying regional order

The article by Charles Issawi (8) was written the year after the momentous events surrounding the establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958. This was a key Arab nationalist moment – one which saw the temporary union of Egypt and Syria. Issawi, an Egyptian-born economic historian, examines the challenges then facing the region and

¹³ Elizabeth Monroe, 'The Shaikhdom of Kuwait', *International Affairs*, Vol 30, No 3 (1954) pp 271-284.

highlights what he views as the huge disconnect between Arab and Western policies.¹⁴ He refers to the 'uninterrupted series of disasters which the West has suffered in the eastern half of the Arab world in the last few years', arguing that 'morally the West is completely discredited' (p.1). As a 'predatory imperialist and rabid warmonger' (p.1), the West is 'weaker than at any time in the last 50 years', and weak across the board: morally, culturally, economically and politically; it was also weak in relation to its main rival the USSR. The Arabs are 'no longer awed' (p. 4). Issawi's advice to the West was to stop opposing nationalism, to concede its major objectives, and reduce its dependence on Arab oil, pointing to the huge untapped shale resources in the US (pp. 8-9). In the end, the UAR failed as much because of internal contradictions as external pressures, but his core argument is powerful nonetheless. Sixty years on the Arab world is far stronger, if divided, and certainly not 'awed'.

Issawi's warnings to the West about its failure to gauge regional politics and lack of positive engagement with the Arab world may have been accurate, but his predictions of Western weakness were premature, as revealed in the next article. Rostow's (9) take on the Middle East is that it is primarily a stage on which superpower rivalries are played out, and in that rivalry the US dominated.¹⁵ Without disputing the centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Rostow's approach shifts attention away from regional politics and ideologies and places regional events firmly in a global context. Rostow, a Professor at Yale University, and Visiting Fellow at Oxford when the article was published, duly writes that 'the Middle East crisis is not a regional quarrel about Israel's right to exist. It is, on the contrary, a fissure in the foundation of world politics – a Soviet challenge to the relationship of Western Europe and the United States, and therefore to the balance of power on which the possibility of modern peace depends' (p.275). As such, the possibility of Soviet hegemony in MENA is not one that the US and NATO can view with 'merely academic curiosity' (p. 276). This is a straightforward realist account

¹⁴ Charles Issawi, 'Negotiation from Strength? A reappraisal of Western Arab relations', IA Vol 35, No 1, 1959, pp. 1-9.

¹⁵ Eugene V. Rostow, 'The Middle Eastern Crisis in the Perspective of World Politics', IA Vol 47, No. 2 1971: pp. 275-288.

about the contemporary balance of power to which IR scholars can readily relate - one which envisages the US playing a leading role to counter Soviet expansionism. If Rostow's appreciation of the Soviet threat is overstated, his understanding of the USSR's extensive and longstanding interests in MENA is particularly convincing in the light of the actions and influence of Russia in the region today, the subject of Roy Allison's article below. One prescription for lowering regional tensions is to address the central issue of peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours working within the UN framework with US or NATO guarantees offering Arab states an alternative to Soviet protection (pp. 286-87).

Fast forward twenty years: it is 1991 and there is no regional peace. It's a far cry from Rostow's world: the Cold War was rapidly winding down, and the central elements of the conflict described above are no longer in place – at least for the time being. Though the late 1980s saw a ceasefire in the longstanding Iran-Iraq War, the Middle East is not part of any end of Cold War dividend. Indeed, the Middle East 'crisis' continues at another level, as suggested in the title of this piece by Yezid Sayigh (10).¹⁶ With Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the international intervention that followed, the Gulf is at the epicentre of regional politics, but once more the crisis is of a more general nature. Sayigh portrays this as a failure of Arab regional order (p. 489). He describes how the old Arab order, one based on Arab solidarity of the kind illustrated by Issawi, which had helped to supply a regional balance of power, is no longer in place enabling the expansionist ambitions of Saddam Hussein (p. 487). His is also an indictment against individual Arab states, against a new generation of Arab leaders, whose selfish and divisive policies have undermined the security of states and any sense of a collective regional security system (pp. 489-90). Though the 1990s would see important steps towards addressing the longstanding conflict between Israel and the Arab states, these efforts were ultimately frustrated. Nearly two decades on there is still no sense of any functioning regional security system and no immediate prospect of developing one. Arab politics remain characterized by division and the pursuit of self-interested policies.

¹⁶ Yezid Sayigh, 'The Gulf crisis: why the Arab regional order failed', *International Affairs*, Vol 67 No 3, pp. 487-507.

The failure of the 'West'

The failure of the Arab regional system as described by Sayigh is, to some extent, also the failure of Western powers. This was perhaps not obvious in the immediate post-Cold War order where Western hubris is visible in the enunciation of a 'New World Order' by President W. Bush – an order with MENA at its heart. The revamped European Union was part of this afterglow, rolling out of a set of policies designed to enhance its new global status and reach. However, from the perspective of 2018, neither the US nor the European powers – the most active exponents of the Bush vision - could claim any durable successes. The next two articles describe the frustrations and disappointments of European and US policy in the Middle East and the spaces thereby created for the rise of other actors.

The first piece under this heading captures Europe's enduring Middle East dilemma and projects it into the 21st century. Despite a rich if complex history of engagement with the region, European powers, neither singly nor collectively have been able to successfully implement a new set of regional policies. The article by Kristina Kausch and Richard Youngs (11)¹⁷ takes a critical look at European policies in the Middle East from the perspective of 2009. They show how, despite a plethora of well-resourced and much-publicised 'Neighbourhood' or Mediterranean' focused policies designed to create a safe and mutually profitable space for MENA-EU relations, the results have been disappointing. The 'Euro-Med' vision could have been a platform for economic, political and social development, but that vision has languished (p. 965); the subsequent Spanish-backed Union for the Mediterranean proposal rather than offering a 'new lease of life' was 'another nail in the coffin' (ibid). Key positions on democratization and human rights had been 'watered down': rather than promoting 'good governance', the EU was content with 'good enough governance' (p. 974). This was a point brought forcefully home by the toppling of the EU-supported Tunisian regime

¹⁷ Kristina Kausch and Richard Youngs, 'The End of the 'Euro-Mediterranean Vision' IA 85/5, September 2009, pp. 963-975

in 2011, showing how, in Rosemary Hollis's words, that the EU had been 'no friend to democratization'.¹⁸

If the record of Europe in MENA is a disappointing one, the US record also merits critical scrutiny. On the 10th anniversary of the Iraq War, and with Obama embarking on his second term, (12) Fawaz Gerges¹⁹ exposes the myth of a transformative policy agenda and analyses 'why US Middle East policy persistently fails.' (p. 300) Obama's policy is characterised by continuity over change: 'From the Palestinian-Israeli peace to Afghanistan, Obama's conduct testifies to the structural and institutional continuity of US foreign policy' (p. 323). In a changed regional and global environment, no longer reflective of a unipolar order, US policy is increasingly challenged by states for whom deference to the West is no longer the norm. Gerges likens the end of America's moment in MENA to the end of Britain's moment nearly fifty years earlier: the Arab world no longer holds the Americans in awe: 'America is neither feared nor trusted to act rationally and wisely preserve world peace' (ibid).

Whether or not one accepts the full weight of this argument - the above article was written before the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 - it is hard to disagree on the general discrediting of Western policies, the pivoting away from MENA or on the emergence of new regional and extra-regional actors who increasingly vie for influence.

In respect of extra-regional powers, the one to note is, of course, Russia – in many ways the beneficiary of Western indecision over the Syrian conflict and the prior fall-out from the Libyan intervention. Russia, like European powers, shares the MENA neighbourhood and has long established regional interests there, as noted elsewhere in this article. Russia emerges from the regional crisis as a potential winner in the sense of being able to capitalise on Western weakness, offering mediating roles while cultivating its local partners, notably Syria and Iran as revealed in the piece by Roy Allison.²⁰ The support for Assad, reflecting longstanding links with the

¹⁸ Rosemary Hollis, 'No friend to democratization: Europe's role in the genesis of the Arab Spring', *IA*, Vol 88, No1 2012 pp. 81-94.

¹⁹ Fawaz Gerges, 'The Obama approach to the Middle East. The end of America's moment', *IA*, Vol 89 No 2, 2013, pp. 299-323.

²⁰ Roy Allison, 'Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis',

Syrian regime, aligns with its wider regional strategic concerns, providing Russia an entry point and vehicle for the extension of its security interests in the near abroad (p. 805). In averting regional chaos, Allison remarks how President Putin appears to believe that 'the tenacity of the Russian position on Syria has earned it greater regional influence (if not sympathy) in the Middle East as well as enhanced global status as a central player in this major international crisis' (p. 821).

Within the region itself, other states increasingly flex their muscles in a changed regional environment in which Western influence has been progressively downgraded. Gerges' list of regional powers included Iran, Turkey and Israel all of whom, in different ways, have been empowered. So has Saudi Arabia. All these 'rising powers', some of whose prior trajectories were mapped out earlier, have been increasingly setting regional agendas to align with their interests and security concerns. Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel, less directly impacted upon by domestic unrest than Turkey (and other Arab states), have accordingly gained status. Iran and Saudi Arabia (in contrast to the 1940s) are major rivals in a power struggle which is reshaping regional alliances. Such power struggles also draw in other rising states like Qatar - the subject of the penultimate piece by Lina Qatib (14).²¹

With its 'astute public diplomacy' and 'expansive foreign policy' Qatar has 'risen in two decades to become one of the leading regional players of the Middle East' (p. 417). Like Kuwait, but to a greater degree, Qatar has been able to punch above its weight on the international stage, demonstrating the ability of small states to command influence. Great wealth, but also Al Jazeera have helped this objective. Yet Qatib, Head of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, also shows how the foundations of Qatar's meteoric rise are inherently unstable. Foreign policy aimed at promoting a Qatari 'brand' featuring conflict mediation, humanitarianism, aid and soft power was initially popular, but policy contradictions – support for Libya's uprising, but not Bahrain's - reveal the absence of a coherent narrative and the 'limits of pragmatism' (p 428). The Qatar-Saudi rift over

International Affairs, 2013, Vol 89 Issue 4, pp 795-823.

²¹ Lina Qatib, 'Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism', *International Affairs*, Vol 89 No 2 2013 pp. 417-31.

support for the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Islamist groups has deepened, and extends into the wider Gulf region. The outwardly robust Gulf Cooperation Council – the exemplary regional grouping - has been weakened and the new ascendancy of the Gulf states remains volatile.

Endnote

Concluding this brief illustrated journey through a century of MENA's international history, a few threads can be gathered together. Since the defeat of the Ottomans late in 1918 and the emergence of the modern Middle East, the region has witnessed a series of 'moments', whether British, Arab nationalist, Islamist or American. Today, Russia appears to be enjoying one such moment in terms of its enhanced regional status. Yet the overriding story here is that none of these moments have endured. An imposed order is unworkable: neither major external nor regional powers and their accompanying ideologies have devised a stable regional system. Rather conflict and competition still predominate in a deeply unsettled regional order. The articles selected here expose the complexity of a region whose colonial past continues to resonate with a troubled present.

From this we should not conclude that the system is set to implode – a topic discussed extensively in the last special issue of July 2017. A common observation following the Arab uprisings was that Middle East states, Arab states in particular, always fragile and contested were somehow doomed to fail.²² However, the evidence suggests otherwise. In a concluding article summing up the contents of the special issue, William Zartman (15) how states, boundaries and sovereignty in MENA may be 'unsteady' but are likely to remain largely unchanged.²³ Recognising the multiple and continuing challenges to states over their 100-year history, he concludes that MENA states 'have an existence that matters and at the same time is characteristically vulnerable, and that the imperfect Middle East system is not on the brink of any major change, either in its components or in the regional order among them' (pp. 947-8). When things do 'settle down' in the future, he

²² Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East', p. 794

²³ William Zartman, 'States, boundaries and sovereignty in the Middle East: unsteady but unchanging', *International Affairs*, Vol 93, No 4, 2017, pp. 937-948.

continues, 'the only way to provide dynamic stability and fairly peaceful relations will be through the establishment of a community of states that tolerate one another's existence and provide regional order through mutual relations.' (p. 948) Zartman's is a fitting conclusion to this series of articles on a troubled century of Middle East history and international relations.
