

## **Middle East Conflict: Bridging History and Contemporary Realities**

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### **Abstract**

The unabated and incessant conflicts emerging from the Middle East are quick reminders amongst the observers who espouse the view that the region will always remain conflict ridden. The history of the larger Middle East (Middle East, North Africa, and countries sharing cultural and historical identity with the Middle East) has always been crafted, shaped, constructed, and reconstructed not just by the domestic stakeholders but has equally been swayed by structural - systemic factors. Rather than construing the Middle East crisis as mere spontaneous happenings, effort is made to contextually and theoretically put the crises in perspective. The utility of the latter is not just a raw academic venture that tends to generate discussion for the sake of argument; instead the attempt is geared at shaping a holistic understanding of conflict in the Middle East by bridging history and contemporary realities. The paper theoretically sheds light on the conflict in the Middle East, focusing on regional and intra-state dynamics. The paper discusses the contemporary dynamics by addressing the regional power contest, hegemonic proclivity, and arms race through the lens of history. Conceptually, the paper posits that understanding the unfolding tensions and conflicts in the region cannot be complete without paying attention to the role of regional institutions and ideological underpinning such as Pan-Islamism and Pan-Arabism. The paper concludes history will remain an important tool of understanding contemporary Middle East conflict. In as much as realism defines state's behaviour, regional competition will remain an enduring

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phenomenon and the changing dynamic of regional equation will complicate conflict resolution.

## **Keywords**

Pan-Arabism, regional power contest, Middle East arms race, Middle East institutional divide, Saudi-led coalition

## **1. Introduction**

The protraction of the political turmoil in the Middle East gives room for competing reasons explicating why the region has remained volatile. Amongst others, religion, the creation of Israel, type of governance system, and plenty reserves of oil (the most sought after energy source) make the region susceptible to political uncertainty. Broadly speaking, conflicts in the Middle East can be uniquely characterised as historical, ideological, revolutionary, religious, cultural, parochial, transnational, and transformational. Nevertheless, the fault-lines remain ideological/religious, secularist/liberal, authoritarian/secularist, monarchic/conservative, traditional/conservative versus statist establishment and modernist, and state versus non-state actor (NSA).

Indisputably, the roots of the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) lie in the region, and the adherents of these faiths have historically displayed convincing religious and political sentiments towards the holy lands. This is evident from the successive occupations of the Beit al-Muqadas – the Arabic name of Jerusalem (Al-Quds - the Holy One) (Van der Hoeven, 2018). The importance of Jerusalem is not just for the Middle East, but it is also important for the rest of the world. The history of the city holds an indelible account of how empires, states, and leaders have struggled to bring it under their control (Armstrong, 2011; Jacobson, 2011; Krämer, 2011). In modern time, the existence of the state of Israel has only exacerbated the problem and further complicated the historical competition. As part of the socio-political fallouts of conflict in Europe, the persecution of Jews, and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the European power (particularly the British) and later the Americans embarked on creating a homeland for the Jews in the Zionist state of Israel undoubtedly, remains one of the most disturbing

and protracted cause of conflict in the Middle East (Khalidi, 2013; Radosh and Radosh, 2010; Weir, 2014).

In addition, the significance of Middle East lies in the fact that it is one of the chief repositories of fossil fuel. This realization that it is the greatest supplier of energy in the modern industrial age has led to division of the entire area into new states to cater to the desire of the great colonial and post-colonial powers to have their zones of influence after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. This had also led to wars before and after 9/11; in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> and first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Chaos and mayhem, such as the one going on in Syria, does not merely fall within the bracket of regional power context but also underpins the notion of reference in a conflict (Galtung, 2009). With an unending political fracas, it suits the interests of references to keep the oil producing states beholden to them through expensive arms purchase and keep Israel safe. The waters have been made murkier by the backlash against the intervention of foreign powers in the form of non-state actors such as Al Qaeda and IS. In both ways, states in the region are strategically dependent on the reference in terms of military hardware for consolidating their reign and regime on one hand, and on the other to tame, oppress and when deemed to crush domestic dissident, whether home-grown or facilitated by external entities. The latest attempt by Donald Trump to irrevocably divide the Middle East on sectarian lines is another way to prolong conflict (Hubbard & Erdbrink, 2017). The Arab's willingness to accept the bait and the arms purchase of USD 110 billion goes to show that the Arab state will not only be protected but will also have military arsenals to fight and defend itself against Iran (Gardner, 2018). On the other hand, Iran has not also been less ill-disposed to muscling up. Tehran is gearing up to expand its influence in the region. The latter's involvement in Syria and Iraq points towards an ominous pattern which is indicative of a new twist to the conflict in the Middle East, yet a reiteration of historical regional power tussle between the Arab and non-Arab neighbours.

## 2. Conflict in the Middle East

The Middle Eastern region has been frequently infested by variegated conflicts. The events of the past century proved that the region is not insulated from transformation. Some notable mentions include: Arab Spring 2010; September 11, 2001 attacks and the resultant occupation of Iraq in 2003; peace initiatives between Israel and Arabs culminating into the Oslo peace accords in 1993; the liberation of Kuwait from Iraq in 1991; the Iran-Iraq war 1980-1988; the Iranian revolution of 1979; the Arab-Israel wars of 1973 and 1967; and the 1908 Young Turk revolution. These are conceivably the most significant watersheds in the modern history of the Middle East (Halliday, 2005).

The trends in the conflict dynamics in the recent decades denote that the Middle East has steadily ebbed away from the traditional methods of state confronting each other. However, the region has radically developed various tactics to use force to influence; it has become prone to conflicts that involve elements of non-state actors and outside powers, unstable alliances, terrorism, and insurgency. Moreover, the region has also developed a greater tendency to indulge into conflicts based on sects, ethnicity, tribe, and religious extremism (Cordesman, 2017). The earlier dissection of the conflict dynamics identified two major features; the weakness of political institutions and the mutual lack of political community as the basic cause of conflict. These features created a greater propensity for the distrust among and between the elites and their subjects in the Middle East. Furthermore, the politics in Middle East continues to focus on the acquisition of power rather than on the use of power to build a polity; which aggravated the failure to institutionalize social change and, therefore, retarded the integration of ethnic, religious, and tribal groups.

The Middle East holds paramount geo-strategic significance for the United States which dubbed the region as *Greater Middle East* or *New Middle East* almost a decade ago due to the evolving nature of the conflict in the region. The states of North Africa, the Levant region and the Persian Gulf collectively form the Greater Middle East. It also encompassed areas such as south Caucasus and Central Asia which are on the margins of the formerly mentioned regions of the Greater Middle

East (Nazemroaya, 2006). In recent decades, especially after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Middle East has become the dominant theatre for United States' intervention in frequency and scale. The conflict in the region has a significant influence on global prosperity and stability and affects a wide range of issues which are vital to United States' interests as a global power.

The conflict in Middle East has mostly been understood through some timeless maxims such as the balance of power, power grudges, the rise and fall of empires, the clash of civilizations, states indulged in anarchy, and the conflict surrounding the religious discourse (Halliday, 2005). However, it is significant to access the contemporary conflict through various thematic lenses – by probing into the structures that run the region, the regional dynamics, and players which shape the attributes of the conflict and intra-domestic dimensions – to better comprehend the nature of the conflict. The internationalization of the conflict, the transnational nature of contemporary conflict, ideological stances circulating in the region, and the religious and historical reasons that make conflict frequently relevant to the region are also important themes to understand the multi-dimensional and multi-layered conflict in Middle East. Furthermore, it is significant to comprehend the trends in conflict in Middle East; primarily focusing on the ending of conflict, its continuation or mutation, and deciphering the impact on a strategic and political level. It is paramount to understand the nature of conflict in a heavily militarized and critical region where most states are in a process of radical transformation, prompted by the exponential increase in population and urbanization, and suffering from inapt governance, weak economic development, and a failing attempt at secularism.

### **3. Regional Power Contestation: Historical Dynamics**

The conflict in Middle East, through the prism of regional dynamics, connotes the incessant lack of regional cohesion and integration due to the protuberant power rivalry amongst the regional hegemony enduring for centuries. The Arabs, Persians, Turks and Israelis have been the leading rivals for influence in the region of Middle East. The power struggle in the region has entrenched the contemporary history of Middle East. Historically, the parochial hostilities and

heterogeneity in regimes of power were strong enough to suppress rebellions but were insecure to risk and initiate comprehensive forms of cooperation with neighbouring countries.

The history of regional power contention in Middle East can be traced back to the Battle of Carchemish, fought at the border between Syria and Turkey in 605 BC, between the Babylonian army and the allied forces of Egypt and Assyrians. The struggle for dominance over the region drove the Babylonians and the Pharaohs into an armed confrontation, resulting in an end to the Assyrian Empire and the emergence of the Babylonians as the masters of the Middle East (American Anthropologist, 2009). Furthermore, the power struggle in the region led to the inception of conquest centres in Middle East; one such establishment was located in close proximity to Nile Delta and Nile River Valley near the Lower Egypt and another centred around Tigris and Euphrates Rivers known as Mesopotamia, now Iraq (Lustick, 1997).

The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Emergence of the state of Israel: The Ottoman Empire cast claims of authority over heterogeneous populations in Middle East by dividing the region into segments which lacked administrative sophistication, and when the empire relinquished control, parochial claims of sovereignty were echoed by local elites in those regional segments. The imperialist ambitions of European states culminated into a comprehensive control under the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I, propelling a European mandatory power system under the auspices of the League of Nations. By 1918, the Turkish Empire had been entirely engulfed by Europe; the British had taken control over Egypt and Cyprus and ingrained influence over the Arabian Peninsula; the French established control over Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco; and the Italians Libya. Therefore, it can be contended that the Ottoman retreat signalled state formation in the recent history of the Middle East (Lustick, 1997: 656) and by extension the onset of regional power contest.

Middle East after 1918 witnessed strides in inter-state relations despite the crippled autonomy of the regional players. The surge for regional influence and establishment of independent political entity in the Arabian Peninsula began with Ibn Sa'ud (the founder of modern

Saudi Arabia) craving for sovereign autonomy which culminated into the making of the kingdom of Hejaz and Najd and the recognition of the new state by European powers in 1926 (Al-Rasheed, 2002: 46-47). Following the power grip, Saudi Arabia made huge effort to sway the happenings around the Peninsula and gulf region.

Following Saudi Arabia, Iraq was progressively more assertive than other Arab states in expanding its influence in the region after its independence in 1932. Iraq aimed to manage the affairs of Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon which were collectively called as the ‘Fertile Crescent’, a stretch of geography that spread from Iran to Iraq (Ajami, 2014). Egypt, on the other hand, tried to exhibit its regional dominance by reaffirming its historic claim on Sudan, emphasizing that the unity of the Nile Valley was imperative. Iran, in the inter-war period, opted to formalize cooperation with other regional states through signing the Saadabad Pact in 1937 with Iraq, Turkey, and Afghanistan (Doran, 1999: 84). Another significant regional development was the united front of all Arab states against the Jewish community in Palestine; aided mostly by British through its rhetoric of ‘Jewish national home’ in Palestine by the Balfour Declaration of 1917. The united stance of Arab states evolved into the League of Arab States in 1945, and it was saturated with inter-Arab politics. However, external forces vehemently pushed for Egypt to lead this alliance which focused to deal with post-colonial fragmentation and the creation of Israel (Halliday, 2005). The most dramatic consequence of the World War II on Middle East was the redrawing of the Palestinian borders which resulted due to an armed confrontation between Israel and Arab states in 1948, and since Jewish forces prevailed, they took up the territory of Palestine and turned million Palestinians into refugees – making the conflict intractable (Ramsbotham et al., 2011).

#### **4. Regional Hegemonic Contest in the 20th and 21st Centuries**

In the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt emerged as the great Arab state uniting the Arab world with the slogan of Pan-Arabism, and Egypt’s quest for hegemony was aided by journalists, teachers, and other professionals. Mass support for Gamal Nasser as the leader of the Arab world reached to an unprecedented level after the British-French-Israel

attack on Egypt in 1956. This time period was characterized as the ‘Arab Cold War’ as the traditionalist monarchies, like Saudi Arab and Jordan, opposed Arab Socialism under Pan-Arabism, and the contention remained till Nasser’s death. However, when Anwar Sadat, Nasser’s successor, signed the Camp David Accords in 1978 without securing the support of any other significant Arab state, it further weakened Egypt’s place as the leader of the Arab world and gave way to Saddam Hussein to replace Egypt with Iraq. Saddam’s government was successful in establishing Iraq at the new centre; championing Arab sentiments and cause, particularly against Israel’s animosity. Such replacement of Egypt by Iraq further bolstered the latter’s position within the Arab League, given the expulsion of Cairo from the League. Subsequently, Iraq became the Arab frontline state against the theo-democratic rule newly established in the neighbouring state of Iran. The Iran revolution spiked some degree of threat amongst the Sunni Arab states afraid of the importation of similar trend in their country. Even then, most of the Arab countries had been hesitant and cautious to unite under Iraq’s banner due to its ruthless use of military force against its neighbours, Iran and Kuwait in 1980 and 1990 respectively, as it was seen as an outrage of international law and a threat to the whole region (Lustick, 1997).

The overthrow of Hashemite monarchy in Iraq in 1958, followed by the withdrawal of the British from the Gulf beginning with Kuwait in 1961 and the fall of monarchic rule in 1973 in Afghanistan, prompted the Shah of Iran to propel Iran’s influence in the region. Pursuing this vision, Iran used its military might against Iraq in continued border clashes from 1969 to 1975 which ended with the Algiers Agreement in 1975. The Algiers Agreement settled the water and land dispute between the states and established the norm of mutual non-interference (Halliday, 2005). However, the state and society of Iran were transformed by a radical change brought by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 which faced the most dramatic challenge due to the all-out invasion by Iraq in 1980. The war continued for eight years and is dubbed as the longest inter-state war in modern Middle East history (Halliday, 2005: 106).

The end of contestation between United States and Soviet Union, which had vehemently existed during the Cold War, did not appear



sufficient enough to instil and establish regional peace. The aggressive invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990 led to the most profound inter-Arab division in the modern history of Middle East. The reasons that propelled Iraq to cause the Kuwait crisis included the historic claim of Iraq over Kuwait as its nineteenth province; Iraq also blamed Kuwait for stealing its oil from the Rumaila field. Furthermore, Iraq also claimed its economy had suffered as Kuwait had sold oil above its Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) quota and pushed the world market price downward. And lastly, the Iraqi invasion in Kuwait was a result of a popular movement in Kuwait appealing for Iraqi intervention (Halliday, 2005: 145). However, the invasion was more of a struggle – seemingly regional hegemonic struggle; Iraq, competing with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, wanted to use the liberation of Kuwait and contempt for Kuwaitis to mobilize Arab opinion in positioning Saddam as a revolutionary leader worthy of fighting for Arab cause. Meanwhile, Egypt had not recovered from the rhetoric of yielding to Israel in 1977-79 and its inability to bring an end to the Palestinian problem. Whereas Saudi Arabia, amongst other U.S clients in the region (Sylvan & Majeski, 2009: 139), does not generally agree with Israeli policy towards the Palestinians and Arab states, that attitude saw a significant tangent following the death of King Faisal (Cordesman, 2003) and most recently in the wake of Mohammad bin Salman (Hubbard, 2018). As a way of demonstrating its uniqueness, Iraq set out to break the regional paralysis with its daring leadership while raising the slogan that its operation against Kuwait was a step towards the liberation of Palestine and eventual ‘right to self-determination’. Such claims and hegemonic rhetoric failed to enchant the Arab countries; rather they aligned with the Western powers to launch an unprecedented military assault on Iraq, the first of its kind in modern history of the Middle East. The internationally imposed sanctions on Iraq culminated in the unpleasant palpable fate the Iraqis had to live with for many years (Halliday, 2005: 145-146).

Interestingly, in the Middle East, regional powers are bent at swaying the outcome of domestic crisis in other states within the region. Although Istanbul and Tel Aviv have strategic partnership (the former a NATO member and a Washington ally and the latter a traditional ally of the Americans), they share dissimilar stances on the Israel-Palestine

conflict. In memorable past, the flotilla saga (Booth, 2010) and the successive discriminatory belligerent exercise of Israel in Palestine strained the long cherished Istanbul-Tel Aviv strategic partnership (Sherwood, 2011). Saudi Arabia has always kept a tab on Yemen even when the brawl in Sanaa has no direct implication for Riyadh; the Saudi government always believes its relatively poor neighbour is within its strategic sphere of control (O'Connor, 2016). More recently, Saudi belligerent operation in Yemen has dragged the already impoverished nation to the worst humanitarian crisis in recent times. Even though it is one of its closest allies in the region, Bahrain could not escape Riyadh's hegemonic disposition (Bronner & Slackman, 2011). Riyadh was equally instrumental through clandestine foreign aid that eventually led to the coup against Egypt's true democracy. Same could be said of Iran and Turkey; Tehran and Ankara would want to have decisive role in the domestic affairs of Iraq and Lebanon, and Syria respectively (Kermalli, 2017; Malik, 2017); Israel is equally culpable, when it comes to influencing domestic situation in neighbouring state, more recently, it played a pivotal role in the ousting Egyptian President Mursi (Middle East Monitor, n.d.; Sadeh, 1997).

The complexion of contest sometimes highlights and downplays the relevance of primordial sentiments. Even while Islam is the common factor amongst Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, dissimilar ethnicity remains the fault line amongst them and the driver for divergent foreign policy. Other than ethnicity, Tehran and Riyadh uphold fundamentally incongruent foreign policy tailored at promoting their sectarian sentiment and hegemonic design within and beyond the region. While Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, and the UAE are on same page – faith wise, their attitude towards the Jewish state of Israel vis-à-vis the latter's treatment of the Palestinians is profoundly poles apart. Most players in the region have used the Palestinian cause to raise their political credibility and legitimacy domestically and abroad, but the reality and behaviours of certain players are indicative that some are more Muslim than other. For instance, while Iran and Turkey can maintain strained and confrontational relations with Israel over the continuous occupation and oppression of the Palestinians, other players would be more diplomatic. Saudi Arabia has maintained a powerful credibility as the guardian of the

two holiest sites of Islam, yet the growing relations between Riyadh, the UAE, and Israel (Stratfor 2018) belies the importance of Pan-Islamism, Pan-Arabism, and, by extension, the Palestinian freedom movement. Ethnicity, language, sect, and religion are essential elements of understanding the bearing of regional power struggle in the Middle East.

## **5. Regional Arms Race**

The structural anarchy of global politics makes states to place a premium on their security, stability and protection from perceived hostile entities. Such proclivity explicates the huge military budget of many states, particularly those resourceful enough to fortify themselves with the state of art military arsenal. States in the Middle East are no exemption to this security dilemma; while they have no military capability of their own, they invariably seek protection under the military umbrella of powerful western states, particularly the United States.

Significantly, the protracted political conflicts in the Middle East and regional power contest nourish the arms race amongst regional powers. The region ranks top amongst the ones with fat military budget (Gardner, 2018; Hubbard & Erdbrink, 2017). A report, issued by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute compared arms imports between 2007-2011 and 2012-2016. Its findings indicated that weapons imports by Middle Eastern nations increased 86 per cent between the two periods, with the region accounting for 29 per cent of all global arms purchases. Hence, the pursuance of security by one nation in the region exacerbated the insecurity of others, leading to a vicious circle resulting in increased militarization of the region at each turn.

The secret nuclear policy of Israel remains both a fear and a persuasive incentive for countries in the region to strengthen their military arsenal (Anderson & Anderson, 2014). Considerably, Israel's monopoly of military power is openly and clandestinely flaunted and demonstrated. Since its creation, Israel has carefully championed and executed policies geared at truncating and disarming other states with the sole objective of creating, maintaining, and guaranteeing an asymmetrical military power equation, which purportedly makes Tel Aviv invincible (Cohen, 2010; Cordesman, 2006; Gallo & Marzano,

2009; Rabinovich, 2015; Steinberg 2008). The nuclear capability of Israel is termed the “world’s worst kept secret” (Cohen, 2012). While it has been fruitful for Israel to manipulate and manoeuvre the structural environment of the international system, on the other hand, same structure and systemic institutions demand that other countries in the region act responsibly and play by the book. While Israel’s nuclear capability is a common knowledge the world over and Tel Aviv is treated as a sacred-cow, other players in the region like Iraq, Iran, and Syria have received harsher and terrible treatment. The UN Security Council’s sanction and the second invasion of Iraq on the premise of weapon of mass destruction (WMD) and connection with 9/11 (even when the International Atomic Energy Agency – IAEA had no evidence against Iraq) are suggestive of a deceptive clandestine design geared at greater fulfilment of the regional asymmetrical military power equation that glaringly favours Israel (Bonn, 2010; ElBaradei, 2011; Stratfor, 2003).

It is no secret that the Arab nations and other regional players are unsatisfied with the status-quo. This explains the likelihood of the Gulf countries considering nuclear technology and programme, either as deterrent against perceived foe or as tool of balancing power equation in the region. Iran’s nuclear programme is a commonplace knowledge while Saudi Arabia’s increasing desire to joining the nuclear club is growingly discursive within the discourse of nuclear proliferation in the region (Cigar, 2016:1). Both Iran and Saudi Arabia, obviously, have different strategic reasons for longing to be part of the nuclear club. Balancing Israel’s nuclear monopoly and allaying its aggression might be a shared reason; however, several years ago, the fear that Iraq may acquire the nuclear capability and employ it to revive its regional hegemony was also a shared sentiment between Tehran and Riyadh (Halliday, 2005).

Arms race has become one of the manifestations of nationalism in the Middle East. Following a protracted diplomatic trajectory, Iran was able to reach an agreement with the P5+1 (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action - JCPOA) over its nuclear programme, though that was never perilous to Iranian national interest or nationalism. The agreement turned out as opportunity cost for Iran and a fulfilment of national interest, but

the Trump administration shattered the Iranian sense of responsibility by pulling out of the nuclear deal (BBC, 2018; Newman, 2018). The pull out globally delineates Trump's Washington as anti-multilateralism and a president with the proclivity to satisfying the Israeli government at any cost (Aljazeera, 2018; Rabinowitz, 2018). As a matter of fact, Iran alone does not bear the burden of being driven by national sentiment; this is equally true for the Saudis. More recently, the US-Saudi arms deals (and consideration of Russia's arms) does not simply underpin and verify the arms race in the region (Aljazeera, 2017; Trtworld, n.d.), they also underscore Saudis' nationalism, either for military superiority or for concerted effort geared at maligning and truncating Iranian influence in the region. Invariably, arms race has become both an obsession and distraction from achieving the objective of conflict-free region. The attitude of regional players reiterates and reinforces the aged stereotype of a region inherently plagued by confusion and the propensity for conflict.

## **6. Institutional Divide**

The most influential organizations in Middle East include the Arab League formed in 1945, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation that came into being in 1969 and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of 1981. These inter-governmental institutions have survived many disputes in the region; however, their performance has never been overwhelmingly contributory towards the peace process, and they have repeatedly been victim to the regional politics. The Arab League has long been criticised as a tool of authoritarian regimes, such as Iraq and Egypt. The same League was used as a tool to humiliate Egypt as it settled on the negotiation table with Israel in 1978 and stripped off its membership as per the decision of other Arab states, mainly led by Iraq (*Council on Foreign Relations*, 2014).

Beyond the Arab League that represents all Arabic speaking nations is the GCC; a small association of oil-rich countries in the gulf region. Like many similar organisations, the idea of the GCC stems from the model of the European Union (EU). Since its inception, the council has recorded degree of cooperation, but recent development in the council directly contradicts and undermines cooperation, understanding, and

amicable conflict resolution upon which regional associations are founded.

The on-going contention between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has plagued the working of GCC. Diplomatic misunderstanding between the two states began in 2014 but became more evident and dramatic in 2017. Though Qatar is a small country, it is strategically influential within and beyond the region. Whether acting as a mediator, providing good office, and offering itself as the platform for conflict resolution or summit for global economic debate, Doha continues to chart a pragmatic foreign policy meant to mark diplomatic niche that does not eclipse Qatar's sovereign integrity or tame Doha to Riyadh's sphere of influence. By all standards, Saudi Arabia is the most powerful state of the GCC with an all-embracing clout.

The long standing Qatar's support for HAMAS and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood elicits tensions with certain Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These Gulf States would demand Qatar to stop supporting the organisations they have labelled as extremist groups and accused of fomenting discord in the region. In 2014, at a meeting of GCC, the issue became so intense that UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia decided to recall their ambassadors from Qatar, souring diplomatic ties while Kuwait and Oman remained non-aligned. The economic dimension of the rift between the countries has been associated with the divide between oil producing Saudi Arabia and natural gas producing Qatar as evidenced by the historic Saudi opposition of UAE-Qatari Dolphin Undersea Natural Gas Pipeline project in 2006 (Al-Rasheed, 2014).

Poverty alone does not bequeath calamity and curse; being rich can, in turn, have its adverse effect, the rich also cry. The tussle between the Saudis and Qataris expresses and amplifies this notion. Qatar has been very progressive and forward thinking in its approach to the problems of the Muslims. The state is very sympathetic to Muslim Brotherhood – Ikhwaanul Muslimun – probably because the current king of Qatar has some sympathy towards the movement. During the chaotic political drama and most particularly the coup that ousted President Mursi, Qatar defended the Egyptian democratic dispensation and disapproved of the illegitimate and forceful removal of an elected government. Doha refused

to kowtow to the stances of few GCC countries, it stood by Mursi both before and during his undemocratic and unconstitutional trials, which, subsequently, resulted in the hostile diplomatic upheaval between Qatar and Saudi-led coalition that also includes Egypt, a non-GCC member.

Prior to the political transformation in Egypt and the controversial Mursi saga, Egypt and Qatar had been in a loggerhead over Qatar's sanctuary to Shaykh Yusuf Al-Qaradawiy, an Egyptian-Azhar scholar of no minor pedigree and one of the most eminent scholars in the Sunni world. Al-Qaradawiy is a sharp intellectual thorn on the skins of the Saudi's Salafi conservative clerics. His fatwas are very cosmopolitan and contemporary; the Saudi's monarchy and Egypt's Sisi loathe him for his intellectual popularity and acceptance the world over and consequently would never be comfortable with the state that harbours him.

In addition to these sins of Qatar, the Saudi-led coalition asserts that the Doha based Al-Jazeera network is promoting sentiments, particularly those espoused during the Arab spring, that are considered as threatening and unfavourable to the Saudi government or others in the coalition and, hence, demanded the closure of the largely watched television station. The diplomatic tension has grown beyond politics and economics; rather it transcends into the realm of religion and social institution and structures. The traditional familial connection between the Saudis and Qataris could not escape the traumatic tension (Finn, 2017; Ramesh, 2017).

The GCC crisis proves yet another nuance in the scholarship of regionalism. It uncovers the level of regional maturity of all parties involved in the crisis; their inability to find a common and agreeable midway to resolving their differences, all points at regional incoherence and institutional failure. The crisis further exposes the lacuna in the understanding of regionalism and regionalisation within the Middle East. Furthermore, it also reemphasizes the realist argument of how powerful national interest and state-centrism will always be the deciding factor that drives state's behaviour as opposed to the liberal and functionalist argument of institutionalism as mechanism for peace amongst states.

Aside from the Arab League and the GCC, the Muslim world in general, and the Middle East in particular, is an integral part of a bigger

institution. Coming into existence as a response to the Israeli aggression and a determination craft an institutional and uniform voice for the wider Muslims of the world, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) became the supranational, yet the global, and institutional representation of the entire Muslim world. The objectives of OIC transcend speaking up against anti-Islam sentiment emanating from outside the boundaries of the Muslim societies; it also includes seeking a mutually acceptable resolution to crisis within the Islamic fold. The frequency of political instability and the incessant wrangling amongst Muslim nations, particularly in the Middle East, would defeat any claim of success story of the OIC. The Arab springs and consequent political instability and crises across the Middle East does not exonerate the Muslim leadership of any form of wrongdoing and misplacement of priority. The crisis is yet a refreshing moment and reminiscence of the often rejected view that the Muslim societies cannot command a common voice to resolving common crisis mostly challenging fellow religious and cultural kin. This failure is captured in the attitude of the Arab League's inaction and indecisive stance (Al-Arabiya, 2015), and its "Hobbesian Nightmare" (Gumbo, 2014), let alone the OIC, which according to Abdullah al-Ahsan inherited the Qur'anic traditions of mediation of conflict (Al-Ahsan, 2004). But the question remains that to what extent OIC has excelled in this bequeathed legacy. OIC has practically represented itself as politically inactive institution even though Abdullah al-Ahsan argues that the organisation has been helpful in arbitrating many conflicts but with little or no practical solutions and years of difficulties (Çolakoğlu, 2013) and failure (Dawn, 2009). The magnitude of recent refugee crisis from the Middle East and the indecisiveness of major Muslim organisations to stand up against sectarian and linguistic politics further adds up and bolsters the view of those arguing that the idea of Ummah is rather a dead concept (Najimdeen, 2016). The OIC has for years been plagued by regional and hegemonic politics which invariably impedes any propensity to fulfil OIC's stated objective in true spirit. Politics within the OIC has never been free from state nationalism which explains the divided political stance that often characterises its decision making process. Nationalism and regional politics undermine the true



manifestation of collective security and collective measure of conflict resolution and reconciliation as enjoined by the Muslim scripture:

And if two parties or groups are the believers fall to fighting, then make peace between both. But of one of them outrages against the other, then fight you all against the one that outrages till it complies with the command of Allah. Then if it complies, then make reconciliation between them justly, and be equitable. Verily, Allah loves those who are equitable.

The believers are nothing else than brothers (in Islamic religion). So make reconciliation between your brothers, and fear Allah, that you may receive mercy. (The Noble Quran, Surah Al-Hujurat, 49:9-10).

The disappointing status of the OIC drives home three challenging questions. Despite being the largest supranational institution, second to the United Nations, the OIC and its Arab League partner cannot boast of enjoying popular support among the Muslim community, for which they claim representation. The limited achievements of these institutions speak volume on the extent to which national border can be challenging to the notion of Islamic commonwealth. The institutional failure is failure at both cognitive and religious level; there is a failure as a religious community and rather than sharing cognitive assonance, there has been an embracement of cognitive dissonance to challenging issues. Neither the Arab League nor the OIC could muster political and diplomatic clout to arrest the protracted Syria crisis. Sentimental politics within the two institutions informed the castigation of Syria and Yemen as non-Arab nations merely because most members of the institutions do not share similar religio-political ethos as the castigated party in the two countries.

Internal fragmentation and the lack of coherence amongst the regional powers and institutions enormously accentuated the tempo of the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts and the consequent refugee crisis which is believed to be the largest movement of people since the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. The statistics of the UNHCR, monitoring the trend in the Middle East with particular attention to Syria, avers that internal displacement inside Syria would not simply aggravate, but many more exoduses are expected if peace fails to rein (UNHCR).

The unfolding realities in the Middle East and laxity of the OIC, Arab League, and the GCC shatter any argument that the Islamic world is capable enough to resolving internal crisis of its own. The realities further underpin the often contested view that contemporary Muslim societies do not bear the spirit of Ummah. This following extract should help place this argument in perspective.

As much as that line of argument fairly conjures some degree of reality, it does not however depict the whole reality. The concept of Ummah entails brotherhood, fraternity, and collective security and responsibility, all of these values have become virtually inexistent, especially during trying period, when required the most. As the crisis mounts, the gates of neighbouring Middle Eastern states were shut, that of course accorded the German leader, the latitude for a lambasting remark “When the gate of Makkah was shut, we (Europeans) opened our doors” a reference to the repulsive gesture received by fleeing refugees. Such a remark belittles the notion of Ummah, questions the essence of Islamic brotherhood, derides the wealth of the Gulf countries and rather reinforces Europe as a benign continent. The concept of Ummah is religious, sociological and transnational though, a good student of international relations will definitely offer explanations as to why this concept has lost its essentiality within the annals of history. One plausible explanation will be the imposition and acceptance of European concept of nationalism and nation-state paradigm by the then colonial world. It is hard for the Ummah to strive in the circumstance, where the generality of nations have succumbed blindly to territorial sovereignty and integrity and ready to do all that it takes to protect that territorial and sovereign right and ownership. Hence, the problem of one country might not necessarily enchant the sympathy of other, which thus explains amongst other reasons why the exodus of people from the Middle East was unmanageable by the regional players (Najimdeen, 2016).

## **7. Arab Spring and Pan-Arabism**

The Arab spring is a phenomenal socio-political development in recent Middle East political history. It is not a mere tension between the

corridor of power and the frustrated youth, but characteristically a representation of the perennial trend of tussle between the state and society in the Middle East. The political turmoil refreshes the history of Islamic societies in the context of struggle between the state and society. The Arab spring carefully fits into our third prism of understanding Middle East conflict which is intra-state conflict. Unlike many of the intra-state conflicts in the region, the Arab spring is unique and different because of its regional dimension and ramifications. The tentacles of the crisis became transcendent and trans-boundary, complemented by regional tension. The Arab spring, which began in the Middle East in 2010 and toppled authoritarian regimes, can be considered as the rebirth of Pan-Arabism. The revolutionary wave started in Tunisia and spread towards the East to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. The event in Tunisia that set forth the Arab spring was never imagined to carry trans-boundary effect, though that stands now as an indelible part of Middle East history. Dissatisfaction with local government and lack of adequate job opportunities, education, and resources led the masses to revolt against the authoritarian and autocratic regimes.

Conceptually, the Arab-centric complexion of spring brings a reminiscence of 19th and 20th centuries Pan-Arabism. The 21st century Arab spring was a continuity of the legacy of the past centuries. A close assessment of the two (Pan-Arabism and Arab spring) shows certain degree of similarity. The 19th and 20th centuries Pan-Arabism became a reality “when increased literacy led to a cultural and literary renaissance among Arabs of the Middle East and that contributed to political agitation and led to independence of most Arab states from the Ottoman Empire” (Etheredge, n.d.). This is also true for the Arab spring, a political agitation by the Arab public, which was prompted and enhanced by the proliferation in ICT literacy (Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheaffer, 2013) and political awareness that, to a certain degree, led to the liberation of the masses from the political claws of Arab authoritarian leaders. While it is increasingly conventional to dismiss the relevance of Pan-Islamism in current era, a total dismissal would be tantamount to burying the manifestation of Pan-Islamism in recent Arab political agitation. The Oxford dictionary of Islam defines Pan-Islamism as the “ideology calling for socio-political solidarity among all Muslims”; if one must read

beyond the lexical definition, the essence and spirit of Pan-Islamism essentially meant effecting a change. In this backdrop, the Arab spring does not simply demonstrated the ‘urge for change’ but is also symbolic against oppression. The spring defeated the reluctant and submissive stereotype associated with the Arab public. It showed a political nuance in the Middle East wherein a leaderless public can constitute threat to authoritarian regimes and can muster socio-political solidarity amongst the people – to purge the system of its political maladies and change the course of their political destiny. Though over the years, a plethora of critique of the Arab spring has surfaced; while some observers applauded it, others dismissed its relevance and dubbed it as a failed project (Gause III, 2011; Gelvin, 2015; Makdisi, 2017). Regardless of its success level, the spring at the medium level was at least the fulfilment of Qur’anic injunction “God will not change the lot of a nation - people, as long as they do not change themselves” (The Noble Qur’an, Surah Ar-Rad 13:11).

Argumentatively, beyond the shadow of traditional brawl between the state and society, the Arab spring delineated the aspirations of the Arab masses towards the values of the western civilization which triggered Arab reawakening as a Pan-Arab movement than a Pan-Islamic one. Moreover, the Arabs became united and educated each other on social media about the Arab reawakening sweeping the region. The influence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and their expansionist designs towards the region, however, signal a revival of Pan-Islamism, though without the support of national governments of the region and the employment of brutal tactics to achieve their goal (Hamed, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

Indicatively, the history of conflict in the Middle East has generated many competing explanations. Rather than addressing all the contending arguments, we have solely tailored the discussion around the regional dimension of the conflict from the vantage point of history; though without any naivety of the interconnection of all competing explanations. In such backdrop, we have reiterated regional power contest as possible answer to the current political unrest and how the latter encompasses other silently mentioned variables that have precipitated the conflict in

different ways. Whichever way one wants to analyse the conflict in the region, it can never be isolated from the interference of foreign powers and hence the structural and systemic dimension of the conflict.

As long as realism dominates state's thought process and action, regional competition will remain a reoccurring phenomenon. Similarly, the role of external players will continue to greatly shape regional power struggle as demonstrated in the Saudi-led coalition against Qatar, the protracted Syrian civil war, and recently the Yemen crisis. While regional power struggle cannot be strictly reduced to confrontation, it will be more shaped out in the form of hegemonic design; the struggle for a powerful regional power. Though the history of the region remains indelible of the absence of visionary leadership, the unnaturalness of a large Arab state and the eventual decisiveness of economic jealousies between states have repeatedly hampered regional cohesion over time and have heightened insecurity in Middle East (Lustick, 1997). The lack of credible leadership that can truly address the issues of the region will incentivise more insurgency and popular political agitation like the Arab spring.

With the changing dynamics of regional equation and the growing closeness between Israel and Arab states, the tempo of Palestinian cause is not unlikely to be modulated. Finding a solution amiable to the Palestinians might be farfetched. Broadly speaking, the Cold War rivalry between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia will perennially shape our reading of the Middle East. The rivalry will, hence, equally shape the relations of rest of the Muslim world with Iran and Saudi Arabia (Choksy and Choksy 2016; Lapidus 2014).

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