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Deconstructing the Middle East: An American Perspective

The United States needs to rethink its geographical definition of the Middle East, or so argues Samir Tata. Because the Persian Gulf and the Levant are two distinct sub-regions, the geopolitical problems and consequences they pose for US strategy are different too.

By Samir Tata for ISN

Confusion reigns over the Middle East. Since 9/11 no region on earth has generated more intense controversy and conflict in American political discourse than the Middle East. Yet the very term “Middle East” lacks geographic precision or strategic clarity. And ambiguity leads to misunderstanding and strife. Americans just have had a near-miss on war with Syria, but in the process have had to endure the spectacle of marching up (Capitol) Hill and (with the help of Russia) down again.

Defining the Middle East

So what does the United States mean by the “Middle East”, and why do Americans feel it is so important? The geographic core of the “Middle East” consists of two strategically distinct sub- regions: the Levant and the Persian Gulf. For opportunistic or tactical reasons, a number of neighboring states have been tacked on to both regional groupings. For example, North African countries, especially Libya and Algeria, have been included in an expanded version of the Levant, while Afghanistan and Pakistan are often included in the Persian Gulf sub-region. Moreover, Turkey is often added to the Levant (reflecting its eastern Mediterranean presence and shared border with Syria) or the Persian Gulf (by virtue of its shared borders with Iraq and Iran), depending upon the context

Given the elasticity in the geographical conception of the “Middle East” it is not at all surprising that confusion abounds. For the sake of strategic clarity, therefore, it is best to jettison the different versions of a “Greater Middle East” and limit the term “Middle East” to the core countries of the Levant and Persian Gulf sub-regions. In fact, from a strategic perspective, it would be more useful to retire the idea of the “Middle East” and instead focus on the Levant and Persian Gulf as two separate and distinct sub-regions. Simply put, from the US perspective, the Persian Gulf looms large as a vital strategic interest while it has no emotional interest. In sharp contrast, the Levant holds enormous emotional interest even though it is strategically irrelevant.

Why the Persian Gulf really matters

Central to America’s position as the world’s sole superpower is the fact that it controls access to the

Persian Gulf's and, therefore, the largest reserves of oil and gas. As of 2012, Persian Gulf [crude oil](#) amounted to 797 billion barrels representing about 52 per cent of total world crude oil proved reserves. The region's [natural gas reserves](#) represent an estimated 37 per cent of proved global supplies.

Yet it is China, not the United States that is primarily dependent upon Persian Gulf energy imports. By 2011 [Chinese oil imports](#) from the Persian Gulf amounted to 2.5 million barrels per day (bbl/d), representing 26 per cent of the country's oil consumption. In sharp contrast [US imports](#) over the corresponding period amounted to 1.8 million bbl, a mere 10 per cent of American oil consumption. Accordingly, ensuring unimpeded access to Persian Gulf energy resources will undoubtedly loom large as a vital national interest for China. What is vital to the United States, however, is its ability to deny its adversaries access to Persian Gulf energy resources. For example, in any future conflict with China (such as a Chinese attempt to take over Taiwan or seize the disputed Senkaku/Daiyou Islands from Japan), the US most likely (through persuasion or coercion) would seek to cut off Persian Gulf oil and gas exports to China.

The challenge going forward for the United States is how to preserve its sole control over access to Persian Gulf oil and gas resources. In the past, Washington has relied upon coercion (e.g. two wars with Iraq and sanctions against Iran) and patronage protection (e.g. Saudi Arabia and pre-revolution Iran) to advance its interests across the region. What it has yet to try is cooperation and détente with its most notable regional adversary. But that might change. Iran's new President, Hassan Rouhani, used his recent [op-ed in the Washington Post](#) to indicate that Tehran is prepared to engage in a serious dialogue that could lead to cooperation and détente. Successful dialogue is likely to hinge upon the clear articulation and mutual accommodation of vital national interests, while agreeing to disagree on issues of intense emotional interest, such as the Israel-Palestine dispute.

And the Levant?

With the notable exception of the Suez, the Levant region is of virtually no strategic value for the United States. It is not a region embellished with significant oil and gas reserves, and neither does it play host to a maritime or land chokepoint that is vital to Washington's military interests or economic security. Yet the region has continued to galvanize intense emotional interest in Washington.

The US commitment to support and defend Israel (expressed in numerous presidential declarations and congressional resolutions although never formalized in a defense treaty) highlights the central role emotional interest can play in the formulation of US foreign policy and national security strategy. From the US perspective, its unconditional commitment to Israel has no adverse consequences with respect to its vital national interests. Crucially, Washington's support for Israel does not damage or weaken its control over access to Persian Gulf energy resources. Quite simply, there is no link between the United States' emotional interest in Israel and its strategic interest in the Persian Gulf.

Moreover, none of the Arab countries of the Levant (the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt) are strategically important to Saudi Arabia or Iran. Accordingly, none of the Arab countries of the Levant can influence, let alone pressure, Saudi Arabia or Iran to threaten US control over access to Persian Gulf energy resources. Of course, neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran, which have enormous emotional interest in the Levant have the capacity to challenge US control over access to Persian Gulf oil and gas. And, if either Saudi Arabia or Iran were to be militarily involved in any significant way in the Israel-Palestine dispute (even by proxy), there would be significant adverse consequences (Israeli retaliation, US shut down of Saudi and Iranian oil exports, loss of US military support for Saudi Arabia).

Certainly, from a historical perspective, the Levant has had no strategic relevance for Saudi Arabia or

Iran. Indeed, the Anglo-French carve out of the Ottoman Empire which created Palestine, Trans-Jordan, Iraq (under British control) and Lebanon and Syria (under French control) in the aftermath of World War I was well entrenched for over a decade prior to the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Ibn Saud's focus was on consolidating control over his newly formed kingdom in the Arabian Peninsula, not trying to challenge the post-WW I order in the Levant. Similarly, during World War I, Iran had been occupied by Great Britain and Russia. Iran's interest was to ensure that it would not be partitioned; the carving out of the Levant was simply irrelevant to Tehran.

Likewise, following World War II, the Palestine issue, which engulfed the Levant and preoccupied Great Britain and the US, was not a vital concern of Saudi Arabia or Iran. Saudi Arabia's core interest was in ensuring that the oil concession it had granted Aramco, an American company, was translated into substantial oil revenues for the kingdom. Iran, which once again had been occupied by Great Britain and the Soviet Union during the war, was focused on ending the occupation with American help.

Future Challenges

The challenge for the United States in the future is to ensure that there is no strategic linkage between the Persian Gulf and Levant. And it must be careful not to conflate the interests of its allies with its own. Since what happens (at least so far) in the Levant does not impact the vital national interests of Saudi Arabia, there is no strategic rationale for Saudi involvement in the Levant. Likewise, what happens (at least so far) in the Persian Gulf does not impact vital national interests of any of the countries in the Levant, including Israel. In the case of Syria, the US has realized (albeit at the last minute) that satisfying its emotional interest in punishing the Assad regime for its alleged use of chemical weapons could jeopardize US vital national interests (by embroiling it in another war). Similarly, in dealing with Iran, the US will have to clearly separate its emotional interests from its vital strategic interests. Accordingly, Washington should let the concept of the Middle East as a strategic construct rest in peace.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Trends in a Tumultuous Region: Middle East after the Arab Awakening](#)
[A Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and other WMD in the Middle East](#)
[The Future of the Middle East and North Africa](#)

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