

Introduction - Regional Turbulence

This Strategic Update marks the launch of LSE IDEAS' Middle East International Affairs Programme. IDEAS' regional programmes emphasise that regions do not exist in a vacuum, but rather within a broader scheme of international affairs in which regional actors have extra-regional interests and non-regional states may have important regional concerns.

Nowhere is this more true than in the Middle East, which is at the centre of a host of political issues whose effects are felt internationally. The Middle East is perhaps the most important geostrategic region in the world, and not just because it accounts for around one-third of all world oil supplies. International relations scholars sometimes address the fundamentals of geography less than they should, so consider the instabilities at the borders of the region.

To the immediate South, piracy in the Gulf of Aden originates from the poverty of a failed state in Somalia, which itself borders Sudan and the genocide in Darfur. Both these north-west African states have significant Islamist movements and have hosted Al Qaeda factions.

To the North, Turkey's unsteady advance towards EU membership has not only forced that country to address vexed political questions of the relationship between religion, state and society, but also serves to highlight the West's political interests in regional stability at the edge of Europe itself.

Militarily, NATO is fully engaged in the stalled Western statebuilding effort to the East in Afghanistan, whose border region with Pakistan remains the key source of Islamist terrorism targeted at Western interests. Afghanistan of course borders the socially divided Islamic Republic of Iran, whose government's desire to acquire nuclear weapons capability is the subject of the ongoing attentions of a weakly-united United Nations Security Council.

Indeed, such is the attention focused on Afghanistan and Iran that the defining conflict of our times in Iraq has sometimes recently been overlooked. Iraq remains a highly unstable state, divided along ethnic, social and religious lines, with a weak government and continuing terrorist violence.

At the heart of it all the interminable Israel-Palestine conflict is more than just a local, or even a regional, issue. It is of direct concern to diasporas across the world, and animates a sense of



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conflict between Arab Islamism on the one hand and democratic crusaders on the other, a point brought out by **Gilles Kepel** in the first contribution to this report. Although those two grand narratives may have failed together in Iraq, the mutual suspicion between the United States and Islamic movements remains, as evidenced by the American administration's continued unwillingness to engage with Hamas, an organisation that **Fawaz Gerges** argues is transforming itself into a legitimate political actor to meet the demands of Palestinians in Gaza.

Emphasising that peace-building in the region requires a holistic approach, **Nigel Ashton** focuses on Jordan's stake in the conflict, and the danger that the process may not take into account the interests of those neighbours most directly affected. Central to that requirement will be the approach of the United States - an extra-regional actor whose involvement is crucial to securing any form of political solution, but **Amnon Aran** doubts that the United States possesses the diplomatic resources to overcome the obstacles to peace in a region where conflict appears the only constant.

