

MIDDLE EAST

STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS



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Middle East Strategic Outlook: Regional and Global Implications

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Ambassador (Ret.) Marcelle M. Wahba

Former U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates; President of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington D.C.

For someone who has spent almost all of my professional career in the Middle East, the number of times we have all talked about the difficulty of a specific period in time are too many to enumerate, so I will not repeat that and just say that the Middle East today continues to be going through a difficult period of transition.

What I thought I would do, instead of focusing on a specific issue, conflict or country, and there are many to discuss today, I thought I would look at the Middle East through maybe five regional trends that I believe define and explain some of the things we see happening in the region today.

I think the first trend we are seeing is that we are at the end of the status quo as we know it. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab Spring or the uprisings of 2010-11 unleashed very powerful forces across the Middle East. Nearly six years now since the food vendor in Tunisia lit the spark that rocked the Arab world, the region continues to go through major upheavals. Probably in my view, we are witnessing the most significant consequences for the region and for the world since the aftermath of World War II. Everywhere we look in the Middle East today we see that the status quo is challenged in almost every respect: the legitimacy of established governments; borders threatened by conflict and by the Islamic State and other terrorist groups; and the absence of strong credible leadership that can unite and formulate an accepted roadmap for the future. We have failed or failing states in Libya, Yemen, a raging civil war in Syria and ongoing instability in Iraq. Tunisia is probably the only country that is making a relatively peaceful transition but continues to be fragile. Egypt has returned to the route of stability of an authoritarian regime but faces serious domestic challenges in its economy and a potent terrorist group in the Sinai.

The second trend that I think we need to understand in a larger context is the Shia-Sunni rivalry. It is a new and dangerous trend and we see this competition of power throughout much of the Middle East: in Lebanon, in Syria, in Iraq certainly, Yemen, Bahrain, and also in the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While many of these conflicts are essentially political, the religious sectarian divide now enflames the region and defines the conflicts in religious terms. This is clearly manifested with the rise of Islamic State and of course the continued presence and in many cases increasing strength of al-Qa'ida in places like Syria and Yemen.

The third trend that I will point to is that the U.S. influence in the region has clearly diminished. We face a deficit of trust and therefore our ability to influence events in the region has clearly lessened in the last five to eight years. I think the fact that the Obama Administration decided not to intervene in a robust manner in Syria has harmed our credibility. The fact that the Obama Administration did not respond in a better manner to support Mubarak when he was under threat is seen by many in the region as betrayal of a leader we supported for many years. Also when we engaged with the Islamic government that took over, led by Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brothers, many in Egypt and others in the region saw that as U.S. support for the Muslim Brotherhood and not just the normal government to government engagement. In my view, many of the conflicts that we see in the region today do not lend themselves to solutions by

external powers. Whether the revolution in Egypt or the struggle for power in Libya or now in the current state of affairs in Syria, regional solutions are required. That said, I think the U.S. can and should play a leadership role by coordinating and supporting our allies in the region. Due to the diminishing stature of the traditional centers of power in the Arab world, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, the disengagement by the United States is a cause for serious concern by many of our allies.

The fourth trend I would point to is that the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have risen to a leadership role in the region that we have not seen in the past. We see a rising assertiveness particularly by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in defense of their national interests and in defense of stability in the region. The fact that they decided to undertake a joint effort against the Houthis in Yemen is just one example. The fact that they worked with the Egyptians and went into Libya against one of the factions in that struggle for power is another example. They are no longer waiting to have active participation by the U.S. in some of these decisions, they are taking decisions on their own and defining their own national interests in a very assertive manner.

The fifth regional trend that I would like to point at which I think is the most critical one and the one you mentioned, Dr. Alexander, is the huge number of refugees and displaced persons in the region. This is, I think, a trend that we will not recognize its immense impact until many years from now. Both the wars in Iraq and Syria have displaced over half of the Syrian population and 4 million Iraqis. In Syria alone there are 5 million refugees and 8.7 million internally displaced Syrians according to UN figures. That is more than half of the Syrian population. What are the repercussions of that 5 years from now? 10 years from now? Will this country ever be the same again? My colleague Ambassador Kattouf knows Syria a lot better than I do and I look forward to hearing his comments on what is going on in Syria. In Yemen, we have 3 million Yemenis internally displaced and this is without the numbers of the many hundreds of thousands dead in both Syria, Iraq and now also in Yemen. It is very important to remember that the refugee crisis has a huge impact on the neighboring countries. Countries like Jordan and Lebanon who have taken in huge numbers of refugees. What will the impact be on their governments, the infrastructure, the educational system, their overall stability? The refugee influx into their cities is clearly taking its toll. And how long can they continue with that kind of pressure of outside refugees? Obviously, the repercussions for Europe are also very significant and all of us have seen the nonstop stream of refugees crossing the Mediterranean.

With these five regional trends in mind, I would like to turn for just a few moments to comment on the impact of our presidential and look at it primarily through the prism of the GCC countries but really more broadly, the Middle East.

I think the watchword for all parties whether U.S. allies, U.S. adversaries, terrorist groups, armed militias, is “uncertainty.” It has created uncertainty here as well but from the view of our overseas allies it remains very unclear the shape and form of a Trump Administration foreign policy. In the region there is a great deal of uncertainty and maybe some anxiety. I think many are hopeful that Donald Trump's nationalism will not be simply nativism, let alone isolationism, and that the administration will develop a robust internationalist element. Obviously that remains to be seen.

On the other hand I think many countries in the Middle East will welcome the lower emphasis on democracy, human rights issues, especially women's rights issues. These are themes that they never appreciated very much from the Obama Administration and certainly many feel they will not be a main issue with a Trump Administration.

However, the main areas of concern for the Middle East as they look at a new U.S. administration will focus primarily on Syria, Iran, and of course terrorism and Islamic extremism. What policies will the US put into place? What actions will we take? What level of engagement will they see from the US in the region?

In Syria, especially for Saudi Arabia and Qatar, they believe that the future of the Middle East will be determined by the outcome of the conflict in Syria. Specifically, they see that the outcome in Syria will determine whether or not Iran becomes a regional superpower whose power they cannot resist without massive international support. I think their main concern with the Obama Administration has been the lack of engagement and limited focus on ISIS without trying to contain or remove Assad. They will be looking to the Trump Administration to see if the new team will be more active in resolving the Syria conflict.

There is also tremendous confusion as they look at some of the statements and read and hear some of the interviews over the past few weeks. They've heard President-Elect Trump strongly praising Russian policy and Vladimir Putin while emphasizing the need to eliminate Islamic State terrorists. However, anyone who understands Syria and the region well, knows that the campaign to support the regime of Bashar al-Assad is a joint Russia-Iran-Hizballah project. So many in the region are waiting to see how the new administration will balance these conflicting ideas. Are they going to be supporting the Russian involvement in Syria, which supports Hizballah and maintaining the Assad administration, or will they consider the Russian-Iran intervention as a negative intervention and see it as a threat?

Another issue regarding Iran of great importance for our allies in the region, is the question of the nuclear deal. Even though President-Elect Trump is very unlikely to abrogate the agreement, many believe he will take a much harder line on the implementation of the agreement. It is very difficult to imagine a continued smooth implementation process under the new administration. From the Arab Gulf states perspective, although they were originally extremely critical of the Iran agreement, I think now that it is in place, very few would argue that it should be abrogated. Many believe it should continue to be implemented but of course they are very much interested in seeing the U.S. administration play a bigger role in enforcing some restrictions on Iran's de-stabilizing behavior in the region and not limit the U.S.-Iran relationship just to the implementation of the nuclear agreement.

On Jihadist terrorism I think it becomes a little more complicated. There has been a new degree of anti-Islamic rhetoric I think in the American discourse, obviously during the political campaign and in the last few weeks. Many of our Arab allies will be dismissing this as campaign talk and I think that they will try to build mutually respectful relationships with the U.S. administration. However the terrorist groups and others seeking to exploit chaos and division will clearly be very encouraged by the prospect of a U.S. administration that explicitly buys into the clash of civilizations, interpretation of contemporary international relations. I think the recent comments over

the weekend that we have heard about the interpretation of Islam and terrorism as being almost one and the same by some of the recent appointments by the new administration will be very difficult for the region to understand and to accept.

Meanwhile, al-Qa'ida in Syria has been quietly and deliberately gaining strength while the world's attention has been focused on Islamic State. I believe the jihadist movement is continuing to gain strength in the region, al-Qa'ida in particular remains a very potent threat especially in Syria and Yemen. The Iranian inspired Shia terrorist sectarian militia groups are also thriving. Therefore, there is really no reason to believe that in the immediate or even possibly midterm there will be any great let-up in the international and regional terrorism from these sources or in the brutal sectarian rivalries that we see so much in the Middle East today. The policy of the new administration on this set of complexities remains unclear as thus far the focus has been solely on the Islamic State.

Cem Ulusoy

Counselor at the Embassy of Turkey, focusing on counter terrorism issues and Iraq

I am just going to focus on Turkey's situation and Turkey's efforts in countering terrorism in particular, after the very useful general overview from the previous two Ambassadors, if I may. So starting with the main points. There are two things I would like you to remember after this presentation.

The first is that Turkey is facing real terrorism threats, and the fact that it is responding to these threats is in line with, obviously, international law, and peaceful and self-defense within the rule of law, and also with the utmost care to strike the proper balance between fundamental rights and freedoms on the one hand and public order and security on the other. You know it is a rather delicate balance, but we are trying to do our best on that.

So the second point is that security is indivisible. Today we can witness different approaches to this phenomenon, but, we think that making a distinction between the terrorist organizations is not correct. There are no good terrorists. So none of them should be supported or legitimized. We do not see any difference between the terrorist attacks in Brussels, in Paris, in San Bernardino, or in Ankara. So it can be carried out by Daesh, PKK, the HKPC, or al-Qa'ida – these are all the entities that we must show against equal determination and show solidarity and match our words with deeds.

So how is the general situation, the current situation? As Ambassador Wahba very eloquently summarized, I do not want to go into the details very much. I just want to highlight three issues. The first one is, you know, the post-9/11 environment where we have the rise of global terrorism. This is an unprecedented era that we are witnessing, and in particular the war in Iraq and its very crucial impact in the region and also towards Turkey as well. We have the regional crisis left unmanaged, and again previous speakers mentioned about it, I do not want to go into detail, but the Syria, Yemen, and Libya we can cite those. And the democratic evolution we have in the region. We have ups and downs in that process and it is a continuing process. All these factors are very much affecting Turkey and Turkey's approach to countering terrorism.

Our perception about terrorism is mainly threefold – first one is PKK and its organic parts PYD/YDG and others. Second is the groups that are exploiting religion –like Daesh, Hizballah, Salafi groups and FETÖ. And the third one is revolution or leftist groups – the DHKP-C and others. So these are the general terrorism threats that we are trying to overcome.

Let me talk a little bit about PKK and how the violence started again. On July 11, PKK announced the end of the ceasefire and threatened to start its attacks. And then we have the 22nd of July and the unfortunate assassination of two police officers in their homes. From there on attacks increased and so we had many, many attacks and obviously we had to respond to those.

What are the tactics PKK is using? To date we witness IEDs and VBIEDs are mostly very much used in the recent period. And just recently – unfortunately – there was the assassination of a local government official by an IED on the night of November, and also on the night of October 9th we had a VBIED attack which was carried out with 5

tons of explosives and it was huge and 10 soldiers lost their lives and 8 civilians as well. And, in the recent period there had been attempts to declare cantons in particular parts of Turkey as well.

So I have two short movies about it. I would like to show you one about PKK's unfortunate terror attack. This was actually taken from the Med-Nuçe TV, which is PKK's TV broadcast from Europe. And the speaker was saying that although Turkish officials said nothing happened, the military vehicle has been blown into pieces. So this is what he said. So the second one, if I can go to the second one, and this is what we had to experience a very short time ago in some parts of Turkey where the cantons declared. You will see what was done by the locals using local administrative facilities. So lots of things, these are the barricades and many places declared no-go places. So it is just a little part of it. So what happened at the end, where we stand? So as of 11th of November this is the situation we are in. 381 civilians unfortunately murdered and 802 security officers as well. So these are the IEDs and explosives that were captured. An incredible amount of explosives and bombs that we got during the operations. And also many schools, hospitals, and ambulances that were attacked. So these attempts to take towns hostage – blockades, to establish autonomy - backfired.

There is another important matter that I just wanted to touch upon. The PKK/PYD issue. There is no difference among them and we have quite substantial information on that and intelligence as well. PYD/YPG is PKK's offshoot and it is acting upon PKK orders. And they accept Ocalan as their leader, and their main goal is to control strategic areas. And what we witness during the last couple of months is that the ammunition given to PYD and to PKK to commit terror attacks in Turkey, which we cannot remain indifferent to. So what we ask our allies and our partners to maintain their stance and vigilance against PKK and affiliated groups. This is very important to counter terrorists. If we do it all together then we can succeed. Otherwise it will be very difficult.

Related to that, there is the misperception of Turkish views on Kurds. Actually this is something we come across quite often here in the States. We witness mischaracterization of recent events as Turkey's as hostility towards all Kurds. So this is not, obviously, correct, and Turkey is not in a fight with the Kurds. Yet, the PKK terrorist organization is attacking security officials and civilians, which claimed 50,000 lives unfortunately. And thus the government is obviously taking action against PKK and affiliated bodies, not the Kurds. And also I need to highlight the solution process that Turkey had initiated and also democratic forms it carried out. More to that is our relationship with the KRG, Kurdish regional government in Iraq. We have already trained 3,000 Peshmerga forces there. These are pure Peshmerga forces, Kurdish forces. We have recently provided medical treatment to them we have a very good solid economic relationship with the KRG as well. These are – I am going to touch a little bit on as well –also crucial in terms of the fight against Daesh. So it is also contributing to overall aims.

I am going to go quickly, because time is running out, I understand, about ISIS. So Turkey is a founding member of the coalition fighting ISIS and we are chairing the foreign terrorist fighters working group. We have been hitting Daesh targets since the beginning. A few points about Euphrates Shield Operation in northern Syria. It is carried out, starting on August 24th based on the notion of self defense, and basically it

is a counter-Daesh and terrorism effort. It is supported by the coalition, and the main object of the mission is to support the advancement of opposition on the ground. So 98 kilometer stretch of our border, which is Daesh's border actually so called, from A'zas to Jarabulus is sealed off. And we cleared over 1,700 square kilometers from Daesh. So these are a few figures on the screen, related to what we are doing about foreign terrorist fighters. 52,000 names in our terror list, and it goes. So you can see on the screen, the border- the Turkey/Syria and Turkey/Iraq border – it is not an easy border. There are many enhanced measures, border security measures we have taken. And this is the new border security system that we are contemplating to put in place. A few pictures about it.

Finally, I would like to touch upon the 15th of July coup attempt in Turkey, which caused the death of 246 civilians and more than 2,000 wounded people. So it was a terrifying, horrible experience and the Turkish state institutions, civilian people, and leadership was targeted. And we have credible information that this was done by FETÖ terrorist organization, which was established in the 1970s. It is a closed cell structure, it is not very open, and the real objective is to seize the mechanism of the constitutional institutions and security units and civil service. And also not only that, but to get a greater influential political and economic power at the international level. So we have identified it as a terrorist organization in June 2016. So in face of the attack – such a grave and barbaric attack to our democratic institutions and our people and nation's security – we have declared a state of emergency to take rearguard measures in a speedy and effective manner. While at the same time as I underlined in the beginning, utmost care is shown to uphold democracy, rule of law, and the fundamental rights. We are continuing to identify and remove these elements related to FETÖ and it is a kind of urgency for our government and a matter of national security.

Prasad Nallapati

Retired Additional Secretary to the Government of India. He served at embassies in various countries, including Israel, Russia, and the USA. Currently, President of the Centre for Asia-Africa Policy Research in India

Dealing with the Middle East is a challenging task. Way back in the 1980s, when I first got into Foreign Service, I was given the Middle East desk and I was a bit unhappy at that point of time. So my boss came in and told me, “Do not worry. It is a fascinating area and you will enjoy.” And as per prophecy, the Middle East has been in the news for right or wrong reasons. There is never a dull moment. And I thoroughly enjoyed dealing with the Middle East; I spent a lot of years in the Middle East in different parts. It is quite a complex and, of course, complicated issue with multiple players, multiple agendas and with intricate web of alliances and counter-alliances.

President-elect Donald Trump inherits a very unenviable situation.

I will speak basically from the point of view of India and Asia in general, so I will not go into the details of the situation of what is happening in the Middle East because it has been well covered by the previous speakers.

Trump’s foreign policy as we see from the Asian region is still evolving. However, We have some idea of broad contours of what his policy is. There are two or three things that we can probably agree:

- defeating IS is a priority, fighting the Assad regime is not;
- willing to cooperate with Russia to attain desired goals in Syria,
- the Iran nuclear accord is a bad deal. As it is hard to cancel it, he will enforce it hard and tough. Hence there will be more sanctions and more sabr-rattling.
- Of course besides the Middle East, there is an unfinished job in Afghanistan as well that he inherits.

Broadly the Syrian approach as I see may not be much different from the current policy of the Obama administration. Trump will also face the same dilemmas of certain challenges from local players and other regional players like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, and etc.

Congress and the Pentagon do not trust Russia. Whether the new president can break through this barrier and push his way down, whether Trump has the gumption to get the leadership in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen to stop internal battles and work out power sharing formulas while keeping the ambitious regional players at bay, it is to be seen. He claimed that he is good at making deals and building alliances, well we do not know yet. Reports of Mitt Romney being considered as Secretary of State is perhaps reassuring.

Let me touch about few flashpoints and their implications for India, the India sub-continent, and Asia in general. I raise a few points for your consideration and if you want to amplify any issues, we can do so during the question and answer section.

Number one is about IS. You may defeat IS in Syria and Iraq but it cannot be eradicated. They will move elsewhere: Europe, other parts of Asia, particularly in the Af-Pak region. Al-Qa'ida is also filling the space with additional forces moving into the area. Islamic State and al-Qa'ida are in competition to expand their presence not only in other parts of the Middle East but also in the Indian subcontinent. They set up Wilayah Khorasan and Al Qa'ida in the subcontinent, respectively some two years ago. IS is spreading in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Let me quote Abu Omar Khorasani, a top commander of Islamic State in Afghanistan. He said, "Trump's hate towards Muslims will make our job much easier because we can recruit thousands." IS is getting more organized in Afghanistan, took geographic control in parts eastern Nangarhar province, along with radio stations and publication of magazines. Repeated suicide attacks in Kabul tell its reach. In Pakistan, two deadly attacks in Baluchistan in less than one month and last year's bus massacre in Karachi have an IS footprint. Groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and TTP factions are working in close association with the IS.

Hundreds of fighters returning from battlegrounds in the Middle East could be a major threat to all Asian countries, including China and India. Hundreds of educated Muslim youth are getting attracted to Islamic State ideology. India is perhaps the least affected of all the countries, so far, in the neighborhood. Only about 25 persons, reportedly, traveled to Syria to join IS or AQ, despite our large Muslim population. Many Indian provinces have successful de-radicalization programs, which are effective in discouraging youth from falling to radical Jihadi ideologies.

Another factor that is of major concern to us is religious sectarian power struggle, Sunni and Shia, orchestrated by Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is being played up in the Middle East and could replay itself in a number of countries in the Indian subcontinent. This is quite rampant in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Iran is recruiting Shia fighters from these countries to fight against Sunni militant groups in Syria. Saudis and Iranians are making efforts to form respective allied groups in India as well. While India is generally immune, to a large extent, to sectarian violence, this may not hold good if it gets intensified in the Middle East.

Indian diaspora in the Middle East is over six million. Pakistan, Bangladesh, ASEAN countries and China also have substantial diaspora population in the region. India and China had to launch massive operations to evacuate their citizens from Yemen, Libya, Iraq as conditions deteriorated there. Their evacuation and rehabilitation are major challenges to all of these countries.

Instability in the Middle East, of course, will disrupt the global economy through the disruption of energy supplies. So, if the chaotic situation of the Middle East deteriorates, it has the potential to destabilize many regions of the world.

To be honest, the situation looks quite bleak to me; I do not see much light at the end of the tunnel. However, I am an optimist and we should make concerted efforts to get all the influential players to play their role to bring peace.

In this context I agree with Ambassador Wahba when she said Syria determines the road ahead.

Syria should be taken as a model by the international community to guide its journey towards a peaceful transition. Other experiments failed in other locations, as in Iraq, Libya, Yemen. So Syria cannot fail if we want to really get back to some kind of stability in the region.

So, what should be done? The U.S. and Russia will have to work together; there is no choice, there is no alternative. Americans must keep aside their reservations about Russia for the sake of Syria and regional peace. Strategic interests of major players like Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia need to be taken into consideration, while restraining their independent support to client groups. Syria, to my mind, is doable. Despite the complicated layers of fighting, the complicated alliances, it is not a gone case. I think it can be revived. One thing is that there has to be sincere efforts both from the United States and Russia to invest a lot more efforts, a lot more resources to get Syria back to normalcy. Whether Bashar al-Assad will remain or not, that is a different question, the people of Syria will decide. But, continued harping on ceasefire as a pre-condition will not lead anywhere. In my mind that is not a right approach. We made a paper on that suggesting a possible road map. We have to come to some sort of negotiated settlement. Many of the opposition groups were brought under one roof in Saudi Arabia, so they can be brought together. A concerted effort can be made to bring peace to Syria, because that will determine what the future of the Middle East would look like.

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