

---

# Competing Interests of Major Powers in the Middle East: The Case Study of Syria and Its Implications for Regional Stability

Saman ZULFQAR\*

## Abstract

*The Middle East region has always remained the centre of attraction for major powers due to its geostrategic importance and huge energy resources. The Middle East, due to hosting many ethnic and religious nationalities, has been a conflict-prone region, facing various conflicts and crises that not only make regional states confront each other but also invite extra-regional powers to play their role.*

*The paper aims at highlighting the current situation in the Middle East by taking Syria as a case study. After 2011, the civil war in Syria and the subsequent instability provided Russia and the United States with an opportunity to support opposing factions engaged in war. The theme of involvement by extra-regional powers in regional conflicts having negative implications for regional peace and stability will be discussed in this paper.*

## Key Words

Syria, Strategic Competition, Conflict, Crisis, Shatterbelt, Stability.

## Introduction

The Middle East, a conflict-prone region, is in a state of flux due to the shifting geopolitical landscape of the region. The current phase of instability and turmoil can be traced back to two important developments – the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the disastrous consequences of the so called Arab Spring (later on called as the Arab Uprisings).

The Middle East and in particular the Persian Gulf have immense strategic importance due to their huge energy resources. It is estimated that the region holds 52.5% of the total crude oil reserves of the world as well as 44.6% of total natural gas reserves.<sup>1</sup>

Another unique geographical characteristic of the region is that the Middle Eastern landmass is rimmed

---

\* Research Officer, Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI), Islamabad, Pakistan.  
E-mail: samanz.pk@gmail.com

by five seas – the Caspian Sea, Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea /Gulf of Aden and the Arabian /Persian Gulf – all of which are important for regional as well as for extra-regional powers that have historically sought to achieve control over them.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, maritime transportation through three chokepoints – the Suez Canal (connecting the Mediterranean and Red Seas), Bab-al-Mandab (connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden), and the Straits of Hormuz (connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea) makes Middle East a tremendously significant area in sustaining the global economy.<sup>3</sup>

The strategic location of the Middle East – at the junction of three continents and with huge energy resources -- has long attracted outside powers to the region. Interestingly, the presence of outside powers has not stabilized the region, rather it has further exposed the fissures – different sectarian outlooks, and weak state structures in the region. To gain competitive advantage, these outside powers build upon and further reinforce internal divisions in the region. These facts have hindered the geopolitical integration of the region as most of the states rely on external military support.<sup>4</sup>

Despite unique geographical characteristics and shared resources, the region has been marred with intense sectarian conflict as well. In particular, the US withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq without signing the Framework Agreement shifted the regional balance of power in Iran's favor. Moreover, the Arab uprisings of 2011 not only created chaos and turmoil but weakened the monarchies in the region. Coupled with these two important developments was the signing of the Iran Nuclear Deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which created insecurity and fear among Iran's rival Arab states. Given the structured insecurity of Gulf-Arab states vis-à-vis Iran and Syria, for which these states had sought US security protection, it is noteworthy that the US withdrawal of troops from Iraq and signing of the JCPOA contributed to harnessing sectarian tensions in the region.

---

The strategic location of the Middle East – at the junction of three continents and with huge energy resources -- has long attracted outside powers to the region.

---

This paper highlights the role of regional as well as extra-regional powers in the Syrian conflict while identifying the implications of their involvement for regional peace and stability. Though the US is still militarily a dominant actor, China's expanding influence and Russia's renewed interest both pose challenges to US interests in the region. Syria, due to its prolonged civil war (2011-onwards) has become a centre for major power competition between the US and Russia. This renewed geopolitical contest by outside powers to achieve their interests at the cost of regional peace and stability by accelerating regional states' fears makes the Middle East an extremely volatile region. The concept of Shatterbelt, a geo-political theory, has been used as the conceptual framework to highlight the geostrategic importance of the Middle East, its power politics, its embedded sectarian conflict and most importantly the on-going Syrian conflict, which has been aggravating issues with the involvement of regional and extra-regional powers. The Shatterbelt concept has rarely been used by writers in the Middle East context. In this regard, the paper is an attempt to apply the concept of Shatterbelt to the Middle East region. It seems a relevant concept regarding existing realities.

## The Middle East – A Shatterbelt Region: The Conceptual Framework

The importance of geopolitical theories in international politics cannot be denied. International Relations scholars are well aware of geopolitical heartland-rimland theories, which both emphasized the permanence and centrality of a global struggle for power between Eurasian-based land power and rimland-based sea power in the context of global maritime dominance.<sup>5</sup> In a related conceptualization, Saul Cohen used the term shatterbelts as roughly equivalent to the concept of rimland.<sup>6</sup>

---

The term “shatterbelt” refers to a geographical region that is beset by local conflicts within or between states in the region and by the involvement of competing extra-regional major powers.

---

Some geographical regions are inherently more conflict-prone than other regions and are referred to as “shatterbelts.”<sup>7</sup> The concept of shatterbelts was coined in geopolitical writings of the 20th century. The term

“shatterbelt” refers to a geographical region that is beset by local conflicts within or between states in the region and by the involvement of competing extra-regional major powers.<sup>8</sup> To a great extent, shatterbelt regions are held responsible for major power conflicts – World War I and World War II are often said to have started in shatterbelt regions.

Traditional geo-politicians and conflict theorists have treated geography either as a facilitating condition – in the context of geographical proximity – or as a source of conflict – with regard to territorial conflicts, while the distinct feature that can be attributed to the concept of shatterbelt is its uniqueness of combining these two characteristics.<sup>9</sup>

Though the term shatterbelt was coined much later, strategists such as Mahan (1900) studied a belt of weak Middle Eastern and Asian states that due to the anticipated presence of vast resources, attracted the great powers – Great Britain and Russia – which got involved in strategic competition for territorial and economic expansion in the area.

The instability during the inter-war period and the outbreak of World War II renewed the interest of geo-political theorists to identify what makes one region more volatile and conflict-prone than other regions. In the subsequent inquiry, the terms shatter zones and

shatterbelts were devised. The study of conflicts in the shatterbelt regions show that states, due to their internal fragmentations – ethnic, religious or linguistic cleavages – fall into civil wars with higher possibility of escalation of conflict due to the involvement of external powers.<sup>10</sup>

Initial writings on shatterbelt regions focused on Central and Eastern Europe but Cohen incorporated the concept of shatterbelts into his regional model of the world. He classified three regions – the Middle East, Sub Saharan Africa, and South East Asia as shatterbelts, which he defined as “large strategically located regions, occupied by a number of conflicting states that are caught between the conflicting interests of the great powers.”<sup>11</sup> The physical, environmental, historical, cultural, and political differences between states and uneven population distribution in shatterbelt regions are likely to produce fragmentation in these states, thus reducing the chances of political or economic coordination among them. Cohen identified that shatterbelt regions have some strategic importance – mineral wealth or control over shipping lanes – thus attracting great power competition to enhance their influence in these regions.

The Middle East as a shatterbelt region is characterized by deep divisions within and between sovereign states

and societies, which are further inflamed by great power competition.<sup>12</sup> Home to many ethnic and religious communities- Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians, and Jews; Arabs, Turks, and Persians; Azeris, Kurds, and Druze; Alawites and Maronites; Nilotic Blacks and Sudanese Arabs- the Middle East has remained mired in conflicts and crises.<sup>13</sup> The religious, ethnic and racial strife gets intensified by scarce arable land and water resources as well as conflicting claims over oil and gas resources.<sup>14</sup>

---

### **The Middle East as a shatterbelt region is characterized by deep divisions within and between sovereign states and societies.**

---

The deep internal divisions in the Middle East shatterbelt are enhanced by major powers' policies to achieve their objectives. To get more leverage vis-a-vis rival states, the major powers are in direct competition due to the strategic location and huge resources of the region, which not only increase geopolitical competition among regional states but contribute to exacerbating sectarian tensions as well.

In recent times, the sectarian cleavage in Middle East politics emerged after

the Iranian revolution in 1979, when the US, along with the Sunni Arab monarchies, viewed Iran as a rising threat to its interests in the region. In this context, the most notable feature regarding US policy is the 1980 Carter Doctrine, which will be discussed in the following section. The Iranian revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq war provided a rationale for the extra-regional powers to get more actively involved in the affairs of the Middle Eastern states by exploiting the fears of regional states. The extra-regional states' involvement, though highly destabilizing, has become a permanent feature in the region.

This paper discusses the interests and roles of the major powers; namely the US, Russia and China, in historical context. The US and Russia had long been involved in the affairs of the Middle East but China, though heavily dependent on energy resources of the Middle East, was not an active player in Middle East politics. For the first time in history in January 2016, China issued a White Paper on its relations with the Arab States.<sup>15</sup> Maintaining a balance between China's relations with Israel and the Arab States as well as between the Sunni Arab States and Iran has been a guiding principle of China's Middle East policy. China has cordial relations with Israel but at the same time it supports a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital

and supports a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East.<sup>16</sup>

## Interests of Great Powers in the Middle East – Past and Present

The Middle East has remained an arena of strategic competition during the 19th and 20th centuries between Western European imperialist powers and Czarist Russia. Even before the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in 1919, Britain, the most important colonial power, had strategic goals in the region and opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 provided it with an opportunity to be the dominant commercial power in the world.<sup>17</sup> The joint control of Anglo-Egyptian forces over Sudan gave Britain access to the western shores of the Red Sea to complement the base on the other side at Aden, which commanded the strait of Bab-al-Mandeb, the exit to the Indian Ocean.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, British protectorates were established over Bahrain (1867), the Trucial States (1892) and Kuwait (1899), which became bases to pursue the power struggle.<sup>19</sup>

Other European powers also got engaged within the Middle Eastern region. France strengthened its foothold in the Levant (Lebanon and Syria) and also took hold of Djibouti,

on the African shore of the Gulf of Aden, while developing the port into a commercial and strategic rival to British Aden.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Italy seized Eritrea and got access to landlocked Ethiopia, which became the central focus for Italy's imperialist ambitions in Northeastern Africa.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Czarist Russia sought expansion towards territories around the Caspian Sea, bringing it into conflict with the Ottoman Empire and Persia.

---

The Middle East has remained an arena of strategic competition during the 19th and 20th centuries between Western European imperialist powers and Czarist Russia.

---

In the mid-20th century, the Western European powers' influence in the Middle East started to decline as France gave up its influence over Lebanon in 1945 and over Syria in 1946. Britain granted independence to trans-Jordan in 1946, and after a year, it withdrew its mandate from Palestine as well.<sup>22</sup> The war ravaged European states – Britain and France left the space for the United States which became the dominant Western power in the region.

As part of its containment strategy<sup>23</sup> United States made defense

arrangements with Middle East states and in response, Soviet Union also formalized a policy of alliances beyond its borders. The Suez Crisis of 1956 provided Moscow with an opportunity to emerge as the patron of Egypt, providing it with military and economic assistance, while establishing military and air bases in the country and subsequently enhancing its influence in the Middle East.<sup>24</sup> Soviet alliances with Middle Eastern states enabled it to deploy naval forces in the eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. At different times, Soviet navy had access to bases in Libya, Egypt, Syria, in Ethiopia's Eritrea province and Somalia.<sup>25</sup>

In this backdrop of external involvement in the Middle East, the interests of United States, Russia and China are discussed below.

## US Interests in the Middle East

The sole objective of the US has been to maintain its predominance in the region and to achieve this end, US is ready to employ all elements of national power including the use of military force. This objective was clearly enunciated in the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 and in the Carter Doctrine of 1980. The Eisenhower Doctrine pronounced US commitment to the security

and stability of the Middle East by employing peaceful means – economic and military aid as well as through the use of force,<sup>26</sup> while the Carter Doctrine stated that ‘any attempt by an outside power to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be considered as an attack against vital interests of the US and will be deterred by any means necessary including military means.’<sup>27</sup> Similarly, US governments from time to time have expressed their interests in the Middle East as core interests.

---

**Ensuring the protection and free flow of oil has been the most constant, and the most important, US interest in the Middle East.**

---

Ensuring the protection and free flow of oil has been the most constant, and the most important, US interest in the Middle East. Olaf Caroe, a British official, recognized the importance of Middle East energy resources especially in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, and identified a role for the US to maintain preeminence in the region.<sup>28</sup> Since the 1970s, America's strategic interest in the region has been not only securing easy access for itself but also ensuring an open and secure market for its allies in East Asia and

Europe. Middle Eastern countries, especially the states of the Persian Gulf, are key oil producers and exporters. Europe, China, and Japan all depend on imported oil to meet their energy needs. In recent times, given US-Iran hostile relations, Iran has been considered as a potential threat to the free flow of oil.<sup>29</sup>

To prevent the spread of nuclear weapons has been another key interest of the US in the Middle East. This policy intends to prevent any hostile state from gaining enough power to threaten US interests regarding oil security or the security of Israel. Initially in 1981, Israel's preventive attack on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor<sup>30</sup> eliminated the possibility of Iraq's developing of nuclear weapons. Similarly, Israel attacked Syria's al-Kibar nuclear facility in 2007.<sup>31</sup> But it is ironical that any effort on the part of regional states to strengthen institutional mechanisms regarding non-proliferation could not gain desired attention from the major powers. In this regard, it is worth noting that the proposals to make the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Free Zone could not produce any dividends. The original proposal as put forward by the Egyptian Representative during the NPT Review Conference in 1995 has been revived from time to time, even in the last NPT Review Conference (May 2015).<sup>32</sup> Apart from Israel,

which has always remained indifferent to the proposal, the US has also been reluctant to support such a proposal.<sup>33</sup>

---

To prevent the spread of nuclear weapons has been another key interest of the US in the Middle East.

---

The United States maintains extensive security cooperation with Israel. Washington helps Israel preserve its "Qualitative Military Edge", with legislation ensuring Israel's superiority over "any conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non-state actors."<sup>34</sup> US and Israeli defense companies often work together on projects, including missile defense programmes such as the Arrow and Arrow II anti-missile systems. The "Iron Dome" anti-missile system, which helps protect Israel from Hamas and Hizbullah rockets, was a joint US-Israel effort.<sup>35</sup> Since the 9/11 attacks, the United States has prioritized counter-terrorism in its policy towards the Middle East. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen rank high regarding bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation.<sup>36</sup> As far as counter-terrorism is concerned, through cooperative efforts, the United States gains access to vital intelligence, local

services use their agents and capabilities to target and disrupt terrorists at home, and in some cases, such as Yemen, the United States secures physical access in order to launch drone strikes.<sup>37</sup>

To meet its interests, the United States maintains a range of security relationships in the Middle East. These include defense cooperation agreements, basing and access rights, and the prepositioning of military assets. The current US force structure in the Gulf consists of bases in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE.<sup>38</sup>

The US has been the largest arms supplier to the regional states. US military commitments and its security guarantees have been the cornerstone of the Middle East security architecture. The US security umbrella has allowed Gulf monarchies to stand up against their powerful regional rivals – Iraq and Iran.

---

**The US has been the largest arms supplier to the regional states.**

---

The US invasion of Iraq and later on withdrawal of US troops from Iraq without signing any Status of Forces Agreement has shifted the regional order in Iran's favor. Moreover, President Obama's focus on East Asia and its engagement with Iran on nuclear

issue was considered detrimental to the Gulf States' interests and created fears and doubts in the Gulf capitals about America's commitment to Gulf security.<sup>39</sup>

The Gulf States' disillusionment with the US, along with their economic pragmatism in light of the global power transition to the East, motivated them to diversify their political and security relations.

In this regard, since 2005 onwards, relations with China, Russia and Western countries were also enhanced.<sup>40</sup>

## Russian Interests in the Middle East

In the post-Cold War era, Russian engagement with the Middle East states can primarily be seen through the prism of countering secessionist movements in the North Caucasus as Moscow had been accusing Gulf entities of funding the separatists and extremists in Russia.<sup>41</sup>

In the past, Moscow had blamed Gulf-based charity organizations for introducing radicalism in the region and financing extremist groups in the North Caucasus.<sup>42</sup>

Russia, while fighting the Chechen wars, faced severe criticism from Muslim countries, especially the

Middle Eastern countries which termed the Chechen fight against Russia as a struggle for achieving right to self-determination.<sup>43</sup> The War on Terror provided Russia with an opportunity to cooperate with the West and classify its military operation in Chechnya as part of the terrorist strategy.<sup>44</sup>

Russia's opposition to the Iraq war and its anti-Western rhetoric helped it to improve its relations with the Muslim states. In this regard, granting Russia an observer status in the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) in 2003 was a breakthrough, which led to the improvement of relations between Russia and Muslim countries and subsequently changed the stance of Muslim countries towards Russia's actions and policies towards its Muslim population in the North Caucasus.<sup>45</sup>

---

**Russia's opposition to the Iraq war and its anti-Western rhetoric helped it to improve its relations with the Muslim states.**

---

It is reported that Russian Muslims have been participating in the war in Syria as part of the rebel forces and constitute the second largest group of foreign fighters in Syria after Libyans.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, militants from the North

Caucasus have joined high military ranks in DAESH<sup>47</sup> in Iraq and Syria.<sup>48</sup> This has been a cause of concern for Russia as these fighters will come back with more battlefield experience and might try to mobilize a global Jihadist movement against the Russian government after the end of the Syrian conflict.<sup>49</sup>

Secondly, Russia is interested in engaging Middle Eastern states economically but, despite its continuous efforts, it plays a marginal role in the economies of the Gulf States. As per 2013 statistics, out of the Gulf Cooperation Council's \$1.47 trillion total trade with the world, Russia-GCC trade was valued at \$3.74 billion.<sup>50</sup> Economic relations remain focused on three areas: arms sales, energy, and investment. The region is the second largest arms export market for Russia after the Asia Pacific.<sup>51</sup>

Despite having political differences on issues of Iran, Syria and Palestine, Russia has established strong economic relations with Israel, with bilateral trade reaching \$3 billion in 2009.<sup>52</sup> While making arms deals with Middle Eastern states, Russia has given due consideration to preserve strategic equation vis-à-vis Israel and the Muslim states of the Middle East. Apart from Israel, Russia has also established strong economic relations with Turkey. Their trade volume has

been constantly increasing and has reached to over \$34 billion in 2012.<sup>53</sup>

As regards Russia's relations with the Gulf countries, energy has remained the most significant component of economic relations. Energy generates over 40% of Russia's federal fund and over 75% of foreign hard currency earnings.<sup>54</sup> Russia has been continuously engaging Iran, Qatar, Algeria and Libya, the key gas producers of the region, to cooperate and coordinate their policies regarding gas.<sup>55</sup> The Russian objective is to contain Europe's efforts to diversify its sources of energy (as Europe imports 80% of Russia's gas) away from Russia. To achieve this end, Russia has adopted a three-pronged strategy.<sup>56</sup> First, to ensure that Russian controlled pipeline routes – Nord Stream and South Stream – are constructed and alternative pipelines circumventing Russia cannot be developed. Second, to engage gas producing Central Asian states such as Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to ensure that they sell their gas through Russian controlled pipelines. Third, to persuade the other gas producing countries (Middle Eastern) to collaborate and coordinate with Russia in deciding market share in the European gas market.<sup>57</sup>

The loss of Iraq as the major importer of Russian weapons was a setback to its interests in the region but after the US

refusal to sell arms to Egypt in 2013 following the military takeover, Russia stepped in and signed arms deals with the Egyptian government.<sup>58</sup>

Apart from Russia's economic relations with the Middle Eastern states, the Arab uprisings in 2011 provided Russia with an opportunity to expand its strategic influence in the region. Initially, Russia remained neutral regarding developments taking place in Tunisia and Egypt as part of the Arab Spring because these two countries were not of much relevance to Russia.<sup>59</sup> Developments in Libya and the subsequent Western military intervention for regime change alarmed Russia, which abstained from Resolution 1973, authorizing NATO's airstrikes against the Qaddafi regime and sanctioning military support for opposition forces to topple the Qaddafi government.<sup>60</sup>

---

**Apart from Russia's economic relations with the Middle Eastern states, the Arab uprisings in 2011 provided Russia with an opportunity to expand its strategic influence in the region.**

---

While opposing Western interventions, the Russian stance on the Syrian

conflict seems highly uncompromising. The Syrian conflict has become a litmus test for confronting the concept of humanitarian intervention, as in 2008 the Russian intervention in Georgia was to set 'redlines against NATO enlargement.'<sup>61</sup> Why Russian policy towards Syria is different from its policy towards other Middle East states will be discussed below.

## China's Interests in the Middle East

China's primary interest in the Middle East has been continued access to energy resources. China has surpassed the US as the largest importer of Gulf energy resources. Since 1995, the Middle East has been China's number one source of imported petroleum.<sup>62</sup> In this regard, Saudi Arabia and Iran are of immense importance. According to 2012 statistics, Saudi Arabia was the number one source of petroleum while Iran was the fourth most important supplier of imported Chinese oil.<sup>63</sup> As regards China's energy relations with Iran, despite expressing public opposition to sanctions, China has complied with the UN and the US sanctions against Iran and later on played important role in negotiating P5+1 Iran Nuclear Deal.

Moreover, rising tensions in East Asia have compelled Chinese policy makers

to look westwards. It was suggested that in 'China's far west, Washington does not have a network of alliances to block Beijing from breaking out, thus China has greater opportunities to enhance its geopolitical and economic influence in Central Asia, the Middle East and beyond.'<sup>64</sup> After much deliberation in 2013, the Chinese leadership declared the launching of two initiatives – the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, adopting the name of the ancient trade route between China and the West through Central Asia and the Middle East.<sup>65</sup> To pursue these initiatives, China has been constructing and financing ports in Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Turkey in the Mediterranean region as well as in Eritrea and Djibouti on the Red Sea.<sup>66</sup> In this regard, China has been heavily investing in Egypt, pledging \$45 billion in construction of the Suez Canal Economic Zone and an additional amount of \$15 billion in Egyptian electricity, transportation and infrastructure development projects.<sup>67</sup>

---

China's primary interest in the Middle East has been continued access to energy resources.

---

Another of China's interests in the Middle East has been preserving

internal security at home and around its periphery. China considers the Middle East as a strategic extension of China's periphery, as the issues unfolding in the Middle East will have a direct influence on China's internal security and stability.<sup>68</sup> These concerns make China a very cautious player in Middle East affairs.<sup>69</sup>

---

### China considers the Middle East as a strategic extension of China's periphery.

---

Historically, China avoided military presence in the region, and its first naval visit to the Mediterranean occurred in 2009. In 2010, the Chinese navy visited Jeddah and in 2011 and 2014, it conducted rescue operations to evacuate its nationals from Libya. Similarly, in April 2015, it evacuated foreign nationals from Yemen while in the same year, it conducted joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea for the first time. In 2016, China started constructing a naval base in Djibouti, an East African country that is at the southern entrance to the Red Sea on the route to the Suez Canal and that also hosts the largest US military base in Africa.<sup>70</sup> In July 2017, after completion of the facility, China sent ships carrying troops to China's first overseas military base.<sup>71</sup>

---

Historically, China avoided military presence in the region.

---

### Current Political Dynamics in the Middle East and Major Power Competition in Syria

After analyzing the interests of US, Russia and China it is imperative to highlight the current regional dynamics that attracted the active involvement of extra-regional powers. Emile Simpson identifies three trends that unveil Russian and the US confrontationist policies in the Middle East.<sup>72</sup> The US and its Western allies, in responding to the Arab Spring, intervened for regime change in Libya and later on attempted it in Syria by backing the rebel forces. But a weakening of moderate rebel forces and strengthening of extremists and hardliners in each case paved the way for Russia to support the regimes on the pretext of preventing 'Islamist chaos'. The best examples of this are Gen. Haftar in Libya, President Assad in Syria, and the Sisi Government in Egypt.<sup>73</sup>

Secondly, after signing the Nuclear deal with Iran, the Obama Administration and later on Trump Administration have taken a hard line stance against Tehran while Russia strengthened its

relations with Tehran and acted as a broker between Saudi Arabia and Iran to set up the November 2016 OPEC agreement.<sup>74</sup>

Apart from the US-Russia stand-off on many issues in the Middle East, China has remained persistent in its stance of non-intervention in internal affairs of states and opposed Western efforts to regime change in Libya and later on in Syria, while emphasizing peaceful resolution of the conflict rather than overthrowing the Assad regime.<sup>75</sup>

---

**China has remained persistent in its stance of non-intervention in internal affairs of states.**

---

The prolonged Syrian civil war attracted the regional as well as extra regional powers to get involved in the conflict to enhance their own interests. A significant reason for the involvement of these states has been Syria's geo-strategic importance in the Middle East. Apart from its own natural resources, Syria serves as the centre of thousands of kilometers of oil and gas pipelines that run through the Middle Eastern states.

Another reason that signifies its geo-strategic importance is the fact that Syria is one of only two Arab states that

share borders with non-Arab neighbors, as it shares borders with Turkey and Israel. The status of being a frontline state adjoining Israel gives Syria an exceptional stature in the Arab world and makes it pivotal in international efforts to resolve the Palestine-Israel conflict.<sup>76</sup> Syria considers Israel as a continuous external threat and its loss of the Golan Heights, its natural defense against Israel, only augmented its insecurity and fear.<sup>77</sup>

Apart from external threats, the current Syrian conflict can be traced back to the so called Arab Spring of 2011. The large-scale protests against President Bashar al-Assad and his government prompted a violent response from the Assad government. The subsequent deterioration of the situation paved the way for external involvement in the Syrian conflict.

Since the outbreak of the current crisis, the external powers have sought to shape the outcomes of the conflict.<sup>78</sup> It is more pertinent to classify external actors into three groups: the first group comprises those who support the Assad regime – Iran, and Russia; the second group consists of those that oppose the Assad regime – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, the US and its NATO allies; and a third group that cannot take sides in a decisive way; Jordan, Lebanon and Israel.<sup>79</sup>

---

Since the outbreak of the current crisis, the external powers have sought to shape the outcomes of the conflict.

---

All the actors supporting or opposing Assad regime have different interests and different strategies. Saudi Arabia and the US both have a convergence of interest in reducing Iran's influence in Syria (which they consider enables Iran to exert influence in the Levant) with regard to preserving the regional balance of power. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states also share these concerns.<sup>80</sup>

The states that support the Assad regime have their own reasons. Syria is the only Arab ally of Iran that reduces its regional isolation, and provides it leverage vis-à-vis Hizbullah and Lebanon, and helps it challenge the regional order supported by the US.<sup>81</sup> Likewise,

As regards extra-regional powers, Syria has been a strategic ally of Russia since the Cold War, and to protect Syria, Russia has exercised its veto power at three crucial times – in 2011, 2012 and 2014- to block the imposition of sanctions or use of force against the Syrian regime.<sup>82</sup> The absence of sanctions has allowed Russia to provide

President Assad with military support when the regime was close to collapse. Russian warships patrolled in waters close to Syria and its military advisors provided support to the Syrian army.<sup>83</sup>

One significant reason for Russia's technical as well as military support for Syria is Russia's access to its strategic base at Tartus. The base is a refueling station and provides logistics facilities to Russian navy ships while providing the Russian navy with the ability to maintain a regular presence in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, Tartus port gives Russia greater ability to navigate in the strategically important Gulf of Aden as well.<sup>85</sup>

---

Syria has been a strategic ally of Russia since the Cold War.

---

Apart from strategic interests, it is noteworthy to highlight Russia's economic interests vis-à-vis Syria, which is a transit state with regard to energy pipelines.

Initially, Russia also favored non-interference and non-intervention in Syria but later on it got actively involved in the conflict by supporting the Assad regime not just diplomatically and politically but by extending military support as well. Russia has been

launching airstrikes in Syria since September 2015, nominally against DAESH targets but critics negate Russia's claim and assert that Russia has also been targeting rebel forces fighting against the Assad regime.<sup>86</sup>

It is estimated that Russian airstrikes have strengthened the Assad regime for the first time in the long civil war that is approaching its seventh year, enabling Syrian forces to retake strategic territory near Latakia.<sup>87</sup>

As for as the US role in the Syrian conflict is concerned, after its inability to get authorization from the United Nations Security Council to resort to military action, it elicited the support of Arab states in bringing forth the Syrian National Coalition in an attempt to unify diverse opposition forces and to get them international recognition.<sup>88</sup> In response to the Syrian military's suspected poison gas (chemical) attack on Khan Shiekhoun, a rebel controlled town that resulted in heavy civilian casualties- 86 people including 27 children- the US launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles targeting the Shayrat airfield in Homs province from where the chemical attack was launched.<sup>89</sup> It has been termed as the first direct US military attack on Assad forces that was strongly condemned by the Russia, terming it detrimental to US-Russia bilateral relations.<sup>90</sup>

## The Syrian Conflict's Implications for Regional Stability

The Syrian conflict in its seventh year seemed to be winding down as the Assad regime had survived and DAESH had been defeated while regional states were looking ahead to the outcomes of the conflict.<sup>91</sup> In this regard, on November 22, 2017, a meeting of leaders from Iran, Turkey, and Russia was convened at Sochi, Russia to discuss the future of Syria. Similarly, UN-sponsored talks between representatives of the Syrian opposition and Syrian government were held on November 28 to chalk out the future course.<sup>92</sup>

---

**In Syria, Russia, Turkey and Iran have emerged as the dominant external players.**

---

To curb opposition, the Government of President Assad launched a fierce bombing campaign against anti-government rebels in Eastern Ghouta in the suburb of Damascus, killing hundreds of people including children and women.<sup>93</sup> Despite the Security Council's resolution for a truce for 30 days, a cease-fire has not taken effect.<sup>94</sup>

In Syria, Russia, Turkey and Iran have emerged as the dominant external players. The apparent disinterest of the United States has given Russia leverage to engage in post-conflict settlement talks. As regards the future of Syria, to maintain the unity of Syria as well as to accommodate the interests of all the stakeholders will remain a daunting challenge for the foreseeable future. So far, the longevity, gravity and complexity of the Syrian conflict have created serious regional implications that are elaborated below.

- **Harnessing the Sectarian Challenge in the Region**

The sectarian issue has long been embedded in the regional politics of the Middle East, but Saudi-Iranian rivalry for regional hegemony has harnessed the sectarian politics.<sup>95</sup> As mentioned earlier, Iran has been the main beneficiary of shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East – the post-Saddam Shia regime in Iraq as well as the Arab uprisings of 2011 have immensely contributed to raise the regional influence of Iran. Moreover, the Iranian-P5+1 deal further helped Iran to shift the balance in its favor.<sup>96</sup> Iran's increased leverage as well as the Sunni monarchies' activism have been harnessing the sectarian divide in the region and can lead to further instability.

The future sectarian challenge may emerge from the emerging political structure of Syria. Syria not only became a battleground for regional states to support their sectarian factions, but Syrian refugees' presence in neighboring states created fear about demographic change in those states. This is especially true in Lebanon (on which Lebanon's political structure is based), but support to pro- Syrian government factions and anti-Syrian government factions can lead to eruption of sectarian and communitarian tensions as was the case in 1975 and which fuelled the civil war there (1975-1990).<sup>97</sup> These fears and concerns can trigger sectarian strife in respective states. Syrian conflict is becoming a defining factor in containing or escalating sectarian tensions in the region. This sectarian divide is not limited to Syria alone, Yemen is also passing through intense civil war. Bahrain and Lebanon also have sectarian cleavages that can be exploited by external players.

- **Rising Militancy**

The Assad regime's renewed initiative to launch attack against rebels in the Sunni dominated region of Ghouta has the potential to not only generate sectarian violence across the region but it can enhance militancy in youth. External involvement in internal affairs of states has already given rise to militancy. Foreign interference on the

pretext of humanitarian intervention in Libya and later on in Syria has been the determining factor in fueling militant tendencies in the region. In this regard, the Syrian example is the most illustrious one that has become a battle field for regional and extra-regional states to pursue their interests. The neighboring states fear that the influx of Syrian refugees will bring about militancy in their respective states as well.

---

Foreign interference on the pretext of humanitarian intervention in Libya and later on in Syria has been the determining factor in fueling militant tendencies in the region.

---

- **Weak and Fractured State Structures**

As a result of the Arab uprisings (2011) weak state structures provided non-state actors and private militias with an opportunity to rise up to fill the security vacuum in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>98</sup>

The prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Syria not just challenge the unity of these two states but threaten to redraw the map of the Middle East.<sup>99</sup> The prolonged civil wars have given rise to

non-state actors. In this context, the most challenging threat has been the rise of the DAESH,

Though after an intense battle, DAESH has been defeated in its stronghold, Mosul, Iraq, but Iraqi forces have to rely on US support to meet the future challenge, as \$1.2 billion in budget funds have been requested for 2018 to continue supporting the Iraqi forces.<sup>100</sup> The United Nations has also estimated \$1 billion will be needed for reconstructing Iraqi cities.<sup>101</sup> The threat of resurgence of DAESH or any other non-state actor cannot be ruled out unless state structures and the legitimacy of governments in the Middle East are restored.

- **Regional Counter-Terrorism Initiatives**

Most states in the Middle East have been directly involved in the armed conflicts since 2011. During 2013-17, Saudi Arabia was the world's second largest arms importer with arms imports increasing by 225% compared to 2008-12. Arms imports by Egypt – the third largest importer in 2013-17 grew by 215% between 2008-12 and 2013-17.<sup>102</sup> In this backdrop, in December 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of a 41-member Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) to form a unified pan-Islamic front against terrorism.<sup>103</sup>

---

## Most states in the Middle East have been directly involved in the armed conflicts since 2011.

---

In this regard, an Arab-Islamic-American Summit was held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on May 21-22, 2017, in which 55 Sunni majority Muslim states signed the communiqué to fight terrorism.<sup>104</sup> During the summit, President Trump criticized Iran and termed it as a state sponsor of terrorism in the region.<sup>105</sup>

The Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFIT) declared to operate in line with the UN and OIC provisions on terrorism. The exclusion of Iran and Iraq from the IMAFIT reinforced the perception that it was an alliance of Sunni states. The policy of exclusion has contributed to signing of an anti-terrorism accord between Iran and Iraq. The two states signed a memorandum of understanding to extend cooperation and exchange experience in fighting terrorism and extremism, border security, education, logistical, technical and military support.<sup>106</sup>

Such alliances and pacts to fight terrorism and extremism face definitional problems as the world does not have a mutually accepted definition of terrorism. It is said that one country's terrorist is another's

freedom fighter. Similarly, the maiden visit of President Trump to the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, not just heightened the fears of states that were excluded from the IMCTC but also concerned Russia, who has intelligence and military relations with these states.

It is pertinent to mention that Russia has been strengthening relations with the states for combating terrorism – Russian paratroopers conducted a joint counter-terrorism exercise with the Egyptian military – the post-Soviet, Russia's first military exercise with Egypt. Similarly, Russia deployed a naval flotilla off the Mediterranean coast of Libya and it supports Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, military leader of the Eastern faction in Libya.<sup>107</sup>

The counter-terrorism cooperation between the US and its allies and between Russia and its allies has the potential to escalate the existing tensions and mistrust in the region.

## Conclusion

The Middle East, a volatile region, has been facing immense challenges. The regional states' mutual distrust and suspicions about each other perpetuate instability in the region. While the strategic location and the energy richness of the region has been a contributing factor to attract outside powers to expand their influence in

the region, regional rivalries have been harnessed by the outside powers by directly supporting the states or their proxies. In this regard, the Syrian case is the best example to illustrate the involvement of regional as well as extra-regional states and the drastic consequences of such involvement for regional peace and stability. The inherent instability which is caused by ethnic, tribal and sectarian conflicts, and strategic competition between regional as well as extra-regional powers –

Russia and the US – make the Middle East a shatterbelt region. Much of the current instability is fueled by the Syrian conflict, but whether resolution of the Syrian conflict will address other sources of instability is yet to be seen.

---

The regional states' mutual distrust and suspicions about each other perpetuate instability in the region.

---

## Endnotes

- 1 Peter E. Paraschos, “Geopolitical Risk in the Middle East and North Africa: Shatter Belts and Great Power Rivalry”, *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, March–April 2017, p. 18.
- 2 Saun Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: the Geography of International Relations*, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009, p. 362.
- 3 Paraschos, “Geopolitical Risk in the Middle East and North Africa: Shatter Belts and Great Power Rivalry”, pp. 9–20.
- 4 Cohen, *Geopolitics: the Geography of International Relations*, p. 355.
- 5 Geoffrey Kemp and Robert Harkavy, “Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East: Strategic Access to Middle East Resources: Lesson from History”, [https://acc.teachmideast.org/texts.php?module\\_id=4&reading\\_id=202&sequence=2#](https://acc.teachmideast.org/texts.php?module_id=4&reading_id=202&sequence=2#) (last visited 21 December 2017).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Paul R. Hensel and Paul F. Diehl, “Testing Empirical Propositions about Shatterbelts, 1945–1976”, *Political Geography*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 1994), pp. 33–51.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Saul Bernard Cohen quoted in Hensel and Paul F. Diehl, “Testing Empirical Propositions about Shatterbelts, 1945–1976”, [www.paulhensel.org/Research/pgq94.pdf](http://www.paulhensel.org/Research/pgq94.pdf) (last visited 7 July 2017).
- 12 Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: the Geography of International Relations*, p.355.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 “Full Text of China’s Arab Policy Paper”, *Xinhua*, 14 January 2016, [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2016-01/14/content\\_37573547.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2016-01/14/content_37573547.htm) (last visited 15 June 2017).
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics of the World System*, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, p. 328.

- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid, p. 328.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid, p. 330.
- 23 The term coined by George Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conflict”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 4, (July 1947), pp. 566-582
- 24 Cohen, *Geopolitics of the World System*, p. 333.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Peter L. Hahn, “Securing the Middle East: The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No.1 (March 2006), p. 38.
- 27 Emile Hokayem and Becca Wasser, “Gulf States in an Era of American Retrenchment”, *Adelphi Series*, No. 447-448 (2014), p. 137.
- 28 Lloyd I. Rudolph, and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, “The Making of US Foreign Policy for South Asia: Offshore Balancing in Historical Perspective”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No.8 (February 25 – March 3, 2006), p. 704.
- 29 Caitlen Talmadge, “Closing Time; Assessing Possible Outcomes of US-Iranian Conflict in the Strait of Hormuz”, *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Summer 2008), pp. 82-117.
- 30 Barry R. Schneider, “Nuclear Proliferation and Counter-Proliferation: Policy Issues and Debates”, *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Oct 1994), p. 226.
- 31 Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Joshua D. Goodman, “The Attack on Syria’s Al Kibar Nuclear Facility”, <http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2009/02/28/the-attack-on-syrias-al-kibar-nuclear-facility/> (last visited 10 December 2017).
- 32 “WMD Free Middle East Proposal at a Glance”, *Arms Control Association*, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/mewmdfz> (last visited 20 June 2017)
- 33 Dina Esfandiary, “In the Middle East, Get Rid of Chemical Weapons First”, *Arms Control Today*, Vol.44, No.1 (January – February 2014), p. 27.

- 34 Daniel Byman and Sara Bjerg Moller, "The United States and the Middle East: Interests, Risks and Costs" in Bengamin Valentino and Jeremy Suri (eds.), *Sustainable Security; Rethinking American National Security Strategy*, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp.267-269.
- 35 Jeremy M. Sharp, "US Foreign Aid to Israel", *Congressional Research Service*, 12 March 2012, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf> (last visited 10 August 2017).
- 36 Michele Dunne and Frederic Wehrey, "US-Arab Counterterrorism Cooperation in a Region Ripe for Extremism", *Policy Outlook*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (October 2014), [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/DunneWehrey\\_USArabCounterterrorism\\_Oct2014.pdf](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/DunneWehrey_USArabCounterterrorism_Oct2014.pdf) (last visited 10 December 2017).
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Hokayem and Wasser, "Gulf States in an Era of American Retrenchment", *Adelphi Series* 54, No. 447-448 (2014), ( , p. 146.
- 39 Ibid., p. 145.
- 40 Ibid., p. 143.
- 41 Samuel Charap, "Is Russia an Outside Power in the Gulf", *Adelphi Series* 54, No. 447-448 (2014),, (2014), p. 187.
- 42 Ibid., p. 188.
- 43 Ronald Dannreuther, "Russia and the Middle East: A Cold War Paradigm" *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2012), p. 547.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid, p. 549.
- 46 Charap, "Is Russia an Outside Power in the Gulf", p.192.
- 47
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid., 190.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid., 192.

- 52 Ronald Dannreuther, "Russia and the Middle East: A Cold War Paradigm", p. 551.
- 53 Ronald Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring Supporting the Counter Revolution", *Journal of European Integration*, Vol, 37, No.1, (2015), p. 89.
- 54 Dannreuther, "Russia and the Middle East: A Cold War Paradigm", p. 553.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid, 554.
- 58 Stephen Blank and Edward Levitzky, "Geostrategic Aims of the Russian Arms Trade in East Asia and Middle East" *Defence Studies*, Vol.15, No.1, (2015), 71.
- 59 Ibid., 82.
- 60 Ibid., 83.
- 61 Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring Supporting the Counter Revolution", p. 84.
- 62 Kristina Kausch, "Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East", *International Spectator*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2015), p. 5.
- 63 Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, "China in the Middle East – The Wary Dragon", Santa Monica, Rand, 2016, pp. 7-8.
- 64 Ibid., p. 10.
- 65 Paraschos, "Geopolitical Risk in the Middle East and North Africa: Shatter Belts and Great Power Rivalry", p. 20.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Scobell and Nader, "China in the Middle East – The Wary Dragon", p. 13.
- 69 Ibid, 14.
- 70 Ben Blanchard, "China Sends Troops to Open First Overseas Military Base in Djibouti", *Reuters*, 12 July 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-djibouti-idUSKBN19X049> (last visited 19 July 2017).
- 71 Ibid.

- 72 Emile Simpson, "This is How Great Power Wars Get Started", *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2017, [www.foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/21/this-is-how-great-power-wars-get-started/](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/21/this-is-how-great-power-wars-get-started/) (last visited 15 June 2017).
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Scobell and Nader, "China in the Middle East – The Wary Dragon", p. 16.
- 76 Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring Supporting the Counter Revolution", p. 84.
- 77 Raymond Hinnebusch, and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, Boulder/London, Lynne Rienner, 2002, p. 144.
- 78 Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, and William Young, *Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition*, Santa Monica, Rand, 2013.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Ibid.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Stephen Blank and Edward Levitzky, "Geostrategic Aims of the Russian Arms Trade in East Asia and Middle East", p. 84.
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta, "Why Putin Wants Syria", *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 2016), p. 5.
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 Ben Quinn, "Russia's Military Action in Syria – Timeline", *Guardian*, 14 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/russias-military-action-in-syria-timeline> (last visited 19 July 2017).
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 Chester Crocker, "Syria's Crisis of Transition", *National Interest*, March/April 2013, p. 19.
- 89 "US Launches Cruise Missiles on Syrian Airbase", *Al Jazeera*, 7 April 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/04/us-missiles-syria-170407013424492.html> (last visited 19 July 2017).

- 90 Ibid.
- 91 Dmitri Trenin, "Putin's Plan for Syria: How Russia Wants to End the War", *Foreign Affairs*, 13 December 2017, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-12-13/putins-plan-syria#/new\\_tab](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-12-13/putins-plan-syria#/new_tab) (last visited 10 April 2018).
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 "Syrian Government Ground Forces Attack Ghouta Despite Russia Truce Plan", *Reuters*, 28 February 2018.
- 94 Ibid.
- 95 Kausch, "Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East", pp. 10-11.
- 96 Ibid, 7.
- 97 Geraint Alun Hughes, "Syria and the Perils of Proxy War", *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2014), p. 530.
- 98 Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, "Iran's Axis of Resistance Rises", *Foreign Affairs*, 24 January 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-01-24/irans-axis-resistance-rises> (last visited 12 March 2018).
- 99 "The Sunni-Shia Divide", <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/sunni-shia-divide#!/sunni-shia-divide> (last visited 20 December 2017).
- 100 Emma Graham-Harrison, "Iraq Announces 'Victory' Over Islamic State in Mosul", *Guardian*, 9 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/09/iraq-announces-victory-over-islamic-state-mosul> (last visited 19 July 2017).
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 "Asia and the Middle East Lead Rising Trend in Arms Import, US Imports Grow Significantly, Says SIPRI", *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 12 March 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/news/press-release/2018/asia-and-middle-east-lead-rising-trend-arms-imports-us-exports-grow-significantly-says-sipri> (last visited 12 March 2018).
- 103 "About IMCTC" <https://imctc.org/English/About> (last visited 12 March 2018).
- 104 "Riyadh Summit Discusses Ways of Rooting Out Terrorism", *Aljazeera*, 31 May 2017.
- 105 "The Arab-Islamic-American Summit: A New Partnership to Confront the Terrorists and Iranian Threats", *International Institute for Iranian Studies*, 28 May 2017, <https://arabiangcis.org/english/monitoring-and-translation/reports/the-arab-islamic->

american-summit-a-new-partnership-to-confront-the-terrorists-and-iranian-threats / (last visited 4 January 2018).

- 106 “Iran and Iraq Sign Accord to Boost Military Cooperation”, *Reuters*, 23 July 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-military/iran-and-iraq-sign-accord-to-boost-military-cooperation-idUSKBN1A80HJ>
- 107 Paraschos, “Geopolitical Risk in the Middle East and North Africa: Shatter Belts and Great Power Rivalry”, p. 19.