

The Middle East in 2017

Continued conflicts, escalating tensions and revived ambitions

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Another uneasy year awaits the Middle East in 2017. The conflict in Syria has reached a turning point with Assad's regime retaking control over eastern Aleppo, and Islamic State's position is considerably weaker than last year. However, even a weakened Islamic State will continue to pose a threat, as will a rejuvenated al-Qaeda. Relations between Iran and its Middle Eastern neighbours are becoming more contentious, with both Saudi Arabia and Turkey wary of Iran's regional aims. The war in Yemen will continue to rage on, thus further straining relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Kurdish – Turkish relations are becoming increasingly strained, as Turkey tries to check the PKK's power and safeguard its borders. In addition, the election of Donald Trump brings with it much uncertainty in regards to US diplomatic relations with Middle Eastern nations. A number of the president-elect's administration have voiced their concerns over the Iranian nuclear deal, with the potential to complicate relations between the two countries.

Syria and Islamic State

2017 will see Syria entering its sixth year of conflict. The UN estimates that 4.8 million people have fled the country and 6.3 million people are now internally displaced (OCHA, 2016). The recent recapture of eastern Aleppo has, for now, ensured that Assad's power will be maintained. In December, Russia, Iran and Turkey brokered a ceasefire, and peace talks will be held by these three countries later this month in Astana, Kazakhstan. Both the UN and the US have expressed support for these talks in a bid to produce a peaceful solution (although neither has been invited to attend the talks) (Wroughton, 2017). Since the victory in eastern Aleppo, Russia has reduced the size of its forces in Syria and is now focusing on a political solution (Al Jazeera, 2017). It is difficult to say whether the peace talks will bring about a political settlement to the conflict. Rebel forces have recently threatened to halt their preparations for the upcoming peace talks, arguing that the regime forces have breached the ceasefire and have continued to fight (BBC, 2017). However, since Assad's position has strengthened

following his victory in eastern Aleppo, and Russia's decision to reduce its fighting force in Syria, a political solution is perhaps possible.

Military campaigns against the Islamic State (IS) will continue to reduce the amount of territory that it controls in both Syria and in Iraq. For example, the Iraqi army is currently making gains in Mosul, albeit at a slower pace than expected (Davison and Kalin, 2017). Currently, Turkey, the Free Syrian Army, and a Kurdish force alongside the US and Russian assistance are leading a campaign to retake control of al-Bab. Al-Bab is one of the last remaining strongholds for IS, and its loss would be a significant strategic blow to the group (Sengupta, 2016). Should al-Bab fall, Islamic State's final stronghold of Raqqa in Syria will be targeted next, eventually leading to the end of IS as a fully functioning military force (Chulov, 2016). However, military victory alone may not be enough to stop IS, as even in its weakened state IS will continue to spread its extremist ideology. Concurrently, as its strength as an insurgent group weakens, Islamic State is likely to conduct more terrorist attacks in order to remain relevant.

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Turkey

2016 has been a testing year for Turkey. 2016 saw a number of terrorist attacks within Turkey, worsening relations with the Kurds, and an attempted coup d'état in July against the current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. There is no sign that Erdoğan will lose control over power within the near future. In fact, there will likely be constitutional changes in 2017 which would enable Erdoğan to consolidate his power even further, and this is to be put to a public referendum later this year (Guéhenno, 2017).

2016 saw continual involvement by Turkey in the Syrian conflict. Turkey's interest in Syria is tied to Kurdish influence in the region, and any Turkish

interference in the conflict is driven by Ankara's aim to reduce the influence of the Kurds (Stratfor Annual Forecast, 2016). The Kurds have accused Turkey of using the Syrian conflict as a disguise in order to attack the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Syria and Iraq (BBC Monitoring, 2016). Turkey has been involved in a number of attacks against the PKK along the Syrian-Turkish border region (Chulov, 2017). The extent to which the Kurds are involved in the Syrian conflict means that they may seek to work towards a de jure rather than a de facto Kurdistan. Or, at the very least, there will be a stronger sense of a Kurdish national identity. However, this is something that Turkey will continually aim to curtail in 2017, as this is perceived as a direct threat to Turkish stability.

Turkish-Russian relations have made a remarkable turnaround since the downing of a Russian warplane over Turkish airspace in 2015. Turkey and Russia are, for the time being, fighting on the same side of the Syrian conflict. It remains to be seen how long this new found friendship between Russia and Turkey will last. Turkey remains a valuable NATO member, for example, it houses the NATO Incirlik airbase in the Southeast of the country which has many US troops stationed there. Turkey has also maintained an ongoing agreement with the European Union in order to try to reduce the number of refugees heading for Europe. Although Turkish-Russian relations may be warming up, such alliances with the West mean that Turkey will also continue to engage and maintain warm relations with the West throughout 2017 (Stratfor, 2016).

Iran

2016 has been a positive year in terms of diplomatic relations for Iran. In January 2016 the Iranian nuclear deal, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), came into force. Since then Iran has seen new trade and investment flows, albeit at a slower pace than was originally hoped (Borden, 2016). During the recent OPEC talks held late last year, Iran was granted permission to raise its oil output, while Saudi

Arabia agreed to reduce its output in a bid to increase oil prices.

2016 has seen Iran continue its aims of expanding its regional influence. It has a significant presence in Shia dominated areas of Iraq. There is a good reason for Iran to maintain a presence within this region. The Shia regions of Iraq include oilfields and access to the Iraqi side of the Shat al-Arab waterway (Marshall, 2015). The south of Iraq is also of strategic importance for Iran, acting as a connection to Damascus (Marshall, 2015). Syria is also essential for Iran because it provides Iran with a bridge into Lebanon, enabling Iran to maintain its ties with Hezbollah (Ansari and Tabrizi, 2016). The recapturing of eastern Aleppo by Syrian government forces in December 2016 is of major significance not only for the Assad regime but also for Iran. It enables Iran to further consolidate its regional aims and maintain a sphere of influence. There are even reports that following the recapture of eastern Aleppo, Iran halted the evacuation of civilians and demanded that the siege of two Shia villages, Fua and Kefraya, be lifted because they were surrounded by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Nusra front), a Sunni extremist group (Chulov, 2016). Such actions suggest that Iran will continue to build on its regional presence in 2017.

President-elect Trump's administration would appear to be against the Iranian nuclear deal. President-elect Trump is himself clearly against the deal, calling it the 'worst deal ever negotiated' (Wright, 2017). Mike Pompeo, the next director of the CIA, has been against the Iran deal ever since its inception. Pompeo argues that 'this deal allows Iran to continue its nuclear programme. That's not foreign policy; its surrender' (Wright, 2017). Such anti-Iranian sentiment will provide relief for the Gulf countries, who fear Iran's regional ambitions (Ghattas, 2016). However, although President-elect Trump and his administration may be opposed to the Iranian nuclear deal, in the current political climate the US has no desire to involve itself in yet another conflict with a Middle Eastern nation (Stratfor, 2016). Given that

Iran's geography provides a substantial amount of protection, and its ability to close the Strait of Hormuz through which approximately 20% of the world's oil passes through daily, Trump would benefit from maintaining a civil relationship with Tehran in 2017 and this may well influence US-Iranian relations (Marshall 2015).

Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Al-Qaeda

With falling oil prices, fighting costly wars in both Syria and Yemen, and trying to prevent Iran from regional ascendancy, 2016 has proved challenging for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Relations with the US have also cooled, with Congress even voting in favour of allowing the families of the victims of 9/11 to sue the Saudi government (Cockburn, 2017). However, President-Elect Trump's choice of defence secretary, James Mattis, is a staunch supporter of maintaining the US-Saudi alliance, and will more than likely take steps to ensure this alliance is maintained (Washington Post Editorial Board, 2017).

Saudi Arabia is unlikely to give up its campaign in Yemen in the near future

The drop in oil prices in recent years has forced Saudi Arabia to take action in order to reduce its dependence on oil revenues. Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the current minister of defence, is also in charge of overseeing the economy. Prince Salman has initiated 'Vision 2030', an economic plan that aims to generate money from sources other than oil. This will be made possible through, for example, the implementation of tax, selling shares in Aramco, and increasing religious tourism to the country (Fattah et al, 2016).

While Saudi Arabia had hoped to keep their involvement in the conflict in Yemen to a short campaign, it has turned into a long and bloody operation. The conflict in Yemen has caused the internal displacement of approximately 2.3 million people, 15.2 million lack access to basic healthcare,

and famine is threatening the lives of millions of people (Arab Human Development Report, 2016). The longer the conflict continues, the longer Iranian influence will endure within Houthi controlled territory. Indeed, a loss in Yemen would prove an embarrassment to Saudi Arabia and its ambition to be the dominant power in the region. However, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to give up its campaign in Yemen in the near future, as Yemen is too strategically important for the stability of both Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula (Cordesman, 2015). A major area of strategic importance in Yemen is the Bab el Mandeb strait which feeds into the Red Sea, and any hostile presence in Yemen could, therefore, threaten traffic through the Suez Canal as well as the daily flow of oil (Cordesman, 2015).

Saudi Arabian involvement in Yemen has caused an increase in the number of terrorist organisations operating in the region. Having been relatively quiet over the past few years, Al-Qaeda and its associated groups have been making advances in local areas and shoring up support (Stratfor, 2017). For example, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been swiftly gaining support and control within Yemen itself. It has created a stronghold in Mukalla, a city in the south-east of the country. It is likely that this expansion of power for AQAP will continue as the war rages on in Yemen which also poses a threat to Saudi Arabia's stability (Bayoumy et al, 2016).

Lebanon

The election of Michel Aoun in October 2016 marked the end of two years of political deadlock in the country. In February 2016 relations with Saudi Arabia somewhat soured, as Saudi cancelled \$3 billion worth of military aid to Lebanon after the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran created tensions in Lebanon (Aboudi and Perry, 2017).

Saudi Arabia opposed Aoun as president, as he is an ally of both Iran and Hezbollah. He often argued for stable relationships with Iran as his latest declaration in Riyadh further reminded other states of his ties with

the Iranian government. Saudi Arabia fears that Aoun will enable Iran to have a stronger influence in the country, on top of the influence it already possesses through its support for Hezbollah (Chulov, 2016). Hezbollah enjoys political legitimacy in Lebanon, and it has powerful alliances and veto powers within parliament (Hu, 2016). However, its involvement in the Syrian conflict is becoming a drain on its resources and causing it to lose support (Hu, 2016). Many people supported Hezbollah because it focused on fighting against Israel, and it has established its legitimacy partly on this basis (Hu, 2016). Given the Syrian occupation of Lebanon between 1976 and 2005, Hezbollah's continual support for the Assad regime may cause it to lose support within Lebanon.

Approximately 1.5 million displaced Syrians have been forced to flee to Lebanon (Cambanis, 2016). Aoun, like Hezbollah, is a supporter of the Assad regime. Aoun has, however, stated that the displaced Syrians must return to Syria, and has publicly stated that: 'There will be no solution in Syria without the return of the Syrian refugees to their country' (Alabaster, 2016). Even if the peace talks being held later this month do bring about a political solution, it is unlikely that displaced Syrians will return home. In a bid to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, Aoun has recently embarked on a trip to Riyadh, no doubt Aoun will aim to resolve the issue of the cancelled military aid. Lebanon in 2017 is, however, likely to become less of a priority for both Saudi Arabia and Iran as both countries concentrate on the conflicts in Yemen and Syria (Cambanis, 2016).

Israel

2017 will mark one hundred years since Britain endorsed the establishment of a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine by publishing the Balfour Declaration. At the end of 2016, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2334, (with the US abstaining) which demanded that Israel stops all illegal settlement activity. However, it does not seem likely that Resolution 2334 will have any bearing on Israeli settlement activity. President-elect Trump seems to be sympathetic to the Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu. Following the passing of the Resolution, Trump tweeted: '... as to the UN, things will be different after Jan 20' (Beaumont, 2016). Netanyahu has warned that the countries which supported Resolution 2334 will pay a diplomatic and economic price (Ferzinger and Arnold, 2016). In reality, the resolution is likely to be more of a symbolic gesture, and Israel will not cease its settlement activities.

Progress on the peace process has not materialised and a two-states solution is not likely in the near future

Republican Senators Ted Cruz, Dean Heller and Marco Rubio unveiled the Jerusalem Embassy and Recognition Act, aimed at moving the US embassy

from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and also changing the Israeli capital from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Smith, 2017). President-elect Trump's nominated ambassador to Israel, David Freidman, is also in favour of the embassy moving from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Smith, 2017). If this Act were to pass, it would no doubt create a huge amount of tension between the Israelis and Palestinians. Jerusalem is a city of the utmost importance for both Israel and Palestine due to its religious and historical significance. Progress on the peace process has not materialised and a two-states solution is not likely in the near future. If Trump and his administration remain pro-Israeli then it is highly likely that tensions will escalate, which could lead to further bouts of violence between the two countries.



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