



NIAS-IPRI Brief

State of Peace and Conflict in the Middle East in 2021

Dr Stanly Johny
International Affairs Editor, The Hindu, Chennai

The Middle East in 2021 witnessed powers making quick moves to consolidate their geopolitical positions considering the larger changes at play. The Middle East and North Africa region, which encompasses the Arab world, Iran, Israel and Turkey, saw conflicts, coups, power grabs, human suffering and economic miseries in 2021.

Introduction

The Middle East (or West Asia) is no stranger to conflicts. Since the end of the Second World War, the region has seen multiple wars as well as peace summits. Given its geo-strategic importance and hydrocarbon resources, great powers have always been interested in the region. If the British Empire was the most important power in the Middle East until the Second World War, the United States has retained an outsized influence in the region ever since. After the end of the Cold War, the US, which emerged as the world's most powerful nation, has carried out a series of military interventions in the larger Middle East and North Africa region as it sought to remake its engagement with local powers. It went to war with Iraq in 1991 and 2003, bombed Libya in 2011 and sent troops to Syria to fight the Islamic State (IS) terrorist groups after the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011.

In recent years the region has also seen the rise of terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and the IS. The US is now gradually shifting its focus to the Asia Pacific region where China is rising fast. The US has pulled back its troops from Afghanistan and announced the end of combat operations in Iraq. It has also drawn down troops from Syria, and removed some of the weapons, including the Patriot missile defence system, it had deployed in the Gulf. As the US is resizing its presence in the Middle East, regional players are repositioning themselves. Turkey wants to play a bigger role in the region, which was ruled by the Ottomans for centuries until the end of the First World War. The Gulf kingdoms, America's allies, have warmed up to Israel. The rivalry between Israel and Iran is at an inflection point, particularly as Iran has resumed its nuclear programme after the US pulled out of the 2015 nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). These developments leave the Middle East in a state of flux, like much of the world.

Major Developments in 2021

The year 2021 saw Middle Eastern powers make quick moves to consolidate their geopolitical positions considering the larger changes at play. The Middle East and North Africa region, which encompasses the Arab world, Iran, Israel and Turkey, saw conflicts, coups, power grabs, human suffering and economic miseries in 2021. This paper looks

at five major crises and other trends that shaped up Middle Eastern geopolitics in 2021 and the prospects for peace and concerns of conflict going forward.

1. Yemen

One of the early foreign policy decisions of the Biden administration, which was inaugurated in January 2021, was to end its support for Saudi Arabia's war in neighbouring Yemen. But President Joe Biden's decision had little impact on the conflict, as the year saw one of the most intense phases of the war in Marib between the Saudi-backed government and the Houthi rebels. Saudi Arabia started attacking Yemen in 2015 after the country's capital, Sana'a, was seized by the Houthis. The Houthis are Shia and the Saudis, a Sunni-Wahhabi kingdom, allege that they are backed by the Shia theocratic Iran, Riyadh's regional rival. When the Saudis launched the war, in an alliance with the United Arab Emirates and with support from the US, it was expected that they would wrap it up rather quickly and restore the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in Sana'a. But to the surprise of many, the war dragged on, with Saudi Arabia struggling to find a way-out. Six years after the war started, the Saudi-led coalition is fractured with the UAE having exited Yemen and a separatist group in the south, the Southern Transition Council, challenging President Hadi's government. The Houthis are still in Sana'a, and have carried out cross-border drone and short-range missile attacks, targeting Saudi positions. In early 2021, the Houthis, who control northern Yemen, advanced towards Marib, east of Sana'a, triggering an all-out war. Hundreds of people were killed in the ongoing battle the result of which could alter the balance of power in the Yemeni civil war.

2. Lebanon

Lebanon, whose capital Beirut was ripped apart by a blast in August 2020, continued to remain on the brink with economic miseries and sectarian rivalries bringing back the memories of the civil war of the 1970s and 1980s. After months of negotiations, Lebanon finally got a full-time Prime Minister in 2021, but the country is witnessing a once-in-a-generation economic crisis. The 2020 blast caused damages worth \$15 billion. Even before the blast, the Lebanese economy was facing a steep contraction. It dates back to the 2019 financial crisis, which saw the country defaulting on its bonds for the first time since its independence in 1943. According to the World Bank, Lebanon's GDP per capita fell by 40% in dollar terms between 2018 and 2020, while real GDP contracted by 20.3% in 2020, pulling the Mediterranean country into "one of the most severe global crises episodes".

Already, Lebanon is witnessing scarcity of medicines and other goods. It is also facing frequent power cuts as the government doesn't have funds to import fuel. Inflation has shot up more than 110%. Unemployment rate soared to 40%, according to the Bank. As the country grappled with these many crises, sectarian tensions were also soaring. In October, shots were fired at a rally called by the Shia Hezbollah against the Beirut blast probe. Hezbollah and its Shia ally Amal Movement blamed the Lebanese Forces, a Christian party, for the shooting. Meanwhile, Gulf countries withdrew their ambassadors from Lebanon over a comment made by one of the ministers of Prime Minister Najib Mikati's new government on the Yemen war, signalling that they don't support the Hezbollah-backed government. As Lebanon moves from one crisis to another, the biggest security risk is the collapse of the state and the possibility of an outbreak of a sectarian civil war. The wounds of the previous civil war are yet to heal in this country.

3. Israel-Palestine

One of the oldest crises in the Middle East, the Israel-Palestine conflict saw another flare-up in 2021. In May, Hamas, the Islamist militant group that controls Gaza Strip, launched rockets into Israel after Israeli troops entered Al-Aqsa compound in Jerusalem, the third holiest mosque in Islam. In response, Israel started air strikes on Gaza, which went on for a week. Tensions were rising between Palestinians and Israel over the Israeli move to evict Palestinian families living in Sheikh Jarrah, a Jerusalem neighbourhood. Israeli settler groups claim that the land in Sheikh Jarrah where Palestinians have been living for decades belongs to them and want to evict the Palestinians. During Ramzan, the Islamic holy month, Israel set up new barricades in Jerusalem's Old City ahead of an expected court ruling on Sheikh Jarrah. This led to violent protests by Palestinians and use of force by the Israeli troops, who stormed al-Aqsa Mosque with tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades. The crisis quickly slid into an open conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Israel carried out heavy bombing of Gaza, which resulted in high civilian casualties, while Hamas kept firing rockets into Israel — some of them evading Israel's Iron Dome defence system. What shocked Israel more was the outbreak of protests by Palestinians across historic Palestine — from the Gaza Strip on the Mediterranean coast through Israeli proper to the occupied Jerusalem and West Bank on the banks of Jordan River. As civilian casualties mounted, Israel also came under international pressure, with the Biden administration publicly demanding a ceasefire. On May 21, Israel agreed to an Egypt-backed ceasefire. When the Abraham Accords were signed between Israel and four Arab countries in 2020, there was one argument that Israel has successfully bypassed the Palestinian issue to normalise ties with Arab countries. But the 2021 conflict suggests that the Palestinian issue would remain one of the critical crises in the region as long as the Israeli occupation continues and irrespective of Israel's warm-up to Arab countries. Tensions still remain high as there are no attempts to kick-start negotiations. Palestinian territories continue to see sporadic violence.

4. Syria

With regard to Syria, the year 2021 endorsed what was already evident — President Bashar al-Assad has won the civil war. His regime has recaptured most of the lost territories, except Idlib province, which is controlled by Hayat al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda branch in Syria) and pro-Turkish rebels. The Syrian Kurdish territories are run by the People's Defence Units (YPG), a Kurdish militia group that has entered into a de facto deal with Damascus. The Kurds seek autonomy, not independence, and for now, the Syrian troops are not fighting the Kurds. Pro-Turkish rebels are controlling slices of territories on the Turkish-Syrian border, which Turkey sees as a buffer between the Turkish Kurdistan, where it's fighting an insurgency, and the Syrian Kurdistan.

In May 2021, President Assad got "re-elected" in a presidential election, in a clear message from the regime that he was not going anywhere. Arab countries, including Jordan which had at the beginning of the civil war helped the anti-Assad rebels, have warmed up to Damascus. But Assad's victory is not complete and there still are fault-lines that could turn the crisis worse. Assad wants to take back Idlib, where 3 million people live. Turkey is steadily opposed to any Syrian-Russian effort to recapture Idlib

because it fears that such an attack would unleash another wave of refugees across the border. Turkey is already hosting millions of Syrian refugees. For now, Turkey and Russia have entered into an agreement to delay an all-out attack on Idlib. But if the Syrian government, backed by Russia, launches an attack, that could trigger a wider conflict.

5. Iran

The Iranian nuclear crisis turned worse in 2021 with Iran steadily expanding its nuclear programme and talks in Vienna to restore the 2015 nuclear deal having hit a deadlock. The nuclear deal, JCPOA, signed by Iran, the US, China, Russia and European powers, had limited Iran's nuclear programme. Iran agreed to cut its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98% and open its nuclear plants for international inspection. But the deal became dysfunctional after the Trump administration unilaterally pulled the US out of it in May 2018 despite UN certification that Iran was fully compliant with the terms of the agreement. Following the US violation of the agreement, Iran also started breaching the deal's terms. Over the past year, it has started enriching uranium to 20% and more purity level, a technical step away from the weapons-grade level of 90%. Iran has also scuttled the IAEA access to its plants and reportedly started manufacturing advanced centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium. If the breakout period — the time Iran would take to make a bomb if it decides to do so — was one year according to the nuclear deal, it has now reportedly shrunk to one month.

The Biden administration has appointed Robert Malley, the lead negotiator of the 2015 deal, as a special envoy for Iran and offered talks to Iran. Tehran held multiple rounds of talks with the remaining signatories of the deal in Vienna in 2021, but refused to hold direct talks with the Americans. The US has agreed to lift the Trump-era sanctions if Iran returns to the nuclear deal, but Iran demands the US first enter the agreement, remove all the sanctions and provide assurances that a future American President would not violate the deal. The talks have so far produced no breakthrough. In the meantime, Israel has warned the US against lifting sanctions on Iran. If the nuclear deal is not revived and Iran enriches uranium to the weapons-grade level, it could send tensions with Israel soaring.

Trends and issues in 2021

While conflicts overshadowed the year, 2021 also saw some realignments in the Middle East. The Israel-Palestine conflict is no longer a hurdle in Arab-Israeli ties. If in 1967, Arab countries, in the Khartoum conference in Sudan, declared 'no peace, no talks and no recognition' with Israel, six Arab countries, including Sudan, have now established formal ties with the Jewish nation—four of them did so in 2020. The UAE and Bahrain, both Gulf kingdoms, have steadily expanded ties with Israel in 2021. This is part of the UAE's reassessment of regional politics. For decades, the UAE played second fiddle to Saudi Arabia and was dependent on the US for security guarantees. The US's move to shift its focus to the Asia Pacific and Saudi Arabia's adventurism, including the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi and the unwinnable war in Yemen, seems to have prompted the UAE to take a different foreign policy course. On the one side, it established ties with Israel, Iran's main rival in the region, and on the other, it reached out to Iran for better diplomatic ties. The UAE exited the Yemen conflict, mended the broken ties with Turkey and joined Saudi Arabia to end the blockade of Qatar. Simultaneously, it's also boosting its defence capability.

Saudi Arabia has also taken half-hearted steps to reorient its foreign policy. While it hasn't formally opened ties with Israel, it's an open secret that the Kingdom and the Jewish nation enjoy warm backroom ties. The Saudis have also started negotiations with Iran. The 2019 attack on Saudi oil installations, which knocked off half of Saudi Arabia's oil production capacity for days, was a game changer for Saudi policy makers. Since the late 1940s, the bedrock of the Saudi-US cooperation was the latter's security commitment to the kingdom. Yet, the US did nothing when Saudi oil facilities came under attack from Iranian drones. Saudi Arabia also sees a growing security challenge across its southern border in Yemen. So it adopted a twin approach — continue to fight the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen while at the same time seeking direct talks with Iran. If there's a breakthrough in Saudi-Iranian rivalry, that could help both countries dial down tensions in the region.

Turkey is another country that needs to be watched closely. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey has turned its focus back to the Middle East from Europe. It had also played an ambitious role in several conflicts in recent years — in Syria, Libya and the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. It's also trying to reassert itself in the Eastern Mediterranean region, which has traditionally been dominated by European powers. Its interests clash with that of Russia in the Caucasus, Libya and Syria, but it has still entered into an entente with Moscow. Turkey even angered the US by buying Russian missile defence system S400. All these developments point to Turkey's desire to play a larger role in the geopolitics of the region which once controlled by the Ottomans. Turkey has built a strong partnership with Qatar and has stationed some troops to the Gulf kingdom. It has carved up a sphere of influence on the Syrian border and helped the Libyan government based in Tripoli defeat General Khalifa Haftar's forces that were backed by the UAE and Egypt. While it's making baby steps in expanding its influence in the region, a weakening economy and a crashing currency remain its biggest challenges.

Forecasts for 2022

The dominant trends in Middle Eastern geopolitics suggest that the region would continue to see realignment going forward. In the post-War world, the Middle East has seen the sands of power shifting many times. If Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel were the three main regional powers in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, a quarter century into the Cold War, the world saw Israel emerging as a new pillar and Egypt losing its influence. The Iranian revolution of 1979 ended America's alliance with the Shia country and ever since, the competition, if not rivalry, between the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia was one of the driving factors of Middle Eastern geopolitics. The region is once again witnessing changes in the existing equations.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have made it clear that they want some kind of détente with Iran. Having realised that the US is shifting its strategic focus away from the Middle East, the Sunni Gulf Kingdoms do not want to get caught in the crossfire in the event of a military confrontation between Iran and Israel — which is probable if the nuclear talks in Vienna collapse. So 2022 is likely to see diplomatic efforts by both Saudi Arabia and the UAE in improving ties with Iran. The Saudi-led bloc has made peace with Qatar, for now. But their paths are different. Qatar would seek to further strengthen its ties with Turkey. The Syrian crisis would remain dormant unless the Russia-Turkey entente collapses and Moscow backs a Syrian plan to retake Idlib by force. The Israel-Palestine issue remains tense. There are no prospects for peace between the two peoples. Israel's

new ruling coalition, in which an Arab party is a member, has halted the eviction of Palestinian residents in Sheikh Jarrah. But the real problem is that there is no peace process. And there's no unity among the Palestinians, with the Fatah running the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas ruling the blockaded Gaza. Unless there's an international push to relaunch the peace talks, the issue would continue to fester with the potential for more flare-ups in the future.

The most dangerous contradiction in the region is the growing rivalry between Israel and Iran. Israel is facing a dilemma: If the Vienna talks are a success and the nuclear deal is concluded, that would lead to the lifting of American sanctions on Iran. Sans sanctions, Iran, rich with hydrocarbon resources, would be free to tap its economic potential and rise as an economic power. Growth and money would only strengthen Iran's regional activism—where it supports militant groups from Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Islamic Jihad in Gaza — and its conventional defence programmes, including its ballistic missile programme. This would alter the regional balance of power and Israel would face a much more conventional rival in Iran. And if the nuclear talks collapse and Iran goes ahead with the production of more centrifuges and highly enriched uranium, Iran could reach the nuclear threshold (90% purity), which could challenge Israel's nuclear monopoly in the Middle East. In either case, Israel faces unpleasant choices and game-changing outcomes. The choices Israel and Iran make in the coming months would decide the future of Middle Eastern geopolitics.