

The Cold War in the Middle East: Then and Now

Lorena De Vita

The Middle East is undergoing a phase of crucial geopolitical and social transformations. Bottom-up uprisings are spreading from Lebanon to Algeria. A dangerous regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is playing out throughout the region, involving actors supported by one or the other party in proxy wars ranging from Yemen to Syria. The United States and Russia are both, albeit very differently, involved in local and regional politics, in ways that may also be exposing the European southern flank to risk. Washington, under the aegis of Donald J. Trump, is simultaneously providing support to traditional regional allies, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, and retreating from the region. This is illustrated, for example, by the decision to withdraw US forces from the border region between Turkey and Syria, in effect betraying the Kurdish forces that had been crucial in the fight against IS. And Moscow has been quick to seize upon the opportunity provided by the US' moves and the local instability to portray itself as a steady, most reliable partner for the countries of the region. Is a new Cold War playing out in the Middle East? Not quite. Yet understanding how the original bipolar rivalry played out in the region is key, as many consequences of policies enacted by the superpowers and their allies during those four fateful decades are still with us today.

Iran: The onset of the Cold War

The Middle East was, from the very outset, one of the major theaters of the Cold War confrontation. Even before the Berlin blockade of 1948, in which the Soviets closed off the Western Allies' terrestrial access to the city in an attempt to force them to give up their control of West Berlin and which is generally recognized as the starting point of the bipolar rivalry, one of the first major Cold War crises had in fact taken place: in 1946 at the eastern end of the Middle East. The origins of the crisis dated back to the early war years when, in 1941, British and Soviet troops had occupied Iran with the aim of preventing the country from aligning with the powers of the Axis. Taking place just a few weeks after the German invasion of the

Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa), the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran had served a crucial geostrategic purpose – that of ensuring the continued supply of military materiel to the USSR throughout the years of the war. With the assent of the newly installed Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, some five million tons of munitions reached the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1945.

Once the fighting ended, however, problems began to arise among the Allies. As became increasingly clear, the Soviets had no intention of ending their occupation of the northern part of the country. The Kremlin even backed Azeri and Kurdish separatists pushing for secession, and supported the establishment of two independent socialist republics – the Azerbaijan People's Government and



the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad. Stalin had felt bitterly disappointed by the wartime Allies, who in the final stages of the war had let thousands of Soviet soldiers die while repeatedly postponing the opening of a second war front. And he viewed the newly created Kurdish and Azeri states as important assets to protect the Soviet interests in the area's oil facilities and resources. It took several months of intense diplomatic pressure – exerted bilaterally as well as in multilateral fora such as the newly founded United Nations – to push the Soviets to withdraw from Iran, but, by the end of 1946, with the support of the United States, Iranian forces had regained control of Mahabad and Azerbaijan. Their separatist experiment ended in defeat, local leaders were hanged or forced to run for their lives.

The Iran crisis subsumed three crucial elements that would play out in the Middle East throughout much of the following decades. First, coming at a time of waning British

influence, the crisis signaled the importance of the region for both the United States and Russia. Second, given that much of the crisis revolved around the access to oil facilities located in northern Iran, the events of 1946 revealed just how interested both superpowers were in the region's resources, further testifying that they would be ready and willing to use their troops to protect such interests. Third, the temporary Soviet support of local separatisms also evidenced just how easy it could be for outside powers to instrumentally support local ethnic and religious identities while pursuing their own geostrategic agendas. These elements – the superpowers' interest in the region and its resources; their readiness to intervene in local affairs; and proclivity to using religious and sectarian divides to further specific political intents – would characterize much of the Middle Eastern Cold War for the following four decades. Such dynamics did not originate with the bipolar confrontation – after all, outside powers had long been meddling in the region's affairs. But with the onset

Middle Eastern countries remain among the main recipients of weapons from Russia and the United States. Today, as during the Cold War, the conflict in Israel/Palestine shows no sign of solution (photo: Unsplash/Cole Keister)



of the Cold War, Middle Eastern regional actors would be increasingly involved in the superpower rivalry, leading to what elsewhere I have termed an “overlap of rivalries” that made regional conflicts even harder to resolve.¹

Iraq: The Cold War's elusive end

The Cold War did not end in Berlin. Exhilarating images of the masses clambering up the Berlin Wall in the fall of 1989 will continue to dominate the collective memory of the end of forty years of a rivalry that brought us all, repeatedly, to the brink of a nuclear *omnicide*. And yet, a much more telling phase began unfolding, shortly thereafter, in the Persian Gulf. Disparaging the rates of Kuwaiti oil production, nine months after the fall of the Berlin Wall Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein began what would become a short-lived military intervention in the neighboring oil-producing country. Saddam's motives had little to do with any alleged Kuwaiti economic warfare and instead related to his need to replenish an impoverished Iraqi economy that had been severely strained by a protracted and costly war of attrition against Iran (1980-1988) which resulted in over 1.5 million estimated Iraqi and Iranian deaths. Not quite grasping what the waning of the Cold War would mean for his own regional ambitions, Saddam ordered the invasion and annexation of Kuwait on 2 August 1990.

Once diplomatic and economic pressure to deter him failed, an international coalition – the largest since the Second World War – led by the United States and with the authorization of the UN Security Council, began a five-week military operation that pushed Saddam's forces back into Iraq and reinstated the Kuwaiti royal family at the helm of the country. The campaign was a success – and its implications were potentially massive. Before the intervention, President George H. W. Bush had addressed the US Congress, stressing the importance of that unique and extraordinary moment: “The crisis in the Persian Gulf,” he explained, “offers a great opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation. Out of these troubled times ... a new world order can emerge: a new era – freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace.”² The rapid success of the international military campaign, whose legitimacy was reinforced by unequivocal UN authorization, ushered in an era of triumphalist confidence – *hubris* in fact – in the possibilities offered by such a ‘new world order’ and in the United States’ ability to mold it.

By the time the Cold War came to an end, several analysts and academics envisaged hopeful prospects for the countries of the region. Nikki Keddie, one of the leading experts in Middle Eastern studies, argued that recognizing the “change of the Soviet Union from a country willing to put out money and arms abroad to one that needs to save money and to concentrate on peacemaking and collective security” was crucial for grasping the significance of “Soviet peacemaking in Afghanistan, [the] reduction of Soviet arms transfers to Iraq and Syria, and [the] peaceful Soviet efforts in the Gulf. This”, she explained, “is part of the general transition to a unipolar world, in which not only can Third World countries no longer maneuver for benefits between two competing Great Powers, but many feel compelled to adjust to US policies in order to receive needed aid and benefits from the United States that they can no longer hope to get from the Soviet Union.”³ Such a transition had the potential to improve significantly regional prospects for peace, and, as Keddie pointed out, “a reduction of the Arab-Israeli dispute could be the most important peace-oriented result in the Middle East of the end of the Cold War.”

Keddie's prognosis was based upon important facts. First, despite Iraq having been one of its main clients in the region, the Soviet Union quickly endorsed the US-led military operation in the first Gulf War. Indeed, at the time of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, US Secretary of State James

A much more telling phase began unfolding, shortly after the end of the Cold War. Disparaging the rates of Kuwaiti oil production, nine months after the fall of the Berlin Wall Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein began what would become a short-lived military intervention in the neighboring oil producing country (photo: Flickr/Matt Buck)

Analysis

Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze were in a meeting together and rapidly issued a joint statement of condemnation of Iraq's aggression against Kuwait. Second, at the time of Keddie's writing, the two superpowers had recently co-sponsored an unprecedented multilateral peace conference including Israeli, Egyptian, Jordanian-Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian delegations, which President Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev co-hosted in Madrid. In his opening statement, co-chairman Gorbachev underlined that "without a radical improvement and then a radical change in Soviet-US relations, we would never have witnessed the profound qualitative changes in the world that now make it possible to speak in terms of an entirely new age, an age of peace in world history," adding that "the right conclusions have been drawn from the Gulf War."⁴ But had they?

The Cold War in the Middle East, Between Past and Future

Thirty years on, the Middle East remains one of the most volatile regions in the world. Blatant widespread human rights abuses take place throughout, facilitated by what Amnesty International termed the "chilling complacency" of the international community.⁵ The conflict in Israel/Palestine shows no sign of resolution; anti-government protests in Syria descended into a bloody and protracted civil war, now turned proxy war among powerful regional and international actors; and Yemen is witnessing one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world – just to name three key flashpoints. The "age of peace" and "historic era of cooperation" envisaged by Bush and Gorbachev in the early 1990s are nowhere in the offing – and this should not surprise anyone familiar with the history of the Cold War in the Middle East.⁶

Much of the region's current struggles can be seen as the legacy of four decades of a bipolar rivalry which saw both the United States and Russia, and the European allies of each bloc, channeling huge amounts of military expertise and hardware to their regional allies in an attempt to tilt the regional power balance to their own advantage. In turn, by exploiting the Cold War divide between East and West and flirting with the superpower that could offer more, most local regimes did not have to bother with democratic accountability, transparency, or the rule of law, because to maintain their power at the local and regional levels they could rely on their large and well-equipped armed forces. Today, the United States and Russia remain the globe's main weapons exporters – combined, their exports account for 57% of all major arms exports worldwide.

And over a third of the global share of major arms imports end up in the Middle East.

But the Cold War is now over. European countries, previously embroiled in one of the respective blocs, need not follow the dangerous policies pursued by the United States and Russia in the area. The Middle East is a region whose instability has critical repercussions for the fragile political equilibrium of the European Union – and it will be imperative to devise and implement coherent common policies, pursued collectively and also by each member state with regional partners, that set the EU on course to become more than a paymaster for the region's corrupt regimes.

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