

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE WESTERN RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MIDDLE EAST?

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This paper will examine state of the relationship between Western powers and the Middle East. It looks at the nature and future of these relationships and in particular two case studies – Palestine and Syria. It will assess the challenges facing these relationships and what possible options varying parties have.

To understand the interplay between Western nations and Middle East powers, it is essential to understand the broader dynamics that shape policy.

For Middle Eastern powers, before they determine their relationships with Western powers, a whole series of other factors are considered, including domestic opinion, the economy, and relationships with major non-Western actors like Russia, India, and China.

For Western powers, the Middle East may not always rank as their topmost priority. For Europe, the situation between Russia and Ukraine has tended to dominate their thinking since 2022. The United States (US) has since the time of President Obama talked of a pivot to Asia even if that has not always materialized. In a period of economic downturn, increasing trade will top the agenda as opposed to conflict resolution and human rights.

The international community seems in 2025 like a fiction. Rarely do major powers act in concert, in particular after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The United Nations Security Council can no longer coalesce around major international threats to security. Increasingly, many states see the world through their own narrow interests, adopting an isolationist poise.

International law has been sidelined or abused. The US that was the architect of the United Nations (UN) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has leaders who are contemptuous of such institutions in the 21st century. Western powers deem international law essential when it refers to Russia's actions, not least in Ukraine but not Israeli actions in Palestine. Many, not just in the MENA region, see double standards at work.

But a serious question has to be asked. What is the “West” anymore? Does such a grouping even exist, such are the divisions amongst those states that might have been seen to be part of this bloc? For this reason, this paper will refer to Western powers.

Moreover, the Western-led global system is weakening. The US and Europe are no longer in such a dominant position and face challenges from other powers.

The US remains the world's most powerful actor but shows signs of decline and is losing out to China. The America-first tendencies articulated by President Trump chime with a sizeable portion of the American population. The era of the US acting as the world's policeman is at an end. Allies of the US, including members of NATO, are no longer assured that the US will honor its collective defense obligations under Article Five of the NATO charter.

No longer does the US enjoy the supreme status in the region it had back in the 1990s, when following the fall of the Soviet Union, it was the world's sole hyperpower. The US is not as close to some of its traditional allies as it once was, including in Europe and with Canada.

Few in Middle East and further afield have high expectations of American leadership. Many were bitterly disappointed with the Biden administration's record, not least on Palestine. The rushed and inept withdrawal from Afghanistan also cemented the US' status as a declining force.

The US has veered between acutely different administrations. The policy gap between Democrat and Republican administrations has widened. Neither, however, have provided answers and solutions to the key challenges the world, including the Middle East, faces.

Both Western states and Middle Eastern actors have to transform how they address the future of the region. The paper makes overall recommendations followed by specific proposals regarding the two case study areas.

The interventionist, neoconservative Bush administration ushered in the 9/11 wars. Even in the US, most now agree these were a costly and humiliating disaster. The costs of the Iraq War are debated but range between one to three trillion dollars. Instead of defeating Al-Qaida, a new international coalition had to be formed to combat an even more extreme Jihadist brand, in so-called Islamic State (ISIS). Even in 2025, ISIS remains a significant threat, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

The Obama administration promised much but delivered little. The 'Arab Spring' protests received lukewarm support which ended up frustrating those who wanted revolutionary change and angering America's existing allies. His administration failed to stop the crimes against humanity the Assad regime perpetrated against the Syrian people. It was Russia and Iran that filled the vacuum. In Libya, the US was once again only partially invested in the military intervention that led to the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime.

Yet enhancing relations between Western and Middle Eastern states is vital. Structural reasons underpin those tensions.

Factors That Affect Western Views of Middle East

The historical backdrop to these links between Western powers and the Middle East matters. A series of negative perceptions of the other abounds. This paper examines these because without addressing them, the relationships will always be prone to such negative perceptions, ignorance, and prejudice.

The relationship between European powers and the US with the Middle East has historically been fraught. The Crusades are a dark period in the relationship historically. More recently, Britain and France have their imperial and colonial record, with records that many in the region do not remember with affection. The US' unbridled support for Israel, come what may, has hindered its influence. The disastrous invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 was both a demonstration of American power but also weakness. Its moral standing was shredded with the scenes of abuse at Abu Ghraib detention center in Iraq and Guantanamo.

But a cycle of failure, war, and bloodshed is also rooted in a host of deeply ingrained attitudes to Arabs and Muslims.

When examining the relationship between Western powers and the Middle East and indeed the broader Islamic World, several key themes emerge in how Western politicians and thinkers tend to view Arabs and Muslims. This affects the way in which policy is debated and formulated. This should not be ignored or belittled because without addressing these ingrained attitudes, the relationships are likely only to deteriorate.

It is hard to ignore the chronic lack of knowledge of this area of the world in Western states. Many observers tend to veer to conspiracy theories to explain Western policy failures when a total lack of understanding can be more to blame. Politicians in democracies in the 21st century are busier than ever, above all handling domestic issues and have less time to devote to vital international concerns, regardless of how important they might be.

This is not helped by increasing security threats throughout the Middle East that render access harder. If you examine the official travel advice from major powers for many states or areas of the region, it is typically to advise against all unnecessary travel or against it all. Syria has largely been off limits since 2011. American citizens do not go to Iran. Israel has denied all access to Gaza for all bar a few and well before October 7, 2023. Areas of Lebanon, including Palestinian refugee camps, have also frequently been off limits.

The consequences are that governments make policies devoid of the in-depth understanding that is required. Diplomats are often confined to embassies, unable to engage fully with the peoples of the countries that they have been deployed to. Attacks on American and European diplomatic missions, such as the attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi in 2012, do not help.

As a result of this ignorance and in some cases prejudice, Arabs and Muslims are often treated as one and the same. Many politicians do not know that there are Arab Christians or Arab Jews, let alone secular Arabs. Few understand that the largest Muslim majority countries are non-Arab, and that there those who describe themselves as secular Muslims or Muslims who do not believe that religion should be part of politics.

The Arab and Islamic Worlds tend to be depicted as one homogenous block. Arabs and Muslims are often seen as being guilty of having a rigid group think. This ignores huge differences from one area to another, from one community to another which should be expected as with any other sizeable region of the world. The attitude is blind to the huge debates over all sorts of political, economic, social, and cultural issues in the Arab World, every bit as fiercely contested as one might find here.

Arabs as a people are also depicted as one. One book even conceived of an 'Arab mind,' as if there is a collective group think amongst hundreds of millions of people in well over 20 different states. The notion that Arabs are a desert nomadic people also persists. Most Arabs are urbanized and few engage in any form of nomadic life.

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Other stereotypes abound still including dirty Arabs, to rich Arabs and, of course, violent Arabs. In the 2017 opinion poll in the UK, only twenty-five per cent associated the Arab World with history,¹ an extraordinary finding given the incredible historical legacy of this region that contains many of the oldest civilizations known to man.

More dangerous is the myth that the Middle East is uniquely violent. This is quite something when it comes from European commentators, the continent that engaged in bloody rapacious colonialism, gave the world two world wars, and was at the epicenter of the Cold War. But it is false.

The Middle East is also not some unique area of the world that needs to be treated differently. Like any region, it has its own specific attributes; its political and social makeup can be assessed in just the same way as any other area. It has dictatorships and monarchies, and it has rentier states just like other areas. It has its ethnic and sectarian tensions but no more so than in other areas such as the Balkans or Central Africa.

Views of Islam

Islam too is portrayed as something alien and non-European. Yet ties with Christian Europe go back centuries. Al-Andalus was for hundreds of years the most advanced, civilized, and even multi-cultural power in Europe. European Islam has been present for centuries but often the common media depiction is that Muslims have just arrived on boats in the last decade.

This is all part of a surging tide of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim attitudes. Far-right populist leaders are not alone in engaging in anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies to procure attention and more favorable poll ratings.

How These Attitudes in Western States Affect Policies

All of these stereotypical and negatives views of the region, its peoples, and Islam affect political debate. Politicians in Europe and North America do not get elected for their expertise on the Middle East, so they enter office typically with only a superficial understanding of this crucial region of the world but in the worst cases, a baggage of misconceptions that bedevil proper thoughtful policy development. Many admit their lack of expertise, others try to cover it up.

But Muslims have fulfilled a purpose to many politicians. Leaders need scapegoats, bad guys to blame. Too often the default option is to point at Muslims. Politicians and the media tend to home in on ‘terrorist’ offences perpetrated by those claiming to be Muslims whilst ignoring the threat from other directions, such as the far right.

Legacy Hatreds

Another challenge is to take on the widespread view that all the conflicts of the Middle East are because of ancient and legacy hatreds which renders solutions and peace processes pointless. This ahistorical view is prevalent when looking at tensions between Arabs and Jews, Turks and Kurds, or Sunnis and Shia, amongst others.

It is frequently used to dodge tough questions about modern responsibilities of states like the US, Britain, and France as it is so much more convenient to explain crises away as something irresolvable based on century-old hatreds, not current and recent policies and actions Britain might be responsible for.

Not Fit for Democracy

One prevailing view is that Arabs are not fit for democracy. There are still politicians who believe that dictatorship is a better model for this area of the world. Some reference a need for an Arab strongman. It belittles the agency of the peoples of the region, many of whom have shown incredible courage in standing up to brutal regimes such as in Syria or Iran.

It is frequently presented as a false, binary choice between dictatorial tyranny or Islamist extremism. This false dichotomy is playing into the hands of both of these categories. Dictators in the region are adept at promoting extremist Islamist groups to dampen American and European criticism of their repression. President Assad of Syria used this to convince large sections of the Syrian population that their choice was between him and the likes of so-called 'Islamic State' (ISIS) or Al-Qaida.

But there are experts too with these views. Bernard Lewis, who was often depicted as one of the most celebrated experts on the region, argued in 2011 as the Arab Spring was in full flow, that democracy was "a political concept that has no history, no record whatever in the Arab, Islamic world." He claimed that "they [i.e., the Arab masses] are simply not ready for free and fair elections."² This acts as an excuse for propping up authoritarian regimes that have little to no popular legitimacy. These comments were picked upon by such regimes as well as in Israel, who fear any outbreak of democracy in the region.

Protests against pro-Western dictatorships are frowned upon or ignored. Many recall the uprisings that saw four Arab dictators lose power in 2011 but ignores the widespread protests in arguably a second Arab Spring in 2019, in countries such as Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Some question why many Arabs do not always admire Western politicians. A greater understanding of the historic relationship of Western powers and the region might explain this.

All too often, Western political leaders pretend that they know the Middle East better than they actually do. History suggests otherwise. Did Western leaders predict the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Palestinian Intifadas in 1987 and 2000, the so-called Arab Spring, or even the latest Israeli war on Gaza? George Bush and Tony Blair in 2003 believed that the Iraq War would spread democracy across the region. The answer in all these cases is unequivocally no. In many of these cases, politicians ignored the advice of experts, especially about the Iraq War of 2003.

But also, those in the region do not always know the rest of the region as well as they believe. This can be difficult to admit. Barriers remain between travel and trade between many Middle East states. Many of the events outlined above that Western political leaders failed to foresee were not predicted in the region either.

This too can contribute to a lack of in-depth understanding in key policy areas.

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Arabists and Experts

Expertise on the Arab World is often not valued by Western political leaders. ‘Arabist’ is frequently used as a derogatory term, as if studying Arabic transforms the student into a suspicious person who becomes more loyal to Arab friends than his own country. The term ‘camel corps’ is used in a pejorative sense.

A recent article in the British right-leaning magazine, *The Spectator*, is worth citing: “Ever since T.E. Lawrence went around Paris in flowing Bedouin robes putting the case for a united Arab nation to the peacemakers of Versailles after the First World War, the British Foreign Office has had a core of upper crust Arabists at its heart. These influential chaps, who are often also Tory politicians and clearly entranced by the romance of the desert, have been a decisive influence on British policy in the Middle East for more than a century. They have consistently advocated for the interests of Arab states – no matter how autocratic – and denigrated the only democracy in the region: Israel.”³

Any proper assessment of British Arabists, including Lawrence, has been that they have always put British interests first. Britain has consistently supported Israel from the days of the Balfour Declaration, through the mandate and even today as it bombs Gaza. Many Arabists in fact warned against the disastrous Suez Crisis and the Iraq War of 2003. Arabists do not all think the same and it is absurd to suggest as this columnist in *The Spectator* did that they do.

Values

The political and media debate often ignores huge array of shared values between different cultures including Arab and European.

Values related debates are thriving in Europe and the US, yet are typically based on a whole series of questionable assumptions. Values are rarely clear. They evolve. Whilst this is understood in the Western context, frequently when attention focuses on other areas of the world, values and beliefs are portrayed as immutable.

At its worse, many in the ‘West’ believe they have superior values and that other cultures should emulate ‘our values.’

Double Standards and Hypocrisy

On the political front, it is not just in the Arab World that Western powers are increasingly seen as hypocritical and indulging in double standards. Too often, Western stances on human rights are an issue of convenience, not principle. The US and European governments were fast to condemn the Russian and Syrian governments for violations of international law and human rights. They supported the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the case of President Putin.

Arabs and others wonder why these same principles have not applied when it comes to Israeli violations of international law, even more so given Israeli atrocities in Gaza.

On the nuclear file, Western powers have imposed sanctions on Iran and nearly gone to war over its nuclear program, but nothing is said about Israel’s actual nuclear weapons arsenal. There is no

appreciation that neighboring states feel threatened by this. Similar sentiments were widely expressed over the whole furor over Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction.

Current Situation in the Middle East

It is hard to be positive about the state of the Middle East region. The 21st century has seen tumultuous and challenging times.

Regimes have been and remain challenged. Dictators in power for decades have been overthrown. A powerful counterrevolution has hit back against popular protests in many countries. Extremist Jihadist groups remain major threats in many areas. Many countries have been or are still wracked by war, crises, and breakdown, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Libya, Sudan, and Yemen, with little sense as to what will emerge in any of them. Israel is extremely confident and aggressive. Iran is assertive and disruptive. The Iranian regime may be under threat, but it remains capable of exerting influence throughout the region.

What Might Be the Impact of a Trump Presidency?

How can one assess the last decade of global politics and in particular the arrival of the second Trump administration in the US? Does this represent a complete rupture of serious global order that has lasted broadly since the Second World War?

How will a Trump second-term presidency shake things up? Things will be different, and his return to the White House will have a transformative effect on global politics and conflicts, including the Middle East. Just how this will play out is far from clear and may never be.

President Trump thrives on the uncertainty and anarchy that he creates. A typical example of the way he keeps other state actors anxious was his refusal to rule out the use of force to acquire Greenland and Panama, and his stated desire to see Canada become the 51st state of the US. He has even articulated a plan for the US to take control of Gaza. Will he follow through on this? Almost certainly not, but he clearly enjoys the turmoil that such comments create.

As the self-styled decider-in-chief, Trump's first administration was chaotic and the policy-making machine incoherent. Will he and his team have learnt from this and prove to be more effective? Many will take quite some convincing. That said, it appears that his team is better prepared to execute his wishes than in his first administration.

A few simple observations can be made. Trump will continue an America-first approach which will front-end American interests as he sees them. He confirmed this clearly in his inauguration speech.

Trump will entrench the US' pro-Israel posture, in so far as this does not clash with his interests. He has appointed a team of principals with pro-Israeli backgrounds. For example, his pick for US Ambassador to the UN, Elise Stefanik, believes that Israel has a biblical right to the West Bank.⁴

Trump will remain against free trade, reluctant to dispatch US troops abroad, and deeply hostile to both

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legal and illegal immigration into the US, particularly from Muslim majority states. He has already pulled out of the Paris Climate accords which has angered some American allies.

In his first term, Trump upset many of the US' traditional allies, mainly in Europe. Already the early signs are that the US-British relationship could be very difficult. Trump's disparaging comments about "Governor Trudeau" are a reminder of how he operates.

Can Europe Mount a Middle East Policy?

Many in the Middle East have in the past looked to Europe to act as a counterbalance to the US in the region. European actors have at times fulfilled such a role.

In terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict, for decades it was European states that maintained the importance of international law and human rights. It was European actors who pressed for a two-state solution through the Venice Declaration of 1980.

Yet this has changed. The European Union is far more divided. It requires unanimity on international issues to adopt significant policy changes. This has proved challenging with actors such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary adopting populist positions and pro-Russia positions. Israel has worked hard to ensure that eastern European states have adopted positions more in line with Israeli views.

The EU cannot continue to allow divisions to undermine its influence in areas that are of vital strategic interest to what is still the world's largest single trading bloc. If unanimity is not possible, then willing states that should at minimum include France and Germany, must take action.

Britain has, following the 2016 referendum, left the EU. This has deprived the union of one of its most experienced and powerful actors. It has one of the largest diplomatic services and aid programs. It has considerably more expertise on the Middle East than most EU states, particularly the smaller ones. It has weakened the union and sidelined Britain on many issues.

Going forward, the EU and the UK should work more closely on international issues. The squabbling that characterized the post-referendum period should be consigned to history.

Case Studies

This paper will look at two major areas of conflict, and how Western powers and the region handle them, with a view to highlighting possible scenarios and solutions.

The first is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, given that it attracts perhaps the most attention internationally and has a major role in shaping the policy of the US and other actors. It remains of significant interest across the MENA region and cannot be ignored as the war since October 2023 has demonstrated.

Secondly, the Syria crisis. This is of vital importance to the region, a country whose future could have a huge role in the shaping of the Middle East in the years to come. In contrast to Israel-Palestine, for many years prior to the fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, the situation in Syria was largely ignored.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The Israel-Palestine is an arena where many of these misconceptions, myths, and even hatreds play out. What follows touches on a few of these but is a useful case study.

This conflict has arguably caused more tensions between Western powers and the region than any other. It has become a domestic issue – one that threatens social cohesion in many of these states. Bitter arguments between supporters of the Israeli and Palestinian causes have been a consistent feature.

For Palestinians, other Arabs, and Muslims, Western powers have betrayed the Palestinians. Their record of support for Israel smacks of hypocrisy and double standards. This reached a new high with the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. Major Western powers have not only refused to hold Israel to account, to uphold the determinations of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Court (ICC) but have armed Israel and provided it security and diplomatic support.

The issue of Palestine and in particular the fate of Jerusalem has been used by extremist forces to recruit to their ranks. This includes both Al-Qaida and ISIS. Iran too has traded on the anger throughout the region to garner support. Houthi missile strikes on Israel made the Yemeni group far more powerful in the region as it was seen as taking some action, no matter how pointless militarily.

The Palestinian refugee issue that resulted from 1947 to 1949 is glossed over in the Western media. Few media outlets or politicians referred to the 70 percent of the population of Gaza who are refugees, who were being forcibly displaced once again.

Many fail to understand the false parity between Israel and Palestine. Israel exists as a major nuclear-armed power. Palestine has not been allowed to come into existence. Its people are largely in enforced exile or surviving under prolonged Israeli military occupation. The asymmetry is acute.

Often, this is mistakenly depicted as a religious conflict between Jews and Muslims, as if this was a result of centuries' old animosities. The reality is that it is a conflict over territory, where the Zionist movement sought with the help of outside powers to take over Palestine where in the 1880s the Jewish community there was only around eight percent of the population, some 20-25,000 people. For Palestinians, the Zionists could have been Hindus, Sikhs, or Mormons, they would have resisted the taking of their country. It is not the identity of their oppressor and colonizer but the very reality of the oppression that angers them.

Another factor is that Palestinians have not been allowed to tell their own story. This often applies to Syrians, Yemenis, Libyans, and others from the region. This is changing slowly but has some way to go. Israeli spokespeople still get more frequent access into the Western media and encounter less hostility.

The ignorance of this conflict is widespread. Few reflected that the 2023-2025 Israel war on Gaza was the sixth major war on Gaza this century. Most politicians had no understanding of the dire situation within Gaza prior to October 7, 2023. Many disputed that the enclave was still under Israel occupation, though international law was clear, as the ICJ confirmed in its advisory opinion of July 2024.

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This forms the backdrop to arguably the greatest international diplomatic failure this century, that is to stop what many in the legal and human rights communities have deemed a genocide in Gaza. It took 471 days to get to a pause in the Israeli bombing on January 19, 2025.

President Biden admitted that the deal was the same as the one that he had put forward in May 2023. This was accepted by Hamas in July 2023. This is a clear indictment of his failure to put pressure on the Israeli government to make a deal. This was made even more evident by the manner in which pressure from the President Trump after the November elections produced an agreement. An additional 10,000 Palestinians were killed in this period, and the ethnic cleansing of northern Gaza had taken place.

Accountability is absent. Israel has imposed a total siege on 2.3 million Palestinian civilians in Gaza – denying them water, food, fuel and power, and medicines. Little was done except by the ICC which issued arrest warrants for war crimes and crimes against humanity against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and then Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, largely because of this.

Despite all of this, Israel is a state that still enjoys warm relations with the most Western powers, most of whom continue to sell Israel weapons despite the genocide, notably the US and Germany. What angers many people, therefore, is why Israel appears to get a free pass regarding international law, including on settlements, home demolitions, the taking of land and water, collective punishment, and torture. It is a test case as to whether these Western powers will enforce international law with the same vigor when it is a friend Israel as it does with hostile powers such as Russia and Iran.

Trump on Palestine

Trump announced early decisions that will affect the Israel-Palestine issue. He lifted all the US sanctions the Biden administration had imposed on Israeli settlers. This reinforced Israeli settler determination to attack Palestinian communities which they did on the day of Trump's inauguration.

The president also removed the restrictions on the massive 2000-pound bombs being exported to Israel that his predecessor had imposed. This will encourage the Israeli government to return to full-scale military operations if and when the Israel-Hamas deal breaks down.

Trump also restored sanctions on the ICC that he had imposed during his first administration. This does not bode well for the issue of accountability. Other states have to decide whether to stand up for this.

In addition, Trump suspended all US foreign aid for 90 days and withdrew from the World Health Organization. This will impact both Palestinians and Syrians. This means that funding to UNRWA, the largest humanitarian agency operating in Gaza, will be suspended at a time that it is desperately required.

The president also made comments about the situation in Gaza that he is not “confident” that the ceasefire will hold.⁵ He also stated: “It’s not our war, it’s their war.” This does not sound like a president who is prepared to press the Netanyahu government hard to abide by phase two and three of the agreement.

Trump made a dramatic intervention on January 26, 2025, when he proposed that Egypt and Jordan take Palestinians from Gaza. “You’re talking about probably a million and a half people, and we just clean

out that whole thing.” He remarked that this “could be temporary” or “could be long-term.” Trump has claimed to have raised this both with the King of Jordan and the President of Egypt. Both governments have vigorously opposed any such move as has the Palestinian leadership. The Jordanian Foreign Minister stated: “Our refusal of displacement is a steadfast position that will not change. Jordan is for Jordanians, and Palestine is for Palestinians.”⁶

This was followed by an equally remarkable Trump statement at the White House during the visit of Netanyahu on February 4. He repeated the desire to empty Gaza of its Palestinian inhabitants but went on to state that the US would take the enclave over. “The US will take over the Gaza Strip and we will do a job with it too. We’ll own it and be responsible for dismantling all of the dangerous unexploded bombs and other weapons on the site, level the site and get rid of the destroyed buildings, level it out.”⁷

The Trump summit with the King of Jordan on February 11, 2025, was an awkward affair. The King maintained his position that Jordan could not afford to take in Palestinians from Gaza. Trump maintained that his plan would be accepted. It is not clear how a plan to be drawn up by key Arab states on the reconstruction in Gaza will be received.

President Trump claims to want to secure a lasting peace agreement. The first step must be for a proper ceasefire deal that can last. Those with influence in the Trump administration should argue for a US commitment to ensure the January 15 deal is not ripped up, and that all sides should abide by its terms or face consequences.

Syria

Syria is a country which has too often been ignored by Western powers. Many believe that this is because it does not possess enormous mineral and hydrocarbon wealth like Iraq and Libya. Historically, Syria was an ally of the Soviet Union for much of the Cold War, particularly during the era of the Baathist regime. Because it adopted a hostile posture toward Israel and a favorable attitude toward Iran since 1979, Syria was never embraced by the US or seen as an ideal state to engage with by European actors.

The consequence of this is that the US and European states had little detailed understanding of Syria, when the protests broke out in March 2011. The US State Department had just one official on the Syria desk in 2009.⁸ In contrast, Russia had a far more intimate understanding of not just the Assad regime but also Syrian society as a whole. This showed as the protests developed into a civil conflict and a proxy war and Russia’s policies and actions showed greater awareness of the dynamics.

The Western policy on Syria from 2011 to 2019 was indecisive and unclear. It backed elements of the Syrian opposition, much of which its politicians knew little about. It called for the removal of the Syrian regime but had no strategy to bring this about. The US, Britain, and France were all highly reluctant to intervene to do this but also were never prepared to provide the levels of military and financial assistance to armed opposition groups to bring this about.

The result was the worst of all possible scenarios. The opposition groups were too weak to defeat the regime but too strong for the regime to crush them. It became a forever war. Profiting from this situation, extremist groups were able to flourish. ISIS and Al-Qaida profited from this.

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When the front lines of this conflict froze in 2020 as a result of a Russian-Turkish agreement, the US and European powers took their eye off Syria. The lazy assumption was that the conflict was frozen and that there was little they could do. The reality was far from this. Fighting did continue but also the economic and humanitarian situation deteriorated rapidly.

There was little to no review of the impact of sanctions on Syrian society and civilians. This has had significant repercussions on economic life in Syria, but evidence indicates that the Syrian regime and its cronies prospered despite sanctions. Only after the fall of Assad did many, including expatriate Syrians, come to appreciate how devastating they had been on ordinary people.

Syria Transition

Such was the failure to pay attention to events in Syria that Western political leaderships were caught by surprise as they often have been in the Middle East, when Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other armed opposition groups captured major Syrian cities, leading to the departure of Bashar al-Assad on December 8, 2024.

Syrian experts had highlighted how the support for the regime had declined. Its loyalist base was fed up with the state of the economy and saw the regime cronies enriching themselves whilst the population was at near starvation levels.

This was why the Syrian army refused to fight for Assad. Its forces melted away. A regime that many had thought has 'won' the conflict fell in a matter of just 12 days.

Syrians are positive about the fall of the Assad regime and grateful to those parties including HTS who helped bring this about.

But Syrian society has been left shattered and exhausted. This matters as Syrians are desperate for a transition to work and that there not be a return to conflict and strife. Whilst the majority of Syrians want the current efforts to succeed, they are nervous about its direction and viability.

Groups and components of Syrian society outside of the current transition authorities feel nervous. HTS has an authoritarian and Jihadist background and will need to work hard to demonstrate that this has been consigned to the past. If it fails to share power meaningfully, it will struggle to hold on to power and the transition will almost certainly collapse.

Syrian women also are fearful of being denied their rights and being given second-class status in the New Syria. They have played a major role not only in opposing the Syrian regime but also in the Syrian economy. Their inclusion in the debate for the future of Syria should not be tokenistic. Syria will be stronger if Syrian women can play a full role in the transition, the economy, and the future of the country.

Ensuring Syrian civil society and grassroots networks flourish is key. A successful civil society will amplify the work of the state but also ensure greater participation of all Syrian communities, tapping into the enthusiasm generated by the fall of the Assad regime. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) will push for human rights, labor rights, and greater participation of women. Many CSOs did this even during the

Assad era even if they had to act in secrecy. They are also an important source of expertise to harness. The caretaker authorities which have limited reach and capabilities will benefit from the local experience of CSOs and their ability to articulate the interests of the communities that they serve. Strengthening civil society matters, particularly in terms of funding but also a proper regulatory framework.

The early signs are that HTS, despite making some positive noises to visiting foreign emissaries, is reluctant to share power with other components of Syrian society. This has already made other communities fearful and untrusting in the new authorities. Many Syrians see that the new authorities have dismantled the existing military and security apparatus to replace it with ones that reflect the makeup of HTS and its allies, not the whole of Syria. Unless this changes, a return to conflict and strife is highly likely.

HTS is far weaker than many external politicians presume. It does not have the numbers to control all of Syria. Governing the entire country is an entirely different challenge to running the province of Idlib. It is a complex challenge. It lacks also the technical expertise required to help rebuild the economy and bring about reconstruction.

Sharing power should not lead to dividing up roles according to sect and ethnicity. This did not work in Lebanon and Iraq and could have grave repercussions in Syria. A quota system would be very dangerous. This is something that HTS has rightly said it wishes to avoid.

But there are extremely competent Syrians of all backgrounds who can be appointed to key roles based on merit and experience. Many in this category will only serve in an administration if it is clear that it is transitional, inclusive, and a stepping stone to legitimate government.

Building trust is essential. Transparency will be vital. Whilst the temptation will be to move rapidly, those in the caretaker government must exert great care to bring the rest of Syrians with them.

Key to this will be the National Dialogue Conference. This was delayed several times, but getting it right does matter. The danger is that this has been rushed. Those who feel left out may well become dangerous spoilers.

Transitional justice systems must also be established. Syria lacks an existing mechanism but also the technical expertise. Transitional justice is essential to ensure that those who committed atrocities are held to account but in a way that ensures justice and not bloodletting across entire communities. As part of this, Syria should join the ICC and sign up to the Rome Statute, opening the legal avenue for former regime members to be tried for their alleged crimes.

A truth and reconciliation process should be considered and encouraged. Syrian society has been ripped about in all these decades and especially since 2011. For such a diverse society to recover, it needs every effort to promote a healing process.

Reparations and restitution are also vital. One of the greatest challenges going forward will involve Housing, Land and Property (HLP) issues. Returning refugees and displaced persons may have a struggle to reclaim their own properties, not helped by the destruction of major repositories of property records either deliberately or as a result of the war.

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Major efforts are required to pursue a political process between Damascus and the north-east and in particular the Kurdish-led SDF. Türkiye has security concerns regarding SDF's links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and its long-running insurgency inside Türkiye. This has led it to back Syrian groups prepared to fight the SDF.

Further conflict would be very unwise. Powers with links to all parties should encourage further negotiations to resolve issues that would focus on addressing Türkiye's legitimate security concerns but also Kurdish fears about their rights that were denied during the era of the Assad regime.

The US should be encouraged to retain its military presence in Syria. It can continue to play vital role in brokering a deal between parties and giving security reassurances that can build trust. Such a presence also remains essential in thwarting ISIS' resurgence in Syria.

Role of External Powers in Syria

External powers must be supportive of transition and economic recovery in Syria but always ensuring that the processes are aligned with Syrian interests and aspirations. Since 2011, external actors have often sought to interfere and impose their own agendas on the Syrian population to the detriment of the country.

US and European states were ill-prepared for the transition away from the Assad regime. The same could be said for many Middle East states as well. Diplomats rushed to Damascus to determine what was happening and what would be the agenda of HTS and its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa.

Uncertainty abounds over whether external powers will recognize the new transitional authorities and lift sanctions and the proscription against HTS and its leaders as terrorists. Greater clarity should be given as to exactly what the new caretaker administration has to do to get sanctions lifted and secure recognition. The US, given its sanctions are the most potent, should lead by defining an explicit pathway for this to happen.

The US did make an initial but limited step. It issued a license on January 6, 2025, but this was limited to six months for vital services and governmental functions. This will not encourage investment in Syria, as businessmen will need greater security and certainty that sanctions will not be reimposed.

The EU finally reached a decision on January 27 to lift those sanctions which impact the Syrian economy. It will be gradual. Strangely, the UK did not make an immediate announcement to take a similar step. It was not until February 13 that a Minister announced that the UK would be amending sanctions in the coming months.⁹

Sanctions relief must be combined with a proper monitoring and evaluation mechanism. This is to ensure that the lifting of sanctions is not abused to form a new exclusive economic elite. The US and the EU must be clear what the benchmarks are in terms of inclusivity and governance for sanctions to remain lifted, for major investments and for the warming of relations.

However, the Syrian economy needs to take off. It is barely existent at present. Sanctions are a major

hindrance to this. A lifting of US banking sanctions will allow vital remittances from large expatriate Syrian communities. Should stability ensure, Syrian expertise could return to the country to fill vital gaps in the labor market.

Crucial to this will be also enhanced stability in Lebanon as the two economies have been so linked in the past. Assistance to the new government in Lebanon should have a positive impact on Syria.

What is unclear is what the position of the Trump administration will be. Trump himself has made clear that he does not wish the US to be involved in Syria. He sees this now as Türkiye's issue.

For much of his first term, Trump had wanted to withdraw US forces in Syria. These currently number around 2000 and are seen as crucial to act as a buffer between Türkiye and Kurdish-led forces, as well as ensuring that there is no ISIS resurgence.

Regarding the fall of Assad, Trump posted that "Syria is a mess but is not our friend."¹⁰ He added that: "The United States should have nothing to with it. This is not our fight. Let it play out. Do not get involved."

This approach is unfortunate as it does not recognize the opportunity for the US to chart a new relationship with a post-Assad Syria which could be far warmer, and sideline many actors such as Russia and Iran that the US certainly does not consider friends.

Whether Trump likes it or not, the US is involved and its interests are at stake. The US sanctions harm the Syrian economy. Without lifting them, Syria will struggle, weakening any transition and jeopardizing regional security which is vital for Syria's neighbors including American allies. Extremism will flourish in a weak or failing state.

Backing a full-inclusive transition is vital, therefore, for American and European interests.

All of this needs to be coordinated. To do this, a well-resourced integrated UN transitional assistance mission must be agreed to with a proper mandate. Russia is likely to consent to this. Such a mission should have a beefed-up mandate but also a new Syrian envoy, familiar with the country and one who speaks Arabic.

Such UN missions were useful in other contexts such as Namibia and Sierra Leone. Such a mission could have unarmed monitors as in the past in Syria to monitor the situation.

A UN mission could be a joint one with the Arab League. The joint mission could assist Syrian bodies to design and implement the necessary transitional justice mechanisms. This could be also assisted by the likes of the EU.

Finally, major powers, particularly the United States, must ensure that both predatory states and spoiler actors leave Syria alone. Israel and Türkiye have both used the situation since December 8 to expand the territory inside Syria that they control. Israel has conducted major airstrikes against Syrian military

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targets. Türkiye and the armed groups it backs have taken actions against Kurdish-dominated areas. Both these powers have legitimate security concerns but military action is not the way to address them.

Spoilers include Iran, possibly Russia, and even ISIS as well as elements of the former regime. Iran has lost a major ally in Syria. It no longer has a corridor that stretches from Iraq to Lebanon by which it can affect the region. This will hurt Iran's perceived interests. It will look for opportunities to undermine the transition process unless it sees positive reasons not to do so.

Russia also has largely lost in Syria. Tartus may no longer be available for Russia as a warm water port. Its options are limited given that the Ukraine front has soaked up the Russian leadership's attention. Other powers may be wise not to unduly antagonize Russia as it could act as a potent spoiler in the future.

Recognition of the new Syria authorities should wait. The caretaker government is desperate for international recognition but it needs to demonstrate that it will share power meaningfully and that it will not target other communities. The transition and constitutional process must be credible and attract the support of the overwhelming majority of Syrian people of all backgrounds.

Recommendations on Overall Policy Approach

FOR WESTERN POWERS

Addressing ignorance as well as prejudice is vital. The world has shrunk. But does this always mean we truly understand the other better? Greater efforts can be made in Western states to humanize the peoples of the Middle East including Arabs. This requires a multi-pronged approach with cultural diplomacy a core part.

People who are not from the Middle East, Western politicians, and diplomats may need to be humbler about what they assume they know about the region, its peoples, and culture. Learning about the area is a continuous learning experience and that making generalized assumptions is a fraught business. It is a region that continuously surprises and yes, frustrates.

To formulate more effective policy, governments and politicians do need to fund and listen to expertise. A failure to do so leads to the flawed policies that have led to the foreign policy disasters, not least this century. Academic departments and think tanks must be properly funded to not just maintain but enhance our understanding of this region.

Greater respect must be shown to the Middle East and its peoples. A new constructive relationship is only feasible if this is planned for the long term, unshackled from all the poisonous myths that still percolate around the political and media ecosystem.

On conflicts, Western powers need to shift from conflict management to conflict prevention and resolution. Wars are costly for all, and greater efforts have to be deployed to avoid them.

FOR MIDDLE EAST

Middle Eastern actors should invest in assisting any such process of mutual understanding. Many are doing this already. Al Jazeera English and TRT World are examples in terms of news media. Such programs should not be propaganda and be prepared to acknowledge any weaknesses and failings in the region as well as strengths and positives. Credibility matters. No such program will be believed if it glosses over the challenges the region faces.

Division and conflict in the Middle East are major obstacles to progress but also provide opportunities for external actors to interfere and profit. Many argue that it has been an ambition of major powers to keep the region divided and therefore weakened. On occasions, regional leaderships have succumbed to this.

In addition, regional powers have indulged in dangerous competitive rivalries. These have had a negative impact on the region.

Regional actors need to find more effective ways to work together constructively. They cannot rely on external powers who have their own challenges, often domestic, which they will prioritize.

The region lacks effective bodies to bring different actors together. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The Arab League is notable as perhaps the least effective multilateral body in the region. Both inside the region and outside it is seen as a talking shop that fails to address the serious issues facing the region.

One option would be to create a totally new organization from scratch. This could be done whether as a direct replacement to the Arab League or an alternative vehicle.

This would only be worthwhile if any new organization had credibility, resources, and teeth. It would take time but could have a long-term pay-off.

Given the nature of events and the disparate makeup of the Middle East, one has to question whether there could be a new body that should include an ethnic-linguistic label, Arab, as this excludes non-Arab actors that are significant players in the region.

Those states considered to be in active violation of international law can be excluded until such time as they rectify that situation. This would mean that Israel and Iran would not be granted membership status in the first instance but could be allowed to join when this changes.

An effective new body would show to the outside world that the region was serious in addressing major issues affecting the region.

Whilst it is likely that any such proposal would be rejected given the positions of certain states, even promoting the idea does focus attention on the ineffectiveness of the Arab League as an institution.

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PALESTINE

Resolving this conflict is vital for the future of the Middle East. This will require strong, sustained, and creative diplomacy from all involved parties. A ceasefire is not sufficient. The underlying issues must be resolved, including the ending of the Israeli occupation and the system of apartheid it has imposed.

1. Pressure must be brought to bear on all parties, particularly Israel, to bring this conflict to a close on a fair and reasonably just basis. As its leading ally, the US has the prime responsibility to pressure Israel or cease supplying it with weapons.
2. The occupation that has lasted since 1967, and which the ICJ has deemed illegal, must come to an end. Whatever solution is followed, this is a necessity. This should be insisted on by all states, regional and international.
3. Accountability matters. Those who have committed atrocities and perpetrated war crimes must be held to account. The US should revise its opposition to the ICC and lift the sanctions President Trump has imposed. All states must respect the existing arrest warrants the ICC has issued and any future ones related to this conflict.

More Middle East actors should follow Türkiye's example and join South Africa at the ICJ and intervene in the case concerning the Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel) pursuant to Article 63 of the Statute of the Court. These states must also be vocal in demanding support from other states to insist that the provisional measures the Court imposed are adhered to.

As part of the accountability process, an independent international inquiry must be established into Gaza with credible independent panelists. The inquiry must be given full and free access across Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). It should cover the treatment of Gaza under Israeli occupation, well before 2023. Their recommendations should be taken up.

4. European and Middle East powers must act in concert to offset the pro-Israeli tendencies of US administrations. Those states who like Hungary, Czechia, and Austria, who have been obstacles to a strong EU position, should be sidelined. As part of this, Middle East states and European powers should try to work together to produce common positions. Even if this not possible, greater unity of stance is advisable for Middle East states.
5. Middle Eastern actors should continue to stand full square with Egypt and Jordan regarding taking in forcibly displaced Palestinians in Gaza as proposed by President Trump. These states may not be able to stand up to US-Israeli pressure alone. One way to counter this is to propose viable solutions as to how to rebuild Gaza without emptying it of its Palestinian population.
6. Major European powers should recognize an independent Palestinian state based on the 1967 lines, including East Jerusalem as a Palestinian capital. Ever since 1980, European powers have pushed for a two-state solution. A failure to recognize the second state undermines the belief in this support.

7. To give further meaning to a two-state solution must be a full European ban on all trade and business with settlements in the oPt. This should have been done decades ago. It would send a strong signal that Israel has to return to its own borders and cannot continue its colonization of the oPt.

European powers should expand the raft of sanctions against Israeli settlers and groups. No European entities should be permitted to raise or send funds to settler groups.

8. International actors should also change their approach to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Many demanded that the PA acts as a security guarantor for Israel, in effect to police the Israeli occupation. This runs contrary to what the Palestinian people expect of their leadership which is to drive forward a strategy for their liberation. There is an unbreachable tension between both roles. International actors should ensure that the PA acquires true popular legitimacy through only pursuing the second function.
9. The Palestinian leaderships need to outline a much clearer strategy for the liberation of their people and the pursuit of peace. This must be based on the realization that the movement on the ground has never been weaker and more vulnerable. Gaza, which has always been the epicenter of Palestinian political activism, has been crushed. It will take years to recover. Sympathetic governments should offer to lend political and technical support.
10. Middle East states should unify their positions toward Israel. The process of normalization known as the Abraham Accords has undermined this collective unity. The Arab League should return to the Arab Peace Plan of 2003 as the basis of any future peace. Any further normalization must be contingent on specific steps to be taken by Israel to end its occupation. This will mean having to stand up to pressure from the Trump administration.
11. More can be done to outline what would be the positives of a region-wide deal with Israel. This would be to demonstrate that the position is not rhetorical but one which if Israel does abide by the desired commitments, will lead to a brighter, safer, more prosperous future.
12. Middle East actors need to coalesce around supporting the Palestinian people and their rights. By joining together, it will make it harder for external powers to pressure individual states to break ranks and make separate deals further dividing the region.

SYRIA

1. The Syrian transitional authorities should make every effort to include all components of Syrian society into the political process. Power has to be shared and all components given a stake in the political process and Syria's future. HTS should be part of this transition but not dominate it exclusively. Syrian women must play a full and equal role in the transition and the future of the country.
2. Syrian institutions including the army, police, and security services should be national in character, reflecting all segments of Syrian society.

3. The work of Civil Society Organizations should be encouraged and supported, backed by funding and a proper regulatory framework.
4. All states should make full relations with the new Syrian authorities contingent on the process to a proper inclusive transition. Defining what inclusivity means and requires will clarify the situation. A proper monitoring mechanism should be adopted to ensure that the transition is inclusive and basic rights are adhered to.
5. Non-military sanctions that impact economic life in Syria should be lifted. If this is gradual, then the sanctioning powers must give very clear guidelines as to what the transitional authorities have to do. Should major human rights abuses occur, sanctions could be restored.

A thorough review and assessment of sanctions should be taken to determine how effective they were in the Syria context in delivering policy goals, so that lessons can be learned.

6. The territorial integrity of Syria must be respected in full. All states must withdraw their forces from Syrian territory unless they have the explicit permission of the caretaker authorities. This includes Israel, Türkiye, and the US.

Israel must end its occupation of the Golan Heights that has lasted since 1967. No state should trade with illegal settlements in the occupied area.

7. Any negotiations with Israel on any issue should be contingent on this being accepted. The first stage must be an immediate Israeli withdrawal from all additional territories occupied since December 2023.
8. All parties must back political negotiations to resolve the future of the Kurds in Syria, to ensure their full rights in a new Syria but at the same time address legitimate security concerns of Türkiye.
9. International efforts should be made to boost the Syrian economy. This should be for all sectors but focused in particular on small and medium-sized businesses. External powers should also resist the temptation to flood Syria with cheap goods which local businesses cannot yet compete with.
10. A full UN Transitional Assistance mission should be set up, potentially as a joint body with the Arab League. A new UN envoy on Syria should be appointed as a joint role with the Arab League as was the case when Lakhdar Brahimi carried out the role until 2014. The new envoy's mandate must be clear and strong. The envoy should be an Arabic speaker.
11. Accountability matters and this should be the guiding policy of all actors involved in Syria. Justice and accountability must be central to the transition in Syria. External powers should be prepared to assist in and fund both a transitional justice program and a truth and reconciliation commission including restitution and reparations.

External actors should assist in ensuring those involved in crimes perpetrated under the Assad

regime are held to account. Funding and technical assistance for proper preservation of documents and evidence should be provided.

The Syrian authorities should become a party to the Rome Statute and join the ICC. By doing this, former regime members can be tried at the Hague. All other states should support a referral to the ICC. Russia should be encouraged to hand over those it hosts to the ICC, including the former president for trial for the crimes they have committed.

Resolving the crises across the globe including the Middle East requires patience, diplomacy, and creativity. Quick fixes are rare. This has to be a collective project with the buy-in of regional governments, the development of more effective institutions, a vibrant civil society sector, and external relations that are constructive, not divisive. Greater investment of time, energy, and funding are vital for any chance to take the region forward to an era that is prosperous, safe, and conflict-free.

Endnotes

- 1 55% of Brits support racial profiling against Arabs and Muslims: Arab News / Caabu / YouGov poll
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- 3 Nigel Jones David Cameron and the long history of the posh Arabist, The Spectator, 17 February 2024
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- 8 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2016/10/11/book-review-christopher-phillips-the-battle-for-syria/>
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