Politics of IR in South Asia and the Middle East

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Abstract: Domestic politics and party ideologies influence much of the politics of international relations. American actions, in the last two decades, has flip-flopped under the influence domestic politics; be it the invasion of Iraq in 2003, or Afghanistan in 2001, or American reluctance to put its forces on the ground in crisis situation in former Yugoslavia or in the current Syrian crisis. Similarly, analysis of two volatile regions, South Asia and Middle East, demonstrate strong influence of domestic politics on their international relations. In South Asia, India’s regional relations are strongly governed by its secular values. Upholding of secular values is the foremost driver of its foreign policy towards Pakistan and other neighbours. Each one of India’s neighbours, except Nepal, is a state with official religion. Pakistan’s internal politics is driven by Islamic discourse that is strongly linked to its existential insecurity and identity. It influences its relations with India. In the Middle East, Israel’s relations with Palestine and other Arab states are influenced intimately by its own internal politics and regional politics involving a tussle between pro-peace moderates and religious hardliners. Both case studies reflect the complexity of international relations in the modern and post-modern world.

1. Introduction

Domestic politics and competing internal political ideologies influence much of the politics of international relations. Mankind has practiced of international relations from time immemorial as the works of ancient scholars such as Sun Tzu, Kautilya, Thucidides and Herododus show us. From ancient times monarchs and kingdoms have practiced practices relations amongst themselves. The influence of domestic issues and people’s opinion governed how a state interacted with its neighbours and the outside world. The state is the primary actor in the international system. Modern international system has evolved from the fall out of a momentous event in history, the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The principal actor of the modern international system is the state, which rests on the foundational triad of ‘sovereignty, state, and nationalism’. Sovereignty ensures the anarchic nature of the international system, while the state and the nation give life and substance to the state through people, territoriality, and governance. The state, therefore, needs to demonstrate its control and power over the territory, it has secured, through governance and monopoly over the use of force to ensure law and order. This requires a balance in the ongoing activities between domestic politics that focuses on internal sustainability and governance of the state; and external relations that focuses on ensuring sovereignty and viability of the state in the international system. Quite obviously, the two impact on each other.

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The fact that the politics of international relations are significantly influenced by domestic politics is well established. The factors that drive this interdependence vary from state to state. For a super power and hegemonic state like the USA, commercial and business interests of domestic companies may drive some of its policies towards rest of the world. For many other countries, domestic politics of survival may have significant impact on their foreign policies.

Following the end of the Cold War, significant elements of American domestic politics created a demand for aggressive approach to exploit international situations to enhance and establish American unilateral dominance. Since then, American actions, in the last two decades, has flip-flopped under the influence domestic politics; be it the invasion of Iraq in 2003, or Afghanistan in 2001, or American reluctance to put its forces on the ground in crisis situation in former Yugoslavia or in the current Syrian crisis.

Similarly for more than half a century, analysis of two volatile regions, South Asia and Middle East, demonstrate strong influence of domestic politics on their international relations. In South Asia, India’s regional relations are strongly governed by its secular values. Upholding of secular values is the foremost driver of its foreign policy towards Pakistan and other neighbours. Each one of India’s neighbours, except Nepal, is a state with official religion. Pakistan’s internal politics is driven by Islamic discourse that is strongly linked to its existential insecurity and identity. It influences its relations with India. In the Middle East, Israel’s relations with Palestine and other Arab states are influenced intimately by its own internal politics and regional politics involving a tussle between pro-peace moderates and religious hardliners. Both case studies reflect the complexity of international relations in the modern and post-modern world.

2. Sovereignty, Territoriality, and Nation-state in Politics

The processes of nation building and governance have heavily impacted politics and international relations in the Middle East and South Asia. All the actors involved have grappled with the problems of identity, national cohesion, religion and secularism, and democracy. The crux of the politics lies in the balance between the nation and the state. Territoriality of the nation-state, whether historically and intimately derived from the people (and therefore, nation) or artificially bordered (fall out of the decolonization process), forms the most important part of the political debate, relations, and conflict in the two regions. A theoretical analysis would bring clarity to this issue.

The central actor in the international system is the state, more correctly the nation-state. The state and sovereignty are critical essentials for the nation-state to engage in politics internally and externally. Sovereignty ensures its recognition as an international unit, and hence a member of the international society, which is the essence of the Westphalian
international society. For the nation-state to be a viable entity, first it must possess territory that is well defined and demarcated. Secondly, the state must have people, who form the nation. Thirdly, the state must possess a government, which implies that the people or nation have the requisite structure to govern the territory and the people. A state is therefore made up of territory, people, and a government.¹ For a state to be recognized effectively, its people will need to be intimately linked to the territory through history, culture, and language. The roles of the state and the nation in the evolution of the nation-state determine the kind of international and domestic politics it gets engaged in.

The concept of territory is crucial to the idea of the state. It is equally vital in the concept of the nation as people, the main proponents of the nation, are intimately and historically bound to their land or territory. A defined territory is necessary for a state to exercise its political power and claim sovereignty. The territory with its people and national attributes, therefore, forms a crucial space in many dimensions: physical or geographical, cultural, and social. Territory, as land and terrain, becomes a resource value for governance and operations. Effectively, territory is a combination of concepts like land and terrain but also encompasses ideas from the field of history, law, and political science. To understand various nuances of territory; defined by its people, borders, and boundaries; one has to delve into history to fully understand the concept and its consequences. Modern world’s nation-state is a Westphalian territorial concept that was applied and accepted universally in the European environment. It gave rise to the Cartesian approach of defining territory on maps through clearly demarcated borders and boundaries. This European culture-derived process goes all the way back to the Roman Empire’s practice of borders, boundaries, and frontiers. However, it is equally important to recognise that the Westphalian state acquired its strength and meaning only when it crystallised through the movements of self-determination of nations.

Epistemologically territoriality is usually associated with animals, where each species tend do define its territory of operations, residence, and ownership. In the same vein, one can see the spatial relevance of territoriality and its physical, geographical, and cultural relevance. Space, site, and culture are important factors that bring substance to the idea of territory. Development of spatial thought and theories on territory and borders tend to work concurrently rather than in a unified approach.² Dipankar Gupta brings out the critical impact of cultural space in the identification of a territory or evolution of the nation-state that should

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² S. Davoudi and I. Strange, Conceptions of Space and Place in Strategic Spatial Planning (London: Routledge, 2009).
be seen as a cultural phenomenon.\footnote{In an excellent study titled 'Culture, Space, and the Nation-state', Dipankar Gupta argues that the significance of culture lies in the fact that it informs the way people interact with each other in defined spaces. The nation-state being one such space, it should therefore be seen as an important cultural phenomenon and not merely as lineaments on a map. Only when the nation-state is understood as a cultural phenomenon can the passions it arouses be better understood. Dipankar Gupta, \textit{Culture, Space and the Nation-state} (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), pp. 96-135.} Robert Sack calls territoriality as the “key geographical component in understanding how society and space are interconnected”. He describes territoriality not just as a simple spatial relationship, but as a spatial strategy to gain control over people and their behaviour, it thus becomes “a geographical expression of social power”.\footnote{R.D. Sack, \textit{Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Quoted in A.M. von Wijhe, \textit{Transboundary State Reterritorialization in the Romanian-Bulgarian Borderlands} (Nijmegan: Radboud University, 2011), p.17.} Territory’s importance to the nation-state comes from its linkage with the people as a nation. While territory does not create nations, it is certainly one of its foundations and a provider for identity. The importance of people to territory is critical in the evolution of the nation-state. People, then, constitute the nation by virtue of bonding through ethnicity, language, culture, and community. Religion can play a role but it is not a mandatory attribute for national and ethnic identity. In short the nation leads the state in the evolution of the nation-state. The identity of the nation-state is heavily impacted by the fact whether nation leads the state or state leads the nation. This crucial issue impacts on the politics practiced by the state. Where the state leads the nation, there abounds a consistent conflict situation both internally and externally. This can be seen in both the regions, South Asia and Middle East.

War and peace amongst states and different regions are the result of the politics amongst nations. In a well made conceptual study, Benjamin Miller examines the specific balance between states and nations in order to determine the more intense, or “hot or warm”, outcomes. He calls the “state-to-nation balance” as the key underlying cause that impacts on a state’s disposition towards relations with other states, This state-to-nation imbalance exists when there is a lack of congruence between states and national identifications.\footnote{Benjamin Miller, \textit{State, Nations, and the Great Powers: The Sources of Regional War and Peace} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 2.} Miller uses this analysis to establish the war proneness or otherwise of regional states. Using this analysis, we can also deduce the behaviour of states in an environment where one of them grapples with existential security problem as well as weakness in the state identity. Thus Miller’s analysis could be used to bring out political compulsions in the case of Pakistan in South Asia, and countries like Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan etc in the Middle East.

Most scholars go with the idea that “the belief in the right to territorial self determination for the group” is the central part of the definition of a “nation”. The evolving nation-state becomes strong when there is congruence between the nation and the state; in
terms of people with shared beliefs, culture, and language have attachments and linkages to a
defined territory called their homeland. On the other hand, in cases where states have been
created without an integral nation, then a significant incongruence emerges. Nationalism is
created on weak and unstable foundations (religion is the most evident use) to drive the
bargain for a nation-state. As Gellner says – “Nationalism is not die-awakening of nations to
self consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.” A state-to-nation
incongruence leads to insecurity stemming from poor identity, nationalist dissatisfaction, and
manifests in some combination of powerful revisionist forces and state incoherence. On the
other hand a high state-to-nation balance reflects successful state-building and nation-
building.7

Politics, both internal and external, is governed by factors related to state-to-nation
balance. State building, as Miller refers to, is the “hardware” of governance infrastructure that
is determined by the institutions and resources available for governing the polity. Nation-
building is the ‘software’ that involves ethnic and community bonding, language, and culture. Where nation-building is strong and precedes state formation, the nation-state finds it easier
to establish state-to-nation balance. Where ‘nation’ is yet to be fully developed, the resulting
imbalance tends to accentuate secessionist forces. In order to prevent the rise of such forces,
the state tends to use factors such as religion, territory, and security dilemma to accelerate
‘nation-building’ process. These manifestations are clearly evident in South Asia and Middle
East.

3. Politics of Partition in South Asia

South Asia, more correctly the Indian sub-continent, consists of several states today
that were once considered integral single unit. It is still a single civilisational entity and
hence, it would not be incorrect to see it as a single nation. Today India is the dominant
nation-state, in all terms of territory, power (economic, military, and technological),
population, resources, and civilizational unity. India has inherited the historical and
civilisational mantle, and hence, its identity, existential, and cultural strengths are derived
from the legacies of many millenniums.8 Every other state in South Asia is dwarfed by India

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7 In the developments leading to independence in British India, subordinate secessionist movements for self-determination, on the basis of religion, was created leading to violence in 1947-48. This led to the partition of India. Israel–Palestine problem in the same period was one of ethno national violence combining religion and ethnic factors. Benjamin Miller, ‘States, Nations, and Great Powers’ p. 71.
8 The significance of this is clearly evident in the documents related to Indian independence. The Radcliffe Commission, which was tasked to define the boundaries preceding partition, defined the two states territories interestingly. Section 2 defined the ‘territories of the new Dominions’. Overruling
not only geographically but also culturally and civilizationally. All states border India, and most significantly all states are officially theological states or advocate their dominant religion. India is the only secular state in South Asia.

Before the partition of 1947, the sub-continent has always been known as India. The concept of India is unlike any other in human history. This national concept of India derives its permanence from many geographical, geopolitical and civilizational factors that are unique and uncommon with any other civilisation. The sub-continent has evolved in a manner so as to have a civilizational unity, a single civilizational concept. This is a paradox considering the subcontinent is also a mosaic of many sub-cultures and languages. The concept of India applies to the entire subcontinent primarily due to its single geographical entity. In the north it was bound by the mighty Himalayas, in the north-west by the Hindukush mountains, in the north-east by the combination of Himalayas, and Arakan ranges with its dense tropical forests, in the west by the Great Thar Desert, and further down the long coast-line washed by the Arabian sea in the west, in the east by bay of Bengal, and in the south by the vast Indian Ocean. This natural geographical boundary gave the Indian subcontinent, what is known as its “splendid isolation”, which aided the development of its civilisation. Though India was isolated largely, yet her vast dimensions, variety of peoples, wide differences of climate, great diversities of soil and different physical characteristics not only prevented her from being a stagnant pool but also gave it a continental character. The geography of India aided the development of her unique civilisation and culture in many ways. The Indian subcontinent was endowed with perennial river systems, a very fertile land mass, excellent weather, in times when technology did not master it, that aided all human activities, and a vast wealth of forests and wild life. Ancient civilisations originated in river basins where water and lands were aplenty. Of all the locations of ancient civilisations India was easily the best and richest.

objections of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Governor-general designate of Pakistan, only the territories of Pakistan were specified by reference to the Provinces that were to form part of the state. Section 2 (1) said ‘…the territories of India shall be the territories under the sovereignty of His Majesty which, immediately before the appointed day (15 August, 1947) were included in British India except the territories which…are to be the territories of Pakistan’. A G Noorani says the contrast was as glaring as its implications were obvious. Independent India was the successor to British India; Pakistan was the seceding state. A G Noorani, India-China Boundary Problem 1846-1947: History and Diplomacy (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 2, and Z H Zaidi (ed.), Jinnah Papers, Quaid-i-Azam Papers Wing, Culture Division, Government of Pakistan, 2006, First Series, Volume III, p. 79.

9 The Indian subcontinent stretches from the Himalayas to the sea. It is known as Bharatvarsha, or the land of Bharat. Bharatvarsha was said to form a part of a larger unit called Jambu-dvīpa that was considered to be the innermost of the seven concentric island-continents into which the earth, as conceived by the Hindus, was supposed to have been divided. But early Buddhist evidence points out that Jambu-dvīpa was a territorial name actually in use from the 3rd century B.C. It was applied to that part of Asia, outside China, throughout which the powers of the great imperial family of Mauryas made it felt. See B.N. Luniya, Evolution of Indian Culture (Agra: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal Educational Publishers, 1951, Fifth Edition, 1970), p. 1. See also An Advanced History of India by Majumdar, Roy Choudhary and Datta, p. 3.

10 K.M. Panikkar, A Survey of Indian History, p. 1.
As a result growth of civilisation was exceptional and soon the subcontinent was the wealthiest land, peopled by an industrious lot who were culturally and economically very advanced. In the ensuing competitive environment many kingdoms flourished, making the subcontinent a world of its own anarchic system, much like the European continent, but with a difference. Here common civilizational roots linked all the states of the subcontinent. A conducive geographical environment, both in terms of climate and vast territory, enabled the development of civilisation and culture that was rich not only materially, but more in terms of intellectual growth, literature, languages, religious enquiry, and an exceptionally high level of enquiry into logic and philosophy. Such cultural vibrancy translated into vibrant economic activity, resulting in the development of a vast and sophisticated manufacturing industry, a complex and advanced economic system centred on the self-sufficient village model and a very active international trade in spices, textiles and sophisticated manufactured goods, which was heavily in India’s favour. The combination of trade and cultural interaction of intellectuals enabled India to influence far-away lands in the whole of Asia and Indian Ocean.

In all, geography, weather, rich resources and a vibrant and intellectually stimulated culture signified the “Concept of India”. It provided a strong Indian identity to the subcontinent that was not dependent on religion or sub regional ethnicity or even language. It was and is an identity derived from common roots of a single civilisation.

. The civilizational construct in the Indian subcontinent enabled the development of many sub-cultures to a high level, while retaining a connecting thread across all regions of the sub-continent. A common view taken by most scholars is to label India as a multinational state with conflict inherent in its sub-national mosaic. This is too simplistic view to take as it looks at the nation-state only through the Westphalian concept that a nation is first constructed out of shared experiences, language, and cultural traits. If this principle is applied to the subcontinent, it would naturally lead one to conclude that it is a mosaic of many nation-states where each state/region has a single language, region, and community cohesiveness.

While partly true, such a view misses the core cultural milieu of the Indian subcontinent. Over centuries and millennia the Indian culture evolved with certain commonality of

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11 In the run up to the independence, Indian leaders tended to favour the name “Bharat” as against “India” for the new republic. This was because in their opinion “India” evoked a meaning of an acquisition rather than a territory. Though “India” was conceptually concrete, it was somewhere to be coveted – as an intellectual curiosity, a military pushover and an economic bonanza. To Alexander the Great as to Mahmud of gazni, to Timur the Lame as to his Moghul descendants, and to nadir shah of Persia as to Robert Clive of Plassey, "India" was a place worth the taking. John Keay, A History of India (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), p. 57.

12 Most scholars subscribe such nationalist concept as having been inspired by the French revolution. Accordingly, many contend that the European view of the nation-state was the model on which nationalist leaders such as Sun Yat-sen, Mahatma Gandhi, Sukarno, and Jemo Kenyatta based their movements for national self-determination. See Multination States in Asia : Accommodation or Resistance, Ed., Jaques Bertrand and Andre Laliberte (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
culture and traditions across the entire subcontinent despite the differences in languages, and regions. Thus religions were welcomed, absorbed and spread throughout the various regions. The story of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism are similar, originated in one corner of India and spread all across. So also later arrivals like Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism have flourished in India. Despite many advanced and matured languages, the origin or fundamentals of grammar of all Indian languages have significant commonality. It led to universal social practices irrespective of religion, language or region. Even when Islam spread in the Indian subcontinent largely through conquest and forced conversion, it transformed itself into an Indian version that incorporated regional cultural traits. The cultural aspects effectively tamed the Islamic onslaught just as it had done in respect of many other religions.

Domestic power politics and British interests in a rapidly changing world drove the Partition of the subcontinent. The strong aspects of the Indian cultural milieu were completely ignored, while formulating so called solutions towards ending colonialism. To understand this in fully one must grasp the nuances of the political administration of the British Raj. When the British arrived as traders the sub-continent had a homogenous character in terms of culture. Islam had penetrated deep into the country through conquest but had also been absorbed, like its predecessors before, fully into its cultural milieu. Therefore, when the British acquired and expanded their territories, it were the result of an ad hoc and completely arbitrary process of annexation, accomplished by outright conquest, by treaties that lapsed from a combination of manoeuvring and neglect, or that had been negotiated under conditions of unequal bargaining strength. All these large provinces were multilingual and multi-ethnic. They were not the result of a policy of divide and rule, a key instrument of colonial power but, once formed, they were certainly sustained by such a policy.13 As the British colonial hold expanded across the entire subcontinent, administrative units remained in many cases as what they had been originally as kingdoms but also remained multi ethnic and multilingual. Major decisions were centralised in British hands. The British used the Indian Army to play the most critical role in the political integration of India as also in securing its external borders. This was possible only because of the cultural homogeneity of the subcontinent. When nationalistic movements became stronger the British solution was based on the successful divide and rule policy. The first significant example of such a policy was when Bengal, a linguistic and cultural homogeneous state, was divided into Muslim majority East Bengal and Hindu majority West Bengal, thus paving the way for future application of the concept of defining nations on the basis of religion. This was in complete variance with the fundamentals of the Westphalian nation-state principle. The British also introduced certain amount of powers to the provinces under the 1919 Government of India Act. However,

elections in provinces were segregated as Muslim majority and Hindu majority electorates. By the late 1930s the British encouraged the Muslims to demand a separate homeland on the basis of projecting themselves as a nation. The result was partition of India on religious basis. While India chose to follow an inclusive policy as a secular state, Pakistan had to choose religious basis in order to build its identity as a nation-state. Geographical regions within the subcontinent were identified on the basis of Muslim majority to create a notional cognitive region, sans nation formation, sans a “national” consciousness and sans a “national” memory. Although the state persona of the Pakistan state, created on 14 August 1947 continues de jure in today’s Pakistan, it was effectively dissolved when the majority in that state (the Bengalis) chose to create a Bengali republic on ethos antithetical to the two-nation theory. The trauma of the Partition, especially in terms of mass movement and relocation of large groups notwithstanding, today’s India is home to a larger Muslim population than Islamic Pakistan or Muslim majority secular Bangladesh. Pakistan continues to struggle to establish its identity as a nation-state, and hence an ideological (Islam) civic nationalism characterises it. On the other hand, a seceding Bangladesh was founded on clearly defined ethnic nationalism; however, it too is hard pressed to establish a separate identity when its roots are traced to the Indian cultural milieu.

4. International Relations in South Asia: Politics of Identity and Geopolitics

The basis on which each of the nations came into existence defines the politics they practice. National security and existential issues permeate practically every aspect of most of these nations. Politics and international relations in South Asia are dominated by the India-Pakistan conflict. This is evident even in regional forums such as the SAARC and economic interactions. India’s political discourse is shaped by its adherence to democracy, respect for diversity, and secularism. Its independence, as Dipankar Gupta points out, is rooted in important root metaphors of anti-colonialism, secularism, minority protection, and anti-Pakistan. These form the important cornerstones of Indian national sentiment. Anti-Pakistan sentiment derives from its pre-independence opposition to the two-nation theory. India’s policies and international relations are strongly governed by its secular foundations of its constitution. In India’s case, a vibrant democracy, the nation and the state are in perfect balance, and therefore, as Miller points out it becomes a strong nation-state that is able to project it position and shape its environment.

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14 Dipankar Gupta, *Culture, Space, and the Nation-state*, pp. 124-125
Pakistan’s political discourse is shaped by its religious ideology. Pakistan, as Christine Fair describes, was born an insecure state. Because the movement for Pakistan was based on Islam and the notion that Muslims and Hindus comprise separate nations, Islam became the ideology of the Pakistani state in a constructed opposition to “Hindu” India. Carving out territories in Muslim majority areas made partition an exercise that inevitably led to a huge human catastrophe in 1947-48. Pakistan’s political leadership had the most challenging task of putting together people displaced from different parts of India into an arbitrary state, along with diversities of regions such as Sind, Balochistan, North-West tribal regions, and creating a nation-state out of it. The only unifying factor was religion, and hence it adopted the ideology of religion as it driving factor in its political discourse. As analysed by Khan, Partition bequeathed to both states notions of nationhood that were “carved out diametrically, in definition against each other”. Pakistan’s grievance that some of the Muslim majority areas (Kashmir being the main issue) were denied to it continues to form the basis of its political discourse with India and rest of the world. Given these factors, the state-to-nation balance is so incongruent that it is inevitable that Pakistan would adopt a revisionist approach in the region and an Islamic ideology driven politics to address its existential and identity problems. Christine Fair quotes Tinker’s observation of 1977 that while many countries remain embittered over lands lost, Pakistan is one of the few countries “with a sense of bitterness and grievance for territories that have never formed part of its polity”.

The lack or weaknesses of the nation in Pakistan, and the real civilisational commonality that exists with India, are seen as huge threats to its survival as a nation-state. As a result, much of its narratives tend to be created anew in its educational and social systems in order to derive a sense of distinct separateness from India. This manifests itself in activities that tend to show Pakistan being more related to the Arab world than the subcontinent. Its relations with the Arab world and the Islamic countries are focused on projecting itself as a champion and protector of the Islamic world.

Pakistan’s geographical location has continued to attract great power support for variety of reasons. The US has been the main anchor for much of the Cold War period. China sees Pakistan as a crucial strategic partner in its strategy of containing India, and in its access to the Gulf and the Middle East.

India’s success as a vibrant democracy and its secular approach has tended to influence the other states in the region. Bangladesh and Nepal have announced themselves as

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17 C Christine Fair, Ibid., p. 42.
secular states recently. However, traditionally religion plays a major role in these countries including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Myanmar.

5. Middle East: Politics of the Israel/Palestine Conflict

A region of the world that has fallen into the hands of innumerable empires over the course of centuries, the Middle East continues to be evaded by a period of prolonged stability. The Arab Israeli conflict remains a central issue; Jerusalem continues to be a hotly contested, claimed by believers of both Islam and Judaism, and has become an inevitable symbol of the ongoing conflict.

The rise of Islam in 7th century AD ushered in a new era that witnessed the incorporation of religion into various facets of politics, governance, culture and everyday life. While this epoch saw the rise of religious conflicts that sowed the seeds of discord and mounting prejudice between Islam and the West, the extensive periods of peaceful coexistence among Muslims, Jews and Christians mustn’t be forgotten. Later on, during Ottoman rule, religious groups coexisted in an environment of relative tolerance for centuries, until its period of decline where vast atrocities, such as the Armenian genocide, were committed in order to suppress dissent.

The establishment of the State of Israel in the year 1948, and the tumultuous events that preceded as well as succeeded it, has given birth to a number of key issues that beg to be addressed if a resolution of the conflict is indeed to be achieved. These include the question of borders and the future of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories, the status of Jerusalem, the plight of the Palestinian refugees, security concerns and mutual recognition. In the broader context of the neighbouring Arab countries, Israel has maintained diplomatic ties with Egypt since the signing of the monumental Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty in 1979, an act that drew intense criticism and caused Egypt to be suspended from the Arab League from the year 1979 until 1989. Jordan, which currently houses over two million registered Palestinian refugees and Israel also established diplomatic relations with the signing of the 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty. However, Israeli relations with its other neighbours are tense at best, with various Arab states proclaiming solidarity with the Palestinians.

The commencement of the Arab Spring in late 2010 led to another period of volatility within the region. Demonstrations erupted across the Middle East and North Africa against authoritarian regimes, political corruption, widespread unemployment and human rights

18 Zachary Karabell, Peace Be Upon You (Vintage, 2008), 4-5.

violations, among other factors. These events placed Israeli-Arab relations on shaky ground, serving as a reminder of the unpredictable nature of these ties. They also redirected the nature of Middle East discourse.\textsuperscript{20} This part of the paper aims to analyse the role of international relations in the Middle East in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the nature of the impact of regional politics and religion on the conflict.

6. Colonial history in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

The end of World War I in the year 1918 was accompanied by the subsequent demise of the long-standing Ottoman Empire, which had allied with the Germans during the war. Territories that had previously been under Ottoman rule for centuries were placed under joint British and French rule as ‘Occupied Enemy Territory Administration’ until they were deemed fit to govern themselves. These territories eventually became League of Nations mandates and were administered by the UK or France for considerable periods of time. Mandatory Palestine - which refers to modern-day Israel, West Bank and the Gaza Strip - was established as a geopolitical entity under British administration in the year 1923.

The Arab Revolt that commenced in June 1916 had played a crucial role in ousting Ottoman rule. Hussein bin Ali, the Hashemite Sharif of Mecca, and British High Commissioner Henry McMahon, began their correspondence in 1915 wherein Arab independence and sovereignty in the region, barring certain parts, was assured by Great Britain in exchange for Arab support against the Ottoman Empire. The British Empire was reliant on the Suez Canal to access its Asian colonies. Employing highly effective strategies of irregular warfare, the small-unit hit-and-run attacks by Arab forces against Turkish armies along the Hejaz Railway allowed Britain to exploit the reduced effectiveness of the armies. The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence was interpreted by the Arab leaders and masses as guaranteeing their independence following Ottoman rule:

The two districts of Mersina and Alexandretta and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo cannot be said to be purely Arab, and should be excluded from the limits demanded. Subject to the above modifications, Great Britain is prepared to recognise and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sherif of Mecca (McMahon).\textsuperscript{21} In the meantime, the Zionist movement and Jewish


emigration to Palestine had been steadily growing since the late 19th century in response to increasing anti-Semitism in Europe, which had persisted for centuries. Calls for the creation of a Jewish state were expressed in light of the persecution faced by European Jews and as a response to the ‘Jewish Question’. In a letter dated 2 November 1917, known as the Balfour Declaration, addressed to Zionist leader Walter Rothschild, the United Kingdom’s Foreign Secretary at the time, Arthur Balfour, pledged British support for the establishment of Palestine as a homeland for the Jews. The declaration proved to be in direct contrast to the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence:

“His Majesty's government view will favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country (Balfour)”.

The great colonial powers continued to have political, economic and cultural interests in the MENA region post-WWI. Taking a realpolitik approach, the UK and France, with the acquiescence of Russia, signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement in secret in May 1916, which ultimately shaped the future of the region. The agreement detailed how the territorial remains of the Ottoman Empire would be divided between them. Ultimately, the territories were allocated to the UK and France, and British-administered Mandatory Palestine lasted from 1923 until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

7. Establishment of the State of Israel and Arab-Israeli Relations

The 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine, which envisioned an Arab and Jewish state coexisting in economic cooperation, was reluctantly accepted by the Jewish Agency for Palestine but promptly rejected by Arab governments. The premature departure of the British, and the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948 was immediately followed by the neighbouring Arab states declaring war on Israel. The 1948 Arab-Israeli war resulted in an Israeli victory and the seizure of over 50% of the area allocated to Arabs under the UN Partition Plan by Israel22, and the Jordanian and Egyptian occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip respectively.

The combined fighting resulted in the mass exodus of Palestinian Arabs, a number that was


23 Kenneth Cragg, Palestine: The Prize and Price of Zion (Cassel, 1997), 57-116.
estimated at the time by the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine to be around 711,000. Over half of the original population of Palestinian Arabs fled to neighbouring states. This is historically remembered as the Nakba or “catastrophe”. The plight of the Palestinian refugees and their right of return has been one of the key issues discussed in negotiations over the years. Israel maintains its refusal to allow the return of refugees. According to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, authorising 3.5 million registered Palestinian refugees to return would be an “act of suicide”.

Meanwhile, the Arab states where fleeing Palestinians sought refuge, including Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, have denied full citizenship rights to many refugees, claiming that this is done to “avoid dissolution of their identity and protect their right to return to their homeland”. The Arab-Israeli conflict culminated in further wars in 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, 2006, the first and second Palestinian intifadas, as well as periodic military attacks on the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. Israeli victory in the 1967 Six-Day War proved to be a critical point in the history of the conflict due to Israel’s acquisition of the territories of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) from Jordan, the Golan Heights from Syria and the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt.

8. Recent Developments in the Israel-Palestine Conflict

Today, large parts of Israel and the Palestinian territories are physically separated by a barrier that will stretch over 700 km upon completion, along the 1949 Armistice Line. Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) checkpoints monitor and control the flow of permit-holding Palestinians into and out of Israel, primarily for work but also for other purposes. According to Israeli human rights organization, B’Tselem, the percentage of total West Bank land occupied and controlled by Israeli settlers and their organisations stood at 42 percent in the year 2010. This does not include the settlements in East Jerusalem. The American-led Israeli Palestinian peace process has been ongoing but has as of yet failed to achieve a viable


solution to the conflict. The 1993 Oslo Accords resulted in the formation of an interim self-governing body, the Palestinian Authority, for the West Bank and Gaza. Following the 2007 Battle of Gaza, the Islamist fundamentalist group Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip. The 2000 Camp David Accords, albeit its ineffectiveness in arriving at a solution, was successful in restoring peace between Israel and Egypt in exchange for the return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt.

Palestine has acquired non-member observer state status in the United Nations and, as of September 2015, is recognised as a state by 136 UN member states, despite criticism of the move from the US, Canada and Israel. However, doubts have been raised regarding the capability of the PA to govern Palestine as an independent state. The PA is known to be rife with corruption and has been blamed for a lack of accountability and transparency in governance, notwithstanding the efforts of finance minister Salam Fayyad to transform the system.

On 9 July 2005, a global campaign known as the Boycott, Reinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement was launched by over 170 Palestinian NGOs as a means to pressurise Israel economically and politically into ending the occupation in the Palestinian territories, which is viewed as a violation of international law, and has garnered widespread international support. This has in turn spawned several anti-BDS movements and drawn criticism for offsetting any progress achieved through negotiations between Israel and Palestine.

8. Role of Religion and the International Community

According to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, the population of Israel stands at approximately 8.46 million as of late 2015. It is comprised of 74.9% Jews, out of which Haredim make up 11.7% and possess a startling annual growth rate of 5%. Arabs constitute 20.7% of the Israeli population and boast a higher growth rate than Jews in total, although this rate has slowed considerably. While internal divisions amidst various Jewish groups remain, focus has often been laid on the apparent incompatibility of Judaism and Islam. Frequent clashes between Jews and Muslims have taken place at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem’s Old City, which houses the al-Aqsa Mosque, considered to be the third holiest site in Islam, and is also venerated as the holiest site in Judaism.

According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center from October 2014 to May 2015, the West Bank settlers, usually the most religious of the lot, view the peace process with more scepticism than Jews living elsewhere. Among Arab Israelis, the percentage of people who believe in the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Israel and an independent Palestinian state has reduced from 74% in 2013 to roughly 50% in 2015. To the question of whether Arabs should be expelled or transferred from Israel, 72% of those who place themselves on the right of the political spectrum (37% of total Jews) said ‘yes’ and 37%
of those who identified with the centre said ‘yes’ (55% of total Jews). 87% identifying as left-wing (8% of total Jews) said ‘no’ to the expulsion of Arabs.28 In the Gaza Strip, Islamic fundamentalist group Hamas has fervently used religious nationalism as a means of garnering support for its mission to liberate Palestine.

The balance of power in the Middle East has been a rather precarious issue, frequently disrupted by continued Western intervention in the region. In fiscal year 2015, Israel received $3 billion in US bilateral aid. US foreign policy with regard to Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East, has been a key factor in maintaining Western influence in the region. For decades, Western policy, media and discourse regarding the Middle East has focussed on the apparent differences between the two societies and the frustration arising from those differences. However, it is erroneous to analyse the current state of the MENA region through the perspective of the West or attempt to transplant democratic ideals in those societies, when in fact the MENA has had a dramatically different historical experience, influenced in no small part by US foreign policy in the region. Zachary Karabell explains in his book, ‘Peace be Upon You’, that tolerance within Muslim societies has historically been related to the feeling of being secure.29 This feeling of security has been challenged in both Western and Middle Eastern societies, particularly since the events of September 11. In recent times, with the conflict in Syria spiralling out of control, the “us vs. the other” approach has largely overtaken mainstream discourse regarding Islam and the West, deeming the two incompatible with each other.

9. Complexity in Solutions

Recent news from Israel Palestine has been clouded by a spate of knife attacks by Arabs on Jews, with the perpetrators including children as young as thirteen. In retaliation, Israel has punished attackers with a shoot-to-kill approach. Referred to as a “knife intifada” by some, it is yet another situation that reminds the world of the fact that in Israel/Palestine, history constantly seems to be repeating itself in some form or another. It would seem, based on past events, that a realist paradigm has been most applicable in the experience of the Middle East. When the ideologies of various groups that comprise the larger Middle East system collide in such a manner disallow basic mutual recognition, it begs the question of whether there is any amicable solution to this long-ongoing conflict, and raises doubts over the viability of the two-state solution.


29 Zachary Karabell, Peace Be Upon You (Vintage, 2008), 9.
Grassroots approaches by various institutions and non-governmental organisations have been attempting to close the wide gap that exists between these groups on an individual level, by starting a much-needed dialogue and attempting to convey the reality of the situation through the perspective of the ‘other’. A constructivist approach is crucial in order to analyse and comprehend the disparities between the groups and how it is preventing the achievement of peace. At a time when mutual prejudices and perceived threats largely affect policymaking decisions, and incitement to hatred is utilized by leaders on both sides as a means of gaining popular support, educating the population on their shared similarities and striving for ways to work together is invaluable.

Conclusion

Middle East’s dominant theme lies in two cases of self-determination: one is the Jewish state Israel, although founded as a theological state its driving factors have been centuries old persecution and the massive holocaust of the Second World war; the second is the still unrealised case of self-determination for the Palestinians. Territorial issues are at the core of the problems in the region but have taken significant religious overtones due to the primacy to the fact that all states in the region are theological states. None of the states officially profess secularism as a policy. Quite naturally, politics of relationships that should focus on territorial solutions have been influenced by the primacy of religious discourse.

The case of South Asia has both similarities and dissimilarities with the Middle East. Here the dominant power is India, which is a secular state. Its relations with others and its domestic political discourse are dominated by secularism. This has a significant influence on other states. The exception is Pakistan, which is driven by strong Islamic ideology. Its political discourse, therefore, complicates the situation. Pakistan’s pursuance of Islamic ideology is driven primarily to address its existential threat to its viability as a nation-state. As long as this insecurity exists South Asia will continue to have secularism and religious ideologies battling for the primacy of the nation-state.