



## Public Lecture 1

# Unpacking the Middle East Crises

by: Antonino Occhiuto

On 25 May 2018, the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) launched a public lecture series on the Middle East Crises. This series aims to provide knowledge, stimulate debate on the issues currently affecting the Middle East and try to solve some of the main impasses.

The premier lecture was delivered by Dr Mitchell Belfer, (EGIC's President) who provided insights to better understand the ongoing dynamics characterising the situation in Iraq, Syria and around the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) a.k.a. the Iran Nuclear Deal.

Belfer began by underscoring the importance of public spaces, such as EGIC, enhancing personal knowledge and accommodating different opinions, as important bulwarks against the thriving phenomena of Fake News—popular, easy to access (especially through social media), that confuses understandings of diverse and complex regions such as the Middle East.

Belfer argued that the Middle East is extremely volatile in the face of conflict contagion. This was certainly the case with the new wave of religious terrorism, which started in 1979 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian Revolution and the siege of the Great Mosque in Mecca. More recently, the 2011 uprisings culminated in civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya. 2011 also marked a resumption of Europe's interest in the Middle East as the civil wars unravelling there are pushing people to flee in search of safety and a better life. Terrorism, migration and the increasing economic interconnectedness—results of globalisation—are illustrative examples of how problems in the Middle East directly affect Europe. The need for inter-regional cooperation and engagement is greater than ever before, especially when it comes to the issue of foreign fighters, European citizens who have been fighting alongside Jihadi groups mainly in Iraq and Syria, who are now returning to Europe.

The lecture carefully explained how the origins of the ongoing crises in Iraq and Syria are linked to Iran's promotion of sectarianism which aims to increase Tehran's influence throughout the region. Despite the importance of regional issues, to fully understand a crisis in a specific country, the historic background of the conflict must be taken into account. It is certainly not a coincidence that radical groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to undermine the Assad regime and the Alawite

domination over Syria since the 1981 crisis in Hama. The 2011 uprisings and the involvement of international actors such as Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, Turkey, Israel, the US and France simply add another layer of complexity to already existing conflicts. Tensions between international rivals—re: Israel vs Iran—can trigger a major international conflict, with Syria as the battlefield.

Iraq's post-Daesh political scenario is moving steadily following the victory of the coalition led by Muqtada Al-Sadr in the 2018 parliamentary elections. Al-Sadr, who was once the leader of the Mahdi's Army, the most potent Shia militia, is now pushing back against Iranian attempts to fully capture Baghdad's military and government institutions. The influential cleric is attempting to roll-back Iranian-promoted sectarianism by reviving Iraqi nationalism and reaching out to fellow and neighbouring Arab states such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Iran's involvement in both Iraq and Syria, suggests the need for increasing public debate and awareness on the effects of economically empowering Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC). The empowerment is the direct result of EU investments in Iran, possible due to the JCPOA-related sanctions relief. A debate is much needed in major EU countries such as Germany, France and Italy. These countries' relations with Iran remained consistent, even in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. And, the economic benefits derived from post-JCPOA European investments in Iran have not improved the standards of living of ordinary Iranians, a point underscored by the recent wave of mass protests across the country. Iran's economy is almost entirely controlled by the IRGC which uses state revenues to finance asymmetric warfare and Tehran's ballistic missile programme. Iran's asymmetric strategy is highly destabilising for the entire Middle East and ranges from support of armed militias such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, groups that pose an acute threat to the security of Israel and Saudi Arabia respectively. At the same time, Iran promotes sectarianism and regime change in smaller Gulf states such as Kuwait and Bahrain—Tehran officially claims Bahrain as its own territory.

Following the US decision to withdraw from the JCPOA, and the perspective of incoming secondary sanctions targeting EU companies doing business in Iran, EU leaders are increasingly pressured to decide whether to safeguard the transatlantic relationship with the US or prioritise the short-sighted economic gains deriving from the increase of business relations with the Islamic Republic.

Belfer's lecture provided a launching platform as well as an opportunity to further engage with a wide and diverse audience on the many initiatives EGIC is involved in, in order to explore cooperation and synergy between Europe and the Arab Gulf.