Redefinition of the Middle East: Interconflict and Intercontinental region

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*Even though it is one of the most recognisable world regions,
the Middle East is not an unambiguous concept even today.
As any other world region, it is not easy to define the Middle East exactly due to
the fact that, in its case, the geographical criterion is not sufficient, and neither
is there consent on how to apply this criterion. Therefore, the need arises that
the geographical criterion be accompanied by a criterion of conflicts, which
have been one of the key determinants of the region for centuries, just as oil
exploitation with which some of these conflicts has been closely correlated.
When it comes to conflicts, are, then, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel and
the Palestinian Authority – the countries that have been most often
referred to in the media today – part of one and the same region?
If the key Middle-Eastern criterion is applied, the region obtains
its clear borders. The only question is – for how long.*

1. Introduction

Oil and conflicts are the two concepts that will be right away associated by many with a single world region. This is, of course, the Middle East, which, linked to these concepts, marks two anniversaries in 2008. The first one is the centenary of the discovery of oil, which was found in 1908 in what was then Persia. The second one is the sixtieth anniversary of the State of Israel, whose establishment in 1948 marked the beginning of the multi-stage Arab-Israeli conflict, which is, despite the multitude of peace initiatives and agreements, still unresolved. Even though the Middle East is characterised by other determinants, too, oil exploitation and the (non-)resolving of conflicts remain its constant and – determinant.

And while the end of the Cold War was marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the beginning of the American war against terrorism was marked by the wrecking of the World Trade Center towers in New York on 11 September 2001. Almost symbolically, twelve years of international relations, which most often received the determinant "the New World Order", went by between 11/9 (9 November 1989) and 9/11 (11 September 2001). This determinant was launched by the ex-president of the United States of America, George Bush Sr., in order to define new relations among countries after the end of the Cold War political and ideological oppositions. According to him, this term included the rule of law and peaceful resolution of conflicts, acceptance of democratic standards and solidarity against aggression, decrease in, and control over, conventional and non-conventional weapons, strengthening of the role

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of international organisations led by the UN, and universal observance of human rights.

With the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, for which the American government accused Al-Qaida, their leader Osama bin-Laden and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the idea of a New World Order became a thing of the past, which was, in the US international political strategy, replaced by preventive attacks on countries which have sponsored terrorism and/or developed weapons of mass destruction (WMD). With the first justification, the USA attacked Afghanistan in October 2001, and with the second, they attacked Iraq in March 2003. After a relatively short military resistance, the US armed forces, together with their allies, overthrew the existing regimes and have maintained their military presence in both countries up to the present.

On the other hand, in September 2000 the second Intifada of the Palestinian population at the West Bank and in Gaza Strip, the parts of the Palestinian Authority since 1994 as a tentative solution towards the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian State, began. In this way, all neuralgic points of the Middle East conflicts were activated, from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, through the civil war and foreign military intervention in Afghanistan, to an identical development in Iraq. At the same time, all three conflicts were sought to be resolved by holding democratic elections. The topical examples of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Palestinian Authority confirm that elections, which, in a substantial sense, meet the important functions of competitive elections from associating political institutions with voters' preferences to the political élite recruitment, can be organised even within the conflicts themselves. Intra-conflict elections are the latest concept even within electoral studies and within international relations, in view of the role of international political actors and the international community in their preparation and implementation.

The intra-conflict elections has been held in a region which has been intra-conflict for decades. The last escalation of conflicts in the Middle East again called for the need to analyze their causes and impacts, in a new geopolitical context. However, the need to (re)define the concept of the region itself has also appeared, since compared to other world regions, there is no agreement on its exact borders. Does not it mean that, besides the geographical and historical criteria at least one more criterion should be introduced in determining the Middle East, i.e. the conflicts.[1]

2. The Concept: Eurocentric or Intercontinental?

Even though it is a case of a region with a firm historical and political identity, the Middle East does not have unambiguously accepted geographical borders. For analysts, what is at issue is not its intercontinental core in Southwest Asia and North Africa[2] but its radius, that is, to which final points in Asia and Africa the Middle East reaches. Besides, the concept itself in all its linguistic varieties is comparatively recent, though some of the most ancient civilisations developed in the area of today's Middle East. The English concept *Middle East*, which in its meaning, but not in the literal translation, corresponds to the Croatian concept *Bliski istok (Near East)*, began to be used in mid-19th century, and got its present meaning in the early 20th century.

This meaning was given to it by the American strategist and naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), who used it to describe the area around the Persian Gulf as a region of an exceptional geostrategic significance, particularly in the context of the then British and Russian rivalry. He used it in this sense in its paper *The Persian Gulf and International Relations*, published in 1902 in the British journal National Review. The concept became widely used after the British publicist and diplomat Sir Ignatius Valentine Chirol (1852-1929), used it while working on his book on the Middle East based on a series of newspaper articles published in the daily *The Times*, whose correspondent he was at the time. He extended the Middle East to the western Indian borders, while in the English language another term was used for the area of the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire – *the Near East*. The concept was discontinued with the end of the World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. A shift "from the East to the West" of a kind occurred between the two World Wars, when the interpretation of the Middle East as the area stretching from Mesopotamia to Burma, i.e. the Middle Asia, was discontinued in the English language, and its definition as a region which, to the West, starts from Egypt, took root.

In the Croatian language, even today, there is a duality of the use of the concepts *Bliski istok (Near East)* and *Srednji istok (Middle East)*, but the literal translation of the English term has ultimately given way to the term *Bliski istok (Near East)*. This difference between the Croatian and English terms is not surprising if we are aware that in both cases the region in question is defined in relation to the geographical location of interpreters, where this region

is literally "near" (cro. *bliski*) East to Croatia and other countries in Southeast Europe.

Most disputes are caused by the Eurocentric definition of the Middle East, no matter whether it is called "near" or "middle" in particular European languages.[3] In other words, the concept has a geographical meaning only from a European perspective. However, it is the European colonial powers, led by the United Kingdom and France after the World War I, and the United States of America after the World War II, who crucially determined the political and economic developments in the Middle East, and it is therefore understandable that in international communication predominated by the English language the concept from their perspective has been accepted. This does not, of course, prevent particular countries in this area from defining and calling the region in accordance with their linguistic and historical tradition, and the linguistic equivalents to the Middle East exist even in Arabic and other languages spoken in the region.

The concept which partially overlaps with the Middle East is the Levant (following the Italian word *levante* meaning the East), and it has been applied to the group of countries in the Eastern Mediterranean: Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel with the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Egypt. Originally, these are countries "in which the Sun rises (comes up)." The Levant has a historical meaning and is today rarely used to denote the region to which it has been applied.

3. Old Conflicts, New Definition

Along with the linguistic one, another key issue regarding the Middle East is a geographical one, i.e. which countries are included in the region of the Middle East. There is no unequivocal position on this issue, not even on whether it is a question of exclusively one part of the West Asia or whether we are talking about a broad intercontinental region which encompasses smaller or larger parts of Africa and Asia. An agreement has been reached concerning the core of the Middle East. It is thus made up of Israel with the Palestinian Authority, then of the countries of the so-called Fertile Crescent – Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, the countries in the Arab peninsula – Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar, and Egypt, which has been included in the region even by the opponents of the extension of the concept onto Africa, because it belongs to the Asian continent with

its north-eastern part – the Sinai peninsula. Except for Israel, all the above-mentioned countries have a majority of Arabic population, and the ethnic criterion is one of the criteria used in defining the region, while the other criterion is the religious one, because, the majority of the population in all the listed countries, except for Israel, is Muslim. The first and the second criterion, according to some analysts, qualify as part of the region even the countries in North Africa west of Egypt – Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, while the second criterion includes Iran, which thus becomes the most heavily populated country of the region, although its population is not Arabic.[4]

According to the religious criterion and the geographical location, Turkey could also be included in the region, but this has been done only by some theorists of the Middle East.[5] In doing so, the inclusion of Turkey as the most northerly country of the region is not unequivocal. Some theorists favouring Turkey's belonging to the region define the Middle East extensively and thus add up to it even Sudan in the south and Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east, while others do not include Turkey with other countries on which there is no unanimous position in their concept of the Middle East. For them, Turkey is an integral part of the region not only because of its location and religion, but also because of the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire, which has largely defined the region, as well as due to the Kurd issue being one of the key political issues of the Middle East, which, by its nature, keeps causing conflicts in Iraq, Iran and Turkey itself. On the other hand, the majority of analysts do not consider Turkey a part of the Middle East, despite the historical determinants and the fact that Turkey has its longest unbroken land border with three countries from the region – Syria, Iraq and Iran. In this view, Turkey is an Eurasian country which is, by its European part, more connected to Southeast Europe than to the Middle East by its Asian part. Besides, in political sense, Turkey aspires to the full membership in the European Union (alongside the existing NATO membership), by which it legitimates itself as a country committed to Euro-Atlantic integration even at the international level. This, of course, does not exclude an analysis of Turkey's influence on the developments in the Middle East, particularly in the context of the topical conflict in Iraq and the retroactive effect of the Kurd entity in Iraq on Turkey.

Finally, there remains the question of the eastern border of the Middle East. Considering the fact that in the majority of theoretical approaches to the

Table 1 Countries of the Middle East as an intra-conflict and intercontinental region *

Country	Subregion	Area (km2)	Population (2008 est.)	GDP Per capita	Government type	Regional Conflicts (1948-today)
Afghanistan	Iranian plateau (South Asia)	647,500	32,738,376	$ 1,000 (2007 est.)	Islamic presidential republic	Yes:Civil Wars (1979-1989, 1992-today), Gulf War (1990/91), US led military intervention (2001-today)
Bahrain	Arabian Peninsula	665	718,306 *note:* includes 235,108 non-nationals	$33,900 (2007 est.)	Constitutional monarchy	Yes:Gulf War (1990/91)
Egypt	North Africa	1,001,450	81,713,520	$5,000 (2007 est.)	Semi-presidential republic	Yes:Arab–Israeli Wars (1948, 1956, 1967, 1969/70, 1973), Gulf War (1990/91)
Iran	Iranian plateau (South Asia)	1,648,000	65,875,224	$11,700 (2007 est.)	Islamic (theocratic) republic	Yes:Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)
Iraq	Fertile Crescent	437,072	28,221,180	$3,700 (2007 est.)	Parliamentary republic	Yes:Arab –Israeli Wars(1948), Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Gulf War (1990/91), US led military intervention (2003-today)
Israel	Fertile Crescent (The Levant)	20,770	7,112,359 *note:* incl. Israeli settlers in the West Bank, Golan H. and East Jerusalem	$26,600 (2007 est.)	Parliamentary republic	Yes:Arab –Israeli Wars(1948, 1956, 1967, 1969/70, 1973), Military intervention in Lebanon(1982,2006) Israeli-Palestinian conflict (1948-today)
Jordan	Fertile Crescent (The Levant)	92,300	6,198,677	$4,700 (2007 est.)	Constitutional monarchy	Yes:Arab – Israeli Wars(1948, 1956, 1967), Black September (1970)
Kuwait	Arabian Peninsula	17,820	2,596,799 *note:* includes 1,291,354 non-nationals	$55,900 (2007 est.)	Constitutional emirate	Yes:Iraqi Occupation (1990/91)
Lebanon	Fertile Crescent (The Levant)	10,400	3,971,941	$10,300 (2007 est.)	Parliamentary republic	Yes:Civil War(1975-1990) Lebanon War (2006)

* Source: The World Factbook, United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 23 October 2008. (www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/)

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Country	Subregion	Area (km2)	Population (2008 est.)	GDP Per capita	Government type	Regional Conflicts (1948-today)
Oman	Arabian Peninsula	212,460	3,311,640 *note:* includes 577,293 non-nationals	$19,000 (2007 est.)	Monarchy	Yes:Gulf War (1990/91)
Pakistan	Iranian plateau (South Asia)	803,940	172,800,048	$2,400 (2007 est.)	Federal parliamentary republic	Yes:Gulf War (1990/91), Conflict in the tribal areas adjacent to the border with Afghanistan(2001-today)
Palestinian NationalAuthority	Fertile Crescent (The Levant)	6,220 incl. as a means of depicting the entire area occupied by Israel in 1967	3,907,883	$1,100 (2006 est.)	Transitional form of Palestinian self-rule with elements of semi-presidential republic	Yes:Israeli-Palestinian conflict (1948-today), First Intifada (1987-1993) Second Intifada(2000-today)
Qatar	Arabian Peninsula	11,437	824,789	$87,600 (2007 est.)	Emirate	Yes:Gulf War (1990/91)
Saudi Arabia	Arabian Peninsula	2,149,690	28,146,656 *note:* includes 5,576,076 non-nationals	$19,800 (2007 est.)	Monarchy	Yes:Gulf War (1990/91)
Syria	Fertile Crescent (The Levant)	185,180	19,747,586 *note:* in addition, about 40,000 people live in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights	$4,700 (2007 est.)	Semi-presidential republic	Yes:Arab–Israeli Wars (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973), Military intervention in Lebanon (1976-2005), Gulf War (1990/91)
United Arab Emirates	Arabian Peninsula	83,600	4,621,399	$37,000 (2007 est.)	Federation with specified powers delegated to the UAE federal government and other powers reserved to member emirates	Yes:Gulf War (1990/91)
Yemen	Arabian Peninsula	527,970	23,013,376	$2,500 (2007 est.)	Semi-presidential republic	Yes:Conflict between North and South Yemen (1970-1990)

* Source: The World Factbook, United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 23 October 2008. (www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/)

Middle East Iran has been regarded its undeniable part, dilemmas are raised by Afghanistan and Pakistan. Like Iran, both countries have predominantly Muslim, ethnically heterogeneous population, which during the last years has been increasingly linked to the unquestionable countries of the Middle East due to the political circumstances. This has been particularly facilitated by the years-long civil war in Afghanistan and the US military intervention against the local Taliban regime in 2001, as well as by using a part of the Pakistani territory as an emergency frontline and logistic base of particular parties in the conflict, which extended the conflict in the "core" Middle East to Iranian eastern neighbours. While Afghanistan and Pakistan, in a geographical sense, do not belong to Southwest Asia, which is *de facto* a synonym for the Middle East[6] (with Egypt and Iran added), in the geopolitical sense both countries have more links to other countries in the region, and it is a question of the criteria against which they are included in, or excluded from, defining the region. If the origin of the conflicts and the way of their resolution are accepted as a key criterion, Afghanistan and Pakistan are integral parts of the Middle East region.

Considering the fact that alongside the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, still awaiting a sustainable resolution, and the bulk of the Middle East conflicts has taken place in the countries of the Persian Gulf (Iraq-Iran war 1980-1988, Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and the Gulf War 1990-1991[7], the US military intervention in Iraq 2003) for almost for three solid decades, the original definition of the Middle East by Alfred Thayer Mahan as a region surrounding the Persian Gulf is gaining increased significance today more than ever before. This is the reason why the region can be understood as a geopolitical area onboth sides of the Gulf. In this case, the inclusion of Afghanistan and Pakistan is beyond dispute. The conflicts made both countries the parts of the Middle East.

4. Conflicts as a Regional Characteristic

In identifying conflicts as a key trait of the Middle-Eastern region, it is necessary to define the types of conflict predominant in these areas, beginning with the definition of conflict itself as a specific form of behaviour. Etymologically, the word conflict comes from the Latin *conflictus*, meaning a striking together or friction. Theoretical approaches offer various ways of interpreting conflicts, but almost all of them try to identify the opposing parties,

the issues over which they clash, the dynamics of the conflict's development and the context in which it occurs. To this, we must also add the use of the concept which encompasses an analysis of the causes and effects of the conflict, its direct, indirect and intervening causes, as well as the corresponding behavior patterns.[8] The definition of conflict in social sciences varies from a struggle for status in a society to a struggle for social resources and changes in a society. However, the basic definition of conflict relevant for its interpretation in issues of domestic and foreign policy starts from a situation in which the opposing sides use conflict behaviour against each other in order to realize mutually incompatible goals and/or express mutual hostility.[9] These three components of conflict – behaviour directed against the opposing party, goal incompatibility and open expression of hostility – appear in various conflict theories, regardless of the interrelationships the authors put them in. For example, conflict theorist and one of the founders of contemporary peace studies Johan Galtung defines conflict as a triangle (triadic construct), the three points of which represent opposing attitudes/assumptions, manifest behaviour and contradiction in the sense of the existence of goals whose realization is mutually exclusive. In addition, Galtung differentiates between "conflicts as hypotheses" and "manifest conflicts," depending on whether or not they include a type of destructive behaviour which is manifested, beyond the usual application of force, and evident in showing physical or some other type of violence toward the other parties in the conflict.[10]

Conflicts defined by incompatible political goals can be divided into three groups. The first two are intra-state and inter-state conflicts, while the third type is a sort of mix between the first two: conflicts in which intra-state conflicts such as civil wars intertwine with inter-state conflicts, most typically foreign military interventions. Conflicts in the Middle East in the last sixty years have mostly exhibited the characteristics of the third group. When it comes to intra-state conflicts in combination with inter-state interventions, such as those that currently exist in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian Authority, it is important to determine the basis of the conflict, i.e. whether it is an ideology, in the sense of a revolutionary change of the existing regime, a secession based on different identities, or a factional separation from the central government.[11]

Various Middle-Eastern conflicts since World War II have belonged to all three subgroups of intra-state conflict, but it should be noted that they were

usually accompanied by an inter-state conflict or at least foreign military and political interference in states' internal issues. Another approach very useful in analyzing Middle-Eastern conflicts is the Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) theory, developed by the Lebanese-American author Edward Azar. Protracted Social Conflicts are characterized by long duration and violent struggle between social groups for such basic needs as security, recognition and acceptance, free access to political institutions and inclusion in economic activities. The elements of a PSC are: 'communal content', mainly groups with a clear identity (racial, religious, ethnic, cultural or other), the denial of basic 'human needs' and rights, the domicile 'governance and the state's role', and 'international linkages' in the conflict.[12] All the main Middle-Eastern conflicts in the last six decades have contained these elements, with certain clusters more dominant than others, but all comprising a conflict spiral which can be stopped only through simultaneous actions within the society, by the authorities and by the international community, e.g. such as those that ended the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990). Failing that, a conflict in a latent stage can become manifest under changed circumstances (e.g. the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars).

The chronology of contemporary conflicts in the Middle East and their spatial continuity are directly related to events during and after World War I, when the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled the greater part of these areas, weakened and collapsed (in 1914 Egypt became a British protectorate, Persia was an independent state with Russian and British interest zones, Afghanistan was an area of rivalry between great forces, and what is today Pakistan was part of British India). The famous British-French agreement, which was drawn up in 1916 by Sir Mark Sykes and Charles François Georges-Picot, defined the post-war apportionment of the Middle-Eastern possessions of the Ottoman Empire to the signatories. The 1917 Balfour Declaration (authored by the British foreign secretary Arthur James Balfour), on the other hand, showed the willingness of the United Kingdom to establish a national state of the Jewish people in Palestinian territory. The former document was a betrayal of the Entente Powers' Arab allies, who had believed in the founding of a pan-Arabian state in the territory of the defeated Ottoman Empire, while the latter document facilitated the settlement of Jewish settlers in the British Mandate of Palestine between the two world wars. Even though the Sykes-Picot Agreement did not prevent the founding of individual Arab states prior to, during and after World War II (Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria,

Jordan), it rendered impossible a unified Arab political appearance. After the San Remo Conference in 1920 and the reaffirmation of its conclusions in the League of Nations in 1922, the Arab areas of the former Ottoman Empire were divided up definitively between the United Kingdom and France. The UK gained control over the areas of Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq, while France controlled the areas of the future Syria and Lebanon.

Even though the first armed conflicts between the domicile Arab population and the Jewish settlers had begun even before World War II, the continuity of conflicts in the Middle East began on May 14, 1948, when the State of Israel declared independence on the basis of the 1947 UN General Assembly Resolution 181, in the area of Palestine that had been designated for a Jewish state by the Resolution. The other part of Palestine, designated for the Arab state, never came into existence as an independent state because the Arab states of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq rejected the Resolution and attacked Israel immediately after its declaration of independence. The first Arab-Israeli conflict ended with Israel's victory in 1949 and its expansion into areas of the would-be Arab state, while the West Bank (Cisjordan) and the Gaza Strip were occupied by Jordan and Egypt, respectively. A new Arab-Israeli conflict broke out in 1956, when Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal, denying Israel the right of passage. It was followed by the Six-Day War in 1967, in which Israel won a flash victory and took over the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai and the Golan Heights, and by War of Attrition across the Suez Canal in 1969 and 1970. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, despite the shifting success of the opposing parties, a status quo was preserved. The animosities started to loosen after the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty signed at Camp David in 1978, but were rekindled by Israel's intervention in Lebanon in 1982 and the beginning of the first Intifada of the Palestinian population in the occupied areas in 1987.

The Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 and the Oslo Accords in 1993 (formally signed at the White House) finally resulted in bringing the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to set up a truce and a plan for conflict resolution through the coexistence of independent Israeli and Palestinian states. Aiming to found the latter, the Palestinian National Authority was created within Israel, in areas of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Authority has some elements of an international subject. However, the conflict escalated again in September 2000, with the beginning of the second Intifada and the failure of the

Camp David negotiations on the "final status" between Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, mediated by US President Bill Clinton. The oldest conflict in the Middle East has yet to be resolved through a peace treaty which has been in the making since 2002 by the Quartet, i.e. the UN, the European Union, the USA and the Russian Federation.

At the moment, infinitely more intense conflicts are under way in Iraq and Afghanistan, both being cases of a foreign military intervention headed by the USA with elements of civil war, particularly in Afghanistan. The almost-thirty-year-long continuous conflict in Afghanistan began in December 1979, when military units of the former USSR entered the country, which led to an internal rebellion against the pro-Soviet regime and foreign military presence. It is estimated that by 1989, when Soviet units began to leave Afghanistan, between six hundred thousand and two million Afghans were killed, while five million fled to the neighbouring Pakistan. Three years after the departure of the USSR, a civil war broke out in the country. The war was ended in 1996 in the biggest part of the country (only North Afghanistan was controlled by anti-regime forces) with the establishment of an Islamic Emirate lead by the Taliban. Accusing the Taliban regime of supporting Al-Qaida in planning and carrying out the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the USA launched a military intervention in Afghanistan the same year and overturned the regime. However, today, seven years after the military intervention and the attempt to improve the situation by holding democratic elections (presidential in 2004 and parliamentary in 2005), the conflict has not ended. To the contrary, a number of military and political analysts consider the conflict in Afghanistan the most severe Middle Eastern conflict at the moment, with Taliban forces being the best-organized internal participant and increasingly taking over initiative. Afghanistan is thus taking the front role in America's involvement in the Middle East. In comparison, Iraq has shifted from the stage of intense military conflict with opponents of the American military intervention in 2003, to a new government legitimized in the democratic election in January 2005 (pre-constitutional) and December 2005 (constitutional), into the stage of controlled conflict.

In Afghanistan and Iraq alike, the USA has turned its former allies into key enemies (the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein in Iraq), and in both cases the outcome of the conflict will depend on the local population's support for the newly-elected government. In this sense, Iraq is in a better position because its three constituent ethnicities (Arab Shi'a Muslims, Arab Suni Muslims and Iraqi Kurds) have the opportunity to politically define the territories in which they are the majority, which could allow Iraq to reconstitute as a sustainable federation. Afghanistan, on the other hand, is in the tight position between trying to set up contemporary political institutions and a traditional society burdened by interethnic rivalries and conflicts. Thus all three of the most conflicted points in the region – Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian Authority within Israel – must first define and make sustainable their own statehood: Iraq through a potential federal organization or peaceful dissolution, Afghanistan by detecting the capacities of the state itself, and the Palestinian Authority by turning its present autonomous status into an independent state coexisting with Israel.

Alongside the conflicts covered above, we must also mention the conflict in Lebanon, which is also characterized by time continuity and the issue of statehood. In terms of religion, Lebanon is the most heterogeneous state in the Middle East. It was almost destroyed in a civil war which lasted from 1975 to 1990. Even though it seemed that the political situation had been stabilized for the long term, the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel at the south of the country in July and August 2006 and the role of Syria in Lebanese domestic issues confirm that Lebanon is also a part of the continuous Middle-Eastern conflicts which are still far from a final resolution.

5. Characteristics of the Middle Eastern Conflicts

In addition to intra-state and inter-state conflicts and their combination, the Middle East as a region is also characterized by the tensions and open hostilities that arise from the types of political systems. If the sixteen states and one autonomous territory that make the Middle East (Egypt, Israel with the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan) are arranged according to criteria adopted early on – geographical continuity and the continuity of conflicts - in two large groups composed of democratic and undemocratic political systems, only Israel simultaneously has a consolidated democratic political system[13] and fulfils the eight institutional requirements[14] that one of the theorists of democ-

racy Robert A. Dahl listed as the preconditions for establishing and a functioning of poliarchy as a democratic system. In the cases not conforming to these requirements, states are either in the early phases of democratic transition or they have undemocratic political systems.

Free and fair elections, one of Dahl's requirements for poliarchy, however, exist in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan but their armed conflicts are a barrier for their political systems to move significantly on the continuum from undemocratic systems to democratic ones. A major issue remains of whether democracy is possible with the ongoing armed conflicts and tens of casualties daily. 'Confessionalism' democracy that characterizes Lebanon since the adoption of that concept in 1943, in addition to as yet unresolved internal conflicts and foreign interventions, prevents Lebanon from being included among the states with advanced democratic transition. The same is true for the 'inter-state' temporary arrangement of Palestinian territories despite having competitive parliamentary and presidential elections, as well as for Pakistan in which elections and governing, between periods of dictatorship, is characterized by violence and authoritarian tendencies. Authoritarian political systems with elements of sultanism[15] also characterize Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, while theocracy characterizes Iran in which there is universal suffrage but the elections are semi-competitive (Council of Guardians of the Constitution can vet candidates for suitability). Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and United Arab Emirates, states with monarchies as forms of governance and without representative democracy, vary in the range of power that monarchs and advisory bodies have, while the other two Middle Eastern monarchies, Jordan and Kuwait, do have certain elements of representative democracy.

Undemocratic and 'faulty' democratic systems of the Middle Eastern countries represent not only the context for conflicts but very often they are also their generators, especially in cases when there also exist rivalries between individual states having in its background personal (the issue of leadership among Arab leaders), national (the Kurd issue), or religiousantagonisms (relations between Sunnis and Shi'a Muslims within countries or between them). The latter characterize the current conflicts in Iraq where there are some mutually conflicted factions of Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. This conflict has been sustained for centuries by the Ottoman Empire by privileging the Sunni minority over Shi'a majority, and after the British troops left and the republic was

established, Saddam Hussein also sustained it by, at the same time, carrying out state terror directed at both the Arab Shi'a and Sunni Kurds. Finally, the existing and potential conflicts in the Middle East are related to the large differences in national wealth between and within countries whereas these differences vary from the poorest countries such as Yemen, Afghanistan, and Iraq to the Gulf oil exporters where Kuwait and United Arab Emirates predominate, as well Israel with a very diverse economy.

6. Other Determinants of the Middle East

In addition to geography and conflicts as well as ethnic and religious heterogeneity, the Middle East region is furthermore geopolitically characterized by at least a few more determinants. These are Islam, the Ottoman Empire, the politics of the European powers after the World War I, oil exploitation, settlement of Jewish immigrants in Palestine and the creation of Israel, politics of the United States after the World War II, and international terrorism[16]. Each of these determinants influenced the Middle East either independently or in interaction with other determinants, in the sense of a historical, political, economical, cultural, and geostrategically rounded off region. Above all, contemporary Middle East is characterized by a long history of its territories in which numerous ancient civilizations developed beginning with the Sumerian civilization in the delta of Euphrates and Tigris, and with the emergence of three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Since the 7th century, Islam has been the most significant determinant of the Middle East. About one fifth of the world population is Muslim, and out of the abovementioned countries in the Middle East, only in Israel Muslims are not the majority. Ever since the Prophet Muhammad left Mecca (the Hijra), an event that Muslims recognized as a historical turning point, during the coming centuries Islam expanded from the far end of Africa all the way to Indonesia. Although Indonesia is the most populated country with the majority Muslim population, while India is, according to the absolute number of Muslims, among the leading countries in the world, the Middle Eastern countries, when it comes to identity, are the first to be associated to Islam. This is not so only because of its history and sacred places, but also because of the key influence of Islam on the political circumstances in the region as well as on the relationship that the region has with the rest of

the world. Moreover, the differences between the Sunni and Shi'a Muslims have also affected the development of within and between state relations, which have often been marked by conflict.

In that sense, the political presence of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East, from the conquests of Sultan Selim I the Grim who conquered the territories of contemporary Syria, Palestine, and Egypt until the defeat in the World War I in 1918, strengthened Islam in the region and acted politically as an 'umbrella' rule just as the ancient Roman Empire did. This means that during the four centuries of continuing rule of the Ottoman Empire the region has, excluding the countries of the Iranian plateau, developed within the same political and cultural frame. In addition, the administrative division of the Ottoman Empire later on served the European colonizers in their political and administrative arrangements within the region, while the Ottoman political legacy in combination with the traditional social relations was also preserved in the later forms of government and political systems in most Middle Eastern countries.

Although the European colonial powers, United Kingdom, France, and Italy, have begun to rip parts of the Ottoman Empire in Africa already at the end of 19th century, fundamental changes occurred after the World War I. Great Britain and France then received the mandate to govern, which in fact meant they were the colonial rulers of the territories from the east coast of the Mediterranean to the western Persian border. During that period, France wanted to use its political presence in the mandate areas to exercise a stronger influence on the existing social circumstances, while Great Britain that controlled the territory from Egypt, which achieved formal independence in 1922, through Palestine and the Transjordan to Iraq, that achieved its independence in 1932, limited its activities on realizing its strategic interests. Access to the largest raw oil wells in the world was certainly among these. Its commercial exploitation began in 1911 when, after the discovery of oil in Persia in 1908, Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was founded, and it continued with the discovery of oil in Iraq (1927), Bahrain (1932), Saudi Arabia (1935), and Kuwait (1938)[17]. Franco-British presence in the Middle East prevented the advance of the Third Reich into the region during the World War II, but by sustaining the existing conflicts and by not resolving the new ones it largely influenced the regional political circumstances after the end of the war in 1945 when the region entered into the most conflicted phase in which political and economic interests were intertwined with one another.

With its efforts to resolve the Jewish question in the British mandate territory of Palestine, the newly established United Nations Organization, with its Resolution 181, anticipated the creation of two new states, one Jewish and one Arab. Creation of Israel, however, provoked the reaction of the neighbouring Arab states and caused the continuation of military and armed conflicts. Among the Arab states and political actors with which Israel was in conflict, up until today Israel was only recognized by Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Arab-Israeli conflict and the need for creating an independent and sustainable Palestinian state are still at the core of the Middle Eastern conflicts. At this point, the entire peace agreement is more a question of to what extent the confronted sides are prepared to compromise, rather than of achieving the main goals. While there is no dispute about the main goals – mutual recognition of the states of Israel and Palestine, and a peaceful resolution of conflicts –the contention still remains when it comes to the status of Jerusalem, the issue of war refugees, and up to which borders in the West Bank is Israel prepared to concede the territory it controls.

Among all the international relations actors, Israel's position is the most influenced by the United States whose political and economic role in the Middle East in the last 50 years is crucial. United States immediately recognized Israel in 1948, while in 1957 the American foreign policy in regard to the Middle East followed the principles of the Eisenhower doctrine. In the midst of the Cold War, this doctrine postulated that American military assistance will be offered to every Middle Eastern country that is fighting against an aggression of a country that is under the influence of international communism. Its derived versions were the Nixon doctrine in 1969 and the Carter doctrine in 1980. After September 11, 2001, the United States acknowledged terrorism as its most serious international enemy, and in the Middle East this was in particular the case with terrorism perpetrated in the name of Islam. Therefore, the American foreign policy during the last seven years was led by the Bush doctrine of preventive wars against the subjects that sponsor international terrorism. This doctrine served as a rationale behind the armed interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. There is no doubt that the American presence in the Middle East in the coming years will depend on a new doctrine. Such a new doctrine will be created by the new American president Barack Obama in

line with his foreign policy vision in which unilateralism should be replaced by multilateralism.

7. Conclusion

The Middle East is a region whose definition demands a multidimensional approach. Its assessment depends not only on the usual geographical and historical criteria, but also on the geopolitical implications that are a result of its 'organic' characteristics. Conflicts are not only a politico-military constant in the Middle East, but they have also become a part of its identity, as much as, for instance, peaceful conflict resolution is part of the identity of Scandinavian countries. By taking into account both criteria – geographical continuity and the continuity of conflicts – in the area studies[18,] the Middle East is becoming a unique field of analysis. Although there is no full agreement about its exact borders, and in that sense about the reach of the analysis, every approach is relevant if it follows its own arguments about the 'formation' of the Middle East. The analysis of conflicts and attempts at solving them in a democratic manner, when looking at the examples of individual Middle Eastern countries, but also at the region as a whole, enables one to identify a few common characteristics. These are: multiple stages and the complexity of conflicts that cannot be unambiguously resolved, the complexity of historical, cultural, and demographic characteristics of the region, the economic importance of oil as its strategic resource, and the crucial foreign policy role of the international community currently led by the United States. It is the United States in particular, with a new administration, that can largely determine which direction will the definition of the Middle East in the coming years move: as an intercontinental and intra-conflict region or as an intercontinental and post-conflict one.

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NOTES

1 „Torn by strife for the last half century, the Middle East has been the stage for, perhaps, the world's most notorious regional conflicts. It best fits the realist view of international politics, but despite this, it is also an area where international law and organization have played significant roles. What is the cause of so much conflict? Nationalism, religion, and balance-of-power politics each provide part oft he answer." (Nye, J. S., Jr. (2007). *Understanding International Conflicts*; New York: Pearson Longman, p. 185)

2 „Three geographic features have had much to say about the character of the Middle East and its people. The first is the region's location between Europe, Asia, and Africa. (…) The second key geographic factor is the Middle East's abundant oil reserves. The region possesses some 68 percent oft he world's oil, most of which is found in four countries: Saudi Arabia (25%), Iraq (11%), Kuwait (9%), and Iran (8,5%). These figures do not include vast reserves of natural gas. (…) The final geographic factor that shaped the Middle East's unique character is the scarcity of its water. The Middle East contains 5 percent of the world's population, yet possesses less than 1 percent of its freshwater." (Palmer, M. (2002). *The Politics of the Middle East*; Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, pp.2-3)

3 In the German language, the term *Nahren Osten* has been used, even though the concept *Mittlerer Osten* is becoming more and more common; the Russian language uses the term *Ближний Восток* in French the term *Moyen-Orient* is used, in Italian *Medio Oriente*, and in Polish *Bliski Wschód*. Depending, then, on the geographical distance of a particular European country from the region being described, both „near" and „middle" east are used. ✦

4 Because of their geographic remove they are sometimes considered separately from the Middle East proper, but because of their ethnicity and their religion they are sometimes included as part of an „extended" definition of the Middle East. Iran is Muslim but not Arab, and its Shiite Muslim majority distinguishes it from most other Muslim states of the Middle East, which are commonly dominated by Sunni Muslims. Though sometimes assigned to „South Asia" or „Southwest Asia", Iran is usually considered part oft he Middle East, particularly since it is a major oil-producing power in the Persian Gulf along with Iraq and Saudi Arabia. (Yambert, K. ed. (2006), *The Contemporary Middle East*. Boulder / Oxford: Westview Press, p.1.

5 Ziring, L. (1984.). *The Middle East Political Dictionary*, Santa Barbara / Oxford: ABC-CLIO Information Services, p. 28.

6 In the proceedings and documents by the United Nations Organisation, the concept of the Middle East has been regularly used regardless the fact that the categorisation of regions by the UNO does not list a region under this name, but uses the concepts of South Asia and Central Asia respectively as two areas in which some countries of the Middle East are included.

7 The Coalition of the Gulf War made the 34 countries opposed to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. It was led by USA. Among other countries, the Coalition was formed of the troops of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrein and Afghanistan.

8 Bartos, O.J., Wehr, P (2002). *Using Conflict Theory*; Cambridge: University Press, p.12

9 Ibidem, p.13

10 Galtung, J. (1996). *Peace by Peaceful Means*; Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, pp. 70-71

11 Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T., Miall, H. (2007). *Contemporary Conclict Resolution*; Cambridge / Malden: Polity Press, p.64

12 Ibidem, pp. 84-89

13 Among the definitions of a consolidated democracy, which means the end of the process of democratic transition, the most plastic is the description of democracy as the 'only game in town.' Democratic theorists Juan L. Linz and Alfred Stepan believe that the democratic transition is completed when "sufficient agreement is achieved about the political actions that bring about an elected government, when the government gains power directly on the basis of free and general elections, when such govern-

ment has real power to enact new politics, and when the executive, legislative, and judiciary powers that were created by the new democracy, *de iure* do not have to share power with other actors" (according to Linz, J. and Stepan A. (1998). *Demokratska tranzicija i konsolidacija*; Beograd: Filip Višnjić, p. 15)

14 These are freedom of forming and joining political organizations, freedom of expression, the right to vote, the right to run for public offices, the right of political leaders to compete for support, that is, compete for votes, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, and institutions that secure that the governmental politics depends on the number of votes and other means of expression of preferences that citizens have (Dahl, R. J. (1998). *Poliarhija; Participacija i opozicija*; Zagreb: Politička kultura, p. 13)

15 Sultanism is a type of undemocratic political system that is characterized by a general glorification of the personality of the ruler, extremely personalized and arbitrary action by the highest ranking state officials, pseudology, and a strong repressive apparatus. In line with its name, its historical origin is traced back to the Middle East (according to Linz, J., Stepan, A. (1998). *Demokratska tranzicija i konsolidacija*; Beograd: Filip Višnjić, pp 66-67)

16 "This does not refer to the international connections that link most terrorism to transborder networks, including diaspora support constituencies, internet communications or criminal supply and money-laudering facilities, but to the relatively small groups of dedicates terrorists who are international in both personnel and purpose and are rooted in nationally based organizations." Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T., Miall, H. (2007). *Contemporary Conclict Resolution*; Cambridge / Malden: Polity Press, p.71

17 According to Smith, D. (2006). *The State of the Middle East: An Atlas of Conflict and Resolution;* Brighton: Earthscan, p. 42

18 „The intellectual and theoretical justification for area studies is that there is something inherently similar about countries that make up a particular geographical region oft he world, such as Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Whether it is common history, language, religion, politics, or culture, researchers working in area studies are essentially employing most similar systems design, and the focus on countries from these regions effectively controls for those features that are common to them while looking for those features that are not." (Landman, T. (2000). *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics: An Introduction;* London / New York: Routledge, p. 28.

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