



 **NTNU**
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology



Grand Strategy

Mapping the Contemporary Middle East

IMEIS, Durham University
&
Dept of Historical Studies, NTNU Trondheim Norway

4th-5th September 2019

Venue

Room 102, Al Qasimi Building, Durham University

Conference Panels and Abstracts

Day One: 4th September 2019

Grand Strategy in the Middle East: History and Context.

09:00 – 09:30 Registration/Coffee

09:30 - 10:00 Welcoming Remarks: Grand Strategy and the Middle East – Themes and Issues Prof Clive Jones

10:00 – 12:15 Panel One: Grand Strategy and the Great Powers: The Historical Legacy

Chair: Prof. Anoush Ehteshami

Russian Grand Strategies toward the Middle East: Tsarist, Soviet, and Putinist (Part 1)

Prof Mark Katz George Mason University

Russia is a country that Western and other observers have often claimed pursues a grand strategy in the Middle East (as well as elsewhere), and that it does so far more determinedly and successfully than its Western counterparts. But what has that grand strategy been, and what is it now? If it exists, it is hardly a uniform grand strategy spanning centuries and regimes. Different Russian leaders have, in fact, pursued markedly different policies toward the Middle East at different times and under different circumstances. The ideological justifications of Tsarist, Soviet, and Putinist policies toward this region have also been quite different from each other. Yet despite their differences, there have been certain commonalities in their approach to the region, including a marked tendency to forego ideology in favor of expediency, and to pursue seemingly contradictory aims either sequentially or even simultaneously. As a result, Tsarist, Soviet, and Putinist policies toward the Middle East have often appeared to be more a series of tactical maneuvers than a coherent grand strategy.

This paper seeks to elucidate how, despite the different political ideologies they adhered to and the different circumstances they faced, there have been many similarities in how Tsarist, Soviet, and Putinist Russia have envisioned both the threats to and opportunities for Russia in the Middle East. Further, it seeks to argue that while the Tsarist, Soviet, and Putinist grand strategies toward the Middle East all met with an impressive degree of success, the Tsarist and Soviet grand strategies also suffered from certain inherent problems—not least of which has been a tendency to overestimate Russia's ability to achieve its strategic aims—that may also negatively impact what Putin's grand strategy toward the region may accomplish.

France, Grand Strategy and the Middle East

Dr Rachel Uttley University of Leeds

France is no stranger to engagement with, and intervention in, the Middle East. From the campaign in Egypt and Syria at the turn of the nineteenth century to the Suez campaign of the mid-twentieth, and in the present, successive French governments have perceived France to be a Middle East

power, as much by history and habit as by means and might. However, while these factors contribute to reasons for French engagement in the Middle East, by themselves they are an insufficient explanation of motives underlying France's ongoing commitments to, and interventions in, the region. The international context within which French engagements have unfolded has changed significantly from the colonial context, through the strategic dynamics of the Cold War, into the post-Cold War world and to the present. France's stance toward the Middle East in certain key respects however appears to hold firm.

This raises a number of questions which this contribution will seek to address. First, how significant is the weight of history and precedent in perspectives on contemporary French strategy in the Middle East? Second, given profound changes in the international landscape, especially since the end of the Cold War, to what extent have France's priorities in grand strategy in the Middle East reflected these changes? Third, what precisely is France's grand strategy in the region in the twenty-first century, and fourth, what are the prospects and implications of its pursuit? In a period of flux, one thing seems assured: France is unlikely to row back on its priorities in this region.

Disorganised Orientalism: British Grand Strategy and the Middle East

Dr Carly Beckerman Durham University

It is difficult to reconcile the study of British post-war grand strategy with scholarship about British policy towards the Middle East. Although it is widely accepted that modern Britain has struggled to project a coherent grand strategy onto the world stage, British intentions towards the Middle East have generally been characterised as deliberately neo-colonial. Much post-colonial work, for example, assumes the existence of a grand strategy, as though British policy towards the Middle East has always been guided by coherent goals. Which, then, is more accurate – the image of a bumbling power incapable of grand strategy, or the portrayal of Britain as purposefully Orientalist? To address this incompatibility between the two literatures, this chapter explores the meaning of grand strategy as a process of policy formation. It views grand strategy as “informed by history, identity and the credibility of the national narrative” but defined as “the organisation of large means in pursuit of large uncertain ends over medium to long time frames”. As such, this chapter identifies the British actors and national role conceptions that would inform any medium- to long-term strategizing for the Middle East. It then seeks to understand the domestic political constraints preventing policy-makers from articulating a coherent grand strategy for the region. This is intended to help reconcile the inconsistencies noted above by detailing how even prevalent neo-colonial or Orientalist ideals have failed to translate into concrete

The United States, the Middle East and Grand Strategy

Prof Tore Petersen, NTNU, Trondheim

For a country long associated with the very term, Grand Strategy, United States policy-making towards the Middle East has often been conspicuous by its very absence. From the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower, through to the Presidency of Bill Clinton, Washington's approach to the region has been marked by poor strategic thinking, no clearly defined overall goals, hardly any long-term planning, and marked by a series of shifting policies executed piecemeal on an ad-hoc basis.

The failed attempts to court President Nasser in the 1960s under the Kennedy Administration, the apparent inability to force Israel to cease settlement construction in the West Bank, as well as the failure to ensure the survival of the Pahlavi dynasty, all stand as examples where the ideal of Grand Strategy manifested itself as limited tactics. This paper therefore lifts the veil on the myth of a coherent United States Grand Strategy towards the Middle East over five decades, arguing instead that it has garnered little tangible influence from its relations with a series of regional actors, who, despite Washington's often impressive military and economic largesse, have often danced to very different tunes.

12:15 – 1400: Lunch

14:00 -16:30 Panel Two: Grand Strategy from the Ground Up – the Regional Actors

Chair: Prof. Clive Jones

Iran's Grand Strategy under the Pahlavis

Iran: Prof Anoush Ehteshami Durham University

For much of the period following the fall of the Safavid dynasty in 1736, Persia found itself in a geopolitical struggle to protect the empire's independence and vast territory from emerging European imperial powers. The modern state of Iran was finally established early twentieth century, largely by the efforts of Reza Shah Pahlavi, but it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the second Pahlavi monarch, Mohammad Reza, found the will and the means to develop and articulate a vision and what might be termed a grand strategy for the country. Bolstered by the close partnership with the West, notably the United States, and a regional linchpin against the Soviet Union (Communism), the Shah initiated a series of domestic reforms in the 1963, known as the White Revolution, in an effort to modernize Iranian society and state. Building on this, and boldened by rapid increases in oil prices from 1972, the monarchy began the rapid march towards the 'Great Civilization' and major power status. The building blocks of Iran's grand strategy were a directive control of the state by the monarch, high oil prices, a close military partnership with the United States, and an industrial and technical base able to sustain an emerging 'Asian tiger' to rival Japan on the world stage. The ingredients of the strategy – its key features, successes and failures – will form the core of this paper and help towards better understanding the state inherited by the country's clerical establishment in 1979.

Israel: The Primacy of Security in the Absence of a Grand Strategy 1948-1988

Prof Zach Levey, University of Haifa

Israel has produced no formal document articulating a grand strategy. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify both the main features and evolution of its security policies. The present study elucidates

the main strategic objectives that Israel pursued during the first four decades since independence. Israeli leaders considered the attainment of these goals imperative for the survival of the Jewish state, viewing them in the broadest terms and by no means as plans confined to the military sphere. This work examines five principal dimensions of Israel's security doctrine, assigning each its place in the strategic and chronological setting. Thus, first, until 1967 the geostrategic dimension forced Israel to cope with long borders, a narrow "waist" and a dearth of natural barriers to separate it from hostile neighbours. Second, the demographic dimension dictating a sustained effort to effect large-scale Jewish immigration was intimately tied to the very ethos of the Zionist state. Third, Israel was concerned to ensure an arms supply commensurate with its security requirements but pursued, too, an atomic energy program intended to afford it a nuclear military option. A fourth dimension was diplomatic endeavour in the widest context, designed to ensure great power support, obviate isolation and enlist regional allies beyond the confrontation states. A fifth element is that of four material assets vital to Israel's security and strategy; water, energy, capital and technology. Our analysis of these five dimensions takes us to the end of the period during which Israel faced existential threats on the conventional plane.

Grand Strategy from the Ground Up: The Case of Turkey

Dr Simon Waldman, Research Fellow King's College London

After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, foreign policy was governed by the maxim of the country's first president and principle state-builder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, "Peace at home, peace in the world". However, Ataturk's statement was not a strategy. If anything, it resembled an ideal or aspiration, an end with open questions about the means. Until 1938, the year of Ataturk's death, Turkey's foreign policy, although pragmatic, lacked grand strategy. The period was marked by isolation as Turkey prioritised domestic affairs and the need for rapid development and modernisation in order to thrive as a nation-state. Upon Ataturk's death, the priority of the next Prime Minister Ismet Inonu was to keep Turkey out of World War II and maintain neutrality. However, it was during the post-war period that Turkey developed the semblance of what can be described as a grand strategy as Ankara placed itself firmly within the Western camp. Turkey received Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan aid. It joined Nato and enthusiastically sent troops to Korea. However, by the 1960s there were significant strains on Turkey's pro-Western trajectory, not least because of the ensuing period of détente and US and European opposition to Turkish interests in Cyprus. Nevertheless, this paper will argue that, until recently, mutual self-interest and shared threats ensured that Turkey's strategic orientation remained within the western orbit and contributed to Turkey's enhanced standing within its neighbouring regions.

Egypt and its 'Grand Strategies'? The Primacy of Regime Survival from Nasser to Mubarak

Dr Dina Rezk, Reading University

As the largest and most populous nation in the Middle East, Egypt's foreign policies have historically played a vital strategic role in the region. But what, if any 'grand strategy' have the nation's republican presidents pursued? This paper explores how the different approaches of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak might be conceptualized. After President Nasser's triumphant political victory in the Suez Crisis, a spate of nationalist upheavals in Syria, Iraq and Yemen appeared to place Egypt in the

position of revolutionary vanguard, leveraging the support of the Soviet Union in the Cold War. But to what extent did pragmatism prevail over ideology in Nasser's pan-Arabism? By contrast, the resounding defeat of the 1967 war ushered in a Western allied policy of 'Egypt first' in the region, epitomized in President Sadat's bilateral peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Egypt was thereby isolated from its traditional role as leader of the Arab world. Under Mubarak, a policy of reconciliation with Egypt's patrons in the Gulf took priority, alongside a 30 year struggle to manage intra-state competition between Egypt's 'soldiers, spies and statesmen' (Kandil 2012) at home, eventually culminating in Egypt's 'Arab Spring.' This paper reveals the continuity and change in Egypt's strategic priorities over the past 70 years, highlighting the primacy of concerns for regime survival in the formation of foreign policy.

A Pivoting Kingdom? Unpacking and Mapping Saudi Arabia's Grand Strategy across the Ages

Dr Philip Gater-Smith University of Tübingen

This paper seeks to identify, unpack, and visualize key spheres and elements of Saudi Arabia's own grand strategy across the ages, as well as Saudi Arabia's place and role in the grand strategies of involved great powers. It thereby integrates and updates this particular case with the literature on grand strategy in general, by focusing especially on the concept of the "pivot state" as an analytical framework. Defined by Sweijis et. Al. as a type of state that possesses 'military, economic or ideational strategic assets that are coveted by great powers [...] [and] caught in the middle of [their] overlapping spheres of influence', the goal is to map the actual and potential flexibilities and shifts in Saudi Arabia's grand strategic orientation along these three dimensions.

The paper examines these specifically over three turning points in the Saudis' past and present interaction with the great powers of Britain, America, and today's returning multipolarity. Given the latter's intersection with the vast social, economic, and security challenges to the Kingdom and its disruptive and disputed Salman regime, measuring how far Saudi Arabia may once again be undertaking a strategic pivot is of critical importance to the country, the region and the world.

19:00 – 21:00 Conference Dinner

Day Two

Grand Strategy and the Middle East: The Contemporary Debates

09:00 – 09:30 Coffee

09:30 – 10:30 Key Note Address: Sir Richard Dalton former UK Ambassador to Iran and Libya

10:30 – 10:45 Coffee Break

11:00 – 13:00 Panel Three: Grand Strategy and the Middle East: the New International Players

Chair: Dr Carly Beckerman

Russia: Professor Mark Katz, George Mason University

Russian Grand Strategies toward the Middle East: Tsarist, Soviet, and Putinist (Part 2)

Russia is a country that Western and other observers have often claimed pursues a grand strategy in the Middle East (as well as elsewhere), and that it does so far more determinedly and successfully than its Western counterparts. But what has that grand strategy been, and what is it now? If it exists, it is hardly a uniform grand strategy spanning centuries and regimes. Different Russian leaders have, in fact, pursued markedly different policies toward the Middle East at different times and under different circumstances. The ideological justifications of Tsarist, Soviet, and Putinist policies toward this region have also been quite different from each other. Yet despite their differences, there have been certain commonalities in their approach to the region, including a marked tendency to forego ideology in favor of expediency, and to pursue seemingly contradictory aims either sequentially or even simultaneously. As a result, Tsarist, Soviet, and Putinist policies toward the Middle East have often appeared to be more a series of tactical maneuvers than a coherent grand strategy.

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The United States and Grand Strategy in the Contemporary Era

Dr Donette Murray, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, UK

Strategy, considered by some to deserve the appellation 'Grand', is complex and contested. Often criticised for being elitist and anachronistic, debates highlight issues of relevance and form, desirability and attainability. What is more, for some, a glimpse of Grand Strategy is perhaps most clearly perceived in a presidentially-monikered doctrine – a conceptual construction attached to an administration and considered its *raison d'être* - that focuses attention on more discrete aspects of foreign policy making.

This paper contends that the challenge lies not in explicating what George H W Bush termed 'the vision thing'. Goals of national prosperity and protection, accomplished through an assertion of primacy, have long underpinned and driven US foreign policies, whether articulated as the Monroe Doctrine, Isolationism, Containment, the 'New World Order' or the neoconservative agenda of the early twenty-first century. 'America First' – the vision advanced by President Donald J Trump - has an historical pedigree. Indeed, and contrary to what the President has asserted, no US administration would be described, accurately, as having embraced or promulgated an 'American Second' platform. Baldly stated, these are truisms and tropes of US foreign policy. It is axiomatic to assert that security - broadly conceived and with a heavy emphasis on stability – motivates and informs US calculations and machinations around the world, including *vis-à-vis* the Middle East.

A better view is that a more meaningful debate turns, not on the vision or goal *per se*, but on how this is understood and realised. At a very basic level, 'America First's' subtitle 'Make America Great Again' suggests an unduly pessimistic and broadly misconceived base line. So armed, this paper asks three questions: Does the Trump administration have a Grand Strategy? What is the character of this strategy, Grand or otherwise, in the Middle East? And finally, what are most salient implications of this strategy for the region and beyond?

China and the Middle East: A Global Strategy where the Middle East has a Significant but Limited Place

Professor Tim Niblock, Tsinghua University and the University of Exeter

This paper contends that, of all the Great Powers, China has the most clearly articulated and consistently-pursued Grand Strategy. It consists of mobilising China's human and material resources around a strategy which gives priority to protecting China's territorial integrity, and asserting China's rights over maritime areas and islands in the "Nine-Dash Line Area" in the East and South China Seas. Beyond that, as reflected in the Belt and Road Initiative and the various Strategic Partnership Agreements with countries stretching to the West and South, the objective is to build "win-win" relationships with countries of the Global South, where Chinese economic interests and the developmental interests of Global South countries interact to the benefit of both. Engagement in the established global institutions (political, financial and trading) is maintained and to some extent deepened, while at the same time alternate institutions geared more to the perceived interests of China and Global South countries are developed. This strategy cannot be conceived in terms of any of the conceptualisations associated with Grand Strategy: it is not expansionist in the traditional sense; it is not exclusively defensive; and it is not "pragmatic" (if that refers to short-term and largely reactive, policies). The spread of China's global economic network requires some enhancement of political and perhaps military engagement, but this is carefully calibrated so as not to entail alignment in regional conflicts. Within this structure, the Middle East carries significance, but that

significance should not be overstated. The importance of the economic relationship needs to be balanced against a strong Chinese determination to avoid entanglement in the intra-regional struggles occurring in a region of limited strategic importance to China.

The European Union and Grand Strategy

Dr Jacob Eriksson, University of York

In its 2016 Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy, the European Union (EU) pledges to promote peace and a rules-based global order, on the basis of shared principles and human rights. Two of its five priorities include 'An integrated approach to conflict', from conflict prevention to stabilization to post-war engagement, and 'Global governance for the 21st century', based on international law and multilateralism. The challenge of translating these noble strategic ambitions into action, however, is proving difficult, particularly in the Middle East. This paper will analyse the EU's contributions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Syria, and the precarious Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or Iran nuclear deal, which illustrate a number of shortcomings in their approach to the region. While the EU funds a number of important humanitarian projects, its ability to turn economic and normative power into strategic outcomes is limited. Multilateralism, a principle which lies at the heart of the organization, is hard to practice effectively, something which affects both the internal decision-making process and the EU's relations with external partners.

British 'Grand Strategy' and the Contemporary Middle East: Between the Legacy of Empire, and the Impact of BREXIT.

Dr Noel Guckian (former HM ambassador to Oman).

Since the EU Referendum in June 2016, the workings of British Foreign Policy, and indeed of the government, has been gridlocked by Brexit. This has also been noticeable in the Middle East. As such, this paper covers the challenges that now define the UK approach to the region, from the evolution of relations with powers whom Britain has traditionally enjoyed a close relationship with, including Jordan and the Gulf monarchies, through to those regional powers where relations have been for more vexed, including latterly Iran and Iraq. It also examines the role the UK has played in trying to broker an agreement, often as part of the EU, between Israel and the Palestinians, as well its role more recently in intervening in comments in the so called troika of failed state: Yemen, Libya and Syria.

Underpinning this analysis is the argument that despite the widely held perception, the British withdrawal east of Suez after 1971 was largely overstated. While British interests in the region might be subjected too (although not dictated) by the rather mercurial character of the Trump Administration, it remains clear that the UK wants to remain a major player in the region, partly because of "History", but also because of Brexit. Some elements of this 'British strategy' are already well dug in and in place; others are still a work in progress. The UK will remain an important player in this region, but realistically, one whose interests and values will increasingly have to compete with a range of outside actors.

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch

14:00 – 16:00 Panel Four: Grand Strategy – The Regional Actors

Chair: Prof. Clive Jones

From Famine to Feast: The Gulf Arab States and Pursuit of Grand Strategy in the Contemporary Era

Prof Rory Miller School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Doha

This paper will examine the evolving efforts of the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (the GCC) – Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain – to develop grand strategies in an important and vulnerable sub-region of the wider Middle East. There is a consensus in the literature that from the time of the GCC's establishment in 1981 until its paralysis in the wake of the embargo of Qatar in 2017, its members lacked strategic ambitions. Instead, having accepted the constraints of the anarchic international system in a region that has experienced three major interstate wars based on the balance-of-power since 1980, they relied overwhelmingly on the United States for their strategic security needs. Where they did attempt to act autonomously, either as a group or individually, they only focused on maintaining moderate and cautious (even conservative) policies intended to address immediate security concerns and domestic political needs. This assessment accurately describes the situation for much of the last half century. However, this paper will argue that in recent decades far from lacking strategic ambitions, a number of these states have been overly preoccupied with formulating and executing grand strategies in response to their own specific threat perceptions and in the service of their own selfish national interests. In line with the conference's key themes and issues, this paper will examine why this has occurred and assess whether these evolving strategies, which have impacted greatly on the regional security environment, can be classified as pragmatic, defensive-fatalist or expansionist-triumphalist.

Iran and Grand Strategy

Prof Gawdat Baghat National Defence University, Washington D.C

For millennia, Tehran has paid close attention to its relations with the Arab states on the Persian Gulf. Oil revenues provide large share of the national income in all these countries. The paper examines the long-term determinants of Iranian regional policy particularly geopolitics, nationalism, Islam and economic performance. Against this background, the essay focuses on Tehran's relations with the six Gulf Cooperation Council states and Iraq. The argument is, rhetoric aside, Iranian regional policy is mainly driven by geo-policy and much less by ideological orientation (i.e. Sunni-Shiite and Arab-Persian rifts).

Locating Strategy and Agency in Israeli Foreign Policy amid the Arab Uprisings

Dr Amnon Aran, City University

This paper challenges the conventional wisdom that Israel's foreign policy lacks strategy and is often pursued ad hoc. Instead, it will argue that Israel's foreign policy is strategic by examining Israeli foreign policy in the wake of the Arab uprisings, which has generated a great deal of academic scholarship. However, the foreign policy of Israel, a key power in the Middle East, has received limited attention. Furthermore, as this paper will demonstrate, the conventional wisdom purported by the current debate, which is that Israel adopted a 'defensive realist' foreign policy posture in the wake of the Arab uprisings, is wrong. Rather, utilising an innovative approach that looks at Israeli foreign policy through a domestic lens, this paper will demonstrate that Israel adopted a foreign policy strategy of entrenchment. This posture is predicated on peace for peace not territory, reinforcing Israel's military capabilities, and granting limited autonomy to the Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Unlike the traditional view of Israeli foreign policy decision-making, which portrays it as ad hoc and lacking in planning, the paper shows that entrenchment derived from a coherent strategy and that agency is located firmly within the office of the prime minister.

Turkey's Grand Strategy Making in the Syrian Conflict : A Neoclassical Realist Approach

Cangul Altudas-Ackay, Durham University

Grand Strategy can be defined broadly as comprehensive, long-term tools of a state to achieve its primary political objectives. In this context, from the advent of AKP in power in 2002 to the outset of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, Turkey's grand strategy has involved numerous soft-power foreign policy tools, such as 'strategic depth', 'zero-problems-with-neighbours', and 'economic dependency'. Following the Arab Uprisings, however, Turkey shifted its foreign policy behaviour, adopting a more activist grand strategic behaviour in an effort to enhance its relative power position. This has been most visible in its embrace of Islamist and revisionist policies as Ankara attempts to shape its regional environment. The paper thus explores the motivations and factors behind Turkey's grand strategic shifts in the Syrian Conflict. To conceptualise Turkey's grand strategic shifts, the paper utilises a neoclassical realist approach that has strong parallels with the concepts of a grand strategy by bringing systemic and unit-level variables in examining a state's foreign policy behaviour. That is to say, regional and domestic levels are investigated in terms of their effects on the configuration and implementation of Turkey's grand strategy in the Syrian Conflict.