



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

**The Middle East in 2019: Plus ça change ...
or worse?**

by Ferry de Kerckhove

May 2019

POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute
1800, 421 – 7th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 4K9
www.cgai.ca

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ISBN: 978-1-77397-073-8



The Middle East has continuously been in turmoil for all the decades since the end of the Second World War, starting with the creation of Israel and the first Arab-Israeli conflict but certainly not limited to it. But what has made things different in recent years is the level of horror reached in a region not short of harrowing events. And this is not the exclusive realm of Daesh, as evidenced by the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi on either direct instruction from, or on behalf of, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Meanwhile, the Egyptian regime has become increasingly autocratic and, with the tacit support of Western governments, indifferent to international human rights norms. With more journalists imprisoned in Turkey than in any other country, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is following in Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's footsteps. The recent municipal election fallouts are unlikely to change the situation. UN efforts notwithstanding, Yemen remains a killing field thanks to the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with the latter doing most of the horrific damage to the Yemeni population. Libya is still looking for a unified government but not necessarily the kind General Khalifa Haftar wishes to impose.

Algerians have managed to derail President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's quest for a fifth term although the situation remains fluid and potentially explosive. The old stalwarts look to prevent losing it all to demonstrators seeking change, but are unsure of how to wield their newly acquired power. The results of the presidential elections may well define the country's future. Omar al-Bashir's 30+ years of rule have ended in Sudan, making us all wonder if an Arab Spring 2.0 is in the offing or if the Sudanese military will simply imitate its northern neighbours. It puts a temporary dent in the U.S. administration's attempt to cosy up to Bashir, but it will likely manage with the new "temporary" regime.

Nick Paton Walsh underscores the fundamental difference between 2011 and 2019: "... the most significant change in the past eight years is in the White House and Brussels. Places that once stood tall, demanding that outdated and unjust dictators heed the will of the streets, are too absorbed by their own rifts now to forcefully articulate convictions."¹ What is certain is that uncertainty in the whole region will only increase and Western countries will be guided by their immediate interests rather than by altruistic impulses. Europe will not entertain new massive migration flows. The U.S. will limit its intervention to the fight against terrorism and will court dictators, as evidenced by the regal treatment President Donald Trump offered to the Egyptian president and the Saudi monarchy.

Syria remains in the hands of the same murderous leader the West so wanted out but the latter has apparently conceded his maintenance in power to Moscow. Unexpectedly, Iran remains faithful to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal despite the U.S. pull-out. However, the theocratic government's oppression of its people as well as nefarious activities in the region and beyond have not lessened. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt have turned their wrath on Qatar, for having seemingly sided too closely with

¹ Nick Paton Walsh, "Arab Spring 2.0' is a Reboot Full of Bugs," CNN, April 13, 2019. Available at <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/13/middleeast/npw-arab-spring-sudan-analysis-intl/index.html>



its Persian neighbour. They have established a total blockade of the country which only the forthcoming soccer World Cup in Qatar might end. Finally, beyond Daesh's demise, other older terrorist groups are reviving. As Colin Clarke puts it, "Its experience fighting in Syria has expanded al-Qaeda's contacts, and, given the [proliferation of jihadist groups](#) worldwide – 67 active groups as of 2019 – there will be more opportunities for al-Qaeda to work with like-minded terrorists from North Africa to Southeast Asia. The threat is compounded by globalization, with barriers to entry for harnessing the power of technology lower than ever."² Irony of history, Iraq continues to fall into Iran's orbit.

Thus, the question for 2019 is simple: are the trends to perdure or will overarching strategic imperatives and local interests allow for changes in the region's dynamics? Such a review must take place on two levels of analysis – that of competing world powers and that of regional/local players. Given the diversity of players and interests, as was seen throughout the Daesh crisis, predicting the future in the Middle East requires considerable work on one's crystal ball. In fact, the region is more like a pool table – a knock on one ball can bring disasters to all the others.

Daesh and Syria

While Trump repeatedly claimed that Daesh had been defeated, it only happened with the fall of Baghouz, the last stronghold of the self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria. There is a consensus that while territorially the group no longer holds permanent ground, its ideology and capabilities have not been eradicated – far from it. There are areas in remote parts of Syria and even Iraq where Daesh-inspired insurgencies can re-emerge. Two issues come out of the defeat: what to do about Syria and how to counter radicalization before remnants of Daesh are re-energized (all the more so now that European countries will release 1,500 convicted terrorists over the next 12 months³). Deradicalization spawned many theories but delivered limited results.

Syria's future is the most important geostrategic issue for the region, one on which Russia has a firm grip at present. Trump has managed to provoke angst in both Republican and Democrat ranks with his withdrawal announcement and, more recently, his expressed desire to stop funding the stabilization program in Syria. Admittedly, the idea of propping up the Assad regime through reconstruction is not very palatable. However, not rebuilding Syria offers the remnants of Daesh a golden opportunity to rebuild on the ruins of destroyed infrastructure, cities and villages. This might explain why some Democratic aspirants to the presidency refuse to denounce Bashar al-Assad's actions as crimes against humanity. The U.S.-made linkage between working on a political solution for Syria and the removal of Iranian-led forces in Syria strengthens Russia as the ultimate referee in post-Daesh Syria. A growing number of Syrian refugees are slowly returning to Syria, if only to prevent the regime from further seizing their properties and distributing them to its

² Colin P. Clarke, "How Terrorist Groups Learn: Implications for Al-Qaeda," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 13, 2019. Available at https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/03/how-terrorist-groups-learn-implications-for-al-qaeda/?utm_source=Fareed%27s+Global+Briefing&utm_campaign=3edb4109df-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_03_14_10_53&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6f2e93382a-3edb4109df-83618225

³ Paul Peachey, "Terrorists Set for Release Across EU Without Proper Monitoring," *The National*, March 6, 2019. Available at <https://amp.thenational.ae/world/europe/terrorists-set-for-release-across-eu-without-proper-monitoring-1.833947>

faithful. Thus, the Europeans may decide to ignore the criminal leader and join in the reconstruction to reduce the inflow of more migrants into their countries.

After seven years of conflict, hundreds of thousands of people dead and injured, millions of refugees and wanton destruction, the country is back to the status quo ante under Assad. Today, the West, which made the most of the contribution in support of the Peshmerga and others involved in the war against Daesh, finds itself excluded from determining Syria's future. Meanwhile, the internally competing triad of Russia, Iran and Turkey dictates the outcome while paying lip service to the UN mechanism established under Security Council Resolution 2224. None of that means that real peace will return to Syria, as the wounds of seven years of civil war remain raw. Geostrategically, Russia has trumped the U.S. The region as a whole is unlikely to forget.

“Don't cry for Kurdistan”

It is unanimously agreed that Kurdish fighters, from the battle of Kobanê in 2014 onwards, in their respective and competing configurations of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Peshmerga (see table below), are principally responsible for the victory over Daesh in both Iraq and Syria. But the future or lack thereof for some form of autonomous Kurdistan defines the survival of the Syrian Kurds now that Trump has vowed to leave Syria. His subsequent partial retraction still provided Erdogan some hope that he could control northern Syria through the establishment of a buffer zone to prevent the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and YPG forces to mount operations against Turkey. That option, of course, became the alternative to Turkey's earlier support of, or connivance with, Daesh to destroy the YPG forces. It is likely to fail as well as Syria regains its full sovereignty. The danger remains of Turkey's pounding northern Syria, and only Russia provides a barrier to this.

Turkish Kurds	Syrian Kurds	Iraqi Kurds
		
PKK: Banned Kurdistan Workers' Party led by Abdullah Ocalan (jailed since 1999)	PYD: Democratic Unity Party, aligned to the PKK	KRG: Kurdish Regional Government
PKK: Operates some camps in northern Iraq	YPG: Armed force, aligned to the PYD	Peshmerga: Armed forces of the KRG
		KDP: Dominant Iraqi Kurdish Party, led by Massoud Barzani
Aligned		

Thus, the fate of the Syrian Kurds remains a critical issue. Yet, history tells us there will never be a Kurdish state. The last opportunity occurred during the negotiation of the 1922 Treaty of Sèvres which included a draft Kurdish state. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk made sure it did not happen and divisions within the Kurdish tribes ensure today that dreams of a country – over 30 million Kurds altogether – remain dreams. It is a well-known fact that Iraqi Kurds are close to Turkey and at odds with the PKK led by Abdullah Ocalan, but less known is the diversity of the Kurdish peoples as shown in the map below.

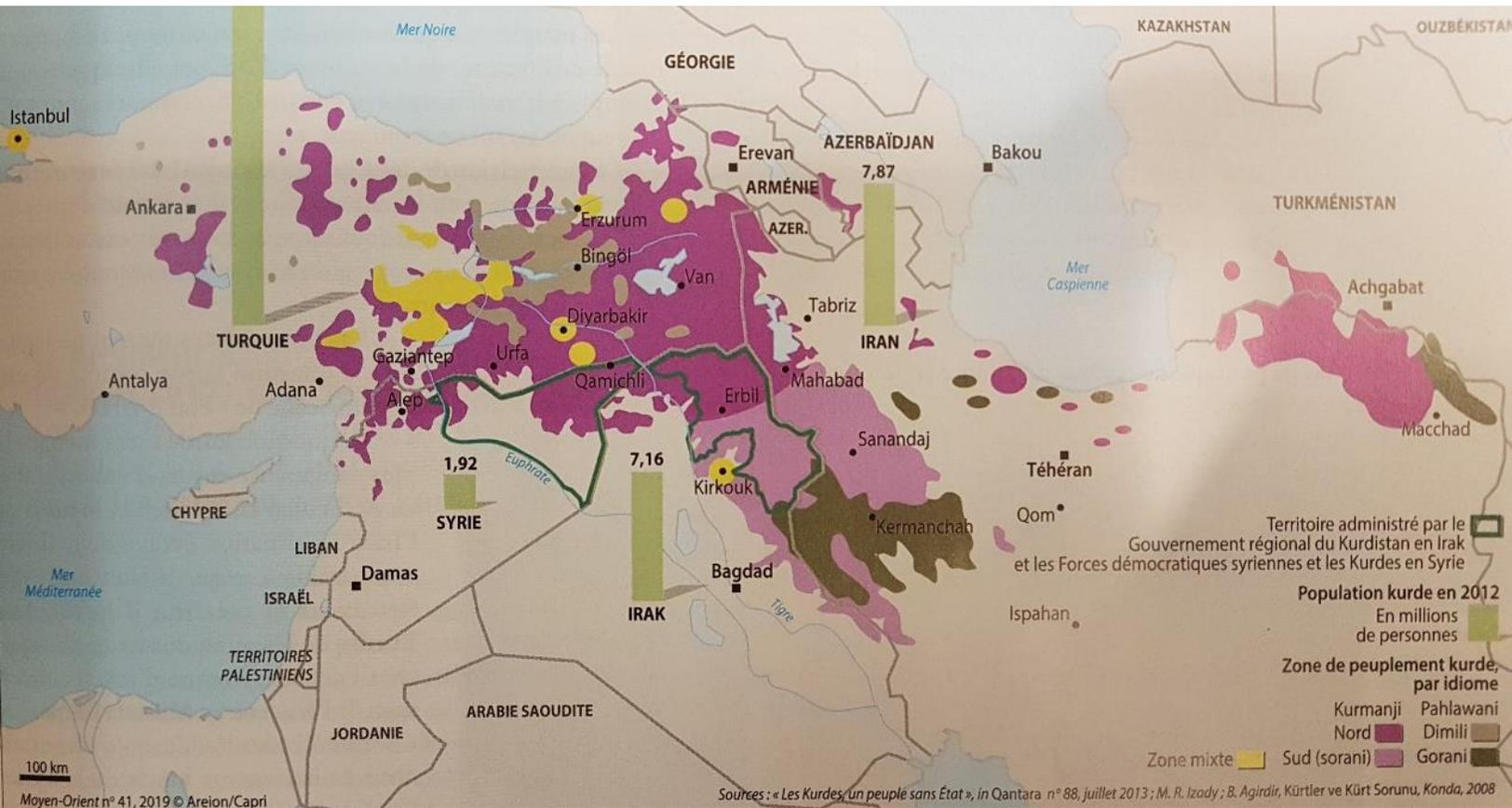


Figure 1: The Geography and Demography of the Kurdish Peoples⁴

The struggle against Daesh provided the Kurds with a powerful international window but, at the same time, enmeshed it with the Arab narrative which, ultimately, is more important for the geostrategic players such as Turkey, Iran, Russia and, hopefully, the U.S. The divisions among the various Kurdish political entities, parties and even economic concepts will negate all the gains from their prowess in battle. So, ironically, any kind of future for Kurdish autonomy rests upon the good will of the Syrian regime. The U.S.-announced withdrawal brought an immediate shift by the Kurds themselves in that direction.

⁴ *Moyen-Orient*, numéro 41, janvier-mars 2019.



Iran and Saudi Arabia – Dante’s Inferno

If there is a defining geostrategic conflict in the Middle East, this is it. Indeed, this is a conflict which one way or another engages all the regional countries. Riyadh counts on support from the UAE, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan and, increasingly openly, Israel. Iran is in cahoots with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Both actors are desperately trying to dislodge each other’s partners. Some have argued that this conflict could be seen as simply the respective leaders’ desire to distract attention from urgent domestic issues, but it is much more than that. The systemic dimension of the conflict goes back to the Shia Khomeini populist religious revolution which challenged the Sunni Wahhabi elitist Saudi domination of the faithful through hosting the holy sites of Islam. For a number of years post-1979, this religious competition dominated the regional rivalry until, progressively, nationalism regained its influence, thereby giving it geographic and alliance structures.⁵ Today, at the macro level, the conflict has an unequal bipolar structure with Iran facing the U.S.-Saudi alliance. Yet, there is little chance of the armed conflict going beyond the Yemen proxy, unless Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu manages to entice Trump to engage Iran militarily, or the emerging Saudi nuclear power infrastructure finally pushes Iran to abandon the Obama administration’s JCPOA. In a sense, the horror of the Yemen war may act as a buffer against more adventurism on the players’ part. The fact that Saudi Arabia has been incapable of delivering a terminal blow to the Houthis in Yemen after three years of war, despite the U.S.’s extensive military support, does not speak well for Saudi military prowess. However, the human tragedy in Yemen trumps everything, to the point of both Democrats and Republicans demanding an end to U.S. military support to Saudi Arabia. One should also appreciate that even an end to the war in Yemen would not bring peace to that country. Conflict has been rampant there ever since the first civil war in 1994, which led to the highly divisive reunification of north and south Yemen. Then came the 2004 Shiite Houthi rebellion with kamikaze attacks against Saudi outposts, followed by further exacerbation of tensions post-Arab Spring. In a way, as French Yemen expert François Frison-Roche summarizes it: “Today, Yemen does not exist.”⁶ As for Iran, regime change which the U.S. and Israel will on the country is unlikely to happen. Both Russia and China have an interest in maintaining Persia as a key element of their concept of global stability and a source of energy not under U.S. control

Haftar’s Libya: An “American” general flexing his muscles!

The emerging international norm of the Responsibility to Protect met its early demise through the “perceived abuse of the UNSC resolution in Libya.”⁷ The result of the intervention and the regime change – officially, not the objective but clearly in the minds of everyone, notably the French and the British leadership – was a disaster. It plunged the country into total chaos which

⁵ See Ferry de Kerckhove, “The Sources of Fundamentalism: Is there an Indonesian Version?” *Kultur, The Indonesian Journal of Muslim Cultures*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2002. See also Gilles Kepel, *Jihad, the Trail of Political Islam*, (Harvard University: Belknap Press, 2002).

⁶ François Frison-Roche, « Yémen, un conflit appelé à durer » *Les Grands Dossiers de Diplomatie*, no. 48, Décembre 2018-Janvier 2019, 55. Available at <https://www.arenion24.news/2019/03/22/yemen-un-conflit-appelle-a-durer/>

⁷ Jay Crush, “The Responsibility to Protect in International Law,” E-International Relations Students, May 31, 2013. Available at <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/31/the-responsibility-to-protect-in-international-law/>

continues to this day, generating an exodus of migrants and providing for a massive inflow and redistribution of weapons throughout the regions of the Maghreb, the Mashriq and the Sahel. Strategically, Libya anchored the revisionism of Russia and China in international politics. These countries would never again be caught in the moral underpinning of Western interventions and the U.S. was no longer to be allowed to dictate the region's future.⁸ Russia started developing its ill-defined, Soviet-inspired geostrategic zone of influence with its re-emergence "as the central actor in Eurasia, with an agenda of integration and the ambition to establish Eurasia as a distinct political and security space."⁹ This led to the Crimea takeover and further encroachments in Ukraine, as well as, eventually, a dominant role in Syria's future.

Russia is pursuing a similar approach to Libya where, despite earlier volatile relations with the late Moammar Ghadhafi, it has had extensive investments. Early on, it saw Haftar – the eastern Libyan commander who had defeated Daesh in Cyrenaica and was made field marshal for the exploit – as the strongman who could bring stability to Libya on favourable terms for Russia. While paying lip service to the UN-backed government of Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj, from 2017 onwards Russia clearly decided to support Haftar, somewhat akin to its support for Assad. It provides financial support (including printing currency which Haftar is taking advantage of in his present campaign) and there are rumours that despite the UN-decreed arms embargo, Russia provides Haftar with advanced weaponry.

The same quest for stability entices Egypt to support Haftar, not only for his contribution to defeat Islamist terrorists, but also to hopefully pacify and unify the country from which up to a million Egyptian labourers send remittances to their

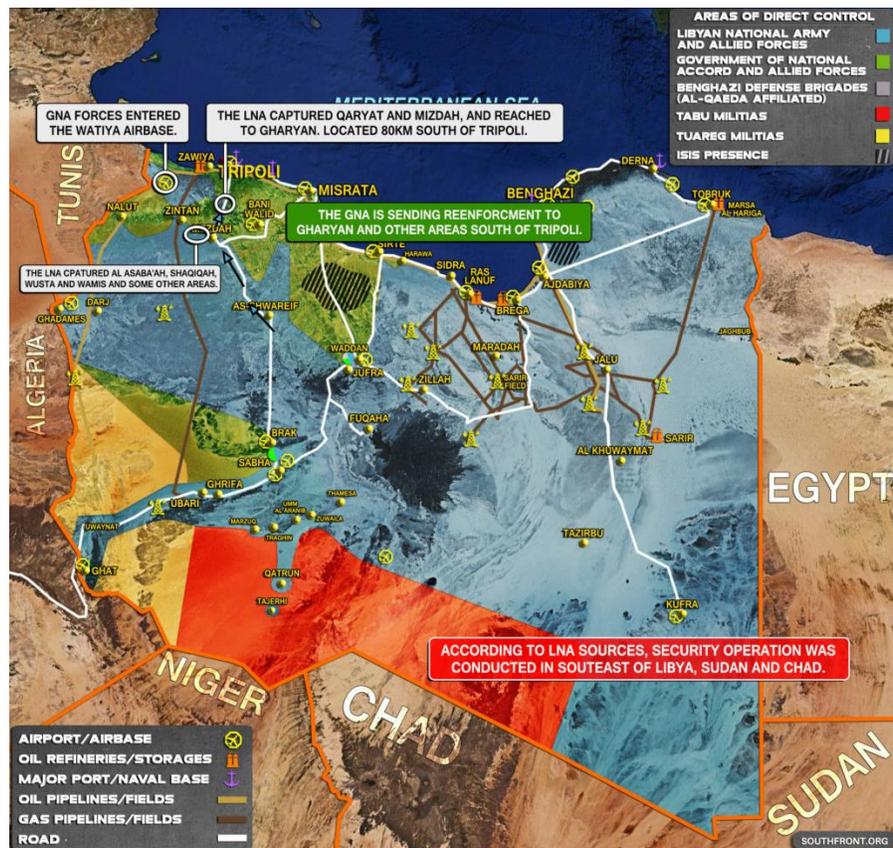


Figure 2: The military situation in Libya as of April 4, 2019. (Source: Maps and Conflicts Database <https://maps.southfront.org/military-situation-in-libya-on-april-4-2019-map-update/>)

⁸ Roland Paris, "The 'Responsibility to Protect' and the Structural Problems of Preventive Humanitarian Intervention," *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 21, 2014, no. 5. Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13533312.2014.963322>

⁹ "Russia and Eurasia," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, archived. Available at <https://www.sipri.org/research/conflict-and-peace/russia-and-eurasia>



relatives at home. Saudi Arabia and the Emirates also see Haftar as the slayer of terrorists. Even France provides tacit backing to him as the essential gatekeeper to further waves of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa. The U.S., which granted Haftar citizenship during his long period of exile in America, sees Libya strictly from the perspective of terrorism, congruent with its formal commitment to assist local authorities in the fight against the active remnants of al-Qaida and Daesh.

Libya remains strategically important as a producer of oil – also mostly under Haftar’s control. Every time the tribulations of the three competing centres of power or semblances of governments in Tripoli, Misrata and Benghazi interrupt Libyan oil deliveries, the international oil market has convulsions.

The key question is whether the world is ready to allow – or supports out of fatigue – the replacement of eight years of chaos, and admirable yet futile UN efforts, with yet another strongman at the helm in Libya, hopefully with greater common sense. Jason Peck provides an alternative view which does not answer the question but offers hope for a less tragic outcome: “Libya has been in a constant state of civil war for five years, and the unique patterns of the Libyan civil war must not be forgotten as we parse its latest developments. The recent march on Tripoli by Khalifa Haftar’s forces is more about media optics and projecting power, than about precipitating a blood bath for control of the capital.”¹⁰ That, however, requires us to believe that positioning for the national reconciliation conference on elections is really what motivates Haftar. And that would assume that the conference will be held in the present circumstances. Bottom line: the quagmire continues, but there will be no solution without Haftar being part of it one way or another.

Netanyahu’s crossing the Rubicon or the end of the two-state solution

Israel’s re-elected prime minister defied international law again when he promised that his government would annex all the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. This represents a significant change in the Israeli-Palestinian outlook. Yet, it is another confirmation of the prime minister’s fundamental refusal to accept the vaunted two-state solution to which he paid homage only once – at his Bar-Ilan University speech of June 14, 2009. His conditions then for a two-state solution entailed recognition of Israel as a Jewish state and the Palestinians’ acceptance of demilitarization, including ceding control of their airspace to Israel, accepting the existing settlements and acknowledging Jerusalem as the unified capital of Israel. He eventually disowned his speech, blaming the Palestinians for making it irrelevant. Settlements expanded and, today, a Palestinian state would look like islets strewn around massive settlement blocs, over a space smaller than 17 per cent of the original Palestinian mandate of 1947. Netanyahu’s statement,

¹⁰ Jason Peck, “The Backstory to Hifter’s March on Tripoli,” Al-Monitor, April 5, 2019. Available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/libya-khalifa-hifter-offensive-tripoli.html>; see also Tarek Megerisi, “While You Weren’t Looking, General Haftar Has Been Taking Over Libya,” *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2019. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/01/while-you-weren-looking-general-haftar-has-been-taking-over-libya-oil-united-nations/>



regardless of whether or how much he will give it some follow-up, is a moment of truth for Israelis, Palestinians and Arabs alike.

Indeed, it is time to put aside hypocrisy or illusions. The two-state solution is dead. Even Trump's nefarious recognition of the Golan Heights as Israeli territory helps to completely change the narrative. The confirmed moribund Oslo I and II accords and everything that followed should also help the Arab countries to revisit the perennial lip-service to the two-state solution. They neither believed in it nor were ever ready to actually force its implementation post-Egypt-Israel and Jordan-Israel peace treaties. Given a Jared Kushner fantasy draft accord – which would not even offer the Palestinians what Oslo did and what the Begin-Sadat accords were supposed to – and a full reckoning of the new reality, Palestinians should simply think in terms of a one-state solution on an equal footing with Israelis. In his analysis of the recent Israeli election, Daniel Kurtzer puts it very well: “The Israeli left is essentially non-existent. This means there is no longer an active constituency arguing for a two-state solution with the Palestinians.”¹¹

Of course, a one-state solution requires an entirely new mindset. Gilead Sher, chief of staff and policy co-ordinator to Israel's former prime minister, Ehud Barak, underscored the dilemma in his 2015 call for a renewed Israeli initiative,¹² to avoid “being dragged into a choice between a Jewish-dominated apartheid-like state and a shared, unitary Jewish-Palestinian state”. Other prominent Israelis have voiced the same concern. Yet, this is where we are today and it has to be considered with a clear-eyed view of Israel's security. South Africa comes to mind but the threat to Israel's security, ironically, could be much less at its borders than domestically, given the evolving demographics, unless Israelis and Palestinians agreed to a new covenant within a unified territory. Most Israeli Palestinians, despite the harassment they are often subject to, much prefer living and working in Israel than moving to Ramallah. The younger generation could be prepared for an alternative. However, the key change in mindset required would be to abandon the concept of settlements as colonizing in favour of sharing land and power equally with full mutual respect by both communities. An impossible dream? Maybe, but it's the only realistic option unless Israel, a marvel of success in so many aspects, decides to veer further toward total ethno-cultural segregation.¹³ Meanwhile, despite the multiple proofs of friendship Trump has shown Netanyahu, security on the ground for Israel, particularly as Iran strengthens its position in Syria, is better assured by Russia which ensures a certain level of stability that the U.S. can no longer fully guarantee.¹⁴

¹¹ B. Rose Kelly, “WWS Reacts (Audio): Israel Elections,” Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, April 10, 2019. Available at <http://wvs.princeton.edu/news-and-events/news/item/wws-reacts-audio-israel-elections>

¹² Gilead Sher, “Israel Should Take the Initiative,” Middle East Policy and Politics Blog, Brookings Institution, Oct. 7, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/10/07-israel-should-take-initiative-sher>. Of course, Sher remained of the view that a two-state solution was the only viable option but that it had to be implemented before the situation on the ground made it impossible (discussion with the author in 2014).

¹³ The most elaborate and thoughtful thinking on a one-state solution comes from Ali Abunimah in *The Battle for Justice in Palestine*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014). On the Israeli side, Moshe Arens, former minister of defence, argued for Israeli citizenship for all Palestinians on the West Bank. But most solutions proposed are seldom based on real equality. See Judy Maltz, “Explained//Two States, One and Other Solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Haaretz*, March 24, 2019. Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israeli-palestinian-conflict-solutions/premium-explained-two-states-one-and-other-solutions-to-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict-1.7044468>

¹⁴ See Carmit Valensi, “From Daraa 2011 to Daraa 2019: The Survival of Assad's Regime and the Challenges to Syria's Stabilization,” INSS Insight no. 1158, The Institute for National Security Studies, April 3, 2019. Available at <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/daraa-2011-daraa-2019-survival-assads-regime-challenges-syrias-stabilization/>



In conclusion?

There is little hope for the future of the region and Western influence is waning. Russia is the dominant player for now. China will want to ensure that Middle Eastern oil and gas flow unhindered to power its industries. Both players will make sure that the American influence in the region does not affect their interests, but they will need eventually to co-operate with the U.S. to sustain some form of stability in the broader MENA region. Co-operation à la carte will be the order of the day, notably on terrorism. Arab Spring 2.0 will likely be muffled or will express itself with limited gains, and probably more repression. As for Israel and the Palestinians, there is little hope for change as long as the same leaders, on both sides, remain in power.

► About the Author

Ferry de Kerckhove was born in Belgium in 1947. He has a B.Soc. Sc. Honours in Economics, an M.A. in Political Science from the University of Ottawa and pursued Ph.D. Studies at Laval University in Québec City.

He joined the Canadian Foreign Service in September 1973. From 1981 to 1985, he was Economic Counsellor at the Canadian Delegation to NATO. In September 1992, he was posted to Moscow as Minister and Deputy Head of Mission. In 1995 he became Associate Chief Air Negotiator, then Deputy Head of the Policy Branch and Director-General, Federal-Provincial Relations in Foreign Affairs and International Trade. He was named High Commissioner to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in August 1998. In September 2001, he became Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia. He was also accredited to Timor Leste.

In September 2003 he joined the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ottawa as a Canadian Center for Management Development Diplomat in Residence. In 2004 he became Director General, International Organizations. In July 2006, he added to his responsibilities the function of Personal representative of the Prime Minister for Francophonie. In 2008 he was named ambassador to the Arab Republic of Egypt.

He retired from the Foreign Service on September 23d, 2011. He is a Senior Fellow at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ottawa, a Fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, and a Member of the Board of the Conference of Defence Associations Institute. He was the author or co-author of four iterations of the Conference of Defence Association Institute's Strategic Outlook for Canada 2013-16. He is a former board member of WIND Mobile Canada. He is President of Ferry de Kerckhove International Consultants Inc.

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