

The Emerging Order in the Middle East:

The Persian Gulf,
the Nile Basin,
and North Africa

Ambassador Dore Gold



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Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

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In October 2020, Ambassador Dore Gold presented a three-session, on-line Zoom course in cooperation with Tikvah Fund Open University. Ambassador Gold based his lectures on the premise that a broader historical perspective provides the key to a deeper, more authentic understanding of the Middle East at the current point in time and where future developments may lead.

Session 1

Historical Trends in the Regional Politics of the Persian Gulf

There is no question that anyone looking at the Middle East over the last few decades would be struck by the total chaos that has prevailed in large parts of this region. It is customary today to speak about the needs of World Order, or as the title of this webinar course asks: Is a new order emerging?

What is striking is that the recent chaos has nothing to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which the high priests of conventional wisdom always stressed in recent decades. What is required instead is to carefully look at the key issues that have framed the regional order in the most important parts of the Middle East. To answer that question, we will look at three *sub-regions* that have been on the diplomatic agenda or can be expected to stand out in the years ahead:

- a. The Persian Gulf
- b. The Nile Basin and East Africa
- c. Libya and North Africa

In 2014, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger published a book about how civilizations coexist. The book was aptly titled *World Order*. It came out just as the Arab Spring was bringing Arab states from the Atlantic Coast to the Persian Gulf into an advanced state of collapse, and major statesmen around the world wondered how a more peaceful future could ever be assured, especially in the Middle East.

There were two elements underpinning world order and countering global chaos, according to Kissinger:

1. World Order entailed a system of rules defining the limits of what is permissible and what is not. For example, the first major treaty between Britain and the Arab tribes of the Persian Gulf in 1820 did not

only safeguard British hegemony, it explicitly suppressed piracy and the slave trade in the Gulf region. In short, World Order established acceptable rules of international conduct.

Today, World Order in the Middle East has a broader definition. It includes prohibiting the use of weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical and biological weapons, and even the development of nuclear weapons.

Clearly, even the possession of these weapons puts World Order at risk and it is not surprising to see the U.S. threaten to use force when such weapons were deployed during the Syrian Civil War.

2. Preserving World Order has also meant preventing any power from dominating others; many times this was called safeguarding the *balance of power*.

So how did this work in practice in the Persian Gulf? Order was preserved by the intervention of European powers, limiting the ability of older empires to expand, and precluding other European states from establishing themselves in critical parts of the Middle East. (British naval power came into the Middle East, which promptly neutralized the old Safavid Empire in Persia and checked the growth of the Ottoman Empire.)

Historically, claimants to this role have involved a number of great powers, some of whom have been forgotten.

1. **Portugal** – Alfonso de Albuquerque, a Portuguese admiral, brought a Portuguese fleet into the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf in the early 1500s and captured Hormuz. If you travel to Oman, you will be struck by the beautiful remnants of Portuguese fortresses in its capital city, Muscat.

2. **England – and more specifically British India**. Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798. Rear Admiral Horatio Nelson defeated the French fleet



Persian Gulf

in the Eastern Mediterranean. The policy of Britain in years to come was to keep European powers completely out of the Eastern Mediterranean. The British decided that they must control all sea routes from Europe to India. They guarded all the gateways to the Indian Ocean: Egypt, Iraq, South Africa, and Singapore. Finally, they sought to check the land expansion of Czarist Russia in the direction of Persia.

This thinking dominated British imperial strategy for over 100 years. It began with the East India Company sending ships to the Gulf. Starting in 1820, the British fashioned a network of protectorate arrangements with Bahrain, Kuwait, Najd, Abu Dhabi, and Oman. In 1916, the last protectorate treaty was signed with Qatar. In Aden, along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, the British established a Crown Colony. The ruling Arab sheikhs surrendered their external sovereignty and received a British guarantee to recognize the rule of their dynasties and protect them in return.

Arab rulers had to consult British advisers if other powers wanted to set up a facility – or a coaling station – to service their ships. But more importantly, these understandings included arrangements over foreign trade. When oil was discovered in the Gulf region, initially only British firms, like the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, could obtain concessions from the local rulers to extract it.

There were compelling strategic reasons for this British position after the conversion of the Royal Navy from coal-burning ships to oil-burning vessels in 1913. In the 1920s, U.S. diplomats pushed the British to open the Gulf for American oil companies as well, setting the stage for Standard Oil of California, which later merged and created the great Aramco (Arabian American Oil Company) concession in Saudi Arabia. It was all-American.

After the British Withdrew from the Gulf Region

The biggest problem with the idea of World Order was who would guarantee it. In the Persian Gulf it lasted until the British government announced in 1968 that it was withdrawing its forces from the Gulf region – east of Suez – by 1972. The old order was over; a new order was needed to safeguard stability.

Would the new order be secured by the U.S. Navy? In 1972, the U.S. was pulling out of Vietnam and was not ready to assume new responsibilities. Initially, it seemed that the West looked to the Shah of Iran to fulfill this role. But by 1979, the Shah fell from power and was replaced by a revolutionary regime: the Islamic Republic, which was committed, according to its constitution, to the export of the Islamic revolution and the violent overthrow of the older order.

One unanswered question was, under what conditions would the U.S. decide that it had to become militarily involved in the Gulf? If the Soviet Union invaded the Gulf region, then under the Cold War doctrine of containment, the U.S. had no choice but to increase its presence. But what if the challenge to the order in the Gulf came from smaller powers? In 1961, Iraq rejected Kuwait's claims to independence and mobilized its forces on the Kuwaiti border. Kuwait sought to activate Britain's defense guarantees, and the Iraqis withdrew.

Almost 30 years later, the Iraqi army was poised to invade Kuwait. The U.S. ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, told her Iraqi counterparts in July 1990 that Washington had “no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts.” What she seemed to be saying was that an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was not of sufficient magnitude to trigger a U.S. military response. This was not the Korean War. Indeed, while the Iran-Iraq War raged on for nearly eight years from 1980 to 1988, the U.S. only intervened if its ships were attacked in the Persian Gulf.

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi forces indeed invaded Kuwait and subjugated it. The lack of clarity about what the U.S. would do undoubtedly

contributed to how Saddam Hussein managed the crisis. President George H.W. Bush ultimately formed an international coalition and evicted Iraq from Kuwait. He spoke about the need for a New World Order.

This brings us to the latest accords signed in Washington between Israel and the UAE, on the one hand, and Bahrain, on the other hand. The UAE was the more pivotal of the two, given its enormous wealth and unique ties with Saudi Arabia. Was there a connection between the history of the UAE and its move in 2020 to make peace with Israel?

As pointed out, the UAE was never colonized by the British. It was made up of seven smaller emirates that had to coexist under the leadership of Abu Dhabi. But they were all Protectorates, surrendering their external sovereignty alone. Formally, they were not Crown Colonies of the British Empire. Arab states that had been colonized and occupied by foreign troops tended to adopt more extreme positions years later. For the UAE, on the other hand, it was natural to work with whomever they shared a joint interest.

Moreover, most analysts point to the fact that the UAE faces a direct threat from Iran. In 1971, the Iranians occupied three islands in the lower Persian Gulf – Abu Musa and the two Tunbs (Greater and Lesser Tunbs). All three are strategically located near the Strait of Hormuz, the exit from the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean. After the fall of the Shah, Iranian militarization of these islands escalated.

The Role of Israel

Israel is not another great power filling in for the British or the U.S. That would be a total misreading of the relationship. But Israel could be an ally of the UAE and other Gulf states against a menacing Iran. Senior Iranian officials have laid a claim to all of Bahrain; in 2009, a

former advisor to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri – described Bahrain as Iran’s 14th province.

In 1996, the Bahraini government submitted documentary evidence to Washington that there was a branch of Hizbullah in Bahrain seeking to overthrow its government. It called itself Bahraini Hizbullah. The government unveiled a plot involving 44 conspirators. At the same time, another Hizbullah branch, Hizbullah al-Hijaz, used a truck bomb against a housing complex in eastern Saudi Arabia known as Khobar Towers on June 25, 1996. Nineteen U.S. servicemen were killed and over 300 wounded. With both Israel and Bahrain forced to deal with Iranian surrogates, their mutual interests dictate the need for a strong security relationship.

Egypt and the states of the Levant had been occupied by the West and hence held a deep resentment towards it. Bernard Lewis has provided the background for this stance. The situation in the Gulf States was more complex. There was hostility at different times, but it was not the same as the hatred in Lebanon, Syria, or Iraq. A modus vivendi was more possible. And the peace treaties with Israel were the latest evidence showing that this was indeed the case. Iran remained a danger to both Israel and the Arab states. The key to the future could be found if the two old adversaries could coordinate and create a new peaceful bloc in the future.

Session 2

Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia: The Struggle over the Nile

Most people think of the Nile River in the context of Egypt alone. That makes sense, given the fact the Nile provides Egypt with 86 percent of its usable water. But, in fact, the Nile River affects many African states. It runs through 12 countries and reaches a distance of 6,695 kilometers, making it the longest river in the world. The two most important tributaries that supply the Nile with water are the White Nile and the Blue Nile.

The White Nile runs from Lake Victoria, situated in Tanzania and Kenya, through Uganda, South Sudan, and Sudan itself. The Blue Nile originates in the highlands of Ethiopia before it flows to Sudan where it merges with the White Nile at Khartoum, the Sudanese capital. As a result, many more countries have a stake in Nile water. If someone wants to find a source of potential conflict in the Middle East, they need to look no further than the struggle that is unfolding over the future of the Nile River.

Affecting this question is the impact of climate change on Africa. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was created in 1988 as the primary UN body that assesses climate change for the international community. The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a report several years ago looking at the implications of population growth, desertification, and climate change for Africa in the future. The report noted that Africa was expected to have the highest rate of population growth in the world in the years ahead.

Taking the period from 2013 to 2045, among the five fastest-growing countries in Africa in terms of population were Uganda and Ethiopia, which also share the waters of the Nile River. Clearly a massive surge in the population of these countries exacerbates the challenge of preserving the distribution of water along the Nile in the future.

The Nile Basin Countries



Desertification is making matters even more challenging. In neighboring Chad, one of Africa's great lakes that serviced four countries has been drying up. In the 1960s, according to *The Economist*, Lake Chad was 25,000 square kilometers in size. It was the sixth largest freshwater lake in the world. Today it has shrunk to half that size.

The IPCC report concludes that Africa will witness a growing demand for water just as its water sources are diminishing. It should be recalled that there is still heavy reliance on agriculture for employing at least 70 percent of the African workforce. The social and political implications of the climatic changes cannot be overstated.

The measures being adopted to mitigate these challenges in Africa are not so simple and have caused new inter-state controversies. For example, there have been escalating tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia, as well as Sudan, over the waters of the Nile since 2011 when the Ethiopian government began the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile. This touched a raw nerve in Egypt, where past governments have for a long time been concerned that there were states seeking to divert the sources of the Nile and cutting back Egypt's share of its waters.

The diplomatic chronology with respect to the emergence of these states has directly influenced the strength of their claims. Britain recognized the independence of Egypt back in 1922, so it was the first of these states that could assert its rights internationally. Sudan became independent in 1956, many years later.

Thus, the implications of this sequence for a new Nile agreement were already clear back then. An Egyptian letter to the British Resident in Cairo stated, "It is realized that the development of the Sudan requires a quantity of the Nile Water greater than that which has been utilized by Sudan." A new Nile agreement followed in 1959. One can understand from this language that the Egyptians were nervous about Sudanese independence and the possibility that it would reduce Egypt's share of Nile water. Egyptian statesmen spoke about "Egypt's natural and

historical rights in the waters of the Nile.” They did not factor in the impact of the development of the upstream countries to their south on Nile usage when various treaties on the Nile were drafted.

Ethiopia is a more complex story. It has existed for hundreds of years; it was an empire going back to the Middle Ages. But it lost its independence in 1936, when it was occupied by Italy. It regained its independence in stages, but it was already formed by the 1940s. So it was well-positioned to assert its historical rights to Nile waters against the Egyptians and the Sudanese. True, many African countries hoped to enlarge their share of Nile water, on the basis of previous international agreements. But these were increasingly being viewed as outdated, emanating from the colonial era. Nonetheless, Egypt argued that the 1929 agreement over the Nile, which it signed, gave it veto power over development projects in Sudan and Ethiopia involving Nile tributaries. These differing perspectives hardened the positions of the parties.

There is a thesis that climate change also added to the tensions across Africa. Analysts studying the outbreak of the Darfur war in Sudan, which led to mass killings by the Khartoum regime at the time, have traced the political crisis that spawned the conflict to desertification and famine, leading to the deaths of nearly 100,000 people in 1984 and 1985 and far greater numbers in the 1990s. Climate change cannot be regarded as the single cause for the outbreak of African wars, but it can be seen as a contributing factor in some notable instances. Certainly in cases in which with mass migrations accompanied climate change, it could be seen as a contributing factor to interstate violence in selected cases.

The rise of a more conflictual Africa undoubtedly led to greater military intervention by other powers on the continent. Iran has sought to increase its presence in Africa in order to establish strongpoints near strategic waterways. That led Iran over many years to establish a growing presence on the Red Sea, using the Horn of Africa and the coast of Sudan. During the 1990s, Iranian vessels smuggled arms to

Port Sudan, which were subsequently trans-shipped up to Egypt and the Gaza Strip for Palestinian terror groups, like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Besides Sudan, Iran also used Eritrea and Djibouti. Moreover, Iran signed an agreement with Yemen permitting its warships to use the port of Aden.

The interaction of the Yemen War with African politics led to new political alignments. Saudi Arabia was ready to provide the financial backing to African states that were prepared to jettison the Iranian presence in their ports and cut diplomatic relations with Tehran. This had a profound impact on Sudan's position in the region, for Sudan broke its ties with Iran and became eligible for Saudi aid. This also set the stage for Sudan to pursue a diplomatic course of better relations with the U.S. and with Israel.

Session 3

Libya and North Africa: A New Challenge for Europe

The structure of Middle East politics along the shore of North Africa was very different from what we saw in the Persian Gulf or along the Nile River into Africa. Along what was called the Barbary Coast of North Africa, there were three main provinces: Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli.

France was the dominant power in North Africa by far, especially in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Its forces had been needed to neutralize the Barbary pirates, also known as corsairs, who had been operating in the region since the 1500s. A number of states were drawn into this conflict including the United States under President Thomas Jefferson. But France still stood out as the power that mattered most.

France actually began to move in and take over these territories in 1830 with the aim of pacifying them. Its rule in Algeria lasted until 1962. France had instituted a brutal occupation that led to the deaths of what were estimated as hundreds of thousands of Algerians and perhaps many more. Unlike the British, the French colonized these territories, bringing in French civilians. France also instituted a military occupation of Tunisia that lasted from 1881 to 1956. In Morocco, which was regarded as independent, French rule lasted from 1912 to 1956. The Italians went to war against the Ottoman Empire in 1911-1912 and captured Libya. Thus, from the Atlantic coastline of Morocco to the Egyptian border with Libya, all of North Africa came under one form or another of European rule in the early 20th century.

When the colonization of North Africa began, what were the concerns of the European powers? First, the distances from Europe to the main power centers in North Africa were small. The distance from Sicily to the Tunisian coast is 352 kilometers. Spain is only 14.5 kilometers from Morocco at the Strait of Gibraltar. Halting the ambitious practices

of North Africans who wanted to test the Europeans was important, given European vulnerabilities. That included dealing with piracy against European ships, or the practice of seizing European hostages, enslaving them, and stealing their property.

But most importantly, North Africa showed itself in the past to be a launching pad for Muslim expansionism into Europe. From bases in North Africa, Muslim armies conquered Spain and Portugal and then invaded France until they were halted by Charles Martel (the Hammer) at the Battle of Tours in 732.

Muslim armies crossed into Sicily (827-902). Subsequently, they even sacked Rome itself. According to Professor Bernard Lewis, the Crusades were conceived and organized as a Christian counter-attack to these military successes on European soil. In the meantime, the consolidation of the Ottoman Empire in the East led to dismantlement of the Byzantine Empire, adding a whole new momentum to the threat to Europe. On land, the Ottomans were able to deploy large armies, twice reaching the Gates of Vienna by the 17th century.

European concerns evolved and the potential threat to Europe became more complex. Even after the defeat of the Crusaders, Western powers fighting in a naval coalition brought about a major blow to the Ottoman Empire at the battle of Lepanto in 1571 near western Greece. For the first time, it appeared that the military tide may have started to turn, but it would still take time until the Europeans would enter the Middle East and Africa as part of their scramble for colonies.

In modern times, especially after the Second World War, a new challenge emerged: the demographic wave into Europe and the ideological approach it brought from Europe's former imperial holdings. Many immigrants crossed the Mediterranean, the largest numbers coming from Algeria. The next mass of people came from Morocco and then Tunisia. There have been a large number of immigrants seeking refuge in the U.S. who came from four African countries: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Kenya. Looking at the

Ottoman Empire 1699–1914



movement of sub-Saharan Africans heading to Europe alone: since 2010, their numbers have reached a least a million, according to the Pew Research Center.

An important change for the region was the emergence of new states which would come to act as predominant powers. With the withdrawal of the old colonial powers, like Portugal, France, and Italy, new states sought to replace them. For example, Iran dispatched armed forces to Africa. Turkey used its civilian air lines to project influence by offering direct flights from Istanbul to virtually every African capital. Turkey also undertook important development projects in Somalia that connected the northern part of the country with its south. Turkey also entered the Red Sea. In 2018, it leased the Red Sea island of Suakin from the Sudanese for 99 years. It was promoted as a tourist center, but it could undoubtedly emerge as a military base, right across from Jidda in Saudi Arabia.

The European Union is getting drawn into serious political disputes involving the African immigrants into Europe. Back in 2008, Libya signed an agreement with Italy to provide temporary reception camps in Libya for these migrants instead of implementing the past policy of rescuing migrants at sea. These turned out to be detention centers for Africans and not innocuous reception centers. They quickly became known for their human rights abuses, like forced labor, torture, and starvation. In November 2018, *CNN* broadcast a report which documented how a Libyan detention center was being used as a slave market, where Africans were auctioned off.

Another front in North Africa was opened by Iran as it sought to intervene in the conflict over the Western Sahara by backing the Polisario guerrillas, which were fighting the army of Morocco over this former Spanish colony.

The Polisario sought to break off the Western Sahara from Morocco, by using Algeria, Morocco's main North African rival, as a conduit for the supply of arms and financial aid. The Iranian Embassy in

Central Mediterranean Migration Route



Algiers provided the facility the Iranians needed to pursue their goals. Algeria's aim was to create an irredentist movement threatening the territorial integrity of the Moroccan kingdom. Iran used Hizbullah to arm the Polisario. The arms transfers involved SAM-9 and SAM-11 surface-to-air missiles. Upon learning what Iran was up to, Morocco cut off diplomatic relations with Tehran on May 1, 2018.

Africa and the Middle East were spilling over into each other, forming a single theater of warfare and intervention by the new powers. Whether any sort of stability could be fashioned remained to be seen.



About the Author

Ambassador Dore Gold is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He is the former Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Israel. He also served as Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations. Ambassador Gold completed his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. at Columbia University.



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