



**Sheep of the desert**  
Palestinian protesters in the Israeli-occupied West Bank city of Ramallah carry a caricature that mocks Gulf Arab leaders swayed by US President Donald Trump's West Asia policies. AP/SABAS MOMANI

STATES OF MATTER

# The West Asian broth and its many cooks

Acts of aggression, both real and imagined, are causing further turmoil in the region



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The de facto ruler of a prosperous land was held culpable in the brutal killing of a dissident journalist on foreign soil. Perhaps the principle of *lèse majesté* protected him from interrogation. As anxious minions did damage control, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin-Salman flew into Japan for a G20 summit, where he was received with warmth and affection.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a vital Saudi ally in the new strategic architecture, also had his moments in the limelight at G20. Fresh from a surreptitious funeral arranged for Egypt's only freely elected president Mohammad Morsi, he too seemed to bear little taint from his gross violations of law and decency.

Since being toppled by al-Sisi in a coup that restored the dominance of the military caste in Egypt, Morsi was convicted to death in multiple trials. Under a regime that regards its job undone till it has condemned an adversary in cases beyond enumeration, Morsi was produced in court yet again on charges of espionage, for alleged contacts with the Palestinian resistance group Hamas. He died in the courtroom and his funeral was hurriedly arranged to prevent public demonstrations.

Al-Sisi, Bin-Salman and the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Zayed are united in a pursuit that has earned the epithet "axis of evil" from former Tunisian president Moncef Marzouki.

The troika's backing for warlord Khalifa Haftar's rampage through Libya to overthrow an internationally recognised government is the latest in a long line of dubious regional misadventures. Ironically, the troika enjoys the unconditional backing of the US, which inserts itself in ways that mock its professions of promoting democracy.

The US brings into the mix the disordered mind of a man-child who occupies the White House and the dysfunction of a family steeped

in the transactional logic of the real estate business. In testimony only partially disclosed, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson recently told a US Congress committee of several instances when President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner had gone behind his back to meddle in policy in ways that served no coherent purpose.

The State Department had no clue about the intent of the Saudi and Abu Dhabi regimes to impose punitive sanctions, including an air blockade, on the monarchy of Qatar. An important US military base in the region and a member of the US-sponsored Gulf Cooperation Council, Qatar's ostracism on grounds that still remain unclear reflect a particularly juvenile tendency in regional politics that Kushner has encouraged.

Kushner the jejune was on global display yet again in the Bahrain summit last month where the purpose was to sell a \$50 billion real estate racket for the West Bank and Gaza as a peace plan for Palestine. As most Palestinian groups laughed away the plan, Kushner went ahead, urging the postponement of issues such as political sovereignty and national self-determination till his racket had played out.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was meanwhile doing his bit in promoting the Trump real estate brand, announcing a Jewish settlement in the Golan Heights that would bear the US President's name. Base flattery was the theme of the event, which acknowledged Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Syrian territory captured in war.

In the new global diplomacy, where grift and bluster are principal ingredients, Iran is a holdout. In eerie recalls of the last great strategic mischief the US caused in 2003 with its invasion of Iraq on concocted evidence of

WMD, images have flooded global air-waves of Iran's aggression against oil tankers transiting through the Straits of Hormuz.

Iran has dismissed the allegation as a crude set-up. Yet there was seemingly sufficient basis for the US to send out an intrusive surveillance drone that Iran shot down. An assault on strategic targets within Iran was planned in retaliation and then retracted. And if ambiguity is usually how adversaries seek strategic advantage, Trump went public with the reasons he had to pull back. It just did not seem proportionate, he explained, for retaliatory missile strikes that could potentially cause casualties numbering well over a hundred.

That was an aberrant moment when Trump allowed a humane instinct expression. He returned to the bluster soon afterwards, threatening Iran with "obliteration" if it dared repeat the attack on any US asset. Unhappy at the indecision, though confident that he

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would have his way, Netanyahu swore that Israel would snuff out every vestige of Iranian influence in its strategic neighbourhood, with the Syrian battlefield being first priority.

Since the US and Israel embarked upon the grand strategic plan of engineering afresh the political geography of West Asia, the covert aspect has yielded to

explicit avowals of intent. Compliant Arab countries, once reluctant to line up behind the project, have shed that reticence. The project, though, has become wickedly complicated and drawn powerful regional adversaries such as Iran and Turkey, once content on the sidelines. The scale of human suffering has ascended and it will not on present reckoning reverse course soon.

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