

AUSTRALIA'S INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST:

A presence in search of a policy

Discussion paper

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Executive Summary

At a superficial level, Australia's interests in the Middle East seem to be little more than providing military ballast to support the imperial or global ambitions of great powers. It is for that reason that, for 80 of the past 100 years, Australia has maintained some form of defence presence in the Middle East. As recently as last August, the Australian government announced the deployment of a surveillance aircraft and a frigate to patrol the Strait of Hormuz. On 13 January 2020, HMAS Toowoomba departed on deployment to the Middle East.

The Middle East, however, has been a focal point of strategic competition for millennia. It remains so. Accordingly, at a more substantial level, Australia has surprisingly extensive and subtle interests in the Middle East. As this paper argues, those interests fall into two major categories: at a minimum, avoidance of the strategic, political and economic consequences of great power, inter-state and intra-state military competition in the region, including nuclear competition; more importantly, as a nation enjoying considerable power and influence internationally, Australia has significant interests in building and working with the international coalitions that create, uphold and promote the international rules-based order on which our long-term prosperity and security depend.

This paper concludes that Australia's strategic interests are more effectively achieved through an active and well-resourced bilateral and multilateral diplomacy than through tokenistic actions such as the deployment of small and ultimately inconsequential military forces.

Introduction

For many Australians, the Middle East is the part of the world that aircraft fly over between the Antipodes and Europe. For some, it is exotic, mysterious, strange and certainly unfamiliar. It is 'other'.¹ For almost everyone, it is 'Muslim' – except, of course, for the little bit that is 'Israeli'. The prevailing media image of the Middle East is one of violence, civil war, broken bodies and refugees fleeing armed conflict. From Algeria to Syria, the Middle East resembles a war zone where national police and security forces are locked in a constant battle with the public, governments topple, and major external powers are represented as moderating internal excesses and preventing national self-harm. Its image is of a region in chaos, a region to be avoided.

If there is any consistency in the Australian public's image of the nation's direct involvement in the Middle East, it is probably through the lens of defence force personnel on active service. David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* and Simon Wincer's *The Lighthorsemen* continue to resonate in Australia's national memory of the Middle East. And as if to give substance to that memory, for almost 80 of the past 100 years Australia has maintained some form of military presence in the Middle East – and continuously, as a member of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) established to monitor the truce that ended the first Arab/Israeli war, since 1956.

In the minds of many of Australia's politicians, particularly those of an older generation, the image of Australian servicemen deployed to the Middle East is more deeply coloured by memories of Australia's fealty to Great Britain and the British empire and, more recently, our security dependence on the US. And to maintain the habit of Australian Defence Force engagement in the Middle East, in August 2019 Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that Australia would provide a surveillance aircraft and a frigate to patrol the Strait of Hormuz in support of the US-led International Maritime Security Construct (sic).

Our imperial links certainly explain Australia's presence in the Middle East during both the first and second World Wars. It reflected Australia's enthusiastic participation in and dependence on British imperial power for our identity and security. Our military forces were the coin in which we paid both our contribution to the defence of the global interests of the British Empire and the insurance premium for our own national security. Australia's

¹ The designation of individuals, communities, societies and even cultures as 'other' is a characteristic response to anxiety, fear and threat. There is an enormous technical literature on this issue. But for a brief and interesting overview, see John A. Powell, "Us vs them: the sinister techniques of 'Othering' – and how to avoid them", *The Guardian (Australia)*, 8 November 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/nov/08/us-vs-them-the-sinister-techniques-of-othering-and-how-to-avoid-them>

interests were the interests of the British Empire. When British Prime Minister Chamberlain announced the declaration of war in 1939, Prime Minister Menzies immediately followed with “and . . . **as a result** [added emphasis] Australia is also at war”. Of course, given Churchill’s reluctance to release, for the direct defence of the nation, Australian forces deployed to the Middle East and Europe, Prime Minister Curtin had to rethink that particular premium in 1942, but that’s another story.

The Suez Canal also had strategic and commercial significance for Australia: 60 per cent of Australian trade passed through the Canal and, until the post-war collapse of western colonial rule, the Canal was deemed to be a vital link in supporting the Western presence in Indochina, Indonesia and Malaya.

Australia’s support for UN involvement in the Middle East reflects a very different set of interests. Through Dr Herbert ‘Doc’ Evatt, Australia played a pivotal role in the creation of the United Nations, and the Menzies governments (with, it should be acknowledged, nostalgia for earlier British Middle East policies) saw support for the UN’s peacekeeping efforts, especially UNTSO, as a reasonable foreign policy objective.

More curious, and certainly more redolent of an infatuation with a declining British imperium, was Menzies’ 1956 Suez adventure in support of British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, ill-considered (not ill-advised, since Menzies sought no advice, conducting his own diplomacy on this matter) and ending ultimately in humiliation for both Eden and Menzies. It was not Australia’s finest hour, where imperial affections and identity politics obscured the decline of British power in the Middle East and ignored the strategic consequences of that decline. Projecting forward to the contemporary realities of the Middle East, particularly the role of the US, Suez continues to resonate. As Bob Bowker has written, “when questions of identity become entangled with shifts in the relativities of power . . . Suez still has cautionary lessons for us all”.²

If the presence of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the Middle East was the price of Empire, it could be argued that the presence of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in more recent decades was the price of alliance with the US. Our contributions were calibrated to be at the lowest possible cost in terms of blood and treasure to secure the highest possible benefit in terms of national security. While our post WW2 contributions may have made little if any difference on the ground (and that makes them quite different from our efforts in the two world wars), they have always been used as tokens in earnest and bargaining chips in the conduct of our business in Washington and in the US Congress. Whether or not they bask in titles such as “man of steel”, as George W. Bush called John Howard, or “man of

² See Robert Bowker, *Australia, Menzies and Suez* (Canberra: The Foreign Affairs and Trade Files no. 6, 2019), p. 120.

titanium” as Donald Trump recently described Scott Morrison, Australian Prime Ministers certainly revel in the approbation of US Presidents.

THE BASIS OF AUSTRALIA'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

So, what determines Australia's interests in the Middle East?

The answer lies in six different but related dimensions of the place of the Middle East in global geo-politics:

- its geo-strategic position;
- the “spill over” implications of internal disputes;
- the clash of great power interests;
- the role of a fractured Middle East in the growth of international terrorism;
- the role played by some Middle Eastern States, particularly Saudi Arabia, in the promotion of Islamic fundamentalism in other parts of the world, especially South East Asia, and,
- the growing national importance of Australia's Muslim community.

Each of these factors impact on Australia and its interests and need to be addressed in a more comprehensive Middle East policy.

Geo-strategic position

The global geo-strategic position of the Middle East is the key to understanding why the Middle East matters. For millennia, it has been at the cross-roads between the civilisations, languages and cultures of north Africa and Asia, Europe and Africa, eastern Europe and Asia Minor, with Egypt, the Ottomans and Persia as key players. They remain so, in their modern forms. And the two great riverine civilisations, Egypt on the Nile and Mesopotamia, the modern Iraq, between the Tigris and Euphrates, have long witnessed ethnic, cultural, religious and political differences, some of which have led to armed conflict. And more recently, of course, the Middle East has been the source of much of the world's energy supply.

The geo-strategic significance of the Middle East is also reflected in the fact that major contiguous states – Russia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Mali and Mauretania – have deep interests engaged in what transpires in the Middle East, and, in turn, what occurs in the contiguous states impacts on the Middle East. Russia's relationship with both Syria and Iran, for instance, reflects its abiding interest in strategic stability in the Middle East, and cannot be seen simply through the lens of its competition with the US.

Strategic spillover

If what happens in the Middle East impacts on contiguous external states, it impacts even more significantly on the Middle Eastern states themselves. And because of the number of players and the number of affected parties, the global ramifications can be significant. The humanitarian crisis of the war in Syria has had a global impact, not just on Syria's neighbouring states, but on European countries much further afield as refugees search for physical safety and economic security. Most of the refugees seeking asylum in Australia originate from the Middle East or Afghanistan. But even for Australia, where the refugee pressure is insignificant when compared to the pressures on Germany, Italy, Greece, France and Spain, billions of dollars have been spent to prevent refugees from attempting to reach Australia and then holding them in offshore detention centres if they succeed. In short, what happens in the Middle East can cost Australia billions of dollars.

Great power interests

Since biblical and Roman times, the geo-strategic position of the Middle East has attracted the attention of significant external powers. The contemporary world is no different.

The great powers have ongoing interests in the Middle East as they seek to build alliances and relationships with regional states while denying the same opportunity to their competitors. In some respects, the Middle East resembles a tableau of Mexican standoffs – lethal three-cornered contests where everyone is held to ransom. The relationship between Turkey and the US, for example, demonstrates how interests can align and clash: Turkey wants to constrain Russia's strategic options by retaining US defence associations while at the same time limiting the ability of the US to realise its strategic interests elsewhere in the Middle East that might constrain either or both Russian and Turkish interests. Russia and the US play the same game, though the stakes for each are different.

The US does not appear to know what it currently wants in the Middle East, or even less how its competing interests in the Middle East might be best reconciled. The laissez-faire Wilsonian instincts of the post WW1 years – a preference for national self-determination over colonialist manipulation of suborned political clients – meant that, during the inter-war years, the US was not a significant player. But its post WW2 rise to global military and political supremacy, and its pivotal role in the creation of the UN as the principal embodiment of the international rules-based order, afforded it a role regardless of its own interests – to the extent that it could even identify what they might be.

At one level, the US acts like a post-modern imperial power, seeking to shape the geo-political environment and determine outcomes without harvesting the kinds of economic or political benefits that were the quest of its imperial predecessors. While the global strategic objectives of the US are generally best met by stability in the Middle East, it has from time to time supported local instability in pursuit of specific foreign policy objectives. This may

reflect the binary tension that exists between the domestic forces, economic and political, that constantly pressure the US administration and the external realities of events on the ground. US policy towards Israel illustrates the problem. But in more recent times, it may equally reflect the lack of consistency and constancy in President Trump's approach to international issues.

The former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami has identified the lack of a US strategy in dealing with Syria.³ While President Trump continues to push for the US to relieve itself of both the costs and responsibilities of its global role, it is unlikely that this deficit will be remedied. Indeed, Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from the Kurdish region of northern Syria – a force that acted as a strategic tripwire protecting the Kurds against Erdogan's Turkish military forces – repeats President George H. W. Bush's betrayal of the Kurds in 1991.⁴ As the Center for Global Policy's Mohammed Ayoob has commented, "the betrayal of the Syrian Kurds has sent a clear message to America's allies in the region and beyond that they can no longer depend on Washington's assurances regarding their security, and that they should search for other options to ensure their own safety".⁵

Russia, however, has a clear threefold purpose in the Middle East: to reduce the authority and power of the US as a global player; to change the way that the 'international rules-based order' is constructed in order to afford it significantly greater authority and control; and to re-engineer regimes and relationships on its borders to enhance its own security. In this sense, Russia is using the Middle East in general and Syria in particular as a test bed for its own broader global aspirations. For the US, as for the nations of the Middle East and the global community more broadly, that matters.⁶ But the gap between Russia's aspirations and their delivery is enormous.

Russia's interests are best served by a weak and compliant Syria and an Iran that is preoccupied with the strategic threats from Saudi Arabia and Israel, both of which seek to manoeuvre US policy for their own ends. Yet a weak and compliant Syria is not what Assad has in mind, nor is Russia able to contemplate the enormous costs associated with Syrian reconstruction and the repatriation of refugees. So, as Ben-Ami has pointed out, Russia is

³ See Shlomo Ben-Ami, "The US needs a Syria strategy", *The Strategist*, 28 April 2018
<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/us-needs-syria-strategy/>

⁴ The Kurds must by now be habituated to the withdrawal of US support. See Jon Schwarz, "The U.S. is now betraying the Kurds for the eighth time", *The Intercept*, 8 October 2019
<https://theintercept.com/2019/10/07/kurds-syria-turkey-trump-betrayal/>

⁵ Mohammed Ayoob, "Who gains from Trump's sudden Syrian withdrawal?", *The Strategist*, 16 October 2019
<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/who-gains-from-trumps-sudden-syrian-withdrawal/>

⁶ For a bleak assessment of Syria's role as a strategic bone over which the great powers fight, see Ramesh Thakur, "Syria a symptom of a broken international order", *The Strategist*, 16 April 2018
<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/syria-symptom-broken-international-order/>

both a master of Syria and a hostage of the Assad regime – a situation from which, ironically, it can only be freed by the US. And that’s something the US simply will not do.

The role of a fractured middle east in international terrorism

The linkage between Islam and international terrorism tends to be front of mind as Australians think of the Middle East, and not without reason. Terrorism on a global scale has been a constant weapon in the armoury of Al Qaeda, ISIS and ISIL. It remains so. The killing of Al Qaeda’s Osama bin Laden in 2011 and the more recent killings of the ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the head of Iran’s elite Quds force Qassem Soleimani are widely regarded as major victories in the ‘war against terrorism’. In fact, these terrorist organisations are less dependent on their leaders than they are on the disaffection and alienation of young Muslims in both the Middle East and abroad. Operating through some two dozen local franchises, Al Qaeda claims some 40 thousand fighters, 10 to 21 thousand in Syria, 7 to 10 thousand in Somalia, four thousand in Yemen, with a similar number dispersed throughout the Maghreb and Sahel⁷. It claims to have some three thousand in Indonesia.

It is increasingly evident that the downfall of Saddam Hussein brought about by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 has led to the breakdown of civil order and the loss of central government control that provides the political and social incubators for the formation of terrorist groups in the Middle East. ISIS and ISIL (acronyms for the same terrorist organisation) advocated a vision for a pan-regional Islamic state, attracting as it did international adherents and recruits from across the world, including Australia. What may have begun as localised terrorism quickly morphed into virulent forms of international terrorism.

This phenomenon was exacerbated by The ‘Arab Spring’, which generated hope in the early years of the last decade, at least in the West, that the Middle East was on a pathway to democracy, but quickly collapsed into mass civil unrest and the strengthening of autocratic rule in several countries, most notably in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and, of course, Syria. More recently, instability in Sudan and Algeria has continued to provide fertile breeding grounds for terrorist and other revolutionary organisations.

The sad truth is that the victims of international terrorism, whether perpetrated by terrorist groups in the Middle East or the lone anti-Muslim gunman in Christchurch in March 2019, are disproportionately Muslim.

Australia is affected: 26 organisations are currently listed as “terrorist organisations” under the Criminal Code, though, as Clive Williams has pointed out, that’s too many to be useful,

⁷ See Bruce Hoffman, “The resurgence of Al-Qaeda”, *The Interpreter*, 13 March 2018
<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/resurgence-al-qaeda>

and the list needs to be culled to those that pose a specific threat to Australia.⁸ The 2002 Bali bombings, in which 88 Australians were listed among the 202 people killed, the 2014 Martin Place (Sydney) Siege where two hostages were killed, the 2015 murder of a NSW Police civilian employee outside the Parramatta Police Station, the 2017 stabbing of a South Australian nurse on London Bridge, the murder of a petrol station attendant in Queanbeyan (NSW) and a hotel receptionist in Brighton (Victoria) in 2017, and the murder of a pedestrian in Bourke Street (Victoria) in 2018 all remind us of the continuing face of terrorism in Australia, notwithstanding the constant and successful efforts of the national intelligence and police agencies.

Historically, events in other parts of the world have prompted acts of politically motivated violence – terrorism – in Australia. The assassination attempt against Queen Victoria's son Prince Alfred in 1868 was a result of problems in Ireland. The clashes between the Serbian and Croatian communities in the 1960s and 1970s reflected instability in the Balkans, while bombings targeted at Israeli diplomats and consulates in the 1970s reflected Middle East tensions. But Islamic terrorism has been more sustained and more multi-faceted, given the dispersed nature of both the threat in the Middle East and the support from around the world, including from Indonesia and Malaysia. In short, Islamic-inspired terrorism or the lone terrorist, inspired by anti-Muslim white supremacist ideology such as New Zealand experienced in Christchurch in March 2019, remains an issue for Australia.

The Middle East and the promotion of Islamic fundamentalism

The promotion of Islamic fundamentalism is an inevitable by-product of Middle Eastern, especially Saudi Arabian, 'soft power' in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.⁹ In the case of Indonesia, as Carolyn Nash has noted, "the country's Saudi-educated Muslim elite have capitalized on opportunities to use increased political freedom to promote religious protectionism and hard-line Islamic orthodoxy".¹⁰ Salafist-Wahabist fundamentalism has progressively permeated the traditionally more relaxed forms of Islam practised in

⁸ Clive Williams, "Terrorism in Australia in 2019: more of the same?", *The Strategist*, 31 January 2019
<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/terrorism-in-australia-in-2019-more-of-the-same/>

⁹ See Asmiati Malik and Scott Edwards, "Saudi Arabia's influence in Southeast Asia – too embedded to be disrupted?", *The Jakarta Post*, 16 November 2018
<https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2018/11/16/saudi-arabias-influence-in-southeast-asia-too-embedded-to-be-disrupted.html>

¹⁰ Carolyn Nash, "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power Strategy in Indonesia", *The Middle East Institute*, 3 April 2018
<https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-arabias-soft-power-strategy-indonesia>

Indonesia and Malaysia, prompting Marina Mahathir, Prime Minister Mahathir's daughter, to observe that Saudi influence "has come at the expense of traditional Malay culture".¹¹

The promotion of a more fundamentalist form of Islam has significant implications for both the political stability and inter-communal tolerance of Indonesia and Malaysia and for the radicalisation of Islamic youth in both countries. It also has implications for longer term regional stability and security, and consequently for Australia.

It is far from evident that Saudi Arabia's intention is to destabilise the Islamic states of South East Asia. Rather, it seems more consistent with Saudi Arabia's ambition to purchase access and influence throughout the Islamic world as its global Islamic leader without any consideration of the local consequences of such a policy. It's 'soft power' in freefall.

Islam and the Australian Community

Reflecting the change in the ethnic and religious composition of the Australian population, Islam has become more widely practised in Australia since the introduction of a non-discriminatory immigration policy. Australia's Muslim population at the time of the 2016 census was 2.6 percent of the population, making Islam the second most practised religion after the Christian denominations,¹² a growth rate of 15 percent on the 2010 national census. This has an important bearing on the maintenance of social inclusiveness and harmony in the Australian community.

Just as the Christian denominations look to Canterbury or Rome or the religious centres of north America for their theological orthodoxy and spiritual inspiration, and as the Jewish faith looks to Jerusalem, so do the Islamic denominations look to the Islamic centres of the Middle East, such as Al-Azhar University in Egypt, the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia, and the International Center for Islamic Studies in Qum (Iran) for their orthodoxy and spiritual leadership. But the links between the Salafist and Wahabist traditions of Islamic fundamentalism and various international terrorist groups have proliferated in recent decades, particularly in Pakistan, where Pakistani madrassas are attracting increasing numbers of adherents from South East Asia. This is a significant development for Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, and consequently for Australia, since it makes the indoctrination of young Muslims in Salafist-Wahabist fundamentalism more accessible and their radicalisation more likely.

¹¹ See Tavleen Tarrant and Joseph Sipalan, "Worries about Malaysia's 'Arabisation' grow as Saudi ties strengthen, *Reuters*, 21 December 2017 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-politics-religion-analysis/worries-about-malysias-arabisation-grow-as-saudi-ties-strengthen-idUSKBN1EF103>

¹² See <https://web.archive.org/web/20170710020910/http://abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Religion%20Data%20Summary~25>

WHAT ARE AUSTRALIA'S INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

Australia's perception of its national interests is very often a function of our economic and trade relationships. The US, North Asia and Europe dominate the economic, trade and investment landscape, with South East Asia and India increasingly coming into sharper focus. Against that background, the Middle East hardly rates. In 2018, Australian trade with the Middle East was 2.5 percent of Australia's total trade (2.5 percent of both exports and imports). Australian foreign investment in the Middle East was 0.2 percent of the world total, and foreign investment from the Middle East in Australia 0.7 percent of the total.¹³

Though Australia's core national interests are seldom articulated by government – they appear to be assumed – it is important to know what they are. They are generally bipartisan. Senator Penny Wong, shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, identified them crisply as: national security; economic prosperity; a stable region; and constructive internationalism.¹⁴

In the light of the geo-strategic issues dealt with above, each of Australia's core national interests is engaged in the Middle East in varying degrees. Australia's national security interests are directly engaged, given the support for global terrorism disseminating from the Middle East's 'badlands'. Australia's economic interests are engaged in two ways: our direct trade and investment interests, even though they are not so very extensive; and, much more importantly, the economic and investment interests, and the energy interests, of our major trading and investment partners, which impact directly on Australia's national economy. Australia has a long-standing and long-term interest in the orderly supply of oil across the globe, an interest that is directly supported by a stable international rules-based order. Australia's regional interests are directly engaged, particularly in the light of the subversive security effects of foreign trained terrorists in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. And Australia's interests in 'constructive internationalism' – which addresses Australia's need both to contribute to the maintenance of the international rules-based order and to advocate global adherence to them – is fundamentally engaged in the Middle East, where the US, Russia, the European powers, along with the key Middle Eastern states, are jostling to manipulate 'the rules' to their best advantage. And one of the consequences of this ongoing competition is instability in global oil supplies.

¹³ These figures are derived from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's *Country Fact Sheets*.

¹⁴ See Senator Penny Wong, "Australia's national interests in a time of disruption", speech at the Lowy Institute, 6 July 2017 <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/penny-wong-australia-national-interests-time-disruption>

Australia is a significant global presence. While not a ‘power’ commensurate with the US, China or even Russia (Australia should always remember that Russia is the 11th largest economy in nominal GDP terms, compared with Australia as the 14th largest economy),¹⁵ Australia is a member of the G20, and of great economic importance to the nations of north Asia and South East Asia. And given its global ranking, Australia is deeply invested in the rules that underpin global order, their effectiveness and their reliability. Hence Australia has a fundamental interest in working with like-minded nations to ensure that the global rules-based order is authoritative, credible and legitimate. And to achieve that objective, Australia needs to appreciate that it has considerable agency.

The Middle East is in trouble. It has been for over a century. Australia is not immune from the broader effects of what occurs there, whether in terms of our own investment in domestic security, the impact of events on parts of the Australian community, or the security impacts on our immediate region. But just as Russia, and Turkey for that matter, are using the Middle East as a test bed for changing the way that the international rules-based order is established and operates, so Australia has an interest in ensuring that their preferences do not become normative. To achieve that interest, however, means that Australia needs to be an active player as distinct from an anxious bystander.

In a disrupted world, where the post WW2 order is under direct and constant challenge (not least of all by President Trump), Australia’s interests are best achieved through an active and engaged diplomacy that focuses on coalition-building¹⁶ and active participation in the institutions and agencies that deliver the global rules-based order that is so central to our international and security policy interests. This includes working actively with the UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO, WFP, the OCHA, the ICRC and UNRWA to address the paralysing refugee, poverty, inequality and hunger problems in the Middle East.

This necessarily takes Australia beyond its traditional bilateral reliance on the US for security guarantees to a greater investment in multilateral avenues for achieving core national interests. For the fact is that Australia shares interests with a great number of nations, not only those considered to be ‘like-minded’ (those that share a positive and constructive approach to keeping the global system in good order) but also those that are affected by what goes wrong. These shared interests are what allow coalitions to succeed.

¹⁵ See “Top 20 Economies in the World” at <https://www.investopedia.com/insights/worlds-top-economies/>

¹⁶ In this context, it is worth bearing in mind Allan Gyngell’s cautionary comments on coalition building. “. . . If Australia can’t exercise agency through our major ally so easily, what about opportunities do we have to combine our influence and weight with other so-called middle powers in pursuit of common international objectives? Coalition building of this sort is a popular idea. It features in the Foreign Policy White Paper and many speeches by our leaders. And it is an excellent idea in principle. But it is difficult to achieve,” “What Can Australia Do?”, Speech to the 2019 AIIA National Conference, 17 October 2019 <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/what-can-australia-do/>

Moreover, successive Australian governments have continued to emphasise the international rules-based order as a core tenet of Australian foreign policy. They are right. For a nation with global interests, but lacking global influence, Australia has no option but to advocate and defend effective multilateral diplomacy, and the institutions within which that diplomacy is practised, as the most effective means of securing our national interests.

With respect to the Middle East, this means working with both the US, when our interests align, and with other nations that share a constructive and collaborative approach to the maintenance of stability and security. Coalition-building is tricky. It requires painstaking diplomacy distinguished by modesty, patience and perseverance – qualities that are not always the hallmarks of Australia’s performance on the international stage. Just consider climate change. But investment to that end is almost always less expensive than meeting the costs of inaction or, what’s worse, the costs of military deployments and armed conflict.

Australia has global security interests, even though it is not a global player. To protect and advance those interests, Australia needs a capable, active and well-resourced diplomacy. This is a critical tool of statecraft and, as such, needs constant evaluation and investment. Whereas diplomacy is often forced into a confected binary with defence investment – “the military is what you need when diplomacy fails” – history suggests that strong and effective diplomacy is a prerequisite for military success, both ante- and post-bellum.

It is a cardinal feature of diplomacy that sound statecraft gives effect to moral purpose, and moral purpose is reinforced by sound statecraft. Given the spread of Australia’s diplomatic representation in the Middle East, we have the ability, in concert with others, to realise our interest in tackling the global refugee crisis at source, in countering terrorism, whether originating in the Middle East or regionally, in enhancing global energy security, and in using our good offices to assist in the resolution of regional disputes. Our interests in the Middle East would certainly support a more vigorous diplomatic effort that is more dependent on dialogue and negotiation and less dependent on military deployment. For the most part, Australia’s military assets in the Middle East are ‘out of sight and out of mind’, delivering little by way of tangible diplomatic or political benefit in the region.

CONCLUSION

In a world where military gestures are increasingly the currency of global engagement, Australia needs to reappraise the relationship between its national interests and the best means of securing them. Diplomacy, the application of agreed international rules and procedures, working in coalitions, and finding the diplomatic tools for peaceful dispute resolution suits Australia’s purposes better than simple reliance on flag-waving or sabre-rattling. Military adventurism is just that, no matter which nation might undertake it. If the use of armed force without a UN Security Council mandate by one country is unacceptable, it is surely unacceptable for all countries. And if assassination is illegal for any country, as

common article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions would suggest, then surely it is illegal for all countries.¹⁷

This is where an active diplomacy, based on a consistent application of international legal principles reflecting our national values, would provide a reliable and, in the longer term, more successful means of promoting and protecting our national interests. And that is as much the case in the Middle East as it is anywhere else.

¹⁷ For an informed analysis of the international legal status of the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, see the The Associated Press, “Was the Drone Attack on Iranian General an Assassination?”, The New York Times, 3 January 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/01/03/us/ap-us-iran-was-it-an-assassination-.html>