

Conflicts in West Asia: Notes for UPSC

West Asia is traditionally the name given to the Fertile Crescent or Mesopotamia, the Levant, the Nile Delta and the adjacent regions of Iran, Arabia and Anatolia. Today, it covers the region from Egypt, Cyprus and Turkey in the west to Iran and the Persian Gulf in the East, and from Iran and Turkey in the north to Oman and Yemen in the south.

Lately, we have been seeing many disturbing reports coming out of the region of constant conflict with the latest being from Syria and Yemen. What are the origins of the conflict? Who is involved? What is the geopolitical impact of such a conflict? Will there be an end to it? What are the implications of India's interest in the regions?

This article will aim to answer all of these questions within the context of the IAS Exams

Origins of the Conflicts in West Asia

Western Asia, for the most part, was under the control of the Ottoman Empire since the 14th Century AD. The empire had a multicultural population varying in race, religion and culture. It wasn't easy to govern such a population without any mishaps but the Ottomans implemented a successful administrative system that rewarded the meritorious and the loyal thus ensuring peace in the region. But this situation changed after the end of World War I in the early 20th century.

Upon the Ottoman Empire's defeat in the war, most of its former territory was divided among the victorious allied powers, chiefly Britain and France. Now that the Ottoman control over most of the land inhabited by Arabs had ended, the time had come for them self-govern these lands without or with limited foreign interference. The British made many such promises in this regard in exchange for Arab support against the Ottomans in World War I.

But none would be kept with the wishes of the Arab people. Out of these two would stand out as the driving force of the animosity between the Western world and the Middle East along with being the cause of the resulting conflicts that would take place in the years to come - the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration.

Sykes-Picot Agreement

The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a 1916 unofficial treaty between the United Kingdom and France, with assent from the Russian Empire and Italy, to define their mutually agreed spheres of influence and control in an eventual partition of the Ottoman Empire.

The primary negotiations leading to the agreement occurred between 23 November 1915 and 3 January 1916, on which date the British and French diplomats, Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, initialled an agreed memorandum.

The agreement effectively divided the Ottoman provinces outside the Arabian Peninsula into areas of British and French control and influence. The British- and French-controlled countries were divided by the Sykes-Picot line. The agreement allocated to Britain control of what is today southern Israel and Palestine, Jordan and southern Iraq, and an additional small area that included the ports of Haifa and Acre to allow access to the Mediterranean.

What the agreement effectively did was to lump together hostile tribes and factions in one area, ensuring that there would be conflicts within these groups. Since it was a secret agreement between European powers, Arabs were not at all consulted about the change in the borders. So unforgettable was the betrayal that even terrorist groups like the Islamic State would seek to destroy the borders created by the Sykes-Picot agreement.

To know the latest about the Israeli-Palestine conflict, refer to the UPSC Exam Comprehensive Analysis dated December 19, 2019.

Balfour Declaration

The Balfour Declaration was a public statement issued by the British government in 1917 during the First World War announcing support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, then an Ottoman region with a small minority Jewish population. The declaration was contained in a letter dated 2 November 1917 from the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour.

The declaration had many long-lasting consequences. It greatly increased popular support for Zionism within Jewish communities worldwide and became a core component of the British Mandate for Palestine, the founding document of Mandatory Palestine, which later became Israel and the Palestinian territories. As a result, it is considered a principal cause of the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict, often described as the world's most intractable conflict.

The reason for this is because the British Government were contradicting their own promises to the Arabs of Palestine in respect to what they too would have a say in the government of the new nation.

Geopolitical Impact of the Conflicts in West Asia

Apart from the humanitarian crisis, the conflicts will only further destabilize the region further with various terrorist factions vying for control. At worst it will fuel not only terrorism in that region but also the world over. Haphazard interventions by the West have only fuelled a raging fire. It will also have economic impacts as these conflicts will influence how low or high the prices of oil will go. As most of the oil comes from mainly OIC-based countries, they can leverage the oil

prices to fulfil their goals and some of these goals may not be necessarily benign in nature and it could even have disastrous consequences for the local populace.

West Asia Peace Plan

There have been many attempts to bring about peace in the region but even the most successful ones - Oslo Peace Accords between Israel and Palestine - have only halted conflicts temporarily.

The latest is the West Asia Peace Plan unveiled by the United States, President Donald Trump on January 28, 2020.

The West Asia Peace Plan states the U.S. will recognise Israeli settlements on the occupied West Bank. The settlements are regarded as a violation of a United Nations resolution that prohibits any new settlement being set up in Palestinian territories.

In exchange, Israel would agree to accept a four-year freeze on new settlement activity while Palestinian statehood is negotiated. Although accepted by the Israeli government, the Palestinian authorities have refused the plan citing that they were never consulted on such matters and that no plans can work without their active participation.

The Palestinian authorities also feel that any plan that does not call for a two-state solution will only see them sidelined in Israeli politics.

As a result, the West Asia Peace Plan will also be one of many such fruitless initiatives aimed at bringing the conflicts in West Asia to an end.

To know more in detail about the implications of the peace plan UPSC Exam Comprehensive Analysis dated January 30, 2020.

Conclusion

It is highly unlikely that the conflicts raging now in Syria, Yemen and other parts of the Middle East will come to an end. It will take too much diligent political manoeuvring to bring all the parties to the negotiation table. Even initiatives such as the West Asia Peace Plan are self-serving at best as they only benefit one party by completely neglecting the other. Until such an initiative is brought about then there is no end in sight to the conflicts currently raging now.

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