



### MUNICH SECURITY CONFERENCE 2018: MIDDLE EAST PERSPECTIVES

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**The Munich Security Conference (MSC) took place from February 15-18, 2018. The conference came amidst a complex global security environment, manifest in deteriorating developments regarding the world's climate, economy and volatile crisis areas.**

For more than five decades, the Munich Security Conference (MSC) has become an important forum for dialogue on security policy. Each February, it brings together senior decision-makers from around the world. These include heads-of-state, ministers, leading personalities of international and non-governmental organizations, as well as high ranking representatives of industry, media, academia, and civil society. Spread over three days, the conference comprises of debates, speeches, and side-line meetings regarding international defence policy.

The key issues for MSC 2018 included: the future of the European Union, its relations with Russia and the US, the conflicts in the Middle East, in particular the war in Syria, and focus on arms control. This year, there were more than 600 participants, including more than 20 heads of state and government, 40 foreign ministers and 40 defence ministers. Non-governmental organizations were also represented. Representatives from the US, UK, Russia, China, Israel, Germany, and France were all in attendance. A number of foreign ministers, including Russia's Sergey Lavrov, Iran's Mohammad Javad Zarif, Germany's Sigmar Gabriel, and Saudi Arabia's Adel bin Ahmed al-Jubeir were also present.

Delegates from US included Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, National Security Advisor HR McMaster, and CIA Director Mike Pompeo. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, EU Brexit

negotiator Michel Barnier, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, and IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde also partook in the conference this year.

The Munich Security Conference is usually an opportunity for world leaders to meet on the side-lines and strive for compromise and conciliation. But this year's gathering is more likely to be remembered for the lack of apparent progress on resolving protracted conflicts around the world. No sign of understanding or hope was evident during the conference. This year's motto "To the Brink – and Back?" seemed an appropriate portrayal of the condition that the world, particularly the Middle East is in today.

"I hope you have all come here to present policy proposals, to listen ... and to build trust",<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Ischinger, Chairman MSC said in his opening remarks. It appears that little of this actually took place this year in Munich.

With so many pressing issues to discuss, this year's conference had the potential to make a difference. However it became more of an open walloping opportunity. Israel's prime minister and the Iranian foreign minister exchanged harsh words at the high-profile event, with Benjamin Netanyahu equating Iran to Nazi Germany,<sup>2</sup> and Mohammad Javad Zarif calling the Israeli leader's speech a "cartoonish circus."<sup>3</sup>

Netanyahu went on to say that Iran was trying to increase its control in the Middle East through political and armed proxies in Syria, Yemen, Gaza and Lebanon. He also pointed out that groupings were shifting in the region stating that, "Now there has been one positive consequence of Iran's growing aggression in the region. It's brought Arabs and Israelis closer together as never before. And in a paradoxical way, this may pave the way for a broader peace and ultimately also for a Palestinian-Israeli peace."<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, just hours before this statement, Israel had carried out a number of strikes against Palestinian positions in Gaza.

Mr. Zarif then proceeded to deliver a list of objections against both the United States and Israel, including US military involvement in the Middle East and what he called Israeli "aggression as a

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<sup>1</sup> MSC - *Munich Security Conference*, February 21, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Iris Mark, "Munich Security Conference: Netanyahu likens Iran to the Nazi Regime," *PNN*.

<sup>3</sup> Noa Landau (Munich), "Iranian FM ridicules Netanyahu's 'cartoonish circus' as attempt to 'avoid domestic crisis'," *Haaretz.com*, February 18, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> *Haaretz*, "FULL TEXT: Netanyahu's speech on Iran in Munich," *Haaretz.com*, February 18, 2018.

policy against its neighbors."<sup>5</sup> He accused Israel of "mass reprisals against its neighbors and daily incursions into Syria and Lebanon."<sup>6</sup>

Syria which was supposed to be on top of the agenda became synonymous to a battleground between all the parties involved, with each player citing their own grievances and nobody touching upon the main issue - the plight of the Syrian people. It became a primary example of the chaos and confusion reigning in the region. For the first time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threatened to attack Iran directly, citing the latter's actions designed against Israeli involvement in Syria. Iran in turn admonished the United States of illegal occupation of the area east of the Euphrates. Russia brought up the US strikes against Assad supporters that had caused many Russian casualties, while Turkey's foreign minister underlined Turkey's war against Kurdish terrorism and called for the protection of Syria's territorial integrity (its own incursion into Afrin made its argument weak). In his turn, the Lebanese foreign minister placed the blame for tensions on Israel which, he accused of constantly violating Lebanese sovereignty by attacking Syria from Lebanon's airspace.

The other main issue was Palestine, which was marginalized, displaying its lack of significance for the world leaders at the conference. It was barely mentioned in the talking points. Prime Minister Netanyahu called for giving peace and a Trump plan a chance, despite Mahmud Abbas's refusal. He even responded to Palestinian attempts to shift the negotiations setting to a new international forum by maintaining that the United States was playing an important role in the process. It seems that a two-state solution, or in fact any kind of solution might not be on the cards any time soon.

And not to forget the Saudis who were trying to propel an agenda of their own. Saudi Arabia's foreign minister called on the US to give it the same rights as other nuclear nations in its push to develop its own nuclear fuel, revealing that it is presently in talks with ten other countries should America refuse. Saudi Arabia plans to build 16 nuclear power reactors over the next 20 to 25 years at a cost of more than \$80 billion.<sup>7</sup>

There is no end in sight for the madness that is the Middle East today; with the recent announcement by the US that its embassy will open in Jerusalem this May, with Eastern Ghouta been bombed relentlessly for the past week and calls for a ceasefire falling on deaf ears as bloodied images of children traversed across social media, the Middle East is suffering from fresh carnage day

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<sup>5</sup> "Read: Full transcript of FM Zarif's speech at 2018 Munich Security Conference," *Real Iran*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ari Natter, Jennifer Jacobs, and Jennifer A. Dlouhy, "U.S. Energy Chief Plans Nuclear Deal Talks With Saudis, Source Says," *Bloomberg.com*, February 26, 2018.

by day. But even as US increasingly looks like a rudderless ship, Qatar has even called for an EU-style security pact for Middle East so that some semblance of peace can be retained.

Mr. Zarif hit the nail on the head when he stated that rather than a strong man, a fresh regional security architecture is required in the region. So far, the former has been the order of the day with Syria becoming a battleground of egos. In a world searching for leaders, this year's conference proved there were no leaders in sight. The conference produced far more questions than answers, and, as it went on, more and more accusations as Israel blamed Iran, Iran blamed Israel, the US blamed Russia and Turkey blamed the Kurds. And all the while, new weapons are being developed. The world leaders failed to display cohesion on what type of common security policy the world needs as they have their own strategic interests and priorities. It's a play out of the realism theory in its most ruthless form and the only casualties are the people on ground.