

War & Peace in the 21st century

The future of the Middle East: understanding conflict, building peace

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CIDOB

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The future of the Middle East: understanding conflict, building peace

The Middle East is one of the most complex regions in the world. It has recently entered a new wave of conflict, characterised by unprecedented level of violence. About a year and a half after Hamas' terrorist attacks and Israel's disproportionate response, which has caused more than 50,000 deaths and a serious humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the conflict spread into Lebanon and the prospects for regional escalation became a real danger. Syria has put an end to the Assad regime but, at the same time, entered a new era of uncertainty. The escalation of violence in current circumstances has lasted longer than previous waves of the Arab-Israeli conflict and has involved more actors, both regional and international. The authority of the United States in the region, under a new Trump Administration is questioned, while the European Union looks increasingly weak and divided. The United Nations, paralysed by an ineffective Security Council, is also unable to promote peace, and the countries of the Global South observe with resentment the double standards of the West, when compared to other conflicts such as the war in Ukraine. Which are the roots of conflict in Middle East? Why is so hard to secure peace? How can the international community promote dialogue and solutions to a lasting peace? What parameters need to be discussed at times of political change in Washington and Brussels? What role should regional and international actors play? Which future scenarios for the Middle East can be envisaged after the current crisis?

09:30 **Opening**

Jaume Collboni, Mayor of Barcelona

09:45 **Introduction**

Josep Borrell, Chairman of the Board, CIDOB

10:00 **The Middle East at a crossroads: understanding the roots of conflict**

A discussion between:

Avi Gil, former Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel

Omar Shaban, Founder and Director, PalThink for Strategic Studies

Salam Kawakibi, Director, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Mirette F. Mabrouk, Senior Fellow and Founding Director of the Egypt and the Horn of Africa Program, Middle East Institute

Chaired and moderated by:

Ángeles Espinosa, Journalist, former Middle East Correspondent, EL PAÍS

Followed by a debate between the speakers

11:15 **Coffee break**

11:45 **The international dimension and its contribution to a lasting peace**

A discussion between:

Merissa Khurma, Non-Resident Fellow, Baker Institute, Rice University

Mohanad Hage Ali, Deputy Director for Research, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center

Sanam Vakil, Director, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Gérard Araud, Distinguished Fellow, Europe Center, Atlantic Council

Chaired and moderated by:

Natalia Sancha, Journalist and Political Analyst; former Political Advisor to the EU Special Representative for the Middle East Process

Followed by a debate between the speakers

13:00 **Debate with the audience**

13:30 **Concluding Remarks**

Pol Morillas, Director, CIDOB

13:45 **Closing**

Jaume Duch, Minister for European Union and Foreign Action, Government of Catalonia

Working language: English

#WP2025

Participants' bios



Gérard Araud

Distinguished fellow with the Atlantic Council's Europe Center, where he works on the future of Europe, EU politics, and the future of statecraft. Ambassador Araud held numerous positions within the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, notably Director for Strategic Affairs, Security and Disarmament, Ambassador of France to Israel, Director General for Political Affairs and Security, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations in New York and ambassador of France to the United States. He has reached the highest rank in the French diplomatic service ('Ambassadeur de France'). Mr. Araud has developed specialized knowledge in two key areas: Middle East and strategic & security issues, he was the French negotiator on the Iranian nuclear issue. He has published his Memoirs "Passeport diplomatique" (2019), a biography of Henry Kissinger "Henry Kissinger, le diplomate du siècle" (2021), and two books of French diplomatic history: "Histoires diplomatiques" (2022) and "Nous étions seuls 1919-1939" (2023). He also recently published the book "Israël, le piège de l'histoire" (2025). He is trustee of the International Crisis Group and columnist for the French weekly 'Le Point' and the French Information TV LCI.



Josep Borrell

President of CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs). From 2019 to 2024 he served as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission. Prior to this, he was Spain's Minister of Foreign Affairs, the European Union, and Cooperation (2018 to 2019). From 2004 to 2007 Mr. Borrell was President of the European Parliament, where from 2007 to 2009 was Chair of the Committee on Development. In Spain, he was a Member of Parliament from 1986 to 2003 and held the position of Minister of Public Works, Transport, Telecommunications and the Environment (1991-1996). Additionally, he was State Secretary for Treasury (1984-1991) and Secretary-General for Budget and Public Expenditure (1982-1984). In academia, Mr. Borrell held the Jean Monnet Chair of European Economic Integration at the Complutense University of Madrid (2013-2017) and also served as President of the European University Institute in Florence (2010-2012). Before his political career, Mr. Borrell was a Mathematics Professor at the Higher Technical School of Aeronautical Engineering and at the Complutense University of Madrid from 1972 to 1982.



Jaume Collboni

Mayor of Barcelona since June 2023. With a strong background in public service, he has held important positions within the Barcelona City Council. From 2019 to 2023, he served as the First Deputy Mayor for Economy, Labour, Competitiveness and Finance, and previously, from 2016 to 2017, he held the position of Deputy Mayor for Business, Culture and Innovation. Additionally, he served as the Vice-President for Social and Economic Development of the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (AMB), an institution of which he is currently the President. From 2010 to 2014, Mr. Collboni was a member of the Parliament of Catalonia. Mr. Collboni has also proven his leadership and expertise at the national level. He has held managerial positions within the Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) (the General Union of Workers) and was a member of the Economic and Social Council of Spain. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Law from the University of Barcelona.



Jaume Duch

Minister for European Union and Foreign Action of the Government of Catalonia. A lawyer, university lecturer and journalist, Mr. Duch has spent practically his entire career in EU institutions. From 2017 until his appointment as Minister, he was Director General for Communication of the European Parliament. Previously, from 2008 to 2017, he was media director, and from 2006, spokesperson at the institution. He was also head of the press room and head of programming in the European Parliament's Directorate General for Communication (2000–2006), and spokesman and adviser to the Cabinet of the President of the European Parliament under José María Gil-Robles (1997 and 1999), with responsibilities for communication, public engagements and official visits. He was also responsible for information and communication for the parliamentary working group of the convention drafting the European Constitution (2002–2003) and for the convention preparing the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (1999–2000). Between 1986 and 1990 he was an associate professor of International Public Law at the Faculty of Law of the University of Barcelona. He has published articles and communications, among other works, and has participated in conferences and seminars on European Union institutions, Community law and European communication. He is a member of the Council of the Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe. Mr. Jaume Duch holds a degree in Law from the University of Barcelona.



Ángeles Espinosa

Journalist, former Middle East Correspondent with Spanish newspaper EL PAÍS. Ms. Espinosa is an award-winning journalist and current comentator on Middle East Affairs. As a correspondent she has interviewed most of its leaders from Iranian Presidents Khatami and Ahmadinejad to the late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and Israeli prime minister Isaac Shamir. For almost four decades she has crisscrossed from Morocco to Pakistan and has lived in Dubai, Tehran, Baghdad, Cairo and Beirut. That experience has been reflected in her books: “El tiempo de las mujeres” (2018), “El Reino del Desierto. Arabia Saudí frente a sus contradicciones” (2012), and “Días de Guerra. Diario de Bagdad” (2003). Among the recognitions for her work, she has received two Ortega y Gasset Journalism Awards for her coverage of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the Julio Anguita Parrado for international Journalism; the Víctor de la Serna and the prize of the Club Internacional de Prensa. She has also been decorated with the Spanish service order Orden del Mérito Civil. Ms. Espinosa has a Master in International Relations from SAIS (Johns Hopkins), and has a degree in Journalism from the Complutense University of Madrid.



Avi Gil

Former Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel (2001-2002). Ambassador Avi Gil has also held several senior positions in the Israeli government, including Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister (1995–1996), and Director General of the Ministry of Regional Cooperation (1999–2001). He has been involved in Israel’s policymaking and peace efforts, including the negotiations that led to the Oslo Accords and the peace treaty with Jordan. In the years following the Oslo Accords, Mr. Gil continued to participate in high-level discussions with Palestinian leadership, including the secret negotiations conducted by President Shimon Peres with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). From 2009 to 2014, he served as Director of Content for Israel’s five Presidential Conferences “Facing Tomorrow”. Additionally, he was a Senior Fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI) from 2003 to 2024. Throughout his career, Mr. Gil has been engaged in academia on topics including policy planning, conflict resolution, negotiation, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the relationship between the press and politics. Mr. Gil’s book, “Shimon Peres: An Insider’s Account of the Man and the Struggle for a New Middle East” (2020), offers a detailed perspective on the statesman’s legacy. Ambassador Gil holds a Master’s Degree in Political Science and a B.A. in Political Science and Economics from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He also earned a Master’s Degree in Public Administration from Harvard University.



Mohanad Hage Ali

Deputy Director for Research at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. In addition to his role at Carnegie, Mr. Hage Ali teaches political science at Emory University and has lectured at the Lebanese American University. Specializing in nationalism and Islamic movements, Mr. Hage Ali has contributed to major Middle Eastern and Western media outlets, including Al Hayat, The Guardian, The Washington Post, and Foreign Affairs. He is the author of “Nationalism, Transnationalism, and Political Islam: Hezbollah’s Institutional Identity” (2017) and co-editor of “A Restless Revival: Political Islam after the 2011 Uprisings” (2021). An academic and political journalist, he holds a PhD and MSc in Conflict Studies from the London School of Economics and Political Science. His doctoral research centered on Hezbollah’s identity construction.



Salam Kawakibi

Director of the Paris branch of the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies. He is a researcher in political science and international affairs and worked as Deputy Director of the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) until 2017. He held the position of Director of the Institut Français du Proche Orient (IFPO) in Aleppo from 2000 to 2006. Mr. Kawakibi is the President of Initiative for a New Syria, board member of The Day After association, member of the board of trustees of Ettijahat – Independent Culture and member of the Consultative Council of the Mediterranean Citizens’ Assembly (MCA). He is Non-Resident Fellows at The Global Institute for Strategic Research (GISR) in Doha. Mr. Kawakibi teaches on Development and Migration at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. His recent publications include ‘Activism in Syria: Between Nonviolence and Armed Resistance’ with Wael Sawah in “Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism” (Johns Hopkins, 2014), ‘The Paradox of Government-Organized Civil Activism in Syria’ in “Civil Society in Syria and Iran” (Lynne Rienner, 2013). He holds a DEA in Political Sciences from l’Institut d’Etudes Politiques, Aix-En-Provence, a DEA in International Relations from Aleppo University and a BA in Economy from Aleppo University.



Merissa Khurma

Non-Resident Fellow, Baker Institute, Rice University. She was a non-resident fellow in the International Security program at New America. Ms. Khurma has leadership experience working in a range of development projects in the Middle East that focused on economic development, the Syrian refugee crisis, education, youth, gender development, and governance. Additionally, Ms. Khurma served as director of the Office of Jordan's Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein (2010- 2013) and as press attaché and director of the Information Bureau at the Embassy of Jordan in Washington, D.C. (2003-2010). Ms. Khurma has a Master of Public Administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, a Master of Science in International Security and Foreign Policy from Georgetown University, and a bachelor of art in political science from McGill University. She is also a leadership development practitioner with a focus on Adaptive Leadership, Public Narrative & Community Organizing.



Mirette F. Mabrouk

Senior Fellow and Founding Director of the Egypt and the Horn of Africa Program at the Middle East Institute. She was previously deputy director and director for research and programs at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council. Formerly a fellow at the Project for U.S. Relations with the Middle East at the Brookings Institution, Ms. Mabrouk moved to Washington D.C. from Cairo, where she was director of communications for the Economic Research Forum (ERF). Before being appointed associate director for publishing operations at The American University in Cairo Press, Ms. Mabrouk had over 20 years of experience in both print and television journalism. She is the founding publisher of The Daily Star Egypt, (now The Daily New Egypt), at the time, the country's only independent English-language daily newspaper, and the former publishing director for IBA Media, which produces the region's top English-language magazines. Her writing has appeared in publications like Foreign Policy, The Hill and HuffPost and she has been quoted and appeared on the BBC, VOA, Sky News, The Wall Street Journal and the Christian Science Monitor, among others. She authored 'And Now for Something Completely Different: Arab Media's Own Little Revolution' in "Arab transitions; Reconstructing the Middle East" (2017) and is the editor of a multi author report "Rethinking Egypt's Economy".



Pol Morillas

Director of CIDOB. He is a political scientist and holds a PhD in Politics, Policies and International Relations from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and a master's in International Relations from the London School of Economics. He has taught at several universities, including UAB, IESE, ESADE and Blanquerna. He is also a member of the Board of Cercle d'Economia and of IESE's Observatori de Política Exterior Europea (European Foreign Policy Observatory). Previously, he was Coordinator of the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the EU, Advisor on External Action at the European Parliament, and Head of the Euro-Mediterranean Policies field at the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). He has published numerous research articles in academic journals, think tanks and opinion pieces on global geopolitics, European foreign policy, and European integration, among other topics. His latest book is "Strategy-Making in the EU. From Foreign and Security Policy to External Action" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and he has co-directed the documentary "Bouncing Back: world politics after the pandemic" (CIDOB, 2021). He has also participated in several H2020 and Horizon Europe research projects and collaborates with other think tanks and international organisations. He regularly collaborates with various media outlets (press, radio, and TV) as a European and international affairs analyst.



Natalia Sancha

Journalist and Political Analyst. From 2021 to 2024 Ms. Sancha worked at the European External Action Service (EEAS), where she initially served as a Strategic Information and Communication Analyst and later as Political Advisor to the European Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process (EUSR MEPP). As Political Advisor, Natalia travelled extensively throughout the MENA region alongside EUSR Sven Koopmans and High Representative Josep Borrell, working tirelessly to advance the implementation of the Two-State Solution, engaging with key political and civil society actors, especially during a period of significant challenges and crises in the peace process after the October 7 attacks. Previously, she worked during fifteen years as Middle East correspondent, first as a freelance and after for EL PAIS, based in Beirut. Ms. Sancha is the coordinator and co-author of the book "Balas para todas" (Larrad Ediciones, 2021), co-author of the book "Siria. La primavera marchita" (Libros.com 2015), and the book of photography depicting the lives of Syrian refugees in southern Turkey titled "Passing Through". She studied journalism at the Complutense University of Madrid, completed a Master's degree in International Relations at Sciences-Po Paris, and graduated from the Master's program in Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University, as a Fulbright scholar.



Omar Shaban

Founder and Director of the PalThink for Strategic Studies (Gaza). Mr. Shaban was a candidate for the 1st Palestinian parliamentary elections in 1996. He participates in conferences on political and economic issues, as well as Palestinian affairs, such as the reconstruction of Gaza, national reconciliation, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Euro-Med cooperation. His political independence and strict adherence to democratic values and principles made him a trusted advisor to all stakeholders. He has also published dozens of articles and policy papers for research reports and think tanks and has been quoted in numerous books such as “Dignity under Siege” (Brussels, 2008) and “Palestiniens” by Mélinée Le Priol and Chloé Rouveyrolles (Paris, 2018). Mr. Shaban and Pal-Think for Strategic Studies received the World Movement for Democracy Award in Recognition for its Civil Society Role in 2024. He regularly writes for various international magazines and has been interviewed by many well-known international newspapers. He holds a BA in economy from Egypt (1984), an MSc in Entrepreneurial Studies from Stirling University, Scotland (1995), and a Master’s Degree in Development from Geneva Graduate Institute in 2023.



Sanam Vakil

Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the Chatham House. Ms. Vakil’s research focuses on regional security, Gulf geopolitics, governance and accountability processes, and on future trends in Iran’s domestic and foreign policy. She is also the James Anderson professorial lecturer in the Middle East Studies Department at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS Europe) in Bologna, Italy. Previously, Ms. Vakil was an assistant professor of Middle East Studies at SAIS Washington. She served as a research associate at the Council on Foreign Relations also providing research analysis to the World Bank’s Middle East and North Africa Department. She is the author of “Action and Reaction: Women and Politics in Iran” (Bloomsbury 2013). She publishes analysis and comments for a variety of media and academic outlets. Sanam received her BA in political science and history from Barnard College, Columbia University and her MA/PhD in international relations and international economics from the Johns Hopkins University.