Not only is the Middle East one of the cradles of civilizations but also a region with the largest natural gas and crude oil reserves on the planet. It is a place where different cultures collide, a focal point of international trade and an important political arena. Interests of three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe) merge in this region, where the United States continues to pursue policies that benefit it.

It is thus not surprising that many nations from this part of the world have been trying to retain their positions of influence in the Middle East over the past decades. For instance, Israel has been doing so with direct support of the United States, a country that aims to turn the former into its own exclusive monitor in the region. A number of other countries (including Saudi Arabia and Persian Gulf states) are doing everything in their power to retain their influence with the aid of energy diplomacy.

During the second half of 20th century, several nations in the region chose to increase their military clout at the regional level. As a result, there are countries with fairly powerful and well-equipped armies in this part of the world nowadays, such as Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Libya and Iran. However, since USA’s policy in the Middle East appears to focus on ensuring that a leader with an independent to US stance does not emerge in the region, the United States has been forced to consistently pursue a strategy of undermining governments whose interests are not aligned with its own. As a result, the US toppled Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq; deposed Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi;
instigated a civil war in Syria; supported the Egyptian revolution of 2011, and imposed sanctions against Iran. Despite all these tough challenges, Egypt’s political influence and military clout have noticeably been growing in the region.

Starting in the middle of the 20th century, the nation began consolidating its position in the Arab world and gradually gaining more influence on the international arena. For instance, Egypt supported Iraq during the longest armed conflict of the 20th century (i.e. the Iran-Iraq war, 1980-1988) by supplying Saddam Hussein with weapons and military experts. At the time, the Egyptian Army became one of the most powerful forces in this part of the world to the great disappointment of a number of its rivals who aimed to seriously harm this nation by supporting “color” revolutions in this region and the rise to power of Mohamed Morsi, with ties to Islamist groups.

The author would be remiss not to mention Egypt’s involvement in the change of government in Sudan and its support of the Libyan peace process.

The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict also enhances Egypt’s political clout and strategic role in the region.

At first glance, Egypt’s key function over recent years has been to act as a mediator between Israel and Hamas. Until recently, the nation did not propose any peace initiatives or engage in shuttle diplomacy to promote peace in the region. In addition, Egypt was not meant to play a central role in the “deal of the century”, which US President Donald Trump and his team had drawn up, instead Saudi Arabia was chosen for it. The Kingdom was to exert pressure on the Palestinians, with the involvement of Jordan.

Recently, there was yet another flare-up in tensions in the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel, which caused substantial causalities among Palestinian civilians. Numerous players attempted to de-escalate the situation but at first, they did not succeed.

The United Nations Security Council held four emergency meetings, with their participants calling on Israel and Palestine to immediately stop the fighting. However, the members of the Security Council were not able to agree on a joint statement urging the two sides to cease all hostilities due to opposition from the United States, which blocked the Council from issuing it.

The Middle East Quartet (which was established to mediate the Israeli–Palestinian peace process in 2002 and comprises the European Union, the UN, the United States and Russia) was not able to aid in the lowering of tensions either. During a virtual UN Security Council meeting on May 16, Secretary-General António Guterres called on the Middle East Quartet “to return to meaningful negotiations” but the efforts of the Quartet came to nothing for the same reason of obstruction from the US. Aside from the far-from-constructive role in the latest conflict played by the US leadership that essentially took Israel’s side, the European Union did not appear to be united on its Middle East strategy, with nations such as Germany showing more support for Israel, while other, like Sweden, - for Palestine.

The US government sent high-ranking diplomat Hady Amr to meet Israeli and Palestinian officials. American President Joe Biden also urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to cease hostilities. At the same time, the US leadership firmly talked about Israel’s right to defend itself. And after taking such a stance, the nation was no longer able to serve in the role of mediator in the conflict since Palestinians distrusted it.

In this climate, the Egyptian leadership played a key role by brokering a ceasefire between the two sides on May 21, 2021. Egypt took advantage of its full diplomatic relations with Israel and good ties with Hamas in order to act as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Its successful efforts showcased the country’s negotiating abilities to the rest of the world. The part Egypt played in achieving the ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian armed groups has not been overlooked in the United States, Russia or Israel. In his statement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hailed Egypt’s role in brokering the agreement between the two warring sides.

Unquestionably, Egypt played a very important part in the resolution of the latest conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, indicating a possible power shift in the Greater Middle East. After all, an Arab country with full diplomatic ties with Israel and a solid relationship with Palestinians succeeded where others have failed. And today, Egypt is viewed as a trusted partner not only in the Middle East where it plays a leading role.

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