



# POLITICAL FAULTLINES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Edited by  
Kingshuk Chatterjee



# Political Faultlines in the Middle East

The whole region of the Middle East is beset with a structural crisis of which particular crises confronting the component countries happen to be merely subsets. The real questions revolve round the issue of how long can the present dispensations of power and social structures in the region forged in the twentieth century (first half or second) can last in the twenty-first, when they no longer reflect the realities on the ground. This volume aims to look at some of the issues to see how the faultlines in the region appear in 2020 to both those in the region, and those outside it. The volume limits itself to only Levant and the Gulf and looks at the tensions within and policies (both foreign and domestic) of some of the key regional players which have regional repercussions. It also looks at the policies of some of the global players operating in the region that have bearing on the regional faultlines.

Kingshuk Chatterjee is a Professor in the Department of History, Calcutta University. Chatterjee's area of expertise is in Middle Eastern politics and he specialises in Political Islam in the Modern World. He is the author of *Ali Shari'ati and the Shaping of Political Islam in Iran* and *A Split in the Middle: the Making of the Political Centre in Iran (1987-2004)*.



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*Edited by*  
KINGSHUK CHATTERJEE



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# Contents

Contributors	xi
1. Introduction	1
2. <i>'A Fantasy Brought to Life': Revisiting Neo-Ottomanism in Yeni Turkiye</i> <i>Anita Sengupta</i>	9
3. Trajectories of a Stalemate: Turkey's Kurdish Question <i>Necati Anaz and Mehmet Ozkan</i>	29
4. The Lebanese Revolution and Hizbullah's Shi'i Axis of Resistance <i>Joseph Alagha</i>	47
5. Imperial Storm Troopers and the Return of the Mahdi: A Historical Perspective of the Israeli-Iranian Struggle <i>Dr. Nir Boms and Maj. (Res.) Stéphane Cohen</i>	97
6. Saudi Arabia: Navigating a Perilous Regional and International Politics <i>Muddassir Quamar</i>	111
7. Safeguarding the Islamic Republic: Structural Factors and Generational Shift Shaping Tehran's Foreign Policy <i>Kingsbuk Chatterjee</i>	131
8. From Proactive to Reactive Shift in American Middle East Strategy <i>Binoda K. Mishra</i>	151



9. The Return of the Prodigal: The Lengthening Shadow of  
Russia in the Middle East 163  
*Hari Sankar Vasudevan and Kingshuk Chatterjee*
10. China, Iran and West Asia: Civilisational Co-operation in the  
Twenty-first Century 179  
*Jigme Yeshe Lama*
11. The Unstable Middle East and India's Options 195  
*Ambassador Anil Trigunayat (IFS Retd.)*

*Dedicated to*

Prof. H.S. Vasudevan

a friend and a mentor

who was claimed by COVID-19

while this volume was being prepared



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## Contributors

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# 1. Introduction

*Kingshuk Chatterjee*

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Global discourse on international relations frequently tends to be overshadowed by the dominant power considerations and perspective of the dominant power, the United States of America – largely because USA is the only power that is present in virtually all parts of the globe. This is true with a vengeance for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) or West Asia and North Africa (WANA) because of the crucial role the region plays in the global energy sector, and the crucial role the US plays in the global distribution of the region's energy resources on the one hand, and in keeping the region stable on the other. Even a few years back, as the Syrian Civil War was in full swing, and the shadow of Da'esh (Islamic State or IS) was looming large all over the region and beyond, MENA/WANA was considered to be particularly volatile. Accordingly, the region was the subject of umpteen discussions all over the world from a variety of standpoints. In course of 2018-19, with the Syrian Civil War running its course and the defeat of IS, the world had begun to think that MENA/WANA has averted a serious crisis. However, if one looks at the region closely enough, it becomes clear that even as one crisis may have been averted, the region is teetering on the brink of still larger crises, which require very careful handling.

Where does the regional faultline lie depends on whose perspective one shares. From the Western viewpoint, it would seem that the greatest challenge in the region is to put Syria back together again, like humpy-dumpty, to prevent the return of Da'esh with a territorial base. It would seem the world is willing to even accommodate Bashar al-Assad in Damascus to bring this about – regardless of what that may portend for the dissident Syrians who had fought Assad all this while egged on by Washington DC and the rest. A task far less spoken about happens to

be putting Iraq back together again straddling its Sunni and Shi'i, Arab and Kurdish faultlines – but truly speaking, nothing seriously prevents Iraq from splitting up into its component parts barring the existing oil infrastructure which requires oil to move from the north to the south of the country to reach the global market.

From the Saudi and Israeli perspectives, the faultline runs along the Islamic Republic of Iran, its controversial nuclear programme, and its regional ambitions stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Levant, creating a “Shi'i axis” that has the potentials of destabilising Israel, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. This perspective is largely shared by the Trump administration and a large component of the American establishment, who therefore agree with Tel Aviv and Riyadh that Tehran needs be hemmed in, and that the JCPOA is inadequate for the purpose. From the standpoint of Iran, the real destabilising factor in the region is Saudi Arabia and *its* regional ambitions, which prevent the stabilisation of Iraq, Syria and keeps the pot boiling in Lebanon, Bahrain and Qatar in a way that Tehran finds disturbing. Tehran is equally peeved by the American disposition under Trump, and after a brief period of what appeared as a kind of bonhomie in the fight against Da'esh, Tehran finds itself at loggerheads with Washington yet again.

Most crucially for the region, with at least four powers (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and Turkey) vying for regional domination, the steady and determined US pull back from the region (probably the only thing Obama and Trump administrations have in common), and Russia re-entering the arena with its own strategic interests (especially in Syria, but also in Iran to a minor extent), is quietly pushing MENA/WANA in largely uncharted territories in the foreseeable future. The progressive weakening of some of the present regimes (Iraq and Syria) and the sheer desperation in the face of repression elsewhere (the Kurds in Turkey, the Palestinians in Israel) has made the Kurdish and Palestinian questions more explosive than they have been at any other point of time in the past.

There is yet another school of thinking that argues the whole region of the Middle East is beset with a larger structural crisis of which the particular crises confronting the component countries happen to be merely

subsets. The real questions, we are told, revolve round the issue of how long can the present dispensation of power and social structures in the region forged in the twentieth century (first half or second) last in the twenty-first, when they no longer reflect the realities on the ground. Woven into a region by the dynamics of the petroleum economy as late as the second half of the twentieth century, the Middle East as a whole, as much as its component parts (the Levant, the Persian Gulf and North Africa) have witnessed exponential changes in the rhythms and patterns of daily life in the last half century – to the point of disproving almost every single assumption about the region that used to be held half a century back. The region, believed to be culturally predisposed towards authoritarianism, has begun to show strong (if hitherto abortive) tendencies towards broadening of the social basis of power – and that is true despite the setbacks suffered in Egypt, Libya, and the Gulf monarchies. Believed to be socially fractured along sectarian lines, people in the region have shown enough potentials of rising above sectarianism, and may well have been successful if only the lineaments of power and the state-system had not been embedded in religious and sectarian communities – one has only to look at the discourse emerging from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon. Sitting at odds with most of the conventional approach to the study of Middle East, this line of thinking envisages a tectonic shift taking place in the region of the Middle East as a whole by the time the millennial generation takes over in the constituent countries of the region – and this is true across the region, and in some cases the states are already trying to anticipate such changes (as in Saudi Arabia under Muhammad bin Salman, and the reformists in Iran). Such tectonic shifts maybe seen even in Israel-Palestine where the texture of the problem of living under occupation ceases to agitate anyone except those enduring it – which explains how Arab states like UAE are willing to deal with Israel, much more than any simple attribution of the credit to diplomatic efforts of the Trump administration.

This volume comes out of a conference held in Calcutta University in December 2019, as a collaborative venture between the Centre for Studies in International Relations and Development (CSIRD) and the

Institute of Foreign Policy Studies (IFPS), Calcutta University, with funding support from the Indian Council of World Affairs and IVS Global Services Pvt Ltd. In addition to some of the presentations in the conference, the volume also comprises papers representing voices from the region, making an even balance between the gaze of the 'insider' and the 'outsider'. The volume aims to look at some of the issues listed above (but not necessarily from the standpoints indicated there), to see how the faultlines in the region appear in 2020 to both those in the region, and those outside it. The volume steers clear of the imbroglios of Syria and Iraq largely because little is likely to change there in the short or even in the medium term, swivelling as these two countries are in the vortices of regional dynamics, with both domestic (Shi'i Arab, Sunni Arab and Kurdish) and regional (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE) and supra-regional (USA, Russia) players locked in a hopeless struggle for dominance. The volume also desists from the traditional approach towards looking at Israel as the nerve-centre of the biggest regional problem, not because the problem of occupied Palestine has been resolved, but because its resolution does not appear likely in the foreseeable future, and also because the region is beginning to show the signs that it may be willing to look beyond Palestine. The volume further limits itself to only Levant and the Gulf, leaving out North Africa altogether, conforming to the geostrategic imaging of the region (primarily by Indian scholars) as West Asia.

The essays in the volume are grouped into three sets. The first set of essays deal with the Levant, and is comprised of two pieces on Turkey, one on Lebanon and one on the Levant as a whole vis-à-vis Iran, and the Israeli response to it.

In her essay on Neo-Ottomanism and the Turkish identity, Anita Sengupta takes a close look at the domestic dimensions of the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the political discourse shaped by it. She looks at Erdogan as representative of a generation of Turks who ascended the heights of political power in the early twenty-first century, and have come to bring about a re-imagination of Turkey's Ottoman past in a bid to shape the post-Kemalist dimension of the Turkish identity. In a very

subtle manner Sengupta seems to contend that the construction of the Turkish identity is no less incomplete than the Kemalist project had once been. The Gezi Park protests reveal, she maintains, precisely the kind of fissures that might yet cause the unravelling of the Yeni Türkiye project of Erdogan.

Related to the question of identity, Turkey's Kurdish question is dealt with in the essay by Mehmet Ozkan and Necati Anaz. They see the Kurdish question as being one motivated by right kind of aspirations of cultural autonomy that have gone out of hand politically with the dream of an independent Kurdistan. Looking into the history of the Kurdish question from the vantage point of Turkish history, they argue that legitimate cultural aspirations of the Kurdish people were badly mishandled by the Turkish state for a long time. They argue that the problems were susceptible to a mutually satisfactory political solution within the more inclusive imagination of "New Turkey" under the Erdogan government. However, it was the larger regional dynamics of the unravelling of the Syrian and Iraqi states that served to skew the possibilities of Turkey's solving her Kurdish question, which has landed both the sides, the Turkish state and the Kurdish movement in a kind of a stalemate from which there is no easy exit.

In his essay on the delicately poised situation of Lebanon through the prism of its most infamous actor, the Hizbullah, Joseph Alagha provides the reader with a broad and sweeping survey of contemporary Lebanese politics, with all its complexities. Beginning with a grand historical narrative about the country, Alagha explicates the operational and structural complexities of Lebanese politics, and situates the rise of the Hizbullah within that context. He then goes on to elaborate the nature of the dysfunctional political system that now obtains in the country, and the manner in which networking among sectarian groupings with vested interests have brought the country close to bankruptcy and the dubious distinction of an almost failed state – leaving unsaid what could be the repercussions of an actual collapse of the state in terms of the larger political landscape of the region.

Nir Boms and Stéphane Cohen have provided a historical perspective of the present struggle for dominance in the Levantine region between Iran and Israel. They situate present Iranian ventures to extend their strategic depth in the Levant in the light of previous such attempts by Persian tendencies of westward expansion, and the tendency of the Levant to be inevitably dragged into the Persian path. They go on to look at present day policies of the state of Israel to deny Iran the kind of strategic depth that it seeks in the Levant, and argue the policies of Israel as a force for stabilising the region by denying Iran the opportunity of growing really deep roots in the region.

The second set of essays deal with the Persian Gulf, or rather the two biggest of the regional powers on either side of it – Saudi Arabia and Iran. Muddassir Quamar presents a comprehensive treatment of the policy challenges and the geopolitical landscape which confronts the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He begins by identifying the major issues that confront the kingdom by way of increasing identification with Islamic fundamentalism, its intrinsic military weakness and vulnerability on account of dependence on oil revenues. He goes on to speak of the challenges the country faces in the region on account of Turkey and Iran, and how that complicates matters for the Kingdom. He finishes with a discussion of the various measures adopted by the kingdom to deal with the challenges confronting it.

Kingshuk Chatterjee's essay on the Islamic Republic of Iran looks at the manner in which the domestic dynamics of the Iranian politics and a generational shift within the matrices of power are likely to make the foreseeable future quite eventful. He explores the need for, and the dynamics of, the politics of economic and political reform within the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and the resistance to such reformism. He then situates the twin impulses of reformism and conservatism from the standpoint of ongoing generational shift within the establishment, thereby infusing a degree of fluidity and unpredictability to the manner in which politics (including the country's foreign policy) plays out.

The third set of essays looks at the roles played by external players in the politics of the region, taking two old actors (the United States and Russia) and two new ones (China and India) as case studies. Binoda K. Mishra presents a brief treatment of the changing disposition the biggest external player in the region's politics in order to argue that the United States of America has over the last several years gradually shifted from an assertive to a reactive posture – it no longer ceases the initiative in the Middle East and sometimes does not even respond to impulses generated from there. This Mishra attributes to the changing nature of US's vested interests in the region and reduced dependency on the region's energy resources.

Hari Sankar Vasudevan's essay on the return of Russia to the Middle East as a major actor in the politics of the region argues that, by contrast to US withdrawal from (or indifference to) the region, Russia's growing ascendancy there is more of the normal behaviour than its absence had been for a decade and a half from the 1990s. Charting the course and the shifting nature of Russia's engagement over centuries, Vasudevan argues that Russia's present engagement with the region is a part of Russia's global vision of a world beyond western dominance. The essay included in this volume was conceptualised by Prof. Vasudevan before he was claimed by COVID-19, and the essay had to be given its final shape by Kingshuk Chatterjee.

Jigme Yeshe Lama's essay deals with the relatively new phenomenon of the presence of China in the Middle East. Lama identifies China's interests primarily in terms of her energy requirements, but argues that her engagement is generally depicted as a civilisational encounter with countries of the Middle East. He offers a relatively detailed study of China's links with Iran compared to his treatment of links with the region as a whole. He then goes on to situate the ties within the policy backdrop of China's Belt-Road Initiative and deals with the question of China's ambitions in the region.

Ambassador Anil Trigunayat's essay on India's relations with the Middle East offers essentially the perspective of a transactional relationship without any ulterior motivations or regional ambition. Amb.



Trigunayat argues the country's energy security and the safekeeping and well-being of India's migrant workers in the oil rich economies of the Middle East as being the prime movers of India's policy towards the region. He also highlights the growing challenges before India posed by the perennial instabilities and volatilities of the region's politics and how best India's policy is geared to weather these out.

Finally, a word of appreciation for Ambassador Sarvajit Chakrabarti (IFS retired), without whose support and encouragement neither the 2019 conference nor the volume would have been possible. The CSIRD and IFPS are deeply in his debt for all his efforts in this direction.

## 2. *'A Fantasy Brought to Life'*:<sup>1</sup> Revisiting Neo-Ottomanism in Yeni Turkiye

*Anita Sengupta*

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In his book *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, Sonar Cagaptay<sup>2</sup> begins with the argument that nations that had once been great empires, the memory of which still lingers, are vulnerable to manipulation by politicians who are able to address this narrative. A populist politician, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's grand political vision was expressed through reconnecting with an Ottoman past in numerous ways including in physical form through buildings like the Camlica Mosque, the first mosque of this magnitude, furnished by a Turkish leader since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Dubbed Erdoğan's Mosque, it testifies to a 'new' Turkey where Islam is enmeshed in politics, society is conservative and internationally Turkey is identified as Middle Eastern and no longer European. Cagaptay argues that referring to Neo Ottomanism as an ideology, however, would be an overstatement, 'it is a fantasy brought to life' and this gives it an unlimited range for interpretation.

Ottoman reveries have justified any political stance and moralizing attitude one can imagine. Sometimes the empire is extolled as a paragon of religious and ethnic tolerance sometimes it is used to gin up 'evidence' that non Muslims like Jews and Christians are treacherous and should never have been granted rights in the first place.

Sometimes Ottomanism is imagined as a homegrown democracy reflecting the peoples' will, such as Erdoğan's AKP, while at the same time the empire's most despotic sultans are praised for their iron fist

rule. Some lionize the Ottomans for ‘standing up to the West’ ignoring the Westernizing reforms of the late Ottoman sultans. It is certain that Turkey’s citizens are imaging and reimagining the Ottomans, and sometimes even inventing traditions and policies which they attribute to their Ottoman forebears.<sup>3</sup>

And it is this concocted combination of a Middle Eastern pivot in foreign policy with a domestic popular stance of safeguarding Turkey’s national interest that defines Turkey today. Writing on August 21, 2014, just after Turkey’s Prime Minister Erdoğan became the country’s first popularly elected President on August 10, 2014, and signaled the beginning of a ‘new era’, Mustafa Akyol in an article entitled “What Exactly Is New Turkey?” argued that the key concept in Turkey’s political lexicon was hard to define.<sup>4</sup> The closest that he could arrive to was that “New Turkey” would be a place where ‘democracy’ would be consolidated and the era of military interventions, a thing of the past. Akyol cited an editorial in the *Yeni Safak*, a pro-Erdoğan daily, which declared that New Turkey would be a project in re-designing and re-establishing Turkey after a century. This would involve among other things a revolution in “education, culture and media”. While these domestic targets engaged politicians in Turkey and strategists elsewhere, there was also speculation on the foreign policy implication of the transformation to a ‘new’ Turkey.

Since 2011, Turkish foreign policy doctrine has been challenged by political changes and growing instability in the Middle East. The ‘zero problem’ approach to its neighbours, no longer corresponded to the situation on the ground and Turkey had been forced to take sides. In his victory speech in June 2011, Erdoğan had promised to adapt Turkey’s foreign policy to a changing regional environment and announced Turkey’s support for democratic forces across the Middle East and North Africa. Similarly, the then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, had argued that the political transitions in the Arab countries were natural and inevitable and that the best course of action would be to develop a sound understanding of the causes of this transformation and develop suitable strategies to cope with the changes.<sup>5</sup> This Middle Eastern turn

in policy encouraged discussions on what was termed Neo-Ottomanism as the guiding principle for Turkish policy. The significance of Neo-Ottoman connects in domestic political rhetoric was interestingly portrayed in Erdoğan's election posters which emphasized that the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, i.e. Justice and Development Party) had the goal of staying in power at least till 2071, the millennial anniversary of the Turk's conquest of Anatolia.

The term Neo-Ottomanism was introduced by a leading Turkish columnist and academic Cengiz Cander,<sup>6</sup> as an intellectual movement that advocated Turkish pursuit of active and diversified foreign policy in the neighbouring region based on Ottoman historical heritage. The Neo-Ottomans envisaged Turkey as a leader of the Muslim and the Turkic worlds and a central power in Eurasia. The idea was first articulated in the early 1990s by liberal secular intellectuals in collaboration with Turgut Ozal, a socially conservative, economically and politically liberal nationalist. Ozal reintroduced into the political discourse in Turkey, the concept of Turkish-Islamic synthesis which emphasized Turkish nationalism and Islam as key contributors to the international standing of Turkey. It underlined the historical legacy of the Ottoman past and flourishing Islamic culture as a source of 'soft power' of the modern Turkish state. As such it was publicised as being essentially less obsessed with domestic issues like the Kurdish question based on the assumption that the Ottoman Empire was the epitome of tolerance, where different groups lived peacefully.

However, in reality there was a definite disconnect between the projection of 'soft power' in the Middle Eastern neighbourhood that was in keeping with the Neo-Ottomanist trend and the gradual hardening of stance in the domestic policy in 'new' Turkey. In its initial phases the AKP did attempt an 'opening' with minority groups including the Kurds. However, reconsideration of Turkish support for the Kurdish agenda in the neighbourhood impacted on the domestic scenario. Anti-Kurdish policies became stringent since 2015 when the Syrian Kurds became an important US ally in its fight against the Islamic State. And while Erdoğan had emphasized that the 'national will' would find its voice in

a 'new Turkey' in which all citizens would be embraced irrespective of their ethnicity or creed and formulated a new slogan, "Vote for AK Party. Write your own Constitution" (*Oyunu AK Partiye'ver, kendi Anayasani yap!*) in actuality anti Kurdish policies were renewed both domestically and in the neighbourhood. This was followed by a period which was characterized by an escalating rift with the Gulenists (since 2012) the Gezi Park protests (2013) an attempted coup (2016) and a Presidential referendum (2017) during which Turkey replaced its foreign policy based on economic relations with the Middle East with a more security-focused one that included greater support for the Muslim Brotherhood, aggression against Kurds in both Turkey and Syria, and a growing Eurasian focus.

Gradual rifts became discernible in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East from promoting 'regional economic cooperation' (about 2002 to 2010) to 'Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Sunni sectarianism' (about 2011 to 2015) and finally 'anti-Kurdish militarism' (about 2015 to 2018).<sup>7</sup> The initial period of regional economic cooperation coincided with the continuation of many traditional elements of broader Turkish foreign policy (i.e. modernisation, a Western focus and EU accession talks). The following periods that featured more focus on Sunni sectarianism and enmity towards the region's Kurds introduced tensions and dissonance between Turkey's Middle Eastern policies and aspects of wider Turkish foreign policy. Nationalistic and personal assertiveness meant that while the AKP's focus on achieving control over the Turkish state, with support from the Gülenist movement was accompanied by a 'status quo' foreign policy during the first period, this was not the case for the second and third periods during which AKP's political dominance alternated with new challenges to its rule from the Gülenist movement and Turkey's Kurds. This profoundly changed Turkey's position in the Middle East and in the West. Instead of a regional role model and soft power, Turkish relations with its neighbouring Syrian regime suffered a setback and although it successfully contained the region's Kurds, this came at the price of a revival of Kurdish nationalism and militancy within Turkey.

It was partly the opposition that the government faced in the Gezi Park protests but more importantly the results of the June 2015 elections that changed the domestic dynamics. And it is within this context as much as within the broader parameters of Turkish ambitions in the Middle East that one needs to examine Neo-Ottomanism, particularly towards bordering states where Kurdish minorities have demonstrated possibilities for autonomy. Code named Operation Peace Spring, the ongoing Turkish intervention in Syria is less about a 'safe zone' (which in any case is complicated by various factors) and more about sending a message of deterrence to Kurds in Turkey, tied to a variant of Turkish nationalism that Erdoğan has been promoting for more than a decade.

This article goes on to map the contradiction inherent in the inclusive overtones of Turkey's 'new' foreign policy with its Neo-Ottomanist orientation and the domestic compulsions that have reshaped aspects of this transition. It argues that where the two diverged the meta narrative was overshadowed by the exigencies of domestic politics and the need to project a 'strong' state which could deal with internal dissent. It begins with the vision of a Turkey that sought resolution of its problems with neighbouring countries and then goes on to argue how in the aftermath of Gezi and increasing Kurdish nationalism the inclusivity, projected as intrinsic to a Neo-Ottoman policy suffered a setback.

### **Neo-Ottomanism in *Strategic Depth***

The November 2002 Parliamentary elections led to the AKP receiving almost 35 per cent of the votes but also to becoming the first party to form the government on its own. Its strong political standing enabled the AKP to be more self-confident in implementing its own foreign policy. The architect of this vision was Ahmet Davutoglu, Professor of International Relations and Chief Advisor of foreign affairs for both Prime Minister Abdullah Gul (who later became Foreign Minister and then President) and the AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (who later became Prime Minister and then President). The main pillars of his vision included the resolution of all problems with neighbouring countries, strengthening Turkey's influence in regional and global affairs

and therefore the acceptance of Turkey as a 'central country' in world politics. The importance attributed by Davutoglu to Turkey's geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-cultural influence urged commentators to claim that he was in fact putting forward a 'Neo-Ottomanist' foreign policy vision. With its emphasis on a multi-layered identity the underpinnings of which are furnished by Muslim subjectivity, in tandem with its call for greater activism in the Middle East, Davutoglu's vision challenged all dimensions of the old national project and approach to foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> Mixing piety with nationalist pride in Neo-Ottoman fashion the AKP declared Turkey to be uniquely qualified to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam, democracy and secularism.<sup>9</sup>

Davutoglu's vision was one where Turkey re-discovered its imperial legacy and sought a new national consensus where multiple identities within Turkey could co-exist. It reminded Turks that they once had a great multi-national Empire that ruled the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans and parts of Central Europe. It has been argued that the crucial difference between the two drivers of Turkish foreign policy, Kemalism and Neo-Ottomanism stemmed from their divergent visions of Turkey.<sup>10</sup> While the former emphasized nationalist assimilation and refused multi-culturalism, Neo-Ottomanism was open to the cultural rights of minorities like Kurds. Compared to Kemalists, Neo-Ottomanists are much more willing to see Islam as a common denominator between Turks and Kurds. While Kemalist nationalism often rigidly confronted Kurdish ethnic demands, Neo-Ottomanism pragmatically sought to co-opt the Kurds. Neo-Ottomanism wanted the Kemalist Republic to be at peace with its multi-cultural Muslim and imperial past. It visualised such an outcome not as 'Islamisation' or as a denial of achievements of the Ataturk but as a sign of reconciliation, normalisation and correction of excesses associated with radical Kemalism.<sup>11</sup> Neo-Ottomanism however had multiple interpretations. While for some, the Ottoman Empire was the epitome of tolerance, where different groups lived peacefully; for others, the imperial past represented Turkish and/or Islamic identities; and still others envisioned the empire as a burden on contemporary Turkey.<sup>12</sup>

It has been argued that three factors helped define Neo-Ottoman tendencies of the AKP.<sup>13</sup> The first was a willingness to come to terms with Turkey's Ottoman and Islamic heritage at home and abroad. This required a redefinition of Turkey's strategic and national identity. In practical terms such a shift had serious implications for policy making, for instance a more multicultural conceptualisation of citizenship. The second, which emerged as a consequence of the first, was self confidence in foreign policy. The third was its goal of embracing the West as much as the Islamic world. According to Edward Wastnidge these were inspired by three distinct images of Neo-Ottomanism under the AKP government; first, the image of the Ottoman Empire as the cradle or apex of civilisation; second, the image of the Ottoman Empire as the Islamic Empire and third the image of the Ottoman Empire as a liberal, multicultural Empire.<sup>14</sup> However, Turkey was seen as a more benign version of the old Empire, devoid of imperial aspirations and merely seeking its rightful place as a cultural, political and economic leader though there have been concerns that its increasingly hegemonistic assertions could be interpreted as political aspiration.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, it has been argued that while Neo-Ottomanism can be analyzed in terms of an attempt to correct the excesses of the militant secularism of the Kemalist era, in foreign policy it should be analyzed in terms of a more paternalistic interpretation of nationhood that seeks to promote Islamic solidarity as an alternative to the western global order.<sup>16</sup> The third image of the Empire as liberal and multicultural was initially used by the AKP for democratic 'openings' in domestic policy in its first term and transposed into Turkey's regional ambitions helped lay the geopolitical foundations of its foreign policy.

Davutoglu's own work outlined this position when he argued that Turkey was central to regional and global politics and that it should draw on its historical and civilisational standing to enhance its position. With his appointment as Foreign Minister in May 2009, Davutoglu, became directly responsible for the further implementation and testing of his ideas.<sup>17</sup> In *Strategic Depth* Davutoglu outlined the policy that should be pursued under four main principles. The first is a 'zero problem



policy with its neighbours'. Turkey was to abandon the longstanding assumption that it is surrounded by enemies and develop good relations with its neighbours. Solutions to the Kurdish and Armenian problems and to the issue of Cyprus are to be sought within this framework. The second is 'multidimensional foreign policy'. Davutoglu visualised a static foreign policy which depends on a single parameter as limiting Turkey's opportunities in the new world. Turkey should seek to diversify its foreign policy and look for a role as a mediator in its neighbourhood. In this way Turkey would attain a status as the central country in the Middle East. New strategic relations were to be established with the EU and with Russia in this context and none of these should be thought of as excluding the other alternative. The third is a 'new diplomatic language'. Davutoglu emphasized Turkey's unique position as a bridge between the East and the West and the realization of Turkey's integration with the EU are accorded equal importance. In this framework, Davutoglu underlined the importance of not leaving diplomacy to diplomats exclusively. Instead he sought the inclusion of the academic community and of the public in the process. The fourth element was 'transition to a rhythmic policy'. In order to improve the effectiveness of Turkish foreign policy, bilateral relations with regional countries were to be developed including frequent visits to their leaders and capitals and with Turkey holding high level visitors from its neighbourhood.

Davutoglu argued that Turkey's historical depth was complimented by its geographic depth, that is, its comparative advantage as against any Mediterranean country, in that it was at once a Middle Eastern and a Caucasian country, a European country and an Asian one.<sup>18</sup> Nora Fisher Onar argues that Davutoglu's Neo-Ottomanism thus goes beyond traditional bilateralism to advocate a foreign policy predicated on 'mutually reinforcing and interlocking processes'. It also emphasized 'geo-economics' understood as developing trade networks in regions hitherto untapped by Turkey.<sup>19</sup> It thus emphasized diplomatic, economic and cultural channels to enhance the prestige, prosperity and stability of Turkey as well as its neighbouring regions. The AKP's overtures to Armenia, for instance, were thus seen as part of a broader strategic culture

aimed at resolving outstanding issues. The bulk of AKP's policies were related to normalising relations with Iran and the Arab world through bilateral and multilateral economic, diplomatic and cultural exchanges.

The first important test of Turkish dynamism, inspired by the new spirit of the foreign policy was the crisis in Iraq in the winter of 2003. The possibility of a war in Iraq and its dismemberment raised the specter of the creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq and separatist demands among the Turkish Kurds. Turkey pursued all avenues to prevent this from happening. Turkey also disallowed American troops from passing through Turkey on their way to Iraq. In post war Iraq, the attention of Turkish foreign policy makers were brought to bear on the former Ottoman possessions in modern Iraq. The inability of the Turkish army to curb Kurdish rebellions in these territories and the British pressure had once forced Ataturk's government to withdraw claims to oil rich Mosul and Kirkuk in 1926. In post war Iraq, once again, contention erupted regarding the fate of these two provinces. The crux of the issue was the presence of major Iraqi oil fields in Mosul and Kirkuk province that could provide economic foundation for a Kurdish autonomous entity.

Turkish military and civilian decision makers perceived such an eventuality as a direct threat to the stability of the Turkish state and Turkey supported the Turkoman minority in these regions and raising an international alarm that the Kurdish leaders would attempt to change the ethnic makeup of Kirkuk by artificially increasing the city's Kurdish population. In congruence with the new foreign policy doctrine, the Erdogan government also pursued a dramatic improvement in its relations with Syria. A number of agreements were signed and bilateral dialogue was initiated on a number of contentious issues. Both countries shared concern about Kurdish aspirations for autonomy in northern Iraq and its repercussions on Turkish and Syrian Kurdish minorities. The Erdoğan government also attempted to open a new era in Turkish-Iranian relations. Here also a common enemy was identified in Kurdish militancy and in particular the PKK which has found safe haven in Kurdish dominated northern Iraq.

Turkey's policy based on the rhetoric of being a "playmaker country in the Middle East" however, encountered strong resistance in Syria in the years that followed. Turkey's objective of establishing an EU like Union in the Middle East, which began with its 'zero problem' discourse and its claim of being a 'model' for the countries of the region suffered because of the Syrian crisis. Since the beginning of the crisis the countries of the region were divided into two groups. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan actively worked to change the Baath regime while the Shiite and anti-western axis which included Iran, Russia, Iraq and Lebanon actively worked for its continuity. Determined to balance its global expectations and regional objectives Turkey in turn aimed towards the down fall of the Assad regime relying on its strength in the Arab streets to ensure a rapid outcome. Developments in the Syrian civil war also impacted the ongoing peace process with the PKK. When the Syrian crisis started in March 2011, Syria's Kurds adopted an ambivalent position. However, in July 2012 they took control of several cities in the north where Kurds were in a majority. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) which governs this region, bordering Turkey, is affiliated to the PKK and clearly expressed an interest to form an autonomous zone in Syria comparable to the Iraqi Kurdistan, a move that Ankara opposed. Turkey's Syria policy in which Erdogan had previously sought President Bashar's overthrow by military means became counterproductive when it contributed to bringing Syrian Kurds into the fray.

### **Neo-Ottomanism and Domestic Discourse: Gezi, an attempted Coup and a New Presidency**

Foreign policy adjustments in the region came at a time of considerable flux not only in the region but in Turkish domestic politics. Conflicts in the neighbourhood affected communities within Turkey like the Nusayri Alevis who constitute the majority of the population in parts of southeastern Turkey bordering Syria. In addition to the sectarian rhetoric in the political arena, the influx of large numbers of refugees in the region led to ethnic and religious tensions. Most recently the Alevis received a blow when the government announced that the third bridge over the Bosphorus, the

construction of which is already under way, would be named after Sultan Selim I or Yavuz “the Grim”. It was under Selim’s reign that the Ottomans conquered the Hijaz in the sixteenth century, became the protectors of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina and henceforth claimed the title of caliph. It was also under his rule that the conflicts between the Ottomans and the Safavids and their Anatolian Kizilbash supporters escalated. The Ottomans persecuted and resettled the Kizilbash in a series of events that is remembered by the Alevis in continuity with the Karbala tragedy as large scale massacres. From the Alevi perspective, the fact that the government named the bridge after a sultan whose legacy is so divisive was unacceptable. During the initial days of the Gezi sit in, Alevi organisations of Istanbul organised rallies against the naming of the bridge.

Domestic Neo-Ottomanist discourses like discourses on foreign policy were grounded in a desire for restoration of ‘ancient values’ though there remains a debate on what these values were. There were similarities in the usage of Neo-Ottomanism in domestic and foreign discourses, however, Wastnidge argues that while in foreign policy the AKP government was cautious of the Neo-Ottomanist label in domestic politics the AKP, in its second and third terms in power, increasingly appropriated Neo-Ottomanism as a ‘rhetorical and legitimising framework for domestic policy’.<sup>20</sup> This was done through attempting to establish direct lineage between particular members of the House of Osman and high ranking AKP leaders particularly Erdoğan, by arguing that the historical enemies of the Ottoman Empire were still working to undermine the power of Turkey and its leaders and by stating that the AKP was continuing the policies of the late Ottoman Empire.<sup>21</sup> These discourses also had material counterparts including introduction of Ottoman language courses in schools, increasing numbers of *Imam Hatip* schools and introduction of Neo-Ottoman architecture which included the decision to build an Ottoman style shopping centre at Gezi Park. It has been argued that the AKP’s attempt to exclude all opposition from the political sphere which became evident in the aftermath of Gezi was also reflective of a paternalistic narrative in Ottoman policy where, for instance, under Abdulhamid dissent was criminalised.

In late May 2013 a sense of frustration at the government's reactions to a range of issues and style of governance, as well as anger at the disproportionate use of force and the failure of mainstream Turkish media to cover it erupted in what came to be known as the Gezi Park protests. In the aftermath of the protests new definitions of the 'margin' have been created with state recognition of a sharp differentiation between supporters of the AKP and those who have opposed its policies in the course of the recent protests throughout Turkey. Erdoğan claimed to govern for 50 per cent of the population who repeatedly voted for the party thereby marginalising the rest who were frustrated about the government's stand on issues ranging from property development and media rights to the role of religion and access to alcohol, all of which were viewed as attempts to impose conservative values on a secular society. Being 'marginal' thereby acquired political overtones that defined belonging in terms of ideological convergence. This majoritarian notion of democracy, which venerates ballots but disregards civil liberty and press freedom, proved to be problematic though its impact on the electoral process was practically non-existent. A number of writings in the immediate post-Gezi Park period stressed that what the protesters wanted was a guarantee that the Turkish government would respect the difference among its citizens and there would be no AKP inspired behavioral norms on Turkish citizens.

Therefore, when Turkey went to polls for a second time in 2015 it was a more divided nation both ethnically and denominationally. The November 1 snap polls was about whether the AKP would be able to restore itself as a single majority, preferably with 60 per cent of the seats and restrict the pro-Kurdish HDP (Democratic People's Party) below the 10 per cent threshold. But there was also a strong message from the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) that the election was also about whether the Kurds would have free political will to determine their own future. As expected, the elections failed to produce a majority. Coalition negotiations became critical in the light of heightened tensions over devastating extremist attacks in the capital, an increasingly violent struggle with minorities and waves of incoming refugees from the continuing conflict in Syria. However, given the challenges to Turkey's

long ingrained democracy from a personalised presidential system, a coalition was projected as a better alternative though it had not worked in the post June 2015 scenario when Turkey held general elections to elect 550 members of the Grand National Assembly and form the Twenty Fifth Parliament.

The election campaign had been marked by varying political agendas and marred by debates about the unlawful use of public funds by the ruling AKP, the state affiliated media's biased representations of the parties and President Erdoğan's participation in the AKP's election rallies, despite a constitutional requirement for him to remain impartial. However, the principal pre-election issue remained whether the HDP could cross the 10 per cent threshold to enter Parliament. Results had come as a reversal of the 13 years of domination of the AKP as a single party government as the party failed to secure the 276 seats required to form a single party government. The HDP managed to pass the 10 per cent barrier, which reduced the number of seats in Parliament that would have otherwise gone to the AKP. Elections results also thwarted President Erdoğan's plans to change the country's Constitution and transform Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential one. Erdoğan, had turned the June 2015 ballot into a kind of referendum towards his drive to rewrite the country's constitution, abolish parliamentarianism and install a powerful new executive presidency occupied by himself. Since the AKP failed to get the required seats to form a majority government, the requirement was for a coalition government to be formed within 45 days to avoid a new election.

However, in the aftermath of the elections the AKP strategy was to block the formation of a coalition government and undermine future electoral prospects of the HDP with the hope that in the next polls the AKP would get a majority and therefore avoid the need of a coalition. Consequently all attempts at forming a coalition government failed and snap elections were called for. In the run up to the elections there were attempts to repress the HDP's prospects and stroke nationalist sentiments to draw votes away from the MHP. Anti-Kurdish policies were renewed both domestically and in the neighbourhood. The Turkish government

decided to extend assistance to the US air campaign against the Islamic State in Syria by opening the Incirlik air base for use by US aircrafts and by adding Turkish aircrafts to the campaign. However, it was widely alleged that instead of striking Islamic State bases in Syria, Turkish warplanes targeted the PKK bases in Syria and Iraq. There was also large scale detention of Kurdish politicians and activists within Turkey.

In a speech on June 26 Erdoğan vowed that Turkey would not accept a move by Syrian Kurds to form their own state in Syria following gains by Kurdish fighters against the Islamic state in recent weeks.<sup>22</sup> It was reported that the military had been given orders to take measures, including an incursion into Syria, to stem possible advances by the ISIL or the PYD and prevent changes in the demographic composition of the Syrian provinces near the Turkish border.<sup>23</sup> As the Turkish government increased its attacks on Kurdish forces there were predictably attacks on Turkish soldiers and police officers in the south east and clashes between Kurdish militants and Turkish forces that left casualties on both sides. The result was a campaign of violence that culminated in the bombings on a procession in Ankara (subsequently blamed on the Islamic State) which was calling for resumption of peace talks between the PKK and the Turkish state. Attacks on the HDP, the PKK and the inevitable retaliation have been attempts to portray the idea of a 'nation under threat' and encourage voters into supporting President Erdoğan's security first agenda. The justification for a change however has been couched in terms of an effective strong executive state more capable of facing terrorism, civil war, economic decline and corruption. In such circumstances freedom of the press is often the first casualty and in the weeks leading up to the polls there was increasing pressure and takeover of the non-state media like *Bugun* and Kanalturk TV and dailies like *Bugun* and *Millet*. Similarly, the then Prime Minister Davutoglu stressed on what he referred to as a "terror cocktail" of the PKK, the Islamic State and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party Front, all of who wanted chaos in Turkey, thereby appealing to nationalist elements. The AKP election campaign for the November polls was based on the looming crisis and the slogan "after us there is chaos".

Critics therefore, argue that the “opening” that the AKP government offered to various sections of minorities like the Kurds or the Alevis and the reforms that were set in motion were propelled by the need to create space for an Islamic identity within the state rather than any commitment towards cultural plurality that the idealistic version of Neo-Ottomanism entailed. Former President Abdullah Gul had stated in an interview in the late 1990s about “a convergence between the aspiration of the Kurds and us (the Islamic movement)” hinting at a basic antagonism towards the founding ideology of the republic with its emphasis on secular Turkish nationalism.<sup>24</sup> A large part of the ‘democratic opening’ was also impelled by the EU accession process and disillusion with the process meant a slowdown of many of the measures that had been underway.

## **Conclusion**

Neo-Ottomanism is itself subject to various interpretations. Nicholas Danforth argues what Neo-Ottomanism stands for depends on how one imagines the Ottoman Empire with a variety of images co-existing in Turkish and international imagination.<sup>25</sup> For instance though the Ottoman Empire recognised the existence of various ethnic groups within the limits of the Empire, there existed a hierarchy of its people which translated to different rights and duties as subjects. Christians paid more taxes than Muslims, were not allowed to bear arms and the testimony of Muslims was considered superior to other religious groups. Similarly, legal reforms that were introduced to create a uniform Ottoman citizenship were never effective leading to the argument that apart from the Tanzimat years the history of the Ottoman Empire was not one where equality existed.<sup>26</sup> To an extent it was this ‘delineated Neo-Ottomanism’ that was appropriated as legitimising framework in domestic politics.<sup>27</sup> While Neo-Ottomanism as a framework was first used in foreign policy, it was in domestic politics that it acquired a distinct meaning particularly following the failed coup attempt in 2016 and the constitutional amendments of 2017.

However, the bifurcation between foreign and domestic politics is not unproblematic and this became evident during recent events. As Turkish



forces entered north eastern Syria to expel US backed Kurdish forces, seven pro-Kurdish HDP Mayors were arrested and replaced with state appointed trustees. This has brought the total number of HDP Mayors detained and removed from office to twelve since the March 31, 2019 Municipal elections raising concerns that democratic representation is being suppressed in the Kurdish dominated southeast. Hisyar Ozsoy, deputy co-chair of Foreign Affairs, HDP, has argued that “Turkey is waging a war on both sides of the Turkey-Syrian border. While they are attacking Kurds in Syria trying to undermine the possibility of autonomous Kurdish self-administration, they are simultaneously increasing pressure on Kurdish politicians at home here in Turkey, so these are two sides of the same coin.”<sup>28</sup> Ahead of the municipal elections, CHP candidates particularly Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, ran campaigns addressing Kurdish rights, gathering support from HDP voters to helping them win against AKP candidates. The HDP has claimed that Operation Peace Spring was a calculated move to once again divide the opposition parties that had united to defeat AKP candidates in the spring elections. The CHP has backed the ongoing Syria incursion while the HDP was the sole party in the Turkish Parliament to oppose the Syrian incursion. Ozsoy went on to argue that “Fighting a war in north Syria always means fighting a war at home,” This whole invasion involves reshaping domestic politics, and Erdoğan has done that by bringing in CHP into this war bloc, undermining the coalition that was established before the Istanbul and local elections.”<sup>29</sup> It is not surprising that it is being argued that Turkish foreign policy has become increasingly centered round the issue of containment of the Kurds in the neighbourhood as power has gradually been centralised in the hands of the President.

In the meantime, in Middle Eastern popular imagination the “Magnificent Century” a hundred episode saga of love and intrigue at the court of Suleiman the Magnificent that enticed audiences throughout the Middle East has been replaced by a new series “Kingdoms of Fire” which deals with the struggle between the Mamluks and the Ottomans over control of the Middle East particularly in Syria and Egypt. The series revolves around how Selim I, who is trying to extend his empire

is faced with the opposition of the people of Cairo led by Toman Bay as he fights to conquer Egypt.<sup>30</sup> Toman Bay, takes over leadership after the assassination of Mamluk Sultan Qansuh El Ghuri by Selim I during the 1517 Battle of Marj Dabiq near the city of Aleppo. However, in the end, he is betrayed by a Mamluk henchman and delivered to Selim I who orders him hung on Cairo's Bab Zuweila Gate, where his body remains hanging for three days before burial, showing the dark side of the empire that ruled Egypt after 1517. Interpreted as projecting the true face of Ottoman rule over the Arabs it is produced by a Saudi owned UAE based company and not being streamed in Turkey.<sup>31</sup> Reflective of the growing disconnect between the Turks and the Arabs and recent signs of tensions that came in the aftermath of Operation Peace Spring, it brings into focus the complexities of the Neo-Ottoman 'fantasy'.

## Notes

1. The title has been borrowed from a line in the concluding chapter of Sonar Cagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, I.B. Taurus, 2019, Kindle Version.
2. Sonar Cagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, I.B. Taurus, 2019, Kindle Version.
3. Conclusion: How Can Turkey Become Great' in Sonar Cagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, I.B. Taurus, 2019, Kindle Version.
4. Mustafa Akyol, "What Exactly is the "New Turkey?," *ALMONITOR, Turkey Pulse*, August 21, 2014.
5. Cited from Eduard Soler i Lecha, "The Conceptual Architecture of Turkish Foreign Policy: An Update in the Light of Regional Turbulence", *Documentos CIDOB*, June 18, 2012.
6. Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol 42, No 6, 2006.
7. See Erwin Van Veen and Engin Yuksel, *Too Big For its Boots, Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East from 2002-2018*, CRU Report, July 2018.
8. The three important aspects of policy which were challenged were 1. emphasis on unitary identity; 2. understanding of secularism; 3. ambivalence towards the West.
9. Omar Taspinar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies, Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism". *Carnegie Papers* 10, 2008, pp. 1-28.
10. Taspinar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies, Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism".

11. Nora Fisher Onar, "Echoes of a Universalism Lost: Rival Representations of the Ottomans in Today's Turkey", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol 45, No 2, 2009, pp. 229-241.
12. Murat Ergin and Yağmur Karakaya "Between Neo-Ottomanism and Ottomanism: Navigating state-led and popular cultural representations of the past", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Vol 56, May 2017.
13. Taspinar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies, Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism".
14. Edward Wastnidge, "Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Reassessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Policy", *Middle East Critique*, Vol 28, Issue 1, 2019, p. 3.
15. Taspinar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies, Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism".
16. See Rasim Ozgur Donmez, "Nationalism in Turkey Under Justice and Development Party Rule: The Logic of Masculinist Protection", *Turkish Studies*, Vol 16, 2015, pp. 554-571.
17. They rest on the assumption of the possibility of achieving a state of harmony in Turkey's regional relations. He has propounded his doctrine in his book *Strategic Depth*. The main thesis of this doctrine is that strategic depth is predicated on geographical depth and historical depth. Davutoglu defines historical depth as a characteristic of a country that is at the epicenter of historical events. He identifies eight former empires, Britain, Russia, Austro Hungary, France, Germany, China, Japan and Turkey as countries with historical depth. In his comparative analysis, he comes to the conclusion that these countries experience similar problems of ethno-nationalism, separatism and general anti-imperialist dissension in their respective regions. Consequently, Turkey due to the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire possesses great geographical depth. This geographical depth places Turkey at the centre of many geopolitical areas of influence. *Strategic Depth* therefore calls for an activist engagement with all regional systems in Turkey's neighbourhood. For details of the development of Davutoglu's ideas see A. Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol 42, Issue 6, 2006.
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19. Nora Fisher Onar, *Neo-Ottomanism, Historical Legacies and Turkish Foreign Policy*, Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, Discussion Paper Series 2009/3, October 2009, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/neo-ottomanism-historical-legacies-and-turkish-foreign-policy>, accessed on December 3, 2019.
20. Wastnidge, "Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Reassessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Policy", p. 12.

21. For details see Wastnidge, “Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Reassessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Policy”, pp. 13-14.
22. Cited from Thomas Seibert, “Turkey Plans to Invade Syria, But To Stop the Kurds, Not ISIS”, *The Daily Beast*, June 28, 2015.
23. The *Cumhuriyet* noted that the military is planning a mobilization of tactical units in an area of some 100 km along the border, possibly 20-30 km deep into Syrian territory. On June 27 the *Hurriyet* noted that the military has been ordered to take measures to prevent ISIL seizure of the territory to the west of the town of Marea, where two strategic border crossings between Turkey and Syria – Oncupinar/Babal-Salam and Cilvegozu/Bab al Hawa are located. The report argues that Ankara now views possible ISIL advances in the area to the west of Marea, a town near the northern Syrian city of Aleppo as a security threat. Military advice was often ignored in the course of these decisions. *Today's Zaman* report on June 28, 2015 argued that the military was convinced that Turkey should present reasons stronger than the possible emergence of a Kurdish state in northern Syria as a reason for the deployment. Military officials were concerned that if done without prior consultation with Russia, Turkey and Iran the military action would be brought into question and this could also spark military confrontation with the PYD, ISIL and government forces. They also argued that the Syrian regime should be consulted so that the operation does not violate international law. See “Army Asks Government to work out political and diplomatic avenues before Syrian incursion” *Today's Zaman*, Ankara, June 28, 2015.
24. Halil M Karaveli, “Ankara’s New Kurdish Opening: Narrow Room for Manoeuvre”, *Turkey Analyst*, Vol 2, No 14, August 17, 2009.
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26. Wastnidge, “Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Reassessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Policy”, p. 18.
27. Wastnidge, “Imperial Grandeur and Selective Memory: Reassessing Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign and Domestic Policy”.
28. Cited from Diego Cupolo, “Crackdown on Kurdish Mayors Raises Pressure on Turkish Opposition”, *Turkey Pulse*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/turkey-replaces-seven-more-kurdish-hdp-mayors.html#ixzz66LsJgeVn>.
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### 3. Trajectories of a Stalemate: Turkey's Kurdish Question

*Necati Anaz and Mehmet Ozkan*

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#### **Introduction**

Turkey's Kurdish question is not a typical question in international politics. It started with right demands but went out of control as both sides escalated the conflict. Since the incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power in 2002, there has been a sea change in terms of the Turkish state's approach to the issues. Ankara no longer sees the issue as purely denying Kurds' rightful cultural demands, rather it sees in a broader question of Turkey's inclusiveness, democratization and creating a 'new Turkey'. Ankara's good intentions did not result in a positive outcome yet in writing off the issue from current Turkish politics, nevertheless it has made so much effort that now it is clearer to talk about a PKK issue rather than a Kurdish issue in Turkey. This essay therefore will try to outline the general and changing dynamics of the issues from the beginning to the present aiming to shed a light on what the future holds.

#### **Background**

Commonly known as the Kurdish question, from a Turkish standpoint the issue mainly possesses two categorical traits.<sup>1</sup> On one hand it contains cultural and identity factors desiring pluralistic answers to the question. On the other hand, it contains geopolitical aspirations including self-determination and territorial ambition that elevates the case to the level of security and a matter of military operations. These two categorical dispositions sit on a binary background, one which goes back to the Treaty of Sevres and the second has ties with regional and international

actors.<sup>2</sup> Turkey's Kurdish question thus happens to be both international and domestic in character, intersecting different blocks of issues and necessitating a holistic approach to the matter without essentialising it to a certain provision. Thus, to understand Turkey's Kurdish question, we need to look at how the 'matter' evolved in time and space and how the answers to the problem are addressed. The idea of Kurdishness as a distinct identity and nation has been recognized more recently than used to be the case earlier. Although number of Kurdish resentments against the Ottoman Empire has been recorded, political and cultural struggles are documented from 1920s to these days (Sheikh Said in 1925, Ihsan Nuri Pasha in 1930, Sheikh Seyyid Riza in 1936). Especially during the single party period, the very existence of Kurds had been denied at the state level and any sort of resentment was treated as a Sevres Paranoia, "fears that there are external powers who are trying to challenge the territorial integrity of the Turkish state and implement the provisions of the Sevres Treaty by establishing local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas".<sup>3</sup> This psychological predisposition has shaped many of the minds of the ruling elites throughout history of the Republic. From time to time diversity of the Republic has been recognised, however consistent embracing of the country's eastern problem and restoring the social harmony did not move forward. With the Law on the Transfer of Certain People from the Eastern Regions to the Western Provinces (Law No. 1907), people of Kurdish origin were moved forcibly to the western provinces creating further cultural, social, economic and political distress that still have its impact felt on Turkish and Kurdish society today.

Internal migration from eastern cities to the western cities of Turkey whether these movements were the result of state action or economic and cultural factors led the Jinn out of the bottle. Western cities continued to receive migrants from Kurdish towns and villages creating new rigors in metropolitan cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and Mersin which in the end made Istanbul the biggest Kurdish city in the world. This mobility in such large scale did not only change the cultural landscape of metropolitan cities, but also changed the epicenter of Kurdish rebellion from east to the west. More and more young people joined Kurdish

resistance in slums especially in Istanbul and Ankara. What is more, Kurdish movement found its new nesting sites and voices. Traditionally, Kurdish question had been the concern of those who were of Kurdish origin but after 1960s, people who had Turkish origin also embraced the matter and moved it to the next level. Essentially forced migration by the state from Kurdish villages and towns aimed to break out of the tribal unity in Eastern Anatolia while pushing socio-cultural assimilation of Kurds wherever they were transferred. This population control and mobilisation also caused retarding of Kurdish opposition to the state until late 1960s.

Another visible consequence of this east to west mobilisation was that Kurdish movement changed its religious and tribal character to the secular and leftist one.<sup>4</sup> Even during the Ottoman time, rebellions against Istanbul showed religious and tribal character more than those of nationalist and secessionist varieties. Until recently Kurdish groups were led by either religious leaders or tribal chiefs. It was the international moment that was championed by students, women and factory workers and influenced by socialist parties and organisations in 1960s. Students and leftist organisations metropolitan cities in particular have appropriated Kurds' social, economic, political and ethnic struggles against Turkish state. Thus, the Kurdish question changed its direction and became the matter of urban areas as well as those of eastern towns and villages. Meanwhile, Kurdish cause began being flagged more and more by secular and leftist groups than by traditional authorities in eastern cities and rural areas. Because of this change of orientation, Kurdish question became more political and ethnic than ever before. In turn, Turkish state also began to see the development as a matter of national existence even more.

Again it was the atmosphere of 1960s that brought relatively greater freedom for political mobilisation in which trade unions and student organisations flourished and became active. The 1961 Constitution provided some sort of liberty for associations and political parties that paved the way for much greater number of Kurdish political activities and publications. Although the 1960 coup d'état brought strict control



over Kurdish populated areas including changing names of Kurdish towns and villages, Kurdish youth and union activities in metropolitan areas accelerated and institutionalised. For example, the Establishment of the Workers' Party of Turkey (WPT) in 1961 was a turning point in mobilising Kurdish matters.<sup>5</sup> In big cities, the party attracted middle-class and progressive fans while it gained the attention of Kurds and Alevis in the rural areas. According to Celik, the party based its campaign on class struggle against capitalist exploitation in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir while focused on liberating people of the east from the institutions of Sheikhsism, squirarchy and feudalism. The WPT kept its socialist tendencies and leftist orientation while giving birth to new revolutionary fractions through which the Kurdish question was brought to the public's attention for the first time. For Celik, it was Mihri Belli who first publicly talked about the Kurdish question in his article entitled "the National Reality" in monthly journal *Aydinlik*.<sup>6</sup> Celik also notes that the WPT as a legal political party in Turkey recognised publicly the existence of Kurds in Turkey announcing that

There is a Kurdish people in the East of Turkey ... The fascist authorities representing the ruling classes have subjected the Kurdish people to a policy of assimilating and intimidation, which has often become bloody repression.<sup>7</sup>

The WPT's understanding of the Kurdish question was heavily influenced by its leftist position and ideological stand highlighting that the Kurdish cause is a matter of class struggle and colonisation of the region by the Turkish dominant class. The party placed a solution before the revolutionary movement, suggesting an end to imperialist policies toward the region through which the long-standing oppression toward Kurds will disappear. Therefore, the WPT suggested more of structural changes and revolutionary remedies to the eastern problem. It is important to highlight here that the WPT was not the only legal organisation to voice Kurdish matters. Many more legal and illegal organisations had undertaken to voice Kurdish consciousness. Their mutual area of focus

seemed to be that they opposed inequality, exploitation and tribal practices in the region and elsewhere in the country. However, as in the case of 1960 coup d'état, the 1971 memorandum banned many of the organisations and associations as well as trade unions and student movements for being a threat to the state and social harmony in Turkey. According to Celik, once again, Kurdish political mobilisation was silenced until the 1974 general amnesty, which brought political and opinion leaders back into the public arena.<sup>8</sup>

1960s and 1970s saw exceptional examples of Kurdish resistance to state policies and marked the era of Kurdish consciousness beyond the Kurdish region in the east. Inspired by leftist and militaristic ideologies, a number of illegal organisations emerged and partially took control of Kurdish political mobilisation. Among these were the Revolutionary Democratic Cultural Associations of 1974 from which the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) emerged later. Parallel with a number of overt cultural associations, many covert liberation groups worked to promote the idea of Kurdish autonomy and independence. Until Kurds organized their own groups, radical leftist groups created by Turkish students carried the flag of demanding greater Kurdish autonomy in their programmes.<sup>9</sup>

By the time Turkey experienced another military intervention in 1980, the Kurdish problem had become a well-known issue both nationally and internationally. The environment brought about by the coup d'état in 1980 marked another wave of strict state control and imprisonments throughout the country. Since the coup was a result of extreme ideological polarisation in the society, harsh sanctions came from the military junta imposed on different sects of the society. As a result, thousands of people were imprisoned; hundreds of them received death penalty and even more were striped from their political affiliations and banned for their political activities. Although Turkey moved to the civilian rule in 1983, Turkish bureaucratic structure formed in the light of the 1980 coup d'état and legalised by the 1982 Constitution remained as a barrier for the recognition of Kurds as a cultural distinct group in Turkey (Celik, 2012: 249).<sup>10</sup>

### **Militarization of the Conflict**

It was the 1980s militarist environment in which the PKK<sup>11</sup> was founded by Abdullah Ocalan and his friends in Ankara. Ocalan was a student in one of the prestigious state universities in Turkey (Faculty of Political Sciences at Ankara University) when he founded the PKK and later became an unchallenged leader of the organization. Being of Marxist origin, the PKK “represented the most marginal sections of Kurdish society and recruited the lower class Kurds such as the peasants who form the majority of population”.<sup>12</sup> As discussed later, one of the main goals of PKK was first to destroy the traditional Kurdish social structure that has tribal ties and then to create an independent socialist Kurdish state. Therefore, oxymoronicly PKK fights to eliminate Kurdish traditional social structure and tribal elites to become international and on the other hand employs much of its energy and time for the awareness of Kurdish Nationalism. As in many secessionist movements, PKK also emerged as a leftist organisation to achieve a nationalist goal.

Soon after the military took control of the government in 1980, the PKK cadre left Turkey for Syria-controlled Beqa’ Valley where PKK militants are trained by Palestinian fighters(Galletti 1999).<sup>13</sup> According to Galletti, here in the Beqa’ Valley “Ocalan consolidated the party structure and established himself as the undisputed leader, often employing brutal methods against dissenters”.<sup>14</sup> Ocalan led PKK till he was abducted by the Turkish National Intelligence in Nairobi, Kenya in February 1999. Today, Ocalan resides as the sole prisoner on Imrali Island in the Sea of Marmara. Although his leadership is bypassed by war hawks in the mountains, Ocalan still remains to be an important authority in the PKK and its affiliated organisations.

Several observations can be made about the PKK. One is that PKK emerged as an armed force to fight against Turkey’s military presence in the east of the country. As part of the self-assignment, PKK positioned itself as the sole unchallenged military unit of the Kurdish struggle toward cultural and geographic independence. Accordingly, the PKK legitimised all its actions toward swallowing all sorts of oppositions and possible contenders as it successfully pushed the Kurdish question

into the hands of armed groups which understood the Kurdish problem as one that could only be addressed within the parameters of military posture and through dissemination of endemic violence and unexpected terrorism strategies. In this sense, the PKK organised its first overt attack on Turkish military in southeastern Turkey in 1984. Since then more than 40,000 people have died and countless more have suffered from the violent conflict. The 1980 coup d'état and the martial law that preceded it put further restrictions on the rights to organise and communicate in their mother tongue. In returned, ethnic and cultural tension toward the state increased and gave more legitimacy to the PKK for greater mobilisation in the following years (Celik, 2012).<sup>15</sup>

Second, the PKK, inspired by radical-leftist ideology, aimed to unite international Kurds under the flag of independent socialist Kurdish state embracing the Kurdish regions of today's Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. PKK based its arguments on the claim that Kurdish regions are colonised by fascist states and only revolutionary forces of PKK could liberate the area. For that reason, PKK was obliged to fight on two fronts; one was against Turkish army and its establishments and the second fight was directed to the traditional structures and non-revolutionary Kurdish authorities which were hesitant to support Kurds to unite under the flag of PKK. These authorities are announced to be the Kurdish feudalists (religious and tribal leaders) and bourgeoisie (landlords). PKK targeted all sorts of Kurdish groups and structures that opposed its terror tactics and philosophy. Accordingly, PKK forced dissident Kurdish population toward west and deliberately aimed at to empty villages that hesitated to support strategic goals of PKK. These Kurds were not even supporter of Turkish state per se. For PKK, targeting the Kurdish opposition was easily justifiable. If PKK did not revive a substantial support from its cause, any action against the opposition was legitimate. Thus, another wave of human mobilisation and politics of silencing took part as a consequence of PKK violence on Kurds. This competition was not always unique to Turkish-Kurds. Kurdish organisations in the region contested each other over dominating the voice of the ethnic group on a geographical basis. For example, Tezcur notes that how decades-old power struggle between

the PKK and KDP indicate strategic organisational interests prevailing over common ethnic identity.<sup>16</sup> Tezcur states that “the rise of the PKK as a mass movement was a significant ideological and territorial challenge to the KDP”.<sup>17</sup> These inter/intra Kurdish rivalries further complicated the Kurdish question even up to today.

It is also important to note here that Kurds should not be counted as a homogenous nation not only because of political reasons but also for geographical and cultural grounds. Majority of Kurds (in Turkey and outside) do not support PKK’s politics and philosophy. There are a number of Kurdish political parties and organizations that are far apart from the PKK both in their means and objectives. The current ruling dispensation in Turkey, the AK Party, since its inception has enjoyed being the most popular party among the Kurdish population. Kurds in Northern Iraq is another example for the case. Urrutia and Villellas note that “Kurdish political aspirations have been constrained by internal strife and divisions, leadership rivalries, distrust, and the complex matrix of cross-border relationships.”<sup>18</sup> However, many Kurds today remain neutral because they often like to take advantages of the political and cultural outcomes of the armed conflict. Kurds are not united geographically as they are spread out in different countries and regions including Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Azerbaijan, and Europe. The terrain also blocks Kurdish unity further and jeopardises possible awareness of Kurdish nationhood. Furthermore, Kurds are also apart with regard to religion and language (Sheyholislami, 2015).<sup>19</sup> For example, Celik states that “Kirmanji, is spoken in Turkey, Syria, and the northern part of the Kurdish speaking areas of Iraq and Iran. The central version, commonly called Sorani, is spoken in western Iran and much of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Southern Kurdish dialects, and Hewrami or Auramani (Gorani) are spoken by as few, especially in Iran”.<sup>20</sup> Kurds in Sulaymaniyah city experience a different form of life than those who live in western Turkey.

Since 1990s, the PKK became number one security problem domestically but an important actor internationally. During this time several developments took place. First, Kurdish politics legally entered to Turkish parliament. Although Kurdish democratic struggle in the

parliament was often interrupted by party closures and imprisonments of their members, one way or another Kurdish voice in the parliament was heard since People's Labor Party (HEP) inducted 21 Kurdish politicians to the parliament through a coalition with Social Democratic Party (SHP) in 1991. When HEP is closed in 1993, Democracy Party (DEP) was established. When DEP was shut down the next year, Peoples' Democracy Party (HADEP) was established in 1994. HADEP collected more than a million votes in 1995 elections and won 37 municipalities in local elections in 1999. Due to the national threshold, HADEP did not enter the parliament but Kurdish nationalist politics was always hot topics in Turkey. The main purpose of these legal establishments were to open another channel for independence and to give voice to the Kurdish cause other than relying on the outcomes of the armed struggle.

The second development considers internationalisation of the Kurdish question. Mainly it took shape on two fronts. On one hand, legal political and cultural Kurdish organisations in Turkey took the case on to the world stage. Especially interest groups, think-tanks and cultural associations produced written materials in languages other than Turkish and organised international conferences to express social, political, economic and cultural issues regarding Kurdish-populated regions and towns. Also, legal cases that are taken to the European Court of Human Rights related to wrong doings of military personnel, the governors of the cities under the OHAL and the deep-state in eastern Turkey. In 1990s, eastern part of the country saw notorious implications of the emergency rule by the state. This, in turn, created systemic violations of human rights for Kurds. Cases that gained no leverage in the Turkish judicial circles were taken to the European Court of Human Rights. This helped the Kurdish question to become more international than before.

On the other hand, Kurdish diaspora via legal and informal channels introduced Kurdish issues to the western audiences as a firsthand informer. As mentioned earlier, security calculations of the state and emergency rules in eastern Turkey resulted in emanations of thousands of dissidents from Turkey to the Western Europe and the North America. People who took asylum in western countries organised to lobby on

behalf of Kurds in Turkey and committed to the Kurdish question to be addressed internationally. Furthermore, the Kurdish diaspora not only become the voice of Kurds in western cities but also become powerful sponsor of Kurdish struggle in Turkey. Thus, on one side, the armed conflict continued on the ground via attacks of PKK, while political and cultural fight in the capital cities abroad went on.

### **Ankara's Kurdish Openings and Peace Efforts**

The first serious attempt to settle the Kurdish issue occurred in 2005 when then-Prime Minister Erdoğan publicly accepted the existence of a Kurdish issue and pledged to tackle it in all its aspects in earnest in a speech delivered in front of a crowd in Diyarbakir, the largest Kurdish-majority city in Turkey.<sup>21</sup> However, this opening soon failed mainly because Turkey did not engage an organic Kurdish partner for the settlement of the issue. Learning from this failure, Turkey embarked on a second trial through secret talks between government officials and PKK representatives in Oslo in 2009. This too came to a halt with the outbreak of violence in 2011.<sup>22</sup> The talks also took place without public knowledge; hence the process would have faced a major crisis if the talks were disclosed. Drawing lessons from this attempt and failure, Turkey's most audacious attempt to date was announced by Erdoğan on the closing days of 2012 when he said that the state was talking with Ocalan, the most important Kurdish political figure in Turkey, with the aim of a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish issue. Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party threw their full weight behind the process.<sup>23</sup> This last attempt, which had the full support of the primary decision-makers in Turkish and Kurdish politics, is unrivalled in the history of Turkey's search for a settlement in the Kurdish issue. However, The Suruç bombing in 2015 collapsed the peace process between the PKK and the Turkish government. In addition, a regional upheaval, particularly the Syrian imbroglio and its Kurdish dimension, has upset this peace process.

Since the start of the search for a resolution of the issue in 2005, the process has failed three times. Each restart has built upon the experience gained and the lessons learned from the previous process. The

lessons learned from the failure of the 2005 opening set the stage for the opening of 2009. Likewise, the lessons drawn from the failure of 2009 paved the way for the 2013 opening. In the meantime, society has been conditioned more for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue, which in return has freed politicians' hands in being more forthcoming on the settlement.<sup>24</sup> For instance, Kurdish peace process initiation announced a committee of 63 'wise men' from seven regions in 2013, including well esteemed persons such as authors, artists, academicians and NGO representatives.<sup>25</sup>

### **Lessons learned: three tracks to the peace process**

The first track consists of the contacts between the government and the PKK. A March 2013 unilateral PKK ceasefire – the ninth of the insurgency, by the PKK's count – has survived numerous incidents. This has been largely thanks to interventions in favor of the process by the leaders of the two sides. The presence of two strong charismatic men, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan and PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, means that both sides have someone who can negotiate, agree and implement a deal if they want to. There have been many visits to Öcalan by Erdoğan's representatives and by legal pro-PKK Kurdish parliamentarians, the latter of whom shuttle between Öcalan, the diaspora and the PKK. In mid-2014, the government legalized the process and set up a ministerial board to oversee it, including 11 commissions that will deal with core matters like transitional justice and disarmament.

On the second of the three tracks, the efforts aimed to remove the roots of the conflict. Turkey is already a better place than it was in the dark years of the 1990s. Five main goals have emerged: full-fledged education in vernacular language; decentralisation in decision-making throughout Turkey; full access to parliamentary politics for significant smaller parties like the Kurdish national movement; a rewording of discriminatory articles in the constitution; and a fairer counter-terrorism law. A state-run Kurdish-language TV has been broadcasting since 2009. Education in Kurdish and other languages spoken in Turkey is now offered as a career option in schools, even if there is systemic resistance to



its implementation on both sides. An incomplete first step towards better local government was taken in March 2014, with a quarter of Turkey's 81 provinces being assigned new powers for their elected mayors. These have been the most gallant steps toward the Kurdish people which were even unthinkable a decade ago (Erdem, 2016).<sup>26</sup>

On the third of the three tracks, the general context and process, and the atmosphere is much more improved since the peace process began. Partly thanks to Erdoğan's embrace of ethnic differences, Kurdishness became normal and more widely respected and accepted at state level. At times when there was no deadly violence in the southeast and leaders used more states-man-like rhetoric, mainstream Turkish public opinion showed positive support for the effort. In Kurdish-majority towns, a decade of economic progress, road-building and relative stability has followed while the middle class of the region began investing in the deal in which they had a big stake.

### **Collapse of the Process: Regional Dynamics**

PKK has missed an excellent opportunity to finish the decades of conflict. Turkey was very serious on peace negotiations however the Syria war has changed many regional balances and calculations on the side of PKK, and the peace process was no exception to this. The PKK has shown a relatively unprecedented ability to operate regionally in Syria and Iraq in 2014-2015; its Syrian branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), has succeeded in forging a previously unimaginable tie with the US, taking advantage of deteriorating Turkey-US relations. The Syrian Kurds' conflict with ISIS terrorists has also triggered unrest in Turkish Kurdish communities in Turkey and Europe. At the same time, the now evident, dangers of Syrian spillover have underlined how many shared interests Turkey, the PKK and Turkey's Kurds have in overcoming inertia in the talks, declaring some mutually agreed end-goals and making the most of the progress achieved over the past nine years. In the end, PKK's Syrian branch PYD took the deal hostage and later turned the table over for more promises that could come with aligning Turkey's opposition in the region.

Since the commencement of the Arab Spring, the PKK has heavily invested political capital in the Kurdish part of Syria, more popularly known by its Kurdish name, Rojava. The PKK does not regard Rojava as a separate case. Rather, it views the area as intrinsic to its regional strategy, including its political calculations vis-à-vis the peace process. Hence, developments in Syria function as a make or break point for Turkey's Kurdish peace process. This point was conspicuously confirmed when the PKK affiliated groups initiated waves of protests on October 6-8, 2014, which resulted in the deaths of more than 50 people and brought the whole peace process to the verge of collapse. Likewise, the latest developments in the Kurdish part of Syria, particularly the fight between the PKK and ISIS, which has spilled over into Turkey with deadly consequences, have gravely endangered the process.

The gap between the two sides' understandings of the Kurdish question and formulas for its settlement, unfortunately, has not decreased. Instead, it has widened since the commencement of the peace process in 2013. The Kurds' gain in Syria in the form of the de-facto establishment of Rojava has only emboldened them and made them less compromising on their demands vis-à-vis Turkey. Thus, further democratisation of Turkey seems unsuitable for the settlement of the Kurdish issue due to the PKK's political status-focused demands and aspirations.

The Syrian conflict has nevertheless emerged as a grave threat to the peace process (Ozkan, 2018).<sup>27</sup> Symbolically, Syria's Kurds have staked out ambitious goals of self-rule and being a dominant geopolitical actor in northern Syria which Turkey's Kurds regarded as a model. Practically, too, the war had, as now proven, the capacity to jump over the border into Turkey. Despite its much clear strength as a state, Turkey remains vulnerable to regional ferment because its society shares many of the ethnic, sectarian and political divisions of Syria and Iraq. This turmoil in the border of Turkey-Syria could only be seen as nothing more than the arc of opportunity for the PKK and its regional branches.

Then there is the drama of Kobani, the north Syrian Kurdish town on the Turkish border that has become an epic symbol during its struggle with ISIS, partly because everyone could follow the fight over Kobani live

on TV and social media. For Kurds in diaspora, Kobani also became the new Mahabad in Syria. For the PKK, the town has turned into the new frontier. Soon the Kobani fight turned into an international celebrity, PKK's Syrian branch PYD had unilaterally declared that Kobani was a self-ruling canton, the PYD's success was a model at last for its vague doctrine of "democratic autonomy". When it turned out that the PYD could not defend this democratically autonomous canton against ISIS; the PKK – and therefore opinion among Turkey's Kurds – blamed Turkey for the fact that nearly 200,000 Syrian Kurds lost their homes and Kobani itself came under devastating siege. This accusation was cynical, since Turkey could hardly be expected to either invade Syria to save Kobani, or to supply the heavy weaponry needed to equip a group against whom it is still effectively at war. Despite the PKK factor, Iraqi Peshmerga crossed Turkish border to enter the combat zone of Kobani with Turkish assistance and coordination to emancipate the city from ISIS occupation.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly Turkish towns and cities have been targeted by both ISIS and PKK affiliated terror groups as a result of Turkey's Kobani stand.<sup>29</sup>

The result was an extraordinary outburst of violence in several Kurdish-majority cities in Turkey on October 6-8, 2015.<sup>30</sup> The leader of HDP Selahattin Demistas called Kurdish pupils to defend cities and blockade roads and towns against Turkish security forces in eastern Turkey. During the embroilment, nearly 40 people were killed in lynchings and shootings. Disturbingly, these protests did not so much pit Turkish Kurd national movement activists against the security forces, but against pro-ISIS Turkish Kurds. It may not be so easy next time: Kurdish public opinion has become highly volatile, and PKK leader Öcalan may not be able to use his political capital indefinitely in absence of real progress in the talks. The leadership of the PKK is hijacked by the mountain hawks and political falcons in HDP.

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult to argue that at social level there is no Kurdish question in Turkey, because there are many inter-marriages and socially bonded

relations between Turks and Kurds. Islam has continued to be the main cement to get these two ethnic groups together and stronger. However, a systemic problem stemming from the foundation of Turkey – mostly to create Turkish identity – has left many years Turkey's Kurdish citizens ethnically feel excluded. PKK has utilised this opportunity to take this issue to further level and state's response accordingly shaped the conflict since 1980s. As Turkey has become a mature democracy and has come to terms with its past both at religious and cultural level, Ankara has started to approach to the issues from a different perspective. In Turkey today nobody denies the cultural and citizenship rights of Kurdish population nor are they being denied political rights. President Erdoğan since his tenure as leader of Turkey wanted to solve this issue; but regional dynamics, Syrian war, double-faced nature of the PKK in several peace negotiations made this issue more complicated. As of 2020, PKK is perhaps the only terrorist organisation which has a military arms composed of 8,000 people in the mountain and at the same having elected members in the Turkish parliament, cities and other elected offices. The problem now is to solve this anomaly and go forward for a more inclusive way. Turkish officials asked HDP leaders several times to denounce the PKK violence and put a clear distance between themselves and the PKK. They never did so, nor intended to do but continued to defend PKK. This has resulted in a new security centric approach from Ankara to move in a direction where anyone who has involved in terrorist activities have to be judged and put in jail. Today several prominent leaders of HDP are in jail and nobody knows how this strange stalemate of Turkey's Kurdish issues will be solved. A possible scenario is that Turkey will continue to crash PKK on the mountains till the weakened organisation becomes willing to sit and negotiate with Turkish state. In the meantime, the regional and international environment has become conducive for sustaining a possible peace deal – while almost the entire region in the Middle East is in disarray. That seems to be the only scenario in future. As of now, given the deteriorating regional dynamics (Libya, Yemen, Iran, Syria, Iraq, etc.) nobody knows how soon that future would be arriving.

## Notes

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3. Ayse Betul Celik, "Ethnopolitical Conflict in Turkey: From the Denial of Kurds to Peaceful Co-existence?," in *Handbook of Ethnic Conflict: International Perspectives*, edited by D. Landis and R.D. Albert, 241-60 (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2012), p. 244.
4. Taha Ozhan and Hatem Ete. *Kürt Meselesi: Problemler ve Çözüm Önerileri*, (Ankara: SETA, 2008).
5. Celik, "Ethnopolitical Conflict in Turkey", p. 246.
6. Ibid., p. 247.
7. Cited in Ibid.
8. Ibid., p, 249.
9. CIA. *The Kurdish Problem in Perspective* (Washington: National Foreign Assesment Center, 2002), p. 22.
10. Celik, "Ethnopolitical Conflict in Turkey", p. 249.
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13. Galletti, *ibid.*
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18. Pamela Urrutia and Ana Vilellas. *Reopening the Kurdish question: states, communities and proxies in a time of turmoil* (Oslo: NOREF, 2012), p. 11 .
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21. Anthony Derisiotis, "Erdogan, Turkey's Kurds and the Regionalisation of the Kurdish Issue," *New Middle Eastern Studies* 9, no. 1 (2019): 53-68.

22. Galip Dalay, "The Kurdish Peace Process: From Dialogue to Negotiation?" in Al Jazeera Centre for Studies Reports, April 22, 2015, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/04/2015422115349145185.html>
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## 4. The Lebanese Revolution and Hizbullah's Shi'i Axis of Resistance

*Joseph Alagha*

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### **Prologue and Background**

In April 2020, Kissinger preached the dawn of a “New World Order” after the exponential spread of COVID-19 worldwide. He admonished, ‘The world’s democracies need to defend and sustain their Enlightenment values.... A global retreat from balancing power with legitimacy will cause the social contract to disintegrate both domestically and internationally’.<sup>1</sup> The “Axis of Resistance”<sup>2</sup> considers the October 17, 2019 Lebanese Uprising as an off-shoot of the “Arab Spring”, and thus a continuation of Condoleezza Rice’s<sup>3</sup> “failed project” of the “New Middle East”, which was part of the New World Order vision, or the “liberal world order” that Kissinger cautioned to “safeguard its principles”.<sup>4</sup> The Lebanese Hizbullah believes that U.S. hegemony over the MENA/WANA has waned with the “fiasco” of the “Arab Uprisings” and the US Administration’s democratisation and liberalisation projects in the region, most notably in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen.

How does this translate itself in the MENA/WANA region, in particular, in Lebanon, one of two Arab countries that are still in a state of war with Israel?<sup>5</sup> Hizbullah seems to vacillate within the parameters of pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism, while maintaining nationalism, or, Lebanese national identity, as the yardstick. Notwithstanding, Hizbullah oscillates between hard (military) and soft (politics and social services) power, thus relying on their effective combination into smart power, most of the times.<sup>6</sup>

Taking conspiracy theory or hidden-hand explanation as the fulcrum and spring-board, this chapter studies Hizbullah’s reaction to three



existential threats: (1) fighting what it calls the Arab Spring's '*takfiri Jihadis*' [Da'esh (Islamic State or IS and its derivatives) in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; (2) the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon; and (3) the Uprising of October 17 and fighting the chronic corruption epidemic in Lebanon, as the Party's leader affirmed: 'Like we defeated Israel, we are going to defeat corruption in Lebanon'.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of this triadic struggle, I believe that Hizbullah is far from being overstretched and depleted, as some analysts contend. I think that the "Party of God" still has a lot of potential, as the "mouse holding the elephant" in the regional confrontation in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; and, at the same time, maintaining its vigilance to halt any Israeli attack against Lebanon, as Hizbullah, like Israel, has proven its capability to fight on many fronts. In Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Hizbullah is aiding its coreligionists without due consideration to the ideological notion of standing by the "oppressed" (*mustad'afin*), or the "downtrodden of the earth",<sup>8</sup> versus the "oppressors" (*mustakbirin*). This broadens the gap between the Sunni-Shi'a divide, which might explode into an overall discord (*fitna*). This scenario is reminiscent of the 2004 admonition of King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein of Jordan of the formation of a Shi'i Crescent in the Levant or the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> Will the "Axis of Resistance" live to such an expectation of foiling the three existential perils? Hizbullah's leadership seems positive. In this respect, the head of Hizbullah's Parliamentary Bloc, MP Muhammad Ra'd contended:

This is the era of the "Resistance". The natural face of Lebanon is the "Resistance" face ... Before the era of "Resistance", Lebanon played an insignificant role in regional and international politics. However, now we are in the eye of the storm, and we need to erect a new Lebanon in harmony with the presence of the "Resistance".<sup>10</sup>

In turn, Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, Hizbullah's Secretary General, confidently affirmed:

We are heading towards a new regional and international order that might unleash new challenges and existential threats ... However, the future is bright as the “Axis of Resistance” will have the final say in that battle ... since its capabilities and outreach are proliferating in an exponential manner. The “Axis of Resistance” is posing a serious challenge to the U.S. hegemony in the Middle East and its unwavering support to Israel.

In spite of all of these challenges, Nasrallah flaunted the steadfastness, vigilance, and eventual victory of the “Axis of Resistance” in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Gaza, and Lebanon: ‘It is just a matter of time’, he asserted.<sup>11</sup>

### **Who is Hizbullah or “The Party of God” and What is its Role in the MENA/WANA?**

The Lebanese resistance movement Hizbullah is infamous for its “terrorist” global reach and militant face. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Hizbullah abducted Westerners in Lebanon and fought the Israeli army, till Israel withdrew its forces from Lebanon in 2000, after 22 years of occupation. Hizbullah reaped political capital and boosted its pan-Arab and pan-Islamic credentials as being the only guerrilla movement that forced Israel to withdraw and return land, while regular Arab armies succumbed to Israeli’s military might. In the wake of the 2011 Arab Revolutions, the pendulum swung to the other direction, which resulted in Hizbullah’s loss of most of its accumulated pan-Arab and pan-Islamic capital since the party was viewed as a sectarian movement aiding Shi‘ites, irrespective if they were oppressors or oppressed. In the “Arab Spring”/“Uprisings”, Hizbullah is fighting alongside the Syrian regime and lending logistical support to the Iraqi and Yemeni Shi‘ite armed militias as well as vocal support to the Bahrainis.

The US, Israel, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands (2004), and other Western countries as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (2016)<sup>12</sup> classify Hizbullah a “terrorist organization”. Until 2019, the UK differentiated between Hizbullah’s “political wing” and its “military wing”, dubbing the latter a terrorist organisation. On July 26, 2013, the

EU followed the UK's classification. However, in March 2019, the UK revised its policy and categorised Hizbullah in its entirety as a terrorist organisation.<sup>13</sup> On April 29, 2020, Germany followed suit and classified Hizbullah a "terrorist organisation" and censured any Hizbullah-related activity on its territories.<sup>14</sup> In response, David Schenker – the US State Department's Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs – encouraged other European countries to follow suit, arguing that the move 'erodes Hezbollah's legitimacy in some quarters in the world and the fiction over differences between military and political wings'.<sup>15</sup> In turn, Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, Hizbullah's Secretary General, contended that this move was expected and is politically motivated as it aims at exerting pressure on the Europeans by the US Administration; and also it intends to please Israel. Nasrallah anticipated more countries to heed US demands. He challenged German Intelligence Services<sup>16</sup> to give hard evidence confirming that the raided associations were Hizbullah's. Nasrallah repeated the mantra that denies Hizbullah has any "Global reach", arguing that these associations have no organisational link to the Party; neither in Europe, nor in Latin America.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of these setbacks, after more than four decades of its founding, Hizbullah succeeded in merging its domestic agenda with its regional ambitions, thus boosting its geopolitical role in the shaping of a new Middle East in the wake of the calamities and misfortunes brought about by the "Arab Spring"/"Uprisings".

In conformity with its realist policy to change as circumstances themselves change, it is important to keep in mind that Hizbullah is not monolithic. The party's internal structure allows it to operate on a number of levels. Hizbullah is a sophisticated, complex, multifaceted, multilayered organisation, composed of at least four main divisions: (1) the "military wing": the *jibadi* and "terrorist" branch; (2) the social services, NGOs, and civil institutions branch; (3) the "political wing" branch; (4) the cultural politics branch or "resistance art".<sup>18</sup> The rapid evolution of Hizbullah from a marginal splinter group to a dominant group in national and international politics enhanced its representation in the globally contested arena of the *Game of Nations*.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the regional struggles and the continuation of the “Arab-Israeli” conflict, which boosted Hizbullah’s argument for keeping its arms, the Party portrays itself as the defender of Lebanese sovereignty and territorial integrity, by fighting both the Islamic State (IS) and Israel. Concerning the former, Hizbullah has been able to spread its wings and flanks to a tangible part of the Christian constituents of Lebanon, especially after the IS’s occupation of 4 per cent of the country’s mountainous eastern border (*Juroud*), and IS’s suicide bombing attacks against Christian villages in the eastern *Biqa’*. In August 2017, Hizbullah and the Syrian Army launched a two-week war of attrition against IS and its affiliate *al-Nusra* on the Syrian mountainous region bordering Lebanon. Concomitantly, the LAF launched an offensive in the *Juroud*. The LAF, Syrian Army, and Hizbullah defeated IS and Nusra. Hizbullah negotiated their surrender and repatriation with their families to the *Idlib* and *Dayr al-Zour* provinces in Syria. This exemplifies Hizbullah’s two-track policy: regional military confrontation coupled with negotiations and deals. In relation to the latter, Hizbullah consolidated the Lebanese government’s stance concerning the land-border conflict with Israel and the maritime border dispute over the oil and gas blocks. Hizbullah warned that, in the case of any Israeli aggression, all oil and gas insulations are legitimate targets for its precise missiles. This might explain why Hizbullah’s military capabilities and modern weaponry eclipse those of the Lebanese Armed Forces<sup>20</sup> (LAF) by far.

### **Conspiracy theory or “hidden-hand explanation”<sup>21</sup>**

Basing themselves on the game theory and rational choice theory in International Relations, advocates of the conspiracy theory, such as Hizbullah and its allies, claim that there is a tug of war between regional and superpowers: where the “Axis of Resistance”, i.e. Iran, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Hizbullah, aided by Russia and China – on the one hand – are facing the US, Israel, KSA and their Lebanese allies – on the other hand. According to this reasoning, the more sanctions are imposed on Lebanon, the more Hizbullah will suffer. Nevertheless, this reasoning proved detrimental to the whole Lebanese economy, led to

the devaluation of the currency, and eventually resulted in the watershed default of March 7, 2020.

The bottom line of the argument is that the U.S. and Israel aim to keep Lebanon busy with internal woes so as not to pump up its potential oil and gas and actualise its hidden treasure, as Israel has done years ago. Noteworthy, Lebanon was not able to do so due to constant political bickering among the corrupt ruling elite. Hizbullah and Nabih Berri – Amal's<sup>22</sup> leader and Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament – subscribe to the conspiracy theory, which, in their opinion, aims at putting Lebanon under enormous debt so that the country will default and the International Community (IMF; World Bank; and credit rating agencies<sup>23</sup> such as Moody's, Standard & Poor's, and Fitch, etc.) would put their hands on the oil and gas as collateral, in exchange for Lebanon's default on its US\$ 31 billion foreign debt.<sup>24</sup>

At the time, what further fed into the conspiracy theory thinking is that the US Administration put on hold an aid package of military vehicles, weapons, and ammunitions to the LAF exceeding US\$ 105 million, under Israeli pressure, as Hizbullah claimed.<sup>25</sup> The following testimonies convinced Hizbullah of its conspiracy theory scenario. During a Congressional hearing, David Hale – the US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs – confirmed the above, saying that the US Administration froze indefinitely the aid in June 2019 as well as two military aid packages to the Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Feltman, a Democrat not affiliated with the Trump Administration and a former US Ambassador to Lebanon, argued before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on 19 November 2019:

'The US has some legitimate concerns about the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) performance, but the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) should resume quickly and publicly: both because of the program's merit in terms of improving the LAF's counterterrorism performance but also to undermine the Hezbollah-Iranian-Syrian-Russian narrative that the US is unreliable'.<sup>27</sup>

In his testimony, Feltman used “Hizbullah” 49 times, which is telling. He said that the October 17 Uprising is not the brainchild of the US; rather, it is a genuine Lebanese revolt against decades of corruption and mismanagement. Feltman clarified that the national interest of the US aims at preventing Iran from having a strong foothold in Lebanon through its “proxy Hizbullah” that threatens Israel. He added that Hizbullah is engaged in regional wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, thus threatening US interests in the entire Middle East.<sup>28</sup>

### **US Targeted Killings in Iraq: Suleimani, Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes & attempts on Hizbullah's Muhammad Kawtharani**

On January 1, 2020, Iranian Major-General Qassim Suleimani, head of the Pasdaran's<sup>29</sup> al-Quds (Jerusalem) Brigade, met Nasrallah in Beirut; then he travelled to Damascus; and from there he flew to Baghdad. One day later, a US airstrike on Baghdad Airport killed Suleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes – paramilitary commander of the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces.<sup>30</sup> The adherents of the conspiracy theory claim that Israel coaxed the US to execute this assassination, fearing massive retaliation from the “Axis of the Resistance”, most notably Hizbullah, had Israel conducted the targeted killing. Israel argued that the response to the US strike would be contained and forgotten, unlike the case with Israel, where such an attack might have ignited a mini-regional conflict with neighbouring Arab countries and Iran. Suleimani's killing ended a close partnership with Hizbullah that lasted over two decades, since 1997, to be precise. Until Suleimani's replacement – his deputy Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani<sup>31</sup> – familiarises himself with the Iraqi terrain, and in order to fill the power vacuum, according to the US Department of State, Hizbullah's Sheikh Muhammad Kawtharani – the man responsible of the Iraqi file – took the helm by financing, leading, and coordinating with anti-US Iraqi militias.<sup>32</sup> The U.S. blames Kawtharani's insurgency for the death of many of its service personnel, and has attempted, on several occasions, to kill him.<sup>33</sup>

While Suleimani was being buried, in the evening of January 7, 2020, Iran launched Inter-ballistic missiles (IBMs) on two US bases in Iraq. Two missiles landed inside the *Irbil* Base, in the Kurdish Province, and 11 missiles landed on the US Marines headquarters inside the *Ayn al-Assad* Base near Baghdad, which also houses other multinational forces who came to shore up the activities of the Iraqi government in fighting Da‘esh (Islamic State or IS).<sup>34</sup> Although the US Army was on full alert, none of these missiles were intercepted. While the US claimed no casualties, the “Axis of the Resistance” boasted “hundreds of casualties” and termed the Iranian retaliation: “The Qassimi Response” (*al-Radd al-Qassim*).<sup>35</sup> In reality, it turned out that some US soldiers suffered brain concussions due to the severity of the blasts when they were talking underground shelter.<sup>36</sup>

The Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, termed the response a “proportionate measure”<sup>37</sup> carried out in “self-defence”: ‘We do not seek escalation or war, but will defend ourselves against any aggression’.<sup>38</sup> In other words, Zarif invoked the International Community’s norm of self-defence, in line with UN Article 51,<sup>39</sup> which stipulates the following:

Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security.<sup>40</sup>

In short, employing the game theory in International Relations in analysing the Iranian missile response, one can claim that the US and

Iran exchanged punches in a 'zero-sum game' fashion, portraying equal capabilities, but not a balance-of-power formula, as the US is by far stronger. But here the key word is 'capabilities', and not only hard power. Although the US Embassy in Baghdad was targeted several times with shells and missiles, both parties put a lid on the matter, and that was the end of the Iranian retaliation. In the meantime, while Nasrallah's rhetoric flaunted: 'This is the beginning of the end of the US military presence in the Middle East', Hizbullah did nothing directly tangible to support this claim.<sup>41</sup>

## SECTION II

### **Minority Politics in Lebanon: Introduction to the Lebanese Political System**

#### ***Ottoman Secularism: the "Millet System" to regulate Religious and Personal Affairs***

Before the Establishment of Lebanon in 1920, the Ottoman-Turkish "Millet System" was in place from 1516 to 1916. Millet in Turkish means "people's nation." It was expedient for the Ottomans to separate religious and personal affairs from the state as a means to maintain stability throughout their huge empire, which later became the "sick man" of Europe. The "Millet System" gave judicial autonomy to the different confessional groups, in the different administrative districts (*villayets*), and consequently to the *Vilayet* of Beirut, which later on became the capital of Lebanon.<sup>42</sup>

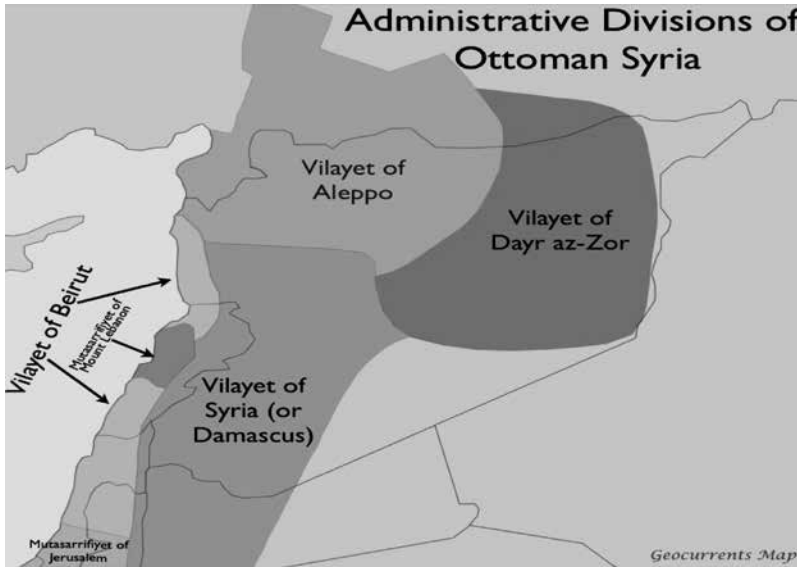
#### ***Le Grand Liban (the Greater Lebanon) of 1920***

After the defeat and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the provisional Arab governments, headed by the *feudal-tribal leaders*, replaced Ottoman rule. This development was short-lived and the Arab nationalist dream of the *feudal-tribal leaders* came to a premature end as a result of the May 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, which had already



divided the Middle East among the British and French. Thus, France created “Le Grand Liban” or the Greater Lebanon on September 1, 1920. From the stance of being their protégé during Ottoman rule, France had vested interest in the Maronites (Catholics) of Lebanon. That is why it extended the borders of Lebanon, at the expense of Syria, to include *Jabal Amil*, the *Biqā’*, and the Sunni coastal cities and declared its independence from Syria to the great disappointment of the Muslims who aspired for unification with Syria. Nevertheless, the Greater Lebanon of 1920 opened up a new opportunity for the Muslims since the Lebanese state was to be based on the guaranteed proportional representation of the different religious minorities. It is from that day on that the numerical distribution of the religious groups among the Lebanese became a serious volatile issue and a source of inequality and injustice. Still, from that time, under no other circumstance would the Muslim leaders aspire to play a prominent political role. Only in a separate Lebanon could the Muslim elite expect to have a substantial role in government. As a result, the Muslim elite proved their allegiance to the Lebanese state when they refused the Arabic call for the unity between Syria and Lebanon. Their regions (constituencies) were calm and indicated a consensus on the Muslim support for the idea of the Greater Lebanon.<sup>43</sup>

The Greater Lebanon had the effect of doubling the territory but also the side effect of complicating its future. It was assured that no community would be pre-eminent, which resulted in the dual imperatives of creating internal alliances and bringing about external support. Nevertheless, alliances like these were destined to fail since no religious community was entirely homogenous, and even intra-community alliances were hard to strike or maintain. However, the alliances among the Muslim elite were not genuine: while it enhanced the power of the elite, it alienated the people.<sup>44</sup> See Diagram Below:



### *First Constitution before Independence*

On May 23, 1926, the Lebanese Republic, having a written constitution and internationally recognised boundaries, saw the light. The Lebanese constitution was drafted by Lebanese parliamentarians and dignitaries<sup>45</sup> along French lines, and Charles Debbas, a Greek Orthodox, was elected as the first president of the Lebanese Republic.<sup>46</sup>

### *The 1932 Census and the 1943 National Pact and Independence*

The one-and-only notorious Census of 1932, which was administered by the French Mandate, was biased towards the Christians. The results of the census were that the Christians (the Maronites) were the majority or the largest community; Sunni Muslims the second largest; and Shi'ites as the third largest, comprising 19.6 per cent of the population in 1932. Because the Shi'ites were the third largest confessional group, they possessed some power, but still disproportionate to their number.

Taking the results of the 1932 census into consideration and the independence of Lebanon from the French in 1943, in the National Pact, which is an oral agreement not written in the 1926 constitution, |

the Lebanese agreed upon the following: Maronites do not seek foreign intervention and accept Lebanon as an Arab affiliated country, instead of a Western one. And Muslims abandon their aspirations for unity with Syria. They also divided the power-sharing according to the following formula: the President of the Republic a Maronite, the Prime Minister (PM) a Sunni, and the Speaker of the Parliament, a Shi'ite. Furthermore, the Deputy Speaker of the Parliament and the Deputy Prime Minister are always Greek Orthodox; the Chief of the General Staff is always a Druze; the General of the Army is a Maronite; the governor of the Central Bank is a Maronite; the Head of the Labour Unions is a Maronite; the head of General Security is a Maronite; the head of Army Intelligence is a Maronite; the head of State Security is a Maronite; and the head of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) is a Maronite. Parliament members were in a ratio of 6:5 in favour of Christians to Muslims. In short, the National Pact created a Presidential System headed by the Maronite President of the Republic, where key security, financial, and economic positions in the Lebanese State were controlled by Maronites. This is referred to in the literature as 'Political Maronism.'

The National Pact between the strong Sunni and Maronite power elite, on the one hand, and the French Mandate, on the other was to become the basis for Lebanon's independence. Moreover, the ratio of appointments in political posts as well as representation in the parliament of six Christians to five Muslims<sup>47</sup>, which was based on the 1932 census, made the Muslims feel they were denied true representation. Lebanon declared its independence on November 22, 1943. However, real independence did not take place until the French army left Lebanon on December 31, 1946.<sup>48</sup>

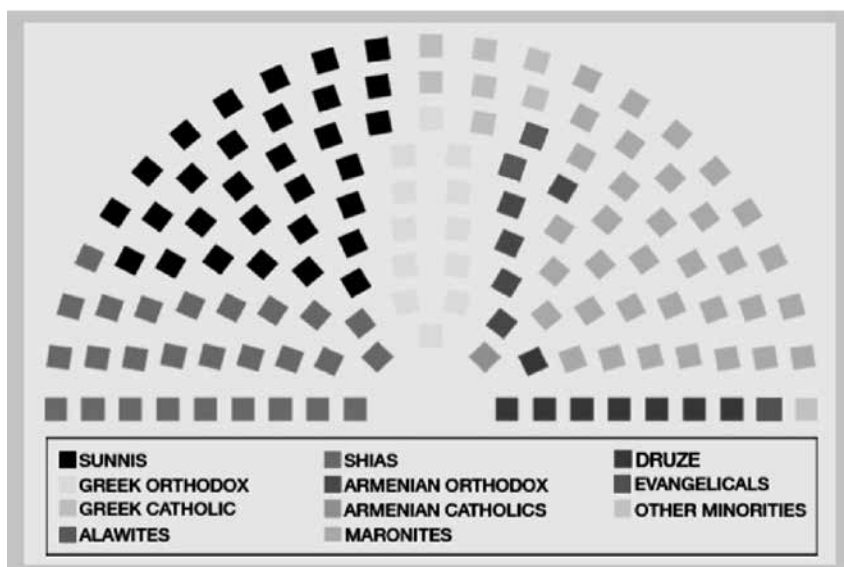
### ***Lebanon's 1990 Ta'if Agreement (New Constitution):***

#### ***The Officially recognised 18 sects***

The New 1990 Lebanese Constitution, known as the Ta'if Agreement, which ended the 16-year civil war (1975-1990), kept the 1943 National Pact power-sharing formula with the following modifications. Since 1990, parliament members were divided 50-50 per cent among Christians and

Muslims. Although there are no constitutional articles to these effects, by practice the Maronites lost the following two security positions to the Sunnis and Shi'as: The head of General Security is a Shi'a; and the head of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) is a Sunni. Most importantly, the Ta'if Agreement created a Parliamentary System and stripped the Maronite President of his powers and vested these in the Cabinet or the Council of Ministers headed by the Sunni PM. This led to more sectarianism and divisions in the country.

Today, the officially recognised religious groups in Lebanon form a myriad (mosaic) of 18 sects, which are the following: 'Alawite; Armenian Catholic; Armenian Orthodox; Assyrian Church of the East; Chaldean Catholic; Copts; Druze; Greek Catholic; Greek; Ismai'li; Jewish; Latin Catholic; Maronite; Evangelical (Protestant); Sunni; Shi'a; Syriac Catholic; and Syriac Orthodox.<sup>49</sup> In the Lebanese parliament, not all of the 18-sects are represented; rather the 128-seats are divided 50-50 per cent among the Christians ("non-Muhammadi Sects") and the Muslims ("Muhammadi Sects"). (See the Diagram below):



### ***Lebanon's Power-sharing Formula of Consociational Democracy***

The most salient feature of the Lebanese political system is its consensual politics, or consociational democracy, as Arend Lijphart<sup>50</sup> dubs it. Consensual politics dictates the presence of no winners and no losers, or a zero sum game. In order to uphold the rule of law, the power-sharing formula in the Lebanese political system divided the spoils among the 18 constituents of the Lebanese mosaic, myriad or, simply, the major sects, while upholding the 50-50 per cent power-sharing formula between Muslims and Christians in the Parliament, Council of Ministers (Cabinet), and Civil Servant's appointments, especially high ranking public positions. The Lebanese political system is characterised by clientelism, or the four infamous 'isms': nepotism; favouritism; sectarianism; confessionalism; and most importantly, crony capitalism, in a deep state<sup>51</sup> or (*imperium in imperio*), typified by the erosion of the rule of law and is governed by the spoils system, as opposed to the merit system. Although the post of the Ombudsman was founded by a law in 2005, until today it has not been implemented: maybe because the Ombudsman is the cornerstone of the merit system and a guarantee of the rule of law.

Lebanon's 1990 Constitution stipulated bicameralism, only a Lower House of 128 Members of Parliament (MPs) materialised, while the 100-seat Senate never saw the light due to political bickering and structural disagreement about running the political system. The Lebanese political pluriform system, its legal pluralism, the allotted parliamentary seats, etc., all point out to the salient role of coalition governments, which, unfortunately, are highly unstable, even in advanced Western democracies, because of their failure to continuously sustain the demands of their constituent members. Unlike Western democracies where political parties seek to implement their own election programs and election campaign promises, in Lebanon, as a form of psychological conditioning, people vote on the basis of personal religious loyalty to their political or feudal leader (*al-za'im*), who in turn showers them with spoils. This chronic system of reaping rewards and benefits results in fragmentation and more sectarianism.<sup>52</sup>

For instance, the previous Hariri Cabinet, which took more than nine months to be formed, was a coalition of nine Political Parties that were haphazardly merged together in order to perpetuate the same parliamentary composition in the Council of Ministers, thus preventing any tangible opposition from taking place. This process sets limitations on the proper functioning of the quasi-democratic system of the Lebanese consensual politics, which eventually leads to the paralysis and stagnation of the entire political system due to excessive negotiations, bargaining, and compromise that are required for decision making to take place. This polarisation and pillarisation resulted in crippling the entire democratic process, pluralism, and the rule of law. Thus, the Lebanese sectarian political system leads to corruption and concentration of power among the ruling elite at the expense of the average citizens who are classified and pillarised among the 18 officially recognised sects or religious denominations. This pillarisation led to polarisation and a fragmented political system and public sphere. After 100 years of the founding of the Republic of Lebanon (*Le Grand Liban*), on September 1, 1920, the country is still struggling with nation-building, in the hope of founding a viable political system that could sustain the Lebanese mosaic together, not only in a much-anticipated strong social bond, but also in the much utopian social and community cohesion under the imagined community slogan of “national unity”, as a form of multiculturalism or melting pot, while preserving the individual identity and values of the constituents. Although as a measure of pluralism almost every pillar, group, or political party has its own TV, radio, and media outlets – the rule of thumb is not to antagonise or bully one another.

### ***Hizbullah's reading of Arend Lijphart's Consociational Democracy***

How does Hizbullah situate itself within the Lebanese political bickering on nation-building and institutional and constitutional reforms? More likely, each party has its own understanding and conception of what democracy is. It seems that the predicaments characterising the Lebanese cabinet formation process have little to do with pro- and anti-democratic tendencies. For almost all political parties, the question was

not whether democracy was desirable, but what kind of democracy would be preferred, and what sort of political system ought to be compatible with it? While the Hizbullah opposition parties promoted a majoritarian democracy (50 per cent+), Hizbullah and its allies preferred a consensual democracy, proportional representation, and lowering the voting age to eighteen, which, in practice, boils down to demographic majority rule since Muslim voters number around 75 per cent, while the Christian voters number around 25 per cent.

The Lebanese system, which is based on the philosophy of elite accommodation, is the most well-known example of consociationalism. Arend Lijphart, who coined the term, proposes that a consociational democracy has to fit four main criteria. First, the elites representing the leading societal groups should participate in an overarching decision-making structure. Second, this structure should incorporate a veto mechanism for each of these groups. Third, proportionality should be the guiding principle in all forms of political representation. Finally, every group should be allowed to arrange their internal matters independently.<sup>53</sup> Both parties – Hizbullah and its allies and Hizbullah opposition parties – agree on Lijphart’s first and fourth criteria, but disagree on the second and third. Hizbullah was able to obtain veto power in 2008-2009 Cabinet, a short-lived experience that impeded the proper functioning of the cabinet and was severed in subsequent cabinet. Nevertheless, Hizbullah and its allies still call for proportionality to give Lebanon’s eighteen ethno-confessional communities more equitable representation. Noteworthy, based on this law the parliamentary election of May 6, 2018 were conducted. Therefore, in Lebanon, contrary to Lijphart’s stipulations, veto power seemingly does not work; while the issue of proportional representation remains debated. Nevertheless, as Hizbullah’s MP ‘Ali Fayyad noted, the institutionalisation of structures fostering consensus between the societal elites remains the core of Lebanon’s political system and its success – political stability – depends on the extent to which elites manage to agree on structural political dilemmas.<sup>54</sup>

In short, “vetocracy” (consensual democracy and coalition government) as well as “mafocracy” (crony capitalism) are the salient

features of the semi (quasi)-democratic political system or political life in Lebanon, which is characterised by an *omerta*<sup>55</sup> – or a strong social bond and blind allegiance, homage, and loyalty to the *za'im* – coupled with bonanza saving schemes in the Lebanese “Banana Republic, i.e. a country that chronically suffers from political and economic instability. This is deplorable, since in 1955 Lebanon was among the ten best countries in the world, and its GDP per capita was higher than that of France and than that of West Germany.<sup>56</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, Lebanon was referred to as the “Switzerland of the Middle East”.<sup>57</sup>

### SECTION III

#### **A Political Hot Potato: The Lebanese Revolution**

Hizbullah's reading and narrative of Lebanese Street Politics falls within the domain of the conspiracy theory. Since October 17, 2019, the Lebanese streets and public squares have been burning with revolutionary youth fever. The youth have been demanding a revamp of the entire political system; and the ousting of the corrupt ruling elite, the previous civil war (1975-1990) warlords, who took hold of the country 30 years ago since 1990. What are the causes of this call for freedom? Why did the “Arab Spring” arrive so late to Lebanon? What is Hizbullah's role and response? What is the plight of the average Lebanese citizen and Hizbullah's constituency, or “Society of Resistance”, in the wake of the financial and economic default?

#### ***The Pressurising Socio-economic Factor: Lebanon's Financial Woes***

In almost all countries where the state of the economy determines politics and policy, in Lebanon it is the other way around. Lebanon is seen as an anomaly where politics dictates and enforces economic, fiscal, and monetary policies. Over the years, subsequent Cabinets lent huge amounts of money from the Central Bank (BDL), which they did not pay back. As the public fiscal demands skyrocketed, BDL used the citizen's bank accounts to fund the corrupt Lebanese state and pay government employees. Thus, the debt became unsustainable: over US\$



100 billion, which is 176 times more than the GDP;<sup>58</sup> something that the economy of a small country of 5 million citizens cannot hold or cope up with, especially since Lebanon hosts around 2 million refugees (Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi), the highest refugee proportion per capita in the entire world.

### ***Lebanon on the Brink of Financial Collapse: The Problem and Cause of the Demonstrators***

On March 7, 2020, PM Hassan Diab made the watershed announcement that Lebanon has defaulted on its debt.<sup>59</sup> What caused Lebanon from shifting from being the “Switzerland of the Middle East” to being one of the most debt-ridden countries in the world? In Lebanon, the culture of corruption is a rampant and a deeply engrained epidemic. Since the civil war ended in 1990, the warlords became the political leaders and divided the cake among them. For the past 30 years, the politicians were stealing the resources of the country. This means that the rich become richer and the poor poorer. According to the latest surveys in Lebanon, 1 per cent own 58 per cent of the means of production and distribution; 0.8 per cent own 49 per cent of the deposits in bank accounts, and these are the politicians and their retinue. Over the past 40 years, they have embezzled over US\$ 800 billion in public funds and tax evasion. Out of the US\$ 800 billion, 56 Lebanese politicians smuggled and transferred US\$ 189 billion from their Swiss accounts to the Luxembourg and other Island safe-havens. Noteworthy, the Swiss authorities agreed to cooperate with the Lebanese government in its future investigation into the matter.<sup>60</sup>

From 1984 to 2020, Lebanese public debt increased from US\$ 1 billion to almost US\$ 100 billion, 38 per cent of which was wasted as subsidies for the National Electricity Company (EDL), which loses around US\$ 2 billion annually and there is hardly any electricity produced. Private generators make up for the electricity shortages. In other words, average Lebanese citizen pays two bills for the electricity. The same goes for water. Consumer products are on the rise, in a country that exports

US\$ 2 billion and imports US\$ 20 billion a year! Many factories and business became bankrupt, and many employees lost their jobs. Added to that are around 2 million refugees (Syrian, Palestinian, and Iraqi), who are draining the resources of a country of 4 million Lebanese citizens. In short, before the demonstrations, the economic situation was on the verge of collapse.<sup>61</sup>

### *Direct Trigger & the Demands of the Revolutionaries*

The direct trigger of the demonstrations, which started on October 17, 2019, and the straw that broke the camel's back is the government's WhatsApp tax of US\$ 6 a month; or 20 cent per day, in the proposed 2020 budget plan. People of all sects, denominations, age groups, males and females, stormed the streets and everyone was chanting "Revolution".

Scenes of national unity reminiscent of March 2005 First Cedar Revolution, after the assassination of PM Rafic Hariri, demonstrated the strong social bond, social cohesion, community cohesion of the Lebanese, all across the sectarian divide. The demonstrators used the word *waja'* to indicate their grievances: a lot of grievances (*waja'*, literary 'pain'). Although the demonstrators formed ad hoc committees, they are disorganised and they lack uniform voice and demands. They are scattered and have no unified leadership, no unified ideology, and offer no feasible alternative to the government or cabinet. Thus, there seems to be no horizon for the 'Uprising' to bear fruit, and this is what the political elite were aiming at in order to saw discord between the demonstrators and stop their socio-political movement.

Although the government retracted the WhatsApp tax on the evening of October 17, instead of appeasing the demonstrators, it emboldened them to carry on further seeking more concessions from the Cabinet, calling for the fall of the regime, and chanting the Arab Spring call of down with the regime: "The people want the downfall of the political system". In the Lebanese context, this does not mean only the Cabinet or the Council of Ministers headed by the Sunni PM, but also the Maronite (Catholic) President and the Shi'ite Speaker of the Parliament, as well as the resignation of the Parliament as a whole.

In reference to the protestors' demands of the resignation of the three aforementioned leaders, the crowds chanted: "All of them must step down"; Other slogans read: "Down with the Oligarchy: Power to the People"; "Down with the rule of the Central Bank (BDL)"; "Lebanon's Uprising"; "Revolution"; "Civil State without a sectarian system"; "You (political elite: ruling class) are the civil war, and we (demonstrators) are the popular revolution".<sup>62</sup>

### ***The Lebanese Regime's Response: Reaction of the Political Elite & Ruling Class***

The Lebanese State tried to appease the demonstrators. The Council of Ministers held a meeting in the Presidential Palace on October 21, 2019, where major decisions were taken to appease the demonstrators and uphold accountability and transparency. This became known as the Hariri reform plan, an over ambitious paper that had no chance of being implemented by the corrupt political elite and the failing private and public financial institutions. The basic points of the plan are the following: (1) Approve and ratify the State Budget of 2020 with a 0.63 per cent deficit, which is unprecedented during the past 30 years; (2) An annual tax on the Central Bank (US\$ 3 billion) and private banks (US\$ 400 million) to reduce state debt by 50 per cent; (3) A promise of no new taxes on the citizens; (4) Reduce 50 per cent of the salaries and benefits of the current and former politicians (presidents, ministers and MPs); (4) Close the Ministry of Information and reduce 70 per cent of the budgets of state councils, such as: [Council of the South; Council for Development and Reconstruction; Ministry of the Displaced, etc.]; (5) Reduce the operating budget deficit of the National Electricity Company (EDL) to US\$ 1 billion; (6): Approve and ratify a General Amnesty Law and Old Age Law before the end of the year, as well as programs for poor families and increase housing loans for the youth, etc.; (7) Put the US\$ 11.8 billion CEDRE Conference loan (6 April 2018) and the McKenzie plan (7 March 2019) on track, as roadmaps for structural reform.<sup>63</sup>

Echoing the demonstrators' demands, on October 23, 2019, the Speaker of the Parliament, Nabih Berri said: "The time is ripe to establish

a civil state'. The President delivered a National Address on October 24, arguing that the protests have no horizon of changing the political system, since this could only be done through institutional processes of the Lebanese state, and not on the street. Aoun stressed that reform is a political process, clarifying that when he was an MP ten years ago, he proposed many draft legislations to stamp out corruption, but they have not been voted upon till this very day; a special tribunal to look into the crimes of the theft of public money; retrieving stolen money; and lifting the immunity and the banking secrecy on civil service employees, i.e. former and current ministers, presidents, MPs, and government employees.

In his mid-tenure national address, on October 31, 2019, President Aoun gave a speech in which he proposed a uniform (civil) personal status law for the 18-sects that form the Lebanese mosaic or myriad, which is unprecedented.<sup>64</sup> Aoun promised to clamp down on corruption and called for the establishment of a civil state where all citizens are on par in front of the law (rule of law; everyone is under the law). He called for appointing the ministers based on their merit and specialisation; rather than their political allegiance.<sup>65</sup>

### ***The US & the International Community's Preliminary Reaction***

On October 22, 2019, PM Hariri met the Ambassadors of the Five Permanent Members of the UN's Security Council along with the UN's special representative to Lebanon. They demanded that the Lebanese government heeds the demands of the protestors, but not to step down or cause any power vacuum, in the already slow-functioning political system. On October 24, 2019, the US Department of State issued the following statement: 'We support the right of the Lebanese people for peacefully demonstrating ... Economic and financial help to Lebanon is pending (substantial government) reforms'. On October 25, 2019, the European Union (EU) issued a statement supporting the Lebanese government's reforms and called on the government to allow people to peacefully vent their anger and demonstrate, (without causing mayhem and engaging in looting and destruction of private and public property).

In his part, the UN Secretary General António Guterres called on the Lebanese government to listen to the demands of the protestors and end turmoil in people's lives so that there would be peace in the streets: "Even in places where there are no protests, people feel hurt and want to be heard."<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, Lebanese government's measures and international calls of support did not appease the demonstrators. On the contrary, the protests increased nationwide, and most of the key roads were blocked, thus paralyzing the whole country and its already ailing economy. The Street was not impressed; the protestors reiterated: "All of them, means all of them"; "Leave, means leave; your tenure caused hunger, and people want the downfall of the regime".

On November 3, 2019, a female demonstration roamed the streets of Beirut asking for women's rights and portraying feminist slogans, among which were the following: "Our Revolution is a feminist revolution"; "I'm going to cause the downfall of the regime, which is sectarian, hierarchal-patriarchal, racist, and capitalist"; "Women have the right to grant the nationality to their children";<sup>67</sup> "No to violence against women"; "It's never too late for the future of our children"; "I want to see my children";<sup>68</sup> "The revolution is a female"; "Power to women". In short, Lebanese women demanded gender equality in four domains: social, economic, political, and, most importantly, legal, because many women do not have access to the justice system, or justice, as such.<sup>69</sup>

### ***Hiszbollah as the Major Player: Nasrallah's Speeches of October 19 and 25***

In both speeches, Nasrallah put his weight behind and lent his support to the Cabinet, Hariri's Reform Paper, and he shored up the Lebanese government and Aoun's Presidency. Nasrallah argued that it is better to keep the status quo ante since it took two years to elect a President, one year to form the Cabinet, and the Parliamentary elections were conducted almost a year ago. Therefore, according to him, there is no need for change, but rather to enforce the reform measures of the Cabinet and the President. On October 19, 2019, Nasrallah argued that a technocrat cabinet "will fall in two weeks"; so it could not be the solution, as the

demonstrators want. According to him, the only solution is to enact the reforms the current political system has repeatedly promised.

In his October 19 speech, although Nasrallah called the revolution a “popular movement”, in his October 25 speech, he retracted that and accused the demonstrators of furthering ‘foreign agendas that aim to destroy the country’.

Nasrallah admonished the revolutionaries to form a unified delegation and go and discuss their demands with the President. If they refuse and remain adamant, then they prove that they are taking part in the conspiracy theory that aims at destroying Lebanon and its institutions; thus, causing power vacuum, anarchy, discord (*fitna*), which could even deteriorate into civil war, as he claimed.

In protest, on October 26, 2019, an estimated one million protestors took to the streets in Lebanon. They formed a 220 km human chain from the South to the North. This is reminiscent of the Baltic Chain of 1989, where one-third of the population of the Baltic Republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) participated in a human chain to demand the independence of their countries from the Soviet Union.

On October 24 and 25, 2019, in Riad el Solh, bloody confrontations erupted among the protestors, who used their arm fists, stones, spray, and sticks in order to engage each other. The Army and Security Forces intervened to separate and defuse the crisis. The protestors blamed infiltrators from Hizbullah, accusing them of aiming to deflect the revolutionary movement from its objectives. The chaos was short-lived, and everything gradually returned to normal, but at the price of some casualties. On the afternoon of October 25, Hizbullah bussed its supporters from three different locations and forced the demonstrators to listen to Nasrallah’s speech. This increased the confrontations and led the Security Forces to act as a buffer between the two confronting groups. Hizbullah blamed conspiracy theory for what has happened accusing some demonstrations of trying to tarnish the image of the “Resistance” (i.e. Hizbullah or Party of God) by including its leader Nasrallah among those who should step down because he is accused of being corrupt like other politicians: “All of them, means all of them, including Nasrallah”;

and Hizbullah supporters replied paying homage to their leader: “Oh God, Oh God, behold our Nasrallah”. The pun is that “Nasrallah” means in Arabic: “victory of God”. Some demonstrators called for unity: “One, one, one: the Lebanese people are one”.

On October 25, 2019, Nasrallah gave his address asking his supporters to vacate all the public squares and streets in order to avoid confrontation with the demonstrations, and they immediately obeyed. Again, Nasrallah warned of the conspiracy theory that aims to cause discord (*fitna*) and lead the country into civil war, warning against any power vacuum, chaos, or anarchy. Nasrallah claimed that the demonstrators are politically motivated and that they are pawns moved by ‘regional powers and foreign embassies’. A bold answer to these claims was levelled by one of the demonstrators in *Barjah*, a Sunni girl, who accused Nasrallah of being the speaker of the Lebanese Republic, which implies that the President and the PM are puppets in his hands.

It is remarkable to note that protests in Hizbullah’s and Amal’s dens are unprecedented (although both parties tried to disperse the demonstrators, sometimes by force): in Hermel and Baalbek in the Bekaa; and Tyre or Sour, Nabatiyyeh and Kafar Rumman, which became a bastion of the Lebanese Communist Party, in the South. Eventually, LAF were dispatched to protect the protestors.

### ***Street vs. Street:<sup>70</sup> Hizbullah’s Counter-Revolution Tactic and Message?***

Is it a coincidence that every time a foreign emissary comes to Beirut, hell breaks loose and a show of force, coupled with street violence erupts between competing groups? For instance, on the same day that the Director General for Political Affairs at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Richard Moore, was supposed to visit Lebanon, on the 39th and 40th days of the Uprising, scenes reminiscent of the civil war days crippled Lebanon.<sup>71</sup>

While demonstrators were distributing flowers to the Security forces in Antelias,<sup>72</sup> on the Ring Bridge<sup>73</sup> – separating the predominantly Muslim West Beirut from the predominantly Christian East Beirut – an informal mini-war erupted between the supporters of the “Revolution”

and their counterparts: Hizbullah's and Amal's backers, who came in the hundreds on their motorcycles. They outnumbered the demonstrators and portrayed a level of anger (thymós)<sup>74</sup> not seen before.

Holding and hoisting Hizbullah's and Amal's flags and banners, wearing black masks, and armed with metal rods and clubs, they stormed, looted, and burned the demonstrators' tents in Riad el Solh and attacked the demonstrators on the Ring Bridge, throwing big rocks at them, and targeting them with laser beams, while shouting sectarian slogans: "Shi'a, Shi'a, Shi'a"; "Allah, Nasrallah and the entire Dahiya"; "Sayyid Nasrallah has foresight",<sup>75</sup> "At your service Nasrallah". The demonstrators responded: "This is Lebanon, not Iran"; "Hizbullah is a terrorist" (3x); "Revolution" (3x). For more than four hours, the LAF and Security Forces had hard times keeping the two groups apart, while suffering few minor injuries in the process.

Hizbullah's and Amal's supporters practiced mayhem and hooliganism on the touristic Monot Street in Achrafieh, in the Christian heart of Beirut, which is a den of the right-wing Phalangists<sup>76</sup> and the Lebanese Forces,<sup>77</sup> who were on their guard holding machine guns, while taking combat positions on balconies and roof tops. Luckily, there was no need to use these weapons, as Hizbullah's and Amal's supporters left after they vented their anger on parked cars and shops. Although Hizbullah issued political declarations denying any organisational role in this "Shi'ite flare up", its image, as an upholder of civil peace, was badly tarnished.

On 26 November 2019, in Tyre (Sour), Hizbullah's and Amal's supporters attacked the demonstrators; looted and burned their tents shouting the same slogans as above. This came as a reaction against the demonstrators' blocking of the roads, an action that caused the death of two Hizbullah supporters, in a deplorable car accident that burned the entire car.

### ***Hariri's Resignation & its Aftermath***

In an attempt to put an end to the protests, on the 13th day, in the afternoon of October 29, violent confrontations erupted between the demonstrators (victims) and their opponents [thugs, infiltrators]



who came armed with sticks and stormed Riad el Solh and Martyr's Square. The attackers destroyed and burned the tents of the protestors, demolished the loud speakers, and other property such as cars and TV crews' equipment.<sup>78</sup> Although they came under fierce rock-throwing, Security forces intervened by firing teargas and pushing the attackers away from the public squares of the demonstrations, thus gradually restoring law and order. Living up to his promise of not allowing anyone to crack down on the demonstrators, PM Hariri announced his official resignation via a televised 1.22-minute short address.<sup>79</sup>

Afterwards, Hariri went and submitted his resignation to the President.<sup>80</sup> In an interview with *al-Mayadeen TV*, the veteran politician, ex-MP Walid Jumblatt called for the formation of a technocrat government as soon as possible, hoping that: 'In these critical times, I call for peaceful and calm dialogue to prevail among the various parties', warning that the fall of the regime or the political system cannot be accomplished in this way.<sup>81</sup> In turn the Maronite Patriarch Bshara al-Ra'i condemned the attack on the demonstrators and hoped that the resignation of the Cabinet will be seen as a positive step towards a speedy formation of a new reform Cabinet, which is tasked of finding a comprehensive solution to the crisis.<sup>82</sup> Rumour had it that Hariri resigned after he got a direct order from Saudi Arabia, after falling out of favour for a long time. Hariri took that as a test of virtue, and he gave his homage to the Saudis and obliged.

The resignation put an end to the "Presidential deal" that brought Aoun to the Presidency. The "Presidential deal" dictated that Hariri remains PM till the six-year tenure of the President elapses. At the time, Aoun served more than half his tenure.

### ***Nasrallah's Reaction: Third Speech***

Nasrallah gave an address in the afternoon of November 1, 2019, in which he called on for the speedy establishment of a serious, honest, and sovereign Cabinet that can obtain the confidence of the people and achieve their demands. Again, he admonished against power vacuum, stressing that time is not on the side of the Lebanese if they want to

avoid economic collapse. He added, 'If the Lebanese State fails to pay the salaries of its employees, we (Hizbullah) would not default and we will keep on paying ... This is a token of our integrity and commitment to our people'.<sup>83</sup> Nasrallah praised the wisdom and foresight of his constituency in not heading the provocations, namely, insults and calls for confrontation among the Lebanese, which might lead to exchanging fire and civil war, since 'everyone has light arms; and Hizbullah has strategic weapons that are only used for the defence of Lebanon, as happened yesterday when we [Hizbullah] fired at an Israeli reconnaissance plane and made it leave the Lebanese airspace ... The issue of the Resistance should be kept aside from all domestic developments. It is a constant fixity (something immutable) in our identity'. He implied that Hizbullah will never use its weapons domestically or as a political bargaining chip in the formation on the new Cabinet, saying: 'we are underdogs in this regard, and we are always underrepresented; we have not used any of our power, all of this in the national interest of Lebanon', as he bragged and admonished.<sup>84</sup>

***Conspiracy Theory & Foreign Intervention:  
Alleged KSA and Qatari Funding***

Another argument that feeds into the conspiracy theory is the handsome funding from some Gulf States. In addition to funding and aid-in-kind and logistical support from the Lebanese Forces and the Phalangists, an electronic army was flooding social media, most notably, Instagram (15-second music) and Twitter attacking Hizbullah and demonizing it (on a flood of accounts). On "Martyr's Square" and Riad el Solh there was one big stage with live entertainment by famous musicians, coupled with paying other shaykhs (Sunni, Shi'a and Druz) to side with the demonstrators, including fake Shaykhs to show that they are against the religious establishment. Noteworthy, inviting famous singers and DJs to perform for long hours costs a lot of money. The demonstrators chanted: "We want to dance and sing and also topple the regime".

On October 25, 2019, a grand Podium for entertainment was built in Jal al-Deeb. When it rained, out of nowhere, thousands of umbrellas

– having the Lebanese flag emblem on them – were distributed to the demonstrators. Also, three times a day, sandwiches wrapped with Lebanese flag papers and refreshments were given to the demonstrators. These things cost a lot of money, and the demonstrators are destitute and poor. Therefore, it is obvious that someone is funding these. According to informed observers, KSA and Qatar are behind this funding. Also, they are behind the resignation of the four ministers of the Lebanese Forces in the Cabinet and the ambivalent position of the two ministers of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) in the Cabinet. Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the PSP, is playing it both ways. He wants to portray the image of the reformer, and, at the same time, he does not want to antagonise Hizbullah, especially after Nasrallah's 19 of October speech. In that speech, Nasrallah indirectly threatened the ruling elite – all those who were in power for the past 30 years and are aiming to reap the fruits of the 'Uprising' – that they will be held accountable and will be prosecuted for that. The Lebanese Forces did not heed Nasrallah's threats, but the PSP decided to play it safe.

Another point is that local TVs were facing tough competition from the social media and were, thus, minimising live broadcast. How could these afford almost 24-hour live coverage; or at least 18-hour live coverage with many embedded reporters in different locations in Lebanon (6 to 8 live transmission locations on the same time), and using drones to get panoramic views? Surely, the money was provided by some wealthy donors, behind whom were KSA and Qatar. Feeding into the conspiracy theory, unconfirmed reports claimed that demonstrators who were staying the night in the streets received US\$ 150, and those who spend the day there received US\$ 100.

### ***Debate on the Formation of a New Cabinet and its Structure***

The demonstrators are asking for an overhaul of the entire political system: they demand the resignation of the entire political establishment, as a step in the right direction of changing the political system in order to make it more equalitarian and representative: "The people want the downfall of the political system"; "All of the politicians must go". Hizbullah begs to

differ. In his two speeches on October 19 and 25, 2019, Nasrallah said that the institutions of the Presidency, Cabinet, and Parliament must remain the same, admonishing against any power vacuum, which, according to him, causes chaos, anarchy, and discord (*fitna*), and might even drag the country into civil war. Nasrallah argued that it took two years to elect a President; almost one year to form the Cabinet; and the Parliamentary elections were conducted on May 6, 2018, after being frozen for almost a decade.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, according to Nasrallah, there is no need for a change in persons, but rather, what is needed is to apply promulgated standing laws in a just, fair, and equitable manner, and to enforce the structural reform measures of the Cabinet and the President. On October 19, 2019, Nasrallah contended that a technocrat cabinet 'will fall in two weeks'; therefore, it could not be the solution, as the demonstrators want. This calls for an explanation. The bottom line is that Hizbullah and its allies do not want to lose their 72-MP majority in the Parliament. However, with the passage of time and in order to prevent further economic and financial collapse, Hizbullah and its allies heeded the street's pressure.

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‘will fall in two weeks’; therefore, it could not be the solution, as the demonstrators want. This calls for an explanation. The bottom line is that Hizbullah and its allies do not want to lose their 72-MP majority in the Parliament. As will be demonstrated below, however, with the passage of time and in order to prevent further political, security, economic and financial collapse, Hizbullah and its allies heeded the street’s pressure.

### ***Diab’s Salvation Cabinet<sup>87</sup> & Future Policy Implications***

After mandatory parliamentary consultations,<sup>88</sup> on December 19, 2019, President Aoun named Hassan Diab – Engineering Professor and Vice-President of External Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB) – to head the new technocrat cabinet, thus giving in to popular demand to form a non-political, specialists’ Cabinet.<sup>89</sup> On January 21, 2020, Diab formed his 20-ministerial seat Cabinet, 12 of whom are holders of US passports. For the first time in Lebanese history, the Cabinet contained six women ministers, including the Deputy Prime Minister, who is also the Minister of Defence, which is unprecedented in the Arab world.<sup>90</sup> Noteworthy, the Ministers of Justice and of the Youth and Sports are well-known political and social activists, campaigning for change and reform, thus supporters of the “Revolution”. The remaining three women ministers, the Ministers of the Displaced, Labour, and Information (spokesperson of the cabinet) were also vocal in supporting the “Revolution”.

On January 25, 2020, David Schenker said that the US cannot reward Lebanon after months of bad administration. Schenker cautioned that Hizbullah punishes those who disobey its orders, as it has done with Hariri senior.<sup>91</sup> He added that the US is closely observing if the Cabinet is ‘committed to eradicate corruption and to lead the country out of its financial crisis’.<sup>92</sup> In February 2020, Schenker warned that the US could sanction corrupt politicians under the Global Magnitsky Act. Nevertheless, according to the Department of State, since 2006, the US Administration has accorded Lebanon military aid worth US\$ 1.7 billion; and over the past ten years, billions in humanitarian, developmental, and educational aid.<sup>93</sup>

On 22 April 2020, the US Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea held a press conference at the AUB, where she announced an USAID donation of US\$ 13.3 million via the American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (ASHA) aimed at fighting COVID-19 and strengthening Lebanon's health sector as well as supporting needy Lebanese families that are below the poverty line.<sup>94</sup> One day later, in a talk with *Al-Nahar Daily Newspaper*, Secretary of State Mike (Michael Richard) Pompeo said that the US will support the Lebanese government if it heeds the demands of the street, i.e. the demonstrators: 'This is what democracy is all about', he said.<sup>95</sup>

In the meantime, The US beefed up its pressure on the Lebanese government. To add the nail on the coffin, Dorothy Shea informed the President and PM that dismissing Riad Salameh – the governor of the Central Bank (BDL) – will make the US retaliate by freezing Lebanese gold and assets that are worth US\$ 20 billion, as Amal's leadership council member Qabalan Qabalan contended.<sup>96</sup> Noteworthy, Hizbullah accuses Salameh of working on furthering US influence in Lebanon by (1) informing the US Treasury about any dubious financial transactions related to Hizbullah, and (2) by imposing the Treasury's sanctions on the Party. In this respect, Hizbullah claims that US pressure led to liquidating Jammal Trust Bank (JTB) – which many rich and influential Shi'ite businessmen did business with, to the extent of dubbing JTB as 'The Shi'i Bank'.<sup>97</sup>

On April 28, 2020, Hizbullah's Deputy Secretary General, Shaykh Na'im Qasim argued that Salameh alone should not bear the brunt of the decades of corruption that led to the imminent economic collapse. Rather, Salameh – along with all the ex-corrupt political establishment and subsequent Lebanese Cabinets since the 1990s – should be held accountable.<sup>98</sup> In a talk show, Qasim clarified: 'We are neither for, nor are we against the resignation of Salameh. It is up to the Cabinet to take such a decision ... and we are part of the Cabinet'. In other words, Qasim stressed the institutionalisation of the decision, rather than political whim or politically motivated decisions. Qasim hinted that Hizbullah will not resort to such mechanisms (politically motivated decisions) that lack

accountability and transparency, when the Party is calling for revamping corruption and implementing (putting into practice) the rule of law.<sup>99</sup>

In his capacity as the John C. Whitehead Visiting Fellow in International Diplomacy - Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution,<sup>100</sup> on May 4, 2020, Feltman stressed that Hizbullah's "hegemony" is the biggest obstacle and challenge to the Cabinet in order to properly market itself and receive aid from international donors. He warned the Lebanese government of heeding to Hizbullah's demands, threatening to sanction politicians who are under Hizbullah's sphere of influence (clout), or are rendering favours to the Party. Feltman said:

As this government relies exclusively on Hezbollah and its allies for its parliamentary support, that traditional justification for external assistance no longer works. The challenge for Diab will be to persuade donors that this plan does not solidify Hezbollah's dominance in an increasingly fractured and dysfunctional, if not non-existent, state ... International financial assistance at favorable terms to close the large external financing gap and finance the development of the infrastructures ... are necessary to support the growth of the economy; and Extensive social safety nets will be created with the assistance of development partners to provide income support, until Lebanon returns to solid growth and most of its population rises above the poverty line ... state oversight of essential financial reform can evolve into Hezbollah-dominated state control ... International supervisors will be powerless to prevent Hezbollah encroachment on the financial sector, should Hezbollah – now that the banks, reviled by an enraged public unable to access their accounts, are no longer sacrosanct – be determined to force the banks to learn a lesson on Hezbollah's terms.<sup>101</sup>

Along similar lines, Schenker admonished that there should be a national consensus and a clear roadmap on the government's economic plan, and not only agreement and support from the so-called "Hizbullah coalition".<sup>102</sup> Touching a sensitive cord, Schenker hinted to the political clout, which the political elite exercise over the BDL, thus making

economic, fiscal, and financial decisions dependent upon political policies, when the world-wide trend in the reverse opposite, i.e. the economy dictates policy. Finally, Schenker pointed to the gravity of Hizbullah's actions in the regional arena (ME), whereby the Party is working outside the Lebanese State's control and is plunging Lebanon into unnecessary wars, which most of the Lebanese prefer to stay out of.<sup>103</sup>

On April 8, 2020, Dorothy Shea, the US Ambassador to Lebanon, said 'Hezbollah's support of terrorist and illicit activities demonstrates that it is more concerned with its own interests and those of its patron Iran, than what is best for the Lebanese people'.<sup>104</sup> A month later, on May 8, 2020, Shea added that the sanctions against Hizbullah aim at curtailing it from controlling the Lebanese financial and monetary system, rather than impacting US monetary and in-kind aid to Lebanon.<sup>105</sup>

### ***Section Conclusion***

Will the ongoing 'Lebanese Revolution' lead to *fitna* and further deterioration; or will it finally lead to the much anticipated political, social, and economic reforms? Without such structural reforms, the International Community will not shore up Lebanon, or even pump a single cent of fresh money, which Lebanon badly needs.<sup>106</sup> As a move in the right direction, on May 1, 2020, the Cabinet officially requested the IMF a US\$ 10 billion bailout<sup>107</sup> – an aid package ten of times more than Lebanon's quota – when it presented its structural economic reform plan or "financial rescue plan".<sup>108</sup>

Schenker said that the reform plan is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition:

It is good that they asked but it is not just about asking. It is a necessary first step ... I don't want to prejudice what the IMF may be looking for but it has to meet a level of transparency and a full commitment to this ... Hezbollah is not known for its support for reforms. This is an organisation that funds its activities through illicit finance, corruption ... Reform at the ports that collects revenues is not going to be appreciated by everyone in Lebanon.<sup>109</sup>



In brief, in addition to reforms, such as controlling borders and closing illegal passages with Syria, as well as not exempting Hizbullah from customs procedures, etc., the International Community is asking the Lebanese government to heed people's demands and embark on a serious plan in order to execute the promised reforms. Although Hizbullah supports the Lebanese government's reform plan, the Party regards Schenker's demands as politically motivated, as were the STL's verdicts issued against Hizbullah before.<sup>110</sup> On May 6, 2020, the head of Hizbullah's Parliamentary Bloc, MP Muhammad Ra'd clarified: 'we do not mind any international aid package as long as it does not encroach upon Lebanon's sovereignty ... we welcome any non-politically motivated assistance'.<sup>111</sup>

According to the Minister of Finance, Ghazi Wazni, public debt has reached an unprecedented proportion: 'more than 176 per cent of the GDP'.<sup>112</sup> On the same day, Bloomberg estimated that Lebanon needs US\$ 28 billion over the next five years.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, on May 9, 2020, Retired General David Petraeus and former CIA Director clarified that if the IMF and the International Community agree to bail out Lebanon from its default, then this does not mean that they are supporting Hizbullah as such; rather, the aim is to shore up the Lebanese state and its institutions.<sup>114</sup>

In this global whirlwind of change, the average Lebanese citizen is anticipating whether the "Revolution" will win more concessions from the political establishment, at a time when stringent State measures and the fear of an uncontrollable spread of COVID-19 has curtailed massive street demonstrations. Another difficulty, which poses a serious problem to the uniformity of the "Revolution's" demands, is the fragmentation of the demonstrators into more than 107 different groups. Will Street Politics recapitulate to the status quo ante, or will it persevere in its demands to stamp out corruption until the very end, no matter what the costs are? In this regard, Asef Bayat argues:

But the street politics of revolutionary times exhibits its constraints when the exceptional episode comes to an end, when the ordinary

people long for normalcy, expecting rewards for the hardship they have endured in the revolutionary battles, and when reforming or building institutions becomes necessary. This means that political engagement and mobilization cannot remain only in the main squares for long but have to be adjusted to the everyday of people's lives, in the backstreets, neighbourhoods, households, workplaces, schools, and villages. The ways in which the revolutionary movements come to fruition, and the ideas and strategies they carry, greatly influence the shape of mobilization beyond the streets.<sup>115</sup>

It seems this is exactly what has happened to the Lebanese "Revolution". It did not die out; it simply began another phase of its evolution. As revolutionary fervour cannot remain ignited forever, in the process of time, it is expected to wane. Nevertheless, it will also take another shape and course of action, as Bayat's aforementioned quote demonstrates.

### **Conclusion: The Interplay among the Three Axes & Lebanon's Future**

Hizbullah subscribes to the parallel-track theory of regional militancy and domestic integration, i.e. it employs Hawkish and Dovish policies based on its calculus of jihad. When the so-called "Arab Uprisings" and the "Arab-Israeli conflict" end, Hizbullah will revert internally and domestically since it loses its reason d'être for regional intervention that becomes very costly in times of peace. Thus, it is not highly unlikely that in the future Hizbullah would gradually give up its pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism credentials for more local hegemony in Lebanese politics. In its 1990s trajectory, Hizbullah has indeed reformulated some of its central ideas and strategies. In response to the Lebanese national context, the country's multi-religious realities, and the new post-civil-war-possibilities of successfully operating within a democratic system, prompted Hizbullah to integrate into the Lebanese political system. Its political ideology changed; in so far, as its leaders meanwhile concede that the establishment of an Islamic state would need the full legitimacy

and sovereignty from the Lebanese people. Hizbullah's former top-down strategy of forcibly imposing an Islamic state against the will of significant parts of the Lebanese society has changed toward an integrative, bottom-up strategy of *infitaḥ* ("opening-up").

Since Hizbullah's blatant engagement in the Syrian war in 2012 – and in other regional wars, such as in Iraq (2014) and Yemen,<sup>116</sup> – the Party lost much more than 1281 fighters, the number Hizbullah announced had died in fighting Israel until May 2000. Hizbullah's regional militancy has placed Lebanon in the eye of the regional storm and conflicting axes. Nearly two decades ago, veteran Lebanese politician Walid Jumblatt questioned: 'How could Lebanon balance between Hanoi [Hizbullah's military resistance and confrontation] and Hong Kong [reconstruction, economic development and recovery]? Could Lebanon enjoy economic recovery while continuing military resistance?' Jumblatt answered that Lebanon had chosen Hanoi to Hong Kong.<sup>117</sup> It seems Jumblatt is right. On April 28, 2020, the World Bank estimated that 60 per cent of the Lebanese are below the poverty line, 22 per cent of whom are untouchables.<sup>118</sup>

Lebanon is trying to pull itself through the neighbouring regional wars with minimal damage. As Prophet Muhammad admonished, '*Fitna* is lurking in the dark. God damn those who wake it up'. In keeping with the Prophetic Tradition, Sunni–Shi'a discord (*fitna*) should be warded off, at all costs, since its consequences would be catastrophic on the *umma*. Instead, on the domestic and regional levels, such situations require from Hizbullah dialogue, negotiation, bargaining, compromise and mutual understanding. Nevertheless, on the regional level, these options are not open at all to Israel and, what Hizbullah labels as "*takfiri jihadis*", namely, IS and its offshoots. Rather, Hizbullah's only option for Israel and IS is military confrontation. In Lebanon, sectarian-confessional pillarisation and polarisation destroyed the political system from within and made it stagnant, corrupt, and unproductive. A century after the founding of the Republic of Lebanon (*Le Grand Liban*), one questions how viable the political system is? Lebanon is a 'Banana Republic' that is constantly struggling with political and economic instability, added to that is the

political bickering over 'nation-building' and sound constitutional and institutional practices.

In spite of the "existential threat" of COVID-19, it seems Hizbullah manipulates soft power by employing "cultural diplomacy"<sup>119</sup> as a strategic and cost effective tool of enhancing its national and international stature. By investing in an open public global sphere, Hizbullah aims at building up mutual understanding and trust with other organisations and states in order to reap benefits in terms of visibility and exposure by portraying its dovish face of socio-political and civil institutions, instead of the stereotyped hawkish face of militancy and violence.

In conformity with parallel track and dual legitimacy theories, and using the coordinates of the middle range theory, I forecast that Hizbullah will keep its weapons until at least the coming two decades for the following three reasons: (1) Arab Spring leftovers, which might wither away in the coming five years. Hizbullah will continue its relentless regional wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen fighting al-Qaeda, IS and its offshoots – or simply, those whom Hizbullah labels as "*takfiri jihadis*" – a situation that resulted from the fiasco of the so-called "Arab Spring", which produced failing states and incessant civil wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria and tensions in Bahrain. (2) In the range of the coming ten to five years, Hizbullah will act as Lebanon's defender of "sovereignty and territorial integrity", against any Israeli land or maritime (oil and gas) aggression on the three bordering blocks (8, 9 and 10) with Israel.<sup>120</sup> (3) In the meantime, it is expected that Hizbullah would continue boosting its pan-Islamic and pan-Arab credentials for the coming two decades, or even indefinitely, i.e. until a "just and permanent peace" with the Palestinians is reached that puts an end to the so-called "Arab-Israeli" conflict. In short, until regional and international winds of change blow against it, it is expected that Hizbullah would remain armed to its teeth, while enjoying the legitimacy and umbrella of the Lebanese state and actively participating in the political system, as the winds are blowing in its favour now. But it remains to be seen: for how long? The repetitive call of the Shi'i Mufti of the Republic to save Lebanon from the tsunami of monopoly capitalism, the "unjust" banking system, and mushrooming

rampant corruption<sup>121</sup> found a responsive chord, as ex-Minister Youssef Salameh admonished:

Lebanon lives a precarious foundational, normative moment in the wake of perplexing domestic, regional, and international circumstances ... coupled with the lack of historic and charismatic leadership ... The Lebanon that we know is facing an existential treat ... but there is hope in the young generation to exercise the required maturity, consciousness, integrity, and national belonging to make a difference, and rise like a phoenix from the quicksand of despicable sectarianism and chronic corruption.<sup>122</sup>

## Notes

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2. This connotes countries where Iranian Shi'i influence and the ideological export of the Islamic Revolution has found a responsive chord, namely, in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.
3. National Security Advisor (2001-05) and Secretary of State (2005-09) under President's George W. Bush Administration.
4. Kissinger, "The Coronavirus Pandemic ...", n. 1.
5. The second country is Syria. "Confrontational States" are countries that share borders with Israel. Two such Arab countries signed peace treaties with Israel: Egypt in 1978 and Jordan in 1994. Most of the remaining Arab countries have normalised relations with Israel, notably, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, although they have not officially exchanged ambassadors, as Egypt and Jordan had done.
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7. 'Nasrallah: the war on corruption is more difficult than liberating South Lebanon from the Israelis', (May 25, 2019) <https://www.lebanondebate.com/news/436792>; 'Nasrallah Unleashes the National Resistance against Corruption' (March 9, 2019), <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/267504>.

8. This is reminiscent of the terminology used in Franz Fanon's 1961 seminal book entitled, the *Wretched of the Earth*.
9. See Ian Black, 'Fear of a Shia full moon', *The Guardian* (January 26, 2007), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jan/26/worlddispatch.ianblack>.
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11. Nasrallah's Jerusalem (al-Quds) Day Speech, (May 22, 2020), 5:00 pm local time. *Al-Akhhbar* 4057 (May 23, 2020): 1, 9; <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=19719&cid=148>.
12. Matthew Levitt, 'Behind the GCC's Terrorist Designation of Hizbullah', Washington D.C.: The Washington Institute, March 10, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/behind-the-gccs-terrorist-designation-of-hizbullah>. The GCC was founded as a regional organisation in 1981 and includes the following six countries: Saudi Arabia (KSA), United Arabs Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain. See also, 'GCC declares Lebanon's Hezbollah a 'terrorist' group: Gulf countries announce the decision amid an ongoing row with the Lebanese group over involvement in regional conflicts' (March 2, 2016), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/gcc-declares-lebanon-hezbollah-terrorist-group-160302090712744.html>
13. Home Office, 'Proscribed Terrorist Organisations' (22 pages). [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/869496/20200228\\_Proscription.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/869496/20200228_Proscription.pdf); <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2>; <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/hezbollah>; <https://www.ajc.org/news/setting-the-record-straight-on-hezbollah-full-report> (Accessed on April 30, 2020).
14. Leah Carter, 'German government bans Hezbollah – Interior Ministry': <https://www.dw.com/en/german-government-bans-hezbollah-interior-ministry/a-53287126>; Madeline Chambers, 'After U.S., Israeli Pressure, Germany Bans Hezbollah Activity, Raids Mosques': <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-lebanon-hezbollah/germany-bans-hezbollah-activity-raids-mosques-idUSKBN22C0LC?il=0> & mirrored by the *NY Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/04/30/world/middleeast/30reuters-germany-lebanon-hezbollah.html>; Agence France Presse, 'Germany bans Hezbollah activity, raids mosques', as mirrored by the *Daily Star* <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Apr-30/505151-germany-bans-hezbollah-activity-raids-mosques.ashx>; Lahav Harkov, 'Germany outlaws Hezbollah, raids mosques and local leaders' homes': <https://www.jpost.com/international/germany-bans-hezbollah-conducts-police-raids-on-possible-members-626364>. (All accessed on April 30, 2020).
15. 'Schenker: Lebanon's IMF request a necessary first step', <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon-news/517768/schenker-lebanons-imf-request-a-necessary-first>

- st/en (Accessed on May 1, 2020).
16. It is not clear whether Nasrallah was referring to all three or a specific agency: Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) – Federal foreign intelligence and security service; Bundeskriminalamt (BKA) – Federal criminal intelligence and security service; Amt für den Militärischen Abschirmdienst (MAD) – Federal military intelligence and security service.
  17. *Al-Akbbar* 4042 (5 May 2020): 4-5. On Hizbullah’s “Global Reach”, see: Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God*. Washington D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015.
  18. Joseph Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Identity Construction* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 185; Joseph Alagha, *Hizbullah’s DNA and the Arab Spring* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2013), pp. 226-227.
  19. In reference to the seminal work of Miles Copeland, *The Game of Nations: The Amoral of Power Politics*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970.
  20. This chapter abides by the standard reference to the “Lebanese Army” as the “Lebanese Armed Forces” (LAF).
  21. ‘A hidden-hand explanation presumes rational agency: someone somewhere intended for this or that event-structure to emerge; and it did ... Conspiracy and ruling-class theories, including hidden-hand explanations: each agent is rational and strives for knowledge-based control, but the plurality of such agents makes total control impossible. More powerful agents, those with better social, financial, and intellectual backing, will therefore tend to rule over less powerful ones. Social Darwinism: the socioeconomic survival of the fittest. Powerful cliques too will conflict, generating a constant jockeying and intriguing for control. When power is wielded overtly, various despotic formations result. When power is wielded covertly, hidden-hand theories come into play ... Hence the importance of hidden-hand and other power-group theories, which ... still idealise the possibility of rational control, ignoring the modern and postmodern fragmentation of the self ...’. Seán Golden, *Disaggregate theories*, Autonomous University of Barcelona (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), 2016. <http://pagines.uab.cat/seangolden/content/disaggregate-theories> (Accessed on May 23, 2020).
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25. *Al-Akhbar* 3898 (November 1, 2019): 1, 2-3; <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12581&cid=113>; <https://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=35835&cid=209> (Accessed on November 1, 2019).
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  28. 'Felman to the Lebanese: "our options or chaos: our way or the highway"', (November 21, 2019), <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/279789>.
  29. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).
  30. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-blast-soleimani/irans-soleimani-and-iraqs-muhandis-killed-in-air-strike-militia-spokesman-idUSKBN1Z201C>
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  41. Nasrallah's speeches of 5 & 12 January 2020: <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=14863&cid=148;> [https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=15109&cid=148.](https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=15109&cid=148)
  42. See Sofia Saadeh, 'Basic Issues Concerning the Personal Status Laws in Lebanon', in Thomas Scheffler (ed.), *Religion between Violence and Reconciliation*. Beirut: Ergon Verlag, 2002, p. 450; Imad Salamey, *The Government and Politics of Lebanon*. New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 106; Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Second Edition. London: Pluto Press, 2012, pp. 3, 261, 301; Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, Reprint Edition. California: University of California Press, 1990, pp. 20-21.
  43. Salamey, op. cit., pp. 24-36, 221; Salibi, op. cit, pp. 16-21; Traboulsi, op. cit: pp. 75-87.
  44. Salibi 1990: 51-54, 69-70, 169.
  45. Most notably, Michel Shiha, Petro Trad, and Omar Daouk.
  46. Salamey, op. cit. p. 138; Salibi op. cit. pp. 34-5; Traboulsi, op. cit, pp. 90-95.
  47. Noteworthy, Lebanon's new constitution of 1990 kept the same sectarian divisions (quotas) in place, but revised the parliamentary ratio to 50-50 among the Muslims and Christians, which is still the case to-date.
  48. Salamey op. cit. pp. 25-30; Salibi op. cit, pp. 178-195; Traboulsi op. cit. pp. 88-109.
  49. Listed alphabetically.
  50. Arend Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy", *World Politics* 21. 2 (1969): 207-225, 211.
  51. Lebanon is a deep state in the sense of being controlled by elite politicians and entrenched, career civil servants (government employees) acting in a non-conspiratorial manner, to further their own interests and the interest of those who

- put them in power without due regard to the interest of the state, or public interest as such.
52. The officially recognised religious groups in Lebanon form a myriad (mosaic) of 18 sects, which are the following: 'Alawite; Armenian Catholic; Armenian Orthodox; Assyrian Church of the East; Chaldean Catholic; Copts; Druze; Greek Catholic; Greek Orthodox; Isma'i'li; Jewish; Latin Catholic; Maronite; Evangelical (Protestant); Sunni; Shi'a; Syriac Catholic; and Syriac Orthodox. In the Lebanese parliament, not all of the 18-sects are represented; rather the 128-seats are divided 50%-50% among the Christians ("non-Muhammadi Sects") and the Muslims ("Muhammadi Sects").
  53. Arend Lijphart, *Democracies in Plural Societies: A Comparative Evaluation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
  54. 'Ali Fayyad, *Fragile States: Dilemmas of Stability in Lebanon and the Arab World* (Oxford: International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC), 2008), p. 95.
  55. Mafia code of silence: the code requirement alleged to apply to members of the Mafia, by which they must remain silent about any crimes of which they have knowledge.
  56. See, Johnny Siddiq, *Radio Voice of Lebanon, 'Alli Sawtak* ['Raise Your Voice'], 21 May 2020, via <https://vdl.com.lb/program/frontend/web/index.php?r=site/episodes&ID=149> (56:50-58 minutes). This is substantiated by: *World Trade Information Service*, Economic Reports: 'Marketing Potentials in Lebanon', pp. 1- 8. Prepared by Aris J. Petterson, Near Eastern and African Division, Office of Economic Affairs; based on source material submitted by the American Embassy, Beirut (March 1958). University of Michigan (Main Reading Room). Mirrored from: *Unites States Department of Commerce: Bureau of Foreign Commerce*. Sinclair Weeks, Secretary. Loring K. Macy, Director. In a festschrift available at the University of California (Riverside) Library (July 21, 1964): 31210016935809, <https://books.google.com.lb/books?id=kUofAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA16-PA4&clpg=RA16-PA4&dq=#v=onepage&q&cf=false>. See also Lebanon's membership in the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (EPTA): <https://atom.archives.unesco.org/annex-i-and-epta-agreement-between-minister-of-external-relations-and-unesco-standard-technical-assistance-agreement>; and <https://books.google.com.lb/books?id=UWktAQAIAAJ&pg=PA35&clpg=PA35&dq=#v=onepage&q&cf=false>.
  57. Michael C. Hudson, 'The Lebanese Crisis: The Limits of Consociational Democracy', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 5.3/4 (Spring-Summer 1976): 109-122. DOI: 10.2307/2536018. Published by: University of California Press on behalf of the Institute for Palestine Studies.
  58. Lebanese National News Agency: (May 6, 2020), <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/477434/>

59. 'Lebanon to default on debt amid financial unrest', *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/lebanon-to-default-on-debt-amid-financial-unrest/a-52676967>
60. 'Scandal of Lebanese Politicians' Transfer of Billions of Dollars abroad "Confuses" Banks', <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2057301/scandal-lebanese-politicians%E2%80%99-transfer-billions-dollars-abroad-%E2%80%98confuses%E2%80%99-banks>; <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/267731-oueidat-asks-swiss-lebanese-authorities-for-info-on-suspected-transfers>
61. Johnny Siddiq, *Radio Voice of Lebanon*, *Alli Sawtak* ["Raise Your Voice"], February 5, 2020 (accessed on March 18, 2020), <https://vdl.com.lb/program/frontend/web/index.php?r=site/episodes&ID=149>. See also "Lebanese Anger Never Falters," *Lematin*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.lematin.ch/monde/colere-libanais-faiblit/story/29369966>.
62. Personal recollection. For instance, see also <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/File/Get/d6d48b1b-6be2-4fd9-8b4f-6bdccdf026bc.mp4>.
63. Conférence économique pour le développement, par les réformes et avec les entreprises » (CEDRE), <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/lebanon/news/article/lebanon-cedre-conference-06-04-18>; [https://www.fes-lebanon.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/documents/Mckinsey\\_Plan/Summary\\_of\\_the\\_Economic\\_Vision.pdf](https://www.fes-lebanon.org/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/Mckinsey_Plan/Summary_of_the_Economic_Vision.pdf); <https://blog.blominvestbank.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/What-the-McKinsey-Report-says-about-Lebanon-Overview-and-in-focus-sections.pdf> (Accessed on May 1, 2020).
64. In 1998, the late ex-President Elias al-Harawi challenged religious personal status laws and proposed a draft legislation of civil marriage, which was not welcomed by both Christian and Muslim religious and political leaders.
65. 'Aoun spells out the characteristics of the new Cabinet, and Hariri is the most lucky candidate', <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/444300/>; 'Lebanese President Aoun calls for "non-sectarian" system: Michel Aoun says Lebanon must change from confessional to civil state as protesters call for a technocratic government', <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/lebanese-president-aoun-calls-sectarian-system-191101055607826.html>.
66. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2307681-vn-chef-leiders-moeten-luisteren-naar-protesten.html> (Accessed on October 26, 2019).
67. Noteworthy, the Lebanese Law of Nationality is patriarchal in orientation, where the man can grant the Lebanese nationality to any women he marries; while the women cannot even grant the Lebanese nationality to her children if she is married to a non-Lebanese.
68. In reference to the unjust religious custody laws, which are patriarch in orientation, thus granting the man special prerogatives. Noteworthy, Lebanon has no

- civil personal status law, a reality that leads to non-uniformity of the law and discriminatory practices due to the presence of 15 different religious courts dealing with such cases.
69. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/2019/11/3/ثورتنا-سوية-تظاهرة-للنساء-تجوب-بيروت>. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/File/Get/d6d48b1b-6be2-4fd9-8b4f-6bdccdf026bc.mp4>; *Al-Akhhbar* 3900 (November 4, 2019): 6-7.
  70. See Chapter 6 entitled 'Square and Counter-Square', in: Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 113-134.
  71. Namely, the Sunday-Monday, November 24-25, 2019: from 11:00 pm till 4:00 am. See, 'British envoy Moore: The matter of choosing leaders and a cabinet is a domestic issue for the Lebanese', <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon-news/485162/british-envoy-moore-the-matter-of-choosing-leaders/en>; 'Senior British official urges govt formation', <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Nov-25/496216-uk-envoy-in-beirut-to-meet-officials-urge-govt-formation.ashx>; 'British envoy: "We support formation of new government in Lebanon"', <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191126-british-envoy-we-support-formation-of-new-government-in-lebanon/> (Accessed on November 26, 2019).
  72. A predominately Christian area, which is five kilometres to the north of Beirut.
  73. Tabaris Square, near Burj al-Ghazal Building.
  74. Rage and personal venting of anger against injustice and tyranny.
  75. In reference to the conspiracy theory floated by Hizbullah, namely, that the demonstrators are orchestrated and led by foreign powers, most notably the US. This accusation came in the wake of Jeffrey Feltman's Congressional testimony. Feltman is former Ambassador to Lebanon and John C. Whitehead Visiting Fellow in International Diplomacy - Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution. See, Jeffrey Feltman (November 19, 2019), 'What's next for Lebanon? Examining the implications of current protests', via: <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/whats-next-for-lebanon-examining-the-implications-of-current-protests/>.
  76. <http://www.kataebonline.org/>
  77. <https://www.lebanese-forces.com/>
  78. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/443755/>; <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/video/2019/10/29/v80989-lebanon-protest-clashes> (Accessed on October 29, 2019).
  79. <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2019/10/29/lebanon-saad-hariri-prime-minister-resignation-intl-ldn-vpx.cnn>; <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/video/2019/10/29/v80995-lebanon-hariri-resigns>; (Accessed on October 29, 2019).
  80. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/443807/> (Accessed on October 29, 2019).
  81. <http://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/1355426/> (Accessed on October 29, 2019).

82. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/443839/> (Accessed on October 29, 2019).
83. Noteworthy, on that very day, Hizbullah paid the salaries of its employees in new unused US-dollar bills, in a country having severe shortages in foreign currency, thus lowering the black market's exchange rate of the US-dollar from 1800LL to less than 1600LL, when the official exchange rate is pegged at 1515LL. Likewise, on November 29, when the price dropped from 2300LL to 1800LL. It seems that a downward spiral is the trend in the depreciation of Lebanese currency. In May 2020, the black market's exchange rate reached 4300LL per one dollar.
84. <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12613&cid=113> (Accessed on May 1, 2020); <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2019/11/1/> (Accessed on November 1, 2019).
85. According to the Ministry of Interior, the turnover was 48 per cent. Does this imply that the demonstrators comprise the rest, namely, the 52 per cent? I do not think this is case since many of those who voted for their political parties and leaders are disenchanted and frustrated with them because of their chronic inability to deliver on their election promises and reform platforms and plans.
86. According to the Ministry of Interior, the turnover was 48 per cent. Does this imply that the demonstrators comprise the rest, namely, the 52 per cent? I do not think this is case since many of those who voted for their political parties and leaders are disenchanted and frustrated with them because of their chronic inability to deliver on their election promises and reform platforms and plans.
87. 'The Cabinet to face the challenges', as he called it (*bukumat murwajahat al-tabadiyyat*).
88. According to the Lebanese National News Agency (NNA), out of 128 MPs, 69 votes named Diab, 13 MPs named Nawwaf Salam, Lebanon's Permanent Representative to the UN, and one vote went to Halima Qa'qur, while 42 abstained from naming anyone. The bottom line is that only six Sunni MPs named Diab, which implies that the majority of the Sunnis are against his appointment, including the Future Movement of former PM Saad Hariri. Noteworthy, Diab served, for three years as Minister of Education in the 2011 Miqati Cabinet.
89. Interestingly, AUB's President Dr. Fadlo Khoury has been vocal in his support of the "Revolution" and he toured the public squares disseminating his message and guiding the protestors.
90. 'Twenty Ministers for the New Government', *Lematin*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.lematin.ch/monde/20-ministres-nouveau-gouvernement/story/23706808> (Accessed on March 18, 2020).
91. This seems a direct reference to the 2005 assassination of PM Rafik Hariri that eventually led to the formation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). Although the STL has delayed giving its final verdict due to the COVID-19 crisis, it has accused four Hizbullah operatives of the killing. See, 'STL delays Hariri case verdict

- due to coronavirus', *The Daily Star* (May 10, 2020), <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/May-10/505630-stl-delays-hariri-case-verdict-due-to-coronavirus.ashx>.
92. <https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2020/01/25/> 'شكر يتحدث للحرّة الوجود-الاميركي-في-العراق-ويعلق-الحكومة-اللبناني'; <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon-news/497466/david-schenker-us-is-monitoring-new-government-per/en>
  93. <https://en.annahar.com/article/1132064-us-could-sanction-corrupt-politicians-says-schenker>; *The Daily Star* (February 1, 2020), <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Feb-01/500362-schenker-expect-pushback-against-us-aid-to-lebanon.ashx>.
  94. Joseph Haboush, 'US gives Lebanon \$13.3 M in aid to fight COVID-19', (April 22, 2020), <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Apr-22/504754-us-gives-lebanon-133m-in-aid-to-fight-covid-19.ashx>
  95. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/475020/>; Rosana Bu Munsef, 'We support Lebanon on Condition of Respecting the Will of the Lebanese People', (April 23, 2020), <https://newspaper.annahar.com/article/1172641-بومبيو-لالنهار-ندعم-لبنان-شرط-احترام-الشعب>
  96. 'Amal Accuses the US of Meddling in Lebanese Affairs by Preventing the Dismissal of Riad Salameh', *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* 15126 (May 27, 2020): 1, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2254176/التدخل-لمنع-إقالة-أميركا-التدخل-لمنع-إقالة-أميركا>; <https://aawsat.com/pdf/issue15126/index.html>; <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/475717/>. Noteworthy, Riad Salameh took office in April 1993.
  97. 'US sanctions Lebanese entities that funnel funds to Hezbollah militants' families', <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/us-sanctions-lebanese-entities-that-funnel-funds-to-hezbollah-militants-families-1.985030>. JTB was sanctioned in August 2019, and it ceased its operations in September of that year.
  98. <https://www.annahar.com/article/1176490-نعيم-قاسم-لمناقشة-موضوع-مصرف-لبنان-اخلى-الحكومة>; <https://almanar.com.lb/6596218>
  99. 'In a Diplomatic Way' (*bi Diplumasiyya*), A Talk Show by Rosana Rammal, *OTV* 9:30 pm, (19 May 2020): <https://www.otv.com.lb/news/90480/بديبلوماسية>; <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=19600&cid=113> (Accessed on May 20, 2020).
  100. <https://www.brookings.edu/experts/jeffrey-feltman/>
  101. 'Lebanon's latest reform-for-support plan: Intentions and implementation may diverge significantly', <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/04/lebanons-latest-reform-for-support-plan/>; See also, *Al-Akhhbar* 4044 (May 8, 2020): 3; 'Hizbullah's Hegemony is the Greatest Obstacle Facing the Lebanese PM', <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/2020/05/07/فيلتمان-هيمنة-حزب-الله-أكبر-تحد-لحكومة-لبنان-أمام-المانحين>; and <https://www.almarkazia>.

- com/ar/news/show/216087/فيالتمان-يحذر-من-خطة-دياب-و-يبشر-باسيل-بالعقوبات (Both accessed on May 6, 2020).
102. Noteworthy, in the first session of negotiations (on 11 May) between the IMF and the Lebanese authorities, cracks in the Lebanese delegation made its position weak, as the representatives of the Central Bank (BDL) argued that the government's plan exaggerated the BDL's losses. On 18 May, in the second round of negotiations, Riad Salameh, the governor of BDL, gave concrete evidence to the aforementioned allegations, thus weakening the Lebanese position and contributing to further perplexing the IMF, which threatened to halt the negotiations until Lebanon submits a unified paper. 'Negotiations with the IMF: Salameh recites his mantra (DBL's Circulars)', *Al-Akhhbar* 4054 (May 20, 2020): 4-5.
  103. LBCI *2030 Program* (May 7, 2020), 20:30 pm local time. "Interview with LBCI", <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/world/519136/> ar; <https://www.al-akhbar.com/Politics/288292/> فيالتمان-وسلامة-والمصارف-جبهة-التحريض-على-الحكوم (Accessed on May 8, 2020).
  104. Joseph Haboush, (May 8, 2020) 'US hits out at Hezbollah but still sending coronavirus aid to Lebanon', <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/us-hits-out-at-hezbollah-but-still-sending-coronavirus-aid-to-lebanon-1.1003005>
  105. <https://mustaqbalweb.com/article/112459-السفير-الاميركية-نعمل-على-منع-حزب-الله-من-السيطرة-على-النظام-المالي-اللبناني>; <https://www.beirutobserver.com/2020/05/2204801/>
  106. At least US\$ 16 billion, according to the Governor of the Central Bank (BDL), Riad Salameh, in his televised address on April 29, 2020, <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/476253/>; <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/476262/>
  107. Ghazi Wazni, 'The Financial Recovery Plan is the basis for negotiations with the IMF and the International Community, and it aims at protecting people's savings', (May 6, 2020): <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/477434/>
  108. Joyce Karam and James Haines-Young, 'Lebanon to ask for \$10bn bailout backed by IMF: Country's Central Bank under pressure to stop run on pound', <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/lebanon-to-ask-for-10bn-bailout-backed-by-imf-1.1013338> (Accessed on April 30, 2020).
  109. Joyce Karam, 'Lebanon's IMF request a "necessary first step", says senior US official' <https://www.thenational.ae/world/the-americas/lebanon-s-imf-request-a-necessary-first-step-says-senior-us-official-1.1013420> (Accessed on May 1, 2020).
  110. See Nasrallah's Speech of May 4, 2020: [https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=19091&cid=148](https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=19091&cid=148;); *Al-Akhhbar* 4042 (May 5, 2020): 4-5; and 'Hezbollah leader Nasrallah rejects Hariri indictments' (July 3, 2011): <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14004096>; 'Nasrallah to those betting on STL decisions: Do not play with fire' (August 26, 2018): <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/breaking->

- news/396859/nasrallah-to-those-betting-on-stl-decisions-do-not/en.
111. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/477524/>; <https://almanar.com.lb/6637897> (Accessed on May 6, 2020).
  112. Ghazi Wazni, 'The Financial Recovery Plan is the basis for negotiations with the IMF and the International Community, and it aims at protecting people's savings', (May 6, 2020): <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/477434/>
  113. Dana Khraiche, 'Lebanon Eyes Move to Flexible Exchange Rate in Economic Overhaul' (May 6, 2020): <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-06/lebanon-to-adopt-flexible-exchange-rate-finance-minister-k9v42umc>
  114. New TV, Beirut, Lebanon. *ZOOM IN* Talk Show with Dalia Ahmad, (Late Evening News: 11:30 pm local time): <https://www.aljadeed.tv/arabic>
  115. Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 134.
  116. Hizbullah had heavy presence in Yemen, way before the beginning of the "Arab Uprisings" at the end of 2010. Hizbullah's presence drastically increased after the Yemini war in 2015, especially in the capacity of field commanders or logistics officers.
  117. Joseph Alagha, 'Successen Hezbollah bij 'kleine oorlog' om Shib'a" [Hizbullah's Successes in the 'Small War' in Shib'a], *Soera: Midden-Oosten Tijdschrift* 9.2 (July 2001): 34-38, p. 37.
  118. 'Lebanon's Economic Update – April 2020', <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon>; <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/525341554825472233/mpo-lbn.pdf>
  119. See Manuel Castells, *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishers 2004 & *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2012. See also, Lenczowski John, *Full Spectrum Diplomacy and Grand Strategy: Reforming the Structure and Culture of U.S. Foreign Policy*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011.
  120. <http://www.lebanongasandoil.com/index.php/news-details/155> (April 24, 2020).
  121. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/475331/> (April 24, 2020).
  122. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/460848/> (February 7, 2020).





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## 5. Imperial Storm Troopers and the Return of the Mahdi: A Historical Perspective of the Israeli-Iranian Struggle

*Dr. Nir Boms and Maj. (Res.) Stéphane Cohen*

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### **Introduction**

The 21st century already witnessed what appears to be a tectonic shift in Middle East. It saw a new type of war – a war on terror – that began with 9/11 and which ended its last (but not the least) chapter with the defeat of the ISIS Caliphate. It saw the return of world powers to the Middle East: as pilots recruited to fight ISIS; as soldiers in Syria and Iraq – but also as volunteers fighting in the ranks of ISIS and Kurds. It saw the failure of the 20th century modern state order with the eruption of the Arab ‘Spring’, and it saw the resuscitation of non-Arab actors, and the ancient Persian civilisation who seeks again to march toward the shores of the Mediterranean. It witnessed a new plague, the Coronavirus, threatening to further weaken the region as previous plagues did in 1833 and 1918.

Even beyond the time of the Achaemenid empire, some 500 military engagements<sup>1</sup> were fought between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Hopeful generals, crusaders and traders marched back and forth on the Via Maris trading route, the ancient highway crossing the Golan Heights and linking Egypt with the northern empires of Syria, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, a deeper look in history may help provide a perspective on the aforementioned events. History might show us that what appears to be a ‘unique reality’ of conflict today could be better understood by looking

at the battles of yesterday. This essay will attempt to offer a historical context to the Israel-Iran confrontation unfolding in the Middle East today. It will also attempt to shed light on the recent appearance of “sulfur gazes” and smoke around the dormant volcanos along the Syrian – Israeli border.

### **Episode I: Past | Persian Cambyses, the ‘madman’**

For three millennia, Persians and Arabs - the two prominent Mideast cultures – have been in contact and conflict with each other with destinies intertwined. Back in the 6th century BCE, at times not less violent and turbulent, the Greek historian Herodotus told the story of Achaemenid Prince Cambyses marching against Egypt through northern Arabia(Histories, 3.5). Indeed, the First Persian (Achaemenid) empire founded by Cyrus (II) the Great have eclipsed all the former nations of the ancient Near East. As early as 539 BCE, when Cyrus conquered Babylon and ended the Neo-Babylonian empire, his son Cambyses held the position of crown prince.

Cambyses, famously depicted as the Sixth Sphinx by Victor Hugo in his work “The Legend of the Ages”, launched a campaign to invade ancient Egypt around 525 BCE. The reasons, if we must believe Herodotus, are quite unusual: He claims that Pharaoh Amasis II had broken his promise to give Cambyses his daughter. In an attempted political scheme, he sent Nitetis, the daughter of the former pharaoh Apries instead, adorned with gold and many other rich apparels. Amasis was concerned by the rising power of the Persians but assumed that Cambyses did not intend to have his own daughter as his spouse but as a mere mistress. Later, as Cambyses saluted Nitetis, calling her by the name of her supposed father, the princess revealed to the Persian king that he has been deceived by Amasis as in truth she was the daughter of Apries (possibly killed by Amasis’ forces). Nitetis’ confession enraged Cambyses against Egypt (although this might have merely the needed excuse for Cambyses to subdue the last remaining superpower in the region). Whilst on his way to Egypt, Cambyses sent a Phoenician fleet with reinforcements through the Mediterranean Sea and marched

his army by foot along the Mediterranean coast and across the Sinai desert (where local Arabian tribes supplied his army with fresh water). Following his conquest of Egypt, Cambyses planned three additional expeditions, against Carthage, against the Ammonians (as the Persians crossed the sand from the Siwa Oasis to strike them, they faced a violent south wind which buried them in the sands), and against the Ethiopians, which ended up as a failure causing him to march back to Thebes, with the loss of much of his army.<sup>3</sup>

This campaign was far from being the last ancient battle involving Persians, Arab and foreign invading forces. In the 4th century BCE, and for 13 years, Alexander the Great fought against the Achaemenid Persian empire led by Darius III, and then against local warlords as far east as India. Alexander marched into Egypt after defeating the commander in Gaza, Batis.<sup>4</sup> The Egyptians welcomed him as their deliverer in 332 BCE and the Persian satrap Mazaces surrendered.<sup>5</sup> Alexander's remarkable military victory was not quickly translated to a regional peace, a principle that will continue to drive much of the politics of the region. The Greeks failed to provide a stable alternative to the Achaemenid Empire and Alexander's death in 323 led to a civil war in the territories he conquered.

Indeed, in the 3rd century BCE, the Syrian Wars (a series of five conflicts) erupted between the leading Hellenistic states that inherited the territories conquered by Alexander: the Seleucid kingdom and Ptolemaic Egypt. One of the main disputes between the two was the control of southern Syria of the time. In the 'Fifth War' (202-200), the Seleucid successfully gained Coele-Syria from the Ptolemies.<sup>6</sup> Weakened by constant warfare, the Hellenistic states eventually fell under the Roman might in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE.<sup>7</sup>

Subsequently, Christendom became the prominent culture in the Levant. It took some time for Middle Eastern tribes to recover from their defeats and reemerge as a force that could challenge Christendom's dominion. The legendary general, Khalid ibn al-Walid, an early convert to Islam who assisted Mohammad in the conquest of Mecca in 629 has managed to leave a lasting mark on the region. He defeated the

Sasanian Persian garrisons in 633 and surrendered Damascus in 635 in preparation of his successful defeat of the Byzantines in the Battle of Yarmouk in 636, reaching all the way to today's Syria and Israel's Golan heights. 1,400 years later, Khalid ibn al-Walid will be resurrected when his name became attached to a Salafi-Jihadist group affiliated with ISIS, in 2016. Indeed, in the bloody Syrian civil war of 2011, the "Khalid ibn al-Walid" militia successfully took over the Yarmuk region in southern Syria, bordering both Jordan and Israel.<sup>8</sup> The Syrian uprising of 2011 - which quickly turned to an all-out civil-ethnic and proxy war - serves as another reminder about the relevance of the ancient crusades and Muslim conquests which symbolised the struggles between East and West, and between Islam and Christendom. They have reemerged, again, engulfing the entire region as Iran becomes the rising regional hegemon, and Israel the modern embodiment of the Western domain, such as the Byzantines once were. Like ancient battles, the modern ones have caused much death and destruction. This time around, the modern army of Khalid ibn al-Walid was largely defeated in a war that took Syria down into the abyss.

### **The Long and Winding Roads**

Back in ancient times, long routes or 'communication lines' - as well as the use of proxies - were common in Persian civilisation. "Land bridges" became a strategic concept long before Iran had tried to build its land routes to Lebanon.

Indeed, an innovation dating to the time of Persian king Darius the Great (550-485 BCE) was the construction of Royal roads as ancient highways. The roads themselves were centuries old and connected the main urban centers of the ancient Near East. However, Darius introduced a system of caravanserais to facilitate rapid communication throughout his very large empire,<sup>9</sup> where a traveller could change horses and find a place to rest or sleep. Mounted couriers could travel more than 2,500 km in seven days; the journey from Susa (modern Shush, Iran, also identified as Shushan in Biblical texts) to Sardis (near modern Salihli, Turkey) took ninety days on foot.

Herodotus praised the Persian couriers: there was nothing in the ancient world that traveled faster than them, and neither snow, rain, heat, nor the darkness of night prevented them from completing their missions with the utmost speed. The couriers had passports enabling them to receive food rations along the roads (according to the Persepolis tablets, Darius' uncle Pharnaces was responsible to issue these passports).<sup>10</sup>

These roads – which today might be called “land bridges” were vital considering the technological limitations of travel via waters or the inexistence of air travel at the time. It might be interesting to note that little has changed due to the modern limitation on alternative routes (considering sanctions and imposed limitations on Iranian sea and air travel). The ancient land bridge between Teheran, Damascus and Beirut had again claimed its glory.

Along the same land bridge, in the northern fringes of Arabia, and in the Syrian Desert region, ancient world empires were contending for domination: on the one side – Greeks, Romans, and then the Byzantines and on the other – the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sasanians. They all traditionally sought alliances with local Arab lords and enrolled their tribesmen as frontier auxiliaries (Greek *Symmachoi* and Roman *limitanei*)<sup>11</sup> to guard and protect the land bridge roads. The honored position of Arabs as “allies” in the Persian empire can be found in Achaemenid sculptured reliefs at Persepolis.<sup>12</sup>

Land bridges have had other ramifications as well. The flu pandemic of 1833 apparently spread through the same “land bridges” which served as the trade routes linking Syria and Constantinople. Persia, of course, was not the only country affected as this plague killed thousands in Asia and Europe, as Iranian reports related the death of dozens of people and corpses laying in the streets of Tehran.<sup>13</sup> Due to the same routes, Iran was one of the regions hit the hardest by the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 with mortality rates significantly higher than those in most regions of the world. The Spanish flu infected Iran through its Western border, from Baghdad to Kermanshah and finally reached Tehran. The reported mortality rate in the nomadic Qashqai tribe, a people of southern Iran, was as high as 30 per cent.<sup>14</sup> It is reported that 5,000 (10 per cent) from

the inhabitants of the city of Shiraz died from the Spanish flu. The mortality rate in some villages was reported at 20 per cent and in Tehran, over a three-month period, 1 per cent of the population died as a result of the flu.<sup>15</sup> In 2020, Iran was badly hit once again by a pandemic, becoming the epicenter of a new virus – COVID-19. Its land bridge to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon have apparently significantly contributed to the spreading of the COVID-19 in the entire region.<sup>16</sup>

### **Episode II: Present | Qassem Soleimani Strikes Back**

The Iranians, the true heirs of the Prophet (according to the Shi'i tradition) are destined to rule the Middle East. They are 83 million strong but surrounded by 400 million hostile Arabs. Under these conditions, their path to regional dominance will be challenging for sure. Unless, of course, some of the Arabs would consider siding with the Persians. But how? The "Arabs" (who are mostly Sunni) are the traditional enemies of the Persian-Shi'a Iranians, and this rivalry has fuel much of war theaters in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

Can an Arab-Persian alliance be once again formed? Well, here comes Soleimani.

Funding, arming, or using foreign "militant groups" have been part of the Iranian strategy ever since the 1979 revolution when the nation's new fundamentalist Shi'ite Muslim leaders sought to export their ideology and vision to the rest of the region. The constraints on the Iranian ability to prevail in an open and conventional conflict became apparent during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Iran had barely been able to challenge Iraq's modern, Western-backed military, ending a devastating war in a painful standstill. As the economic and human costs of the war became devastating, a creative and less conventional concept was needed in order to operate beyond the enemy lines. This concept is enshrined in the elite Quds (Jerusalem) Force which emerged from Iran's preeminent military force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC).<sup>17</sup> Iran's leaders have avoided open warfare ever since, favouring the deniability and lower casualty rates offered by covert operations and proxy warfare over open confrontations.

The Quds Force became increasingly visible on the world stage in the 21st century, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and, even more so, following the regional upheaval that shadowed the so-called 'Arab Spring'. In Iraq, the Quds Force played an important role in organising and supporting Shi'a militias against US forces, coordinating most notably with the Badr Organisation. The Quds Force was tasked to ensure continuity in the Iranian influence over Iraq and its commander, General Qassem Soleimani (1957-2020), reportedly intervened in October 2019 to prevent the ouster of Adel Abdul Mahdi, then Iraq's Prime Minister.<sup>18</sup>

As the 2011 uprising in Syria evolved from a civil to a proxy war, Quds Force came to save Syria's Alawite president, Bashar al-Assad, a political ally as well as a member of a Shi'i sect of Islam. Hezbollah, a Lebanese proxy established in 1982, funded, armed and trained by Iran, had kept very close relations with the Quds Force and its commander, and was quickly dispatched to the Syrian battlefield. Quds Force also took a leading role in organising ground forces against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The old land bridge was now more important than ever, as a new Iranian proxy corridor was being built from Teheran to Beirut, via Iraq and Syria, enabling the formation of a new military front against Israel.

In Yemen, Quds Force supports the Houthis, a tribal faction from northern Sa'ada who belongs to the Zaidi Shi'i.<sup>19</sup> The Houthis which are engaged in a violent rebellion against the central government supported by the Saudis, were bolstered in the aftermath of Yemen's 2011-12 uprising.

The Palestinian front is another Quds Force arena of operations. Soleimani praised the Palestinian struggle during the so-called Quds Day: "One of the important and valuable innovations of Imam Khomeini was making the Palestinian affairs a central policy issue."<sup>20</sup> Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called Israel a "cancerous tumor" and urged the Palestinians to unite and model their resistance against Israel on Hezbollah.<sup>21</sup> The Iranians had long made efforts to provide real backup for their statements through weapons smuggling and support to Palestinian proxy factions such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.<sup>22</sup>



What connects all these arenas is the effort to recruit Arab allies as proxy forces in key theaters, by positioning non-Iranians at the frontlines.

Following the buildup of Hezbollah, the largest and most successful Iranian proxy, Quds Force began to expand its operation in Iraq via the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), whose strength was estimated between 100,000 and 150,000. The PMF emerged in June 2014 as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a leading Shi'ite cleric, called upon all adept Iraqis to defend their country against the Islamic State. Sistani's *fatwa* mobilised the PMF, in which Shi'ite fighters were instrumental in the fight against and defeat of ISIS.<sup>23</sup> While some of the PMF militias later merged into the Iraqi Security Forces, other elements like *Kataib Hezbollah* continued to maintain strong ties to Iran's IRGC, a fact that helps explain the circumstances of the death of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the founder and commander of *Kataib Hezbollah* who was killed alongside General Soleimani in January 2020.<sup>24</sup>

As in ancient times, Syria remains a focal point of tension between all the regional stakeholders and even if Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that the war in Syria was "really over,"<sup>25</sup> the country remains divided. Foreign powers continue to intervene, and Syria continues to bleed from incessant battles and territorial claims. Turkey invaded Syria from the north, attempting to prevent the establishment of a future Kurdish polity on its southern border. The Americans still maintain some key position, but with a much-reduced signature. Iran seeks to deepen its hold and strengthen its "land bridge" project that seeks to encircle Israel by creating a 'ring of fire' (missiles) and proxy forces around it. Russia, the other dominant player in Syria, aims to end superfluous tactical battles and reach stability in a war that was won thanks to its own effective intervention.

From its perspective, Israel is determined to sabotage the Iranian scheme, which becomes more and more embedded and complex. Iran attempts to build its 'ring of fire' and transfer missile technologies to its cherished proxy – Hezbollah. In August 2019, the IDF exposed the identities of IRGC senior officers involved in Hezbollah's attempt to develop and acquire precision guided missiles in Lebanon.<sup>26</sup> The extent of the Iranian project can be seen through the countless Israeli strikes

in Syria,<sup>27</sup> reportedly against Iranian bases used to transfer weapons and technologies to Hezbollah but also to crystalise its bases across Syria. More than once, the Iranians were forced to move their weapons supply line due to Israeli strikes of Iranian bases in Damascus, Shayrat, Kisweh, Hama or the T4 airbase.<sup>28</sup>

Loyal to its proxy model and in parallel to its “hard power” *modus operandi*, Iran attempts to move further toward a soft power model: it seeks to infiltrate the Syrian security apparatus, promote the Shi‘ite culture and religion and thus export its own brand of the Islamic Revolution to yet another Arab ‘State’. Already back in the time of Hafez al-Assad, Iran established a network of educational, cultural, and religious institutions throughout Syria. This network has been further expanded during Bashar’s reign.<sup>29</sup>

### **Episode III: Back to the Future | The Syrian arena and will the Empire Strike Back?**

Over the course of history, Western and Eastern kingdoms had continuously wrestled in the Middle East. Today’s Syria, Iraq and Lebanon are no exception: old wars refuse to fade away, particularly when the flag of God or a civilisational claim are still waved in pride. Herodotus named the force of 10,000 Persian elite troops as the *Immortals* (Gk. *athánatoi*), a corps of selected Persians under the command of Hydarnes II, the son of Hydarnes. While the force consisted mainly of Persians, it had also included Medes and Elamites, another reminder of the ability of the Persians to enroll others to fight their own wars.

This force was known as the *Immortals* because it had always kept up to strength; when a combatant was killed, his position was quickly filled by another so that the total strength of the force was never less than 10,000. Soleimani – and his successor Esmail Ghaani – appeared to have adopted Hydarnes’s strategy. Considering the hundreds of IDF strikes conducted in Syria, the Quds Force commanders must replenish their militias with modern day Medes who will usually come from the ranks of Hezbollah fighters as well as fresh recruits from Iraq and Afghanistan.

After Lebanon, the Syrian arena provided a new stage in the Israeli Iranian confrontation as the IRGC activities and aspirations have brought the conflict to a new front, right on Israel's northeastern border: the Golan Heights and beyond. The first Quds Force general killed by Israel was Mohammad Ali Allah-Dadi in 2015.<sup>30</sup>

The Iranian meddling activities in Syria and Lebanon continue and it is yet to be seen how the next chapter in this epic battle will unfold or how Israel and its allies will struggle with Soleimani' and Ghaani's *Immortals*. Ideas do travel in the Middle East, across space and time. Recently, Israel dispatched its own Symmachoi – “frontier auxiliaries” – or local allies across its borders. It has implemented such a scheme in Lebanon, supporting the Maronites and the South Lebanese Army (SLA), until it withdrew from South Lebanon to the Blue Line in 2000. More recently, Israel did it again through the “Good Neighbor” operation which has primarily provided humanitarian assistance (but also operational support) to several Syrian groups in the Syrian Golan Heights.<sup>31</sup>

Israel's focus on the Syrian arena and its growing fear from Iranian and other Islamists proxies may trigger another important historical reference. The *Mamluks* (from the word *Mameluke* or a “slave soldier”) were a proxy force during the Abbāsid era that later won political control of several Muslim states including Egypt, Syria and Palestine. The practice of “slave recruitment” began in Baghdad by the ‘Abbāsid Caliph al-Mu‘tasim (833-842), and later became common throughout the Muslim world.<sup>32</sup> In a scenario that can be analogous to Lebanon of today – in where Hezbollah, an Iranian funded terror group who now controls part of the Lebanese government and holds the largest military power in the county – the mamluk generals succeed in taking control of India, Egypt and Syria, establishing dynasties of their own. This impressive achievement becomes even more significant considering the numbers: Historian David Nicolle argued that the army led by the Mamluks totaled around 40,000 troops in the late 13th century, with only 10 per cent Mamluks in the total forces.<sup>33</sup> With Hezbollah in Lebanon and recently founded Islamists proxy groups in Syria, Israel stresses the

need to ensure that any new *Pax-Iranica* or Islamist order will not replace the fragile status quo in Syria in particular, and in the region at large.

Geologically speaking, the Golan Heights, the border region between Israel and Syria, is a Plio-Pleistocene basaltic plateau and part of the largest volcanic field of the western Arabian Peninsula.<sup>34</sup> Dozens of cinder cones – remnants of ancient volcanoes – are located on both sides of the border. The recent Syria war have seen them erupting again, although this time, not with the fire of nature but rather with the fire of war. The contemporary alliances are yet another manifestation of the ancient wars between the opposite civilisations of the time, Orient vs. Occident, West against East. Israel, which had found itself on the **Faultline** of this conflict is also located on the **Frontline** of the contemporary struggle against the current heirs of the Achaemenids. Nevertheless, declining resources, growing resentment, public opposition in Lebanon and Iraq, as well as the US policy of “Maximum Pressure”, impose serious hurdles on the Iranian Ayatollahs’ schemes across the region. The Corona crisis has placed Iran at the epicentre of the regional pandemic, it has added another strain on the Mullahs who desperately try to change course amidst growing popular unrest of a populace demanding accountability.

Will the empire fall, or, strike back again? Time will write the chronicles of this current struggle. The old volcanoes, having seen the rise and fall of generals and empires, will continue to bear witness to the unending bloody odyssey of the levant. May the Force be with us!

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## 6. Saudi Arabia: Navigating a Perilous Regional and International Politics

*Md. Muddassir Quamar*

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### **Introduction**

The Middle East has been going through an extraordinary phase of violence and tumult since the “Arab Spring” protests of 2010-11. Not that the region was haven of peace and tranquility before, but the massive protests, demonstrations and regime responses and the resultant conflicts, civil wars and geopolitical competitions are unprecedented even by Middle Eastern standards. In the early stages of the mass movement, it was mainly the economic issues – unemployment, corruption, poverty and economic divide – that brought the people on the streets. Soon, however, the protests acquired political connotation given the non-empathetic response of the authoritarian regimes used to rule by force. Even after a decade, the situation has hardly changed, instead it has become worse.

The civil wars in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya, for example, have continued unabated and the menace of terrorism, notwithstanding the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), remains a challenge. These conflicts have created humanitarian crises, caused massive loss of lives and rendered millions homeless triggering exodus of refugees to Europe and other parts of the world. Since 2018, the region has witnessed a second wave of protests including in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Algeria and Sudan leading to internal rumblings. On top, the fragile regional economic environment is bound to be seriously affected by the disruptions caused due to COVID-19 and this is bound to affect the regional politics.



Besides the political, economic, security and humanitarian impacts, a key outcome of the Arab Spring is the sharpening of the regional geopolitical divide. It has become more complicated because of the multiplicity of actors involved. Broadly, there are three types of actors – national and transnational non-state groups, state actors led by important regional countries and external powers. Among the important regional actors are Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, the UAE and Qatar. The major external powers involved are the US, Russia, China and in a limited way the UK, France, Germany and Italy. The regional geopolitical alignment is far from clear and various regional and external actors have been quickly aligning or realigning their interests based on short-term or immediate interests. Many have relied on or aligned with non-state actors<sup>1</sup> to act as proxies to advance their interests.

Both international and regional actors have used the chaotic situation to advance their ambitions and expand influence, and this has forced others to reassess their positions and build new partnerships and alliances to secure their interests. Majority of smaller and weaker states have preferred to align with their larger neighbours, but others along with bigger regional powers have taken to proactive engagements and interventions to suit their aspirations. They have hedged their bets with multiple external powers to ensure security and attain prosperity. There is a proliferation of non-state actors, especially of the Islamist variety. The Islamists have manifested themselves in varied ways; from groups joining political and constitutional process to armed movements, militias and terrorist organisations vouching for violent overthrow of regimes. Vulnerabilities to and fear of these non-state actors too have forced domestic and foreign policy realignments in many countries.

### **Saudi Arabia and the Region**

The regional political fault lines and geopolitical competitions have put Saudi Arabia in a difficult situation. The kingdom is a regional powerhouse that enjoys legitimacy because of its Islamic credentials and for its financial heft. However both these factors have faced serious threats in recent years. Notwithstanding the aura associated with custodianship of

the Islamic holy sites in Mecca and Medina, the kingdom has attracted criticisms from various quarters for using the holy places for advancing its interests.<sup>2</sup> Many in the region and beyond blame the kingdom for being the harbinger of fundamentalist and radical Islam in the world. Extremists on the other hand call out Saudi monarchy for failing to uphold the sanctity of Islam and Islamic holy places on account of colluding with “infidel” powers.<sup>3</sup> The kingdom has also invited criticism for mishandling the Haj pilgrimage by both Turkey and Iran.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, the disruptions and fluctuations in the international oil market have limited Saudi Arabia’s monopoly over international hydrocarbon producer and exporter.<sup>5</sup> This has meant a growing financial constraint to manage both the domestic economic indulgence and regional “cheque book” diplomacy. Resultantly, the kingdom has incrementally introduced taxation and reduced subsidies, it has also tried to reduce the inflow of foreign workers.<sup>6</sup> It has introduced large scale reforms to broaden and diversify the economy and sources of revenue under the *Saudi Vision 2030* programme. The disruptions due to COVID-19 are expected to further complicate the Saudi efforts to overcome the economic and financial challenges. Together with economic reforms, the Saudi monarchy has introduced radical social initiatives aimed at both responding to domestic demands and external criticisms as well as creating better socioeconomic environment for the success of the economic policies.

Notwithstanding the challenges to its core strengths, Saudi Arabia continues to be the most important Arab and Muslim country. It enjoys wider support both among the global Muslim community and regional states. Despite some differences on specific issues, a number of regional countries including the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco remain aligned with Saudi Arabia while others, such as Oman, Kuwait, Algeria and Tunisia, though are not aligned, recognise it as an Arab and Islamic leader. Hence, the challenge comes mainly from Iran, Turkey and Qatar, and the non-state actors. Among the countries that are internally divided, such as Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Libya, there are elements supportive of the kingdom or its allies but are mostly in

weaker position. Likewise, despite the financial challenges and economic constraints, Saudi Arabia's ability to influence regional (and global Muslim) countries' behaviour or their internal politics remains strong.<sup>7</sup>

However, the kingdom has a key vulnerability; it is militarily weak and relies completely on the US for ensuring regional security in the Persian Gulf.<sup>8</sup> Even for managing its own internal security, it depends on external support. For a variety of reasons, the Gulf militaries have remained weak but because of the alliance with the US, this has not become a problem until in recent years when the US has been showing signs of reducing its regional security commitments.<sup>9</sup> This has put the kingdom and its Gulf allies in a difficult situation wherein they were left to fend for themselves in Yemen leaving their military weakness seriously exposed.<sup>10</sup> This has been a major factor in the kingdom's decision to reassess its relations with important regional and international countries, especially Israel and Russia.

Saudi Arabia desires status-quo in regional politics as it suits its pole position in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> It does not want any significant change in regional order that it believes will undermine Saudi interests and influence. The kingdom has proactively worked to attain this objective since the Arab Spring protests broke out and for this reason many have termed it as a "counter-revolutionary" power.<sup>12</sup> Hence, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy choices have been partly guided by this principle that in Riyadh's view faces the twin threats of Iranian expansionism and Islamist proliferation. A third factor of Turkish "neo-Ottoman" revivalism has been added to the Saudi threat perception in recent years. Moreover, maintaining the regional order has been complicated by the interplay of power politics among great powers.

### ***Geopolitical Challenges***

Saudi Arabia faces a number of geopolitical challenges emanating from the dynamic regional environment. First and foremost, the challenges emerge from Iran and these are the products of the ideological and political rivalry,<sup>13</sup> and though there are some sectarian or ethnic overtones they are not the primary motivations. Iran is a large country with vast

resources, big demography and is geo-strategically located connecting South, West and Central Asia. It is ideologically motivated to challenge the US hegemony in the Persian Gulf and has since the 1979 Islamic revolution indulged in the rhetoric to promote revolutions in the region.<sup>14</sup> Compared to Saudi Arabia, it is militarily stronger and is technologically superior. It has a nuclear program that puts it in a position to be able to acquire nuclear weapons capability, and over decades it has developed or acquired sophisticated weapons including long-range ballistic missiles.

Iran is expanding its political influence and military presence in several regional countries including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Palestinian territories and in parts of North Africa. Iran has also been training and supporting non-state actors to fight its rivals and maintain its influence in the respective countries. From the Iranian viewpoint, this is done to counter the US regional hegemony and its grand designs of “democracy promotion” through military interventions that threatens Iranian regime security. Tehran feels that greater regional influence gives it “strategic depth” to withstand any US onslaught or by its regional allies, especially Israel. For Saudi Arabia, however, these are dangerous postures that undermines its regional position and threatens its security as well as the security of its allies.

The tensions and divergences between Saudi Arabia and Iran had started soon after the Islamic revolution and have continued unabated except for a brief period of rapprochement in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> Iranian gains in Iraq after the 2003 Iraq War and inroads in Syria after the 2011 protests alarmed the kingdom and as the internal situations in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq deteriorated, the two found themselves supporting opposing sides of the conflicts or political fault lines. Conspicuously, while Iran has been successful in its interventions, especially in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, Saudi political and military efforts in Yemen and Lebanon have not achieved much success. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and its allies are unnerved by the multiplying number of Iranian proxies among the Arab Shias and feels threatened by Iranian rhetoric against hereditary rulers of the Gulf, which many in Iran and among its proxies feel should be replaced by revolutionary regimes.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, Saudi Arabia's regional position is challenged by a resurgent Turkey that aspires to achieve a global middle power position. Under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who first came to power in 2003, Ankara had gradually built on its strengths to gain inroads in the region. Until the outbreak of the Arab Spring protests, it was more cautious and was satisfied with improving trade and positioning itself as a "model" Muslim country.<sup>17</sup> Since 2011, however, Ankara became more aggressive with political and military interventions in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Horn of Africa as well as in the dispute among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members. Unlike Iran which justifies its expansionist policies in the name of ensuring its own security, Turkey has no such excuse and its regional postures emanate purely from desire to play power politics in the region. Being the immediate successor of the Ottoman Empire that had the nominal control over the vast Arab territories until the early 20th century, and being a strong military thanks to the membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Turkish power politics unnerves Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the way Ankara used the killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi<sup>18</sup> to sully Saudi Arabia's image reinforced the view in Riyadh that Turkey intends to challenge the regional order and its position.

Thirdly, Saudi Arabia is challenged by the rise of political Islam or Islamism that in the wake of the Arab Spring gained significant political grounds in some regional countries as well as in the regional politics.<sup>19</sup> The MB, the most prominent Islamist non-state transnational actor, has become Saudi Arabia's (and the UAE's) primary concern as it gained power in Egypt, albeit briefly, and its offshoots formed governments in Tunisia and Morocco, won an election in Libya, gained prominence in Yemen and received support from Turkey and Qatar. Further, their call for Islamic republicanism attracts wider appeal on the Arab streets. Together with these, the presence of elements sympathetic to MB ideology within the kingdom has become a cause of alarm for Saudi Arabia. It has made Riyadh to partner with the UAE and Egypt to take action by outlawing the MB and groups directly or loosely affiliated to it. Besides the MB, there are other regional or transnational Islamist actors including Shiite

resistance movements, Salafi-Jihadists and takfiri militants who openly call for the overthrow of the Saudi and other Arab monarchies that poses security and geopolitical challenges to the kingdom.

Fourthly, the interplay of global power politics between the US, Russia, China and European countries which is being partly played out in the Middle East complicates Saudi Arabia's geopolitical choices. Saudi Arabia has been an ally of the US and depends on it for ensuring security in the Persian Gulf but some of the choices made by Washington in recent years including the decimation of Iraq after 2003, allowing the fall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, not following up on the "red line" in Syria in 2012 and finally the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 underlined to the Saudis, as well as its other allies, the perils of over-reliance on the US.<sup>20</sup> Though the Trump administration had altered some of the policies of his predecessor,<sup>21</sup> the continuing US desire to reduce its commitments in the region has been amply clear making the regional allies to hedge their bets with other global powers especially Russia and China.

This, however, is easier said than done because it not only complicates relations with the US but also makes Saudi Arabia susceptible to interests of these two global actors who are involved with all regional actors including its rivals and are interested in enhancing their regional influence and power projection. Russia has followed up its politico-military intervention in Syria with large scale commitments in Libya and has been hobnobbing with China and Iran for a regional security architecture in Persian Gulf.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, China has been enhancing its economic engagements with all countries in the region and has invested heavily in developmental projects in almost all regional countries and is promoting the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) toward developing trading networks owned by Chinese companies.<sup>23</sup> The politico-economic investments has meant that all major and minor regional state actors have been hedging their bets with Moscow and Beijing in order to avoid being isolated or left out. They are lured by the promise of economic gains and weapon supplies and in the process also reduce reliance on the US.

## **Foreign Policy Choices**

Saudi foreign policy choices are conditioned by geopolitical compulsions together with the need to ensure regime security, economic prosperity and territorial integrity of the kingdom as well as maintaining the regional order. This had entailed a six-pronged approach of challenging Iran, neutralising political Islam, ensuring stability in the neighbourhood, building partnership with like-minded regional countries, stabilising the international hydrocarbon prices and strategic hedging with established and emerging global powers.

### ***Countering Iran***

A number of Saudi foreign policy choices, especially since 2011, have emanated from the geopolitical challenges posed by Iran. For example, Saudi Arabia along with Israel was opposed to the Iranian nuclear agreement and though it eventually could not convince the Obama administration to refrain from signing the JCPOA and welcomed the deal, Riyadh never reconciled with the idea that Iran can have an active nuclear programme.<sup>24</sup> It remained suspicious of Iranian nuclear ambitions and this, in turn, led to Riyadh signing a number of nuclear cooperation agreements with companies from Japan, South Korea and China.<sup>25</sup> For the same reason Riyadh welcomed the election of Donald Trump despite his widely noted Islamophobia. Trump's clear anti-Iran stand, his rhetoric against the nuclear deal and promise to withdraw from the deal made Saudi Arabia ignore his other fallacies. Trump's choice of Riyadh as his first foreign visit as president underlined the contours of his Middle East policy.<sup>26</sup> Arguably, the visit was partly the trigger for Riyadh to initiate the boycott of Qatar in July 2017.

Doha's perceived growing proximity with Tehran and its patronisation of the MB in regional affairs were the reason Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were unhappy<sup>27</sup> and apparently received green signal from Trump who gloated on twitter "So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding ... extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar. Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!"<sup>28</sup> soon

after the announcement of the boycott. The concern over the nuclear armed Iran made Saudi Arabia welcome the unilateral US withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018. A statement issued by the Saudi embassy in Washington observed:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia supports and welcomes the steps announced by President Donald Trump regarding the United States' withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. The Kingdom also supports reinstating economic sanctions on the Iranian regime, which have been suspended under the nuclear deal.

The Kingdom's previous support for the nuclear deal concluded by Iran and the P5+1 group of countries was based on Saudi Arabia's conviction in the need to take all possible steps that may assist in non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East and the world. The Iranian regime however, took advantage of the economic benefits afforded by the lifting of sanctions and used them to continue its destabilizing activities in the region, especially by developing its ballistic missiles and supporting terrorist organizations in the region, including Hezbollah and the Houthi militias, which used the capabilities provided by Iran to target civilians in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, as well as, repeatedly targeting international shipping lanes in a blatant violation of UN Security Council resolutions.

The Kingdom reaffirms its support of the strategy previously announced by President Trump towards Iran, and hopes the international community will take a firm and unified stance against the Iranian regime, and its destabilizing aggression in the region, its support to terrorist groups, particularly Hezbollah and the Houthi militias, and its support of the Assad regime – who has committed heinous crimes against its people that led to the death of more than half a million civilians, including through the use of chemical weapons.<sup>29</sup>

As evident from the statement, Riyadh was anxious over growing Iranian influence and military presence in the region. The Iran factor can also be seen in other foreign policy choices of the kingdom such as the



decision to militarily intervene in Bahrain in 2012 to restore stability and ensure the security of al-Khalifa rule. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia had feared that Iran was instigating the Bahraini Shia opposition groups to overthrow the monarchy which they believed would put Bahrain under Iranian influence. The same logic worked in Saudi decision to intervene militarily in Yemen in March 2015 where the Houthi rebels had reportedly backtracked on the agreement to have a unity government after the end of the National Dialogue in June 2014 and had forcibly taken over the administration by January 2015. Though unlike Bahrain, the intervention did not lead to restoration of the status quo ante and pushed Yemen into an unending civil war.

Saudi decision making vis-à-vis Iraq, Lebanon and Syria too have been partly guided by limiting Iranian influence in these countries. Saudi Arabia, for example, supported the Free Syrian Army and other secular and Salafist factions fighting the Assad regime in Syria at least during 2011-12.<sup>30</sup> It was only after the fallacy of such a move strengthening the ISIS and allegations of some of the financial and military support being extended to the opposition reaching the jihadists came to light that Saudi Arabia gradually distanced itself from the Syrian opposition. Riyadh has also been supportive of anti-Hezbollah factions in Lebanon and supported Saad Hariri who has extensive business network in the kingdom to maintain influence and limit Iranian meddling. In Iraq too, Riyadh reached out to Muqtada al-Sadr in 2017<sup>31</sup> when he was facing troubles in Tehran and tried cultivating relations with his Sairun alliance that emerged as the biggest political faction in the May 2018 elections. This even though did not make much difference in terms of the political equations in Baghdad, Riyadh apparently was instrumental in limiting the electoral success of Iran-backed factions.

Saudi Arabia has supported the US economic sanctions on Iran and called on Iranian leaders to heed to the demands of the people and not meddle in regional affairs.<sup>32</sup> As the tensions in the Persian Gulf started to rise due to a series of incidents of targeting of oil ships and culminated with the September 2019 drone attacks on ARAMCO oil installations in Abqaiq and Khurais, Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for trying

to destabilise the region and hamper oil supply routes.<sup>33</sup> Further when US-Iran tensions rose due to the targeting of US surveillance drone over the Persian Gulf by Iran and the built up of protestors outside the US embassy in Baghdad which culminated in the killing of General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, Saudi Arabia maintained that Iran should stop creating troubles in the region.<sup>34</sup>

### *Curtailing Political Islam*

In addition to countering Iran, Saudi foreign policy choices have been guided by the objective to curtail the proliferation of Islamism in regional politics. Saudi anxieties over popularity of Islamic republicanism and threat perception of jihadi-terrorism are directly proportionate to concern for regime security in Riyadh. One of the first signs of the kingdom's strengthening resolve to curtail the MB came from Egypt. In 2013, when the military led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi intervened to remove the President Morsi, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported the move.<sup>35</sup> Some would even argue that they were actively backing the soft military coup in Cairo. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia classified the MB along with ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra as terrorist groups and banned them.<sup>36</sup> Since then numerous Saudi MB sympathisers within the kingdom and outside were hauled up and jailed by the Saudi security agencies. Apparently, one of the reasons Khashoggi had gone into self-exile was his fear of being targeted because the perceived inclination toward MB.<sup>37</sup>

The diplomatic, political and economic boycott of Qatar by the quartet of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain was mainly directed to prevent Doha from patronising the transnational movement. Qatar had come out in support of MB in Egypt, it has been supporting elements close to MB in other conflict-ridden countries including Syria and Libya and has given shelter to numerous MB members from Egypt, Palestine and other parts of the world in Doha.<sup>38</sup> While until 2011, this was not seen as a major problem, the Arab Spring and developments in Egypt changed the Saudi, Emirati and Egyptian attitude and Qatari Emir came under pressure to give up the patronisation of MB. This problem had acquired threatening proportions because Al Jazeera which is funded

by the Qatar ruling family was seen as promoting the MB ideology and highlighting the lack of public role in politics and governance in Gulf monarchies, except Qatar. Hence, one of the most prominent demands put forth by the quartet to revoke the boycott was closure of Al Jazeera and its sister media outlets.<sup>39</sup>

The same logic was working in Saudi decision to support Emirati and Egyptian intervention in Libya to counter the Government of National Accord (GNA) and support General Haftar's push to take control of the whole of Libya.<sup>40</sup> The MB has been a critical factor in the bitterness in relations between Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is considered an ideological incarnation of MB in Turkey and President Erdoğan is an ardent supporter of moderate Islamism and Islamic republicanism.<sup>41</sup> This had brought him into prominence in the Arab world in 2011-12 where he had visited Cairo, Tripoli and Tunis to promote the Turkish "model" of Islamic democracy. Turkey has been supportive of the MB and its offshoots in various parts of the region and had come out heavily against general Sisi led coup in Egypt in 2012.<sup>42</sup> Turkey extended crucial strategic support to Qatar after the boycott. The support to MB is a common link between Ankara and Doha and this has been instrumental in strengthening of the ties between the two. This means that even before the Khashoggi affair brought the bitterness between Riyadh and Ankara in public, the strains in relations over support to political Islam had crept in.

### ***Stabilizing the Neighborhood***

The third major foreign policy approach for the kingdom is ensuring political and economic stability in the neighbourhood. Saudi leadership understands that instability in the immediate surrounding can spread inside the kingdom in no time and hence, it has used political influence and financial aid to regional countries to prevent instability.<sup>43</sup> This was the guiding principle in Saudi taking lead to send the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) to Bahrain in March 2012, diplomatic and political mediation through the GCC to oust Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen in February 2012 and start a National Dialogue to have a government with

participation of all Yemeni political factions.<sup>44</sup> As mentioned earlier, it was the failure of this political process and Houthi endeavour to take power by force that provoked Saudi Arabia to intervene militarily in the country three years later. Historically, Saudi Arabia had been sensitive about any trouble in Yemen not only because it shares a long and porous border with the country but also because of the large Yemeni expatriate population in the kingdom. Saudi Arabia, for example, had supported the US-led counterterrorism campaign against the al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen.<sup>45</sup> It was the same concern for widespread instability that had led to Saudi Arabia unsuccessfully counselling the Bush administration to attack Iraq in 2003.

The political and diplomatic efforts were complemented by financial support to neighbouring countries to keep them safe from economic collapse, often referred to as “cheque book” diplomacy.<sup>46</sup> Numerous regional countries either completely depend on Saudi largesse or often turn to it to survive economic hardships. For example, Saudi Arabia and UAE have committed and delivered billions of dollars in aid to the Sisi regime since 2013.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Jordan being a resource starved country is nearly dependent on Saudi and Gulf Arab financial aid, investments and remittances to sustain.<sup>48</sup> Bahrain, Lebanon, Palestinian Authority (PA) and Yemen too are major aid recipients of the kingdom. In many ways, this has made the aid receipts as client states of the oil-rich monarchy. Saudi Arabia is also one of the largest financiers of the Arab League and the OIC as part of its financial diplomacy.

### ***Strengthening Regional Partnerships***

Saudi Arabia has also been building alliances with like-minded regional countries that have a similar foreign and regional policy outlook. The most important among these is the alliance with the UAE and Bahrain. The three members of the GCC have in recent times aligned their foreign policy to safeguard their interests. The key convergences among them are the threat perceptions vis-à-vis Iran and political Islam and their vulnerabilities have brought them together. Key signs of the alignment are the decision to boycott Qatar, intervene in Yemen, support to Sisi in

Egypt and Haftar in Libya. Beyond the GCC, Egypt<sup>49</sup> and Jordan<sup>50</sup> are other countries with which the kingdom has built strong partnerships. Both are traditional allies of Saudi Arabia, though had their share rivalries in past, and their partnership have been strengthened over the decade since the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Morocco too has developed close ties with Saudi Arabia since 2011.

Besides the Arab-Islamic countries, Saudi Arabia has been developing close contacts with Israel in recent years. Though the two countries do not have diplomatic relations, neither have any official contacts but there have been reports of secret meetings and talks in third countries<sup>51</sup> as well as a growing understanding so far as the regional affairs are concerned. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*; this ancient proverb best describes the evolution of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Not to deny the US factor in the play, but the Saudi-Israeli rapprochement has more to do with their convergence of interest vis-à-vis Iran that both see as a threat to their security.<sup>52</sup> This had become apparent through their strong opposition to the Iranian nuclear negotiations and agreement and support of Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal. There are other convergences as well including the potentials for economic and defense cooperation but they are unlikely to take off without any breakthrough towards resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which at this stage looks unlikely.

### ***Controlling Oil Market***

Saudi Arabia for long had remained the unchallenged leader in the international oil market being the largest producer and exporter of oil and the leader of the oil cartel organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).<sup>53</sup> However, over the past decade and half a number of developments, including the emergence of natural gas and renewables as cleaner alternatives, global economic recession and slowdown since 2008 but above all the shale revolution in the US, have wreaked havoc in the oil market.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the monopoly of the OPEC too has been compromised. This forced Saudi Arabia to develop a partnership with Russia to control the international oil market in 2016 and since then the two have emerged as the joint leaders in controlling the market

and determining oil prices.<sup>55</sup> The OPEC+ arrangement came under constraint in early 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 on the global economy and it led to serious disagreements between the two over oil cuts to keep the prices higher. It triggered the oil price war initiated by Saudi Arabia that led to near-collapse of the market forcing the two to get back together to agree on production cuts to stabilise the market.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Strategic Hedging***

Finally, Saudi Arabia has been hedging its bets with various global powers to avoid over-dependence on the US, have better negotiating ability and to avoid being caught in the tumultuous impacts of great power rivalries. Rise of China and Russian resurgence together with emergence of non-traditional middle powers have started to seriously impact the international order.<sup>57</sup> The world is no longer unipolar and as the debate rages to define the evolving shape of a multipolar world order, Saudi Arabia like other regional countries has started to build stronger partnerships with major international powers. While the US remains the most important ally and the security guarantor in the Gulf, the growing Russian political and military footprints and surging Chinese economic presence in the Middle East has forced a rethink on foreign policy decisions.<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, Riyadh has been working to improve economic, political, diplomatic, defense and military relations with not only Moscow and Beijing but has also with emerging and middle powers including Germany, Japan, South Korea, Australia and India. From the Saudi viewpoint, this strategic hedging becomes necessary to shield the region order in the Middle East as it increasingly inches towards becoming a theater of showdown between global powers.

### **Summing Up**

Saudi Arabian regional policy hinges on the principle of maintaining the status-quo in the regional order. It faces the twin-challenge of Iranian expansionism and Islamist proliferation while also facing the emerging contestations due to a resurgent Turkey and an intensifying global power politics. Traditionally, the kingdom relied on the two core strengths –

Islamic legitimacy and financial prowess – to extend its foreign policy goals but incrementally both have come under threats because of these factors. Together with its military weakness, these threats make Saudi Arabia vulnerable to the tumultuous regional politics vis-à-vis its core national interests of ensuring regime security, economic prosperity and territorial integrity. The kingdom has therefore evolved a six-pronged foreign policy approach of countering Iran, curtailing political Islam, stabilising the neighborhood, strengthening regional partnerships, controlling oil market and strategic hedging with global big and emerging powers to navigate the perils of the regional politics and international relations.

## Notes

1. Among the most important non-state actors is the *Ikhwan al-Muslimeen* (Muslim Brotherhood; MB) and its various localised and country-specific factions who support the idea of Islamic republicanism to replace authoritarian regimes and hierarchical monarchies putting them at odds with some powerful regional actors, especially Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Then there are Salafists groups ranging from apolitical and pacifists to jihadists and takfiris of Al-Qaeda (AQ) and ISIS variety, and those in between the two extremes. Finally, there militant Shiite revolutionaries that are either proxies of Iran, such as Hezbollah, Kataib Hezbollah and armed groups in Syria, or are aligned with it such as Houthis in Yemen.
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## 7. Safeguarding the Islamic Republic: Structural Factors and Generational Shift Shaping Tehran's Foreign Policy

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Ever since USA pulled out from the nuclear deal with Iran, the sanctions regime has effectively crippled the Iranian economy. Despite the demurrals of other signatories to the deal, Tehran today has its back to the wall. The economy is under tremendous pressure with forex transactions at a minimum; barter-like trade with neighbours like Russia, Turkey and others have kept the economy going, even as costs of daily living have increased exponentially. Yet at the same time, Iran's presence in Syria and Lebanon appears stronger than ever, despite the killing of Qassem Soleimani. In Iraq, Iranian influence is considerable enough to bring about wide-scale protests against it, which led to the resignation of the Prime Minister of Iraq in 2019. Only the large scale protests beginning in late November 2019 in both Lebanon, Iraq and Iran began to reveal the extent to which pressure has built up against the Islamic Republic.

This paper means to argue that it is not simply Iran's nuclear programme which is at stake in the ongoing churning in the Islamic Republic. Nor is it simply the debilitating effects of the economy on account of the sanctions regime. The Islamic Republic of Iran is in a particularly vulnerable situation because of some long-term structural dynamics operating in the country. The paper further means to argue that the structural problem is complicated by a generational shift of the political elite, as the revolutionary generation needs to make room for the post-revolutionary one. The Islamic Republic is caught in the midst of a combination of these two.

The essay is divided into three parts. The first section deals with the root causes of the malady that ails the Iranian economy, talking about its disfiguration during the Iran Iraq War, and the subsequent attempts to undo that through a generation of botched economic reforms. The second section talks about the agenda of structural economic reform in the Islamic Republic, and the resistance to it, in order to indicate the entrenched character of structural obstacles to reform. The third section highlights how that structural problem is further complicated by an ongoing generational transition in the corridors of power in the Islamic Republic.

### *Economic Woes of the Islamic Republic*

Ever since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran tried to establish an economic order that would best suit the interests of its people.<sup>1</sup> Towards this end the regime has experimented in turn with all sorts of approaches. In its initial phases, Tehran experimented with regulated economy, associated with the Prime Ministerial tenure of Mir-Hossein Mousavi and the war economy he put together in the 1980s in the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq war. Then in the 1990s it began to experiment with market economy (associated with free market and private enterprise advocated by the former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Thereafter Tehran turned towards economic populism around 2005 with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Needless to say, none of these approaches have delivered on the crucial promise of the Islamic revolution of 1979, that an Islamic order would bring about a just and equitable economic dispensation, and reduce inequalities within the system.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was brought about by a groundswell of public disaffection against the crony capitalism that had characterised the rentier economy of the five decades of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79).<sup>2</sup> In those five decades, the proceeds of Iran's oil exports had been deployed in industrialisation of the country's economy at a break-neck speed, accompanied by rapid urbanisation from the 1960s and the rise of a proletarian class. A creamy layer of industrial capitalists were allowed

access to a share of the revenue receipts by the rentier regime, who used the capital to import foreign technology and even foreign capital to bring about industrial modernisation in the country, displacing the mercantile capitalists of the *bazaar* who had dominated Iranian economy till the beginning of industrialisation. Like all other modernising dispensations of the Middle East, the Pahlavis too had invested heavily in a modern educational system, but the modernised sector of the economy did not generate nearly as much absorptive capacity as the volumes of educated youth leaving the colleges and universities. All those who did not benefit materially from the Pahlavi project of modernisation – the underclass, the *bazaaris*, the educated unemployed – made common cause with the critics of the modernisation project to bring about the revolutionary upheaval of 1979.<sup>3</sup> The Islamic Republic that came into being, thus, set itself the mandate of addressing all the disgruntled elements that brought the revolution about by dismantling the capitalist system of economy spawned by the Pahlavis.

Dismantling the crony capitalist dispensation was the easier part; the difficult task was to find something to replace it with. The revolutionaries of 1979 who framed the constitution of 1979 were equally clear in their rejection of the socialist model of development. They talked of creating an Islamic order that was neither fully one, nor fully the other. The constitution of Iran both safeguards private property and enterprise and declares capitalism to be illegitimate; it ordained that the crucial (“mother”) sectors of the economy would be either nationalised or publicly owned in a cooperative mode, but the private sector would continue to operate for everything else.<sup>4</sup>

The revolutionary order, thus, put in place initially a highly regulated economy that was quite different than the garden variety of a socialist order. This was not necessarily an ideologically motivated decision, for there was little clarity on what an Islamic economic order stood for. Also, as industrial and crony capitalists close to the Pahlavis fled the country in 1979, Iran’s economy had taken a hit. As rough and ready ‘revolutionary justice’ began to be handed out to anyone suspected of being collaborators by way of purges, by 1980 even technicians, engineers and people from

the managerial ranks began to flee the country. Thus, when Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, and the “longest war” (1980-88) began, industrial production necessary for military purposes were particularly affected. It was in that background that the assets of no less than fifty of the largest industrial houses and industrial ventures were nationalised,<sup>5</sup> which were made over to sections of the revolutionaries who by the early 1980s constituted the new elite, dominated by the newly constituted *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Islami* (Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, hereafter, Sepah).<sup>6</sup> Large amounts of subsidy were poured into these industrial ventures to facilitate production for military purposes right through the years of the war. This was accompanied by the nationalisation of the remaining major sectors of the economy, including all private banks, insurance companies, and heavy industries. Large economic and financial foundations (Bonyad-ha), i.e. conglomerates of the Pahlavi era were also taken over ‘in order to redistribute their resources among the poor and the needy’, operating on the principles of cooperative management similar to *waqf* administration.<sup>7</sup> For nearly a decade spanning the duration of the Iraq War, the government controlled domestic prices and imposed a wage ceiling, and kept foreign exchange rates artificially overvalued, subjected imports to governmental allocation, and required a variety of permits for establishing of new industrial enterprises. Foreign investments in Iran were mostly rejected and subsidies were provided for nearly all basic foodstuff.

However, in the medium and long-term, the cost of the Iraq war was too great. Quite apart from the physical devastation caused by the war both in terms of the human casualties and loss properties running to the tune several hundred billions of dollars, the Iranian economy was exhausted in 1989. According to the government’s own estimate, Iran’s GDP in constant prices declined during the war at an average of 1.5 per cent, so much so that in 1988-89, GDP in real prices was equivalent to that of 1974.<sup>8</sup> The remedy was clear – the economy needed a massive infusion of capital for its revival. However, with little productive economic enterprise for nearly a decade, there was precious little by way of capital mobilisation. There were those within the establishment who were in favour of borrowing from the global financial market or institutions,

but Tehran's failure to negotiate a World Bank loan (in the face of US opposition) and determined resistance from within the larger Iranian establishment quickly ruled that option out by 1989.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, by the late 1980s, by way of an alternative a consensus emerged about the need for the state to withdraw from the economy outside petroleum sector. Both Presidents Rafsanjani (1989-97) and Sayyid Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005) worked towards dismantling the large state – premised upon foreign exchange liberalisation, decontrol of prices, elimination of subsidies and privatisation of state-owned enterprises. They tried to change the role of the state from intervention and control to supervision, thereby allowing private capital and the market to increase investment in infrastructure and industrial output.

To the extent denationalisation involved divestment of stakes held by the government in the economy, the consensus by and large held. But, the consensus broke down on the question of whether the private sector should be allowed to grow back to a stage where they played a major role in the country's economy. When Rafsanjani embarked on the massive bid for reconstruction of the Iranian economy, known as the *jihad-e sazandegi*, there was some resistance from the newly-formed revolutionary elite against Rafsanjani's idea of a full-fledged privatisation of the nationalised sector, lest it brought about a return of the industrial elite of the pre-revolutionary times.<sup>10</sup> It was agreed that while the state would divest its holdings, the divested entities would run on a co-operative mode by outfits dominated by the revolutionary elites, being either taken over by smaller outfits run by the Sepah, or run by the Sepah-dominated Bonyad-ha. Thus, denationalisation of industrial and economic enterprises did not end up with their being completely privatised. In the 1990s, the Sepah (and from 2005 its reserves, the Basij militia)<sup>11</sup> acquired a controlling stake in many of these enterprises, creating a vast network of industrial and financial conglomerates. These industrial and financial conglomerates dominate the country's economy to the extent that much of the Iran's industrial production and financial sector in 2020 continues to be dominated by outfits associated with the Sepah, and to a lesser extent the Basij.<sup>12</sup>



The problem of this stunted mode of denationalisation of state-run enterprises was, of course, that this did not bring about any fresh infusion of capital into the economy. Not all state-run enterprises were immediately denationalised, and even most of those that were denationalised being taken over by the Sepah and particularly the Bonyad-ha, the total corpus of capital remained unchanged. Furthermore, both the outfits run by the Sepah had been receiving subsidies for their operations during the wartime, not unlike the nationalised sector. Even in the 1990s, outfits run by the Sepah continued to claim the economic concessions and subsidies that they had been accorded from wartime, virtually as their entitlements for 'public service'. Additionally, industrial and financial conglomerates of the pre-revolutionary era operating under the rubric of the Bonyad-ha (dominating sectors like communication, engineering, road-building, shipping, oil and gas) went on claiming exemption from government scrutiny. Over time these emerged as useful mechanism for personal enrichment for some elements of the revolutionary elite, which therefore hindered the reconstruction efforts in a big way.

By the late-1990s, as oil prices dropped sharply, the government of President Khatami was faced with the need to reduce the footfall of the state in the economy even more and bring about fresh infusion of capital.<sup>13</sup> Apart from reviving and initially successfully pushing for the opening up of Iran to foreign capital, Khatami mounted the pressure for divestment on the Bonyad-ha and outfits run by the Sepah and the Basij. Consequently, the Sepah and those associated the Bonyad-ha began to join other forces opposed to the Khatami and his reformists in resisting the agenda of economic reform.<sup>14</sup>

Economic liberalisation under President Khatami had brought in its wake considerable economic hardship. Hence the IRGC-Basij axis attacked the reformist agenda as a betrayal of the promise of the Revolution towards the creation of 'Islamic' order. The basiji leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the presidency in 2005 with his promise of a redistributive vision of the economy in a veritable chiliastic order. In the four years that followed Ahmadinejad undid many of the more unpopular economic reforms undertaken by his two predecessors, and indulged

in an exercise of populism. The populist agenda of Ahmadinejad was marked on the face of it by an agenda of redistribution backed by high oil prices, which were the highest in two decades during the first term of Ahmadinejad (2005-09). By this time, the pressure to continue with divestment of the nationalised grew sufficiently strong for Ahmadinejad to embrace what had been otherwise a key plank of the agenda of economic reformists. Behind the smokescreen of redistribution, however, Ahmadinejad orchestrated the privatisation policy in such a manner that the Sepah and particularly the Basijis close to him benefited from the divestment of nationalised resources carried out since 2006, much in the same way that the Sepah had in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, privatisation which was meant to mobilise capital reinvestment in Iran's sanction-ridden economy was instead carried out in the opposite direction where the state actually lost capital assets, even as the revolutionary elite entrenched itself in the various sectors of the country's economy. So doing it threw the agenda of economic reform completely off the rails.

### *The Agenda of Economic Reform and the Resistance to It*

Towards the end of the Iraq War, there emerged a consensus in Iran that the largely nationalised economy stood in urgent need to be dismantled, but there was no agreement on how that was to be brought about. The pivotal point of distinction became the issue whether the economy should be driven by market forces alone, or whether there should be some degree of regulation that would still be necessary to ensure the 'Islamic' character of the Republic. Political platforms since 1989 have been classified by observers largely on the basis of where they stand on the question of such reforms. Those who have advocated the need for such reforms have been loosely called the Reformists; those who have chosen to stand on the side of regulation to 'conserve' the 'Islamic' nature of the regime have been loosely identified as the Conservatives.

The primary agenda of economic reform in the Islamic Republic is to wean the Iranian economy from its overweening dependence on oil, and strengthen the bases of the non-oil component in the country's economy.

Foremost among the votaries of economic reform is the camp of President Rafsanjani, loosely assembled around the *Hizb-e Kargozaran-e Sazandegi* (Party of the Executives of Reconstruction) who strongly advocated the programme of denationalisation and privatisation of economic resources, strengthening of market forces and a normalisation of Iran's relationship with the international community – both Presidents Rafsanjani and Hassan Rouhani (2013-till date) hail from this section of the reformists. There were also those among the reformists who believed that the agenda of economic reform would not be complete without the larger reform of the Islamic Republic to safeguard the citizen's political and cultural liberties, free from all kinds of regulation of both the public sphere and the private sphere by the regime. This position was embraced by President Mohammad Khatami and his *Nehzat-e Dovvom-e Khordad* (Second of Khordad movement), and later by the *Jebhe-ye Mosharikat-e Iran-e Islami* (Islamic Iran Participation Front).

The Conservative opposition to the Reformist position is mounted by a firm belief that such reforms would undermine the fundamental features of the Islamic and revolutionary order that was brought into being in 1979. They favoured the dismantling of the nationalised economy of the 1980s in favour of a mercantile bourgeois order, but are not comfortable with the full opening up of the Iranian economy to global market forces. Such conservative positions characterised the *Jamiat-e Mo'talefeh-ye Islami* (Allied Islamic Society) in the 1990s, and the *Osulgarian* (the Principlists) of present times, represented by politicians like the former Speaker of the Majlis (Parliament) 'Ali Larijani. Many of the politicians from this camp, including Larijani, have association with the Sepah and the various Bonyad-ha, and have so far opposed tooth-and-nail any attempt at the reforms of the cooperative sector and the Bonyad-ha (dominated by the revolutionary elites, and in particular, the Sepah). Also among the Conservatives happen to be the *A'telaf-e Abadgaran-e Iran-e Islami* (Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran), a faction led by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and comprised largely of those who have had a connection with the Basij. Soliciting a populist, economically redistributive agenda in economics, the *Abadgaran* favour an economic order with a fair degree of regulation. The Conservatives, especially the *Motalefeh-Osulgaran* combination, have

historically dominated the Iranian Majlis even when Reformists have held the Presidency – except for a brief period during 2000-04, and thus have successfully created roadblocks for Presidents Rafsanjani, Khatami and Rouhani by thwarting their bids to reform the economy of the Islamic Republic, severely crippling any prospects of serious reform.

And yet, the need for reform has proved more enduring than the Reformist movement so far has. This has largely to do with the structural factors operating in the country. The Islamic Republic of Iran has one of the most literate adult populations around the world (around 90 per cent),<sup>16</sup> and also one of largest proportion of population having had access to higher education (nearly 20 per cent of all Iranians have been through a college<sup>17</sup> – almost double the number of Indians in the corresponding category). It is this section of the population – the highly educated, urban youth in pursuit of a more comfortable life – who constitute the bedrock of the constituency of economic reform in the country.<sup>18</sup> Despite such immense wealth in human resources, Iran's economy as a whole does not have nearly as much absorptive capacity in terms of employment as is required – in March 2014, youth unemployment stood at a staggering 27.4 per cent in 2019.<sup>19</sup> Further, any rudimentary study of the demography of Iran also reveals that the country is largely urban, and thus the share of the agricultural sector in employment generation is insignificant, largely because the returns from the sector are not satisfactory enough to draw this educated youth. In the last two decades, the sector that has grown exponentially to absorb ever larger numbers of Iranians has been the urban service sector, but the sanctions regime have hampered the full growth potential of this sector.

The most important structural problem confronting the Islamic Republic today is the technology gap that is essentially a product of the politics of the Islamic Republic both at home and abroad. The petroleum sector, Iran's principal foreign exchange earner, and manufacturing sector of Iran are caught in a kind of a technology time warp, because ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has not really had any major access to foreign technology. Since the Iranian petroleum and industrial technology before 1979 was essentially imported from the west, American imposition of a punitive sanctions regime against the country followed by the Iran-

Iraq War dried up all technological inputs from abroad, and Iran was thrown back on its own capacity to improvise. Once the war was over, there was resistance from within the establishment to the idea of foreign capital, hence even though Iran opened up for business she had little fresh infusion of technology. This meant that in crucial capital intensive technologies, such as in the petroleum sector, Iran was out of the loop of the advances that had been seen in other areas of the world, and had to manage with what the Iranians could develop their existing technology through extensive research and development.<sup>20</sup> Iran's petroleum infrastructure sector, though, was particularly badly hit, because in that particular technology Iran did not make sufficient advances.<sup>21</sup> Even as her total volume of oil production slowly expanded since the Iraq War, her productivity did not and in 2017 Iran was in a condition that she could produce less oil than she had done in 1979.<sup>22</sup> This implied in turn that her oil revenue could not increase as fast as it might otherwise have had, and thus reduce the total corpus of investible corpus available in the country's economy.

It is largely on account of this that the reformists in the Iranian establishment have come to maintain it to be essential that the rentier economy of the past be replaced by a post-oil economy. They argue that the creation of a dynamic, industrial and service economy is essential to retain the allegiance of these people for, and for the survival of, the Islamic Republic. For that, Iran needs to gradually remove the shackles of regulation that characterised the oil-powered rentier economy of the early years of the Republic, and allow private capital – both foreign and domestic – to stimulate the economy to the point that it is able to regenerate itself, and be integrated with the international economy. Only then could a whole generation of people who have come of age in the Islamic Republic, and have no memory have of the pre-revolutionary regime, find any sense to offer their allegiance to the present dispensation. Hence, in the eyes of reformists like Khatami and Rouhani, structural reforms in the Iranian economy are not merely categorical imperatives, but also a kind of existential necessity.

The nuclear deal signed by Tehran, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015 has to be situated in this context. The economic

sanctions imposed by the USA from 2003 (upon the discovery of Tehran's nuclear programme arguably beyond the scope of its NPT commitments) had botched Khatami's attempts at a gradual integration of Iran within the global economic landscape. Ahmadinejad's defiance of the international community crippled all prospect of such integration, and increased the difficulties for the country once the global economic slowdown of 2008-10 caused oil prices to fall precipitately, and thus weakened Iran's rentier regime financially. The situation was further exacerbated by the still more severe sanctions regime introduced by USA and EU on account of Ahmadinejad's nuclear adventurism. Thus, when he came to power in 2013, President Rouhani was compelled to reduce subsidies across the economic sectors begun by Ahmadinejad by about 50 per cent, because by then the subsidies regime had become unsustainable.<sup>23</sup> Given the tremendous hardship caused by the crippling sanctions regime, there developed a broad consensus among the Osulgarian and the Reformists that the sanctions regime had to be brought to an end. When the JCPOA came into being, Rouhani banked on the nuclear deal to help reduce economic hardship, which would have enabled him to press further with structural reforms, and in particular reform of the economically pampered *Bonyad-ha* and the cooperative sector dominated by the Sepah.

Fully aware of this possibility, the Conservative lobby associated with the *Bonyad-ha* and the Sepah began to criticise Rouhani, saying the deal was not producing the economic turn-around that he had promised.<sup>24</sup> They fielded two candidates for the Presidential election of 2017 – Ebrahim Raisi (head of the richest *Bonyad*, the *Astan-e Qods Rezavi*) and Mohammed-Bagher Ghalibaf (former Sepah commander, associated with the *Bonyad Khatm al-Anbiya*), presumably to galvanise the opposition to such structural reforms by the interest groups that were benefitting from activities of these outfits and others like them, which could amount to as much as 30 per cent of the total employment generated in the Islamic Republic.

Indeed, the JCPOA gave reformism a fillip, having Rouhani sail out to Europe and Asia alike, looking for fresh investments and infusion of

much-needed technology, the most important being the investment by the French oil major Total in Iranian petroleum sector. But the deal also entrenched the opposition to the possibility of structural reforms. When the deal was concluded, the nuclear establishment of Iran, (dominated by the Sepah and the Basijis because of the security profile) had been put on leash. The relative quiescence coincided with a virtual free hand Sepah were given in propping up Bashar al-Assad and defeating Islamic State – this involved the allocation of considerable resources. It makes one wonder whether there was a kind of trade-off between the Sepah's acceptance of the nuclear deal on the one hand, and the government's tacit acceptance of the Sepah's forward push in Iraq and Syria.

Criticism nevertheless began to emerge that JCPOA was not as productive as initially hoped, and much of it came from the opponents of structural reforms in the Iranian establishment.<sup>25</sup> Rouhani was accused of failing throwing away the regime's nuclear leverage in his quest for support of "outsiders". Trump administration's decision in 2018 to pull out of the JCPOA, and reinstate a severe sanctions regime helped the Conservatives to attack the whole Reform agenda altogether, which accounts for the increased adventurism by the Sepah that was seen in 2019 (which nearly dragged the two sides on the brink of conflict) even as diplomatic option continued to be resorted to by the Iranian government.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Generational Shift in the Islamic Republic*

The struggle for structural reforms and the resistance needs be situated in the backdrop of a generational shift that Iran has begun to undergo in the last decade or so. After the death of Rafsanjani in January 2019, the *Rahbar* (Supreme Leader) 'Áli Khamenei happens to be the last of the revolutionary caucus that had formed around Khomeini, and had brought about the Islamic Revolution of 1979, hence constituting the core of the revolutionary elite that came into being with the Islamic revolution. Almost the entire range of the political elite of the Islamic Republic today are in that sense the second tier of the first generation of the revolutionary elite – ranging from Presidents Muhammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hassan Rouhani, the powerful Speaker of the

Majlis 'Ali Larijani, the head of both the Shoura-e Negahban (Guardians' Council) and the Majlis-e Khobregan (Assembly of Experts) Ayatollah Jannati, the head of the Judiciary Ebrahim Raisi, right down to former Mayor of Tehran and now the Speaker of the Majlis, Baqer Qalibaf, the Secretary of the Expediency Council Mohsen-Rezai, and the head of the Sepah's Qods Brigade Qassem Soleimani – all come from the 1980s, constituting the revolutionary generation that came into being *after* the revolution in 1979, running right through the 1980s. All the Presidents of the Islamic Republic so far (after Abolhasan Bani Sadr demitted the office in 1981) have come from the revolutionary generation, people who had honed their political skills in the heat of the revolution, and who continue to derive their political legitimacy on the strength of their role in the creation of the revolutionary order – including the youngest of them, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.<sup>27</sup> Same is true of all the Speakers of the Majlis,<sup>28</sup> heads of other constitutional bodies (elected or unelected).

By 1997, which marked the high period of reform, the post-revolutionary generation of the elite had begun to enter into the political arena (the leading light being Javed Zarif, foreign minister to President Rouhani) representing the aspirations of a generation of people who had no connection to, or no memory of, the pre-revolutionary era. These are the people who have so far held nothing higher than mayoralties and some cabinet portfolios, and have not made it into any of the highest offices of the Republic.

Yet these members of the post-revolutionary generation of the political elite have been instrumental in reshaping the political discourse of the Islamic Republic in a big way. Representing as they do the generation of Iranians who were born after 1979, or too young to remember it, they do not think much of the relentless drumming of the beats of the revolution. They helped reformulate the political discourse from the late 1990s to speak no longer simply of the *Engelab-e Islami*, but also of the *Jomhuri-ye Islami* (i.e. the Islamic Republic, not the Islamic revolution).<sup>29</sup> Thus implying that the political legitimacy in the Islamic Republic cannot and should not be derived from the foundational moment of 1979 alone, rather from what has followed since.



This ideational tussle across generations has been discernible since early 2000s, from when a struggle has been waged to establish political legitimacy through a decoding of the “Islamic” element in the revolutionary regime. Both the so-called conservatives and the reformists have been equally innovative in this process of deconstructing ‘Islam’ for the last three decades or so.<sup>30</sup> Hence, ideas representing economic progress to both conservative and reformist camps have been promoted in the name of Islam – advocating either for regulated economy and society (conservative) or free society and free enterprise (reformist), as against an earlier tendency to equate Islam very narrowly with social practices and mores (women observing the *hijab*, maintaining segregation of the sexes in the public space including public transport, etc.). The public sector assets were denationalised by arguing Islam does not authorise nationalisation of economic assets except in emergencies, and is generally supportive of private property; however, much of such denationalised assets were retained by the co-operative sector in the name of equity that is supposed to be the hallmark of Islam. Conservative forces have traditionally argued in favour of tightly regulating the public space, and have endorsed enforcement of Islamic morality; by contrast reformists favour deregulating the social and the cultural spheres because to them that freedom was quintessentially Islamic.

While the language of politics in contemporary Iran is such that Islam operates as the touchstone, the revolutionary generation continues to adduce their revolutionary credentials to any claim of political legitimacy, because of the pivotal role the revolution played in founding the Islamic Republic. In fact, the revolutionary generation – especially the more conservative elements tend to conflate revolutionary credentials with Islam itself. Thus, ‘Ali Khamenei was chosen as the successor to Ayatollah Khomeini as the Rahbar on account of his proximity to the latter (and his political acumen) despite not having the theological credentials that might have been expected of any successor of Khomeini. It is largely following that line of argument that the Shoura-e Negahban (Council of Guardians), dominated by the conservative elements of the revolutionary generation right from its inception, have been disqualifying from the

late-1980s the candidature of prominent reformists (among others) at elections for the President, the *Majlis*, and the *Majlis-e Khobregan* (Assembly of Experts) as well as in local elections, thereby very often emptying elections of their meaning. They have also been pivotal in thwarting attempts at reform, both economic and political, whenever they have gained momentum, by ruling presidential measures and laws passed by the *Majlis* as un-Islamic.

Such monopolistic claims over the Islamic Republic made by the revolutionary generation have been among of the more serious grievances nursed by the post-revolutionary generation. They find the entire institutional apparatus stacked against their aspirations should they not fit into the schema of the revolutionary elite. They have generally responded by either voting overwhelmingly in favour of a candidate they hoped would bring some reform (Khatami in 1997 and 2001; Rouhani in 2013 and 2017),<sup>31</sup> or by staying away from the polls altogether (in 2005 Presidential elections,<sup>32</sup> and *Majlis* elections of 2004, 2008, 2012, 2020).<sup>33</sup> From time to time, therefore, the post-revolutionary generation takes to the streets in order to air their grievances – as they did after the 2009 Presidential elections disputing the outcome,<sup>34</sup> or in 2020, after initial official denial upon the accidental shooting down of a Ukrainian passenger airliner, demanding greater transparency and political accountability.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, not all young Iranians necessarily root for reforms. Beneficiaries of the revolutionary order (both in terms of economic benefits and in terms of access to offices of significance), in particular the Sepah, the Basij or those associated with the Bonyad-ha consider free enterprise (i.e. integration with the international economy) and unqualified political freedom as subversive. They were happy to undermine the JCPOA and return to sanctions-resistant economic order, largely buoyed up by its large network of patronage. Their network of patronage includes a whole post-revolutionary generation of Iranian lower and lower middle class youth from the small towns and the provinces of Iran, who have flourished on account of the various scholarships made available to them in the country's economic institutions, and jobs in enterprises dominated by the Sepah-Basij axis.

Nor is it the case that the revolutionary generation is comprised necessarily of defenders of the revolutionary order. Some of the leading lights of the reformist cause such as Khatami and Rouhani had begun as archetypal regime insiders before they espoused the cause of the reform. The reformists however seem to represent more the post-revolutionary social forces that are largely disgruntled with the regulated economic and social order that came with the revolution, and want Iran to be open and generate greater opportunities for those who are outside the circle of patronage of the revolutionary elite. The reformists believe that, in recommending in their programme of reform that might even lead to a veritable re-founding of the Islamic Republic, they are working to safeguard it, rather than undermining it as their conservative opponents charge them as doing.

## **Conclusion**

In the past couple of years (if not longer) Tehran's responses in its dealings with the world have often left its interlocutors befuddled with its mixed messaging. However, except for the tenure of Ahmadinejad, Iranian Presidents have tended to try to deal with the international community by walking the path of structural reforms. Vested interests of the revolutionary elite have generally succeeded in stalling them. Even on the issue of Tehran's nuclear options, reformists like Khatami and Rouhani initially favoured Iran being a nuclear threshold state, and were perfectly willing to sacrifice the nuclear option if that allowed integration with the global economy. By contrast, the Sepah, the Basijis and some of the other conservatives have argued that the interests of regime security make the nuclear option an existential imperative. Hence, during 2009-10, when hard-pressed Iranians sent nuclear negotiations under Larijani with Khamenei's support, they were undermined by President Ahmadinejad himself. Rouhani used the JCPOA to try to reintegrate Iran into the international economy, and vested interests of the Sepah and the other conservatives have chosen to oppose it yet again. The brinkmanship that characterised Iran's activities in the summer of 2019 – either directly or through its proxies – pushing the region on the brink of conflict happens to have been the direct outcome of this opposition to Rouhani's nuclear

diplomacy. Until the structural problems of the Islamic Republic are resolved, this would not be the last crisis of its sort.

## Notes

1. For a detailed discussion see Evaleila Pesaran, *Iran's Struggle for Economic Independence: Reform and Counter-Reform in the Post-revolutionary Era*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 27-38.
2. See Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism 1926-79*, London: Macmillan, 1981.
3. Misagh Parsa, *The Social Origins of the Islamic Revolution* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1989).
4. Article 44, *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.
5. Anourshivan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: the Iranian Second Republic*, (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 83-88.
6. Suzanne Maloney, "Agents or Obstacles: Parastatal Foundations and Challenges for Iranian Development", in Parvin Alizadeh (ed.), *The Economy of Iran: Dilemmas of an Islamic State*, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 154.
7. *Bonyads* are a variation of a *wqaf* (sing. *waqf*.) i.e., autonomous charitable foundations in Muslim societies relying upon endowments by faithful, purported to provide material support to the less-privileged members of the Muslim community. Associated generally with religious shrines and orders, organisations such as the *Bonyad-e Astan-e Qods* or the *Bonyad-e Panzdah-ye Khordad* have prospered under the Islamic Republic. For instance, based at the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, owning property all over Iran and receiving a steady stream of revenue from alms paid by pilgrims, the *Bonyad-e Astan-e Qods* is supposed to have an annual budget of around US\$ 2 billion. The Islamic Republic, however, has invested far greater assets to *bonyads* that have to attachment with religious endowments. While there are some foundations that rely on private funds, most rely heavily on the government for either direct subsidies or special prerogatives, with considerable autonomy. Several of such quasi-public foundations, such as *Bonyad-e Mostazafan wa Janbazan* (Foundation for the Oppressed and the Self-Sacrificers, entrusted with protecting victims of the revolution and the war) and the *Komiteh-ye Imdad-e Imam* (Imam's Relief Committee, providing medical, educational and social assistance to needy rural families), were pivotal to sustained war effort and also economic activity all through the 1980s.
8. Jahangir Amuzegar, *the Islamic Republic of Iran: Reflections on an Emerging Economy*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).
9. Pesaran, op. cit., pp. 73-96.
10. Ibid., pp. 85-87.

11. During the 1980s, the *Basij* forces had worked in tandem with the regime to physically crush all domestic opposition. Frequently, such activities took the form of enforcing Islamic virtues and punishing immoral or lax behaviour on part of the people, and were constitutionally underwritten by the injunction to engage in *amr beh al-ma'ruf wa naby an'l munkar* (lit. Enjoin what is known [to be Good] and Forbidding the Evil). See Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
12. It needs be understood that the influence of the Sepah in Iranian economy is not that of a monolithic organisation that is centrally controlled by any one individual or a group of individuals. While the paramilitary organisation of the Sepah is indeed heavily centralised and controlled (so far) by the Rahbar and the collective leadership of the organisation answerable to the Rahbar, when it comes to its operations in the economy of the country the Sepah functions like a loose network of conglomerates tied to each other through a network of people all of whom are connected with each other through that same network. At occasions people connected with the Sepah may be divided among themselves, in accordance with the interests of the outfit they immediately represent, but the network tying them to each other has historically proven more important than particular interests dividing them. See, Frederic Wehrey, Jerrold D. Green, Brian Nichiporuk, Alireza Nader, Lydia Hansell, Rasool Nafisi, S. R. Bohandy, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2009). For a detailed profiling of the Sepah's economic interests, see Appendix A, pp. 99-102.
13. For a sense of the discussions around liberalisation and economic reforms during the Khatami period, see Massoud Karshenas and Hassan Hakimian, "Managing Oil Resources and Economic Diversification in Iran", in Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi, *Iran in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Politics, Economics and Conflict*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge 2008), pp. 194-216.
14. Bijan Khajehpour, 'Iran's Economy: Twenty Years after the Islamic Revolution,' in J.L. Esposito, R.K. Ramazani (eds) *Iran at the Crossroads*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) p. 114.
15. Under a new law regarding 'privatisation' introduced by Ahmedinejad, nearly 2,000 nationalised entities valued at anything between US\$ 100 and 140 billion were privatised. Almost 40 per cent of the shares so divested were earmarked as "justice shares" for sale among low income households at heavily discounted prices. The value of such resources made over to 4.6 million people has been put at US\$ 2.7 billion. See Nader Habibi, "The Economic Legacy of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad", *Middle East Brief*, Crown Centre for Middle East Studies, p. 3, <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB74.pdf>, accessed on January 31, 2014.
16. *UNESCO Country Reports: Iran*, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/ir>, accessed on December 10, 2019.

17. Ibid.
18. Behzad Yaghmayan, *Social Change in Iran: An Eye-witness Account of Dissent, Defiance and New Movement for Rights*, (New York: SUNY, 2002), pp. 73-116.
19. *World Bank Group*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=IR>, accessed on January 19, 2020.
20. For a very comprehensive discussion on the question of science and technology in Iran, see Abdool S. Soofi and Mehdi Goodarzi, (eds), *The Development of Science and Technology in Iran: Policies and Learning Frameworks*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
21. For a detailed argument on this, see Fatemeh Hoshdar and Seyed Farhang Fassihi, "Technology Development in Iranian Petroleum Industry: Approaches, Achievements and Challenges" in Ibid. pp. 87-110.
22. [https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries\\_long/Iran/background.htm](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Iran/background.htm), accessed on December 10, 2019.
23. Daniel Fineren, "Iran parliament backs Rouhani plan for subsidy cuts" Reuters, February 6, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-subsidies/iran-parliament-backs-rouhani-plan-for-subsidy-cuts-idUSL5N0LA0DJ20140206>, accessed on December 10, 2019.
24. Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Iran's conservatives are now criticizing the country's nuclear deal", *Business Insider*, July 17, 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/irans-conservatives-criticize-the-countrys-nuclear-deal-2015-7?IR=T>, accessed on December 10 2019.
25. "Iran conservatives attack govt over nuclear deal", Arab News, May 14, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1302056/middle-east>, accessed on December 10, 2019.
26. For a discussion of how domestic politics nearly dragged Iran into conflict with the USA, see Kingshuk Chatterjee, "Brinkmanship in the Persian Gulf: What Drove American and Iranian Policy in the Summer of 2019?", in *Stosunki Międzynarodowe/International Relations*, vol 55, no 2, 2019, pp. 25-42.
27. 'Ali Khamenei (1981-89) and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) were direct students of Ayatollah Khomeini, and were among the architects of the Islamic revolution right from its beginning. Sayyid Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) was a student of Khomeini who served as the Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance (1982-92) before he became the President of the Republic. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) was a student at the University of Science and Technology at Tehran when the Islamic Revolution happened. He joined the Basij upon the outbreak of the Iraq War, which he served right through the war. During the war he held administrative positions in West Azerbaijan, before being appointed the governor of Ardabil, and then elected the Mayor of Tehran. Hassan Rouhani (2013-till date, term ends 2021) has been a member of the Majlis from 1980 to 2000, eventually

- serving as its deputy Speaker. From 1989 he has served on the Supreme National Security Council, and from 1991 on the Majlis-e Khobregan. As the representative of Khamenei on the SNSC he was in charge of Iran's nuclear negotiations during the Khatami era as well.
28. These were Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1980-89), Mehdi Karroubi (1989-92, 2000-04), 'Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri (1992-2000), Gholam 'Ali Haddad-'Adel (2004-08), 'Ali Larijani (2008-20) and Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf (2020-).
  29. Yaghmaian, op. cit., pp. 205-20.
  30. For an excellent treatment of this see, Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: the Struggle for Reform in Iran*, (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2001).
  31. In the 1997 elections, 79.92 per cent of the total electorate voted, with President Khatami receiving 69.06 per cent of the votes cast. In 2001, the figures were 66.77 per cent, and 77.01 per cent of that, respectively. In the 2013 elections, 72.94 per cent of the electorate turned up for the Presidential Polls, of whom 50.71 per cent voted for Hassan Rouhani; in 2017 the figures were 77.33 and 57.14 per cent respectively. Data compiled from website of Iran's Ministry of the Interior. <https://www.moi.ir/Portal/file/?462772/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AA%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-95.pdf>
  32. In the 2005 Presidential elections, only turnout was 59.76 per cent, of which Ahmadinejad received 61.69 per cent. Date collected from the website of the Iranian Ministry of the Interior. <https://www.moi.ir/Portal/file/?462772/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AA%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-95.pdf>
  33. The turnout in Majlis elections for these years were as follows: 2004 – 51.21 per cent; 2008 – 51 per cent; 2012 –; 2020 – 42 per cent. Compare that years when some reformists were allowed to run – 2000 – 67.35 per cent: 2016 – 60 per cent. All data compiled from *Iran Data Portal*, <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/parliamentary-elections>, accessed on August 12, 2020.
  34. referred to as the *Entekhab-e Gumsbudeh* in the reformist circles.
  35. Pariza Hafezi, “Our enemy is here’: Iran protesters demand that leaders quit after plane downed”, *Reuters*, January 12, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-crash/our-enemy-is-here-iran-protesters-demand-leaders-quit-after-plane-downed-idUSKBN1ZA0X6>, accessed on August 12, 2020.

## 8. From Proactive to Reactive: Shift in American Middle East Strategy

*Binoda K. Mishra*

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“We are opening a Pandora’s Box,” Dwight Eisenhower warned when he ordered the first US combat mission in the region.”<sup>1</sup> This has now been proved to be prophetic given the situation the US finds itself in the Middle East. The compulsions of Cold War rationalised the entry of the US into the region in the 1950s. That entailed entanglement in the issues of the Middle East that proved to be a more complex labyrinth than US could comprehend and manage. However, US had strong strategic reasons not to leave the area under the nose of Communist Soviet Union. There were three core reasons for the US decision to get entangled in the region: to deny the Soviets a strategic space; access to oil; and the establishment of Israel.<sup>2</sup> Only one of them was a material (oil) gain that the US was seeking in the region; the other two are more related to ideology and identity. During the Cold War that emerged after the Second World War, there was a perfect mix of these three interests and the US enjoyed the advantage of a benign image vis-à-vis the images of the Europeans, such as the British and the French. The US was also hailed for its decisive role in the victorious side of World War II. The control over the “Wells of Power” was shifting from the British hand to the hands of the US. The latter had replaced the former as the primary guarantee of security to the region for most of the prominent countries in the region.

By the early 1950s, the US had realised the maze of complex interplay of interests based on various identities, and variously manipulated by politics, that complicates the region but they had no readymade solution to any of the problems. In addition to the that the US project



of establishing a Jewish complicated the matter more for the US to hold on to its image of benign power. The persistent Soviet efforts to see the back of the Americans through spread of communism in the region alarmed the US so much that in the name of preventing the spread of communism, Eisenhower Doctrine was effectuated that committed US military involvement in the form of aid and even presence. On the call of the Lebanese President Camille Chamoun requested the US to help him control the growing civil strife in the country between the Christians and the Muslims. Though the intervention was short and targeted, it sent the signal of US preparedness of getting involved with its men and machine as the Lebanon intervention demonstrated a strength of 14,000 active fighters and supported by 40,000 sailors with a fleet of 70 ships.<sup>3</sup> This deployment and intervention was justified in the name of keeping the Soviets at a distance from the region.

The fear of the Soviets expanding their sphere of influence in the Middle East compelled the US to proactively cultivate the region. The access the Soviets got into the region by winning over Egypt, Syria and to a large extent Iraq, alarmed the US. Thus, the US on its part attempted to dethrone the Soviets by providing military aid to countries that were part of the so called “Northern Tier” who looked at the US for supplies of modern arms and equipment to deal with the regional threats they faced including threats from domestic political and civil crises. Till 1990, the US policy towards the Middle East remained a continuation of the Truman Doctrine in varying degrees depending on the nature of the US administration from time to time. While Eisenhower was reluctant in using force, but saw reason in intervening in Lebanon in 1958, Kennedy, during his short stint had not demonstrated much enthusiasm towards the region as he was primarily occupied with the Cuban Missile Crisis. That historic crisis added strength to the hawks in US administration to build a rationale for deeper engagement with the region on the pretext of saving US’s oil interests in the region. The oil interest was related inversely to the Soviet influence in the region and thus warranted proactive measures to prevent Soviet expansion into the region either militarily or ideologically. The Soviets were constantly at the game of

fomenting communist movements throughout the Middle East making the US constantly nervous. The partial success of the Soviets in the form of bringing important countries such as Egypt, Syria and Turkey made the US anxious enough warranting proactive engagement in the region.

While the Soviet threat was the face of the argument for increasing US involvement in the Middle East, the economic rationale was never lost sight of. The Anglo-American Petroleum Agreement (1944), right in the middle of the World War, underlines the American compulsion for involvement in that region. Arguably, the economic interest of the US, i.e. oil remained permanent throughout the Cold War period and if that entailed US shifting sides in the region, the US did not hesitate to do that. The conflict ridden Middle East was divided on the basis of the oil division between the British and the Americans. In coordination, both carefully operated in the Middle East to block Soviet entry into the region. This continued throughout the Cold War period and even after that till the US discovered shale oil/gas in its territory. To protect its oil interests in the region the US kept itself entangled in the region in spite of reluctance on the part of some US Presidents. The US involvement in the region became so intense that it could not keep up to its role of just a mediator for conflict resolution. It militarily intervened in many countries including its former allies such as Iraq.

The Israel Project, the other important reason of US involvement in the region, entailed the US antagonising a large part of the Arab World. Divided on the sectarian lines the Arab world has two major regional powers namely Iran and the Saudi Arab. Given Iran's equations with Israel and; change in the leadership through the Islamic revolution in 1979, the US saw reason to contain Iran's influence in the region. For this, along with cultivating Sunni countries of the Arab World, the US also helped Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war during 1980-88 only to turn the guns on Iraq in 1990 when Iraq attacked Kuwait. However, the US remained cautious about not getting militarily involved in favour of the Israel cause. It rather tried to pose as a genuine mediator between Israel and the Arab World. The US did achieve partial success in this role so far as securing its own interests in the region are concerned, but largely

failed to solve the Arab-Israel conflict that still lingers on. The Carter administration's efforts led to the Camp David Accord (1978) and Peace Treaty (1979) between Israel and Egypt. But failed to make any progress in solving the Israel and Palestine problem.

With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and with it the end of the Cold War, the face of American argument lost steam. Beginning from President Clinton, all subsequent US presidents put withdrawal from the Middle East in their election manifesto as involvement in that region in the absence of a clear Soviet threat, was seen as unnecessary of the American public who got increasingly worried about the loss of US lives in the Middle East quagmire. In addition, the successful discovery and extraction of Shale oil in the US considerably reduced US energy dependence on the Middle East. Thus, the rationale for continued involvement in a region that offers no seeming benefit to the US, proved unattractive and US lawmakers publicly announced their intentions to withdraw from this troubled region. It can separately be debated if the US has the right to withdraw from the Middle East after transforming the region into a worse shape than before, but the fact is by the beginning of the 21st century, the US had lost all motivations to remain involved in the Middle East. The collapse of the 2000 Camp David summit arranged by President Clinton was the last pro-active step the US had taken with regard to the Middle East.

Before the US could draw a strategy to draw itself out of the Middle East, a spectacular attack on US changed the scenario completely. The September 11, 2001 attack on five US targets; awakened the US to the new realities; that posed real threats to American interests anywhere, including the US homeland, having firm links to the Middle East. The US faced the real threat of non-state actors working against the US with their own agenda or as proxies for Anti-US powers in the region. The second real threat the US faced from the post-9/11 Middle East of state(s) failing and the present non-state actors taking over a state and making it rogue; or even a sovereign state turning rough with weapons of mass destruction and directed against the US. Unlike the threats of the Cold War, these threats have demonstrated themselves needing a

response from the US, which the US can ignore at the peril of its own interests and even security.

A complete reassessment of the Middle East by George W. Bush led the US to believe that the roots of the new threat lies in the nature of the Governments in the Middle East and thus in order to eliminate the threats the region needs to be made more democratic, if needed militarily. It began with the quick response to Al Qaeda attacks. With more of an intimation to the UN than seeking permission from it, the US went into Afghanistan with the flag of democracy and rule of law as guarantee of human rights. The Afghan invasion after the 9/11 resulted in a new form of engagement that was no longer part of any American grand strategy. In fact by the beginning of the 21st Century, the US had fatigued itself from engagement with the Middle East and preferred to eject out of the region. But the 9/11 event and the geopolitical situation in the region forced the US not only to stay on but also keep responding to the threats emanating from the region from time to time. The first reactive policy of the US towards the region began with the attack on Afghanistan in September 2001. Though the war was launched in the name of democracy and human rights, in reality the war on Afghanistan was a war of the US to protect the US homeland and overseas assets from non-state threats. The threat was real and the bases from where such threats emerged had very strong Middle East connections.

In its attempt to tackle the emerging threats from the region, the US made matters worse by committing some of the worst policy blunders towards the region. The invasion of Iraq was the most important and significant in terms of being a continued headache for the US. Removal of the unpopular dictator in Saddam Hussein earned the US no long term good will in the region let alone from Iraq. There certainly was euphoria when the US first went in to dethrone Saddam but this soon turned into an outrage against the US. The reasons were plenty and mostly explicable. The US played on the same concepts that plagued the region, i.e. Identity (ethnic and religious). In the way of tackling one manifestation of identity based conflicts, the US itself generated new manifestations of Identity based conflicts. The mishandling of the Iraqi militia with ethnic

identity and the bureaucracy with Baath Party ideology led to a vacuum in Iraq that was quickly filled by a force more dreaded than any the US encountered ever before – the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The US had to react to this new reality now. That brought them face to face with another reality of working with forces that are/were controlled by Iran in the region. US had to use forces potentially opposed to the ISIS, and the latter being a Sunni Islamic force warranted the US to form an alliance of the Shiites and Kurds to defeat the ISIS on the ground.

The Bush Jr. and Obama administrations had no options but to join hands with Iran-backed forces operating in Iraq. The Bush administration aligned Iran with the organisation perceived as terrorists by the USA, and drew an Axis of Evil involving Iran, Iraq and North Korea in the aftermath of the 2/11 attacks.<sup>4</sup> But once the US invaded Iraq in the pretext of the latter attempting to possess Weapons of Mass Destruction, the entire scenario changed for the US. The US realised that it needs Iran's help to stabilise post-Saddam Iraq. The US administration kept the option of luring Iran to work together in Iraq after the invasion in 2003. The mysterious unsigned document namely "Roadmap"<sup>5</sup> forwarded by the Swiss Government to the US State Department on May 4, 2003, contained the details of a proposal for the US and Iran to work together. Though the US did not respond to the proposal at that time, it is known that the Bush Jr. sent Mohamed ElBaradei with a proposal for negotiating all outstanding issues between Iran and the US. Iran's former Chief Nuclear Negotiator Hassan Fereydoun Rowhani claims, "Bush had told ElBaradei that he was not familiar with the situation in Iran and who has the ultimate power, but an Iranian representative with the authority to make a deal should go to the US and Bush himself would personally lead the negotiations."<sup>6</sup> Iran did not take the proposal at that time. The US kept on putting pressure on Iran to come on board in its fight with forces operating in Iraq. But the objective of stable Iraq became the compulsion of stopping ISIS during the Obama administration. Thus, the Obama administration decisively wanted to win Iran over. The US began serious negotiations with Iran under the theme of arresting the nuclear programme of Iran. But it had the middle-east objective of

containing terror predominant in its negotiation with Iran. Finally, the US succeeded to pressurise Iran enough to come to the table to negotiate what is known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The US managed the support of Iran towards its war efforts in Iraq by the successful conclusion of the JCPOA. With at least a neutral Iran and allies like the Kurds, the US succeeded in breaking the kingdom of the ISIS but the region remained far removed from the control of the US. The way the US tried to handle the Iraq crisis in the post Saddam era, created another long-term headache for the US, i.e. the increase in the sphere of influence of Iran in the region. The only achievement in terms of reducing the threat to the American mainland which the US achieved during the Obama administration was the elimination of Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda.

The territorial loss of the ISIS and the loss of leadership in Al Qaeda did not completely eliminate threats to the world and to the US in particular. The defused ISIS and franchised Al Qaeda continue to pose grave threat to the US. Which the US needed to address being present in the region. With the failure of the Bush administration's hope of succeeding on the spirit of democracy in the region, the Obama administration had to think differently and he came up with his broad policy of "Asia Pivot". Though Obama initiated the Asia Pivot policy in deference to Bush administration's obsession with Middle East and Democracy and argued to focus on the wider Asia where China was fast growing as an important power to reckon with. Though the Asia Pivot Policy was intended to focus away from the Middle East – withdraw from Afghanistan and Iraq – towards addressing the issue of rise of China; in reality the US was faced with Chinese movement towards Middle East as a compulsion to remain engaged in Middle East.

By 2015, China had become the largest importer of oil with over 50 per cent of its oil imports from the Middle East. Around the same time, in 2013, China announced its massive One Belt One Road (OBOR, later changed into Belt and Road or BRI) project that spanned three continents and involves very much the Middle East. In view of its objective of creating a global economic system around China, there is a

possibility of China increasing its military engagement with the region. At present China is involved militarily in the region but in smaller measures. “China has concluded partnerships agreements with 15 Middle Eastern countries. It participates in anti-piracy and maritime security missions in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden.”<sup>7</sup> There is growing concern in the US that China may pose itself as an alternative to US power in the region. This became an additional compulsion for the US to remain engaged in Middle East that might have lost some of its relevance to the US in terms of energy and establishment of the State of Israel. Chinese aggressive economic push into the region, coupled with China’s non-concern with the nature of Government in countries it has to deal with; presents the US with real danger of losing strategic ground to China in the region. It is believed that China has more hold over important countries of the region like Iran than US could ever have. Chinese control over the Middle East not only will reduce American dominance in the world but also will increase the chances of persistence of powerful non-state actors, including US designated terror outfits in the region. It is known to the US that while it was busy fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan and losing man and material in the name of protecting Human Rights; China was busy striking deals for smooth to and fro transit of materials of Chinese interest through Afghanistan with the help of Taliban and other local insurgent/guerilla forces/private armies. Piggy riding on US provided security environment may be the preferred policy for China now, but that may soon change with the increase of Chinese economic interests in the region. In the event of the BRI project succeeding in catapulting China at least into the centre of the international economic system, the defeat of American Ideas would be impending.

While the US had direct compelling reasons such as persistence of terror threat from the region and still substantive oil interests to remain involved even after the end of the Cold War; the entry of the Chinese brought back the Cold War time strategy of containment in US foreign policy. This time it is against China that seems much more stable than the former Soviet Union. The creeping Chinese advance into the region through the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

(SCO) is strategically alarming enough for the US. China has extended Observers status (soon to be a member) status to Iran and dialogue partner status to Turkey are direct Chinese moves to cut into the sphere of influence of the US in the region that warrant a suitable strategic response. The Trump administration fixed its attention firmly on China in formulating its Middle East strategy.

The second potent threat the US now faces in the region is from a re-assertive Russia. The creation of the Eurasian Union signals Russia's economic interests in the periphery of Middle East. The 2015 intervention in Syria sent a strong signal that Russia is recalibrating its Middle East policy. "By reversing the course of the Syrian civil war and saving an old client, Moscow sent a message to other Middle Eastern regimes that it is a reliable partner."<sup>8</sup> During the Syrian intervention, Russia worked closely with Iran and thus now has a better leverage with Iran to the irritation of the US. Russia has also upgraded its relationships with Turkey, another important Middle East player. Russian moves in the region reminds the US of the Cold War days and the anxiety of Russia bouncing back to active involvement in Middle Eastern conflagration is now a distinct possibility.

The US, seems to be lost on this front and due to its China focus, does not have the enthusiasm to take on the Russians in the region. The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from Syria exposing its Kurdish allies to Turkish aggression sends confusing signals to the players in the region about the worth of the US as a security provider. For the time being US, though is worried about the possibility of Russia working against US interests in the region, feels none of its interests – preventing terror attacks from the region, ensuring survival of Israel, preventing Iran from going nuclear and a steady flow of oil from the region – are in any danger. Thus the US can focus on the rising threat of China and can work with Russia in the region to safeguard its interests.

The Trump administration, has taken a view of the region that is not much different from the Obama administration but his approach differs slightly from that of Obama. While Obama believed on a working relationship with Iran to be in US's best interests in the region, Obama



thinks, such cooption of an Islamic power will jeopardise the primary interest of the US, i.e. meeting the threat of Islamic terror. Trump has gone on record in more than one occasion terming Iran as a sponsor of terror. He despised Obama's achievement in the form of arresting Iran's progress towards nuclearisation. Trump believes tougher sanctions would buckle Iran and it would yield to working with the US in the region. A follow up assumption, most view as faulty, Trump has is that Iran can be a friend if the current regime in Iran is removed. Thus, Trump has dumped the Iran deal arrived at during the Obama administration. Trump adopts a dual policy of fuelling protest against the present regime by putting severe sanctions on Iran; and by posing direct military threat. As his first term comes to an end, Trump seems to be succeeding in neither of its approaches towards Iran. Rather, it has antagonised Iran and made the US position and influence in Iraq unsustainable. Arguably Iran now runs two countries, itself and Iraq.

The major focus of the Trump administration is rising China and Trump twisted/modified the Obama time "Asia Pivot" to "Indo-Pacific" to deal with that rising China. Trump hopes to contain China's rise by drawing up an alliance of willing potential partners involving Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia. Though such an arrangement is not related to the Middle East, Trump's hopes of dealing with Chinese rise in Middle East rests on keeping China on its toes in the Pacific where China has more vital interests. To Trump's illusion, the "Indo-Pacific" architecture is not seeming to take shape the way Trump would have wished it. At the same time, his Middle East policies of pressurising Iran, wooing Turkey and cementing firmer relationships with the Arab world do not seem to be yielding desired results.

The present Middle East is much different from the Cold War times. During the Cold War, the US had clearly defined goals and challenges to those goals; the US could strategise and ensure its strategic objectives in the region are protected and furthered. In the post-Cold War situation, the US seems to be clueless. The factors affecting US interests in the Middle East has multiplied in comparison to the Cold War times and the active actors in the region have varying agenda making a comprehensive

assessment of the situation difficult for the US. While the strategically stable Cold War environment provided the US with an opportunity to be pro-active in the region, the post-Cold War environment presents the US with a region having numerous actors operating actively with their agenda forces the US to react, mostly in an ad hoc manner putting its interests and its position in the region in great uncertainty.

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## 9. The Return of the Prodigal: The Lengthening Shadow of Russia in the Middle East

*Hari Sankar Vasudevan and Kingshuk Chatterjee*

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It would have been difficult to anticipate in 1991 and the years that followed that Russia would play a substantial role in the Middle East in the first quarter of the 21st century. The strange phenomenon that we have been seeing, in the past years especially, of growing Russian involvement in the Middle East from Syria to Libya, from Turkey to Iran – what is now being called the “lengthening shadow of Russia” would have been difficult to envisage even as late as 2005-6. The growing presence of the Russian Federation in the conflict zones of Syria and Libya, and also the steady diplomatic support that it has lent Iran, has sounded the alarm in the capitals of NATO countries on either side of the Atlantic that this marks a new phase of expansionism on Russia’s part. The western academia has begun to draw the picture of Putin as the mastermind of this new ‘evil empire,’ which if not communist is at least as authoritarian as the last one.<sup>1</sup> However, if one takes a slightly longer perspective into consideration, Russian presence in the conflict zones of Libya and Syria and hovering on in the background in the nuclear imbroglio of Iran would not seem that incongruous.

This paper means to look historically into how this ‘shadow’ of Russia was constituted, by looking at the Soviet and Russian pasts in the region, and then looking at the last phase of that Russian past a little more closely. This essay on Russian involvement can be visualised in three parts: first, a long Russian involvement in the region which actually predates the American presence, which was deep and almost millennial in character. Russian interest in Turkey, the Levant or Iran cannot be measured against the kind of interest the USA has in these

countries. It used to be much a more substantive presence for a far longer stretch of time. That presence was a phenomenon which was constituted much more deeply over the years, and played out substantially differently during the Soviet period – the phenomenon was nevertheless composite in its character.

The second part of the essay deals with the caesura of the 1990s, a break which was a result of economic and geopolitical changes which took place as a consequence of the reduction of the Russian state in the 1992-95 period, roughly speaking, confining Russia to a territorial stretch in which some of the links of Russia with the Middle East was substantially reduced. To what extent was the caesura a major caesura can be debated, but it was during the caesura that the institutions that the US had been operating with, in the case of the Middle East, assumed different proportions and different forms. In the 1990s, there were certain accretions that took place in the way in which the USA developed its controls over this particular area.

The third part of the essay deals with the revival of Russian interest in the early 2000s, that is during the first term of the Putin administration, during which the Russian Federation was willing to operate within the system that had been instituted by the US and EU in this region, playing the second fiddle and high partner. There was no question of playing the role of a 'low partner' – they were keen to play the role in consonance with the system that had been instituted. So, the revival could be said to have begun in an earlier phase of the post-cold war system in which Russia was playing the role of a partner, from a position of strength – this was the so-called Gorchakovist approach of the early Putin era, associated with Igor Ivanov.

This was followed by the second phase of the Putin era, which may be divided into two parts. The first period which runs from roughly 2004-08, during which it became clear to the Putin administration that there was not going to be the status of parity to which they aspired in their relationship with the EU and the US, in the politics of the region, adjacent to the southern shores of Europe. This applied not simply to the Middle East, it also applied to the areas of the former Soviet South,

which were belts of activity in which the Russians had an interest over time. This was reinforced by the crisis of 2008, which means not simply the Georgian war of the year but also the great economic crisis that Russia endured during 2008-10, which resulted in a major reevaluation of the way in which Russia sees its international position. To this was added the growing set of developments that followed after 2008 – the Georgian Crisis, the Ukrainian Crisis, the sanctions regime, all of which were running up to 2018.

That particular set of developments brought Russia forcefully into the Middle East, so that in the past decade the interests which have begun to manifest themselves before 2008 now begun to take on clear forms, ceasing to be a part of an ad hoc strategy, and attempted to reconstitute the strength of the Russian state through relationships of trade and exchange with the Middle East; it became a part of a perspective. The Russian state has become more perspectival in its approach to the region, setting up its own way of looking at the region within a larger set of global strategies. These strategies in their turn are part of a proto-regime that is sought to be built on institutions based on sovereignty, running counter to rules-based international order that the US and EU stand for in global politics. In other words, the Middle East has a particular position in this Russian perspective.

The Russian perspective is essentially based in the territory of the Russian Presidency, even though the executor of the policy is the Russian Foreign Ministry – particularly there is a difference between Lavrov and his predecessors. His predecessors had a degree of authority within the policies they had enunciated, but Mr Lavrov is more a follower of his President, and believes in many of the perspectives that the President has set out. The paper means to argue that the year 2019 has seen some very interesting developments all of which are coming together to seem to be strengthening the position of the Russian Federation, even though its economy is in a catastrophic state. Part of the reason that the Russian Federation is able to take this position is because of renegade behaviour within the EU, i.e. not everyone is in agreement with the positions that NATO has taken on different issues, certainly with respect to some

developments in the Middle East and more particularly Turkey, and considerable support from China, and in a somewhat curious way (in the sense that it is not clearly articulated) from India.

### **The History Bit**

From the time that the Russian kingdom became the Russian state, i.e., between the 10th and 15th centuries, Turkey and the Levant have been a part of the Russian imagination. If you look at the manner in which Russian elite imagination is constituted in this five-centuries period, in terms of the manuscripts, pilgrimages and all sorts of different inputs into the constitution of a ruling class, you see that everybody knew where the Holy Places associated with Russian Orthodox Christianity are, and all of them have some kind of a direct association with that particular region.<sup>2</sup> There was an awareness of the significance of the Istanbul, which as Constantinople used to be the metropolitan centre of Orthodox Christianity, and of the Holy Lands in Palestine – both of which happened to belong to the Ottoman Empire. Once the Tsarist Empire of Russia gained adequate strength, a running thread in Russian policy, accordingly, developed by the 17th century that aimed at establishing access to these regions, and if possible some kind of presence in lands connected to the Orthodox Church. By the treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji (Article XIV) of 1774, Russia obtained the right to rebuild a “public church of the Greek ritual” (i.e. Orthodox Church) in Constantinople, and the right to send pilgrims to Jerusalem; the Russian Orthodox Church established a permanent mission in Jerusalem in 1857. In addition, Russia in the 19th century began pursuing the “warm waters” policy, requiring control of Crimea and the Caucasus regions and seeking access to the Mediterranean Sea. This particular objective drew the Tsarist state into no less than thirteen major wars between 1677 and 1917.<sup>3</sup>

By the 16th century, traders had begun to move eastwards into Siberia and also southwards into this particular region. 17th century onwards, however, there was an Islamic belt which gradually came to be constituted within and as a part of the Russian state. Initially, it was

semi-independent in the sense that it was either in a perpetual state of rebellion, or treated with kid-gloves by the Muscovite empire – a phase that runs well into the end of the 18th and early 19th century, bringing about the gradual assimilation of the territories of the Golden Horde, i.e. Islamic states of Crimea, Astrakhan, Kazan, etc., till the treaty of Golestan by which the Muscovite state landed up on the northern border of Persia as a partly Islamic state. As Eileen Kane points out in her study of the Russian Hajj, this essentially became a formalised enterprise in the late 19th or early 20th century when the imperial state began to take responsibility for these Muslims in all sorts of ways in their spiritual domain.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, to the memory of Christianity, was added the social space of Russian Islam as far as the Middle East is concerned, resulting in a new dimension.

Additionally, right through the 19th century, Tsarist Russia was jostling with the Kingdom of Persia, and despite being checked by Britain (and British India), wielded enormous leverage over the developments in its southern neighbor. In absence of any concerns of faith and pilgrimage, Russia's interests in Persia were purely territorial and economic. The countervailing presence of Britain ensured that Russia could not make any territorial acquisitions at the expense of Persia after the treaties of Golestan and Turkomanchai, but it could not prevent Russia developing an almost exclusive area of economic influence to the north of Kingdom of Persia. By the end of the 19th century, Russia enjoyed a veritable economic stranglehold in the north, and in the years in the run up to and during the Great War, Russia was in veritable occupation of the region before the October Revolution helped Persia regain her sovereignty over her own territory.<sup>5</sup>

Once the Tsarist state made way for the Soviet Union, Russia's involvement with the Middle East changed somewhat in character over the 20th century. In course of the Soviet period, on the one hand, during the Comintern era, all the various liberation movements in this region are handled by the Soviet state – in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Palestine, etc. – and Soviet minorities were used to create parties throughout the Middle East. So much so, that by the year 1939 the USSR had refurbished itself



with a series of slightly tangible, shadowy establishments in the region. Communism did not readily flourish in the region, with the exception of Iran, where Soviet influence grew substantially during the inter-war years as communism struck fairly deep roots in the country, and the Tudeh Party grew to political prominence, particularly during the period of 1941-53. The Tudeh Party, being the foremost party of the Iranian left, was split right down the middle on the question of proximity to Moscow, and before and after the CIA-engineered anti-communist coup of 1953 the establishment of the Tudeh party remained sympathetic to Moscow and desirous of closer ties – accordingly, the Soviets invested heavily in the opposition in Iran because after 1953, Iran was firmly within the US camp in the Cold War right up to 1979.

Ironically, despite the fact that the Soviets made less advances ideologically in the rest of the Middle East, socialism suffused and permeated into national liberation movements of the Arab world, especially in its Ba'athist nationalist variety in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. More importantly, Ba'athist opposition to the unbridled capitalism of the west, and preference for a regulated economic order generally pushed this countries away from the West, and Moscow was only too willing to oblige with help in industrial development in order to draw these countries into its own orbit in the Cold War era. Thus, Soviet involvement in the region was constituted in a more institutional manner in the 1950s and 1960s, (during which Soviet Islam becomes formalised within the ambit of the state), and the liberation support of the interwar period is replaced by a developmental gambit – Russia becomes a developmental model to the secondary belt of Middle Eastern countries (i.e. excluding Turkey, which for various reasons remain in competition over the Soviet South), viz. Egypt, Iraq and Syria, and to the extent that there was an attempt to establish a stake in Palestine. Soviet industrial exports, technology and especially arms exports acquired major significance as Iraq and Syria in particular developed close defence ties with the USSR. In 1988 Soviet arms exports in the region was in the realm of US\$ 14.5 billion (as against US exports of US\$ 12.6).<sup>6</sup> So a broad belt of territories from the frontiers of Turkey to Iran constituted a solid regional bloc in which the Soviets had an interest till 1991. Thus unlike the

USA, the Russians have had long historical connections with the Middle East, with which they have had deep engagement over several centuries, which have tended to deepen over time.

### *The Caesura of the 1990s*

The 1990s marked a kind of caesura in this long tale of involvement in the region, as the Russian Federation that emerged from the end of the Cold War was a much weaker entity than either the Russian Empire or the USSR. The Russian Federation was technically meant to deal with the whole swathe of new countries that came up across the Soviet South, ranging from Ukraine to the Caspian Republics, as these were removed from the geopolitical ambit of Russia. The USA meant to consolidate this through its creation of GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova), which once used to be spelt with an extra 'U' (GUUAM) to indicate the reach of the organisation up to Uzbekistan, which was essentially a belt of territories in the former Soviet South. The Russian Federation was so weakened by the collapse of the Soviet system that it could not meaningfully thwart this US penetration of its own backyard. In fact, Russia was not even in a position to thwart the gradual absorption of her former satellite states of the Warsaw Pact countries into the orbit of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance, which brought the NATO to Russia's doorstep.

Much of this Russian withdrawal from its neighbourhood dates back to the period 1991-96 when Andrei Kozyrev was the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation. Kozyrev represented a small section of the Russian establishment that wanted Russia and the West to quickly normalise their relations after the bitterness that characterised the Cold War. Accordingly, he favoured close cooperation with the West even in the neighbourhood of the Federation,<sup>7</sup> both in Eastern Europe, the Soviet South and the Middle East, which effectively meant Moscow was to yield space in its spheres of influence to the USA and other regional powers in order to bring about integration within the Euro-Atlantic structures.

No wonder, therefore, that Russia lost a lot of ground in the Middle East, inter alia, to start with. Symptomatic of Russian approach to the

region in this period was seen during the Iraq War of 1991. When Iraq invaded Kuwait and was put on notice by Washington DC, Moscow did not embrace the cause of its old ally as energetically as it used to earlier. UN Security Council resolutions were carried and an international coalition was built with unprecedented ease, even as Moscow struggled in vain to defuse the crisis diplomatically. Moscow stood aside when the US-led coalition pummeled Iraq, liberated Kuwait, and set up a severe sanctions regime against Baghdad.<sup>8</sup>

Also during the early nineties, Russia's old antagonist, Turkey, was a part of set of strategies being pursued by the US to elbow out Russia from the region. Turkey was a long-time competitor in the Turkic speaking republics of the Soviet South (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and a member of NATO since 1948. Turkey went on an overdrive after the collapse of the USSR to bring the five Turkic republics of Central Asia under its cultural, economic and hopefully political, influence when it created the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Zone. It began to make available educational and institutional support and opened trade relations with the Central Asian Republics. Iran also tried to do the same for a time, but with less noticeable success. So both in terms of institutions, trade relations, education and the like, the Russians found that all sorts of alternatives had begun playing in this region and they had become marginal. As it is, 1990s was a difficult period, Russian economy was in shambles, so there was no question of their taking a more formidable restructured role in this region.

Largely on account of this marginalisation, Kozyrev's successor in the Foreign Ministry, Yevgeny Primakov later spoke of the period as a 'disaster.'<sup>9</sup> As Russia tried to resuscitate itself economically and politically, the Middle East ceased to be assigned much priority by the foreign policy establishment in the early 1990s. The only noticeable achievement from this period was probably the beginning of Russia's reestablishment of diplomatic ties with Israel (broken up in 1967), and allowing of emigration of Russian Jews to that country. The "honeymoon" that followed in Russian-Israeli relations blossomed over the years that followed as Russo-Israeli trade burgeoned ever since.<sup>10</sup>

Russia began to hope to steal its way back to the Middle East, primarily on the back of defence and energy cooperation with countries in the region during the Yeltsin years. Driven primarily by Russia's need for hard currency, Russia's sale of defence hardware to countries of the Middle East right from the Kozyrev years, when Russia was more attuned to US sensitivities. Nevertheless, even then the Yeltsin regime was firm in its determination to sell arms to US's NATO allies like Turkey (which was fighting the Kurds, about whom the Americans were somewhat sympathetic) as much as to the Islamic Republic of Iran,<sup>11</sup> to the great chagrin of Washington DC. The most important deal of this era pertained to Russian agreement with Iran in 1995 to start building its Bushehr reactor for civilian nuclear energy purposes. However, pressure from Washington DC even persuaded Moscow to put on hold arms transfer to Iran between 1996 and 2001, to its own disadvantage. By contrast, Russia's ties with Turkey improved significantly right through the 1990s, even though Washington DC did not necessarily approve of it.<sup>12</sup>

### *Lengthening of the Shadow – the Putin Era*

In the Putin era, in his first term (1999-2004), President Putin wanted to get along with the European Union and the USA as much as President Yeltsin had before him, but no longer at the price of playing the second fiddle. The first clear statement of foreign policy object of the Putin years came as early as the year 2000, with the Foreign Policy Concept Paper, where the clear difference between the international outlooks of Russia and of the West were clearly identified as distinctive. But even at that date, it was said, that “[t]he main goal of Russian foreign policy in Europe is creation of a stable and democratic system of European security and cooperation. Russia is interested in the further balanced development of the multifunctional character of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).”<sup>13</sup> Under the Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (1998-2004), Russia also remained malleable in its relationship with the US, talking in the Concept Paper 2000 about the need for deepening bilateral cooperation for the greater common good. It maintained that: “[t]he Russian Federation is prepared to overcome

considerable recent difficulties in relations with the United States, to retain the infrastructure of the Russian-American cooperation created for the past ten years. Despite the existence of serious, in some cases fundamental, differences, Russian-American cooperation is a prerequisite for improving the international situation and ensuring global strategic stability.”<sup>14</sup>

Two instances of such cooperation despite fundamental differences were seen during American invasions of first Afghanistan (in the wake of 9/11) and then of Iraq. Moscow was not comfortable having US forces in its neighbourhood, yet when the US invasion of Afghanistan began Russia actually gave the US military logistical support.<sup>15</sup> However, it threw in its weight behind the Northern Alliance to ensure some kind of presence around the negotiation table in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Far more significant was the case of US invasion of Iraq, with which Moscow had historically strong ties. Moscow suspected that beyond the smokescreen of US claims of Saddam regime’s “irrefutable links with the Al-Qaeda,” Washington sought to drag Iraq into its own orbit – away from Moscow which tended to be the general destination of nearly 40 per cent of Iraq’s total oil exports. Moscow did its diplomatic best to save the Saddam by warning the US and the UN of the costs of military escalation, and struggled to thwart American designs of regime change – but Russia was too well aware of its own economic weakness at that stage to come militarily to the aid of Saddam Hussein.<sup>16</sup> In February 2003, when US determination to push ahead with regime change was unmistakable, Putin even sent the old Middle East hand Yevgeny Primakov to persuade Saddam to step down in a last bid to prevent the war.<sup>17</sup>

Between 2004-08, it became clear that the approach would not work. Russia understood that the United States was not going to accord it parity in the international theater, generating considerable disappointment in Kremlin circles. By this time, Russian economy had also recovered significantly under the stewardship of President Putin, with its GDP measured by purchasing power increased by a staggering 72 per cent, and real incomes and real wages improving by over two and a half times.<sup>18</sup> Such favourable performance in the domestic arena did

not get reflected in Russia's standing in the international arena vis-à-vis the West. This was not only on account of the expansion of the NATO in east, the EU's own expansion in Eastern Europe, and by 2008, creation of the Baku Ceyhan pipeline which shipped Central Asian gas to Turkey and then beyond bypassing Russia – all these indicated measures that Russia considered undermining the foundations of its economic stability in this region. This was owing to Russia's approach to a particular kind of energy politics heavily devoted to one major institution, the Transnet, i.e. the pipeline system that they had in place supplying oil to Europe, and Gazprom, the large state-owned natural gas provider. So, creation of the Baku Ceyhan pipeline was a major break within this system of oil and gas transfer from Russia to Europe from the days of the Cold War. The Russians realised that the dominance that they used to enjoy in East Europe and the Soviet South was growing to be eroded by the US system of dominance, and that they would have to sacrifice much of their East-West energy dominance courtesy the Druzba pipeline, in the long term to the Baku-Ceyhan alternative.

Consequently, in this period of the two Georgian Wars and the Colour Revolutions, the preoccupation with energy politics assumed a new hue with the coming of the economic crisis during 2008-10. The "hail-fellow-well-met" approach of 2000-04 came unstuck around this time – a departure that coincided with the appointment of Sergei Lavrov as the Foreign Minister (2004–till date). During Putin's first term in office, Russian economy was improving, it was able to pay off its debts, and internationally it was stable state with a particular role. But after 2008, briefly there was a big problem, and the contours of the economy put in place during the first two terms of Putin were coming unstuck and could be saved only with rapid state intervention, and diversification of the energy sector. Thus energy politics became the key.

From before 2010, a large number of new ventures could be seen taking place, viz. Nordstream,<sup>19</sup> the Southstream,<sup>20</sup> to ensure that energy politics remains diversified, many of the problems associated with the Druzba pipeline are resolved,<sup>21</sup> and it was clear that these would be somehow financed by the Russian state or international financial institutions. For

reasons that then begin to transpire for the period between 2014-18, (Syrian Crisis, and the Ukraine crisis of 2014), circumstances tended to weaken Russian attempt to recover using European resources in an independent manner. That is to say, the hope that investments will come from all across the globe helping Russia recover, came to an end. This needs emphasis – that the recovery path taken by Russia was very seriously prejudiced by what came to transpire. After 2010 there was a different recovery path altogether – courtesy the working out of Nordstream I and II with heavy involvement of the Russian state, and the abandonment of the Southstream after the Ukrainian Crisis.

Of course the main question is why does Russia take an interest in Syria and the ISIS problem at all. Russia could very well have left these complicating factors of Middle East alone. But here we have to bear in mind that the economic recovery path is heavily associated with territories which are of the Soviet South. The region was beginning to become unstable, and repeated Russian presidential statements began to underline that the destabilisation of the region made it very important for Russia to cultivate its interest directly, to safeguard its own interests. This course of Russian venture southwards has become increasingly more complex, partly because it is associated with the Trump period in the USA. On the one hand, with the abandonment of the Southstream, and the development of the Turkstream<sup>22</sup> in their energy politics and that of Nordstream II, (i.e. energy politics for EU sponsored by Germany but opposed by Poland and the USA), Russia's energy politics has successfully established itself on a viable trajectory, regardless of the sanctions imposed on her on account of her Crimean adventure.

The other complicating factor is the autonomous nature of Russian relations with the Middle East as a region to which Moscow has returned in course of the last decade and a half. This is clear from the increase in terms of arms sales,<sup>23</sup> a series of local currency-arrangements to bypass the sanctions regimes, and Moscow's success in bringing Turkey, Iran and Syria into a state of cooperation and collaboration which will reinforce the Russian position in the region. It is clear, that from the beginning of Putin's third term as President (2012-18) Russia has embarked on the

most aggressive posture in the region since 1991, but not particularly more aggressive than what had been the norm in the Soviet years. Thus, Russia has exercised its veto in the UN Security Council over Syria on no less than 16 occasions in defence of the regime of Bashar al-Assad from 2011,<sup>24</sup> and at least two resolutions against Iran since USA pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal, i.e. JCPOA in the last two years. This, however, is no mere return to the pattern of Cold War politics of the 20th century, where Moscow would inevitably find itself ranged against Washington DC. There have been occasions when Moscow has stood with the USA when its own interests have suited it to do so.

However, it is important to understand the strategic nature of Moscow's game-plan in the region. The Russian Federation is moved by a firm desire to stabilise its neighbourhood in a manner that minimises possibilities of confrontation, and contain any confrontation that may be occasioned. In this game-plan, Russia looks at Syria as its "trump card."<sup>25</sup> Russia's naval facility in Syria's Tartus, giving Moscow easy access to the Mediterranean virtually guarantees that Russia would want to safeguard the Bashar al-Assad regime to preserve its own interests against a more unpredictable combination represented by the enemies of Assad, which might plunge the region into internecine conflict.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Russia's general willingness to stand by Tehran flows more from Russia's enduring economic interests in the Islamic Republic, which happens to be a major destination of Russia's arms exports right through the Putin years. Moreover, as American sanctions regime became more and more severe, Russia stood solidly by the side of Iran, declaring the US\$ 50 billion investment guarantee to Iran,<sup>27</sup> and the entry of Iran on into free trade agreement with Eurasian Economic Union,<sup>28</sup> and Moscow running virtually a barter economy with the Islamic Republic – in the process securing its economic foothold in the country. Such ties do not make for any enduring strategic alignment, though, as is evident from Moscow's remaining quiet whenever Israel chooses to target Iranian outposts in Syria<sup>29</sup> – clearly Moscow does not want Iranian footprints in Syria becoming any bigger than absolutely necessary to keep Assad at the helm in Damascus.



Even with Turkey, Russia's bonhomie seems to grow from strength to strength, despite the chill of 2015 over the downing of a Russian military aircraft for violation of Turkish airspace. This dated back to the early part of President Putin's second term, when Moscow and Ankara came to an understanding that access to the Black Sea would be denied to non-littoral states in times of disturbance, known as the Black Sea Harmony Agreement of 2006.<sup>30</sup> The agreement became a crucial factor during the Georgian Wars and the Ukraine crisis when Ankara refused to relent before US pressure in allowing its navy through. In return not only has Russia sold the S-400 Missile system to Turkey, the only NATO country to have bought the weapons system, Russia even allowed Turkey to move into the Kurdish dominated northern region of Syria so that Turkey could create a security cordon to deny Kurdish rebels in Turkey the kind of strategic depth they otherwise may have had.

## **Conclusion**

Unlike the United States, Moscow's involvement with the Middle East is quite an old one, even though its nature and emphases have changed from one era to another. Beginning with territorial designs in the Imperial era, the ties graduated into developmental assistance and defence sales of the Soviet times, before entering into the present era. Russia's presence in the region of late is a part of Russia's new policy of "Pivot to the East", as Moscow seems to be moving away from Europe heavily supported by developments in the region. It is thus more of a return of a prodigal neighbour to the region after a brief and anomalous absence, rather than some outsider who has suddenly chosen alight on the region with a kind of an expansionist agenda. Moscow's ties in the region are likely to only deepen over the coming years, and her shadow is likely to grow bigger over the region, as the latter gets integrated into Russia's economic orbit much more than has hitherto been the case.

## **Notes**

1. See for instance, Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest*, (New York: Hachette Books, 2019).

2. George Majeska, "Russian Pilgrims in Constantinople", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol 56, 2002, pp. 93-108.
3. Andrej Kreutz, "The Geopolitics of Post-Soviet Russia and the Middle East", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 1, Winter 2002, p. 50.
4. See Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015).
5. See Firuz Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia, 1886-1914: A Study in Imperialism*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968).
6. Alexei Tchistiakov, "The Middle East in the light of geopolitical changes," *International Affairs*(Moscow), No. 8, 1995, p. 51.
7. See, for instance, Andrei Kozyrev, "the Lagging partnership", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1994.
8. See, Alexey Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy: from Lenin to Putin*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 276-312.
9. Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 303.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 322-28.
11. Between 1991 and 1995, Russia sold to Iran hundreds of major weapons systems, including 20 T-72 tanks, 94 air-to-air missiles, and a few combat aircraft like the MiG-29. Lionel Beehner, "Russia Iran Arms Trade", Council of Foreign Relations briefings, <https://www.cfr.org/background/russia-iran-arms-trade>
12. See Robert Freedman, "Russia and the Middle East under Yeltsin Part I," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, Spring 1997, pp. 12-34.
13. Cited in Nalbandov, *Not by Bread Alone*, p. 7.
14. Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 8.
15. Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy*, p. 345.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-49.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
18. Sergei Guriev; Aleh Tsyvinski. "Challenges Facing the Russian Economy after the Crisis", in Anders Åslund; Sergei Guriev and Andrew C. Kuchins (eds), *Russia After the Global Economic Crisis*. Peterson Institute for International Economics; (Centre for Strategic and International Studies; New Economic School, 2010), pp. 12-13.
19. The Nordstream is a network of energy pipelines connecting natural gas reserves in Russia (Vyborg) with Germany (Greifswald) running along the edges of northern Europe, altogether bypassing East and Central Europe as under the Druzhba pipeline.
20. The South Stream was a proposed energy pipeline meant to carry natural gas from Russia through the Black Sea to Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovenia, Hungary and Austria. Proposed in 2007 by the Russian state-owned Gazprom corporation, it was abandoned in 2014 when it fell foul of European laws, and in the background of EU sanctions against Russia on account Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea.

21. The Druzhba pipeline is one of the world's biggest pipeline networks, carrying oil across some 4,000 km from eastern parts of European Russia to various points in Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Germany. "The List: Top Five Global Choke Points" Foreign Policy, [https://web.archive.org/web/20061207190632/http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=3457](https://web.archive.org/web/20061207190632/http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3457)
22. The Turkstream is an energy pipeline that carries natural gas from the Russian South to Turkey. Set up after the cancellation of the South Stream in 2014, the project was put on hold after Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft in 2015, but has since resumed after normalisation of relations between the two sides.
23. For a brief treatment of this issue, see Natalia Kalinina "Militarization of the Middle East: Russia's Role," *Security Index: A Russian Journal on International Security*, 20:2, 2014, pp. 31-45, DOI: 10.1080/19934270.2014.965962
24. Michelle Nicole, "Russia, China veto Syria aid via Turkey for the second Time this week", Reuters July 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-un/russia-china-veto-syria-aid-via-turkey-for-second-time-this-week-idUSKBN24B2NW> .
25. Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy*, p. 385.
26. It is possible to argue that Russian determination to keep Assad in power in Damascus was increased by the example of Libya, where Russia held itself back at the Security Council, and saw with alarm the manner in which the country unravelled. Having strategic interests in Syria, such an eventuality could not be allowed to transpire.
27. Henry Foy, Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Russia ready to invest \$50 bn in Iran's energy industry," *Financial Times*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/db4c44c8-869b-11e8-96dd-fa565ec55929>, accessed on November 29, 2019.
28. "Iran's accession to Eurasian Economic Union finalized," *Iran Press News Agency*, August 29, 2019, <http://iranpress.com/content/13567>, accessed on November 29, 2019.
29. "Israel, Russia said to reach secret deal on pushing Iran away from Syria border" <https://www.cufi.org/israel-russia-said-to-reach-secret-deal-on-pushing-iran-away-from-syria-border/>, accessed on November 29, 2019.
30. Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy*, p. 354.

## 10. China, Iran and West Asia: Civilisational Co-Operation in the 21st Century

*Jigme Yeshe Lama*

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Theories help explain the behaviour of states, the international system as well as the structures prevalent with the system. They comprehend the interactions and the end result among states. One theory that helps in understanding world politics is the power transition theory. This theory has undergone much change and has expanded to incorporate newer ideas. However, the focus has always been on the transformation in the international system that has now extended to the regional subsystems throughout the developing world.<sup>1</sup> It is this understanding of the transition of power that can be used to comprehend the current rise of China, which is slated to overtake the current superpower; the USA. China's economic growth as well as its rising military power makes it a prime candidate to unseat the US. Some of the important measures taken by Beijing to increase its power has been the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) launched by Xi Jinping in 2013-14. It can be seen as a Chinese alternative to the west led globalisation. Beijing has also challenged the international financial norms and institutions, which are all termed as tools of US hegemony. The Middle Kingdom has also built its blue water navy with its naval base in Djibouti in Africa becoming the first naval base outside China.

Thus as a rising power and the next hegemon, its interactions with other countries can be termed as being dynamic and heterogeneous. A close inspection of its foreign policy reveals the steps taken to consolidate its rising status, which is somewhat visible in its interactions with countries in West Asia. Also the foreign policy approach of the Chinese

towards West Asia is interesting as the region is dubbed as a playground for the Americans and other western powers. Whether it was the British, the French or the Americans, West Asia has always remained significant in terms of its rich resources, strategic locations or even for feeding the frenzy of the modern “self” through creating a discourse of Orientalism. What is important is how the interaction between the western powers and West Asia is relatively recent, while with China, the links are much older and ones that were based on a degree of mutual trade and commerce. This included the “Silk Road” trade which connected China to Iran, Turkey and Egypt. Along with this there has also been evidence of a robust maritime trade that existed between China and West Asia during the 8-9th centuries.<sup>2</sup> It is commercial ties that defined Sino-West Asian relationship during the 1980s when China was undergoing economic reforms and which still remains as the most important item in their interactions.

During the period of economic reforms, which were heralded in China by Deng Xiaoping, Beijing was seen to be following a policy of non interference in its engagement with the West Asian countries, whether it was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Saudi-Iran rivalry, the Chinese were fence sitters. Then China’s ties with West Asia were built on three principles – secure energy supplies and expand markets for finished goods and find investment opportunities. Deng Xiaoping’s maxim “hide your capabilities, bide your time” was followed by the Chinese leadership towards their interactions with West Asia. However contemporary Chinese foreign policy reveals that its overall approach to West Asia has started changing. Beijing has become more active in global diplomacy concerning the region, which is seen through it taking strong positions in the UN as observed with the Syria vetoes and had even begun flexing its military muscles that is evident with the joint naval exercises that China had with Russia in the Mediterranean. These larger changes in China’s foreign policy can be traced to the leadership of Xi Jinping.<sup>3</sup> Xi in his second term has consolidated his position further and has emerged as the paramount leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Under his leadership, China is poised to make it big in global diplomacy and assert

itself through economic and military means. Its foreign policy is seen to be much proactive as it is seen to be stepping into the ambitions of a big power. In this context under Xi Jinping, China does want to play a major role in West Asia. The region assumes great importance for China as West Asia provides much of the fuel needed for boosting growth in the Middle Kingdom. China is the world's largest oil importer. Its demand for imported oil is expected to grow from 6 million barrels a day in 2014 to 13 million barrels a day by 2035.<sup>4</sup> Till 2015, Saudi Arabia was the largest source of oil for China, which however has changed as at present it is Russia that supplies most to China.

China has also diversified its dependence on oil through importing it from Iran. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have strong defence ties with China as seen with the sale of Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles and the Dong Feng – 21 ballistic missiles to Riyadh. In West Asia, Saudi Arabia and UAE are the largest trading partners with China with a trade of US\$ 50.1 billion and US\$ 41.0 billion respectively with Beijing.<sup>5</sup> Under Xi Jinping, China is seen to have adopted a non-zero sum game approach, whereby it is seen to be engaging with rivals such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Iran, all at the same time. Majority of these engagements are in the form of economic and commercial exchanges.<sup>6</sup> This is much visible in China and Israel's "innovative comprehensive partnership" that stresses on China absorbing Israel's technology in hi-tech and other advanced domains. It is "innovative cooperation" which is the motor driving overall ties with Israel. Tel Aviv has also joined the BRI in 2017, which is of much advantage to China as it can have access to Israel's market as well as use its connections with other West Asian nations.<sup>7</sup> However Rio Feder, the Managing Director for APCO worldwide in Tel Aviv states that the Israeli state is seen to be growing suspicious as to China's interest in investing in the market fearing that China's increased involvement could compromise some of Israel's national security interests that can make Israel forego many of the BRI's opportunities.<sup>8</sup> For the Chinese, access to Israeli technology is a major objective turning their economy to an advanced level.<sup>9</sup>

## **Sino-Iranian Relationship**

However, the first part of this paper will focus on China's ties with Iran, which has remained steadfast over the years. With Iran, China is seen to be carefully cultivating a strong relationship, one that can be traced to a much earlier period. Both countries hark on the past in forging their present relationship. This is specially seen with the past invoked in much of their official narratives. This constant evocation of a civilisational rhetoric becomes important as it is seen to be lubricating the process of Sino-Iranian cooperation. The civilisational rhetoric is utilised by Iranian and Chinese nationalist narratives especially the idea of western domination and humiliation over them.<sup>10</sup> This is important as it forms the core of a belief system for both countries that triggers an emotional and a normative response. China is seen to be putting Iran among the category of countries, whereby Iran is seen as an equal power that should not feel inferior to western powers. However, both countries were humiliated by the west in the past and at present are also been kept weak by the western nations. There is a strong need for both China and Iran to struggle against western hegemonism.<sup>11</sup> The foreign policy discourses of China and Iran utilises this narrative of national humiliation suffered by both in their interactions, for instance, during a visit by Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, the Shah's younger sister to China in April 1971 after the US ping pong team visited China, the Premier Zhou Enlai stressed on the ancient ties between the two countries and the bringing low of both countries by "foreign aggression".<sup>12</sup> The theme of shared humiliation in the hands of the western powers continued in the Sino-Iranian ties even after the overthrowing of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. At present, the leaders of both countries have stressed on "common histories" and "being subjected to hegemonic threat today."<sup>13</sup>

This opposition towards western hegemonic power is seen to be somewhat uniting Iran and China, even though this might be merely rhetorical. Yet, in the early 2000s both countries stressed on the need for a "dialogue among civilisations" and also a need for the endorsement of country specific standards of human rights that was a rebuttal of the western notions of universal rights. This stems specifically from the fact

that both Iran and China are inspired by a sense of their outstanding civilisational achievements over long stretches of history that entitles them to an esteemed rank in the community of states, and with the current international order dominated by the west; this status is not provided to them.<sup>14</sup> There is also a constant tracing of the historical connections between Iran and China with the links starting from the period of Han China and the Parthian empire of Persia in 139 BCE, when a Chinese envoy named Zhang Qian arrived in Persia and eventually established the Silk Road. Even the first translators of the Buddhist sutras into Chinese was a Persian prince from Kushan, which eventually led to more extensive commercial and cultural contacts between both countries especially during the Tang dynasty in China. The contacts between both increased after the Mongol conquest of both countries in the 13th century, with annual diplomatic missions between Yuan China and Il Khanate Persia. During the Ming dynasty, the trade and commercial ties between them expanded exponentially especially with a huge demand for Chinese blue and white porcelain products.<sup>15</sup> Both countries were rich and powerful, which were however oppressed by the western colonial powers.

John Garver mentions about how both China and Iran serve as part of the in-group, the group which stood as a contradistinction to the western “other”. They are seen to be examples for each other or are reflections of one another, whose glory and affirmation of self-worth was seen to be reduced by the condescending attitude of the west.<sup>16</sup> This narrative of Sino-Iranian cooperation suggests that this relationship is natural, non-objectionable and positive, which was destroyed by the west and the contemporary western objections to Sino-Iranian relations reflect lingering western attitudes of superiority towards both countries. The current relationship is termed as a non-military relationship which is an implicit reference to the moral superiority over the violent, imperialist western powers.<sup>17</sup> Before the Europeans arrived to oppress both China and Persia, these two countries interacted thickly, peacefully and to mutual benefit.<sup>18</sup> It is the sharing of oppression in the hands of the west that is seen to be influencing their relationship during the 1960s and 1970s when they united to uphold the interests of the Third



World against imperialists.<sup>19</sup> This period saw both nations containing the Soviet Union and the subsequent countering of the US hegemonism in the 1990s, developing the economies and military forces in their own countries, supplying and consuming energy and so on.<sup>20</sup> It is precisely these factors in the relationship between Iran and China, which makes their interactions interesting and much important.

China's relationship with Iran is also strongly determined by the fact that the latter is a powerful country in the Persian Gulf, which is an important route for trade and energy supplies for China. Also, with Iran being rich in energy resources and as China is dubbed as the economic dynamo of East Asia, there is bound to be strong interactions between both countries. China is a rising power with an economy that has an insatiable appetite for oil, which is much supplied by Iran and the Persian Gulf, adding to the importance of the relationship. There is also a strong cooperation between both countries over weapon's programme especially of Iran and thus in the past we see Beijing backing Tehran in any UN debate regarding sanctions on Iran's nuclear weapons programme.<sup>21</sup> While China supported the 2018-19 sanctions on Iran, it was seen to be expanding its economic and security cooperation with Tehran. Xi Jinping became the first world leader to visit Iran after the sanctions were lifted and he announced the start of a new season of Sino-Iranian ties and a 25 year strategic cooperation plan, plus also committed to increasing the two way trade to US\$ 600 billion over the next decade. In 2004, Iran had 7 per cent of the world's oil reserves and 15 per cent of the world's natural gas reserves. The Persian Gulf contains 50 per cent of the world's oil supply, which is seen to be much attractive for PRC. Also Iran's geographic position that dominates the oil rich Persian Gulf, separating Russia from that Gulf and also offering convenient overland transit between Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. Thus, this strategic aspect of Iran is seen to be deeply attractive to PRC.<sup>22</sup>

An important point raised by John Garver in his landmark study on Sino-Iranian relations titled 'China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World' mentions that Beijing's policies towards Tehran in the 1970s and in the 1990s were inspired by a realisation that Iran

could play an important role in blocking Soviet “expansionism” and US “unipolarity” respectively. As China is a rising power, its partnership with countries like Iran becomes important. It is seen as a win-win for both countries as a cooperative relation with Iran multiplies China’s own influence in an important region of the world. For Iran, cooperation with China is attractive for similar reasons as for Tehran, there is a hope that China’s power may be adequate to check and at least resist aggressive US actions.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, for China, the natural resources that Iran has is important as China might be able to influence the global allocation of oil and hence the balance of power. Thus, with the civilisational rhetoric between both states assuming a foundational significance, it is also the modern nation state’s pursuit of power and national interest that drives both Iran and China in a tight embrace. It is under this that in the 1990s, China’s aim was to strengthen Iran’s position in the Gulf and thus it could stall US drive for unipolar hegemony and make it more likely that oil would be available to China under special circumstances.<sup>24</sup> At present, these ties are seen to have further strengthened as both countries have agreed to enhance security cooperation through intelligence sharing, counter terror measures, military exchanges and coordination. Iran is important for China due to the BRI as it is seen to be connecting West Asia and Central Asia. Iran was one of the first nations to get on board the belt and road of the PRC, which was also seen as an important way for Tehran to counter the west led isolationist policies against Iran.<sup>25</sup> More will be covered in the section on China’s BRI in West Asia.

Security ties of China with Tehran were high even during the period of the sanctions as seen with Chinese warships docking at the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas in 2014 as well as in 2010 Chinese fighter jets refuelled in Iran, making it the first foreign military units permitted on Iranian soil since the Iranian republic was established. Beijing has also supported Iran’s ally, the Syrian president Assad by vetoing the resolutions prepared by the Western powers demanding his ouster.<sup>26</sup> Having a diplomatic presence in Iran is important for China as it is the only country where the US influence is seen to be almost nil, thus for Beijing it becomes the perfect launching pad for its entry into the region. In more recent times

China has also acted as a peacemaker between rivals in the region as seen after the ransacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

### **China and West Asia**

China is seen to be maintaining strong commercial linkages with Saudi Arabia that was visible through China supporting “Saudi Vision 2030” plan – a blueprint for reducing Riyadh’s dependence on oil and reliance on other drivers of the economy such as infrastructure development – where China is a world leader – apart from healthcare, education and tourism.<sup>27</sup> China’s involvement in West Asia, till 2017 can be seen to be taking a much cautionary stand that is indicative in an op-ed written for the *Global Times*, which mentions about the need for China to maintain a distance from a deeper involvement in West Asia’s foggy smoke and mirror politics. The article elaborates about how China’s ability to influence the region is much behind the US, EU and even Russia as well as stresses on how the Middle East is not in the core area of China’s diplomatic interest. The emphasis laid in the article is on the need for China to increase its economic interactions with the region that has to be done in a low profile manner.<sup>28</sup>

Deng Xiaoping’s maxim of “cross the river by feeling the stones” can be utilised in deciphering the 2017 op-ed that was published in the *Global Times*. However, while the op-ed in the official tabloid can be seen as a part of the formal stand of China with regard to West Asia, still we do see much diplomatic efforts exerted by Beijing towards the region as seen through the hosting of a high level meeting by the Chinese in an effort to promote a peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis. Xi Jinping had also sent emissaries to Tehran and Riyadh to defuse tension after the ransacking of the Saudi embassy in Iran. Beijing had also declared support for the sovereignty of the Yemen government, whom the Saudis supported in the war against Iran’s proxy. Hence China is seen to be involved in a balancing act between the Saudis and Tehran or wading into the Sunni Shia conflict, which is of utmost interest and has to be investigated through multiple lenses. A primary reason is the economic benefit the region provides to a growing China that will be negatively

affected with an escalation of conflict between the Shias and Sunnis (*Foreign Policy*, 2018). China's desire to cultivate a Middle East without sectarian instability also traces to the hallmark of its foreign policy in the 21st century: the BRI and in which a peaceful West Asia plays an important role. The BRI in West Asia and its impact will be discussed in the conclusion of the paper.

Its foreign policy towards West Asia is also shaped by its domestic considerations related to Xinjiang and the Uyghur population who have for long resisted Chinese rule. Many of them have been termed as joining the ranks of the ISIS and thus getting further radicalised. Moreover with reports of the Uyghurs experiencing massive human rights violations in the hands of the Chinese state, China's diplomatic overtures towards the West Asian countries assumes much importance (*Foreign Policy*, 2018). Every Arab government in the Gulf region and beyond has chosen either to ignore or voice support for China's human rights violations against Muslim Uyghurs. Most of them signed a letter to the UNHRC supporting China on the Uyghur issue and commended Beijing for correctly fighting against terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.<sup>29</sup> This diplomatic coup by Beijing is the result of its economic build-up in West Asia which has also transformed into political and strategic initiatives undertaken by China towards the region. This was seen in 2018, with Xi Jinping announcing the establishment of a China-Arab States Strategic Partnership of Comprehensive Cooperation and Common Development.<sup>30</sup>

There has been a rise in multilateral institutional setups mostly created by China, through which interaction is formalised and managed with the West Asian states. In 2018, for instance in the 8th Ministerial Meeting of the China Arab States Cooperation Forum held on July 10 in Beijing the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed on how peace, reform and development are common needs of various countries in the Middle East while stability, peace and happiness are common pursuits of the people in the region, which should be achieved through cooperation among all member states. He also stressed on how the Arab states are the true protagonists in the region and hence they have to play an important

role in the Middle East's affairs. Finally the Chinese foreign minister is seen to be elaborating on how China together with the Arab states is willing to be a builder of peace, facilitator of stability and participator of development in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup> John Garver in 'China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World' also mentions how China has strongly affirmed to the policy that the handling of the Persian Gulf affairs should be the Persian states themselves.<sup>32</sup> The rise in Chinese diplomatic involvement and the desire to play a much bigger role in West Asia stems from the importance of the region to Xi Jinping's pet project, the BRI, where the Arab states are dubbed as natural cooperation partners in the joint building of BRI. China is the second largest trading partner of the Arab states with direct investment in these countries exceeding US\$ 15 billion. With the BRI developing in the Arab states, the economic and political linkage with Beijing is much expected to rise and grow. The role of the BRI in Iran and West Asia is important as it has become the most important policy of the Middle Kingdom in dealing with the states in West Asia. Dubbed as an alternative to the west led globalisation, the BRI is seen to be making strong inroads in much of West Asia, a resource rich and strategically important region in the world.

### **The Belt and Road Initiative and West Asia**

The BRI is a grand design of China to create a set of infrastructural connectivity that will link much of the world with Beijing. It is an initiative from the current Chinese president Xi Jinping who conceived the BRI as an alternative to the present west led globalisation, but one that negates the drawbacks of the current model that favours the west. China terms the BRI as a win-win proposition for all the participants and stresses on ushering growth in the developing and underdeveloped regions of the world. Like with all Chinese investments the BRI has no strings attached, which means there will be non-interference in the domestic affairs of the recipient countries. This clause is also seen to be much favoured by the authoritarian states, a form of government that is much associated with West Asian countries. China has BRI agreements with 18 Arab countries, and Chinese companies have signed US\$ 35.6

billion in contracts there, US\$ 1.2 billion of it directed towards local energy and manufacturing sectors. China's trade with Arab countries reached US\$ 244.3 billion in 2018.<sup>33</sup> China had prior access with many of these countries through a number of official platforms, most notably the China Arab States Cooperation Forum and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which Iran has joined as an observer and of which Turkey is a dialogue partner. West Asia's importance to the BRI emerges from the prospects of developing road, rail and port access to major markets, including the reconstruction of Syria and Iraq and also gaining access into the EU.<sup>34</sup>

West Asia as reiterated earlier is also significant for Beijing's energy supplies. A close inspection of individual countries in West Asia reveals further the implementation of the BRI. In Iran, China is financing the upgrading of the Tehran Mashhad railway with China's Exim bank lending US\$ 1.5 billion for lines electrification.<sup>35</sup> This railway is important for the BRI as it provides the connection to China's western region of Xinjiang. It will link Urumqi, the capital of China's Xinjiang province to Tehran, connecting numerous central Asian countries. From Tehran, the rail link will connect Turkey and Eastern Europe. It will also open a way to Europe via developing a rail route from southern Iranian ports to Azerbaijan.<sup>36</sup> For Iran, the BRI is also an important way to counter the west led isolationist policies on Tehran. It is seen to be deeply entrenched in Iran with Chinese enterprises in 2015 signing contracts worth US\$ 1.5 billion with their Iranian counterparts. Iran is a major market for Chinese construction and energy infrastructure equipment. Beijing's major contracting projects in Iran include energy, transport, steel and chemicals.<sup>37</sup>

As the BRI is a project of connectivity, the numerous incentives undertaken in Iran through Chinese investment assumes importance and becomes an entry point for the Chinese in West Asia. Iran also sees China as a natural ally against the US especially under Trump. It is seen to be supporting China in the "trade war" with the US and regards the protectionist approach of the US and its abandonment of rules-based trade concepts as being counterproductive, unreasonable and destructive.

Tehran is seen to be stressing on how with China there is a sharing of a vision of sovereign states with independent foreign policies across the Asian continent being connected, prospering together and realising their potential and their true places in the world. This is seen as a strong criticism of unilateralism that the US has been pursuing for long and how its interventionist policies have eroded the sovereignty of weaker nations. Iran is seen to be stressing on how this is not the case with China that is clear with the implementation of the BRI as the tenets on which it is based is one of inclusive growth and strategic mutual trust. As Robert Kaplan writes, “an American war with Iran will drive the country even further into the hands of China, which already accounts for almost a third of all Iran’s energy trade. While China’s energy ties with Iran may be curtailed as a result of the Trump administration’s sanctions, as well as by the complexities of the Beijing-Washington trade talks, China and Iran will eventually find a way to cooperate and thwart the United States. Iran is at the very centre of 21st-century geopolitics. It dominates Central Asian trade routes and sits at the hydrocarbon nexus of the Indian Ocean, with a coastline of over 1,500 miles stretching from Iraq to Pakistan. Iran is the key to China’s plans, just as China’s plans are key to Eurasia’s destiny.”<sup>38</sup>

Another country that assumes significance to the BRI is Turkey as it is at a major crossroads for the connectivity project and thus assumes importance. Chinese involvement in Turkey is strong as seen with the 2015 Chinese acquisition of Turkey’s third largest port, Kumpport in Istanbul by the Chinese giant container terminal operator Cosco Pacific for US\$ 940 million. Cosco holds a 65 per cent stake in the port and the volume of bilateral trade between both countries was recorded at US\$ 26.3 billion in 2017. The balance in trade is in favour of China.<sup>39</sup> However, in early 2019, strong criticisms against the human rights violations of the Uyghurs by the Chinese state were made by the Turkish government. This had been done due to a rise in public support for the Uyghurs in Ankara and other cities. The Chinese government were quick to reject the statements from Turkey and the lopsided power equations between both countries made sure that there would not be strong ramifications against Beijing.<sup>40</sup> With regard to Syria, Chinese contractors are looking at reconstruction projects

to rebuild the country after the civil war. For the Chinese Syria can provide an alternative route to Europe than the Suez canal. Under the BRI, there are plans to build the Tripoli-Homs railways and a SEZ in Tripoli port for the Chinese has been built.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

On the November 27, 2019, China hosted the Middle East Security Forum, which can be dubbed as Beijing's latest attempt in increasing its diplomatic foothold in West Asia. Under this Xi Jinping proposed the idea of abandoning the idea of exclusive security and absolute security in the Middle East and instead proposed the idea of sustainable security architecture, under which a primary focus will be to promote peaceful solutions through political means and thus prevent violence. The sovereignty of nations are to be respected and no interference will be tolerated and hence the UN resolutions on the Middle East are to be adopted and a concerted effort has to be built creating a link between the region and international community. Through the meeting, Beijing is seen to be sending a clear message to the western powers as the idea of a common security that has been proposed is one where there is no unilateral absolute security and rejects military intervention or unilateral action. China is termed as never interfering in the internal affairs of the Middle Eastern countries or engaging in the creation of the spheres of influence and does not seek geopolitical self-interest. It proposes to be a builder of peace, a promoter of stability in the Middle East and a contributor to development. Hence the meeting and the subsequent statement released alludes to Chinese desires in playing an important role in West Asia (China Arab States Cooperation Forum, 2019).

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# 11. The Unstable Middle East and India's Options

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West Asia, occasionally also referred as Middle East (ME), is our extended neighbourhood with historic and civilisational linkages. Overtime, the relationship and impact have been further entwined and acquired strategic imperatives and salience clearly attributable to the presence of huge diaspora; significant reliable remittances; energy dependence and crucial trading and maritime lanes. In recent years the relationship has been expanded to include more strategic elements like defence and security cooperation, counter-terrorism, anti-piracy, cyber security and the Islamic connection. Therefore, developments especially the negative ones in any part of the region particularly in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have a direct consequence for India's core concerns and security. Unfortunately, West Asia has several fault lines and hotspots that continue unabated and add to the dangerous instability in the region. Intra-regional rivalries including Saudi – Iran; Arab-Israel conflict in the context of Palestine; Blockade of Qatar; Role of US, Turkey, Russia and China and the decade old Arab Spring and declining crude prices and adverse impact of COVID-19 have been further accentuated in recent times providing a trigger to the already fragile and distrustful landscape. The hotspots in Libya, Yemen and Syria are heating up even more.

Middle East is in a downward flux and the present day conundrum has the potential to destabilise the region which can have devastating impact on India which is its close strategic neighbour. While this situation may have been externally induced and exacerbated with the 2003 misadventure by the US in Iraq, or for that matter in the backdrop of the so called Arab Spring, the NATO bombing of Libya and extended conflict in Syria. The West Asian, especially Gulf, countries

have also given wind to their deep seated intra-Arab and Shi'i-Sunni conflicts and religious leadership and superiority in varying regional landscapes leading to greater destabilisation and unpredictability which could have disastrous ramifications for the countries themselves in the "Mutually Assured Destruction" syndrome. While the Arab Spring has witnessed qualitative change broadly through overthrow of the well-entrenched regimes, the Gulf Monarchies (despite the rifts and inherent contradictions) installed younger leaders in decisive leadership positions be it Qatar, Saudi Arabia or UAE – three major economies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with the former currently confronted with an internecine blockade from the latter two and turmoil for nearly four years. Arab Spring 2.0 is having its toll in Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq and Sudan while Egypt, Tunisia and Libya continue to struggle with the aftermath of the start of the *sui-generis* and externally induced Revolutions that witnessed the removal of long-time autocratic leaders.

The onset of President Trump on the global stage and his unpredictable policy pronouncements, mostly via twitter, have created greater uncertainty in the world, and more so in the Middle East. His withdrawal from the JCPOA and enmity towards Iran have culminated in a near war like situation and has the potential of conflagrating the region that will have a devastating impact on both the region and oil importing countries elsewhere. His statements on shifting USA's embassy to Jerusalem that led to de facto violation of all agreements and UN resolutions hitherto and likewise recognising Golan Heights as part of Israel have made the region more volatile. As for the Middle East Peace Program, the so called "Deal of the Century" to resolve the Palestine issue has been junked by the Palestinians as being totally one sided and unfair. It also legitimised the Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Let us review some of the ongoing conflict situations.

### **Saudi-Iran Rivalry**

The biggest problem and the hotspot, as well as ever so simmering conflict in the West Asian region, remains the competition and rivalry for exerting influence both religious and geopolitical between the arch enemies

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Both are oil producing economies and are large countries with large populations and have been armed to the teeth. Iran is also aspiring to go nuclear. Their Shi'i-Sunni outreach and leadership is well acknowledged and both have been able to ensure big enough constituencies of adherents abroad for their respective brand of Islam. Salafi and Wahabi philosophy of Islam is propagated by Saudi Arabia and the King of Saudi Arabia is the custodian of the two Holy Mosques at Mecca and Medina – the holiest of sites for the Sunni faith and the Muslims all over. The Iranian spiritual leaders consider themselves as the ultimate authority for the Shi'i faithful, and try to guide their destiny within a politico-religious framework. Both Saudis and Iranians provide huge funding to various Madrasas and other religious educational outfits to nurture their respective religious constituencies across the world, especially in the developing countries. Saudi Arabia has an edge in this competition because it controls and issues the Hajj quotas to various countries where Muslim population is resident on a pre-determined allocation formula. Both accuse the other of fomenting extremism, terrorism and radicalisation and use religion as a major influencer with armed groups. While Al Qaeda and its various offshoots are said to be getting support from Riyadh the well-known groups like Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria and Hamas in Gaza, Palestine and Shia militant groups in Iraq eke out their sustenance from Tehran.

### **Questionable Role of USA**

USA has played a definitive role in destabilising any chance of workable rapprochement between the two. Supporting one against the other in the regional context provided the necessary trigger to more hardened positions on both sides. Moreover, Iran's clandestine efforts to go nuclear presented the readymade platform to further penalise the Persian State through extensive sanctions, viral attacks on nuclear installations and global containment. The other reason was the Iranian claims to obliterate the Jewish state which in their view had no right to exist. This is not only an anathema to Israel whose Middle East policy has containment

of Iran as a central theme but which is also clearly in sync with the Saudi objectives. This had an underlying and overt support from the US Administrations which, driven by Jewish lobbies and exceptionally close strategic relationship, stand by Israel at any cost. This has been far more obvious during the Trump Administration.

After the 1979 overthrow of the Shah's regime by the theocracy in Iran the Americans were condemned as "Satanic". Iran was declared an Islamic Republic some four decades ago. The animosity and friction with the West and with its Gulf neighbours and Israel has been a standard feature of their international discourse since then. It is ironical that in their military misadventure in 2003 against the Saddam regime the US has proffered Iraq on a platter to Iran and today Iran plays a more deciding role in Iraq and exercises it through the Shi'i militias, its revolutionary guards and the leadership in Iraq some of whom have to be from the Shi'i faith in accordance with their constitution. This has been true in the fight against ISIS (Da'esh) in the Levant. Ironically the US invasion of Iraq and subsequent military adventures in Syria and Libya have spawned the extremism and global terrorism which it always professed to fight against. Moreover, US has emerged as a major competitor to the Middle Eastern Oil and gas with its Shale projects and hence observers believe that strategically US is in a retroactive mode from the region, since under Trump US wants its clients and even strategic partners to pay for the security they seek. This has obviously caused a crisis of confidence and hence opened a crevice for other actors and multilateral arrangements.

Iranian mullahs do not shy away from invoking and provoking their militant supporters to decimate the US authority wherever they can and by whatever means they deployed. US has followed through with more sanctions during the last four decades except during Obama Administration when with the help of P5+1 the Joint comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to subject Iranian nuclear ambitions brought under rigorous international and IAEA supervision. In fact after a gap of 30 years in September 2013 first time Iranian President Rouhani and US President Obama spoke and the hectic and complicated negotiations that were marked by bridging the deep mistrust finally led to the deal .

The JCPOA was signed in 2015, sanctions were eased and the frozen assets of Iran were released.

Saudi Arabia, Israel and other Sunni states vehemently objected to the Iranian deal as they feared that this development would give greater access and financial muscle to the Iranians to pursue their regional project of decimating Saudi influence. They felt disadvantaged. The Saudi War against Yemen and Houthis since 2015 was said to be the protest and frustration with Obama administration as the Saudis had felt that the Americans were veering towards their arch enemy Iran. Hence, they decided to go against the intransigent Houthis and militia groups aligned to and supported by Iran. But this protracted war has taken its toll on the stressed economies of Saudi Arabia and UAE who are now looking for an honourable exit. Earlier the Saudis had established the Gulf Cooperation Council to counter the Iranian threat and later a Sunni Islamic force and US-Saudi military alliance to deal with any military threat to their interests. Iran despite sanctions and isolation and restricted access of markets to its oil and gas and other resources has managed to keep its nexus and tentacles of Shia militant groups and sympathisers intact. Some would argue that continued adversity has given them the edge and a renewed leadership as Iran has deepened its relations with Russia, China and Turkey who have expanded their strategic footprint in the region. Moreover, the major European countries that have been part of JCPOA look at the unilateral American sanctions by President Trump as arbitrary and non-productive. India also suffered due to that and had to bring its Iranian oil imports to zero

But in May 2018, President Trump junked the JCPOA and with his more stringent sanctions and high-handed approach almost brought the region to the brink of war and disaster. In May-June 2019 and Iranian forces shot down an expensive American military drone over the Strait of Hormuz which even though a narrow yet highly international trade and maritime passage which though an international trade route is controlled by Iran. Earlier, six oil tankers were hit in Gulf of Oman and Iran was accused of that. More and more stringent sanctions by the US have made the Iranians more confrontational and abrasive. Iranians have



always maintained that economic sanctions must be lifted before they could respond to any US overtures and ongoing pressure tactics which are counterproductive.

On January 3, 2020, the killing of a highly placed and powerful IRGC General Qassem Soleimani by a US drone strike in Iraq was sure to provoke Iranian “severest response”. It was somewhat confusing as the Iraqis were trying to diffuse the deteriorating situation between US and Iran. Iranian fervent condemnation and calibrated response and well thought out missile attacks on US military facilities conveyed the symbolic message that Iran could attack the US assets and facilities at will in the region. Persian Gulf became the hottest spot. This had pleased the Saudis, Emiratis and Israelis. But the Gulf countries know that the American adventurism may hurt them the most as Iran considers dozens of US bases in the region as fair target and the host countries would bear brunt of collateral damages should a full-blown war breaks out. At least for now they do not consider the military option as the most feasible one.

### **Iran and Israel – the Confrontationists**

Venomous exchanges, clandestine operations and terrorist acts against one another have increased between Iran and Israel, especially since the Iranian nuclear ambitions became apparent. Both are nuclear and missile capable and have mutually destructive capacity, even if not equally efficacious but enough to wreak the havoc in the region. The two were not always adversarial and Iranian nuclear ambitions went through their sine curve from the time of Shah when the two were on the same side and friendly enough to share technology and military equipment. In their book “The Greatest Missions of the Israeli Secret Service MOSSAD”, Michall Bar-Zohar and Nissim Mishal wrote that Iran’s Shah Reza Pahalvi started building two nuclear reactors, both for peaceful and military purposes. But it did not cause any alarm as Israel was a close ally of Iran. Israel supplied modern military equipment after the Iranian General Hasan Toufanian in 1977. They even offered nuclear capable state of the art surface to surface missiles. But the Iranian revolution changed that entirely.

The adversarial relationship between Iran and Israel continues in high decibel derogatory statements, covert operations, terrorist activities and undermining the lethal capabilities in different theatres of war and conflict from the Gulf to Syria to Lebanon to Palestine. This obviously helps the Saudi regime despite their prolonged vitriolic against Israel and no diplomatic relations and several wars in the past that hinge on the resolution of Palestine. But this has not prevented the informal rapprochement between Tel Aviv and Riyadh especially under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman who acknowledged that Israel had a right to exist like other countries. Netanyahu government has undertaken several policy changes with requisite outreach, even if low key, towards the GCC countries. Netanyahu's visit to Oman and allowing Israeli pilgrims and businessmen to Saudi Arabia as well as ongoing sports diplomacy has brought the possibility of closer engagement between the Israelis and Sunni Arab states. They already have Peace treaties with Jordan and Egypt.

In the wake of continued US-Iran tensions, at the last UN General Assembly session, Iranian President had announced his stability and rapprochement plan in the Strait of Hormuz, "HOPE" i.e. Hormuz Peace Initiative and to create a "Coalition of Hope" in the region to reduce tension and ensure stability and security. They appeared to be keen to reduce tensions and move forward. Even in last December, President Rouhani spoke to their News agency IRNA that 'from Iran's point of view there is no problem in developing ties with neighbours and resuming relations with Saudi Arabia'. Even Saudis expressed the hope in guarded terms placing the onus on the escalating side i.e. Iran. Such facile statements may not be able to reduce the tensions but could surely mitigate the likelihood of a conflagration which will have to span out the ongoing theatres of conflict for influence and suzerainty be it in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq or Syria .Meanwhile Oman , Qatar and UAE and Kuwait continue to retain working ties with Iran and have even provided occasional assistance.

### **India's Act West Policy**

India has enjoyed exceptionally close, historic and civilisational ties with West Asia. By the end of the first millennium BC, trade between India and Arabia became the economic backbone of the Arabian peninsula. Centuries old bilateral trade benefitted both sides greatly as it enhanced their knowledge and understanding of each other and the Arabs acted as a conduit to the West taking Indian knowledge like numerals and traded spices, foodstuff, jewellery, textiles and muslin and other goods flowed from India toward the Arab region, while pearls, horses and dates were exported from the Gulf region. Economic ties continued during the British rule in India. No wonder Indian Rupee was a legal tender in several countries until the 1970s.

Most of the Gulf countries are in close vicinity and extremely important for India's strategic and energy security. There is tremendous good will and bonhomie for India and the Indians in the region. Indians account for over 9 million people in the Gulf and in most cases constitute the single largest expatriate community. They have emerged as great contributors to the wellbeing and development of their host economies and countries. Indians are the preferred workforce due to their discipline and sincerity of purpose and hardworking ethos. Indians especially in the GCC countries remit around US\$ 35-45 billion annually to India that adds to our vital foreign exchange reserves. Over time a qualitative change has occurred as Indian entrepreneurs have also emerged as the major trading and investment collaborators of the host countries.

There are many common political and security concerns of India and the Gulf countries, which could translate into coordinated efforts for peace, security and stability in the Gulf region, and security of the maritime routes passing through the region. The Gulf States are going through a significant change and transformation. Emerging common threat perceptions create further opportunities for West Asia-India cooperation in the future. This envisages jointly preparing to meet emerging domestic and regional challenges, foremost being the common threat from terrorism and fundamentalism. Thus, both the Gulf and the West Asian region and India need to cooperate and coordinate their

efforts to combat such forces to meet their challenge. These are clearly addressed and reflected in the discussions during high level interactions and statements issued thereafter (visit [www.mea.gov.in](http://www.mea.gov.in)).

India's so called policy of "Look West" has been converted to "Link and Act West" even though high level visits from India were few and far between. This hiatus was addressed from 2008 onwards when former PM Manmohan Singh visited Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. High level exchanges have become frequent with PM Modi on the horizon.

After PM Modi took over, the Arab governments were somewhat concerned and apprehensive that India might adopt a more pro-Israeli policy at the expense of traditional relations with them and the Palestinian cause itself will suffer. Besides the longstanding personal friendship and bonhomie between PM Modi and PM Netanyahu made them wary. This was soon dispelled. PM Modi understood the exceptional importance of relations with the Middle East that included Israel too. Hence a rounded and balanced relationship was to follow.

PM Modi first visited UAE followed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia as well as to Iran and Oman (August 2015 to June 2016) in the first two years and to Israel in 2017 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations. Several leaders from the region visited India. In an unusual gesture Crown Prince of UAE was the Chief guest on our Republic Day. Exceptional collaboration in security & intelligence matters with an unusual emphasis on counter terrorism cooperation (CT) was the hallmark of the declarations post the visit that clearly targeted the cross border and havens of terrorism especially in Pakistan that was a warning to them since hitherto under the Islamic cloak Pakistan was able to garner the Arab support as benefactors. This was no longer available or at least was qualified which is a stellar achievement.

The Joint Statement with UAE was an exceptional document as it forbade Pakistan to use UAE territory for anti-India activities, which has hitherto been the case as the fugitive terrorist Dawood and his D Company and several others had been taking refuge in UAE and shuttling between Pakistan and the UAE while carrying out anti-India activities. In fact several accused Indian origin terrorists were

extradited to India. Most recent case was that of the close aide of Dawood – the notorious Farouq Takla which is clearly an indication of the respect and resolve to genuinely address mutual concerns. Moreover, billions of dollars of strategic investments in India have been agreed to by these countries. While Iran is the Gateway of India to Central Asia and Afghanistan through the strategic Chabahar port, the GCC countries are integral to India's energy security, over all security and counter terrorism efforts as well as safety and welfare of the huge Indian diaspora. No wonder PM Modi visited UAE the second time as the Indo-UAE Relations have acquired a special strategic character. Several MoUs were signed in railways, energy sector, financial services and manpower. But for the first time an MoU between an Indian consortium (OVL, BPRL & IOCL) and Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) was signed that allows the acquisition of 10 per cent participating interest amounting to US\$ 600 million in Abu Dhabi's offshore Lower Zakum concession for 40 years. A highly significant development that was not conceivable until recently as hitherto we only had a buyer seller relationship with UAE. Similarly, strategic storage of oil has been in the pipeline.

Our close friendship and concerted engagement has begun to yield tangible results in several areas of our strategic interest in a rather short time as enunciated in the Joint Statement of August 2015 during PM Modi's visit to UAE first by an Indian prime minister in a quarter century – Recognising that India is emerging as the new frontier of investment opportunities, especially with the new initiatives by the government to facilitate trade and investment, encourage the investment institutions of UAE to raise their investments in India, including through the establishment of UAE-India Infrastructure Investment Fund, with the aim of reaching a target of US\$ 75 billion to support investment in India's plans for rapid expansion of next generation infrastructure, especially in railways, ports, roads, airports and industrial corridors and parks.

Palestine issue has been a very sensitive one and treated as a yard stick of India's sincerity for the Arab world. India has unstintedly supported the Palestinian cause which was also very dear to the ME countries. Arab

-Israeli relations have their own negative dynamic in the international and domestic public perception and outreach. India's relationship with Israel provided some fodder to the critics who accused India of diluting its support and cooperation with the Arab world but India had kept Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in the loop while establishing diplomatic relations in 1992. India continued to maintain good relations with all the countries in the region to serve her own national interest. Our stand and support has been clear and articulated in all the fora while giving huge assistance to the Palestinians both as grant and in capacity building. Late Mrs Sushma Swaraj the External affairs Minister reiterated India's historical support for Palestine stating that it will be a central point of our foreign policy. "For independent India support for the Palestinian cause has been a reference point of its foreign policy," she told the Nonaligned Movement's Ministerial Committee on Palestine on the side-lines of the high-level General Assembly meeting. "I strongly believe that India's expanding relations in the region with all nations will only strengthen the Palestinian cause, that can never be undermined" she said. This cleared the deck for any doubt.

On the other hand PM Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Palestine-Ramallah on February 9, 2018 discarding any doubts that any Arab watchers have had. This was the clearest reiteration of India's position. President Abbas conferred the Grand Collar – on PM Modi which is the highest Palestinian award given only to a very few. Palestinian leadership which has discarded US as an honest broker of Peace and hopes that India perhaps could play a more proactive role in the Middle East. Even Syrians and other have been looking to India for an enhanced political role. PM Modi went to Ramallah via Amman where he had extensive discussions on counter terrorism, de-radicalisation and economic and security collaboration as well as on issue of Jerusalem and Palestine. King Abdullah II who was on a visit to Pakistan and UAE cut short and returned earlier to Amman to meet PM Modi. Both the leaders have developed a fond relationship. Within Weeks King Abdullah II was on a highly significant State visit to India, after a gap of 12 years when over a dozen agreements and MoUs were signed including the one on

defence cooperation that has hitherto been elusive due to Jordan's closer relations with Pakistan

Speaking at the Westminster, UK on April 2018, perhaps the first time India's recent independent foreign policy driven by a robust India and her national interest was expounded in no uncertain terms by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his "Bharat ki Baat Sabke Saath". He wondered "What prevented Indian Prime Ministers from going to Israel. Yes, I will go to Israel and I will even go to Palestine. I will further cooperate with Saudi Arabia and for the energy needs of India I will also engage with Iran." The fact that he specifically chose to refer to West Asia clearly underlines the importance India attaches to our relations with the region but with a fine tuned de-hyphenation and strategic autonomy.

### **Matrices of Collaboration and Way Forward**

- a) **Security:** It is imperative that our cooperation bilaterally and regionally should be deepened and focussed in the areas of intelligence sharing, counter terrorism, money laundering, contra band and counterfeit goods and currency manipulations; cyber security and AI collaboration, etc. Frequent consultations through appropriate consultative mechanisms are a prerequisite. Our embassies could establish a local mechanism with their counterparts to carry forward on various issues and information exchange which could subsequently feed into the bilateral institutionalised mechanism for addressing the mutual concerns.
- b) **Defence:** We have several MoUs and agreements on defence cooperation whose functionality should be duly assessed through a SWOT analysis. Although most are West-centric, there has been an increasing interest in the region to allocate some kind of security umbrella role to India in a non-intrusive manner which should be exploited especially in the maritime domain. Apart from standard exercises, goodwill visits, counter-insurgency and CT areas and anti-piracy and maritime cooperation we should try and deploy as many defence experts and advisers as possible, possibly from a select pool of retired personnel, wherever a demand or requirement is foreseen.

We should encourage senior officers from both sides on exchange programmes and training, etc. at NDC and other War colleges. It is being done but could be expanded in a more focussed manner. One of the most important requirements in the context of our SAGAR policy should be to establish naval assets at the key ports in the gulf and elsewhere. Duqm project in Oman must be pursued with greater vigour. Oman is a very important and neutral country and could act as a good pedestal for our regional outreach in the strategic context. We have also been very slow to capitalise on defence procurements by various countries which needs to be addressed by clear identification of our capabilities, supply and execution potential before we embark, we embark on this venture. Saudi Arabia is the largest importer of arms and equipment but is interested in joint ventures for local production. Joining in such energises and enhances the stakeholder's advantage in the longer run.

- c) **Space:** Several countries in the region are interested in launching their satellites for various purposes where we can provide them platforms and opportunities while in the commercial ventures, we could attract their investments.
- d) **Economic Cooperation:** Although the regional economies especially in the Gulf are going to feel the heat of low oil prices and depressed markets and financial meltdown and consequent hold ups, we need to take stock of various commitments made so far for large scale investments by some of the countries in the region especially Saudi Arabia (US\$ 100 billion), UAE (US\$ 75 billion) and Qatar (US\$ 5 billion). We would need to prepare the specified projects' profiles in accordance with the areas of interest expressed by their sovereign wealth investors on priority. In addition, a complete assessment should be made of investment and project opportunities for Indian companies in these countries. Saudi Arabia and UAE are ramping up their 2030 plans and so is Qatar for their 2022 World Cup where there would be huge opportunities for Indian private and public sector to encash. Almost every country is heading towards renewal energy, i.e. solar and in the UAE an Indian company Sterling Wilson



has already commissioned the biggest solar power plant. Indian companies could work with local companies and financial institutions to undertake and bid for projects in the countries which are dependent on funding and support from the region. Likewise, in other countries we need to identify opportunities and lock them in for future. To quote a case of Jordan, they have one of the largest and well located shale deposits in the world – which should be secured for futuristic purposes by entering into appropriate arrangements. We are hugely dependent on phosphates and potash for our agriculture and in this context countries like Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, where we already have some ventures, need to be harnessed in long term strategic tie ups for mutual benefit. Again, countries like Jordan have a web of FTAs that provide preferential access to all major markets. Some Indian origin textile companies have taken advantage of it but could be done if indeed Indian companies set up ventures there in automotive, food processing and even digital economy, etc. Moreover, they could explore the vast opportunities that will eventually open up in Syria and Iraq. Although an exercise on the utility of FTAs is underway frankly a suitable FTA with Jordan could be of great help in due course. This apart from Egypt is the only other country that has peace accord with Israel and that could be exploited as well since we have excellent relationship with the Jewish state.

- e) **Energy Security:** Since West Asia remains a life line for our energy security and industrial development and they may be open to India partaking in their E&P potential it will be desirable to secure the assets while we can. Strategic petroleum reserves in India must be expanded, recouped and completed while the prices are competitive and for that sometimes-long-term arrangements are beneficial. We may surely be having long term plans including diversification of sources, supply and value chains but it is time that we had well calibrated approach for 30-50 years horizon while branch out into alternate energy mix. Capacity of refineries and investments therein could be attractive for the investments for State oil companies from the region and should be encouraged. Iran is an important partner

but the US sanctions and pressure have created a dilemma and trust deficit for India which needs to be bridged through concrete action. We could perhaps think of created a special purpose vehicle/or set of companies in the PPP ruse which could be made insular from the adverse threats and sanctions which could indulge in Rupee-Rial or barter trade or for that matter with other sanctioned countries. For Iran only verbal articulation will not suffice for long. Chabahar port could be in jeopardy. We must develop a comprehensive strategy vis a vis Iran, unless how we deal with currently is the policy we wish to follow. Despite realpolitik the dictum "a friend in need is a friend indeed". Iran is also important for various gas pipe line projects, howsoever futuristic, they are. Their surplus balance of trade funds or part thereof could be allowed to be used in certain key projects.

- f) **Food Security and Third Country Partnerships:** India and Africa have a special umbilical relationship with a renewed focus and clear articulation of policy and objective after PM's Kampala address. The West Asian countries especially those from the Gulf are keen to invest in their food security and Africa has tremendous arable landmass. India has centuries old knowledge, expertise and proven track record of Green revolution and agricultural and agronomic practices including clusters of food processing industries. African countries mostly lack these basic ingredients. Therefore, Indian expertise, African allocated landmass and financial resources and markets of the middle east is a win-win relationship with a complete value chain. Already UAE, China and Africa are doing that in Ethiopia and elsewhere. We could aggressively look for such opportunities and create requisite trilateral mechanism with the target countries.
- g) **Diaspora Dividend:** With an estimated 9 million population we have huge stakes in the region. Moreover, thousands of Indian companies are trading and doing projects there. Scores of Indians are, even though divided among ethnicities and associations, are heading various companies and financial institutions. They are trusted by the locals and have tremendous access in the system and could act as a reasonable conduit for information. It will be useful to have a core

group of 10-15 prominent members (after due diligence) in very country whose informal task could be to interact with concerned Ambassador on key issues and opportunities. We need to be prepared for perhaps biggest ever evacuation of Indians from Gulf countries due to pandemic.

- h) **Political Engagement:** Region is in a flux and power dynamic is changing rapidly in West Asia. India has developed excellent bilateral strategic ties with most countries in the Arab Gulf as well with Israel and Iran. This approach is appreciated by the Middle Eastern countries and while they share that perspective, they do not expect India to take sides given their realistic assessment of the tenets of Indian foreign policy which essentially argues and propagates resolution of conflicts through dialogue. Similarly, we cannot work with a binary approach either of bilateralism or for that matter their closer relationship with Pakistan that is an Achilles heel for India. In fact, majority of the Arab leaders would like to see India-Pakistan relationship resolved so that they do not have to be seen partisan either way. While the ME countries may accept our de-hyphenated approach to the regional disputes as a given, we may also get the same in return at a crucial juncture in our own sub-regional or India-China context. It is also essential for us to project India's Muslim advantage and Islamic credentials in our regional engagement to stunt the vitriolic of organisations like OIC and Arab league on India's internal matters. Bilaterally it all works fine but a constituency needs to be created among the Islamic nations which blunts negative propaganda against India in the regional bodies where we are not members. Also important that Islamophobic statements in India are treated with contempt they deserve so that these are not used to decimate the goodwill created internationally. However, we should regularly reengage with the GCC mechanisms for working on a coordinated regional policy matrix.

Standing Review Mechanism(s) should be headed at a fairly high level for its effectiveness.

As trust and stakes in India increase we should be prepared to play a more proactive and robust role in the region as well as become a reliable peace initiator/interlocutor in the regional hotspots.

We are on a strong pitch in the region and now it depends on how well we bat!