

Iran: Assessing New, Emerging Geopolitics in the Middle East

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The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 marked the birth of new geopolitics in the Middle East. Two years later, the Bush administration attacked Iraq hoping not only to topple the country's brutal and unpredictable dictator, but also to pave the way towards the collapse of the Iranian system. The theory behind the US policy-makers' thinking was the democratic domino effect. Paul Wolfowitz, then the US Deputy Defence Secretary and one of the masterminds of the Iraq invasion, maintained that Iraq could be, "the first Arab democracy" and that it would "cast a very large shadow, starting with Syria and Iran, but across the whole Arab world." However, we now know that his theory was flawed. In fact, with the collapse of Iran's two arch enemies, i.e., the Taliban to the east and Saddam Hussein to the west, Iran's influence became increasingly *stronger* over time. This was entirely unexpected by the US while it happened, first in Iraq and, subsequently, in other parts of the region.

Then there were two more colossal waves, the results of which began to reshape geopolitics of the Middle East. The first wave consisted of uprisings in part of the Arab world against long-lived dictatorships, the so-called "Arab Spring" that began in Tunisia in December 2010. The second wave, initially inspired by the first, was the eruption of the Syrian civil war. These two developments have also

had a great impact on the geopolitics of the region and beyond.

The ties between Tehran and Damascus have historically been based on shared strategic interests, including circumvention of US and Israeli hegemony in the Middle East. The two countries also supported one another to balance Arab states that are allied with the US and unfriendly towards them. Once the civil war erupted in Syria, major regional and extra-regional actors became involved with a tacit consensus to curb Iran's strategic depth in the region by toppling Bashar al-Assad's regime. Additionally, each member of this group sought to gain a distinguished position with which to exert its influence in the region, thereby enabling it to fulfil its own interests. As such, a front involving the West – led by the United States – Israel, Turkey, and several Arab states in the region – led by Saudi Arabia – was formed to bring down Bashar al-Assad. The opposing front included the Syrian government, Iran and Russia. Subsequent developments created complexities that were unexpected by anti-Assad proponents. Out of these complexities emerged threats to the actors in the front and divisions amongst them. Let us see how the developments played out.

The United States

The US administration admits that "...it is clear that the crisis of Syria is growing, not diminishing."² The deplorable rise in Syria of al-Qaeda and affiliated groups that are arch enemies of the United States has sharply elevated Syria's level of threat to the national

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² Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry, 14 February 2014, www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/02/221658.htm.

security of the US. According to the US Secretary of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson, "Syria has become a matter of homeland security."³ In his annual report entitled "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," James R. Clapper, US Director of National Intelligence, told the US Senate that the war in Syria has, "created opportunities for extremist groups to find ungoverned spaces from where they can try to destabilise new governments and prepare attacks against Western interests."

The US approach in Syria as described by President Barack Obama in his State of the Union address has been to "support the opposition that rejects the agenda of terrorist networks,"⁴ with the expectation of unseating Assad. This protocol, combined with turning a blind eye to the policies of those of its allies in Syria – mainly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey – that have directly or indirectly contributed to Jihadi groups, both logistically and financially, has been responsible for the creation of the current, dangerous dilemma in Syria. Interestingly, in his statement Clapper referred to Syria as a "proxy war" between Iran and Hezbollah on the one hand and "Sunni Arab states" on the other.

Some observers argue that the Syrian crisis may provide the US with a strong enough incentive to reach a resolution with Iran over its nuclear programme more quickly so that the two countries can tackle the Syrian crisis in a concerted, cooperative manner

By now, conventional wisdom dictates that there is no viable solution to remedy the crisis in Syria other than to engage Iran. Iran and the US share a common enemy and must strategically halt al-Qaeda advances, rooting them out in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. As such, it is reasonable to expect that the US will engage Iran at such time as their dispute over

Iran's nuclear programme is resolved. In fact, some observers argue that the Syrian crisis may provide the US with a strong enough incentive to reach a resolution with Iran over its nuclear programme more quickly so that the two countries can tackle the Syrian crisis in a concerted, cooperative manner.

Israel

With the emergence of the moderate Hassan Rouhani as President in Iran, hardliners in Israel and the pro-Israel lobby in the US urged the US administration not to abandon its aggressive policies towards Iran. After the historic telephone conversation between Rouhani and Obama last November, the first direct communication between the two countries' leaders since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Israel's President Netanyahu called Rouhani a "wolf in sheep's clothing"⁵ and warned the international community not to buy into his charm offensive. Meanwhile, after the Geneva interim agreement between Iran and the P5+1 in November 2013, aimed at permanently resolving Iran's nuclear crisis, the pro-Israel lobby relentlessly sought to impose new sanctions on Iran through the US Congress in order to derail the process of reaching a peaceful solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis. Had the move actualised, it would have been a clear violation of the Geneva agreement and, thus, the end of it.

Israel and its lobby faced a major defeat on two fronts. First, the US took Tehran's conciliatory messages seriously and, after ten tumultuous years, carried out covert and overt talks with Iran and, ultimately, entered into an agreement with Iran in the framework of the P5+1. Pouring cold water on the potential for new US sanctions against Iran, Obama publically warned that he would veto such efforts by the pro-Israel lobby in the Congress.

Another major defeat experienced by Israel was its failure to convince the Obama administration to militarily attack Syria. The Russo-Iranian initiative of convincing Bashar al-Assad to annihilate Syria's

³ Remarks by Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson at the Woodrow Wilson Center, 7 February 2014, www.dhs.gov/news/2014/02/07/remarks-secretary-homeland-security-jeh-johnson-woodrow-wilson-center.

⁴ President Barack Obama's State of the Union Address, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/28/president-barack-obamas-state-union-address.

⁵ "Netanyahu calls Iran's Rouhani 'wolf in sheep's clothing'." *Al-Jazeera*, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/10/1/netanyahu-calls-irans-uhaniawolfinshpeepscloting.html>.

chemical weapons arsenal, as well as opposition to military attack from some European capitals, mainly the British Parliament, left no room for President Obama to pursue military options.

As a result of these developments, Israel became isolated and unable to pursue its aggressive policies toward Iran. Worsening matters, as the Syrian war unfolded, the American expert on US security Bruce Riedel put it best: the jihadists surrounding Israel became the frontline threat to the country "like never before in the history of the global jihad."⁶

Turkey

The Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was another major element of the tacit coalition pursuing regime change in Syria. Erdogan has never shied away from expressing his firm support for Islamic groups including the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, his crackdown on social media and threats to his rivals of "paying the price"⁷ for opposing him have resulted in a clear fragmentation of Turkish society and have also escalated friction between Turkey and Western countries. The situation was exacerbated with recent developments in the Syrian town of Kasab, where members of the Armenian community were attacked by the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra group, a group that Erdogan's government is accused of supporting. The case has already triggered focus by the US House of Representatives on Turkey's role in Syria, given its support of jihadi groups.⁸

On the evening of his party's March 2014 victory in the local elections, Erdogan declared that Turkey is at war with Syria.⁹ Erdogan relentlessly continues to pursue his initial plan to bring down the Assad regime. However, as the situation in Syria deteriorates and the threat of groups that are associated with al-Qaeda lingers, Turkey will face two options: either

shift from its existing failed policy towards Syria, or deal with the terrorist blowback, for a long time.¹⁰ Adding to the misery is Turkey's economy. Once hailed as a miracle, its growth has abated and the Turkish currency has plunged to near record lows against the dollar. Erdogan's dream of becoming a super power in the region and erecting a neo-Ottoman empire did not come true. Indeed, it is difficult for one to imagine how Turkey is prepared to play a significant role in the region.

Saudi Arabia

Leading the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia hoped to compensate for its loss in Iraq to Shia Iran by involving itself in efforts to topple Syria's Assad, Iran's strategic partner. Saudi Arabia intended to establish a Sunni Syria with one caveat: that a Muslim Brotherhood government in Damascus would threaten the monarchy. Things did not go as expected. Instead of moderate groups, there rose extremists who are sworn enemies of the Saudis. Making matters worse were heightened differences between Qatar, which has close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and has also played a major role in funding Islamic rebels in Syria, and three GCC countries led by Saudi Arabia in March 2014. These differences resulted in the withdrawal of the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE from Doha, Qatar's capital. Qatar "suggested the move stemmed from displeasure over its actions beyond the Gulf, for example in Syria and Egypt, where it has backed groups opposed to the Saudi government."¹¹ If this claim holds true, it means that Saudi engagement in Syria has backfired. Not only would the Saudis have failed to expand their influence in the region by toppling Bashar al-Assad, but they would also have lost their leadership role in the GCC. Compounding the problem of their waning

⁶ RIEDEL, Bruce. "Al-Qaeda now frontline threat to Israel." *Al-Monitor*, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/al-qaeda-israel-threat.html.

⁷ TAŞTEKİN, Fehim. "Erdogan: political enemies will 'pay the price'." *Al-Monitor*, 30 March 2014, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/turkey-akp-elections.html.

⁸ PALLONE, Frank, Jr. "Leaders of Armenia Caucus Urge President Obama to Condemn Attacks in Armenian Populated Area of Syria." <http://pallone.house.gov/press-release/leaders-armenia-caucus-urge-president-obama-condemn-attacks-armenian-populated-area>.

⁹ "Turkey is at war with Syria, Erdoğan says in post-election speech." www.todayszaman.com/news-343511-turkey-is-at-war-with-syria-erdogan-says-in-post-election-speech.html

¹⁰ "Turkey deals with terrorist blowback on Syria." *Al-Monitor*, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/turkey-syria-geneva-ii-terrorism.html.

¹¹ MCDOWALL, Angus and BAKR, Amena. "Three Gulf Arab states recall envoys in rift with Qatar." <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/03/05/uk-gulf-qatar-ambassadors-idUKBREA241FN20140305>.

leadership is that Oman, another GCC member, acted as a mediator between the US and Iran, the outcome of which was the realisation of the most unprecedented deal between Iran and the US since the 1981 Algiers Accord.

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The US-Saudi relationship has also been strained by the US administration's reluctance to pursue military action in Syria, as well as the secret negotiations with Iran leading to the Geneva agreement between Iran and the P5+1. Now, if the United States makes the likely decision to combat the dangerously organised terrorism in Syria, it would not be able to implement a coherent policy in Syria as long as its close ally, Saudi Arabia, is involved in a proxy war with Iran. Therefore, as strange as it may seem, the US is encouraging Saudi Arabia to move towards the resolution of its disputes with Iran, allowing them to address their regional security and the threat from al-Qaeda in concert.¹² This unprecedented alliance has the potential to transform the geopolitics of the region from one driven by suspicion, hostility and competition, to a new one based on confidence-building and cooperation.

So far, it seems that Iran's rivals have not benefited from their tacit consensus, and subsequent actions aimed at over overthrowing Bashar al-Assad and

curbing Iran's strategic depth in the region continue without success. However, one can calculate that if Iran's nuclear issue is resolved, the United States will move towards cooperation with a willing Iran in combating organised terrorism in Syria as well as Iraq and seeking to bring the Syrian crisis to a diplomatic end. In that event, Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, being allies of the US, will not challenge US policy. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia in particular, as mentioned earlier, will likely engage in a reconciliation process with Iran and even cooperate in the interest of fighting extremists that threaten its own monarchy. Under the moderate Rouhani, with a strong mandate to improve relations with its neighbours, Iran will be receptive to this initiative. As Mohamed ElBaradei penned recently, a final resolution to Iran's nuclear crisis "can be translated into a broad security and cooperation agreement, paving the way for a grand bargain with the West and a sea change in regional security and stability."¹³ Meanwhile, although the Israeli hardliners and the pro-Israel lobby in the US will likely make efforts to prevent the formation of such cooperation as it appears, the Obama administration has made its decision to pursue détente with Iran.

However, if the Geneva interim agreement fails, the US, in all likelihood, will tighten the sanctions even further. In such an eventuality, communication and dialogue between Iran and America will likely come to a halt and the pattern of previous years, i.e. the exchange of hostile and threatening rhetoric from both sides, will once again culminate in hostilities. Irreconcilable and conflictual policies on both sides of the fence cannot continue forever. History dictates that when governments fail to overcome their differences through dialogue, they seek military solutions.

¹² TABATABAI, Adnan. "Time to Foster Iran-Saudi Relations." www.lobelog.com/time-to-foster-iran-saudi-relations/

¹³ ELBARADEI, Mohamed. "Hassan Rouhani, Time 100 leaders." <http://time.com/70838/hassan-rouhani-2014-time-100/>