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## **The Changing Regional Architecture of the Middle East**

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The last two generations have witnessed a steady decline of the Arab states, to the extent that some no longer even exist as the unitary entities they once were, like Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. Generally speaking the Arabs have not modernized successfully. Most Arab states (excluding the oil-rich and less populous Gulf States) suffer in one way or another from a critical imbalance between population and resources resulting in consistently poor economic performance. The Arab world cannot sustain its rapidly growing population (280 million in 2000; 380 million at present; and about 460 million within a decade or less). The pressure to emigrate from Arab states to more prosperous parts of the world is at an all-time high.

For over a century it was customary to refer to the Middle East and the Arab world as virtually one and the same. That however is no longer politically true. The Arabs, of course, remain the largest ethnic group in the region, but it is the non-Arab states of the region that have become its key political players. Not one single Arab state is presently a leading Middle Eastern power. The erstwhile movers and shakers like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq are but shadows of their former selves.

Some would argue that Saudi Arabia is the exception to this rule. But this is not really so. The perception of Saudi power and regional influence derives from Saudi Arabia's immense wealth (*Riyalpolitik*, as it was once cynically dubbed).

But this wealth was never effectively translated into decisive regional clout. Moreover, the Saudis, with present-day low oil prices, are considerably less wealthy than they once were.

Saudi Arabia was mostly on the defensive in the heyday of Nasserism, and Saudi conduct of regional policy in more recent times has not got much to show for it either. Saudi Arabia needed the US military to protect the country from Iraqi expansionism during the Saddam era in 1990-1991. The air campaign the Saudis have waged since early 2015 to subdue the Houthis and curb Iranian influence in Yemen hasn't achieved much, beyond the killing of thousands of innocent Yemenis.

In the struggle for Syria, the Saudis have courted failure yet again. In the 1950s the struggle for Syria was about its place between East and West in the Cold War. In recent years the struggle was essentially on whether Syria was to remain the Alawi dominated state of the Asads and a crucial link in Iran's Shi'i camp, or to be ruled by its Sunni majority as an integral part of the Sunni Arab camp. Saudi intervention in the Syrian civil war proved to be quite useless and their adversaries, Asad and the Iranians, have been considerably more successful, albeit with the crucial assistance of the Russians. Thus far the Saudis have generally failed in their efforts to curtail Iranian hegemonic designs.

The void left by Arab weakness has been filled by the non-Arab states of the region, Iran and Turkey and to a lesser degree by Israel. Iran and Turkey, as opposed to most of the Arab states, are not recently established entities and unlike many Arab states are not artificial creations, but large countries of some 80 million people each. They have long histories as sovereign nations, with unique linguistic and cultural identities of their own, long before the advent of European Imperialism that was the handmaiden to many of the Arab states. Turkish and Iranian nationalism have consequently proved to be considerably more cohesive and politically successful than Arab nationalism.

Arab nationalism, especially in its revolutionary Nasserist formulation, was the panacea that promised the Arabs renewed power, prestige, and prosperity. But it did nothing of the kind and turned out to be a false messiah, as exposed in the most humiliating of defeats to Israel, exactly half a century ago, in 1967. Defeated Arab nationalism left a huge ideological vacuum that was rapidly filled by Islamist politics. After 1967, the Islamists could argue with far greater credibility that “Islam was the solution.” After all, secular Arab nationalism and Arab socialism had just proved that they would never be the solution.

However, if Arab nationalism had sought to supersede religious sectarianism in the Arab world and to unite all the speakers of the Arabic language as one nation, Islamism had the opposite effect of exacerbating sectarian differences. For the Islamists, religion was obviously the key marker of collective identity. In the Islamist world view there were very clear and meaningful divisions and distinctions between Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. As radicalizing Sunnis and Shi‘is highlighted their unique identities, various non-Muslim minorities were left with little choice but to withdraw into the protective sanctuary of their respective communities. Arab societies broke down into their sectarian components, eroding the integrity and cohesion of multi-sectarian Arab states.

Sectarianism also drives regional inter-state alliances. If in the 1950s and 1960s “progressive” pro-Soviet republics railed against “reactionary” pro-American monarchies, all of these terms have become obsolete, supplanted by sectarian division between Sunnis and Shi‘is. The Sunni Arab states and Turkey are on the Sunni side of the regional fault line. Shi‘i Iran and its Arab allies in Shi‘i Iraq, in‘Alawi-dominated Syria, and the Lebanese Shi‘i militia, Hizballah, have formed what Jordan’s King ‘Abdallah has called the “Shi‘i Crescent.” More recently Iran has increased its influence in Yemen too, through its ties with the Shi‘i Houthis in Yemen, leading some anxious Sunni Arabs to complain that the “Crescent” had evolved into a “Full Moon.”

Ever since the overthrow of Saddam and the empowerment of the Shi'i majority in Iraq, Iran has increased its regional influence in the Arab world. The destruction of Saddam's Sunni-dominated Iraq, the gatekeeper of the Arab East, enhanced Iran's regional posture. Iranian ascendancy has now reached new heights after the partial victory of the Asad regime in Syria. Asad's survival was thanks in no small measure to the involvement of Iran and Hizballah, bolstered in the most recent, decisive phase of the war by Russian intervention. Iran's fight for Syria was crucial for the preservation of Iran's hegemonic momentum. Asad's defeat would have been an unbearable regional setback for the Iranians. Their victory in Syria is instead a great setback for the Sunni camp. It also brings Iran's military presence closer to Israel than ever.

Russian involvement in Syria was in many ways reminiscent of the historic Soviet breakthrough in the mid-1950s when the USSR leapfrogged over NATO's Northern Tier into Egypt with a path-breaking arms deal with 'Abd al-Nasser at the height of the Cold War. Now, however, the Russian power projection was facilitated by US regional retrenchment under President Obama, which came in the wake of the extremely costly and largely unsuccessful US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

US retrenchment has added to America's Sunni Arab allies' sense of vulnerability, especially after the nuclear deal with Iran. The nuclear deal between Iran and a coalition of the Great Powers (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and the US) placed important limits on Iran's nuclear program, but it failed to impose constraints on Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony by other means, much to the disappointment of America's allies in the region.

Relative Arab weakness also paved the way for the decisions of Egypt and Jordan to make their peace with Israel. Egypt's withdrawal from the Arab order of battle left the Arab states with no war option with Israel. Israel and the Arab states have not engaged in war for over 40 years. If the Arab-Israeli conflict was once the core of Middle Eastern regional politics, it has not been so for decades. The Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait were indicative of the

changing places of core and periphery in Middle Eastern geopolitics. The Gulf, which had been thought of for many years as the periphery of the region, emerged as its new core as the conflict between Israel and the Arabs lost its regional centrality. As such, the regional importance of Iran rose accordingly, a trend that has only gained further momentum with Iran's increasingly expansionist regional profile.

In this new Middle East Israel is not alone. In the more distant past Israel was isolated, facing just about all of the Arab states as actively hostile enemies. That is no longer true. Israel now has Arab allies. It has made peace with some key Arab states and it has common interests with others, as they all share profound concerns about American retrenchment and an Iranian hegemonic design. These "alliances," however, will remain rather limited and kept under wraps until such time as Israel and the Palestinians make real progress towards some form of mutually acceptable political settlement.

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