

CURRENT HISTORY

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“Iran’s rise has alarmed Israel, Turkey, and the core Arab states in equal measure, encouraging a . . . reworking of the regional balance of power.”

The Middle East’s New Power Dynamics

ANOUSHIRAVAN EHTESHAMI

Relations among the regional powers in the Middle East continue to dominate global concerns about security. As we watch the era of George W. Bush fade into history, we are still saddled with the consequences of policies that unleashed US military might in the region and, in the process, caused substantial imbalances among the regional powers that have proved difficult to redress.

The transformation of Iraq into a Shiite-run state, the first of its kind in the modern Arab world, together with a further weakening of the Arab order that has followed, is a case in point. The US intervention in Iraq disrupted the region’s notoriously contested and nebulous balance of power and, not surprisingly, reinforced anarchical behavior patterns. A power vacuum in the Arab world invited Al Qaeda into Iraq. It also emboldened Iran, Israel, and Turkey to become more assertive in their regional dealings.

But among the key non-Arab actors in the Middle East, it is Iran that has gained the most leverage in recent years. This has created a region-wide sense of apprehension compounded by concerns over that country’s nuclear program and the aggressive posture of Iran’s neoconservative president. Iran’s rise has alarmed Israel, Turkey, and the core Arab states in equal measure, encouraging a further reworking of the regional balance of power. Although it is far too early to talk of a joint Arab-Israeli position on Iran, the two sides share enough strategic concerns about Iran’s rise to be tempted by some stealth “bandwagoning.”

The extent and shape of such cooperation will depend, of course, on progress toward resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But Iran’s rise has already provoked a strengthening in the Turkish-Israeli partnership, as well as a greater Turkish presence in both the Arab and transcaucasus realms, territories in which Iran too has been increasingly active.

Containment of Iran, through confrontation or appeasement, has become a major driver of regional balancing. Indeed, the possibility of a war to contain Iran has haunted the region since the introduction of the “Bush Doctrine,” affecting regional security calculations at every level. Many Arab leaders are anxious about the consequences of an Israeli military attack on Iran, since the Iranians have gained a substantial foothold in the Arab region. No one is underestimating Tehran’s ability to lash out, and nowhere is the fear of an Israeli-Iranian military exchange more evident than in the Persian Gulf subregion, where regional rivalries are more acute than ever.

In the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia’s emergence as the dominant Arab actor has been matched by Iran’s resurgence as the northern shore’s main player and ally of the new Iraq. Iran and Iraq taken together, given their considerable resources and demographic weight (approaching 100 million people), can dominate power relations in the energy-rich Gulf.

Iran and Iraq’s alliance-building aspirations eventually may be dampened by Baghdad’s assertion of its Arab identity as a means of reintegrating into the Arab mainstream, differences over oil production and pricing, Baghdad’s concerns about Iranian meddling in Iraq’s internal affairs, and possible religious tensions over Iran’s politicization of Shiite Islam. But for the time being at least, the two countries are likely to continue working

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closely together in areas of interest to Iraq: two-way religious pilgrimages, socioeconomic and infrastructural development of Iraq (in the south in particular), free access to the Persian Gulf waterway, boundary issues, and the like.

In any case, since 2003 and the US-imposed regime change in Iraq, Riyadh and Tehran have been grooming themselves as the subregion's dominant local powers. And since both have also been increasing their respective stakes in the Levant and the Arab-Israeli theater, their jockeying is no longer limited to their immediate neighborhood. The Saudis and Iranians' rivalry is now effectively pan-regional.

AMERICA HAMSTRUNG?

Into this fluid situation has stepped an American president with a new outlook and a promising set of priorities. Barack Obama has pressed Israel to accept a just peace with the Palestinians and made efforts to settle grievances that have dogged US-Iranian relations. The problem Obama faces in trying to achieve these laudable goals is less political than strategic, in that Washington will likely find it increasingly difficult to separate the theaters in which Israel and Iran operate.

This being the case, so long as Tehran and Tel Aviv persist with their aggressive intent toward each other and their zero-sum approaches to regional diplomacy, it will be practically impossible for the United States to press one party without having to look over its shoulder at the other. Indeed, at no time has strategic interdependence across the regional theaters been so deep, fueling power rivalries and competition over the entire broader Middle East.

Thus US action, albeit very different in kind from the interventions of Obama's predecessor, is likely again to prove disruptive to the region. The reason for this is that the United States is perhaps the greatest outside "local" power the Middle East has ever seen. America continues to be the region's dominant external actor, whose considerable local presence, politically and militarily, gives it the attributes of a local power as well. US actions have often proved decisive in tipping the balance of power among regional rivals.

At the same time, Washington also has to balance its Iran policy, and its attempts to further

the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, against other priorities in the global arena in which it operates. The United States will have difficulty persuading skeptics like China and Russia to commit to the US position on Iran without compromising on its other priorities, such as economic imbalances, Georgia's independence, global warming, North Korea's nuclear program, Taiwan's security, human rights in Tibet, a new arms control treaty with Russia, and support for counterterrorism efforts.

Russia and China should not be seen as passive actors in the Middle East. Each of these nations has a wide range of interests (military, economic, and political) to protect, in particular, in Iran. They undoubtedly will seek to ensure that any redistribution of regional power following a US-Iran rapprochement or war does not occur at their own expense.

Furthermore, how far can the United States press Tehran and Tel Aviv when it remains stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan? Perceptions of a hamstrung America figure into the calculations of Middle East actors. Their assessment of Obama's real strengths could prove decisive in the struggle among the key parties. And uncertainties regarding the United States add to regional volatility.

VIOLENCE AND PARANOIA

What the above implies is that the Middle East landscape is fluid and its power relations rather uneven. This region, unlike others in the world, is characterized by intense dynamism in which power relations can change rapidly and external pressures can affect the regional balance of power in dramatic and often unpredictable ways.

The drivers of rivalry in this highly unstable environment are also distinct from those in other regions. One driver is the prevalence of paranoia. Most Middle Eastern states over time have developed a sharp security and military edge. In fact, this characteristic is not unique to authoritarian regimes: From Israel to Pakistan, the security paradigm dominates. For good reason, some would say. Yet, in policy terms, the obsession with security fuels regional suspicions as well as rivalries, in the process ensuring the presence of well-oiled military machines in every critical country in the region, regardless of size.

Regional rivalries were already changing the Middle East's strategic map when the United States intervened in Iraq in 2003.

A second driver of regional rivalry is the capricious and intense violence that, with each eruption, undermines regional states' sense of security and feeds their unilateralist tendencies. Endemic violence, coupled with the frequency and intensity of conflicts, has had a corrosive effect on interstate relations. Each violent act hardens the shells of states in the region, at the same time fueling their predatory instincts and sharpening their survival strategies. The struggle for survival has in turn encouraged maximalist policies and competition for supremacy—for some states, supremacy and survival have become synonymous.

Third, non-state actors as perpetrators of violence play an important role in stoking contention in the Middle East. In recent years, for example, Israel has found itself embroiled in two conflicts with two separate non-state actors—Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006 and Hamas in Gaza in 2008–9. On each occasion, other states found it impossible to stay clear of the war zone.

In 2006, Iran and Syria rushed to the aid of Hezbollah, and after the guns fell silent undertook a massive rearmament of the Islamist militant group, thus not only challenging Israel's botched attempt to alter Lebanon's political makeup, but

also ensuring that the regional landscape would not change in Israel's favor. The conflict thus deepened rather than curtailed regional rivalry.

Lebanon itself—which remains in a state of political paralysis, and which has suffered a power vacuum since the assassination of its popular former prime minister, Rafik Hariri—has served as an arena for regional rivalries to play themselves out. (Few thought it a coincidence that, within 24 hours of Prime Minister Saad Hariri's September 10, 2009, announcement that he was abandoning his efforts to form a government, two rockets were fired into Israel from Lebanon. Nor did Israel's subsequent retaliation surprise anyone. These events did, however, underscore the fragility of the war-created status quo.)

In 2008, the entire Arab world was caught up in the storm that Israel's attack on Gaza unleashed. Egypt and Jordan in particular came under intense pressure that forced them to defend their diplomatic links with Israel and to appear supportive of the Palestinians. Saudi Arabia, too, found itself badly exposed in the region, standing accused of not providing sufficient support to the Palestinians. Riyadh's reputation faced risks due to a conflict that was not of its making or choosing.

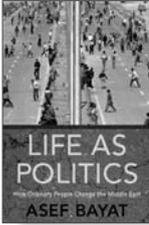
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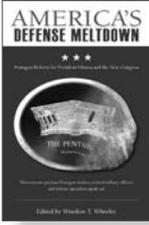
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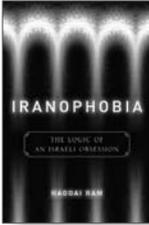
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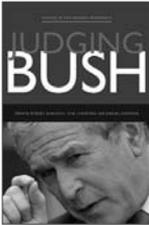
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Even if some Arabs may have secretly welcomed Israel's pulping of the Islamist militant faction Hamas, the Arabs' apparent impotence in the face of perceived Israeli aggression increased dissent among their ranks, which in turn inflamed their rivalries. The Arab states, divided as they were, found themselves caught again in the rivalry between Iran and Israel on the regional stage, as Tehran did everything it could (short of sending soldiers) to portray itself as the true defender of the Hamas warriors and by extension the Palestinian cause.

These episodes show that non-state actors can, partly through violence and partly through skillful political action, stoke regional rivalries. Al Qaeda, another non-state player with influence in the Middle East, has through unpredictable terrorist acts compounded the fear that elites harbor about regime stability. All this makes regimes more vulnerable to, and suspicious of, penetration of their realms by other states or by non-state actors sponsored by other states. More than anywhere else in the world, instability and violence form the backdrop to state actions, and help shape states' perceptions of each other.

UPSETTING THE BALANCE

As already noted, the Middle East is a penetrated regional system in which external powers have a strong presence, yet at the same time they have proved unable to regulate its politics. As a consequence, such powers have had little choice but to rub shoulders with regional state actors and non-state forces. The critical problem for the external actors has been the need to maintain prudent mechanisms for managing regional antagonisms while minimizing their own destabilizing effects on the regional balance of power.

Considerable evidence suggests that regional rivalries have intensified since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. The attacks acted as a second catalyst—following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the apparent end to direct superpower competition in the Middle East—for a deepening of contention among regional powers. On top of this, the US military interventions after 9/11 have had a crucial impact on the regional system, adding to underlying tensions in the Arab world that Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait had generated.

The 9/11 attacks put immense strain on the pro-Western Arab regimes and their relationship with the United States. With Riyadh in shock

after 9/11, and on the defensive for its support of Islamic activists and of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, strategic space was opened up for the non-Arab states to occupy. Iran, Israel, and Turkey all have begun to feature more prominently in regional machinations since 9/11, though in very different ways.

Also, long before 9/11, Iraq's changing role in the region had been upsetting the Middle Eastern balance of power. Iraq for some decades had been the "eastern gateway" of the Arab world and a major balancer in the Arab-Israel theater as a provider of "strategic depth" for the so-called front-line Arab states. After 1980, however, Iraq's role began to change considerably. Within one decade it unleashed its military might in two bloody and futile campaigns, against Iran (1980–88) and Kuwait (1990–91). The result was that Iraq was greatly weakened and its traditional role as the Arab east's decisive power was eroded.

Likewise eroded during this period was the position of Egypt, the central axis toward which Arabs had traditionally gravitated, and Arab and non-Arab states alike contended in the 1990s over the resulting power vacuum. An Arab region without a heartland became an atomized and fractured place, more vulnerable to the influence of others. Slowly but surely the regional balance of power began moving away from the great Arab powers and toward countries such as Iran and Israel.

In Egypt's case, this process had begun with the 1979 Camp David accords with Israel, which led to the regional isolation of the Arab powerhouse for a decade. In more recent times, Egypt's inability to bring order to the Palestinian political ranks, to help stabilize Lebanon, to rebuild Arab partnerships in the Maghreb and with the Gulf Arab states, and to moderate the impact of the Iranian-Syrian alliance in the Levant have all resulted in the weakening of Egypt's role as the political center of the Arab region.

So regional rivalries were already changing the Middle East's strategic map when the United States intervened in Iraq in 2003. Even so, the intervention seriously aggravated antagonisms in the region, as it transformed Iraq (west Asia's most populous Arab state) from a country with a Sunni-dominated political order to a Shiite-ruled state that is, at least for the time being, emotionally, ritually, and politically close to neighboring Iran.

To the dismay of the major Arab powers such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, non-Arab Shiite Iran had

overnight acquired an unrivaled voice and presence in the historically and strategically important Iraq. The Arabs' "eastern gateway," which Saddam Hussein had so painstakingly strengthened in order to check Iran, had suddenly become a paved highway over which Tehran could spread its influence and unique brand of political Islam to the heart of the Arab world.

ISRAEL MISCALCULATES

The rise of Iran has affected not only Arab politics but also Israel's calculations regarding the regional balance of power. While a much weakened (and US-occupied) Iraq served Israel's broader interests, certainly leaving Syria more vulnerable if nothing else, it is clear that Israel did not expect this good fortune to come at the cost of greater Iranian influence in Iraq and a more influential Iran on Israel's own doorstep.

Just three years after the fall of Baghdad, in the summer of 2006, an indication of the ways in which the new pattern of rivalries could affect the regional order was provided by the inability of the Israeli Defense Force to defeat the Lebanon-based Hezbollah during an intense one-month conflict, despite the Israelis' military superiority. The outcome was widely interpreted as the Arabs' first victory over Israel in 60 years—yet Hezbollah is a Shiite organization sponsored by non-Arab Iran. Hezbollah emerged as the champion of the "Arab street." Its turbaned leaders were cast as heroes and their photographs were displayed in every major Arab city. Shiite penetration of the dominant Sunni order has not let up since.

Having said this, it is important not to underestimate the role of the Arab powers, which have remained vital to the overall strategic makeup of the region. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Algeria, and Libya retain considerable influence. Although power is divided unevenly among them, collectively they form a sizeable community of actors.

Among the Arab nations too, however, power in recent years has been shifting quite markedly. Saudi Arabia's role has grown considerably, aided by a massive increase in oil prices from 2005 to 2008, the proactive policies of King Abdullah, and a mending of relations with the United States. At the same time, smaller Arab players in the Persian

Gulf, with their financial muscle and also US support, have grown in significance. Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and to a lesser extent Kuwait fall into this category.

These smaller Arab countries are affecting regional politics in ways that do not always accord with the interests of the major regional actors. They sometimes help to defuse tensions through mediation, but also have unintentionally fueled rivalries and furthered Arab fragmentation in their pursuit of independent interests. Qatar's diplomatic involvement in Palestine and Lebanon, in direct challenge to the larger Arab states, and its decision to invite Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the Gulf Cooperation Council's 2007 summit in Doha, are examples of this trend.

THE SAUDIS AND THE REST

Why do these regional rivalries matter? The Middle East continues to be strategically important as a primary source of energy and on account

of financial power, geopolitical competition, and of course religion. But for all its riches, indeed in part because of its riches, it is also one of the world's most volatile regions. Beyond the dramatic impact of security-related developments after 9/11, the Middle East

has acquired a further strategic edge as demand for its hydrocarbon resources has seen substantial growth because of the rapid rise of China, India, and other pivotal economies. Meanwhile, violence and militarization in the region have not ebbed. And with the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, a new power dynamic has appeared. It is important, therefore, to understand the particular roles and character of the major regional players as each competes for greater influence.

Iran and Israel can be said to be the "missionary" actors par excellence today, in terms of having a clear mission in their conceived roles and in their drive to achieve their objectives. Saudi Arabia, Syria, and to a lesser extent Egypt also have a definable role as leading Arab powers in the region, but at the same time they have to adjust to a new dynamic among themselves. The polarization and rapid fragmentation of the Arab region that followed Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in August 1990 increased the tendency for uneven distribution of power. In fact, the pattern of Arab fragmentation had been established by Egypt's uni-

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lateral peace treaty with Israel in 1979, after Cairo had led a number of Arab military campaigns against the Jewish state. With Iraq weakened and under international sanctions in the 1990s, other players grew in prominence.

But it was not until this century, with the US intervention in Iraq, that new power lines were firmly drawn, cementing an intense rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Syria and Egypt remain critical players in the Arab-Israeli theater, and the former's role is also important in the context of the conflict in Iraq and the political turmoil in Lebanon. Even so, the manner in which Saudi Arabia has emerged with a clear voice and presence across the Middle East theaters is quite extraordinary. In some respects Riyadh's game may be summed up as an effort to consolidate its position as the "first among equals."

Although the kingdom's small population, limited military strength, domestic religious militancy, and exposure to oil price fluctuations continue to make it vulnerable, Saudi Arabia's huge oil wealth and capital accumulation give it considerable weight in the region. The Saudis' successful global diplomacy—they have forged links with China, India, the European Union, and Turkey, while keeping their traditional US ties strong after a blip in 2001 and 2002—highlight their desire to manage the regional agenda. With regard to Lebanon, Palestine, the wider Arab-Israeli peace process, and the Gulf Arab responses to Iran's challenge, Riyadh's diplomatic presence has become a real force to be reckoned with.

Further evidence of this new reality is to be found in Saudi Arabia's prominence in the Persian Gulf subregion's delicate power relations. The growth of the subregion is in itself a feature of the continuing fragmentation of the Arab world. This subregion, however, is not an entirely Arab one. It contains the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Iraq, but also Iran as a direct player, and Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen as extended members.

Pakistan and Yemen represent serious security challenges for the subregion and could very easily affect its stability. Both nations are weak centrally and radical transnational Islamist groups are taking root in both. Turkey, for its part, is playing an increasingly constructive role, and has demonstrated the potential to facilitate

regional integration. Ankara has consolidated its strategic links with Israel, even as it works more closely with the Arab states. Turkey is also well placed to aid Iraq's recovery, help provide Iran access to Europe, and facilitate economic partnerships between the Middle East and the Turkic republics of Eurasia.

THE IRANIAN CHALLENGE

Iran, on other hand, poses a potent state-level challenge. As a growing regional power that seems un beholden to others, it is perceived as able to absorb external pressures exerted on it. For the United States, Iran remains an adversary—and a "grave threat," were it to acquire a nuclear weapons capability, according to Obama. For the Arab states, Iran represents a "challenge" that needs to be dealt with collectively, according to Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal. For Israel, Iran is said to pose the greatest threat, both directly and also in strategic terms.

Among all of these players, it is feared that a nuclear-armed Iran would drastically shift the regional balance of power in Tehran's favor. Such a development would, moreover, fuel a new and potentially

deadly regional arms race, as Israel's Arab neighbors would face a growing temptation to develop their own nuclear deterrence capabilities. Israel's nuclear monopoly thus could end in a rapid proliferation. Israel's apparent readiness to strike against Iran's nuclear installations reflects in part the threat to Israel's security supremacy that is posed by Tehran. But military action would inevitably further disrupt the precarious regional balance of power and encourage new realignments of political forces in the region.

Iran's nuclear program, therefore, poses the most urgent strategic challenge in the Middle East. As it happens, the danger of a new regional conflagration has increased because of the configuration of leaders and policy makers in the most critical Middle Eastern countries concerned, namely Israel and Iran. In Israel, an Iran-obsessed right-wing government has tied the future of peace with the Arabs to the curtailment of Iran's nuclear activities, most notably its uranium enrichment, and is in effect holding America's new regional diplomacy hostage to this issue. Given the real challenges that Iran's

The Saudis and Iranians' rivalry is now effectively pan-regional.

policies and utterances pose to Israel, the latter's concerns cannot be easily dismissed. But how easily can they be addressed?

On the Iranian side we have seen the reelection of President Ahmadinejad confirmed this year, despite evidence of industrial-scale electoral fraud in his favor. His administration's legitimacy deficit could encourage adventurism abroad, as he attempts to deflect discontent at home and also to recover his international reputation as an uncompromising hard-liner.

More broadly, the three areas of concern that defined the Bush's administration's relations with the Middle East—terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and anti-Americanism—continue to apply when it comes to Iran. The worldview of Iran's paranoid regime is shaped by conspiracy theories and its fear of regime change. To have the regime's very foundations shaken by its own citizens—as occurred after the fraudulent June election—has to be unsettling to the leadership.

As a result, some in the ruling establishment will likely encourage the acceleration of the nuclear program's weaponization. For them, survival can only be assured through strong deterrence: that is, deterrence against outsiders' interfering in their suppression of the opposition movement at home. This is not good news—not for the sake of nonproliferation, nor for the sake of a more balanced set of relationships in the region.

On the other hand, some in the Iranian elite will recognize that one sure way to shore up the disgraced regime would be to strike a grand bargain with the United States. This option should not be dismissed as unrealistic, given the state of play in Iran and the mounting political, economic, and social problems facing the dominant ruling faction. In any case, what transpires regarding Iran's nuclear program is likely to prove decisive for relations among the region's powers.

UNCERTAINTY AHEAD

We are entering, once again, a period of uncertainty for the region. Given Iran's significant weight and influence in the broader Middle East, developments in that country will cast a shadow over everything else. Unfortunately, while Washington seems ready for a leap forward and a comprehensive deal to achieve better relations in the region, Iran and Israel continue to display a bunker mentality in which zero-sum-game calculations prevail.

It is striking that in the Middle East today, hopes for peace are still held hostage to a regional order characterized by the rivalries of postcolonial states, as opposed to postmodern ones. As long as regional politics remains the monopoly of these states, whose behaviors are defined by the "otherness" of their neighbors, contentious rivalries will remain the modus operandi of the Middle East, to the detriment of everyone. ■