

The Changing Middle Eastern Platform: Implications for US Policy

Asher Susser

The Middle East of today is in a state of constant flux. In many ways it is a very different place than what it was just a decade or two ago due to the fundamental changes that have taken place on the ground in many spheres. Thus an understanding of the new challenges the US and its strategic ally – Israel – are facing in the region requires an analysis of the different dynamics currently underway and an effort to comprehend their ramifications.

First, the Middle East is no longer dominated by the Arab states. For generations the world identified the Middle East as an Arab dominated region, particularly when pan-Arabism was popular and widespread. For most of the twentieth century Arab countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia played a major role in the region, but things have since changed. Egypt can still be perceived as an important player in the region, but although it is the biggest Arab country in the region, it no longer leads the Arab world in the way it once did. Iraq obviously no longer plays a major political or military role in the region and it is very far from the superior position it held just a decade or two ago. Syria is presently Iran's junior partner and is internationally isolated, and Bashar Asad has so far not been successful in leading his country to a position of major player in the region. And lastly, Saudi Arabia is neither as wealthy nor as influential as it once was.

Second, as a result of this Arab contraction, hegemony in the Middle East is shifting towards three countries that share one common attribute – they are the non-Arab powers of the region: Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Iran's

influence is evident far beyond the Gulf region. It is evident in Iraq, but also in Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. Needless to say, the Iranian nuclear program is widely perceived as yet another tool aimed at supporting Iran's claim to hegemony in the region.

The Second Lebanon War can be understood as an example of this changing character of the Middle East. The war was actually a confrontation between two of the new non-Arab hegemonic powers in the Middle East – Israel and Iran, through its proxy in Lebanon, Hizbollah. This confrontation amplifies once again the process whereby the Middle East is transforming into a non-Arab dominated region.

Turkey is once again rapidly becoming a major regional actor. Turkey has forces in UNIFIL in South Lebanon, it is building industrial zones in the Palestinian Authority, and it has also played a very central role in mediation between Israel and Syria. Turkey has vested interests concerning Iran and Iraq and is an important player when it comes to the determination of policies of the international community towards both of these countries. Although Turkey seeks to obtain full membership in the EU, the chances of this actually happening seem rather slim. Hence Turkey is in fact being “pushed back” into the core of the Middle East of which it is an historical part.

Assuming that the United States is considering phasing out of Iraq, it won't be able to formulate such a strategy without holding a dialogue with the two critically important non-Arab neighbors of Iraq, Iran and Turkey.

Third, the historical Sunni dominance of the region is diminishing politically and strategically. With the exception of Lebanon, all the Arab states were Sunni dominated countries. This is no longer the case. Iraq's Sunni leadership was crushed by the American invasion in 2003, and Iraq has become the first Shiite dominated Arab state. In Lebanon the Shiites led by Hizbollah are rapidly becoming the dominant force in local politics. Taking into account Lebanon's demography, it seems it will only be a matter of time until Lebanon follows Iraq to become the second Shiite dominated Arab state. This is taking place at a moment when the regional influence of Sunni Muslim countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia is, as aforesaid, in decline.

On the other hand, the emergence of Shiite Iran as a major player and its influence over other players in the region such as Syria, Lebanon

(through Hizbollah), and the Palestinians (through Hamas) symbolizes the emergence of what some have referred to as a new “Shiite crescent.” The Sunni Arabs, as their political discourse suggests, are deeply concerned by the expansion of Shiite Iran and fear a scenario where the Shiite Persians will dominate the core area of the Arab Middle East.

The shift in the balance of power from Sunni dominance to Shiite ascendance is the most dramatic since the advent of Islam in the seventh century. The Shiites in the Arab Middle East were always a marginal and downtrodden underclass, in absolute contrast to Shiite Iran’s growing influence today, stretching from Iraq in the east to the Mediterranean in the west. Not long ago this phenomenon, unprecedented in the modern era, would have been unthinkable.

Fourth, the historic dominance of the secular core of the region is reversing roles with a more religious periphery. Iran and Turkey, both located on what used to be regarded as the “periphery” of the Middle East, are becoming the strategic center of the region, while Egypt and Syria, previously deemed the central players in the region, are losing their importance. This shift has various implications. First, it would not be surprising if the United States regarded this new center as its primary focus in the foreseeable future. Second, historically the underlying secular concept of Arabism and its expansion as an ideology in the Middle East was also the platform for secular politics. However, today Iran (and to a certain degree Turkey too) is an alternative source of inspiration in the region and its platform is based more on religious politics than secularism.

As a result, the contraction of Sunni Arabism is also marked by a retreat of political secularism, and of secular life in general in the Middle East. This is leading to a recrudescence of what sociologists call “primordialism” -- political organization based on clan, extended family, ethnicity, sectarianism, and religion. In this context of a primordial traditionalist reality it is very problematic to initiate Western-style democratic processes, inspired by secular individualism.

Similarly, this context can also explain the rise of Hamas to power in the Palestinian territories. Hamas did not rise to power solely because Fatah was corrupt and disorganized in the management of its own affairs, or because of Abu Mazen’s so-called weakness of personality. It had more to do with the decline of Palestinian secular nationalism as part of a much

wider regional phenomenon, stretching from Turkey to the Palestinian territories and just about everywhere in between.

Fifth is the rising importance of the various non-state actors. The weakening of the Arab states is accentuating the role of non-state actors in the region such as Hamas, Hizbollah, al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, and so on. Israel is no longer confronted solely by states but also by non-state or sub-state organizations. Perhaps there might be an advantage to the non-state actors becoming state-like, because then they can more easily be held accountable for their actions. But the fact remains that the security challenges Israel has to contend with are entirely different from what they used to be in an earlier era of conventional warfare.

Against the backdrop of this changed Middle East, two immediate conclusions come to mind with regard to American policy in the region. *One*, it is imperative for the US and Israel to reach a conceptual common understanding vis-à-vis the changing characteristics of the Middle East. A common understanding of the “new Middle East” they both face at the beginning of the 21st century will enable the existing strategic partnership between their countries to expand and deepen several-fold.

Two, the linchpin of the new American administration’s policy in the region ought to be based on engagement and dialogue from a position of strength, especially towards Iran. If the United States and Iran reach some kind of an understanding regarding the Middle East, it will have very positive ramifications with regard to the entire region. It will be much easier for Israel to talk about an agreement with Syria when there is an American-Iranian understanding rather than trying to do the impossible and drive a wedge between Iran and Syria. The implications of an American-Iranian understanding would also have a positive impact on Israeli-Lebanese relations and on the Palestinian conflict. Iran is currently playing a negative role in the region. Thus only a successful dialogue between Iran and the United States has the chance of dramatically changing this reality. A failure of such an engagement would require Israel and the US to cooperate on an entirely different approach.