

Iran and the Arabs: The Historical Shift in the Balance of Power

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In early 2015, an Arab analyst in Abu Dhabi noted wryly that the so-called “Shiite Crescent” mentioned by King Abdullah of Jordan in December 2004, in reference to the arc of Iranian influence from Tehran to Beirut via Iraq and Syria, had “become obsolete... Today, it’s a full moon and the Gulf is surrounded.”¹ Indeed, as the Iranian-backed Shiite Houthis in Yemen advanced and took control of more of the country, the Iranians acquired leverage and influence beyond the straits of Hormuz all the way to Bab al-Mandab at the entrance to the Red Sea. The Sunnis of the Gulf grew increasingly anxious about the hegemonic design of Iran and its allies and proxies.

Iran’s reach was most impressive, but this was thanks less to Iran’s intrinsic power than it was to the debilitating weakness of the Arabs. The Arabs find themselves in a deep crisis, racked by revolution, civil war, and mass emigration that have come in the wake of the ignominious political failure of pan-Arabism. This was the culmination of a long process that had its beginnings in the early 1960s, with the dissolution of the promising unity between Egypt and Syria in the form of the United Arab Republic (UAR), followed by the first civil war in Yemen and the disastrous defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 war with Israel, from which the Arabs never entirely recovered.

Eighty years ago, in the late 1930s, two very important books were published in Egypt. One was *Siyasat al-Ghad* (*The Politics of Tomorrow*), by Mirit Butrus Ghali, and the other was *Ala Hamish al-Siyasa* (*On the Margin*

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of Politics), by Hafiz Afifi. Both sought to address Egypt's socio-economic problems resulting from its rapid population growth. By the use of statistical and other data, they "tried to show that unless Egyptian leaders embarked on a rigorous reform program the country courted disaster."² Such rigorous reform never really took place in Egypt, nor in the other Arab countries.

All the countries of the Middle East, including the non-Arab countries of Iran and Turkey, have experienced rapid population growth and massive urbanization. Tens of millions have abandoned the rural areas for the cities, invariably contributing to social dislocation, political radicalization, and instability. Turkey experienced years of intensive political violence and military interventions in the political system between the early 1960s and the early 1980s, leading eventually to the political takeover of the Islamist AKP in 2002. Iran underwent revolutionary regime change in 1979 with the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty and the rise to power of the regime of the ayatollahs and the formation of the Islamic Republic. Generally speaking, however, Turkey and Iran – judging by GDP per capita, for example – have thus far fared much better than most of the Arab states (with the exception

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of the wealthy Arab oil producers), due primarily to their very long history as effective sovereign states, with more or less homogenous populations in terms of religion that are linked for the most part by a common language.³ Turkey has had a very long history of Western-style modernization, and Iran, though joining the process of modernization later than Turkey, also had the blessing of oil wealth to help it get by.

For its part, however, the Arab world cannot sustain its population. Though growth rates are declining, the Arab population is growing faster than the region can accommodate. In 2000 the population of the Arab states from Morocco to the Gulf was 280 million; it is presently some 380 million, and is projected to reach approximately 460 million by 2025.⁴ The regional predicament might best be summed up in the question, who will supply the jobs, money,

electricity, and water for another 80-90 million people?

Moreover, the Arabs are in the throes of a deep socio-economic and political crisis, whose end is nowhere in sight. The process of Western-

style modernization has not produced the expected power, prestige, and prosperity, while Arab nationalism and messianic pan-Arabism ended in dismal political failure. Arabism, at least in theory, if not always in practice, was a secular ideology that sought to unite the people, whether Muslim, Christian, or other, on the basis of the language they spoke. The failure of pan-Arabism was therefore also the failure of this crucial platform for the secularization of Arab societies.

The difficulties encountered by the process of modernization in Middle East countries, including Turkey and Iran, have been accompanied by a widespread return to the warm embrace of neo-traditionalism – political Islam and religious sectarianism (and in some countries, tribalism as well). This was not only true in the domestic politics of Middle East states, but also in inter-state relations that are largely controlled by sectarian alliances between Sunni states against their Shiite rivals. It was no longer a question of monarchies versus republics or pro-Soviet states against their pro-American rivals, which was a feature of the distant past.

Nowhere were these transformations more salient than in the recent crisis in Yemen. In the Yemeni civil war in the early 1960s the republicans, supported mainly by Egypt, battled the royalists who were backed primarily by the pro-American monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Iran. In those days, the Zaidi Shiites, the Houthis of today, were mostly royalist, while the Sunnis were mostly republican. The Saudis and Pahlavi Iran were on the same side of the ideological divide in support of the royalist Shiites of the time. The relevant political fault line then was between the so-called “progressives” in the Arab world led by Nasser’s Egypt, and the “reactionaries,” the pro-Western monarchies. The sectarian divisions of the present, in which Shiite Iran and its Shiite allies, in their support of the Zaidi Shiites of Yemen, are arraigned against the Sunni states, were irrelevant in the 1960s. In contrast, the former royalist Shiite allies of the Saudis in the 1960s have now become their mortal sectarian enemies.

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beginnings of the twenty-first century ushered in a new era in Middle East history, in which pan-Arabism has long faded into the background and many Arab states, from Libya to Sudan and from Yemen to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon are struggling to survive in unified sovereign entities. There is no state of Palestine yet, but it already has two sub-sections in the making.

Islamic Politics: Between Sunnis and Shiites

The return to the comforting embrace of religion tends by its very nature to exacerbate sectarian loyalties and divisions. When Sunni Muslims radicalize and religious belief becomes the decisive marker of collective identity, all the other sects and denominations tend to do just the same in the name of their own self-defense. Shiites and the various non-Muslim minorities thus also withdraw into the protective shell of their communal identities and allegiances.

Sunni and Shiite radicalism have their sectarian uniqueness. Moreover, these specific characteristics have important influences on the nature of the Sunni-Shiite competition and on the balance of power between Iran and the Arabs. Sunni radicalism and Shiite radicalism differ in a variety of ways, the most critical of which is in their respective major guiding principles. As John Esposito has pointed out, the common denominator that emerged in traditional Sunni political thought was that “the minimal requirement for an Islamic government was not the character of the head

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of state but rule according to the *Shariah*.”⁵ Modern Sunni radicals therefore placed the emphasis on the essential implementation of the *sharia* (*tatbiq al-sharia*). Following in the footsteps of leading modern mid-twentieth century Sunni thinkers such as the Pakistani Abu Ala al-Mawdudi and the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, as far as the radicals were concerned, society could not be truly Islamic unless it was founded on religious law. As Mawdudi argued, societies that did not function in this way were inherently illegitimate and *jahili*⁶ by nature. Conversely, Shiite radicals of the Khomeini school placed the emphasis on the character of the ruler who was to oversee the implementation of the

sharia. Thus, the main Shiite focus was on the principle of *wilayat al-faqih* (or *velayat-e faqih*, in Persian), the guardianship of the jurisprudent, rather than on the application of the *sharia*.⁷

Pan-Arabism was a unifying umbrella for all speakers of the Arabic language irrespective of their religious denominations, at least in theory, if not always in practice. Sunni radicalism, on the other hand, is by its very nature extremely divisive. Sunni radical thought has invariably been characterized by institutional vagueness. It was never made quite clear exactly who and by what means implementation of the *sharia* would actually occur. There is no recognized Sunni central clerical authority to pass judgment on such matters. There have been a myriad of organizations and militias in the Sunni world that claimed the right to promote their views on the implementation of the *sharia*, whether by democratic persuasion or by force, including beheadings, mass executions, the enslavement of women, the demolition of archaeological sites, and a variety of other acts of barbarism. Predictably, the self-appointment of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State (in Iraq and al-Sham) as caliph in June 2014 was accepted by some, but rejected by most.

The multitude of Sunni organizations – such as the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda, Ahrar al-Sham, the Muslim Brotherhood in the different Arab states, salafi groups that are jihadist, and others that are not – sometimes fight together, and on other occasions against one another. These and scores of others are the enemies of all non-Sunnis – the Shiites (whether Arabs or not) and the various non-Muslim minorities: the Alawis, the Yazidis, and the Christians of the different denominations. They are also the enemies of various Sunni regimes, which might be radical Islamist themselves – such as the Saudis, or not, like the Hashemites in Jordan. Overall, Sunni political Islam aggravates the sectarian differences that pan-Arabism sought to inherit. Sunni radicalism is diffuse, multi-polar, and extremely divisive, reminiscent at times of the Hobbesian state of “war of all against all,” thereby threatening to dismantle the religiously heterogeneous Arab states of the Fertile Crescent like never before since these states came into being a century ago.

The political vacuum created by this internal disintegration was most inviting to the Iranians, who had a number of relative advantages over the Arabs. Since the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the Iraq of Saddam Hussein was the effective gatekeeper of the Arab East, on the frontier with Iran of the ayatollahs. But the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam radically changed the regional balance of power in Iran’s favor. The so-called de-Baathification of Iraq essentially meant the dethroning of the Sunnis, who lorded over Iraq through the machinery of the Baath

party, and the empowering of the Shiite majority in Iraq. After all, the ruling Baath party in Iraq was a political machine for Sunni supremacy and the marginalization of the Shiites. Sunni supremacy had been the rule in Iraq for centuries, from the Abbasid Caliphate through the Ottoman Empire to modern day Iraq, whether under the Hashemite monarchy since the 1920s, or the Baath since the late 1960s. Virtually overnight Iraq was transformed by the de-Baathification of the post-Saddam era from a Sunni-dominated state into a Shiite-controlled natural ally of Shiite Iran that is a springboard for enhanced Iranian regional influence.

This process was further facilitated by the political advantages inherent in the Shiite doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*, as developed by Ayatollah Khomeini. The Khomeini concept identified the supreme religious authority in Iran with the head of state, and thus the Supreme Leader of Iran was also the supreme religious authority of the Shiites. Though the Khomeini thesis was never accepted unequivocally by all Shiite clergy and there are many rivals to the Khomeini doctrine, it has been accepted by most Shiites in Iran and among many elsewhere in the Middle East. Therefore, as opposed to the chaotic multi-polar world of Sunni radicalism, Shiite radicals tend to accept Iranian centralized spiritual authority and political leadership. Hizbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq, and even the Houthis in Yemen are willing collaborators with Iranian hegemonic design, directed effectively by the instruments of the Iranian state, especially the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran).

Among the Sunnis there is no similar authority or leadership. The Saudis would like to play that role but they are not politically or militarily capable of doing so. Many of the radicals were hostile to the Saudis, and even leading Sunni states, like Egypt and Turkey that were in the same camp with Saudi Arabia, did not necessarily share their interests on all matters. Turkey has taken a much more conciliatory attitude toward Iran than the Saudis. Neither Turkey nor Egypt was as enthusiastic as the Saudis in the pursuit of the war option in Yemen. The military regime in Egypt and the Islamist government in Turkey have had a tense relationship ever since the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and they have not seen eye to eye regarding the Syrian quagmire.

Iranian Constraints: The Syrian Achilles' Heel

Despite these advantages, the Iranians were not all powerful with the upper hand at all times. Indeed, the Iranians have had their limitations too, even

as they have demonstrated admirable determination in the pursuit of their objectives. They have not been averse to the use of force or subversion through the Shiite populations in neighboring states. They were similarly willing to invest huge sums of money, even in times of financial stress, in the service of their regional interests, not to mention their relentless pursuit of a nuclear capability, even in the face of international sanctions and diplomatic pressure. On the other hand, Iran was a regional power, but no more. In global terms Iran was a minor power whose impressive regional stature was mainly a function of the weakness and disarray of its Arab neighbors. Iran's GDP per capita was only one third of Saudi Arabia's and half of Israel's.⁸ Economic sanctions as well as remarkably low oil prices weighed very heavily on the Iranian economy.

In Yemen, as in Bahrain in 2011, where the Saudis and their Gulf allies have chosen to use force against presumably pro-Iranian Shiites in areas that were on their doorstep, the Iranians have not been able to resist effectively. The Shiite rebellion in Bahrain was suppressed. In Yemen, after what seemed like an unstoppable Houthi advance through much of the country in 2014, even as far south as the port city of Aden, Saudi-led military intervention has been relatively successful. With the Saudis attacking from the air, backed by UAE ground forces advancing northwards from Aden and an effective US naval blockade, the Houthis have been pushed back and there is little the Iranians seem to be able to do about it.⁹

However, it was the civil war in Syria that was Iran's veritable Achilles' heel. The war did not go well for Iran's client, the Assad regime, which suffered serious setbacks in early 2015 in different parts of the country, from Idlib in the north to Tadmur (Palmyra) further south. Having already taken control of much of the country, the opposition forces came perilously close to the very heartland of the regime in the northwestern coastal region. The regime found itself fighting desperately for its survival, at great human cost – on all sides.

In Iraq, unlike Syria, Iran's allies, the Shiites, are the majority population, and Shiite militias there have been instrumental in the successful Iranian-guided effort to defeat ISIS in places like Tikrit and elsewhere, gradually pushing them out of some of their Iraqi strongholds. But even there the fight is far from over, as gains for ISIS in Ramadi have shown. Iran's allies in Syria, the Alawites who were the backbone of the regime, were just some 12 percent of the population. They were exhausted by the fighting, and suffered serious problems of morale and manpower. There were defections

in the senior echelons of the regime and a variety of mysterious deaths that suggested considerable internal dissent at the top. Assad was increasingly dependent on Iran and on Shiite fighters from Iran's Revolutionary Guards and elsewhere, especially Hizbollah from Lebanon and Shiite militiamen from Iraq and Afghanistan. The fighting was difficult, and the Assad regime was at a numerical disadvantage.

Yet despite the heavy cost the Iranians seemed determined to continue the struggle. In addition to the manpower they mobilized on Assad's behalf, they were said by diplomatic sources in Beirut to be propping up the regime with some one to two billion dollars per month.¹⁰ This was a huge sacrifice for the cash-strapped Iranian government, and an indication of the great strategic importance that Tehran attaches to Syria. The loss of Syria for Iran would be a major strategic setback. Syria provides the essential link with Hizbollah; a Syrian loss could seriously undermine the Shiite militia's power base in Lebanon. Moreover, Syria also provides Iran with a second potential front with Israel along the Golan. Indeed, both Lebanon and Syria offer the Iranians, in collaboration with Hizbollah, critically important outposts on Israel's borders from where to attack Israeli civilians with tens of thousands of rockets at any time of Tehran's choosing. Such rocketry was intended to deter the Israelis from attacking Iran's nuclear project, or to force Israel to pay a very heavy price if it were to decide on such a military option. Most recently, in late May 2015, an Iranian military official threatened that Iran and Hizbollah had 80,000 missiles ready to "rain down on Tel Aviv and Haifa."¹¹

The fight for Syria between Iran and its allies and the Sunni camp was therefore at the very heart of the struggle for regional hegemony. For decades after the creation of Lebanon in the 1920s, the question was whether Lebanon was a Maronite Christian-dominated pro-Western state or part and parcel of the Sunni Arab world. With the demographic and political decline of the Maronites, that question was decided by the mid-1970s. Now the question has become whether Lebanon is still part of the Sunni Arab world, or has it been irreversibly sucked into the Iranian-Shiite camp, thanks to Hizbollah's predominance in Lebanese politics. If the Iranians lose in Syria there is every chance that these questions would eventually be decided against them.

Actions by Russia in collaboration with Iran in the fall of 2015 and the large consignments of Russian equipment and military personnel to Syria have been one of the most impressive demonstrations of power projection

by the Russians since the end of the Cold War. Flying through Iran and Iraq to the Latakia area in Syria, the Russian action is indicative of the vital importance the Iranians and their allies, the Russians in this case, attach to the preservation of the Assad regime in Syria and their willingness to take concrete action to protect their interests.

Conclusion: Iran, the Arabs, and Israel

The negotiations between the US and the other great powers and Iran on the nuclear issue came at a critical juncture, with Iran pained by the international sanctions regime and Iran and its Syrian allies facing serious difficulties and setbacks in the Syrian civil war. Since the negotiations were led by a US administration that seemed more anxious than Iran to reach an agreement, the end result was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action concluded in Vienna in July 2015. The agreement ensures the termination of the sanctions regime, but in the long run, it does not necessarily prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons if and when it so desires. Irrespective of the fact that Tehran reaffirmed in the agreement (twice) “that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons,”¹² the great fear of the Sunni states and Israel is that the agreement, which leaves Iran’s nuclear infrastructure intact, allows the Iranians, after a certain hiatus, to pursue their hegemonic design with ever greater determination and ever increasing resources and room for maneuver, despite their commitments in the agreement. No one among the Arabs, except for ISIS and its ilk (hardly the desired partners of the Sunni regimes), would be there to hold the Iranians back. If, generally speaking, the balance of power between Iran and the Arabs was shifting in Iran’s favor for decades, following the nuclear agreement this was still the case, only more so.

This situation creates an entirely new strategic environment for Israel. In recent decades the Arab world has undergone a major structural shift as a result of the steady decline of the Arab states, their failure to modernize successfully, and the dismal failure of pan-Arabism. The non-Arab states of the Middle East, Turkey, Iran, and Israel have become the major regional powers. This failure of secular pan-Arabism

This failure of secular pan-Arabism paved the way for the rise of Islamic politics, which has in turn given a new lease on life to sectarianism and to sectarian conflict in the region, pitting Sunnis against Shiites, and the Arabs – Sunnis, for the most part – against Shiite Iran.

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In 1979 two major events shook the Arab world to its core: Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel and the ayatollahs came to power in Iran, resulting a year later in the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War. For eight years Iraq fought a desperate war against Iran, ostensibly protecting the Arab East from potential Shiite-Iranian expansionism. As Egypt departed from the Arab order of battle, war with Israel was no longer a realistic option. The conflict with Israel receded steadily in importance as the fear of Iran was on the rise. Jordan followed Egypt and made peace with Israel in 1994. Since 1973, i.e., for over forty years, Israel has not been engaged in war with any of the Arab states. Israel as the major concern of the Arabs was replaced by Iran and the Shiites, in the wake of the rise of Hizbollah in Lebanon and especially after the overthrow of the Baath in Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent conversion of Iraq into the first Shiite-dominated Arab state.

The political and strategic core of the Middle East has shifted from the Arab-Israeli domain to the Gulf, and in this new structure Israel has common cause with key Sunni Arab states against Iranian hegemonic design. The evolving structure creates new vistas for Israeli foreign policy and opportunities for the reconfiguring of Israel's place in the Middle East. Israel is no longer the lonely eternal outsider confronting the Arab collective, but one of a local informal alliance of likeminded countries, who rest on the friendship of the US and seek to protect themselves from the ambitions and subversion of Iran and its proxies.

As the balance of power between the Iran and the Arabs shifts in Iran's favor, so Israel and key Arab states, like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, have more strategic common ground than ever before. As events in Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen show, the Iranians have their limitations too. It is, therefore, quite conceivable for Israel and various Arab states to collaborate, together with the US, to constrain and contain Iran's regional ambition.

Notes

- 1 "The Iran-Saudi Rivalry," *The Economist*, April 7, 2015.
- 2 P. J. Vatikiotis, *The Modern History of Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), pp. 309-10.

- 3 Turkey's population is composed of 80-85 percent Sunni Muslims and 70-75 percent speakers of Turkish. Iran is composed of 90 percent Shiite Muslims and over 50 percent Persian speakers.
- 4 Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR)-United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Data for the Arab States, Population, total both sexes, <http://www.arab-hdr.org/data/indicators/2012-3.aspx>; Barry Mirkin, *Arab Spring: Demographics in a Region in Transition*, United Nations Development Programme, Regional Bureau for Arab States, Arab Human Development Report Research Paper Series, 2013, p. 12.
- 5 John Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, 4th ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), p. 31.
- 6 The *jahiliyya* in Islamic tradition is the period of ignorance and barbarism that preceded Islam and the revelation of the Prophet. A jahili society was therefore a non-Islamic and obviously illegitimate society in accordance with Mawdudi's concept of the "new jahiliyya."
- 7 For more details see Yvonne Haddad, "Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revival," Charles Adams, "Mawdudi and the Islamic State," and Michael Fischer, "Imam Khomeini: Four Levels of Understanding," in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 67-133, 150-74; Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, pp. 30-31, 131-52; Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 188-213.
- 8 CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html>.
- 9 Shlomo Brom and Yoel Guzansky, "The Conflict in Yemen: A Case Study of Iran's Limited Power," *INSS Insight* No. 747, September 16, 2015.
- 10 Nicholas Blanford, "Why Iran is Standing by its Weakened, and Expensive, Ally Syria," *csmonitor.com*, April 27, 2015.
- 11 Michelle Malka Grossman, "Iran Threatens '80,000 Rockets at Tel Aviv and Haifa' Over Distorted Ya'alon Comment," *Jerusalem Post*, May 21, 2015.
- 12 Preamble and General Provisions, "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," Vienna, July 14, 2015.