



New Permutations in the Mideast “Game of Camps”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Middle East is today divided into four rival camps: Iran with her proxies and allies; the Salafi Jihadists, currently dominated by the so-called “Islamic State”; the Muslim Brotherhood movement in its various manifestations, including Hamas, supported by Qatar and by Erdogan's Turkey; and the “forces of stability”: all those who fear and resist the rise of the first three camps, with Israel an active and important player in this latter camp.

The first few days of 2016 have already provided fresh evidence of the changing dynamics of the regional balance of power. The escalating tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are the most salient aspect of a larger drama now unfolding across a broad landscape – from Yemen to Syria and from the Gulf to Libya.

The traditional tool of analysis of the Realist school – “raison d'etat” – has largely been rendered irrelevant by the collapse of states. Thus it is necessary to map the regional struggles – which have brought about immense destruction, bloodshed, deprivation, mass migration and foreign intervention – along the ideological fault lines dividing the groups now seeking to dominate the region's future.

It is easy enough, when the Saudis execute a Shi'a cleric and Iran erupts in sectarian anger, to simplify the current upheaval in terms of the primordial confessional divide between Shiites and Sunnis; the divide that has torn apart the world of Islam since the days of 'Ali Ibn Abu Talib in the 7th century. And yet the present confrontation deserves a more nuanced analysis; a perspective that avoids the tarring of all Muslims, or of all Shi'a or Sunnis, with the same brush.

The rivalries being played out so violently across the region reflect the imprint of modern ideological imperatives, albeit interwoven with traditional themes: the revolutionary politics of 20th century totalitarianism woven into, or rather, dressed up as, fundamental religious positions. This distinction is useful not only in order to better understand the emerging landscape but also to design coherent strategies to beat back and ultimately defeat the totalitarian challenge.

Thus, it is possible to discern in the "Middle East" as broadly defined – North Africa, the Levant, the Red Sea basin, and the Gulf – not two confessional camps, but four ideological camps.

[One might add a fifth, secular nationalist socialist camps, which once dominated Arab politics; and a sixth camp: the hopeful young liberals who played such a prominent role in launching the political upheaval in the first place. But these are the forces of the past and (perhaps) of the future, respectively. They are not in real contention for power at present.]

Of the forces who are in contention, three camps or groups belong to the general category of Islamist totalitarians: Iran with her proxies and allies; the Salafi Jihadists, currently dominated by the so-called "Islamic State" (IS); and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) movement in its various manifestations, including Hamas, supported by Qatar and by Erdogan's Turkey. (Prime Minister Netanyahu has called these groups "branches of the same poisonous tree").

The fourth camp, loosely defined, brings together all those who fear and resist the rise of the first three camps. We can call these actors [the forces of stability, with Israel as an active and important player in this camp.

What we are witnessing is a shift in the complex balance of power among these four camps. They are essentially at war – even if they do at times find it possible to cooperate across the ideological divide, against what they come to see as even more dangerous enemies.

The sharp edge of the escalating Iranian-Saudi confrontation reflects the fact that the Iranian camp on one hand, and the forces of stability on the other, have by now come to see each other as the predominant challenger, with IS and the MB relegated to a second tier.

What happened? To begin with, the Ikhwani (Muslim Brotherhood) camp went into sharp decline, diminishing their prospects and curbing their ambitions. (Turkey had hoped that the AKP could become the predominant

political template for the rising MB tide). Sisi's grip on power in Egypt seems firm, despite persistent economic problems, recurrent terror attacks, and serious doubts as to the validity of the recent parliamentary elections. The chances of an MB return to power seem slim.

Elsewhere, an-Nahdha in Tunisia has regained the status of the largest party in parliament, when the governing coalition of parties (Nidaa Tunis) fell apart. But at this point, they seem to have little appetite to take power again.

Hamas, after the painful blows of 2014, remains eager to avoid another test of wills in Gaza. The Jordanian front party of the Ikhwan has split. The Syrian MB factions have been marginalized. Across the Gulf, the written work of Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Mawlana Abu-A'la al-Mawdudi and their likes is being taken off the shelves as subversive. The list could go on and on. In short, since the summer of 2013, the fortunes of the MB has been receding, casting doubts about the movement's usefulness as a "strong horse" with which to ride to power.

The same cannot yet be said of IS, whose spectacular acts of public brutality enhance their mystique and still draw to them certain types of young people, excited by the prospect of a life of action outside all Western (read: human) norms.

On the ground, IS has made gains in places like Libya, and its forces still hold large swathes of Iraq and Syria. Its momentum, however, has been checked.

The Russian intervention in Syria may not have been quite as transformative as it is claimed to be, but it did increase the Western drive to do more – as did the horrors in Paris. The fight against IS is still far from being overwhelming; it needs to be far more focused and purposive, operationally and strategically. But it is sufficient to ensure that Baghdadi's "Caliphate" is being steadily eroded, and cannot ultimately compete at the highest level of the struggle for power.

This seemed to leave the Iranian regime and its wide network of proxies, allies and agents in a position to turn the years of turmoil to its advantage. With the Russians now shouldering some of the burden of saving the rump regime state in what is left of Syria from collapse, the Iranian camp is free to resume the march for regional hegemony. This is true even before international sanctions on Iran are lifted and funds begin to flow to Teheran.

Consider these developments. An IRGC commander has already boasted that the Guards already control four Arab capitals – Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut

and Sana'a – and two of the world's maritime choke points, in the Straits of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab. To this scary list could be added the network of subversives in the Eastern seaboard of the Arabian peninsula – whose activities were at the core of the violent Saudi reaction. On the Mediterranean, in addition to their grip on Lebanon through Hizbullah, a fully-owned Iranian subsidiary, and their hold on Assad's remnant of Syria, Iran also has a proxy in Gaza known as Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), as well as a cooperative relationship with Hamas (although the latter belongs to the MB camp).

The Obama Administration, which looks upon the nuclear deal as a key strategic legacy, has been paying lip service (but little more) to the need to counter Iranian regional ambitions. As the international focus shifts to fighting IS, it is not surprising that the Saudis and others in the region have the impression that Obama and other Western leaders are willing to look at Iran as part of the solution, not the key part of the problem. After all, Iranian-trained Shi'a militias were increasingly significant in the battle against IS in Iraq, and Tehran has been willing to sing from the same sheet of music as Washington when it comes to fighting “terrorists.”

(This is, of course, a fairly surprising assertion from the world's premier fount of state-sponsored terror, as the authorities in Argentina, Bulgaria and India know all too well. Even more surprising is the willingness of some in Washington to take these Iranian protestations at face value.)

Perhaps more than any other factor, it is this sense that the US can no longer be relied upon to stand effectively alongside the forces of stability in the region which drives the new dynamics in “the game of camps.”

Saudi Arabia has by now put together a broad, Sunni-based coalition of forces committed to fighting terrorism. It is, in effect, conducting a continuous and often brutal coalition warfare against the Houthi uprising in Yemen (– which is seen in Riyadh as a Shi'a dagger aimed at the two holy sites, Mecca and Medina, in the Hijaz, Saudi Arabia's Western province and the cradle of Islam).

Enough inducements (and pressures) were brought to bear on Bashir's regime in Sudan, ultimately translated into a dramatic decision to defect from the Iranian camp directly over into the Saudi-led ranks in Yemen. The Sudanese have been joined several Arab states in cutting off relations with their former patrons in Tehran.

Most significantly, Turkey – facing growing friction with Russia over Syria and the need for a general review of her priorities, given the extremely poor

results of past policies – also has strongly indicated an interest in closer association with the Saudis and their camp. In this context, interestingly enough, Ankara has openly raised the proposition of improving relations with Israel.

This new reality has thus become so distinct so as to force Turkey and Qatar to consolidate their bilateral cooperation, including unprecedented plans to station Turkish forces in Qatar, as well as to reconsider their priorities in the regional game.

It would be premature, and at this stage unwise, to speak of the emergence of a coherent and strong camp of stability, acting in close cooperation. The Saudis seriously differ with Egypt over Syria, and the Israeli relationship with Abbas' regime in Ramallah, despite common perspectives on the broader regional challenges, has suffered a severe regression in recent months as the Palestinians latched on to a wave of terror as a political tool. Turkey's shift has yet to mature, and Erdogan's intentions (and his continued commitment to Hamas) still arouse suspicions in Jerusalem, and in Cairo.

But given the potential rise of Iranian power, alliances which until recently seemed unlikely may well become the building blocks of new realities. This is exactly what already has happened in the Eastern Mediterranean, where the interests of Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Greece and Cyprus, as well as Italy and other European powers who are waking up to the dangers of the present situation – now cohere.

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