

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE EVOLVING GEOPOLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

Though Middle Eastern region is not new to wars and conflicts, yet it has gone through a political and social quake over the past decade. Since 2003, with the American invasion of Iraq and the subsequent birth of anarchy, Middle East has converted into a fireball. The Arab spring saga, the rise of militant- non-state actors specifically the Islamic State (IS), deepening regional rivalry, the erosion of state authority, the breakup of social fabric and the widening sectarian fissure has put politics, stability and security in a dismal state. Dethroning of the Government in Yemen, followed by Saudi attack has further intensified the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia; a cause of sectarian conflicts in the region. Moreover, with the Iranian nuclear deal and the herculean terror of IS and other groups on the rise; it is argued that all regional actors and external powers will have to act responsibly in order to reverse these chaotic trends and to restore stability. The article views contemporary situation of the region through lens of regional security complex and comprehensive security doctrine. This analysis aims to include all sectors of statehood and security in Middle East in a comprehensive framework.

Introduction

The Middle East is a region that is strategically located at the junction of Africa, Asia and Europe. Having a total area of nearly 9,000,000 KM², this vast region spreads from Egypt to Iran and from the southern border of Turkey down to the Arabian Sea. Some of the world's most important waterways such as the Persian Gulf, the Red sea, the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aden count as its strategic and economic assets. The Middle East is a region of huge deserts, fertile river valleys, and a hub of energy. It is considered the cradle of some of the

world's oldest civilizations - the Babylonians, Sumerians, Mesopotamia and the Nile civilization, birthplace of the world's major religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the meeting point of Turkish, Arab and Iranian history and cultures.

Nevertheless, the story of Middle East does not end here. The advent of Islam in the 6th century B.C fundamentally transformed the people and society of this great region. Till date, Islam bears huge influence on politics, society, culture and daily life in the Middle East. Right after its advent, Muslim rulers, scientists, craftsmen and traders turned this region into a center of knowledge, peace and prosperity. By the first quarter of the 20th century after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, many scholars thought that Middle East had lost its civilizational and historical value. The discovery of oil in early 20th Century transformed the Middle East into a reservoir of energy. Subsequently, the geo-politics of the Cold War made this region to serve as a geo-strategic asset and the engine of global economy.¹

Over the years, the Middle East has, unfortunately, turned into a battleground of foreign conspiracies, regional rivalries, sectarian fault lines and an array of intra and inter-state armed conflicts. Moreover, the cultural, social, civilizational and ideological variety of the people of Middle East has been exploited by despotic rulers in collaboration with foreign powers for the simple reason of ensuring their rule over the people.

Traditionally, the major elements influencing politics and foreign policies in the Middle East have been; the Palestine issue, Iran's nuclear program, Saudi-Iran rivalry, the Shia-Sunni identity, Israel and the interests of foreign powers. The Arab spring added even more profound but dangerous dynamics to this list. These include the rise of militant and terrorist non-state actors having regional links and networking. The best example of these groups is Islamic State (IS). Self-styled leaders and other influential figures having

external forces behind them besides their own motives to control these armed militias and terror groups.

One of the dominant external players in the Middle East is the United States. Traditionally, it has enjoyed a high degree of influence over politics and security in the Middle East and at times acted as a patron of security in the region.² Many believe that after losing its credibility among Arabs, US might be in search of a new ally in the region in the form of Iran. With political bonds between the US and its long-time Arab allies weakening and finalization of Iranian nuclear deal, some experts of the region suggest that the US and Iran might come closer to each other, because Iran is relatively stable than Arab world and may become its ally against IS and Al-Qaeda.

The self-immolation of a Tunisian man was soon followed by million-man demonstrations that jolted the region and led to the collapse of a number of tyrants. This huge mass mobilization was dubbed “the Arab spring”. To many, the Arab Spring, a symbol of, oppression, denial of rights, neglect and a resistance to foreign presence, came as a ray of hope. However, this ray of hope quickly turned chaotic. The Arab Spring, after having quickly turned bloody, has transformed the dynamics of regional and global politics and security.

Owing to the ongoing sectarian divide and political chaos in Yemen, Syria and many other Arab countries, the authority of the rulers have shrunk and the ethnic, tribal and sectarian elements started filling up the gaps. Social fabric has broken down. Organized, violent, extremist and sophisticated non-state actors are wreaking havoc with lives and property.³ Unfortunately, it is the common people who have lost their lives, faced migration and abuse and are being persecuted under one or another label.

Middle East; owing to its geo-strategic location and being pivot of the world energy security calculus, is the most significant region where conflict, weakened governmental structures and instability cannot be left unattended by world community. The ongoing situation in Middle East has

potential to have spill over effect on the neighbouring region. With the onset of new era in political history since 2001, stakes of major powers in the region and consequent transition of institutional structures, Middle East has developed challenging situation, both in political and security realms. As the emerging situation is posing multidimensional challenges at all three levels; state, individual and institution; it is relevant to apply regional security complex analysis. Furthermore, the recent events imply that any long-term solution to the problems of the Middle East will need to be regional and indigenous where people are part of the statecraft.

In the contemporary era, the major issues in the Middle East are Iran-Saudi rivalry, the sectarian divide that has engulfed the region, the rise of ISIS, Iran's nuclear programme and the war in Yemen and Syria. So, as the despotic tyrants ruled with iron fist and Israel busy in expansion and oppression, Iran and Saudi racing for regional supremacy and the US looking after its own interests. Palestine kept on bleeding and the West, US and other Arab governments watched the situation inconsiderately. ⁴ Although, things seemed acceptable on the surface, but, beneath, lava was being cooked and the volcano erupted in 2011.

There have been many theoretical frameworks to analyze different situations of Middle East in history. What is the most appropriate to understand indigenous realities of the region is framework of Regional Security Complex (RSC). This paper analyses the evolution of Middle East security complex, role of actors, factors and phenomenon with an emphasis on the ever-growing salience of the region. The region has rich variables of all analytical sectors prescribed comprehensively only in the theory of regional security complex, for instance social, political, economic etc. The analysis also considers Turkey as an 'insulator state' in the regional security complex. The 'interface logic' of theory also applies well to the current and emerging situation of the region. The paper also takes into

consideration the role being played by major powers to further their own objectives.

Iran - Saudi Relations – from Warm Rivalry to a Cold War

Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are two of the main players in the Middle Eastern region. Along with the American attack on Iraq and the Arab awakening, the Saudi – Iran rivalry is the main cause of the huge transformation, the region is going through in the present time.⁵ It can be argued that Iran-Saudi rivalry that has now turned into a regional cold war is, in fact, the main motor behind the conflicts. Owing to their size, population, resources and influence in the region, security and politics in the Middle East is conditioned by the way the Royal Kingdom and the Islamic Republic play their cards.

Historically, the relationship of Iran and Saudi Arabia has remained quite frosty. It is a relationship, which has gone through tough times during the Shah's period, reached a crisis point after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and what we see today is a breakpoint in it. During the time of the secular Shah, relations were relatively friendly and a visible degree of cooperation between the two states existed. Their relationship reached a crisis point immediately after the Khomeini-led Islamic revolution.⁶ The reason was that Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, besides trying to export the revolution abroad, called upon the Saudis to rise against the monarchy. For Saudis, this was enough of Iranian interference in its internal affairs. In 1987, when the Saudis quashed Iranian protesters in Mecca, Khomeini openly declared the Kingdom as the Islamic Republic's chief enemy.⁷

The decade of 1990s was a period of Détente. This was relatively a better period, as Khomeini was no more present on the scene. Iran had paid a huge cost for trying to export its revolution abroad and Saddam Hussain had emerged as a common enemy of Riyadh and Tehran. The relationship of

Iran and Saudi Arabia has significantly deteriorated after the American attack on Iraq in 2003.

Post Arab Spring Relations

Presently, both the countries are locked in a Cold war due to differing interests in the region. It's evident from the way both have responded to developments that have swept the region recently. While Iran supported Morsi regime in Egypt, opposed foreign intervention in Libya, called for the rights of the minority Shiites in Baharian and stood firmly beside Assad and its proxies. Over the past decade, Iranian clout has increased in Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria and Lebanon. Saudi Arabia on the other hand, supported Morsi's removal from power, provides financial, military and diplomatic support to the Syrian opposition. Riyadh has supported its proxies and sympathizers in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. Moreover, when Riyadh saw the Al-Khalifa's rule weakening in Baharian, sent troops to quash the uprising there.⁸ Recently, the Saudi attack on Yemen has added more antagonism to the already frosty relations and now, the Yemen civil war is considered to be a proxy of Saudi Kingdom and Iran.

Iranian Nuclear Programme; Pre and Post Deal

Until reaching on an agreement with P5+1, the Iranian nuclear programme has been considered to be one of the most critical issues. Indeed, it has been provoking tension and suspicion in the entire Middle East as well as international community. While the United States, European powers, Israel and the GCC countries viewed that Iran was allegedly on its path of becoming a nuclear weapon state. The Iranian Government stressed that, its nuclear program was for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, inside the framework and in accordance with the principles of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Furthermore, for Iran, its nuclear program symbolizes its peaceful technological advancement and triumph against Israel and United States.⁹

On the other hand, the West, Israel and GCC countries have categorically called Iran's nuclear program as threatening, dangerous and unacceptable. These states have declared to go to any extent and do whatever it takes in order to prevent the Islamic Republic from acquiring a nuclear bomb. Iran managed to develop its nuclear program in a very clandestine manner for over twenty years, until in 2003/4, IAEA formally hinted at Iran being racing for nuclear weapons.¹⁰ Being a signatory to NPT, Iran was under international obligations not to develop, produce or possess nuclear weapons and other kinds of WMDs.¹¹ Being signatory of NPT, Iran could have gone for nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, while staying away from developing Nuclear weapons.¹² After UN sponsored sanctions against Iran, starting from 2005, the first major breakthrough in these negotiations occurred in 2013 when Iran and P5+1 agreed on a six months Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) and a Framework for Cooperation (FFC) between the IAEA and Iran. Under this deal, the world powers agreed to ease the back breaking sanctions and release Iranian funds worth 7 billion dollars. Reciprocally, Iran agreed to an expanded IAEA access to its nuclear facilities and promised to cut down Uranium enrichment from 20% down to 5 %.¹³

After hectic efforts, debate and discussion on Iran's nuclear Programme, on April 2, 2015, it was announced in Lausanne, Switzerland that, eight nations states agreed on the framework of Iran's nuclear deal. The announcement said that, "Today, we have taken a decisive step: we have reached solutions on key parameters of a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)."¹⁴ Based on this agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran and P5 plus 1 was formally announced on July 14, 2015. According to JCPOA, Iran will limit its installed enrichment centrifuges from 19000 to 6000; only 5000 of these will be spinning.¹⁵ These will be first generation centrifuges without any advance model for another 10 years. Natanz enrichment plan of Iran will cease enrichment and instead will be used as physics research centre for 15 years. Low-enriched uranium will also be reduced from 10,000kg to 300kg for the next 15 years.¹⁶ For

15 years, there will be no heavy water reactor established by Iran and the current facility (Arak heavy-water reactor) will be removed and destroyed.

Israel and Saudi Arabia opposed the nuclear deal between Iran and P5+1, instead they were favoring a military action to destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure. For Israel and Saudi Arabia, Iran's nuclear programme will mean a severe blow to security and stability in the region. Despite international sanctions, Iran gained a unique ability of having developed long-range missiles (ICBMs) that can hit Israel and every other country in the region.¹⁷ Interestingly, as Israel has already gained nuclear capability, top officials in the Saudi establishment have categorically stated that the Kingdom will not lag behind if the Islamic Republic goes nuclear.¹⁸ For Saudi Arabia and Israel, a nuclear Iran would have gained an unprecedented leverage over the politics and strategy in the Middle East. The Duo visualized that, nuclear capability will result in an increased Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, Hamas, Hezbollah, Lebanon, Yemen and other countries like Bahrain which have significant number of Shiite population. Indeed, Iran already gained influences over all these even without having nuclear weapons, indeed a strategic gain.

The Tribal Nature of Middle Eastern States

The sectarian wars that have erupted today in the Middle East can also be traced back to the tribal nature of many of the states in the region. A tribal state, in which the loyalties of the citizens are not with the institutions of the state but with the tribes or sects to which they belong, makes these states inherently weak. This is one of the reasons why the current conflicts have taken a sectarian dimension. The leaders in order to prolong their role rely on the sect to which they belong. Saddam relied on its Sunni population, Al-Maliki relied on Shias, Assad depends on the Alawites and the Al-Khalifa dynasty rely on the minority Sunnis of Bahrain. These conflicts in one way or another are linked to Tehran and Riyadh who exploit these conflicts to feed their geo-political rivalry.¹⁹

Who is with whom in the Middle East?

As the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia aggravated after the Islamic revolution. Tehran and Riyadh have crossed the sectarian line in finding and choosing allies in the region. For example, Iran has been a staunch advocate and supporter of the Sunni group HAMAS. Again, Iran is a staunch supporter of the rights of Palestinians who are mainly Sunni. Iran was against foreign intervention in Libya which is again a predominantly Sunni state. President Morsi – a conservative member of the Sunni Brotherhood had close ties with Shiite Iran rather than Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Iran doesn't really like the Houthis, but Iran has a political and strategic compulsion to stand with the Houthis. On the other hand, every Sunni is also not a friend of Saudi Arabia. The Muslim Brotherhood – a conservative Sunni entity, is staunchly against the Saudi monarchy, Al-Qaeda, ISIS and other hard-line Sunni groups are as much against Kingdom as they are against Iran. ²⁰

Current State of Affairs

Iran - Saudi divergence is visible everywhere across the Middle East. Be it Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain or anywhere else. The Saudis are playing more on Sectarian card, by projecting the cause of Wahabi Islam against Tehran. As Shias are in minority, Iran therefore, does not refer directly to sectarianism. Instead, Tehran uses Anti –Jewish, Anti-Israel and Anti- American rhetoric to mold public opinion in its favour, feed its supporters ideologically and protect its Iran-Syria- Hezbollah axis.

At present, as the Saudis are on the defensive, they are facing a growing Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. After nuclear deal, Iranian international isolation and economic sanction has reduced reasonably. Imagine how the region has changed, compared to early 2000s, when, Iran was politically isolated, Saddam was sitting next to its borders, a hard-line and extremist Sunni group – the Taliban were ruling Afghanistan and lastly Iran at that time was the member of

United States' axis of evil. Much has changed now for Iran. Taliban are no more in Afghanistan, Iraq, with which it had its 10-year long war is heavily influenced by Iran and despite all odds, Iran has prevented the fall of Assad so far. Nevertheless, against IS, neither Iran, nor Saudi Arabia seem to have found any panacea.

Islamic State-The Birth of a Terrorist Network

If any hopes of reconciliation and peace were to live after protests turned bloody routs in Syria in May 2012. The rise of IS and the capture of huge swaths of Iraqi and Syrian land by the group has quashed all those hopes. As the term "al-Sham" suggests, ISIL wants to establish its rein in a region that ranges from the south of Turkey to Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel.²¹ For some "al-Sham" and "Levant" which means greater Syria, or Syria and Lebanon, carry the same meaning.²² Although, the group is known by the names of ISIS, ISIL, IS, *al-Dawla*²³ and Da'ish,²⁴ John Daniszewski, of the Associated Press says, "We believe this is the most accurate translation of the group's name and reflects its aspirations to rule over a broad swath of the Middle East."²⁵ In June 2014, the group named itself as Islamic State (IS).

The roots of current instability and violence in the Middle East, to some extent, go back to 2003 when US and Britain invaded Iraq. For the high-tech American and British war machine, the invasion was expected to be a piece of cake. What followed the invasion, was a total chaos, disorder, violence and instability. The violent insurgency, which quickly followed the invasion, opened the door of hell. Innocent Iraqis as well as British and U.S soldiers got killed on daily basis. For the Americans, the insurgency quickly became a reminiscent of the Vietnam War.

The group behind this mounting insurgency was later known to be Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). A Jordanian veteran of the Afghan Jihad –Abu Muasab Al-Zarqawi, led this group.²⁶ The AQI comprised former Jihadis, Iraqi Sunnis who felt marginalized in post-Saddam Iraq, Officers of the Baathist

party and other Al-Qaeda sympathizers from across the region. After three years of giving a tough time to the Americans, Al-Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. air strike on June 7, 2006 and replaced by an Egyptian, Abu Ayyub al-Masri. As the head of AQI, Masri dropped the label of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), gave a new name to the group - Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), later ISIL, ISIS, and now IS. In 2010, Al-Masri was killed by US forces and replaced by Abu-Omar Al-Baghdadi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi respectively.²⁷ By exploiting political, social and ethnic grievances in 2012, Al-Baghdadi's men took control of the eastern rebel-held city of Raqqa and began stretching along the border with Turkey²⁸. Re-organised, revamped and lured by the vacuum all around, IS was once again carrying out major attacks in Iraq and Syria on almost daily basis during the year 2013.²⁹

The Rise of ISIS

Three main factors played a crucial role behind the rise of ISIS. The first was the American decision of disbanding Iraqi army after it occupied the country. This not only made all those people upset and jobless, but it also infused a sense of desperation among the wider Sunni population of Iraq. The second factor was the politically suicidal policies of Al-Maliki - then, Iraq's Prime Minister. Al-Maliki pursued a sectarian line in governing Iraq. Sunnis were ousted from key governmental posts, marginalized and their grievances were not addressed. Maliki used security forces against Sunnis which further deepened divisions and polarization between the two sects. Calling everything terrorism was just a wrong panacea for the insurgency. And at a time, when Maliki should have gone for political reforms, he acted otherwise and to a large extent alienated the Sunnis. The third factor had a regional dimension. Both Saudi and Iran wanted to maintain its influence in Iraq. At a time when Iran was backing Shiite figures and militias, Saudi provided generous funding and support to Sunni groups in order to weaken Iranian influence in Iraq.³⁰

All these developments directly and indirectly benefitted ISIS and other militia outfits. So when the monster rose, it was too late for everyone to control it. Even though, there is a large US-led coalition fighting ISIS today. IS' defeat will take years and even many more years will be required to reverse the trend in the wider region. The only thing left for the people today is to learn how to deal with chaos that is going to last for many more years.

ISIS' ATM

ISIS has so far launched daring assaults in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Yemen. Currently, IS is the richest terrorist group with its daily earnings exceeding the figure of more than U.S. \$3 million a day. IS obtains this money from selling oil, smuggling antiquities, extortion and taxation.³¹ It is also believed that regional countries particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia might also have played with the dragon. As a weak Iraq was in favor of Iran, studies have established that Iran had been financing Al-Qaeda in Iraq in its early days. All this was done in order to keep the US on the defensive and engaged within Iraqi cities.³²

Moreover, Iran is also believed to have provided sanctuary to Al Zaraqawi and Al-Qaeda leaders when they fled Afghanistan after the American invasion.³³ The same argument holds true about Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are also blamed to have provided cash to the IS, as it was a Sunni group and Saudis thought they would use this and other similar groups to keep the spread of Iranian influence under check. It is difficult to determine whether both Iran and Saudi Arabia knew the consequences of their actions, however, the strategic calculus has now changed. IS must have surprised all of its ex-supporters. Today, IS is hitting Sunnis and Shiites alike. It is also hitting Saudi Arabia and its allies and is becoming a growing danger for Iran as well.

The Military Muscle of ISIS

Today, IS is not only the world's richest terror group, but also world's most sophisticated and well-equipped group. Armed with light and heavy weapons like machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, surface to air missiles, captured tanks, Humvees, and bomb-proof vehicles left by the Iraqi army and withdrawing US forces, IS commanders are also considered expert in bomb making, propaganda war, administration, recruitment and battlefield tactics and strategy. As a number of Baathist officers have filled its ranks, IS has shown formidable resistance against the combined strength of US, Iraqi army, Kurdish forces and Shiite militia. Many analysts consider that, US has an indirect role in the birth and subsequent rise of IS. IS, has in its ranks and cadre, trained and war-hardened fighters hailing from different nations including non-Middle Eastern and Western countries.³⁴

Yemen War

Yemen is one of the most impoverished, divided and complicated countries of the Middle East. A country divided on political, ethnic and sectarian lines, its society had long been facing a crisis of the government and unity. The presence of a myriad number of players like the US, AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) and other proxy groups extremely complicates the political atmosphere in Yemen. The presence of so many diverse groups has already complicated things, Saudi Arabia's attack and the awakening of regional proxies, have made the situation even worse. Iran has formally shown its concern over Saudi attacks in Yemen. There is a complicated situation in Yemen and Saudi should remember that, Yemen might not be another Bahrain. This time the Kingdom is dealing with a very complicated country.

Saudis are experiencing growing Iranian influence in Yemen. It is very simple to understand that the sole reason behind Saudi's attack on Yemen is to prevent Iranian influence from spreading.³⁵ Although, the Saudis have their own problems with Al-Qaeda and Muslim Brotherhood who

have considerable presence in Yemen. Riyadh will never allow the Houthis who are backed by Iran and former president Ali Abdullah Saleh to run a country next to its immediate south. This would simply make the crisis bi-polar for the Saudis who are facing similar challenges to its north. This is the reason that Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf i.e. Egypt, Sudan and the US intervened militarily in Yemen after the Houthis ousted Saudi-backed president Abu –Rabuh Mansour Hadi.

The intentions of Tehran are, however, quite clear. Iran would like to keep the Saudis involved in as many places and on as many fronts as possible. Because this will increase domestic, pressure on the Saudis and might weaken the country internally.

Déjà vu in Yemen

More than a year has now passed since the Houthis started advancing in Yemen and the Saudis have been bombing Yemen, what is visible ground is chaos and lawlessness. Neither of the party seems to be winning this war. The analysis of the present situation leads us to say that both are making a mistake. The Houthis and the Saudis both should have seen this day. They are repeating the grand American blunder in Iraq. The reason is that military action by the Saudis or the physical capture of territory by the Houthis will not bring stability to Yemen. Military action, in other words, cannot be a substitute for long-term political rapprochement between the parties. The only outcome will be further instability. Surprisingly enough, as the Americans have withdrawn from Yemen, and the Saudis and the Houthis are locked in battle, they are indirectly creating an opportunity for their common enemies - IS and AQAP to exploit the situation. And to remind ourselves, the strengthening of AQAP and IS in Yemen will have global repercussions.³⁶

The Syrian Crisis

Ever since its start in March 2011, the Syrian crisis continued expanding. Starting from pro-democracy in

Southern city of Derra by youth, the crisis has formally taken the shape of international conflict, where major powers have stepped in with their militaries and logistics supporting either the Syrians or the opposition groups. By September 2015, over 250,000 Syrians had lost their lives.³⁷ This is besides those, who still are missing and there are many who are non-Syrians in origin and just joined the conflict on the ideological basis or as proxies of major or regional powers. As per UN estimates, millions of Syrians have left their homes and trying to take refuge in either neighbouring countries or in various European countries.

Apart from major powers, the main rivalry in Syria is between Iran and Saudi Arabia, each promoting its own school of thought and ideologies too. Iran has given weapons, ammunition and billion of USD for the survival of Assad regime. Iranian military and civil fighters have been fighting against the rebels on behalf of Assad Regime. On the other hand, Saudi Arab and many other Sunni monarchs are supporting the rebels in all respect. Now with Russian support to the Assad regime, Syria has become a centre of the global power play. U.S and some EU countries had their direct and indirect presence and support for the rebels. After IS attack in France, killing 129 people, France has moved its aircraft carrier³⁸ in the region and bombed on the locations of IS. The aerial bombing has killed hundreds of innocent civilians, besides few rebels or IS militants. Turkish shooting down of Russian aircraft has further escalated the situation and it is likely that, U.S and Russia may engage against each other in the region, for the promotion of their strategic objectives. Such a situation will be disastrous for the Middle East. For the sake of local masses of Middle East, the major powers, UNO and regional actors must make efforts to cease the hostilities.

Role of the Regional Actors – Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), headed by Saudi Arabia, although having difference of opinion on Muslim brotherhood and Morsi, have by and large stood united on

core regional issues of security. The GCC countries share Saudi concerns that are emanating from the rise of IS. All GCC countries including Qatar, Kuwait and UAE are part of the anti-IS coalition. There is an agreement that IS has emerged as the collective enemy of all GCC countries, rather foreign powers and Israel. Resultantly, the security and political challenges of the contemporary Middle East of all GCC countries are similar to that of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia like other states of the region, is going through its toughest times. Its foreign policy options are gradually shrinking and it is facing severe setbacks on the regional level. Its influence is vanishing over the regional governments, its appeal as being the center of Islam is losing ground, its status as the protector of the right of Arabs has ended, and similarly, it is also not winning its rivalry with Iran. To add to the Saudi predicament, its relations with the US are at the lowest point ever. All this has put Saudi Arabia against an avalanche of challenges.³⁹ All of these challenges have forced Saudi Arabia to take unexpected foreign policy steps. As evident from the strike against Houthis, Saudi Arabia seems to be growingly concerned with increasing Iranian influence in the region. It has supported militant networks across the region in order to balance Iranian influence. It has also criticized Hamas and has stopped short of explicitly condemning Israeli aggression against Gazans. Surprisingly enough, Saudi Arabia was a vocal supporter of General Sisi when he overthrew Mohammad Mursi in mid-2013.⁴⁰

The Egypt of Al-SISI

Egypt, no doubt is the most important country in the Middle East. If Saudi Arabia is considered the birthplace of Islam, Egypt has, to a large extent, remained the intellectual base of Islamic thought and political Islam. Since early 1970s, Egypt has remained a close US ally. It has played a mediating role in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. It's one of the largest recipient, of American military aid as well. Things were going smooth in Egypt until the fall of Mubarak and the election of

Mursi- a Muslim brotherhood candidate which raised eyebrows in US, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Morsi's close ties with Iran and Hamas were unwelcomed by Saudi Arabia, US and Israel.⁴¹ Many believe that it was for this reason that Morsi was finally overthrown in a coup led by General Sissi, thus, reversing the policies of Morsi. Since the fall of Morsi, insurgent attacks have increased in Egypt's Sinai province. More concerning is the fact that IS has raised its head in the volatile north east of Egypt- the Sinai. Gradually, Sinai is becoming a breeding ground for IS and its supporters. This is evident from the fact that on June 4, 2015, the Egyptian branch of IS claimed responsibility of firing rockets into southern Israel. Moreover, since 2013, more than a hundred Egyptian soldiers have lost their lives in attacks that are widely believed to have been linked to IS.

One of the brazen attacks carried out by ISIS came on July 1, 2015 in which nearly two dozen Egyptian soldiers were killed and many injured. For Egypt, the threat of IS does not come only from Syria or Iraq. It also faces the danger of IS-spill over from Libya to its west. Being a very important country of the Arab world, Egypt can be considered a potential IS target in the near future.

Turkey

Turkey, a very important state which lies at the fringes of the Middle East is likely to be affected by the ongoing unrest close to its borders in Syria. Having its own Kurdish problem, regional interests and a right-wing government, Turkey will be closely watching events as they unfold. So far, the instability in Syria has put a negative impact on Turkey both economically, politically and strategically.⁴²

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Turkey support has been the opposition against Assad. However, Turkey is concerned with the rise of ISIS and other extremist groups close to its borders. These groups certainly pose a threat to Turkey's security and sovereignty. In fact, Turkey has been a major transit point for fighters that arrive from Europe to

Syria and if IS is able to spread its tentacles into Turkey, it will bring the group at the doors of Europe and Caucasus. For Russia and Europe, such a development will be too much to ignore. The current puzzle for Turkey is that as it has growingly become entangled in the war in Syria, it is hard for Turkey to find a way between Assad and IS. In mid November 2015, Turkey shot-down a Russian fighter plane, after it crossed over the Syrian border. The incident has created tension between Turkey and Russia. Russia and Syria accuse Turkey for supporting rebel groups including IS against Assad regime.

Jordan

Jordan- the Hashemite Kingdom is considered a close American and Saudi ally in the region and therefore, a good enough reason for IS to target it. The basic problem of Jordan comes from its demography and geography. While there is no doubt that ISIS has an appeal inside Jordanian society, it is geographically situated such that it borders with; Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Therefore, for Jordan, to remain isolated from IS, is nearly impossible. The demographic challenge of Jordan comes from the fact that Jordan houses millions of Palestinian and Syrian refugees while at the same time it is a country that has seen less social and economic development so far.

Hardline Jihadist-Salafism and anti-Western Muslim brotherhood has gained a visible presence in the country in the recent times. So, if we were to look into ISIS' strategy, the group might be trying to reach Jordan so as to expand its influence southwards towards Palestine, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Although failed by Jordanian army and intelligence, IS has a number of times tried to enter Jordan.⁴³ Thanks to the alertness of Jordanian army and the vivid anti-ISIS stance of King Abdullah, Jordan's borders have not been breached by IS so far.

Israel

Israel is US' closest, formidable and natural ally in the Middle East. Since its creation in 1948, the US has strongly stood beside Israel diplomatically, politically and militarily. In fact, the US considers Israel as the only democracy in the middle of Arab monarchs. Israel's security and the interests of Israel remains a cornerstone of US regional policy in the Middle East.⁴⁴ Although Israel has normal relationship with Egypt, Jordan and recently it has received favorable signals from Saudi Arabia as well, Iran happens to be seen as Israel's enemy and strategic mire.

It is to be remembered that while the US has been teaching democracy to the Arabs, the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands by Israel remained the main source of extremism in the region. On one hand the militant groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS have used Israel's occupation and its atrocities against Palestinians as tool of recruiting people, on the other, Iran, by highlighting Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, is also using anti-Israeli rhetoric in order to gain support for its influence in the wider region and improve its bets against Saudi Arabia.

Perspective on the Role of Global Powers Russia

Russia has long history of engagement with the Middle East. During the cold war, it had formidable strategic allies in the Middle East such as Egypt and Syria. Although Egypt changed its direction in the 1970s and went into the US camp, Syria and Iran remain critical Russian allies in the region. The end of cold war saw an end of Russian influence in the world and Middle East. Russia's influence in the region came to a bare minimum during the time of American unipolarity. But, as the world is witnessing a re-arrangement and re-distribution of economic power and political influence. Russia has again started looking for a greater role in the region. Russia's role has been crucial in preventing the US and the west from taking a Libyan-style military action in Syria or against Iran.

Although difference of opinion and interests exist among Saudi Arabia, Iran, United States and Russia, the Iran- Russia duo seems to be blocking the US from increasing its influence in the region. Indeed, Russian involvement in the region is quite different from that of US, while the US is mainly concerned with protecting its energy supply and the security of Israel; Russian interest is of a strategic nature. Russia is primarily concerned with preventing fundamentalism and terrorism from reaching its borders and blocking US influence in the region.⁴⁵

The recent policy of Russia in the region is very different from that of US. Russia has opposed the US and Saudi backed rebels in Syria and recently started bombing the IS sites and other groups fighting against President Assad. After shooting down its aircraft by Turkey, there appears to be cold war between Russia and NATO.

China

The most renowned reference of China in today's politics is its economic rise. While China is rising economically, resource-rich Middle East naturally becomes an important place for energy-hungry China. The foreign policy of China is very different from that of US and Russia. While US yearns for democracy, human rights and reducing anti-Americanism, Russia, struggling for maintaining a strategic balance, China however, has adopted a non-missionary foreign policy with no political strings attached to its policy. What China wants is to have economic market and energy contracts so as to ensure its exports grow and its energy supply is maintained.⁴⁶ China is interested in the energy supply coming from the Middle East; therefore, it would like stability to prevail in the region. As China is trying to diminish US' economic influence in the region through its expansion to the Middle Eastern markets, its future strategy calls for forging close ties with countries (Middle East) that are located across new Silk Road and maritime economic belt.⁴⁷ Eventually, it can be inferred that as China is mainly interested in the market and energy of the Middle East, it makes China interested in the politics of

Middle East as well. Although China doesn't have any traditional allies in the region, it is rapidly increasing its influence in Middle East and has a greater acceptability among the regional countries.

Future Prospects

It is hard to determine whether Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran and the US- the major players in the region, knew the consequences of regional instability or not. The rise of IS and the current anarchy are the logical outcome of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the US interests. Furthermore, a decade of ill-conceived policies of the region's most influential rectangle - US, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel have also fertilized disorder in the region. Today, Yemen, Syria and Iraq are facing existential threats to their security and integrity. One wonders whether these states will or not be able to protect their integrity. Alternatively, an analysis of the situation leads us to ask whether a major transformation in the geography of Middle East is on the cards. Only time will give us a clear answer of these questions.

It can be, stated that, the Kurds, who have long struggled for autonomy are, achieving their dream. If it happens, the integrity of Syria and Iraq is certainly at stake. This will ultimately raise eyebrows in Turkey and Iran. Because Iran and Turkey have a significant Kurd population with sub-national aspirations present there since long.

The contemporary Middle East is going through a very crucial phase of its history. Its society, politics and security are going through a phase of transition and flux. Major developments like the Arab spring, US invasion of Iraq, social unrest across the region, Israel-Palestine dispute, the war in Yemen, Syrian strife, Saudi-Iran rivalry, the rise of extremism and terrorism, tribalism, the rise of sophisticated terrorist networks and deepening Shia-Sunni fissure are tearing everything apart.

In conflict zone of Middle East, it appears that, authority has collapsed and chaos and disorder rule the region. The Kurds are stronger and autonomous than ever, Iraq lies divided politically, ethnically and socially. Syria- the country of Palmira and Aleppo has turned into ruins. IS and Hezbollah are acting more like a state rather than a non-state actor, the Huthis, once deprived and ignored, today rule vast swathes of Yemen. Sectarian militias both Shia and Sunni have largely replaced state armies.

Saudi Arabia and Iran although still mongering for regional dominance, nevertheless have started feeling the heat. Gaza is still bleeding and the west bank still in shambles. The only thing Al-Sisi has achieved after the removal of Mursi is instability, hopelessness and is now faced with a threat of organized insurgency in Sinai. Most despairing is the role of the US. Its illegal invasion of Iraq neither brought democracy nor diminished terrorism. What we see is wolves dancing on the plains of Iraq. Not to be forgotten is the fact that US and its ill-conceived strategies and policies are largely responsible for the current mess. Now, Russia has jumped into the region to counter the US and sustain the Assad regime. France and other EU actors are also making their entry into the region after IS attacks in France killing over 132 people. One can only hope that US, EU and Russia stop playing with strategies in the volatile region of Middle East. Rather enlarging gulf between Muslims of Middle East, the major powers should let the regional actors resolve their intra-state and inter-state disputes.

For Iran and Saudi Arabia, there is writing on the wall. Again, history is witness to the fact that after the Islamic revolution in Iran and the beginning of Iran-Saudi rivalry, both have paid a heavy cost in lives and money. Iran-Iraq war is a terrible and tragic reminder of it. It's high time that both of the countries understand that their actions are not serving the Muslims and the people of the region in anyway. In contrast, their foreign policy choices have caused trouble, fissure, enmity and misunderstanding among Muslims inside and outside the region. Ultimately, they will have to find a

better solution because in this rivalry, both are going to lose. Therefore, it is time to build regional consensus to prevent the rise of extremism and terrorism. In addition, the infamous terror groups like IS, Al-Qaeda and other terrorist non- state militias alongside other sectarian elements must be dealt with severely.

To sum up, it can be said that the recent developments in the Middle East have put sovereignty, security, well-being, and human dignity at stake. It is time to understand that instability in the Middle East, if not controlled, will have global repercussions as witnessed during IS attacks in France. The world is simply different today and the idea that this anarchy will only confine itself to the Middle East, is severely wrong. The pages of history bear witness to the fact that any developments in the Middle East have had a farther resonance in the wider Muslim world in particular and in other parts of the world in general.

And finally, to the Ayatollahs, Sheikhs, Al-Sisis, Assads and Al-Malikus, let it be reminded that gone is the time of despotism, tyranny and neglect. There is no more room of a paid-for security or a hired stability. There is no room left for hired security guarantors from the outside world. Be it the US or any other state, real security, stability and prosperity are ensured of the whole population is treated respectfully and is included in statecraft; without giving stake to the population, stability in the Middle East will remain a dream.

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