

**DYNAMICS OF PEACE AND STABILITY IN THE MIDDLE
EAST ARENA:
IDENTIFYING THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND
OPTIONS FOR RESPONSE**

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The Middle East, an organic landmass from the Nile to the Indus¹, is identified as ‘the cradle of civilization’ in history and a conflict-prone and energy-rich arena in the contemporary context. The region remains on a high pedestal from the geo-strategic perspective² in view of its images as the life-line of the world economy and the spill-over from Israel-specific tensions and turmoil. It also remains sensitive to Pakistan-India dynamics as a factor in the security environs.

The challenges in the regional scenario though rooted in historical experience, are expressed in the high stakes in the region’s energy resource: oil reserves 65 % and gas reserves at 45% of the world.³ The search for peace and security has thus been contingent upon the interplay of the region-based primary interests with that of the predominant extra-regional forces.⁴

The contemporary scene ought to be viewed in a three-fold light. Firstly, the most significant burden of history transferred to the region today relates to the post-Ottoman fragmentation in the Arab realm, inter-state territorial disputes, and hotbeds of conflict inherited from the colonial age, together with the emergence of Israel as a colonial implant. A lingering suspicion between Iran and the Arab flank of the Gulf also forms part of the legacy. Secondly, the continuation of conflicts, particularly the Arab-Israeli issue, over half a century carries impact on the social fabric of the region, raising serious questions regarding governance.

Last but not the least, *Pax Americana* has remained the overwhelming factor in the post-Cold War strategic environment vis-à-vis the region. The primary American agenda and related threat perception on questions such as energy, terrorism and Israeli security were indeed pace-setters in the arena in recent decades.

However, the scenario in the making calls into question the potency of unipolarity in the upcoming decade and raises expectations that the regional stake-holders will have greater maneuverability to move closer and take up shared responsibility towards security and cooperation in the arena.

Unipolarity at Play

Concurrent with the discovery of oil and gas, the region has been witnessing the presence of extra-regional forces that profoundly influenced its political and economic dynamics.⁵ However, the post-Cold War era is characterized by an unprecedented American influence and freedom to act in the region.⁶ The U.S preponderance was manifested first with U.S-led liberation of Kuwait and reaffirmed in its successive moves towards containment of two principal powers: Iran & Iraq. In the backdrop of ventures in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States carried massive military, air and naval re-deployment in the Gulf (in spite of an earlier withdrawal from Saudi Arabia) and brought its CENTCOM headquarter to Qatar. More significantly, it signed bilateral security agreements with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, binding up security needs of the Gulf monarchies directly with its own presence in the Gulf.⁷ In the same logic, persistent efforts have been made to redefine the Arab threat perception: shifting the focus away from Israel to what is projected as Persian hegemony,⁸ and thus widening the gulf between two flanks of the waterway.⁸

The popular mindset has been registering a negative fallout of what is seen as *Pax Americana*: The neo-con vision of a new Middle East generates fears as if re-drawing the regional map or cultural re-engineering of the societies is in the making. In the past decade or so, the fate of Arab-Israeli conflict and prospects for a settlement became increasingly dependent on the scale and depth of American intercession with the parties. Concurrently, the lack of progress in the peace process has accentuated the sense of despair, deprivation and injustice amongst broad masses. The scenario shows a widening perception gap between state and street⁹. It also provides a germination ground for militancy.¹⁰

Contemporary Political Landscape

The political landscape as evolved in the backdrop of the U.S preponderance, is defined by an Israeli existence as the region's most powerful state and sole (though undeclared) nuclear power, a defiant Iran and uneasy coexistence between Israel and the Arabs. The most critical imprint on the contemporary scene flows from Iraqi quagmire and near-demise of the Middle East peace process, besides a number of related factors that are interwoven with the governance issue. It unfolds the 'domino effect' that has the potential of eroding the primacy of the U.S or capacity of its allies to deliver. It also carries seeds of challenges that are in the making for the next decade or so.

The American invasion of Iraq led up to the eclipse of secular Al-Baathists and abolition of the largest standing Arab army, ostensibly assuring greater security for Israel. However, this in effect, implied end of the 'Sunni dominated' Iraq, which was perceived 'strong and motivated enough to balance the radical Shiite Iran. The Iraqi quagmire has thus opened flood gates of Iranian influence beyond the traditional realm¹¹ and generated fears amongst status quo forces in regard to linkages amongst radicals transcending the so-called 'Shia Crescent'.¹² Concurrently, it has unfolded numerous destabilizing currents: Sunni-Shiite tensions have surfaced in Iraq and throughout the region. Second, Iraq has become a rallying point for militants from across the frontiers. Third, the country's political make-up fore-warns of a potential three-way division. In sum total, these factors serve as catalyst for anti-American sentiment on a larger canvas.

The emergence of Iran as an important regional player, in spite of decades long policy of containment, is phenomenal. It has acquired decisive influence in Iraq and proxies in the Arab-Israel conflict. In the U.S threat perception, Iran continues to be the 'single country that may pose the greatest threat to U.S interests'.¹³ The regime in Tehran is also seen as an existential threat to Israel. It is, therefore, the object of continuing sanctions and greater pressure on the nuclear issue. Conversely, Iran's nuclear programme,

notwithstanding its scope, manifests the country's urge to seek recognition of the role it conceives for itself.¹⁴

The regional scene is characterized by recurring U.S choice for Israeli primacy in the Arab-Israeli equation. This runs counter to hopes amongst various stake-holders regarding the unique American capacity to work with both Arabs and Israelis. The peace remains illusive even though the so-called peace process is now more than fifteen years old. Successive variants for a forward move have died down. In the process, the Palestinian Authority that was initially seen as vanguard of the peace process, remains impotent in the wake of a post-Arafat leadership crisis, fragmented Palestinian polity and continuing Israeli intransigence. The rise of Hamas together with efforts to clip its wings, and the Israeli unilateralism have further eroded the prospects of meaningful advance towards a settlement.

The nuclearisation of South Asia, alongside the Arabian Sea, brought about a qualitative change in the strategic environment in the region of close proximity. The reciprocal nuclear tests: Pakistan following India (May 1998), created a deterrence within the region, matured the concept of nuclear responsibility, and unfolded compulsions--from within and outside--to take up the course of a sustained dialogue to address the unresolved bilateral issues. Concurrently, the broader region continues to receive fallout from two developments of high significance: First, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) brought into a sharper focus Pakistan's geopolitical disposition and its relevance for peace and stability in a trans-regional setting. Second, Indo-Israel cooperation attained an unmistakable strategic dimension, adding strength to Israeli primacy in the Middle East.

Arms Race and Threat of Proliferation

The extra-regional presence has been a catalyst rather than a halting factor in arms race. As a region, "the Middle East consistently spends proportionately more money for arms purchases than any other region of the world, whether this is measured as a percentage of GNP or of total government spending".¹⁵ The region

representing only five percent of world population, “accounts for 30 percent of world arms imports.”¹⁶

Growing trend towards proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is yet another significant development that has all the potential to increase the existing instability manifold. Israel is already an undeclared nuclear power, generating deep sense of insecurity and an unavoidable desire in the Arab world to find balance of power. Iran which is suspected of pursuing a concerted effort in this direction, suffers from a crisis of confidence in the Arab world and therefore, not seen as a reliable counterpoise to Israel. This adds to the existing perplexity and unfolds opportunities for extra-regional powers to add up nuclear energy models, to the existing conventional arms race¹⁷.

War on Terror

The regional stake-holders have been in unison in their appreciation of the phenomena of terrorism as a strategic threat in the post 9/11 global scene. They were, by and large, responsive to the international community’s ‘war on terror’, sharing the policy direction as well as its fall out. Concurrently, there is an increasing level of discomfort with definition of terrorism within a U.S.-centric agenda. The states that are not in harmony with the US diagnosis, remain under scrutiny and even sanctions. The change of semantics with the advent of Obama administration has not brought about any significant change in the scenario. Second, the U.S definition of terror is all encompassing, leaving no room for the people’s right of resistance against foreign occupation or alien subjugation. Last but not the least, apprehensions caused in the Bush era¹⁸ continue to linger that the neo-Con intelligentsia is trying to turn the campaign against terror into a war against Muslim Civilization and Islamic religion. In a nutshell, myopic approaches to GWOT have enlarged perception gaps and given rise to avoidable notions regarding ‘clash of civilizations’.

Impact on Governance

The impact of long-festering Middle East crisis on the social fabric has brought in the fore a number of issues regarding

governance. The issues can be viewed in the context of State vs. Street, inertia vs. reform¹⁹ and the rise of non-state actors.

The perception gap between the ruling elites and ‘man on the street’ exists on a wider canvas in the region. The regimes seek umbrella from the West in the wake of limited choices under the unipolar order.²⁰ Conversely, broad masses are mainly anti-West and represent an acute sense of injustice that has come about in the past decades. The continuing conflict also enabled the regimes to delay any significant reforms in the governance process. The region, therefore, remains an area without sustained democratic institutions/participation and without a reliable ‘vent for the popular steam’. The Palestinian Territories and Iran are perhaps lone exceptions. (Ironically, electoral process in both had reconfirmed primacy of the Islamists).

The non-state actors have gained profile and credence in the wake of successive failures of states in the Arab-Israeli conflict and lack of adequate participation in the decision-making process. They have, in cases, come up with enlarged roles compared with role of a state. For example, Hezbollah’s resistance to Israeli invasion of Lebanon (July 2006) brought them a legendary status as this non-state actor was seen doing what all Arab regular armies had previously failed to do. Similarly, the rise of Hamas and its sustainability in the impoverished Gaza in spite of its eclipse from power is a point in case. More significantly, the non-state actors have demonstrated a convergence of interest as is mirrored in the consultative process between Hamas and Hezbollah²¹. It is interesting that the recipe for democratization and reform offered by the US for ‘Broader Middle East’, is seen as an alien imposition and when put to test, brought forth electoral gains for the Islamists.

Role of Ideology

‘Islamic Revival’ as against erstwhile nationalism and various radical streams are relatively newer phenomena on the region’s political map. These are intrinsically linked up with a sense of denial and a missionary zeal to achieve what remains unfulfilled to-date.

It is important to recall key aspects of this phenomena. First, the ideological streams based on nationalism and socialism died down with successive setbacks in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The secular approaches to politics also face a down-turn (Ironically, some look at Saddam as the 'last secular ruler' in the contemporary Middle East). Second, the 'Islamic revival' is a wider phenomena, corresponding to the so called 'Broader Middle East'. Various streams representing this phenomena have gained popular ground and filled in the ideological vacuum in the absence of nationalist/secular activism. (This is illustrated in the activism displayed by various sub-streams flowing from the erstwhile Al-Akhwan including Hamas). They thrive on what is seen as a choice between the so-called corrupt elite and the vibrant religiously-motivated revivalists. The inability of traditional Arab regimes to counter the appeal of radical Islam, is indeed a dilemma for the U.S as well.

The prevailing sense of injustice has germinated militancy and extremist view points, not always providing feeder for terrorist infrastructure. Nevertheless, their identification with 'Islamic Revival' creates an ongoing image problem of higher proportions. The sectarian strife that runs in tandem with radical Islam, ought to be seen as a reactionary phenomena promoted by the vested interests.

Emerging Trends and Response Options

In the upcoming decade, the oil and gas assets of the Gulf will gain higher strategic value as the global economies are likely to come under the 'eye' of an 'energy storm', made of multitude of uncertainties. The market already mirrors a growing demand in relation to supply, (projected to increase 57% from 2000-2025), higher costs inherent in efforts towards diversification of sources and the perceived geo-political risks, either because of instability or threat of terrorism. The supply constraints mean that higher prices are likely to recur and persist for long. It also implies an ever growing importance of energy security.

The strategic choices made by the U.S. in the wake of the unipolar order, relate to military presence and control over the political direction of energy-rich region, besides diversification of sources of supply. It has relied upon pre-emption, under the Global War on Terror (GWOT), to carry forward its agenda. However, in the upcoming decade, the U.S. role will be constrained by the impact of an array of internal and external forces, the inherent limits of U.S. power, and the outcome of policy choices it had made over the years²².

The United States is likely to remain a dominant power when compared with other extra-regional players in the region. However, its influence may not be all encompassing.²³ The limitations on the U.S. power may also flow from increasing challenges by the foreign policies of other countries. For example, the European Union's unwillingness to join the chorus against Iran and its differing approach to the Palestinian problem; and the 'resurgent' Russia's choice to demonstrate its independence from the United States on the two issues. No less important will be China's aversion to greater pressure on Iran in view of its growing stakes in the Gulf oil and, therefore, in stability of the region.

The regional stake-holders, in keeping with the diminishing unipolarity, are likely to expand their security bridges with Europe and with China corresponding to their stakes in stability. It is not clear as to how far the U.S would be able to keep China away from security cooperation with states in the region. However, there would be a growing skepticism within the region towards any Indian move to assume a hegemonic role in view of Indo-Israeli nexus. The perception regarding Pakistan as a factor complimenting the Gulf security system is likely to be re-enforced.

In the upcoming regional arena, Israel and Iran ought to be viewed as the most powerful states while there is no early end in sight of the post-colonial fragmentation in the Arab realm. It would be increasingly important as to how the three players find readjustments in the wake of diminishing uni-polarity. Israel is likely to remain an unpredictable factor in the situation, trying to perpetuate the Arab disarray and countering Iranian influence. The

regional climate would be eased if other regional players help Iran to come out of the 'containment syndrome' and downplay its rhetoric. Second, a gainful choice with the Arab camp would rest more on confidence-building with Iran and to evolve structures of cooperation, based on shared interest, rather than rely upon extra regional protective umbrella. In the context, Pakistan could play a positive supplementary role in enforcing the intra-region process in view of its strategic disposition, non-partisan image in relation to the erstwhile Iran-Arab divide and distinct status as a moderate Muslim nation in the periphery.

In spite of diminishing unipolarity, the climate in the region does not auger well for fast track progress on the Palestinian-Israeli front or an early wrap up of the Iraqi quagmire. The upcoming political scenario will thus continue to witness activism by 'Islamic revivalists', some with radical overtones, as they fill the political and intellectual vacuum in the Arab world. The non-state actors are also likely to remain assertive in the absence of conclusive progress in the Middle East Peace Process.²⁴ However, greater reform, even though incremental, and participatory democracy may neutralize the tide. Judged from the recent tests and trials, a greater democratization is likely to bring in an upsurge of the 'revivalist' political stream. However, recourse to alternates can only lead to further radicalization.

Similarly, the option of another war in the Middle East, whether propelled by radicals on the Arab-Israeli front or imposed for regime-leveling in Iran, is indeed fraught with a multi-dimensional crisis. Active hostilities on either front can unfold radicalization of the region, activating non-state actors all through, and bring de-stabilization of energy-based economies and strategic supply routes.

The Gulf, compared with others in the region, is likely to be in the focus of regional security perspective for the coming decades as well. To recall, the contemporary Gulf scenario is overwhelmed by the Arab flank's dependence on the extra-regional umbrella in keeping with the regimes' view of the perceived need for survivability. This dependence however comes in tandem with latent

fears of the overpowering impact of the unipolar order: apprehensions of being sucked into another war that can be destabilizing for all segments of the society. There is an inlaid desire for “Gulfanisation” of Gulf security. (The GCC was initially seen as a product of fears from Iran’s “export of revolution”, as augmented by extra-regional forces). However, with the settling down of the dust, there is increasing realization that economic and security interests of regional stake-holders, rooted in the need for uninterrupted oil flow, are very much similar if not the same. A growing space is now available for assuming regional responsibility as the region awaits the first signals of diminishing unipolarity.

The intelligentsia and policy-elite across the geographic and political divide in the region ought to re-visit the accumulated European experience of the past one century and see how the common stakes of today have buried the history of divisive conflicts in that continent. In this context, it is increasingly important to study as to how the region can advance regional cooperation on two tracks: First, the Arab League revitalizes its ranks and finds an active economic link with the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO); creating a shared community of interest up to Central Asia and Pakistan. Second, the Arab littoral states of the Persian Gulf and Iran work effectively to diffuse lingering tensions within the region; expand and upgrade the existing institutional framework for cooperation and assume the same stature and responsibilities in the Gulf arena as the EU did in Europe.

The de-stabilizing potential of the upcoming scenario, however remote, makes it increasingly important that the regional stakeholders act in concert to promote the process of dialogue from within the region and thus enlarge stakes of both state and non-state actors in peace and stability. It would be relevant to develop an approach that, first of all, engages and admits the non-state actors in the political processes and thus erode their radical postures. Concurrently, the regional stake-holders move with diligence and greater pace to energize the intra regional process and institutional frameworks of cooperation.

Author

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Notes

¹ The nomenclature ‘Middle East’ has been a colonial (and later, a neo-colonial) convenience rather than a geographic expression. The connotation of this nomenclature has also been shifting like the ‘shifting sands’ of the region. For example, expression ‘broader Middle East’, now used by the US and G-8, is in fact synonymous with bulk of the muslim world. However, discussion in this paper is essentially related to the region from Indus to Nile which continues to evoke interest for its conflict-prone and energy-rich characteristics.

² Farah Naaz, “Security in the Persian Gulf”, *Strategic Analysis*, [Vol. XXIV. No. 12](#), (March 2001)

³ Gal Luft “Dependence on Middle East Energy and its Impact on Global Security” available at <http://www.iags.org> accessed on 25th March 2009.

The share of oil reserves is varyingly described as 55%. For this comparative view, see Kenneth M. Pollack, “Securing the Gulf”. *Foreign Affairs*. (July/August 2003), See at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20030701faessay15401/kenneth-m-pollack/securing-the-gulf.html>. Accessed on May 15, 2008.

⁴ Mirza Aslam Beg, “Energy Security Paradigm for Persian Gulf Region in 21st Century”. *Quarterly Journal, National Development and Security Rawalpindi*, (February 2000).

⁵ Farah Naaz, “Security in the Persian Gulf”, *Strategic Analysis*, [. Vol. XXIV. No. 12](#) (March 2001).

⁶ Richard N. Haass, “The New Middle East” *Foreign Affairs*, (November/December 2006).

⁷ Kenneth M. Pollack, “Securing the Gulf”. *Foreign Affairs*. (July/August 2003), See at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20030701faessay15401/kenneth-m-pollack/securing-the-gulf.html>. Accessed on May 15, 2008.

⁸ Barry Rubin, “The Geopolitics of Middle East Conflict and Crisis”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, (September 1998).

⁹ Kenneth M. Pollack, “Securing the Gulf”, *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2003) See at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20030701faessay15401/kenneth-m-pollack/securing-the-gulf.html>. Accessed on May 15, 2008.

¹⁰ Mark Edmond Clark, “A possible path to change in US-Iran Relations”. *PfP Consortium Quarterly Journal*. Spring 2005. See at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/pubs/ph/details.cfm?lng=en&id=22782>. Accessed on (May 15, 2008)

¹¹ Kemp Geoffrey, "Iran and Iraq: The Shia Connection, Soft Power and the Nuclear Factor", *Special Report 156*, (November 2005): <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr156.pdf>.

¹² The term "Shia Crescent" has been used by Jordan's King Abdullah twice during 2004-2006 to denote the expanding Iranian influence among states and non-state actors in West.

¹³ Saxton Jim, "Iran's Gas and Oil Wealth", *The Joint Economic Committee Study of United States Congress*, (March 2006)

¹⁴ Arif Kamal, "Dimension and Consequences of NATO Expansion to Eurasia: Reviewing Iran's Security Environment", *Criterion Quarterly*, (April/June 2008).

¹⁵ Prince El-Hassan, "Future Prospects for Security and Cooperation in the Middle East", *THE RUSSI JOURNAL*, <http://www.informaworld.com/smp/titlecontent=t777285713>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ The UAE and Jordan are already responding to the French and American marketing endeavor in regard to nuclear power development.

¹⁸ Mark Edmond Clark, "A possible path to change in US-Iran Relations". *PfP Consortium Quarterly Journal*. Spring 2005. See at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/pubs/ph/details.cfm?lng=en&id=22782>. Accessed on May 15, 2008.

¹⁹ Daniel L. Byman, & Jerrold D. Green, "The Enigma of Stability in the Persian Gulf Monarchies", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, (September 1999) Vol.3. No, 3, See at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1999/issue3/jv3n3a3.html>. Accessed on May 15, 2008.

²⁰ Barry Rubin, "The Geopolitics of Middle East Conflict and Crisis", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, (September 1998)

²¹ A convergence of interest amongst the non-state actors across the sectarian divide, was repeatedly expressed in the years 2004-06' e.g. Hizbollah and Hamas shared fora to mobilize political support. Similarly, Iraq's Shia leader Muqtada Sadr proclaimed himself as the "beating arm of both Hamas and Hizbollah..." (*Khutba* at Kufa Grand Mosque during 2004 revolt in Faluja).

²² Richard N.Haass, "The New Middle East" *Foreign Affairs*, (November/December 2006)

²³ ibid.

²⁴ Ibid