

THE RENEWED BALANCE OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Balance of power has a long history among Mesopotamian civilizations; a history filled with conflicts between Kings and Emperors out of fear from each other. An outstanding one would be the war between twelve kings of Mesopotamia headed by King Hadadezer of Damascus and Ahab King of Israel against expansionism of King Shalmaneser III in 853 BC. The objective was to avoid the increase of Assyrians supremacy. However, their effort was doomed to fail. Centuries later, in a similar manner, the coalition of Arab governments aimed at controlling the extension of Israel failed to succeed. Nevertheless, the endeavor towards establishing the Balance of Power has not always been ineffective, as the Assyrians were brought to a halt by the mighty Ourarto civilization, and the unrivaled dominance of Israel has been struggling by the uncompromising stance of the Islamic Republic in Iran.

It could be said that a new era in the Middle East began following the exit of the Great Britain from the Persian Gulf in 1967. It signaled an unmarked page in the political history of the region as it gave way to the gradual development of independent governments. In this era, as it was in the ancient time, a multi-polar system configured. Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Israel, turn out to become the new version of Egypt, Elam, Ourarto, Assyrian, and Hebrew civilizations and like their ancestors they grew to carry on a constant rivalry. The existence of such state of animosity in both the ancient and modern time has avoided the supreme domination of one of these regional powers over the others. However, this balance of power has given each of these players the chance of survival, in addition to endowing them with a fragile peace. The process of stabilization of the balance of power system in the Middle East approximately took till 1991. By that time neither Israel nor Iran could gain superiority over one another, same as none of the Arab governments fell ahead of the others.

The last decade of the twentieth century brought with it a relative atmosphere of peace and calm to the region. Iraq apparently understood that the effort to invade and occupy territories of its neighbors was in vain regardless of whether they were supported or opposed by the West. In addition, six wars between Arabs and Israel proved to have resulted in nothing but destruction of both side's resources. Consequently the time came for signing peace treaties. But the last decade of the twentieth century had a more significant characteristic; a new regional bipolar system was emerging. By end of the Cold War, Iraq and Libya lost their communist comrade; Egypt saw its traditional influence on the Arab world vanished; Turkey approached Europe evermore. When democracy became the measure of legitimacy for ruling regimes, Saudi Arabia lost its reputation. Iraq went deep in a state of seclusion following its invasion to and consequent retreat from Kuwait. Iran and Israel remained to compete. They gradually formed a bipolar system in the Middle East and began taking allies both regionally and globally. Syria became a

partner for Iran and Egypt sided with Israel. Arab governments of the Persian Gulf formed the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf and allied with the United States. In this fashion, two opposing fronts materialized and became the base for seeming stability along with rivalry. Interestingly, in the heat of intense rivalries between Iran and Israel, no direct war has taken place between the two, yet in no moment of time has the enmity among them lost imminence. As much as Iran gained partial popularity in Lebanon and Palestine, Israel also gained support of some of Iran's neighbors against the Islamic regime.

Although President Bush's attack on Ba'athi Iraq did not completely disarrange the overall regional balance of power, the subjective and inevitable contradictions of the United States policy in the Middle East resulted in its vulnerability against both Iran and Israel but in different perspectives. President Bush administration's foreign policy pursued an offensive approach with regards to Iran aimed at promotion of Israel in the Middle East by restraining the increase of Iran's regional power and influence. The idea was to shift the regional balance of power among the traditional rivals to the sole advantage of Israel by means of Hard Power.

Campaign against expansion of nuclear weapons of mass destruction became a reason to threaten Iran while ironically Israel and other countries in the region like India, and Pakistan have enjoyed nuclear weapons for years. Upholding democracy was also introduced as another cause to undermine the defiant Islamic regime in Iran whereas some of the United States closest allies in the Middle East like Saudi Arabia and Yemen are under the rule of utmost suppressive and dictatorial regimes. Thus Regime Change became the prime purpose based on the hypothesis that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic in Iran is a result of its ideological convictions therefore a change in its international and domestic policies can only occur by removal of the current regime and its replacement by a regime which is more compatible with the liberal ideology.

However, not only the effort to change the regime in Iran has somewhat proved to be unsuccessful so far, but also the implementation of 'the Greater Middle East Project', even after the attack on Iraq has resulted in the increase of the Iranian regime's influence in that country. In addition, the mere threat of Regime Change has resulted in controversial presidential and parliamentary elections in Iran since 2005, giving way to empowering hardliners and forcing out moderate reformists from the political scene within the regime.

Failure of the United States in persuading Iran to abandon its nuclear program, and at the same time taking total control of the regime by hardliners may to some extent re-endorse the significance of the balance of power in the Middle East. For years the United States managed crisis in the region based on Balance of Power among countries like Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. The United States may have come to the conclusion that in order to best satisfy its interests and bring stability to the region, there is no better way but to renew

the balance of power in the Middle East. Fear of a nuclear Iran is not essentially founded as it was not in the case of Iraq's WMDs.

Even Saddam's attack on Iran happened only when he perceived Iran to be weak and disarranged after the revolution of 1979 and assumed that within few days he would be able to annex the oil-rich south of Iran to Iraq. Once his vision proved to be false, he panicked and lied about having WMDs and by the same token was overthrown by the United States and its allies years later. Fear of retribution was what stopped Saddam short of any offence following both his defeat in Kuwait and Israel's bombing of Iraq's nuclear power plants. Same fear has so far avoided direct confrontation between Iran and Israel.

It is likely that the United States would return to its previous policy in the Middle East and prefer a system of Balance of Power as already there are tacit indications of such shift in policy since President Obama took office. This approach has the potential to safeguard the United States' interests better and avoid conflict and chaos in the region. It is needless to say that such approach would be more preferable to Iran as well, pending that the ruling regime realizes this great opportunity and play its cards sensibly.