



In the Middle East, Much Hangs on Which Way Iran Could Evolve

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January 2015

Executive Summary

- * Two major recent events – Israel’s target killing of Iranian and HizbAllah senior officers on the Golan Heights, and the death of Saudi Arabia’s King Abdallah – help accelerate the slide of the greater Middle East to a new posture. Both events were quite inevitable but still with no forewarning.
- * The modern Arab State is gone, rejected by the vast majority of the populace.
- * The revival of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities as the viable buffer zone between aspirant outside powers and the Arab Heartland is irreversible because the new key elements – the unified Kurdish entity in Iraq-Syria and the Alawite-Druze in western Syria – along with Israel, are immovable.
- * The rise of a cohesive al-Jazira has radicalized and is challenging the entire Arab World. Abu Baker al-Baghdadi has revived the dream of restoring Arabia to its glorious days. No power, definitely not the infidel West, can take this dream-come-true away from the Sunni Arab masses.
- * The genius and foresight of Saudi Arabia’s King Abdallah prevent the Caliphate from attaining total victory. Will his successors be as effective in navigating Saudi Arabia and the Sunni world?
- * Iran is a huge country with rich historical tradition as a regional power which cannot be ignored or cancelled. Iran is also a nuclear power with purchased warheads and a well-established nuclear doctrine confirmed by force structure, command authority, and repeated exercises.
- * The big question is “whither Iran?” as the post-Khamene’i era is dawning near. The debate is about the grand strategic context of the ascent: whether Iran will rise as a Persian minority or as a leading Islamist-Jihadist power.
- * The Israeli target killing of the senior officers demonstrated that unchecked escalation along Jihadist lines would not be tolerated. As Tehran contemplates reaction, Iranian leaders are now compelled to reassess short-term and long-term ramifications, and thus to re-examine Iran’s overall grand strategy.
- * Overall, Russia has committed to the Fertile Crescent of Minorities where Israel and Iran are the preferable dominant poles as the key to stability in the greater Middle East. For Putin’s Kremlin, Israel is first and foremost the largest Russian community outside the former Soviet Union.
- * For Obama, the “Grand Rapprochement” with Iran is first and foremost the defining act of his own legacy for posterity. Obama is convinced that if Washington offers Tehran a large-enough and glorious-enough rôle in the future greater Middle East, then Tehran would help him. With time running out, Obama’s Washington has evolved into a steamroller with no restraint, respect for facts, or commitments to allies.



* The crucial undertaking is to make the current Fertile Crescent of Minorities as strong and viable as possible. For Tehran, this would mean that sole viable option to ascending anew as a regional power would be in the context of playing Persia's classic rôle as the eastern pole of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. Then, as in the days of the Shah, Iran would return to being a positive force and its strategic capabilities would no longer be considered a threat.

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About the Author of this Issue

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ANALYSIS

Two major recent events – Israel’s target killing of Iranian and HizbAllah senior officers on the Golan Heights on January 18, 2015, and the death on January 23, 2015, of Saudi Arabia’s King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz al Saud – help accelerate the slide of the greater Middle East to a new posture. Both events were quite inevitable, but still with no forewarning.

Even before these events, during the early Winter of 2014-15, the Middle East started a slow progress toward the restoration of stability. Exhausted by cold and destitution, the grassroots in the greater Middle East have been pushing for stabilization of the situation and settling on a viable regional order, imperfect as it may be. While the people are ready to tolerate a lot, the decisionmakers of all levels and creeds are yet to face and accept reality, let alone commit to the ensuing drastic changes.

The modern Arab State is gone, rejected by the vast majority of the populace.

Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon are no more, and Jordan and Yemen are not far behind. In their place there have emerged entities based on ethnic, tribal, and religious self-identities: the Sunni Arab Islamic Caliphate of the al-Jazira heartland, the predominantly Alawite-Druze entity of western Syria, the Shiite HizbAllah land, the Maronite-Druze bloc, the Shiite Arab entity of south-eastern Iraq, and the Kurdish land. Yemen is being torn apart between the Houthis, Hadhramautis, and smaller groups. Libya is in the midst of a fratricidal orgy of violence between tribes, clans, and other power-seekers.

The enduring bloodshed and destitution themselves seem proof that the leaders of the Western-created and – sustained entities called modern states cannot deliver for the people. Instead, the population has been gravitating to the traditional forms of self-identity blood relations – ethnical, tribal, etc. – and utopian pan-identities, mainly Islamism-Jihadism. Many of the people of the region seem to have already given up on statehood and will never agree to lose self-control in favor of return to the states which failed them.

The emerging entities can be divided into two groupings.

The first is the revival of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities as the viable buffer zone between aspirant outside powers and the Arab Heartland: al-Jazira. The key minorities from east to west are the Ahwazi Arabs, the Kurds, the Alawites, the Druze, the Maronites, and the Jews. The Kurds’ resolve to defend themselves led to the consolidation and success of the present unified Kurdish entity carved out of northern Iraq and northeastern Syria. The endurance and success of the Alawite-Druze in western Syria seem to have eliminated the viable threat to their hold onto power.

This means that two the key elements of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, along with Israel, are immovable. Indeed, Pres. Abdul Fatah al-Sisi’s Egypt is also evolving as a buffer power, shielding Arabia from north-east Africa.

The rise of a cohesive al-Jazira has radicalized and is challenging the entire Arab World. The driving force is the northern part where the Islamic Caliphate is going back 13 centuries by both terrorizing the people into compliance, as well as stirring their imagination and hopes for the return of long-lost glory. Acting on the teachings of the Khorasan Pledge, Abu Baker al-Baghdadi has revived the dream of restoring Arabia to the glorious days of the four Rashidun Caliphs (pious caliphs who succeeded Mohammed) and particularly the pious Caliphs Abu Baker and Omar. No power, definitely not the infidel West, can, al-Baghdadi and his colleagues feel, take this dream-come-true away from the Sunni Arab masses neither by aerial bombing nor by boots on the ground.



The profound threat of al-Baghdadi's Caliphate is the inspiration it gives to other Islamist-Jihadist communities all over the world, an inspiration which could not easily be forgotten or countered.

The genius and foresight of Saudi Arabia's King Abdallah prevent the Caliphate from attaining total victory. The King succeeded in transforming Saudi Arabia in time to cope with these dynamics by raising traditional Bedouin values and integrating them into the Saudi evolving grassroots. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has so far contained the slide of Islamism-Jihadism into the south of al-Jazira and particularly the Islamist-Jihadist efforts to control Mecca and Medina which would have given the dream of the Caliphate all-Islamic confirmation.

Will the successors of King Abdallah be as effective in navigating Saudi Arabia and the Sunni world?

Left to be decided is the future rôle of Iran. Iran is a huge country with rich historical tradition as a regional power which cannot be ignored or cancelled. Iran is also a nuclear power with purchased warheads and a well-established nuclear doctrine confirmed by force structure, command authority, and repeated exercises. Therefore, all the region's countries recognize Iran's nuclear posture, even if secretly. The crux of the current Iranian nuclear effort is to lessen dependence on North Korean inputs and acquire warhead self-production capacity. While the P5+1 negotiations might prolong this phase, they almost certainly will not reverse the overall ascent of Iran as a nuclear power with more than regional aspirations.

The big question is "whither Iran?", as the post-Khamenei era is dawning near. Ultimately, Iran's future course will be decided in the aftermath of the profound self-deliberations among Iran's own younger generation of leaders. There is no debate about the continued intent on the escalation and expediting of Iran's regional ascent. The debate is about the grand strategic context of the ascent: whether Iran will rise as a Persian minority or as a leading Islamist-Jihadist power.

Everybody in official Tehran agrees that the hard-won on-land access to the shores of the Mediterranean – the first since the Achaemenid Empire more than 2,300 years ago – must be retained at all cost. Iran is fighting all over the region in order to contain the eruption of Sunni Islamism-Jihadism which threatens to disrupt this access. Iran is helping and sustaining the key buffer forces: Shiite Iraq, the Kurdish bloc, Alawite-Druze western Syria, and the HizbAllah of Syria-Lebanon.

Iran is also destabilizing the Arabian Peninsula by sponsoring the chaos in the Shiite-populated eastern Arabia and by preparing for the "war on oil" (which extends to Central Asia) which could devastate Western and Far Eastern economies. Iran is taking over Yemen and the Bab-al-Mandeb through the quasi-Shiite Houthis, and is consolidating in Sudan. Iran is thus threatening the Suez Canal and challenging Egypt which, under Sisi, has been reviving as a regional power and a guardian of the traditionalist stable Sunni World.

The current leaders in Tehran have made it clear that they believe major confrontation with Israel is a key element of Iran's grand strategy. Tehran believes that leading a drive for the ultimate destruction of Israel would be irresistible to the increasingly radicalized Arab World and would therefore ensure the Arabs' acceptance of Iran's regional hegemony as an acceptable price for the liberation of al-Quds [Jerusalem]. Hence, Iran sponsors HizbAllah, HAMAS, and other radical Palestinians, as well as anti-Egypt Jihadists. Furthermore, by containing Israel, Tehran wants to demonstrate to Arab states that they cannot rely on an Israeli umbrella to contain Iran, and that they therefore should accept the Iranian regional hegemony.

Iran went too far on the Golan front by contemplating building infrastructure there which would both be able to hit the Israeli deep rear and to arm the Jihadist forces in the West Bank through an unstable and cracking



Jordan. The Iranians and their HizbAllah proxies raised the ante to a level unacceptable to Israel. The Israeli target killing of the senior officers in command of this project during an inspection tour stalled the program. Israel demonstrated that unchecked escalation along Jihadist lines would not be tolerated. As Tehran contemplates reaction, Iranian leaders are now compelled to reassess short-term and long-term ramifications, and thus to re-examine Iran's overall grand strategy.

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin's Russia is also restraining and creating dependency of Russia's historical implacable nemeses: Turkey and Iran. Russia is harnessing Turkey via economic relations. By transforming Turkey as the venue for exporting Russian and Central Asian gas, Russia restrains to some extent the neo-Ottoman zeal of Ankara. No less important is the Arab rejection of neo-Ottoman hegemony and claims to leadership of Sunni Islam.

Russia is engaging Iran by helping redefine Iran's regional rôle and through protection against Western attacks so that any administration in Tehran would feel less threatened and would thus focus on constructive policies. Russia has long believed in the unique rôle of Shi'ite Iran as a wedge preventing the unification and consolidation of Sunni Jihadist bloc from Afghanistan-Pakistan to the heart of the Arab World and the Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, Russia is once again competing with China on the "Between and Betwixt of Empires" and the revived Silk Road, where Persia is the historic western pole of China's Silk Road polity. The Kremlin is convinced that the most significant challenge is not whether Iran will become a regional power, but the evolving character of Iran as a regional power; as a minority or a radical hegemonic power. The Kremlin believes that Iran has been shifting to Persian-minority identity in recent years, and that this nascent trend needs to be helped.

Overall, Russia has committed to the Fertile Crescent of Minorities where Israel and Iran are the preferable dominant poles as the key to stability in the greater Middle East. For Putin's Kremlin, Israel is first and foremost the largest Russian community outside the former Soviet Union. This is a community that must be secured and protected, and whose close relations and interaction with the Russian Motherland must be further consolidated and expanded.

In contrast, President Barack Obama's Washington is committed to the empowerment of Iran as a regional power over reconstituted modern states. These states would have to be imposed by force over hostile and rejecting populace, a rôle which a powerful Iran could undertake. Obama believes these states must be Islamist – ruled by the Muslim Brothers or derivative thereof – and thus preferable to the mullahs' Administration in Tehran. To expedite the ascent of Iran, Obama believes, Israel has to be contained, cut down to size, and put on the defensive through the inflating of the Palestinian "peace process". Iran-sponsored Palestinian and HizbAllah proxies are the best instrument for pressure on Israel.

For Obama, the "Grand Rapprochement" with Iran is first and foremost the defining act of his own legacy for posterity.

Obama is convinced that if Washington offers Tehran a large-enough and glorious-enough rôle in the future greater Middle East, then Tehran would help him by accepting the Grand Rapprochement. The realities in the region pale into irrelevance when they stand in the way of defining Obama's legacy. With time running out, Obama's Washington has evolved into a steamroller with no restraint, respect for facts, or commitments to allies. (Indicative of Obama's policies is the US incessant pressure on, and blackmail of, Argentinean President Cristina Kirchner to cancel the Interpol Red Notice on key Iranian officials including Ali Akbar Velayati – the key



negotiator with Obama's closest confidant, Valerie Jarrett – which already led to the assassination of investigating prosecutor Alberto Nisman when he refused to bow to US pressure.)

The great quandary is therefore whether Iran would continue its current confrontational Jihadist ascent, convinced that Obama could deliver acceptance by Israel and pro-Western Arab states. Or would Iran revert back to the traditional rôle as a Persian Shiite power; that is, a minority in a greater and surrounding Sunni Muslim world. Iran would then return to playing a major stabilizing rôle as a co-pole with Israel the way Iran did during the Shah's days. The latest target-killing on the Golan Heights, as other unacknowledged explosions and bombings, keep reminding Tehran that Jihadist ascent has its high price.

However, the crucial undertaking is to make the current Fertile Crescent of Minorities as strong and viable as possible. Such a development would not only enshrine stability, but would send unambiguous signal to all that the regional order and stability enshrined by the Minorities were here to stay. For Tehran, this would mean that sole viable option to ascending anew as a regional power would be in the context of playing Persia's classic rôle as the eastern pole of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities.

Then, as in the days of the Shah, Iran would return to being a positive force and its strategic capabilities would no longer be considered a threat.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

An earlier version of this article was published in *Defense & Foreign Affairs, Special Analysis*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 7, on January 26, 2015.