



Regional Influentials

ONE WAY OF LOOKING AT THE DYNAMICS OF regional politics in the Greater Middle East is to focus on the behavior of what was once known in American strategic parlance as “regional influentials,” i.e., the states that possess the greatest degree of geo-strategic, political, economic and cultural “weight.”

At present, this group consists of three non-Arab states – Iran, Turkey and Israel, and one Arab one, Egypt. For Arabs, in general, and Egyptians, in particular, it has become painfully obvious that, individually and collectively, Arab states are weaker than their non-Arab neighbors. Arab analysts often warn of hegemonic desires – whether of Israel, with American support, of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Iran, or even of a newly assertive, neo-Ottoman Turkey.

With regard to Israel and Turkey, these characterizations are misplaced. But, not so in the case of Iran. Tehran’s longstanding efforts to export the Islamic revolution by supporting opposition movements in the Arab world, its assumption of leadership of the anti-Israeli camp, and its determined pursuit of a nuclear weapons program have left neighboring Arab governments extremely uneasy. The fact that the legitimacy of the Khamenei-Ahmadinejad regime was seriously compromised by the fraudulent presidential elections in June was a relief on one level, but also a further cause for concern, in that the regime might be even more assertive in the region in order to restore its tattered image at home.

Where might this be? Lebanon and Palestinian affairs have been two arenas where the Iranians have flexed their muscles in recent years. However, the Arab world, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, along with their Lebanese and Palestinian allies, Western governments and even Israel have pushed back with some success.

The current “action” in this regard is taking place far from the Western media’s eyes, in remote Yemen, where armed conflict in recent months between government forces, backed by Sunni fundamentalists, and a revivalist Zaydi-Shi’ite offshoot has resulted in hundreds of fatalities and thousands of wounded and displaced persons. Yemeni politics are almost always fractured with a strong tribal component, but the regional dimension, i.e., Iran’s perceived support for the rebels, is causing considerable concern in Saudi Arabia, the Yemenis’ traditional, if not always welcome, “big brother.”

Of course, it was the revelation of the existence of Iran’s heretofore secret nuclear facility, which drew the most attention throughout the region in recent days. Arab governments and commentators found the new development particularly disturbing, for it seemed to confirm Iran’s intention to attain a nuclear weapons capability, which would leave them between the hammer of a possible U.S. or Israeli military move to destroy Iran’s facilities and the anvil of a nuclear Iran hovering over the Gulf and beyond.

In the eyes of Ghassan Charbel, editor-in-chief the Saudi-owned pan-Arab al-Hayat daily, Iran was “dancing on the edge of the abyss with the assurance of someone who does not fear to slip into it,” behavior which he found reminiscent of Saddam Hussein before the 2003 war that toppled his regime.

Turkey’s response to Iranian muscle-flexing, including its nuclear program, has been measured. In general, Turkey would prefer Iran not to attain nuclear weapons capability, but the political elite, especially, is utterly opposed to the notion of a Western or Israeli strike, fearing regional destabilization. Turkish President Abdullah Gül reminded Ahmadinejad last year of Saddam’s fate, and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced in response to the latest disclosure that he would be going to Tehran to discuss regional problems, including the nuclear issue.

More generally, Turkey appears more confident than ever regarding its position in the region. A decade after (successfully) threatening Syria with war if it didn’t cough up Kurdish opposition leader Abdullah Oçalan, the two countries’ foreign ministers recently signed an agreement to establish a joint Strategic Cooperation Council and to abolish visa requirements for each other’s citizens. Moreover, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu hosted Iraqi and Syrian foreign ministers in an effort to mediate tensions, which had arisen following Iraqi accusations that Syria was behind a wave of renewed bombings in Iraqi cities.

Davutoglu has provided the Turkish government with the conceptual framework for its more assertive regional policies, combining the notion of “zero conflict with neighbors” with recognizing Turkish strategic depth, a policy which has led it to actively engage in promoting Israeli-Syrian negotiations and seeking a greater role in the Israeli-Palestinian arena as well.

As for Egypt, it too has not been entirely absent from the regional diplomatic arena. It continues to invest energy and political capital in attempting to break the intra-Palestinian impasse and conclude a prisoner exchange between Hamas and Israel which would free Gilad Shalit, in order to renew the Palestinian-Israeli peace process and reinforce Cairo’s standing in Washington. Permitting Israeli warships to traverse the Suez Canal was a clear recent signal to Iran.

At the same time, Egypt continues to see Israel as a strategic rival, viewing Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman’s high profile visit to African capitals with opprobrium. In addition, the embarrassing defeat of Egypt’s longtime Culture Minister Farouk Hosni in his bid to become UNESCO chairman offered another illustration of Egypt’s declining centrality.

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