

The Security Dilemma of Iraq and Syria and Regional Politics

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Abstract

Middle Eastern dilemma is the corollary of the power vacuum after the Iraq invasion. ‘Replacement of authority’ does not necessarily conform to the objective of democracy and hope. Invade, overthrow, install and roll-back, a Machiavellian scheme, does not serve the goals of democracy. A major power in a hurry disturbs equilibrium. Replacing one autocrat with another will not do any good for the society at hand and the region into consideration. All the regional actors would try to adjust to the changes in equilibrium. As a result, organizations like ISIS exploit the slip-ups of provisional governments and get the backing of other actors, whose interests are at stake. The regional actors, operating in the environment of security dilemma join the conflict to extract as much as possible to keep regional balance in order. History replicates this phenomenon time and again. Middle East (Iraq and Syria) is the contemporary example of this phenomenon. This paper will try to understand the ongoing conflict in the Middle East from the perspective of regional politics operating under the environment of security dilemma, and major powers’ politics operating under the basic logic that regional influence enhance the capabilities of major powers that contribute to state’s hierarchical position internationally, which therefore, makes it difficult to create common grounds for peace process.

Keywords

Middle East, security dilemma, peace process, major powers

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The Dilemma of Middle East

Realism, simplistically, describes the operation of world politics. Peculiarities spaced out, to realism international politics is the operation of the egoist states in the anarchic international system for the attainment of power (in relative terms), which manifest itself in capabilities and is responsible for the international interaction of states. Power is an influence and acts as means (Waltz, 1990) to achieve an end. To major actors, it is the 'influence' they carry in international politics, which counts. Corollary of capabilities, influence ensures their position against the constraints of international system. Shift in the international system, means 'change/shift in the distribution of capabilities'. States respond to shift in the structural distribution of capabilities, either of a system or of a region. It is for this particular attribute that 'peripheral political configuration' becomes vital; it ultimately contributes to the capabilities of major actors and enhances their competitive edge.

Regional configuration, therefore, in a multi-actor arrangement, turns into imperative and thus states, which in a bi-polar system, may possibly be ignored suddenly becomes inevitable for political configuration of influence, particularly, if the region is Middle East. Middle East is a region of vital importance in international politics. Its significance as a region is due to its energy resources, its strategic position and the presence of, what Huntington referred to as fault-lines of different religions and cultures. Middle East's regional politics is shaped by the presence of regional actors alongside international actors, giving birth to Middle Eastern dilemma. The dilemma represents a spiral model of Neo-realism, which depends on two variables, i.e. the offense-defense differentiation and the variance of time and space (Glaser, 2015).

The long term impact of the Iraq war on the stability of Middle East cannot be measured, but it was more costly than the Neo-conservatives have ever imagined. The Neo-conservatives are such war hawks who assume that American foreign policy agenda can best be moved forward with the notion of invading, overthrowing, installing and rolling back. However, a Machiavellian scheme may not serve the purpose every time in operation. It is not the intention but action that matters. The US failed to assess Middle Eastern political configuration. The problems of migration increase in crime rate, ambiguity and uncertainty alongside emergence of ISIS shattered peace of the region, which was already in shackles due to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Arab spring, too, took the toll of major states for example, Egypt, Libya, and

Syria of the Middle East in encountering the trouble, which either collapsed or faced disorder on a large scale. Genesis of the crises lay in conflicting interests of key actors, both at regional level and at international level, who are acting independently on the basis of their cost-benefit analysis. It is argued that with power come responsibility and commitment and that to guard and fulfill these, power plays an important role (Jervis, 1978). Actors involved in Middle East are in the grip of these structural forces. Without understanding the genesis of all these forces it is difficult to comprehend the Syrian crises.

The Crisis in Middle East

The Syrian crisis elongated due to many reasons. It is always iterated that the Middle East is important due to its large reserves of natural resources as compared to other regions of the world. The question arises that Syria is less rich in oil resources, so what was the main reason of the rivalry of the major powers like the US, China and Russia in the particular state? The answer is very simple, i.e. the important strategic location of Syria. Historically, Syria remained troubled due to her rivalry with Israel and her tilt towards Iran and Russia was an issue of concern for the US. Before discussing major power rivalry, it is important to consider Syrian approach to foreign policy. This will provide an opportunity to assess the situation more vibrantly and efficiently. The fundamental constituent of Syrian policy conduct was 'pan-Arab nationalism', very much prevalent in all Arab states. The Syrian case was no different, albeit with a Realpolitik model adopted after Assad came in power. Syrian alignments reflected her balancing against the geopolitical threats, in particular Israel. The ends and means were matched by rational foreign policy model, which shifted with the regional balance.

Pursuing pan-Arab nationalism was to keep the support of Arab states, to have access to resources and to purchase military equipment for establishing a stronger military. There was a normative political element as well, i.e. 'the Israeli animosity,' which was used by the Syrian authorities for Arab-nationalism. Supported by grievances, Syrian authorities eulogized Golan Heights, lost in the war of 1967 to Israel, in her foreign policy pursuit (Drysdale & Hinnebusch, 1991). However, this very idea developed a negative connotation for Syria in major powers, particularly US. American interests in the Middle East are not only confined to natural resources, but also the protection of Israel. Christopher M. Blanchard explains the US goals as; preserving the flow of energy resources and commerce that is vital for US regional and global economies, ensuring transit and access facilities to support

US military operations, countering terrorism, stemming the proliferation of conventional and unconventional weapons and promoting economic growth, democracy and human rights. Michel Chossudovsky criticizes America by arguing that the Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Iran and Sudan became the targets due to their refusal to play into the hands of US to provide unlimited access to the Anglo-American oil company. Similarly, Syria and Lebanon are targets because of their strategic alliance with resource-rich Iran. Syria is a target due to two fundamental reasons; strategic alliance with Iran; as a prelude to topple the Iranian government.

Neo-realists define it as the corollary of the security dilemma, which is the direct consequence of the pursuit of security for which they assume power as the 'means' (Waltz, 1979). The history of the wars and conflicts depicts the same. The inherently conflicted nature of Middle Eastern political environment and an absence of pivotal regional power have led external powers to act as balancer. Alliance formation, led by key regional actors remained the modus operandi of Middle Eastern actors. Security assurances then stabilized small states against the threats posed by anarchic structure. Vulnerable states acquire more and more material capabilities to secure themselves from the threats posed by other actors. The key in Middle Eastern politics is that this particular phenomenon operates at blocks level, where security is defined in terms of allies a particular camp has after any major event. The analogy here can be made that of a 'road accident'. Whenever there is road accident, all other drivers will adjust to the happening. Events of note are, like road accidents in the context of Middle East, which will force the actors to adjust. Therefore, Iraq-war and Arab-Spring triggered massive foreign policy adjustment programmes in Middle Eastern actors, which was the corollary of structural forces.

In international stability, regional balances play a key role. For Waltz, 'Israel's nuclear power is the reason of Iranian desire for nukes not the contrary. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, the end result of that will be a peaceful region, more secure due to the newly created deterrence and no other state will try to acquire the nuclear weapons (Waltz, 2012). Waltz argued the system compels states to take bigger decisions, to protect their specific interests. Specific interests are defined by actors, which in the context of Middle East are global and regional, differently. This particular definition generates conflict among the actors, not only at global but also at regional level. For example, it was inevitable for the United States, to over-throw Saddam to protect the petro-dollar alliance (Engdahl, 2010). Alongside, the neo-

conservative slogan of ‘democratize Middle East’ too acted as a bump on the road, which disturbed the smooth flow. After 9/11, America streamlined states as ‘an axis of evil’ and ‘rogue states’. Her approach towards the Middle East was that of isolation (Katouff, 2012). The toppling of Saddam’s government was a conservative move and not a realist one, as the realist tendency does not take morality into consideration. Charles Krauthammer suggested that the democracy once established in Iraq and Afghanistan will proliferate to Middle East (Krauthammer, 2013). The Neo-conservatives during Bush administration used democratic peace theory to justify their actions against Iraq and other Arab countries. The underlying assumption was to remove the threat of terrorism. They believed that masses under autocratic regimes do not have the opportunity to express their feelings peacefully, thus they are more prone to violent means, which is the root cause of terrorism. A former US ambassador, Theodore Kattouf, claimed that Bush administration did not hesitate to let people know that perhaps all Arab states were next. It is also speculated that during Hezbollah-Israel War, Elliott Abram encouraged Israel to extend the war in Syria (Lobe, 2007).

The consequence of this was the overall disturbance of Middle Eastern balance. Global actors take into account their analysis of balances disregarding that of regional actors. Regional actors try to adjust to the challenges posed by the moves of global actors. Most of the times, these challenges are against the status quo, for example, US invasion in Iraq in 2003. In the context of Middle East, balance is the achievement of parity in influence, usually sectarian in nature. Replacing Saddam, a Sunni Ba’athist, with Al-Malaki, a Shiite representative, was not only a change in personality but a change in the overall balance of the region. Furthermore, democratic drive in Egypt led Muslim Brotherhood to the throne, which posed a threat to the social fabric of the Saudi Kingdom and that of Gulf countries. Structural forces shape the behavior of the actors. Thus, regional constraints shape policy preferences. The kingdom adjusted by supporting Al-Sisi against Morsi in Egypt. At the same time it launched a massive international movement against Assad to install a government that could disturb the famous nexus in the region of Iran-Syria-Lebanon. Harmony of interest developed at this point between global actors and regional actors. As Katusa (2015) observed, Syria is a clearinghouse for Mideast strife. Every Mideast player has a proxy or a natural ally or a natural enemy in Syria, so what happens there influences the security of every country, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and its fellow Persian Gulf Oil producers (pp. 173-174).

Distribution of capabilities is the hallmark of Neo-realist understanding of international stability. This is measured by the number of powers existing in the system. All the states are equal in the pursuance of their foreign policy objectives, determined by structural forces. States thus do not want to subordinate their interests to the benefits of others. Hence, survival is the foremost goal of a state, which determines their behavior and compels it to build its capacities for the same goal and increase its relative power. Relativity makes states positionist as maintenance of the status-quo and enhancing its capabilities are relative in nature. Thus, security dilemma is relative advancement in the capabilities or position of one state against other. Middle East depicts no different picture. This is the positional placement of states in the system, limiting the cooperation among states with fear of relative gains made by other states.

Two structures are used by states' to balance power; the internal balancing and external balancing. Internal balancing involves the enhancement of capabilities with economic growth and military spending. Syrian government, for example, for internal balancing focused continuously, on the military spending alongside, enhancing capability to cope up with external balancing. External balancing, on the other hand, is alliance formation in which states take benefit from muscle of more powerful states. Who then supports the head of the camp will automatically nurture support of the rest of camp. Therefore, actors like United States and Russia are important in the overall picture of Middle East, alongside regional actors capable of influencing regional politics. Syria aligned with Iran can be grouped in this category. Despite pan-Arabism, Syria remained an ally of Iran, due to convergences of interests as well as sectarian similarity of the both states (at the Alevite level in Syria). It can be contended that bi-polar system, as compared to uni-polar and multi-polar system, is more suitable for peace and stability at the systemic level. The reason for this stability is that states focus on 'internal capabilities enhancement'. The distribution of power capabilities in actual determines the international outcomes (Frankel, 1996). Regional context is not that different, it can be termed as mini-international system.

Whether the context is regional or international, foreign policy is approached with pragmatic considerations of power rather than morality and ethics (Genest, 2004). Obama showed realist orientation, throughout his tenure. He resisted intervening militarily in Syria. He embraced pivot towards Asia and appointed John Kerry and Chuck Hagel to lead foreign office. Realist tendency was prominent during the

Cold War too. President Ronald Reagan also took a realist stance on Syria. He saw the conflict in Levant as a major vulnerability in the region's stability and the augmentation of the USSR threat (Leverett, 2005). Reagan also preferred engagement instead of intervention in the region. This framework continued influencing foreign policy until 1991. Syria was an important part of the balance of power strategy of the US in the region. The states use the domestic powers as their muscles to enhance their role and exert more pressure and influence. US also used Syria as a balancer. James Baker recognized the necessity of Syria in an alliance and adopted a more realist approach to deal with her instead of an ideological approach (Fields, 2007). This is a constant part of the realist tradition, where states take decisions in response to their self-interests and not the international norms or institutions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, the ardent exponent of balance of power, bound to act in response to structural forces. Revisionist in his approach to international politics, under the influence of systemic and reacted in a manner he should. In her pursuit of national interest the United States over-emphasized her ability and regional commitments. Russia lost her strong hold in the region, after the disintegration of Soviet Union. The removal of Ba'athist party from government left Russia with only sanctuary in Syria and Iran. Russia put all her stakes on Assad and Iran in the context, sustained and still is sustaining international pressure in the shape of sanction and prices of natural resources, which the United States and the Kingdom agreed to lower oil prices to hit their adversaries, Russia and Iran respectively. Why Russia is so adamantly supporting Assad?

Carr (1946) considers that the art of Persuasion has always been a necessary part of the equipment of a political leader. Hence, leadership of a state has the task of understanding; characteristics of ordering principle, the differentiation and distribution of capabilities among the equals, and be considerate of domestic variables, which form part of the structural variables in shaping foreign policy responses of the state¹. Statesmen are important for power projection in international affairs, a phenomenon explained by Carr in Spanish Civil War of 1936, where ideological influences indulged both communist and fascist in civil war, on mere assumption that ideological statesmen will pursue interest in harmony to parent nation, from where the ideology is generating (Carr, 1946). Assad, thus, holds the key in this context. Russia needs someone who could ensure her interest in the region. Middle East is important for its geo-strategic significance.

¹ Kenneth N. Waltz characteristics of the international system

Similarly, Russia needs dependence of European actors' dependence on her resources, through Ukraine. After installing a pro-Western government in Iraq, the western allies are trying to export Middle Eastern oil through Syria, which will hit Russia hard in her control over the Western Europe energy demands. Furthermore, Russia wants to sell her arms so instability in Syria provides her with a market too. Access to Mediterranean Sea too will provide her an option to monitor international waters. The Sunni-Shiite conflict is a chronic issue in the region. Despite being identical in culture, language and norms, the Arab world always remained troubled due to its sectarian differences. Overall, Sunnis are the majority sect comprising of 85-90% population of Muslims, while Shiite consist of 10-15% of the adherents. The Shiite majority countries are the Iraq, Azerbaijan, Iran and Bahrain. The conflict on sect basis saw different clashes in Middle East. One of the most notable was the First Gulf War between Iran and Iraq. Although it was a border dispute but the underlying cause was sectarian. The Sunni leader of Iraq was apprehensive of the Shiite majority of Iraq, where the spill-over effect of Iranian revolution was feared.

The Arab-Israel Conflict is another conflict dating back to the post World War I. The quest for power to dominate region is the factor creating security dilemma. The turmoil in Middle East has been taken as an advantage by the Western powers, to fulfil their needs of energy resources. The absence of balance of power for neo-realists is the cause of conflict in Middle East. International organization, to impose power or solve the issues of the states miserably failed. The UN started the R2P or 'the right to protect' in 2005, which failed to deliver since its emergence. For instance, it failed to tackle with crimes against humanity in Darfur, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Gaza and Congo etc, (Ballamy, 2010). The options are hurdle in prospects for peace. Syrian case is the best example of major power rivalry on the measures taken for a particular belligerent state. Russia and China viewed negotiation as the best solution for the strife, while US seemed eager to intervene militarily and punish the regime for mass atrocities. This created a deadlock in the international environment. Disregarding regional complexities destroys stability and ensures destructions. Threats like ISIS are the product of slip-ups from disregarding. Major power in a hurry disturbs equilibrium. Replacing one autocrat with another would not do any good for the society at hand and region in consideration. All major actors would try to adjust to the changes in equilibrium. Organisations like ISIS exploit the slip-ups of provisional governments and get backing of other actors, whose interests are at-stake. The

superseded faction probably would try to get their own back, which increases the chances of conflicts. History replicates this phenomenon time and again. Foreign policy under the influence of an ideology requires tactful assessment on the part of its practitioners (Kissinger, 2015). Social make-up of a state alongside regional political configuration, are the components to be taken care of in to formulate sound policy options (Rose, 1998).

American foreign policy's hawks, neo-conservatives had a fantasy of creating democracy with guns and barrels. There was a clash of interests between them and the realists to contemplate over the best options to tackle the Arab world. Obama administration vowed to use all measures to tackle with issues; using diplomacy, as is evident from the Iran and P5 nuclear deal. America has still been unable to tackle the Middle East problem. New crises challenged old ideas. The challenge of ISIS is the recent one among the challenges of Middle East that forced the US to reassess her policy for the region and chart out new ideas and institutions to establish regional peace and stability. Western democratic societies exist on the principle of dual relations, i.e. the contractual basis of their political culture, where public opinion holds key. Middle Eastern politics works on strong tribal arrangements which factor is important in understanding Middle Eastern dilemma. The options are a hurdle in prospects for peace. Syrian case is the best example of how major power rivalry on measures taken for a particular belligerent state. Russia and China viewed negotiation as the best solution, while US seemed eager to intervene militarily and punish the regime for mass atrocities. The end result is a deadlock.

Interests of Regional Actors

To keep the regional balance in order, regional actors operating in an environment of security dilemma join the conflict to extract benefit. It is operating on the basis of zero-sum game. Middle Eastern politics has its own dynamics. It operates as a block, the Shiite block led by Iran and the Sunni Block led by Saudi and in case of Syrian strife Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Alongside, Israel maintains a central role in overall picture. Schism in blocks disturbs the equilibrium. Israel shifts its alliance at the time of need. Groups have to take animosity factor, the Israeli card, at the level that it does not create a massive outcry from public. Israel supports Saudi stance against the Shiite axis and consider it a threat to overall stability in the region. The Russian-Shiite-Alawite alliance, led by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, is threatening the security apparatus of the region. The gains of this

group are automatic loss of the other. Iran if lost Syria then she will not be in a position to work out her nexus. Thus far, Iran is supporting Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militia groups fighting inside Syria. Turkey (Erdogan joined the fight) is fighting against ISIS, who in reality is bombing the Kurds population. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is facing problems. Her adamant response against Assad has high stakes. The kingdom is open in opposition. The problem kingdom is facing is its 'dwindling economy' due to low oil price; its engagement in Yemen crises; increased oil production from Iraq and a sanction free Iran will cut Saudi's influence in the region. Now, non-state actors are important for Saudi to carry out attacks in Iraq and Syria. However, one important critical question is how the kingdom would react to ISIS threats within its own territory.

The Humanitarian Aspect of the International Politics

Why humanitarian intervention is not justified in the conflict prone area? The history quotes numerous examples where interventions had worsened the situation even more. It is though justified when there is a need to protect the states against an oppressive and tyrant state, committing mass atrocities. The humanitarian intervention under the current law is technically not possible. There are a number of considerations, for example, legal, economic and moral. The UN article 2(4) states that the state sovereignty cannot be challenged by the use of force or threat of use of force, except two conditions, i.e., first the individual self defense or the collective self defense in response to the armed attack and second is the use of force authorized by the UNSC under chapter VII of the charter. The article 24 of the UN charter grants the responsibility of maintaining peace to the UNSC. The definition of war and peace and the ultimate decisions are taken by the UNSC. It also deals with the means and ways to deal with a particular threat which includes either to intervene militarily or impose the economic sanctions or to punish the state with a limited intervention. Economic sanctions are seen in the case of North Korea or the Iran, after the alleged nuclear proliferation. These threats also vary in nature and capacity as well as the response from the UNSC. For instance, the current wave of imbalances in the Middle Eastern region has different dimensions for every state. Humanitarian interventions are subject to the ground realities and the observers, which of course view it in their own national interest. This is the case of Syrian Crisis, where Russia and China vetoed the resolution four times, to intervene militarily. This was the use of the humanitarian card in under self interest. The Russian

interest was preserving the Assad regime in order to keep its only ally in the region. In China it was the economic interest and the non-intervention doctrine, to keep the safety measures. Apart from that the states also intervene in their self interest, for instance the intervention in Serbia and Kosovo in 1999, without the approval of UNSC by the US and NATO members (Oudrat, 2000).

Finding Common Grounds for Peace Process

The peace process in the Middle East is costly and difficult due to the political environment and the vested interests of the major powers. The politics on the extraction of maximum resources, in the guise of humanitarian aid are tarnishing the situation even worse. The prospects of peace in the region are very much dependent on the great power politics. The peace in Syria can be sought by Russian mediation and a pressure over Assad to come to the negotiating table. Since the time of his father, Hafiz Assad, Syria has shown a realist model of foreign policy and diplomacy, in that it always tried to turn the tables in its favour, or wait for the right time. Here the regime is also entangled in a bloody war, but it's not giving up. This is causing the whole dilemma to multiply in its intensity and make the war more and more costly. Besides, Russian meddling in Syrian conundrum is making the situation more complex. Russian role in political settlement can provide Russia, and edge of having more influence and increase its reputation in the region as well as internationally. The collapse of talks in Geneva depicts that the right moment has not arrived (Saunders, 2016).

The Russian intervention has placed US on a brink of losing its face in Syrian war. The military resurgence of Russia is showing its zeal to get back to the political influence in the world politics. In realist terms, it's the resurgence of Russia. The strategy of US and Russia is different upside down. Russia is more decisive, while US is more uncertain and dispersed. Russia, claiming to attack ISIS is hunting down the enemies of Bashar, while America on the other hand is also bombing ISIS (Ackerman, 2015). The cooperation of both states in the conflict is a difficult task due to the divergence of interests. Russia wants to hold Iran and Syria as its strongest allies in the region, while US wants to break the spell by hunting down Bashar and clear the troika power.

Increasing Regionalism in the Arab World

The Arab world, despite having common culture, religion and economic resources, remains the least integrated state of the world with a trouble of coexistence. This is the result of the lack of vision of the

monarchical states with no expertise in the international politics for that matter. The Arab states never tried to compete with the West, to improve their status, instead they pursued for making alliances with the West. They lack the resources of stability, like military sophistication and technological innovation as well as political farsightedness. There is a lack of strong regional institutions for the coordination of the regional collaboration. The three dynamics that have always troubled the Middle East is the unresolved Middle East, the disparity between the oil rich countries and those they are not, as well as the authoritarian role of the US. In the backdrop of these three dynamics, the regional integration cannot be fulfilled.

Regional Influence to Enhance the Capabilities of Major Powers

The bid to exert more and more influence is the reason of the security dilemma. The league of Arab states has always acted as the scapegoat in case of the complaints of the regional actors. It remained inactive. The silence in response to the interventions in the region was out of the desire to prefer the international intervention by that of the UN or the US. The Arab states have a defensive posture due to the US policy towards the Middle East. That is the neo-conservative policy of intervention to bring democracy and fulfill their realist goals. The regional actors will try to adjust to the changes in the equilibrium which occurred due to the disturbance in the equilibrium after the Iraqi invasion.

Conclusion

Russian goal in Syria is to push the US and the regional actors into choosing between Bashar al Assad and violent extremism of ISIS and others. Russia's air strikes aim at weakening the rebel forces and make it a two prong conflict. Considering this case, the air strikes of US against ISIS are an aid towards Assad's regime (Saunders, 2016). The problem here is that the interests of Syria and Russia differ from each other in that Russia wants a negotiated peace, while Syria wants a peace won in battle field. The Chinese interests also converge that of Russia. This is a new era of Chinese diplomacy. China wants to maintain its non interference policy, but it also wants the political solution of Syria. It announced to provide humanitarian aid to Syria as well as a personnel aid training program for Syrian regime (Ramani, 2016). China has maintained a long bred security and economic partnership with Syria. This is an opportunity for China to forward its agenda in the Middle East, a vital region for Chinese flow of energy

resources for its bulging economy. China also defies the Western agenda of regime change in Syria. Syrian war would be decisive for the future of Middle Eastern politics in that it is a formidable player of the regional power struggle. The punch above its weight has caused Bashar to lose his strangle hold in the territory, inviting the external powers to meddle in the region for their vested self interests in the guise of humanitarian politics and the cause of serving the liberal goals of spreading democracy.

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