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### **Middle East: Insane To Be An Optimist?**

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**E**ven by its notorious standards, the Middle East is passing through a turbulent phase without any overarching vision or way out. Military means appears to be the principal option for those seeking to change the situation as well as those wanting to retain the status quo. If the Middle Eastern leaders lack political will, non-regional stakeholders lack strategic vision. This combination is proving to be deadlier and the region is plunging into greater uncertainties.

In spite of denials and contrary rhetoric, the US decline and disinterest in the Middle East is palpable. If it's traditional allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia feel let down, its adversaries feel emboldened. The approach of President Barack Obama toward some of the core issues facing the region such as Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Arab Spring, crisis in Syria, sectarian violence or the Iranian ascendancy is the result of a Middle East policy that lacks vision, direction and effectiveness. On Syria, for example, prayers for a Russian failure appear to be the preferred strategy of the Obama Administration.

Despite its economic wealth and Islamic credentials in military-security terms, Saudi Arabia is a small power and suffers from political and strategic vulnerabilities common to all such states. Its expanded external involvements, often with little political purpose or success, highlight its vulnerabilities and fears than its presumed capabilities. Seen in this context a resurgent and perhaps hegemonic Iran would have unintended consequences for the Middle East. When Iran was embroiled in the decade-long nuclear controversy, supporting it made political and strategic sense for China and Russia both to reign in American unilateralism and to ensure their relevance

in the Middle East. In aftermath of the nuclear deal, these countries will have to fine-tune their Iran policy and co-opt Saudi Arabia in their strategic calculus.

Sectarian divide is as old as Islam and became political when the Ottoman Empire confronted the Persian Safavids in the sixteenth century. Of late, it has returned with rejuvenated vigor, if not vengeance. The Shia-Sunni divide is here to stay and feeds on and contributes to violence in Iraq, Syria and Yemen as well as to the continued tensions in Bahrain and Lebanon. Seeing the plight of the brethren in Iraq after the fall of Saddam, the Sunni Arab states feel beleaguered and are unable to seek a political solution based on accommodation and respect. The regional tension following the Saudi execution of its Shia dissent cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr is the latest reminder.

Falling oil prices is not good news for anyone. It reduces the ability of rentier economies to pursue their social welfare arrangement and the resultant unaccountable governances. For richer country like Saudi Arabia, with its extended external commitments and liabilities, falling prices mean a dent to its politico-diplomatic fortunes. With oil prices hovering less than US\$30 per barrel, Iran will not gain materially from the lifting of sanctions. The same holds true for Russia whose resurgence in the post-Soviet era coincided with its emergence as an oil-gas power. Even for the oil importing countries, low prices are a bad news in the long-run as they will increase their dependency upon cheap oil and in process will reduce the incentive for alternative green energy options and undermine the outcome of the UN efforts on climate change.

Cooperation among major stakeholders is also problematic because of their differing world views on major issues. Some are strategic differences and others are tactical. Is Bashar al-Assad part of the problem or part of the solution? Will he leave at the beginning of national reconciliation or after it is achieved? Disagreements among the principals left the country in tatters and beyond repair and recognition. Sooner are later, the stakeholders will have to prioritize the importance of Syria over regime's survival. Likewise, in some cases, Iran is part of the solution and in some others it is part of the problem. Its actions, rhetoric and policy choices are causing consternation in many Arab and non-Arab capitals. The Iranian opposition to extra-regional involvement in the region, for example, is seen as a euphemism for a Persian hegemony.

Ideally the Arab Spring and international pre-occupation with the Islamic Caliphate and religious extremism should have pushed the Israeli and Palestinian towards a lasting settlement. Unfortunately both sides lack vision, wisdom and determination to seek accommodation and at least in the foreseeable future one should not visualize an end to this vexed conflict.

While terrorism is a menace to civilization, fighting it suffers from lack of international consensus on the definition of the problem and the short-sighted state approaches. Political correctness and immediate interests have resulted in countries viewing terrorism by certain groups as benign and friendly; the phenomenon of Afghan Arabs, for example, has not dissuaded Saudi Arabia from supporting salafi elements in Syria.

Ironically the core problem of the Middle East is not the imperial-colonial Sykes-Picot cartography but the failure of all post-Ottoman states, including Turkey, to evolve an inclusive national identity that forges a sense of unity and common destiny. Their nation-building process has been skewed and ensured and perpetuated the domination of a family, narrow ideology or faith thereby ignoring the complex social mosaic. Hence, some of the key problems facing the Middle East are due to the treatment and mistreatment of ethnic, religious and national minorities. Addressing and rectifying the marginalization of minorities is a precondition for social cohesion and reduction in internal tensions.

For a lasting stability the Middle East needs a grand bargain where principal stakeholders, especially Russia, the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia adopt give-and-take positions and accommodate the concerns and fears of their rivals. Whether on the civil wars (Syria and Yemen) or oil prices, no single country will be to determine the final outcome. While non-regional players could intensify a crisis or mediate a solution, much of the problems of the Middle East are internal in nature and therefore only domestic choices could bring about order and stability. Non-regional players are a midwife not a messiah for its problems.

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