

West Asia in Flux, Resistance and Liberation: Palestine, Syria, Iran

Connecting the Dots

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A series of events linked to West Asia in the last nine months has brought to the surface the under-currents and cross-currents in the region's perennial struggle between occupation and hegemony, on the one hand, and resistance and liberation, on the other. It is crucial to understand how these events are related to one another, to connect the dots, as it were, in our attempt to make sense of what is unfolding in the world's most strategic – and most dangerous – region.

We shall show how five events – two in Syria, two related to Iran and one concerning Palestine – driven by some of the same interests and agendas are all inter-connected and how they in turn are linked to Yemen, Qatar and Lebanon. The roles played by Israel and Saudi Arabia, needless to say, will figure prominently in all this. Their roles are intimately intertwined with that of the United States of America, the hegemonic power that has dominated West Asia for at least five decades.

Syria

One of the most dramatic events in the politics of the region occurred on the 10th of February 2018. Syrian ground to air missiles downed an Israeli F-16 and damaged another F-15 fighter plane. The Israeli planes had infiltrated Syrian air space with the aim of destroying a Syrian drone air base. Since the beginning of the Syrian war in March 2011, Israel had launched no less than eight incursions into Syria seeking to emasculate Syrian military defences. However, this time Israeli air power was confronted with devastating effect. The Syrian ability to retaliate shocked the Israeli military and political elite. As analyst Elias Akleh put it,

“Warning sirens wailed in many Israeli towns in the north, Israelis hurried into shelters and Ben Gurion International Airport near Tel Aviv had temporarily halted air traffic. He continues that on Sunday (11th February) Israel spread its iron dome on its northern border “while sending more reinforcements south on the border with Gaza Strip.”



The remains of the F-16 jet that crashed in northern Israel (Source: RTE)

To cover up the embarrassment arising from an act of naked aggression, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu quickly concocted the tale of a drone from an “Iranian drone base” in Syria violating Israeli air space and Israel being forced to retaliate which was how its fighter plane “crashed” within Syrian territory. It should be emphasised that there are no Iranian drone bases in Syria. The tale had to be spun not only to exonerate Israel but also to cushion the shock of Syria’s successful assault on an F-16 equipped with the “latest American defensive Electronic Counter Measures (ECM) that is supposed to defend the plane from missile attacks.” It is telling that

“the very expensive ECM failed to defend the plane against the older 1960s technology of the Russian S-200 missile that hit the planes.”

The implication of this for Israel and the US, its protector, is far-reaching. It is Israel’s air superiority which is at the core of its military superiority that has enabled it to dominate West Asia. Israeli air-power annihilated the Egyptian air-force in the 6 day war in 1967. Israel bombed an Iraqi nuclear facility at Osirakin 1981. In Lebanon, it rained bombs in the 34 day war in July 2006. Gaza has been bombed a number of times, the 2014 assault being the latest. It is not just infrastructure that has been destroyed; thousands of civilians have died because of Israeli air-power. As a result of all this, Israeli air-power had acquired a halo of invincibility. That halo disappeared in smoke on the 10th of February. What does this mean for Israel’s ability to continue its military dominance of the region? This question has become critical because strategically situated Syria is now backed to the hilt not just by Hezbollah and Iran but also by militarily powerful Russia. Is this the beginning of a change in the power equation in West Asia?

The other event in Syria also offers some insight. Because US backed rebels in Syria, a substantial portion of whom were part of various terrorist outfits have been defeated by the Bashar al-Assad government supported by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, elites in Washington sought to save face by finding a foothold at the Syria-Turkey border by arming and financing some 30,000 Kurds tied to the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) which for decades has been fighting the Turkish government. This has naturally infuriated the Turkish government of Recep Erdogan. Other governments in the region that have sizeable Kurdish populations such as Iraq and Iran have also condemned the US plan which they fear will pave the way for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state that all four states (Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran) are opposed to. Israel incidentally endorses the idea of an independent Kurdish

state since it serves its agenda of fragmenting states in West Asia. The US plan which appears to have been put on hold has been particularly adverse for its relations with NATO ally, Turkey.

Iran

If the US has piqued Turkey, the former's animosity towards Iran which goes back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, has reached a new peak under President Donald Trump. In spite of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) re-affirming that Iran is complying with the 2015 nuclear deal that it forged with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany, Trump insists that Iran has violated the deal which he, in any case, regards as a bad deal that should be re-negotiated. It is only because the European Union refuses to go along with Trump and agrees that there has been Iranian compliance, that Trump has re-certified the deal for the time being. The Iranian nuclear deal is not the only issue on which serious differences are developing between US and Europe. The question of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel which will be analysed shortly is yet another major global concern on which Europe has a different take. Are challenges in West Asia prompting Europe to adopt a different course in international relations - a course which will make it more independent of the US?

The US's negative attitude towards Iran is also reflected in its never-ending machinations to oust the government in Tehran. The Washington elite, backed by Israel and Saudi Arabia tried 'regime change' again in late December 2017 by eagerly endorsing demonstrations in a few cities focusing initially on unemployment, inflation and corruption. The demonstrations fizzled out partly because they lacked mass appeal. Their failure proved - if proof was needed -that regime change through external manipulation is stupid and infantile. It has undermined further the credibility of the US and its anti-Iran partners in West Asia.

Palestine

An even bigger blow to the US and Israel was Trump's public announcement that his country recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel - a recognition that the US Congress had accorded in 1995 - and intended to move its embassy to that city. The opposition to the announcement was massive with 128 countries out of 193 in the UN General Assembly demanding that the US government withdraw the declaration. They rejected it because it violated international law, was unjust to the Palestinians and would subvert any peace effort.



16-year old activist, Ahed Tamimi (Source: Middle East Monitor)

The question one should ask is whether this announcement is actually a preliminary step towards a so-called 'Peace Plan' that will witness Palestinians being given small pieces of land in the West Bank over which they would exercise limited authority - apart from keeping Gaza - while effective control of all these fragments, would remain in Israeli hands. It is quite conceivable that to implement this Bantustan, the Israeli elite will seek the cooperation of the Saudi elite. One can be absolutely certain that such an unjust move will be rejected outright by the Palestinians, other Arabs, the Muslim masses, and indeed, people everywhere who cherish fairness and human dignity.

If the Saudi elite colludes with the Israeli elite on this, it would be partly because it needs the material support of the US in the pursuit of its agenda in Yemen, Qatar and Lebanon. In each of these countries, its explicit goal is to establish its dominance and curb what it perceives as "Iranian influence." Both US and Israel have given approval to the Saudis. In Yemen, the US has been supplying weapons to the Saudi-led coalition that has been bombarding one of the poorest countries in the world. Israel is uneasy about Qatar's ties with Iran. The Israeli elite is even more determined than the Saudi elite to crush the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

There is therefore a convergence of motives among the elites of the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia. While their individual and collective determination to perpetuate their power in West Asia has a lot to do with this convergence, their enmity and antagonism towards Iran is also the glue that holds them together. It is connecting these dots that link the various actors in the region that is crucially important at this juncture.

However much the desire to perpetuate their power, our analysis has shown that the unfolding scenario in West Asia is not in favour of the US or Israel or Saudi Arabia. The events in Syria and Iran are major setbacks for all three of them. The Jerusalem-Palestine debacle is a huge blow to the US and Israel while the imbroglio in Yemen, the quagmire in Qatar and the failure to force the Hezbollah out of government in Lebanon through the botched resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, all testify to Saudi recklessness. These events taken together have made a significant dent upon the politics of occupation and hegemony in West Asia.

But let's make no mistake about this. Neither occupation nor hegemony is about to end anytime soon. Genuine liberation is still a distant horizon. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon us to recognise that the power equation in the region is changing. The situation is in flux. A new pattern of relations is emerging which will marginalise some of the existing actors. Russia's more purposive role, Iran's positive and growing influence, the ability of the Syrian people and their leaders to hold the fort in the midst of great adversity, the Hezbollah's strategic astuteness and most of all the sacrifice and suffering of the courageous people of Palestine and the region as a whole will be the determinants of a new and bright future for West Asia.

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