

# Geopolitical Upheaval in West Asia and North Africa. Who is Responsible?

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*WANA (West Asia and North Africa) has been engulfed in turmoil and upheaval for decades. What are the root causes of instability in this vital region of the world? An objective analysis would reveal that the elite interests of two states in WANA, Israel and Saudi Arabia, and the drive for dominance and control over the region by the United States and its allies lie at the root of the perpetual conflict and violence that has brought so much death and destruction to WANA.*

Elite interests in the two states and US helmed hegemony are often inter-woven, though they sometimes operate along separate lines. Their total impact upon the region has been colossal.

I shall begin with Israel which has been the single most de-stabilizing force in WANA.

Israel

Since its illegal creation in 1948, Israel has been obsessed with its security. Its notion of security is different from that of perhaps almost every other state on earth. It equates its security with the exercise of total dominance and power over the entire region. This is one of the reasons why it has continued to annex Arab lands, expand its territory and entrench its settlements in the last 66 years.

It used its 1948-9 war with its Arab neighbors for instance to gobble up more land just as it turned the six day war in June 1967 into a massive land grab exercise annexing Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem in Palestine; parts of southern Lebanon; the Golan Heights in Syria; and the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. Since 1967, Israel has tightened its grip over the West Bank and East Jerusalem through unending expansion of settlements.

In pursuit of its policy of aggrandizement, the Israeli elite invariably targets a state and its leader. In the fifties and sixties, it saw Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser as its mortal enemy not only because of Nasser's opposition to Israel but also because of his ability to mobilize the Arab masses for a cause. This is why Israel joined hands with Britain and France in an attempt to foil Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. They failed partly because the American President, Dwight Eisenhower, was openly critical of the action of Israel and its friends.

After the Suez episode, Israeli leaders and pro-Israel lobbyists in the US adopted various strategies to ensure that the US government would privilege Israeli interests over everything else. When the 1967 war occurred, the US leadership was unequivocally committed to Israel, as it has been ever since. It is a reflection of the inordinate influence

that Israel and its American lobbies exercise over the US Congress and the Senate, the White House, the upper echelons of the nation's economic and financial hierarchies, the media, academe, and the entertainment world.

It was US power and influence that helped to move Egypt out of the Soviet Union's orbit a few years after Nasser's death in 1970, into the US's sphere. This was a triumph for Israel. It culminated in a US brokered peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1978. The one-sided treaty weakened Arab resistance to Israel and its policies.

However, the following year, Israel suffered a major setback when the Iranian people overthrew their monarch, Reza Pahlavi, who was regarded as the gendarme of the US and its allies in WANA, in one of the most popular revolutions in history. As an aside, it should be mentioned that more than two decades before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, there was another noble and courageous attempt to assert Iranian independence by a nationalist, Mohammed Mossadegh, which was crushed by British intelligence and the CIA in 1953. Back to 1979, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Imam Khomeini, and the Iranian Republic now became Israel's foe. Together with the US and various states in WANA, Israel sought to undermine the Revolution — though it was not directly involved in the eight year war imposed upon the fledgling republic by a number of Arab states led by Saddam Hussein of Iraq. The war which resulted in almost half a million deaths was manipulated by the US, abetted by Britain and a handful of other Western allies. It has now come to light that the US and Britain not only supplied chemical weapons to Saddam but also secretly built a germ weapons arsenal for the dictator.

It is ironic that after the Iraq-Iran War ended in 1988, the Western powers turned against Iraq. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 was the reason. The invasion provided the excuse to increase US control over Kuwait, a long-time US ally, and to launch an attack on Iraq. Israel, for its part, had been antagonistic towards Saddam and Iraq since the late seventies, its association with Iraq during its war against Iran notwithstanding. It will be recalled that the Israeli air force unilaterally bombed an Iraqi nuclear plant at Osirak in 1981.

Israel's antagonism towards Iraq was driven by a number of factors. Saddam, like Nasser, was staunchly pro-Palestine and anti-Israel. Iraq has huge oil reserves and was in the early years of Saddam's rule, the second biggest oil exporter in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Some of this oil wealth was utilized by Saddam to help the families of Palestinian martyrs. Saddam had also invested heavily in arms and in building a scientific infrastructure. For Israel, a leader with such a track record was a threat to her security.

This is why Israel endorsed wholeheartedly the suffocating sanctions that the US and Britain, through the UN Security Council, imposed upon the Iraqi people from 1991 onwards. They were reputedly responsible directly or indirectly for the deaths of some 650,000 children in the nineties. When the US and Britain invaded and occupied Iraq in 2003, Israel understood that the security of Israel was one of the two real reasons, the other being oil. What this means is that if over three million people have died in Iraq since 1990, including the eight years of US occupation from 2003 to 2011, it was partly to protect Israel.

Again, in one of the many twists in the politics of WANA, when the US introduced elections in Iraq in 2006, and the majority Shias came to power, the US, Israel and some Arab

monarchies suddenly realized that the Shia-led government in Baghdad was more inclined to look towards Tehran. This was something that they did not bargain for. So they began spawning and supporting Sunni militant groups opposed to the Shia government. Thus Al-Qaeda became part of the Iraqi political landscape. The Machiavellian manipulation and exploitation of the Sunni-Shia dichotomy in Iraq and elsewhere intensified to the zenith.

It was not just the rise of Shia power in Iraq that has created some apprehension among the Israeli elite. In Lebanon, since 2001 Shia military and political power has consolidated. It was a Shia grassroots movement, the Hezbollah that succeeded in thwarting the Israeli assault upon Lebanon in 2006. If the Israeli armed forces fear any people's movement in WANA, it is Hezbollah.

Linking Hezbollah to Iran is the Syrian leadership under Bashar Al-Assad who is from an Alawite (Shia) family. These are the three elements in what Israel regards as the most formidable opposition to its power in the region. Crushing this triumvirate is at the core of Israeli policy. It is also at the center of US strategies in the region since it views the Hezbollah, the Syrian leadership and Iran as adversaries of US hegemony.

It is within this framework that one should appraise the attempt by various armed groups to oust Bashar Al-Assad since 2011. Israel has provided material assistance to some of these groups. Israel itself has conducted numerous military strikes against Syrian army positions. The armed insurgency, orchestrated by regional actors such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey and global players like the US, Britain and France, has drawn thousands of foreign fighters from some 80 countries who regard the ouster of Assad as a "jihad." The three and half year insurgency has resulted in the death of tens of thousands of Syrian civilians and soldiers, apart from the insurgents themselves.

For Israel, within the triumvirate it is Iran that it views as its implacable foe. The Israeli elite realizes that Iran's military and scientific capabilities are more formidable than Iraq's under Saddam Hussein. It is also a major oil and gas exporter. The leadership has a stronger mass base. It has enduring religious links within the region and adheres to a religious ideology that is distinguished by a high degree of personal sacrifice and collective commitment. It explains why Israel has gone all out to convince its patron and protector, the US, and European powers that Iran is pursuing a clandestine nuclear weapons program under the guise of a peaceful nuclear energy program. Though Iran has declared that producing nuclear weapons is prohibited (haram) in Islam and has allowed extensive and intrusive inspections of its nuclear facilities over a number of years, the Israeli elite continues to peddle lies about Iran's nuclear intentions. It has even forged a key document and presented it to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to incriminate Iran. Computers at Iran's nuclear facilities have been hacked.

Israel has launched a cyberwar against Iran's nuclear program. Iranian scientists have been assassinated. In a sense, all these moves by Israel merely underscore its overwhelming obsession with security — an obsession which bears no semblance to reality.

It is an obsession, there is no need to emphasize, which is most aggressively expressed in Israel's handling of the West Bank and Gaza. I have already taken note of the entrenchment of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Gaza, often described as the "world's biggest open-air prison" has been subjected to massive Israeli onslaughts on at least three occasions since 2008. In the latest, in July- August 2014, about 2,100 Palestinians were killed, a

quarter of them children. Since 29 September 2000, at least 9,100 Palestinians have been killed. Almost always, Israeli leaders justify the killings in the name of Israeli security.

## Saudi Arabia

If security is Israel's *raison d'être*, protecting the throne of the House of Saud is the actual though unstated reason for many of the decisions and actions of the Saudi ruling class. As part of the endeavor to protect their throne, Saudi rulers have over the years taken into account some of the needs and aspirations of their own people and their neighbors while ensuring that royal power remains intact. This has been their approach towards the Palestinian cause. Formally, Saudi rulers have always supported the rights of the Palestinian people and provided financial and humanitarian assistance but they will not do anything that will jeopardize their relations with Washington and London who help to protect their throne — and who at the same time safeguard the interests of Israel. Perhaps the exception was King Feisal who though a close ally of the West also sought to use oil as a tool to exact some concessions from the US for the Arab cause in the 1973 War.

Saudi's peripheral role in the politics of the region changed through two events in 1979. There was much consternation in Riyadh over the Iranian Revolution for a number of reasons. The Saudi elite saw the Revolution as a challenge to feudal monarchies in the region. Its egalitarian thrust articulated through Islam was also at total odds with the type of Wahabi Islam practiced by the House of Saud. For the Saudi elite the fact that Iranian Islam is Shia was also problematic since the majority of Muslims are Sunni. It was around this time that the Saudis began to present the Sunni-Shia dichotomy as a major theological and political schism. It is worth observing that when Iran was under a monarch, before 1979, the Saudi elite who enjoyed a close relationship with the king, Reza Pahlavi, did not see his Shia affiliation as a barrier! Saudi Arabia played a critical role in the war that followed against Iran, bankrolling to some extent the Iraq helmed, US backed, coalition. The Saudis were determined to stop the spread of a pro-republican, anti-monarchical Shia Islam diametrically different from Wahabism.

The other event in 1979 which evoked a response from the Saudis was actually outside WANA. This was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Saudis worked hand in glove with the US, especially the CIA, in helping to create a huge network of freedom fighters — the mujahideen — from a number of countries who travelled to Afghanistan to liberate the land from what was perceived as a godless invader. Pakistan's leading intelligence service, the ISI, was also involved in this exercise.

The significance of the entire Afghan episode for this analysis lies in the fact that some of the militant groups that emerged out of the conflict such as Al-Qaeda appear to have strong links to Saudi Arabia. The late Osama bin Laden for instance was a Saudi national with close ties to the Saudi elite. Fifteen out of the nineteen 9-11 hijackers were Saudi. It is alleged that established Saudi personalities helped fund the 9-11 operation.

Sunni militants in Iraq fighting a Shia government are said to be supported by Saudi money. This money need not be from the State. It could be private individuals. And since the crisis in Syria erupted in March 2011, state and non-state actors from Saudi Arabia have been heavily involved in not only funding militants but also in arranging for the flow of arms and fighters to the country. Religious preachers from Saudi have been among the most vocal in mobilizing youths to go to Syria to fight an "infidel" Shia government allegedly oppressing

the Sunni majority. It is the rhetoric of these Saudis conveyed through You Tube and Face Book that has had a huge impact upon Muslim youths from Kuala Lumpur and Karachi to Birmingham and Berlin. In other words, Saudi money and Saudi preachers have been a crucial factor in the world-wide mobilization of Sunnis against Shias in the context of the Syrian turmoil. What this means is that the Saudis and some other groups in WANA, both Arab and non-Arab, bear some responsibility at least for the growth of terrorist outfits such as the Islamic State (IS). One should add that a lot of the sermons of IS and other preachers of the same ilk are not only blatant distortions of religious teachings but also deceitful misrepresentations of the actual situation in Syria. What is really tragic is that these perversions of truth and reality have led to the death of thousands of mainly young people from so many different parts of the world.

When we reflect on how Saudi Arabia has contributed to the upheaval in WANA and compare it to the role of Israel, we will discover that the most significant point of intersection is in their common opposition to Iran. 1979 was in a sense the trigger. For Israel it has been Iran's challenge to its security in the form of its non-existent nuclear weapons program. For Saudi Arabia it is Iran and the alleged rise of Shia power in the region. It conceals to an extent intra-regional rivalry between two states for power and influence.

This brings us to the role of the US.

The United States of America

My analysis so far has provided numerous instances of how the US maintains its hegemony over WANA. This is a goal that has become more pronounced since the sixties though the US began to develop an interest in the region from the twenties. Oil was the starting-point. It explains why two oil rich monarchies in WANA, Saudi Arabia and Iran, were courted by the US at that time. US oil barons in fact were following in the footsteps of the British who had forged ties with the palace in both countries.

There is no need to emphasize that the nation that has served longest as a conduit for the perpetuation of US hegemony in WANA is Saudi Arabia. Immediately after the second world war, a victorious US, through its control over Saudi oil, was able to shape the direction of the rise of Europe from the ashes of the war because Europe was so dependent upon Saudi and other oil exporting states in WANA. The US invariably seeks control over the production and sale of oil. The desire for control is what makes the US an hegemonic power. This has to be distinguished from seeking access to oil which is what most states do. It is partly because they want control over oil that Britain and the US chose to invade and occupy Iraq in 2003. It was also because of the desire for control that the US and other Western powers ousted Muammar Gaddafi and attempted to install proxies to rule oil-rich Libya in 2011.

Invasion and ouster are perhaps extreme examples of the drive towards hegemony. As I have hinted, most of the time, US control over oil — the life-blood of contemporary civilization — within WANA is achieved through the cooperation and collusion of states like Saudi Arabia and the other oil-exporting Arab monarchies. Nearly all these monarchies — it is only too apparent — are puppet regimes which are only too willing to help the US maintain a tight grip on the region's oil taps.

Saudi Arabia in particular is especially important to the US because it is the world's biggest exporter of oil and the leading member of OPEC. To put it differently, the US exercises



indirect control over OPEC. Since Saudi Arabia is also in some ways the de facto leader of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the US also has some influence over this 57 member inter-state organization.

The significance of the US-Saudi nexus in perpetuating US hegemony has come to the fore again through a recent deal between the two which has resulted in the Saudis flooding the world market with cheap oil with the underlying motive of weakening Iran and Russia, nations which are heavily dependent upon oil and gas as their principal sources of revenue. According to the well-known analyst, William Engdahl, this Saudi operation “is by all appearance being coordinated with a US Treasury financial warfare operation, via its Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, in cooperation with a handful of inside players on Wall Street who control oil derivatives trading.”

Saudi Arabia is not the only state in WANA that serves US hegemony. Nearly all of them facilitate US and Western hegemony in different ways and through different arrangements. There are well-equipped US military bases in a number of states, including Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. Bahrain for instance is home to the US’s Fifth Fleet. Turkey is a longstanding member of NATO. Western economic interests in the form of its multi-national corporations and its financial hubs and instruments dominate the region.

Because US hegemony is overwhelming, any attempt on the part of a government or a movement in WANA to strike out on its own is bound to evoke a negative response from countries in the region and the US itself. This has happened on a few occasions. One of the more recent ones would be the gas pipeline agreement signed between the governments of Syria, Iran and Iraq in July 2011 which would have witnessed the construction of a pipeline that would have carried gas from an Iranian port near the huge South Pars gas field to Damascus via Iraq and eventually to Lebanon and from there to Europe. Qatar which has its own pipeline plan and was intending to supply gas to Europe was piqued by the agreement. This, it is alleged, was one of the reasons why it joined Saudi in a concerted effort to overthrow Syria’s Bashar Al-Assad through funding terrorists and recruiting so-called Jihadists. Certain influential lobbies in Washington provided moral and material support to this effort since Assad was and is an opponent of US hegemony.

Washington, it should be observed, also did something else which I have alluded to: it played Shias against Sunnis and Sunnis against Shias. Dividing and ruling or dividing and dominating their targets is what hegemonic or imperial powers have indulged in right through history. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and some other states, are partners of the US in this diabolical game but with their own agenda. Israel is in the same category.

Exploiting the Sunni-Shia divide is one of the many facets of hegemony which Israel and the US pursue together. It can be argued that since the sixties they have been partners in hegemony in the suppression and oppression of the Palestinian people, in the conquest of Iraq, in the drive to oust Assad in Syria and in the targeting of Iran. The convergence of US-Israeli interests in these hegemonic adventures conceals a deeper, symbiotic relationship between the two nations. I have already discussed how this relationship developed over time through the influence exerted by powerful Israeli Zionist lobbies in the US.

It is largely because of this relationship that Israel has been able to secure what it wants from the wars it has fought and the assaults it has conducted in the region. No other nation on earth has been protected by hegemonic power to this extent. And the protected nation

has been able to use and exploit the hegemon to such a degree that one wonders whether it is the US or Israel that sets US foreign policy in WANA. For many observers, it is a clear case of the tail wagging the dog.

Israel and Saudi Arabia help to perpetuate US hegemony over WANA. The US in turn protects Israeli and Saudi interests. From all accounts, their relationship is solid and strong. And yet, cracks have appeared in their relationship of late. Why? What does it portend for the future?

## Conclusion

The Israeli and Saudi elites are annoyed and angry that the US and other western powers, together with Russia and China have entered into talks with Iran on its nuclear program. The aim is to reach a comprehensive agreement that will ensure that Iran will never acquire nuclear weapons while continuing nuclear research for peaceful purposes which is the right of every sovereign state. Both sides are hoping to achieve agreement by November 24 2014.

Once an agreement is forged, the Iranian leadership would want the US and Europe to lift all the unjust sanctions imposed upon Iran over many years. The sanctions have had an adverse impact upon the Iranian economy though it should be emphasized that even before the present round of harsh sanctions, the Iranian government had been open to negotiations on its nuclear program. In fact, the present President, Hassan Rouhani, was Iran's chief nuclear negotiator under Muhammad Khatami when the latter was President from 1997 to 2005.

This willingness to negotiate, to seek an amicable solution, to end the sort of confrontation which may lead to war and violence, on the part of Iranian leaders such as Rouhani, Khatami and another former President, Rafsanjani, would be one of the reasons why there is a serious endeavor now (with the ascension of Rouhani) to resolve the nuclear issue once and for all. The Iranian people on the whole have always been inclined towards the peaceful resolution of disputes, as reflected in their political culture.

For certain important reasons the present US leadership too may be a little more inclined towards a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue than say George Bush Junior was. A couple of these reasons may have something to do with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israel's cruel and callous treatment of Palestinians borne out by its systematic and periodic massacres of the poor and powerless inhabitants of Gaza since 2008 has begun to create some revulsion among Americans themselves. It is significant in this regard that a recent Google Consumer Survey in the US shows that 6 out of 10 Americans believe that the US gives too much aid to Israel. President Barack Obama himself has been less than enthusiastic about endorsing all the policies and actions of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. His expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank would be among those actions which has alienated many of his supporters in the US and more so in Europe. It is because of this that Obama and some others in Washington are now seeking some balance in the US's approach to politics in WANA. Reaching out to Iran may be part of that shift.

At the same time, there may also be some disillusionment in the corridors of power in Washington with the Saudi elites arising from their direct and oblique involvement with the brutal and barbaric violence of militant Wahabi oriented jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria. Of

course, the US itself, as this analysis has revealed, has been colluding with these militant groups. Nonetheless, since their violence has become an acute embarrassment to all those who have been hobnobbing with the militants, US leaders now appear to be distancing themselves from the more obvious funders and sponsors of terror like the Saudi rulers. Besides, more Americans and Europeans today are aware of how retrogressive and atavistic the Saudi ruling class is on matters pertaining to women, human rights, and relations with non-Muslims and even other Muslim groups.

The changing attitudes of US elites to Israeli and Saudi elites which are still in their nascent stage should be viewed against the backdrop of declining US and Western power itself. It is partly because the US and the West are no longer as dominant in the global economy as they once were, and are less capable of calling the shots on international issues of political and strategic import that their approach to political actors in WANA may also be changing somewhat. The US in particular has witnessed how in spite of all the attempts to emasculate Iran, it remains resilient. Tehran's solid ties with Russia and China have enhanced its resilience and the US is aware of this. It is quite conceivable that some quarters in Washington realize the importance of coming to terms with a nation like Iran within this changing global landscape.

To all these factors, one should also perhaps add the quiet, behind-the-scenes role of various individuals on both sides of the divide who are determined to lessen tensions and misunderstandings between the US and Iran. Some of these men and women are former diplomats. Their "track 2" dialogue over a few years has paved the way for the talks between Iran and the US and other powers which are now in their final stage.

There is no guarantee that an agreement will be clinched. The obstacles are formidable. Israeli and Saudi opposition remains uncompromising. But if an agreement is finalized and it respects Iran's right to pursue its peaceful nuclear program and at the same time leads to the elimination of sanctions against the country, it would have a huge impact upon WANA and the world. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia will have to adjust to a new political reality where their interests will not be assured any more of unequivocal endorsement from the US. This could well induce changes in their policies and politics towards their WANA neighbors. A new balance of power within WANA and between WANA and the US may have a salutary impact upon regional and world politics.

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