



## **An Era of New Strategies and Alliances in WANA**

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Four years have elapsed since the Arab Spring permeated into the socio-political milieu of the Arab world. The after affects have been analysed differently by different commentators at different times. The phrase that have been used to project this political upheaval ranged from “Arab Winter” to “Arab Autumn”, given the fact that desired results were missing.

What is being witnessed in the backdrop of the present upheaval is a combination of collapsing states, in few countries, power struggle in other nations and the emergence of radical warlords vitiating the geopolitical atmosphere across the region. Not only this, but the ongoing intra-regional conflict is well-blended with rapid crystallisation in the geo-strategic map of the region as well. There are different dimensions of the geo-political turmoil in the region which can be divided into trans-regional and internal sectarian fissure.

There could be divergent perceptions of altering US's unchallenged role in the region, but the strategic assertion of Russia, after a prolonged phase of apathy in the regional politics, is a fact and it becomes more obvious when one notices the two decades of presence of the US there.

The future will tell how US engages with an active Iran-inspired bloc in the region if both Iran and US move forward and clinch much controversial nuclear deal as the GCC states already harbour much anxiety about the design and intent of the post-nuclear deal Iran in the region. GCC nations are apprehensive of US commitment in future as Saudi Arabia has repeatedly alleged the United States of pursuing a weak policy in the region, particularly against President Assad of Syria which is a strategic ally of Iran and a bulwark against sectarian expansion of Saudi Arabia. With the passing away of King Abdullah, US and other regional actors would be watching how Saudi Arabia unfolds its regional policies under the new rule of King Suleiman

Russia's constant political and logistic supports along with Iran to Assad's regime are indicative of its growing roles. Moreover, the US\$ 3 billion defence deal and agreement for naval cooperation in the Alexandria port between Russia and Egypt are reflective of upward proximity between the two, which is seemingly a major shift, given three decades of estrangement between them after Egypt's abrupt turn to the US fold in mid 1970s. The visit of Russian President, Mr. Putin to Israel in the year 2012, culminating in a deal to extract gas from the reservoirs of Israel, is another facet that tells about the ascending role of Russia in the region. The enhancement of Russia's role in Levant region like Syria, and in North Africa like Egypt is well-fused with the appearance of few regional alliances which has sectarian and radical dimensions.

Syrian pro-democracy protest morphed into a sectarian civil war turning the country into a hub of proxy war between two traditional regional rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia. This proxy war led Iran to acquire a new strategic role for itself in the region on the basis of strong support of Syria, Hezbollah of Lebanon, and Shiite-led regime of Iraq in order to extend the crescent of its own design from Tehran to Lebanon. There are five distinct groups (regime, Iran, moderate opposition, different militias and Jihadist and Kurds) which are holding the country captive. Iran stepped in to protect its sectarian bastion and is carefully calibrating its regional role to replace Saudi-led 'moderate' alliance, to become an unchallenged strategic actor in the region. Iran now has reserved a place for itself on the table for any negotiation about the future of Syria.

The Iran-impelled alliance has garnered a substantial amount of political and logistic supports of Russia along with the support of Shiite groups of other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Yemen. The full control of Yemeni Houthi rebels over the capital city of Sana in Yemen and subsequent resignation of its President seems to be a bigger threat than ISIS to the Saudi regime because it could cause Saudi Arabia to lose one of its historical allies in the region. The Saudi government has already been accusing Iran of instigating sectarian war in its eastern province igniting the Shiite groups to secede from the Kingdom to form a new confederation with the Shiite-dominated kingdom of Bahrain.

To confront the growing influence of Iran-inspired alliance, its traditional rival Saudi Arabia along with its new strategic ally in form of Egypt is employing all its strategic tools at its disposal to stop the Iranian tide in the region. Since the inception of sectarian war in West Asia and parts of North Africa, Saudi Arabia is vehemently advocating the ouster of President Assad to weaken the strategic pillar of Shiite group in order to compensate the loss of Sunni regime in Iraq after the departure of Saddam Hussein.

The strong basis of Saudi-US relationship seems to have eroded after the US abandoned President Mubarak amidst the political protests in Egypt in the beginning of 2011; creating deep mistrust between the two and apparently US does not enjoy the Kingdom's cordiality to the same extent as in the past. Seemingly, growing proximity between Iran and United States after the enunciation of the nuclear negotiation and, of late, apparent understanding against ISIS has further deepened the diplomatic coldness between US and Saudi Arabia. In order to further strengthen the Saudi's clout in the region, a decision has been taken in last GCC summit in Doha to establish a Unified Defence Command (UDC), which apart from GCC, would include Egypt, Morocco and Jordan. Not only this, but Saudi Arabia wants Egypt to lead the unified command as a pre-emptive move with an intent of not antagonising other GCC members like Qatar and Kuwait which might show their displeasure at kingdom's stewardship. In order to further strengthen the sectarian alliance, a rapprochement has been made recently between Saudi Arabia and Qatar mediated by Oman and Kuwait when the relationship between them soured after the Arab Spring.

In addition to Iran and Saudi Arabia, other nations in the region too have been extending all sorts of strategic supports to the sectarian militias out of their strategic calculation. Meanwhile the emergence of a large numbers of miscreants called 'street Jihadists' along with radicals, extremists and terrorist groups are another unpleasant outcome of what one is made to believe today that reductionist definition of the erstwhile political upheaval as "Arab Spring" itself was very faulty and hasty phrased inscription. This bizarre group of warlords and Jihadists are vehemently bent upon changing not only the geo-strategic, but also the geographical map of the region. The most prominent of these has been the ISIS. It has been able to polarize a large number of *Jihadists* scattered across the region, who are jettisoning their parental organizations to join them. Syria and Iraq have proved to be fertile grounds for them because of the widening power vacuum. The rapid expansion of ISIS has forced several countries to revisit their strategies to face its surge. For instance, it has compelled both Turkey and Iran to review their past political stances because the rise of ISIS has deepened the geo-strategic complexities in the region. It has forced Turkey to alter the premise of its foreign policy because the ISIS has reached very close to its border province threatening its national security. ISIS's involvement with the Kurds of Iraq is likely to re-orient Turkish policy towards Kurdish political movement in near future. ISIS has compelled the US to re-join the war against terrorism after it had ended its 'war against terror' campaign. Not only this, but there are unconfirmed reports of secret negotiations between Iran and the US to lay out comprehensive plan to wipe out the menace of ISIS. However it still remains a puzzle how a group of not more than 3000 was able to capture the large swath of territories in Syria and Iraq in such a short span of time and the surge might require the strategic community to redefine and explain the contextual genealogy of terrorism in the Arab world.

It is not only the warlords who are threatening the territorial integrity of some parts of the region but countries like Yemen and Libya have become stateless. For instance, the capital city of Sana in Yemen is under complete control of "Houthi" rebels and its President has resigned. The Houthis are reported to have captured almost 70 % of arms and ammunition belonging to Yemeni national army and they are reported to be in possession of all sophisticated weapons like long-range missile, tanks and armored vehicles.

Likewise, more than three years after Colonel Gaddafi was toppled and later killed in a NATO-backed operation, Libya is still awash with weapons and different factions of militias like *Fajr Libya* and *Shabab-Islami* and several Bedouin tribal forces and warlords are pushing the state into absolute anarchy and collapse of the state system seems imminent. Today, Libya has a parallel parliament and government and the traditional social and tribal alliance have also been affected by the present political conflict rendering the situations more complicated.

Give the present scenario in the region, any kind of political pronouncement or prediction seem to be difficult but the critical issue at this juncture remains whether warlords, radical groups and power rivalry would redraw the national boundaries or the peace, order and governance would be restored but after a prolonged phase of unrest, conflict and disorder.

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