



Waiting for the Shoe to Fall Middle East Style

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Executive Summary

- * Notable deaths in early January 2020 - of Qassem Soleimani and of Sultan Qaboos - push the greater Middle East to increased tension and instability.
- * Consequently, there emerges a growing risk of a sudden discrete action - by design or by accident - sparking a major confrontation that, rhetoric notwithstanding, nobody really wants yet everybody dreads.
- * The modern Arab state is dead and a myriad of desperate sub-state entities are rising to assert themselves.
- * The Middle Eastern Entente of Iran, Turkey and Qatar has embarked on an audacious and risky push to exploit the chaos in order to become the dominant regional power.
- * The great power presence is evolving with the US leaving grudgingly and a coalition of Russia and China taking over and establishing a new sphere of influence.
- * The indigenous grassroots' hatreds, tension, frustration and despair that have been building and intensifying for close to a decade will burst into the open. Then, nobody will be able to do anything but wait until the carnage and flames exhaust themselves.

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Analysis

Two notable deaths in early January 2020 push the greater Middle East to increased tension and instability. Consequently, there emerges a growing risk of a sudden discrete action - by design or by accident - sparking a major confrontation that, rhetoric notwithstanding, nobody really wants yet everybody dreads.

First came the target-killing by the US of Lt.Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the revered commander of the IRGC's Qods Force (who was promoted posthumously), and several Iranian, Iraqi and Lebanese seniors at the Baghdad airport.

Then, came the death from cancer of the Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said al Said - who for five decades was the highly respected "responsible adult" and "voice of reason" of the greater Middle East.

Tehran interprets Soleimani's target-killing to be a major milestone in the US determination to resist and block, by force if necessary, the Iranian surge in the region. Hence, Tehran resolved to accelerate the implementation of the decision, made months beforehand, to banish the US from the region even at the risk of escalation and war.

Immediately after Soleimani's death, a shaken Ayatollah Khamenei instructed the Iranian High Command to minimize direct and largely symbolic retaliation and revenge. Instead, Iran will now focus on an accelerated and intensified implementation of the anti-US campaign. The crux of the campaign is to make the US presence untenable through the aggregate impact of a multitude of proxy strikes on US facilities and interests, terrorism against US targets, and the destabilizing of local authorities to the point they will no longer be able or willing to host US facilities and personnel. Alas, this surge will take place without Soleimani's intimate knowledge of the regional dynamics and the tight control he exercised over Iran's proxies. Hence, several players will try to exploit the uncertain times in order to push their own respective and explosive agendas - thus adding to the confusion.

The main engine of escalation and exacerbation of tension is the determination of "the Middle Eastern Entente" of Iran, Turkey and Qatar, originally consolidated in March 2019, to capitalize on the current situation and circumstances in order to maximize their gains against both the Arab World and the great powers involved in the region.

In early 2020, the leaders of the Middle Eastern Entente asserted their new policies. In his 17 January Sermon, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei noted that God was guiding Iran's ascent against the US. "That a nation has the power and spirit to slap an arrogant, aggressive global power is a sign of God's power. Therefore, that day too is a Day of Allah." Rather than avenge Soleimani's death, he reiterated, "the main punishment (for the US) will be expulsion from the region." On the same day, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's soulmate Ibrahim Karagul declared the arrival of a new era for Turkey. "The era of 'defensive politics' is over for Turkey! This is the rise of a superpower. ... Turkey confined to its borders cannot survive." During a recent visit to Tehran, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani concurred that unless the US demonstrated restraint in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East as a whole - drastic measures will have to be taken in order to guarantee security and stability for the entire region.

The overall situation is fraught with danger because of the concurrent passing of Sultan Qaboos. For decades, Qaboos relied on his own wisdom and knowledge, as well as Oman's unique Ibadite school of Islam (that is neither Sunni nor Shiite, but is going back to soon after the death of Prophet Muhammad), in order to become a most trusted mediator and messenger. His discreet intervention helped prevent and contain many conflicts



and crises from escalating out of control because he and his judgement were trusted by all. His successor, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, is well respected. But it will take a long time before he can fill his uncle's huge shoes regionally. In the meantime, the absence of channels of communications engenders mutual mistrust and expedites inclination to act on worst case scenarios.

Meanwhile, the unfolding mega-trends in the greater Middle East, especially in the Arab World, continue and intensify.

Most important, the demise of the modern Arab State has now become irreversible. While governments remain in place and leaders pretend to make decisions and implement policies - this is no more. Ultimately, even the Arab leaders themselves are cognizant of the development as reflected in the tepid and confused reaction to the popular riots in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan.

The internal stability and working of even the most important of states are unraveling. The crux is not the riots that attract media attention. The fateful key is the transformation of society and the economy. There is a growing disengagement of the grassroots from central governance. Instead, there emerges a growing reliance on regional, popular and blood-related frameworks - minorities, tribes and urban extended families. Significantly, these sub-state frameworks have saved the grassroots from the state-level fratricidal carnage and foreign interventions of the last decades. There is no way the grassroots will accept the dismantling of their own life-saving socio-economic frameworks and agree to return to dependence on, and trust in, the state-level frameworks that have failed them so badly. Consequently, the ensuing quest for localized self-sufficiency - both social and economic - severely undermines the legitimacy and power of the modern state. Since in most areas the traditional tribal and minority habitats cross modern borders - the awakened localized entities ignore borders. The vicious genie of secessionism and self-identities is out of the lantern - never to return back in.

The most important Arab states - Saudi Arabia and Egypt - show major internal cracks emanating from profound delegitimization and mistrust of the ruling elites.

In Saudi Arabia, the erratic reign of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman al-Saud engendered regional foci of power united in their hostility toward the House of al-Saud. The radicalized northwest (as well as southern Jordan) gravitates around the leadership of Islamist clerics; the economic powerhouse of the Hijaz is wrestling Islamic Leadership from the House of al-Saud; the oil-rich Shiite east has regional identity (jointly with the Shiite majorities in the other Gulf states) that is pronouncedly pro-Iranian; and, most important, the Bedouin tribes of Najd, long the bedrock of support of the House of al-Saud, now reject their oath of allegiance and gravitate to the regional north-south axis led by the Shamari Nation. While some of these entities are hostile to each other - their common quest to rid themselves of the al-Saud reign is significantly stronger.

In Egypt, the intensifying struggles of the rapidly growing population (that is expected to cross the 100 million-mark in 2020) over scarce and dwindling vital resources - basic food, Nile water, electricity, etc. - have morphed into the emergence of regional foci of power defined by ethnicity (mainly in rural areas) and narrow localized interests (mainly in urban centers). The Nubian, Beja and Dom rural people of southern Egypt fight the encroachment of Arab farmers and reallocation of Nile water; and the Arab rural communities of the Delta fight the communities of central Egypt over the use of Nile water. There are intensifying bitter disputes between the urban clusters of Asyut, Cairo and Alexandria over scarce electricity that stifles the economy, diminishing food supplies for the sprawling poor, lack of housing and infrastructure, and overall diminishing hopes for having



families and normal life. Again, the friction and traditional mistrust of key groupings are put aside in pursuit of a common goal - namely, undermine the power and influence of the Cairo elites.

The looming disintegration and collapse of Saudi Arabia and Egypt removes the sole balancing element for the catastrophic state of most other Arab states - Yemen, Sudan, Libya, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and increasingly Jordan. All these states are consumed by fratricidal multi-element carnage that fractured and alienated their key population groupings to a point that reconciliation and co-existence are no longer possible. The attempts at governance and democratic reforms, formulating constitutions and running elections, are all exercises in futility for the grassroots are adamantly against the return to the state-level frameworks that have so recently betrayed them and wrought so much suffering and losses. The undermining and unraveling of the modern states are made worse by foreign interventions of both the United States that is making strenuous efforts through military and economic pressure to impose central rule over the distraught populace; and a multitude of proxies, mainly Iran-led but also Turkey- and Qatar-led, that both further their own regional interests and take sides in the spreading fratricidal strife and carnage.

Also of paramount significance are the recent demonstrations and riots in non-Arab Iran. Unlike the demonstrations of the last decade that were largely driven by economic hardships and ensuing government crackdowns, the current wave of demonstrations adds to the socio-economic despair a distinct awakening of Iran's minorities who rebel against the powers of the Persian-dominated central government. Concurrently, genuine and widespread nationalistic patriotism burst into the open in the massive funeral processions of Soleimani. As has happened throughout history - all Iranians put their differences aside and rallied behind the banner to defend their motherland against external threats. This demonstration of spontaneous grassroots patriotism is not lost on the chauvinistic elements in Tehran and convinces them to focus on furthering nationalistic external initiatives in order to not only further Iran's historic interests and aspirations, but to also reduce the internal discontent over the socio-economic near-collapse of Iran.

For the Middle Eastern Entente of Iran, Turkey and Qatar, these regional dynamics constitute both opportunities and threats. On the one hand, the weakened states prove incapable of resisting the surge of the trio into regional preeminence. On the other hand, there rises from the ashes of the states and the plight of the fractured populace vindictive radicalism that is a combination of militant Sunni Islamism and lust for blood revenge for all the torment of the last decade or so.

Hence, the Middle Eastern Entente escalates and intensifies the drive for regional power and dominance, both together and separately. The three powers are pushing hard and audaciously in order to transform the region irreversibly in their favor before there emerges a new Arab Sunni force to be reckoned with. A great priority of the three powers is suppressing the Fertile Crescent of Minorities (that includes Israel) because once it becomes viable - it will constitute anew the regional buffer separating between the aspirant foreign powers of Turkey and Iran and the predominantly Sunni Arab heartlands. The Middle Eastern Entente fears the ascent of the minorities as a key outcome of the prevailing collapse of the modern Arab states.

Hence, the trio has resolved to move fast, push hard and take major risks. Most important is the close cooperation with radical Islamist forces - including Sunni entities - on account of common foes and despite contradictory objectives. Turkey is supporting Jihadist forces from Syria, Iraq, all the way to Libya, Somalia and Yemen; Iran sponsors a multitude of Sunni Jihadists in Iraq-Syria, Libya, Yemen and the HAMAS-Islamic Jihad; and Qatar helps with funding and equipping all of them. Indeed, during the formal introduction of the new commander of the Quds Force, Brig.Gen. Ismail Qaani - he spoke in front of a row of flags of the IRGC and their



predominantly Shiite formal allies and proxies. For the first time, the HAMAS flag was prominently displayed - a testimony of the HAMAS's formal joining of the Iranian army of proxies under the command of the Quds Force.

There is a formal division of labor between the members of the Middle Eastern Entente. Iran focuses on the on-land corridor to the shores of the Mediterranean by controlling the entire territory between western Iran and the sea; on controlling both shores of the Persian Gulf by empowering the Shiite-populated oil rich areas; as well as on dominating the key choke points of the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb (the latter from Yemen). Turkey focuses on establishing a security zone in northern Syria and Iraq by suppressing the Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq (while Iran suppresses its own Kurds); on exploiting the plight and ambitions of Jordan's Hashemites in order to dominate the Hijaz and the Red Sea (also through Turkish presence in Somalia and Sudan); on increasing presence in the Persian Gulf by building bases in Qatar; and, through the recent agreement with the Western-supported Jihadist-propped up "government" in Libya, on carving the eastern Mediterranean and separating Israel, Egypt and Cyprus from the Balkans and Europe.

Meanwhile, in the absence of Sultan Qaboos, there are no open channels of communications between the warring sides, no attempts to reconcile and/or mediate are made, and there are no viable efforts to calm things down.

Into this explosive mix enters the Israel factor. Both Turkey and Iran have declared their commitment to liberating Jerusalem and destroying Israel as an important objective in their ascent to regional and all-Islamic prominence. In recent months, both Turkey and Iran made concrete contingency planning to capitalize on the growing tension between Israel and the HAMAS, Islamic Jihad, the HizbAllah, and the Islamist forces in Jordan and the West Bank in order to intervene directly in the fighting with the declared objective to destroy Israel. The scope of the Iranian military preparations for such a confrontation is disconcerting. Meanwhile, Qatar keeps a door open and coordinates with Israel the support for the HAMAS-controlled Gaza Strip.

However, rhetoric notwithstanding, there is great apprehension about a major war with Israel.

Consequently, Iran and its proxies and allies remain grudgingly inclined to absorb the damage and casualties inflicted by Israel's "Campaign Between Wars" - the ceaseless bombings of and raids on Iranian and Iran-proxy strategic facilities and storage sites in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

That said, there is strong resolve in both Tehran and Ankara to NOT give up on, or even alter, their ultimate strategic-regional push irrespective of the costs. There is growing willingness to intervene directly in regional conflagrations, to employ ever larger proxy forces, and, should the need arise, even national military forces. Such higher profile interventions, and thus also risk taking, are visible from Libya to Yemen, to the Persian Gulf, and particularly in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

Both Iran and Turkey continue to push hard - cognizant that they might spark an escalation of a huge magnitude. The contingency plans of both countries include concrete preparations for the total destruction of the region's energy resources and infrastructure in case of a major conflict. Both countries also threaten Israeli vital interests (including Islamist takeovers of Jordan and the Sinai Peninsula) and increase the threat to the Israeli civilian rear (mainly by proxies like the HizbAllah and the HAMAS) - cognizant that Israel is extremely sensitive to civilian casualties.

Meanwhile, there is a major realignment of the great powers in the region.



The US - largely irrelevant if powerful - is grudgingly leaving the greater Middle East. The exit process started long before the Iranian decision to banish the US in cooperation with Turkey. The US no longer needs the region's hydro-carbons because the US is self-sufficient and exporting. The tension with Europe and East Asia reduces the US interest in guaranteeing their energy supplies. Moreover, control of the region's oil market is not sufficient to guarantee the US dominance over the global energy economy on account of the Russia-led camp. With lavish US military and technological supplies and aid, Israel is strong enough to defend itself and its vital interests - but not enough to start a major regional war that can ensnare the US if something goes wrong. Under such conditions, the imperative for the US to remain entangled in such a volatile region has diminished.

Enter the coalition of Russia and China that has revived the historic Silk Road system of alliances and interests throughout the Eastern Hemisphere. Their anti-American strategy bolsters the standing of the Middle Eastern Entente. While both Russia and China exercise strong support for vanquished state governments (mainly Syria and Iraq) - theirs is a very pragmatic regional approach that accepts the collapse of the modern state system and focuses instead on reliance on the Fertile Crescent of Minorities (that includes Israel) for regional stabilization. There is a division of labor between China and Russia with the former responsible for economic and development issues, and the latter for security matters. China and its proteges do need the region's oil and gas badly - and are thus committed to preventing a conflict that will set the region literally aflame. Russia's bitter historic enmity toward Iran and Turkey affects the Russian readiness to tolerate their reckless excesses. At the same time, Russia benefits from the relentless anti-American drive of both Iran and Turkey.

Hence, both China and Russia maintain very delicate balancing with the Middle Eastern Entente. China and Russia are determined to neither have a confrontation over the trio's respective vital interests, nor tolerate their strategic ascent to preeminence over the entire region because this will eclipse or challenge the great power dominance by both China and Russia. As well, both Russia and China have excellent relations with Israel, and thus emerge as the sole viable channels between Iran and Turkey, and their pursuit of regional interests, and Israel in the hope of passing messages, defusing face-offs and crises - thus preventing a major eruption from happening. Ultimately, the profound, if latent, conflict between Russia and China on the one hand and the Middle Eastern Entente on the other over who will be the real master of the greater Middle East is bound to dominate all long-term relations and add to the regional friction and instability.

Thus, there is growing possibility that a miscalculated move, an operational accident, or an unintended infliction of excessive civilian casualties will spark an immediate region-wide eruption and a major explosion nobody will be able to contain.

The indigenous grassroots' hatreds, tension, frustration and despair that have been building and intensifying for close to a decade, and especially since 2016, will then burst into the open. Then, nobody will be able to do anything but wait until the carnage and flames exhaust themselves.

And so we wait...

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

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