

**“IRAN'S ARAB STRATEGY:
WHAT IS IT, AND WHAT DO ARABS MAKE OF IT?”**



SUMMARY OF A MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE WEBINAR



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OVERVIEW

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Tehran has invested heavily in its strategy toward the Arab World. Today, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the generals in the Revolutionary Guard are as committed as ever to remain deeply engaged in Arab countries, from Lebanon to Syria and Yemen and beyond.

In a webinar hosted by Alex Vatanka, the Director of Iran Program at the Middle East Institute, three leading experts, F. Gregory Gause, Mahmood Sariolghalam and Randa Slim took an in-depth look at the sort of drivers that shape Iran’s Arab strategy while also looking at where the Arab countries, particularly the states of the Persian Gulf, stand vis-à-vis Tehran as the Iranian leadership speaks of the need to begin a new chapter of détente with the Arab World.

KEY COMMENTS MADE BY SPEAKERS

1. MAHMOUD SARIOLGHALAM (*Tehran based Non-Resident Scholar, Middle East Institute, Washington*)

- For Iran, of all the various regions in the world, the most turbulent and unstable ties have been with the Arab world.
- In the 1960s, the fundamentalist writings of Egyptian scholars was used by opposition forces in Iran, especially in religious circles and many opponents of the regime stayed in places like Egypt and Syria and had much association with Palestinian forces.
- The Iranian revolution was in many ways inspired by Arab elements who had become disillusioned with nationalism and had instead opted for religion.

- After the revolution, the new regime initially looked to Arab societies and linked with Palestinians, though this trend was upset with the onslaught of the Iran-Iraq War which changed that narrative.
- Realizing their own power after the war, the regime in Iran started to concentrate on the Shias in the Arab world and in reaction to US pressures for regime change in the 1990s, they tried to obtain some leverage over the US and Israel by reactivating their nuclear program and by empowering Shias aligned with themselves in the region.
- While the first decade after the revolution was dominated by ideology, national security concern with ideological posturing became the name of the game for Iran in 1990s and after.
- As a result, the regime is seen as being expansionist, although the underlying reason for the projection of power has to do with internal security reasons.
- The challenge for Iran in dealing with 22 Arab countries with 400 million people is what how to move forward or what to do in the absence of a viable economic abilities.
- The domestic structure arrangements inside Iran is such that the Deep State can out manoeuvre others in government by relying on posturing and using or playing the Israel/US card as potential threats to the security of the nation.
- Previous governments in the Islamic Republic, such as that of President Rafsanjani, have at times wanted to reach out but the Deep State has at all times wanted to keep the US out of Iranian politics.
- Iraq is now a scenario where the Deep State is confronting both the US and in Israel (in Iraqi Kurdistan).
- The interests of the Deep State will continue in the future and will not be affected by any change as a result of the impending succession jockeying to replace Khamenei.
- In terms of Iran-KSA relations, Iran understands this to be a key factor and wants at this time to expedite better ties. For its part, the KSA wants a larger package deal that includes regional stability starting with Yemen.
- It is a fact that while government in the IRI wants diplomacy, the Deep State wants security. This duality of approach inside the Iranian political system is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

- While national interest of the country is today more than ever before defined in terms of developing its economy and allowing the nation to achieve its economic potential, it is a fact that since 1979, the 'national or regime interest' has been defined in terms of its security and survival above anything else.
- In this regard, Arab countries are incapable of doing much to change this outlook – something that can only be done by the US and Israel.
- It should also be stated that even before 1979, Arab governments in the Persian Gulf did not want to accept Iranian hegemony in the region.
- For the time being, security stands out as the key priority for the Deep State in Iran, especially in view of the reality that Iran and Israel are in essence at war with one another in the region.
- Thus, for the Deep State in Iran to keep US and Israel out, it will have to increase its investments in regional states such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon in order to protect itself domestically.
- On the subject of competition between 'Axis of Resistance vs Abraham Accords':
 - Most critical/analytical unit in Iran is the elite structure and how the leadership will approach various issues in the future.
 - The IRI is facing a range of soft problems from environment to inflation, education, health care, immigration as well as other social and national issues.
 - How the IRI is likely to manage such domestic issues alongside its foreign policy posturing is the important challenge facing the Deep State.
 - There has been a constant issue in Iranian academic circles in the past 30 years regarding how a developing country can pursue a foreign policy that has no linkage to its national economic development (i.e., pursuit of some items that have been so contradictory over time!).
 - Therefore, the question that remains is how long Iran can sustain the separation of these priorities in terms of economic development and foreign policy.
 - These issues are made more complicated by the fact that we are entering a bipolar Middle East with Russia pulling in a different direction and with Iran pivoting more towards it and changing its geo-political calculations.

- In the final analysis, 'U turns' in Iran may become possible due to the dynamics of the succession process that is being played out at this time.

2. F. GREGORY GAUSE (*Professor of International Affairs and John H. Lindsey '44 Chair, the Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University*)

- US-Iran relations are almost defined by domestic politics on both sides.
- Some politicians in the US have at times tried to break out of this cycle, but anti-Iranian sentiments have become more polarized in recent years with the Republicans almost entirely in the camp for regime change in line with perhaps a major chunk of the Democratic Party.
- What has transpired as a result is the 'Classic security dilemma'- which provides the following impression: 'the more I do to make myself secure the more I seem to threaten others in the opposite camp'.
- Motivated by security threats, while Iran pushes its capacity to counter perceived threats coming from the US and Israel, but seen from Arab eyes, this is nothing other than a threat aimed at them.
- The problem has become more compounded with the rise in the number of 'broken Arab states' where the Islamic Republic state has been able to significantly increase its level of influence.
- As such, while the IRI might be willing to negotiate over the nuclear deal, it will on the other hand, remain most reluctant in giving up its influence in those broken states (e.g., Iraq and Lebanon).
- While Iranian offers for a new security architecture (such as the Hormuz Initiative which calls for the departure of all foreign powers from the Persian Gulf) is essentially a non-starter, nonetheless, a number of Gulf states (e.g., UAE and Kuwait who are sending their Ambassadors back to Tehran) are keen to try and de-escalate with Iran but not at the cost of lessening their ties with the US.
- At the end of the day, the final determinants are based on 'balance of power' calculations.
- After 5 rounds of talks between Iran and the KSA, it appears that the price for diplomatic success lies in Yemen.
- It is having to be said that reaching a settlement in Yemen is an exaggerated term even if Iran and KSA were able to come to some kind of temporary agreement.

- However, friendly and cooperative ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the near future are very unlikely mainly because of what happened in September 2019. The fact that this event was carried out by Iran (as well as the fact that after 6 decades of promises the US did nothing to protect the Saudis) is something that cannot be forgotten by Saudi Arabia.
- A number of US administrations have expressed explicitly that they were not interested in promoting regime change in Iran – something that the Iranian regime did not believe – given especially that other administrations and their actual policies such as the Trump administration wanted nothing other than regime change.
- Today, the Biden Administration should say that regime change is not their policy in order to reassure the IRI.
- As for Saudi Arabia, there are a lot of changes happening on the domestic front while MBS is trying to enhance KSA's foreign policy influence in the region as well (having learned a significant lesson after his previous heavy-handed failing efforts).
- In short, domestic policy priorities in the KSA will not reduce its foreign policy objectives.
- On the subject of competition between 'Axis of Resistance vs Abraham Accords':
 - There is some cynicism with regards to any change that could come about as a result of the Abraham Accords, an event that may in some way be related to speculations regarding US retrenchment from the region.
 - It is a fact that every Arab agreement with Israel since Camp David in the late 1970s has in reality been an agreement with the US.
 - Gestures by countries like the UAE may have been motivated by a desire for pleasing Trump or his son-in-law Kushner while arriving at some form of a quid-pro-quo arrangement with the US.
 - Hence, significance of the Abraham Accords is mostly public relations oriented.

3. RANDA SLIM (*Senior Fellow and Director of Conflict Resolution and Track II Dialogues Program, Middle East Institute*)

- The recent events in Iraq are a poignant reminder of the way things are in the region. While a frail agreement/solution with an unclear road map has been imposed mainly at the behest of Ayatollah Sistani, Iraq is nevertheless the best example of the fact that there are limits to what the IRI can do much like there are limits to what Hezbollah can do in Lebanon.
- Powerful Iranian proxies either in Iraq or Lebanon all have their limits and are simply incapable of imposing solutions.
- A serious problem for Iran in the region has to do with its branding! The Iranian brand is one of failed governance, civil war, and one with a record of funding elements that move against youth aspirations while killing or destroying progressive elements in civil society.
- Moreover, the Islamic regime in Iran does not have an economic vision that appeals to the Arab youth who much prefer the economic vision that is on offer from say Dubai.
- Finally, it is generally accepted that the Iranian Shia brand is likely to be much less effective in the region as a whole going forward.
- Arabs have been disappointed by the outcome of Donald Trump's 'Maximum Pressures' and are also resentful of the fact that Trump failed to react to the Iranian attacks of September 2019 against Aramco facilities.
- Also, the Ukraine War, which is the first major international encounter outside the Middle East region, has created a new impetus for leaders wanting to move towards de-escalation.
- While de-escalation with Iran will not lead to major changes, but irrespective of what ultimately happens to issues like JCPOA or others, there is a desire to pursue this path at this time – something that might even lead to a situation where relations between Israel and KSA is normalized.
- De-escalation is therefore driven by a different interests and have nothing to do with other issues. They are motivated by leaders across the board wanting to preserve their own regimes (IRI and the Arabs).
- At the same time while the 'rapprochement trend' – one between Iran-GCC, GCC-Turkey and Egypt-Turkey, is likely to continue, what is unclear is what do the Arabs have that they can offer to secure Iranian cooperation in this regards.

- As for the Iranian 'brand', that is unlikely to change with the change of leadership in that country.
- On the subject of competition between 'Axis of Resistance vs Abraham Accords':
 - Abraham Accords will not change much, although they have now become part of the regional fabric.
 - Axis of Resistance is also here to stay so long as there are broken Arab states where the IRI can entrench itself and use deprived Shia communities for purposes of promoting its objectives.
 - In short, both are here to stay because they are driven by different conditions.

