

Syria

A point of change?

Conflicts Forum

Conflicts Forum is a most informative source about developments in the Middle East. Their weekly commentaries, such as this from late September, provide up-to-date and insightful assessments. Based in Beirut, Alastair Crooke and Aisling Byrne of the Forum contributed articles about Syria to earlier issues of The Spokesman (numbers 114 and 115 respectively).

Very occasionally, a point of inflection occurs in human affairs – a moment of latent potential, which somehow springs into present ‘being’. The potential may have been there for some time, but how this potential may suddenly turn fecund is always mysterious. There we all were – literally – on the brink of a regional war, and yet this near-abyss has brought to us certain important possibilities (though long there), but now somehow fertile. Of course, such ‘points of inflection’ may emerge stillborn – and in a certain sense, we are already living now the consequences of just such an earlier point of inflection – though one *not taken*. Inflection points, of course, can lead to further conflict, just as much as yielding new solutions.

There came an earlier such ‘point’ in 2003/4, but the opportunity was ignored, and it soured; and still it embitters Middle East politics. Instead of coming to any fruition, the region was frozen into opposing axes of ‘evil’ and of ‘moderation’. It was largely in direct reaction to this war of competing visions (and the very real regional wars that accompanied this period) that regime change in Syria became such an existential need for the Sunni monarchies of the Gulf. The fierce push-back by Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and (then) Hamas, against the project to impose on them an hegemony of so-called ‘moderation’, and the resultant resistance front’s determination to build deterrence, led to heightened fear across the Gulf. After the 2006 war [in south Lebanon], Riyadh took further fright at the mounting popularity of Iran and Hizbullah on their own Sunni streets. Revolutionary Islam seemed to be gaining the upper

hand. And – finally, the straw that threatened to break the camel’s back of Gulf states – came: the Arab ‘Upheavals’, with their evident assault on old orders and institutions, and their disesteem for established authority. Gulf states decided to do ‘whatever it takes’ to stop Iran and the new currents of thinking (such as a rising Muslim Brotherhood) dead in their tracks. Their very survival, it seemed, hinged on it.

This decade-long, ever-mounting, existential Gulf anxiety, and its resultant regional strategy of igniting a Sunni ‘intifada’, built around Sunni grievance and sectarianism, and floated off upon a tide of petro-dollars, precisely was what seemed to collapse as the Gulf ‘kings’ absorbed Obama’s U-turn on Syria. What made it so traumatic was that the Obama horse’s ‘refusal’ at the Syria fence could not truthfully be claimed to be a failing of Obama alone. In reality, the US ‘system’ had buckled (public and Congress together). And the Gulf leaders could see the pillars of their entire strategy – designed to crush the opposing ‘axis’ and the ‘new ideas’ emerging from the Muslim Brotherhood and others – being pulled to the ground, too. President Assad would stay, and Iran would not be dismantled, but emerge strengthened.

We have seen much huffing and puffing as a consequence from Gulf leaders such as Prince Turki of Saudi Arabia who threaten to stand steadfast to the ‘cause’ – in spite of US ‘weakness’ – determined to re-make the Middle East in their authoritarian image. But this is evidently fanciful (in spite of their possibly pyrrhic victory in Egypt). What is emerging (just as it did thirty odd years ago in Afghanistan) from their firing-up of Sunni Islam is extremism, rather than moderation – and inter-Sunni strife.

The Gulf ‘flag-ship’ strategy in Syria, too, is in tatters. It is not succeeding in the ‘field’ and – paradoxically – it seems that it was precisely the imminent prospect of US military intervention in Syria that so frightened the jihadist groups (believing that they would be its prime object, as a prelude to the West setting up the *Free Syria Army* as a copy of the Sunni ‘awakening councils’ in Iraq) that ignited the several days of bloody inter-factional fighting amongst the opposition. Its (perverse) outcome has been a further radicalization of the jihadist groups, so that Syria’s most powerful now flatly reject the western-backed opposition group purporting to lead an interim government in exile:

‘The 13 groups, led by the al-Qaeda-linked *al-Nusra* Front, also called on supporters of the Syrian opposition to embrace Sharia law “and make it the sole source of legislation” ... The new group includes many who were until now members of the openly US supported *Free Syria Army*, and include the very “democratic” folks Senator John McCain met at the Turkish-Syrian border ...’

In effect this severely cripples the Gulf's political strategy for Syria. For who would the Obama Administration now suggest should sit on the opposition side, to negotiate with the Syrian government in Geneva – the militarily empowered jihadists, or the evidently disempowered exiles?

This radicalization within Sunni Islam was the inevitable consequence, we have argued, of the way Gulf figures try to buy military 'effectiveness'. Just as we witnessed in Afghanistan (eg Gulbaddin Hekmatyar), those deemed 'effective' by the Gulf are often the extremists. And they become the magnets to Gulf funding. The same is happening now in Iraq, and around the region and north Africa – the direct consequence of the Gulf's 'push' for re-vindication of Sunni hegemony has been the firing-up of Sunni extremism everywhere. And the West is beginning to take notice, and to be concerned. Gulf leaders and Israeli ambassadors may argue that *the bad guys [in Syria] who weren't backed by Iran are preferable, to the bad guys who were backed by Iran – even if their 'bad guys' were affiliated to al-Qaeda*; but this is not at all how the US or Europe sees things. Even indirectly, being allied to al-Qaeda touches on sensitive, 9/11 political nerves in the West.

There was bound to be disquiet – and real fear – in the Gulf, as they saw their regional strategy implode. Loud voices may assert that Gulf leaders will simply ignore the West – 'a plague on them': the Gulf will follow its own interests. But on the other hand, 'how far can they go, to step out of the western orbit' – particularly in the context of the powerful re-emergence of al-Qaeda styles of thinking? Perhaps the most important factor is the invisible golden 'handcuffs' that bind the Gulf sheikhs to the western financial system: 'the sheikhs are far too compromised'. And beyond this, ultimately, they remain dependent on the US security umbrella. The collapse of the regime change project in Syria will be a grave setback for Saudi Arabia, as an entire western strategy may be drawing to a close – and a new beginning *vis-à-vis* Iran may be being required of them.

And here is the 'point of inflection': from the edge of the Syria abyss, the potential for a change towards Iran seems suddenly to have become fecund. It should be clear that in pursuing this new Iranian direction, President Rowhani enjoys a broad (but not unlimited mandate), and a green light from the Supreme Leader. From the optic of the White House, a new direction in respect to Iran must come to be understood as the only logical outcome to the (domestically-induced) act by the American 'system' of baulking at even 'limited' US military intervention in Syria. (If Syria cannot be done ... what prospect Iran?)

But another aspect must also be tugging at the US Administration's consciousness: what the Syria intervention episode also underlines (at least for most in the region) is the beginning of a transition from a unipolar global order to something more complex – a system of big power relations, or perhaps, a system of relationships between powerful coalitions. On the debit side (from the Western optic), its customary perquisite of resort to unilateral action is becoming much, much harder in the face of significant headwinds, but the shift in the global order also might not be all bad for the West, if it can come to terms with the new realities.

Whilst an earlier 'inflection point' foregone effectively iced over the region and its political divisions into their present highly polarized form, an 'undoing' of that earlier lost opportunity could well change many things. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often given as the key to strategic change in the region; but for reasons too complex to rehearse in a short space, the 'key' to that 'key' and much more (including Syria) might well lie in Tehran.

'But what will become of our friends in the Gulf?' is what we imagine will be the response of some readers. As one analyst notes, Iran of course will help Saudi Arabia make this transition, as the latest appointment of Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani as the Supreme Leader's representative in the Supreme National Security Council signals to Riyadh. Its significance can be understood by the fact that Shamkhani was once decorated a decade ago – it may seem light years away – by none other than King Abdullah himself, for fostering Iran-Saudi ties. The admiral was at that time serving as Iran's defence minister in President Khatami's cabinet. But there is also a less well-known history between the new Iranian President and Saudi Arabia that may prompt the Saudis at least to listen. As one former diplomat noted, 'the Persians and the Sunni Sheikhs quarrel all the time, but also can patch up without outsiders' help'.

This may be true, but Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states – if this 'point of inflection' were to become truly pregnant – will none the less have to contend with the fire that they themselves have lit in the region, which is already singeing the hems of their cloaks. The consequences may be profound. But what is the alternative? Their present policy, on the other hand, effectively amounts to rushing around the regional brush fires with a bellows (also known as a Prince Bandar).

Israel's Prime Minister seems more intent on discrediting Israel from any serious influence on US or European thinking by his florid accusations of Iranian perfidy, which at least are consistent with his beliefs – if not very helpful for Israelis contemplating the possibility of dealing with significant

strategic change in their neighbourhood. With Syria's chemical weapons on the way out, and with Iran disavowing nuclear weapons, it is becoming clearer, too, that the whole proliferation issue needs to be re-thought: changes in the nature of weapons and the move to cyber warfare, make the distinction between conventional and weapons of mass destruction less and less clear. We need a new weapons proliferation definition, and an anti-proliferation policy that focuses on de-escalating *militarization*, rather than one that simply concentrates WMD in the hands of certain parties (an outcome which breaches the intent of the original Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty bargain between states). It will become ever less realistic for western states to accord Israel – in this new context – a privileged (nuclear and other) exceptionalism.

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