

The Middle East between stasis and evolution: the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran

A critical review of the lecture “The International Relations of the Middle East: Continuity and Change” by professor Fawaz A. Gerges held at NAMEPES Summer School, June 21st, 2022

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Introduction

During a lecture held at NAMEPES Summer School on June 21st, 2022, professor Fawaz A. Gerges reflected on what has changed and what has stayed the same in the international relations of the Middle East. By employing a postcolonial approach to the subject, prof. Gerges highlighted how a set of historical factors owing largely to external influence have determined the political development of the region, which currently finds itself in a moment of transition. In this brief essay, the tenets of continuity and change in the Middle East outlined by Gerges are discussed and applied to the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Middle East: definitions and history

The Middle East has always been a critical geographic, cultural, and political juncture. The definition of the region varies based on the characteristics considered, with some restricting its boundaries to the Arab world, and others embracing a wider swath of land which includes non-Arab states (Turkey, Israel, and Iran). The latter definition of the Middle East shall be taken as a reference point in this paper.

The international relations of the Middle East are significant in that they provide a framework to understand the historical developments which have shaped the region in the last century. The end of World War II in 1945 largely concluded the period of formal colonialism in the region as perpetuated by European powers, especially France and Britain. However, the physical retreat of occupying powers and the rise of local leaders throughout the region could not hide the fact that former colonial rulers, now rebranded as potential ‘friendly’ allies, maintained their grip on the internal and external developments of the Middle East. The onset of bipolar confrontation in the context of the Cold War transformed the Middle East into a particularly complex battlefield where national interests and great power competition collided, often violently. Colonial legacies were not limited to political alliances but were also visible in the institutional setups of the newly independent states, in the configurations of their societies and in the ways their cultures, ideals and values had been irrevocably influenced by the experience of colonial subjugation. In this context, it is important to consider postcolonialism as a tool to understand the permanence of dynamics and discourse shaped and inherited by colonial domination. Furthermore, what must be understood is how soft power has, in some ways, borne much more fruit in terms of influencing the long-term development of decolonized states in line with the models proposed by colonial powers than physical coercion has.

The end of the Cold War, far from representing a halt in the trend of external meddling in Middle Eastern affairs, determined the beginning of what can be described as the ‘American moment’ of US global hegemony. While this phenomenon was global in scope, the region experienced several momentous instances of American unilateralism. Nowadays, tides have shifted, and while interpretations of the current phase by scholars vary, there is a wide consensus that the Middle East is in a moment of transition the implications of which are yet to be grasped.

Throughout the changes of the last century, up to today, there are elements of Middle Eastern statehood, politics and international relations which have stood steadfast. Whereas the retreat of colonial control nominally endowed local populations with the power to determine their own destinies, the very borders which these new states inhabited were drawn by imperial design and soon became objects of contention. However, it was not just the externally imposed nature of these states’ borders which served as a reminder of the unbreakable link which bound them to their former masters, but the very institutional structures and elites which formed the bedrock of these independent nations continued to be intrinsically dependent on foreign support to ensure their survival. This inherent dependence has transformed the Middle East in what Carl Brown defined famously as a “penetrated region”, which carries the weight of colonial legacies in terms of international relations.¹ Another central tenet of continuity in the region is the complicated role of sovereignty. In the postcolonial Middle East, sovereignty is not only fragile, in the sense that elites have failed to cement their credibility *vis-à-vis* the people and are susceptible to the threat of revolution, but it is also not salient, as international powers and even regional states routinely disregard each other’s sovereignty in the pursuit of their own interests. Sovereignty has failed to truly affirm itself and therefore has created a system of fragile states, which call into question many realist assumptions used to interpret the international relations of the region.² Finally, the Middle East is characterized by the permanence of geostrategic rivalries, the so-called ‘geostrategic curse’. Rivalries which have entrenched themselves, often motivated by elites as rooted in ideology, serve more to maintain the status quo than to pursue any sort of normative victory. Truthfully, in-depth analysis often shows that many rivals enjoy more convergence than divergence in their ultimate objectives. Indeed, just as maintaining the status quo was a major objective in the Middle East of both the USA and the USSR during the

¹ Carl L. Brown, *International politics and the Middle East: Old rules, dangerous game* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1984), 3-5.

² Raymond Hinnebusch, "Foreign Policy in the Middle East," in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 1.

Cold War, the same can be said nowadays in the continued struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, for example.

Regardless of these continuities, evolutions in the political landscape of the Middle East are significant and not to be overlooked. The international political landscape is changing rapidly, as many see the United States' progressive retrenchment as a sign that the days of American hegemony are not only over, but that Washington is no longer interested in pursuing a Middle East-centric foreign policy and is rather looking to pivot to the Far East. The space left by the Americans will not remain empty, as Russia and China have long been edging closer to regional leaders by adopting anti-imperialist (thus anti-Western) tones and exploiting their opposition to Western hegemony as a key to engage even pro-Western allies, such as the Gulf monarchies and Israel. Russia's influence is more political, China's is more economic; nonetheless, their decisive impact on traditional balances is already widely felt, with the most striking example being the region's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.³ Additionally, non-Arab states are slowly taking over the traditional leading role from Arab states in the region. With Israel building new alliances and pursuing normalization of diplomatic ties, owing also to its skillful sidelining of the Palestinian issue (which many regional leaders themselves have found more favorable for their interests to ignore),⁴ Turkey rising and Iran fighting for its power in the Gulf, non-Arab states are increasingly holding the keys to the castle. In the meantime, institutions which protected the idea of people-led rule in the Middle East are breaking down while autocratic power is strengthened and strongmen rise up, and the progressive degradation of environmental conditions threatens the very existence of many states in the region.

The case of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a good testing ground to assess how the continuities and changes identified by prof. Gerges play out in practice on the national level. Iran is a country whose recent history features one of the most consequential revolutions of modernity, which brought down a monarchy which traced its roots back to Cyrus the Great and installed an Islamic government which ultimately rests in the hand of a single person, the infallible Supreme Leader, who reigns in God's name until the return of the Mahdi. When Iran's revolution brought the Shah's Western-backed government crashing down in a whirlwind of protest and ideological

³ Martin Indyk, "The Price of Retrenchment," *Foreign Affairs* 14 February 2022.

⁴ Marwan Muasher, "Normalization of Arab Countries with Israel: Regional Geopolitical Aspects of the Agreements," *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2021* (2021): 58.

rhetoric, many were left wondering where it all came from. Certainly not many had paid attention to the social turmoil which the Shah's Westernizing reforms had created within the country.⁵ The 1979 revolution challenged modernization theory, and it called into question longstanding beliefs in the resilience of regional strongmen in the face of popular pushback. And, above all, it fueled the flames of fear in the West of Islam as the complex ideology which underscored the fiery new Republic, whose ideas they could or would not attempt to understand and discern from the fundamentalism of those who exploited it for their own political gain.

In many ways, Iranian history is defined by change. However, as the lofty slogans of revolution soon started to reveal a different reality, many began recognizing familiar traits in the new Islamic Republic. Whereas Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and his successor and current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, never spared anything but venom for the monarchy and the corrupt West which had propped it up, the Islamic leadership soon fell into repressive and oppressive patterns similar to those which had characterized the Shah's regime. (In a way, the continuity of political oppression, undemocratic and arbitrary rule from the monarchy to the *velayat-e faqih* reminds of the famous quote from Giuseppe Tomasi de Lampedusa's 1958 novel *Il Gattopardo*: "If we want everything to stay as it is, everything has to change".) Furthermore, Iranian foreign policy maintained a continuity in that leaders maintained a perception of Iran as a hegemonic power in the region. Even the Islamic Republic's current fight for the development of its nuclear program shows continuity with the Shah's efforts, who insisted on ensuring Iran's nuclear capacity counter to Western demands.⁶

The question of sovereignty in Iran demonstrates once again the fragility of this concept in the region. Sovereignty within Iran is fragile because the government is unable to effectively control internal affairs as it struggles with other powerful forces, particularly the security establishment. Nowadays, the security forces have created something of a shadow state which exerts tremendous influence on Iranian domestic and foreign policy.⁷ In addition, the long shadow of the Supreme Leader, who has a strong relationship with the security apparatus, weighs heavy on the government's freedom of action by constitutional design. This creates a domestic situation in which identifying the ultimate source of authority is complex and thus sovereignty is uncertain. Furthermore, Iran's pervasive, destabilizing influence on foreign countries' internal affairs through proxies and by direct intervention clearly marks its deep-set tendency to disregard the saliency of sovereignty. Actions such as the support for the Houthis

⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2008), 155 ff.

⁶ Abbas Milani, "The Shah's Atomic Dreams," *Foreign Policy* 29 December 2010.

⁷ Ali Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Iranian Politics," *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (2008).

in Yemen, for Hezbollah and for Shiite militias in Iraq, and open attacks on neighboring countries such as the recent IRGC strike in Iraqi Kurdistan display this tendency. Iranian leaders believe it is their right to maintain a neighborhood which falls in line with their political and security interests; debates over the significance of violating their neighbors' sovereignty are irrelevant.

As previously mentioned, Iran is among the non-Arab states which have risen and taken up the powers which were historically held by Arab nations. However, in continuity with the past, Iran remains vulnerable in light of its dependence from foreign powers. Iran looks increasingly to China and Russia to gain political support, evade Western sanctions, and salvage its crippled economy. Recent agreements of cooperation with Moscow and Beijing exemplify this, as does Iran's strongly pro-Russia stance in the context of the war in Ukraine. However, Iran's negotiating position with regard to the nuclear deal shows that its leaders are acutely aware of the need to obtain sanctions relief because they recognize that their economy is dependent on engagement with global – Western – markets.

Several of the elements of continuity and change outlined by prof. Gerges can be clearly recognized in the case of Iran. After 1979, many observers saw the country as falling into a sort of stasis in the grip of the new Islamic leadership, having rejected everything about pre-revolutionary Iran. However, a more careful analysis shows how the new regime actually preserved some of the previous one's policy lines (and oppressive behaviors), and how, regardless of perceptions, the country has undergone changes in line with the wider evolutions in the region.

Conclusion

The Middle East is experiencing profound transition, yet there are some constants which allow observers to recognize familiar patterns. The question is not so much whether continuity and change (co-)exist in the Middle East, but to rather to what extent these seemingly contradictory factors influence each other, and whether, at a given moment, one takes the lead. At the present moment, global change is spilling over to the region, but the outcomes thereof are hard to define. This is certainly the case for Iran, which finds itself in a delicate position, between nuclear negotiations, the pressure of sanctions, the fragility of the government and its increasingly complex relations with Russia and China, especially in the wake of the war in Ukraine. Whether a catalyst for true evolution in the Islamic Republic is appearing on the horizon is still unclear, but the state is certainly not as robust as it claims to be. Iran thus acts as a topical example

which proves the validity of the theses formulated by prof. Gerges in relation to continuity and change in the international relations of the Middle East and continues to serve as a starting point for broader analyses of the geopolitical evolution of the region.

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