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The Geopolitics of Arab Turmoil

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In 1822, the Foreign Minister of Great Britain, George Canning, sent a memo to his Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, in which he laid out what he considered, should be the basic principle of Great Britain's foreign policy:

> "[We should not consider] the wishes of any other government, or the interests of any other people, except in so far as those wishes, those feelings and those interests may, or might, concur with the just interests of England."

At that time, Great Britain was the hegemonic power of the world-system and was able very largely to impose its wishes on the rest of the world.

Today, in the Arab countries, there is great turmoil. And, as the turmoil unfolds, there are a large number of countries which are pursuing their interests in the region. The principal problem is that there is now no hegemonic power. The consequence is a great deal of huffing and puffing, but the multiple geopolitical actors seem both hesitant and ineffectual. They talk far more than they act.

A great deal of geopolitical attention is focused on Syria, where the regime and its internal opponents have been in escalating contention for some time. Who is fighting whom and for what reasons is a matter on which the narratives of the two sides diverge totally. The Syrian government is opposed to any outside involvement in Syria's internal struggles, whereas its opponents constantly call for such outside involvement - on their side, of course.

The United States, erstwhile hegemonic power, has called publicly for Bashar al-Assad's renunciation as president and for a regime that the United States would consider more representatives of the Syrian people. It has in addition called upon the government to cease its internal military actions against the opposition. It has sought, unsuccessfully, to get the U.N. Security Council to adopt supportive resolutions. It has imposed unilaterally economic sanctions on Syria. It has said it would furnish humanitarian aid to Syrians inside the country and in exiles. It consults regularly with other powers about how to move forward.

What it has not done is to engage in direct military action in Syria, alone or in consort with other countries. Most recently, the U.S. Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta gave an interview to the Associated Press, in which he said that, despite constant calls for a "no-fly zone" over Syria, such plans are "not on the front burner." To do this would require a "major, major policy decision."

There seem to be various reasons for this. It would not have the legitimation of a Security Council resolution, as in Libya or at least as the NATO powers claimed the resolution gave them.

To be sure, the United States engaged in military action in Iraq in 2003 despite the failure to obtain a comparable U.N. resolution. However, this is the second explanation. Retrospectively, many seem to feel that the Iraqi intervention was not all that successful, and there is a fear of repeating the negative consequences of that intervention.

The third explanation is that senior U.S. military officers believe that they are already overstretched in the Middle East, and that the Syrian military would offer more serious resistance to outside intervention than Gaddafi's military was able to offer.

The fourth explanation might be summarized as war-weariness on the part of the U.S. public. According to recent polls, a majority now consider that the U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were mistakes, ones that ought not to be repeated.

A fifth explanation may be that, despite the U.S. definition of the Baathist regime as unfriendly, it seems to have serious uncertainties, perhaps grave reservations, about what would happen in Syria were the Baathist regime to fall. It worries about the possibility that an al-Qaeda-like group might obtain considerable power in a post-Baathist Syria.

It also believes there could be a power struggle among factions that would create a situation comparable to what happened in Afghanistan after the fall of the communist regime in 1992. The Alevi supporters of the present regime might retreat to their mountainous area of origin and continue fighting from there. There seems also to be a fear of oppression of the minorities by a successor regime (including of Christians).

In short, the United States is indeed pursuing its geopolitical interests. But there is considerable debate in the United States about what that interest is, and whether it has the geopolitical power to affect the situation in the direction it thinks best for the United States. The reaction of those inside Syria to U.S. actions and non-actions has been negative on both sides. The Syrian government has condemned the United States for its pressure on the president to step down. The opposition forces have publicly expressed their deception with the United States for not intervening in the way they wish, and have proclaimed that they cannot count on serious U.S. action.

The two ex-colonial powers, Great Britain and France, waffle like the United States, only more intensively. The condemnations of al-Assad were earlier and stronger. But the reluctance to consider direct military action also seems earlier and stronger. The Libyan interventions demonstrated the limits to their military effectiveness without direct U.S. collaboration.

Julian Burger, *The Guardian*'s diplomatic editor, wrote on Aug. 13: "The US, Britain and France are scrambling to retain their influence amid fears that most support from the Gulf States has been diverted towards extremist Islamic groups." Berger says that Jon Wilks, Britain's special envoy to the Syrian opposition, went to Istanbul to meet with a senior representative of the Syrian National Council. Wilks stressed two matters. Great Britain wished to keep the Syrian violence from spreading to Turkey. And Great Britain informed the opposition leaders that respect for human rights and minorities was "a condition of future cooperation."

France's Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius believes that the Sarkozy government had overinvested in the Syrian National Council, and was urging support for Manaf Tlass, a

prominent Sunni military defector from the regime. The problem for Great Britain and France, as for the United States, is not only whom to support and what form of support to offer but also whether they have the clout to affect the internal situation significantly.

Do the Gulf States have this clout? They too are pursuing their own geopolitical interests. However, the two most active states, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, are not pursuing identical policies.

Qatar has been quite open about supplying funds and arms to opponents of the Syrian regime, perhaps especially to Salafist and jihadist groups. Qatar has been attempting for over a decade now to become a major player in the Middle East, replicating the role it played in Libya with a similar role in Syria. In pursuing this policy, is it not also trying to forestall any putative Saudi attempt to absorb all the Gulf States?

And Saudi Arabia? It seems as ambivalent as the United States. Saudi Arabia projects itself as the defender of Sunni Muslims everywhere, especially against Shi'a, and notably against Iran. But not all Sunni Muslims accept a Saudi leadership role, given their commitment to Wahhabi Islam. The Saudi regime does not regard all Sunni Muslims with a complacent, indulgent eye.

Saudi Arabia has great difficulties ensuring such a leadership role. The Saudi regime worries about two other Sunni forces strengthening their Middle Eastern position. The Muslim Brotherhood espouses a different version of Sunni orthodoxy. Furthermore, the Brotherhood's *locus classicus* remains politically and theologically in Egypt. Its current revival in Egypt (as well as elsewhere) may permit Egypt to resume its erstwhile role as the primary state in the Arab world eclipsing Saudi Arabia.

Worse yet, for the Saudis, is the renewed strength of al-Qaeda, which is committed to overthrowing the Saudi regime it considers corrupt and un-Islamic.

The Saudi problem in Syria is that the opposition groups are under Brotherhood and/or al-Qaeda and/or secularist leadership - none of which makes the Saudis rejoice. So, despite their wish to clip the wings of Iran and their vocal assumption of guarantor of Sunni Islam, it is not sure that they have been supplying many arms to the opposition forces.

Turkey's importance in the region has steadily grown. Its desire to be a major player absorbs ever more of their diplomacy. But it is hard to know exactly what policy Turkey is pursuing. It is clear that they have become quite critical of al-Assad and the Baathist regime. They make statements that are increasingly similar to those made by U.S. leaders. They offer refuge (albeit a very cramped refuge) to opposition Syrians who wish to cross the border.

But they also insist that Syrian opposition forces may not organize violence from within Turkish borders. The Turks resist the talk of a no fly zone. The support they seem to be giving the opposition is rhetorical and humanitarian, but not military. Furthermore, the Turkish government is preoccupied with the Kurdish movements, both inside Turkey and in

neighbouring countries, including of course Syria. Kurds in Syria seem to have taken advantage of the turmoil to organize control over Kurdish areas. And the Baathist regime is unwilling (or perhaps unable) to curb this. This both upsets and rattles the Turkish government. Once again, therefore, more talk than action.

Egypt's primary object is reestablishment as the leading Arab country. For this, the new regime will seek to recalibrate its relations to the key issue, Palestine, without too strongly breaking from the United States. Syria is secondary in this delicate task.

Iraq and Jordan find themselves in dilemmas, worrying that the Syrian turmoil may affect their own fragile internal stability. They both accept opposition Syrian refugees, but both seem to force them into tightly controlled camps, denying these refugees any political/military activity. This has led to some of the exiles actually returning to Syria, feeling they are more comfortable there. The Palestinians share this same prudent attitude.

Lebanon's prime geopolitical interest is to maintain the extremely delicate current internal arrangements. But given the close ties the various Lebanese groups have to forces in Syria, it seems very difficult to maintain a neutral stance. France is strongly urging them to do just that.

Israel cannot be ignored as an actor. For some time now, the Israeli regime has made its number one concern the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran. It is not obvious that they can prevent that - precisely what worries them. Where does Syria, Iran's key geopolitical ally, fit into this picture? Syria has also been de facto a relatively calm neighbour of Israel. While Israel wants to weaken Iran (and the fall of the regime would no doubt do that), it is aware that the forces that would replace the regime would likely be far less of a relatively calm neighbour. This makes Israel almost mute on the Syrian turmoil.

Iran, a giant in the region, seeks geopolitical recognition of its right to inclusion in decision-making about the region's future, specifically including Syria. This is exactly what the United States and Israel refuse Iran. So, Iran has nothing to lose and everything to gain by working to sustain the Syrian regime, and offering itself as a key "honest broker" in Syria.

Russia and China have concrete concerns - naval bases, energy resources. But there are graver issues for them. They have been insisting that what happened in Libya cannot be allowed to happen again. They believe that Great Britain, France, and the United States used an ambiguous U.N. resolution to use military force to overthrow the regimes and reinforce thereby their geopolitical interests.

They perceive the United States as an erstwhile hegemonic power that is not yet ready to acknowledge its decline, which unwillingness they see as the greatest danger in the region. They use their veto in the Security Council to prevent a potential collapse of order in the whole region. They have no particular fondness for al-Assad or the Baathist regime *per se*. They await their opportunity to work for a political solution to Syria's internal conflicts.

The principal conclusion from this survey is that the various powers neutralize each other. None today has much ability to affect Syria's internal politics. They are all condemned to talk more than they act. The consequences of this geopolitical impasse for internal developments in Syria remain therefore very uncertain. In the end, the internal actors are very much on their own.

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