

ALLIANCE POLITICS AND THE NEW POWER EQUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*Dr. Nazir Hussain and Amna Javed**

Abstract

Middle East is a conflict-ridden region with multiple alliances in its domain; alliances are a fluctuating factor in the region because they often do not sustain. Now, that there is multi-polarity in the region, alliances would automatically be affected. Moreover, with the contemporary crises in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, alliance formations have become more intricate. Alliance politics has become a dominating force in the realm of Middle East since more foreign powers like U.S, Russia and China have become tangled. The regional power-play among Iran, Israel and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) alongwith Turkey has an impact on alliance formations as well. Then, due to the convoluted equation of state to state and state to non-state interactions, alliance politics has become quite significant. Alliance politics between internal and external states in Middle East will have overarching impacts for the region that can to an extent control the future dynamics of Middle East.

Keywords: Alliances, Power Equation, Middle East, Non-state Actors, State Actors.

Introduction

According to Stephen Walt, alliances are of immense importance in the international arena, once an alliance is formed it has certain effects on international politics. Alliances are, “a formal or informal commitment for security cooperation between two or more states.”¹ However, a detailed analysis reveals that alliances are critical in nature, which follows certain ideas and factors. Alliances are of many sorts, the choice depends on the actors’ will as well as the circumstances under which they are formed; militarily, there are offensive or defensive alliances, politically, there are symmetrical or asymmetrical alliances, ideological alliances, institutionalized alliances like NATO, security alliances and strategic alliances. Moreover, all forms of alliances have variant structures as well as functions and also are differentiated in terms of security arrangements.

States would disband any alliance if there is a radical change in the threat perception. This threat is of an external nature and states would no longer be compelled to be a part of alliance where the threat no longer seems relevant or states

¹Dr. Nazir Hussain is Director School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad and Amna Javed is Security Analyst focussing on Middle East affairs.

have now come across more favorable means of security. Secondly, alliances erode because there is a declining credibility, the alliance members cannot defeat or deter their opponents and thus they may re-align with the opponents. It also takes into notice the idea of commitment from the partners. Lastly, most alliances collapse because of the changing domestic politics. This incorporates the changing traditional, ideological or ethnic links between the ally states. Moreover, a domestic competition which means that the political elites try to take control of the situation by jeopardizing the alliance, a regime change and massive ideological splits.

All in all, alliances are important and a tricky business and a highly multi-layered concept, which takes capabilities, populations and credibility into account. Stephen Walt maintains that the future of alliances will be significantly different and somewhat more complex but nonetheless, alliances will keep on being a major part of global and regional politics.

Historical Analysis of Alliance Systems in Middle East

Middle East is ripe with alliance systems and history bears witness to it. Throughout time, the regional dynamics have been alluring towards alliances, which have indeed created the regional structure as it stands today. The region actually follows a pattern of shifting alliance structures. It is a pattern, which incorporates military, political and ideological aspects and goes on as such;

- **1920-1948:** The alliance politics began because of the imperial powers' own material and political interests, which sometimes assimilated the monarchies of Middle East. The British had cultivated an indirect rule in Middle East by establishing monarchies in Iraq, Transjordan and later in KSA. This indirect rule was a form of status-quo to status-quo alliance.² Moreover, in a bid to protect its own interests, Britain aligned itself with other European powers like France to break the Ottoman Empire during the First World War.³ But this alliance soon broke away as both imperial states sought to fight among themselves over the territories of the broken empire.⁴ During the two major world wars, the Allied and the Central/Axis powers practiced their alliance dynamics within the region as the 'war of interests' followed in Middle East.
- **1948-1990:** Soon after the end of World War II and the beginning of decolonization, the entire political map of the region began to change. With Britain and France pushed back, there were new powers; the US and the USSR. Before the Revolution, Iran had aligned itself with US and Israel. Moreover, the Saudis were also tilted towards the US. Hence, an alliance of US, Israel, Iran and KSA was dominating the entire system. Egypt to a large extent also aligned with the US initially. Iraq and Syria had openly declared their alliance with the USSR.⁵ These dynamics changed because the Post-

Revolution Iran became a state, which broke away from any alliance pattern with their idea of 'Neither East nor West.' During the era of the Cold War, Middle East had become a mid-ground for balancing of power and threat. The original alliance system vehemently shifted to something new. Syria, Egypt, Libya, South Yemen and to some parts even Iran were seen to be affiliated with the USSR.⁶ On the other side, Israel and KSA were still vocal allies of the US. Moreover, Turkey had moved away from Russia and joined the military NATO alliance with the US. Another factor, which dominated the alliance pattern, was the oil politics; this was an era, where in Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)—Iran and Iraq were at equal footing while Syria and KSA were allies.⁷ Quintessentially, the alliance patterns, which followed were more dependent on the regional states and were initially not subject to external motivations. Curiously all this changed following the pattern and more interestingly the alliance dynamics were on another level during the Iran-Iraq war. During the Iran-Iraq war, the alliance scheme was so confusing that the US and USSR both were behind Iraq. Moscow also silently supported Iran and later on propelled itself mainly behind Iran making for a short-term logistical alliance.⁸

- **1990-2008:** This period was also marked with intra-state conflicts where visible alliance systems were seen. For instance in case of Kuwait crisis, KSA actively supported Kuwait against Iraq. This was obviously a step away from the alliance structure, which had previously persisted. In 2003, the US attacked Iraq and re-entered the Middle East dynamics. All in all it showed the structure of the region as one filled with cracks especially since Russia was now at a set-back due to the Soviet disintegration. This paved the way for US to come out as a formidable power in the region and this was the time where US maneuvered the regional dynamics by forging sturdy alliance structures with not only the KSA and Egypt among other smaller Arab states but also Israel. The Global War on Terror (GWOT) propelled US-KSA and the US-Israel alliances as one of the strongest ever in the region. The ousting of Saddam Hussain, the antagonism towards Iran, the oil hegemony with the Arabs and the fight against global terrorism all pointed to the fact that US now governs the alliance structures. Although this alliance structure is one which still is intact even though there are visible craters but the alliance dynamics of power gradually subsided.
- **2008-2016:** This is an era wherein the US and its allies are not the sole powers within the region. With Russian advancement in the region new alliance equations have come up. U.S is no longer a dominating force since after the gradual failure of the GWOT along-with the emergence of Russia, the post Arab-Spring and the Syrian war, there is a new power centre in the shape of Russia-Iran-Turkey trifecta.⁹ Moreover, with China now militarily

involved means an added advantage to this trifecta. This goes to show that the shifty alliance politics have taken another leap towards the trifecta whilst pushing the US led alliances back.

Contemporary Power Equation in Middle East

The region of Middle East has turned out to be an amalgamation of alliance systems and a race for influence and ascendancy. The rudimentary notion is that the two factors combined have led the structure of power to be rather dismal. There are many contemporary features of the power equation in the regional dynamics and most of them follow a valid pattern of alliance formations. The major feature which goes on to make the power equation in the region revolves around the multiple conflicts and crises, which govern the region. Syrian conflict, Yemen crisis and the series of crises in Iraq and Libya stand out in this regard.

Engrossment of Core Foreign Powers

The phenomenon, which makes the entire power equation of Middle East a distinguished one is the heavy engrossment of various foreign actors with categorical influence. The fore-mentioned historical analysis gives an insight as to how the region has always been captive of various alliances commanded by foreign powers.

Altogether there are three major foreign actors involved in Middle Eastern power dynamics; US, Russia and China. This makes the region a zone of eccentric multi-polarity. The military, political and security involvement of these foreign actors make the region largely dependent on their interests and principles as well as policies. There was inevitable involvement of the US in the regional dynamics especially in the Syrian civil war, Libya and Iraq wars and even the Yemen crisis. The US has now a very vague policy framework in the region; singularly it grew closer to Iran and withdrew this stance, has a topsy relation with Turkey, is nagging on its alliance perimeters with KSA and has gone back to being steady with Israel. This also comes at a time when the conflicts and wars have become prolonged beyond imagination. Perhaps the US has out-played its interests and prolonged its presence in the region.¹⁰

Russia is making its way to the top of the power equation. Russia now has a heavy involvement in Syria, mainly to protect its old alliance with Assad. But it also has other things on its agenda, the military market of the region being one of them as well as trying to steer the region away from the US influence zone. This it aims to do by being politically and militarily vocal in Middle Eastern security dynamics, which begin from Syria. This will thrust Russia further the power equation and the alliance formations particularly with Iran and its allies.

Power Play of Regional Powers

Among the regional actors there is an inimical competition of authority, influence and sectarianism, which makes their power-play rather serious and severe. Middle East is one region where there is no particular regional hegemon but a high level of competition. Firstly, there is KSA which is the chief Sunni state having a distinctive dominance, which even though is waning, has a certain eminence. KSA is known for getting into various alliance formations with states which are status-quo in the international order.¹¹ This is directly aimed at curbing the eminence of Iran in Middle East. Even in the contemporary dynamics, KSA has maintained a visible stance and gotten itself into proxy wars with Iran, present example is Yemen.

Iran on the other hand is the chief Shi'ite state of the region and though it has seen ups-and-downs. Iran, in the contemporary dynamics in Middle East is vigorously involved in the Yemen and Syrian crises simultaneously.¹² It has successfully maneuvered itself by latching on and forming new alliances with new actors in the region; Russia and China are two examples. In due course of time, it might come out as a dominant power of the region.¹³

Then there is Israel, a state which is the only Jewish state in the region. In terms of military it is the most powerful state in the region. It actively maintains a solid alliance and partnership with the US for a long time. In terms of the power politics, Israel is at a strange place because it neither gets along with KSA nor with Iran nor had issues with Turkey as well. But it realizes how the states see Israel as a threat. In the current state of affairs, the region saw Israel and KSA on the same place regarding Iran's role in Syria. Furthermore, Turkey and Israel also had a rapprochement. It also seems that it has a fair share of monopoly in terms of Egypt which is now an auxiliary power. But the current role of Israel is to maintain guarded flexibility in the regional dynamics.

Finally, there is Turkey, which is a rising regional power in Middle East and comes with its own set of features for the region. In the current semantics it has gorged itself in the Syrian crisis and is calculating to do the same in Iraq, with power and influence. It did so whilst coordinating an alliance with Russia and Iran, which was rather unforeseeable. This guarantees that Turkey as a power will be there to stay in Middle East. But the paradoxical point is that it aims to be a balancer in the region while disrupting the balance of power.

Rise of Non-State Actors

Non-State Actors have always been an active part of the regional dynamics but they were never really an active part of the power equation. Yet the contemporary dynamics see a visible change in that setting. Then National Security Agencies (NSAs)

have over the years gained an exhausting relevance in Middle East because they have in a way come to dictate the terms of strategic and security environment of the region. In terms of number one cannot scale down as to how many of them exist because each armed group has a number of splinter groups.

In terms of number and strength, most NSAs exist in Syria alone because of the crisis. But other states are by no means devoid of their existence. Yemen and Palestine have a fair number of armed groups. Within Syria only, there are a number of factions which have a fair amount of importance. ISIS or Daesh is at the top of it followed by Al-Nusra, Ahrar-al-Sham, Free Syrian Army, PKK, Hezbollah, Syrian Islamic Front, Syria Martyrs' Brigade, Syria Islamic Liberation Front, *Tawhid Brigade* and Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades etc.¹⁴

In the Yemen crisis, there is a gory game of leverage between the Houthis which are known to be a proxy of Iran. Then there is AQAP (Al-Qaeda of Arab Peninsula) which is in direct conflict with the Houthis, Iran and the US. In fact it is because of the AQAP that the US was driven to enter Yemen crisis. Muslim Brotherhood then is one of the oldest factions particularly in the Levant. While many believe that they might be fading in importance but this is not exactly the case. It still maintains its position in Egypt and has a lot of splinters groups and still maintains political relevance.¹⁵ Hamas is another such faction within Palestine that is still active.

Politics of Alliances in Middle East

Politics is a complex idea not only as an independent element but as a product of many variables. One variable which gives rise to politics happens to be alliances and partnerships. But at the same time, politics itself give rise to alliance formations. This makes the two things run parallel to each other. Moreover, it also makes the region prone to politics of alliances which then go on to determine the strategic, security, political and economic turf of the region. It also needs to be considered that because of all of these existing features an explosion has emerged which gives birth to a hostile zone of political, ideological and military antagonism between various alliances.

State vs State Alliances

In the first place, because of the fact that the region has turned out to be a major zone of balancing power and threat, there is a rigorous clash of state alliances. Ever since foreign states began to interfere more and more, there has been an added pressure in the dynamics of alliance formation. Three factors govern the dynamics of state versus state alliances.

Firstly, there is the factor of ‘cultivation of influence.’ This owes much to the nuanced structure and system of the region. The clear example is the US alliance with the Arab states against Russia-Iran axis.¹⁶ The latter has clear manifestations in the Syrian crisis and might begin to get tangled in the Yemen conundrum.¹⁷ The main purpose for both sides happens to establish their own influence zones and power in the region in terms of politics, security, economics and military.

Secondly, there is the factor of ‘strategic calibration.’ The alliance systems have become somewhat dodgy and when any alliance dominates influence within the region, it can begin calibrating the strategic map of the region. This not only includes geo-strategic but economic and militarily strategic as well.¹⁸ Obviously the clear manifestation is that with US-KSA-Israel alliance there comes to the horizon of the region a much different strategic interplay, bargaining and monopoly. If the trifecta of Russia-Turkey-Iran becomes dominating, there is going to be a radical maneuvering in the strategic culture of the region.

Thirdly, there is the deeply rooted, yet carefully concealed factor of ‘economic sustainability.’ This is another feature which contributes to the politics of alliances. In this context ‘economic’ is a broad term, which includes the management of resources, oil and markets of Middle East. The US-Arab alliance in this case has a clash with Russia-China-Iran alliance in Middle Eastern dynamics.¹⁹ There is hostile competition of arms market, oil production and sale as well resource management.

State vs Non-State Alliances

There has been an inevitable rise in the Non-State Actors, they have gained due importance in alignments, balancing, bandwagoning and proxy-alliances. The relevance of these actors is such that states have in very unprecedented ways, support them that it seems that short-term proxy alliances have been formed. In Syrian conflict alone there have been partnerships forged between various state actors and non-state groups for both political and military purposes.

One example would be the US tactical and military help of the Arabs and Kurdish armed groups to fight Assad and ISIS respectively.²⁰ This is a tactical and short lived military alignment between the parties. Russia also tried to forge a partnership with the Kurds in Syrian crisis,²¹ which reveals that more states are interested in making full-on use of non-state actors. Another example would be the Iranian support and partnership with various NSAs in the region. Iran has, throughout history supported and a formed reliable alliance with many mainstream NSAs and out of these, Hezbollah is one of the best known example.²² Then there is the relationship which Iran had with Hamas and in the current domain, Iran also backs the Houthis in

Yemen crisis; it all points out that in the power equation and politics of alliances, NSAs have a certain prominence.

Regional Alliances

The most intriguing phenomenon perhaps happens to be the highly muddled politics of regional alliances in Middle East.

First happens to be the Syrian-Iranian alliance which is of dense political, military and strategic alliance. This is one alliance which arrived on the surface out of mutual antagonism and today stands tall amidst all the crises. On the theatre of the high-political strata, the Syrian-Iranian alliance structure has been promising. At the same time because of the power it gained in the regional politics, it became the cause of many conflicts as well.²³

Secondly, there is probability of a KSA-Israel alliance because of the common ground which the two states have found. This almost-alliance was and still is considered highly volatile as well as unpredictable. The reason happens to be the fact that both states have been extremely hostile to each other in the past. Yet to topple the Iranian position, the two came together and now they seem to be growing closer.²⁴

Finally, there is a very dangerous spectacle occurring in the region. The region has always been a ring of sectarian conflicts and for this reason two sets of alliances exist there; the 'Sunni Axis' with KSA, Egypt, Qatar and Bahrain and the 'Shia Crescent' with Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. This alliance in a way dictates all other alliance structures between internal as well as external actors in a bid of sectarian cum statist conflict.²⁵

Implications and Future Discourse

Middle East is a highly volatile and unpredictable region and to understand the future course of action or the impacts is a notion beyond the reach of anyone. Yet with each aspect of the regional semantics, there arise certain variables, which make the task a bit easy and within grasp. As for the implication of the politics of alliance, three mighty factors emerge.

Firstly, alliance politics has made the entire region a precinct of instability. Middle East has now been turned into a one-way road towards instability because with each alliance there emerges a new conflict, which turns destructive as well as explosive in nature. This makes the region highly tumultuous and implores more foreign actors to enter into its foyer. Naturally with each entity meddling in the regional dynamics, instability arises. Alliances have actually made the region more vulnerable because it presents Middle East as a region full of cracks of internal and

external disabilities, which outside forces try to amend by forming alliances. Secondly, the 'state to non-state' alliances have made the region a hub for intra-proxy wars i.e. wars between various proxies and alliances. Yemen crisis, Libya and Iraq and most importantly Syria are all violent examples. Of-course alliances are not the only cause but they have served as a means as well as an end. Because there are more alliances between the states with their own favoring non-state actors, a very complicated edifice has raised which means that with every clash of interest between them, intra-proxy wars will be propelled. More the alliances, more complicated the power equation becomes and more proxy wars come to the surface. Thirdly, the Middle Eastern arms market has become not only rigorous but more hostile. Because of foreign actors' heavy involvement in the region, which has led to fluctuating alliance systems and the subsequent rise of NSAs, the arms market has become a place which foreign actors can manipulate and the regional powers can utilize while the NSAs can strengthen.

Conclusion

Alliance formation is already a very complicated issue and in Middle East it has an added contour of complexity and volatility. The alliance structures in the region are generally shaky and keep changing with the altering events. Because of various crises, the history saw alliances being made and quickly dismembered. Even today the same is the case and perhaps it will only get more complicated with time and the proliferation of foreign actor involvement. Standing in multi-polarity from within and outside, Middle East has an open ended politics of alliances. The politics of alliances follows a pattern of over-lapping and contrasting as well as contradictory state interests. Political and military alliances are the most prominent ones in the region and it also seems that it is an odd mixture of symmetrical and asymmetrical alliance. Russia is now the state which might guide and dictate the politics of alliances in the region alongside Iran and Turkey. This does not mean that the US will only be on a stand-by mode. It will participate in the alliance politics and do so in a typical military based fashion. Furthermore, with China involved, the game will become more intertwined and a surprising feature happens to be the propensity by which Non-state actors are on the rise and participating in the regional dynamics.

NOTES

- ¹ Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse?" *Survival*, 39:1, (1997): 156-179.
- ² John Middleton, *World Monarchies and Dynasties*, (London: Routledge, 2013): 201.
- ³ Mehran Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East: A Political History since the First World War*, 3rd Edition, (California: University of California Press, 2011): 15.
- ⁴ Nazir Hussain, *Strategic Dynamics of West Asia*, (Islamabad: Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2010): 123.
- ⁵ Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005):78-89.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ilan Berman, "The Bear is Back: Russia's Middle Eastern Adventures" *National Review*, February 18, 2005.
- ⁹ "Russia-Iran-Turkey Alliance Most Effective in Solving Syrian Crisis" *RT News*, December 27, 2016.
- ¹⁰ Stephen M. Walt, "The United States Should Admit It No Longer Has a Middle East Policy" *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2016.
- ¹¹ Sarah Almukhtar and Karen Yourish, "Old, New and Unusual Alliances in Middle East" *New York Times*, March 30, 2015.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ See, Nazir Hussain and Mansoor Ahmed, 'Rising Iran: Implications for the Middle East and Pakistan' *Strategic Studies*, 36:2, summer 2016.
- ¹⁴ Aron Lund, "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria" *Combating Terrorist Centre*, August 27, 2013.
- ¹⁵ Micheal Bassin, "Muslim Brotherhood Starts to Splinter" *The Times of Israel*, July 11, 2013.
- ¹⁶ Micheal Rubin, "Russia and Iran Are Closer Than Ever Before—and Their Military Alliance Keeps Expanding" *Business Insider*, December 23, 2016.
- ¹⁷ Yuri Barmin, "Russia's Yemen Strategy Comes into Focus" *Russia Direct*, April 1, 2015.
- ¹⁸ L. Carl Brown, "Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East" *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997.
- ¹⁹ John Turner, "Great Powers as Client States in a Middle East Cold War" *Middle East Policy Council*, 19:3 (2012).
- ²⁰ Patrick Clawson ed., "Syrian Kurds as a US Ally; Cooperation and Complications" *Policy Focus* 150, The Washington Institute, (November 18, 2016): 20-27.
- ²¹ Joseph V. Micallef, "The Enemy of my Enemy: Russia and the Kurds Reshape the Syrian Civil War" *Huffington Post*, February 20, 2016.
- ²² Chafic Choucair, "Hezbollah in Syrian Crisis: Gains, Losses and Changes" *Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies*, June 1, 2016.
- ²³ Jubin M. Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment" *Ortagudu Etutleri*, 4:2, (January 2013): 31-54.
- ²⁴ Ben Caspit, "Is Israel Forming an Alliance with Egypt and Saudi Arabia?" *Al-Monitor*, April 13, 2016.
- ²⁵ Sarah Almukhtar, Sergio Pecanha and Tim Wallace, "Behind Stark Political Divisions, a More Complex Map of Sunnis and Shiites" *New York Times*, January 5, 2016.