



The new order in West Asia

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How Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey are competing for influence

- When protests erupted on Arab streets in late 2010 and in 2011, felling deeply entrenched dictators such as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, it was certain that the changes in government would alter the regional dynamics as well.
- Eight years later, it is evident that the Arab world has changed, but not in the way many had predicted.
- The structures of the old Arab world have been either destroyed or shaken, but without fundamentally altering the domestic politics in Arab countries.

The backdrop of history

- There have been multiple power centres in the Arab region, at least since the second half of the 19th century when the Ottoman Sultans shifted their focus from the East to the West.
- The waning influence of the Ottomans in the Arab region created a vacuum which was filled by emerging regional leaders such as Muhammad Ali of Egypt, the Hashemites in central Arabia and the Mediterranean region, and the Al-Saud family in the Arabian peninsula.
- In post-war West Asia, Egypt remained the most influential Arab country.
- The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan maintained its influence in the Mediterranean region, while Saudi Arabia was confined to the Arabian peninsula.
- When Egypt and Jordan were in relative decline, particularly after the 1967 war with Israel, Iraq rose under the leadership of the Baathists.
- Though there were deep divisions between these countries, one point of convergence was “stability”.
- Neither the monarchs nor the dictators in the Arab world wanted any threats to their grip on power.
- This order started to age much before the Arab protests.

The reign of the Saudis

- Saudi Arabia was generous in helping the Sisi regime.
- In the event, what we have now is a weaker Egypt ruled by a military dictator who's increasingly dependent on the Saudi-UAE axis.
- In the Arab world, Saudi Arabia doesn't face a real challenge to its leadership now.
- The U.S. and the Arab nations also announced plans to create a Middle East Strategic Alliance, also referred to as the Arab NATO, which is a transnational Arab security entity under Saudi leadership.
- The common enemy of this bloc is Saudi Arabia's main geopolitical and ideological rival in the region, Iran.
- Riyadh has been aggressive in taking on Iran in recent years, be it the anti-Iran campaign it is spearheading globally (in the U.S., Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman compared the Iranian regime to Hitler's Nazi rule), the increasingly high military spend, or the desire to take on Iran's proxies (interference in Lebanon's politics or the war on Yemen).
- Within the Arab world, Saudi Arabia has made it clear that it will not allow alternative power centres to rise, and never from its backyard.

Multipolar region

- In relative terms, Riyadh has consolidated its position among the Arab countries.
- But its quest to become a major regional power faces serious challenges.
- The problem begins with its own inexperience.
- Second, Iran is hardly a pushover.
- Third, there is a third pole in today's West Asia: Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey.
- While Turkey is not aligned with Iran either, it has shown willingness to cooperate with the Iranians on matters of mutual interest — such as the Kurdistan issue and the Syrian conflict — while its ties with Saudi Arabia have steadily deteriorated.
- West Asia's Muslim landscape is now multipolar: Saudi Arabia, as the leader of the Arab world, is trying to expand its influence across the region; Iran is continuing to resist what it sees as attempts to scuttle its natural rise; and Turkey is returning to a shaken region to re-establish its lost glory.
- This multi-directional competition, if not confrontation, will shape West Asian geopolitics in the coming years.

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