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[Home](#) > Middle East Chess-Board Power-Play 2019

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The Middle East chess-board in 2019 is marked by intense power rivalries between the regional powers and a rearrangement of chess pieces by the two Major Powers---United States and Russia---traditional rivals vying for influence in this volatile region of the world which has been in a state of strife since end of First World War 1919 when new nations were carved out of the old Ottoman Empire.

On the Middle East chess-board in 2019 is not only in play the power jostling between the United States but also regional power jostling for predominance between contending powers like Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia who in the years following the end of the Cold War have acquired considerable military capabilities and nuclear weapons potential.

The Middle East Cold War template in terms of areas of influence of the United States and Former Soviet Union was well delineated with the Arab Socialist military regimes lined up behind the USSR and the Arab monarchical regimes of the Gulf Region and Israel in United States strategic orbit.

Disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and temporary eclipse of Russia as successor state much reduced in size witnessed United States holding undisputed sway over the entire Middle East till about 2005. It was during this period that United States military intervention in the form of the two Gulf Wars against Iraq took place without any major impediment or counter-moves by Russia.

In terms of Middle East regional powers line-up behind United States and Russia over the years one witnessed Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel standing solidly behind United States and only Iran and Syria were in adversarial mode against United States and enjoyed proximate relations with Russia.

Turkey had however had started showing signs of moving away from the United States despite continuance as member of NATO. During the Second Gulf War Turkey did not permit US Air Force deployed at Turkish bases as part of NATO deployments to carry out strikes against Iraq.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia too in political signalling acted likewise and US Central Command major assets had to be relocated to Qatar. Saudi Arabia was the first to deploy Chinese CSS-2 long range missiles from China in its territory at the beginning of the 1980s. Saudi Arabia was China's first significant foothold in the Middle East followed by supply of Silkworm Ant-Shipping missiles to Iran.

Iran under severe UN and US sanctions stood defiantly alone and despite the foregoing utilised this decade with Russia's help initially to build up its Armed Forces strength and capability including indigenous defence production infrastructure.

In terms of naturally endowed national attributes of power in terms of geographical size, geostrategic location and sizeable population resources only Turkey and Iran stand out as Regional Powers. Both these nations also enjoy geographical contiguity with each other and significantly also enjoy geographical contiguity with Russia.

The rearranged Middle East chess-board in 2019 in term of power-play and areas of influence of United States and Russia no longer appears all that predictable as in the hey-day of the Cold War. Amongst the major regional powers of the Middle East the only predictable template is that of Iran which under US sanctions and constant demonization is a 'stand-alone' major regional power. Saudi Arabia and Turkey manifest changing contours in their relations with the United States despite having been strong allies of the United States for decades. Both of these two nations have appreciable relationships with Russia presumably as Plan B.

Turkey under the present political dispensation frustrated at not being given membership of the European Union diverted itself towards Middle East –centric policies with strong Islamic tinges as opposed to its secular past national ethos propounded by the Founder of Modern Turkey Kemal Ataturk. Turkey continues to be a member of NATO but has made significant political reach-outs to Russia. Turkey's latest acquisition of S-400 Air Defence missiles systems from Russia has brought its relations with United States to its lowest point.

Within the Middle East regional matrix Turkey's relationships have manifested many changing hues. At one time it maintained strong relationships with Israel and even Iran. The same cannot be said to be true in 2019. Sometimes it appears that under present political

dispensation Turkey used Israel and Iran relationships for political messaging to the United States.

Saudi Arabia along with Iran till the Iranian Islamic Revolution was considered the 'Twin Pillars' of the US security architecture in the Middle East. In 2019, Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a bitter power tussle for regional predominance.

The Saudi Arabia-Iran power-tussle for regional predominance is in 2019 the salient defining feature of the Middle East power-play chessboard. Besides direct adversarial postures against each other, Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in regional proxy wars extending from Yemen in the South to Syria in the North. This contributes to destabilising turbulence in the Middle East as behind the scenes, obviously, external influences of United States and Russia are at play in terms of catering for their respective areas of influence.

There is also in play the Islamic sectarian card in play in the Saudi Arabia-Iran power-play and that Saudi Arabia is the leader of the Islamic Sunni world whereas Iran is the undisputed leader of the Islamic Shia world.

The Middle East gets very neatly divided into two Islamic segments of the 'Shia Crescent' of the Northern Tier of the Middle East comprising Syria, Iraq and Iran and the Southern Tier with much wider number of small Gulf Monarchies led by Saudi Arabia. Though the monarchical Arab States of this segment are ruled by Sunni monarchs but they have sizeable Shia populations in their midst owing spiritual if not political allegiance to Iran.

In terms of influence sway of United States and Russia in the Middle East it can be broadly asserted that the 'Shia Crescent' states of the Northern Tier are more aligned towards Russia despite Iraq having been under US military occupation for long. The United States in 2019 exercises considerable influence over Saudi Arabia and its associated Gulf Arab monarchies despite Saudi Arabia making some moves towards Russia including arms purchases.

Looking in 209 into the future of the Middle East in terms of regional power and stability the perspectives are not promising. In the Northern Tier, conflictual confrontations exist in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey muscling militarily into Northern Syrian territory to create a 'buffer zone' for its security.

In the Southern Segment of the Middle East, the proxy war in Yemen between Saudi Arabia and Iran continues and shows no signs of abating. In marked escalation Yemeni Houthi rebels have targeted major Saudi Arabian petrochemical complexes of RAMCO in recent months. Within the Gulf, naval conflictual flashpoints exist between Iran and United States which can ignite unintended skirmishes into full blown war.

Into this witches melting pot of regional flashpoints need to be added armed face-offs between Israel and the Hezbollah operating in Lebanon and their Gaza counterparts. The ISIS Islamist Threat which could recently be put down at great cost by United States was made

possible only by Kurdish Militias who are in conflict with Turkey as Turkey considers Kurdish Independence Movement groups as a terrorist threat.

Topping it all in the Middle East is the ever-present danger of nuclear flashpoints centring on Iran in which United States and Israel have a strategic convergence in terms of nuclear de-fanging of Iran. Dangers of nuclear powers proliferation in the Middle East with Saudi Arabia and Turkey eager to acquire nuclear weaponisation through Pakistan is another destabilising factor and a challenge for the United States.

Finally, one would like to assert that the Middle East could have been relatively more stable with conflictual flashpoints kept from escalation had the United States reset its relations with Russia in which the power templates within the Middle East were more predictable on the lines that existed during the Cold War era.

Concluding, perspectives indicators in 2019 suggest that the Middle East would continue for considerable times ahead to remain volatile and conflictual,. This would emerge not only from intra-regional power tussles between contending powers aspiring for regional predominance namely Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia but also the overall global power jostling between United States and Russia with China as a distant third.

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