Arab-Iranian Relations

Re-examination Geopolitical Realities

Paper presented by:

Pirouz Mojtahehid-Zadeh Ph. D.
Professor of Political Geography and Geopolitics at the University of Tehran

To: the international conference on:
Arab-Iranian Relations – Doha Qatar
1st & 2nd December 20012

www.fairforum.org
Abstract

Arab-Iranian relations have never been devoid of controversy in the modern era. Historically these controversies emanated mostly from ideological differences (sectarian controversies within varying Islamic schools of thoughts). With the advent of Karbala calamity the foundation was laid for a millennial Shiite ascendency which in turn introduced new dimensions to the politics of the statehood of Sunnite Caliphate.

With the rise in colonial geopolitics of the Great Games of the nineteenth and early twenties centuries, spread of British colonial rule in the geographical span of what can be described as contiguous Arab-Iranian region caused some form of affinities between the two as co-sufferers from colonial rule, and relations between Iran and its Arab neighbours developed more on the basis of natural regional interests. But withdrawal of the colonial rule from the region in early 1970s left new legacies of friction and conflicts resulting from territorial and border differences which in turn have been exploited by new colonial interests to drive the two sides apart (1).

As from 1960s endeavours persevered by the Qom Shiite seminaries of Late Ayatollah Brujerdi, the then spiritual leader of the world of Shiism, supported by the Iranian political leadership of the time on the one hand, and the Al-Azhar University of Cairo acting as the leading seminary of Sunnite Islamic studies resulted in the development of mutual understanding and acceptance of each other whereupon rifts and open conflicts were replaced by cooperation at the service of unity among Moslems.

The advent of Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran triggered new geopolitical resentments among her extra regional adversaries, which resulted in a series of inevitable changes in the regional geopolitical settings with inescapable impacts on Arab – Iranian relations. These new changes in Arab – Iranian relations manifested itself mainly in four major categories in recent decades (2):

1- Slogans in the streets of Tehran such as the “export of the revolution” which largely meant for domestic consumption were interpreted by the extra-regional players as new Iranian revolutionary strategy of armed struggle for the eradication of traditional regimes in the Arab World. Lack of an experienced and professional diplomatic service in Islamic Republic of Iran allowed these false but dangerous games of exploitation of domestically oriented propaganda resulted in the tragic imposition of the eight-year war of attrition with consequences that still is affecting geopolitical balances in the region.

2- A misunderstanding triggered by the Iranian officers at the island of Abu Musa in 1992 resulted in the outbreak of fierce territorial claims on the
said islands with undeserved consequences in triggering new conflicts among the two sides which elevated Arab-Iranian misunderstandings substantially (3). US president George W. Bush and British Premier Tony Blair personally travelled to the countries in Iran’s neighbourhood and openly encouraged them to pick up arms against the Islamic. Use of harsh language of disrespect against national identity of Iran agitated at least this one Iranian expert on territorial issues between Iran and her Arab neighbours in this region to adopt a strong legal and geopolitical language to rebut politicising of the claims with unmistakable results, but all these could have been prevented if we the Arabs and the Iranians were to decide to solve our mutual differences among ourselves.

3- The task of deepening ideological friction between Iran and her Arab neighbours on the other hand seemed to have been taken over by Israel in mid-2000 (4). Reports in 2004 and 2006 revealed that following meetings between Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert and Hashemite leaders of Jordan led to the announcement on the discovery of a Shiite Crescent in the Middle East that represents a Shiite geopolitics of wanting to establish Iranian hegemony over Sunnite Arab Middle East (5). This propaganda gained momentum by 2006 as Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak jumped on the band wagon and that encouraged a fierce sense of competition among those who insisted on the spread of Salafi movements to counter balance small pockets of Shiite uprising in some parts of the Middle East, which if not checked in time will bring calamity to the world of Islam to the delight of those who are hard at work to drive us apart.

Here again this author with a reasonable background in the study of the geopolitics of the region tries and seems to have succeeded in disclosing the falsehood of Ehud Olmert – Prince Hassan Al-Hashemite geopolitics of Shi'ite Crescent.

4- And finally, the controversy over the naming of the Gulf separating Iranian Plateau from the Arabian Peninsula, though quite old, caused new frictions among Arabs of Peninsula and the Iranians in the first decade of the 21 century (6). This was also exploited by the extra regional players in their geopolitics of divide and rule, though indirectly, the undertone of affront to national identity left little room for patience and tolerance with the consequent result that regional experts such as this author used his vast efforts to neutralise most successfully the harmful effect of extra-regional exploitation of this case whereas the Arabs and Iranians have the ability to find out that they can overcome
even this sensitive issue if they sincerely wanted to bring harmony to their inter-related regional life.

With the fundamental changes brought about by the more intensified political and strategic activities of the regional actor that acts as the appendix of the extra-regional powers, and new threats that it has paradoxically caused in the form the so-called Arab Spring opened up new opportunities for the regional players to broaden the regional prospect of harmony and cooperation. In this new atmosphere Arab-Iranian relations cannot escape the imperatives of greater geopolitical awareness of; firstly, the twenty first century world of geopolitics is changing fast from big power domination of the regions in favour of greater dispersion of power throughout regions; and secondly, finding out what can bring the Arabs and the Iranian closer to each other in greater regional harmony and how could this be made possible in a way that greater cooperation for the harmonious management of the affairs of the region would safeguard natural interests of all concerned. Having studied the affairs of the region in details for the past forty years or so, this author is of opinion that forums made up of regional academic and diplomatic experts can examine possibilities of regional solutions to regional conflicts and working out regional geopolitical possibilities to elevate the standing of the region in the international geopolitical order of the twenty first century.

Notes and references
1- For a background to author’s assessment of Jordan-Israeli arguments on the idea of Shiite Crescent, see: Mojtabazadeh, Pirouz, هماوایی توطئو گران غربی و عربی در منطقه، اطلاعات بین المللی، سال سیزدیم، شماره 4982، لندن 16 مرداد 1385 – 7 اگوست 4001.


5- Author in interview with BBC Persian Television, Thursday 18th January 2011.

6- Author in interview with ISNA semi-official Iranian news agency on Shiite Geopolitics, 28th January 2006, code 8505-03122.