The Democracy: Issues and Challenges in Israel's Neighborhood

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Abstract: The developments affecting Israel's neighborhood over the past decade have led Israel to take a close look at her foreign and security policies. There is a widely shared belief that Israel has to formulate policy options to secure her national interests, keeping in view the changes occurring in her turbulent neighborhood. This research paper offers a well-rounded survey of Israel's relations with some of the important countries in her immediate neighborhood like Egypt, Jordan and PLO, develops plausible scenarios for each of them, and proposes options for consideration by policy established. The paper also takes a prospective look at Israel's neighborhood and the question of democracy in that region particularly Israel's immediate neighborhood.

Keywords: Democracy, Israel, neighborhood, protests, West Asia.

1. Introduction

Israel's neighborhood has been characterized by political turbulence for the past five decades. Most of this turbulence has been generated by internal factors, rooted into the dilemmas and challenges of state formation. The Carnegie Foundation 2005 and 2006 & Freedom in the World report 2010-2013 came out with the listing of the failed and failing states and among the first twenty two of Israel's immediate neighbors, namely Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Libya, Yemen, Tunisia and Lebanon find prominent place [1]. The Carnegie Foundations another report in 2007, on "Index of Terrorism" put Iraq, Palestine and Syria as the world's largest source of 'global terrorism'. This is a matter of serious concern, not only for Israel, but also for the entire International Community. The Carnegie criteria for failed and failing states that takes into account factors like political instability, failure of governance, violence and terrorism, lack of transparency, corruption etc., can of course be debated for its imperfection and imprecision and the methodology of applying this criteria can be faulted on various counts, but to any ordinary observer of the West Asian situation, internal political conditions in Israel's neighborhood are not a matter of comfort. On the broadly agreed criteria of any States performance, of the stability of its power structure, its ideology and political legitimacy, its social support and endorsement and its economic resilience and dynamism, Israel's neighbors stand for below the adequate and globally acceptable norms [2].

What constitutes Israel's neighborhood today was the periphery of the British mandate like Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine. In accordance with the terms of the Palestine Mandate system, Britain was in control of the land that would later become Israel [3]. Once the World War was over, Britain decided to withdraw from the Middle East. But the Empire's main goal was being of extracting and accumulating natural resources, especially oil resources from the Middle East and protecting and expanding its regional dominance in West Asia, the development of institutions and capabilities were tailored only to suit this specific goal before withdrawing. In the process much of the periphery was neglected; mercifully left undisturbed in its subsistence level economic existence and its oppressive and archaic feudal social and political organization [4]. This huge time lag in the development of political and social institutions and building of economic developmental capabilities between that Israel the core - and its present day neighbors; the periphery of the British empire; is often not accounted for properly in the analysis of current difficulties and turbulence. This time lag is more than evident in evolving viable state structure and building required economic momentum for stability and development.

2. The Democracy Question

The basic question that haunted Israel's neighbors for the past seven decades is about democracy. The popular desire for change and freedom notwithstanding, there is very limited ability (or desire) amongst key political actors to accommodate it, to assure fair and repeated elections and to allow the full gamut of values and institutions that are necessary for democracy to actually take root. Typical example of this can be seen in the role of armies in Egypt, Iraq and dictatorship in Syria, disturb politics in Lebanon, monarchies in Jordan and other gulf countries. Entrenched feudal vested interests behind these forces have reinforced the resistance towards democratization of politics [5].

The Middle East is in a state of turmoil and tumult the like of which have not been seen in generations on the one hand. In its first blush, the Arab awakening represented a clear shift in the power balance between the rulers and the ruled. Where fear had prevailed for decades, suddenly it was gone; the masses were on the streets, and the leaders were on the defensive. The shift of the internal balance of power within the Arab world seemed to promise a new dawn and a quick, popular march towards

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democracy. Today, the much longer-standing ethnic and religious cleavages which historically defined the region are once again coming to the fore-placing existing state structures under profound challenge. As a result, we see very little to suggest that democracy --- or anything even remotely approaching it --- is likely to flourish in the Middle East anytime soon.

The countries of the Middle East, and others, have undergone almost a form of social revolution; precipitated by the explosions in information and awareness, aspirations and identity consciousness. The manifestations of these explosions could be, seen in the Egyptian revolution of January 2011. This unprecedented upsurge of People's power not only in Egypt but in the whole of that region, the protests of January and February 2011 people defined security forces all over Egypt in a peaceful manner. As estimated strength of 12 to 15 million people had hit the streets in different parts of Egypt during this protests.6 Elements of the rising popular aspirations and assertion are also evident in Israeli border near Gaza and West Bank spreading Hamas attack, [7] demands for political reforms in Gulf monarchies and the troubles for Syrian Ba'ath regime headed by Bashr al-Asad. [8] Inadequate, halfhearted and in consistent state responses to the popular aspirations have often created space for extremism and insurgencies in their mobilization along violent and ethnic lines. In Libya and Yemen, the popular uprising faceted stiff opposition from the ruling regimes. This resulted in a more protracted confrontation between the government and the protesting masses, unlike the rapid-fire dismantling of the regimes, which took place in Tunisia and Egypt. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia's bold initiatives to open up the monarchial order are an appreciable example of foresight in search of democracy, but to what extent the Saudis political order will be able to rise above the ethnic mindset remains to be see. [9] Syrian experience is illustrative in this respect. Its democratic institutions and developmental processes were ethicized with the launch of "Alawite-Shia nationalism" in 1961. [10] The gene of ethnic state building has pushed an otherwise progressive state into a deep and unending social conflict. It also led to the distortion in its democratic institutions such as the creation of an all-powerful executive Presidency (after the Second World War) the wisdom of which is now increasingly being questioned within Syria. The largest minorities groups within the region are crying for their human freedoms and rights while the states relentlessly and ruthlessly pursue the military course to eliminate the ethnic problem in the name of fighting terrorism of the ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and Al-Qaida and threat to their regime especially in Syria and Iraq [11].

The democracy question in Israel's neighborhood has been considerably vitiated by the external factor. During the Cold War years, the superpower pursued their respective strategic interests in the region at the cost of newly emerging democratic institutions. The West, in particular the US, supported military in Egypt and monarchies/feudal interests in Kuwait, Oman,

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to secure strategic advantages.12 Scholar and observers of the Egyptian situations are almost of unanimous opinion that Egyptian military alliance with the US was largely responsible for the political rise of military in Egyptian politics. The damage that the growth and entrenchment of the army in Egyptian politics has done to the evolution of democratic institutions and processes has indeed been immense. Even after the Cold War, the international factor has impinged on West Asian political processes in contradictory ways. On the one hand, there has been an ideological upsurge in favor of democracy and human rights globally and no country in West Asia is immune from its impact. On the other hand, militaries, monarchies and all sorts of autocracies are still in favor of major powers to ensure their respective strategic stakes. In the aftermath of 9/11; pliant regimes that can effectively contribute to the "Global War on Terror" have been supported and strengthened irrespective of their democratic credentials.13 This inherently contradictory nature of the US's position is clear in the context of Egypt's current political turmoil. Under the realms of democratic rhetoric's, President Fattah al-Sisi and the Egyptian military are seen as indispensable allies in the fight against terrorism. Similarly, for preparing to deal with a rising and assertive Iran, Monarchies and Shia government are preferred in Iraq, Bahrain and Palestine. Ignoring the thrust of Palestinian peoples, the US may still like to have at least a ceremonial government, knowing very well though that the Palestinian government is not inclined to remain ceremonial or even constitutional. The US is trying to bail out the Syrian government even by accepting around one lakhs of their refugees living in Europe [14]. In Iraq, the Shia led dominated government prevailing arrangement has the blessings of the West but no one is sure about the kind of democratic regime that this so called 'caretaker' arrangement will deliver.

Israel too has been a protector of Palestinian government in its neighbors, West Bank and Gaza Strip in the name of stability and peaceful political order [15]. In Palestinian, Israel played a critical role during the early 1950s to 1980s in removing the rule of the Palestinian peoples, but the political approach that emerged subsequently favored democracy to co-exist" with Palestinian government. This dual approach has been pursued till date in the name of "two pillar" theory wherein a parliamentary government was seen as an essential component of multiparty democracy [16]. Israel also has meekly accepted the military backed interim regime in Egypt in the hope that this regime will address its longstanding concerns for security and economic cooperation. The past record however, tells us that its neighbors have drawn its support and inspiration from religious groups and has remained indifferent and even hostile to Israeli sensitivities.

A. Prospects of democracy

In six of Israel's eight immediate neighbors, the democracy question is intricately involved with domestic turbulence. These neighboring countries are Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon,

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Egypt, and Bahrain. Iraq, Syria and Bahrain are the countries where domestic turmoil is an account of ethnic conflict (Shia-Sunni) but there also (Iraq and Syria) the question of authority structure of the presidential executive, as noted earlier, is under debate, with the demands that Syria should go back to parliamentary democracy. In Iraq and Palestine the fate of the democratic institutionalization would eventuality, depends upon the direction that the "Global War on Terror" takes. The prospects are that the Jihadi terrorism will remain strong and kicking and in that eventuality, democratic institutions cannot evolve viably. In Iraq the past few years of Shia dominated government rule had deeply fragmented political parties. Some of these parties like al-Dawa party and Moqtada al-Sadra have even discredited themselves in popular perceptions by seeking opportunistic alliances and proximity with the other Shia group. We do not yet see a robust popular movement against the Shia dominance or in favor of credible democracy [17]. Even the international community, which is making shrill noises in favor of democracy, in fact needs army more than ever before to fight terrorism. Under such circumstances, prospects are that neither terrorism will be fought resolutely nor democratic forces will be strengthened effectively.

Like in Iraq, the ground reality in Syria is also not very promising for the prospects for democracy. While the international pressure on Syria for democratic opening may continue to be built up by the West through the UN, Syria's real supporters like Iran, Iraq and Russia will continue to shape their responses cautiously. The resolution adopted at the GCC countries gathering in December 10 2013, [18] are a clear indication that the regional dynamics cannot be dictated by the international thrust. Moreover, internal political space within Syria is equally fragmented. The main opposition party of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces is in a bad shape to mobilize disaffection against Asad regime [19]. The Sunni populations with other minority groups who came on the streets are also deeply divided as an institution. The ambitions and excesses of the Asad regime. Even a large number of ethnic groups have made a convenient and opportunistic peace with the regime. They are not accepting the Asad's leadership as they did during civil war [20].

The unfolding thrust and direction of the "Global War on Terror" in the Iraq and Palestine theatre will also decisively influence the prospects of credible domestic institutions in Syria because of the spread of Jihadi links from West to the east of West Asia. The ascendance of Jihadi forces in Iraq and Palestine will surely embolden similar forces in Syria and erode the prospects of genuine democracy in Iraq and Syria. The Syrian President Bashr al-Asad government has repeatedly claimed that democracy in Syria cannot be revive an older familiar lines [21]. The Asad regime in Syria is trying to restructure the whole dynamics of Syrian politics. One wonders if there is any viable design for the prospective changes, but the popular sentiments are too strong in Syria to let the Asad regime muzzle democratic aspirations beyond a limit and put together

an authoritarian system under the facade of the so called representative institutions.

The Gulf monarchies are likely to move slowly incrementally towards political opening and popular accountability. But one doubts if such incremental changes will go beyond cosmetic institutional transformation. The situation in Yemen and Bahrain are prone to extremism and terroristic outbursts. The frustrated opposition may even encourage extremism to create political space for itself. Bahrain too will have to remain alert on the question of terrorism and extremism as some of the radical groups are pitted against convenient solutions being worked out (in collaboration with the US and international community) for resolving the problem of Bahrain's Shia.

B. Israel's Response

One country that is going to be directly affected adversely by the persisting turbulence and uncertain prospects of democracy in West Asia is Israel. However, Israel stands rather ill-equipped to creatively respond to the turmoil in its neighborhood. Israel lost its peace initiative in Palestine some time earlier, in the aftermath of the abortive UN Emergency Forces experience [22]. Since then it has allowed the West to play the visible and the dominant role. In Egypt and Lebanon, Israel hardly has any leverage to influence domestic political dynamics. Any move on Israel's part in this respect may even prove to be counterproductive. In Iran also Israel is constrained from distancing itself from the Islamic regime in the interest of its strategic stakes. It is in Palestine that Israel has a decisive say, that its positive interventions was appreciated by all concerned during people's protests Intifadas, December 1987 and second on September 2000. But since then, its wavering commitment to the people's aspirations and popular forces has resulted in much erosion of its goodwill and political clout after Hamas's legislative victory began in 2006.

As political turbulence and the democracy question in its sensitive neighborhood are going to persist and even assume more serious dimensions in the years to come, Israel will have to cope with their spill-over on its own vital security, economic and socio-cultural interests. It is imperative for Israel to evolve a creative framework of engagement, with the persisting challenges in the neighborhood that encompasses realistic and resilient initiatives on social, cultural, economic, political, strategic and diplomatic fronts. Two aspects of such engagement deserve urgent and emphatic attention. One is related to the democracy question directly. Israel's approach has so far been reactive as well as neutral to the questions of democracy in the neighborhood, and accordingly, cautious, calculated and power-structure (in the neighborhood) based responses have been made. Israeli policy will have to be more and more proactive on the democracy question keeping the interests of their people at the core, and not of the power brokers, in the concerned neighboring country. This may at times, invoke resentment of the regime in power but that has to be accepted as part of the cost of policy in the short run.

Eventually, if the turbulence is based on peoples' broader interests, Israeli policy will pay, in the long run. It would create broader goodwill and cultivate such powerful political constituencies that would support and sustain Israel's vital interests in that region.

Secondly, Israel will have to restore and reinforce its strategic space in the neighborhood which it seems to have vacated voluntarily or inadvertently to the extra-regional powers like the US. An example of this could be seen in the case of Egypt, where despite considerable US, UK and UN pressure; Israel has stood its ground. That is not evident in other countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen and even in Bahrain. Under the institutionalized regional strategic dialogue, there is attempt to coordinate Israel's neighborhood priorities and policies with the US. In Syria and Iraq, Israel started relying on the US influence in pursuance of its security interests. Israel's image and stakes are seen in the neighboring countries to have been sanitized by its growing proximity to the US strategic vision at the global as well as regional levels. There are obvious are of tensions in Egypt between the US interests and those of the Egyptian military establishment. As Egyptian situation gets more complicated, Israel's interests should not be allowed to suffer collateral damage as a result of its excessive and avoidable identification with the US. In that region, almost its every political section is expecting Israel to take a bold and independent initiative to engage with the peace process and ensuring Israel's security. Israel's priorities there must be pursued with sufficient economic and strategic investments. When chips are down, only a confident, proactive and independent Israeli stance would make positive impact on the turbulence in neighborhood.

3. Conclusion

The West Asian region is full of contradictions, disparities and paradoxes. In the past-colonial period, the region has been a theatre of bloody inter-state as well as civil wars; it has witnessed liberation movements, nuclear rivalry, military dictatorships and continues to suffer from insurgencies, religious fundamentalism, terrorism and absence of democratic government. Depending on how these drivers pan out, the West Asia could see either a cooperative or a conflict scenario. For a cooperative to materialize on inclusive growth and regional cooperation. However, a conflict scenario in that region can also materialize. This would happen if the security dilemmas faced by the countries in the region are not addressed. Absence of meaningful regional cooperation could lead to tensions and conflicts. Israel, being the pre-eminent country will have to take the lead in forging closer links with its neighbors especially Egypt and Jordan and forging a sense of regional identity. Many of the instability scenarios predicted in this research paper be altered if Israel takes the initiatives in crafting an assertive policies on Israel's external democracy support which put premium on connectivity rather than separation which shape the democratic values in the region as a whole.

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