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Critical Thinking Paper: ENVI-423-003 Geography of Middle East

Three issues that have served as effective learning supplements in Geography of Middle East class include the following: the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel, continuing troubles in Iraq in the post-War on Terror era and the effects of high concentration of funds to Jewish organizations in the United States (US). The foregoing issues provide significant impacts on understanding the nature of Middle Eastern politics better, given the complicated interests of nations therein and their volatile status towards one another, the US and its allies. Key to understanding the complicated nature of Middle Eastern politics is the divisiveness brought forth by Iran and Israel. Iran, with its nuclear program and close ties with groups linked to terrorism, poses its growing influence in the Middle East as more of a growing security threat than an emerging gateway for social, political and economic opportunities that could cohesively tie the region together. Israel, with its sovereign status disputed by Palestinians, has since provided further complications to the US on its definite stand in the Middle East (Fiske, 2014; JTA, 2013; Lyon, 2014).

Saudi Arabia and Israel do not share formal diplomatic ties with one another, although there is an understanding that their alliances with the US provide them with mutual understanding towards one another. Such commonality also provided for the opposition of both Saudi Arabia and Israel to Iran, whose growing influence in the Middle East comes with the threatening effects of its nuclear weapon program and connections with groups linked to terrorism. Highlighting the positive, albeit informal, relationship of Saudi

Arabia with Israel is the Munich Security Conference. Fiske (2014) reported that during the Munich Security Conference, a former intelligence director of Saudi Arabia praised Israeli Justice Minister Tzipi Livni for her handling of affairs as chief negotiator of Israel for the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Livni, remarking, “Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] not become a copy of Gaza”, gained the affirmation of former intelligence director of Saudi Arabia Prince Turki bin Faisal al-Saud, saying that he understood “why [she] is the negotiator for Israel”. The report from Fiske (2014) came amidst a string of other reports noting that Saudi Arabia is allegedly communicating with Israel through back channels, in the absence of formal diplomatic ties. Such provides for a positive remark for the security situation of the Middle East, whose volatilities often stem from its numerous groups linked to terrorism allegedly connected to Iran, alongside civil disorders arising from civil wars in nations such as Egypt and Syria conducted due to calls for regime change (Fiske, 2014).

The conflict between Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims in Iraq has led the nation reeling in its post-War on Terror struggles. Having been devastated heavily during the military campaigns of the US conducted against the regime of former strongman Saddam Hussein, Iraq currently faces the challenge of rebuilding its social, political and economic institutions. Yet, the attacks conducted by Sunni Muslims led by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a group with alleged links to al-Qaeda, against the Shi’ite government of Iraq led by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki continue to destabilize the security situation in Iraq. A report by Lyon (2014) on car bombs and gunshots that killed 75 people in Baquba, Ain al-Jahash, Maamil, Dujail and Saqlawiya

featured Maliki asking for help from the international community. Such action by Maliki proves that Iraq has yet to recover from the turmoil it has experienced since the start of the 21st century. One might therefore conclude that the US, having waged its War on Terror, has not entirely changed the security landscape of Iraq. Conflict between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims continue to threaten the Iraqi people to this day (Lyon, 2014).

The sensitive situation of the Jewish people in the Middle East has not spared criticism towards their fellowmen living in the US. Former United Kingdom (UK) Foreign Minister Jack Straw spoke boldly against the massively “unlimited” funds held by Jewish organizations in the US as the reason why US efforts at reaching a favorable closure to Israeli-Palestinian peace talks has yet to bear fruit. Such serves as a point of imbalance that gives Israel undue advantage in an agreement where both the Jewish people and Palestinian Arabs should vouch for fairness over sovereignty issues (JTA, 2013).

According to Straw, as reported by JTA (2013), the involvement of Jewish organizations – commercial, for profit or nonprofit ones, on US soil makes the US somewhat ineffective in its efforts at reaching reconciliation between Israel and Palestine.

The difficulties featured by the three issues - the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel, continuing troubles in Iraq in the post-War on Terror era and the effects of high concentration of funds to Jewish organizations in the US, reflects the greater problem of the Middle East in terms of security. As a promising region wrought in factionalized struggles, the Middle East has found in the US a formidable partner that enables them to find better solutions at reaching for social, political and economic stability. Although the

US itself admits its ineffectiveness in its diplomatic efforts in the Middle East at certain points, it is nevertheless unthinkable as to how the region would be able to solve the kinds of conflicts it has right now on its own. Simply put, the US, albeit being a divisive figure in itself at times, is a necessary mediator for all the current struggles the Middle East is experiencing, given its developed social, political and economic structures that have stood to benefit many of the nations within said region (Fiske, 2014; JTA, 2013; Lyon, 2014).

Top Two Examples

Scholars of Middle Eastern politics would most likely have the following issues in mind concerning current events in the region – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iranian nuclear program. There is an understanding that the US is involved in both of the foregoing issues, although concrete progress has yet to follow amidst scenes of diplomatic deadlocks affecting regional stability within the Middle East. A pragmatic approach that has prevailed in both of the foregoing issues involve the use of sanctions to urge noncomplying parties to take prudent action based on existing agreements. However, there is also the understanding that noncomplying parties may resort to belligerence – an instance the US seeks to avoid best as the mediating party (Khoury, 2014; Reuters, 2014).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has yet to meet a concrete solution since the Jewish people returned from their diaspora to Arab-occupied Palestine in 1947. Since then, disagreements over sovereignty have caused a series of armed and diplomatic tensions between the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) – the party aiming for the creation of an independent State of

Palestine, and the State of Israel. With mediated proposals from the US and its allies such as the Two-State Solution having yet to come to fruition, both the PLO and the State of Israel have become increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress on the peace talks. In fact, in a recent report by Khoury (2014), close associates of PNA President Mahmoud Abbas have spoken against any further peace talks with Israel, underlining their pessimism over any form of progress through the formation of a State of Palestine in the next 20 years. Calling on Palestinians to return to the path of resistance, senior Fatah official Tawfik Tarawi said that the PNA would not make any move to accept the framework agreement produced by US Secretary of State John Kerry over the dominance of Israel. Secretary General Yasser Abed Rabo of the Executive Committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) added that Israel “wants to erase any element of Palestinian sovereignty.” Both Tarawi and Rabo agreed that should Israel continue to dominate, there would be a breakdown in Israeli-Palestinian peace talks (Khoury, 2014).

The US and its allies have enforced sanctions on Iran with the objective of containing it from continuing its nuclear program. The growing dominance of Iran in regional politics has gone with it the threat of its growing support for groups linked to terrorism such as the Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank, Hezbollah in Lebanon and others with possible links to al-Qaeda. Dubbed by the US as a terrorist state, Iran has posed further threats with its possession of nuclear weapons in its arsenal. Therefore, the US and its allies have since been active in advocating against investing on business opportunities in Iran. In a report by Reuters (2014), US President Barack Obama reiterated the stand of the US and its allies against investing in Iran. Obama noted that the

US will come down “ like a ton of bricks” on firms that are found violating sanctions against Iran. The announcement of Obama came amidst reports that Iran welcomed 100 business executives from France as delegates exploring potential investment opportunities in the nation. French President Francois Hollande, for his part, sent a stern warning to said executives over sanctions against Iran. Both the US and France, alongside their allies, affirmed their commitment to prevent Iran from gaining steady revenue streams from investment activities as long as its nuclear program is still in place (Reuters, 2014).

Most of the complications existing within the Middle East, particularly in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iranian nuclear program, all come from domestic interests that cause tensions at the regional level. Both the PNA and the State of Israel have yet to resolve matters over sovereignty due to accusations that the latter is superseding the former in ongoing peace talks over the framework agreement of Kerry. The Iranian nuclear program, for its part, has yet to halt amidst sanctions enforced by the US and its allies against investing on business opportunities in Iran. At this point, one has yet to see how the US would strategize towards making concrete solutions starting from the need to untangle the complex web of issues concerning the Middle East (Khoury, 2014; Reuters, 2014).

Top One Finding

Seymour Hersh (2014), in his article published by the London Review of Books, presented an alternative viewpoint on the causes behind the sarin gas attack in the Ghouta area of eastern Damascus, Syria, on August 21, 2013. Armed with intercepted intelligence findings, Hersh (2014) sought to

establish that the Syrian rebels, with the assistance of the Turkish government, perpetrated the sarin gas attacks, not the forces under the administration of President Bashar al-Assad as frequently reported. Neither the Syrian rebels nor the Assad regime had substantial evidence pinning down their accusations as they both blamed themselves on the pretext of the ongoing Syrian Civil War (Hersh, 2014). Nevertheless, Hersh (2014) sought to deviate from popular claims implicating the Assad regime by using intercepted intelligence findings appearing to involve the Turkish government (Human Rights Investigations, 2014).

Although widely disputed by both the US and Turkish governments, the findings written by Hersh (2014) relies on intercepted intelligence findings coming from unnamed intelligence officials he claims as reliable information sources. Hersh (2014) anchored his investigation based on the premise that President Barack Obama did not seek the approval of the US Congress when he authorized US military intervention in Libya. The same did not hold for Syria since Obama sought the approval of the US Congress two days before the scheduled military intervention. The US Congress subsequently called off proceedings when Assad, through Russia, submitted himself to Obama in renouncing all chemical weapons of Syria. From there, Hersh noted that internal conflicts may have caused Obama change his mind – a fact he attributes to intercepted intelligence findings he gathered (Hersh, 2014; Human Rights Investigations, 2014).

Hersh (2014) claimed that since the sarin gas used in Ghouta did not match those known harbored by Syria, Turkey might have had a hand in the sarin gas attacks. The intercepted intelligence findings point to al-Nusra Front

(ANF), an al-Qaeda-linked jihadist group standing as among the rebel groups in Syria, as the source of the sarin gas. The ANF, with suspected links to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, allegedly used sarin gas to attack Ghouta and deflected the blame to the Assad regime as a way of urging the US to authorize military intervention. Obama, in his “red line” declaration, noted that the US would only intervene militarily in Syria once belligerents start using chemical weapons (Hersh, 2014). The decision of Obama to fulfill its “red line” threat went to a standstill when, as Hersh (2014) noted, privately took notice of Turkish covert involvement (Human Rights Investigations, 2014).

The controversy behind the sarin gas attacks in Ghouta is crucial to understanding how the US seeks to form a mutual understanding with the Middle East. Clearly, interests are at stake in this controversy – the US and its allies wanted to organize the removal of Assad, with Turkey seemingly wanting to expedite the process as portrayed by the intercepted intelligence findings Hersh (2014) has gathered. The dynamics of US-Middle East relations are present in this controversy, especially because the US is bound to add further friction to its relations with Iran, a known supporter of the Assad regime, over the Iranian nuclear program. Yet, the menacing tactics exploited by Turkey in pushing the US to authorize military intervention in Syria has required US relations with the Middle East to be at a careful balance, for any mistake may generate costly diplomatic consequences (Hersh, 2014; Human Rights Investigations, 2014).

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