Quarterly Round Up

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The Region

There has been an increase in uncertainty and turmoil in the world which has been dominated by the Middle East crisis; though the war in Ukraine, and US-Chinese political and economic tensions, have been vying in importance, though not to the same extent.

Certain developments and trends, or rather their continuation, stand out. In the Middle East the tragic genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza continues with no effective counter from any side - including from the vast majority of Muslim countries of the OIC. Repressive measures against the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank have intensified. Only Hezbollah went into action to support Hamas to put pressure on Israel for ceasefire in Gaza and in Lebanon. The Houthi government surprising many, given its limited capabilities and distance, sprang into action: blocking many ships going to and from the Suez Canal, launching occasional missile and drone strikes against Israel; and has persisted despite repeated aerial attacks from the US and UK. Unlike in 1973 there is no discussion or move towards an Arab oil embargo. Rather, OPEC talks are taking place on how to stabilize and rebalance global oil supplies if Iran's oil industry - including the offtake Kharg island which handles some 90% of Iran's oil exports - are attacked by Israeli missile or air strikes.

Lebanon, with a less homogenous population than Gaza, is being subjected to almost similar devastation as Gaza; both to further degrade Hezbollah, and to attempt to divide the two communities, on the pattern Israel pursued in 1982 with the PLO. The most robust response was from Iran, when it first launched a prenotified and symbolic messaging drone and missile strike against Israel.

It is difficult to know what lessons can be drawn from these pivotal events because of little analysis from the Muslim world. However,

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without doing so, lessons for the future cannot be drawn. It is always easy in retrospect to assess motivations, tactics, strategy, and how far they succeeded or otherwise. Nonetheless some preliminary lessons can be drawn and discussed. Certainly, some Hamas objectives were fulfilled. First of all, the set back to the US-Israel policy to resolve the Middle East problem: by delinking the Palestinians and the creation of a UN-recognized Palestinian state from their grand plan for an Israeli rapprochement with the Arab and Muslim world centering around Saudi Arabia. Which was in turn to be built on US security guarantees and civil nuclear cooperation with the KSA. In fact it put the Palestine issue squarely in the forefront.

Secondly, the role of external powers and allies: in 1973 the Arab coalition of Egypt and Syria had achieved considerable success - regaining control of the Suez Canal, albeit at the cost of the Golan Heights; and disproved the reputation from the 1967 defeat and loss of the Sinai that Arab armies were no match for Israel. Egypt's initial success was set back by the countermove of Israeli General Ariel Sharon innovatively re-crossing the Suez Canal to the west side of the Canal at the Great Bitter Lake to try to hem in and sever lines of supply to the Second Egyptian Army on the East side of the Canal by capturing Ismailia. An outnumbered force of Egyptian paras and commanders fought a valiant rearguard action till their backs were at the Ismailia canal, till the UN-ordered ceasefire commenced, thus inflicting a tactical and strategic defeat on the IDF. It may be recalled that Sharon, considered second in military stature to Moshe Dayan, was made infamous when the IDF under his command facilitated the September 1982 massacre of some 3,500 civilians, in their protected camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut: in violation of their obligations as the occupying power after the PLO had withdrawn from Lebanon. He was also particularly brutal in Gaza.

While both the US and USSR sent military supplies to their respective allies when Kissinger at first refused the Soviet offer for a ceasefire, the Soviets threatened to unilaterally send troops to stabilize the Egyptian position. After a brief pause of heightened nuclear-alert tension the Americans accepted the proffered ceasefire; the Suez Canal

returned to Egyptian control; and Sinai while partly demilitarized and with a UN observer force, returned to Egyptian control.

Thirdly, the importance of allies. Israel has retained from its creation the unwavering political and military support of the US. Not so the frontline Arabs, be they neighboring Arab countries or territories under Israeli occupation, who ever since the USSR broke apart have no equivalent ally. Iran has been the main backer of the Palestinians, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and certain militias in Iraq and Syria; but the power differential with the US backing Israel has been such that it has till recently acted with extreme prudence. This despite the provocation of its key nuclear scientists being periodically assassinated; some nuclear facilities being sabotaged; and most recently the Israeli bombing of its Embassy in Damascus and the killing therein of a number of its diplomats and an elite Quds force commander; followed in quick succession by the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in an Iranian State Guest house in Tehran; and then the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah himself.

Fourthly, the power of technology and of those that master it, has been made clear in this conflict. Preparing for the 1973 War President Saadat had put in plans to conscript college graduates into the military, and to ensure better weapons and training. An Israeli commander has written that when the Egyptians had crossed the Suez Canal with full surprise and using high pressure water jets to sweep the opposite banks, his armored brigade was ordered to counter attack. They saw what looked like a group of small trees which suddenly turned into crouching soldiers all armed with deadly anti-tank bazookas, which completely broke up the attack.

The greatest failure of Iran was not to well arm its allies with anti-aircraft, hand-held missiles which would have seriously affected Israel's total and dominating air superiority. For Hamas, while it took Israel by surprise, it may also have been better to break out of Gaza using only its trained and disciplined soldiers, ensuring that no Israeli civilians were harmed in any way but captured to exchange for the many Palestinians in detention, and thus avoiding much criticism from quarters mainly in the West that, however unfairly, count in the global scheme of things. Had a

sizeable Hamas contingent held onto the territory it seized, and fought to the last man, that too would have created their own Masada. Not that the devastation in Gaza and the massacre of so many innocent women, children, and non-combatant male civilians has not created a far bigger Masada of sacrifice and suffering. As the UN Secretary General said, the breakout by Hamas had a certain context, meaning that after so many years of occupation and oppression there was bound to be a reaction. That has been the effort and pattern of all occupied peoples be it in Vietnam, Kashmir, or Palestine. However, while little credence is given in the Muslim world to Israeli claims, and despite the fact that most killed were soldiers, Hamas should have tried to avoid any action that was later used by Israel to try to justify its industrial scale mass killing of Palestinians by claiming to seize the moral high ground in much of the West where non-western lives are considered of little weight or importance.

After the second and more substantial Iranian ballistic missile attack, of limited impact, Israel has vowed it will launch a deadly attack which will surprise Iran. Israel has partially achieved one of its aims: to draw the US into this war against Iran and its allies. The Houthis have been bombed, an American carrier force with ABM ships and a troop contingent lies offshore in the Gulf to defend Israel and deter Iran, and its ABM capability has already been used against the Houthis and the two Iranian missile strikes. However, till now the US position has been mainly to help defend Israel, and this includes its latest move to station there the advanced Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) battery of anti-ballistic missiles with US soldiers to operate this system or systems. So far the US does not overtly support Israel's principal objective to destroy at best or at least to seriously retard Iran's nuclear capability. A capability that US intelligence assesses is a year from making a deliverable bomb once the decision is made by Iran, of which it sees no sign as yet. Rather the new Iranian President during his recent visit to the UN General Assembly called for the revival of talks on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which was negotiated to allay suspicions about Iran's nuclear progress and intentions but which the US withdrew from under President Trump.

The Israeli response and the reaction of Iran will dominate forthcoming events in our region. Whatever happens, several matters are clear. Regardless of the stance of the governments in our region the reaction of the public will be uncompromisingly against Israel and its allies. Secondly, amongst the major powers while the evolving position of the most consequential, the US, cannot be clearly ascertained, at this point it tends publicly at least towards limiting the Israeli response. Thirdly, of the other major powers China and Russia have stakes in defusing the crisis and limiting its fallout though limited ability to do either.

Fourthly, a state is at its most vulnerable when it is close to nuclear capability but has not yet attained it, a fact of which Iran and all parties - including the Israelis - are well aware

Fifthly, the wheel of history turns slowly as do the mills of the Almighty. While the Iranians can be rigid, arrogant, and occasionally interfering in the sectarian affairs of their neighbors to defend their minority communities, as do other regional powers for their own interests; it may be remembered that the Persians are a proud people and heirs to a great and ancient civilization. In the sixth and fifth centuries BC the Emperors Darius and his son Xerxes invaded Greece to punish the Athenians, whom they considered terrorists, for their mercenary raids and for meddling in their vast Empire, including supporting the Ionian revolt. Around 260 AD the Roman Emperor Valerian was defeated and captured by the Persian Emperor Shahpur the First and used by him till he till he lived as a footstool to mount his horse. It is not that the Iranians have not like others had their setbacks, but it is never wise to count them out - they are likely to present their own surprises.

The Great Powers

The US/EU and Russian focus in Europe revolves around Ukraine. Ukraine expected or hoped that its offensive in the summer of 2023, with newly supplied western military equipment, would roll back Russian forces, who had not performed well uptil now, and regain its own territory in the East if not Crimea at this stage. However, this counter-offensive did not go as planned and ran into well prepared and fortified

multiple lines of defense. Ukraine lost a significant amount of its newly supplied equipment. Instead the Russian army in greater numbers, and especially artillery and ammunition along with its air superiority, started its own offensive which it mounted all along the front. By the use of more, and better by now trained troops, Russia has been making slow but steady progress; although at a large cost of men and materiel, and has captured a few key transportation hubs and high grounds to be able to threaten more territory held by Ukraine in what it considers now as its own territory. It may be recalled that on 30 September 2022, Russia announced the annexation of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. Ukraine launched a surprise offensive into Kursk in Russia proper. Kursk had been the site of the largest tank battle in World War II, in 1943, between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and was won by the USSR.

The objectives of this Ukrainian offensive were twofold. First of all, to throw the Russian offensive off balance by drawing away troops from the main and long front. Secondly, to hold Russian territory as a bargaining chip in any negotiations towards a ceasefire. However, this interesting diversionary tactic has not produced its objectives so far. Though some 1,000 square km of territory was seized quickly by crack Ukrainian forces in the face of light and ill-trained Russian border forces, Russian forces in Ukraine did not however lose focus. As President Putin put it, they would take care of this issue in their own time. This latest Kursk bulge has been contained by Russian reserves and a small counter offensive on the flank of the bulge which could threaten Ukrainian lines of supply. Some 300 square km has been regained by Russia. There is some criticism in Ukraine that the Kursk offensive thrust has diverted well-trained troops that were and are needed on the main front to contain a creeping but steady Russian advance.

President Zelensky has pinned his country's hopes on his Victory Plan, to get Western permission to use long range western weapons deeper into Russia than hitherto permitted, and to obtain membership of NATO and the EU quickly. However, there is caution amongst his US and European allies of getting drawn into a direct confrontation with

Russia, and this weapons permission has not yet been accepted due to a lack of consensus.

The US, its Allies, and China

The US and increasingly in various degrees its Western allies have started viewing and treating China as their main strategic threat. China is under challenge over Taiwan, in which the Philippines has joined in; pressure from India on their long border; with trade tariffs on its very competitive electronic cars and other exports; over its ties to Russia in the Ukrainian war; and access to the latest technology, including chip-making technology; as well as constant critical western media propaganda. However, while it will remain in continuing struggle, it would appear that China has reached the stage that its advances in these fields cannot be stopped for long.

India and its Neighbours

India has suffered a series of reverses in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. But given their proximity to such a large neighbour, especially in the case of Bangladesh which is 80% surrounded on its land borders by India, while the pendulum has swung from one side to the other, realistically speaking it will probably swing back to the middle, as is happening already in Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

India and Pakistan

Bilateral relations have remained frozen since India annexed IIOJK in 2019 and are likely to remain so, despite some voices urging resumption on the Pakistani side. The new elections in IIOJK saw a larger turnout then before; but the result was viewed as an expression of discontent with the Modi government's 2019 move to end Indian Kashmir's special constitutional status, and its policies to bring in outsiders and to give them voting rights, along with changed delimitation of constituencies to disenfranchise further the occupied Kashmiri Muslims. The BJP gained twenty-nine seats in Hindu majority Jammu, but did not win a single seat in the Muslim majority valley despite its nineteen candidates. The National Congress led by Farooq Abdullah won 42 seats in the house of 92 along with its ally the Indian National

Congress with six seats. Nevertheless, cold comfort for those wanting to be free of their enforced occupation and yearning for their right of self-determination,

India regards Pakistan as weak and politically unstable, and has also moved to demand negotiations for changing the terms of the Indus Waters Treaty, obviously to its advantage, where already one the main strategic objectives of its many run of the river dams is to be able to hold back water during the crucial Rabi sowing season in Pakistan. India should not forget that earlier its progress in building dams in occupied Kashmir, including the Baghliar Dam, was retarded for a number of years by an active insurgency.