

THE US ELECTIONS, THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE MIDDLE EAST

By Andreas Andrianopoulos

US Election Dynamics

- Under the shadow of worsening European and American economies, budding banking scandals, and the approaching fiscal cliff, partisan politics is likely to be more acute than usual. Larger philosophical debates about whether the system is meant for the few or many have already erupted. The dialogue involves how to balance between the influences that have acted over American politics at different times in history, such as free trade or protectionism, isolationism or engagement, tax break or hike.

- The major bone of contention between the Republicans and Democrats is obviously what programs to cut. US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta had alerted lawmakers last year not to implement a “doomsday mechanism” that would have resulted in Pentagon budget slashed by \$600bn, saying that these cuts could severely threaten US national security. The cuts were only supposed to kick in if the Super Committee fails to secure a deal on budget savings.
- On the other hand, President Obama faces stiff opposition from the Republicans on increasing tax on the rich to tackle the alarming US deficit. The Republicans have opposed the plan such as the ‘Buffet Tax’.

- The debate between the two parties is reflective of their traditional worldview. The Republican’s do not like to tax the rich and see it as counterproductive in promoting more investments. Moreover, they like to cut social programs, from which mostly the lower middle class and poor benefit. They are considered strong on issues of national security and thus they defend defense budgets. On the other hand, Democrats usually increase social spending that results in bigger government and want to tax the rich more and the middle class less.

American System And Public Frustration

- In the present state of recession, the stalemate over the deficit has increased public frustration and alarm. The New York Times op-ed columnist David Brooks reflected in May:

“The American decentralized system of checks and balances has transmogrified into a fragmented system that scatters responsibility. Congress is capable of passing laws that give people benefits with borrowed money, but it gridlocks when it tries to impose self-restraint.”

- He went on to comment on the strong role technocrats are beginning to play in the affairs of European Union:

“Decisions that reshape the destinies of families and nations are being made at some mysterious, transnational level. Few Europeans can tell who is making decisions or who is to blame if they go wrong, so, of course, they feel powerless and distrustful.”

The unfolding economic recession and banking scandals in the West reveals what the unchecked association between money and power can do to the system. The representatives of the people are now caught between serving powerpowerful interests groups or the welfare of common people.

Foreign Policy

- On matters of foreign policy and national security, both parties want to appear strong. The parties have tried to differentiate their policies before the elections, but once in power, they have stuck to continuity. For example, after Bush, President Obama increased drone attacks in Pakistan many times over. Most of the other red lines established by Pakistan were crossed on Obama's watch. The policies regarding Iran have also remained consistent.

It can be hypothesized that military withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan has more to do with American economic realities than any fundamental change in policies. The complexity of foreign policy and novices of the American public in this regard means more dependence on the state institutions to run the show.

- The grave local and global challenges being confronted by US are multifaceted and may not be resolvable by the politics of election cycles. The political jockeying can help parties win elections, but if they are able to actually resolve issues, is questionable. In fact, the problems and challenges are getting worse. If and when, America develops the will to conduct a system level correction, it will have profound global implications.

Emerging Alignments In The Middle East

- Relationships in the Middle East are shifting dramatically over the issue of Syria and Iran. On the one hand, Turkey and the BRICS countries have supported Iranian rights to peaceful nuclear program and have not relented from importing oil from it despite EU and American sanctions. On the other hand, the position of Arab countries and Turkey are similar when its come to the situation in Syria. However, this did not prevent Arab nations from attempting to sideline Turkey from the controversial Arab League conference, recently held in Iraq.
- Meanwhile, USA is strengthening its ties with the Gulf States, while warning Iran that its window for diplomacy will not be open long. But this does not mean the Gulf countries are united against Iran. Qatar, an emerging regional power, has strongly opposed any military action against Iran.

The Evolving Dynamics Of Islamic Spheres Of Influence

- During the World Wars the region of South Asia, especially modern day India and Pakistan, were responding in their own peculiar way to the changes that were shaping the Middle East, such as the break-up of Ottoman Empire. The responses were taking the form of Deobandism and Khilafat Movement etc

Islamic Spheres And Arab Spring

- The core is dominated primarily by the Arab speaking countries, while the peripheries includes the Turks, Persian, and other nations of South Asia and the Asia Pacific. The more traditional and literalist interpretations of the Islamic teachings have emerged from the core, while the contemporary understanding of Islam originated in the peripheries and have Turkish and Iranian roots.

- the Afghan and Iraq wars, and the arrival of Arab Spring, have complicated the ground reality of the Arab world as well as the peripheries. Moreover, the West was forced to abandon its support of dictators that had become a symbol of the status quo.
- As the Arab world passes through this transformation, the transition process in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt have thus far presented mixed results. On the one hand, as the scope and reach of the war against extremists has spread, Islamists have gained grounds. On the other hand, the Arab awakening has crept inward towards the core, and it has turned bloodier in states like Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. Customarily, it's the developments of Egypt that have profound ideological influence on the rest of the Islamic world and the changes there are being closely watched.

- This sea change that continues to unfold in the Islamic core, has implications for the emerging and establishing powers, and the Islamic peripheries, and they are all in a bind to adjust to these fast moving events of the region.

The Islamic Spheres And Emerging, Established Powers

- The interplay of the above dynamics has resulted in hardening the position of Russian and China on what these uprisings have come to represent. While these powers, including India, had abstained on the vote of imposing a no-fly zone in Libya. Russia in particular regretted it and subsequently opined that the resolution was used by the West as a pretext for military intervention, regime change, and in gaining security, economic and political gains.
- This has further complicated the situation in Syria that can now be termed as a proxy war. The rebels are being supplied by Western powers using Qatar and Saudi Arabia as intermediaries while Russia continues to back the Assad regime. Now, the Syrians have finally employed the support of Kurds on its side of the border, to be used against Turkey, from where most of the interference in Syria is believed to be occurring. The shape of emerging alliances is represented by NATO, Turkey and GCC countries on the one side, while Russia, China, Iran and Syria on the other. This is somewhat similar to how during World War I and II, Muslim regions and colonies were either allying with the Central or the Etente, and the Axis or the Allied powers respectively.

The Dynamics Of Islamic Core Vs. Periphery

- What do these changes in the Islamic core mean for the periphery states? As the core countries of the GCC ally with NATO and Turkey, the periphery countries are under pressure to select one or the other grouping.
- In the emerging alliances, however, the Gulf countries have the most precarious position, as they are dependent on the West and the peripheral powers for their defense and security needs. On the other hand, the peripheral powers of Turkey and Iran are not dependent in a similar fashion. Moreover, the Gulf countries have a credibility issue that Turkey and Iran do not have, when it comes to their affairs with Israel.

- With Turkey putting itself squarely in the middle of the Syrian crisis by supporting the rebels there, some in the country are questioning if Turkey has unnecessarily placed itself in the cross winds of the brewing storm. Perhaps it wants to position itself correctly this time, and to undo the loss it suffered when the Ottoman Empire went under.
- This unprecedented situation in the Islamic core has also put peripheral power of Pakistan under pressure to decide one or the other grouping. This was amply visible in the recent vote in the UN Security Council on Syria that was vetoed by Russia and China for the third time, while Pakistan and South Africa abstained. On the other hand, India, including 11 other nations, voted in favor of the resolution that threatened tougher sanctions against Assad regime. India appears to be leaning more and more towards the NATO, GCC, and Turkey alliance.

- The call from Saudi Arabia for the 4th emergency meeting of the OIC in August could better understood under this context. It's a panic call from the GCC countries for support from the periphery, as they fear the Syrian crisis is about to spill over.