

Impact of the Northern Tier on the Middle East

A Rejoinder*

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1. INTRODUCTION

DR SARIOLGHALAM'S article is highly appreciable for its timeliness and is particularly significant for its analysis of Iran-Arab relations. In my view, even Western authors would not reflect the main patterns of the framework of these relations so unequivocally, not to speak of his fellow citizen colleagues.¹

I agree only partially, and in varying degrees, with the four major hypotheses put forward in the article. Sariolghalam argues that Turkish-Middle Eastern relations will be focused more on trade and investment, ignoring the intra-regional politics, while relations with the former Soviet republics of Turkic identity will grow, especially in the cultural and economic sectors. As regards Iran, he presupposes that relations with the Middle East will be more conflictive than cooperative, whereas relations with the Caucasus and Central Asia will develop on a good track with emphasis on cultural interaction.

I will first present my point of view on these hypotheses and then develop my own analysis regarding the impact of the Northern Tier on the future of the Middle East, emphasizing the role of Russia as the key determining actor in the politics of Central

Asia and the Caucasus as well as the Middle East. This issue is neglected in Sariolghalam's article, though Russia's bilateral relations with the states in these regions are highlighted to some extent.

2. TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Turkey's relations with the Middle East have long been perceived by the public at home as relations with the Arab peoples who collaborated with the imperial powers (e.g. Great Britain and France) during World War I, thereby breaking the faith with Ottoman rule. Such fixed memories of the past, and the highly dynamic and unpredictable intra-Arab relations, could not and did not facilitate the establishment of sound relations between Turkey and these states as they gained independence. In addition, Turkey's security considerations, fundamentally different from those of the Arab states, required NATO membership against the Soviet threat – an issue that did not mean much for most of the Arabs. However, Turkey has been a determined supporter of the Arab cause in every international forum regarding the Palestine issue. In support of this policy, Turkey refrained from entering into high level diplomatic or economic relations with Israel until the latter recognized

the inherent rights of the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, in general terms, the Arab Middle East was considered as 'somebody else's business' by many Turkish politicians.

The character of Turkish-Arab relations changed drastically following the military coup of 1980 in Turkey when relations with the European countries and Western financial circles were grievously affected by the military rule. The long ignored Arab capital resources seemed to be the sole opportunity to fuel the stagnated Turkish economy. Following the 1983 free elections, with the takeover of the government by Turgut Ozal – a conservative figure in the public eye – Turkish-Arab relations experienced unprecedented growth, particularly in the finance and tourism sectors. Hence, Turkish and Arab businessmen reaped the benefits of well-established trade and banking relations which in the final analysis helped to ameliorate the images that both sides held of each other, though not profoundly.²

This rather short period of relatively warmer relations notwithstanding, Sariolghalam's hypotheses that '[Turkey's] relations will be less affected by the Middle Eastern conflicts, politics and political oscillations' and 'Turkey will benefit the most by ignoring the Middle Eastern politics' do not seem warranted due to the reasons supplied in his own article. The issue of the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers is a major impediment to further prospective relations. Whereas Turkey controls the allocation of the waters of the Euphrates-Tigris drained from Turkish territory (which are indeed subject to yearly variations and are not abundant as Sariolghalam suggests), obstinate claims by Syria and Iraq to share these waters complicate the whole picture.³ This hydro-political issue is being tabled at every Arab gathering as an indication of so-called Arab solidarity. Turkey is always blamed in the final declarations of these meetings for using water as a weapon against the Arab world. Consequently, Turkey's 'peace pipeline' project of the second half of the 1980s, aimed at delivering the waters of the Seyhan and Ceyhan rivers

(that flow into the Mediterranean) to the Arab peninsula, still awaits to be taken seriously. Admittedly, one reason for the rejection of Turkey's proposal was that it would also be of benefit to Israel. This grandiose project would carry an amount of water equivalent to the Jordan river.⁴ Had it been approved, the pipeline would not only satisfy the thirst of the region but would also be functional in fostering substantial economic and political relations; it would also promote peace among the states in the region, including Israel. Hence, even the water disputes indicate that Turkey's relations with the Middle East states are not immune at all, as Sariolghalam asserted, to the internal dynamics of the region.

3. TURKEY, THE CAUCASUS, CENTRAL ASIA

Turkey's relations with the Caucasus and Central Asia are being exaggerated both inside and outside of Turkey by most of the actors concerned. Sariolghalam is correct in his observation that a great majority of the politicians, scholars and journalists have 'underestimated Russia's interests and geostrategic outlook toward the near abroad'. But his observation cannot be attributed, as indeed implied in the article, to the official policy adopted by the Turkish governments. In fact, the officials of the Turkish Foreign Ministry have been blamed by the leaders and spokesmen of several extreme-right political parties as well as by journalists for being still too wary of the Russian influence in the region. These political parties, true to their *raison d'être*, advocate further involvement of the Turkish governments in the conflicts of the Turkic world. Similar demands were often voiced by some of the leaders of the Turkic communities living in the troubled lands of the former Soviet rule but to no avail.⁵ The most Turkey could achieve regarding, for instance, the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan was to be part of the Minsk Group established under the auspices of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).⁶

Pan-Turkist criticism notwithstanding, the

governments in Turkey have opted to foster relations with this region, focusing on the cultural and economic domains. Turkey recommended the newly independent Caucasian and Central Asian states for full-fledged membership to international organizations like the UN, the NATO Cooperation Council, and the CSCE as well as to international financial organizations like the IMF and the World Bank.⁷ Turkey's underlying goal was to prepare the ground in its immediate periphery so that stable and democratic independent states could flourish. Turkey's approach to the newly independent states was indeed in perfect conformity with its policy of the late 1980s that was aimed at establishing a network of vivid economic transactions among the littoral states of the Black Sea. One of the objectives of establishing the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Council (BSEC) was to enhance the level of mutual confidence, around the Black Sea basin, achieved by the CFE Treaty between East and West.⁸ However, the objectives set at the beginning have hardly been attained owing to a great extent to Russia's policy of restraining Turkey's influence in its so-called 'near abroad'.⁹

4. IRAN, THE CAUCASUS, CENTRAL ASIA

Iran's relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus will lay, in my view, more emphasis on the economic than on the cultural domain, while the reverse is asserted in Sariolghalam's article. The break up of the Soviet Union brought to the fore the utmost important question how and where from the endless mineral resources of the Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the Caucasus would be delivered to the world markets? Turkey, with its geographic location as well as its democratic regime compatible with the West, appeared to be the most likely route for pipelines when compared to Russia, with a ruined economy which could hardly afford such extremely costly projects, and to Iran, whose regime is seen as a threat to Western interests. The sense of the negotiations for deciding on alternative projects seemed to initially favor Turkey's propos-

als, which was also said to be economically feasible, and ostensibly endorsed by the USA.¹⁰ However, Russia's commitment to not let Turkey get into substantial economic relations with its former protégés caused drastic deviations in the attitudes of the leaderships of the Turkic republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Hence, little hope, if any, remains for Turkey to host the pipelines in the foreseeable future unless all other alternatives are exhausted, especially for the delivery of the millions of tons of oil deposits in the Tengiz region of Kazakhstan.

Consequently, Iran emerged as the feasible alternative to host the pipelines. The most recent developments show that large scale economic relations are being established and that several bilateral agreements are already signed in that respect between Iran and Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Others are reportedly under way. The Russian veto that worked well against the Turkish pipeline projects did not materialize against Iran. Russia, apparently, promotes Iran in world politics. In the public domain, there are signs of this collaboration.¹¹

5. A NUCLEAR IRAN IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

I agree with Sariolghalam's assumption that Iran-Arab relations will be more conflictive than cooperative. Nevertheless, an important issue which will certainly exacerbate tensions in the same context is worth noting.

Recently, Iran decided to complete the construction of two 1300 MW(e) light-water nuclear reactors at Bushehr nuclear site, once initiated by the Germans but then halted. Despite strong reactions, particularly from the USA, Russia and Iran signed a USD 1 billion protocol in January 1995, whereby Russia agreed to provide Iran with comprehensive assistance.¹² The nuclear deal with Russia raised suspicions about the intentions of Iran, because an advanced nuclear industry may be exploited both for producing huge amounts of electricity, and for manufacturing nuclear explosive devices passing through identical stages. Hence,

with the nuclear infrastructure that it is expected to acquire from Russia, Iran may soon become capable of manufacturing nuclear weapons on its own, though this is strictly forbidden by the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to which Iran is a state-party.¹³ Moreover, the task of verification of compliance with the terms of the Treaty which is conferred upon the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) can hardly be fully accomplished since the IAEA is mandated to carry out safeguards inspections only in the nuclear sites declared to the agency.¹⁴ Thus, a possible scenario for Iran would be to manufacture nuclear weapons in undeclared sites using nuclear material procured from various sources, thus evading international controls.

6. THE WORLD OF THE NEW ORDER

An important question that needs to be answered at this stage is why Russian-Iranian relations gain momentum in the post-Cold War era? It is well-acknowledged that due to structural reasons, Russia is compelled both economically and politically to hold on to the former Soviet republics, especially the ones in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This has recently been officially declared as the 'near abroad' doctrine which also signals the revival of a loose political entity that is to somehow replace, de facto, the former Soviet Union, though now deprived of a worldwide ideological appeal. Russia, at the core of that entity, will hereafter be more concerned with its near abroad than with getting into direct worldwide confrontation with the USA.

I prefer to call this framework of international relations the *World of the New Order* (rather than the 'new world order' or 'disorder', as has been speculated). A new order, indeed, pervades the emerging patterns of relations in this major part of the globe and will have an impact on the rest. Having inspired it, Russia, in my view, aims to manage this order itself, with Iran as its assistant.

With its attitude towards Iran, Russia will 'hit three birds with one stone'. First, Iran will certainly have to retreat, to a great ex-

tent, from its ambition to export its revolution to Muslim communities in the newly emerged republics in its periphery for the sake of guaranteeing the nuclear weapons manufacturing capability obtained from the *master* of these republics. This will make things easier for Russia in that region, Turkish influence having already weakened.

Second, by allowing the oil and gas pipelines to traverse Iran towards the Gulf, Russia will, in the final analysis, control the opening of the enormous mineral resources of the newly independent states to the world markets. Hence, through the leverage of cooperation with Iran in the nuclear field, Russia will have a say in the oil traffic of the Gulf. It must be remembered that during the Cold War period, the control of Iran and the Gulf area by pro-Soviet forces or by the Soviet Union itself was feared in the West because it would result in the encirclement of the southern flank of NATO; in addition, Soviet control of Gulf oil would have provided Moscow with a valuable means of intimidation.¹⁵ Improved relations with Iran will thus place Russia in a strategic position that even the Soviet Union failed to gain.

Last, but not least, an economically, militarily and thus politically stronger Iran with its present regime will be a destabilizing factor for Western interests in the world through its support of the Islamic fundamentalist movements everywhere, except the territories under Russian influence. In this manner, Russia will be in a position to preclude the USA from acting freely in world politics.¹⁶ This, in my view, will mark the emergence of the *World of the New Order*.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- * This article was invited as a rejoinder to Mahmood Sariolghalam, 'The Future of the Middle East: The Impact of the Northern Tier', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 27, 1996, no. 3, pp. 303-317. The article is part of a project initiated by *Security Dialogue*, 'Conditions for Peace and Security in the Middle East.' The project has been funded by the

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- 1 For views of other Iranian scholars see *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, a publication of the Tehran-based Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS).
 - 2 Since the mid-1980s there has been a considerable inflow of Arab capital resources via the establishment of branches in Turkey of such financial institutions as Bank Mellat, Al Baraka-Turk, Kuwait-Turk, Faisal Finance and many others. According to Serif Egeli, Chairman of the Foreign Trade Association of Turkey, Turkish and Arab businessmen developed an important network of goodwill during the 1980s. (See Kemal Kirisci, 'Turkey's Search for Security in the Middle East', *Perceptions*, Center for Strategic Research, Ankara, vol. 1, no. 1, March–May 1996, pp. 151–168.) Moreover, in the same period, millions of Arab tourists have, in a sense, invaded the big cities of Turkey, especially Istanbul, Bursa and Konya where one can still see traces of Ottoman Islam culture.
 - 3 A political as well as a scientific discussion of these matters is reproduced, as an extract of a PhD dissertation in progress, by Aysegul Kibaroglu, 'Prospects for Cooperation in the Euphrates-Tigris River Basin', in P. Howsam and R. C. Carter, eds, *Water Policy: Allocation and Management in Practice*, (London: E & FN Spon, 1996, forthcoming).
 - 4 Interview with Özden Bilen, former Director of the State Hydraulic Works (DSI) of Turkey.
 - 5 Ebulfaz Elcibey, the former pro-Turkish president of Azerbaijan, in his first

interview with a Turkish reporter on September 18, 1995 (*Hurriyet*), criticized Turkey for not supporting him during the rebellion of Suret Huseinov which led to his deposition and eventual replacement by the pro-Russian Haidar Aliev, the current president of Azerbaijan. Elcibey said 'Russia is simply a blown-up balloon ... and Turkey must not be so timid in supporting the Turkic republics and must be in the forefront'. For details, see Robert Olson, 'The Kurdish Question and Chechnya: Turkey versus Russia since the Gulf War', *Middle East Policy*, vol. 4, no. 3, March 1996, pp. 106–118.

- 6 Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States participated in the CSCE negotiations that took place within the framework of the Minsk Group. The function of the Group was to define the emergency measures required to ensure cessation of hostilities. Later, the Minsk Group monitored the ceasefire imposed by UN Security Council resolution 882, of which Turkey was a co-sponsor together with Russia and the United States.
- 7 Turkey encouraged and fully supported the formal applications of Turkic republics to these organizations in order to let them be either full-fledged or associate members. For extensive chronological coverage of Turkey's relations with the Caucasus and Central Asia, see Heinz Kramer, 'Will Central Asia Become Turkey's Sphere of Influence?', *Perceptions*, March–May 1996, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 112–127.
- 8 BSEC project, which at the beginning did not receive much attention in the political circles, was reinvigorated following the demise of the Soviet Union. Several former Soviet republics such as Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were invited to join the ranks of economic cooperation alongside the Russian Federation and

- the Balkan states such as Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania. This cooperative arrangement was officially inaugurated in Istanbul, in June 1992.
- 9 A striking example is Russian President Boris Yeltsin's message on New Year's 1994: 'We are committed and determined to protect Russian interests in the near abroad. Our fate and historical links make living apart impossible and people will never permit such a thing.' A simple documentation of similar declarations would require thesis-like studies. See, Anthony Hyman, 'Power and Politics in Central Asia's New Republics', *Conflict Studies*, no. 273, August 1994, p. 24.
 - 10 The world's largest proven resources of oil and natural gas are contained mostly within the territories of the littoral states of the Caspian Sea, namely Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Iran. Such multinational companies as the British Petroleum and Ramco of Great Britain; Amoco, Pennzoil, Unocal, and McDermott of the United States; Statoil of Norway; Delta-Nimir of Saudi Arabia; and the state oil company TPAO of Turkey are very interested in the so-called 'deal of the century'. The deal of the century is considered one of the underlying causes of confrontation between Turkey and Russia. See Robert V. Barylski, 'Russia, the West, and the Caspian Energy Hub', *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 49, no. 2, Spring 1995, pp. 217-232.
 - 11 In a trip to the Persian Gulf states in autumn 1994, Prime Minister Chernomyrdin and Defense Minister Grachev emphasized their desire to fulfill their obligations toward Iran in the areas of armament and nuclear energy exploitation. See, Mehrdad Mohsenin, 'Iran's Relations With Central Asia and the Caucasus', *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 834-853.
 - 12 The protocol outlines a wide range of assistance including the supply of nuclear material, and training of approximately 500 Iranian technicians as well as some 20 graduate students and PhDs annually at Russian academic institutions, and cooperation in building low power research reactors for instructional purposes. Among a plethora of articles documenting the nuclear engagements of Iran see, for example, David Albright, 'The Russian-Iranian Reactor Deal', *The Nonproliferation Review*, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, Spring - Summer 1995, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 49-51.
 - 13 In a private conversation, during an international conference in Lund, Sweden in June 1995, Dr. Hadjihusseini of the IPIS told me that Iran was undergoing 'serious economic crises since the drastic falls in the oil prices, and also suffering from a considerable decline in the generation of electrical energy'. Hence, according to Dr. Hadjihusseini, 'Iran had no other option but to revitalize its Bushehr project, only for civilian purposes, in which already USD 4 billions have been spent'.
 - 14 Beyond its limited mandate, the IAEA has no authority to conduct inspections in undeclared sites unless the host state gives permission for such inspections.
 - 15 For an assessment of the relations of the states in the Middle East with the 'superpowers' during the Cold War, see Ali L. Karaosmanoglu, 'Turkey's Security and the Middle East', *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1983, pp. 157-175.
 - 16 In a visit to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Laos in December 1994, Alexander Vengrovski, deputy to Russia's state Duma, stated that most of the Islamic and Pacific Ocean states wished to prevent US pressure and influence in different parts of the world, and he mentioned Iran as a strong country whose political stability, especially during the Soviet crisis, would be beneficial to all. See Mohsenin, *ibid.*