

Interlocking crises strangle Middle East

Gilles Kepel
The Australian
8 April 2010
P. 8

Three crises structure the Middle East today: the Levant crisis, centred on the Israel-Palestine conflict and its Lebanese and Syrian extensions; the Gulf crisis, focused on oil and the antagonism between the Arabs and the Iranians and Sunni and Shia Muslims; and the AfPak crisis, where the Taliban threatens NATO troops in Afghanistan and the cohesion of Pakistan.

Each of these crises has its own dynamics, but they are highly interdependent.

The Levant crisis is embodied primarily by the Israel-Palestine stalemate. Benjamin Netanyahu's government rejects a two-state solution and a freeze on settlements, which could split his coalition in the Knesset.

The Palestinians are divided between Fatah, which administers the West Bank, and Hamas, in charge of the Gaza Strip. The leaders of the two Palestinian factions are so weak they are mere pawns in a battle of influence between Egypt and Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and Syria, Qatar and Iran on the other.

The conflicting interests of the Gulf are played out on the front line in Palestine; and they have the financial resources to impose their views. But mainly, the Gulf's own issues are on a scale incommensurable with those of the Levant: the world cannot do without the oil that passes through the Strait of Hormuz.

The resolution of the Iraqi chaos and an orderly withdrawal of US troops lie at the core of Gulf crisis. The reintegration of Iran into the regional security system in exchange for its return to the global economy is US President Barack Obama's riskiest gamble.

After the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2005, the Iranian political establishment saw an opportunity to reap maximum gain from the US's floundering intervention in Iraq.

In symbolic terms, Iran's policy paid off: Ahmadinejad -- and Hassan Nasrallah of Lebanon's Hezbollah -- have become the champions of anti-Zionism.

But Iran's economy is in tatters; the international embargo compounded by corruption, squandering and record inflation, is impoverishing a weary population.

The third crisis, the AfPak zone, has emerged as an obstacle of unforeseen size. It was the 1980s jihad in Afghanistan, funded by the US and the Arab governments of the Gulf to defeat the Red Army and offer an anti-Soviet, pro-US alternative to the export of the Iranian revolution, which brought this region into the Middle East in the broad sense.

And it was Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, sons of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, veterans of that jihad, who linked, in their own way, Afghanistan, the Gulf and Palestine to the US in the cataclysm of September 11, 2001.

In retaliation, the US and its allies overthrew the Taliban, but instead of consolidating their victory there, they transferred troops to Iraq and became bogged down.

Obama's gamble has been to return to a neglected Afghanistan to finish off the eradication of the Taliban and the al-Qa'ida networks based in the tribal areas on the Pakistani border, thus pacifying the AfPak crisis to free the US's hand for action in the Gulf and the Levant. An entrenchment of the US and NATO in the AfPak zone would only weaken their capacity for negotiation and action with respect to the other two crises: a weakened interlocutor would be in less of a position to pressure Iran, Israel and the Palestinians into making concessions.

The Obama administration made three initial moves: an outstretched hand to the "people of the Islamic Republic of Iran" last year, the Cairo speech last June aimed at restoring confidence between the US and the Muslim world, and pressure on Israel to freeze settlement building.

Through these steps, Washington hoped to re-engage with the Middle East as a central player, an honest broker.

But the initiatives have backfired: the policy of the outstretched hand to Iran, which sought to galvanise the "reformist" party around Rafsanjani, instead spurred the radicals around the Revolutionary Guard to join forces and ensure the re-election of Ahmadinejad.

Obama did not mince words to urge the Netanyahu government to freeze settlements. Yet Israel has inflicted serious rebuffs.

In this complex configuration, the Middle East is developing into one of the key poles in the new multi-polar world.

Will the region remain close to the West, albeit through a contrasting relationship, or will it turn towards the emerging powers of Asia, particularly China, which are now major customers for its oil?

That is one of the fundamental questions for the international system in the years ahead.

Gilles Kepel is Philippe Roman chair in history and international relations at the London School of Economics, and professor and chair in Middle East Mediterranean Studies at the Institute of Political Studies in Paris.