

Iran, Israel and the Birth of New Alliances

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, 28th August 2012, Jerusalem



120 nations of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) are at a crossroads in their 16th Summit in Tehran this week where the longer term impacts of the Second Arab Awakening (the Arab Spring) are likely to reveal themselves.

The NAM was established in Ban Dong in 1955 by Nasser (Egypt), Nihro (India), and Sukarno (Indonesia), and joined later by Marshall Tito of Yugoslavia in 1961 to create an alternative political narrative to those offered by western capitalist nations and Soviet-style socialism during the Cold War.

Many question the contemporary relevance of the NAM, seeing it as a relic of the past with a menial influence upon world affairs. This summit is different. Given how the narrative of the new chapter of political Islam (within the democratic model) is likely to push to the fore during the upcoming talks, the NAM's political compass may well be cast away from the leftism of the past, in a direction more relevant to the concerns of the people in the region. This serves to reaffirm how the Second Arab Awakening will shape the future of the Middle East.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is hosting the summit this year. Ahmadinejad is hoping for a show of solidarity against sanctions the West has imposed to punish Iran for its nuclear activities. It is an attempt to bring Iran out of its isolation through forging new regional ties which are overtly supportive of his nuclear intentions (whatever these may be)..

Egyptian President Mohammed Mursi will be in attendance at the summit with the hope of reasserting Egypt's leadership role in the Arab world following the 25th January Revolution. Like the first day back to school after a long, and eventful summer vacation, the NAM summit will witness everyone trying to reestablish their position in the school yard. The new comers (the Tunisians,

Egyptians, Libyans, and Yemenis) may have a tough time locating their new cliques in this environment.

Mursi need not worry about making new friends: new cooperation is expected between Cairo and Tehran following thirty years of separation since Camp David in 1979. Last week President Mursi allowed the unhindered passage through the Suez Canal of Iranian ships carrying weapons to Syria, contrary to American requests.

Developing a shared approach towards resolving the Syrian crisis may also bring the two sides together; it remains to be seen if they will be willing to sacrifice Al Assad to end the Syrian bloodshed.

Mursi is also negotiating with Israel on a number of fronts: on his recent security operations in the Sinai and the status of the Rafah crossing, on playing a role in the Hamas/Fatah reconciliation in Gaza, and in sticking to Egypt's commitments under the Camp David Agreement of 1979.

But are the other major powers likely to embrace Iran in the same way as Mursi?

Classically, the Saudis have kept a safe distance from Iran fearing the hegemony of the Shiite Iranian influence in the Gulf. Famously in 2008 Wikileaks revealed how they had encouraged the US to launch a pre-emptive attack on Iran to prevent them from acquiring nuclear weapons. However, since this time, the Saudis have shied away from any manoeuvres which could further destabilize a region which is already ablaze. This year, the Saudi monarch embraced the Iranian President Ahmadinejad at the Islamic summit, and suggested the establishment of an Islamic forum to promote dialogue among various Islamic schools of thought supported by Al-Azhar mosque in Egypt, the Turkish Islamic ruling party and Prince Hassan of Jordan.

Due to the Flotilla incident of 2009, another key power in the area, Turkey has moved from mainly tactical support for Iran, to becoming a player in strategic alliances which oppose the boycott of western nations, as well as oppose any US/Israel attack on Iran. Security concerns are paramount when it comes Israeli-Turkish relations. Antagonistically, Israel has continuously supported the Kurdish community in Turkey and Northern Iraq providing military training, as well as funding economic development. However, Turkey and Israel see a mutual threat in the arms smuggling among Al Qaeda groups which takes place along Turkey's three borders with Iraq, Syria and Iran. Turkey seeks to maintain a balance of support for its regional neighbours while giving a nod to its potential future partners in Europe whose security concerns it must respect.

Israel will be paying close attention to the alliances that may emerge from this summit. The Israeli obsession with a pre-emptive strike on Iran's nuclear program despite the endless requests from the US to refrain from taking such action (especially during the US election year) casts a veil over the whole summit.

The Saudis and the Gulf states are threatened by this march to war as it risks destabilizing the already fragile state of affairs in the region. A possible Israeli attack on Iran may lead to the formation of a Quartet (most likely made up of Egypt, Saudi, Turkey, and Iran) with a focus on self-defence, stability and the isolation of Israel, accompanied by the rise of political Islam in the post-Arab Spring era.

The importance of Palestinian participation in the Non Aligned Movement is fourfold: to maintain the PLO's seat within the movement, to reinforce the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, to build support for the UN statehood bid in September, and to signal to Israel and the US that Jerusalem (Al Quds) will continue to be on the political agenda of the new alliances in the region.

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