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Geopolitical issues of Middle East and diplomatic challenges for Pakistan

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore geopolitical and geostrategic significance of the Middle East. Middle East is an overarching region in term of geopolitics, geo-economics, security as well as ideological. The multiple factors have destabilized the region. Today Middle East has become the center of global affairs including political, economic, and security sensitivities. By using qualitative research methodology, secondary sources have been used to conduct this research. Ramification of this study has explored that historical and geopolitical overview of the Middle East is necessary to understand the current regional conflicts of the Middle East. Recommendation of the study is that Identification of prevalent Middle East's political systems, religious dynamics, economic challenges, social movements, and their impact on regional dynamics will help to recognize regional affairs.

Key Words: Geography, Geopolitics, Demography, Ideological factors, Security threats.

Introduction

This study has elaborated geopolitical, ideological, economic and security measures of the region. The Arabian Peninsula is surrounded by water and flows through the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean (Gunes, 2018). The Middle East caught the world's eye and also gained prominence for its rich abundance in variety of resources of oil and gas reserves. The powers that exist outside the region like China, US and Russia each one of them had tried their best to intervene and to establish their influence in the region (Stivachtis, 2018). International relations mostly focused on materialistic power including military spending and economic output, while demographic power is equally important for the survival of a state. The Middle East is a convergence of geopolitics and geoeconomics because many parts of the region are developing rapidly in terms of industry: petrochemical, in terms of infrastructure: roads, pipelines, ports etc, and in terms of electricity and modern

communications. The sacred land of the Middle East has equal importance to all monotheistic ideologies of Christianity, Jewish, and Islam. Significance of geopolitical location and establishment of Zionist state has been interplaying a combination of cluster of factors including dynamics of power competition, domestic influences and ideational factors that has unleashed new security challenges in all parts of the Middle East. The cycle of security and instability seems to be continuing in future.

Geography of the Middle East

Middle East occupied an important position on the edge of the multicontinents including Asia, Europe and Africa and holding important sea lanes and international trade routes. The region spread in the north to the Caspian, Caucasus, Black Sea, and Marmara, and in the West Aegean, eastern Mediterranean, Suez Canal and Red Sea, in the Southern the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman, eastern border covered by a line across the horrific desert covering east central Persia across most of its narrow waist from the Caspian to the Makran coast (Longrigg, 2017). The Middle East is also known as “Arab World “ consist mostly of Arabs which are Muslims. Arabian Peninsula consists of seven countries including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Yemen and UAE, and non-Arabian Peninsula consists of eight states including Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Turkey. Area of the Middle East is defined in different interests, criteria, and scientific disciplines. The Middle East is bordered by Morocco in the west, Pakistan and Afghanistan in the east, Turkey in the north and Ethiopia in the south (Ozalp, 2011). The Arabian Peninsula is surrounded by water and flows through the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean (Gunes, 2018). So Cyprus and Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Republic of the Lebanon, State of Israel, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Sudanese Republic and Egypt, The Persian Gulf Region including Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, United Arab Emirates, Muscat and Oman covered 3,500,000 square miles of land (Longrigg, 2017).



(Google.com)

Geopolitical Importance of the Middle East

The Middle East is an extremely important region in terms of power and trade. The Middle East is the region which plays a significant role in world trade and power purposes as well as its regional politics which impacts the global setup and relations because Middle East is a multicontinental region that includes regions of Asia, Africa as well as Europe. Its Lands partially touch the shores of Mediterranean Sea parallel to Arabian Peninsula. An American naval historian Alfered Thayer Mahan first time used the term Middle East in his book “The Persian Gulf and International Relations” after his book the term began to be used commonly. The land of Middle East can basically stretch as far as Pacific Oceans (Diop & others, 2012). From 1299-1923, Middle Eastern land was basically under Ottoman Empire which lasted for many centuries, embedding rich and exotic features to this land. Ramifications of WW I changed the global arena and Ottoman Empire declined and all Asian, European and African states segregated. All Arabian and non-Arabian Middle Eastern states were discrete by the “Treaty of Severe” 1920 and ratification of international peace agreement “Treaty of Lausanne” July 24, 1923. Today it is an amalgam of countries of South West Asia and Africa (Ehteshmi, 2015). The Middle Eastern region consists of some of the most important resources in the world. This resource rich land was discovered in the late 19th century when Europeans vied to control Middle East and most importantly by British invasion. The Middle East caught the world's eye and also gained prominence for its rich abundance in variety of resources in its territorial states including Cyprus, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Iran, Jordan, Qatar, Oman, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. The Middle East is also known in the world for its abundant resources which dominates world economy mostly because of its oil and gas reserves. The following chart showed the ME global Oil dominance

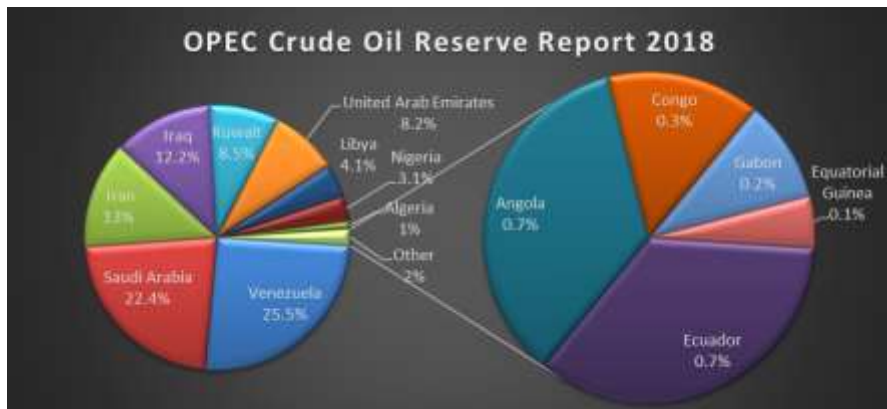


Table 1

Country	Percentage	Country	Percentage
Venezuela	25.50%	Nigeria	3.10%
Saudi Arabia	22.40%	Algeria	1.00%
IR Iran	13.10%	Equatorial Guinea	0.70%
Iraq	12.20%	Angola	0.70%
Kuwait	8.50%	Congo	0.30%
United Arab Emirates	8.20%	Gabon	0.20%
Libya	4.10%	Equatorial Guinea	0.10%

Under the OPEC report its member countries hold 79.4% world’s total proven oil reserves, and Middle East holding 64.5% of total OPEC reserves (Verhoeven, 2018), (OPEC, 2018).

Likewise Middle East holding world’s major gas reserves

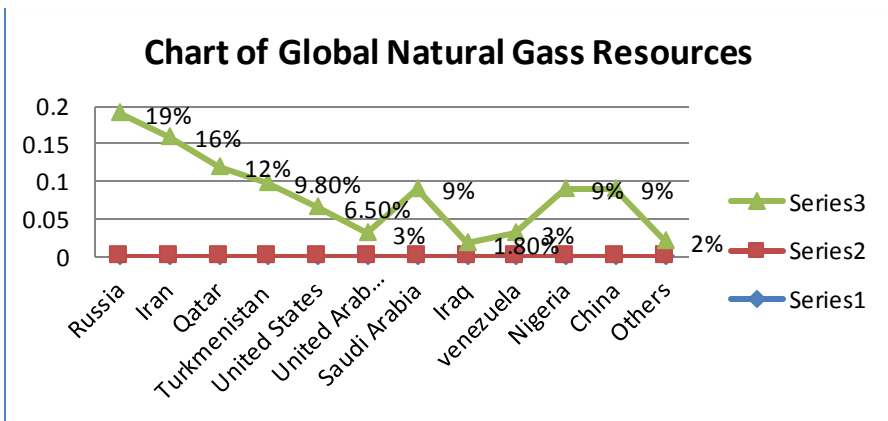


Table 2

Country	Percentage	Country	Percentage
Russia	19%	Saudi Arabia	7%
Iran	16%	Iraq	1.80%
Qatar	12%	Venezuela	3%
Turkmenistan	9.80%	Nigeria	9%
United States	6.50%	China	9%
United Arab Emirates	3%	Others	4%

According to table Middle East holds almost 40.80% of world’s natural gas reserves (Ataman, 2021).

Middle East is not limited to only these two resources it consists of a variety of resources which makes it rank as world’s most significant area. Other resources found in Middle East are Gold, Bauxite, Zinc, Copper, Iron Ore, Phosphate, Turquoise, Silver, Led, Timber, Tin, Uranium, Manganese etc. Each country existing in Middle East consists of unique natural resources .

The most eminent and practiced ideology in Middle East is Islam which dominates the Middle Eastern states except in Israel and Palestine. 93 percent of the population

follows Islam and is evenly distributed throughout Middle East. There is a substantial population of Jews originated in Israel which follows and practices Judaism as their ideology and where Christianity is also practiced. Israel is the only state in Middle East where ideology Judaism with 82% of its population is Jews and rest is Christians. Christianity with the percentage of 4 is also practiced in the regions of Lebanon, Egypt and Palestine but in minute number. Arabs constitute the majority ethnic group in Middle Eastern states except for Israel, Iran and Turkey. Kurds are the second largest ethnic group existing in Middle East as a minority throughout Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. Within the ideology of Islam Muslims are further divided into sects whereas Sunni sect is the predominant sect believed amongst the majority in Middle East and Shia sect as the minority. Middle East consists of a vast population with a diverse culture but Islam as an eminent ideology having dominant cultural adaptation (Tannous, 2020).

The Middle East has been struck by Conflicts since post World War II. From Countries like Israel fighting Arab countries in the Middle East to Iran and Iraq war, from Egyptian Crisis to Persian Gulf Crisis, the Middle East went through confrontations in the region. Civil wars namely Arab Uprising breaking in different countries of this region. Being an amalgam of several countries which have their own culture, language, and ideological beliefs, conflicts are easy to arise. Besides this region is extremely rich in oil production for the world which makes it even more prone to power struggle and instability. The top reason why conflicts arise in this region is Israel. Whole Muslim world is full of natural resources. Oil has become a crucial weapon. If the whole Arab world unite and uses this weapon, they have the potential to jam the world. A demonstration had been seen during Arab-Israel war 1973 when Saudi Arabia stop oil supply to United States on October 20, 1973 and stopped US aggression against Arab world. Kuwait, Bahrain, and Libya also followed Saudi Arabia. The cut-off of oil to the United States, and European countries had not only created the industrial crisis, but had also caused fuel problems. In Netherland oil was used as fuel. Shortage of oil created crisis, so the United States stopped using daylight. European countries especially Britain, France and West Germany had accelerated their efforts to enter into private agreements with Arabs (Akbarzadeh & Baxter, 2018). Apparently this tactic of the Arabs proved to be very effective but United States and its allies retaliated against the oil supply Arabs and other Muslim Countries. In this regard the United States started with Saudi Arabia and martyred Saudi King Shah Faisal bin Abdul Aziz through his nephew prince Faisal on March 25, 1975 (Kaussler & Hastedt, 2017).

The powers that exist outside the region like China, US and Russia each one of them had tried their best to intervene and to establish their influence in the region (Stivachtis, 2018). US, on the other hand, is extremely active in penetrating its political influence more rapidly than the other two by selling arms to groups for regional domination to intervening in Iraq and Syrian civil war, this is also a tactic to discriminate other countries in the region to unite for a Single unified State so that it gets difficult for China to hold economic and social benefits in the Middle East. Yet due to Covid 19 much of the world's economic conditions are at stake. With recent decline in oil activities many countries like Saudi Arabia and UAE are facing a shrink in their economy upto 4%. This made it possible for China to intervene and

deal in oil resources on much cheaper notes and to provide sustainability to the Middle East but this too has its consequences.

After deposing Iranian Democratically elected president by replacing it with aristocratic Shah, the US and Britain then started to intervene the Iranian land with their political influence, however, after the establishment of an Islamic theoretical parliament, Iran rose to regional power and posed threats to other competing countries. Meanwhile many Gulf countries allied with US and Israel to resist Iran and its threats. Recently, American President Trump called out The United Arab Emirates and Israel to sign a “PEACE TREATY” in order to gain peace in the region which also includes the suspension of Annexation of West Bank. But this peace treaty was flawed as according to Israel, no plans will be changed to the Annexation which led to rage and disappointment from the United Arab Emirates. Apparently, UAE is the third country to sign an actual diplomatic agreement with Israel. According to the US, this diplomatic signing was a peace agreement however, for the Arabs it’s more like a roadmap for the bilateral relationship. This major conflict can be seen as the root cause of political instability and power struggle. Many Arab states begun to follow US-Israel policies to protect them from expected Turkish threat. Saudi Arabia signed an economic agreement of NEOM City with Israel in 2017. Today both states have close friendly relations. Behind this friendship being leading Middle East states Muhammad Bin Salman begun to pressurize Pakistan for diplomatic relations with Israel, by discarding Muhammad Bin Salman pressure Pakistan still stand on her stance of free Palestine. This issue created diplomatic and security tension in the region and may create serious economic and security crisis for Pakistan (Tucker, & Roberts, 2019).

Demography and Economic Resources of the Middle East

International relations mostly focused on materialistic power including military spending and economic output, while demographic power is equally important for the survival of a state. Because population has risen, labour force for infrastructure, and workforce to produce goods. Population has played effective role during the time of instability to bring change. Population is a primary element of a state, other entities on the globe enjoy their demographic component, while in the Middle East in the perspective of demography referred to as a “youth bulge”, only few Middle Eastern States have been enjoyed institutions rooted by civil society. Tunisia, Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt are the states where civil institutions applied the break against upheavals. Most Gulf States have increased their economic revenue by the oil based rentier economies. This is how natural resources and demography of the Middle East grab the attention of international actors. Under the joint Arab Economic Report 2015 that Arabs are 5.2% of the world while holding 27.5% of world’s total natural gas reserves and 55.2% of world’s total oil reserves. Yet the region is suffering from imbalanced economic issues. The Gulf region holding large part of energy assets concentrated in North Africa. Energy assets and economic stability also shows the rank of a country on the global arena. Under the Global Competitive Report 2016-2017 Qatar and United Arab Emirates are ranked at 18 and 16 respectively in the perspective of economic achievement. Saudi Arabia ranked at 29, Egypt 115, Iran 76 and Yemen ranked at 138, while non-oil rich countries like Israel and Turkey are higher in rank at 24 and 56 than these oil rich countries. The reason is economic opportunities are not equally in access to all. Largest 20 companies of each state including United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia,

Oman, Morocco, Kuwait, Egypt, Lebanon, and Bahrain are not listed on the stock exchange. While biggest companies of these states do like to have a higher board of directors from the members of royal families or high ranked government officials. This shows that laymen have limited access to the rent base enterprises and hydrocarbon wealth. This is the reason that regional citizens often face corrupt bureaucracy and inefficient officials. According to the transparency international report most corrupt Parliament members and tax officials are seen in this region (McKee, 2017). These factors also affect the people's preference during the time of instability.

Youngsters are the precious assets of any society, so one of the strongest assets of the region is young population. According to the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) 2016 that youth of 15 to 29 ages is about third of Gulf States population, likewise the other third belong to below the age of 15. While non-Arab countries like Turkey and Iran have shared higher ratio of this age category than Arab States. Youth play the act of economic seed. The group of youth perpetually remained challengeable at the stage of employment. The world youth unemployment rate was at 13% in 2014, while in the MENA region highest youth unemployment ratio was at 28.2% and 30.5% respectively (Sorenson, 2018).

Emerging Geopolitical Patterns and the Middle East

New geopolitical ideas were projected post-cold war era. Transitional or hybrid models were generated. The three bloc geo-economic presented the North South model which is Zones of peace and zones of turmoil, clash of civilizations, and balance of power. Contemporary international system is based on geoeconomics, so economic competition has become central thinking of three blocs. These three blocs might be the mainstream of international relations. Three blocs are leading:

1. Pacific Rim region centered by Japan including Thailand, Indonesia, Korea, China and rest of the East Asian states
2. Germany led European bloc that assumed to include former Soviet states and Russia, and may also North Africa.
3. United States centered Western Hemisphere bloc including NAFTA (North America Free Trade Agreement) group, and Latin America

The status of South Asia and North Africa seem ambiguous in the study and Middle East has become a geoeconomic card. The three bloc model also discussed in the "End of History thesis", that pursued from the ideological conflict of big powers and dominated global stage since 1930s to the prediction that such sort of conflicts can never be recur but superseded older economic rivalries (Daojiong & Meidan, 2015).

The three bloc model might be believed to be state centric, and more focused on trade between nations than a complex system of marketing, production, and global corporate patterns of development. Because three blocs better understand the reality of global trade and investment in this infinite economic interdependence age, globalized production of sundry goods, and multinational industry. The three bloc model also views the dividing line drawn by Pacific and Atlantic Oceans between the American bloc and other two. The competition between three blocs focused on "regionalism or region states" within North America, Asia, and Europe.

It is also manifested that international system is based on five to six poles having equal weights that includes United States, Russia, China, Japan, United Europe, and maybe India. Anyhow in this complex system Islamic Greater Middle East also becomes an effective pole where fault lines run between the Middle East, Russia, Europe, and India. It can say that in military terms, fundamental balance of power is against Islam and Middle East (Oskarsson, 2018). But they counterbalance it by the gas and oil reserves, and by political leverage. Because all other poles United States, China, Europe, East Asia, India, China, and Japan all are heavily in Middle East for oil and gas energy. Yet the energy producer is intensely exploited from the other poles. Samuel Huntington's thesis "Clash of Civilizations" has great attraction for the students of international relations from the perspective of Middle East (Russett, 1993).

The Middle East is a convergence of geopolitics and geoeconomics because many parts of the region are developing rapidly in terms of industry: petrochemical, in terms of infrastructure: roads, pipelines, ports etc, and in terms of electricity and modern communications. But this development is felt as a threat by some nations for their interest in the region and they began to modernize their weapons as America. She took down Iraq's infrastructure during the air assault of desert storm. For instant desalination plants of seawater expected to target in future wars are indicators of Middle East convergence into zones of turmoil, and the region left out of globalization, but some of its parts will try to maintain its identification with the southern half of North South divide (Blackwill & Harris, 2017).

Ideological Factors of the Middle East

According to Jewish intellectuals "Nation is a spiritual concept" and "ideologies is an essential factor of the national ego" (Bensoussan, 2007). Middle East is the sacred place of the three monotheist ideologies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This shows the role of Middle East in the evolution of human civilization. One of the oldest ideology is Zoroastrianism which was founded around 3400 years ago. It includes two deities of Ahura Mazda (Avestan, Wise lord) and Ahriman, and Avesta is the sacred text of Zoroastrians. Yezidis are also one of the oldest communities in the Middle East who exist in Iran. In Iraq and Syria, many religious groups have formed social fabrics for many years, however, the existence of extremist groups has caused such social fabric. So sectarian fanaticism created huge unfinished conflicts in the region. The sense of retaining religious identity and belonging to a specific religious group mostly harms the degree of socialization. For instance, majority of Sunni Kurds used marginalized Yezidi Kurds in Northern Iraq for decades, which is called the Kurdistan region (Sorenson, 2018). On the other hand strictness of Yezidi played a significant role in nurturing both Kurdish communities because of their historical identity linguistically and ethnically. But intermarriages between the two communities are strictly prohibited and became the cause of honor crime. In Iraq, Shiite Muslims were being oppressed for loyalty to Iran which is the largest Shiite power in the region. The sectarian differences between Shiite and Sunni in Iraq are deep-rooted from historical hostility against the tyrant regime of Yezid for centuries. Shiite Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki in Iraq showed no mercy for Sunni. During his period political rights of Sunni Muslims had been oppressed. Shiite Sunni differences also affect Syria where Hafiz Al Assad of Shiite family Alawite eliminated his opponent from Sunni sect, in 1971. The Alawite family of Shiite sect holds the powers through security and intelligence. Alawite oppressed

Sunni Muslims in Syria who are approximately 74% population of Syria. Muslim Brotherhood took up arms against Assad regime that became the cause of casualties and destruction in Hama. Afterward, Shiite Sunni conflict continued in Syria.

The level of violence can be predicted by the degree of ideological conflicts in the region that pattern the power competition within the domestic states. Saudi Arabia intervened in Bahrain and Yemen on behalf of Sunni power, while Iran is Shiite power supporting Shiite forces and rebels in the region. Ideological differences also exist between Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Vatikiotis, 2016). The states under the impact of ideology always suffer from economic, political, and cultural issues. Ideological diversities and conflict always unleashed the door of foreign intervention. Likewise, Middle East where foreign forces support one side of the conflict like the USA, Russia, and China support their choice of group. Along all the different sects of Islam Judaism is also a fundamental root of conflict in the region. The degree of monopoly of Judaism is increasing in the region. Major wars occurred between Arab and Israel for the land of Palestine (Sorenson, 2018).

Security Threats in the Middle East

The Middle East grabs the world's eye for its natural resources, and for this reason today Middle East has become most conflicted region of the world. The tension starts right after the World War I and post-Ottoman Empire when Europeans vied to control the Middle East and establish a Zionist state in the center of Arab countries. After this change, many conflicts took place in the Middle East including Arab-Israel wars, Iran-Iraq War, Gulf war, and Saudi Arabia conflicts with Turkey, Iran, Qatar, and Yemen. In nutshell, the short Middle East has become the stage of conflicts set by major powers and acting by domestic states. The Middle East has become the graveyard of conflicts because of its natural resources, especially oil reserves. To acquire its natural resources great powers distract its countries and population in internal conflicts. Power competition between internal and external game players patterns security threats in the entire region (Koch & Stivachtis, 2019).

Conclusion

This study has explored the historical and geopolitical significance of the Middle East which is necessary to understand the current regional conflicts of the Middle East. It is important as it documented the existence of political demarcation that became the reason for conflicts in the region. And local population interprets the current situation through historical events. Consequently, Western views of locals have been tinged with distrust and suspicion but did not stop the people of the Middle East from aspiring to these ideals of independence and self-determination which are now included in international agreements and celebrated in the West.

Strength of the Study

Here are some strengths of the study as the Middle East has a rich historical background, and studying conflicts in the region allows for an understanding of the historical factors that have shaped the current dynamics. This historical context helps researchers and policymakers analyze the root causes of conflicts, identify recurring patterns, and develop a long-term perspective.

Weakness of the Study

The weakness of the study is that the Middle East is a region of immense complexity and diversity, with numerous ethnic, ideological, and political factions. Understanding the intricacies of these conflicts requires in-depth knowledge of historical, cultural, and social factors. However, due to the sheer complexity, it can be challenging to grasp the nuances and accurately predict outcomes.

Recommendations

A historical overview of the region will help to understand the Middle East's current political, social, and cultural landscape that will lay the groundwork for understanding geographical and cultural diversity, contemporary issues and conflicts. Identification of prevalent Middle East's political systems, religious dynamics, economic challenges, social movements, and their impact on regional dynamics also necessary to recognize regional affairs.

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