

The Middle East Issue and China's Middle East Diplomacy

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I. The Middle East issues

From the historical angle, the Middle East issue is the Eastern Question in the 20th century. The Eastern Question emerged when Germany, Britain, France and Imperial Russia all engaged in a power struggle in the 19th century. It was about how to divide and take the countries and regions under the control of the huge Ottoman Empire. The Eastern Question was put to rest after World War I, the outcome of which was the collapse and the division of the Ottoman Empire. After that, the territory in West Asia and North Africa controlled by the Ottoman Empire became the British and French colonies, which further strengthened the colonial system. That was when the Eastern Question became the Middle East issue. It includes territorial questions, ethnic and religious problems in West Asia and North Africa, as well as the struggle for independence of many countries and regions.

From the angle of region, the department of West Asia and North Africa in our national ministries administrative division is in charge of the Middle East including 19 Arab countries, Israel, Iraq, Turkey and South Sudan which declared its independence in 9th July, 2011, with all together 23 countries.

1. The religious background of the Middle East issue

The Middle East is the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the world's three major religions. Judaism and Christianity originated from Jerusalem, while Islam the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in today's Saudi Arabia. The Qur'an, the finest literary work of Islam, is divided into two parts. The chronologically early suras are Mecca, and the latter are Medina suras.

According to American scholar Huntington, there are 11 civilization systems in the world, 8 of which are prominent. Actually, in my opinion, only 3 of them have global impact. The first one is the Western European and North American civilization with Christianity at the core and about 2.3 billion Christians. The second one is the Islamic civilization with its core countries in West Asia and North Africa. There is an international organization called Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (former Organization of the Islamic Conference) including 57 member states and

This paper was written according to shorthand draft of the Think-tank Month speech delivered on May 19, 2015, Fudan University's 110th anniversary, by Professor Zhu Weilie who is the director of Institute for Middle East Study, Shanghai International Studies University. It has not been reviewed by the author.

headquartered in Jeddah. The organization reported the total number of Muslims all over the world was 1.6 billion in January, 2014. The third one is the East Asian civilization represented by Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The three major civilization systems still have tremendous international influence nowadays. Although Hinduism deserves attention, it has limited international influence.

Islam is the most dramatic religion in the world, from which originated the religious extremism which is the ideological root of international terrorism. As for China, Islamic issue not only involves geopolitics and international politics, but also Chinese politics. China's Xinjiang issue is mainly about fighting against three forces, of which are religious extremism and national secessionism. Both are related to the Middle East in terms of spreading and infiltrating channel and are involved distorting and mutilating Islam in terms of contents and essence.

Islam is divided between Sunni and Shia. The dispute between the two denominations began soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (570-632) and lasted for about 1400 years. The substantive differences between them lie in the legitimacy of religious politics and the basic principle whether a Caliph should be elected or be chosen from successors. The two major denominations develop their own systematic doctrines, jurisprudence and etiquette, which leads endless and long-lasting expanding sectarian struggle.

Iran is the biggest Shia country, believing in the Twelvers and having the biggest Shia population, where Shia makes majority. The Huthis in Yemen is Zaidism, a sect of Shia Islam. The Alawis in Syria is also a branch of Shia Islam. However, according to strict doctrine, the Alawis was considered as "heterodoxy" and was excluded by the Shia Iran for a long time. The Alawis hasn't been recognized by Iran until the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s that brought Iran and Syria closer to each other.

2. The key points in every stage of the Middle East issue

After World War I, the Middle East in British and French colonial system mainly searched for the national independence and national liberation. There are four ethnic groups in the Middle East: Arabs, Persians (today's Iran), Turks (today's Turkey) and Jews (today's Israel). Some other ethnic groups don't constitute countries, for example, the Kurdish Question appeared during WWI. Since IS emerged, the Kurdish Question re-arose the international attention. The Kurds are estimated to number around 30 million. The Kurds are a cross-border ethnic group, mostly inhabiting Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey in the Middle East. The others are the Copts in Egypt believing in Christianity, which are 8 million people, accounting for an estimated 10% of the Egyptian population. Currently, the Kurdish

Question is very serious and has become one of the real geopolitical issues in the Middle East.

Since the mid-50s after World War II, the world has entered the period of the Cold War when the United States and the Soviet Union established their own allies systems: the NATO allies of the U.S and Warsaw Pact of the Soviet Union. The focus of their race was in the Europe, but they actually competed for the influence in the Middle East. Europe was not at war during the Cold War. In the late 90s after the Cold War, the Kosovo War broke out, making the Sothern Europe the battlefield. The wars during the period of the Cold War happened in the Middle East countries like Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Algeria, Yemen, etc. They were backed by the Soviet Union, while the gulf countries like Israel and Saudi Arabia were member states in the American allies system.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union marked the end of the Cold War. First were the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989 and German unification. Then came the outbreak of the Gulf Crisis and the Gulf War in August, 1990. Coalition forces from 34 countries led by the U.S. against Iraq led by Saddam led Iraq withdrawal from Kuwait. Last were the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the successive independence of the Soviet republics. The Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union ended with the victory of the U.S.

For 25 years, from the end of the Cold War until now, through the 1990s and 15 years in the new century, the themes of peace and development in the Middle East still remain. In the 1990s, the Question of Palestine, the biggest problem in the Middle East had some good news. President Clinton's Middle East policies were dual containment policy aimed at containing Iran and Iraq in the east of the Middle East the Arabic-Israeli progress to advance peace negotiation with Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and other Arabic countries and to obtain phased breakthroughs. However, the double standards of the Israel-Palestine policy cannot negotiate a final resolution of the Palestinian fight for an independent state, the core of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The September 11 attacks happened in the new century. It was the great event directly threatening the American homeland security in the first year when President George W. Bush held his office. He focused the global strategic security on the Middle East. His Middle East policies full of rich neo-conservatism were anti-terrorism, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and against rogue states. Soon he declared war in Iran and Afghanistan in succession. In 2004, he adjusted his Middle East policies into "anti-terrorism, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and democratization transformation of Islamic countries".

Compared with the Middle East policies of every president after WWII, Bush's policies were unimaginable and had serious consequences. After the official establishment of Israel in 1948, although the U.S. treated the security of Israel as core interests and promised to offer any possible support to Israel, the U.S. never sent troops to every Arab-Israeli Wars and regional conflicts, only offering information, intelligence, weapons and economic aid to Israel and other Mideast allies. In 1948 when the first Arab-Israeli War broke out, American troops were Jewish volunteer forces, not including active-duty forces. The Gulf War in 1991 where President Bush led multi-national forces got Security Council authorization. The Iraq War President George W. Bush started in 2003 was without evidence or legal justification abnormal manifestation of American hegemonism and power politics to an extreme.

The Iraq War is an important point to the U.S. It cost great in treasure and military power and stirred domestic public opposition. The financial deficits that were tackled by former President Clinton occurred again. Later on in 2008, financial crisis broke out, leading American comprehensive national strength to decline from the high point to relatively weak. To the Middle East, the U.S. directed to rebuild the countries after the Iraq war, adopting the system which distributed power based on denominations and ethnic groups. It opened the Pandora's Box, which directly led to sectarian and ethnic conflicts and tension regional rooted in Iraq. Al Qaeda and other religious extremism and terrorist organizations didn't disappear, but resurged and spread everywhere more rampantly. Since President Obama took office in 2009, American Middle East policies changed greatly from direct arm interventions to withdrawal from Kuwait and reduction of strategic input in the Middle East step from step. America takes the control and dominance of regional order and push Europe and allies in the Middle East to the first line. The dramatic change immediately caused the imbalance of power among the Middle East countries and rapidly exposed the livelihood problems of corruption and wide wealth gap, and institutional problems accumulated for a long time and difficult to solve because of the ignorance of reforms for ten years in the Middle East. Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution was sparked by self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor in December, 2010, and then the revolution quickly spread across the neighboring countries in the Middle East and turned out to be an unrest in Arab countries that has no end until today.

3. The root causes of the Middle East issue

A. The external reasons

For external reasons, American Middle East policies are to blame. Then,

what is the core content in American Middle East policies?

The first one is to ensure the absolute security and advantage of Israel. It is decided by the domestic politics in the U.S. American Jews make up the minority of American population, but they have voice and influence in American economic, media, film and television field and academic circles. Their strong awareness to get involved in politics has great impact on American domestic politics and public opinions, especially the Congress. Among all the lobbies in American Congress, the most prominent is AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee). There is no doubt about the significance of Israel to the U.S.

The second one is the Middle East oil export areas. The Middle East is rich in oil production, with more than 60% of oil reserves in the world and supplying 40% of world production. Russia has the world's largest natural gas reserves. The second one is Iraq, followed Qatar. The Middle East has about 1/3 world's natural gas reserves.

From the end of WWII until now, the global industrialization and modernization cannot be achieved without energy, especially oil and gas. The U.S. has always been the largest oil import country until recently succeeding in produce shale gas. The U.S. mainly import oil from Mexico, Venezuela and North Sea. Sometimes America imports oil from Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries with low proportion of about 1/4 total imports which increase to about 16% in the new century. The purpose of American control of export and import of Middle East energy is to control the economic lifeline of different countries and out of the need of the hegemony and power politics.

The third one is the dominance and control in the Middle East affairs that is to maintain the regional order. America as the only superpower of the world in pursuit of dominating global affairs must establish and maintain its own international and regional order. The Middle East and America have a stake in politics, economy, security and other strategic interests. Therefore, America has invested lots of resources in the Middle East, have worked for it for decades, and will never give up the dominance of regional affairs and hotspot issues. Although America shift its strategic focus to east, it still has the strongest voice for many hotspot issues like the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Iranian nuclear issue, Syria issues and anti-terrorism represented by IS, as well as manipulates the resolutions.

B. Internal reasons

From the internal reasons in the Middle East, the core is how to peace and development problems? There are many Arab countries in the Middle East with great influence. From the end of WWII until now, they

develop the core values and traditional thought inertia according to their history, mainly depending on the belief in Arab nationalism and Islam. It has always been their ideal to pursue Pan-Arabism, Arab Ba'ath and Islam Resurrection. Egyptian revolution of 1952 after WWII led by Nasser was a national democratic revolution encouraging and inspiring numerous other nationalist movements to establish republic regime in many other Arab countries in East Asia and North Africa, such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Algeria, and Libya. Arab nationalism became the most influential regional major ideological trend in the 1950s and 60s. However, in the third Arab-Israeli War in June, 1967, Egypt, Syria and Palestine met their Waterloo and had large amount of territory occupied by Israel. Arab nationalism by Nasser wound down with the emergence of various Islamist groups. Though in the case of Shia, as far as Sunni Muslims are concerned, the victory of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 was that Islam defeated corrupt and intolerant regimes of Palaiologos. Since the following 1980s, the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq invading Kuwait, the Gulf War, the Lebanese Civil War, the Oslo Accords between Israel and Palestine, Palestinian stone-throwing, 911 attacks, Afghan War, the Iraq War...successively broke out in the Middle East. The reforms and development always failed to be put on the agenda in Arab countries themselves. Compared with other regions in the world, Arab countries' modernization lagged far behind, where domestic economic and social conflicts became more serious and intensified. After Obama's adaptation of the Middle East polices, obvious reduction of strategic space and resource input in the Middle East, the political, economical and social conflicts in Arab countries were finally exposed and led a lasting upheaval in Arab countries. During the period, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and other Arab countries changed regime. Jordan, Morocco and other Arab countries experience government reshuffle. Civil strife in Libya and Syria resulted in the crisis of outsider military forces intervention. Islamic extremism seeks opportunity to surge and even came upon the political stage. Religious extremism and terrorist groups spread everywhere and create havoc, especially since June, 2014, IS blatantly captured territory, killed innocents and became serious public hazard in the Middle East and the international community. The Middle East is still the most unstable hot spot in the world.

II. Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East

1. The history of Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East

Let us start with the 1950s. Premier Zhou Enlai referred the Middle East that "the Islam countries was related less to China and had little impact on our nation. The work in the Middle East can proceed step by step". That is to say that China began to put the diplomacy in the Middle East on the

agenda and has entered the knowing, contacting and researching phrases. In the Bandung Conference in 1955, the speech of Premier Zhou was kept postponing because of the oppositions of anti-China and anti-communist from countries including Arab countries. Premier Zhou therefore demanded to make an adding speech where he emphasized that “China was not here for seeking difference, but for seeking common ground”. That is also known as the famous “spirit of seeking common ground while shelving differences”, complementing to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in Bandung Conference, laying the solid foundation for Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East. The spirit also gained wide popularity and praise from Arab countries in the Middle East and started the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Israel. For half a century, Premier Zhou said to Chinese diplomatic staff that “To earn a position in the world, the most important is to respect others. Sincere attitude helps you gain others’ trust. Mutual respect is necessary. As a great nation, China should take the initiative”. The directive the criterion of Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East, has been remembered and faithfully practiced by Chinese diplomatic personnel and endures today.

Since China established diplomatic relations with Saudi Arab in 1990 and Israel in 199, China has established diplomatic relations with all countries in the Middle East. After the tumultuous Cultural Revolution, China began the reform and opening-up, the country need be rebuilt. China adopted a long-term policy towards the complicated conflicts and the turbulent situation in the Middle East, which was “overall detachment and appropriate involvement”. In 1993, the marking point, China changed from the exporter of oil to the importer of oil. The CPC and Chinese leaders emphasized on the full use of recourses and markets home and abroad and then “good use of petrodollars” was proposed, which obviously improved the status of the Middle East in Chinese diplomacy. The Department of Asian and African Affairs considered the Middle East as “extension of China’s neighboring strategy” in strategic level. In the new century, the 16th CPC National Congress political report concludes Chinese diplomacy in four aspects, which is the great powers as keys, neighboring countries coming first, developing countries as basis and multilateral cooperation as platforms. The Middle East countries are not only “foundations”, but also “stages”. China’s diplomatic and academic circles refers the Middle East as “primary” neighboring countries and regions and also the “one part of China’s neighboring strategy”, which aims to underscore the significance of the Middle East. It is quite reasonable based on the fact that the oil imports from the Middle East for many years account for more than half of total imports. The volume of bilateral trade has increased from billions of U.S. dollars to hundreds of

billions of dollars. The Middle East accounts for the most overseas labor service projects and contracts with China. It is proved that the Middle East has become the important platform in managing relations with great powers and in the diplomacy of hotspots, and involves more and more national sovereignty, security and core interests.

In recent years when dramatic changes happened in Arab countries, China has laid out foreign policies at the beginning “observing the situation coolly, seeking profit or avoiding loss, going with the flow and acting appropriately”, which insist on the respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs. China has actively send envoys, promoted contacts with different denominations and provided humanitarian assistance to promote peace and talks, and to work on the political solution of related crisis. It is known that in the United Nations Security Council vote on the Syrian crisis, China upheld the principled stand of non military interference and imposed vetoes for three times, which provoked outrage and condemnation by some Arab countries. As time goes on, China actively conducts public diplomacy targeting confidence building and misgivings removing. Facing the fact, the political and academic circles in Arab countries agree and praise adherence to principles of Chinese diplomacy. Therefore, the friendship between China and Arab stands the test of time and Arab countries deeply feel the role and influence of China, the responsible great power.

2. The Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping has been vigorously prompted through “the initiative of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” issued by the National Development and Reform Commission the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce in March, 5th, 2015. Before, I have attended several related conferences and international seminars. The most impressive understanding was that “the Belt and Road Initiative” was a complete new international cooperation mechanism that China suggested to the international community. The mechanism aims at jointly building an opening, tolerant, balanced and regional economic cooperation framework that benefits all the countries and regions, and dedicated to constructing communities of interests and destiny. It is completely different from the colonial systems after WWI and ally systems built by the Soviet Union and the U.S. after WWII. Therefore, it is considered as new Chinese contribution to the world, characterizing by sharing and non-exclusiveness. Meanwhile, it is an active exploration on a new global governance pattern based on peace, development, cooperation and win-win to alleviate and resolve the conflicts, which is quite different from the traditional Western pattern with indulgence in military interventions, regime change, color revolutions, sanctions and

containment.

The Middle East, located in the intersection among Asia, Africa and Europe is a vital part of the ancient Silk Road and the necessary passage in Chinese One Belt and One Road at present. On June 5th, 2014, President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech entitled “promoting the Silk Road spirit and deepening China-Arab States cooperation” in the sixth ministerial meeting of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum where he gave a clear interpretation of the Silk Road spirit and proposed “1+2+3” cooperation pattern where energy cooperation in the center, infrastructure construction and trade investment facilitation as two wings, mutual beneficial cooperation in hard power the breakthrough of three high-tech fields: nuclear power, aeronautical satellite and new energy. In addition, China proposed to organize more activities of friendly exchanges, expand the scale of art festivals held in cooperation, encourage young students to exchange and study abroad, deepen cooperation in tourism, aviation, press, publication and other fields and cooperate in series of soft power programs to train diverse talents for Arab countries. Chinese proposals are not only far-sighted, but also down-to-earth, warmly welcomed and widespread praised by Israel.

Currently, China also faces many practical problems when promoting “One Belt, One Road” strategy in the Middle East. First, there are plenty of regions and countries with significantly different national situation and various needs. Some countries with unstable situations are still under the harassment of civil strife, wars or terrorism. Some countries don’t know much about “One Belt, One Road”, consider it as the Chinese version of “Marshall Plan” or even misunderstand that China is going to shift their eliminated production facilities. Second, city and provincial governments and enterprises in China mostly have great passion, but they haven’t carry out basic research work carefully and deeply, have not actively communicated with target countries to get the knowledge of real situations or completed the docking mission with the development need and plan of target countries based on “One Belt, One Road” principle of discussing, building and sharing. Third, “One Belt, One Road” is not only national strategy, but also cultivate generations of professional talents that can shoulder the responsibilities. At the beginning of establishment of new China, China learned from the Soviet Union, quickly set up colleges specialized in Russian and successively sent large number students and trainees to the Soviet Union to acquire all kinds of knowledge and skills. In the early years of reform and opening-up, Deng Xiaoping paid high attention to talent cultivation, made instructions like resuming the college entrance examinations, sending students abroad and education as fundamental to a country's establishment and prosperity. The promotion

of “One Belt, One Road” strategic project demands higher for talents’ international, educated and professional levels and comprehensive abilities, which needs the attention and guidance of government departments and the involvement of highly institutions pushing forward the reform of majors and disciplines construction to meet the need of new era and new tasks.

At last, as an old teacher long-term engaged in the Middle East, I still emphasize the significance of the Middle East and Middle East study. No super powers emerge in the Middle East. The important geographical location, abundant oil-gas resources, the center of and influence in Islamic civilization make the Middle East a “strategic module” as always in fact. The rise, development and exerting influence of any great powers cannot be separated from the Middle East. Too few researchers, too few institutes for Middle East study in China and low level of research do not match the status as new global power and cannot meet the national demand. I hope that there will be more and more people become interested in the Middle East issue, take part in the research and together make contributions to the Chinese characteristic Middle East study.

Translator/Shi Ying

Introduction:

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Followed long-term development trend in the Middle East region, focusing on major realistic demand of China and provinces such as Shanghai and Ningxia, the Institute for Middle East Study actively provides policy consultation service for national ministries and local governments. In the past five years, experts and scholars from the institute have held over 200 academic lectures inside and outside the campus, published more than 400 commentaries on mass media, and played an important role in policy-making consulting, public opinion guiding, talent training and academic research. The institute now has 13 professional researches, including 7 professors and 3 associate professors. 11 of them have Ph.D. degrees. The institute hosts one Chinese academic periodical Journal of Arab World and one quarterly publication Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (registered and published in the U.S.). The institute is approved one first-level discipline, political science, and two second-level disciplines, Arabic languages and literature and Middle East study, to award the doctoral degree, and also three second-level disciplines, including international relations, international politics and diplomacy, to award master degree. The institute also cooperates to build post-doctoral research center for political science and foreign language and literate study.