

Interview - Anoush Ehteshami

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Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in your field?

My 'field', as you put it, is quite a big, wide and diverse one I'm afraid, straddling the boundaries of international relations, dynamics of global regions, and international political economy, so I have to try and keep up with a multitude of debates emerging on so many fronts. At the core, I am currently consumed by four key issues. First, how do regional powers (often categorized as 'middle' powers) shape regional systems and influence such systems' interactions? In particular, I am intellectually consumed by the rapid breakdown of state order in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regional system following the 2003 Iraq war and the post-2010 Arab uprisings. This region has not been stable for decades, don't get me wrong, and war and violence have played a huge part since the later 1940s in 'regulating' inter-state relations. Ideological convictions, whether it's Islamism and its jihadi variants, secular nationalism, or populism, have also played their part in shaping relations between states and communities. Nor can we overlook the role of external powers in securitizing what is essentially a penetrated regional system. Still, the regional system's rapid corrosion, fragmentation, polarization, and vulnerabilities have set it apart from other regions. In this strategic theatre the middle powers have acquired a distinct advantage and are 'riding the tiger' unreservedly and often in competition with each other. Uniquely, here the middle power category in terms of capacity, influence, drive and ambition, can also be extended to small states such as Qatar and the UAE.

Related to this are the questions: how do authoritarian systems survive? How do we account for their resilience in the face of often insurmountable odds? An interesting aspect of authoritarian resilience in the MENA region is that it straddles regime types, whether hereditary monarchies (Saudi Arabia in particular), semi-open republics (Turkey, Iran, Iraq), and what the late Nazih Ayubi would have called fierce republics (Syria, Algeria, Egypt).

My second area of interest, and closely related to the above, is the idea of 'Asianization of Asia' – Asian convergence in a different way. I have been watching interactions across Asia since the early 1990s. Then it was increasingly clear that West Asia (the Middle East) and East Asia were displaying growing signs of convergence. Rapid economic growth in the East in the 1970s and 1980s (notably in the so-called Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs), such as

Interview - Anoush Ehteshami

Written by E-International Relations

the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Thailand) intensified their dependence on imported hydrocarbons from the Persian Gulf. As oil prices rose in the 1970s, coinciding with double-digit growth figures of the NICs, and also Japan of course, so the oil importers looked to compensate for their trade deficit by raising their exports to the oil exporters. Thus, an energy-driven relationship was born which in the 2000s has been sustained by China, India and other East and Southeast Asian economies. This Asianization, in my view, has acquired a new edge as China pushes ahead with its massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is slowly but surely pushing Asian sub-regions closer together. Some countries, like Japan and India, are less happy about this, but in Central and West Asia the BRI is being embraced and everybody is eager to jump on the new 'Silk Roads' bandwagon.

Third, I am very keen to understand how global regions respond to 'systemic shift', that is to say the steady transfer of economic power (and with it I suspect political, diplomatic and eventually military power too) from the Atlantic world to Asia. What will the rise of China in this context mean for such strategic regions as the Middle East and North Africa? How will China's policies shape relations between South Asian countries? How will the BRI change the political economy of Asia's landlocked but resource-rich countries? And, finally, how will the United States respond to China's growing presence and influence in regions regarded as vital to its national interest?

Finally, and this is part of a current project I am leading, how do jihadi groups, which are the quintessential non-state actors, behave when regional order collapses? I would like to understand their role in this, their strategic agenda, their use of narrative for advancing their alternative anti-Westphalian and different future. Linked to this is my on-going interest in authoritarian rule and its impact on regional relations. This, I would argue, can still best be tested in the MENA region.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I think the end of the Cold War was a watershed moment as it threw virtually all of our presuppositions in the air and challenged most of our established frames for understanding international relations. Power politics changed, and with it also the grip of realist assumptions. Thus, variations on realism (neoclassical realism, complex realism) emerged, and at the same time alternative ways (constructivism being just one of them) of understanding international relations gained currency. Alongside this, new works on the changing global economy began to influence my understanding of international relations. The perennial question for me has been, as the locus of economic power moves away from the Atlantic world towards the 'Indo-Pacific', to what extent will global political power follow?

Michael Cox and others make a strong case that shifting economic power East should not be confused with the transfer of global politico-military power eastwards and the United States is likely to remain the dominant superpower for decades to come. Yet, empirical evidence does suggest that global political power is becoming much more tradeable in the twenty first century. A country like China is able to build on its growing economic weight with some serious politico-military muscles as well as effective 'soft tissue' (soft power) to help it spread its weight around in virtually all global regions. Previous eras have shown that rising powers build on their economic base to become leaders in ideas, technological innovation, and ultimately geopolitical reach built on military might and diplomatic prowess. China, arguably, is manifestly developing along all these fronts in pursuit of great power status. A long way to go when compared with the United States, but on its way.

In your most recent book you argue that the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is stuck in transition. Why is this the case?

The year 1979 was transformational for five countries. Nicaragua had its Sandinista uprising, Egypt had its peace with Israel, Marcos was booted out of power in the Philippines, Rhodesia became Zimbabwe and waved good-bye to its colonial overseer, and Iran had its unique Islamic revolution. Each in its own way has made a permanent mark, and ironically not a single one of these countries has settled down properly and been able to move into a state of political tranquility, if not democracy. There are different reasons as to why this is the case, but in the case of Iran we have the added dimension of politicized religion playing such a crucial part in shaping the state and state-society relations following the fall of the monarchy.

Interview - Anoush Ehteshami

Written by E-International Relations

My main argument in the book is that the Islamic Republic is on a hamster-wheel and while motion is evident, on closer inspection this is in fact circular motion. So, since the birth of what I have called the 'Second Republic' in Iran in 1989, following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini (founder of the Islamic Republic and its first Supreme Leader) and constitutional reforms to create an executive presidency, Iran has had three attempts at 'reforming' its way out of the political and economic structural problems it faces. But, every time it has failed to do so because of the power of the extra-judicial forces in the country who have inhibited forward motion. Further, as the legitimacy of all political stakeholders depends on their acceptance of the given rules of the game, none can dare visualize a polity beyond the straightjacket of the *Vali-e Faqih* system. They are all prisoners of their own legitimacy dilemmas so the country's leaders cannot move the reform of the system forward and so long as they remain prisoners of the system (*nezam*) they will be unable to address the country's multitude of governance, economic, social, environmental, and of course political problems.

The country is stuck in transition because its political system remains inflexible and controlled and therefore unable to move forward, and because its divided elite is caught in a permanent cycle of factional denial. The Supreme Leader, moreover, perpetuates the cyclical motion of the republic by blocking meaningful change, as was the case in 2009. Now, whether generational shift at both societal and elite levels will break the logjam remains to be seen. In the meantime, the republic's transitional state means that it is going backward and not standing still. The economy is weak, the political system is corroding, corruption and nepotism are rife, and the youth have lost hope in a prosperous future. This is what the transitional condition gets you.

What are the consequences of this transitional status for current domestic and foreign policy?

This state of affairs has profound implications for the country. Domestically, it puts all meaningful change on hold. So, by way of an example, privatization or broader economic liberalization efforts merely redistribute wealth and assets between elite factions, leaving the national economy weak and vulnerable. The *nezam's* sacred cows are not challenged and innovative ideas about how to move the system forward and out of its impasse are dismissed as treasonous whispers. As the boundaries of the transitional condition are controlled by the regime, elites and society bounce from one side to the other, without actually achieving anything. This is exactly the condition of President Rouhani's presidency.

Externally too, revolutionary absolutism can trump pragmatism and prevent Tehran from making compromises for the sake of its future prosperity. They continue to use posturing as policy, which is in fact negative diplomacy. No one dares challenge the red lines drawn by the Supreme Leader so no meaningful progress on Iran's role conception and policy behavior can be made. Targeting exiles who might be involved in challenging the regime's grip, or even perceived as threatening it, is another sign of the fact that foreign policy is still influenced by violent acts substituting as constructive diplomacy. When you are stuck, you lash out.

What impact are US sanctions having on Iran? What are the implications for its future foreign and economic policy?

The US sanctions are devastating the country's economy and blocking its only lifeline – oil extraction and exports. While the government is trying to contain the effect of the sanctions on everyday life, the collapse in the value of the country's national currency (the rial) has made life for an importing country like Iran unbearably expensive. This problem is being compounded by shortages of virtually everything, which is itself being compounded by hoarders, many of whom have strong ties to the regime. So the backbone of the country, its large middle class, is again under siege and losing social and monetary ground.

Looking forward, if the EU's 'alternative' trading system does not deliver, which is looking likely, then the country will have little choice but to deepen its eastward drift – towards China in particular, but also India, the Republic of Korea and Southeast Asian countries. Russia also looms large as a pseudo-strategic partner. Iran will increasingly turn its back on the West to the detriment of both sides, and draw closer to Asian countries, many of whose authoritarian regimes will reinforce the same currents in Iran. Ultimately, the sanctions will weaken the Iranian economy, prevent it from dealing with its core structural problems, strengthen the grip of hardcore conservatives on the country, alienate

Interview - Anoush Ehteshami

Written by E-International Relations

its youth from the West, and shift the country's geopolitical focus.

What are the most positive and concerning developments in Iran's foreign policy?

The most concerning features of IRI's foreign policy are its reliance on non-state actors to press its interests in the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, and South Asia. Its use of non-state actors in battle, in the form of militias, is causing serious concern in the region and beyond and is compromising Tehran's call for dialogue and détente. On the positive side, the fact that it has remained loyal to the JCPoA (the nuclear deal) is commendable and its efforts to remain civil in its exchanges with the Trump Administration is a positive sign that it would like to be seen valuing the rules of diplomacy above dogma.

How would you describe the relationship between states in the Middle East and those in East Asia? What is your assessment of China's aims and potential success in the Middle East regarding its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?

This is a growing relationship, and one that is being nourished by growing traffic in energy eastwards and a vast trade and investment footprint by the East Asian countries and India in West Asia and the wider MENA region. Based on growing evidence, I argued recently that between 2000 and 2014, Sino-Middle East trade volume increased 17-fold from \$18 billion to \$312 billion. In 2010 China replaced the US as the region's largest trading partner. Bilateral economic ties are still defined by China's enormous energy demands but this is the underpinning of greater interdependence. In 2015, 51% of China's worldwide crude oil imports came from the Middle East, making the Persian Gulf China's principal supplier of hydrocarbons. This trade is so vital to China, as it once was to the West, that it has ensured the delivery of hydrocarbons by signing bilateral memorandums of understanding with all major crude oil supplying countries in the region. These memorandums of understanding are backed by numerous framework deals involving China's state-owned companies and their Middle Eastern counterparts. China is entrenched and is increasingly at the centre of the MENA political economy. The fact that China is now the main trading partner of more than 10 MENA countries speaks to the reality of deepening trans-Asian relationships, which now encompass culture and education, as well as political exchanges. China's Arab Forum is a classic example of Beijing's steady 'encroachment' into what was in the twentieth century the West's strategic playground.

With regard to China's BRI, I think this is a major and possibly world-changing initiative which will certainly place China at the heart of Eurasia, and therefore the twenty first century world order. This trillion dollar multiple of projects is ambitious to say the least, and marks China's arrival as a major player, but the BRI's success in the Middle East will partly be determined by China's staying power, and partly by its ability to overcome or maneuver around the region's many contradictory forces, competing middle powers, sectarianism which is shaping state perceptions, and containment of its multiple conflict zones. Beijing's express wish not to interfere in any country's domestic policies may be music to the ears of the region's autocrats, but the BRI's encroachment is a massive intervention in its own right. Also, whether China can work with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel and Egypt and ignore the deep strategic tensions between some of them remains an open question. The BRI should also be seen as new multilateral framework, but for this to work the partners need to be very sure of the regulatory and governance structures of BRI transactions, project financing, dispute resolution mechanisms, property rights, licenses, and a whole host of other factors which feed into ensuring that a multilateral framework works to the satisfaction of its stakeholders. China still needs to demonstrate this, and its BRI clients need to be assured of the end game – what is in it for them!

In a recent journal article you described Saudi Arabia as a resurgent regional power. How has Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the MENA changed in recent years? Do you view these changes as positive developments?

To use the analysis of the article you cite, I argue that Prince Mohammad bin Salman, having overstepped Prince Mohammed bin Nayef as Crown Prince, is now all-powerful in the Kingdom's small core. Also holding the posts of First Deputy Prime Minister, Defence Minister, and Chairman of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs has enabled him to secure access to the most important levers of governance and has made it possible for him to exercise tremendous power and influence. Such concentration of power in the Kingdom is unprecedented and the

Interview - Anoush Ehteshami

Written by E-International Relations

fact that the Crown Prince has squeezed all competing princes out of the traditionally close al-Saud governing circles is challenging the established rules of the game in the Kingdom. More unsettling was his decision in November 2017 to incarcerate dozens of his powerful cousins and their elite allies on charges of corruption and abuse of public funds. This act not only alienated many, but has also undone the consensus-based Saudi approach to decision-making.

The internal changes and dramatic policy initiatives since 2015 speak of a strong Saudi desire to reduce its direct dependency on external powers, which had been the enduring feature of its foreign policy until 9/11. In reality, however, since 2017 the Kingdom has been quick to restore its close relations with the United States under the Trump administration and revitalize its close military and intelligence ties with the United States. In order to achieve its regional objectives against Iran and assert itself as the dominant Arab power, the Saudis have willingly, and inevitably, (re)attached its wagon to that of the United States. Whether it had really ever distanced itself from its most powerful and reliable backer remains a question. Arguably, it never really loosened the critical life-support ties with Washington. The Kingdom has, at the same time, set about building ever closer partnerships with China, the European Union, India, and Russia. With virtually all of these states and parties, energy drives Saudi policy, which remains a hard power tool in the Kingdom's toolkit. As a consequence of its outreach strategy, Saudi Arabia has dared to go beyond the United States and build partnerships with other global actors, making the Kingdom one of the best networked countries in the world, with its voice heard, and its presence felt, in more parts of the world than at the beginning of this century. Much of this networking is of course in the interest of building up the country and securing Saudi Arabia itself.

On the all-important economic front, critical transformative change has been occurring under Mohammad bin Salman, who has also made it his mission to change the Kingdom's political economy by reducing the economy's dependence on external oil revenues. This is vitally important for going forward as Saudi Arabia is watching with concern the formation of a perfect energy storm against it. On the one hand, the United States is growing as an exporter of oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG), rapidly reaching Saudi Arabia's markets in Europe and Asia. In 2017, the United States was the world's largest producer of petroleum and natural gas hydrocarbons, according to the International Energy Agency. US crude oil production had reached 9.7 million barrels per day (mb/d) and exports around 1.1 mb/d. It was exporting its oil to 37 different countries in 2017. By 2022, moreover, it will be exporting 4.0 mb/d. In terms of gas production and exports, the US registered a 47% increase in gas production in the decade 2006-16, to 28.5 trillion cubic feet (TcF). In 2017, it exported 2.7 TcF per day, which is set to increase to 9.8 TcF per day by the end of 2019. The US can now produce more oil than Saudi Arabia and it can match the gas outputs of Iran, Qatar and Russia.

On the other hand, Iran and Qatar are raising their natural gas export capacities substantially in response to the global climate change rules which will require massive reductions in the use of crude oil – Saudi Arabia's lifeline – as a source of energy. For some analysts, Saudi warmth toward the United States and measured hostility toward Iran and Qatar can also be explained through the lens of the rapidly-changing global energy markets in which the Kingdom will need the muscle of its American energy competitor to subdue the competition from its close neighbours. Closer proximity to China and India, also, are designed to secure the Kingdom's medium- to long-term markets in Asia, certainly until such a time as it can afford to look at the horizon beyond oil exports.

Now, whether the assertiveness we now witness in Saudi behaviour is a good or a bad thing is essentially a normative question, but what we are seeing are the costs – in Yemen, in relation to the treatment of critics of Mohammed bin Salman, and in the approach to Iran and Turkey – associated with assertiveness. The question to ask is how sustainable is Saudi assertiveness?

Is the MENA region particularly susceptible to sub-state and non-state actors such as violent jihadi groups?

The MENA region is susceptible to sub-state and non-state actor interventions because the regional order is corroded and fragmented, and also because the state system is both fierce and weak. In the absence of regime legitimacy, and under situations of severe sociopolitical stress, such non-state actors – particularly those with a discernable ideology and a clear mission – enter the centerground and challenge the narrative, legitimacy and grip of

Interview - Anoush Ehteshami

Written by E-International Relations

the prevailing political regime on the state.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Dare to be yourself and value theoretical eclecticism as a stepping stone toward a deeper understanding of the forces which shape our world and regulate the relations between its 'units' of states, as well as interactions between people and non-state institutions and actors. In other words, aim to understand the world as a multidimensional stack of forces interacting, often quite randomly and with narrow aims, in complex settings and explore the consequences – big picture, small scale, a combination of both – of these interactions and exchanges.