



EURODEFENSE-ESPAÑA

PERMANENT EUROPEAN WORKING GROUP
Mediterranean Basin Observatory

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

June 2016

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Some nations of the Western world took domination of the Middle East from the Ottomans and exercised it for almost a century. They created entities that were modelled on European nation-states. However these entities did not conform to the definition of a nation in a region predominantly Arab and Muslim. And this reality was not taken into account because at the lower level there were tribes, clans and ethnic groups that were divided by new borders. At another level, for some centuries broad religious loyalties to Islam, like Sunnism and Shiism have existed that have laid a transnational claim of loyalty. The uprisings, upheavals and somehow revolutions that have swept the Middle East (ME) and some countries in Northern Africa (NA) in the last five years have shown that nations as such have not existed in this area. There are only states that have encompassed several components lacking national homogeneity and they have been hold together by autocratic regimes. When in 2011 the “Arab spring” led to changes in the region, it was realized that the nation-states have failed and uncovered two things:

- a).- That subnational forces are the actual reality in of all MENA countries.

- b).-The obliteration of the Syria-Iraq border by subnational forces allowed appearing a space, a core element of a transnational power: Daesh that transcends borders all over MENA.

The uprisings have been followed by a wave of violence: civil wars, failed states, sectarian clashes, religious strife, terrorism, insurgency and, last but not least, an increase of the repression all over. In their aftermath the populations are forced to leave and some states, either foreign or from the region, have undertaken moves that are giving way to a new geopolitical situation.

THE PREDICAMENT OF THE POPULATION

The violence against the inhabitants of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya because of the civil wars and the religious and ethnic conflicts are forcing the populations to flee their countries in search of better and safer places to live. All these have transformed the MENA into the region where the highest number of displaced persons and refugees live. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees this number is about 7 millions of persons. They are placing a heavy burden in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan that could affect their political stability. But also growing numbers migrate to Europe. The EU is in the receiving lane to accept them. Their distribution among EU members is creating tensions because they are bickering on how to cope with the immigration problem.

Unless Europe and other countries solve the conflicts in MENA and reshape the region into viable nations taking into consideration the realities of the Arab world, the illegal immigration will be not solved in the short term.

THE MIDDLE EAST NEW GEOPOLITICS

Looking into the events that are happening in this region it can be said that they have triggered several approaches that could shape a new geopolitical situation.

We could identify one as the new policy of the **United States (US)** that do not consider the countries of ME as a priority for its foreign policy and they are refusing to subordinate American interests to those of either Saudi Arabia or the rest of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The US goals now are: first, to fight terrorism and, second, to establish a balance of power between Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, each one wishing to become a hegemon in the whole region. With this aim, the

US has increased the level of its relations with Iran, once it has been reached an agreement on the nuclear issue that places Tehran back in the geopolitical theatre. It seems that the Iranian nuclear program is less important to Washington than its collaboration against Daesh.

The outcome is a new relation with Saudi Arabia that is considered not crucial to American interests, because the US are not dependent now from its oil supplies and they are not prepared to commit troops to solve the ME conflicts after what happened in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

Washington's relations with Turkey are being difficult because of the differences they have regarding the Syrian war.

But actually, the US deems that they can influence the region whether the consequence of the turmoil in MENA leads to reshaping its political landscape or not. With this idea in mind they are working together with Moscow to find a solution in Syria in order not to let Russia act alone in the solution of the ME conflicts.

Other approach is the **Russia's** goals in the ME as shown by its intervention in the Syrian war helping the Syrian Government and its sudden limit to that help. It looks as if Moscow wanted only to modernise and to expand its military bases in Tartous and Latakia to reaffirm, if needed, its presence in the region. But it seems that the underlying goal is to become an important player for the future of MENA and also to fight terrorism alongside the Western world.

To perform that role Moscow cannot forget that it has a competing power in Turkey and needs to counter it through a tighter cooperation with Iran. This policy is also set to balance the Americans in the Persian Gulf, where their V Fleet anchors in Bahrein.

Turkey, a country member of NATO, is also willing to play a hegemonic role in the ME and even beyond it in NA. However, it competes with identical aspirations of Saudi Arabia and Iran. To carry out that policy the Turkish President and his Government need to alter their democratic system to have a free hand in handling any situation that might arise when applying such policy.

Ankara wants to participate in restructuring the future of the ME by giving help to the Sunni rebels on Syrian soil. In so doing it is seeking:

- To fight the Syrian Kurds of the YPG (People's Protection Units) to avoid their closeness to the Turkish Southern border that might increase

their cooperation with the fighters of the Party of Kurdish Workers (PKK), and therefore, to generate a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity.

- To prevent Saudi Arabia of becoming hegemonic in Syria if Riyadh appears as the solely supporter to the Sunni rebels fighting Assad.
- To check Iran's support of Damascus in the civil war and to counteract its expansionism in the ME.

It is also very important for Turkey's foreign policy the relationship with the Autonomous Government of Kurdistan (AGK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). With the aim of attracting the Iraqi Kurds to Turkey' sphere of influence, Ankara and Arbil are working closely to enhance economic and commercial ties This allows the hot pursuit of the PKK fighters by the Turkish forces on Iraqi soil. Notwithstanding, the policy of Ankara of supporting financially Arbil also seeks to prevent it of getting too close to Tehran.

An issue that it is spoiling the relationship between Ankara and Washington is the help that the Syrian IPG Kurdish fighters are receiving from several American agencies to combat Daesh and Al-Qaeda. The YPG and its political branch the Democratic Union Party are considered by Ankara as a direct menace, therefore Ankara believes that Washington' support of the Syrian Kurds is jeopardizing the Turkish's Government policy towards this ethnic group.

There is a fundamental question regarding Turkey policy in the ME and its membership of NATO. It regards to article 5 of the Treaty of Washington and whether it will be applied in case Turkey would be attacked by Iraqi, Syrian or Iranian Kurds or even by Syrian loyalist forces. It is very likely that this issue will be discussed, among others important questions, at the next NATO Summit that will be held in Warsaw on the 8th and 9th of July since one point of the agenda is the disorder in MENA.

Another power player in the ME is **Iran**. Liberated somehow from the animosity of the big Western powers, mainly the US, Tehran is resolutely acting in the region and is looking forward to become a real regional power, expanding its strategic influence towards Iraq, Syria and Lebanon besides of the Persian Gulf. Its goals are:

- To reaffirm its active presence in those countries and in the Gulf by supporting subnational Shia groups.

- To avoid that in the Syrian war there would be an exclusive intervention of the GCC countries that might endanger Iran's interests in that country and in the whole region.

With regard to Iraq, what Tehran is after is to gain a hegemonic position to oppose to Turkey's policy towards the Autonomous Government of Kurdistan (AGK) weakening the ties between them using the close relationship between Tehran and the party Kurdish Patriotic Union, member of the AGK. In this framework Iran is offering to Arbil the construction of a pipe line that will link it with North-Western Iran in need of oil since the Iranian fields are far away in the South. The present negotiations are already well advanced since this question is also relevant for the internal policy of Iran that is interested in facilitating that area's development. Nevertheless, the main aim is preventing Turkey of being the only power in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iran is already in the Persian Gulf a hegemon taken into account its population, its high level of the education with several universities and, above all, its armed forces, well trained and equipped. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies are no rivals despite the fact that they have very good equipment but not parallel capabilities and are lacking a high number of trained personnel as shown in the Yemen war where Riyadh has not been able to defeat the Houthis supported by Tehran.

To carry out its policy in the ME, Iran is an allied of Russia, an enemy of its challenger: Turkey. But there is some inkling that Tehran and Ankara are having contacts through Algiers to finish the Syrian war and so preserve their respective interests.

Saudi Arabia is another power that is pursuing the reshaping of the ME against the aspirations of Turkey and Iran. The main obstacle in this endeavour is that while both countries have been for centuries empires with great weight in the region, Saudi Arabia became a country in 1932, out of a group of disparate tribes. Nevertheless, the fact that it is the place where the Islam's "Holy sites" are situated has given it a status among the Arabs and Muslims in the world. Being also the biggest oil producer and, as a by-product, a financial giant, its foreign policy is founded on these two facts. Riyadh looks to expand Salafism-Wahhabism to other Arab and Muslim countries as a way to combat threats towards its autocratic Monarchy. Something similar was done in the 50's and 60's to fight Arab Socialism expanding from Egypt, Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, now it is financing the Sunnis revolts in Syria and Iraq to stop the expansionism of Iran and somehow of Turkey.

But the shift of American policy towards Iran and its lack of interest to continue to be the pivot of the status quo in the ME have led Saudi Arabia to forge a new foreign policy to avoid isolation. Now Riyadh is trying to gather new alliances to counter Iran's aspirations in the Levant and in the Persian Gulf. First, by having more influence in the GCC, despite the Qatari's attitude in the Syrian war, and increasing the support to the Sunni rebels fighting there. It has also augmented military expenditure and rather forced the Gulf countries to combat Tehran in Yemen. Secondly, by giving financial assistance to Egypt, Jordan and to the countries where the Muslim Brotherhood is or has been to counter its likely penetration into Saudi Arabia.

However, the loss of revenue due to the fall of oil prices is compelling the new Monarchy in power since 2015, to revise and to adopt a different approach to face the challenges out of the threats of Shiism, of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and of Daesh without the American umbrella and taking into account the internal need to change Saudi society.

With that aim, the Saudi government has drafted the "National Transformation Plan 2030" that contemplates a new vision to tackle the changes they need to steer Saudi Arabia through the redesigning of the ME bearing in mind Iran's and Turkey's expansionism.

CLOSING REMARKS

The Middle East is an area of great strategic importance and the upheavals that began in 2011 have shaken a region where most of OPEC countries are. Nowadays, the entire ME is in disarray because the upheavals have unsettled the most solid pillars of what had been considered as stable, even indisputable, Arab order. Arab regimes saw the uprisings as an existential threat to their grip on power the only thing they cared. But this power has collapsed and several countries long considered solidly under the control of autocracies have fragmented, like Iraq and Libya, or civil wars are ravaging them like in Syria and in Yemen. This has brought to the fore realities that had largely been beneath the surface. One of these realities was the heterogeneous nature of the social fabric in a number of Arab states that has been challenged in the revolutionary process. This is shown in terms of religious sect in Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia or elsewhere in the Levant and in the Gulf. It tends to do so more in ethnic terms

in the Kurdish areas of some countries, in the Turkmen tribes or the Berbers in the Maghreb.

All this is leading to the search of new geopolitical order in the region where the actors are in most cases foreign to it but with important strategic and economic interests.

The dynamics of disintegration that was unleashed during the uprisings all over the region will be difficult to reverse without new and inventive means of political and social reintegration. The question is that the US, Russia and the EU do not have hard or soft power to reorganize the Arab world the way it was done a century ago.

Perhaps they could use their influence to stabilize the region through federalisation of some countries and overhauling others always taking into consideration the features of each one to form true nations.

In North Africa the increasing militant activity, coupled with regional governments' inability to combat it, will greatly expand the security threats to the region and to Europe.