



## **REPORT ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

September, 2017

Since the last Report on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) sent to the Presidents' Council in March 2017, there have been some developments regarding this region worth pointing out.

First: the new presence, but not real involvement, of the USA in the Middle East (ME). It seems that the new policy of President Trump towards this region is not to shape it according to a peace plan that might solve wars and national crisis and to start a nation building program. The US President and his counsellors have the idea to forge an Arab-Sunni coalition:

- To fight terrorism from the Islamic State (IS),
- To counter Iranian influence that is damaging the policy of Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere,
- To negotiate peace between Israel and Palestine.

In these areas Washington is ready to deepen the relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the Islamic Military Alliance (IMA) -a Saudi led antiterrorism group- to combat terrorism and its Iranian sponsorship.

But the question is if the countries that integrate that loose alliance would help the USA to achieve the above mentioned goals. A commitment of Washington to halt and then to reverse the increasing expansion of Iran in the whole ME is the proviso under what they would cooperate with the USA on other issues. Because Saudi Arabia and the Sunni alliance see President Trump as a tool for rebalancing power in the ME, in contrast with the two previous presidencies that, according to Riyadh, opened the door to Tehran.

However, we have to bear in mind that the vision of a new US-Sunni alignment that President Trump has proposed is probably going to fan the Sunni-Shiite sectarian conflict, instead of trying to bring peace to the region. Moreover, the likely allies of Washington in this endeavor are far apart from one another, as we have seen in the dispute with Qatar inside the GCC.

In the Syrian conflict, the new US administration is not enlisting the Arab Sunnis to play a bigger and fair role to solve it. The lack of interest by the US in the outcome of the Syrian civil war, except to fight the Islamic State, is giving to Russia, Turkey and Iran the ability to shape the future of the ME and of some countries of NA.

Another development worth looking into is the stronger assertiveness of Turkey after the failed coup that has brought up an almost autocratic regime. Ankara thinks there is a power vacuum in Syria and Iraq that it is trying to fill in the future with Islamist

governments across the ME. In this context Turkey does not hesitate to work with foreign and regional actors, even at the expense of existing central governments, to increase its footprint in the region and to preserve its territorial integrity.

Turkish's persistent fear of Syrian Kurdish autonomy coupled with the one already existing in Iraq is mobilizing nationalist fury in the country and is guiding the AKP ruling party's policy towards Syria. This attitude of the Turkish government is weakening its traditional Euro Atlantic commitment and replacing it with a greater independence to pursue its new regional interests.

In the wake of this new policy by Ankara, the rapprochement of Turkey and Russia serves both countries in a geopolitical context of checks and balances.

For Russia having strong ties with a strategic NATO ally has the added value of weakening NATO by rising questions regarding Turkish loyalties. For Turkey, Russia becomes an indispensable partner to keep a check on Kurdish autonomy and to shore up its suffering economy. The Turkey-Russian relationship further serves as a balance against Western dominance in the ME after the uprisings of 2011.

Another development in the ME is the regain of political activity by Saudi Arabia in order to impose its will inside the GCC and to some countries of the region. It seems the direct consequence of the visit of President Trump to Riyadh and the compromise to obtain arms worth of billions from the US. This has emboldened Saudi Arabia to impose sanctions against the dissident policy of Qatar for its independent international policy regarding terrorism and relations with Iran.

The House of Saud cannot tolerate that Doha is supporting the political Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood which is a direct threat to the autocratic monarchies of the Gulf and Doha lack of animosity against Tehran. This row, that has also brought along Riyadh countries like Egypt, Abu Dhabi, Bahrein, Yemen and some others, has created a new fault line in the ME and it has also shown long standing tensions among member of the GCC because of economic and strategic rivalries.

The signing of an agreement on July 11 between the US and Qatar on counterterrorism has shown to Saudi Arabia and the other three countries that are blocking Qatar, that Washington -as the region's primary security patron- will not tolerate the campaign to isolate a key Gulf state hosting the biggest US military presence in the region and the main command post to fight terrorism.

Though the dispute among members of the GCC may drag on, the US mediation will prevent it from escalating further".

### **How the European Union is acting in the Middle East and North Africa**

Looking into what the EU is doing in the MENA, the view is not very encouraging. There is a lack of a political will to become a protagonist to promote and defend its interests. The outcome is powerlessness that is self-inflicted due to the absence of a common vision to deal with the issues at stake in MENA. It can be said that the involvement of the EU in this part of the world that is vital for European interests has diminished in the last few years. The EU and some of its member states have been

reduced to be accessories to the policy of the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia that are pursuing their own conflicting objectives. Meanwhile Russia has emerged as a leading player in coordination with Iran and Turkey.

The Syrian conflict, despite its direct impact on the EU in the form of refugees as well as of terrorist attacks, has failed to awake a European policy beyond the humanitarian aid and planned reconstruction support whereas the EU's actions in the coalition against the Islamic State remain secondary.

The EU Global Strategy of June 2016 does not set a real political planning to intervene in MENA and only defines vague ideas for that region. The Ministerial Conference on Syria last April showed again the absence of a common approach of the European institutions to intervene in MENA.

If the EU wants that its efforts in the MENA become at least visible they should be targeted and well-conceived in order to achieve a political presence, because in the very next future power in the MENA is in the hands of those that are ready to wage a war. The EU should show its power alongside with the tools it has to bring to Tunisia a real democracy; to help Libya to build a new country; to stop in Egypt the repression against civil society; to halt Iran's takeover of Iraq; to reach a peaceful agreement in Syria; to prevent the Turkish' aim to dominate the Kurds in Syria and Iraq; to let know some Gulf states that they cannot continue to support terrorism and not to allow Russia to have the final word to bring peace to the region.

The real issue for the EU is if it is ready and able to play an assertive role in MENA.

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