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THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE EU

Though the Middle East (ME) has never been a picture of stability, the region has had at least a semblance of order for the past hundred years, held together by authoritarian regimes that for all their failings managed to keep the region from devolving into outright chaos. That is no longer the case. The disarray has invited outside powers like Russia and other states to intervene.

RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Moscow has ended decades of Russian irrelevance in the Middle East and built a stronger position than the Soviet Union enjoyed 40 years ago. Since President Putin has saved Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime from collapse, he has established working relations with every major power in the Middle East, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran and Turkey, though several of them are against what he is doing in Syria. Russia has worked successful deals with Saudi Arabia to prop up international oil prices. Its relations with Israel have never been closer, notwithstanding Russia's has greatly strengthened Iran in Syria.

From other point of view, there is the conviction of American regression that prevails throughout the Middle East (ME) and that took root in the early Obama years and has grown steadily since. The US, up to now, has shown not a great interest in the ME and seems unwilling to engage in diplomacy. In the region exist American air and naval bases

and major deployments in Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, among others, and contingents in the war zones of Syria and Iraq. However, Washington has abandoned its strategic goals in Syria because it has no interest in the country and looks like if it is hesitating between to contain or confront Moscow. Despite all its military strength, the assumed powerbroker in the region today is Russia.

It seems that the Trump administration is mostly interested in containing Iran by supporting Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and strongly helping Israel as spearhead against Iran. Moreover, the Trump unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, has opened the door to more conflicts and it is in direct opposition to its European allies not only in this issue but also in the Jerusalem question.

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

In Syria, the country has become a stage on which regional powers like Israel, Iran and Turkey play out their conflicts. Today is a fragmented territory where foreign military occupations and conflicting political agendas might lead to new confrontations. In the north and northeast, where tensions between Turkey and Kurdish forces could escalate into armed conflict; and in the east, where the regime and pro-Iran militias on the one hand and Kurdish forces on the other might struggle for hegemony over large territories. This may be compounded in different parts of Syria by suicide bombings organized by defeated elements of the Islamic State, or by fighting around besieged opposition-held localities if the sieges are not lifted by the regime.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, it is attempting to modify the regional balance of power by amplifying a regional struggle over political and economic alignment. But while most of the international attention is around on Saudi Arabia, the UAE is getting increased attention. The country is ready to be one of the main players in reshaping the Persian Gulf, the Middle East and North Africa after the changes in the region in the wake of the upheavals of 2011.

Outside powers like Iran and Turkey are evolving in the search for partners and patrons. In short, the result is a changing ground of internal and cross border conflicts that affect the ME and the NA regions.

For the foreseeable future, power in the Middle East will ultimately rest in the hands of those willing to wage war.

THE EU IN THE MIDDLE EAST

This situation has severe implications for Europe's stability. Europeans tend to look at the Middle East exclusively as the home of Islamic terrorism and the cause of the unprecedented migrant and refugee crisis that began in 2015.

The EU's goals regarding this area are stated in the June 2016 EU Global Strategy. They are aimed to endow the states and societies of the region with the necessary instruments and reforms to withstand the threat of deconstructing major Arab states from Iraq and Syria to Libya. However, it is not getting the desired results.

Right now, the question is as if in this environment the EU is absent everywhere. In Libya, it is Egypt, Algeria and the UN that are negotiating. In the Syrian conflict Russia, Iran, and Turkey have replaced the EU and the United States. In the Persian Gulf there is only a mild interest. Israel decides on new settlements in Palestine without any serious resistance. And in Iraq, there seems to be no EU at all.

It can be said that with few exceptions, the EU has not played a proactive foreign policy role in the Middle East. There have been a series of reactive responses driven by other players, such as Iran, Turkey and Russia, or outright powerlessness.

Notwithstanding, Europe has the power but it underestimates it. It should use all the tools it has to make sure Tunisia becomes a successful democracy, to help Algeria through its succession and economic challenges, to steer Morocco towards a better path to change its economy, to help get Libya back on track, to press Egypt to cancel its repression of civil society and to stop Iran's takeover of Iraq.

Since the United States of President Donald Trump are more a liability than an ally, the EU has the possibility now to establish itself as a force that can help the Middle East and North Africa to become more stable and more democratic.

However, to reach that position and have a substantive influence in the Middle East the EU should take into account several factors:

- The EU lacks a common vision for the region because its discourse and foreign policy toward the Middle East are unclear and uncertain which harms its credibility. The lack of integration among EU member states hinders the adoption of a common position and direction.
- The EU's policies are outdated and inadequate. The European Neighborhood Policy is not only obstructing the emergence of a regional approach but is also ineffective as it has excluded entire parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Its Mediterranean policy is dictated more for an idealistic approach than for pragmatism.
- The EU's humanitarian aid is not enough for countries torn apart by violent conflicts, although an alternative reading underlines the strong political message embedded in the humanitarian interventions at the core of the EU's response to Middle Eastern and North African crises.
- The EU cannot remain only a donor entity that lacks the political courage to change the situation in the MENA region.

THE OUTCOME

Taking advantage of U.S. and EU hesitation, geopolitical competitors have been filling political and security voids in the Middle East. Europeans need to become quicker in anticipating and acting on power vacuums to avoid being outpaced by global and regional disruptors such as China, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey.

The big question mark is if the EU wants to play an all-encompassing task in the Middle East and North Africa because it seems that there is a lack of political will to play a more leading role in the region.

It looks as if European countries are only too consumed with domestic and regional issues to pay attention to their Middle East and Southern neighbors.