

## Middle East: alliances in times of turmoil

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### Theme<sup>1</sup>

The Middle East is becoming a region with multiple centres of instability and increasingly complex conflicts.

### Summary

Faced with the increase in regional instability and the –relative but firm– advance of powers fighting against the status quo from very different positions, there is a real risk of implosion, which would subsequently disfigure the Middle East. The growing sense of insecurity among the different regional actors has a direct effect on their choice of alliances and foreign policy-making. A combination of factors bodes for an unstable short-term future in the Middle East, where today's alliances can change abruptly and where one has to be prepared to expect the unexpected.

### Analysis

If anything can define the Middle East in 2014, it is its character as a region that is messy and in rapid flux. In this part of the world, as in others, insecurity leads to power struggles. Regional foreign policies are aimed at eliminating or containing threats, whether perceived or real, to 'security', which can be understood in different ways. National security is often confused with the security of the regime and its capacity to remain in power. It also encompasses interests of the State, such as sovereignty, territorial integrity and the capacity to exert influence. The latter may be aimed at reaching regional leadership, advancing economic interests or gaining recognition from the major powers.<sup>2</sup>

From a realist perspective, when faced with a serious threat, these states will often either seek balance by forming alliances or 'bandwagon' as opportunists. In other words, the choice is between forming alliances against common threats or aligning with the source of the threat in an attempt to remain safe from harm.<sup>3</sup> The ensuing

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis was originally published in the *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2014*, edited by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). The content of the Yearbook can be accessed at <http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publicacions/anuari-de-la-mediterrania/sumaris/iemed-mediterranean-yearbook-2014>.

<sup>2</sup> HINNEBUSCH, Raymond and Anoushiravan EHTESHAMI (eds). *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (2nd ed). Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> WALT, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

security dilemmas are, therefore, how countries can defend themselves without their rivals feeling threatened and subsequently triggering an arms race. Another security dilemma facing several countries in the Middle East is the choice between developing their own defensive capabilities and ‘contracting’ their defence from the major international powers. These dilemmas often generate paradoxes and contradictions.

For decades, the countries in the Middle East have formed different alliances, been the target of multiple threats and suffered numerous overlapping conflicts. These processes seem to have become much more complex in recent years. Three factors –which will be dealt with later– contribute to this growing complexity: (1) the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the consequences of having upset internal and regional balances; (2) the ‘Arab Awakening’ and the socio-political transformations experienced in the region since 2011; and (3) the foreign policy of the Obama administration towards the area, in part conditioned by the two preceding factors.

The Middle East is becoming a region with multiple centres of instability and increasingly complex conflicts, which stretch from north to south and east to west. The destruction of Syria, decomposition of Iraq, unrest in Egypt and Libya, rivalries between the petro-monarchies of the Gulf, complicated relations with Iran, widespread social discontent, exploitation of the ethno-sectarian divides, the spread of jihadism, confusing US policy in the area and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict are some of the symptoms –and results– of the growing complexity that the Middle East is experiencing.

The panorama described above is producing a rapidly growing uncertainty among the different regional actors, which increases the sense of insecurity. This, in turn, has a direct effect on their choice of alliances and foreign policy-making. Faced with different threats –real or potential– alliances arise that are not necessarily exclusive in character. Allies against one threat may not be the same against another. In today’s Middle East there are rivals who share common enemies, allies who support opposing sides of the same conflict, contradicting interests between ‘friendly’ countries, common interests between ‘enemies’, partnerships that until recently were unimaginable and unnatural pacts. Some old friendships and enmities are being replaced by new alliances in a highly volatile environment.

### *Three shock waves*

Three factors –referred to here as ‘shock waves’ due to their capacity to dramatically increase tensions and generate explosions– are contributing to disfiguring the Middle East and altering the alliances and balances of power among its members. The first shock wave was produced by the invasion of Iraq, led by the US in 2003, and the consequent regime change in Bagdad. According to the neo-conservatives, this invasion would serve to transform the country into a loyal ally of the US and make it a model for democratisation for its neighbours. The reality, a decade later, is quite different: Iraq is a fractured country, plagued by violence and radicalism and

whose sectarian government is in the hands of allies close to Iran.

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US actions in the Middle East after 9/11 have contributed –unwittingly– to Iran’s regional rise. On the one hand, in 2001 the US put an end to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (an enemy of the Iranian Ayatollahs), which handed power in Kabul over to groups allied with Tehran. On the other hand, in 2003 the George W. Bush’s Administration toppled Saddam Hussein, who had acted as a containment wall against Iran’s ambitions of hegemony in its Arab neighbourhood. A predictable consequence was the increase in Iran’s influence on the arc that stretches from Iran to Lebanon and through Iraq and Syria. This, on the one hand, has sparked strong reactions from Iran’s rivals and, on the other, reluctance on the part of the US to become involved in further Middle Eastern ventures.

The second shock wave was produced by the so-called ‘Arab Awakening’, which, since 2011, has generated internal shake-ups in several countries. The effects of the socio-political changes can be felt throughout the region and have put all authoritarian regimes on the defensive, faced with the risk of coming under increasing criticism from their populations. This has led all regimes to try to ‘shield’ themselves with all possible resources: economic (trying to contain social discontent or influencing other potentially problematic countries), ideological (exercising influence through certain religious-political interpretations), identity-focused (mobilising socio-political actors by appealing to their primary identities, whether tribal, religious or ethnic) or resorting to dependence (seeking protection from external security providers in exchange for guaranteeing certain strategic interests).<sup>4</sup>

The third shock wave was the change in the policies of the Obama Administration towards the Middle East. Much has been debated about whether Washington is disengaging from the region as a result of its pivot towards Asia. What seems clear is that, more than having a ‘policy’ towards the region, Obama has adopted an ‘attitude’ based on the belief that such deep involvement in these countries creates more problems for the US and depletes energy for tackling serious challenges in other regions.<sup>5</sup> That change in attitude is altering the calculations of the traditional US allies, which, in turn, is generating nervousness and mistrust in countries like Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, Turkey and the small petro-monarchies of the Gulf.

Growing levels of energy self-sufficiency, together with traumatic experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, have led the US to ask its allies (and also its former enemy Iran) to assume more responsibility in guaranteeing a framework of regional security that does not depend almost entirely on Washington. This focus explains why, in November 2013, an interim agreement was signed in Geneva –described by many as ‘historic’– between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany. The agreement was focused on the Iranian nuclear programme, although its reach would be much broader with the gradual lifting of

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<sup>4</sup> AMIRAH-FERNÁNDEZ, Haizam. “International Relations of the Gulf: Interests, Alliances, Dilemmas and Paradoxes”. *Elcano Royal Institute* (15 March 2011).

<sup>5</sup> KHOURI, Rami. “A New Age in United States-Mideast Relations”. *Agence Global* (29 October 2013).

international sanctions against Iran and its opening to the rest of the world. A key issue for Iran lies in the recognition implied in negotiating 'face to face' with the major world powers.

*Uncertain alliances in a convoluted region*

The traditional analytical framework for explaining the formation of alliances in the Middle East is revealing serious limitations, owing to the fact that several of these states are fragmenting and have ceased to operate as cohesive actors. In fact, Syria and Iraq have ceased to act as states in their internationally recognised territories for some years already. The concept of the 'State' in the region as a whole is increasingly under question. The borders inherited from European colonialism (determined in the Sykes-Picot agreement) are also being brought into question, as well as the traditional leadership models in societies with large numbers of young people, low expectations in wealth distribution, little respect for freedoms and an increasing openness to the outside world.

Several of the conflicts currently affecting the Middle East are often viewed as part of a sectarian war between members of the two main branches of Islam: Sunnis and Shiites. While it is true that the religious element figures highly in the discourses of both sides' ideologues, the key does not lie in a religious war but in a bloody power struggle in the face of increasing insecurity, in which the opposing religious identities are replacing nationalism as a mobilising agent. It is easy to identify a kind of 'Cold War' in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran, each of which relies on clients and allies (both states and non-state actors) whom they support with resources, guarantees and direct involvement when possible.

Today, three regional blocs can be identified: the bloc under Iranian-Shiite leadership (which includes the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, the Iraqi regime of Nuri al-Maliki, Hezbollah and, in a more or less intermittent way, Palestinian militias like Hamas or the Islamic Jihad); the Saudi-Sunni bloc (on which the Egyptian regime depends, headed by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, together with countries like the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan and, to an extent, the Palestinian National Authority); and, lastly, a much weakened bloc formed mainly by Qatar and different organisations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. The military/civilian coup against the Egyptian government of Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 strongly affected the composition of these alliances, as that government was close to both Qatar and Turkey. For its part, although Israel has not declared itself to be a member of any of the blocs, it is a de facto ally in the Riyadh-Cairo axis.

Despite the apparent clarity of the blocs described above, there is a high degree of complexity regarding their alliances and interactions. While Saudi Arabia and Qatar compete with one another and take opposing positions over the destiny of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the two countries are allied against Iran and its protégé al-Assad, supporting Syrian groups composed of the Muslim Brotherhood, among others. For its part, Iran massively supports the al-Assad regime against the

Syrian Islamist rebels, who are backed by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Palestinian movement Hamas, which, remarkably, have also received support from Tehran. With regard to Turkey, this country maintains good relations with the Arab Gulf states and is siding with them against al-Assad, while holding a very different view with regards to the support that the military-backed Egyptian regime should be receiving. And, lastly, there is the so-called Islamic State (or ISIS), which has taken control of territories on both sides of the border between Syria and Iraq and is currently threatening countries that had previously given it their support.

## Conclusion

### *Whither the Middle East?*

Faced with the increase in regional instability and the –relative but firm– advance of powers fighting against the status quo from very different positions, there is a real risk of implosion, which would subsequently disfigure the Middle East. This could be caused by the disintegration of certain borders, the decomposition of more states, wars between neighbours or a regional conflagration. The question is whether there is time to halt the processes that could result in one of these scenarios and, if so, what policies could now avoid the appearance of much more serious problems in a not very distant future.

The US seems to be trying to square the circle: reaching a definitive agreement with Iran, maintaining its traditional alliances in the Middle East, containing the devastating effects of the decomposition of Syria and Iraq, and, at the same time, avoiding being dragged into a new military intervention in the region. Achieving all these goals does not seem easy, or even probable; something many are counting on and will try to take advantage of when the time comes. All of the above bodes for an unstable short-term future in the Middle East, where today's alliances can change abruptly and where one has to be prepared to expect the unexpected.