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*The Middle East torn
between security dilemma and power vacuum*

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The 2011 uprisings failed in spreading democracy. They did, nevertheless, reshape regional relations leaving three traditional powers of the area – Egypt, Syria, Iraq – as barely functional states. The Gulf countries – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE – are leading a potential endless counter-revolution effort. The latter has ignited a toxic circuit of proxy wars that is re-orienting regional foreign policy with a compass driven by altered perceptions of threats and opportunities. The hope that, at the end of the Syrian War, major actors would have designed a regional order based on new power relations was premature. The new order, as Marc Lynch said, is fundamentally one of disorder¹. States that avoided collapse are fragile, and the political and social problems that led to the Arab Uprisings are still there, beneath the shallow.

Syria and Libya are almost failed states. In Syria, thanks to Hezbollah, Iran, Shia militias and Russia, the regime has been able to survive. Yet, fighting is not over, and the Kurds are now facing the threat of Turkey besides the risk of a US disengagement. In the South, Israel is striking at Iran's and Hezbollah's entrenched positions on the battlefield. Libya, after the Skhirat Agreement and the birth of the GNA (Government of National Accord) under Fayeze al-Sarraj, seemed ready to start over, but foreign interests and internal struggles between Tripoli and Tobruk have reignited the war.

Iraq, thanks to the Global Coalition and its forces, has contributed with an astonishing effort to defeat ISIS and conquer back Mosul, however it is suffering of huge chronic economic and social problems². Besides, the fact that from 2005 Baghdad was ruled by Shia governments has put the country in the crosshairs of its neighbours.

The war in Yemen, that started as a civil war and later became a proxy war between Saudis and Iranians, has resulted in a large outbreak of cholera, leaving millions of people in starvation. In Egypt, after the military coup of 2013 that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood, repression, popular discontent, pockets of insurgency, are making the country struggling for its own stability.

Even countries relatively successful, such as Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, are facing internal problems, from youth high rates of unemployment to Islamism, massive economic problems, and the fear for a spill over effect from neighbouring Libya. Each of these crises and conflicts have in

¹ Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Order*, Foreign Affairs, 13 August 2018.

² Robert Baer, *Iranyana*, Piemme Edizioni, 2010.

common the erosion of the legitimate power in the region, a paradigm that can be used as a frame of reference³.

Moreover, the US will to disengage from the region, started under the Obama presidency with the “leading from behind” approach, has provoked a power vacuum that has paved the way to a harsh competition for regional hegemony: an external competition with Iran and its allies; and an internal one led by Saudi Arabia and UAE against awakened political Islam and its sponsors (Qatar, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood)⁴. The US administration is trying to align its policy with Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, in an attempt to restore a regional order controlled by its allies. Until now, the approach has proven to be fallacious if not misleading. The void of power by disengagement cannot be fixed simply with some sort of a “hub and spoke” strategy⁵, even if the allies share a common enemy (Shia Iran) that should have acted as a glue.

The absence of a regional dominion triggers what we can call the “*security dilemma*”: the power vacuum creates the opportunity to assert control over an area of interest, but at the same time exacerbates the inner perception of insecurity in a dangerous spiral. The mixture of perceived threats (domestic upheavals, spreading of political Islam, Iran resurgence, US exit from the region, shortage of oil demand) and opportunities, such as the possibility to take advantage of weakened rivals, has drawn regional powers into potentially endless proxy wars. A dynamic rather similar to the one during the Thirty Years War in Europe.

We can recapitulate the main elements of the situation as follows:

1. Proliferation of failed states;
2. Lack of legitimacy;
3. Competition for regional hegemony;
4. Power vacuum;
5. Security dilemma.

³ Leonardo Palma, *Il problema della legittimità. Le Rivolte Arabe e la controrivoluzione sunnita*, Geopolitica.info, 2018.

⁴ Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism*, Tauris Academic Studies, 2006.

⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Does America need a foreign policy? Toward a diplomacy for the 21st century*, Simon & Schuster, 2002.

Besides, we should underline that the 2011 Uprisings did not come out of nowhere. Causes stem from the alteration of regional dynamics that erupted – sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly – after the end of the Cold War. Those changes exposed the internal cohesion and strength of the Arab states: some adapted, others made it through somehow, the rest collapsed⁶.

Altering the balance of power. From Nasser to the Iraqi invasion

Despite the fascination by some specialists, the Cold War Middle East (or MENA) followed political and geopolitical logics very similar to other regions also in different historical periods. This geopolitical concept foundered after the end of the Cold War because the main components of the area ceased to be a system and became three distinct, albeit interconnected, geopolitical regions: North Africa (more and more the northern belt of the Black Continent); the Gulf, gravitating on the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific and the Levant, with a centre of gravity more on the Mediterranean, still a security transatlantic extension of the Atlantic region but economically since 2006 a terminal of China, India, Gulf and some African trade, well before the Belt and Road Initiative.⁷

Two fields were born at that point: on the one hand, the emerging countries ruled by a young generation of soldiers imbued with Arab nationalism, on the other the old monarchies supported by the West. In the complex geometry of the Cold War, the latter became a sort of extension of the Atlantic Alliance to prevent the Soviet Union, as in the 19th century, from gaining access to warm seas. The Government of Her British Majesty promoted, in 1955, the creation of the Baghdad Pact (called also CENTO, the then real attempted copy of an “Arab NATO”) which Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan and Iran joined as the main countries policing the Southern flank. The United States had looked with interest at this initiative but maintained – at least in the first half of the 50s – an attitude of allergy towards the terminal manifestations of English imperialism.

American politicians, with zeal and Protestant fervour, had believed that the infinite goodness of their democratic and republican history would have vaccinated them against these kinds of manifestations, and that it was therefore possible to imagine a relationship of a different kind with

⁶ Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars. Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, 2016.

⁷ See Nomos & Khaos 2006, Alessandro Politi (ed.), *Nomisma*, Bologna for the concept of Chindoterranean as a sea terminal of the abovementioned trade and investment flows.

the Middle Eastern countries. Such hopes were disregarded in a few years: following the Suez crisis and the Franco-British withdrawal from the Near East, the United States replaced the old colonial countries as *dominus* of the region. In 1957, the Cold War opened its southern front when Bulganin and Zhou Enlai, on the 18th of January, declared that they would have supported Middle Eastern nations against any aggression; a declaration that followed the request made by President Eisenhower to the American Congress to dispose of the armed forces in order to defend the Middle East in the case of Soviet's aggression. In June, Washington joined the Baghdad Pact and in July 1958, after the coup in Iraq, sent landing troops to Lebanon to stop the potential revolutionary "contagion" in the area.

In a little less than two years, the United States found itself trapped in a Sisyphus' effort that still prevents them from exiting definitively from the region. In a situation of extreme social and political volatility, composing and recomposing a line favourable to the West leads not only to exacerbate a series of almost insoluble contradictions, but also to raise the worst enmities. It was in this way that from the old British Empire, America inherited not only the responsibility for maintaining the security of the Middle East, but also the hatred of Arab nationalism. And since Arab nationalism, while professing non-alignment, sought protection in Moscow, the United States, after some hesitation and due account, found itself considering Israel as its best possible ally. But in this unwanted shift, caused as often happens in international politics simply by inertia, sprouted out all the contradictions that from the 1960s conditioned the US action in the Near East.

According to Malcolm Kerr, the dynamic of conflict between the two superpowers was reflected at a regional level, between the 1950s and the 1960s, with the development of an "Arab Cold War"⁸. Under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt started competing with Western-supported regimes, political Islam (i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood and its associates) and the conservative powers, such as Saudi Arabia, in a relentless conflict that ranged from military interventions (like Yemen) to proxy strife over Jordan, Lebanon, Syria. Arab unity, socialism, anti-colonialism and hostility towards Israel were the platform of the ideological fuel for the Arab Cold War.

However, this came to an end with the death of Nasser and the advent of massive oil wealth: "*states became more interested in regime survival than grand ideological causes*"⁹, with the apparently eccentric

⁸ Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamel Abd al-Nasr and his Rivals, 1958-1970*, Oxford University Press, 1975.

⁹ Marc Lynch, *Op. cit.*

exception of colonel Gaddafi. During the 1970s, the various regimes developed stronger security structures and harshly repressed the domestic opposition, as Sadat and later Mubarak did with the Islamists¹⁰. The 1973 war against Israel, for example, was motivated by Arab nationalism in the joint planning with Syria, but the Egyptian planning was driven by the need to recover prestige after the desire to wash the 1967 defeat and take back control over the Sinai Peninsula.

As states became more secure internally, the less were the opportunities for the horizontal diffusion proxy conflicts, but more proxy concentration on the Lebanese Civil War that lasted from 1975 to 1990. Per se the 1979 Iranian Revolution was not interested or able to pursue an expansion in the area; but the rallying of conservative Arab regimes against a common enemy generated in due time the apparently strange alliance between Damascus and Tehran and the exploitation of Lebanon as an outlet from a strategic siege situation.

With power established, some of the yesterday revolutionaries joined the already strong ranks of conservatives. The shift became evident when, in 1990, after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the Saudis request the presence of American troops on their “sacred” territory to protect them and drive out the Iraqis from the emirate. To preserve the survival of the dynasty, the monarchy was willing to accept foreign troops in the land of the Prophet, unleashing a hard-line opposition among Islamists. Osama bin Laden was the Saud representative among the anti-Soviet Afghan mujahedeen since 1979 and during the war he embraced an increasingly more militant and integralist approach to political Islam. Honoured in Saudi Arabia in 1990 as a hero of Islamic resistance against the Soviets, he sharply dissented from the idea of entrusting to “infidels” the protection of the Kingdom and in 1992 he was banished from the country¹¹. It marked the emerging of al Qaeda at regional and global level.

The Arab States did not arrive to the 2011 Uprisings in good health. “*That era of hard states had been fading for some time before the eruption*”¹². The main causes of the crises can be summarized as follows:

1. The end of the Cold War;

¹⁰ Gilles Kepel, *Le Prophète et le Pacha. Les mouvements islamistes dans l’Égypte contemporaine*, Editions La Découverte, 1984;

¹¹ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower. Al-Qaeda and the road to 9/11*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006; but also: Pargeter, *The New frontiers of Jihad. Radical Islam in Europe*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008, and the classic: Gilles Kepel, *Jihad. The Trail of Political Islam*, Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2009; also: *The Princeton Reading in Islamist Thought. Text and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden*, Princeton University Press, 2009.

¹² Lynch, *Op. cit.*

2. The collapse of the Oslo Peace Process;
3. The War on Terror and 2003 Iraqi invasion;
4. The 2008 economic crisis;
5. The spread of social media and communications technology.

The end of the Cold War has meant a lot of things. One of these is the affirmation, also in the Middle East, of globalization. This process has introduced a deep challenge to the traditional order of the region, pushing the states to cut welfare spending, spiralling the growth of youth unemployment, poverty and infrastructure decay. Rentier-States found themselves hostage of the economic forces and the 2008 financial crisis showed that no one, not even oil suppliers, was safe.

At the same time, televisions, social media, telephone, satellites fuelled the opposition against the regimes, enhancing the capacity to express and share opinions. The snowball increased its size with the failure of the Oslo peace process, the beginning of the Second Intifadah and the Global War on Terror (GWT) after 9/11. The US administration knew that the kind of political-religious terrorism that provoked the attacks against the WTC had a plural matrix, but it nevertheless believed that that bloodbath had ideologically originated in a specific area. The debate was between figures pointing out at Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, where anti-US and anti-Western hatred was strong, notwithstanding the political posture of the elites, and those who had a geopolitical approach. These people believed that the US power had been questioned for a long time by several actors, such as Iraq, Iran, and Syria and that the 9/11 attacks were the leading motivation for a geopolitical restructuring of the region and global power. They decided in the to go into the Middle East to re-affirm their power in the region through a military intervention against a non-aligned Iraq, and to send a clear and loud message to Saudi Arabia (since many hijackers were its subjects), Iran, Syria, and to reassure Egypt, Israel, Jordan and the petro-monarchies. However, shaping the region with military power became a quagmire, even for the sole superpower enjoying a unipolar world.

The impossible balance. From the uprisings to the Arab Wars

The Iraqi invasion, with the foreseen strengthening of Iranian influence and the strengthening of jihadism, was followed by the conflict in south Lebanon and Gaza. All this contributed to undermine the foundations of regional cooperation. At the dawn of 2010, beyond the goal of containing Iran, very few had remained to sustain the old Arab order. The upheavals in Egypt,

Tunisia, Sudan, Libya, Syria, Bahrain were the ending point of structural changes that dated back to the first 1990's.

A political space unified through satellite television, internet, social network allowed the protests to self-sustain their effort and create a spill over effect all over the region. Demonstrations calling for the end of economic hardships, repression, lack of political and social freedom, propagated from Tunisia to Bahrain over a few days. The domestic impact of the upheavals was clear, but the fallout went far beyond the naïve assumption that the Arab Springs were only a genuine manifestation of the desire for democracy and freedom. On the contrary, the uprisings accelerated the inevitable unveiling of the deep contradictions within the Arab world and the fallout dismantled the regional balance of power. The US initial choice to look for an alternative leadership (following the Turkish example) to replace outdated dictatorships, backfired in Egypt and then across the area due to local and regional dynamics.

Traditional regional powers such as Egypt and Syria lost their capacity to project influence and to be assertive: the latter fell trapped into a civil war that soon became international, the first was consumed by the clash between the Islamists and the secular authoritarianism of the military.¹³ Instead, the Gulf states found themselves in the position to exploit their wealth, media empire (*Al-Jazeera*), transnational connections with groups near the Muslim Brotherhood (Qatar), or international enterprises (UAE), to exercise soft-power across the region. Thanks to money and propaganda, they could project their influence in Libya, Yemen, and Syria by financing factions and sending well-equipped and trained mercenaries. The fact that these countries thought they could be the new leading powers in the region does not mean that they share the same views and interest. Saudi Arabia and EAU have found themselves struggling with Qatar (and Turkey) over Libya, Syria, Egypt, backing different factions, groups and terrorists, and the result has been the split within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the diplomatic isolation of Doha.

Syria became the theatre where all these fractures met. After the “successful” overthrowing of the despised leader Gaddafi, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey saw the upheavals against President Bashar al-Assad as an opportunity to change the Syrian regime and to deprive Iran of one of its allies¹⁴. Without the possibility to bring the international community in, as it previously happened in Libya,

¹³ Mehran Kamrava, *The Arab Spring and the Saudi-led Counterrevolution*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Winter Issue, 2012.

¹⁴ On Libya see: Rob Weighill & Florence Gaub, *The Cauldron. NATO's campaign in Libya*, Hurst Publishers, 2018.

the Gulf States and Turkey decided to arm the insurgency, more often than not its dangerous jihadist component. However, while the Iranian and Russian interventions have been coordinated, Saudis, Qataris, and Turkish perceived one-another as rivals as much as allies, and their competitive efforts backfired most of the times.

In late 2012, the insurgency was sharpened by the privatisation of the flow of supplies, thanks to Salafi networks which shifted the power inside the rebellion towards the jihadi groups. Since the latter were the most effective fighters, the Gulf States and Turkey increased their support, helping the culture broth where ISIS originated¹⁵. It should be remembered that privatisation and “liberalisation” of terrorism from its previous state influence and support, typical during the Cold War, was started precisely with al Qaeda.

The Islamic State was not a proxy of any state, rather an insurgent force born from a branch of AQI (al-Qa’ida in Iraq) that quickly exploited instability and shaped both Syria and Iraq into a state openly challenging the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916), its borders and the legitimacy of the local entrenched dynasties and dictators. The birth of this terrorist self-proclaimed Caliphate forced the US to intervene against it after years of attempts to arm, contain, and shape the opposition to the Syrian regime and Iran. But even a limited intervention caused a series of unwanted consequences, such as the effort to manage the competition with Russia without becoming entrapped in a wider conflict or, worse than ever, escalate into an open war.

The campaign against ISIS, nonetheless, led to a greater Turkish involvement and a team change: in 2015 the United States, looking for proxies to tear down the Caliphate, decided to help and sustain the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), banned under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey started fearing a reborn and strengthened Kurdish separatism, a nightmare that led Ankara to escalate its military intervention in 2017 and to seize northern Syria. At the same time, the wide presence of Hezbollah’s militias and Iranian special forces were a motivation for Israel to enter the conflict with the aim to contain Shia expansionism towards the Golan Heights and striking at the Iranian military capabilities.

¹⁵ Theodor Tudoroiu, *The Arab Spring: last episode of the Cold War*, Contemporary Politics, 19:3, 2013, pp. 304-320.

Facing the security dilemma

What can explain ambiguous foreign policy decisions taken by the Arab countries after 2011 is insecurity. The clear and present danger to survival that these establishments fear from internal upheaval and external manipulation has brought them into a tireless effort to increase their security at the cost of triggering negative feedback cycles that are leaving them less secure than ever.

Saudi Arabia, Bahrein, EAU, Qatar, Jordan, and Egypt are all terrified by the possible outbreak of another insurgency, fearing not only upheavals at home but also the risk of a “revolutionary” infiltrations from their neighbours. When economic protests erupted in Jordan in May 2018, the UAE, Qatar and Saudi – even if competing for the region – decided to intervene by renewing assistance to the Hashemite Kingdom in order to appease the demonstrators. Fear for domestic insurgency has led general al-Sisi to expand his anti-Islamist campaign but, in so doing, he alienated large segments of the population that supported his coup in 2013.

In Saudi Arabia, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, after consolidating his power with ruthless manoeuvres, brought his country inside a quagmire both in Yemen and within the GCC. In 2017, the diplomatic attack against Qatar was aimed at imposing Saudi dominance over the Gulf Cooperation Council and isolate the Muslim Brotherhood challenging the monarchy at home; Doha, however, showed to be more resilient than Riyadh may have expected and the diplomatic crisis ended with the erosion of Saudi-US relations and the weakening of the GCC. At the same time, the decision to escalate the war in Yemen together with the UAE has turned “*a minor Iranian foothold into a stronger strategic alliance with the Houthis rebels*”¹⁶. Same results with Syria and the “kidnapping” of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, a move that simply exacerbated a political crisis and weakened the pro-Saudi influence inside the parliament of Beirut.

As said in the beginning, these apparently nonsensical actions are driven not only by a harsh competition, but also by the apparently perverse logic beneath the search for security in an environment with a void of power. Whenever there is a *vacuum*, regional powers expand their influence, otherwise their rivals will. But once they get involved in a proxy conflict or a diplomatic one, a disengagement becomes inconceivable because it is felt it will only strengthen the rivals. Here is the security dilemma: we cannot win, but we cannot leave.

¹⁶ Lynch, *Op. Cit.*

As the struggle goes on, sound political and intelligence analysis goes out, magnifying fears and worst-case scenarios. Born out of the simplification of the Shia Crescent, the narrative of an Iranian expansionism against the Gulf countries embodies these fears: in reality Tehran wants to regain the political importance it had at the times of the Shah and opposes Tel Aviv's shaping of the region, but it is not as strong as Saudis and Israelis believe. In the meantime, the failed campaigns in Yemen and Syria have only increased Iran's prestige, despite the biting of the economic sanctions. In a region intoxicated by these dynamics, no reassurance from the United States can help. Nor the unprecedented volume of weapons sales, nor the withdrawal from the JCPOA are considered enough; if the signature of the nuclear deal under Obama worried Israel and the Gulf States as the premise to an appeasement and possible legitimization of Teheran's aspirations, the withdrawal has had the effect to trigger renewed fears for Iranian re-nuclearization and strategic competition. Moreover, the attempt made by President Trump to realign the Sunni States with Israel is hampered by the clashes between the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.

Since the Gulf States and the old monarchies no longer see Washington as a guarantor, not only of regime survival but also as a security provider, many of them are building up different relationships with Russia, China, and, if expedient, even the EU. But involving external actors makes the threat perception much more altered, increasingly distancing the possibility to build a new regional political order. The United States are not willing to stay in the Middle East forever, and they do not feel anymore the need to act as the security provider and balancer of the region. Of course, they cannot leave it to chaos, and the desire to pull out clashes with the need to reach some sort of order before leaving. But no regional actor seems able to exit from the security dilemma right now, as all players are trapped in reshaping the region around an elusive clear hegemony or bipolar order.

The essentials have broken deeply the fabric of relationships in the Arab world. The question is: are we approaching the ending phase of an Arab Thirty Years War, as some commentators say, or are we facing the same conditions that Europe lived between 1921 and 1939? The answer lies crucially but partially within the region and unfortunately is also the purview of great global powers: North Africa, Levant and the Gulf could escape wider wars only if their elites devise new balances in time or they could be involved in a major global confrontation. In both cases the security dilemma would be a moot point.



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