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ARAB GEOPOLITICS 2022



Background Policy Paper

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The global fallout of an ongoing major crisis and conflict had deep and lasting consequences on the Arab geopolitics, reinforcing existing trends that were already pushing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) towards a regional détente, but also showing multiple emerging challenges at the same time. In a context marked by a normalisation process, involving not only Israel and its Arab partners, but also regional foes up until now fighting each other in different conflict theatres, still active in the region, the neutral stance adopted by many Arab leaders during the current crisis is certainly not surprising.

With implications that go well beyond the Arab world and extend to many developing countries, the new version of the non-aligned movement has long been in the making, eased by what has been perceived in many Arab capitals as the unpredictable behaviour of Western partners. Only in part compensated by the legacy of the Abraham Accords, Washington's disengagement from the wider region (emphasised by the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan) is accelerating under the Biden administration, increasing the disillusionment of the Arab leaders looking for reliable security providers while facing external threats.

The variability of the US foreign policy certainly helps explain the circumspection with which Arab partners are hedging their bets while facing difficult choices. Out from the cold, Riyadh's non-commitment to the normalisation of ties with Israel for the time being surely sets an example, as well as the UAE's decision to abstain from a vote on a UN Security Council resolution condemning Russia's attack against Ukraine in the early days of the war. These cases show all the limits of the recalibration promised by the Biden administration, a compelling argument for local stakeholders eager to find endogenous solutions to the multiple crises affecting the region.

And that is exactly where the 'other' normalisation between regional competitors engaged in various forms in the civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen came into play. Warming ties between Egypt, Qatar and Turkey, but also the rapprochement between Ankara and its main geopolitical rivals (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) are raising hopes of a new era for the Middle East, now ready to leave the chaotic post-Arab Spring transitions behind. Direct talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia could also push the normalisation wave to new heights, if and when a comprehensive settlement, addressing not only the different regional crises, but also the impending nuclear issue is reached.

The dangers of not seizing the moment offered by this window of opportunity are certainly huge and could reinforce pre-existing tendencies prone to widen the regional divide. In these uncharted waters, arms transfers risk giving a military dimension to the normalisation front, corroborating reports about the establishment of an Arab NATO that, however, still looks like a very distant prospect that could further antagonise emerging regional blocs. Not many in the region necessarily see the activities of Iran and its proxies as a threat and, if the opportunity presents itself, they could join forces, this time not in the name of a common Islamist ideology, but in order to share a mutual anti-normalisation stance.

In this challenging context, the return of popular politics in the MENA after a lull of two years due to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 adds to the complexity. The recent wave of protests in Iran has highlighted the frail basis on which long-standing regimes have built their legitimacy, making the prospect of a change from within a real possibility once again. Growing pressure on local elites is also driven by the devastating consequences of the climate change, which has exposed the vulnerability of the region to rising temperatures, water scarcity, droughts and desertification, at a time when Egypt is expected to host the next UN Climate Change Conference (COP27).

On the other hand, violent attacks against parliaments in Iraq and Libya suggest a manifest democratic regression. Driven by populist tendencies that have found a breeding ground in times of economic crisis, exacerbated by the disruption of wheat supplies, a return to the authoritarian rule is increasingly seen as the only way out of the democratic quagmire considered as the main responsible for the decline of living standards. Tunisia, where the Parliament has been first suspended and then dissolved, is certainly a case in point, while the imbalance of power contained in its new hyper-presidential constitution represents the inevitable outcome.

In a context marked by an ongoing authoritarian turn, the US reset has evidently left Washington and its Western partners vulnerable to the pro-Russian propaganda in a region crucial for energy supplies. Nevertheless, the new neutralism 2.0 certainly works both ways and some oil and gas producers in the MENA would not mind nuancing their sympathies for Moscow to gain some financial breathing room. Algeria for example has been reinforcing ties with Italy, agreeing to expand its gas exports despite a bilateral military cooperation with Russia rooted in history.

Thanks to its proximity and an infrastructure system already in place, the Maghreb could soon become a new energy hub for Southern Europe, also considering long-term projects to build new pipelines from untapped reserves in sub-Saharan Africa. However, resuming tensions between Algeria and Morocco cast a long shadow over these ambitious plans and are already making energy supplies from the sub-region increasingly volatile, a collateral damage of the expanding ramifications of the Maghreb rift caused much more by the ongoing normalisation process rather than being a side-effect of the unsolved Western Sahara issue.

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