



POST-HEGEMONIC (DIS)ORDER AND REGIONAL BALANCING STRATEGIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract:

Following the so-called Arab Spring, the strategic situation in the Middle East has been one of disorder. A series of critical, complex and interrelated security failures have resulted in chaos and bloodshed unprecedented even for a region with Middle East's history and legacy. The demand for intervention has been high but the response has been very low. In such an unchartered and rapidly deteriorating regional security setting, this paper argues that the conspicuous absence of US hegemonic engagement has allowed for the return to overt regional balance of power strategies and proxy conflicts. Our hypothesis is that a regional balance of power and the resulting order (or disorder) heavily depends on the type of great power regional engagement. In such a context, the "hands off" or non-hegemonic approach that characterizes US strategy since the Arab Spring eruption has heavily contributed to a highly disorderly regional balance of power landscape. In the absence of US hegemonic involvement, revisionist threats emerge and local rivalries intensify.

Key words: Middle East, hegemonic stability, balance of power, order, strategy

Titulo en Castellano: El (Des)orden post-hegemónico y las Estrategias de Equilibrio Regional en Oriente Medio

Resumen:

Después de la llamada primavera árabe, la situación estratégica en el Oriente Medio se ha desordenado. Una serie de quiebras de seguridad críticas, complejas e interrelacionadas han dado lugar a un caos y derramamiento de sangre sin precedentes, incluso para una región con la historia y el legado de Oriente Medio. La demanda de intervención ha sido alta, pero la respuesta ha sido muy baja. En un marco de seguridad regional tan complejo y en rápido deterioro, este artículo defiende que una ausencia visible del compromiso hegemónico de Estados Unidos ha permitido el retorno al equilibrio regional de estrategias de poder y conflictos de representación. Nuestra hipótesis es que un equilibrio regional de poder y el orden resultante (o desorden) depende en gran medida del tipo de compromiso regional de la gran potencia. En ese contexto, el enfoque "manos fuera" o no hegemónico que caracteriza la estrategia estadounidense desde la erupción de la primavera árabe ha contribuido fuertemente a un equilibrio de poder regional altamente desordenado. En ausencia de la participación hegemónica estadounidense, surgen amenazas revisionistas y se intensifican las rivalidades locales.

Palabras Clave: Oriente Medio, estabilidad hegemónica, equilibrio de poder, orden, estrategia

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1. Introduction

In March 2017, the *New York Times* reported that the US, in the course of a month, launched more airstrikes in Yemen than during all of 2016.² In Syria, it airlifted local forces to front-line positions while in Iraq, troops and aircraft were central in supporting the urban offensive in Mosul. At that point, with President Trump in office for two months, expectations were sky-high that US military involvement was deepening, marking a shift from the Obama “doctrine”, where the Middle East is no longer so important to American interests, and even if it were, there is little an American president can do to make it a better place. It is a region that consumes diplomatic energy, economic and military resources which would be more efficiently devoted to Asia, Africa and Latin America.³

What happened with Trump, though, was not a renewed US hegemonic engagement. Rather it was a shift in military decision-making with new procedures that made it easier for commanders in the field to call in airstrikes without waiting for permission from more senior officers. Some of the shifts have also involved small increases in the deployment and use of American forces or, in Yemen, resuming aid to allies that had previously been suspended. This is far-cry from a hegemonic re-engagement.

However, in a region that profoundly lacks clear endgames, the shift in military involvement did not appear to have been accompanied by increased planning for the day after potential military victories. More importantly the lack of strategic appraisal of the future in places like Yemen and Syria could render victories there by the United States and its allies unsustainable.

The Obama administration sought to limit American engagement while pushing — mostly in vain — for diplomatic solutions. It also launched frequent airstrikes to kill individual jihadists or to destroy their facilities and sent thousands of American troops back to Iraq to train and advise Iraqi forces, and also provide firepower, so they could “degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State. But under Obama, the White House often spent weeks or even months deliberating certain raids and airstrikes out of concern for the lives of American troops and civilians — and often to the frustration of commanders and American allies. Under Obama, the United States provided military support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, but halted the sale of precision-guided munitions over concerns that airstrikes by Saudi Arabia and its allies were killing too many civilians. But since Trump took office, his administration has advanced some arms deals for coalition countries, while approving the resumption of sales of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia.⁴

Trump’s more muscular approach has been hailed by Gulf leaders, who felt betrayed by Obama’s outreach to Iran and who hope that they now have an ally in the White House to help them push back against their regional foe. However, what is clear is that this military surge has not brought with it a clear strategy to change the state of play in the Middle East.

In order to make sense of the Eastern Mediterranean, understanding the dynamics in the Middle East is crucial as its security landscape influences the choices and actions of regional and extraregional actors in its sub-region of the Eastern Mediterranean. Hence our emphasis on the Middle East before a brief look at the Eastern Mediterranean context.

² Hubbard, Ben and Michael R. Gordon: “U.S. War Footprint Grows in Middle East, With No Endgame in Sight”, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/world/middleeast/us-war-footprint-grows-in-middle-east.html>

³ Goldberg, Jeffrey: “The Obama Doctrine”, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

⁴ Hubbard and Gordon, *op. cit.*



Post-Arab Spring, the strategic situation in the Middle East has been one of disorder. A series of critical, complex and interrelated security failures have resulted in chaos and bloodshed unprecedented even for a region with Middle East's history and legacy. The demand for intervention has been high but the response has been very low. A decade and a half after the US military campaign in Iraq, and some eight years after the celebrated "Arab Spring", the turmoil is met by a profound lack of appetite for strategic response and regional engagement. By any measure, the region has entered an era where American hegemony and the relative stability and predictability it provided is a distant memory.

Today, the region lies at the crossroads of multiple rivalries and conflicts. "The proliferation of failed and weakened states has created new opportunities for competition and intervention, favoring new actors and new capabilities. Regional dynamics are no longer determined by formal alliances and conventional conflicts between major states. Instead, power operates through influence peddling and proxy warfare."⁵ With the notable exception of Tunisia's relatively uncomplicated peaceful transition, the Arab popular revolts unleashed a wave of violence and tensions in Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Syria, whose effects the entire region continues to experience. During this period, Libya set the stage for a bloody civil war and became a theater of regional competition. Egypt moved from ancient regime authoritarianism to Islamic regime authoritarianism and back to the ancient regime. Yemen, which suffers from a major humanitarian crisis fueled by civil war and military intervention by Saudi Arabia, also experiences additional tensions due to Iran's growing influence. Iran has not abandoned its ambition to cross the nuclear threshold, and the situation is again highly unstable following the US abrogation of the nuclear deal and the imposition of new sanctions. Although the jihadist onslaught in Syria and Iraq is on the verge of being defeated, the situation in both countries is far from reassuring.

Meanwhile, Syria became the source of bloody proxy wars and region-wide trauma. The civil war has claimed a death toll too high to contemplate and a colossal refugee problem, while the return of Putin's Russia, following the de facto annexation of Crimea, has elevated the strategic stakes for the day after. At the same time, jihadist-Salafists are still in abundance. In Lebanon and Palestine, weak governments and authorities are constantly challenged; Egypt, one of the cornerstones of the once familiar regional security architecture and a pillar of relative stability and predictability, has gone from autocracy, to constitutional theocracy and back to autocracy, elevating itself to a major problem of the regional security breakdown; Jordan, although it has successfully ridden the wave of Arab transitions, it has done so without seriously addressing some of the key economic and political challenges facing the country; and Turkey, the other critical foundation of American post Second World War strategic planning, had its foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) contaminated by approaches with a strong sectarian taste, blinded by doctrinal rigidity and illusions of great power grandeur, damaging, thus, its credibility in Washington and other European, Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern capitals.

As 2019 began, it looked like the war in Syria might be drawing toward an ending that few in the international community wanted. Yes, ISIS was on the way to defeat as a conventional fighting force—but the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, regained control of most of the country. Today, an end to the conflict is nowhere in sight. Moreover, what began as a civil uprising seven years ago now looks more like an international conflict where patron states are replacing their proxies. This dizzying array of

⁵ Lynch, Marc: "The New Arab Order. Power and Violence in Today's Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 97, nº 5, p. 116.



overlapping and competing conflicts and alliances has become unmoored from the war that began in 2011. Most of the conflicts have nothing to do with Syria per se.

With 400,000 people dead, the conflict in Syria is no longer just about the future of Assad, the Syrian people or even ISIS, which has now lost most of the territory under its control. Instead, it's a series of battles for geopolitical dominance. The key player is Iran, which has extended its influence and reach inside Syria. Tehran, now effectively holds the levers of power. Assad has ended up becoming a hostage to Iran's interests. Others in Syria are pursuing their own agendas. Turkey is battling the Kurdish YPG militia, which it sees as an existential threat. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who once called for Assad's ouster, now seems resigned to his staying with the fight against YPG the only priority that matters,⁶ provided Turkey has a fundamental say in what happens along its borders even if that implies a military presence within Syrian territory.

In such an uncharted and rapidly deteriorating regional security setting, this paper argues that the conspicuous absence of US hegemonic engagement has allowed for the return to overt regional balance of power strategies and proxy conflicts. To be sure, the international politics of the Middle East have always been about war, civil strife, sectarianism and external interventions. However, great-power involvement either in the form of competitive balancing or hegemonic management by a great power makes a difference in regulating regional competition, diffusing crises and containing warfare. Regional actors tend to bandwagon with a global hegemon or see their ambitions contained and their status marginalized. Our hypothesis is that a regional balance of power and the resulting order (or disorder) heavily depends on the type of great power regional engagement. In such a context, the "hands off" or non-hegemonic approach that characterizes US strategy since the Arab Spring eruption has heavily contributed to a highly disorderly regional balance of power landscape. In the absence of US hegemonic involvement, revisionist threats emerge and local rivalries intensify.

The appeal of US and the West as a stabilizer has been rapidly declining and this has taken structural characteristics. The rise of Asia and the growing influence of the Gulf are reshaping regional geopolitics and are curbing the power reach of Washington. The implications are profound across a wide array of security issues. No longer can the US shape the strategic landscape. The failure to convene a meaningful meeting on Syria in Geneva and persuade all warring parties and regional actors of the utility of joining in and reaching a negotiated settlement is a case in point. Decisions on the situation in Syria and the day after are now the prerogative of Tehran, Istanbul, Moscow Riyadh or Doha⁷ to the extent that the Astana process has tended to overshadow its Geneva counterpart. Turkey, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia are seeking and securing larger footholds in the region that are further undermining the ability of the US to secure favorable geopolitical arrangements.

In such a context, foreign policies are "driven by a potent mixture of perceived threats and opportunities. Fears of resurgent domestic uprisings, Iranian power, and U.S. abandonment exist alongside aspirations to take advantage of weakened states and international disarray—a dynamic that draws regional powers into destructive proxy conflicts, which sow chaos

⁶ Collard, Rebecca: "The War in Syria Has Entered a Dangerous New Phase", 15 February 2018, at <http://time.com/5159869/war-syria-entered-dangerous-new-phase/>.

⁷ To try and resolve the stalemate over Idlib, it was a Turkey, Russia and Iran Summit. The US were nowhere to be seen! Gambrell, Jon and Nasser Karimi: "High-stakes diplomacy as battle for Syria's Idlib looms", 7 September 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/syria-summit-in-iran-may-decide-idlib-military-offensive/2018/09/07/89adc86e-b25e-11e8-8b53-50116768e499_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7fd5498e3907.



throughout the region. Any vision of the region finding a workable balance of power is a mirage: the new order is fundamentally one of disorder.”⁸

2. The old anchors are no more...

The Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East comprise a sensitive region of strategic dynamics gathering the interests of diverse state as well as sub-state actors and strategic realignments caused by several countries' security search. The US cast a wide political and security shadow in the region since the end of the Second World War. The cornerstone of the US strategy in the region optimized two major regional triangular relationships: US-Turkey-Israel and US-Egypt-Israel.⁹ In the case of the Egyptian-Israeli partnership, common interests included countering Iranian activism, combating terrorism and religious extremism and maintaining some form of stability by balancing out any threatening behaviors.

These strategic priorities have traditionally enhanced the US interests such as maintaining a stable regional balance of power, securing the energy supply of the West and ameliorating Israel's security dilemma through boosting its ties to major littoral powers. For these reasons, the US was allowed more freedom in partly shaping and controlling the development of the regional order and providing the foundation for regional stability.¹⁰ Although relations had always been close, in the case of Turkey and Israel, a strategic turn took place when they signed a military cooperation agreement in 1996.¹¹ That agreement was considered as an essential element of the Turkish-US strategic bond. It highlighted Turkey's importance in the Middle East as Israel's partner, while as a side payment it generated strong support from the powerful Jewish lobby in Washington on issues that were important to Turkey, such as countering the influence of the Armenian lobby and supporting Turkey's demands for advanced military hardware in the US Congress.¹²

Turkey's geostrategic position was always crucial for US foreign policy objectives in the wider region of the Middle East. During the Cold War, "Turkey was a strategic imperative of the US"¹³. The fundamental feature that has determined the course of the relationship has been its predominantly security-oriented nature,¹⁴ without a solid social and economic basis and hence without a clearly defined list of priorities. By most accounts as already mentioned, it is Turkey's strategic location, which dictates that its importance to Washington is primarily a function of US objectives in Turkey's neighboring regions. Turkey has been seen as one of the most important forward bases through which US policies in the wider Middle East region would be implemented, and has provided the US with much needed strategic depth in its regional engagement policies¹⁵. Given this consideration the relationship has been rendered vulnerable

⁸ Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 116-7.

⁹ Alterman, Jon and Malka, Haim: "Shifting Eastern Mediterranean Geometry", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 35, nº 3 (Summer 2012), p. 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹¹ The agreement allowed, among other, the Israeli Air Force to use Turkish airspace for training, thus providing Israel with much needed strategic depth. By 2001, the US military was participating in trilateral air force and search-and-rescue exercises with Israel and Turkey.

¹² Aydin, Mustafa: "Reconstructing Turkish-American Relations: Divergences versus Convergences", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, vol. 40 (2009), pp. 134-135.

¹³ Friedman, George: 'Turkey's Strategy', *Geopolitical Weekly*, 17 April 2012, at http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/turkeys_strategy/, p.2.

¹⁴ After almost 50 years of alliance the trade volume has remained rather low. It is noteworthy, that despite Turkey's impressive economic performance since the mid-2000s, trade with the US reached only \$15 billion in 2010 and remains overly dependent on large US defense and aircraft sales. See Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), *US-Turkey Relations: A New Partnership*, Independent Task Force Report nº 69 (2012), New York, p. 11.

¹⁵ Gerger, Fawaz A.: "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?", *International Affairs*, vol.89 nº 2 (2013), p. 317



and dependent on circumstantial strategic security assessments of the interests involved¹⁶, while the profound asymmetry of power is said to be responsible for Turkey's distrust of the US¹⁷.

Since the late 2000s, however, the strategic geography that the US strived to shape underwent notable change¹⁸ with the advent to power of political forces that did not seem eager to share the same agenda as their predecessors. The established relative predictability that was a fundamental characteristic two decades ago regarding supposedly customary assumptions and relationships were directly challenged by the "Arab Spring" social turmoil and its aftermath. The two-triangles-setting worn off and political disorder became the "order" of the day. The long-lasting Israeli-Palestinian conflict exploded in spasms of violence, with the November 2012 eruption and the July 2014 Gaza Strip eruptions. Although, the crises looked like a rerun of past turmoil, this time the context was quite different. Traditional actors had new calculations and each tested the limits of the order in the wake of 'Arab Spring' regime changes.¹⁹

3. Erdogan's Turkey: Neo-ottoman geopolitics

US-Turkish relations have been subject to great pressure in recent years. The end of the Cold War marked a new era for Turkish foreign policy, which has been freed from its fear of Russia. Given this advancement, Turkish strategic dependence on the US also diminished.²⁰ In the 2000s, Ankara had less existential threats to deal with, but its neighborhood was becoming (more) unstable given the unpredictable stance of the US to follow the 2003 military campaign against Iraq. In Washington, Turkey's geopolitical value was in doubt following the fall out over Iraq. For the Pentagon – Ankara's most ardent advocate - Turkey's strategic importance is only valued in the context of its availability to US troops²¹.

At the same time, the public opinion in Turkey has demonstrated a disregard for the need for strategic support from the West and Israel perceiving the relationship with the United States as "more dangerous than the threat an alliance with the United States was meant to stave off"²². In the second half of the 2000s, the EU's foot-dragging over Turkey's accession further diminished the credibility of the West. Moreover, there have been many in Turkey who began to question whether NATO and US were still indispensable to the country's foreign and security needs²³. Turkey's growing regional ambitions strengthened the perception that the West and NATO should not be allowed to hamper the country's regional strategies as these have been embodied in former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's 'strategic depth doctrine'.²⁴

¹⁶ Global Relations Forum (GRF): *Turkey-USA Partnership at the Dawn of a New Century*, Task Force Report (2011), Istanbul, p.19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁸ Alterman and Malka 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

¹⁹ "The Gaza Crisis: Will the ceasefire lead to peace?", *The Economist*, 24 November 2012.

²⁰ Friedman, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

²¹ Park, Bill: "Strategic location, political dislocation: Turkey, The United States, and Northern Iraq", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 7, nº 2, (2003), p. 9.

²² Friedman, *op.cit.*, p. 2-3.

²³ Oguzlu, Tarik: "Turkey's Eroding Commitment to NATO: From Identity to Interests", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol.35, nº 3 (Summer 2012), p.153.

²⁴ The doctrine states that Turkey should feel the responsibility to help put its region in order. This is a mission Turkey has inherited from its Ottoman past. According to Oguzlu, "the idea that Turkey needs to fulfill a particular historical mission is very much *idea-politik*. Though the fulfillment of this mission would likely serve Turkey's realpolitik concerns to have stability and security in surrounding regions, the motivating factor of Turkey's various initiatives in this regard is very much identity/ideology driven." (Oguzlu, *op.cit.*, p.159-160). Also see Sozen, Ahmet: "A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy: Transition and Challenges", *Turkish Studies*, vol.11, nº 1 (March 2010), pp.103-123.



AKP leaders consider the Islamic world as an equally – to the West - important component of Turkey's foreign policy. Erdogan's foremost argument was that Turkey has neglected its historic and cultural ties as well as its diplomatic, economic and political relations with the strategically critical Middle Eastern, North African and Eurasian regional complexes.²⁵ In the case of the Middle East, this major policy shift was framed in what has been described as a 'neo-ottoman' platform.²⁶ According to Han, 'for the AKP, Turkey's Ottoman heritage introduced both as a sense of historical responsibility toward the Middle East and accorded it a sort of exceptionalism in the region. When a worldview propagates such exceptionalism and claim legitimacy from an ancient heritage, it becomes more likely that the regional assessments of decision-makers will be flawed'.²⁷ Besides, it can lead to a distorted assessment of Turkey's relative power and influence.²⁸

The case of Turkish exceptionalism has had also another dimension. An attractive argument has been made that since AKP's advent to power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy has been strongly based on ethical concerns and a quest for a just and peaceful international political order. Berdal Aral has argued that Turkish foreign policy discourse as well as practice has been one of respect for international law, supporting human rights both at home and abroad, standing by the democratic uprisings in the Arab world, and a search for justice everywhere. He also concludes that morality in the Turkish international posture will remain a fundamental principle of Turkish foreign policy so long as AKP remains in power "on account of its reformism, its powerful sense of mission rooted in Turkey's deep history, and its strong grounding in the virtues of morality and justice as essential ingredients of Islam".²⁹ Aral notes that with few exceptions³⁰ Turkish diplomacy between 1945 and 2002 "could be coined as an 'amoral' foreign policy, which broadly overlapped with a 'formalism' that dovetailed with a state supporting the main pillars and structures of the international status-quo irrespective of whether it was unjust, oppressive, or morally despicable".³¹

In such an ideologically driven context, Washington and the West should not have expected that Turkish cooperation in regional contingencies could be forthcoming.³² Rather, narrower and perhaps incompatible definitions of interests and a quest for more autonomy of

²⁵ Murinson, Alexander: "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy", *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 42, n° 6 (November 2006), pp. 945-64.

²⁶ This is how, in an AKP major address, Erdogan described his party historic mission: "On the historic march of our holy nation, the AK Party signals the birth of a global power and its mission for a new world order. This is the centenary of our exit from the Middle East... whatever we lost between 1911 and 1923, whatever lands we withdrew from, from 2011 to 2023 we shall once again meet our brothers in those lands". See Fradkin, Hillel and Libby, Lewis: "Erdogan's Grand Vision: Rise and Decline", *World Affairs Journal*, (March/April 2013), at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/print/63552>.

²⁷ Han, Ahmet K.: "Paradise Lost: A neoclassical Realist Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy and the Case of Turkish-Syrian Relations", in Raymond Hinnebusch and Ozlem Tur (eds) (2013): *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, Farnham, Ashgate.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁹ Berdal, Aral: "Law, Ethics, and Justice in the Emerging International Order: A Study of Turkish Diplomacy under the AK Party Government (2002-2014)", *Insight Turkey*, vol. 17, n° 3, Summer 2015, p. 189.

³⁰ According to Aral, one major exception was the founding in 1997 by the then PM Necmettin Erbakan of the Developing 8 (D-8), among eight Muslim states, "whose goals, inter alia, encompassed justice and fairness as the determining feature of the relationship between member states, thus supplanting the ills of the prevalent international economic system such as economic exploitation, inequality and confrontation". *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Gerger, *op.cit.*, p. 317.



action should have been expected.³³ Under Erdogan Turkish foreign policy has been more assertive, active and diverse, across its neighborhood.³⁴

In the case of Iran's nuclear ambitions, for example, the debate in Ankara seems to be more political rather than strategic in character. "Ankara's overt rationale has been that by acting as an intermediary between Iran and the West, rather than as a strict ally of the West, it will acquire more influence over Iran"³⁵; however, when in 2012 Ankara refused to support the economic sanctions against Tehran and in addition identified Israel as part of a nuclear Iran problem, Ankara seemed to be breaking away from the dominant assessment of the situation in the West. However, Iran's regional leadership ambitions and policies of dominating Iraq as well as its strong support of the Assad regime proved to be a major obstacle, and hopes of partnership turned into bitter rivalry.³⁶ In Syria, Turkey found itself on the other side of the Sunni-Shiite divide, confronted by Iran, Hezbollah and the Shiite government in Iraq, and when in 2012 the Turkish Parliament approved military action³⁷ it was further drawn, in a sectarian quagmire and depriving Washington of a trusted regional ally.³⁸

The AKP government has been openly quite critical of the pre-existing arrangements. They have sought greater distance from Israel and adopted independent positions vis-à-vis and beyond the reach and influence of the US. The policy shift has been so profound that many observers, both in the Western capitals and Turkey, have questioned Turkey's variation from its traditional posture. Mustafa Aydin has gone so far as to note that "the era of strategic partnership has ended"³⁹, while Reynolds supports the view that "there is no pretense inside Ankara that its long-term interests are in fundamental alignment with those of America"⁴⁰. Sayari has argued that perceptions about US declining power and retreat "have been influential in Turkey's aspirations for greater independence and strategic autonomy"⁴¹.

On the ground, the most vivid illustration of Washington and Ankara parting ways has been US's strategic choice back in 2015 to closely cooperate with and arm the Syrian-Kurdish militias against ISIS. Although, compatible with Obama's "no boots on the ground" Middle East doctrine, the decision delivered a blow to US-Turkish relations. With Donald Trump adhering to the basic contours of the Obama approach things became even more strained.⁴² The organic link between Syria's PYD-YPG and the terrorist PKK intensified Turkish security dilemma and confirmed that Turkey cannot trust the US. As a result, Turkey prioritized the Kurdish threat and northwest Syria (and northern Iraq) has become the terrain where divergence between Ankara and Washington stretches to the point of break down.

³³ Walberg, Eric: "Turkey-Israel Relations and the Middle East Geopolitical Chessboard. Turkey redraws Sykes-Picot", 30 September 2011, at <http://www.globalresearch.ca/26867>.

³⁴ Robins, Philip: "Turkey's "double gravity" predicament: The foreign policy of a newly activist power", *International Affairs*, vol. 89, n° 2 (2013), pp. 381-397.

³⁵ Reynolds, Michael: *Echoes of Empire: Turkey's Crisis of Kemalism and the Search for an Alternative Foreign Policy*, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, Analysis Paper n° 26, June 2012, p.v.

³⁶ Fradkin and Libby, *op.cit.*

³⁷ Also, Arango Tim and Saad Hwaida: "Turkey's Parliament Approves Further Military Action Against Syria", *The New York Times*, 4 October 2012, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/world/middleeast/syria.html>.

³⁸ Zeyrek, Deniz: "Turkey's Syria Policy: Success or Bankruptcy?", *Radikal*, 26 May 2013.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 140

⁴⁰ Reynolds, *op.cit.*, p. vi-vii.

⁴¹ Sayari, Sabri: "New Directions in Turkey-USA Relations", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 15, n° 2 (June 2013), p.136.

⁴² Aydin, Mustafa: "The Syrian Reckoning", 15 February 2018, at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/mustafa-aydin/the-syrian-reckoning-127332>.



The Turkish government has directly accused the United States of supporting the July 2016 military coup attempt. The government discourse has turned to extremely anti-American and mutual suspicion is becoming structural. Pentagon's mistrust has forced Turkey to look elsewhere for support. The announcement that it intends to purchase over Russia's S-400 missile defense system has been seen as an attempt to jeopardize NATO's missile defense capabilities while openly violates US sanctions against Russia. Washington's response was to block the transfer of the fifth-generation F-35 fighter jet to Turkey. Moreover, the downward spiral continues, with both sides engaging in a tit-for-tat of sanctions and tariffs after Ankara refused to release an American pastor detained on terrorism charges.

4. The Iran-Saudi Arabia “tug-of-war”

The regions fault lines are explosive indeed. However, the one that dominates and sublimates all the others is the fierce struggle for regional influence between the Saudi-Arabia and Iran. The sectarian dimension is striking, but the rivalry has much to do – perhaps more so - with pure power.

4.1 Iran

Over the past twenty years, and particularly in the last seven years, Iran has been a clear beneficiary in a geopolitical competition with the Gulf and Israel –some of the strongest undercurrents in the Middle East. Taking advantage of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Tehran was able to reap the benefits of its pre-1979 Islamic Revolution investments in its natural allies in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere in the region.

The country, which played a crucial role in the transformation of peaceful protests in Syria to civil and proxy war, single-handedly changed the balance of power in the conflict zone by deploying militias from all over the Shia world. As a matter of fact, Iran effectively became the de facto dominant force in Iraq through its proxies, in Lebanon through Hezbollah and in Syria due to its (para)military intervention.

While Tehran for years preferred to flex its muscles in a covert way, working at arm's length with Hezbollah and Hamas as proxies, chaos in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and the rise of ISIS changed that posture. Iranian military advisers have openly directed militias throughout the region. In Iraq, Iran coordinates as many as 100,000 Iraqi fighters mobilized by Iraqi Shia clerics who in 2014 issued emergency religious edicts urging all able-bodied men to join the fight against ISIS. In Yemen, a Shiite movement styled on Hezbollah ousted the Yemeni President with the help of Iranian arms and money. In Syria, Iranian military advisers help the regime by arming and coordinating a mix of paramilitary groups that include Hezbollah fighters, and Shia militias from Iraq and Afghanistan known as Jaysh al-Shabi (the People's Army). Iran has these militia groups working together across borders, providing each other training and reinforcements.⁴³

At the same time, Tehran strengthened its ties to Shia communities in the Gulf. Although the country's efforts ultimately resulted in failure in Bahrain, it successfully created a patronage relationship with the Houthis in Yemen, a group with traditionally weak links to Iran, to establish a military base capable of threatening Saudi Arabia. Iran's involvement stokes sectarian tensions that deepen regional conflicts: Its Shiite allies fight Sunnis, who, in turn, feel threatened by Iran's growing influence. That has made Sunni regional powers Saudi Arabia (and Turkey) anxious, and it had fueled support for – or at least acquiescence to – Sunni extremism in both Iraq and Syria.

⁴³ Spindle, Bill: “Iran Flexes New Clout Beyond its Borders”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 6-8 March 2016.



4.2 Saudi Arabia

By contrast, Saudi Arabia regards the Levant as ground zero in its struggle with Iran. Sunni Arab powers led by Saudi Arabia want to curb what they see as Tehran's drive to consolidate an arc of Shia power in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. The anti-Assad uprising in 2011 was seen in Riyadh as a geostrategic opportunity to alter the regional balance in Saudi Arabia's favor. It was perceived as a chance to weaken Iran and at the same time to neutralize all al-Qaeda elements in Syria. Beyond the sectarian nature of the Iran-Saudi struggle in Syria, Riyadh seeks a stable Sunni authoritarian regime that will be a natural partner and will weaken the old Iran-Hamas-Hezbollah axis.⁴⁴

Saudi Arabia has attempted to insulate itself and the Gulf Arab states from the region's transformative forces through the timeworn policies of subsidies, cosmetic reforms, and, in the case of Bahrain, military intervention. Beyond the Gulf, Riyadh has sought to check the regional rise of both the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Iranian influence, pursuing an increasingly assertive foreign policy that is simultaneously counterrevolutionary (such as offering financial aid to the military-backed government in Egypt) and pro-revolutionary (such as providing military support to anti-Assad rebels in Syria). In Egypt, Saudi Arabia strongly and without any hesitation supported the military, but in Syria has been backing the opposition. Containing the Brotherhood is what matters and the imperative of overthrowing the Assad regime has taken second place especially since the possibility of a Syrian Brotherhood prevailing in Damascus is abhorrent to Riyadh.⁴⁵

Saudi Arabia, along with the UAE are strategically working against the interests of two different regional blocs: Hezbollah, Syria, Iran and Iraq on one front and Turkey, Qatar, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood on another. This means that there are today three discernible de facto alliances operating in the Middle East. Interestingly, for the first time in half a century, none of these alliances are strategically aligned with the US and the West.

5. Making Sense of the Middle East

The Middle East has never been relieved of conflict. Religious division and deadly factionalism have always been present. Religious fault lines between Sunni and Shia, power struggles between Saudis and Iranians, statehood feuds between Arabs and Israelis are the order of the day for quite some time. But rarely, if ever, have these divisions run deeper or become more bloody than after the Arab street awakening in 2011. Nor have they ever seemed less likely to end before more war has rolled over the nations in the region.

In Washington, each crisis in the Middle East was met with trepidation without committing US resources. Washington's response was defined on a case-by-case basis without the traditional ideological inclinations or instinctual reactions contaminating the decision-making process.⁴⁶ One thing looks clear, though: The US demonstrated a very limited appetite to affect the course of events. Where more action was needed, absence was offered. The US seemed lacking the will and the power to intervene in a critically important region, and the widespread perception has been that American influence in the Arab world has seriously waned. The Trump Administration's approach to the Middle East created new dimensions in the polarization between Iran, Israel and the Gulf States. Bearing in mind that the Obama doctrine is charged with the first wave of chaos in the region, it is possible to argue that Donald Trump

⁴⁴ Wehrey, Frederic: "Gulf Calculations in the Syrian Conflict", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 June 2014, at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/09/gulf-calculations-in-syrian-conflict-pub-55865>.

⁴⁵ Nasr, Vali: "Back to the Future for US Policy^[11] In Egypt and Syria", 31 July 2013, at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/back-to-future-for-us-policy-in-egypt-and-syria.html?utm_source=&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=7893#ixzz2bxmjcGcG.

⁴⁶ Milne, 2012, *op. cit.*, pp. 941-942.



launched the second wave. The Qatar crisis and Saudi Arabia's reform efforts in the wake of Trump's participation in the May 2017 Riyadh summit arguably marked the beginning of a new era. In other words, the Trump Administration played a crucial role in the most recent developments –which seemingly fit into Iran's traditional rivalry with the Gulf countries and Israel, but also represents an attempt at regional design.

However, a renewed US hegemonic role is elusive. The gap between U.S. foreign policy and national security discourse, the country's instruments on the ground and the capabilities of its alliances is still there. Trump's unilateralist, vulgar and transactional policies further deepen instability. The US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran seems more likely to transform competition between regional powers into destructive tensions as it reopens the prospect of an American or Israeli military strike – as opposed to creating a new regional order.

According to Henry Kissinger, “the region's geopolitical framework collapsed. Russia's unilateral military action in Syria is the latest symptom of the disintegration of the American role in stabilizing the Middle East order that emerged from the Arab-Israeli war of 1973.”⁴⁷ American policy has sought to straddle the motivations of all regional actors and therefore its ability to shape events has rapidly been eroded. The US is now opposed to, or at odds in some way or another with, all parties in the region. But what defines the role of the US in the region is absence after almost half a century of more or less direct engagement. Almost all regional partners and enemies as well as geopolitical competitors have concluded that the US “seems unable to act as a hegemon to influence outcomes in the region. While the United States remains a Great Power, including in the Middle East, it has reached the end of its hegemonic control.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Kissinger, Henry: “A Path Out of the Middle East Collapse”, 16 October 2015, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-path-out-of-the-middle-east-collapse-1445037513>.

⁴⁸ Krieg, Andreas: “Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East”, *International Affairs*, vol. 92, nº 1, 2016, pp. 112-113.



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