

RESHAPING OR RESTRUCTURING?

A new security subcomplex in the Middle East

The constant and increasing instability of the Middle East provides limitless opportunities for the intensification of the regional rivalry and the competition for power-projection and regional dominance. This race for regional leadership seems to reshape the former Levant and Gulf security subcomplexes, as the actors, their aims and influence are going beyond the borders of the former subcomplexes. Therefore, this region more and more seems to become one security unit that cannot be analysed without taking into consideration the processes and interactions between the two main (former) parts. The dynamics, the actors, the area desired to be dominated and the radius of action of the eventual power-projections delineates a new, united security subcomplex in the making with specific inner mechanisms, characteristics and power systems, based mainly on the hostility and rivalry between Iran on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and Israel on the other.

To all these tensions, the three historical conflicts of the Middle East (Iran-anti-Iran agenda combined with the Sunni-Shiite antagonism, intra-Sunni rivalry, Israeli-Palestinian conflict) provide the context. The changing balance of power and the thriving intentions to gain ground in the unfilled power voids resulted in a Middle East in constant transformation and reconstruction, with an increasing number of conflicts and intensifying hostilities. The growing regional instability gives space to the intensification of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which seems to become the main organizer dynamic of the new security subcomplex in the making.

The origins of the regional instability

The regional instability derives mainly from the decreasing polarization of power (at the level of the states), the changes in the regional balances and the power vacuums.

The two main events that unleashed the regional instability, were the interventions of the US and the Arab Spring. The so-called Arab Spring, started in 2011, disappeared or weakened formerly significant power units, making them fall into chaos or converting them into failed or dysfunctional states. The most visible examples for this are Syria, that remains in civil war since 2011 and evoked a serious refugee crisis and the rise of the Islamic State; and Egypt, that since the collapse of the Mubarak regime is absorbed by an internal chaos, where internal fractions struggle for the power and where there is no stable and strong center

of power that could control the monopoly on violence and power, and the central government is not able to control the whole territory of the state.

The interventions of the US in Iraq and Afghanistan made even with the ground these two countries as regional powers. Iraq, that once was one of the major regional players (the determining dynamic of the Gulf-subcomplex was the rivalry among the triangle of Iran, Iraq and the Saudi-led GCC) has been reduced to one of the greatest threats to regional stability. The intervention of the US in Iraq neutralized the Taliban, that had always been extremely hostile to Iran (they almost went to war in 1998). Iran, that previously always needed to keep an eye on its neighbours, as it was bordered by two countries explicitly hostile to it, got rid of the necessity of dedicating resources for self-defence against these two powers. With the collapse of these two hostile regimes, Iran didn't need to be worried about an armed conflict with one of its neighbours anymore (the other neighbours of Iran are weak or they don't have intention to initiate a dispute with Iran). The consequence of the interventions of the US in Iraq and in Afghanistan was that the role and the power of the two remaining powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, increased relatively, they become able to act and to project their power in a wider area. For the increased power of the other and for the lack of an adversary that could contain the other, both Iran and Saudi Arabia started to feel itself more threatened by the other, both of them started to consider the other as a more serious threat to its security. The consequence of the increasing regional instability, arisen from the sequels of the Arab Spring and the interventions of the US, was that Saudi Arabia and Iran mutually began to reckon the other one as the main adversary and a threat of existence. The decreased polarization of power (US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the aftermath of the Arab spring, including the domestic weakness of the formerly stable regional powers) increased the relative power of formerly less active actors (Iran and the Gulf Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia), making them feel more threatened by the other and leaving them as the unique comparable adversary of the other. At the level of states, the decreased polarization of power increased the regional instability and made the remaining powers possible to act and to project their influence in a wider area.

More and more powerful non-state actors in the game

The disappearance of formerly significant states generated a power vacuum not just at the level of the states, but at the sub-state level, too, which increased the number of the actors. The weakened or collapsed statehoods set in motion an internal struggle for power and allowed the reinforcement of the non-state actors and intensified the rivalry among the

different factions. Weaker or failed the states are, more intense the rivalry among the actors and the groups become (while there were only few territories with weak statehoods or weak state control or while these ones were located far from the strategic centres, the interactions and the relations were dominated by the states). The bigger the internal power vacuum become for the weakened or failed statehoods, more non-state actors emerged or reinforced and started to contest for the power. As a contrast of the weakened or failed statehoods, the non-state actors (such the remaining parts of the IS and the al-Qaeda, the Hamas, PKK, PYG, YPG etc.) are well-organized and strong entities, that participate in the political crisis in progress, they often become involved in the military confrontations and operations, they implemented and pursuit intensive social activities (providing education, health care etc.) – in the practice they are acting like a state.

Liquid and volatile alliances

The new internal and external demands meet: the intra-state political actors are looking for protectors and supporters, while the external powers (such as Iran and Saudi Arabia) are looking for proxies and local partners to spread and project their influence. It was not Saudi Arabia or Iran who provoked the weakening of the statehoods or who made the states fail, they only seized the opportunity generated by the weakened or failed statehoods, as all these strengthened and new-born internal non-state actors were looking for a regional ally who can provide them financial, material, human and diplomatic support (such as money, arms, technology etc.) and with whom they can find an ideological or identical common denominator (e.g. ideology, religion) to build a cooperation on. Still, the relationships and the alliances are extremely volatile and liquid, regarding both the participants and the level of commitment. As for the participants, there are no solid blocks – not even the GCC can be considered as a hegemon unit, the Arab organization is thorn by internal disputes and conflicts of interests (as we could see in case of the blockade against Qatar). As for the level of commitment, the scale of support goes from direct intervention to providing military or political support, even in the case of the same actor (see the direct Saudi intervention in Yemen and the direct Iranian intervention in Syria vs the Saudi support in Syria and the Iranian support in Yemen). The actors determine their standpoint, actions and approaches topic by topic, they are chasing individual goals instead of acting like a part of a solid block. Fluctuation is high, turnarounds are common, viewpoint changes are quick, reactions are mainly defensive among and within the alliances. The actual and individual position of the actors is defined not by the common values, ideology or identity, but by the sense of the level

of threat. Examples for this are the relationship of Iran with the Hamas or the hostility between Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood (in some cases we can find enduring ties, such as the friendly relationship between Turkey and Qatar and the Saudi-Iranian confrontation). Alliances are temporal and they vary according to the scene, the coalitions are rather ad hoc. The global players take part in these alliances, but they not always have a dominant and leading role. The US have been trying to create an anti-Iranian coalition, but this coalition was not solid since the beginning – Bahrein participated mainly for the pressure of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait was not so eager, Qatar refused to join, while a cooperation with Israel still remains almost unacceptable for the Arab public opinion (the normalization of the relations of Israel with Bahrein and the UAE are often considered as a test to sensitize the wider Arab public for settling the relations with Israel). The non-state actors have often more influence to shape the public opinion than the states themselves, that is why cooperating with the non-state actors are inevitable and become part of the struggle for power. As for the sub-state level, there are more actors moving and acting, with more relative and absolute power and importance.

Penetrated region with self-limited penetrators

A less committed US

The regional instability has been exacerbated by the significant changes that happened at extra-regional level. The region remains penetrated, more than before, for the increased number of global players who are present, but less, regarding their level of commitment. Extra-regional powers are acting if they were part of the region, the regional processes cannot be analysed without taking into consideration the role, the attitude and the interests of the non-regional actors who are involved and present in the region. The three main extra-regional players in the former Levant and Gulf region are the US, China and Russia.

In the past years, the role of the US in the Middle East has been described mainly with the term of “strategic disengagement”. For the changes and the redefinition of its foreign policy, focused on the “pivot to Asia”, the attitude of the US towards the Middle East has become more uncertain and less predictable for the regional partners. The Middle East now has less importance for the US, for the intensification of its strategical and global rivalry with China, that required the re-allocation of the resources (diplomatic, political and military) to Southeast Asia and for the depreciation of the importance of the oil of the Middle East for the US (for the shale oil the US has become less imported-oil-dependent, now, as shale oil exporter, represents rather a competitor than a partner for the OPEC-countries). The most

important strategic rationale for the US presence in the region and the justification for spending billions of dollars over decades to ensure US military predominance in the area, was the need to preserve the free flow of energy resources out of the Persian Gulf – the shale oil, the renewable energies and the green plans and tendencies reduced considerably this former priority. For that, the level of willingness to intervene of the US has changed – in Iraq, Washington intervened directly, while in case of the Arab spring it did not; in Iraq it modified the status quo, while with its non-intervention in Syria it strengthened the status quo and the incidences. Nowadays, the public opinion of the US is more sensible for the human losses, the interventions in the Middle East are unpopular among the population of the US, they seem to prefer the disengagement and the withdrawal from the region. The cost of an intervention in the Middle East is high (in terms of financial and human resources, too), while the US has not enough direct interests in the region that could justify or would require investing in achieving more or the same presence in the Middle East. The US tries to avoid additional involvements in the Middle East and aims to free and withdraw as much resources as possible. A complete withdrawal will not be possible for the US (not just for the lack of willingness), for the interconnection of the region with global processes and the presence of the strategical adversaries of the US in the region. The main interest of the US is maintaining the Middle East stable and balanced, in order to be able to dedicate to this region the less forces and less resources possible.

Previously, one of the most important pillar of the Middle East policy of the US was the cooperation with 4 or 5 regional powers (such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, Turkey) – for most of them the JCPOA was the final and most clear sign of the divergence of the US from its traditional Sunni allies. During the Trump era, even for the few selected US allies it became obvious that the US will not protect its allies in this region (only the support provided to Israel seems constant). As the former allies have the perception that the US is not so concerned about their interests than before and as they do not consider enough the security guarantees provided by the US, even these strategical partners of the US started to look for allies within and beyond the region, to fill the power voids created by strategic disengagement and the decreased level of commitment of the US. As the core interests of the US are not threatened by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the US administration will try to avoid involving and miring in the (present and future) conflicts of the region, as the most important regional priority of the US is not resolving the problems of the region, but maintaining it stable (even if this is a negative stability) to impede any terrorist organization (re)gaining strength and to avoid the spread of the threat of terrorism.

The vacuum created by the decreased interest and level of commitment of the US in theory could give possibility to other extra-regional powers to increase or establish their influence in the region.

Russia with the intention but without enough means to return

Russia has been trying to return to the region, with an increased attention and pursuing a minimax strategy (obtaining the most benefits possible with the less efforts inverted). Russia's presence in the region stems from economic, political and security considerations.

The economic interests of Russia in the region are settled mainly in three fields: arms sale, nuclear technology and cooperation with the OPEC-countries.

For the increased regional instability, the military spendings of the region have risen (it is Saudi Arabia who has the highest spendings per capita on arms in the world). The arm sales of the US often arrive with delay or become cancelled (for the bureaucratic processes, for concerns about the human rights or for representing a threat for the security of Israel). For that, the US arms sales are considered less reliable – by contrast, Russia is not constrained by similar obstacles. The increased regional instability and the Arab spring generated an anxiety among the countries of the region, therefore they increased their military expenditures to ensure their security and survival. This growing spendings on arms alarmed the Iranian, who needed to purchase more weapons and better technologies, to balance the increased military spendings of the countries of the region. This back and forth self-defence and the mutual distrust led to a regional arms race. The one who can sell arms to each country is Russia (for the sanctions in vigour no one else can sell arms and defence systems to Iran), the Russian arms are sold to each participants of the conflicts.

The region represents a market for the Russian nuclear technology (see the Russian nuclear plants in Iran, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey). Not each country of the region is rich in oil, for that they need other forms to produce energy. Others (like Iran), even if they have oil, they cannot dedicate it for the domestic market, as oil sales to abroad generates a significant segment of their PIB and the budget is highly dependent of this income.

For a stable budget, Russia needs high and stable oil prices, which meant the basis for the OPEC+ cooperation. The OPEC+ resulted beneficiary for both parts, for this the tensions in 2020 between the Arab participants and Russia were resolved relatively quickly. To maintain the cooperation of the OPEC+ effective, a constant dialogue between the OPEC countries and Russia is required.

The economic interests mean presence and influence in the region. Besides, the region is another scene of the US-Russian global confrontation – the region represents an opportunity for Russia to position itself again as a global player, equal to the US and to reconstruct the image of Russia as a global power.

But keeping an eye on this region is not just political and economic interest on behalf of Russia, but a core security interest, too. Syria, Iran, Azerbaijan and the Caucasus form the security belt that guarantees the security of Russia. For that, paying attention to the processes, contingences and affairs of this area is vital for Russia, Moscow aims to stabilize this area among the Russian border, to avoid the instability and the problems of the zone crossing the border and creating problems within Russia, too.

Notwithstanding, the Russian influence in the region is limited for several barriers: Russia is a great military ally, Moscow is eager to provide arms and technology, but Russians are not able to resolve complex military issues alone. Russia can act and decide only when the US would not like to decide or to be involved. Russia, for its or internal structural economic problems and budget imbalance can dedicate only limited military and financial resources to the region. The Russian adventure in the Middle East is unpopular in Russia, as the public opinion cannot see the direct benefits that could justify the Russian efforts in the region. Besides, the pivot to Russia of the countries of the region are often motivated by the aim of gaining the attention of the US and to (re)gain the commitment of Washington. The cooperation with Russia is often not the goal, but a part of a profit maximizing strategy; the countries of the region would not risk the relation with the US for Russia. Any step or agreement made would be immediately sacrificed if this meant a part of a deal with the US – the case is the same for Russia regarding its relation with the US. Despite of this, Russia seems to be a more reliable ally than the US was during presidents Obama and Trump, and Russia makes its best to project this reliable-partner image. Russia can work out and push through its aims and have influence only while this does not cross the direct interests of the US and its local partners cooperate with Moscow. Russia, even if it is not able to resolve the problems alone, can have a key role in the stabilization.

China – reluctant presence

Nowadays, China's presence in the region is mainly economic, but this is about to change in the medium term. For China, in this region the priority is ensuring the supplies for its economy and to guarantee the security of the transport routes. Additionally, in the countries of the region programs with the aim of diversifying the economy are going on (such

as Vision 2030, New Kuwait 2035, Abu Dhabi 2030, Qatar National Vision 2030, Oman Vision 2040, Bahrain's Economic Vision 2030). All these programs require foreign investments, and China looks like an appropriate partner for it – but an eventual debt-trap and the experiences of the Chinese investments in the countries of Africa and Southeast Asia makes the leaders of these countries cautious and suspicious towards the Chinese investments. The economic interests of China require a stable Middle East (which is the interest of the US, too), where the access to the energy resources and the freedom of navigation is guaranteed and not interrupted (this is another shared interest with the US). For the uncertainty concerning the attitude of the US, the countries of the region opened up toward China (and Russia). The advantage of China is that in case of China, there is no mistrust for a colonial past or tension for a previous intervention that should be overcome. As for China human rights and democracy are not a pre-requisite for a business partnership or economic cooperation and as Beijing follows the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs, for the regimes of the region China is an easier partner to deal with than the Western countries. If the commercial confrontation between the US and China goes on, China is expected to seek to strengthen its ties with Iran (for whom for the sanctions oil sales are of vital importance). The reality existing in case of Russia, that everything is subjected to the relation with the US (on both sides) is valid in case of China, too: the priority of the relation with the US overwrite any cooperation, deal or pact. The perception of China about the region is different of the Western countries: while for the Western countries this region represents a burden and a problem to solve, China considers it rather an opportunity for its economy. But China actually would not like to replace the US as a security provider for the region, as Beijing would not like to pay the cost (neither in financial nor in military terms) of having such a role. For that, China prefers going on like a “free-rider” and leaving the US (and Russia) to stabilize the region in the way they can, as exactly the example of the US showed how costly maintaining stable the Middle East could be. China prefers a stable Middle East instead of paying the cost of defining this stability - while it remains possible, Beijing will prefer obtaining agreements without becoming involved in the political and military conflicts of the region.

The power vacuum, that emerged at the level of the states is present at the level of the global powers, too. The changing Middle East policy of the US (about which it cannot be known exactly in what consists and by whom it is decided) has created space for other global players and has made the regional partners feel the necessity of diversifying their external relations. The return of Russia to the region is for filling the hiatus and the power voids

generated by the diverging of the US and consists in seizing the opportunities not taken by the US. China, meanwhile, is benefitting of acquiring the supplies once destined to the US. There are space and opportunities for external players to act in the region - if they do not claim more presence or influence, it is not for the lack of the possibilities, but for their own internal limits or lack of willingness. The lack of a committed security provider and an exclusive global leader to trust on and to ally with makes the region more instable and exposed to intra-regional conflicts and rivalries.

Conclusion – same tendencies in a wider area

The changes in the regional balances of power and the regional instability increased the number of the actors that move on the regional chessboard and gave them more opportunity and space to act. For the collapsed or weakened statehoods and centres of power, substate and trans-state actors were born or strengthened, the rivalry among them has intensified, horizontally and vertically as well. All these actors (state, trans-state and substate ones) are seeking allies to reach their aims and to spread their influence, which has created co-operations at regional, extra-regional and subregional levels, involving both Arab and non-Arab actors, giving space to the localization and internalization of the competition among the great and regional powers. The strategic disengagement of the US is another complication, especially that the resources and efforts devoted by the great powers to this region are limited, not for the lack of possibilities, but for their own decisions. The region, nevertheless, remains penetrated, but the local and regional actors cannot be ignored. Neither the extra-regional, nor the regional actors can act unilaterally, without and against the local partners. For this, the conflicts of the regions are characterized by proxy wars, asymmetrical confrontations and hybrid warfare. Yet, there are no permanent alliances, the coalitions are interest-based, created on case-by-case basis, without real common ideological motivations and background, with varying level of engagement on the different scenes, resulting ad hoc co-operations and highly volatile and liquid alliances. With no security architecture present (or even in the making) the region can easily become a venue of an intensifying arm race as a result of mutual fear and distrust, whilst looking for a growing power-projection and sense of self-security. Despite that, the region is not a military challenge, but rather a diplomatic one.

All these processes, conflicts and the confrontations seem to appear along the axis of the Saudi Arabia-Iran controversy (with an intensifying Gulf Arab-Israeli relationship), and the rivalry among them is becoming the main organizing factor of this newly emerging security complex. The question is whether this remains in the long run or if it transforms into

something else – but in both cases the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia seem to intensify inevitably.

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