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The Quest for a Regional Order in the Middle East

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The Middle East is once again going through a period of war and upheaval, including mass murder of civilians, state failure, transnational terrorism, sectarian wars, physical and societal destruction, massive arms purchases, use of non-conventional weapons (notably chemical) and a permanent risk of proliferation of WMD. These developments are a threat to the region, but also to the rest of the world and to Europe in particular. The current turmoil should not be underestimated for its potential to trigger an even bigger hot war that could involve other players, if only because of miscalculations by some of the parties involved.

The conflict in Syria started as a peaceful popular protest related to economic conditions, the demand for dignity and social justice, and a loss of legitimacy of the elites, akin to what happened in other Arab countries as part of the episodes of the so-called Arab Spring. It quickly turned into armed resistance as a consequence of the brutal repression by the Assad regime. It is now part of a regional war of which it is only one of the battlefields, next to Yemen, Libya, the Sinai, and Gaza as well as in the Persian Gulf as a whole.

The war is fueled by regional and international players supporting the combatants. It epitomises the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional supremacy and involves numerous peoples and countries that are not Arabs or Iranians, among which some also aim to play a role in the regional power game, such as Turkey and Israel. The Kurds play a central role too. They will not allow their central role as allies of the West in the fight against ISIS to go unrewarded by their absence at the negotiations for the political settlement that will follow the conflict.

This is less a war between Sunni and Shia than a confrontation between Arabs and Persians, in which religion constitutes an ideology to pursue political aims. (Sunnis and Shias have lived side-by-side mostly peacefully throughout the centuries in the societies where they co-existed.) It was not born yesterday and refers to a collective memory going back 14 centuries, when Arab conquests under the banner of Islam and holy war in its name took on and defeated the Persian empire that had dominated the region for centuries, well beyond the borders of what is commonly referred to as the Middle East today. Like in the present phase, it had involved other peoples and nations, such as the Turks and the Jewish kingdoms, as well as peoples from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The term Middle East remains a Western concept that does not necessarily fit with the perception that the people and the leaders of the region have of themselves. It also needs to be revisited in view of the geographic areas and the players that determine the region's fate. One cannot ignore the place of Afghanistan or Pakistan in the current developments. The Persian and Arab civilizational heritages go much beyond the borders assigned to the contemporary Middle East. The cradle of our own civilization for a large part is there. It has always been a bridge between the Eurasian land mass and its Atlantic shores. It remains an essential bridge in the globalized world we now live in.

OUTSIDE INTERVENTION

The world periodically invites itself to the region, as it is again the case today. As the Arab Human Development reports published by UNDP have consistently underlined, the two main ills of the region have been the shortcomings in human development and exposure to external intervention. It is not a happy history for the peoples of the region.

Without going back in time too far, Western meddling has been a major factor in the current situation. It started in contemporary times with the defeat of the Ottomans in WWI and the subsequent partitioning of the Ottoman empire by the victors, especially France and Great Britain. It has continued into these last decades, with the American invasion of Iraq and the operation against the Ghaddafi regime in Libya, which have failed to plan for the day after and created the conditions for state failure. This led to an empowering non-state actors and planted the seeds for a jihadist insurgency that thrived on the feeling of dispossession by Sunni populations, while in Iraq it paved the way for Iranian ambitions to take control of its previous foe and expand its influence in the Gulf and the Levant.

Western powers do not only bear responsibility for encouraging these movements by their strategic mistakes. They have often actively engaged and supported Islamists against sitting rulers, in a drive to undermine Arab nationalism and similar trends such as Mossadegh's rule in Iran, during the Cold War. They went as far as supporting jihadists in the case of Afghanistan, to defeat the Soviet Union, with Saudi support, which led to the advent of Al Qaeda.

Russia's return to the region, to the Mediterranean in particular, is one of the striking features of the last few years. Moscow imposes its role as master of the game, keeping pragmatic relations with all regional players, including Israel. This comeback is also part of its energy strategy.

China guards a low profile for the time being. It takes care of the promotion of its Silk Road mega-project that aims at making it the main economic power in the world, in which the Middle East plays a central part as a land and maritime bridge between Europe and Asia, not to mention its thirst for energy resources . This progressive economic footprint invites her to keep good relations with all countries in the region. Its discretely increased presence in UN peacekeeping operations in the area, its evacuation of Chinese and European nationals from Yemen, the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti (next to a US base), and joint manoeuvers with Russia in the Mediterranean: they are probably less inspired by the intent to acquire a big strategic profile for the time being, than by the aim of protecting her economic interests and her citizens in the zone linking the Indian ocean and the Mediterranean.

Such positioning by other world powers accompany a relative US strategic retreat as the dominant power in the region. This was initiated by the Americans themselves under the Obama administration, under the heading "leading from behind", and is now being continued by the Trump administration. It does not mean that the US has become

irrelevant, just less predictable and less reliable. See Trump's move on Jerusalem, as dangerous as it is useless for American interests in the region.

WHAT ABOUT EUROPE?

Europe is strategically absent, even though it is hit frontally by the fallout of conflicts in its neighbourhood, which it had wanted to stabilize through cooperation and progressive integration. This absence is worrisome, both for Europe and for the aspirations of the peoples of the region who had been comfortable with taking a leaf from the European integration process as a model of peace building and prosperity. Europe's failure to change the status quo eventually turned out to be a disappointment and a threat against the European model itself.

If Europe wants a voice in the reduction of instability and the political solution of the problems, it urgently needs to give itself the means to be a strategic player, instead of being a simple spectator of the fate that others are ready to assign to it. President Macron made a brilliant plea in that respect during a conference at Goethe university last October in front of academics and students, moderated by Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Gilles Kepel. It remains to be seen however if French diplomacy will go down that path in practice.

As High Representative Mogherini said in a recent speech in Rome, the EU has one asset, money, that it can use as leverage in creating the conditions for post-war reconstruction. But that will not be enough in the absence of a coherent and common EU vision of the regional order that should emerge to replace the chronic instability in the region, including a view of its own short and long term interests, as well as the means to impose its vision among the concert of world and regional powers. Europeans themselves have not always demonstrated unity of purpose in that respect.

Engaging those who have taken initiatives good or bad but hold the advantage in the field and on the diplomatic stage is thus necessary. Engaging Russia through its traditional transactional approach is imperative. Then the EU would have to turn to the US and encourage it to launch a more active diplomacy, in the name of common interests. And finally the EU must pursue a frank and candid dialogue with regional partners, including the most problematic ones. Without such a hard-headed diplomacy, statements of principle and good intentions will remain useless.

A NEW REGIONAL ORDER?

Working with all players to find a political settlement of the current conflicts must at the same time lead to a broader, long-term discussion on a stable regional economic, security and social order in the Middle East, followed by a political initiative to launch a process in that direction. If anything, this should be the central contribution of Europe to the stabilization and the prosperity of the Middle East as an essential element to preserve the European project itself.

Such a new regional order should be owned by the states and the peoples of the region, who will have to find the resources and the political will to initiate a long term process leading to an architecture of stable and mutually beneficial relations, based on the principles of respect of sovereignty and non-intervention in other states' affairs, territorial integrity, borders established according to international law, economic and security cooperation, including early warning systems in order to prevent crises.

The first step is to recognize that the old order is gone forever. The second is that such a demarche will require patience and leadership, as it is not an easy road to travel. The method should combine a top-down and a bottom-up

approach. The peoples have recently expressed in various ways their demands for more social justice and government accountability. Without strong involvement of civil society, even honest efforts of modernization by some local government will not succeed. Better education, involving women and youth, encouraging local entrepreneurs, and cultural creativity will not come about by government decree. A strong and responsible civil society and institutions to protect it are key to stability and progress, which are needed to integrate the region in the globalized world and give it its rightful place.

International players cannot be ignored, because they have interests and because they have the resources to help a positive outcome of such a long term process that the regional players are not yet in the position to design and to implement on their own. But they must desist from the former and current approach to impose solutions, and they must stop patronizing. Some humility would be welcome, in view of history. That means they have to come together around a common roadmap, setting aside power competition as the only rationale for dealing with the region.

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