

Middle East – facing challenges and changes with long-term impact on the security culture of the area¹

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Abstract

The Middle East is an extremely interesting and appealing area, given its history as well as recent events. The international community is constantly looking towards this area to see new developments unfolding and speculate on the manner in which they can affect global policy. Their interest is fuelled by the particular history the area has and the specifics which differentiate it from other areas of the world. There are several particular elements on account of which the Middle East is attracting attention: the oil feud, Sunni-Shia disputes, establishment of the state of Israel, remnants of the US-USSR proxy wars, followed by the rise in terrorism and fundamentalism. The aim of the present article is to take all these elements and put them together in an equation to see the manner in which security culture manifests in the Middle East.

Keywords: *security culture, Middle East, oil, Sunni-Shia dispute, oil, terrorism*

Introduction

While in previous years the debate on the Middle East was focused on the effects of the Arab Spring in those very countries in which it manifested, and often led to forecasts on the future states to be affected by such a phenomenon, at present, the discussion on the Middle East is even more complicated, when attempting to hint at the main evolutions of the area. This is due to the fact that the region kept in countries such as Syria, the issues generated by the Arab Spring phenomenon, while the Syrian civil war produced an issue of severe magnanimity – the migrant crisis which has been affecting this area, as well as Northern Africa and Europe. One can add to these the current crises and conflicts, such as those crises of the Gulf and Yemen, which turn the Middle East in one of the most complicated regions, where tensions and violence are at alarming peaks.

All these are accompanied by several events and evolutions, which, through the sensitivity of the matters they create, act as stimuli with a major contribution to maintaining a climate of tension in the region, which is both dangerous and counter-productive to the identification of long-term effective solutions to the Middle East issues, at the same time as destabilizing the security climate and culture of the area. Terrorism and migration are still important to the regional agenda, as well as the Sunni-Shia rivalry, in the wider context of US-Saudi Arabia closeness and the removal of the latter from its friendship with Iran, altogether maintaining a high level of instability in the area. Another important aspect deals with the

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current situation of Israel, which, ever since the US acknowledged Jerusalem as its capital city, constituted a push factor in pursuing strategic interests, having direct effects over those countries targeted by its actions.

Within this complicated puzzle called the Middle East, the involvement of a large number of state and non-state international actors makes things very difficult to regulate, while crises and conflicts are almost impossible to solve. Therefore, the presence on the regional agenda of elements such as migration, terrorism, and sectarian rivalry which have a negative impact on the regional stability. Moreover, changes expected to occur on a leadership level within countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran and Oman, once some relevant personalities from these countries stepped aside, point out towards these areas in the attempt to anticipate the evolutions of countries whose foreign and domestic policy have the capacity to affect the entire region.

Influential aspects within the area

The Middle East is a complex space with a complicate centuries' old history. Thus, this area which is the cradle of old civilizations and religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Zoroastrism², a vast territory, continues to represent on an international level a place of maximum importance, given its history, geopolitics as well as probable evolutions, which are, to a smaller or larger extent the result of former days of glory and turmoil.

There are several issues which need to be taken into consideration when analysing the geopolitics of the area: oil, the foundation of Israel and the USA-USSR competition.

Oil

Oil is considered to be the main element around which the entire Middle East geopolitics developed. During the 20th century, the discovery of vast resources of oil brought unprecedented strategic and economic importance to the region. Emerging Western economies considered Oriental oil an important source of supply, a situation dating to the present day as well³.

² ****The Early Middle East*, Ancient Civilisations, UShistory.org, <http://www.ushistory.org/civ/4.asp>, (accessed on 10.10.2018).

³ Mark Hobbs, *Oil maps of the Middle East*, British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/maps/articles/oil-maps-of-the-middle-east> (accessed on 10.10.2018).

The discovery of vast resources of oil brought major transformations to the region, which used to be a hotbed of religious tensions and conflicts and territorial wars.

Once the West acknowledged the geopolitical importance of the Middle East, nothing could have prevented their involvement in the region. Thus, those friendly leaders to the West have been tolerated despite the endemic corruption of their governments, while the removal of those less favourable to Western interests has been encouraged and supported by Western states. For some authors, such policies of the West have been considered to be a part of its fight against communism, but critics accused the Western involvement in the region of simply attempting to gain access to the vast oil resources of the Middle East.⁴

The end of the Cold War did not lead to a reduction in Western interests in the area, but, on the contrary, the Middle East remained the main sources of oil for Western needs.

The foundation of Israel

This is an element of great importance to the Middle East evolution, with consequences to the present day and to the future, undoubtedly. When the independence of Israel was proclaimed on May 14th, 1948, the surrounding Arab states refused to accept and acknowledge its existence, which was briefly transformed in a war declaration and a constant state of tension. This was augmented also by the rivalry between Israel and Palestine, testimony to an on-going conflict between two states.

Inevitably, the involvement of the other Arab states on the Palestinian side led to an extension of the state of tension and conflict within the region, while the survival of Israel, in such a hostile space, was owed, to a large extent, to its closeness to the United States and the open American support. Thus, Washington's decision to support Israel represents one of the most important elements which shaped American foreign policy in the Middle East, while the decision to acknowledge, among the first, the state of Israel and support it until present, despite the opposition manifested by other actors from the American establishment (be they Republicans or Democrats) generated consequences visible today as well as in the future.⁵

The US-USSR competition

⁴ Robert Kennedy Jr., *Middle Eastern Wars Have Always Been About Oil*, GlobalResearch, Center for Research on Globalisation, 26 February 2016, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/middle-eastern-wars-have-always-been-about-oil/5510640> (accessed on 10.10.2018).

⁵ *Milestone: 1945-1952. Creation of Israel, 1948*, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/creation-israel> (accessed on 12.10.2018).

However, the oil of the Middle East was not an element of interest to the United States at first; also, the American foreign policy did not perceive this space as one vital to its strategic interests. Thus, the American presence in the Middle East was not a priority for the Washington decision-makers for a long time. However, the competition with the USSR throughout the Cold War led the US inevitably closer to this area and such a manifest interests generated results visible also in the present.⁶

A relevant example in that regard is the Nixon Doctrine, which influenced the creation of a Persian Gulf policy aiming to achieve stability in the region, at the same time as maintaining it. The policy of "the two twin pillars" was focused on two states relevant to the US in the area – Saudi Arabia and Iran and was a means employed by Washington to reply to all those challenges launched in the region by the USSR.

The Iranian Shah, supported by the Americans, enjoyed the benefits deriving from this relationship, which even brought him the opportunity to purchase American weapons, while Saudi Arabi launched a long-lasting partnership with the United States, which is functional even nowadays.⁷

The invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 by the USSR is another turning point in the Middle East evolutions, despite the fact that the American administrations did not consider it vital to their interests. However, Moscow's decision to invade this country forever changed the American perspectives regarding the country, as well as the entire region.

The end of the Cold War and the following period did not mean an abandonment of the region by the two actors – the United States and the Russian Federation (the successor of the USSR). On the contrary, the relations maintained by the two powers with the local leaders are a continuation of the previous policies put in place.

The current Middle East – a mixture of challenges and open-ended solutions.

⁶ Bobby Beaver, Jeffrey Beaver, Matthew Wilsey, *The Middle East: United States Policy and Relations in the Latter Half of the 2th Century*, Ethics of Development in a Global Environment (EDGE) | War & Peace | The Middle East in Transition, https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/war_peace/middleeast/hcentury.html (accessed on 12.10.2018).

⁷ Alex Guittard, *Iran and the Nixon Doctrine. American Arms and the Rise and Fall of the Shah*, The Research Gate, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291602744_Iran_and_the_Nixon_Doctrine_American_Arms_and_the_Rise_and_Fall_of_the_Shah/fulltext/56a44a0f08ae1b6511309e2b/291602744_Iran_and_the_Nixon_Doctrine_American_Arms_and_the_Rise_and_Fall_of_the_Shah.pdf (accessed on 12.10.2018).

At present, the region is dealing with a series of events which have complicated its existence to a great extent – the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, migration, to name but a few.

But not only these have contributed actively to the destabilization of the area. There are other elements and issues which have placed themselves on the international agenda as sources of instability:

- The crises and conflicts of the Middle East are permanent sources of tension, as their emergence has regional as well as global impact. Be they crises or conflicts, the interest shown by actors, even from outside the region, inevitably complicate any attempts towards finding a long-term solution. Noteworthy examples are the conflicts dating back to the formation of the Israeli state, the Syrian civil war, the Yemen conflicts, the Gulf crises, etc.
- Migration – the phenomenon is not new in this area, but it suffered an amplification in recent years, with negative effects on the destination countries, as well as those placed on the transit routes. Currently, the Middle East is both a destination and source of refugees on a global level, with Syria and Yemen at the forefront of these evolutions, on account of the major population displacement generated by their ongoing conflicts.
- Terrorism- featured by Al-Qaeda and ISIS /ISIL (the Islamic State), as well as by improper leaders, such as Saddam Hussein – highlighted interest from the United States in the area, especially after the events of 9/11.

Additionally, there are several elements to be taken into consideration on a regional level:

- The Sunni-Shia rivalry, which placed Saudi Arabia and Iran as competitors acting on a null-sum game, transforming the region in a space in which their rivalry impacts all surrounding states⁸.
- The interest of the international community for the securitization of oil resources is another important element in analysing regional tendencies. Estimates indicate the fact that the US could reach self-sufficiency in energy resources by 2020⁹, which highlights both the importance of the Middle East oil and a high interest for safe and secure transport routes from the Middle East to the rest of the world, including the West, a major user of such resources.

⁸ ****The Sunni-Shia Divide*, A CFR InfoGuide Presentation, Council of Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/sunni-shia-divide#!/sunni-shia-divide> (accessed on 15.10.2018).

⁹ Ansuya Harjani, *US to achieve energy self-sufficiency by 2020: Exxon Mobil CEO*, CNBC, 9 January 2014, <https://www.cnbc.com/2014/01/04/us-to-achieve-energy-self-sufficiency-by-2020-exxon-mobil-ceo.html> (accessed on 15.10.2018).

➤ The current situation of Israel represents another aspect influencing the evolutions of the Middle East. The focus should not be here on the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has been a hot topic on the regional and international agenda for decades, but rather the special relationship between the state of Israel and Donald Trump, a leader who acknowledged Jerusalem as the official capital of the Israeli state, an act refrained from by its predecessors.¹⁰ There is now hope among the Israeli leadership, that what Barack Obama "broke" through its appeasing policy can be revived by Trump. And the momentum gained by its closeness to the US is highly visible in the Israeli state's regional policy.

➤ The improvement of the US-Saudi Arabia relationship is another aspect to influence the Middle East evolution, as the latter is somehow sharing the fate of Israel. Thus, the arrival of Trump at the White House was the much-needed bout of oxygen in Riyadh to rebalance its relationship with Washington.

Moreover, the contract signed between the US and Saudi Arabia for the purchase of American weapons by the Saudis brought a major comeback of the Saudis in the region, being also a guarantee that in the following years, especially during the Trump administration, Saudi Arabia is likely to have a privileged status within the region due to its privileged relation to the White House. Such an evolution in the Washington-Riyadh bilateral relations led to an increase in Saudi assertiveness, especially given the deterioration of relations with Iran.

➤ The deterioration of relations between the US and Iran, which culminated on the 8th of May with the announcement made by Trump on the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA. This was a decision which did not surprise anyone, given the fact that a larger part of Trump's campaign was centred around a very sensitive subject – that of Iran, and especially the relation between the two countries, which at the time-candidate Trump considered to be a privileged one, in need of reversal.¹¹

Such a reversal took place on the renunciation to the nuclear agreement signed on July 14th, 2015, which opened a Pandora's Box with consequences which can no longer be limited to Iran. Moreover, the reintroduction of sanctions in the summer of 2018, as well as those expected to occur in November, when Iranian oil exports are to be dramatically restricted, are likely to throw Iran in a situation of economic uncertainty, which will be damaging to both its

¹⁰ Mark Landler, *Trump Recognizes Jerusalem as Israel's Capital and Orders U.S. Embassy to Move*, The New York Times, 6 December 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/world/middleeast/trump-jerusalem-israel-capital.html> (accessed on 15.10.2018).

¹¹ *Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, The White House, 8 May 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action/> (accessed on 15.10.2018).

domestic policy, as well as regional one. No doubt, the evolutions to occur as a result of the imposition of sanctions will negatively affect Tehran's options in the Middle East, especially in the context of the Sunni-Shia rivalry and the advantages that the Riyadh regime is currently enjoying from the United States.

Conclusions

The evolutions of the past years in the Middle East demonstrated its complexity, highlighting the challenges that the countries of the region and the international community need to manage. Efforts made towards the resolution of important issues proved efficient to a limited extent, but some decisions contributed to the manifestation of new tensions which have effects both on a regional and international level.

In addition to this, the instability which is specific to this area creates the feeling that this region is marked by a disorder incredibly difficult to control. Nevertheless, such a disorder is impossible to control without the understanding of key aspects of the region and the need of a particular approach towards their resolution.

All these aspects are most certainly affecting the security climate and the security culture of the area, already extremely precarious. From the point of view of national security and defence, security culture refers to a manner of thinking and embracing a nation's values and interests. Moreover, it refers to the manner in which the individual and state institutions understand essential concepts such as "state", "security", "defence", "national security", "threat", "risk" and "vulnerability".

The fulfilment of a "security culture" resides both with the individual and the state institutions. As far as individuals are concerned, its contribution to the development of a security culture depends to a large extent to the manner in which security threats are responded to by the state. Other elements which can influence the development of an effective security culture in the Middle East is the involvement of individuals in a country's social life and their report to those events which can destabilize their perception on what can be considered a state of security. And this is highly visible on the level of leader relations going from an individual level to a group one and then to a societal one.

On the other hand, state institutions are compelled to actively and openly contribute to the development of a security culture, both on an individual level (through the creation of a state of things which can help the individual feel safe), as well as within a societal and international level, and here one should focus the attention on those countries of the Middle East which have conflicts threatening to spill over the border and which threaten the regional stability.

As can be easily noticed, within the already much -altered state of affairs of the Middle East, the building and implementation of a national/regional security culture is hardly a viable option.

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