

## Security issues in the Middle East: The present challenges and threats

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**Abstract.** The article analyzes the issue of the Middle East security. The Arab countries are facing a lot of regional threats and a fundamental shift in the regional security system, which has become one of the basic variables for the Middle East through the transition to a new form of regional and international interactions. The existence of mutual influences between the nature of the international system and the regional order of the Middle East and the Gulf region is already considered as an incubator for all intractable conflicts and crises.

We cannot study the concept of regional security in separate from the global effects and repercussions. After the end of the Cold War and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the structural transformations and global changes led to the emergence of profound changes in the international system, which resulted in the restructuring of the general features of the international environment.

The international transformation is marked by the fact that the new world order increased the chances of emergence of new international powers in both Europe and Asia, whether countries or major economic or political blocs trying to establish a multi-polar international order, which prompted the United States to pursue a policy of cooperation with competing powers.

And in light of this international environment, it was natural for the regions of strategic importance, particularly the Middle East, to be affected because they were linked to relations of mutual influence with the international system, as international balances affect regional balances.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Persian Gulf, regional security, instability, Russia, United States, sectarianism, balance of power

**For citation:** Werfelli W. (Tunis). Security issues in the Middle East: the present challenges and threats. *Aziya i Afrika segodnya*. 2021. № 9. Pp. 73-78. (In Russ.). DOI: 10.31857/S032150750016592-3

### INTRODUCTION

In the Cold War era, the major global powers gave priority to global dynamics instead of regional ones. But in the last few decades policymakers became increasingly interested in the dynamics of the Middle Eastern regional subsystems [7]. The Middle Eastern system has been in a state of flux since the attack of 11/9, which certainly had major consequences at domestic and international levels. One was the Bush Doctrine which paved the way to the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003, which was at the behest of a small band of neoconservatives in the Bush administration who had long favored the use of American Power to reshape critical areas of the world [11. p. 238] under the pretext of "War on Terrorism" [3, p. 17].

### REGION IN DISORDER. SECTARIAN STRIFE: THE SILENT CHAOS

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 has been the most axial event in the Middle East region due to the ambiguity and insecurity that has dominated in its aftermath, which have affected the broader region and reflected new shifts in the regional balance of power leading to the rising of the United States and Iran as the main superpowers in the lack of regional attempts able to establish a regional security system [17].

The Middle East region lives on the impact of escalating civil wars and sectarian tensions which has become the first and the most important set of issues facing the region. The tensions between Sunnis and Shiites, in light of the Iranian power's growth, have increased anxiety in some Arab countries: Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain, which made the region exhibit signs of deep social trauma and crisis of identity at both state and society levels [16, p. 42].

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was, at least partially, the beginning of the Middle East Sunni-Shi'ite struggle and was considered as the most difficult event in the history of the region due to the Iranian attempts, over several years, to explore the regional map of the Middle East to export its revolution and spread its influence. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, the instability caused by the Arab Spring events and the rise of Sunni extremist have enabled Iran

to advance in its Shi'ite Crescent's project by building a Land Bridge which connects Iran to Syria, Lebanon to the Israeli border at Golan [4].

The above-mentioned threats have led regional countries to cooperate with the major powers in the region to follow a new strategy towards the Middle East and plan to deal with the destabilizing civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya in order to end to civil wars by providing military assistance to shift the military balance decisively in favor of one side [13, p. 33].

The Syrian revolution has been started as a replay of the Tunisian and the Egyptian one, as a revolt against authoritarian rule, corruption, social inequality and bad governance. But the age-old tensions led to reawaken the millennial conflict between Shia and Sunni and the conflict quickly took on sectarian overtones [8]. Sectarianism issue in Syria has been exacerbated by external powers since the power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their respective blocs in the Syrian conflict is more a catalyst that exploits and fans the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict in the context of the two countries own geostrategic competition.

The Sunni-Shia divide could widen and become far more volatile. The effects of this could include considerable increased instability in the region, but more particularly in the Gulf area and the Eastern Mediterranean. The two opposite camps in cooperation with their regional allies are using a strategy of Silent Chaos by supporting the opposing forces in Syria, in combination with calls of Sunni or Shi'a Jihad against the other side which would provide fertile ground for reinforcing sectarian trends in the conflict leading both camps to involve into proxy wars [15, p. 89].

The concept of regional security order is highly fragmented and shaped by political rivalry and different security interests. Post-revolutionary Iran became anti-Western, and specifically anti-American, while Saudi Arabia and the United States remain allies. The tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran started in 1979 when the Iranian revolution created a religious Shiite state, and has been reinforced by the Iranian nuclear deal in 2015 ending Iran's isolation from the international system together with the reform of its relations with allies. Iran emerged in the region as a superpower and began to involve into proxy wars in the MENA region. Tehran wields influence in the Middle East through its use of non-state partners, despite renewed U.S. sanctions against Iran and a US withdrawal from the nuclear deal.

The real problem of proxy war was introduced by the fact that the United States and its NATO allies opened the gates for regional proxy wars by the two major wars for regime change: in Iraq and Libya. Those two destabilizing wars provided opportunities and motives for Sunni states across the Middle East to pursue their own sectarian and political power objectives through "proxy war".

The international community is largely trying to resolve conflicts raising in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and civil wars in various countries in the region: the rise of non-state violent actors (terrorism), human security issue (refugees), and the use of some external powers a silent chaos strategy to incite the sectarian strife and produce insecurity in terms of the politicization of ethnic identities [6].

## THE SPREAD OF TERRORISM IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The growth of sectarianism is considered as one of the most important dangers since it is associated with the expansion of terrorist movements in the Arab region to extend their control over all countries of the region that follow the policy of sectarian division, contributing to the transmission of sectarian interactions to neighboring countries [19, p. 179].

The security environment in the Middle East region has become one of geostrategic challenges that are extremely dangerous to the security and stability of the Arab region as a whole, in light of the qualitative geographical expansion during the recent period of terrorist organizations ISIS and Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria which affected the security and stability of the region, which made it a realistic threat [5].

According to a report issued by the United Nations Organization in 2017<sup>1</sup>, the number of fighters in Syria and Iraq exceeded 40,000 fighters of 110 nationalities and has indicated that hundreds of foreign fighters are fighting in Syria and Iraq, Libya, Pakistan and Somalia. Accordingly, the concerns of the international community, especially the Arab countries, are increasing about the possibility of cooperation between the terrorist groups that spread in many countries, which would make the Middle East an arena for fighting and civil wars between various terrorist

<sup>1</sup> Meetings Coverage and Press Releases. Security Council-United Nations. 11.28.2017. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc13097.doc.htm> (accessed 20.11.2020)

groups. The fears lie in the future of foreign fighters returning to their countries and carrying out terrorist operations that threaten international security as a whole [14].

### THE NEW AMERICAN POLICY: CHANGING THE STRATEGY

In 1979, at the Iranian Revolution period, the U.S. were strategically unable to protect the Persian Gulf Oil. And since that, America has expanded its alliances to manage oil supply threats. The US maintain installations in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman as well as military and civilian advisory in Saudi Arabia and UAE [21, pp. 74-75].

Since the withdrawal of British forces in the 1970s, the Gulf area has been militarily dominated by the United States. And as Chuck Hagel, the US Defense Secretary, declared in December 2013: "The United States have a ground, air, naval presence of more than 35000 military personnel in and immediately around the Gulf" [12]. The presence in the Persian Gulf has been a priority for the United States due among other things to the key threat posed by Iran in the Strait of Hormuz which is the most important energy chokepoint. Since the post September 11, and in the light of the US-led war in Iraq, the global attention has focused increasingly on the oil crisis which was again considered as a threat to the international peace as it was in the 1973 War.

By the beginning of 21st century, the Middle East became a new target for the US strategy of a comprehensive pre-designed restructuring of a region which had held an important place in U.S. policy consideration for several decades. The rise of American regional capabilities in the Middle East region is quite distinct. The United States has been more deeply involved in the Middle East than any other major powers specially after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The events of 09/11 have led to major changes, which were considered as a turning point in US foreign policy. They began a war in Afghanistan in 2001 to topple the Taliban regime, waged a war on Iraq in 2003, toppled Saddam Hussein's regime, and interfered in the affairs of the Arab and Islamic world under the pretext of "spreading democracy". The fact that the U.S. State Department "uses the concept of democracy as a tool for achieving U.S. strategic goals" was admitted by one of the most famous American political scientists, Francis Fukuyama, on June 15, 2007, at the Gorbachev Foundation, where he presented his report titled "U.S Foreign Policy after the Bush Doctrine". He added "Democracy is always a very important goal, but it will be never the sole purpose America wants to reach [18].

US foreign policy has intensified in the Middle East since the events of 9/11, which have strengthened the position of neoconservatives who adhere to Islamophobic ideas and beliefs. Their ideas were to use force to impose American hegemony on the Arab region in particular, expressed by Donald Rumsfeld: "September 11th created the kind of opportunities that World War II provided for reshaping the world"<sup>2</sup>.

These events also contributed to a kind of legitimacy of the US foreign policy in the unipolar world order, born after the Second Gulf War in 1991. So, the 11 of September was a turning point in the American foreign policy toward the Middle East.

The successive US administrations have followed a way of strengthening American intervention in various regions of the world under various pretexts, but the real reason is to protect its interests and confirm its hegemonic role in the region under the pretext of supporting democracy and human rights in the Arab world, as the US government linked the elimination of terrorism to the need to carry out a kind of political reform and put forward NGO that it called "Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)" founded in 2006.

So, the potential for shifting security geometries will not be limited to the region itself. Extra-regional powers will be permanent participants in the evolution of the Greater Middle East and a growing exposure to the consequences of conflict and cooperation within the region and on its periphery. The role of the United States, some European states, China and Russia will be central [9].

Over the past years, the rhetoric and conduct of US China policy have toughened. The 2018 US National Security Strategy (NSS) depicts China as a "revisionist power" that is "attempting to erode American security and prosperity" and "shape a world antithetical to US values and interests"<sup>3</sup>.

As the United States prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan, in the context of "ending endless wars" and reallocating military resources to compete with their main competitors, countries in the region are working out their

<sup>2</sup> Secretary Rumsfeld Interview with the New York Times. *New York Times*. October 12, 2001. <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO0110/S00083/secretary-rumsfeld-interview-with-new-york-times.htm> (accessed 09.06.2021)

<sup>3</sup> The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (accessed (14.06.2021)

strategies to take advantage of the resulting power vacuum. Beijing was preparing for this scenario by communicating and steadily improving relations with various Afghan actors, including the Taliban, in anticipation of this inevitability and to ensure its political, security and economic interests, through the Chinese "Belt and Road Initiative" which China considered it as a solution to instability and poor development in Afghanistan. China seeks to take advantage of the opportunity to extend its influence while avoiding potential security risks.

Wide gaps remain in the US and Chinese approach to the region. While the United States has proactively intervened militarily and politically in the region on the pretext of promoting democratic reform and confronting threats to American interests, Beijing has striven to ensure diplomatic relations with all regional governments with keenness to play a bigger role in the lucrative arms market in the Middle East.

### PAX-RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

It is widely believed that the United States' role in the Middle East has declined. Russia is attempting to re-emerge as a major regional player by positioning itself as a mediator and strategic partner using soft power initiatives that are aiming to regain the influence which has been lost in the aftermath of the Cold War. That is since World War II, Russian interests in the Middle East have been marked by a "zero-sum" competition for influence in the region with the United States" [2]. Russia's foreign policy toward the Middle East since 2003 has been characterized by a new assertiveness. Russia appears to renew its role as a leading power and be more effective in challenging the traditional hegemony of the United States [17].

Moscow, as well, increasingly aspires to play the role of a mediator in the Middle East. On July 23, 2019, the Special Representative of the Russian President to the Middle East and African countries, Deputy of Russian Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov presented Russia's concept of collective security in the Gulf region to the representatives of the Arab countries, Iran, Turkey and the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, the European Union, and the League Arab countries, and BRICS countries [1]. In the context of developing Russia's proposal to stabilize the situation in the Arab Gulf, it was stressed that the establishment of a comprehensive regional security system can only be the basis for ensuring a stable future for all the region. The main principles that form the basis of the concept are - implementation in phases, strict adherence to international law, and above all the United Nations Charter and Security Council resolutions.

The situation in the Gulf region has developed sufficiently for Russia to present an initiative for security in the region. The expert on the "Jamestown Foundation" for Russia and the Middle East Affairs, Theodore Karasik, said in an interview with the Russian "Novosti" agency: "The basis for this Russian move is ready, as Russia plays the role of mediator between the various parts, and this is the normal and not new process". For his part, the researcher from the American Brookings Institution, Michael O'Hanlon, believes that discussing the proposals presented by Russia may be useful: "I support such a dialogue, but early withdrawal of American forces from the region does not make any sense in my opinion" [20].

Russia is moving in the Middle East region within the framework of its strategy aimed at combating the phenomenon of terrorism and extremism. It seeks to be an active player in crisis management and to create more cooperative relations with other powers to solve these crises [10]. With participation of Russian military grouping, the Syrian troops and Syrian patriotic forces, Russia has radically changed the situation in fighting international terrorism and take initiative in nearly all areas to create the conditions for the start of a peace process [22].

Despite the dire consequences for the Arab countries and for the region on the whole, the Arab Spring brought to Moscow the political opportunity to regain its influence in the region, as these changes prompted Russia to formulate a new foreign policy. It has followed a mixture of tactics, taking into account its interests in the region, the most important of which is the Russian-Iranian alliance to support the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Russia sees in the Arab Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, an ally in the global energy market where coordination between Russia and the Arab states in the energy field is carried out to maintain the oil market and ensure a minimum oil price. Joint participation in the processes of exploration and development of production explains the interest of Arab countries in cooperation with Russia and the positive development of Arab-Russian relations [10].

So, Russia seeks to fit the Middle East into a strategy with a principal goal - restore its influence in critical regions such as the Middle East, where Moscow seeks to fight terrorist threats, has important economic and political interests as well, and sees itself in competition with the United States and its partners.

Russia plays an important role in the Middle East, as its presence is considered a part of an international struggle to share influence, that is based on cooperation not a confrontation and conflict. It is classified as a positive conflict that does not lead to a military clash, but rather would achieve the element of overlapping international and regional interests in the region.

## THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union's foreign policy in the Middle East has developed in the recent period in parallel with the retreat of the US policy to concern itself with the region during the Obama administration's period. The European Union's policy has clearly emerged through Europe's support for the Middle East peace process. In light of the events that the Arab countries have witnessed since the beginning of 2011 and in support of the EU for the Arab revolutions, the European Commission issued on December 16, 2011 a memorandum entitled "The European Union's Response to the Arab Spring" in which it supported the Arab movement and the peoples' demand for dignity, democracy and social justice.

For most regimes in the Middle East, the European Union represents an important or (potential) source of market, investment and development assistance, but it is not seen as a normative influence in internal reform. In lack of the Union's leadership, its policies are often dictated by the United States, especially those related to Islamic countries. The EU's soft power capabilities are unlikely to change soon at a time when Europe's weight in the international arena is greatly diminishing.

Several reasons have contributed to Europe's weak position on Middle East issues, including the fragility of the European Union's constitutional structure, as the lack of unified goals among the member states of the European Union that does not help in taking decisions by consensus of all countries. The decision-making in the European Union is limited to the stronger sovereign states that work to implement their policy, not the policy of the Union, and this explains the difference in European policies towards the Middle East region. In addition to the fact that the interests of the EU today have become more economic than political, as it sees the Middle East region as a mere market to support its exports and has abandoned the political role in favor of the United States of America [20].

## CONCLUSION

The Arab region, especially the Middle East, is witnessing outcrops of instability and political vacuum, and according to the theory of power, this political vacuum will be filled by traditional or non-traditional opponents. So, it is imperative for Arab countries to draw up a strategy and a roadmap to confront external and internal threats. And it seems that a serious political, economic and social coordination similar to "Damascus Declaration 1991"<sup>4</sup> signed by eight Arab countries in the aftermath of the Gulf War II, became a necessity to embody the Arab solidarity and increase the effectiveness of joint Arab action in a way that serves the supreme Arab interest. The "Damascus declaration" referred to work in accordance with Arab and international conventions, and established principles in international action, in matter of building peace and security.

In light of the current challenges and threats, and despite the relentless efforts to build a unified Arab Middle Eastern strategy to confront them, the scenario of establishing a unified regional security system that includes the Middle East and North Africa without taking into account the different interests of its parties is not sustainable. The greater the number of countries participating in such systems, the more difficult it will be to settle issues due to the different nature of conflicts in the region, which requires developing different strategies to deal with them.

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Поступила в редакцию (Received)  
02.05.2021

Доработана после рецензирования (Revised)  
20.06.2021

Принята к публикации (Accepted)  
20.08.2021