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Middle East: Shifting Geometry, Simmering Conflicts

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Middle East: Shifting Geometry, Simmering Conflicts

Volker Perthes

The political geometry of the Middle East underwent significant shifts in 2017, not unlike in 2011, when a series of popular protests and rebellions spread through the region, unsettling most of its ruling elites (and unseating a few of them), and bringing about significant regional realignments. This rebellious moment ended in most of the Arab states with the re-establishment of authoritarian elites possessing a somewhat – but only somewhat – heightened consideration of public opinion. State breakdown and war, and an upsurge of terrorist violence, were also experienced in many places. Sudden shifts like these have demonstrated that coalitions and alliances in the Middle Eastern state system tend to be temporary in nature, largely subject to considerations of regime security and to the personal hold on power of ruling elites. This accounts to some extent for the lack of a stable balance of power and the absence of even basic regional security arrangements.

Popular explanations for patterns of regional alignment and conflict in the Middle East tend to focus on religious or sectarian divisions (the ‘Sunni–Shia divide’), on the form of government (monarchies versus republics), or on the international orientation of states and regimes (pro- or anti-Western). While these dichotomies do sometimes emerge, they are mostly misleading. Consider the confrontation between Qatar and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which entered an exceptionally hostile period in 2017. This confrontation defies not only the notion of unity among the monarchies, at least on the Arabian Peninsula, but also that of a Persian Gulf conflict pitting the Sunni Arab countries against Shia Iran. Moreover, the crisis has demonstrated that international ties do not necessarily suffice to create or maintain co-directional regional bonds. After all, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the one hand, and Qatar on the other, all count among the most important US allies in the region.

We cannot predict the events that are likely to shape regional dynamics, but we can reasonably assume that regional leaders will often try to deal with and shape geopolitical developments in a way that is neither irrational nor ideological, but pragmatic, and underpinned by the logic of domestic power. Three issues are likely to determine the regional agenda in the next year or two: ongoing efforts to wind down the war in Syria, the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, and, of course, the positioning and policies of Russia and the US. Other unresolved conflicts – the war in Yemen and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in particular – will continue to be of enormous consequence to the people affected by them, but can be expected to have a lesser impact on the overall political geometry of the region.

Syria and Iran

In Syria, as well as in neighbouring Iraq, the war against the Islamic State is almost over, at least to the extent that the group’s territorially based, jihadist state-building project, or self-styled caliphate, has been largely overcome. The civilian population and the original parties to the wider civil war (mainly government and opposition or rebel forces) have all suffered enormous losses. In Syria, the government of President Bashar al-Assad has re-established control over some two-thirds of the country. It is much weaker today than it

was in 2011, however, given its ongoing reliance on the intensive support of Russia, Iran and Iranian-sponsored forces to regain and hold territory previously lost either to oppositional forces or to the Islamic State. If any party has won the war, it is not the Syrian government and certainly not the rebels, but rather Russia. The opposition (meaning those political and armed anti-regime groups that seek, or at least do not reject, a negotiated, national, political solution to the conflict) has not been totally defeated, but it has certainly lost the war: armed opposition groups have been largely relegated to so-called 'de-escalation areas', of which there were initially four. One of these is under Turkish protection, while the rest have been defined by Russia in co-operation with Turkey, Iran and, in one case, the United States. Altogether, opposition-held territory accounts for less than 10% of Syrian territory. In addition, about one-fifth of Syrian land remains under the control of the Kurdish Party of Democratic Union (PYD), which is less interested in who rules Damascus than in how much autonomy it can achieve for Syria's majority-Kurdish areas in the north.

The creation of the de-escalation zones had initially led to a significant reduction in military violence between government and opposition forces. Since late 2017, however, these zones have become the main focus of escalation. The Northern and Southern de-escalation zones have shrunk under fire; and the so-called Eastern Ghouta Zone, just outside Damascus, has returned to government control after heavy fighting and the eventual capitulation of the local armed groups by April 2018.

In contrast to much of the past seven years, most of the relevant regional and international players now tend to agree that the end of the war against the Islamic State provides an opportunity to reach a negotiated settlement between government and opposition that takes the actual balance of forces into account. They also agree, to some extent at least, that without a negotiated settlement providing a modicum of political 'transition', any government will find it impossible to stabilise and rebuild the country. Moreover, almost all interested actors recognise that any failure to reach a basic settlement risks the continued fragmentation of the country and even the emergence of an 'Islamic State 2.0'.

All this is not to say that the principal external players agree on the best way to settle the conflict. It remains to be seen, for example, whether Russia will use its influence in Syria to enforce a pacification process involving only limited constitutional changes that basically preserve the current political system while co-opting opposition leaders – or using force to subdue them if co-optation fails. Alternatively, UN efforts to engage the parties in real peace negotiations might eventually lead to a more genuine form of power-sharing, new constitutional arrangements, significant guarantees for political and human rights, and credible, UN-supervised presidential and legislative elections. Given current patterns of influence and leverage in Syria, the former scenario seems more achievable than the latter, but also more brittle. Moreover, the latter could only succeed if regional and international forces, including Russia, the US and the EU – as well as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and smaller but more aggressive players like Qatar – were actively to support it.

In this way, the Syria conflict is still linked to the ongoing Saudi–Iranian struggle for regional hegemony. Both Riyadh and Tehran tend to see each other as their main rival for regional leadership, and hence as a threat. Both are also taking aggressive steps to impose their respective perceptions on the entire region. Saudi Arabia remains the main sponsor of the Syrian opposition, while Iran is the main regional backer of Assad.

Tehran is unlikely to give up its enormous political investment in Syria, or the geopolitical gains it has made, such as its strong influence on the government and security apparatus

in Damascus, the considerable economic opportunities that have presented themselves in Syria, and what basically constitutes a secure land connection from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Advisers from the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps, friendly governments, and loyal militias have helped Iran to acquire more influence in the Levant than any other power. In contrast to Russia, however, Iran has allies and clients in Syria, but no friends, and it may at some point overreach, particularly if the differences between Tehran and Moscow, or between Iranian operatives and a Syrian government that no longer felt existentially threatened, were to grow more salient. There is also some question about whether domestic actors can or will push the Iranian leadership to adopt a less confrontational regional and international posture, and to concentrate more on implementing economic reforms and building constructive relations with other powers. There are certainly political actors in Iran who would favour such an adjustment, but also those who would prefer to compensate for any sign of domestic weakness by assuming a more aggressive foreign-policy stance.

In the recent past, Iran has more than once been able to capitalise on the weaknesses or mistakes of others, not least by filling the void that was left by the absence of an effective Iraqi force to counter the Islamic State from 2014, or by stabilising the Assad government in Syria. It has also been able to strengthen its relations with Turkey. Ankara and Tehran may have different perspectives on global affairs, but they do share similar threat perceptions. Both have fallen in line with the Russian approach to conflict resolution in Syria; and it should come as no surprise if Ankara eventually re-establishes official links with Damascus. Neither Turkey nor Iran, however, wants to be seen as a mere junior partner in a Russian-planned and -managed settlement of the Syrian conflict. They also want to limit Kurdish independence aspirations in Iraq and Syria. Turkey further wishes to prevent the emergence of a PYD-dominated zone along the Syrian–Turkish border. Add to this Ankara’s increasing lack of trust in the United States, particularly since Washington made the PYD (the sister organisation of the Kurdish Workers Party or PKK, which is banned in Turkey) its main military partner in Syria, despite and against all warnings and protests by its Turkish NATO ally. With Turkey’s recent military incursion into the northern Syrian district of Afrin, Ankara has come a long way toward weakening the PYD and establishing a Turkish-controlled protectorate along the Western parts of the Turkish–Syrian border.

Saudi Arabia

The confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran has mostly played itself out in Syria over the past seven years, but the two countries have been geopolitical rivals for much longer, even before Iran became the Islamic Republic. Yet their rivalry is not an immutable fact that cannot be at least partially set aside on the basis of shared political or economic interests. Consider, to give but two examples, the countries’ common opposition to the Iraqi takeover of Kuwait in 1990, or their somewhat uneasy but still successful cooperation to settle the Lebanese civil war in the early 1990s.

As regards Syria, Saudi Arabia no longer opposes a settlement that would leave Assad in power, but wishes to block what it would regard as an Iranian takeover. Although there is room for compromise, Riyadh has done little to encourage this. Since his elevation to minister of defence in 2015 and Crown Prince in 2017, Mohammed bin Salman has been the driving force behind a highly assertive and strongly anti-Iranian regional policy. This includes an appallingly destructive war in Yemen that does not seem to be close either to a

military decision or a negotiated settlement, and which may have fostered the very Iranian presence and influence there that the Saudi leadership claims to be fighting. Similarly, Riyadh may have helped Iran to strengthen its reputation in Lebanon by trying to force the country's prime minister, Saad Hariri, to resign under murky circumstances from a TV studio in the Kingdom.

The Qatar crisis that emerged in 2017 was a poorly engineered eruption of long-standing differences, one that appears to be undermining the only functioning sub-regional organisation in the Middle East: the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council. The boycott of Qatar by neighbouring countries (along with Egypt) has imposed economic losses on Qatar and undercut its ability to manipulate regional conflicts by distributing financial largesse to radical political and military actors. The latter consequence has arguably been the most positive effect of the crisis so far. But Saudi Arabia and its allies, primarily the UAE, have not really succeeded in enforcing their will on their smaller neighbour. Rather than scaling down its relationship with Iran as demanded by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, Doha has become dependent on Iranian air space and imports, upgraded the countries' relationship, and invited Turkey to enlarge its military presence in the emirate.

Saudi Arabia's increasingly assertive regional policy should not be seen in isolation from the ambitious and much-needed efforts of the Crown Prince to embark on a form of belated nation-building in a state that since its inception has defined itself more in religious than in national terms. The prince's Bismarckian 'Vision 20' programme, which aims at preparing Saudi Arabia for a less carbon-dependent future, represents an attempt to reform the country's society and economy, and to mobilise the Kingdom's younger generations. The leadership wishes to make fuller use of Saudi Arabia's male and female workforce, to promote scientific and technical education, to downgrade the influence of the religious establishment and the appeal of radical Wahhabi Islam, and to foster a sense of nationalism. History offers more than one example of similar endeavours that were accompanied by aggressive foreign policies.

It is an irony of sorts that both the Saudi Crown Prince and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who was re-elected with a convincing majority in 2017, have identified a need for domestic reform in their respective countries. Both would stand to gain from enhanced cooperation between their countries. Yet they could easily lose the opportunity to implement their reform programmes by engaging in costly external confrontations.

While his regional policies have so far brought mixed results at best, Mohammed bin Salman was doubtless able to boost his domestic and regional stance by securing the personal support of US President Donald Trump and US acknowledgement of Saudi Arabia's lead role in a loose coalition of Arab states. It was certainly easy for the Crown Prince to align himself with the Trump administration's two priorities in the region: the fight against terrorism (however defined) and a rollback of Iran.

While the Middle East policies of the US and other extra-regional players are not the main focus of this article, it is clear that regional actors react to signals, or what they perceive as such, from the great powers. Thus, it is little wonder that the Saudi, Emirati and Israeli leaderships, among others, are eager to integrate the Trump administration's more hard-line stance on Iran into their own political projects. Other US allies, meanwhile, are wary of an approach that seems to place military expediency above alliance considerations – this is certainly the case for Turkey – and to be marginalising the US in the political and diplomatic domains, not least by encouraging the perception that US policy favours the

Saudi and Israeli governments in an overly partisan way. By de-emphasising diplomacy and taking decisions, such as his recognition of Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel, that alienate friends and foes alike, Trump has arguably been undermining the US role as the ultimate mediator in a region that is accustomed to relying on it, despite its long-standing support of Israel.

Russia, by contrast, seems to have learned something from previous US policy books for the Middle East, particularly that it should make itself a non-ignorable interlocutor for all the relevant parties, and to make no secret of its strategic interests. Thus, Russia is cooperating with Iran to stabilise the Assad government, but also receiving the Saudi monarch in Moscow, even before the King had visited Washington. Russia is Syria's most important military ally, but Moscow has also been demonstrating its excellent relationship with Israel, not least by means of a much-publicised visit of its defence minister to Tel Aviv. There have even been suggestions that Russia may be acceptable as a mediator on Jerusalem. And whereas the US has been ignoring, in Ankara's view at least, some of Turkey's main national-security priorities, Russia has been able to transform a relationship that was on the verge of war in 2015 into a form of co-ownership over a settlement process for Syria – never leaving any doubt, however, who arranges the seating order.

This is not to say that Russia is a benign actor. Among other things, the Russian defence ministry's proud announcement that its military had used the war in Syria to test new weaponry will certainly be seen as cynical by those members of Syria's opposition who are now supposed to accept Russia as a peace broker. Still, Moscow, unlike Washington, appears to have a plan, both to end the war in Syria and to enhance its own posture in the wider region.

The United States, meanwhile, seems to have become a diplomatic eyewitness to other powers' political initiatives in the region, despite its military leadership of the anti-Islamic State coalition and its strikes against Syria's chemical-weapons facilities. This is most visibly the case with regard to Syria. Consider that in 2015 and 2016, the US secretary of state and the Russian foreign minister co-chaired four ministerial meetings of the so-called International Syria Support Group, which helped to launch the UN-led Intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, and to bring about a first (albeit short-lived) cessation of hostilities. By contrast, in 2017 the US was content with observer status in the Russian-led Astana talks. Even the new US Syria 20 policy, as laid out by then-secretary of state Rex Tillerson in January 2018, has confirmed the military's lead on Syria. It calls for an open-ended US military presence in the country even after the defeat of the Islamic State, mainly to deny an expansion of Iranian influence, but displays no ambition to re-assume a leading political role with regard to Syria's future.

One could be forgiven for seeing a certain parallel here with the position the European Union has been in for a long time, perhaps minus its preparedness to commit substantial sums of money to regional development schemes. It remains unclear whether the EU, most likely under French leadership, will be able to fill some of the diplomatic void that the US has left in the region. Given the habit of Middle Eastern leaders to balance their external relations, rather than allowing the political–diplomatic game to be dominated by a single great power, it is likely that there would be takers for such a European role.

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