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TACKLING THE MENA REGION’S INTERSECTING CONFLICTS

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Introduction

Following the recent withdrawal by the United States (US) from the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the re-imposition of sanctions, the Iran situation is becoming tense.1 There has been some discussion in Europe and the US about what will happen next: now that the US has withdrawn, will Europe do so? Will Iran withdraw? And if it does, what happens next? Will there be war or an attempt at regime change in Iran? Nobody knows but everybody is talking about all the possibilities. What is surprising is that in Iran nobody seems to be worried about it – neither hardliners nor moderates, not even in academia. Iranians consider that they have established a “balance of terror”: they are aware that the US can attack them, either directly or via proxies somewhere in the Middle East, but the US has a lot of assets spread out over the Middle East and beyond, which Iranians believe they could also hit. With this mutual deterrence situation, both sides know – or think – that they could inflict tremendous harm on each other. Right now, everyone is waiting to see what Europe will do, and both the Americans and Iranians are trying to force Europeans to make a decision. The Iranians want to force the Europeans to break from the US, which is not going to happen, but they are still unrealistically expecting it. And the Americans are preventing it by trying to divide the Europeans.

The notion of there being a “balance of terror”, in the region and beyond, is important. Iran actually has the capability to strike at the US, either its assets directly or its proxies in Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon and other places. This is significant because, while in the Middle East there used to be only the Israel-Palestine conflict – which is still the source of many ills –, the region is currently ridden with conflict. There are wars in Yemen and Syria, instability in Lebanon and Iraq, and a failed state in Libya, and a key problem is that although these conflicts started out separately they have come to intersect. These are no longer conflicts between local actors, as the regional powers have become involved and, in some cases, the global powers as well – such as Russia and the US.

Moreover, in the very recent period we see not only that conflicts in the region have started to bleed into one another but that new lines are being drawn, essentially between two emerging camps: what

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1 Since the JCPOA’s implementation three years ago, Iran has been in full compliance with its obligations under the nuclear deal. The problem is that Iran never saw the economic benefits of the nuclear deal. Not even under Obama, who lifted the sanctions, and less so under the Trump administration, which came into power against the nuclear deal. The sanctions are not visible in Iran but are visible in people’s pockets, because the rial has devalued tremendously. People have a harder time making ends meet, and it will have a long-term impact: those who were always opposed to the nuclear deal are generating a consensus in society in the belief that they cannot trust the US.
is roughly an anti-Iran alliance – formed by the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and maybe Egypt – and Iran and its local proxies or allies – militias in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Hezbollah. But these two camps are choosing the entire region of the Middle East and parts of North Africa as their battleground. This rivalry is actually aggravating pre-existing disputes in these places, worsening them and – this is the key point – making them harder to resolve. Why is that a problem? First of all, people are dying, so there is an issue of morality and humanity. In Yemen, for example, we have already seen a huge humanitarian catastrophe, with its population being clearly affected by famine as well as widespread cholera and other diseases. In Syria, we have seen huge suffering and death as a result of bombings, refugee flights and massive displacement. Secondly, there is a self-interest issue – and usually states act better on self-interest than on morality. In this regard, these conflicts are a security threat for Europe. Chronic instability in the Middle East neighbourhood means ongoing flows of refugees to Europe, as well as the arrival of Jihadists or the departure from its cities of “would-be Jihadists” to battlegrounds where they get trained and later come back and set off bombs. Thus, it is an inherent interest of Europe, in particular, but also of the US, despite being further away, to intervene in the region – hopefully in a preventive way, to try to stabilise the situation. However, there is usually not only a preventive but also reactive attitude. When European states and the US react to what they perceive as threats to their societies, they tend to come with responses that are heavily securitised – such as joining an armed coalition and bombing Islamic State (Daesh) – instead of addressing the underlying problems that give rise to radical movements. There is no mystery about where these movements come from: they thrive on chaos and poor governance, a chronic problem in the region.

To all that, we have to add the current youth bulge. There is such a great demographic growth in the region that societies cannot keep up in providing the jobs, services and prospects to young people that they would like to see. In the Middle East, North Africa and beyond, it is increasingly difficult to have these opportunities, and there are all kinds of reactions to that: some people join popular movements, others are very lucky to find a job – even if it is a dead-end job, at least they make some money to secure the welfare of their families –, some join violent movements, and some just get into a little boat and try to make it to safer shores where they expect to find new opportunities. This is a serious issue, and the way that the Western world is addressing it is predominantly by securitised measures, such as trying to intercept the boats or sending airplanes over Iraq, Syria, or Libya to fight Islamic State. But this only makes things worse. It may provide short-term solutions but they are only bandages. In the end, these problems do not go away.

The Five Clusters of Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa

A number of conflicts have emerged in the Middle East and North Africa in the last century, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and the onset of colonial regimes in various formats, always French or British driven. To better understand these frictions, five clusters of conflicts could be identified.

The first cluster comes directly out of the trauma of the First World War and the establishment of these states, and it takes two forms. One was the establishment of borders back then, which did not necessarily reflect the aspirations of the people living in these areas – there was an Arab nationalist movement that wanted a single Arab state but that did not come about; the Kurds
wanted a state of their own but that did not come about either. Overall, for the Arabs the feeling was that the Western colonial powers wanted to divide, weaken and rule them. As a result, there is a question that is a hundred years old about the legitimacy of the borders that were established back then and that have been challenged until today. The second trauma was as a result of the orders or governing systems that were established back then, which reflected colonial imperatives, interests and thinking. The French set up essentially republics, and the British set up monarchies; that is what they knew. But these were alien entities for the local populations, who had lived in a different administrative structure under the Ottoman Empire for centuries. That colonial history was like an earthquake that set off a number of conflicts. There were coups d'état and revolutions because people could not put up with the governing system that had been put in place. Certainly, after a hundred years many things have changed and evolved tremendously and the colonial systems did not survive but the basic legitimacy problem that was created at the time has not been overcome. In fact, the Arab uprisings of 2011 were essentially the final manifestation of people rejecting the problems that were created a hundred years earlier.

Cluster number two is the continuation of that, in the form of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In 1917, the Balfour Declaration called for the creation of a homeland for the Jews in the territory of Palestine, although it took another thirty years before it was established. In 1948, the creation of the State of Israel was, again, a traumatic event that set off a number of conflicts – with its own local population of Palestinians and between Israel and its neighbours.

A third cluster was set off by the revolution in Iran in 1979. It was essentially a revolution against a repressive secular monarchical regime, which was replaced by an Islamic and republican regime – but it was just as repressive. This also set off a number of conflicts. Iran helped establish Hezbollah in 1982, three years after the revolution. It also threatened the stability of the Gulf States, because there were Shia populations living there – at least it was seen this way by the Arab states where these populations lived. And so chronic instability was established. The Iran-Iraq war is a very good example of this: it was started by Iraq in order to stifle the Iranian Revolution but it failed and turned into an eight-year war, at the end of which there was a stalemate that ended in 2003 when the US invaded Iraq and let Iran in. This third cluster set off a sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shia – even though historically sectarianism was always there, it had not been very prominent until that moment. After 1979, and especially during the Iran-Iraq war, sectarianism came to the forefront, and it really burst out after 2003 in Iraq, mostly because of the mistakes the US made at the time.2

The Shia revolution had an effect on the Sunni states as well, and also in 1979 there was another important event, the siege of Mecca, which is the fourth cluster. The revolutionaries who took over the Grand Mosque of Mecca were very much inspired by the Iranian Revolution – even though they were ultimately opposed to it, because they came from the Sunni corner. They saw that their Sunni masters in Saudi Arabia and others in the Arab World had not provided a dam against Shiism,

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2 Cleavages exist everywhere, in all societies: there are ethnic, confessional, tribal, rural versus urban, and plenty of other cleavages. However, their existence does not imply that there will be conflicts. People fight when these cleavages are politicised, as we saw for example in Iraq after 2003. At that time, nobody talked about being Sunni or Shia, those words were not used. Suddenly, these concepts started being used, and Iraq moved towards a sectarian war. A year or two later everybody was using these terms, and then the fighting started. Thus, it is very important to prevent people, populists for example, from exploiting the existing cleavages for their own political ends and starting conflicts that way.
so they wanted to react to that and to replace the Arab regimes, which they saw as lackeys of the West and as illegitimate entities. The siege of Mecca was defeated within weeks but then the Saudis responded to it by pre-empting and co-opting any further revolutionary idea, and they started to promote their brand of reactionary intolerant Wahhabism. This was possible because they had oil money – this was right after the oil crisis in the mid-1970s –, so they started funding mosques, preachers and literature, and spread it all through the Muslim world. However, with all that came an intolerant strand of Islam that, although it did not create the current Jihadists, provided fertile ground on which Jihadists could thrive once the states broke down. The Jihadists came out in the 1980s, during the fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and later in Iraq after 2003, but they accelerated again after 2011 when some of the states collapsed during the Arab uprisings. Jihadism is an intra-Sunni fight against the more moderate forms of Sunnism – including the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which is a politically moderate, although socially very conservative, Republican and parliamentary movement.

Finally, cluster number five were the uprisings in 2011, which triggered a new set of conflicts: the civil war in Yemen, in Syria, in Libya, and troubles – not yet civil wars – elsewhere. This is where we are today.

Key Issues to Look at in Future Peacemaking Efforts: Intersecting Conflicts, Non-State Actors, Fluid Alliances, and the Need for an International Arbiter

The Western world tends to think that by sending the United Nations (UN) and some peacekeepers the problems in the Middle East and North Africa can be fixed, although this does not work anymore. The reason why is that conflicts in the region have started to bleed into one another, so suddenly everything is connected and thus more complicated to solve. If the Saudis and Iranians decide to cool things down in Yemen, for example, the Iranians will want something back in Syria, but then the Saudis will state that they do not want the Iranians in Syria. So how do we address that? With increasing difficulty. When addressing these conflicts, if we look at UN efforts, we see that there is one special envoy for Israel-Palestine, one for Syria, one for Iraq, for Yemen, for Libya and even one for Lebanon. And they accomplish very little, mainly because they see things in isolation, and conflicts are no longer isolated. What we need instead is an entirely different approach to addressing these conflicts.

Syria is a particularly interesting case, as it is the only one where the abovementioned five clusters of conflicts converge. Regarding the first cluster, the uprising against the Syrian regime was the result of the people feeling that the Syrian system, a legacy of the regime that had been established a long time ago, was not working for them. In addition to that, the Kurds in Syria challenged the country’s borders – they felt they belonged to the other Kurds as one nation and they wanted to erase those borders. Considering the second cluster, Israel has been heavily involved in Syria. As a neighbouring country, it cannot afford to stay out – its mortal enemy Hezbollah in Lebanon has moved into Syria, so Israel became involved by bombing it, as well as the Syrian government and Iranian assets. The third cluster has been present given that Iran also became involved in the Syrian

3 Moreover, the UN, which is a 74-year-old institution, is in critical need of renovation and reform, as can be clearly seen in the battlefields in the Middle East today.
conflict. Iran has had a long opposition to Israel, since 1982, and has long supported Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Thus, when the Syrian regime came under threat, Iran came to its aid in order to secure a supply line for its ally Hezbollah. Regarding the fourth cluster, the Gulf States started supporting the unarmed opposition with weapons. However, they were working at cross-purposes and contributing to a fragmented opposition — Qatar and Turkey were mainly supporting the MB, while Saudi Arabia was trying to counteract that. In fact, one of the main reasons why the opposition in Syria failed to overthrow the regime was because of infighting, which was triggered by disputes between the Gulf States. Moreover, the arming of these groups led to a further brutality in the war, and gave rise to Al Qaeda in Syria and to Islamic State. Finally, the fifth cluster is the actual civil war in Syria and how it has started to metastasise throughout the region, dragging Iraq in for a while — when Islamic State jumped from Syria back into Iraq — and involving Turkey and its fight against the Kurds.

Given that all of these conflicts are intersecting in Syria, how can they be tackled? If they are tackled in isolation, whenever one thing goes wrong it can easily result in a much bigger conflict. The way forward, then, requires taking a holistic view, having an overall picture. Addressing a conflict without understanding its basic drivers and the drivers of the conflicts that are intersecting with it can only make things worse. We can consider a particular aspect of a war, but we cannot do so with our eyes shut to whatever else is going on. We need to take everything else into account to avoid inflaming other fronts by trying to solve a specific one.

Besides conflicts being increasingly intersected, the second reason why peacemaking is becoming more complicated in the region is the emergence of new — and mostly non-state — actors that have ambitions of their own. Kurds, for example, finally see their chance after a hundred years; Islamic State wants to recreate something which it calls the Caliphate; Al Qaeda, the same, and there are other groups. In fact, in situations of chaos, all kinds of groups — ethnic, religious, etc. — suddenly want to arm themselves against each other. This is very dangerous, as there are all kinds of armed militias running around, causing great destruction, and creating new refugee flows.

A third phenomenon that makes peacemaking difficult is that alliances are becoming increasingly fluid. Groups or states are creating alliances with other states or non-state actors that were unimaginable before. In Israel, for example, Netanyahu is trying to make peace with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and it is mutual because there are economic interests at play. The only thing that is holding it back is that the people in the street in the Arab World do not stand for it, so the regimes have to be very careful not to go too far with this. The reason we have not seen Mr. Trump’s famous “peace plan of the century” is because the opposition to it on the ground is too great — it is a silent opposition in many ways, but it is there. Another strange alliance we have witnessed is the US supporting the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) — a terrorist organisation by its own definition. How did the Americans get out of this contradiction? They said their alliance was with the YPG in Syria

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* Some Arab states supported the rebels in Syria but Egypt, for example, was never really far from Bashar al-Assad and the UAE were never really involved in the Syrian war. Now there is a form of rapprochement between them, which derives from the Arab states’ recognition that Bashar al-Assad, or his regime at least, is there to stay. As a result, in the near future Arab states will likely attempt to work with the regime to try to wean it away from the Iranian embrace. However, the Arab Gulf states are unlikely to invest a lot of money in Syria, as they still see it as beholden to Iran, their mortal enemy.
(the People’s Protection Units), not the PKK – even though it was. They asked the YPG to call itself the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) instead, and to bring some Arabs in as well. It worked, despite being a very odd alliance, until Trump said he would withdraw American troops. Then, the US allies were suddenly left twisting in the wind.

A fourth problem that complicates peacemaking is the absence of a strong arbiter. Where is Europe in all this? Missing in action. Ever since the Second World War, there has been a division of labour between the US and Europe. The US has been the hard power, a protection for Europe, while Europe has provided the soft power in the external relations. That is where the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) comes from, and all other aid efforts towards the developing world. So Europe could play an arbiter role, a mediating role in conflicts, as long as it knew that it had the US behind it – because in the end you need military power, and Europe does not have it. However, now Europe finds that the US is no longer playing a backup role, not under Trump. So it does not really know what to do because it does not have the full array of options to play that role by itself. In addition, Europe is congenitally incapable of forging a common foreign policy. In terms of the overall reconstruction of Syria, for example, the main European countries do not want to engage in it, as they believe that this will strengthen and perpetuate what gave rise to the uprising in the first place – a regime that has proved to be incapable of governing a society and which has killed hundreds of thousands of people. They do want stability in Syria, and the Syrian people to rebuild their lives, and the Syrian refugees to return, but they are not going to invest in this regime. This position may weaken over time and certainly some countries are restarting diplomatic relations and bringing some money into Syria. However, the big money is not with them but rather with France, Germany and Britain, and they are still holding the line. In the future, Europe should certainly come forward and play a more proactive role in the region.

Focusing on the US, despite the many critiques that could be formulated towards its approach to the region, in some cases it has also helped mediation efforts. However, that quality is no longer there because the current US administration, and arguably even the previous one, is not very much into mediating conflicts among the Arab states and the other states in the region, the Iranians and the Turks. Americans have economic, social and political problems at home, and they do not want to get embroiled in foreign entanglements and conflicts. In addition, the US is waning as a world power. That means that, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are in a dispute, nothing is mediated, nothing is resolved, the conflict continues – and, as mentioned, they export their conflicts to other battlefields, so it is other people who suffer. This can only be stopped through mediation. And the only arbiter there is in a conflict right now is Russia in Syria: it is the strongest party in the country, and in the last year it has prevented an all-out conflict between Iran and Israel. That is good, although not sufficient, and we do not know if it will last.

We have to bear in mind, though, that military intervention, like the US intervention in Iraq, is not mediation. Intervention is destructive, it backfires and creates more problems than it solves, as we have seen with the emergence of Al Qaeda and Islamic State. However, the need for a global arbiter remains, as in its absence it is a free-for-all and the regional states compete with one another trying to establish dominance.
Moving away from the conflicts, there are also deeper problems in the region – problems that have given rise to some of the current hot conflicts or may do so in the future. On the one hand, there is the aforementioned youth bulge and the huge economic challenges that it carries, such as joblessness, which has emerged as a result of the population growth that these countries have been unable to cope with. On the other hand, there are resource restraints: water, most importantly, but also oil, which has been both a curse and a way for the region to finance itself. As a consequence of climate change, there were already droughts in Iran last year, and the same in Iraq, with dust storms and agriculture not being in good shape as a result. And oil has run out in Yemen, is running out in Algeria and is also a problem in other places. In Syria, for example, now that the US has announced its withdrawal, one of the key issues will be what happens to the oil fields that Syria has, which are all in the North-East – it is not a lot of oil but is the only oil, so it is strategic. As the resources become scarcer in the region, the fights will likely become more intense.

Concluding Remarks

Some conflicts in the Middle East have to run their course; the key is to contain them and prevent doing further harm. In any conflict in the region, there is the risk that not only local or regional actors and their proxies kill each other, which is already happening, but also that global actors – Russia and the US, for example – get into a direct confrontation. This has been a potential in Syria, although it has been avoided until now, but could also happen in Yemen – between Iran and the US in particular. To avoid this, containment and de-escalation are key. This can be accomplished through the UN and state mediations but it is a long-term challenge.

When intervening – not in a military way necessarily but also through humanitarian aid, development aid, or any kind of interaction – when there is an imbalance of power, harm can be minimised by trying to find areas of shared concern for the different sides and setting a common agenda, without setting the terms. This is critically important, as in the West we still tend to have the colonial way of thinking that we have advanced societies and we can give technological aid to messy Middle Eastern countries and do all kinds of things for them because we have all kinds of nifty solutions. This is, of course, not the right approach, and it backfires. In fact, societies collapse because of a combination of internal governance problems that have built up over decades plus the nefarious impact of foreign interventions. We may not be able to fix the governance questions, people in the region have to do it themselves. What we can do from our side is to at least work hard to not make matters worse by intervening in the wrong way.

Climate change, for example, could be a good area of common concern to look at in order to reduce tensions between parties in dispute, as it affects everyone. Maybe not in the same way but there are a number of common concerns: for example, water sharing and other arrangements where transnational cooperation is possible. This is where Europe can play a very useful role, through its

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5 In many cases – natural disasters or war, human-made disasters – humanitarian aid is critical to keep populations alive and in place until better times come along, but it does create a dependency and it is a very nuanced issue. In addition, whenever there is a lack of political will to fix a problem, the default solution is to throw humanitarian aid at it, and that is wrong. In the case of Gaza, for example, you could easily argue that humanitarian aid is financing the occupation, which is the source of the problem, so it would be prolonging the life of the occupation. That is directly counter to what actually ought to happen, which is to bring the conflict and the occupation to an end. There are other steps that could be taken instead – such as the Gazans being able to go in and out and not being in an open-air prison.
diplomacy and mediation between powers. By focusing on the non-provocative issues, the safe issues, and trying to build confidence between parties, channels of communication – which in many cases do not even exist – can be established. The current Western approaches are heavily securitised but the solution is rather to try to engage in diplomacy, open up channels of communication between local actors that are in conflict, encourage and help states to do that, and provide them with the means to do so. People should actually participate in some ways too, so that they can help shape their own futures. That is critically important, but how to do it? That is the sixty million dollar question – and probably it is worth much more than that.