

# Transitions and Regional Geopolitics in the Arab World

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## The System of Arab States in the Post-War International Order

On 14 February 1945, on his return from the Yalta Conference to lay the foundations for the political organisation of post-war Europe together with Stalin and Churchill, President Franklin D. Roosevelt held his famous meeting with the Saudi King, Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, aboard the cruiser USS Quincy in the Suez Canal. This was where the alliance between the two countries was sealed, in a pact in which the US offered Saudi Arabia military protection and supplies of oil and a guarantee of stability in the area. In addition to the agreements on oil, defence and stability in the area, President Roosevelt tried in vain to persuade the Saudi Monarch to facilitate the flow of Jewish refugees to Palestine. The Quincy Agreement marked the beginning of an era of growing North American hegemony in the Middle East, based on oil production. Likewise, what were to become the three basic elements of US policy in the Middle East were also established: a guaranteed oil supply and the stability of the crude oil market; the US interest in the Jewish population of Palestine followed by the security of the State of Israel as of 1948; and the general stability of the Middle East area.

During World War II, the post-war order was already in preparation and would revolve around the system outlined in the United Nations Charter signed in San Francisco. To this universalist system were added a series of economic institutions that have come to be

known as the Bretton Woods system, consisting essentially of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and later the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). This international political, institutional and economic architecture, under the new and dominant leadership of the United States, was to give the world economy as a whole, and especially the Western economies, the so-called Thirty Glorious Years, the great cycle of economic growth and transformation that ran from the forties to the economic and energy crises of the seventies.

Regarding the geopolitical order, this period would be marked by bipolarity, with two major powers emerging from World War II. The First and Second World Wars brought an end to Europe's position of domination, confirming the bipolar nature of the international balance of power. Soviet expansionism, especially in Europe during the immediate post-war period and then in dozens of different ways in what was known as the Third World, was met with the so-called US 'containment policy.' The policy, proposed initially by Kennan in his 'long telegram' and then in his famous article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine in 1948 implied the coexistence and mutual acceptance of the two major powers as two opposing worlds, but in balance. Later, however, the situation would become known as the balance of terror as the threat of nuclear armament developed. On the geostrategic level, it was best represented by the confrontation between the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO), led by the US, and the Warsaw Pact, led by the USSR. This was central to the bipolar confrontation, perfectly defining the countries that were brought together by NATO on the one hand, and those of the Warsaw Pact in Eastern Europe and the USSR on the other. As for the rest of the world, since this was a geopolitical and ideological confrontation, the two hegemonic powers competed

with each other in an attempt to attract the broad spectrum of non-aligned – known then as Third-World – countries to their side and cause.

The containment policy also entailed, in particular, that the United States would attempt to establish an effective system of containment through a series of political and military alliances with the countries bordering the Warsaw Pact. In Europe, the main stage of the confrontation, the quintessential alliance was NATO. The system of alliances that began with NATO in 1949, and which was to include Turkey as of 1952, continued along the immense periphery of the Warsaw Pact, through the Middle East and Central Asia by way of the Baghdad Pact, and beyond with alliance systems woven by the US over the years in Southeast Asia, especially Thailand, as well as the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, the China of Chiang Kai-shek, Korea and Japan.

In the Arab World, influence from the still-present British and French Empires in the immediate post-war period would continue to guarantee the countries' alignment with the West. By 1944, however, the League of Arab States was already under construction and was officially founded at the Cairo Conference in 1945. The Arab League has constituted the fundamental basis of the multilateral Arab system since the war, notwithstanding its capacity and effectiveness, or lack thereof, during its different periods. Moreover, and clearly as part of the US containment policy, the so-called CENTO Pact (Central Treaty Organisation), otherwise known as the Baghdad Pact, was signed in Baghdad in 1955. Advocated by the United States and United Kingdom – only the latter of which would sign the Treaty and become a member of the organisation – Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan would form part of the pact. Its efficiency and trajectory were complicated, largely because of the instability in the countries involved, their tendency to distance themselves from Anglo-American influence, with the exception of Turkey, and the absence of a direct commitment from the US right from the beginning.

But in the Arab world, the post-war and Cold War periods were fundamentally the era of independence and construction of new nation states. Both the British and French colonies (with the vicissitudes of the Vichy and Free French governments), and even the former colonies, helped their respective mother countries in their war efforts in the hope that peace

would bring the opportunity to build their new independent states. The countries that began to gain independence, therefore, joined the organisation alongside the initial core of Arab League founding countries (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, plus North Yemen as early as 1945). Of particular significance were Morocco and Tunisia, joining in 1956, and, after its bloody independence war, Algeria in 1962.

The system of Arab states marked the start of a club for conservative countries, which clearly included the Hashemite monarchies of Jordan and Iraq, and that of King Farouk in Egypt, not to mention the Libyan monarchy under King Idris up until 1969. An even more fitting member of the club was Saudi Arabia, where Abdelaziz ibn Saud had proclaimed himself King in 1932 after reconquering and unifying the country, first becoming Sultan of Nejd (1912) and then King of Hejaz (1926). During this initial post-war period, Great Britain and France continued to wield great power in the area. Gradually, however, their hegemonic role would be replaced by that of the US, revealing the major geostrategic and geopolitical change in the area as a result of World War II. In 1948, the first Arab-Israeli War and the creation of the State of Israel marked the system of Arab states' first major failure. As well as the progressive incorporation of the remainder of Arab countries as they gained independence from colonial rule, the Arab League's 1945 founding charter also foresaw the constitution of an independent Arab Palestine and gave it provisional representation in the bodies of the League. The catastrophe of 1948 – the Palestinian Nakba – and the proclamation of the State of Israel therefore constituted a difficult situation for the group of Arab countries to accept. This was to be the origin of the subsequent history of unrest and instability in the area.

The Suez Crisis in 1956 was confirmation that Great Britain and France were no longer major powers in the area. After the humiliation of being forced to withdraw by Moscow and Washington, both went on to occupy secondary roles in a bipolar system that allowed for just a single leader on each side – the United States and the Soviet Union.

Throughout the Cold War years, one of the most important successes of the Soviet Union was achieving a series of political, and in some cases military, alliances with countries from the other side of the

*cordon sanitaire* surrounding it, and particularly with certain countries of the Arab world. This began spectacularly with the fall of the Egyptian monarchy of King Farouk at the hands of the Free Officers, whose revolution was to claim victory in 1952. Egypt was the central country of the Arab world from a geographical, demographic, cultural and historical viewpoint and Nasser was to be the quintessential leader of the young states' new Arab nationalisms. After the clash with France and Great Britain over the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the subsequent Suez Crisis as well as US refusal to finance the Aswan Dam, Egypt formed an alliance with the USSR. The 1958-59 revolution brought about the fall of the Hashemite monarchy of Iraq. In the unstable republican Syria of the time, alignment with Nasser and Moscow also prevailed, first after the rise to power of Shukri al-Quwatli in 1955 and then under the rule of Hafez El Assad and the Baath Party, following the 1970 coup. Algerian independence and the victory of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in 1962 after the bloody civil war would add another important member to the so-called radical front of the new secular and leftist Arab nationalisms. Colonel Gaddafi's overthrow of the monarchy of King Idris of Libya in 1969 extended the list of major countries advocating left-wing Arab nationalism, which had strong anti-West sentiments and flew the flag for Third-World causes and non-aligned countries.

## The new Arab states, with the legitimacy gained from independence, spent those years building the basic institutions of the State

In addition to this group of radical Arab countries, led by the Egypt of Gamal Abdel Nasser, was the moderate front, consisting of the Gulf monarchies in general, led by Saudi Arabia, together with Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, and, importantly, the new moderate Egypt following Sadat's expulsion of the Soviets in 1973. This was the traditional system of Arab states in the different Cold War and *détente* periods, with the obvious addition of elements that bolstered the pro-Western front on the area's peripheries. This included Tur-

key's NATO membership in the eastern Mediterranean and the US alliance with the Shah of Iran, Reza Pahlavi, in the Gulf, particularly after the US-orchestrated defeat of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and the democratic system itself in 1953, after the Iranian PM dared to nationalise oil production. This was a system of tension and balance typical of the bipolar global panorama (though it did nothing to stop the repeated crises) especially in this case throughout the Middle East due to the impact of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and the Arabs in general, ongoing since 1948.

This was, it is worth repeating, a crucial period for the construction of the Arab nation states. In general, the construction of the modern states was based on the administrative-political structures inherited from colonial administration and not as a continuation of the former, pre-colonial political and institutional structures, which had partially persisted in many cases, especially under the protectorates. In any case, the new Arab states, with the legitimacy gained from independence, spent those years enthusiastically building the basic institutions of the State, from defence to education, health and tax systems; and advancing their industrialisation. This was all carried out under a state-driven philosophy of economic development along interventionist and in many cases socialist lines, and also to compensate for the weak or non-existent private initiative.

## The Crises of the Bipolar World

Due to a series of events that would have major repercussions, 1979 has become a key year in modern history. Some of these events were of extraordinary geopolitical relevance in the Arab world and Middle East.

- The *Russian invasion of Afghanistan* was the first of a long sequence of moves that, besides the consequences inside the USSR itself, was to lead to increasingly serious crises throughout the Muslim, and especially the Arab, world. It is a known fact that in Afghanistan, the fight against the atheist Soviet invaders engendered the first modern jihadist groups, backed by the US and Saudi Arabia. These notably included al-Qaeda and Bin Laden.

- 1979 was also the year of the bilateral Peace Treaty between Israel and Egypt, the expulsion of Egypt from the Arab League and the subsequent move of the League's headquarters to Tunisia for the next 10 years (1979-1989) as a consequence of the 1978 *Camp David Accords*, that, without actually achieving peace, introduced geopolitical changes in the Middle East. Jordan would also sign a Peace Treaty with Israel in 1994, after the 1993 Oslo Accords.
- 1979 was the year of the *second oil crisis*. Although rising petrol prices initially multiplied OPEC countries' revenues, their subsequent fall was to lead to difficult years of forced macroeconomic adjustments that gave rise to social revolts in certain Arab countries in the eighties.
- As a result of regional geopolitics, 1979 was above all the year of the *Islamic revolution in Iran*, led by Ayatollah Khomeini.

The geopolitical significance of the revolution in Iran was enormous, although less so on a global geostrategic level, as bipolarity was soon to decline. In the Soviet Union, as was the case later for Russia, Khomeini's example was viewed with great concern, due to the possible contagion effects in republics that were traditionally majority Muslim, dotted across the southern periphery of the extensive Soviet territories. Until then, the Persian Gulf, or Arabian Gulf (depending on your standpoint) had been a lagoon of stability under Anglo-American rule. Khomeini's revolution changed the system of balance, or tension, in the Persian Gulf. The construction of the modern states, both in the Arab world and especially in Turkey and Iran under the Shah, was a secular process based on a policy of economic and social modernisation, as well as a modernisation of mentalities. Internal political confrontations in Arab countries originally consisted of Arab national movements fighting for independence, against colonial rule, and later of struggles between leftists – not all of which would fall into the modern concept of the word in politics and society – and conservatives. Nationalism was the dominant mentality in all the countries. The ruling civilian, or in many cases military, elites, were of secular tradition, and more so in the republics than in the monarchies: Syria and Iraq's Baathism, Egypt's Nasserism, Bourguiba's Destour

and later the Algerian FLN or Morocco's Istiqlal had an entirely different political makeup to the old qadi jurisconsults and politicians of the Quranic tradition and pre-colonial governments. Furthermore, the elites educated at the old Islamic universities of large mosques like Al-Zaytuna in Tunisia were seen as submissive or even collaborators in the colonial or protectorate days, which is why they were side-lined after independence. Khomeini's revolution, however, rekindled the fire of Muslim sentiment, which had always remained alive among the masses. It would increasingly be used as a flag for opposition discontent with Arab regimes that had become fossilised and bureaucratised under the iron grip of authoritarian regimes and leaders clinging to power.

Political Islam has deep roots, although the origins of its contemporary versions can often be identified with al-Banna's creation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo in 1928. In a world already becoming increasingly unipolar, after the eighties, with communist ideologies and systems falling into disrepute, the social and political opposition to Arab regimes began to adopt an Islamist flavour. The secular and modernising authoritarian regimes' failure with regard to Israel was key in their fall from grace. The humiliating and successive defeats of several combined Arab armies, at the hands of the small and despised State of Israel, particularly in 1967, seriously damaged the popular support of Arab leaders and their regimes. The other major source of frustration was the failure of authoritarian governments to offer their populations the economic and social improvements promised with independence. Islamism would be the beneficiary of this feeling of failure, humiliation and oppression.

On a regional level, the massive geopolitical significance of Khomeini's Iranian revolution became even clearer after 1989. The fall of the Berlin Wall marked the beginning of the Soviet Empire's deconstruction. Countries throughout Central Europe began to change camp, some of the Soviet Union's republics broke away and gained independence and all countries from the Warsaw Pact experienced major changes in their economic and social systems. Without the bipolar tension of the Cold War, it would now be regional conflicts that took centre stage. Through the middle of the Gulf and along the Iran-Iraq border runs one of the historically important geopolitical borders. The Ottoman Empire reached

Iraq, always opposed to the Iranian Safavid Empire. This is the line that, since antiquity, has demarcated two cultural worlds: the Assyrian-Mesopotamian world and that of the Persians. In the history of Islam it is above all the demarcation line between the majority Sunni world on the Arab side and majority Shiite in Iran. Their confrontation and fight for regional hegemony and the control of resources, particularly energy, would gain increasing prominence in the future.

### **The End of History? Instability and Wars in the Unipolar World**

The fall of the Soviet Empire and disrepute of the Communist ideology, as well as the rapid transformation of the economic systems of Central and Eastern Europe as of 1989 were welcomed by neo-conservatism in the US as a possible *End of History*, in the sense of a final victory of liberalism, and as a consequence, of the historic confrontations with other ideologies. In the Middle East, geopolitical changes were already being felt in the previous decade with the Soviet failure in Afghanistan. The victory of Khomeini's revolution in 1979 was especially seen as a threat from the other side of the Gulf, particularly by the conservative Saudi monarchy. The religious primacy of Saudi Arabia and the Al Saud dynasty as Guardian of the Holy Places of Islam constituted the very foundation of the monarchy's legitimacy, which it has always claimed to be inseparable from the spiritual leadership of the Arab and Sunni world. The Khomeini revolution once again presented Iran as an alternative leader of Islam, which, unlike Saudi Arabia, was of the historically victimised and vindictive Shia denomination. The triumphant, revolutionary Shia Iran became the enemy of the Al Saud Monarchy and its most serious threat.

The Monarchy's first response on a regional level was the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 as an alliance between Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, under Saudi hegemony. As of 1984 the GCC would have a joint military force – the Peninsula Shield Force – for mutual defence and with the capacity for military intervention, with its headquarters and command centre in Saudi Arabia. GCC forces finally intervened in Bahrain in 2011-2012, not against a

foreign aggressor, but rather to crush the democratic demands of its own people.

But there was no direct confrontation with Iran after the 1979 revolution. Instead, Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent the rest of the Arab and Sunni world, offered support to Saddam Hussein in the destructive and bloody Iran-Iraq War, which would span the entire decade of the eighties. The old pact between Roosevelt and Abdelaziz ibn Saud from 1945 continued to function, giving rise to the so-called 'dual containment' policy, which was of interest to both the US and Saudi Arabia. Its aim was to contain both Iran's Shiite and Islamist revolutionary impetus and the feverish expansionist aspirations of Iraq's Rais, Saddam Hussein, in his bid for domination. Like a new Nasser, Saddam Hussein's rule, besides being authoritarian and personalist, was secular and modernising in its own way. Dual containment worked, but only while the war lasted, with enormous loss of life and human suffering for the countries involved. Once over, Iran was still outcast by the international community while it remained involved in verbal confrontation with the 'Great Satan' – the United States – and the 'Zionist entity' – Israel. This was an era in which the regime of the Ayatollahs sought internal consolidation and to strengthen the country, despite the international siege against it. Saddam Hussein's war with Iran, on the other hand, ended in 1990 with no winners and massive mutual destruction. Barely a year later, however, in 1991, the Rais had already launched his invasion of Kuwait.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait provoked the first massive invasion in the Middle East by what was by now the only world power after the fall of the USSR: the United States. President Bush established a major international coalition backed by resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, which would have proved complicated, if not impossible, in the Cold War and bipolar era. The capacities of the single superpower were far less limited now, with all the advantages and drawbacks that this implied. President Bush Sr. was intelligent enough to impose on himself the restrictions necessary to free Kuwait and destroy most of Saddam's army, but without invading Iraq or defeating the Baathist regime or its Rais. The Americans and the British knew how important the Iraqi piece was, containing it so that they could also contain Iran. And on this point they coincided with Saudi interests. In the rest of the Arab world,

there was almost unanimous support from governments for the international coalition, who even participated militarily, despite the people on the Arab streets supporting Saddam Hussein over the plutocrats and egocentric millionaires of the Gulf. But the reality was that, despite the self-imposed limits of the Bush coalition, the weakening of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime was such that Iraq began to break apart as a nation-state.

It would be true to say that the creation of modern Iraq has its origin in its Hashemite monarchy, created by the British after World War I through the application of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. But it is also true that states, and not only history, have created nation states. This was the case in Europe, where the modern nationalities were consolidated through the configuration of the states, beginning with France's progressive change under its monarchy. Likewise in the Arab world, the states created in the 20th century had been established as nation states that were more or less solid, based on their historical and geographical congruity, but above all based on the conflicts they had faced. Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia are today nation states that are rooted in a longstanding tradition. Although the borders outlined in the Sykes-Picot Agreement to redistribute the territories in the Middle East among the British and French empires were drawn with a set square in the European chancelleries, the French and British foresaw a somewhat different outcome from the Sykes-Picot agreements, which was dashed by Kemal Ataturk's recovery of the whole of Anatolia. The course of history had also done its work, including the additional incorporation of Alexandretta into Turkey, the final organisation of the states of Lebanon and Syria or the divisions of Palestine. The consolidation of new states, and new nationalisms, in any case, quickly ended the intended unity of the Ottoman provinces.

### The end of the bipolar world and the dominion of a single superpower also contributed to certain other major problems

In countries throughout the Arab world, modern states have gradually created their own nationalities over the decades. The pan-Arab rhetoric posed no obstacle to

the strong nationalism of each nation state, whether monarchies like Morocco, Jordan or Saudi Arabia, or republics like Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Syria or Iraq. The first Gulf War in 1991 (or second if we count the Iran-Iraq War) seriously weakened Iraq's Baathist State. Its military power was left in ruins, and the reputation of its great leader, Saddam Hussein, who had hoped to be the new Nasser and leader of the Arab world, was in tatters. The international coalition had encouraged both the Kurds in the north and the Shiites in the south of Iraq to rise against Saddam Hussein and contribute to the coalition's war efforts. They were then left to their fate and only the brutal repression of Saddam Hussein was enough to enforce order and a pseudo-unity for the country, despite the international embargo on trade with Iraq and the no-fly zone throughout the Kurdish area. In the Iran-Iraq War in the eighties, all Iraqis had fought heroically as Iraqi patriots. From the fierce repression after '91, however, rifts began to emerge in Iraq, with the fragmentation of national sentiment and sense of belonging which would be exacerbated as of 2003 by the US invasion and the ensuing disorder and sectarian strife. The end of the bipolar world and the dominion of a single superpower also contributed to certain other major problems. The Soviet defeat and Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan, plus the subsequent neglect of the area, allowed for the creation of the Islamic State of the Taliban, which was built in the lair of al-Qaeda. In addition, the massive flight of Russian Jewish emigrants to Israel strongly changed the country's social, ideological and religious makeup, and therefore the behaviour of the State of Israel. The example set by the pioneers of the first Kibbutz, which had been admired by so many European leftists, was becoming a distant memory. The conservatism of the recent arrivals had little in common with the tradition of the Sephardic Jews from the Mediterranean world or with the progressiveness of the Ashkenazi pioneers of the first decades of the Israeli State. These are all factors that have contributed to the ethnic-religious and political polarisation both in Israel and in the Arab world. The Camp David Accords were sabotaged and radicalism on either side became heated to the point that both Rabin and Sadat were assassinated at the hands of their respective extremist enemies.

A result of the growing ideological and religious radicalisation was the growing boom of Islamist movements, both moderate and violent, from which

terrorism on an increasingly large scale emerged. The devastating civil war in Algeria throughout the nineties, which pitted the Islamist FIS radicals against the State, and, driven by paranoia, even against the population at large, was just an initial phase. Prominent participants in this were former Islamist combatants in Afghanistan, allied with the Taliban. The mega-attacks of 11 September 2001 were to raise the confrontation to a global scale and lead to the direct involvement of the United States and Washington's neo-conservative administration.

The invasion and defeat of Afghanistan under the Taliban was the first episode of the 'War on Terror' launched by President Bush Jr. The second was when President Bush and the neoconservatives launched the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as an attack on Islamist terrorism. Today it is clear that the weakened regime of Saddam Hussein had none of the highly sought-after weapons of mass destruction, nor that it was a pro-Islamist regime, or linked with al-Qaeda. Rather it was a harsh, authoritarian regime, but of the secular and socialist tradition of the Baath, and therefore in opposition to Islamism. In any case, this time the destruction of the Iraqi State was total, including the military and police apparatus, the administration, institutions and the existing social structure, whether good or bad. The result, as we know, led to destruction, disorder and confusion amid all kinds of violence and sectarian, ideological and territorial fighting, whose consequences are still incalculable.

### **Democratic Revolutions: Revolts and Geopolitics**

The gradual appropriation of the Arab states by the groups in power created a growing authoritarian and repressive spiral in the face of an increasingly educated population less inclined to tolerate predatory regimes. Revolution, driven by the citizens, was the result, which has introduced new variables of major significance in the area's geopolitical framework. The Arab Springs were citizen revolts led by youth and the more erudite sectors of society, although the Islamist parties have subsequently shown their strength. The results at the moment are variable, with an Arab world with greater internal differences than ever:

- There is just one case of a victorious revolution, namely where it all began, in Tunisia, where a democratic transition is now in the process of consolidation.
- A group of countries is in transition by reformism, fundamentally Morocco and Jordan.
- Some movements have been re-channelled by the authorities, with the population awaiting reforms, as in Algeria.
- There are certain countries, fundamentally from the Gulf, where the citizen revolution has not even had the chance to take off as a political movement, or where it was crushed right from the start with Saudi and GCC support and intervention, as was the case in Bahrain.
- There has been a Thermidorian reaction to the Egyptian revolution, following General el-Sisi's coup.
- There are two serious cases of open war against a country's own citizens: one by Gaddafi's Libyan regime, where, after his defeat, militia chaos is still reigning; and the other by Assad's regime in Syria, where destruction on a massive scale and civil war continues its blackened path. The case of Syria, as the heart of the Arab world, is especially serious from a geopolitical standpoint. As well as the immense suffering of the Syrian people and the destruction of the country, the consequences of the sectarian struggles and immense difficulties of reconstructing a viable state in neighbouring Iraq may well disrupt the area's traditional geopolitical landscape.

### **Organising the Disorder**

#### *Fragmentation of Middle East States and Resurgence of the Shiite Arc*

The implosion of the State in Iraq – as a consequence of the US invasion – and in Syria – due to the prolongation of a war of incredible proportions that is being waged by the Syrian regime against the opposition in its own country – have blown to pieces the fragile balances in the complex ethnic, cultural, religious and political mosaic of the entire Middle East area. The traditional order could only be authoritarian in both cases, with an Alawite, and therefore Shiite although heterodox, military elite governing

a majority Sunni Syria – with several other small minorities –, and with a minority Sunni elite governing Iraq, with a 60% Shiite population and a 20% Kurdish population. But in the area's complex geopolitical architecture this configuration produced a situation of stability – albeit an unjust one – for decades.

The fall of these two major, oppressive states, which have left an area massively weakened, adds to the already fragile and complicated situation throughout the East:

- the Palestinian territories: extremely weakened and divided between the West Bank and Gaza, with structures with very little power, fought over between Hamas and Fatah's Palestinian Authority;
- Lebanon: multiconfessional, multiethnic and multicultural, victim of atrocities and successive wars incited by all kinds of interferences, as well as being a county claimed by Syria, and therefore always under threat from it;
- Syria: whose nerve centres are still under the rule of the Alawite military;
- Iraq: supposedly democratic and governed by the Shiite majority, whose hegemony fuels and deepens the divide with the Sunnis and Kurds.

This great arc of instability serves as the stage for new struggles between Shiite Islam, fundamentally backed by Iran, and Sunni Islam supported by Saudi Arabia. After the First Gulf War in 1991, the destruction of Iraq's army and the country's quarantine, Iran clearly emerged as the great beneficiary of the US operation; a Shiite and revolutionary Iran which Saudi Arabia and the US had hitherto been able to contain with the war against Saddam Hussein. In recent times, the Shiite Prime Minister al-Maliki's reluctance to implement policy inclusive of the different parties and factions of Iraq has succeeded in destabilising the area, again in favour of Iran. The great geopolitical turnaround in the regional panorama is the possible constitution of a Shiite arc, which groups together the countries of the former Fertile Crescent under a single Shiite alliance with Iran. Although fragile, this alliance would combine revolutionary movements like Lebanon's Hezbollah, states, or by now pseudo-states en route to implosion, such as Syria's Alawite regime, and the Shiite government in Iraq, as well as Iran itself. With the exception of Iran, none of these groups exist in a cohesive society or

solid nation state, regardless of whether or not they may have approached such a state in the past.

#### *Local, Regional and Global Conflicts*

What is happening in Syria, as in Iraq, is not a war, but rather several wars at the same time and on several levels. The conflicts may be external, whether territorial or border-related, ideological, over regional hegemony or economic exploitation; or internal, whether secessionist, ideological, religious, ethnic or social; or they could be the internal reflection of global conflicts, as has unfortunately been the case so often between communists and anti-communists in many Third-World countries. The problem with the geopolitics of the Middle East is that all these conflicts coexist at the same time, in each of the countries and in the region at large. For each conflict, a different system of alliances, and interferences, may arise. All of these different conflicts coexist within a framework, or rather a state of chaos, which, once unleashed, is contradictory, ungovernable and explosive.

Of all the conflicts and wars being waged in the Middle East, therefore, we must distinguish between local wars, those on a regional level and those that are a reflection of global confrontations.

- On a *global level*, fortunately, there is no open confrontation, despite Russia's intervention under Putin in favour of the Al-Assad regime, which escaped US air strikes in the summer of 2013 after the regime had bombed the population with chemical weapons. Russia is trying to regain some of the Soviet Union's global power, which explains its attempts to re-establish ties not only with Syria, home to the only Russian naval base in the Mediterranean, but also with other former allies that Putin hopes to woo, such as Egypt, or other countries in areas like Latin America. The success of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the increasingly violent clashes in Ukraine might seriously complicate things. But Russia, today, is not the Soviet superpower it once was, capable of acting as such anywhere in the world within its areas of influence, or expanding these by force. The Middle East conflicts, therefore, are today essentially regional or internal. By the same token, the confrontation that al-Qaeda and the jihadists claim to have with the 'Crusaders' and



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with the whole of the West is, in fact, a reflection of the massive internal conflict in the Arab-Muslim world vis-à-vis its fit in a modernity constructed from a cultural tradition that is not their own. The vast majority of its victims are Muslims.

– On a *regional level*, the main conflicts are now between Israel on one side and the Palestinians and the Arab world at large on the other; between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the major players of two territorial groups and two concepts of Islam around the Gulf; and between violent Islamist movements and their own societies, which the Islamists intend to dominate, and the countries of the Ummah, which they want to conquer.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is what causes most friction between the Arab world as a whole and Europe and the United States. The situation is continuing to worsen in a perverse spiral of growing extremism. The disproportionate use of force on July-August 2014 and destruction and the asphyxiation of Gaza by Israel not only offends and irritates all Arabs without distinction to unfathomable degrees, but also causes outrage and stupor among the international community, including among traditional supporters of the Jewish and Israeli cause and among those who condemn the Hamas attacks from Gaza. Its contribution towards the growth of radical Islamism is equally significant.

In the conflict around the Arabian (or Persian) Gulf, which is home to the greatest changes – and none of them good –, violence is also spiralling though once again not as a direct confrontation, but by interference in the domestic conflicts of other countries.

– On an *internal level*, it is now in Syria and Iraq where the conflicts are turning into open wars of complex dimensions. In both cases, the implosion of the State – at the hands of the Americans in Iraq and as a result of the struggle between citizen revolution and massive military repression in Syria – has unleashed a spiral of confrontation that is going beyond the control of their Iranian and Saudi mentors.

▪ In Syria, the increasingly active presence of jihadists and Islamist radicals in the insurgents' camp has blocked any possible military support from the US, Europe and the international community. Beyond the Iranian support for the Alawite Syrian government and that of Putin's Russia for its traditional ally, the infiltration and growing armed activity of jihadi movements, first al-Qaeda and then ISIS or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (or Greater Syria, or al-Sham), though fighting the regime, has proven to be its salvation. It has blocked international intervention and left the democratic insurgency to the mercy of Assad's ruthless military apparatus. The suffering of the Syrian people has been prolonged indefinitely and the effects on the neighbouring countries (the arrival of masses of refugees, the formal and informal transit of arms and combatants and the effect on the different minorities and internal factions) are putting great pressure on and endangering the stability of all countries involved, particularly that of Lebanon and Jordan.

Today it seems clear that the basic war between the government and opposition in Syria does not have a military solution. The only way out seems to be if foreign interference, at some stage, has a positive influence on the different parties, allowing them to reach some kind of understanding, which is hard to imagine after the pain and suffering that has already been inflicted. Besides the US, Iran and Russia, there is an important part to be played by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, possibly Qatar and a stable, strong Egypt under the presidency of el-Sisi. Little is known about Israel's role to date. If they were to reach an understanding they could fight together against their mutual threat: international jihadi terrorism.

▪ In Iraq, there are also three levels of conflict underway:

On the *internal level* the first conflict is the Kurdish secessionist tension, which is now practically a state within the State, having grown in self-governance under the protection of the no-fly zone and US defence against Saddam Hussein's army between 1991 and 2003. The Kurdish government is now signing international agreements with Turkey and exports its oil directly. Only the savage attack by ISIS jihadism, now self-styled the Islamic State (IS) after proclaiming its brutal caliphate, has made it essential to form a common front between the Kurds and the majority Shiite central government in Baghdad. The second internal conflict, which began as armed resistance against the old Baathists wanting to restore Sunni power in Iraq, has turned into the general Sunni and specifically jihadi struggle against the Shiite government of Baghdad. If this evolves into an inclusive configuration and policies inclusive of the moderate and generally secular Sunnis, the Sunni-Shiite conflict would be replaced by the struggle of all parties against radical Sunni jihadism.

On the *second level*, that of *regional conflicts*, there are also various confrontations in Iraq. These are being waged indirectly – by proxy – through foreign interference, the financing and supply of arms or the manipulation of information and international policy coverage. Paradoxically, the US and Iran have been the major advocates of the government in Baghdad, to the point of finally being in agreement on the excessive anti-Sunni sectarianism of al-Maliki. Politics, and especially international politics, creates strange bedfellows, in this case the US and Iran, which, through the bloody war between their proxies in Syria, are still in conflict over the nuclear question, the defence of Israel, etc.

**In the case of Iraq, forming a government that is inclusive of the different minorities and internal factions and attaining the difficult understanding among the regional and global powers involved in the internal conflicts are key elements for the country's peace and viability**

But on the regional level the basic confrontation is between Iran and Saudi Arabia; and here there are some interesting developments significant for their importance on a regional level and their possible impact on internal confrontations. The first development is the coup d'état (and new regime?) of el-Sisi, with massive Saudi financial and political support against the Muslim Brotherhood and the government of President Morsi, which enormously strengthens the position of Saudi Arabia in the Gulf and that of the Arab and Sunni conservatives in general. Ironically also, the disappearance of the bipolar confrontation has clearly brought to light the fact that the Saudis consider as enemies both Iran's Shiites, who threaten their stability and hegemony in the area, and the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists, whose contagion might threaten the internal stability of their rule.

The second development affects the *third geopolitical level*, the *global* one. Despite President Obama's efforts, the US is still involved in Iraq's conflicts. But the development consists in the election of the new Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, and the possibility of an understanding with the US on the nuclear dossier, a priority for the US in part because of how it affects Israel's security. On the other hand, the third development is the spectacular growth and potential of the United States' own production of oil and gas through fracking techniques, which represents a complete geopolitical change in and of itself, in particular for the Gulf States and other oil-producing countries. These developments have led to a certain fear in Saudi Arabia over the continuity and firmness of the alliance sealed by Roosevelt and first monarch of the modern Saudi State aboard the USS Quincy in 1945.

Furthermore, in the case of Iraq, forming a government that is inclusive of the different minorities and internal factions and attaining the difficult understanding among the regional and global powers involved in the internal conflicts are key elements for the country's peace and viability, as well as for the common struggle against international jihadi terrorism. Besides jihadism's military defeat on the ground, however, it should be remembered that its defeat on a global level requires a moral and political victory in all Muslim societies. This, in turn, will mean resolving the blatant situations of injustice that exist in the area on the internal and regional levels.

## From Chaos to Reason?

Finally, on a level that includes the whole of the Arab world, there is the conflict unleashed by the Arab Spring; that is to say, that of the modernising citizen movements against the oligarchies of the traditional Arab authoritarian State, whatever their political, confessional or ethnic denomination. Essentially, and despite the current splits in the Arab world, this is the conflict with the greatest long-term trajectory, insofar as it represents the difficulties Arab Muslim societies have in adapting to modernity. But there is no changing the course of history, and the reactionary movements, in the most literal sense of the expression, have lost the battle in the medium and long term, whatever their denomination and for all the violence and damage they can inflict in the meantime. For the time being, the modernising and democratic movement is winning in Tunisia and doing so gradually in other reformist countries. The battle, however, in addition to achieving democracy, is fundamentally of another kind; that of modernising societies and not only political power structures. This is the battle for literacy, for growth in levels of education and culture and for the countries' economic and social development as an essential foundation for the successful process of democratisation of societies and people's mentalities and not just political structures. This is the battle that the Arab populations have been fighting day after day for many years and through which they are now demanding democracy. It is in this context that Europe's help and the influence of European soft power can be most effective and even essential. The truth is that the absence of Europe throughout the last cycle of conflicts in the Arab world in its multiple dimensions, and especially in the Middle East, is shameful. And this situation must be urgently remedied. Europe cannot go on allowing itself the luxury of being a political dwarf in areas of its own vital interest.

If there have been successive waves of democratisation in the world there is no reason to believe that the Arab world will be a permanent exception

If there have been successive waves of democratisation in the world – the powers defeated in the immediate post-World War II period; Spain, Greece and Portugal in the seventies; Latin America in the eighties, Central and Eastern Europe in the nineties; the countries of Asia and the Balkans and gradually other areas in subsequent years – there is no reason to believe that the Arab world will be a permanent exception. In the long term, the construction of democracy demanded by its citizens as a whole and their efforts to improve the situation will lead to the evolution of political and administrative structures in all Arab countries. But in the short and even medium term, many of them may encounter great resistance, conflict and suffering.

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