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# Traditional Rivalry or Regional Design in the Middle East?

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**ABSTRACT** *The repercussions of the Arab Spring and new polarization between Iran, Israel and the Gulf States means the Middle East faces multiple rivalries and conflicts. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and the United States seem to have reached an agreement on certain issues in an attempt to redesign a fractured regional order. This vision is yet to be realized on the ground given the uncertainty around Washington's global role. In assessing regional stakeholders and their potential capabilities as well as several scenes of regional conflict, the paper argues Turkey plays a traditional role in balancing tensions between Iran, the Gulf and Israel. While Turkey does not have a silver bullet, it provides 'balancing' support to the region, preserving neutral, middle ground.*

## Introduction

**F**or the past seven years, the Middle East has been preoccupied with the repercussions of the process known as the Arab Spring. Today, the region lies at the crossroads of multiple rivalries and conflicts. With the notable exception of Tunisia's relatively uncomplicated transition to democracy, the Arab revolts unleashed a wave of violence and tensions in Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Syria, whose effects the entire region continues to experience. During this period, Libya set the stage for a bloody civil war and became a theater of regional competition. Egypt's democratic progress has been reversed by a military coup d'état. Yemen, which suffers from a major humanitarian crisis fueled by civil war and military intervention by Saudi Arabia, also experiences additional tensions due to Iran's growing influence. Meanwhile, Syria became the source of bloody proxy wars and region-wide trauma. By contrast, Iraq, which triggered regional fault lines for twenty years, was not directly affected by the Arab Spring. In the wake of the 2003 U.S. occupation, however, the country became a 'failed state' due to instability, sectarian policies and terrorism. The country continues its efforts to recover from these crises to this day.

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**Bearing in mind that the Obama effect triggered the first wave of chaos in the region, it is possible to argue that President Donald Trump launched the second wave**

Over the past twenty years, and particularly in the last seven years, Iran has been the clear victor in a geopolitical competition with the Gulf and Israel –some of the strongest undercurrents in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Taking advantage of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Tehran was able to reap the benefits of its pre-1979 Islamic Revolution investments in its natural allies in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere in the region. The country, which played a crucial role in the transformation of peaceful protests in Syria to civil and proxy war, single-handedly changed the balance of power in the conflict zone by deploying militias from all over the Shia world. As a matter of fact, Iran

effectively became the de facto dominant force in Iraq through its proxies, in Lebanon through Hezbollah and in Syria due to its most recent military intervention there. At the same time, Tehran strengthened its ties to Shia communities in the Gulf. Although the country's efforts ultimately resulted in failure in Bahrain, it successfully created a patronage relationship with the Houthis in Yemen, a group with traditionally weak links to Iran, to establish a military base capable of threatening Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the opposite camp –the Gulf countries and Israel– experienced major strategic setbacks in the wake of Iraq's occupation and with the consolidation of Iranian influence. During this process, Israel and the Gulf countries did not always form a united front. However, it is possible to claim that their relationship became stronger due to their mutual opposition to Iran. Unlike in earlier attacks against Palestinians, Israel has been unable to assert its dominance over Hezbollah. Most recently, the country suffered a humiliating defeat against the group in 2006. During the Obama presidency, Israel was concerned by Washington's efforts to use Iran to counterbalance the Sunni bloc in the Middle East. As such, Tel Aviv was among the most vocal critics of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the West, which alleviated international pressure on Tehran. Although the country welcomed Hezbollah's decision to suspend attacks against Israeli targets and concentrate on the Syrian conflict, Israel views the group's potential empowerment in this process as a serious threat. Meanwhile, the Gulf countries have been distracted from their rivalry with Iran, as they focused on implementing pro-status quo policies and crushing revisionist players during the Arab Spring. Moreover, the threat of 'Iranian expansionism' became far more visible due to Tehran's growing hard power in a range of countries, including Yemen and Syria.

The Trump Administration's approach to the Middle East created new dimensions in the polarization between Iran, Israel and the Gulf States. Bearing in mind that the Obama effect triggered the first wave of chaos in the region, it

is possible to argue that President Donald Trump launched the second wave. The Qatar crisis and Saudi Arabia's reform efforts in the wake of Trump's participation in the May 2017 Riyadh summit arguably marked the beginning of a new era. In other words, the Trump Administration played a crucial role in the most recent developments –which seemingly fit into Iran's traditional rivalry with the Gulf countries and Israel, but also represents an attempt at regional design.

Turkey, which stands to experience the side effects of this new era directly, as part of the region and with regard to its bilateral relations with third parties, has attempted a balancing act in an effort to reduce tensions and prevent violent conflict between the two sides. As such, Ankara seeks to support countries, in a difficult position due to growing polarization between Iran, Israel and the Gulf, in order to avoid becoming party to polarization while maintaining neutral middle ground amidst chaos and conflict. At a time when polarization grows between great powers, including Russia and the United States (U.S.), Turkey has criticized the Gulf indirectly and Iran directly to stress the need for regional powers to establish a new order and cooperate more closely.<sup>3</sup> Unhappy with Iran's regional expansionism and the instability Tehran fuels through its proxies, Turkey's balanced policy could be perceived by the Gulf's ambitious crown princes as an obstacle to their goals.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's (MbS) assumption of power, the Qatar crisis, high-profile arrests on 'corruption' charges, an attempt to force Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign, and the use of Iranian ballistic missiles by the Houthi rebels to attack Riyadh are among the many developments supporting the view that the current situation goes beyond the traditional rivalry between Iran, Israel and the Gulf countries. Such a view can also be supported by other events such as Trump's plan to 'contain' Iran, mounting pressure on Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to accept Washington's 'peace' plan, efforts by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to install its proxy, Mohammad Dahlan, as the leader of Palestine, pressure on the Syrian opposition by Riyadh to reinvent themselves and the emergence of a special relationship between Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. By contrast, these developments effectively suggest there is an attempt at regional design. Although public debate has almost exclusively focused on domestic changes in Saudi Arabia, the Qatar blockade and growing tensions with Iran, it is clear the dispute has regional dimensions and that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel and the U.S. seem to have reached an agreement on certain issues. It is quite unlikely, however, that this agreement –an attempt at regional design– will play a founding role in the Middle East. Currently, expectations are low for at least two reasons: Washington's changing global role fuels uncertainty, creates a power vacuum and entails disorder in various parts of the world, including Europe, the Middle East and Asia-Pacific. At present, there



U.S. President Trump, Saudi Arabia's King Salman and Egyptian President Sisi put their hands on an illuminated globe during the inauguration ceremony of the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology in Riyadh, on May 21, 2017. BANDAR ALGALOUUD / AA Photo



is a major gap, for example, between U.S. foreign policy and national security discourse, the country's instruments on the ground and the capabilities of its alliances. Moreover, Trump Administration's unilateralist, vulgar and somewhat inconsistent policies, which seek to protect U.S. economic interests, further deepen instability. To make matters worse, it is important to note U.S. foreign policy and national security discourse has yet to translate into a sustainable and applicable strategy. In other words, Washington's statements fail to make a game-changing impact on the ground. This is largely due to serious disagreements and differences of opinion amongst Washington policymakers, domestic tensions and the Trump Administration's inability to exert control over the U.S. bureaucracy.

Secondly, the current attitude of the U.S., which desperately needs to set a new Middle East policy, creates a balance of power likely to transform regional tensions into hot conflict. The Trump Administration's Iran strategy, for example, seems more likely to transform competition between regional powers into destructive tensions –as opposed to creating a new regional order. As seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, theoretical comparisons of power and capabilities do not necessarily translate to actual influence in the Middle East, where chaos and violent conflicts make more room for state and non-state actors alike. Keeping in mind that Iran and Russia have been most successful at exploiting those new rooms for maneuver, it is possible to conclude that U.S. policy, which promotes conflict rather than order in the Middle East, creates serious risks.



Iranian, Russian and Turkish Presidents met in Sochi to discuss the Syrian crisis on November 22, 2017.

MIKHAIL SVETLOV / Getty Images

## Individual Game Plans

A number of major developments took place in the Middle East since Trump attended the Riyadh summit in May 2017 meeting with Arab leaders.<sup>4</sup> During this period, the most notable countries have been Saudi Arabia, where systemic changes are taking place, the UAE, the Gulf's most operational country, Israel, which has kept a low profile since the Arab Spring except for launching occasional airstrikes, the U.S., which entered a period of political chaos since Trump's surprise victory in the 2016 presidential election, and Iran, whose expansionist foreign policy secured its place atop the list of national security threats in many countries. While refusing to become party to the growing polarization in the Middle East, Turkey is concerned by the potential regional chaos and conflicts. Provided that most assessments of regional developments in recent months have been centered on Saudi Arabia, it would be best to start this rundown of individual game plans with Riyadh.

### ***Saudi Arabia: The Risks of Audacious Projects***

Fierce competition within the Saudi royal family, which manifested itself in the form of power struggle and a game of thrones, has effectively ended to the advantage of MbS. The crown prince sought to become the Kingdom's de facto leader before entering office by launching audacious projects, such as Vision 2030, and implementing a series of reforms.<sup>5</sup> Recently, the Saudi crown prince had a large number of religious scholars arrested and pledged to promote 'moderate Islam'

in his country.<sup>6</sup> Finally, MbS formed the National Anti-Corruption Commission to make it clear that no kind of graft shall go unpunished. Although Saudi officials insist the most recent arrests were part of a crackdown on corruption, the international community has remained suspicious of Riyadh's motives. Though the arrests in question represented a selective crackdown on corruption in practice, their real purpose was to consolidate MbS' power over the economy, the political arena and the national security apparatus to clear his path to the crown and silence critics of his reform agenda and foreign policy initiatives.

To be clear, the rise of MbS to crown prince was rapid and it is impossible to isolate this process from regional discussions. Backed by Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), the UAE's crown prince, MbS was presented to Saudi and international (particularly American) audiences as the most suitable candidate for the Saudi crown. According to leaked email messages of the UAE ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba to Washington, policy makers in Washington were told that MbS was the man to transform Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile at home, the Saudi crown prince took advantage of King Salman's debilitating medical condition to take a series of steps that would clear his path to power –all under the umbrella of his father's authority. As mentioned above, those steps were geared toward tightening his grip on the Saudi security apparatus, eliminating political opponents and rivals, and arresting en masse individuals with mass economic power. Had it not been for a series of crucial steps taken by the Saudi-led axis, perhaps these changes could have been considered part and parcel of the country's domestic politics. The Qatar blockade, the forcible resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the missile attack against Riyadh (which confirmed Iran's involvement in Yemen), Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Israel, the ongoing search for a new leader in Palestine, lengthy negotiations with Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner,<sup>8</sup> efforts to shape the Syrian opposition and dialogue with some members of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the designated terrorist organization PKK in Syria and Iraq, however, suggest that MbS' pursuit of power fits into a broader regional context. Likewise, the fact that the Saudi crown prince set a number of challenging regional goals while simultaneously disturbing the traditional balance of power in his country suggests that his domestic agenda was in sync with his regional actions.

In this regard, MbS' emphasis on 'fighting extremism' and 'going back to moderate Islam' must be considered in conjunction with Saudi Arabia's future goals in the Middle East. Clearly, this discourse promises to create an ideological basis for a crackdown by the U.S., Israel, Egypt and several Gulf countries against the Shia militias, who have been an important part of Iran's expansionist agenda. At first, one could reach the conclusion that Saudi Arabia was simply trying to attract foreign investors and rehabilitate its image against the backdrop of declining oil prices. Instead, those steps must be seen as an effort by Riyadh, which has been held responsible for radicalism in the Sunni-Salafi



world since the 9/11 terror attacks, to whitewash or transform the notion of Wahhabi Islam.

It is clear that the Saudi crown prince's idea of promoting 'a version of Islam that is in harmony with the West and the world' will translate into some level of social liberalization – as opposed to democratization. A broader look, however, reveals that MbS' real objective is to combat Iranian-backed Shia militias and make references to 'moderate Islam' in an attempt to secure Israel's support to that campaign. By portraying Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Shia militias as the root cause of radicalism in the Middle East, Riyadh expects the Trump Administration to focus on Tehran's expansionist agenda. Moreover, it is possible to argue the 'moderate Islam' rhetoric seeks to replace the polarization between Shia and Sunni-Wahhabis with tensions between Arabs and Persians. As such, Saudi Arabia seeks to promote a new brand of Arab nationalism in an effort to win the support of Arabs in the ideological fight against Iran. The country's efforts to reach out to the Shia community in Iraq should be considered part of the same strategy.<sup>9</sup>

Due to MbS' audacious foreign policy goals, Saudi Arabia entered a period of fragility and high risks. As a matter of fact, the Saudi crown prince, whose performance in Yemen has been subject to widespread criticism, took a huge risk by starting his efforts to contain Iran in Lebanon –where Tehran's most powerful proxy, Hezbollah– holds sway. While Riyadh sees eye to eye with Israel and the U.S. in Lebanon, it remains unclear to what extent this agreement could yield concrete results against Hezbollah. After all, none of the three countries seems willing to shoulder the burden on behalf of the others. Instead, all of them clearly want the others to take the risks. Meanwhile, the Houthi rebels still have considerable operational capabilities in Yemen, where a humanitarian crisis has worsened and Iran's influence increases uncontrollably. Needless to say, the changing balance of power in Saudi Arabia, coupled with an ideological (as opposed to interest-driven) conflict with countries like Qatar and the fragility of Iranian-influenced parts of the Gulf region, render more difficult the fight against Iran and its proxies. The level of success of his audacious steps at home and abroad will determine not just MbS' political future but also Saudi Arabia's status among countries in the Gulf and the Middle East.

### ***The United States: The Gap between Policies and Objectives***

The Trump Administration, which pledged to reverse Barack Obama's regional policy by repairing Washington's relations with traditional U.S. allies, engaged in a series of talks with Saudi Arabia and Israel. Trump, who traveled to Saudi

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with the Iranian threat, which involved cooperating with allies against Iran's destabilizing policies and terrorist activities, imposing additional sanctions on Iran, targeting Iran's ballistic missile capabilities, and preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Trump Administration is clearly not sympathetic to Iran, the U.S. seems to lack the necessary approach and instruments to launch a sustainable and comprehensive campaign against Tehran, despite unveiling its strategy. This is partly due to Iran's growing sphere of influence since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Obama Administration's willingness to look the other way as Tehran strengthened its regional appeal, and the ability of great powers, most notably Russia, to consolidate their power in the Middle East. At the same time, certain policymakers in Washington seem to be against an unnecessary fight against Iran (barring the nuclear issue) and the launch of new military campaigns at the behest of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Keeping in mind domestic tensions in the U.S., Washington will arguably refrain from making an effort to contain and limit Iran –not to the extent that Israel and Saudi Arabia expect from them anyway. The U.S. failure to prevent Bashar al-Assad's regime and Iranian-backed militias from controlling Syria's crucial land border with Iraq, coupled with its decision to stop supporting the moderate rebels –the only legitimate force capable of withstanding Iranian influence in Syria– is proof of Washington's overall lack of interest. Simply put, the Trump's Iran policy seems limited to statements and moral support to Saudi Arabia and Israel rather than a sustainable roadmap.

In recent months, Jared Kushner plays a significant role in negotiations with Saudi Arabia and Israel as well as Washington's search for strategic harmony with those countries. Having developed a close relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, MbS and MbZ, Kushner seeks to find a solution to tensions between Palestine and Israel, advocate Iran's containment and create a new regional order to mount pressure on rival ideologies and groups in the Middle East. The main problem is that the aforementioned players tend

Arabia on his first overseas trip on May 20-22, 2017, left the Kingdom after making strongly-worded statements about Iran and signing a number of lucrative arms deals.<sup>10</sup> Over the following months, he took steps to undermine the Iran nuclear deal –one of the Obama administration's most significant foreign policy achievements. Accusing Tehran of sponsoring terrorism, Trump created a four-step 'strategy' to deal

to have their own priorities and pursue their own agendas, even though they agree on various issues. In other words, the language of common ground appears to be used by all players involved to reach their own goals. Those differences, which are hard to address, prevent comprehensive and result-oriented steps from being taken despite their agreement on Iran.

### ***Israel: The Immediate Beneficiary of Regional Chaos***

Throughout the Syrian crisis, Israel made headlines mostly by carrying out airstrikes against Hezbollah's weapons convoys. The country viewed the Arab Spring's reversal as a strategic victory. The 2013 military coup d'état in Egypt, in particular, expanded Israel's room for maneuver in the region and made it possible for Tel Aviv to mount pressure on Hamas. By contrast, Israel has perpetually remained on the fence in Syria. On the one hand, it welcomed the ability of a weakened Assad regime to remain in power. On the other, it viewed the growing power of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria as a national security threat. Although Israel launched airstrikes against strategic targets and weapons convoys, and created a buffer zone along its Syrian border with the help of rebel groups, including the *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), it has been threatened by the manpower and weapons available to Iran and Hezbollah. As a matter of fact, Israeli officials claim that Hezbollah has transferred missiles to Lebanon, where it allegedly established production facilities. A military incursion against Syria and Lebanon, however, remains unpopular in Israel. The fact that Tel Aviv failed to take comprehensive military action against the Assad regime in the wake of the downing of an Israeli F-16 military jet by Syria attests to that fact.

Although Israel followed the gradual empowerment of Iran, its traditional rival, over the past twenty years, it failed to ensure the adoption of necessary policies by the U.S. –especially during the Obama presidency. Having to choose between limiting Iran's nuclear capacity and curbing its regional influence at the time, the international community managed to address the first issue by making a nuclear deal, yet made no effort regarding the latter. This situation most deeply frustrated Israel and Saudi Arabia. With Trump in the White House, the two countries were able to put Iran on top of Washington's list of national security threats. During the Obama presidency, when Washington neglected its traditional allies in the region, Saudi Arabia and Israel formed contacts through UAE mediation in the hopes of holding policy talks against Iran. Under Trump, in turn, the shared concerns of Washington, Riyadh and Tel Aviv facilitated active cooperation. Although Kushner's close relationship with Netanyahu, MbS and MbZ hasn't translated into concrete policy as yet, it certainly made it possible for that cooperation to become deeper.<sup>12</sup>

Fundamentally, Israel shares Saudi Arabia's concerns about Iran. Unlike Riyadh, however, it does not want to fight the Iranians across the region. Israel's priority is to address the growing Hezbollah presence in Lebanon and to se-



## **The Emiratis, who made a name for themselves by supporting military coups, civil wars and various political-military moves during the Arab Spring, have been able to take bolder steps primarily because they haven't directly experiences the negative side effects of regional chaos**

cure its land border with Syria. Therefore, what it primarily has in common with Saudi Arabia is shared hostility towards Hezbollah. As a matter of fact, senior Saudi officials accuse Hezbollah of training the Houthis rebels in Yemen.<sup>13</sup> Under the circumstances, it is possible to claim that the two countries will primarily target Hezbollah and, by extension, that Saudi Arabia's efforts to influence Lebanon through Hariri are part of that policy. It is more likely, however, that Israel stick to targeted strikes instead of launching a comprehensive offensive against Hezbollah, provided that Tel Aviv came to expect less from the Trump Administration on Iran. One could argue that Israel won't launch a military operation against Hezbollah, which is far more powerful than it was in 2006, under the leadership of its cautious Prime Minister Netanyahu.

### ***UAE: The Background Player***

The tiny Gulf country played an important role in crushing the Arab Spring and the 2013 military coup d'état in Egypt.<sup>14</sup> Again, the UAE remains the strongest advocate of MbS' rise to power in Saudi Arabia. Keeping a low profile in the crown princes' ambitious push for regional power, the UAE encourages MbS and Saudi Arabia to take risky steps at home and abroad. The mass arrests in the Kingdom and MbS' foreign policy decisions were presumably influenced by Abu Dhabi. Having supported the Saudi crown prince's military campaign in Yemen, the country hasn't been directly affected by the Yemen crisis and therefore feels less pressure than Saudi Arabia. The Emiratis, who made a name for themselves by supporting military coups, civil wars and various political-military moves during the Arab Spring,<sup>15</sup> have been able to take bolder steps primarily because they haven't directly experiences the negative side effects of regional chaos –which they helped fuel.

As chief financier of Khalifa Haftar's coup in Libya and Sisi's violent overthrow of Mohamed Morsi's democratically elected government in Egypt, the UAE seeks to reshape the Middle East by lobbying Washington policymakers and using pro-status quo players and other non-state actors as proxies. Having developed relatively serious operational capabilities compared to its size, Abu Dhabi has formed strategic alliances with Israel and certain groups in the U.S.



Turkish soldier hoists a Turkish flag in Afrin town center after the Turkish Armed Forces and Free Syrian Army took control of Afrin on March 18, 2018.

HİŞAM EL HOMSI / AA Photo

Ironically, the country has the strongest trade relations with Iran in the Gulf region.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, whether the UAE genuinely wants to contain Iran remains questionable –although the country employs visibly anti-Iran language. At the very least, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh seem to have certain disagreements over Iran’s containment. Having operated in the shadows of Saudi Arabia, Israel and the U.S. until now, the UAE possibly wants to exploit the various crises faced by Saudi Arabia to become more active in Gulf politics. In other words, Emirati decision makers seem to believe that they can play a more active role in the Middle East –whether or not Riyadh’s gamble pays off.

### ***Iran: A Policy of Expansionism***

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran and its proxies have steadily strengthened their influence in the Middle East. Having played a crucial role in Syria’s violent crackdown on peaceful protests and fueling hot conflicts, Tehran has exploited regional chaos to consolidate its power in many parts of the region through its many proxies. In Iraq, for example, there are notable parallels between the rise of ISIS and the growth of Iranian influence. In this regard, Iran effectively used ISIS and al-Qaeda threats to legitimize its expansionist policies. At this time, the Iranians are the most effective foreign player in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria (along with Russia), and Yemen (through their proxy, Houthi rebels). Keeping part of the Syria-Iraq border under control, the country has been able to create a logistics corridor between Tehran and Beirut. At the same time, the Iranians are able to manage the flow of foreign fighters inside this corridor through the proxy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

## **Moscow had a grand strategy in the Middle East. However, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, actively uses the Middle East as part of his plan to restore his country's global position as a challenge to U.S. power**

Iran has a number of advantages in its geopolitical struggle with Israel and the Gulf; therefore, Tehran believes that it can deal with the increasingly vocal anti-Iran front. In addition to having natural allies among Shia in Gulf countries, investing heavily into proxy forces in the region and controlling active militant groups on the ground, Iran counts on conflicts of interest within the anti-Iran bloc and the

lack of a regional consensus to target Tehran. It is difficult to argue that the anti-Iran bloc, which has been unable to curb Tehran's influence in Yemen and Syria, has been able to develop a comprehensive and result-oriented strategy to achieve success in Lebanon –where Iran's most powerful proxy is in a dominant position.

The main source of Iran's fragility outside its borders is the over-extension of its military in the region, whereas domestically it faces several challenges, including social and economic problems, the ineffectiveness of the state apparatus and political divisions fueled by ethnic and religious diversity. Most recently, the transformation of localized grievances into countrywide protests, the high death toll in Tehran's crackdown on protestors and the direct targeting of the Iranian regime by the crowds revealed the state's weaknesses yet again. Although those protests were born out of domestic grievances, a number of statements were issued by the U.S. and members of the anti-Iran bloc in support of the protestors. In other words, the anti-Iran bloc viewed the protests as a way to render Tehran more fragile and to deepen divisions inside the country. To be clear, statements of support by countries like Israel and the U.S. were considered proof by the regime that the protestors were part of a conspiracy against Tehran. Due to the harsh crackdown, coupled with the de-legitimization of the protests with references to international support behind them, the protests gradually died out and it became clear that such protests couldn't be exploited by regional powers. Still, domestic fragility and divisions in Tehran could prove useful for the anti-Iran bloc, if they develop a concrete strategy.

Iran's regional expansionism, use of sectarian identity as a geopolitical tool and willingness to engage in hot conflict with other countries through its proxies on the ground make the country a serious threat to other regional powers.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Iranian expansionism and the Tehran-controlled militias represent problems that must be solved without delay. Keeping in mind where they operate, it is clear that a regional agreement could solve that problem. Iran's expansionism has been able to continue due to the failure of regional players to



reach a consensus, the rise of regional polarization and conflict (which hinders the emergence of counter-balances to Tehran) and pressures on mainstream Sunni groups.

### ***Russia: The Balancing Global Power***

Though not a direct party to regional competition and/or design efforts in the Middle East, Russia seeks to shape the debate by making critical touches. Having witnessed their influence in the Middle East vanish after the Cold War, the Russians made a spectacular comeback to the region by filling the power vacuum created by the Syrian conflict. Although the country has not been able to create its own order anywhere but in Syria, it certainly has emerged as a balancing force in regional matters. At this point, it would be difficult to suggest that Moscow had a grand strategy in the Middle East. However, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, actively uses the Middle East as part of his plan to restore his country's global position as a challenge to U.S. power.<sup>18</sup>

The Russian military intervention in Syria tilted the balance of power to the Assad regime's advantage. At this time, the country seeks to reflect its deterrent force in Syria to other conflict zones and areas of disagreement. Having formed an alliance with Iran in Syria to keep the Assad regime in power, Moscow has actively opposed attacks by the anti-Iran bloc against Tehran. Although the Russians have a different set of priorities than both Iran and the regime in Syria, it has emerged as the global patron of both parties. Emerging as a 'playmaker' in Syria and seeking to perpetuate its accomplishments, Russia's influence in other countries has been considerably less. Still, the country made an effort to take its relations with regional powers, including Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to a new level.<sup>19</sup> At a minimum, Russia sought to limit the room for maneuver available to the group of countries, led by the U.S., attempting to redesign the Middle East through deterrence and potential actions. Although Moscow developed a special relationship with Tel Aviv, it nonetheless opposed Washington's unilateral actions regarding Jerusalem and Palestine. Pursuing a special relationship with Haftar in Libya and Egypt's Sisi, the country sought to create an alternative to the relations between those players and Western countries. Maintaining a neutral position regarding the Qatar blockade, Moscow has been openly critical of the U.S. role in the crisis. Meanwhile, the Russians have been largely absent from Yemen and Lebanon. Still, the country started playing a more active role in the Middle East, hoping to present an alternative to regional players having trouble with their global allies. Through those steps, Russia has played a balancing role in regional conflicts and competition.

### ***Turkey: Multilateral Engagement***

Having traditionally played a balancing role in tensions between Iran and the Gulf and Israel, Turkey made an effort to de-escalate tensions instead of par-

## **The reason why Turkey raises questions about the anti-Iran bloc's roadmap is because it does not want the current tensions between Iran and Israel and the Gulf to evolve into a hot conflict**

icipating in the conflict. Although the country has strong economic relations with Iran and held negotiations with Iran and Iraq on the Syrian conflict and the KRG independence referendum, it has been critical of Tehran's expansionism in recent years. Turkey's take on the current crisis and its regional repercussions, however, differs from the views of both sides.

Turkey essentially compartmentalizes its relations with Iran into two areas. The first group consists of bilateral contacts on politics, security, culture and the economy. With the exception of economic relations, it is difficult to argue that the relationship has been uncomplicated. However, Ankara seeks to compartmentalize the various areas, hoping that problems

in one area won't have a negative impact on others. Due to this process of compartmentalization, Turkey and Iran have been able to continue dialogue at times of crisis and despite certain disagreements. The Turkish government's position on the most recent wave of protests in Iran, for example, differed from the anti-Iran bloc. Noting that the protests were a domestic Iranian issue, Turkey criticized outside interventions in the country's internal affairs.

The second area relates to Iranian expansionism in the Middle East. Like many other regional powers, the Turks are unhappy with Tehran's expansionist agenda, efforts to fuel instability through proxies and exploitation of sectarian identity for geopolitical gain. In recent years, the relations between Turkey and Iran have been strained primarily for this reason. The countries disagree most visibly in Syria, where Iran provides unconditional (and bloody) support to Bashar al-Assad's regime and fuels region-wide instability by deploying tens of thousands of militias to the conflict zone. Likewise, it is no secret that Iran has been one of the most vocal critics of Operation Olive Branch and deployed certain militia groups to Afrin in order to support the terrorist organization PKK. Although Syria talks are underway within the Astana framework, the two countries do not see eye-to-eye in this area. Therefore, it is important to note that Turkey, Russia and Iran haven't formed an actual bloc –even though they facilitated dialogue in Astana and Sochi. With regard to Iranian expansionism, Turkey agrees with the anti-Iran bloc in select areas. In particular, the Turks share the concerns of Israel and the Gulf on the presence of Iranian-backed militias in Syria.

The reason why Turkey raises questions about the anti-Iran bloc's roadmap is because it does not want the current tensions between Iran and Israel and the Gulf to evolve into a hot conflict. The country maintains that methodological

errors and competing priorities among members of the bloc, which has yet to produce a sustainable strategy, could unleash a new wave of chaos in the Middle East. After all, it is necessary for the various players, which would like to contain Iranian expansionism, to reach a consensus and concentrate on shared goals. Instead, the developments that took place in the wake of Trump's visit to Riyadh fueled polarization, jeopardizing any hope of a consensus and distracting the various countries from their goals. For example, the Qatar crisis, an ideologically motivated issue that occurred at a time when consolidating the Gulf was crucial, actually undermined the fight against Iranian expansionism. Interestingly enough, countries like Qatar and various movements, which do not share the ideology of Israel and the Gulf, are effectively compelled to side with Tehran in this conflict. Nonetheless, Turkey continues to maintain cordial relations with both Iran and countries like Saudi Arabia.

Particularly the ideologically-motivated actions of the UAE tend to distract the bloc's attention from Iran and effectively expand Tehran's room to maneuver. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi's hostility towards Turkey goes beyond the borders of the Middle East. It is no secret that the UAE's media outlets have been smearing Turkish military bases in Somalia and Qatar, the country's ambassador to the U.S. invested heavily into anti-Turkish lobbying efforts and think tanks, such as the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, which sought to legitimize the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey, receive funding from Abu Dhabi. The country's ideologically-motivated approach poisons Turkey-Gulf relations just as it created major problems for Saudi Arabia in Yemen.

One of the biggest shortcomings of the anti-Iran bloc's roadmap to contain Tehran's influence is related to the alienation of mainstream actors with the potential to limit Iran's religious and social influence in the region. Provided that Mbs' push for 'moderate Islam' will create an apolitical Salafism rather than a mainstream Sunni identity, Iran's containment seems unlikely without that religious and social hinterland. In the absence of Sunni movements, which in many countries are being eliminated under pressure from the Gulf bloc, efforts to contain Iranian influence will be devoid of a strong religious and sociological basis. To be clear, the movements in question closely resemble Turkey's religious and sociological background and political positions. To weaken Tehran's political influence, the divisions among and the erosion of Sunni political movements in countries with strong Iranian influence, from Yemen to Iraq, must be addressed. Therefore, the Gulf must think strategically, rather than ideologically, to strengthen its ties to regional players like Turkey and promote the mainstream's political participation in relevant countries.

At this time, there is no axis that could counter-balance the polarization between Iran and Israel and the Gulf countries, which concentrates on the Middle East but affects a range of countries from Pakistan to Morocco, and to



Leaders of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain did not participate in the 38<sup>th</sup> Summit of GCC following their blockade of Qatar. The meeting lasted just for a couple of hours.

YASSER AL-ZAYYAT / AFP / Getty Images

reduce existing tensions. Turkey does not have the capacity to overcome the polarization between Iran, Israel and the Gulf by forming a new axis either. Instead, the country engages in indirect criticism of the Gulf countries and direct criticism of Iran, and expects regional players to cooperate more closely and create a new order. Still, Turkey provides ‘balancing’ support to countries, which have been negatively affected by said polarization, in order to preserve a neutral middle ground. At the same time, the country seeks to strengthen its defense cooperation, along with political and economic relations, with countries like Kuwait, Oman and Pakistan, with which it sees eye-to-eye in a number of areas.

## The Stages of Polarization

Providing a brief summary regarding the individual game plans of regional and global powers helps to understand better the polarization that is taking shape in the region during the last years. The power struggle between Iran and the anti-Iran bloc has gone beyond a rivalry in recent months and evolved into a regional calibration effort. This competition and calibration attempt takes place in other countries –rather than Iran and its opponents. Yemen, Saudi Arabia’s top priority; Qatar, the UAE’s main focus; Lebanon, where the anti-Iran bloc faces the greatest challenges; Syria, where Iran consolidated its power and regional fault lines have been broken; and Palestine, which is Is-



rael's top priority, set the stage for the most recent developments.

### ***Qatar: An Ideologically-Charged Blockade***

Under ordinary circumstances, the anti-Iran bloc would be expected to strengthen their alliances with other countries in their fight against Iran. However, it became clear that realpolitik meant little for the Saudi-led Gulf coalition's Qatar policy. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which accused Doha of meddling in the internal affairs of Arab countries, supporting terrorism and collaborating with Iran, launched a blockade with support from several countries where they exerted considerable influence. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE had been critical of Qatar's anti-establishment position during the Arab Spring and, in particular, its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. This competition, at the heart of which lie ideological differences, manifested itself in Syria, Egypt, Libya and Palestine.

Having competed (and even clashed) with Qatar in various parts of the world in the past, the anti-Qatar bloc began to target Doha as part of their new regional blueprint. Their requirements for lifting the blockade aimed at subjecting Qatar to a comprehensive political and ideological recalibration. Some of those conditions were as follows: severing diplomatic ties with Iran, cutting ties with terrorist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, al-Qaeda and Hezbollah, shutting down *Al Jazeera* and its sister networks, eliminating Turkey's military presence in Qatar, cutting financial support to all individuals and organizations viewed as 'terrorists' by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the UAE, etc. Qatar had to meet these demands within 10 days and allow a monitoring mission to establish whether or not Qatar accepts and executes these demands.

These conditions, which Qatar considered unacceptable, were particularly significant because they showed the deepening political and ideological differences between Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE over the past seven years. Needless to say, Trump's Riyadh visit and Washington's efforts to reshape the Middle East in cooperation with Israel and the Gulf countries played an important role in the transformation of disagreements into a blockade. The Qatar crisis is important for at least two reasons. It shows the agenda of the U.S., Israel and the Gulf countries, formed on the basis of hostility towards Iran, goes beyond containing Tehran. Secondly, it establishes the anti-Iran bloc ideological steps, such as the Qatar blockade, instead of adhering to realpolitik. After all, it is possible to argue that Qatar has been fighting Iranian proxies in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq for years. The fact that Doha has been punished, citing its relationship with Tehran, suggests that the blockade was about ideo-



**The Qatar crisis was a manifestation of the deepening ideological divide rather than the traditional Iran-Gulf rivalry in the Middle East**

logical differences and Qatar's independent foreign policy initiatives rather than Iran itself. In other words, the Qatar crisis was a manifestation of the deepening ideological divide rather than the traditional Iran-Gulf rivalry in the Middle East.

### ***Lebanon: On the Brink of Explosion***

One of the most politically fragile countries in the Middle East, Lebanon made headlines again in recent months due to Saudi Arabia's attempt to remove Prime Minister Saad Hariri from power. Although domestic tensions in the country received little attention against the backdrop of the Syrian civil war, its political balance of power remained fragile and sensitive nonetheless. In addition to failing to elect a president, Lebanon has experienced immense pressure due to Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war and violent clashes along its porous border with Syria. Again, the country took a backseat to the situation in Syria, which captured the attention of various players including Hezbollah.

Saudi Arabia made a surprise move in late 2017 to summon Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Riyadh, where he was forced to announce his resignation. The controversial announcement fueled allegations that Hariri was being held against his will in the Saudi capital. The Lebanese leader made the case that he was not detained in an interview with *al-Mustaqbal* to no avail. Shortly afterwards, Hariri flew to Paris at the invitation of French President Emmanuel Macron before returning to Beirut, where he held a meeting with President Michel Aoun and announced that his decision to suspend his resignation.<sup>20</sup> As such, Saudi Arabia's political move proved unsuccessful.

Observers accounted for Hariri's involuntary resignation in three ways. According to the first explanation, Riyadh was dissatisfied with the Lebanese prime minister's crackdown on Hezbollah. Others suggested that Saudi Arabia wanted to start a political crisis in Lebanon in an effort to marginalize Hezbollah. Finally, some analysts argued that Hariri was an ally of the losing side in Saudi Arabia's game of thrones.

The above mentioned explanations, individually and collectively, could account for the crisis. At this time, it would appear that Saudi Arabia is unwilling to launch a direct military intervention in Lebanon and instead seeks to paint a target on Hezbollah's back through political and economic pressure. It seems more likely that Tel Aviv will conduct military operations against specific Hezbollah targets, whereas Israel and the U.S. build political and economic pressure on the group.

At the same time, the crisis revealed the anti-Iran bloc hasn't yet developed a clear strategy to combat Hezbollah in Lebanon –although they clearly intend

to take action. The lack of a coherent strategy, coupled with Hezbollah's consolidation of military power over the past seven years, remains the most serious challenge to the anti-Iran bloc's plans. The group, which continues to dominate Lebanese politics and the country's national security structure, has further strengthened its grip largely thanks to the Syrian civil war. Meanwhile, Hezbollah is known to have relocated some of its forces from Syria to Lebanon due to the increasing likelihood of military intervention. Under the circumstances, it seems the effort to mount political pressure on Hezbollah through Hariri's resignation has failed to make the desired effect. Quite the contrary, the general population in Lebanon, including Sunni Muslims, criticizes Saudi Arabia. Moving forward, future steps against Hezbollah are unlikely to succeed unless the group's adversaries develop a new, comprehensive and well thought-out strategy. It is therefore no coincidence that Lebanon has been largely ignored by the anti-Iran bloc in the wake of Saudi Arabia's failed Hariri move.

## **The power struggle between Iran and the anti-Iran bloc has gone beyond a rivalry in recent months and evolved into a regional calibration effort**

### ***Yemen: A Crisis within a Crisis***

Although Yemen doesn't rank high in Washington or Tel Aviv's lists of priorities, it is atop of the list of external threats against Saudi Arabia. In the Yemen crisis, which was MBS' first foreign policy and national security experiment, Saudi Arabia has been unable to get satisfactory results. Prolonged clashes, the Houthi movement's increasing level of activity and Iran's influence (which represents a self-fulfilling prophecy) fueled what the United Nations considers a major humanitarian crisis. The Houthi rebels, whose relationship with Iran was relatively weak in the past, joined forces with Ali Abdullah Saleh, a former Saudi ally, to seize control of strategic areas including the capital Sanaa. In response, Saudi Arabia and the UAE reached out to Saleh in an effort to turn him against the Houthis. His assassination by the Houthi rebels, however, significantly weakened the Saudi-UAE bloc's position in Yemen. Unable to get results despite heavy air bombardment, Riyadh has yet to develop an exit strategy from the war-torn country.

Although the UAE is often assumed to act in line with Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi seeks to divide Yemen –which is a considerable concern to Riyadh and the disagreement between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on policy has been one of the main reasons for their failure in Yemen. For example, Riyadh continues its loose partnership with the al-Islah movement backed by the al-Ahmar family –an important part of the anti-Houthi bloc. The UAE, in turn, takes drastic measures against al-Islah due to the group's links to the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen. According to international monitors, Abu Dhabi has established

## Operation Olive Branch, established that the YPG militants, to whom the UAE reached out in the past, are not an effective force against Tehran

a secret network of prisons across Yemen, where a large number of locals, including members of al-Islah, have been tortured to death.<sup>21</sup>

In Yemen, where the Saudi-Iranian rivalry took a violent turn, clashes have a local and regional nature. The Houthi rebels had formed militias when their relationship with Iran was considerably weaker than assumed. Ahead of the most recent clashes, the group stepped up its political and military cooperation with Tehran. During this process, Iran is known to have indoctrinated Houthi fighters in an

effort to turn them into a concrete threat against Saudi Arabia. The Houthis, who lack the political and military capacity to govern Yemen, exploit Riyadh's strategic shortcomings and failure to mobilize international support. In truth, it is possible to suggest that a number of promises were made to Saudi Arabia with regard to Iran's containment in Yemen. However, the messages of solidarity never translated into military and operational support –which raises questions about the methodology and chance of success of Riyadh and its allies.

Today, Saudi Arabia must keep a number of local and regional dynamics in mind. On the one hand, the country must support its allies in Yemen and find a solution to the humanitarian crisis. To be clear, the assassination of Ali Abdullah Saleh significantly limited Riyadh's options on the ground. Moving forward, Saudi Arabia could step up its assault and strengthen its ties with local groups such as al-Islah. The UAE's destructive effect, however, must be taken into consideration when it comes to al-Islah. In other words, Abu Dhabi will certainly make an effort to prevent closer cooperation between Saudi Arabia and al-Islah.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia must gather regional and international support to contain Iran. At this time, it is possible to note that countries like the U.S. and Israel, with which Riyadh sees eye-to-eye on Lebanon, are unwilling to provide concrete support to ongoing operations in Yemen. Under the circumstances, Saudi Arabia is compelled to create a new roadmap, which involves dialogue with local players, in order to prevent the further strengthening of Iran's influence in the country. Otherwise, the potential challenges in Lebanon could emerge in Yemen to pose a direct threat to Riyadh.

### ***Syria: The Heart of Proxy Wars***

In the rivalry between Iran and its adversaries, Syria has witnessed an increase in Tehran's influence over the years. Since the Syrian civil war broke out, Iran has been involved in the conflict –directly through the Revolutionary Guards



and indirectly through the proxy of Shia militias.<sup>22</sup> The anti-Iran bloc, in turn, has taken steps either limited or not directly related to the regional rivalry. Although the U.S. supported the anti-regime opposition in the beginning, the fight against ISIS became Washington's top priority in the wake of the siege of Ayn al-Arab.<sup>23</sup> With a small number of exceptions, the U.S. refrained from taking action against the Assad regime and the Iranian influence in Syria. Meanwhile, Israel limited its involvement to airstrikes against the positions and military convoys of Hezbollah –which it considers a national security threat. Tel Aviv did not conduct operations that could change the balance of power in the Syrian conflict and limit Iranian expansionism. Rather, its priority has been to decrease Hezbollah's missile capabilities and secure its land borders.

By contrast, Saudi Arabia was distracted from Syria, where it supported certain opposition groups historically, when conflict broke out in Yemen. Gradually, the country decreased its military support to the moderate rebels. At this time, Saudi Arabia does not have enough proxies and instruments in Syria to challenge the Iranian influence. Having engaged in talks with certain tribes in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor in cooperation with the UAE, Riyadh does not find itself in a position to use the tribal card against Iran. Although Saudi Arabia has a strong influence on the High Negotiations Committee, an umbrella body created to represent the Syrian opposition, it seeks to transform the group by accommodating the objections of Cairo and Moscow. This step, which represents a political agreement with Russia, reduces the political transition prescribed by the UN Security Council's Resolution No. 2254 to constitutional reform and elections without requiring Assad to step down – which stands in contrast with Riyadh's original position. It would appear that Russian President Putin and President Trump reached an understanding on narrowing down the scope of UNSC Resolution No. 2254 at their meeting in Vietnam.<sup>24</sup>

Although political negotiations over Syria reached a new stage, this new era is unlikely to benefit Saudi Arabia, Israel or the U.S., which agree on the goal of Iran's containment –at least on paper. In other words, the Astana and Sochi talks are unlikely to provide strategic benefits to the Gulf countries, which have been unable to respond to Iran and Russia on the ground or at the negotiating table. After all, securing the regime's future at a time when Assad continues to depend on Iran and Russia for his survival effectively means that Tehran's presence in Syria will be consolidated. Although Saudi Arabia and the U.S. seem to adopt what is basically the Russian position, Iran will continue to strengthen its influence in Syria through its proxy, the Assad regime.

Moving forward, it is possible to suggest that the anti-Iran bloc will take two actions against Iran in Syria. First, Israel will continue to target the arsenals of

## UAE and Saudi Arabia seek to weaken the military wing of Hamas to broker an agreement between the group and Fatah, whilst pledging economic recovery to Palestinians aggrieved by the blockade through the proxy of Mohammad Dahlan and with the assistance of Egypt

branch, against Iran. Operation Olive Branch, however, established that the YPG militants, to whom the UAE reached out in the past, are not an effective force against Tehran.

### *Palestine: The Heart of the Conflict*

The developments in Yemen, Lebanon and Syria resulted in increased political activity in Palestine. The anti-Iran bloc –namely the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel– seems to be directly involved in the most recent developments in the area. Likewise, Egypt works together with the Gulf to use its influence on Palestinian politics and its land border as a trump card. Although it is not directly related to the goal of Iran’s containment, Palestine remains an important item on the anti-Iran bloc’s agenda.

In October 2017, Fatah and Hamas agreed to form a reconciliation government. The negotiations were brokered by Egypt and Dahlan under the auspices of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The newly-formed government took steps to promote social reconciliation by providing financial support to the families of Palestinians, who died in clashes following Dahlan’s coup attempt in Gaza. To be clear, this move was orchestrated by the UAE to facilitate Dahlan’s return to Palestinian politics. Following the reconciliation government’s takeover of border crossings in Hamas-controlled Gaza, Egypt responded by opening the Rafah border crossing. Finally, against the backdrop of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was summoned to Riyadh to hold talks with Saudi officials. Abbas was allegedly told by Saudi Arabia to accept Jared Kushner’s ‘peace’ plan or resign from his post and warned about the armed wing of Hamas and the Iranian influence over the group.<sup>25</sup>

It is possible to argue that the UAE and Saudi Arabia seek to weaken the military wing of Hamas to broker an agreement between the group and Fatah, whilst

Iran and its proxies along with strategic areas. By taking that action, it will seek to limit and deter the Iranian threat emanating from Syria. At the same time, Israel will seek to stop military deployment from Syria to Lebanon. Secondly, the anti-Iran bloc will engage in talks with Russia in an effort to fuel tensions between the Russians and the Iranians over Syria. Moreover, the Gulf countries could engage with the Assad regime as well as cooperate with the YPG, the designated terrorist organization PKK’s Syrian

pledging economic recovery to Palestinians aggrieved by the blockade through the proxy of Mohammad Dahlan and with the assistance of Egypt. Their goal is to create a new political environment in Palestine, where Dahlan can become more popular and support the 'peace' plan developed by Jared Kushner and his close ally, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. As members of the anti-Iran bloc, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have supported this plan. Their attempts to undermine UN efforts to condemn the Trump Administration's Jerusalem move could be considered linked to the same group identity. Particularly, the decision by Mahmoud Abbas to attend the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's Istanbul summit could result in the aforementioned alliance's raising questions about Palestinian leadership. The greatest obstacle to the success of the aid plan is the lack of consensus between the various parties and the fact that there are a lot of moving parts. Implementing this plan could contribute to the fight against Iran by minimizing Iran's influence over Palestine, which took a hit during the Syrian civil war. It is important to note, however, that mounting pressure on Palestinian groups –in particular the military wing of Hamas– could create additional room to maneuver for Iran in Palestine.

### **Conclusion: Regional Rivalry or Re-design Attempt?**

A quick look at the range of players and countries in the Middle East, who are engaged in conflict and/or competition, shows that we cannot account for the emerging alliances and developments in the region with reference to Iran's containment. It would appear that Iran's containment is part of a broader effort by the emerging bloc to redesign the region. All previously-mentioned stakeholders consider the chaotic environment in the Middle East and the Trump presidency as an opportunity to further their agendas. In a rush to seize that opportunity, they seek to impose their own agendas on the rest. This situation, coupled with special agendas, has effectively undermined efforts to combat Iranian influence in the Middle East.

At a time when coordination in the Gulf region is absolutely crucial, the Qatar blockade, which started with accusations against Doha, weakened the fight against Iran. The blockade, which has been upheld by the UAE in particular, compels Qatar to work more closely with Tehran. The Qatar blockade, a product of intra-Gulf rivalry and the UAE's ideologically-motivated war, creates tensions in the region that Iran could exploit, and renders impossible any kind of coordination. At the same time, the marginalization of Kuwait by Saudi Arabia and the UAE represents a method to which the anti-Iran bloc must not resort. Likewise, the systematic targeting of Turkish interests by Abu Dhabi and its extensions in Saudi Arabia suggest that either their actual goal isn't to contain Iran or they suffer from an extraordinary lack of strategic depth. Ironically, Turkey is a unique player that shares the concerns of Israel and the Gulf

**As chaos looms in the region, Saudi Arabia, the U.S., Israel and the UAE are involved in some kind of grand bargain. The purpose of the said bargain is to redesign the Middle East, which was shaken by the Arab Spring, by creating a new status quo**

on Iranian expansionism whilst disagreeing with the anti-Iran bloc on other issues.

As chaos looms in the region, Saudi Arabia, the U.S., Israel and the UAE are involved in some kind of grand bargain. The purpose of the said bargain is to redesign the Middle East, which was shaken by the Arab Spring, by creating a new status quo. Despite suffering from a shortage of necessary tools and strategy,

the anti-Iran bloc seeks to restore the status quo by containing Iran. The new status quo would involve the weakening of Iran in Lebanon and Yemen, where it poses a direct threat to the anti-Iran bloc, the reincarnation of the regime in Syria, forcing Palestine to reach an agreement with Israel under Dahlan's leadership, disciplining Gulf rivals, such as Qatar, through economic and even military measures, reviving the pre-Arab Spring dominant ideology by paying lip service to reforms, and targeting state and non-state actors that object to that ideology.

It appears that the Trump presidency's effect on the Middle East will be to fuel polarization between Iran, Israel and the Gulf rather than to create a new regional order. This situation, in turn, makes Saudi Arabia, Israel and the UAE –the ambitious players– look for a new regional design. However, the instruments mobilized by Iran, coupled with the Gulf's inadequate capacity and Washington's lack of a coherent strategy, could only serve to deepen regional chaos. ■

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