



## Multipolaridad e inestabilidad en Oriente Medio

### Resumen:

Hace ya más de una década que Estados Unidos decidió reorientar su esfuerzo estratégico, hasta entonces muy volcado en Oriente Medio, hacia el área Asia-Pacífico, lo que aconsejaba acometer una reducción de su presencia militar. Aunque las propias dinámicas regionales han impedido, de momento, llevar a cabo este ajuste, la incertidumbre que esta mera posibilidad provoca, en unión a los efectos causados por las primaveras árabes, han obligado a las potencias regionales a revisar su esquema de relaciones, dando lugar a un orden regional, aún en evolución, que gira en torno a cuatro polos de poder enfrentados entre sí. El conjunto constituye un sistema multipolar desequilibrado altamente inestable.

En este complejo entramado de relaciones, es a lo largo del eje Irán-Israel donde la tensión alcanza su punto máximo, por lo que son los acontecimientos que afectan a uno u otro de sus polos los que mayor potencial tienen para influir en el sistema.

### Palabras clave:

Oriente Medio, orden regional, EE. UU., Arabia Saudita, Israel, Irán, Turquía, Egipto, Emiratos Árabes Unidos.

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## Introduction

In November 2008, days before the end of his second and last term in office, President Bush agreed with the Iraqi government to withdraw US troops deployed in Iraq since the military campaign that led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003<sup>1</sup>. With this decision, the US marked a sharp change of course in its Middle East foreign policy, ending decades of steadily increasing military presence that had nevertheless contributed little to regional stability. Fully endorsed by President Obama<sup>2</sup>, this decision led to the last soldiers withdrawing from Iraqi territory on 18 December 2011<sup>3</sup>. Few thought that the US would be forced to return just three years later, but at the time there was little doubt that, beyond partisan visions or interests, reducing its presence in the Middle East had become a matter of national interest.

At almost the same time, late 2010 saw the beginning of a wave of street protests demanding dignity, human rights, freedom and democracy that spread throughout 2011 across the Arab world with varying results, ending in the worst cases – as in Syria and Libya – in armed conflict (Figure 1).

No cause-effect relationship can be established between the two events, but both eventually convinced regional leaders of the need to adapt to this new situation that was beyond their control and threatened to overwhelm them. A process of readjusting their power relations thus began, ultimately giving birth to a new geopolitical order.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq On the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organisation of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq', 17 November 2008. Version published by *The New York Times*. Available at [http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/20081119\\_SOFA\\_FINAL\\_AGREED\\_TEXT.pdf](http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/20081119_SOFA_FINAL_AGREED_TEXT.pdf) (accessed October 2021).

<sup>2</sup> BAKER, Peter, 'With Pledges to Troops and Iraqis, Obama Details Pullout', *The New York Times*, 27 February 2009. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/28/washington/28troops.html> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>3</sup> 'Timeline: Invasion, surge, withdrawal; U.S. forces in Iraq', *REUTERS*, 18 December 2011. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-usa-pullout-idUSTRE7BH08E20111218> (accessed October 2021).

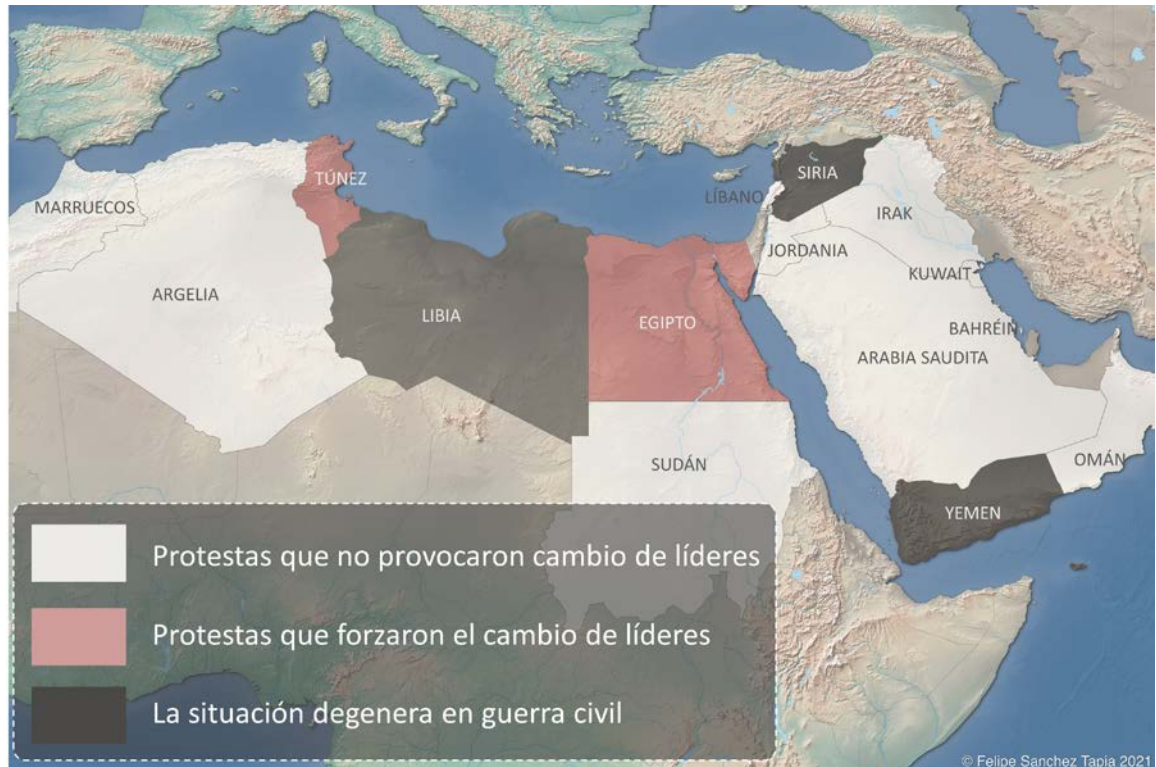


Figure 1: The Arab Springs.

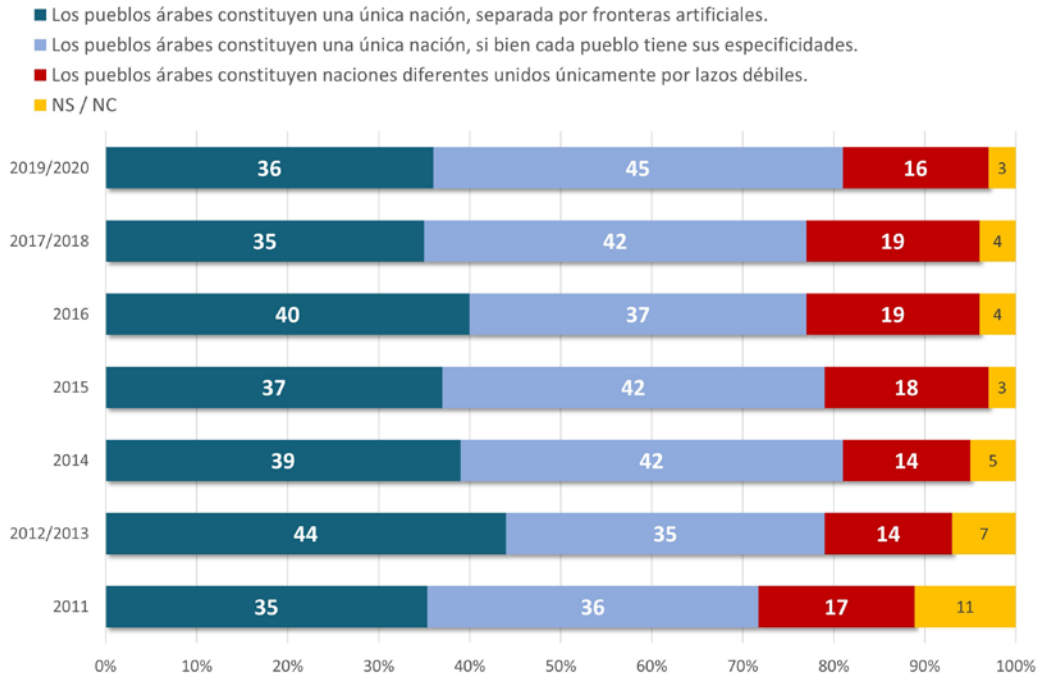
It is difficult at this stage to foresee what the final shape of this emerging new order will be, although we can already glimpse the outlines of what it might look. Identifying them is the subject of this analysis. We will initially examine the effects of Arab Springs on regional relations, which have ended up forming a system of antagonistic blocs, and then we will refer to the influence that the geopolitical competition of the major global powers exerts on the whole. Finally, having briefly analysed the latest actions of the regional powers, we will draw conclusions.

### Effect of the riots

From the outset, the Arab Spring phenomenon was perceived as a transnational movement that undermined the foundations of more or less autocratic regimes exercising power over societies in which, for historical reasons, national sentiment is weak. The sense of belonging to a great Arab nation generally trumps national identities (Figure 2), which could facilitate the spread of a disturbing phenomenon across artificial borders. For the local regimes, the fall of Presidents Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt after the first wave of protests highlighted the magnitude of the threat, and staying in

power became their first motivation<sup>4</sup>. Their response was initially to seek their own protection, but not all did so in the same way; nor with the same success.

### Sentimiento de pertenencia a una única nación árabe



Arab Opinion Index 2019-20. Encuesta realizada a 28.288 individuos residentes en 13 países árabes.

Figure 2: Sense of belonging to a single Arab nation. Source: Arab Opinion Index 2019-20.

For some, as was the case in Kuwait or Jordan, a change of government was enough to calm things down and bring the situation under control. For others, such as Oman, Saudi Arabia or Morocco, concessions in the form of timid reforms achieved the same effect, accompanied, in the case of the Gulf monarchies, by vast injections of money into the system in the form of salary increases for public employees or generous subsidies for consumer goods or energy products<sup>5</sup>. There was no hesitation in using force when necessary to crush protests, as was the case in Bahrain, but those who were unable to control events – Syria, Libya and, years later, Yemen – eventually ended up in bloody civil wars.

<sup>4</sup> LYNCH, Marc, *The New Arab Wars*, Public Affairs, Perseus Books LLC, 2017, P. 57.

<sup>5</sup> In the first half of 2011 alone, the Saudi government announced a package of economic subsidies in areas such as education, health and social assistance worth more than 70 billion dollars, a package that by the second quarter of 2012 had already absorbed 130 billion dollars. Additionally, the government launched youth employment programmes in the security sector and religious establishments, and more than 100,000 social housing units were built between 2011 and 2013. OSMAN, Tarek, *Islamism: What it Means for the Middle East and the World*, Kindle edition, p. 152.

Of the multiple cases, it is those of Egypt on the one hand, and Syria and Iraq on the other, that have had the greatest impact in altering the hitherto established regional order. They did so not only because of the internal consequences, but also because events gradually exacerbated pre-existing tensions in the region, such as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, whose effects have been felt in the war in Yemen, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the conflict between Turkey and the PKK, which has spilled over into northern Syria.

### ***The case of Egypt***

The case of Egypt is paradigmatic, and although the crisis in this country has its origins in internal causes, its effects reverberate with intensity beyond its borders. The key here was the emergence of political Islam embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), an organisation that had in fact hardly participated in the initial stages of the uprisings but quickly took political control of the situation. It was precisely around General Abdelfatah El-Sisi's coup d'état, which ousted them from power with broad Saudi-Emirati support,<sup>6</sup> that two opposing blocs were articulated, creating a geopolitical fault line that has only widened to the present day. On one side were the countries most closely identified with the organisation, Turkey and Qatar, and on the other, those that considered it a threat to their internal stability and had consequently outlawed it: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in addition to Egypt itself.

Western countries did little to reverse the situation in Egypt, and more than a few of them welcomed the overthrow and outlawing of the MB with some relief. Illegalised and persecuted by the new regime, little remains of the organisation's operational structure in Egypt and many of its leaders, fleeing the country, ended up finding refuge in Turkey and Qatar.

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<sup>6</sup> LIPPMAN, Thomas W., 'Support for el-Sisi: What's in it for al-Saud?', *Middle East Institute*, 3 September 2013. Available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/support-el-sisi-whats-it-al-saud> (accessed September 2021).

## ***Syria and Iraq***

The geographical continuum formed by Syria and Iraq is the second of the scenarios that has had the greatest impact on regional balances. Strategically located between the great poles of power, the beginning of the revolts against the autocratic regime of Bashar al-Assad, together with the vacuum created in Iraq after the US withdrawal in 2011, created the conditions for the progressive intervention of its powerful neighbours: Iran trying to maintain sympathetic governments in both countries; the Gulf states in support of various opposition factions; Israel to limit Iranian and allied expansion, especially the Lebanese militia Hezbollah; and Turkey to try to overthrow Assad in firstly, and curb the expansion of an independent Kurdish entity with connections to the PKK along its southern border second.

## ***An unbalanced multipolar order***

In fact, the intervention of these countries, which has been progressively increasing, is due more to an attempt to gain strategic depth than to exercise dominance *per se* over these spaces. At regional level, this strategic depth can be interpreted under the logic of 'offensive realism' proposed by John Mearsheimer, describing how they 'look for opportunities to alter the balance of power by acquiring additional increments of power at the expense of potential rivals'<sup>7</sup>. In other words, the aim is to project power into these spaces in order to prevent a rival power from doing so. The result has been a proliferation of proxy wars in which the major regional contenders avoid direct confrontation as much as possible, but which have had, and continue to have, devastating consequences.

Much has been written about the sectarian nature of the conflict in the Middle East, understood as the confrontation between Sunni Islam and Shia Islam. This division certainly has its importance in power relations between states, but it should not be overestimated. Along the realistic lines of the previous paragraph, religious diversity throughout the region offers opportunities to exert influence in neighbouring countries, but support for these communities is rarely a motivation for state action. The reasons are

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<sup>7</sup> MEARSHEIMER, John J., *The tragedy of great powers politics*, updated edition, Norton&Company, 2014, p. 21.

often geopolitical, otherwise it would be difficult to understand Iran's support, for example, for radical Sunni groups such as Hamas.

All these developments, with mutually reinforcing effects, have shaped a regional order around four poles of power that either seek to secure their strategic interests in their neighbourhood, generating an intermediate zone of great instability stretching from the Persian Gulf to Libya<sup>8</sup>, via Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the eastern Mediterranean, or use pre-existing conflicts (Yemen) to harass and unbalance their rivals (Figure 3):

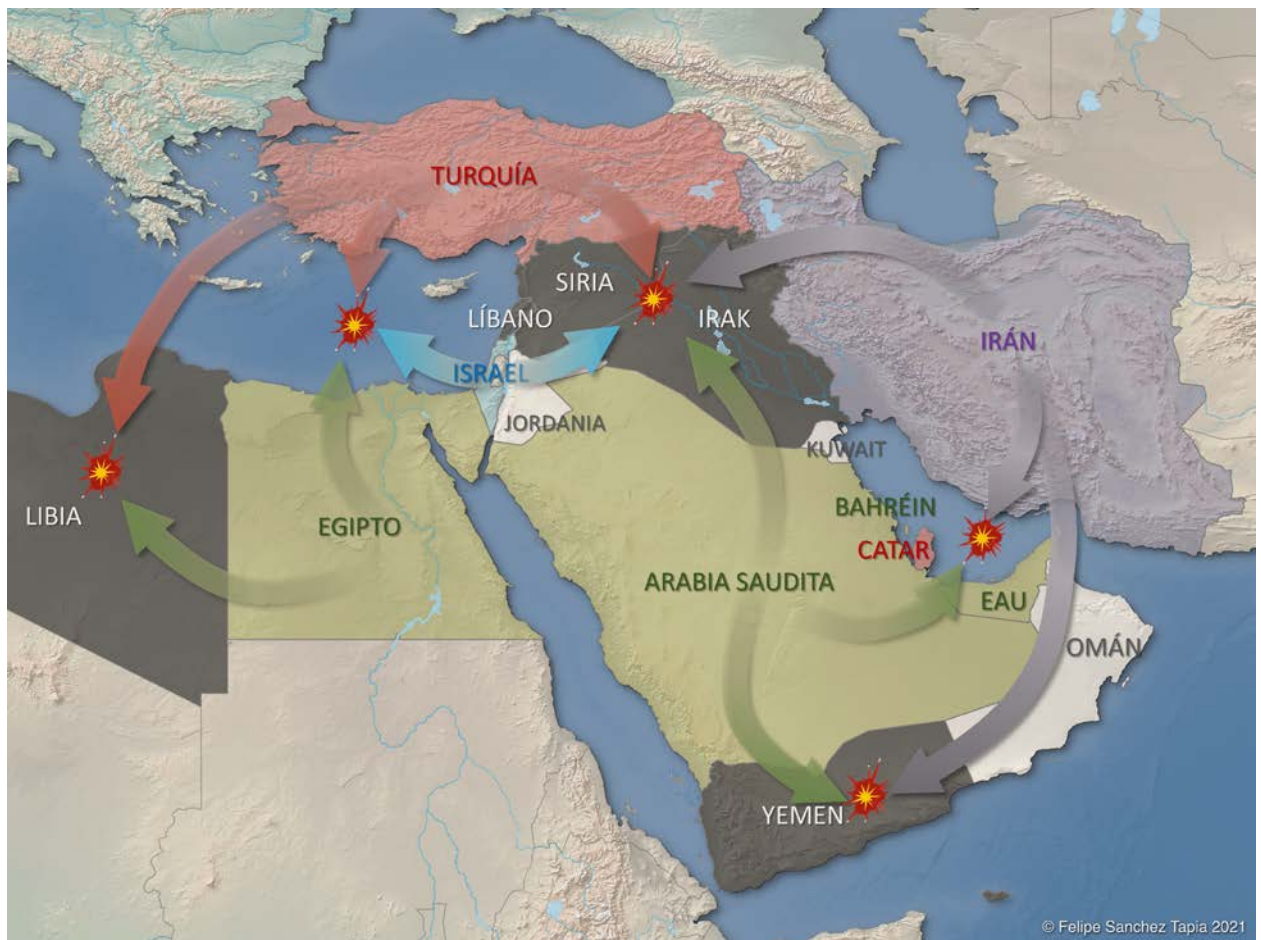


Figure 3: Configuration of antagonistic blocs in the Middle East.

- The first bloc is made up of Turkey and Qatar, whose interests are not always aligned with those of the major global powers. Turkey pursues an independent and assertive foreign policy with a strong security component while Qatar, with

<sup>8</sup> The Libyan conflict also follows this pattern. Obviously, Libya is Egypt's neighbour, but from Turkey's point of view, Egypt is also part of its neighbourhood. In fact, both countries signed an exclusive economic zone delimitation agreement in 2019.



abundant economic resources, exerts considerable influence by using soft power instruments<sup>9</sup>.

- On the opposite side is the aforementioned anti-MB bloc of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt, which seeks to contain the expansion of both Turkey and Iran. In this 'anti' bloc, which extends its influence to the eastern Mediterranean area<sup>10</sup>, the UAE, initially a satellite of Saudi Arabia, has become more prominent and is pursuing an increasingly independent foreign policy, befitting a genuine regional power.
- A third pole of power is represented by Iran, Saudi Arabia's traditional rival, whose interests are threatened by both the 'anti' bloc countries and Israel. The US maximum pressure campaign has pushed Iran closer to Russia and China, having recently formalised its candidacy to become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a goal Iran has been pursuing for years<sup>11</sup> and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)<sup>12</sup>.
- The fourth pole is Israel, for which Iran remains the main threat. Its military actions in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon are essentially aimed at preventing Iran or its satellites from occupying positions from which they can directly threaten its territory. Its interests clash doubly with those of Turkey, which on the one hand, seeks to set itself up as the main defender of the Palestinian cause, openly supporting Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and which on the other, seeks to secure a strong position in the sharing of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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<sup>9</sup> CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio, 'From Soft Power to Subtle Power: The Case of Qatar'. IEEE Analysis Paper 38/2021. Available at [https://www.ieee.es/contenido/noticias/2021/10/DIEEEA38\\_2021\\_JOSCAS\\_Catar.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/contenido/noticias/2021/10/DIEEEA38_2021_JOSCAS_Catar.pdf) (accessed October 2021).

<sup>10</sup> This bloc, most notably the UAE, has positioned itself strongly in support of Greek and Cypriot theses in the Eastern Mediterranean, adding additional pressure to its relations with Turkey.

<sup>11</sup> 'Iran Granted Full Membership of Shanghai Alliance SCO', *Tasnim News Agency*, 17 September 2021. Available at <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2021/09/17/2573070/iran-granted-full-membership-of-shanghai-alliance-sco> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>12</sup> 'Lavrov: Process of Iran's permanent Membership in EAEU clicked', *IRNA News Agency*, 7 October 2021. Available at <https://en.irna.ir/news/84495766/Lavrov-Process-of-Iran-s-permanent-membership-in-EAEU-clicked>. (accessed October 2021).

Its strategic position has been considerably strengthened following the presentation of the Century Agreement<sup>13</sup>, which aims to resolve the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and, above all, by the signing in 2020 of the Abraham Accords, whereby Bahrain and the UAE – and subsequently Sudan and Morocco – have recognised and established diplomatic relations with the State of Israel<sup>14</sup>.

Overlapping interests and, above all, common enemies, have brought these poles of power closer together and they have reached a certain ‘two-by-two’ understanding, without establishing formal partnerships. Turkey and Qatar maintain pragmatic relations with Iran that have allowed them to set aside differences to collaborate in specific areas, such as the fight against terrorism<sup>15</sup>, while the ‘anti’ bloc, as we have seen, has undertaken a visible rapprochement with Israel, always with the intention of countering Iranian influence.

Other countries, such as Oman, Kuwait and Jordan, are minor powers and exert limited influence. However, their importance should not be underestimated, either as mediators (Oman and Kuwait) or as key players in the evolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Jordan).

In this multipolar system of power-sharing, the greatest tension shows along the axis separating Israel and Iran, which, to a large extent, conditions all other relations. What happens on this axis has repercussions for the rest of the system. But here, Israel enjoys superiority in both hard and soft power resources (successful economy, effective military force, culture, values, political legitimacy, etc.)<sup>16</sup>. Among them, military superiority, of particular value in a region as troubled as the Middle East, is guaranteed by its nuclear capability and the unconditional support of its US ally<sup>17</sup>. This makes the whole what Mearsheimer calls an ‘unbalanced multipolar system’. The bad news is that of the possible power-sharing systems - bipolar, balanced multipolar and unbalanced multipolar

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<sup>13</sup> ‘PEACE TO PROSPERITY: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People’, *The White House*, January 2020. Available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf> (accessed September 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Among the Arab countries, Egypt and Jordan had already signed peace agreements with Israel in 1979 and 1994, respectively.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Turkey and Iran Orchestrate Joint Military Operations Against Kurdish Insurgents’, *Foundation for Defence of Democracies*, 26 June 2020. Available at <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/06/26/turkey-iran-joint-military-operations-kurds/> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>16</sup> NYE, Joseph, *The Future of Power*. Public Affairs, 2011. p. 99.

<sup>17</sup> ZANOTI, Jim. ‘Israel: Background and U.S. Relations in Brief’, *Congressional Research Service*, 16 September 2021. Available at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R44245.pdf> (accessed October 2021).

- the latter presents the greatest instability and potential for conflict, not least because of the multiple possibilities for miscalculation<sup>18</sup>.

### **The major powers**

Although the development of this geopolitical order is fundamentally the result of regional dynamics, the influence of the major global powers – Russia, China and the United States – cannot be underestimated. Admittedly, they no longer have the ability to shape the regional geopolitical environment at will that they once did, but their influence remains considerable. And in the opposite direction: as the Middle East is one of the arenas where competition for world hegemony is revealed, what happens here influences its power relations.

### **Russia and China**

In addition to questioning US hegemony at global level, which has pushed them to establish a strategic partnership to counter it, both powers share the need for a Middle East that is as stable as possible. And they do so, to a large extent, for similar reasons.

For Russia, intervention in the Middle East serves two fundamental interests: limiting the spread of instability towards its own territory, especially from radical Islamism, and maintaining influence in energy markets originating in the region. Worrying developments in Syria led it to become directly involved in the conflict from 2015 onwards with a carefully calculated military intervention that prevented the fall of the Assad regime, its strongest supporter in the region since Soviet times. On the energy front, Russia has gained a very important tool through the formalisation in 2016 of the OPEC+ agreements, a forum in which it can effectively defend its global energy interests<sup>19</sup>.

To secure its influence, Russia has established cooperative relations with virtually all state and non-state actors with weight in the region, establishing itself as an indispensable

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<sup>18</sup> MEARSHEIMER, John J. *Op. cit.* p. 338 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Declaration of Cooperation OPEC and non-OPEC, 10 December 2016. Available at [https://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/static\\_files\\_project/media/downloads/publications/Declaration%20of%20Cooperation.pdf](https://www.opec.org/opec_web/static_files_project/media/downloads/publications/Declaration%20of%20Cooperation.pdf) (accessed October 2021).

geopolitical actor in this part of the world and regaining its undisputed role as a global power.

China, heavily dependent on energy imports from the Middle East<sup>20</sup> and interested in integrating the region into its Belt and Road project, has not remained on the sidelines either, although for the moment its military presence is practically non-existent. China has woven a tight web of diplomatic relations and investments in all Middle Eastern countries which, together with its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, makes it a priority partner, especially for those like Iran that are isolated.

### ***US foreign policy***

For different reasons, a scenario of stability would also benefit the US. In the end, it is a precondition to reduce its presence in the region, a goal it has been pursuing for over a decade. Without success. Quite the contrary, as the emergence of the Islamic State (Daesh) in 2014 and the need to contain Iran's expansion in the region has not only prevented it from doing so, but has also led the country to substantially increase its forces<sup>21</sup>.

Breaking this trend will not be easy and will oblige the US to make difficult decisions. The question at this point is not so much whether the United States will reduce its presence, but when and how. In this regard, Iraq and Syria are emerging as possible scenarios in which downsizing would fit the premise of 'ending endless wars' with high costs in lives and resources and whose outcomes are questionable. In fact, the end of the US combat mission in Iraq has been already announced<sup>22</sup>. The problem is that the United States cannot completely abandon a region that would be at the mercy of its rivals. It is not likely to do so, and considering that the US has ample room to reduce its military presence without compromising its strategic objectives, it is likely to eventually find the balance.

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<sup>20</sup> 51% of China's crude oil imports come from the Middle East. In the case of gas, the percentage is substantially lower, as only liquefied gas comes from this part of the world, which accounts for approximately 15%. Data: BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2021, 70th edition.

<sup>21</sup> 'The 2019-2020 Iran Crisis and U.S. Military Deployments', *Congressional Research Service*, 9 January 2020.

<sup>22</sup>The end of the combat mission in Iraq has in fact already been decreed. 'Biden, Iraqi prime minister to announce end of U.S. combat mission in Iraq', *NBC News*, 26 July 2021. Available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/biden-iraqi-prime-minister-announce-end-u-s-combat-mission-n1274992> (accessed October 2021).

However, this reduction would require several adjustments. Firstly, the containment of Russia and China, which, as we have seen, are powers that are very attractive to the states of the region, can be much more effective with the cooperation of a Turkey that can also be of great use in managing relations with Iran. American support for the Syrian PYD is the major obstacle preventing a sincere collaborative relationship between the two countries, and a withdrawal from Syria could facilitate understanding. Collaboration with Turkey could also be of great interest in facilitating US access to the Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia's and China's backyard, which, after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, have become virtually out of reach. Turkey may try to play this card to increase its strategic value as an ally, although very deteriorated relations between the two governments will not facilitate this. For the time being, sources claim that the Biden administration has just confirmed its continued support for PYD factions in Syria<sup>23</sup>. This is likely to be the case, at least until *realpolitik* advises otherwise.

In second place, the United States would need to ease tensions with Iran, for which a reissue of the nuclear deal is a *sine qua non*. Negotiations in Vienna have stalled, but the new Iranian government has already signalled its intention to return to the negotiating table, even with conditions that are *a priori* difficult to accept<sup>24</sup>. It will be a long and difficult process with success by no means assured, and which will also have to take into consideration the security requirements of Saudi Arabia and Israel. Meanwhile, signing a new nuclear deal is a prerequisite for Iran to emerge from the deep economic crisis caused by the sanctions regime, among other factors, but it remains to be seen to what extent it is willing to make concessions.

In the long term, and beyond the nuclear issue, the US could benefit greatly if it were "prepared to reach a geopolitical understanding with Iran on the basis of Westphalian principles of non-intervention and develop a compatible concept of region order"<sup>25</sup>. It is certainly a bold gamble, but one that would bring great geopolitical advantages. An understanding with Iran would bring stability to the system, facilitating US withdrawal, while helping to disrupt the dynamics of rapprochement with China and Russia by Iran,

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<sup>23</sup> 'Joe Biden's pledge of support reassures Syria's embattled Kurds', *The Conversation*, 1 October 2021. Available at <https://theconversation.com/joe-bidens-pledge-of-support-reassures-syrias-embattled-kurds-168905> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>24</sup> 'Iran signals it could return to nuclear talks next month', *The Times of Israel*, 4 October 2021. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-signals-it-could-return-to-nuclear-talks-next-month/> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>25</sup> KISSINGER, Henry. *World Order*, DEBATE, January 2016, p. 173.

under US pressure. The dilemma faced is that, to quote Kissinger, "pursuing its own strategic objectives, the United States can be a crucial factor...in determining whether Iran pursues the path of revolutionary Islam or that of a great nation legitimately and importantly lodged in the Westphalian system of states. But America can fulfil that role only on the basis of involvement, not of withdrawal"<sup>26</sup>.

### ***A new web of relationships***

We do not yet know what the final direction of Biden's policy will be, but the recent withdrawal from Afghanistan, showing his more realistic side<sup>27</sup>, has confirmed fears and raised concerns among his regional allies. As former foreign minister and architect of the UAE's participation in the Abraham Accords, Anwar Gargash, recently noted, "We will see in the coming period really what is going on with regards to America's footprint in the region. I don't think we know yet, but Afghanistan is definitely a test and to be honest it is a very worrying test"<sup>28</sup>.

Uncertainty over the degree of US engagement is prompting a review of regional relations to adapt to a geopolitical environment that looks set to see less US involvement, greater relative prominence of China and Russia and, above all, greater autonomy for regional powers in the formation of a geopolitical order 'from within'. A series of actions, public statements, official or unofficial conversations and gestures between rivals thus reflect the great fluidity with which their relations evolve. Realism makes strange travelling companions.

Turkey has ostensibly lowered the aggressive tone of its regional foreign policy and has initiated a diplomatic rapprochement with 'anti' bloc countries, starting with Egypt<sup>29</sup>, but

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 174.

<sup>27</sup> SHIFRINSON, Joshua and WERTHEIM, Stephen, 'Biden the Realist: The President's Foreign Policy Doctrine Has Been Hiding in Plain Sight', *Foreign Affairs*, 9 September 2021. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-09/biden-realist> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>28</sup> 'UAE official says time to manage rivalry with Iran and Turkey', *Middle East Monitor*, 3 October 2021. Available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211003-uae-official-says-time-to-manage-rivalry-with-iran-and-turkey/> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>29</sup> EL-KHAZEM, Ibrahim. 'Egypt cites progress in relations with Turkey', *ANADOLU Agency*, 2 October 2021. Available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/egypt-cites-progress-in-relations-with-turkey/2381077> (accessed October 2021).

also with the UAE<sup>30</sup>, Bahrain<sup>31</sup> and Saudi Arabia<sup>32</sup>, although to achieve this it will need to reconsider its support for the MB. Israel is also a target for its diplomacy. Rebuilding relations that have deteriorated to the point of near rupture will not be easy, but again, *realpolitik* can be a powerful incentive.

More strikingly, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have initiated a rapprochement with Iran and both have acknowledged holding talks with the Ayatollahs' regime<sup>33</sup>. Progress in this direction could lead to surprising results. Iraq's role as mediator in this rapprochement has been decisive and will contribute to strengthening its strategic position at regional level.

The position of Arab states towards the Syrian conflict is changing. Few now see overthrowing Assad as an achievable goal and rapprochement gestures have begun that could lead to Syria's reintegration into the Arab League. The renormalization within the Gulf Cooperation Council of relations between the 'anti' bloc and Qatar, after three years of the latter's isolation, may facilitate coordinated Arab action, as well as open new channels of communication with Iran<sup>34</sup>. Arab states seem convinced that only their intervention can resolve the conflict, which presents new perspectives and opens up new opportunities.

Finally, Israel is working with US support to consolidate and extend the Abraham Accords to other Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia<sup>35</sup>. It is true that the accords can bring greater stability at regional level, but - and this is the other side of the coin - the fact that more and more Arab states have de facto abandoned the defence of the Palestinian

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<sup>30</sup> GUCUKGOCMEN, Ali, 'Erdogan says Turkey, UAE ties improving after rare meeting', *REUTERS*, 19 August 2021. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-holds-rare-meeting-with-senior-uae-official-2021-08-18/> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>31</sup> 'Turkey-Bahrain cooperation is developing: King Al Khalifa', *Daily Sabah*, 6 September 2021. Available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-bahrain-cooperation-is-developing-king-al-khalifa> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>32</sup> SANZ, Alba, 'Turkey reaches out to Saudi Arabia', *Atalayar*, 24 September 2021. Available at <https://atalayar.com/content/turqu%C3%ADa-tiende-la-mano-arabia-saud%C3%AD> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>33</sup> 'Saudi Arabia confirms recent talks with Iran', *AL JAZEERA*, 3 October 2021. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/3/saudi-arabia-confirms-recent-talks-with-iran> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>34</sup> 'Qatar FM on GCC blockade, Iran and engaging with the Taliban', *AL JAZEERA*, 13 October 2021. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/13/qatar-taliban-iran-nuclear-talks> (accessed October 2021).

<sup>35</sup> "Biden working to add Saudi Arabia to Abraham Accords", *ARUTZ SHEBA-Israel News*, 20 October 2021. Available at <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/315396> (accessed October 2021).

cause makes it difficult, if not impossible, to reach a 'two-state' solution, which until now has been the axis around which the possible resolution of a conflict that is still entrenched revolved. At present, management seems to be prioritised over conflict resolution.

## Conclusion

For more than a decade now, the United States is torn between its declared intention to reduce its military presence in the Middle East and a reality that has forced it, at times, to even increase its troops in the region. Moreover, the turbulence caused by the Arab Spring across the region – the effects of which are still being felt – has sowed unrest in regimes that, seeing themselves threatened, have made survival their main motivation.

Uncertainty caused by both circumstances has encouraged autonomous action by regional powers that have been shaping 'from within' a multipolar order of antagonistic blocs in which states, while avoiding direct confrontation, are involved in disputes and proxy wars in intermediate spaces.

A first bloc formed by Turkey and Qatar opposes an Arab bloc comprising Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt, created around a common opposition to the political Islam represented by the MB, while Iran and Israel, which mutually regard each other as 'existential' threats, represent the other two antagonistic poles of power.

Common interests and threat perceptions have been bringing the blocs closer together, without ever forming formal alliances. On the one hand, Israel and the Arab bloc, motivated by the Iranian threat and which, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, have ended up sealing the Abraham Accords; on the other, Iran and the Turkish-Qatar bloc have sought to maintain relations that are fragile but pragmatic enough to cooperate on a limited basis on issues of mutual interest.

The distribution of power in this scheme of relations is far from perfect and forms an unbalanced multipolar system which, as we have seen above, is the most unstable of all possible geopolitical systems according to the father of offensive realism. Unfortunately, there is no indication that this will change in the short to medium term. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that certain countries, such as the UAE or Qatar, will eventually consolidate themselves as true regional powers that, endowed with greater strategic autonomy, will end up exacerbating polarisation and making the system more unstable.



In this unstable regional order, it is the axis that separates Israel from Iran that presents the greatest tensions, so what happens there is likely to have the greatest impact on the whole, in one direction or another. Consider, for example, the effects on regional conflict of a definitive breakdown in negotiations with Iran that would allow the latter to acquire nuclear weapons.

Having said that, certain circumstances could operate in the opposite direction. Action along the Iran-Israel axis, including a difficult but not impossible Saudi Arabian accession to the Abraham Accords, or a reissue of the Iran nuclear deal that takes into account Saudi and Israeli concerns, could have a considerable stabilising effect that, while not resolving all regional conflicts, would contribute to a significant de-escalation of tension.

US withdrawal from Afghanistan suggests a continuation of its strategic reduction of military presence from the Middle East that will continue to profoundly affect fluid regional power relations. The scenario is volatile and we are witnessing a reconfiguration of the regional order, the extent of which it is too early to determine. Times of change are always turbulent and there is no shortage of cause for concern in the Middle East. *Insha'Allah*, this time it will be different.

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