

THE IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS ON MIDDLE EAST GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

Răzvan MUNTEANU¹

ABSTRACT

AS PROVEN BY HISTORICAL EVENTS, THE MIDDLE EAST IS A HIGHLY INTERCONNECTED GEOPOLITICAL ARENA, THERE CHANGES IN THE INTERNAL STATUS QUO OF ONE ACTOR, SUCH AS SYRIA, IN THIS CASE, AFFECTS THE STATUS QUO OF THE ENTIRE REGION IN A PROFOUND MANNER. REGIONAL CHARACTERISTICS SUCH AS SUNNI-SHIA RIVALRY, POOR GOVERNANCE, EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM AND ARCHAIC AUTHORITARIAN RULING ARE SUPERIMPOSED OVER INTERNATIONAL INTERESTS FROM THE UNITED STATES OR RUSSIA. THIS ARTICLE TRIES TO SUMMARIZE THE PRESENT SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST FROM THE STARTING POINT OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS.

KEYWORDS: SYRIAN CRISIS, MIDDLE EAST, SHIA, SUNNI, IRAN, ISLAMIC STATE, YEMEN, BORDERS, GEOPOLITICS

INTRODUCTION

If at the beginning of 2014, UN General Secretary, Ban Ki-moon, had stated he hoped for a solution for the Syrian crisis, events that followed proved to be much more complex though, giving rise to a very hard to predict evolution for most experts studying the Middle East.

Regarding Syria, the protests started in March 2011 thus, the violent reaction from the part of the Damascus regime and the geostrategic position of the country led to the outbreak of an internal armed conflict that has at its roots various regional and international interests. Moving forward, Syria is now an insecurity hotbed, already affecting countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Israel, while high interconnectivity and interdependence factors, specific to globalization, make this risks and security threats to be felt on a global level.

So far the Syrian crisis left behind hundreds of thousands of victims and over two million refugees, most affected countries affected by the spilling being Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey. Noticeably, each and every one of these countries has internal affairs issues regarding the management of the massive refugee flow, benefiting from underfinanced social services. If Ankara announced that foreign support for the management of immigrants is only symbolic, for the other states involved things are far more complicated. Jordan faces a massive water shortage crisis and Egypt with grave economic problems, authorities in Cairo taking into consideration to rationalize foods. Furthermore, native populations show

¹ PHD in Political Science, SNSPA, CEO Global News Intelligence

discontent regarding the fact that immigrants of Syrian origin accept jobs for far less pay, thus increasing unemployment rates and poverty. The development of the underground economy substantiated by economic problems represent real hotbeds for insecurity, leading to mass protest in 2013 against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and unrest against the Jordanian monarchy, which geopolitical role of pivot is very important for the stability of the Persian Gulf countries.

Regarding Lebanon, it suffered from the import of violence from Syria, the tensions and armed confrontations between Sunni and Shia, the latter benefiting from Alawite support, are evermore present. The precarious situation could be observed since the beginning of last year, when Hezbollah was accused of the assassination of Wissam al-Hassann, the head of the Lebanese intelligence service. On this backdrop, of course Hezbollah is one of the catalysts of the sectarian tensions as a result of the direct involvement in the conflict in the neighboring country, thus accelerating in this way societal cleavages to the prejudice of geopolitical interests, as a result of the fear that a new government in Damascus, led by Sunni, would weaken ties with Tehran, making it virtually impossible for Iran to provide logistical support for Hezbollah, which could lead to the delegitimization of the organization within the Lebanese society.

In this logic, if it fails to keep the current regime in power, the best mid-term solution for Hezbollah is to perpetuate the Syrian crisis and weaken all the actors involved, thus avoiding the emergence of a force that would control all of Syria.²

GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

On this backdrop, the Syrian crisis managed to fuel the clash of the geopolitical axes, placing head to head, the two biggest branches of Islam, Sunnis and Shies, which lead to the escalation of sectarian tensions not only in Lebanon but in Libya, Iraq, Pakistan or even Bahrein.

Notwithstanding regime change that came with the Arab Spring, Yemen for example, didn't manage to implement socio-economic reforms, long awaited by the population, thus the separatist threat scenario remaining possible in the near future. The inability of the Sana'a regime to win back control over the whole national territory led to a rise in influence for Houthi rebels in the north and to the development of the Al-Qaeda branch, Al-Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP), in the south. If the Saudis always feared that a unified Yemen at their southern border, would allow the emergence of a powerful regional actor, presently Riyadh takes all measures possible in order to maintain territorial integrity of this country, because if borders shift to their pre-1990 configuration and South and North Yemen reappear on the Middle East map, the latter would become a Shia geopolitical pivot for Iran which Tehran would use to win indirect access to the Bab el-Mandeb strait and to the Red Sea. Furthermore, the awakening of the Shiite axis could be imported in other Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia and Bahrein being the most exposed.

As in the case of Yemen, Syria's national security is affected on all sides, the government failing to control the entire national territory which lead to the rise of Islamic State (IS) and the foundation of a new Caliphate which incorporates Syrian and Iraqi territories.

Based on Al-Qaeda Iraq, Islamic State detached itself from the Osama bin Laden founded group because of divergent interests on the Syrian front. Nevertheless, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi managed to bring to his side the old military junta of Saddam Hussein, marginalized by the Shiite government of recently replaced PM Maliki. From an economic

² John Calabrese, *The Regional Implications of the Syria Crisis*, Middle East Institute, december 2012, <http://www.mei.edu/content/regional-implications-syria-crisis>

point of view, the Caliphate survives mostly over the control of Syrian oil fields, managing also to capture 600 million USD, captured from the Central Bank in Mosul. From a geopolitical point of view, territorial expansion will draw opposition from Saudi Arabia in the Southern flank, Turkish opposition in the North-East and Israel's in the South-East.

Thus, one of the biggest weaknesses of IS is the lack of support from a regional power, similar to the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran or Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey, which makes the future of the Caliphate uncertain.³ The same cannot be said regarding the Kurds in northern Iraq where the steps made towards independence are ever more visible.

After the conquest of Kirkuk, the regional government of Northern Kurdistan managed to double the oil quantities exported via its own infrastructure in nearby states, especially in Turkey. With a developed economy, delivering 400.000 barrels of oil per day and with Peshmerga military forces extremely well organized, the Kurds benefit from US, Israeli and Turkish support, which half a decade ago would have seemed very hard to believe.⁴

Furthermore, the peace dialogue initiated between Ankara and PKK, and the withdrawal of Kurdish militants in northern Iraq, raises the hypothesis of the creation of Kurdistan by severing Kurdish populated territories in Iraq and unifying them with Kurdish populated territories in Syria. The newly developed situation could give Turkey internal stability by solving the terrorist threat that lasted for more than 30 years and also could provide territorial integrity. Furthermore, Ankara is consolidating its energy security by already signing a gas supply treaty with the regional government of Kurdistan in Iraq, avoiding energy vulnerability with Russia and Iran.

The idea of founding a Kurdish state was first proposed by France and Britain immediately after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, but the Treaty of Sevres was objected by Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern day Turkey. According to the Treaty, the Kurdish state was to be founded in two steps: independence for Turkish Kurds and unification with the Kurdish population in Iraq. Mostly Sunni and organized in a tribal fashion, Middle East Kurds had been living scattered in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran but it seems that the great losers of the fall of Ottoman Empire could become the great winners of the Syrian crisis.

We see a new paradigm of the Muslim world, where leaders like Hafez Assad or Saddam Hussein, even though being considered promoters of pan-Arabism, were above all, guardians of their own borders, which are now at risk to be changed for the first time since there were sketched by the colonial powers.⁵

CONCLUSIONS

By making a brief analysis of the Extended Middle East, we see a arc of instability which stretches from Afghanistan to the shores of the Mediterranean, thus fueling the clash between Shia and Shiite axes, leading to increased social tensions in Bahrein, Lebanon and Pakistan. So, despite 9/11, the Clash of Civilizations theory proposed by American political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington proves to be far from realization because Muslim states in the Middle East are to divided between divergent interests. Thus, Yemen is on the brink of secession, The Conference on National Dialogue issued by president Haidi being stalled

³ Gregory Gause, *ISIS and the New Middle East Cold War*, BROOKINGS Institute August 25, 2014

⁴ *Kurdistan and the future of Iraq*, Financial Times, June 30, 2014

⁵ Karim Emile Bitar, *The Regional Implications of the Syria Crisis*, Geneva center for security policy, <http://www.gcsp.ch/Regional-Capacity-Development/Publications/GCSP-Publications/Policy-Papers/Whither-the-Old-Order-The-Regional-Implications-of-the-Syria-Crisis>

while territories that once belonged to Syria and Iraq are now part of the so called Islamic Caliphate.

All the events of the last decades managed to prove that the current Middle East resembles the 20th century Balkans. On this backdrop, the Syrian Crisis substantiates what we can call the end of the Sikes-Picot Accord.

Although less speculated in public space and academic media in Romania, the reconfiguration of the Middle East is an old and thoroughly discussed topic on the international agenda, taking shape around the year 2006, when US general, Ralph Peters published in *Armed Forces Journal* a possible future map of the Extended Middle East, then further exploring the subject in depth in a book called *Never Quit to Fight*. Although the map is not an official version of the Pentagon, it was and is intensely debated, including in the NATO College in Rome.

According to Peters, the new outline will fix the mistakes committed at the end of the First World War. Thereby, Iran would remain a wholly Shiite state, losing territory to the new Kurdish state and to a Greater Azerbaijan which will enhance its surface as a result of US interests and support in the Caspian Sea region. Iraq would be divided in three: a Shiite state in the south, a Sunni state in the center and a Kurdish state in the north. Saudi Arabia would also cede territories to Yemen and Jordan and lose control of Mecca and Medina which will transform into a Sacred State of Islam, similar to Catholic Vatican. Israel will have the same configuration as pre-1967 while Greater Lebanon would occupy the Syrian coastline depriving Damascus of access to the Mediterranean Sea. Pakistan would suffer the biggest changes through the realization of Baluchistan in the South, by ceding territories in the West to Afghanistan but mostly by losing territories in the North to India, which will become the new US pivot in Asia-Pacific, through Washington will try to counterbalance Chinese interests in the region.

Of course, other new maps have been speculated upon and analyzed, but space and time does not allow us to explore them. Regarding Peters's opinion, until now it appears that it confirms the division of Iraq and the foundation of a new Kurdish state, but, at least for now, it does not confirm the foundation of a Greater Yemen. As stated above, the Sana'a regime didn't manage to cope with internal crises, being on the brink of secession.

Concerning Syria, an internal solution is hard to achieve right now, because, although it has military superiority over anti-Assad combatants, it doesn't manage to decisively win in armed conflict and the use of SCUD missiles proves, according to analysts, the desperation with Damascus tries to hold onto strategic positions.⁶ The rebels themselves are failing to conquer large cities, despite the fact that they dominate numerous adjacent settlements. So, Deraa, Homs, Hama, Damascus, Idlib or Dayr al Zawr are either in the possession of Assad or taken back shortly afterwards.

Foreign military intervention by Arab states and not Western states stumbled on Russian opposition, while neither Saudi Arabia, the promoter of this scenario, doesn't benefit from a positive image on the international or internal stage, because of the contradiction between supporting Syrian protesters and suppressing any form of dissent amongst Saudi citizens.

At the same time, some analysts take into account a coup in Syria, in which the army takes command. Even though it is hard to believe that it could be achievable, because Syria is led by the Assad family, the supporters of this idea consider that on the mid and long term,

⁶ Calabrese, *The Regional Implications of the Syria Crisis*

military power could take into account a coup as a last resort for the internal security of Syria.⁷

Furthermore, the armed prolongation of the conflict could cause the territorial disintegration of the country and lead to Alawite-Christian led state in the North-East part of Syria which could allow continued access to port Tartus for Russia. No matter the final solution, either being one presented here or not, the Syrian crisis is a direct threat to regional and international security that upon solving, will modify the balance of power on a regional and global scale.

Despite any solution, Syria will be a weakened state, grinded by its socio-economic problems, incapable to impose its own national interest beyond its own borders, which backs the idea of the foundation of a new Kurdish state in the region.

⁷ Fehmi Agca, *The effect of Syria crisis on the transformation and integration of the Middle East*, Journal of Bilge Strateji, Vol 5, nr.8, 2013m 109-110

REFERENCES

1. **Andre de Nesnera**, *Syria's Chemical Weapons Vulnerable as Conflict Widens*, Voice of America, <http://www.voanews.com/content/syrias-chemical-weapons-vulnerable-as-conflict-widens/1658696.html>
2. **Gregory Gause**, *ISIS and the New Middle East Cold War*, BROOKINGS Institute August 25, 2014
3. **Barry Buzan**, *People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, Columbia University Press, 2008
4. **Fehmi Agca**, *The effect of Syria crisis on the transformation and integration of the Middle East*, Journal of Bilge Strateji, Vol 5, nr.8, 2013
5. **Immanuel Wallerstein**, *Jihadistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran*, Al Jazeera America, June 15, 2014
6. **Jihad el-Zein**, *Geopolitical Shifts in Mideast to Benefit Kurds*, Al Monitor, March 24, 2013
7. **John Calabrese**, *The Regional Implications of the Syria Crisis*, Middle Est Institute, decembrie 2012, <http://www.mei.edu/content/regional-implications-syria-crisis>
8. **KarimEmileBitar**, *The Regional Implications of the Syria Crisis*, Geneva center for security policy, <http://www.gcsp.ch/Regional-Capacity-Development/Publications/GCSP-Publications/Policy-Papers/Whither-the-Old-Order-The-Regional-Implications-of-the-Syria-Crisis>