



# EAG POLICY PAPER

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## Power in the Middle East - Whither Regional Hegemons

The power structure in the Middle East today is marked by a trend towards regional axes. Elements of power - be they diplomatic, economic, cultural, or even media based - are diffused between a number of states and no nation is posed to become the next regional hegemon. What are the constraints on each state's quest for hegemonic status and what are the effects on regional politics and security issues? This Policy Paper is the outcome of the seventh workshop of the Expert Advisory Group (EAG) - European and South Mediterranean Actors - Partners in Conflict Prevention and Resolution, held in Istanbul, Turkey from February 27 to March 1, 2009.

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## 1

### INTRODUCTION

by Sarah Anne Rennick

In the wake of the three-week Gaza War that ushered in 2009, the Middle East North Africa region is witnessing a reinforcement of the trend towards regional axes and the dispersion of power among various states. The Gaza War brought to the fore and helped define two major axes with sharply different ideologies and strategies vying for regional leadership. At the same time, the emergence of a regional hegemon

seems today unlikely; elements of power that allow a state to emerge as a hegemon are spread out among different states, and even those seeking great power status face numerous constraints on their ambitions. In this Policy Paper, entitled "Power in the Middle East - Whither Regional Hegemons," regional experts in security and international relations explore the structural, institutional, and ideological dimensions of regional power dynamics and leadership in the Middle East. In the first section, Martin Beck and Mohamed Abdel Salam provide a theoretical framework and the major trends shaping

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regional leadership. They highlight three schools of thought – structural realism, institutionalism, and constructivism - that serve as methods of understanding the region and its trend towards multi-polarization, and examine the various hegemonic trends in the Middle East since the 1960s.

Following this theoretical framework, four case studies are presented. In his article "Iran: A Sustainable Bid for Regional Leadership," Alessandro Quarenghi examines the position of Iran and its rise to great power status, focusing on its internal military, economic, and intellectual capacities and constraints. Ahmed Driss' article "Algeria: Hegemonic Actor in the Region of North Africa" examines how the geo-strategic importance of Algeria has contributed to its hegemonic ambitions but how internal constraints and the flagging economy stifle its potential. In "Israel in the Middle East: Past Images and Current Mediation Rivalry," Emily B. Landau questions the position of Israel as a regional hegemon and instead describes how the country is used by other states to express their hegemonic ambitions. In "Egypt: Rethinking the Regional Role", Mohamed Abdel Salam explores the tendency towards pragmatism and direct spheres of influence which limit Egypt's regional role to matters strictly of its concern.

Finally, in a brief conclusion entitled "No Region for Hegemons," Carlo Masala explores the impact of power dispersion in the Middle East and the possible advantage for external actors to establish a hegemon amongst Arab states.

## 2

### ON THE NOTION OF REGIONAL POWER

by Martin Beck / Mohamed Abdel Salam

Studying power and its distribution in the Middle East reveals an interesting phenomenon: contrary to other world regions, there is no clear-cut regional power in contemporary Middle Eastern politics. This situation has important ramifications on the

issue of leadership, and in particular the absence of strong leadership on the structural, entrepreneurial, and intellectual levels.<sup>1</sup>

In analyzing this subject, three different schools of thought can be useful to apply: structural realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. Under the structural realism approach, which highlights power distribution, the Middle East stands out for its high dispersion of power. Instead of a concentration of power, the Middle East has several sub-regions, all of which are structured in a multipolar manner: the Maghreb (Algeria vs. Morocco), the Gulf (Iran vs. Saudi Arabia) and the Mashreq (Israel vs. Arab states).

From the institutionalist's point of view, what is most striking is that regional integration in the Middle East lags far behind that in other areas, including Europe, East Asia, and Latin America. Even among many regional experts of the Middle East, knowledge of institutions such as MAFTA (Mediterranean Arab Free Trade Area) and GAFTA (Greater Arab Free Trade Area) is sparse, demonstrating that such regional institutions have limited reach and visibility.

From the perspective of constructivism, the most notable characteristic of the region is the limited degree of solidarity, despite the commonality of Arabic as the main language and Islam as the dominant religion. This is reinforced by the existence of some obvious outsiders: Israel, Turkey, and Iran. What is left as a shared value tying together many segments of Arab societies—as well as Iran and Turkey—is a joint identity of an outspoken negative nature: anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Structural leadership refers to the translation of superior power capabilities into bargaining leverage; entrepreneurial leadership is related to the ability of setting the agenda and overcoming stalemates by capturing a "bargainer's surplus;" intellectual leadership means the capability of transforming ideational capital into negotiation results by shaping the perspectives of other actors.

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Americanism. Israel's role is also of high significance, but again in a negative way: Pro-American Israel is considered by the Arab world to be a mere extension of Washington.

Although there is no dominant power, Middle Eastern politics are influenced by regional actors with strong leadership qualities. The Middle East today is characterized by a system of multipolarization where certain states, each with different attributes, emerge as medium powers. In addition, it is possible to identify three strategic trends that have been interacting to shape the regional balance of power:

1 –Unilateral Leadership: The era of hegemonic regional power ended with the decline of Egypt's role in the late 1960s. Egypt's advantage at that time was its ability to combine different elements of power as well as benefit from the great disparity between itself and others states in the region. Moreover, Egypt was able to consolidate its status through the general recognition of its leadership. In the following period, these elements of power were dispersed among various states. And despite the efforts of countries such as Iran, this specific model of regional hegemony is unlikely to be replicated.

2 –Regional Axes: This trend has reemerged strongly as of recent and has started to shape inter-state relations in an important way. The two camps are composed of the Radical or so-called Resistance axis, which consists of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, and the Moderate axis, consisting of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the countries present at the January 2009 meeting in Abu Dhabi. A cold war persists between these two coalitions and has already played out during the Lebanon war in 2006 and the Gaza war in 2009.

3 – Core State Alliance: While some countries have attempted to form a multilateral regional leadership (such as the Arab Cooperation Council and the Arab Maghreb Union), the most important countries in the past were the so-called "core countries" that formed a tripartite leadership consisting of

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Recognized by the Arab world, these countries attempted to work as a regulator of regional interactions, and tried to form a broader regional structure called "6 + 2" in the beginning of the 1990s. Collective leadership never worked out, however, although efforts to reshape it occur from time to time.

Whatever the theoretical framework used to analyze the balance of power in the Middle East, there are no simple explanations. While regional axes are the current trend, the Middle East is witnessing ongoing transformations of power, and the conditions and relations of key players are changing and posing new challenges.

### 3

#### **IRAN: A SUSTAINABLE BID FOR REGIONAL LEADERSHIP?**

*by Alessandro Quarenghi*

Iran is the Middle Eastern power most clearly and willingly attempting to reach regional leadership. However, is its attempt sustainable by its actual and potential resources?

1 – Militarily, Iran's large population (around 70 million, comparable only to Egypt and Turkey) could make reaching regional leadership appear possible but, because of its internal religious, cultural, and ethnic cleavages, it is difficult to predict the population's willingness to "rally around the flag" in case of a full-scale war. Indeed, some analysts regard the likelihood of this happening as quite low. Furthermore, even if the Basij militia and the Revolutionary Guards, in addition to the rest of Iran's army, do form a relatively and potentially impressive military force on paper, in reality it is highly unlikely that the technological level and efficiency of the weapons at their disposal match their numbers. In order to overcome these shortcomings, Iranian elites have tried to reach a "projection capacity" by both establishing ties with regional states and non-state actors and developing long-range missiles and nuclear warfare. Nonetheless, Iran's economic structure does not seem well-equipped to be

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quickly transformed into an efficient "war-economy."

2 – Economically, Iran's decades-long dependence on oil has distorted the economy, fuelled corruption, and reduced efficiency – problems only exacerbated by the ideological economic mismanagement of President M. Ahmadinejad's administration. Also, due to the confrontation with the West, even its oil industry is in disarray (despite being the country with the second-largest proven reserves after Saudi Arabia, Iran actually imports energy). With the West's markets difficult to reach because of UN, US, and European sanctions, Iran has turned east, towards China and Russia. However, for different reasons, both countries are unlikely to be able to offer Iran the economic way out that access to the European and US markets could.

3 – Intellectually, Iranian efforts at expanding the country's influence have been characterized by the support on the one hand of Islamist groups and on the other hand of revolutionary and terrorist groups. Iran's attempts to present itself as the last champion of Islam, anti-Americanism, and anti-Zionism have been helped by the gradual but ultimately dramatic reduction in Arab states' support of such groups. Of course, the presence of Shi'a communities in almost all Middle Eastern states has offered Iran the advantages of religious solidarity; yet, balanced by its Persian ethnic character, its regional opportunities remain limited.

To sum up, Iran's bid for regional leadership seems to rely more on the elites' will than on actual and potential capabilities. This desire for hegemony is nothing recent, dating back at least as far as the Shah's days, with Khomeinism adding an ideological character to it. However, in the last two decades international and regional developments have shaped and keep shaping the region in Iran's favor, providing opportunities that the Iranian political leadership has skillfully exploited.

The upcoming presidential elections (scheduled for June 12, 2009) are unlikely to result in a substantial change of direction,

regardless of the winner. It is the state of the economy that could force Iran to reconsider them. The Islamic Republic needs relatively high oil prices (estimated in 2008 to be above \$95 a barrel) in order to balance its budget<sup>2</sup>; given the recent sharp decline in oil prices, Iran must dig unsustainably into its own Oil Stabilization Fund to sustain both the regime and its international policies. According to some scholars, the economic situation is indeed so grim that it could either force Iran's leadership to make dramatic policy decisions (which could mean anything from raising regional instability to discontinuing support for "proxies") or unleash an internal popular revolutionary attempt.

## 4

### **ALGERIA: HEGEMONIC ACTOR IN THE REGION OF NORTH AFRICA?**

*by Ahmed Driss*

Algeria has a number of natural advantages that provide it with a degree of potential to become a regional hegemon. The country possesses great economic potential, thanks to important hydrocarbon resources. It occupies an important strategic position, bordering the other Maghreb states in addition to the Sahel nations of Mali, Niger, and Mauritania. And Algeria has the second longest maritime border on the southern shores of Mediterranean Sea, providing it with strategic importance in the Basin as well.

In addition to natural resources, Algeria has historical ambitions of regional dominance. Already before independence, the Algerian nationalist leaders tried, unsuccessfully, to exert control over the North African fight against French occupation. Following the end of colonial rule, the country continued to assert its regional ambitions

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in N. Raphaeli, "Plummeting Oil Prices – Iran's Options", *The Middle East Media Research Institute – Inquiry and Analysis*, No. 471 (30 October 2008). Available online at <http://www.memri.org/bin/latestnews.cgi?ID=IA47108> (latest access: 22 February 2009)

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through a series of conflicts and in particular its efforts to control the highly contested Western Sahara. Algeria was to a large extent responsible for the armed conflict against Morocco in October 1963. Its refusal to revise its eastern and western borders inherited from the colonial era (forcing Tunisia to give up almost 10,000 Km<sup>2</sup>) was one of the primary reasons for this war. In addition, the country's share of responsibility in the evolution of the Western Sahara conflict is noteworthy.

Explanations for Algeria's implications in these regional turf-wars vary. Several analysts point to ideological underpinnings fueling the country's actions, citing its important role in the third world movement and in defending the principle of self-determination. Indeed, the ideology - shared with the Soviet Union - concerning the duty to fight "imperialism" can explain the aggression towards the Moroccan monarchy, which Algeria saw as a part of this imperialist vector. Other analysts explain that Mediterranean Algeria aspired to create a "corridor" to the Atlantic Ocean, which, besides its political and strategic character, would allow the Western Sahara to evacuate its iron ore more quickly and at a lower cost. Whatever the reasons, the Sahara affair allowed Algeria to gain diplomatic successes and thus strengthen its status as "older brother" vis-à-vis neighboring states.

Is the Algerian potential, in spite of its importance, as high as its ambitions? The character of the Algerian economy, almost totally dependent on the export of hydrocarbon, shows structural problems which cause the economy to suffer and places it in a constant state of precariousness. Unemployment, which affects 25% of the working population, is also an important handicap. To stabilize employment, the Algerian economy would need to create 250,000 jobs a year for at least a decade, which is currently impossible without necessary structural reforms such as the adoption of rule of law as well as the upgrade of the administration and the banking sector.

On the other hand, the geographical position of Algeria and the global fight against terrorism act in favor of the country's power ambitions. Due to the activities of Salafist groups in the African Sahel region, the United States was keenly interested in a strategic partnership based on direct military cooperation with Algeria. Thanks to this cooperation, Algeria can renew and strengthen its armament, something almost impossible before September 11<sup>th</sup>. This opportunity provides Algeria with the possibility to become the first military power in the Maghreb.

Nonetheless, while its natural resources and geographic strategic advantages provide it with great potential, Algeria is not a strong hegemonic power. The one-party system, corruption, seizure of society by army generals, various mismanagement during decades, as well as the weakness of current will to carry out essential reforms has strongly limited the structural capacities and intellectual abilities of Algeria.

## 5

### **ISRAEL IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PAST IMAGES AND CURRENT MEDIATION RIVALRY**

*by Emily B. Landau*

A discussion of Israel in the context of possible leadership and/or hegemony in the Middle East is difficult to conduct outside the realm of perceptions and images. The state's objective resources or indicators of power – in particular its military and economic strength – have at times been interpreted and presented by others in the region as an indication of Israel's desire to assume a leading role in the region. Normally, the image has not been that Israel could be a regional leader in the positive sense, but rather that Israel harbors a sinister desire to impose itself on an unwilling region.

These perceptions ignore some important facts. First, with the possible exception of Shimon Peres' book *The New Middle East* (1993), Israel has never indicated that it views itself in this vein. Second, Israel's major frame of reference for maintaining a

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strong strategic edge over its Arab neighbors is security, not domination. And finally, even if Israel did harbor such intentions, it could not be an effective dominant force in the region because it could never gain legitimacy from its neighbors in this role.

Nonetheless, this image can be powerful and can exert real influence on regional politics. The best example of this was in the early 1990s, in the context of the multilateral track of the Madrid peace process. Egypt viewed itself well into the 1990s as the natural leader of the Arab states, and was attempting to reassert itself within the context of new regional dynamics. Israel's presence in the process was unprecedented, and added considerably to the Egyptian challenge. Ironically, one of the ways by which Egypt sought to enhance its own bid for leadership was by emphasizing the danger of Israel's overwhelming strength and possible regional intentions. The state's presentation of itself as the one who would confront Israel in this regard underscored the idea that Egypt was the champion of the Arab national interest and thus worthy of a recognized leadership role. Thus although nothing substantial had changed in the early 1990s in terms of Israel's objective indicators of power, it was played up as a potential rival as part of a regional political dynamic.

Currently, in light of Iran's clearly stated hegemonic ambitions, including rhetoric regarding the Persian Gulf and the use of proxies to spread its influence, Israel is no longer in the limelight as far as questions of hegemony are concerned. Today there is an interesting new dynamic involving Israel and the bids for regional influence on the part of two major players: Egypt and Turkey. These two states have been recently competing – albeit implicitly – with regard to the important role of mediator. Mediation is a well-established strategy employed by states in order to enhance their status. As a party to a number of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, Israel has been at the center of their attempts. Because a mediator must be a state that maintains reasonably good relations with both sides to the conflict, this has

had a side effect on the nature of relations of each of these major players with Israel. With regard to Turkey, its crisis with Israel over the war in Gaza made it clear that it could not mediate a settlement between Israel and Hamas. Its desire not to lose the mediation option in the future was one incentive for Turkey to seek to repair relations with Israel in the following months. In this sense, Israel finds itself in the role of a passive player in a mediation-based competition over influence in the Middle East.

## 6

### **EGYPT: RETHINKING THE REGIONAL ROLE**

*by Mohamed Abdel Salam*

During the last few years, much has been made about the decline of Egypt's role as a regional power. Usually, reference is made to Egypt's dominance during the fifties and the sixties. And while that model of power no longer exists, it continues to create unrealistic expectations about the role Egypt is supposed to play, despite the fact that the situation in the region has completely changed.

The Egyptian vision of regional balance is multipolar, meaning that a group of major countries can interact within certain rules of engagement related to the maintenance of regional stability. In this framework, Egypt is one of the major influential powers, especially when its vital national interests are affected. Although it may sometimes be unable to achieve what it wants, Egypt is able to block what it does not want, as when it supported Iraq against Iran in the eighties and when it stood against the regime of Saddam Hussein in 1991, or even its present-day position against Iran.

The main elements of Egyptian power come from its population size (as the most populated Arab state), its influence at the political level, and its leading cultural dominance. Egypt also has a large military power and its economy almost started to flourish before it was hit by the global financial crisis. However, the country's problem

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lies in its foreign policy options, heavily determined by the following:

1 – The priority of Egyptian internal affairs, in the face of different social and political problems. Egypt emphasizes that strength on the internal front (especially on the economic level) will lead to a stronger external role in the end, recognizing that the mainstream in the street is more interested in the local talk shows than the Al Jazeera channel.

2 – An emerging idea of "spheres of direct interest," along with the realization that control of the interactions of Middle Eastern states has become complex, even for the United States itself. The solution has been to identify specific spheres embodying Egyptian real interests and draw red lines that, if traversed, would incite protective moves.

Egypt's domains of intervention in external affairs are widespread: the country is strong in the Palestinian-Israeli arena, seeks to maintain the unity of Sudan, and works to reduce Iranian regional interventions. It has links with the Arab Gulf region and a position regarding Syrian behavior. It has wide concerns regarding the Mediterranean, and a role in dealing with the problems of regional terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and trends of over-internationalization. Egypt also has influence within international multilateral institutions. Nonetheless, as a rule of thumb, Egypt is not interested when there is no internal consensus on what is considered a direct threat or a real opportunity.

This situation, however, is not satisfactory to all: when any regional crisis erupts, or when an unusually positive development takes place, there is much debate in Egypt concerning its regional role. Radical currents surface to call for active engagement as well as the revitalization of strategic programs. At the same time, pragmatic currents emphasize realistic options, as long as core Egyptian interests are not harmed.

That being said, the Gaza war has affected Egyptian orientations towards its

region-wide role. Should Egypt redefine its regional role based on this crisis? Should it wait until the threat is at its borders, or should it slightly expand the vital scope of its national security? These questions are being asked with hot blood but cool minds. A new wave of debate on the regional role is again dominating political life in Egypt.

## 7

### **NO REGION FOR HEGEMONS?**

*by Carlo Masala*

As the individual articles in this edition of the EAG Policy Paper have shown, there have been several attempts by different regional actors to achieve hegemony over the last decades in the Middle East. Nonetheless, despite ambitions, these efforts have all failed. States vying for hegemony have either been counterbalanced or they have lacked domestic support and the necessary political, military and economic resources to pursue such a policy.

From this observation three questions arise. Firstly, what are the consequences of a lack of regional leadership in the Middle East region? Secondly, what would be different if there were a regional hegemon in the Middle East? And thirdly, what are some of the possible strategies for external actors with regard to establishing or supporting a regional hegemon if it is considered appropriate?

The consequences of this lack of regional hegemony are obvious. Since Israel no longer represents the common denominator for Arab politics, inter-Arab rivalries are mounting, adding to the already tense situation in the region. From an external perspective, there is no reliable and accountable contact among the Arab states on which one can rely.

If there were a regional hegemon leading the Arab world, consensual policies for external actors might become much easier than they currently are. A regional Arab hegemon with benign intentions vis-à-vis external interest, together with Israel, could

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form the basis for a viable regional security system which could lead to more stability than currently can be found. Moreover, it would disburden external actors from becoming too closely engaged in the region itself, thereby diminishing the perception of imperialist behavior.

Thus the emergence of a benign Arab hegemon might be in the interest of external actors. However, given the fact that no regional power has naturally arisen, the question must be asked if external actors can support the emergence of one in order to pursue a strategy of buck-passing in the Middle East. For the time being, it seems to be highly unlikely. As such, Arab states might have to learn to live with the hegemon they instinctively do not want but who has, nonetheless, been present for more than three decades: the United States.

**About the Expert Advisory Group (EAG)**

This project aims to explore a constructive and sustained relationship between European and South Mediterranean actors in Conflict Prevention and Resolution, in the context of past and present collaborative efforts in the Middle East and North Africa. The main objective is to create a knowledge-based network in order to advise relevant actors from both shores of the Mediterranean on current political and security developments on an ad-hoc basis.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the members of the group agree with the general thrust of this policy paper but not necessarily with every individual statement. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed in this policy paper rests exclusively with the contributors and their interpretations do not reflect the views or the policy of the publishers.

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