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Debating Middle Eastern Alliances

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With global and regional order in flux, traditional alignment patterns in the Middle East have been flanked by a proliferation of new alignment patterns and various forms of ad hoc cooperation. This paper summarizes the debates among a group of experts in September 2019 on old and new patterns of Middle Eastern alliances and major changes in regional cooperation trends both among states and between states and non-state actors, and their impact on the region's geopolitics and security.²

Typology of Alignments

Partnerships between states can be grouped along a continuum of increasing commitment, integration and formality, ranging from supranational organisations over formal contractual alliances to looser partnerships and ad-hoc single-issue cooperation. The term alliance/ally, although often mistakenly employed for looser forms of cooperation, is most commonly defined as two or more states forming a lasting cooperation to supplement each other's assets/capabilities either for a common goal or against a shared threat. Alliances are the formal subset of the broader phenomenon of alignment. Formal alliances strengthen existing alignments or create new ones (Snyder 1990).

Why do (or don't) states enter into partnership with each other? Balance of power implies that the need for survival against a threat in an anarchical international system leads to either bandwagoning or balancing. Factors that lead states to balance include aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, or offensive intentions (Walt 1987). States may refrain from entering alignments for the sake of independence, influence, better options, standing commitments, or disagreement in other domains.

The definition of alliances is becoming more fluid as states enter multiple special-purpose coalitions with different actors with opposing goals. Concepts of partnerships in the Middle East have also expanded vertically, including a wider range of actors, such as a wider state use of armed non-state proxies. Non-state actors as transnational players differ significantly from states as they in their objectives, capabilities, and modus operandi. While there is a rise of ad hoc co-operations, these are not replacing but complementing the structural, both of which have always coexisted. In the MENA region, ad hoc and other forms of informal cooperation was always more powerful than formal, institutionalized forms.

The typology of cooperations ranges from the formal to informal, from more to less institutionalization. Examples of formal, institutionalised cooperations range from the institutionalized multilateralism of a supra-national organization (European Union) over the classical alliance of a collective defense compact (NATO) to issue-based contractual alliances (Kyoto Protocol). On the informal, non-contractual side of the spectrum are ad-hoc coalitions, issue-based coalitions, as well as short- or long-term partnerships with nonstate actors (such as between Iran and Hizbollah).

Strategic and tactical partnerships must be distinguished: the former is often characterized by a high level of cooperation and based on shared values or ideology; the latter allows partners to jointly pursue

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² This paper is based on the discussions of the workshop "Mapping MENA Alliances" held in Madrid on 19 and 20 September, 2019, organized as part of the Mediterranean Advisory Group series of meetings by the Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

a number of shared goals but does not necessarily go beyond or have any religious, sectarian or ideological underpinning. Alliances based on a set of joint values, religion or ideology are stronger and have greater legitimacy to cooperate. But most MENA alliances today are based less on identities than on practical shared interests. Transactional nature of tactical alliances: if for an urgent interest or need you require the support of a specific actor, you need to serve his interest, too. Often one partner may discover in the process that the transactional cost for a tactical cooperation is too high, and cracks emerge.

Alliances are being shaped and by the configuration and evolution of hybrid political order. While the State remains dominant actor of international affairs, non-state actors have come to play an increasing role as regional security players, often as partners and proxies of states. There is a wide typology of hybrid actors that combine state and non-state features, operating in the military, political, religious and social domains, thereby challenging the binary nature of state vs. non-state (Hamas and Hizbollah being the clearest examples). More nuanced perspectives today acknowledge the large grey zone between the two and the multiple types of interactions between them. Strategic relationships between state and non-state actors are not new: imperial history was built upon them, and the principle of divide-and-rule revolves around NSAs. So why are we discovering hybrid actors now? The fragmentation of political authority plays a major role in a hybrid political order in which governance is shaped by more than one actor, and non-state actors (such as religious or charity institutions, but also violent militia) compete or share power with governments. The rise of non-state actors implies a big shift as it alters how we define the formation of alliances in International Relations.

Partnerships between state and non-state actors are usually less institutionalized, do not adhere to formal agreements, or constitute shared institutions. Governments can benefit from non-state actors' service deliveries in their polity – here non-state actors do not challenge the state as such and operate within its legal boundaries and institutions. But over time the alliance could turn into a source of competition (such as Hizbollah and other Shia militia in Syria). Partnerships between non-state actors and a foreign government are typically – and often simplistically – referred to as proxy relationships. Non-state proxies relying on foreign resources in return for help to advance the patron's interests on the ground (e.g. Hizbollah and Houthis with Iran, Ikhwan with Qatar, Syrian and Yemeni rebels with Saudi Arabia). The transnational partnership may shape balance of power of the region, and even at the global level when global players such as the United States or Russia are involved (e.g. Turkey's alliance with al Qaeda in Syria). Some foreign states align with local non-state actors to undermine sovereignty and the prevalent order in their country, or on the contrary, to restore stability and sovereignty in accordance with their own interests (Assad-Hizbollah). The advantage of allying with local non-state actors for states is that they are not perceived as intruders but as an organic part of local society. Also, violent non-state actors are less expected to respect international norms or play by the rules of the game than states, therefore a partnership with them gives the patron state a larger room of maneuver without any direct attribution or accountability (as embodied, for example, in Iran's proxy strategy). In turn, state support empowers non-state actors by means of money, weapons, more sophisticated military capabilities. Disadvantages for the state are that it has rarely full control over the non-state partner, especially in a tactical alliance, and sustaining the alliance over time requires lots of resources from the state.

Based on this rough typology of alignments, which are the structural alignments that have dominated the MENA region in the past decades? What goals, interests, ideologies or other ties have united them? Which have been the main fault lines in the region, and what were the factors underlying those divisions?

Historical Alignment Patterns in the Middle East

The key issues or fault lines that have shaped alignments in the Middle East (and perhaps slightly less so in North Africa) are: Arab unity versus state sovereignty; political Islam (both are related as political Islam picks up on pan-Arabism as a challenge to state sovereignty); the relationship with foreign powers

(especially the US/USSR enmity during the Cold War shaped alliances within MENA); and the Palestine/Israel dossier (which is also related to both Arab unity and foreign powers).

We can distinguish four periods of alliance-building in the MENA. The first is the immediate post-WW2 period, prior to the foundation of state of Israel. During this period, there were two dominant blocks, organized around the idea of Arab unity versus state sovereignty: the Hashemite block (pro-integration, greater Syria) versus the anti-Hashemite Egyptian block (pro territorial status quo). The big themes of this time were independence from colonialism, unity (or lack thereof), and Palestine. Against this backdrop, the Arab League was born out of a compromise between these two blocks in 1945 and has remained weak and ineffective ever since. This period saw also very little meaningful regional cooperation, also a feature persisting until today. The lack of cooperation and regional integration also contributed to the defeat of the Arab states and the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

The second period of MENA alliance-building was the era of radical pan-Arabism, dominated by Gamal Abdel Nasser from Egypt, also dubbed the 'Arab Cold War' (Kerr 1971), with conservative pro-Western states pitted against radical pan-Arab states. Nasser preached unity attached to dignity, prosperity and power to Arabs. Others rejected Nasser's ideas and preferred traditional state sovereignty. These blocks linked up well to the Cold War and Arab states' great power ties during this period: Iraq, Turkey and Iran with the US; Egypt with the USSR; and others such as Jordan caught up in-between. Pan-Arabists promoted the foundation of the UAR, but it remained an idea which never worked. From the formation of the UAR (and federation between Iraq and Jordan as response, and Arab leadership growing in Iraq) the idea of Arab unity started to fall apart and was further undermined by the proxy war between Egypt and Saudi in Yemen in the 60s which strained Egypt's resources. This period ended with the defeat of the Arab coalition in 1967.

The third period was the era of conservative Arab States, initiated by the flipping of Egypt from the leader of the pan-Arab coalition to being a part of a conservative Arab states coalition – which eventually came to include the US – on which Egypt relied for economic resources, leading to Cairo's peace treaty with Israel. The Egyptian regional role has been in decline ever since. During this period, the Palestinian issue rose in prominence once again. This period was then marked by a string of forming events: the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the emergence of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, the emergence of a radical axis including Iran, Syria and various non-state actors, and the Iran-Iraq war. Saddam Hussein unsuccessfully tried to revive Nasserist pan-Arabism, and with his invasion of Kuwait and eventual defeat in the Gulf war, Iraq was out of the picture as a regional leader. The idea of pan-Arabism died with it, strengthening the idea of sovereign Arab states combined with political and economic rot, and in parallel (not coincidental) a reintegration of political Islam into the panorama, reviving also the idea of unity to the Islamic political sphere. Both built up and culminated in the Arab Spring in 2011. During this period, there were no really meaningful efforts of structural regional cooperation, with the last serious effort being the 2002 Arab peace initiative.

The final phase of alignment has been the post-Arab-Spring period following the 2011 uprisings, during which three ad hoc blocs have formed: the so-called axis of resistance around Iran, Syria and its proxies (sometimes paired with Russia and China), pinned against a conservative pro-Western axis (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt), not so much changed from the previous period; and a pro-Islamist bloc around Turkey and Qatar (this bloc caught in between the others, aligning here and there). Notably, power in this period has shifted eastwards from Egypt and Syria to the rich Gulf sheikhdoms who no longer intend to be only rich and sponsor other groups but who have increasingly turned into actors in their own right, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Despite the lack of formal relations with most Arab states, Israel is now de facto partner in the conservative states bloc, as the Palestinian issue has ceased to be a decisive factor in forming alliances in the region (although a number of states including Iran, Qatar will claim otherwise). This period has also witnessed a return of Russia and China (economically) to the region. Their presence shapes MENA coalitions to the degree they provide alternative partnerships and assets to those previously provided exclusively by Western countries, for example as major weapons suppliers.

The Evolving Role of Global Powers

While the United States has had no institutionalized alliances based on a formal treaty in the MENA, it has long-standing security partnerships and security relationships that involve hosting bases, operating forces, and selling arms. The trajectory of the US role in the region can be divided in three phases. From the withdrawal of the UK east of the Suez, the US became the dominant external player in the region, taking over this role from the British. During the decade of the 70s, the defining feature of US MENA policy was the consolidation of its pillar strategy: picking the actors that the US believes will be the key players in the region invest heavily in, as encapsulated in the Nixon doctrine. The US' twin pillars during this decade were Iran and Saudi Arabia, although de facto Iran and Israel came to be the most relevant relationships due to KSA's military weakness. An important influence of the pillar strategy was Vietnam war fatigue which led to the idea of picking and nurturing strong regional partners with money, arms and political support in order to avoid a direct military engagement of the US. This strategy fell apart via the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, where the US lost its key pillar, the consequences of which we are still dealing with today and which defined the entire US relationship with the region. The Islamic Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan jointly led to the paradigm whose effectiveness is heavily debated today, with critics arguing that relying on regional pillars does not suffice, and in order to keep the oil price stable, the US needs to directly guarantee the security of the region.

The 1980s reinforced the principles of the Carter doctrine in US MENA policy, with the most seminal event being the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, and the Egyptians flipping from the Soviet to the US side and becoming a key US partner in the region. This period saw reinforced US support to 'moderate' (in terms of foreign policy) status quo powers. The GCC was founded, largely to confront Iran. Iranians and Iraqis were busy fighting each other. During that period the thinking of the need for a qualitative military edge was dominant, implying the need to balance Egypt and Israel militarily with the Gulf. The US was directly involved through the tanker wars against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war to signal its commitment to freedom of navigation. But despite the US commitment to Persian Gulf security, the US' maximum force presence there up until 1990 and the first Gulf war there was a mere average 8700 US personnel stationed in the Gulf.³

During the 1990s, a number of world events led the United States to adjust its policies in the region, albeit always in view of supporting the group of moderate, aligned status quo forces, most notably the 90/91 collapse of Soviet Union, which concentrated US interests in the region away from great power competition and more narrowly on the big three goals of Israeli security, oil flow and anti-extremism. During the early 90s the MENA's center of gravity, and of US attention, shifted from the Levant to the GCC states. There was massive proliferation in the Gulf, a revisionist Iran, and Iraq being nurtured by skyrocketing arms sales in 91-92. The 90s was a transformative decade with regard to the direct US commitment in the region, with the presence of US troops in the region rising up to over 500.000 (as opposed to 8700 during the 80s).⁴ Even then after this uptick, during the 90s only 6 percent of US forces worldwide were deployed in the Middle East (as opposed to 60 percent in Europe and 20 in Asia).

During the 2000s, 9/11 was the most transformative event, followed by the 2003 Iraq war, both of which shifted the US interest in the region towards counterterrorism, away from some of the more traditional interests, although the pattern of siding with the so-called moderates persisted. Importantly, over this decade, the US force presence in the MENA represented over 50 percent of globally deployed US forces, notably surpassing that in Europe and Asia, up from just 2 percent in the 70s. This is also the decade in which Iraq technically moved into the American camp after the fall of Saddam (albeit remaining still a close Iranian partner).

During the decade of the 2010s, political realities in the MENA region – and hence, US policy – have been much less clear-cut and more complex. While in the previous decades, it was easy for the US to know who is for us and who against, now even long-standing moderate Sunni partners have a much more nuanced profile, and there are fissures within that camp. The GCC is basically at war with each

³ Statistics taken from forthcoming RAND report on regional alignments.

⁴ RAND, *ibid*.

other. Turkey remains in NATO but with lots of friction. Just as in the 70s with Nixon doctrine fatigue, there is fatigue with MENA intervention, and the rising interest in Russia and China reduces attention to the MENA. The decline in US troops also reflects that fatigue, with the number of US troops in the region now reduced to (20K?). US policy has come back to placing its bets on regional partners instead of direct military engagement, a strategy that fits well with Trump's America First principle. However, in contrast to the Cold War, where there were some states pro and other anti US, today Iran and Syria are the only states directly opposed to the US (plus some NSAs), but the rest is either neutral or pro. Ironically, therefore, the US has not seen a more favourable environment in the region in terms of the least amount of hostility from states. At the same time, these alignments are not as static (and hence as reliable) as they used to be, partially due to the presence of China and Russia and regional players' hedging. China increasingly active via Belt and Road. They are not necessarily replacing the US role, but even close allies such as Israel have very good relations with Russia. Over time, the US partnership choices have been largely bilateral, heavily focused on security and externally-focused, and largely ignoring the domestic politics even of its closest partner states – often to Washington's great detriment and surprise. The pillar strategy overall has not been successful because either pillars were lost, or the pillars shifted or proved incapable to do the heavy lifting. Saudi Arabia is the US' first partner in the Gulf, and every US president's first visit in the region was to Riyadh, but the Saudis were not able to defend Aramco the most important oil facility in the region, despite the billions of arms sales and defence the US has been enabling them with. There is a backlash against the idea of Middle East partnerships in Washington, paired with a great reluctance to commit US treasure to this region anymore – and yet there are no viable partners to work with.

Russia's relationships in the MENA have been closely linked to its relations to the United States, and can thereby be best divided in Cold War and post-Cold War phases. During the Cold War, in 1948 the first Arab-Israeli war and subsequent defeat of Arabs encouraged Russia to invest in weapons exports to the MENA region. A central theme of Russia's presence in the MENA during the Cold War was ideological confrontation with the West, hence it invested heavily in MENA communist regimes in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and South Yemen, all with the idea to build proxies to confront the West away from the Soviet borders. In 1955 Russia struck the first big arms deal with Egypt, followed by Iraq and Syria. Importantly, the regimes never had to pay for the arms, instead Russia was giving away arms in exchange for influence. 70 percent of Russia's arms exports to developing world in the 20th century went to the MENA region. Following the 1973 Yom Kippur war, Russia and the GCC countries became rivals on the global oil and gas market. When Arab states set up their oil embargo, Western Europe turned to the Soviet Union for oil and gas and Russia started to re-orient its hydrocarbon exports toward Western Europe (which unlike CIS states paid in dollars cash). The Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979 placed it close to the Strait of Hormuz which, having become a major player in the global oil market, the Soviets had an ambition to control.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the first decade of the post-Cold War period was largely marked by Russian inertia in the MENA region as Moscow had other things to worry about. Nevertheless, Russia developed its commercial ties with Turkey, and increasingly also with Iran. In 2001 Putin, recently ascended to power, thought that MENA was where RU and US could partner, offering to let US use military airports to transport troops to Afghanistan. The Putin regime at the time was quite liberal and willing to negotiate, open on Palestine and Iran, an attitude which later contrasted with Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference. The turning point in Putin's stances came with the 2004 revolution in Ukraine, after which the Russian government became much more hard line and critical of the West. The 2011 Arab Spring was seen as continuation of Western plot of revolutions meant to reach Russia as well. This motivated Russia to a major push to come back to MENA to contain this kind of undue Western influence and stop further outbreaks of revolution.

Another quantum leap that marked this new pre-emptive Russian opportunism in the Middle East was Russia's 2015 entry in the Syrian civil war, which happened against the backdrop of the Arab Spring and what Moscow perceived as America's role therein. Other motivating factors concerned concerns of the ties of the Russian community with the MENA, including in terms of CT/radicalization; as well as economic motivations (the Russian economy being in bad shape and Russia looking for new markets).

Finally, the ambition of projecting power and gain leverage over the West by means of the MENA conflict arena has been offering a lot of attractive opportunities for Russia. While some see the Russian invasion in Syria as a way of drawing attention away from Russia's annexation of Ukraine and subsequent international isolation; others have interpreted it as a way of looking for new areas of convergence with the West, along the lines of Russia's role in the genesis of the JCPOA with Iran (which could have given the RU-US relationship a new boost).

Today Russia's policy in the MENA is very ad hoc, analysts close to the Kremlin assure there is no grand strategy. While some observers have been wary of a joint Russia-China alliance alongside Iran, in reality Russia-China relations are very superficial and based largely on a common desire to counter US projects (Chinese joining Russia's veto on UNSC Syria Res), rather than any real joint endeavors. A big question mark is whether Russia's interest in the MENA will last, given limited resources and political backlash. Many observers believe Russia's interest in the region is not authentic but remains instrumental, linked to its relations with the United States and Europe. Once relations with the West improve, it is argued, Russia may take a back seat in the MENA. This vision gains ground as Russia's resources are very limited so it cannot invest more than it already has; further Russian hard power projection in MENA (outside of Syria) is therefore highly unlikely. It remains unclear what happens to Russia's MENA policy once Putin is gone, but it is widely believed Syria has been the peak. The challenge for Russia in the MENA going forward will be to formulate a strategy for the region that is based on soft rather than hard power.

Mediterranean Advisory Group

A Network of Euro-Mediterranean Experts

The KAS Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean has launched the Mediterranean Advisory Group (MAG) as a series of dialogue rounds to contribute to the strategic debate on the ongoing processes in Europe's Mediterranean neighborhood to help in better coping with the various changes and challenges. MAG is a network of experts and practitioners from both shores of the Mediterranean, which reviews and analyzes developments in the region connected to security, foreign policy and migration. The meetings take place on a bi-annual basis and are held alternately in Europe and in the southern Mediterranean region. The findings and recommendations of MAG are intended to inform decision-makers and are published regularly in the Mediterranean Dialogue Series.

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