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Tinder Diplomacy? Questioning Alignments in Middle Eastern Geopolitics

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In an environment of global geopolitical transition, long-standing patterns of partnership between states erode. At the same time, the multiple uncertainties over how the world of tomorrow will be governed, by whom, and under which norms, favors interest-based cooperation among geopolitical actors alongside more structural partnerships. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the past decade has seen both erosion and consolidation of long-standing partnerships, and the emergence of a range of interest-based cooperation. Moreover, multipolarity and diffusion of power lead to more, often conflicting coalitions, adding up to a complex web of overlapping alignments and antagonisms.

Are the traditional patterns of alignment in the Middle East replaced, or flanked, by new patterns of coalitions, and how durable are these? What are the key factors that bring states and other regional actors to align or cooperate with each other today? To which degree do shared interests determine partnerships?

In pursuit of these questions, the Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung conducted a snap survey among a group of 20 Middle East experts about the positions of some of the most important regional actors and their positions on key regional security issues. The aggregated results of this non-representative survey are depicted in the chart below, providing a glimpse of the approximate thematic alignments of key regional (largely governmental) actors on some of the most relevant regional themes.

Methodological note: The data included in the following graph stem from a snap survey among 22 Middle East experts conducted by the KAS Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean in September 2019. The sample being non-representative, and the data not being nuanced by additional variables, the results remain subjective and superficial, and hence, the chart can only illustrate approximate tendencies. It does not provide a representative reflection of current MENA positions or alignments.

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Key Actors' Positions on Regional Issues

ACTORS	ISSUES	Iran's regional ambitions	Stance on political Islam / Muslim Brotherhood	Palestinian statehood	Kurdish statehood	Western Sahara statehood	Political liberalization / democracy	Economic liberalization / free trade	Combating climate change	Chinese BRI	Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen	Assad's rule in Syria	Haftar's role in Libya	Qatars isolation in the GCC	Fight against Islamic / State al-Qaeda
USA		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
CHINA		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
RUSSIA		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
EU		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
FRANCE		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
GERMANY		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
UK		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
ALGERIA		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
MOROCCO		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
EGYPT		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
IRAN		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
ISRAEL		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
TURKEY		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
QATAR		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
SAUDI ARABIA		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
UAE		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
HEZBOLLAH		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
MUSLIMI BROTHERHOOD		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
ISLAMIC STATE / AL-QAEDA		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●



The thematic convergences and divergences among some of the key actors in the region allow for a number of cautious hypotheses.

Iran is considered the decisive geopolitical challenge by governments in the region. The isolation of Iran and its proxies in the region and the subordination to it of other, previously leading dossiers such as Palestine reflects how central a priority the Iran dossier has become to many regional and external players. These concerns have long ceased to be about nuclear proliferation; instead they point to a set of more fundamental questions of competing visions of political order for the MENA region, and the instrumentalization of state weakness and political and security vacuums to advance one's own vision for the region. The attack on Saudi Aramco has widely been interpreted not primarily as an attack on Saudi Arabia but as one on the global economy. With this internationalization of conflict, the Iranian dossier increasingly transcends the realm of regional power competition and becomes a global security concern that currently towers over, and conditions, all other regional concerns. Whether local populations in the MENA region share this concern to the same degree remains uncertain.

Primacy of hard security: MENA alignments are determined by threats, not opportunities. The matrix reflects a deep concern among MENA governments for regime survival, stability, and defense against tangible hard security threats among both regional and external actors. The primacy of hard security over human security is reflected by the virtual disappearance of the democracy agenda, and the relative lack of attention to structural economic and environmental concerns, while hard security concerns receive overwhelming, disproportionate amount of attention and resources. This prioritization or hard security and short-term stability is accurately reflected in both policy and partnerships of the major players, and it is a key factor conditioning alignments. A few geographic and thematic centers of gravity determine the region's alignments much more than others. These are security-related items including the Iranian dossier, the Kurdish issue, the Syria and Libya wars, and (despite relative decreasing importance) Palestine. Some fragile partnerships between unlikely allies persist because ruling elites have or perceive no choice in the face of a common enemy. For example, the shared threat perception of Iran, as well as their joint perception of the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to domestic stability and regime cohesion, unites Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. The history of MENA alignments illustrates how the shared-threat coalition has been a leading theme of Middle Eastern alignment patterns over the past decades and remains so today. In other words, MENA alignments and coalitions today continue to be defined by threats, rather than opportunities.

Countries isolated on specific issues will find it difficult to rally support. For example, Algeria remains isolated on Western Sahara, therefore a disruption of the status quo on this dossier with the support of other regional actors is not on the horizon. Especially notable is Europe's isolation on the democracy dossier, which leaves the European Union and its member states as the only remaining vocal defendant of human rights and democracy in the region; a finding which is particularly significant given the latest wave of popular uprisings across the MENA region that meet with very little international attention or support. Finally, the United States' very critical view on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) meets with less vocal suspicion in Europe, and is viewed rather positively in the MENA region. There are indications, however, that this will not remain so, and once the full impact of the BRI initiative in the region unfolds, both European and MENA views on this dossier will become more critical, moving closer to the US position.

Some natural alliances remain under-exploited. Looking at the mere quantity of agreement on key regional issues, some countries appear natural allies. EU member states stand out in this regard, at least formally agreeing about almost everything, which seems natural for the European Union as a supranational alliance based on shared values and interests. Other striking overlaps appear more counter-intuitive. The country closest to the EU positions is not its closest ally, the United States, but Morocco (Tunisia, if it was included in the scheme, would likely produce similar overlap). This connection between Europe and its close North African partners is not given sufficient attention. Also notable, the positions of Turkey are closer to those of the EU than those of the United States, which might surprise given the tense state of EU-Turkey relations. Another notable finding: the thematic overlap between the United States and Israel on key MENA regional issues is twice the overlap between

Europe and the United States. The current relative disagreement between Europe and the United States on MENA regional issues is likely to be rather circumstantial and temporary than structural.

Genuine consensus themes bear potential for rapprochement. Among the main themes on which there appears to be at least nominal consensus across the MENA region are free trade, the fight against climate change, Palestine, and BRI. The most notable cluster, however, is the opposition against ISIS/violent extremism, the only common denominator behind which almost all the key governmental players can rally and which, albeit under varying definitions and motivations, is a priority for all. The opposition against ISIS and violent extremism reflects one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century proliferation of hybrid warfare. While the opposition to violent extremism varies greatly across actors, ranging from visceral antipathy to warfare, there may be room to leverage unity on such broad consensus issues with countries with which we have otherwise difficult relations, such as cooperation with Russia on counter-terrorism. Trans-national counter-terrorism cooperation bears further potential to unlock cooperation in North Africa, especially between estranged regional competitors Morocco and Algeria at a moment of domestic threshold in the latter. Similarly, the GCC countries in the context of the Qatar blockade disagree fundamentally on politics and regional security, but retain wide agreement on fundamental economic policy, free trade and oil policy, so herein might lie further potential for economic cooperation to widen common ground and ease political tensions.

Nominal consensus does not necessarily reflect policy or alignments. The suggestion that consensus on some of these issues provides room for a major policy push may however be misleading if consensus remains merely nominal. The opposition to ISIS in many cases stands as an umbrella for the protection of regime interests and does not necessarily reflect a genuine opposition to extremism. The consensus on the need to counter violent extremism is purposefully exploited by regional actors to advance their broader regional agendas and to clamp down on domestic opposition without having to fear international pushback. By a similar token, the reality on the ground is that the two state-solution for Palestine is gone, yet the matrix still shows a broad support for Palestinian statehood. The broad support on Palestine at a formal rhetorical level dissimulates that Palestine is no longer a priority for most Arab governments and there is no willingness to invest any political capital in this dossier. The matrix also draws a picture of Iran versus large coalition of Iran-sceptics; yet it remains difficult for the US to gain partners for concrete action to contain Iran in military terms (for example for a maritime coalition in the Strait of Hormuz in 2019).

Fluid versus static alignments. The most fluid alliance in the MENA, and hence most malleable in terms of policy, has been the conservative pro-Western alliance, given the extremely broad portfolio of attitudes within that camp towards the different regional crises and challenges. The Muslim Brotherhood alliance was also rather fluid between 2011 and 2013, but since the ouster of Morsi and the re-establishment of the alliance between Qatar and Turkey it has been quite stable and consistent. The most static alignment pattern is the 'resistance' axis led by Iran which is in a defensive, nearly isolated position in the regions, with few strategic options to change alignments. These trends – the conservative camp being the most and the resistance camp being the least fluid and flexible in terms of alignments – are likely to continue in the nearer future. Among the factors determining the degree of fluidity of an alignment is the degree of threat perception that will influence the determination to cooperate; the flexibility provided by different modes of engagement with regional and international actors; and the degree to which the alignment is based on an underlying ideology or a shared value system. The main base of the conservative camp's survival has been its wealth and US support, and both are eroding, so we may expect even more fluidity in this camp, especially with the decline of the eroding GCC rentier state model.

Regional and global agendas may clash. Alignment decisions of regional powers differ from those of global players. The thematic mapping exercise illustrates that Western powers, and in particular Europeans, do not have many shared interests with regional powers. Outside powers may come to the region to counter their global competitors. Regional powers cherish outside powers' support because it gives them regime security, but often they do not share outside powers' wider global security concerns, so they look to contain the global dimension and channel outside powers' actions towards their own

concerns. In this setup, a rival outside power entering the game can be attractive as a partner provided it is not aligned with any of their regional enemies. So a new outside power that is not yet aligned with anyone – such as China or India – is highly attractive at first. The differing motivations of global and regional powers may lead to friction in the partnership when regional and global goals clash.

A Future of Overlapping, Threat-Driven Coalitions. In conclusion: if current inter-governmental partnerships are mainly defined by shared threats (or perceptions thereof), the outlook is a picture of a Middle East that continues to be defined by crises and hard security threats, albeit in a much less predictable fashion than was the case in the decades past. As threat patterns and geopolitical arenas overlap, the likeliness of new structural alliances decreases as cooperation with actors who simultaneously share and torpedo some of our most fundamental interests is likely to become the norm.

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