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Middle East War: What To Make Of It?

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In 1989 the USSR breakdown imparted a quaint look to the East-West and North-South rankings. The world as we knew it gave way to a new optimism and an apparent benevolent expansion of freedom. This optimism, however, was short-lived. New threats arose and the perspectives of international security and stability changed both quickly and radically.

In the early 90s, the crisis in Yugoslavia showed how precipitously a European State could come apart and how the ensuing instability and war could affect peace and security in Europe. With the attacks of 9/11 came the notion of Islamic terrorism as a global threat; and, since then, the offensive in Afghanistan, the Iraq War, and the successive Islamist attacks perpetrated against targets outside of regular "theatres of war", brought political and ideological confrontations to the forefront of the world stage.

This unfolding process had and continues to have a profound effect on the situation in the Middle East, where political insecurity has continually worsened since the First Gulf War (1991). Tensions between States are a characteristic of the region. However the threat of conflict is currently appearing in new and dangerous ways, with prospects of old rivalries being played out with sophisticated weaponry, especially now with the heralded nuclearization of the region, the manipulation of strategic energy resources and the exporting of Islamic terrorism.

War

The first war of the 21st century began exactly when a great many experts in geopolitics, geo-strategy, international law and other "architaves" of the world system, argued that, given the downfall of the USSR and the prevalence of the USA as the only superpower, any future conflicts would be no more than localized skirmishes and that the community of states was heading towards being governed by a tranquil and wise international legal order, universally policed by the UN.

11 September 2001 was a rude awakening. Suddenly, the time of the great wars involving various powers was not a thing of the past; after all, war was not a clean business, rather, it yielded corpses; above all History was hardly over: rather like Press Rewind, History was starting again, with the usual pain and blood.

However, if war as an act of violence intended at bringing the adversary to heel continues to be operative, the same cannot be said about state monopoly on the ability to make war, which, for now, has been surpassed. Those who propose that war is a pathology of State sovereignty would do well to recall that only after the modern era did the notion "State" come to define the political unit; that war already existed before and that it will most probably continue to be waged if and when the "nation state" ceases to exist.

For now, at least, the conditions of war have changed. The geopolitical configuration changed, or rather, the balance of force. Borders have ceased to define the purview of the State's security, the theatre of operations now extends

to world scale, the dangers, the arms and the enemies are no longer limited to a territory, the players multiplied. The State is no longer the only decisive player, as we now face now transnational organizations, mercenaries, terrorist groups, which neither have the same concerns nor the same responsibilities and which tend to blur the distinction between things civil and things military. Traditionally, war was held between different political entities and civil war occurred within a given political entity, the viability of which was called into question. These days some external wars assume the form of peace keeping or policing operations, maintaining order or re-establishing authority. It is becoming harder to clearly establish the differences between internal and external situations... and the expression “international civil war” even began to be used.

What is more, War between states use to involve a principle of limitation, a principle of rationality that ultimately tends to accommodate survival interests. Now, the return of the religious dimension as presented in the case of the Islamic *jihad* makes a direct hit here. Human bombs contradict two fundamental principles of the warring tradition: 1) soldiers do not fight each other to die but to save what is theirs, their life, their homeland, their family; and 2) war aims to neutralize the enemy by means of force and not the indiscriminate death of civilians.

In religious war the symbolic takes precedence over interests and annihilates the conditions of self-regulation, being satisfied only with totality. This order of the level of the absolute repudiates the former notion of the consent of nations and spurns any and all alignment with a hypothetical international juridical order. At the centre of the issue, at the crossroads of law and power, lies state sovereignty and its guarantees of order within the international system.

A System in crisis

11/9 was like a hologram of what was to come. By attacking the USA Al Qaida not only attacked the predominant power within the current system of states. It broadcasted an equally powerful signal to everyone who was fighting to get or to bring down established power - within and outside the Islamic belief system. This attack, topping a long series of attempts against North American targets drawn up by a stateless organization based within a member State of the UN, brutally illustrated the problem of the usefulness (or lack thereof) of borders and, above all, of the need to re-evaluate the well-founded uses of national sovereignty... that is, of values (*difficult word these days*)

What are the constitutive values of the international system? What is its source of legitimacy? How is power obtained and what procedures have to be fulfilled for this power to be accepted as being well founded? Can a regime that, housed within its own apparatus or in a “rental” State, kills or allows the populations in its safekeeping to be killed, continue to benefit from the sacredness of borders? Who can sit in judgment?

Initially the USA responded with a classic counter-attack, gathering allies and bombing Afghanistan until the Taliban regime fell. It was expected and well

received, reassuring, even. Then the American Administration went a step further and decided to respond to the reconfiguration of the World as it seemed to stand revealed. And they went ahead with a preventive war, a war to depose Saddam Hussein, a war to liberate Iraq.

The Iraq War constitutes an historical turning point, and this is why it raises problems of comprehension. These are transformative times, of unprecedented speed, extremely difficult to evaluate in mid flow. There is a certain lack of concepts which would enable us to fully grasp and/or describe the implications of the new situation. How can one understand its real dimension, the whole range of possibilities? What we have are old ideological arguments, belated questions that only reinforce a confrontational atmosphere. Can we find a new set of categories? Is it possible or even desirable?

The lonely position of the USA as guarantor of the liberal order naturally arouses all kinds of contradictory feelings. As any other nation, country or state the US has a whole series of interests to promote and/or defend. Besides this, its *ethos* as an ideological power, (which it always was), leads America to defend the values of liberty and to respond on this level to the challenge being thrown to the whole democratic system by the regressive forces of the islamist movement. This seems to be how the USA's policy of military intervention comes to be justified, not through the need or will to conquer but in the name of establishing freedom and democracy, with the heightened importance of guaranteeing the defense of open society in a world where, as we see, borders are a meager guarantee.

To a large extent, American policy has been to accept the challenge put forward by political Islam, by the so-called islamist ideology, and to take it seriously, or rather, to understand that the apparent archaism comes from a shrewd ideological analysis of the combined weaknesses of western societies, and that it corresponds to a radical challenge concerning "the best form of government".

The archaism resides not in a rejection of technological progress, but in the will to submit the forces of progress to a system of political tyranny that promises to have control over History and Time. The seriousness of the threat results mainly from two aspects: the first is its nature as an anti-historic movement and consequent capacity for mobilization against the system; the second is the globalizing vocation of Islam to be here in the service of a desire for power which is not intermediated by any responsibility with regard to the system. Together, these two elements have an extremely potent capacity for disruption, as Iraq and various cities around the world have already had the opportunity to appreciate.

So, it may be said that the main objective of the Bush Administration has been to maintain the strategic initiative. Notwithstanding the errors along the way, there has been continuity in a response built up on various layers: firstly, take the war into the enemy's territory. Secondly, not to set time limits on the length of the war. Thirdly, to deploy international political action built on ideological, strategic and tactical layers (this being to a certain extent retrieved from Iron Curtain period). Let us consider the following: ideologically, the agenda of

democracy and security and of the fight against tyranny is pertinent and has a strong political appeal; strategically, the invention of a "Great Middle East" protects, without saying so, the whole southern flank of a weak Europe, of a hesitant Turkey and of other allies, declared or not, up to the borders with India; tactically, it brings about an effort to break the "mythical-imperialist" front of the alleged Arab nation working with allied governments on the so-called "underlying sources of insecurity".

A risky strategy: from a superpower which exercised a powerful influence in the Middle East, the US has become a regional player, committing a considerable part of its resources and prestige in a task with a doubtful conclusion. The journey of a democratic Middle East will be long and twisting. History, thankfully, has not ended, so we may live to hear about it.

European Crisis

More than the USA, Russia or even the European Union, Islam may well be the factor which will best define and shape the Europe of the 21st century.

Ironically, already in 1989, as the fall of the Berlin Wall accelerated European integration, it also allowed the first manifestations of the Islamic desire for confrontation, as in the case of the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie and the beginning of the controversy over the use of the veil in France. Since then events have galvanized the attitudes of European societies towards Muslim communities, as much as the Muslim identity of these communities. The Muslim presence in Europe, allegedly over 20 million people, is increasingly seen as a challenge to social harmony, reopening debates considered closed long ago, like the place of religion in public and civil life, tolerance, secularism as a path towards modernity and the very identity of Europe.

It is proving hard for Europe to deal with homegrown islamist terrorism, as confronting it – in terms of time, territory, and timing – necessarily means creating and applying clear definitions of the proportion of Islam which it is prepared to tolerate within its and the various States' borders. This is a complex and unpleasant issue. Besides the evident work of policing and security, the defense of the rights of Muslim individuals and citizens is put into question – And so are also European national identities, which feel the need to stand up against the idea of not possessing legitimacy to draw the line where, for instance, multiculturalism and parallel societies should stop.

Euro-Islamic ties have produced a whole series of new phenomena, including the increase in terrorism, the emergence of a new anti-Semitism, enticing the anti-liberal left and pushing political parties to the right, even leading to adjustments in the notion of European collective interest, questioning the opportunity for greater integration and the reformulation of the future European foreign policy, namely enlargement. Now, with a full blown institutional crisis in the European Union, the debate on the demarcation of political borders is blooming. This is to the credit of the prospective admission of Turkey, which brings with it the objective fact of being a Muslim country, confronting the European Christian identity, not from the point of view of

observance but from the point of view of the political community and its civil, secular characteristics.

It is especially difficult to deal with a situation that directly calls into question the four fundamental pillars of the construction of Europe, or rather, liberal democracy, tolerance of integration, the attraction of Soft Power, and the normative effect of a foreign policy built on the projection of financial power. With the fundamentalist threat operating inside and outside its borders, European countries should devise a viable external approach to the volatile or unstable states from Casablanca to the Caucasus. A thankless exercise severely disciplined by the weakness inherent to the degree of external dependence that the European Union has in vital areas such as energy supply and defense issues.

The Greater Middle East

From the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, a vast stretch of land is home to sixteen Arab states and also to Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Israel, Pakistan and Turkey: some twenty modern states which have in common the fact that they fully or partly follow on from former Empires. Almost none of these states fully enjoy defined or internationally recognized borders. Practically all have territorial disputes with one or more of its neighbors with whom, most of them are, have been or will be at war. The region is going through a cycle of ethnic and religious conflicts and extremism, represented mainly by the emergence of the islamist ideology, with the notion of a political and irredentist Islam disseminated by groups which, constantly changing profile and location and working in networks, threaten the precarious stability of a good number of states, the high volatility and internal contradiction of which is, in itself, a powerful factor of change. If the collapse of the regime and eventual collapse of the state is obvious in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, it is also a real possibility for various others. It is here that the main opportunities for Islamist extremism and terrorism reside and also the most serious threats to international security and stability.

The Return of the Great Game

One of the more interesting consequences of the dissolution of the USSR was the emergence of the republics of Central Asia which, returning to the map of former Transoxania and reopening the territory of the Great Game, formed, in fact, the new border north of the Middle East. In the 19th century, the original version of the "Great Game" meant the political dispute between Great Britain, Russia and the Persian and Ottoman Empires, and was played out in the region that went from the Caspian Sea to the border north of China.

Now the game is different, the prize is greater and access less restricted: situated at the crossroads of the (ex-)Soviet, Islamic, European and Asian worlds, the Caspian basin and the Persian Gulf region claim 70% of world oil reserves and perhaps half of the deposits of natural gas, and which may, in time and in its wider area, constitute the largest energy market in the world. Needless

to say, the issue goes far beyond the financial stakes, to the strategic question of power and balancing now underway, radically and quickly changing the previous situation in the region.

With the USA "entangled" in Iraq, China has already taken the first steps towards setting the regional agenda, specifically with the Shanghai Group, which began as an anti-terrorist league, and now seems to be turning into a traditional alliance of states, developing a regional arms market and, principally, defining the rules and conditions of access to the area... and dictating who is excluded: the USA had their request for observer status rejected.

With the possible exception of Afghanistan, all the SCO allies seem to share an interest in reducing American influence, which in practice means an effort to make sure that the pipelines in the region also run from west to east. Its members do not require good behavior certification.

The adhesion of Russia consolidated this strategic partnership. Russia, which currently has observer status in the Organization of the Islamic Conference, need no reminding of the volatility of its southern flank, exposed to the unrest of some 23 million Muslim subjects. Sending out clear signals of a desire to return to "its rightful place" on the world stage, and convinced that whoever controls oil and the distribution circuits can also control the consumers, Russia spares no effort to recover this traditional zone of influence. As the world's leading producer and exporter of gas and the second in terms of oil Russia has 23% of world gas reserves and is the main supplier of the EU (30% of consumption), the demand for which is constantly increasing. With the control of strategic resources, Moscow has a singular political position which it makes use of to create its profile as the main player in the "Great Game".

In turn, Iran has a three-fold interest in access to the energy resources of Central Asia and the Caucasus, from where it reaps direct economic and financial benefits quite useful for its domestic stabilization; it benefits from its geographic situation to reactivate a privileged "Persian corridor" between Central Asia and the Caucasus; and uses these two aspects in favor of a third which is to promote and obtain recognition as the regional great power. Teheran has sought to strengthen its relations with the states of the area through religious solidarity, political diplomatic accords and regional infra-structural programs.

Turkey also pursues its strategic interests, aiming to reduce its energy dependence on Arab oil, but above all to consecrate its esteemed statute of bridge between Asia and Europe and to re-enhance a strategic situation somewhat confused with the end of the USSR. The Turkish decision makers are obviously concerned with a complex set of strategic choices and challenges, in particular the Iraqi/Kurd nexus and the security dimension of a nuclear Iran... all in the not-to-be-dismissed threat of seeing its Persian neighbor and Muslim brother attacked by its partner in NATO.

Be that as it may, the interests around the Caspian Sea converge on the prospect of a rebalanced reduction in the importance of the Middle East,

especially of Arab countries, in the world production of energy. The argument states that the predominance of the Persian Gulf states amongst the producers makes the supply to the rest of the World capable of being manipulated and extremely vulnerable and that the development of a network of supply pipelines spanning out of the Caspian would be a way of minimizing the risk, considerably reducing dependence on OPEC production and thereby modifying the relationships of strength in the Middle East.

The centre of the Middle East would naturally move from Arabia to Persia.

The Middle East, after all?

A zoom over the Middle East today takes us to the world of the Ottoman Empire, to its successor states of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey. And to Iran, a neighboring power which again claims centrality. For a good part of the 20th century, and for the foreseeable future, the concentration of oil reserves places considerable leverage over the world economy in Arab hands. But even so, the Arab world is hardly being spared the transformative frenzy which seems to have overtaken the international system of states. The high returns of oil are again heating up state budgets and flowing from the petrol economies to those which do not have it, already increasing the FDI/GDP ratio increases in Egypt, in Jordan and in Lebanon. Growing numbers of Arab immigrants flock to the richer countries in search of better living conditions.

It may be said that, if there is a political Islam seeking to realise a global agenda, there is also a new Arab awareness. The question of the caliphate is very modernly connected with the implementation of forms of globalization and religious authority. This is as much because a significant number of Islamic Arab political movements want to re-establish religious institutions as it is because the wider debates on globalization and the breakdown of the national state instil verisimilitude to the model of the transnational religious political community. Islamist, or hedonist, the message is issued in a common language and will be broadcasted by satellite television, be it Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, or anyone of a number of new-old newspapers which dispute Internet space in Arab and increasingly in English. These are the emissaries of a new Arabism which does not need instruments of government, the very nature of which restrain universal and imperial ambition which is seems to be characteristic of Arabism and of Islam.

On the political front, however, Arab nationalism has collapsed. The “Arab Nation” has not managed to leave its rhetoric behind. The degree of probability of liberalisation could increase in the region, but the adverse factors are enormous. In spite of many cases of an increased flexibility of the borderline of what is acceptable by the powers that be, authoritarianism continues in good health, with monarchs and royal families firmly committed to ensuring the survival of the dynastic principle. In the cases where power was obtained by means of an electoral procedure, either constitutional guarantees do not exist and neither does there seem to be an opening in terms of freedom of speech or

association, or they were elected as party movements with an expressly anti-democratic program. The combination of modern media and of geopolitical resentment seem to drive the transformation of the Arab political landscape by way of a consistent mass of public opinion which is exercised over international issues, the place of women, the role of religion in public life, the weak legitimacy of governmental regimes.

The Iraq War provoked radical changes in the Middle East, the most patent of which is the eminently local nature of the definition of political interests. Whichever the religious complicities may be, alliances seem to be made along lines of political rationality.

Iraq

Iraq represents the main challenge, due to the domestic difficulties which daily confront the Iraqis, due to the high potential for regional instability and due to the draining of symbolic and real power which the politico-military irresolution represents for the USA. Since the fall of Baghdad, the War and all issues concerning the use of force and the projection of American and Western power have been exhaustively discussed, with an extraordinary virulence in America and elsewhere.

For a good part of 2007, the fundamental question has been whether the USA will withdraw its troops from Iraq or if it is possible to construct some kind of political solution for the conflicts in Iraq and in the region. From this perspective, military intervention would be victorious if it could guarantee the space and incentives necessary for political agreement. It is a developing equation, the outcome of which we can only wait for. The action continues. Analysis can only be made with results.

"The war we are in is not the war we entered into. But we went into it together" is how Bush defined the problem. In Washington, the victory of the Democrats in the interim elections of 2006 added fuel to the anti-war and anti-Bush arguments in such a way that we now have an unusual proliferation of candidates for the 2008 presidential elections, all of which are structured around the agonizing question "What to do in Iraq", to which in fact underlies the question of knowing how to lead a superpower through an historic crisis of major proportions.

With a war under way in Iraq, an open war between Palestinian factions, the threat of civil conflict in Lebanon daily underscored by Hezbollah, an Israeli government on the brink of imploding, the imperative of containing an Iran on the nuclear path assumes priority, demands determination and postulates the reformulation of alliances and regional policy.

Iran

One of the more important developments of recent years is the re-appearance of Iran as a main power in the Middle East. This rise is due to various factors such as geo-political advantages, the price of oil and the regional power vacuum.

To the west Iran touches the Arab world; it borders on Turkey (that is, with NATO) to the north west and to the north is Russia and the Caucasus; to the north east are the new independent states of Central Asia; to the east, Afghanistan and Pakistan... and on its southern border, the parkway of the global economy, the Persian Gulf.

Spirituallywise, the regime of the mullahs is perfectly positioned, between the Arabs, the Turks, the muslim Asians of the centre and of the south, to futher its claim for Islamic leadership.

Teheran continues to be loyal to its revolutionary program of dedicating itself locally, regionally and, in time, in the world, to restoring a regime of power and government in line with its interpretation of the Truth.

It already has the image of having unlimited capacity to flout the norms which govern relations between states, and even more so between cultures; it now openly pursues a program of regional destabilization, through client-type organizations, with special mention for Hamas and Hezbollah which, sponsored in cash, arms and strategic direction, strive to develop a regional escalation, whether in Lebanon, or through border attacks on Israel.

Some things do oppose Iran; in the Afghan east and in the Iraqi west it is sandwiched by the military forces of the USA and NATO; its Syrian partner is politically crude, the brutality of Hezbollah's actions in Lebanon managed to gain the consensus of the Security Council to demand its disarmament and to move a major UN intervention force to the south of Lebanon.

However, the nuclear issue remains the most important one: the possibility of an Iranian Government possessing nuclear arms capacity has ultimately been sufficient to bring heads together, and not only American ones: the unanimous approval of sanctions by the UN Security Council (December/06), has increased the political and diplomatic pressure on Teheran. The hope is that sooner or later the cost of isolation will become so important, so destructive to its economic power, that Iran will become interested in sitting at the negotiating table.

One must say that at this stage it is rather difficult to envisage political expediency in sufficient amount to bring about the containment of Iran and the neutralization of the danger it represents for the Gulf States, for Israel, for the region, for Europe and for the stability of the world economy.