

OBSERVATORY FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

Report for the Presidents' Council

November 4th 2016

The Observatory in today's meeting has discussed the evolution of the political situation in the Middle East in order to track the underlying lines of action that are affecting its institutional and political development.

The geopolitics of the region is now dominated by the confrontation between Russia and the US to gain influence among the countries that are competing for the hegemony in that area. This confrontation has taken place mainly in Syria, where the main goal of the 2011 uprisings to topple the Damascus regime has been replaced by the battle for the domination of the Middle East. It seems that Russia has shifted part of the European quarrel with the US and its allies to this region with the aim of alleviating the pressure Moscow is feeling in Europe. Since Washington has decided to step back in the Middle East to lead only from behind, the region has become an open battleground between traditional US partners (Turkey and Saudi Arabia) that are experiencing the need to fend for themselves and long-time US foes (Iran and Russia) that consider they are having an opportunity to expand their powers and protect their allies. The EU as such could have taken a first class role in the Middle East, but it was not ready because has been accustomed to leaving tough political and military decisions to the US even when direct European interests are at stake.

The Observatory has perceived the rising influence of Turkey in the region after the failed coup to counter the assertiveness of Iran from one side and Saudi Arabia from the other. It looks as if the Turkish goal is to place itself above those two countries and at the same time to combat the Syrian Kurds that constitute a threat to its territorial integrity if they establish land links with the Turkish Kurds. To this end, it could happen that Ankara might occupy permanently a part of Syrian territory.

Also the Observatory has noted that democracy in Turkey is in danger because of the restrictions the regime has imposed to basic human rights and the prospect of restoring the death penalty. Can a NATO member act in such a way?.

Iran is another country that the Observatory has been monitoring. Its role in Syria betrays larger goals using Shi'ism as a tool and increasing its relationship with Moscow as shows the use of Hamadan air base by Russian bombers that fly over Syrian areas. Tehran is confronting Saudi Arabia that is becoming the head of Sunnism in the Arab world as a way to mark Riyadh hegemony in the Middle East.

The outcome of this intertwining of interests is difficult to forecast. But whatever it will be it will have an impact in Europe. The Observatory plans to follow up the situation.

With regard to North Africa, the Observatory has detected that in Libya the political landscape after the brokering of the UN to form a new government has not changed much. The Islamic State seems to be less tolerated than before.

Tunisia finds itself in a maze because the government is incapable of balancing the advantages of democracy with the welfare of its citizens. They consider that up to now there has not been an improvement of their living standards.

Algeria is an uncertain state because the succession of the President remains an unsolved question between the military and the secret services. From the economic point of view low prices of crude are hindering development plans to improve the life of the people. But also the question is that the economy remains in an artificial situation because of its vulnerability.

Regarding Morocco, the reforms that were carried out after the upheavals in 2012 are shielding the country from the influence of Salafists and are allowing a smooth transformation to improve the wellbeing of the population through the country. Nevertheless, the demonstrations inside and outside Morocco because the death of a citizen in awful circumstances show that the present situation might change for the worst and they could affect its stability. The Observatory is going to watch closely these developments.

Mariano Garcia Muñoz
Ambassador of Spain Eurodefense España