



EURODEFENSE-ESPAÑA

**REPORT
ON
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

March 2017

Since the last Report sent to the Presidents Council last November 2016, the situation in the Middle East and North Africa is not showing any signs of improvement. It continues to deteriorate and at the same time is in a permanent flux.

The roots of this instability can be found first, in a broader participation of some external actors to this region and second, to the decrease of activities from countries of the region, mainly due to the worsening of their economic situation as an outcome of lower oil prices added to the realisation that the rebel groups they are helping to fight in Syria are leaning towards the Al Qaeda ideology and praxis.

Among the actors playing a bigger role in the Middle East (ME) are Russia, Turkey and Iran because they consider that the war in Syria and the combat against Islamic State terrorism is an opportunity to promote their respective interests. Russia, through its growing involvement in Syria, has gained a preeminent position to promote and to defend its political interests not only in the region but also elsewhere. Moscow is seeking a place as undisputed actor in the ME and in the world. The visit of the Israeli PM some weeks ago to Moscow to let know Russia what are the goals of Tel Aviv in Syria is a token of this.

On the other hand Turkey, that is undergoing an in-depth political, military, social and economic transformation, has a twofold aim in the ME:

1. - To counter Iran in Syria and Iraq as a response to the perception that Tehran is increasingly encroaching in its historic sphere of influence. (Perhaps it will be worthwhile to analyse the rivalry between Iran and Turkey as a factor preventing to reach an agreement to solve the conundrum of the ME).

2. - To prevent a Kurdish national identity to the South of its border with Syria, by the Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Party and its military branch, the People Protection Units (YPG) that have very close links with the Turkish PKK, a terrorist organisation for Ankara and a danger for its territorial integrity.

The growing Turkish military intervention, known as Euphrates Shield, is backing those two goals. But it is also worth bearing in mind that an undisclosed target of Turkey is to establish a permanent foothold in Syria.

Regarding Iran, its presence in Iraq and Syria has been increased even more as can be seen in the battles for Tikrit and Mosul on Iraqi soil and in the fights for Alep and Raqqa in Syria. In its combat against the Islamic State (IS), Tehran hides also an underlying pretext to maintain its axis from the frontier of Pakistan to the Mediterranean.

The actors having a role in the Syrian war from its beginning Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE are now backtracking as a consequence of the losses by the rebel groups they were fostering to the forces of the regular Syrian Army, supported by Russia and Iran. But also because some of the rebel groups they were supporting have been absorbed by the ones linked to Al Qaeda. The former Jabhat al Nusra Front, that changed its denomination to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to disguise its affiliation to Al Qaeda, has integrated most of the disbanded rebel groups that were under the umbrella of the Gulf Cooperation Council and has a new name: Fateh al-Sham. It has become more powerful after the losses of the IS and constitutes a real threat to the Gulf Monarchies because of its ideology. Therefore the GCC members are distancing themselves from the Syrian war. Another reason to act in such a way is that Saudi Arabia and its allies of the GCC are fighting a very expensive war in Yemen where Iran is acting through its proxies. Due to the reduction of their revenues forced by the declining oil prices the former first actors in Syria are compelled to almost abandon that scenario up to foreign non-Arab powers.

A new sign of this approach can be seen in the participation and organisation of the Astana Peace for Syria Conference, chaired by Russia, Turkey and Iran where Arab governments of the ME have not been invited. Also the US and the EU representatives are absent.

In North Africa (NA) there is not improvement because politics and economics in the countries of this area are surrounded by the uncertainty of their future. Egypt has gone back to autocratic rule like in Mubarak time besides the aggravation of the economic and social situation. In the Sinai Al-Qaeda is strong and is creating a stronghold against the Egyptian army. In Libya, instead of two governments there are now three, one of them sponsored by the UN, fighting among them to gain power. The Libyan people are suffering from this struggle with no end in sight. The Libyan chaos is a destabilizing factor in North Africa and also for the EU because it has become the platform for illegal immigration towards Europe.

In Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco the worsening of the economic conditions is creating social unrest due to the realisation by their respective populations that there are not changes in the near future that might improve their living standards. This could lead to accept Salafist and Jihadist ideologies if the governments in those countries are unable to cope with the situation. The consequences for the EU could be very negative.

The state of affairs in MENA is also a by-product of the course of action of the United States in the region. After being an “interested spectator” during the Obama administration, it is still difficult to perceive what the new Administration policy will be for those countries, except to combat terrorism. This explains the presence of US Special Forces in Syria and Iraq but there is a lack of definition of the goals of Washington for that part of the world.

Regarding the EU, the Brexit is not helping to create a dynamic approach to the MENA.