

Middle East: New Balkans of the World?

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Abstrakt

Middle East is a region whose geopolitical dynamics has many analogies with the role of the Balkans in the first half of the 19th century and up to the 3rd decade of the 20th century, namely a "Powder keg of Europe", defined in the same period as the "Eastern Issue". Moreover, Middle East is a region located at the junction of three continents: Europe, Asia and the Mediterranean Africa, and along with ancient Egypt is the cradle of Western civilization, providing for it political, economic, religious, scientific, military, intellectual and institutional models. Four millennia of civilization before Christian era did not pass without leaving a trace. Trade, currency, law, diplomacy, technology applied to works in time of war or peace, the profit based economy and the bureaucratized economy, popular and absolutist government, nationalist and universal spirit, tolerance and fanaticism – all these are not inventions of the modern world, but have their origins and methods of implementation, often even sophisticated methods, in this region.

1. Difficulty of an overview

In fact, in an area being so vast, ranging from Mediterranean shores and reaching to the Indian Ocean, and geopolitical and geostrategical events are occurring and moving *fast*, and often contradictory. That is exactly why is difficult to rebuild an overview of trends in the region, because there are so many lines of geopolitical action that intersect themselves, and is hard to discover priorities, which vary depending on the views and interests of those directly involved and of the observer.

Nothing comparable, for example, to what happens in a Europe facing a dramatic financial and economic crisis that unifies and subordinates all other issues.

The difficulty of analysis on the Middle East results from the multitude of objectives and their continuous variation on a scale of priorities that arise both in the small countries and in the middle and large countries in this area, within which all of these can be applied even to political and military groups and movements, making uncertain the decryption of political line followed by actors in the region¹.

During the Cold War, the analysis was easier, even if it was more schematic and superficial. The standard of judgment was simple: who was not lined with the West automatically made "the game of the Soviet Union". Balance scales were only two: if one went up, the other went down. Today, they have multiplied and the mechanism of balance, which is always in motion, remains hidden.

In time, there were accumulated paradoxical situations, whose developments were not expected, or normally foreseen. We have to mention some of them. Firstly, it is what is referring to the relationship of Israel with surrounding Arab world (Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon), characterized initially by direct military confrontation, then, in a second phase, by confrontation with the further Islamic world in (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya), and finally, in the current phase, the relationship with Palestine, that is just the starting point of the crisis, with the unresolved problem of accepting refugees. It was rational to assume that peace with Egypt, considered an authority in the Arab world, would have a domino effect. But it was not the case. Perhaps competition for political hegemony in the Arab world between Egypt and Saudi Arabia prevented this domino effect, but within this explanation found their place the initiatives of Syria in Lebanon and of Iran in the same Syria and, indirectly, in Lebanon and in current Palestinian territory under Palestinian authority.

Another apparent paradox is constituted by the inconclusive Arab-Israeli wars, then reduced to police-military operations in Lebanon and Gaza. Individual conflicts mitigated some **situations**, allowed to stabilize positions, but their results on battlefield did not change mutual distrust even if, at times, international pressure, particularly from the U.S., was very strong, taking advantage of Moscow weakness after the collapse of the communist system.

Today the situation is almost reversed: U.S., that on 15 December 2011 lowered the flag in Iraq, marking the end of its troop presence in Iraq, is facing a financial and economic crisis that reduces its intervention ability, while Russia makes its presence felt in international fora, where manages to block certain decisions with his vote.

¹ Bădescu, I. Mihăilescu, I. , *Geopolitică, globalizare, integrare*, Editura Mica Valahie, București, 2003

It was thought that leaving the political scene a character as Yasser Arafat (11th of December, 2004), skilled in making the transition from war to peace and back, will enable a change in relations with Israel. Instead, relations remained volatile and conflict between Al-Fatah and Hamas groups have impeded President Abu Mazen to provide an unequivocal political line, situation that was exploited by Israeli, otherwise cautious to follow a path without exit alternative, and those capacity to create a new internal disagreement is not to be underestimated. Economic conditionalities, effective in other circumstances, there seem to have minor effects, especially because different parties may rely on external aid that can not be lost: the American for the cause of Israel, the Saudi for the Arab-Palestinian cause.

On September 23, Abu Mazen has submitted the formal application for admission of out of negotiations with Israel, which replied that the peace must be concluded before admission. This position was supported by the United States, which makes unlikely for now the acceptance of Palestinian President demand, who could put then the admission issue of his country into UNESCO. In fact, it's all about small / insignificant diplomatic action which does not change a blocked situation²³.

Even the challenge raised by terrorism, dressed in Islamic extremism of Al-Qaeda, which at first seemed to pave the way towards a final settlement of accounts, was not decisive. And ten years has passed. That led to two U.S. military interventions with contribution from dozens of other countries in Afghanistan, in Iraq, with the cost of 3,000 billion dollars (which probably caused the U.S. economic and financial situation contributing to the explosion of crisis in 2007 and 2008) and 6,000 soldiers dead, plus other 2000 dead soldiers belonging to allied states (the number of Iraqi and Afghan civilians and soldiers is not specified, but certainly very high), but had no result about to which can be said that was decisive. In fact, here democracy is far from being established decisively, beyond electoral practices.

2. A Spring without Summer⁴

Another paradox is the so-called "Arab Spring", which will celebrate soon two years. Leaders of Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya have fallen. Unlike other countries, Colonel Gaddafi's regime fell as a result of military intervention of Western powers (France and the UK, at the forefront, but with

² Vasile Simileanu, *Geopolitica spațiului islamic*, Editura TopForm, București, 2011

³ Vasile Nazarie, *Rivalitățile geopolitice din regiunea Golfului Persic și viitorul Euro-asiiei*, *Revista Geopolitică*, nr.46/2012 București

⁴ Michel Chossudovsky, *Confronting Iran, "Protecting Israel": The Real Reason for America's War on Syria*, *Revista Geopolitică*, nr.46/2012 București

sustained support of U.S.), which allowed the rebels in Cyrenaica to gradually obtain control of Colonel supporters. Finally, Gaddafi paid for Libya's isolation created by poor domestic and foreign policy. It was not enough to give up officially to the support given to extremist movements, and not useful for him that he suppressed the Muslim fundamentalists. Elections in Egypt, held on 28-29 of November, have open road to movements as Muslim Brotherhood (with their Freedom and Justice Party) and Al Nor, to conquer total power in Egypt, so far not being clear whether moderate or extremist line will prevail.⁵

"Arab Spring" had even serious consequences in the Arabian Peninsula: the Yemen president, after 33 years in power, gave up, while Saudi troops intervened in Bahrain to stop rebellion and its spread. The most serious of all, the situation in Syria, where, since March last year, more decisive and armed anti-regime groups struggle and face a harsh crackdown, that led, so far, to at least 7,000 dead. Syrian president Bashar Assad, pressed by Arab League, made promises of reform, but the situation shows a regime still determined to use military repression. The responsibilities of Assad's absolute leadership are not inferior to those of Gaddafi, but even the circle of sanctions on the regime and negative evaluations was enlarged, no intervention coalition is to be seen. Some analysts argue that one of the reasons could be that Syria has no oil.

On 14th of December last year, Frederic Hof, regional coordinator for Middle East Affairs, pressed the U.S. State Department by saying in a very frank language, while listening to one of the committees of Congress, that Assad's regime is "equivalent to a living death" and accused Russia of acting according to "political calculations" (ANSA online, December 14, 2011).

French president Nicolas Sarkozy raised from time to time the issue of intolerability of Syrian regime. Turkey has offered hospitality for a Syrian government in exile and from multiple sources was found that Syrian army desertions, together with foreign mercenaries formed a truly armed resistance. But so far nothing has happened. Even Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, which is pressuring Assad to make certain reforms do not go too far in their approach because, in their turn, fear that protests could explode in their own countries. Israel, which failed in its alliance with Turkey, scrupulously observes the developments in neighboring countries. And, in the same time, lost the confidence in maintaining good relations with Egypt and Syria concomitant with increased danger of a confrontation with Iran. Meanwhile, Israel feels somewhat neglected by U.S., even being aware that President Obama's priority is economic crisis overtaking, which is threatening his reelection. President Obama ended the intervention in Iraq, without condemning his predecessor who initiated it and is preparing for withdrawal from Afghanistan.

⁵ Vasile Simileanu, *Geopolitica Statului Islamic*

It is obviously that actors implied to wonder what will be the consequences of American retreat. Iran's hegemonic ambitions are known, but there must be taken into account the new political dynamics of Turkey, whose model of moderate Islamism is becoming more and more a success, if not in entire Muslim world, at least in the own country. A stronger secular vision manifested more pregnant before, in Iraq led by Saddam Hussein, but even it was attractive for many, ended in vain. Iraq's fate remains uncertain: centrifugal pressures multiply but nobody has the courage to open the issue of borders redefinition. Iraq is held together by the pressure of surrounding countries which would enjoy its scission. Strong Iranian influence on the Shiite community in Iraq is a reality that alarmed so both Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Kurdish issue is also far from being solved and the separatists do not hesitate to defy the government in Ankara.

3. Ambitions of Hegemony⁶⁷⁸

Destabilization of Iraq worries and the same can be said for Syria, caught between Turkey and the same Iraq. A deep crisis of Assad's regime may actually upset the whole region of the Middle East and nobody would want to contribute to a mess of the situation and the risk of escape it from hand. All these facts made Assad to insist on repression. And then there's Iran, supported in the region by population, its territorial spread and, above all, its status as source of oil and gas. Iran is a Shiite small continent surrounded by the "sea" of Sunni. An old imperial tradition, a deep and special religion and philosophy are so many reasons to Iranian pride and distinctive differences from their neighbors, especially arousing the interest of Saudi Arabia, which is not only oil and gas stronghold reaching from here in Western countries, but is also the depository of Islamic tradition. Continue modernization of defense and military equipments and the situation in which Tehran would possess nuclear weapons, after secretly developed long and medium range missiles, can not leave Saudi government as a spectator. For now, the only Islamic power that belongs to the nuclear circle is Pakistan, a country struggling to free itself from the idea that its mission would be to have to deal with India, but also attracted by the sudden and rapid development of the neighboring country, that could

⁶ Jerome C.Glenn, Theodor J. Gordon, Middle East Peace Scenarios ,Revista Geopolitică, nr.46/2012 București

⁷ Yevgeniya Gaber, The Model Rivalry or the Rivalry of Models? Turkey + Qatar Relations in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring, Revista Geopolitică, nr. 46/2012 București

⁸ Cristina Alexandrescu, Iraq/Afganistan în oglindă, Revista Geopolitică, nr.46/2012 București

become a pole of attraction irresistible in the world and could change the geopolitical and geostrategic balance of the subcontinent of which Pakistan belongs.

And if the relationship with the U.S. deteriorated strongly, Islamabad maintains the one with China, that began to denounce U.S. policy that would aspire to its surrounding. The statement released by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, saying that American foreign policy will focus on East Asia, and which, in fact, contains the idea of displacement of 2,500 U.S. troops in northern Australia, certainly raised big question marks in China. In this way, existing power lines in the Middle East are conjugated with those of the Far East. And this world tour is completed with high criticism raised even by the U.S. facing the last elections in Russia, where Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency. Russian Protests against alleged electoral fraud have prompted Putin to accuse Washington of instigating them and accusing it of Gaddafi's death, with the clear intention to reactivate anti-Western Arab nationalism.

When there are tensions between the U.S. and Russia, the Middle East does not react immediately. As demonstrated by the Moscow's action to end sanctions on Syria and Iran, despite the fact that in Kremlin is not seen with good eyes the Iran access to the club of countries with nuclear weapons.

4. Reflections on the Economic Crisis

As one can easily imagine, the financial and economic crisis that scattered in last four years primarily the Euro-American area, reflects also on Middle East. The chances decreased to support the Arab spring by strong investment and open markets. Thus pacifists factors working in favor of agreed solutions are less effective, although they have never been decisive. But fewer resources means that the new regimes of North African countries, Egypt and Morocco, will have difficulties in dealing with the demands of the population, especially the young. There are opportunities for large religious movements, more or less fundamentalist, which will increase conflict with modernised but weaker secular groups. Given this aspect, slowness of growing of Arab spring is not necessarily negative, continuous reflection within these countries being a positive thing, even if the final result remains uncertain.

Despite French-British intervention in Libya, because of the economic crisis Europe is unable at this time to influence the Middle East. To that must be added the difficulty of president Obama, who at the beginning of his office set aside any bias in negotiating with Iran, then becoming more and more interested in the struggle of elections. Capturing and killing of Bin Laden counts increasingly less facing to the economic crisis that led to an unemployment rate of 9%.

The election result will be decided by economy, even if a move of president at international level cannot be excluded – however, it will probably be considered only as a diversion.

This information on Middle East confirms our initial assumptions: there are too many current lines of conflict, the priorities of governments and movements operating in the region are too changing to give a unitary meaning of overlapping events. Wait is predominant, an exasperating course of action, maybe because of a fear of making missteps or give rise to uncontrollable chain reaction throughout the region. We can only hope that the analogy between the relationship had by Balkans with Europe is the same as the relationship Middle East has with the world, and this relationship will not have the same dramatic result for the fate of the peoples in the area as in the first case.