CIDOB • Barcelona Centre for International Affairs

ISSN: 2013-4428

notes internacionals CIDOB

169 MARCH 2017

LIQUID ALLIANCES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Can Zygmunt Bauman help us understand the volatility of alliances in the Middle East? Bauman's "liquid modernity" depicts a situation of constant change, fragility, and vulnerability. He applies these terms to the labour market, the community and the individual, but they may also be used to refer to the regional order in the Middle East, its institutions and leading actors.

According to Bauman the social structures that condition individuals' behaviour come apart more quickly than new ones are able to form. There is no time, he tells us, to develop a consistent strategy; there is no long-term thinking or planning. Each shift throws up a new list of opportunities and threats. Fear spreads and leads to defensive responses. The main fear is of being left out, or, in Bauman's words, of missing the train, or falling out of the window of a fast accelerating vehicle. Something similar is happening to the region's leaders.

Solid blocs do not exist and when an alliance is forged it is based not on shared identity or a common project but on fear. One-off events change the perception of what or who represents a threat, which is how temporary alliances that are limited to single issues proliferate. They are liquid alliances that adapt to the landscape. Rivalries become liquid too. Actors that are traditionally at odds unite to face specific threats without recognising each other as allies.

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Syria is a good example of the liquid nature of the rivalries. The main local actors have been changing their definition of the threat, whether because of events on the battlefield or because of instrumental calculations.

The United States and Russia have a central role while, with the possible exception of the Maghreb, Europe is not seen as a potential ally.

The involvement of multiple actors suggested that Libya was becoming the setting for a regional confrontation based upon the level of antipathy or sympathy towards the Muslim Brotherhood

In Yemen, the Saudis and Iranians have taken opposing sides but their level of involvement differs.

The relationship between Russia and Turkey is an example of liquid rivalry

Algerian diplomacy has opted for the liquid in order to make itself a pivotal actor, a potential mediator and an indispensable interlocutor.

Although they see opportunities with Trump, all of the region's capitals continue to wonder how solid the US commitment is to security in the region.

The liquid has been taking over the solid without completely replacing it. Just as important, therefore, as attempting to understand liquid alliances is explaining why certain actors retain the desire to form solid alliances and why some rivalries persist. To find answers it is useful to focus on regional conflicts such as Syria, Yemen and Libya but also on the ups and downs that have characterised relations between Russia and Turkey, on the one side, and Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the other. It is also relevant to see whether this dance of alliances is confined to the Middle East or has spilled over into the Maghreb. Speaking of alliances, given the United States' key role it must be asked whether Trump's election will solidify traditional alliances or infuse them with more liquidity.

In this analysis the Europeans are a secondary player. Not only because the European Union and its member states are embroiled in other battles but, above all, for how they are seen in the region. Except perhaps in the Maghreb, Europe is not seen as a potential ally (solid or liquid) but as a trade partner, a driver of reforms or an actor that is capable of intervening in humanitarian crises.

Who supports who in Syria?

This conflict's shape has been changing and the number of relevant actors has multiplied. It began as a peaceful mobilisation and became an act of insurgency. The fight for freedom and dignity was progressively overshadowed – abducted, even – by sectarian dynamics. With the invaluable collaboration of the ISIS and Al-Nusra Front (linked to Al-Qaeda), the regime managed to place this conflict within the framework of the global fight against terrorism. An eminently local conflict gradually acquired first regional and soon after global dimensions.

In Syria, the fight for freedom and dignity was progressively eclipsed – abducted, even – by sectarian dynamics.

Some may argue that Syria is not the best case to start discussing liquid alliances. After all, hasn't Assad received solid support from Moscow and Tehran? He has, but it should be borne in mind that each side of that triangle has a different goal: Assad's is survival, Iran wants to prevent its regional rivals taking control of Syria, and Russia is seeking to boost its projection as a global player. So if these interests come into conflict the alliance could dissolve. In fact, at various points there has been speculation that both Moscow and Tehran might have let Assad fall if they had been sure that what came next would preserve their vital interests.

Among those who have decided upon toppling Assad the alliances are more fluid. At local level, some groups fight together in a particular province but confront one another in other parts of the country. Support from abroad has also been changing. At first, the United States and various European countries sided exclusively with the rebel groups linked to the Free Syrian Army. But from 2015 onwards, some decided to support the mainly Kurdish YPG-SDF militias (the initials of the People's Protection Units-Syrian Democratic Forces). They were presented as the most effective actor in the fight against ISIS. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have also supported different rebel groups but have done so in such an uncoordinated manner, pursuing such diffuse goals, that they have contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition camp from the very beginning.

In fact, Syria is a good example of the liquid nature of the rivalries. The main local actors have been changing their definition of the threat, whether because of events on the battlefield or because of instrumental calculations. For example, the Assad regime did not face ISIS directly until the end of 2015, in a move that strengthened the anti-terrorist rhetoric and broadened support inside and outside the country. The YPG-SDF forces also stepped up the fight against ISIS to improve their domestic and international reputation.

For their part, countries like the United States, France and Turkey have for a long time maintained that there would be no solution without Assad leaving. However, while more emphasis has been placed on the need to fight other groups, Assad's rehabilitation has become more likely.

Neighbouring Iraq shows similar dynamics, although of lower intensity. In October, the operation to expel ISIS from Mosul was launched, coordinated by the Baghdad government with the participation of all kinds of forces (the regular army, the Kurdish peshmerga, religious militias and the international support of both Iran and the United States). This operation led at the end of 2016 to a rare moment of national unity. Will they turn against each other once the city is liberated?

The liquid nature of the alliances and counter-alliances in Syria – and to a lesser degree Iraq – reflect three overlain dynamics: the opportunism of local actors, the negative sum game of regional powers always ready to take losses provided those of their rivals are greater and the tactical manoeuvring of the main international actors.

How Libya became a regional conflict

These dynamics have been replicated, less virulently, in Libya. When the transition process collapsed in 2014 and two parallel government structures were formed (which became known as the Tobruk and Tripoli governments) various regional actors stepped in.

The most notorious case is the economic and military support given by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates to the Tobruk government and the army led by the anti-Islamist marshal, Khalifa Haftar. This support went as far as the bombing campaign of Tripoli by Emirati aeroplanes with Egyptian logistical support. On the other side, Qatar and Turkey backed the Tripoli government, which was characterised by the presence of members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Uncomfortable with this confrontation, the Maghrebi neighbours (Tunisia and Algeria) supported national dialogue initiatives and rejected the idea of international intervention.

Libya became the setting for a regional confrontation based upon the level of antipathy or sympathy towards the Muslim Brotherhood. The actors that perceive this group as a threat to the regime's security (Egypt after the fall of Morsi and the Emirates right from the outset) became most actively involved in the conflict. Especially interesting, though little documented, is the evolution of the Saudi position. Saudi Arabia's initially backed Tobruk but its support waned in parallel with its rapprochement with the Muslim Brotherhood in other conflict settings (they are on the same side in the conflict in Yemen and King Salman had a meeting with the leader of Hamas in July 2015). It remains to be seen whether Tunisia and Algeria will succeed in moving from regional conflict to regional coopera-

tion in their attempt to further involve Egypt in finding a durable solution for Libya.

The extra-regional actors also deserve mention. Formally, the United States and the European countries support the Government of National Accord (GNA). Italy is said to be supporting the militias of Misrata, who are one of the biggest backers of the GNA. Nevertheless, throughout 2016, speculation began that Washington, London and Paris had on occasions given support to Haftar. Much more visible was the closer relationship between Russia and Haftar, something that raised concern in Europe, who does not want to see the Kremlin playing a similar role in Libya to the one it does in Syria. Europe considers Libya to be part of its neighbourhood and, thus, would be keen to be involved in any initiative to solve this conflicts where all Libya's neighbours participate in.

Yemen: A proxy war

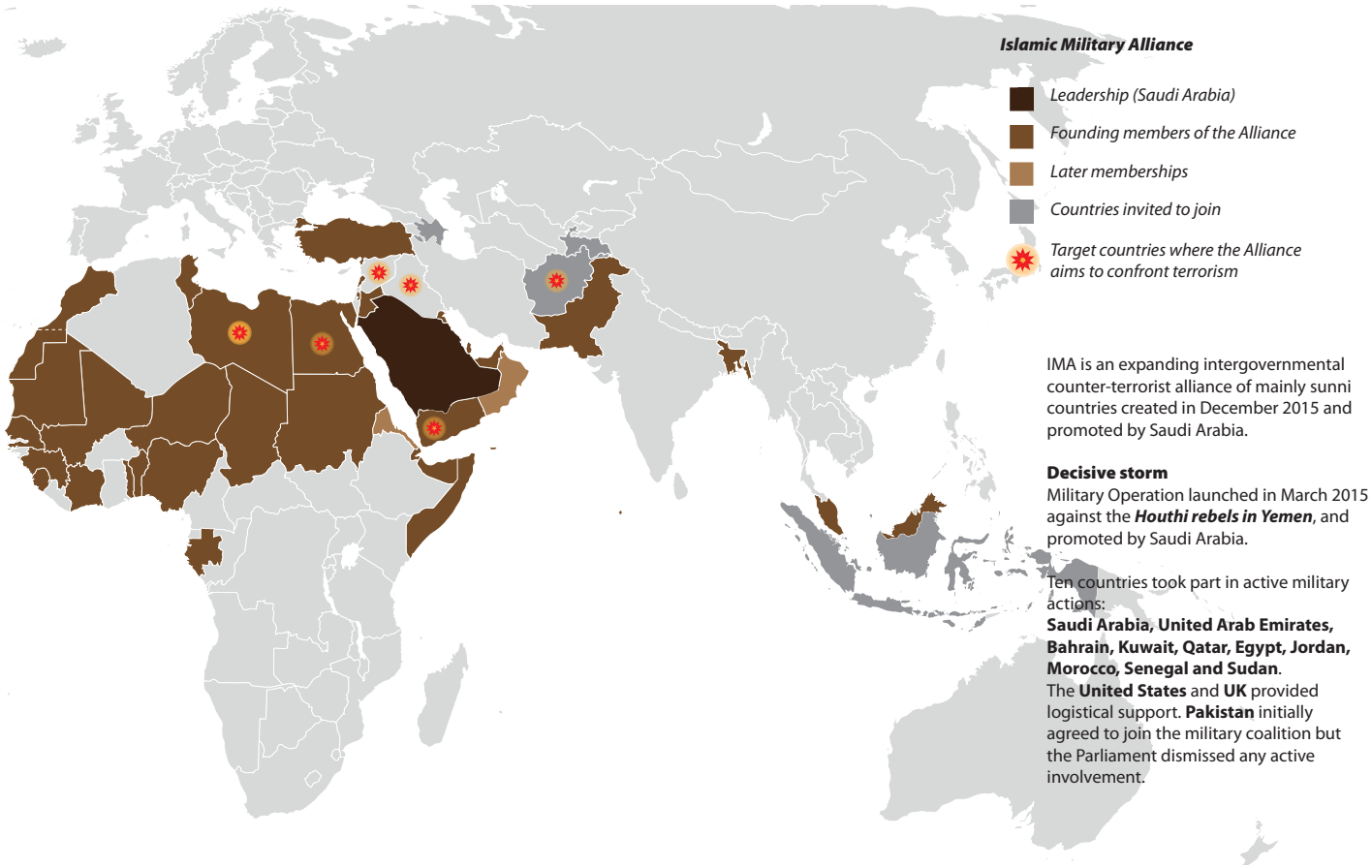
The concept of a proxy war is often used to describe the conflict in Yemen. From this perspective, the Saudis and Iranians are using local actors as pawns in a confrontation of regional scope that is also being fought in other places in the region such as Syria, Iraq and Bahrain. The origin of this confrontation lies in the Saudi fear of being encircled. Iranian leaders boasting, in public and private, that they already control four Arab capitals – Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Sana'a – does not help.

Riyadh fears that the Iranians are taking the conflict into Saudi Arabia itself, where a large Shiite minority lives. Seen this way, Iran is not just a competitor for regional hegemony but an existential risk to the regime. The Iranians, for their part, demand to be treated as a great regional power and not as a pariah state.

In Yemen, the Saudis and Iranians have taken opposing sides but their level of involvement differs. The Iranians are accused of financing and arming the Houthis, a Zaidi group (a branch of Shia Islam distinct from the majority one in Iran) with roots in the north of the country and a strong tribal component. By contrast, the Saudis have intervened directly on the battlefield, leading Operation Decisive Storm.

> The Iranians demand to be treated as a great regional power and not as a pariah state.

Islamic Military Alliance (IMA): members and targets



Sources: Saudi Press Agency: "Joint statement on formation of Islamic military alliance to fight terrorism", Riyadh, December 2015. Jenkins, B. M. (2016): "Saudi-Led Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism. Welcome Muscle in the Fight Against Terrorism, Desert Mirage, or Bad Idea?", Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016.
Sources: CIDOB www.cidob.org

The current conflict began in 2014 when the Houthis occupied the capital and ousted the internationally recognised government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. One year later an alliance was formalised between the Houthis and the country's previous president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, erstwhile enemies. On their side, the Saudis managed to get the endorsement of the Gulf Cooperation Council to launch a military operation with the aim of restoring Hadi to power. This conflict was thus added to other facets of the conflict in Yemen like the presence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the province of Hadramaut and the resurgence of secessionist movements in the former South Yemen.

The positioning of the other regional actors illustrates the diverse nature of the alliances. The military operation led by Saudi Arabia counted on the participation of Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. Nevertheless, the Emirates, through Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, downscaled their involvement midway through June 2016. This move indicates that, despite positioning themselves on one side, the Emiratis seek to preserve a certain room for manoeuvre and do not feel equally threatened by the rise of the Houthis. Some reports point out that the UAE is far more concerned with AQAP and instability in the South. Even more meaningful was Pakistan's refusal in April 2015. Despite being a traditional ally of the Saudis, Islamabad fears being drawn into a sectarian war that would threaten its social cohesion (the country has a significant Shiite minority, of, according to sources, between 6% and 20% of the population).

Egypt prefers to maintain its autonomy and define its position case by case according to its national interests and not those of a supposed Sunni bloc.

Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia promoted an anti-terror coalition bringing together 40 countries. This was seen as a new move to isolate Iran when it was announced. The absences from the coalition reveal that Saudi Arabia faces difficulties when projecting itself as the leader of the Sunni world against a Shiite Iran. Algeria, for example, declined the offer to join the coalition and positioned itself in favour of a negotiated political solution. Despite Pakistan refusal to join the Yemen war, for the reasons mentioned before but also because it was reluctant to antagonise its Iranian neighbour, the dance of alliances turned again at the start of 2017. In an effort to reshape relations, a retired Pakistani general, Raheel Sharif, was named head of the anti-terrorist coalition.

In contrast to Syria, the global powers have opted to keep a lower profile in Yemen. Russia declined Saleh's invitation to get involved in the conflict. And despite the formal backing of the Hadi government, the United States started to be critical (at least during the Obama period) of the way Saudi Arabia was conducting the operations. The US priority in Yemen remains the fight against AQAP and the ISIS cells.

Russia and Turkey: From crisis to reconciliation

The relationship between these two countries is an example of liquid rivalry. Ankara and Moscow support rival groups in Syria and placed themselves on the edges of the conflict when, on the 24th of November 2015, Turkey downed a Russian warplane that briefly entered its airspace. In an attempt to show its muscle, Ankara called a NATO meeting. Russia announced that it would not retaliate militarily but would apply sanctions in strategic sectors. It also modified its "Kurdish policy", permitting the opening of a representative office of the PYD in Moscow and supplying YPG-SDF with arms. What is more, the Kremlin launched a very harsh communication campaign, accusing Erdoğan's inner circle of funding ISIS through oil purchases. This message was spread by sympathetic media and even the Russian Ministry of Defence.

Up to then, Turkey and Russia had managed to keep their rivalry in Syria from changing the essence of their bilateral relations. Turkey is one of the preferred tourist destinations for the Russian middle classes and Russia is an important trade partner for Turkey and its main energy supplier. Additionally, both countries had signed a strategic project in the nuclear field. Risking all of this suggests either that the threshold of distrust had been crossed or that the situation in Syria was so open that both feared losing everything and were prepared to take greater risks.

Nevertheless, in the space of less than a year the situation changed again. The reconciliation is inaccurately attributed to the attempted coup d'état on July 15th 2016. This interpretation suggests that Erdoğan turned to Moscow because of the scant support from Western partners. Putin's solidarity call helped. But the thaw had already begun two weeks before the attempted coup on the 27th of June, the day Erdoğan issued an official apology and Russia responded by announcing that it would start lifting the sanctions.

What changed between November 2015 and June 2016? Turkish Prime Minister Davutoğlu (architect of the policy on Syria) had left his position. The violence between the state security forces and the PKK had intensified and Turkey needed to cut all Russian support, direct or indirect, to the organisation. In northern Syria, YPG-SDF militias had made such great advances that territorially connecting the three Kurdish cantons and thereby controlling a large part of the border between Turkey and Syria was increasingly feasible. In the rest of Syria, Assad had gained ground on the rebels.

So the reconciliation came from a position of Russian strength. Turkey felt threatened and saw its allies in Syria retreating. It sought to save what is most fundamental and guarantee, if not Russian support, then its neutrality if Turkey decided to intervene in northern Syria to halt the Kurdish advance. This would materialise with the launching of Operation Euphrates Shield on August 24th.

The renewed friendship between Russia and Turkey has been described as a marriage of convenience: a union that is based neither on a common project nor an emotional connection but on temporary interest. As a consequence, it can be dissolved quickly if one of the parties (or both) considers the other to be dispensable.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt: From support to estrangement

The supposed alliance between the two main Arab powers in the Middle East has taken sharp turns in five years. The first was in 2011. The Saudis implored Mubarak to hold on. After his fall, and especially after the election of the Islamist Mohamed Morsi in 2012, relations between the Egyptians and Saudis cooled. Qatar began to give the financial support the Saudis had previously provided. Doha saw the political change as an opportunity to further increase its regional influence.

The second shift occurred in July 2013 after Morsi's removal and the rise of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as the country's new strongman. Qatar withdrew and Saudi Arabia regained its dominant position as Egypt's main financial support. Despite not fully agreeing on Syria, both made the effort to show that they were allies again.

The third change was more gradual. With King Salman reaching power and the rise of his son, Prince Mohamed, the Saudis softened their policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudis were prepared to establish one-off alliances with this movement if it allowed them to better face the Iranian threat. This position was clearly incompatible with the Egyptian vision, for whom the brotherhood remained an existential threat. Little by little relations cooled. Nevertheless, the event that accelerated the distancing was when Egypt sided with Russia in two votes on Syria at the United Nations Security Council. The Saudis responded by suspending the oil supply, obliging the Egyptians to look for other suppliers, such as Algeria and Iraq. They even addressed the issue with the Iranian authorities in an exceptional visit by the Egyptian energy minister, Tarek el-Molla, to Tehran in November. For Riyadh this visit was a provocation, just as Egypt saw a high-level Saudi delegation visiting the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Dam shortly afterwards and the announcement of the construction of a Saudi military base in Djibouti as betrayals.

Over these five years, two patterns help us better understand the formation of alliances in the region. The first shows how vulnerable these alliances are to changes in their members' domestic politics. This is especially true if such changes take place in a regional power or if the group that reaches or is ousted from power forms part of a political movement of regional scope. The second is when the expectations of the nature of the alliances differ, which tends to cause misunderstandings and multiplies the risk of tension.

The Saudis have attempted to forge a Sunni bloc and consider that Egypt, naturally, should form part of it. Riyadh believes that the purpose of this bloc is to contain Iran and has attempted to institutionalise the alliance at all levels. Egypt, by contrast, prefers to maintain its autonomy and define its position case by case according to its national interests and not those of a supposed Sunni bloc. Among other reasons this is because of what the current government defines as a threat: not the rise of Iran but infiltration by the Muslim Brotherhood, an eminently Sunni group.

For this reason, unlike the tensions between the two countries of the past century, it is not the dispute for regional leadership that explains the phases of increased closeness and, above all, distance, but rather the fact that they do not always share the perception of who or what is an existential threat and what is the best way to face it.

> Turkey seeks to protect what is most fundamental and guarantee, if not Russian support, then its neutrality to halt the Kurdish advance.

And meanwhile in the Maghreb...

The Maghreb has, generally, had a peripheral role in the region's large geopolitical shifts. Not just because of its geographical position, but because in this sub-region everything has turned upon the relationship between Morocco and Algeria.

This changed with the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Various Gulf countries, as well as Turkey, have redoubled their presence in Tunisia and Libya either to preserve or increase their global influence. For their part, Morocco and Algeria have taken a more proactive role in the Middle East. Morocco fully aligned itself with the Saudis, as demonstrated by its involvement in military operations in Yemen. Algeria advocated for political solutions to regional conflicts. In this line, Algiers strengthened its political contacts with Iran, although it sought to avoid entering into direct opposition to the Saudis. This allowed it, for example, to mediate between the Saudis and Egyptians over the OPEC agreement to raise the price of crude in September 2016.

These shifts had diplomatic repercussions for the disputed Western Sahara. Morocco managed to get the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council to align their positions and boycott the Malabo summit between African and Arab countries in November 2016 in protest against the presence of the Polisario Front. Egypt, on the other hand, did attend. Morocco took this as a further sign of the rapprochement between Algiers and Cairo, adding it to other political decisions such as when in July 2016 Egypt decided not to join a list of 28 countries seeking the expulsion of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) from the African Union and in October of the same year hosted a Polisario Front delegation at the Arab-African parliamentary congress.

Once again the solid coexists with the liquid. Solid is the rivalry between Algiers and Rabat and solid is the Moroccan

alignment with the positions of the Gulf Cooperation Council in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. Algerian diplomacy, in contrast, has gone liquid to make itself a pivotal actor, a potential mediator and an indispensable interlocutor.

The United States and its regional allies: A crisis of trust?

One of the pillars of US policy in the Middle East has been its alliance with four of the five regional powers: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and Turkey. The United States guarantees their security to differing degrees and through more or less formalised structures.

The Maghreb has, generally, had a peripheral role in the region's large geopolitical shifts.

However, trust has been weakening, especially during the Obama administration. The US criticisms of the way these countries handled internal crises have not gone down well. Even less appreciated was the commitment to sealing the deal on the Iranian nuclear programme, above all to the extent that the end of the sanctions could provide Iran with additional resources to finance groups that are perceived as direct threats by Israel and Saudi Arabia. For Ankara, the collaboration between the United States and the mainly-Kurdish YPG-SDF militias in northern Syria was seen as a threat, as this military equipment could end up in the hands of the PKK.

For all that, many old allies of the United States are expectantly waiting a possible shift in US policy in the region. After Trump's election some are even hopeful. Israel would like him to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. Egypt hopes that he includes the Muslim Brotherhood in the list of terrorist organisations. Turkey trusts that his arrival will facilitate the extradition of the cleric Fethullah Gülen but is sceptical on how, when and with whom it will attempt to establish safe zones in Syria. In the Gulf they wonder how far Trump will go in his opposition to Iran.

Despite those opportunities, Middle Eastern capitals keep pondering how solid the US commitment is to security in the region. That the United States acts impulsively, as the first gestures of the Trump administration suggest, may produce immediate satisfaction but unease in the long term.

In conclusion, greater uncertainty and greater instability

The solid coexists with the liquid in alliances and rivalries. Permanent alliances are rare. Yesterday's enemies work together and supposed allies face each other on various conflict frontlines. It is an era of temporary disagreements and fleeting reconciliations.

So as not to get lost, it is worth highlighting the events that provoke a change in the perception of who or what constitutes an existential threat. These facts change the tempo of a dance of alliances taking place on three different stages: the local, the regional and the global. It is an exercise in which, just to complicate things, different kinds of actors participate: regional organisations, states, transnational political groups and militias, among others.

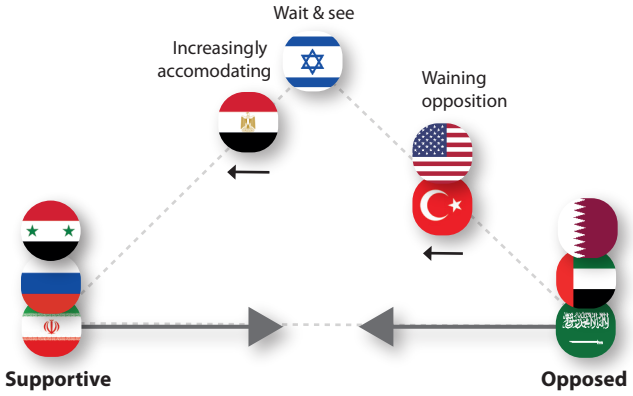
Some regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia and perhaps Iran, still aspire to leading solid blocs. However, the other actors prefer to preserve their autonomy to adapt to new circumstances and not end up left behind. Their behaviour is less predictable, distrust reigns, and with it comes the risk of sudden shifts and defensive reactions. Though neither the only nor the main reason, the liquid nature of alliances is contributing to making the Middle East and North Africa a more unstable, less predictable region.

WHO WANTS WHAT?

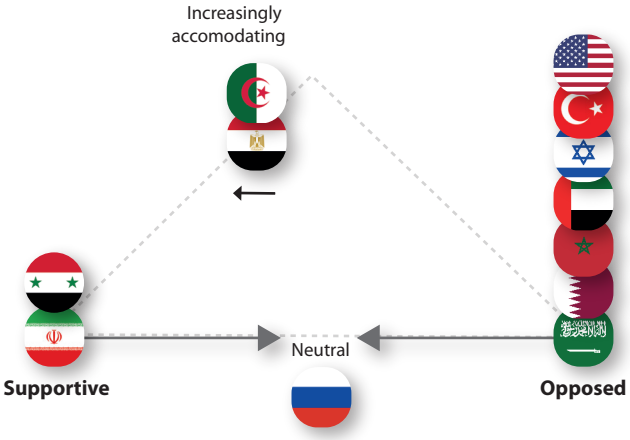
Divisive issues in the Middle East and North Africa

Alliances and rivalries are increasingly liquid. Key players join forces on one issue and are at odds elsewhere. They also change camps and this is how the picture looked like in early 2017. Yet, some of them are consistently aligned (Qatar and Turkey) or always in confrontation (Saudi Arabia and Iran). Global players are part of this game but not always in a dominant position.

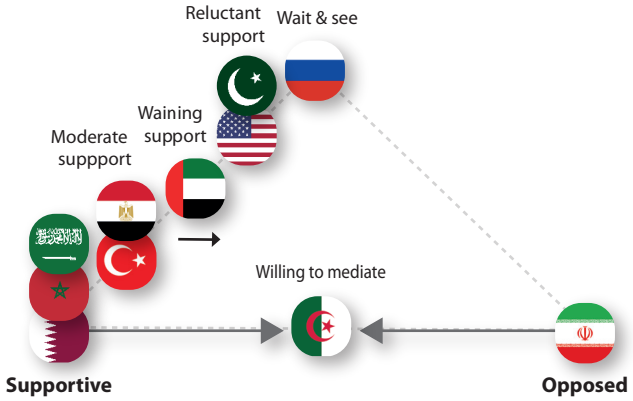
Al-Assad's Rule in Syria



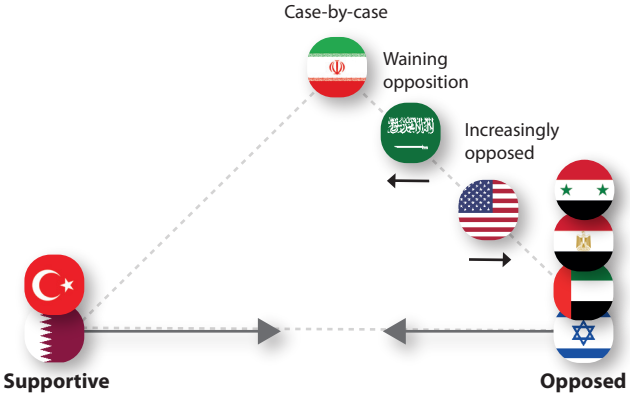
Iranian Regional Ambitions



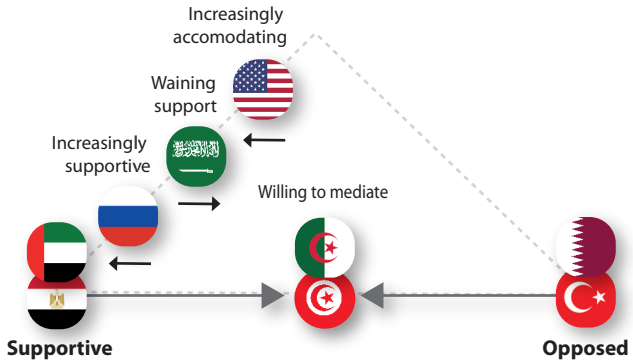
Decisive Storm Operation in Yemen



Stance on the Muslim Brotherhood



Stance on Haftar's Role in Libya



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