

The regional counter-blocs strategy in the context of the Middle East Second Cold War

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Abstract

Iranian Shiite geopolitical theories aimed at forming a transnational ideological project in order to unite the Islamic world and the formation of Iran military and ideological strategically allies in addition to Iran's nuclear ambitions have shaken the regional alliances system. Adapting to a radical change in regional policy and security requires the use of a counter-bloc strategy with account for questions regarding the structure, formation, motivation, and risk involved with counter-bloc to Iran. For countries with a Sunni ideology, this stage requires reformulating and upgrading their strategy with a regional ally characterized by hostility to Iran and loyalty to USA, in addition to military, nuclear and cyber capabilities and global support to form a counter-bloc. Israel, a historical enemy of the Arab nation became the best option. Turkey's absence within this structure may impede the success or continuity of the strategy of the counter-Iran bloc.

The aim of the study is to give a comprehensive view of the regional counter-Iran strategy within the Second Cold War in the Middle East in an attempt to discuss the explicit and implicit aspects that constitute the features of this strategy within the framework of Arab-Israeli normalization.

Relevance of the topic is due to the tendencies of the Sunni Arab regimes loyal to the USA led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to rely on rational calculations that exclude nationalist and ideological sentiments in order to save the Regime security and maintain balance in the Cold War with Iran.

Methodology: The study used the historical, analytical, predictive, and case study approach to investigate the possibility of forming a regional counter-blocs strategy in the context of the Middle East Second Cold War.

Key words: Arab-Israeli normalization, Regime security, Sunni Arab state, USA, KSA, Palestinian issue

Introduction

According to Harry R. Yarger, strategic theory opens the mind to all the possibilities and forces at play, prompting us to consider the costs and risks of our decisions and weigh the consequences of those of our adversaries, allies, and others (Yarger, 2006). The complexities associated with the ideological constants require diversified and flexible strategies in the Middle East that link ends and means. Building a counter-bloc to any hostile policy helps to improve coordination between strategies in providing the large-scale support in favor of a common agenda. Agreeing on a unified strategy between multiple actors helps spread the collective message that may reach a larger base and attract other actors to the bloc. The strategy of the counter-bloc is not at all new to the Middle East, which has been the scene of repercussions for the conflicts with Israel since its establishment in 1948. National and ideological assumptions were the main determinants of building dogmatic alliances and dividing areas of influence, but in light of the great turmoil in the region since the rise of Iranian influence and the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions, the policy of the bloc's strategy has emerged in a different way in terms of the determinants that draw the alliances.

The four regional powers: Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel, the most influential in making a map of the region's interactions at the current time, each seek to polarize areas of influence to strengthen their counter-bloc.

Iran's polarization of Shiite-minded countries and Turkey's attraction of Qatar led to a split in Arab ranks, which prompted Saudi Arabia and its allies to favor rational calculations in forming a bloc that can counter

Iran's growing power and limit the possibility of the rise of Turkish influence. Forming counter-Iran and Turkey bloc strategy at the same time is hardly realizable as long as Turkey is within the structure of pro-American states and within the map of areas of American influence. The new bloc distinguishes retreat of the national and religious ideology in favor of strategic and economic interests and the ruling regimes security in the Sunni Arab states loyal to USA.

The axis policy in the Middle East

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, the spread of radical Islam has crystallized the politics of axes, or blocs in the Middle East. Three main axes seek to dominate the region and shape it according to its model, convictions and interests. Each of these axes has varying economic and human potentials, but they are generally converging, if we take into account the population and size of the economies and the oil and non-oil resources available to each of them, or those that can be employed or utilized in some way. The most prominent bloc that has emerged with a Shiite ideology led by Iran "axis of resistance", which stems from religious foundations, including political systems and party blocs that operate as a regional geopolitical system that leads the Shiite blocs and controls them in intellectual, security and political aspects, especially in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. This system raised the slogan of hostility for Israel and the policies of the United States of America in the Middle East, and preferred the alliance with Russia and China as international poles. Iran views the Palestinian issue as one of the most important just causes in the world, and deals with it as the most important issue for Muslims in the strategic sense, thus supports armed action against Israel and rejects settlement, peace and normalization with Israel. The Palestinian issue has formed a very important source of the legitimacy of the Islamic revolution and the legitimacy of the ruling regime. One of the foundations of the Islamic revolution in Iran is confronting Israel «the Palestinian issue will remain the cause of the nation as long as Israel exists as a state, and the solution to the Palestinian issue lies in removing Israel from the map of the Middle East, and this will only be achieved by supporting the Palestinians with money and weapons as it is a sacred Islamic duty» (طافش 2012). The 2006 war between Israel and the Lebanese militant group augmented the strength and prestige of what is known as the "axis of resistance," a power bloc that includes Iran, Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas in Palestine (Mohseni 2017). Through this bloc, Iran is seeking to lead a new regional political and security order in the Middle East. The "moderation" axis, which consists of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and other Arab countries loyal to the USA was established to be an anti-Iranian bloc. There are deep political and strategic differences between these axes, but there are also lines of convergence or intersection between them in some crises. The main disagreement between the axis of "moderation" and the axis of "resistance", for example, is primarily a political dispute, and its motive is leadership in the region. Despite the sectarian difference between the components of the two axes, this does not overwhelm its political side. The "Palestinian issue" and "alliance or hostility" with the West are the two preferred fields through which the two axes exercise their strategy (. سلمان 2020).

The third axis, which is relatively new, and can be called the "Brotherhood" axis, is led today by Turkey, Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood and the organizations close to it. The need for the State of Qatar to establish a political axis with Turkey has been strengthened since the Arab boycott of it in 2017 due to its policies that were rejected by some Arab countries, especially with regard to support for extremist and terrorist organizations in the region associated with Qatar's adoption of the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood. Consequently, Qatar preferred to form an axis with Turkey as a way out of isolation, especially in light of the United States' disregard for the support of its ally, the State of Qatar. Turkey is also under the burden of political pressure and US sanctions, as it has witnessed a great rift with the American side under the administration of President Trump, and this rift is likely to increase in the era of the new president, Biden, as well as the ambiguity and contradictions that dominate relations with Russia. This is in light of the escalating disagreements regarding a number of issues, the latest of which is the Karabakh crisis, in addition to the deep and growing disagreements with European countries and NATO, in addition to the difference of views between Turkey and many Arab regimes(فوزي 2020). Consequently, the Turkish decision-makers consider that deepening the strategic partnership with Qatar may be one of the mechanisms for lifting the international isolation imposed on Turkey, especially since there is a shift in Turkish foreign policy that represents the tendency towards "the militarization of Turkish foreign policy" or what is known as "neo-Ottomanism", Turkey has come to rely on the military entrance as one of the main mechanisms to enhance its presence in the Middle East region, and this is embodied in the military bases that are now present in

Somalia, Iraq, Syria and Qatar; thus, the Qatari-Turkish axis enhances the presence of Turkey in the Persian Gulf region and reduces the influence of regional actors opposing for its policy.

The policy of the axes has led to a radical reshaping of the contemporary Middle East system, the most important sign of change is the reorganization of one of the axes to include the State of Israel in order to form a strong and rational counter-bloc that flips the standard of the Arab-Israeli conflict and transforms it from a national domain to a local domain that belongs only to Palestinian people. The failure of Arab nationalism to support the Palestinian issue and protect Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem is likely to work in favor of regional blocs led by non-Arab states (Iran and Turkey) that use religious ideology as a tool for polarization within the context of the Cold War II in the Middle East.

The structure of the new regional counter-Iran bloc

After the Middle East region was divided into three dissonant axes in terms of ideological and strategic visions, and all of them shared hostility or at least popular aversion to the State of Israel, the region is witnessing the beginning of a more dangerous phase in the birth of a regional axis with the participation of Israel within the framework of the realignment of alliances in the Middle East. Regardless of the difference in ideological and national perspectives between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies on the one hand, and Israel on the other, the common denominator between them is considered more important strategically – it is total loyalty to the USA.« United States is fortunate to have capable regional strategic partners in Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Sunni Arab states that share a common interest in countering Iran's threatening ambitions» (Indyk 2017) .

Iran's nuclear ambitions provide a powerful logic for the dominance of strategic security concerns and a major reason for the formation of the anti-Iranian bloc. Iran will be a nuclear competitor to Israel, which is the only nuclear country in the Middle East, is an important matter for the head of the structure of alliances in the Middle East – the United States of America. Iran's regional hegemony ambitions by the Shiite geopolitics theories are not less important for USA and Israel.

Israel and USA are bound by strong relations, the American aid provided to Israel is the main factor in strengthening and building it militarily since it was founded in 1948. The United States was one of the first countries to recognize Israel and the first to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017. (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-israel/> 2021) The reason for this support lies in the presence of the « Zionist Lobby» as a pressure group in the United States of America and its great ability to influence the American administration. The Zionist lobby is not a single entity or institution, but rather different entities that unite in their goals for the benefit of Israel and support it in any policies it pursues, through strategies and action mechanisms that it adopts in order to extend its influence in the United States of America.(الشربيني2018) Thus, Israel is considered the first ally of the United States of America in the Middle East and the first land in the structure of the countries allied with America, regardless of the differences of the American administration.« Israel is a great partner to the United States, and Israel has no greater friend than the United States» (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-israel/> 2021). Preserving the security of Israel and promoting peace between the Arabs and Israel was among the priorities of the United States' policy, the American diplomatic involvement in adopting the normalization agreements has been present from the first agreement with Egypt. The Camp David Accords 1978 drew the frameworks for the peace treaty and the Israeli-Egyptian normalization in the presence of US President Jimmy Carter (عبد الرحمن 2019) One of its actual results was the fragmentation of the anti-Israel bloc led by Egypt, which included most of the Arab countries. The United States supports most of Israel's steps and shares with Israel its unwillingness to recognize the State of Palestine and its hostility to the Iranian nuclear project. The factor of Iran's hostility is more likely to weigh on the factor of the Palestinian issue; Iranian threats can directly affect the security of the ruling regimes in the region in the near perspective, Palestinian issue has no calculations when compared to the Iranian threat. «A regime security approach explained the Arab foreign policies and alliance choices. Regime security remains the key driver of alliance politics in the Middle East» (Curtis 1995).

The historic Saudi-American alliance was based on the foundation of common enemies. The Soviet Union and Arab nationalist regimes hostile to monarchy and capitalism were the common enemy of Saudi Arabia and the United States. The role of Saudi Arabia in exploiting its religious nature and its money in this conflict for the benefit of the United States was an important matter for American policy (<https://arabicpost.net> 2020). Currently, the two sides share hostility to Iran. The structure of the regional anti-Iran bloc also includes Jordan, most of the Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Egypt, Morocco and Sudan. Washington hopes, by encouraging its regional partners to normalize relations, to

redistribute the defense burden over a more integrated defense network of regional allies (Farouk 2020).

The possibility of the of unifying pro-American regional counter-Iran bloc strategy

Assessing the feasibility of consolidating a pro-American regional counter- bloc strategy is difficult due to multi-level factors and measures within dynamic contexts that can quickly transform outcomes into failure, including the formation of a counter-block by Iran that China and Russia enter as strategic partners in addition to Iran's proxies in the region characterized by the real ideological affiliation to Iran.

Conforming to the hypothesis (the enemy of my enemy is my friend), Iran may play an irritating and a provocative role for the United States in the event of an overt conflict of influence in the Middle East between China and the United States. Iran is likely to be within the Chinese sphere of influence in the expected new Cold War.

In this regard, the USA seeks to strengthen its security partners in various ways, and the most prominent of these methods currently is expanding the scope of Arab-Israeli normalization. Normalization may develop the idea of engaging in future military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Sudan to counter Iran's growing influence in the region and limit the consequences of Shiite polarization. «Access to Israeli technology and innovations, especially in the field of defense, is of great importance and is considered an essential element in the normalization agreements between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain».(https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1184809 2020).According to Moshe Patil, Head of the Israel Missile Defense Organization in the Ministry of Defense, «there are a lot of benefits in terms of exchanging missile technology between Israel and its new allies in the Persian Gulf, this issue must be discussed and approved first by Israel and the United States» (Ibid). USA paved the way to form a regional strategy against Iran, with the participation of Israel, after its negligence in responding to the September 2019 drone attacks on two key oil installations inside Saudi Arabia (Saudi Aramco), which was attributed to Iran's proxies in the region as part of the Second Cold War in the Middle East. One of the goals of this formation is to reduce the ideological obstacles between Israel and the Arab countries, which can only be achieved through formal normalization between the largest number of Arab countries and Israel. USA aims to establish the continuity and vitality of Israel in the region by consolidating conviction about the positive indicators that could result from the convergence of Israeli interests and the Sunni Arab state in the face of Iranian threats. A strategic realignment of Middle East counter-Iran bloc with the active participation of Israel constitutes a threat that acts as a deterrent tool in favor of the USA in the new Cold War. The Saudi-Israeli relations have not risen to the level of official normalization that the United States of America is seeking. Normalization may not be in favor of the religious weight that Saudi Arabia enjoys in the Middle East and the Islamic world. Official normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia opens the way for Turkey, which is trying to consolidate its position as a leading power in the region by pursuing an opposite policy (by opposing Israel), which expands the scope of the countries participating in the Cold War in the Middle East to become multi-polar regionally. At the same time, Saudi Arabia needs Israeli cyber capabilities and Israel's expertise in irregular warfare involving nonstate actors in order to confront, or at least balance, the Iranian capabilities in this field.

Israeli police storming of al-Aqsa at this particular time (after the Abraham Accords) and the bloody confrontations that followed between Israel and Hamas should not be viewed as an emergency event, as it might be in the context of testing the stability of the strategic partnership with the Arab countries that normalized the relationship with Israel and which the strategic bloc against Iran shares. These events could demonstrate the fragility or durability of future cooperative agreements between the countries of the pro-American bloc. Although support for the Palestinian cause is rooted in the feelings of the Arab peoples, the attacks on Gaza, which are considered the most violent link in a series of Israeli escalations, did not put the governments that normalized the relationship with Israel recently, namely the Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan in a position of backing down. According to Abdul Khaleq Abdullah, a professor of political science in the UAE, «the current events will not affect the Abraham Accords, which has become a strategic path compatible with the interests of the UAE and Israel and cannot be reversed»(2021 قاييد) . Bahraini political analyst Abdullah Al-Junaid believes that everything that is happening in Gaza is just a round of violence that has a human cost, but it is not a new political event. The Abraham Accords will not be affected. THE Abrahamic pacts are between states and peoples, and the immediate and future denominators must be preserved despite all political challenges» (2020 قاييد).

In contrast to the Arab countries that were content with denouncing and condemning the Israeli escalation,

the Iranian position was supported by money and weapons. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman Jonathan Conricus confirmed during a weekend briefing: «The role of Iran is important. Iran is a supplier of weapons for Hamas, weapons and money». (Субботин 2021)

An indicator of the continuity of the strategy of the Arab-Israeli regional counter-bloc to Iran includes four basic elements:

- a unified political strategy of the pro-American countries to put aside their differences;
- creating a regional environment conducive to normalization;
- strengthening of regional cooperation, taking into consideration the possibility of moving from a political to a military settlement;
- a unified post-conflict strategy.

The Turkish-Qatari axis, despite the recent problems with USA, includes countries loyal to the West and opposed to Iran, at the same time it is taking a path in support of the Palestinian issue. An enormous network of media, including satellite channels, newspapers, and websites explicitly or implicitly express policies with the Islamic ideology hostile to Zionist thought. The absence of the Turkish-Qatari axis from the structure of the anti-Iran bloc constitutes a negative sign for the formation of a unified strategy for states loyal to the United States of America, and thus may frustrate the possibility of the continuity and success of the new bloc. There are more in-depth indicators that weaken the possibility of the continuity and success of any regional bloc that includes Israel, due to the difficulty of ignoring the size and influence of religious ideology and the popular Arab, Turkish and Iranian aversion of the Israeli entity. It is difficult for ideologically divided countries to act according to a unified strategy or plan a post-conflict strategy, even if it is all within the framework of America's spheres of influence.

Conclusion

The pro-American countries in the Middle East are aware of the Iranian ideological and strategic danger represented in the Shiite geopolitical theories and the nuclear program and the recruitment of extremist militias, parties and states with Shiite ideology into the axis of resistance and its anti-American, anti-Israel and anti-Sunni ideology strategy. The greatest danger is the distribution of spheres of influence within the new Cold War.

The unification of an anti-Iran strategy for the pro-American countries may seem like the best solution. On the other hand, the growing distrust among the pro-American states makes the establishment of a unified strategy elusive.

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