



The New Bloc: "The Middle Eastern Entente"

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Executive Summary

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Analysis

A new bloc is emerging in the greater Middle East with the declared objective to dominate the entire Arab World, confront and contain the US and its allies, as well as control and benefit from the entire hydro-carbon economy - from production to transportation. The leading members of the new bloc are Turkey, Iran and Qatar; with Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan submitting to the new bloc. Russian experts call the new bloc "the Middle Eastern Entente".

The key to the success of the bloc is the emerging correlation of influence of the great powers in the aftermath of the wars in Syria and Iraq. Russia and China are ready to compromise with the regional powers in order to secure their vital and global interests, while the US, Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, Israel are the nemeses of the bloc.

The roots of "the Middle Eastern Entente" are in Doha. Back in Summer 2017, Qatar initiated a myriad of bilateral and trilateral discussions with Iran and Turkey after Saudi Arabia and the GCC allies imposed the siege on Qatar in June of that year. However, it was not until the second half of 2018, with the initial impact of the siege largely ameliorated, that the long-term post-war posture of the greater Middle East became a major priority.

It was then that Doha, Tehran and Ankara started talking about forming a coherent strategic bloc. According to Iman Zayat, the Managing Editor of *The Arab Weekly*, in late November, the three countries struck a deal in Tehran to create a "joint working group to facilitate the transit of goods between the three countries." This was the beginning of a profound realignment of the three regional powers. "Qatar has irrevocably joined with Ankara and Tehran against its former Arab allies. It has conclusively positioned itself in a regional alliance that pursues geopolitical dominance by driving instability," Zayat explained.

It did not take long for the three powers to realize that for such a bloc to succeed - it must focus on security issues and not just economic issues. Hectic negotiations followed. In mid-December, the three foreign ministers - Muhammad bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, Mohammad Javad Zarif and Mevlut Çavuşoğlu - signed the protocols and agreements for the new bloc on the sidelines of the 18th Doha Forum. In the Forum, Qatar formally called for "a new alliance that would replace the four-decade-old Gulf Cooperation Council." Since then, specific and concrete negotiations on the consolidation of the bloc have been taking place. The final modalities for joint actions and common priorities, particularly the integration of the Arab states, were formulated in early March 2019.

Iran was the dominant force in this phase. The last decisive push for the Arab integration took place during Bashar al-Assad's visit to Tehran on 25 February 2019. There, he submitted to the demands of the Mullahs and to tight supervision by Tehran. Significantly, during his stay in Tehran, Assad was constantly escorted by Qassem Soleimani (Commander of the IRGC's Quds Force), Mahmoud Alavi (Iran's Minister of Intelligence), and Ali Akbar Velayati (Khamenei's chief advisor on security and foreign affairs issues), who attended all his meetings with Iranian leaders. In Tehran, Assad committed to supporting the new bloc and the greater Middle East the bloc members are trying to create.

The geo-strategic and geo-economic objectives of the bloc are huge, and, as things stand in late March 2019, largely attainable.



The first objective of "the Middle Eastern Entente" is to quickly consolidate strong influence, if not hegemony, over Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan before the Fertile Crescent of Minorities emerges as a viable geo-strategic and political entity. The primary role of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities is to constitute a buffer containing the upsurge of the Sunni Arab milieu and blocking the access of both Iran and Turkey to the heartlands of al-Jazira. The greatest fear of the bloc members is the possible ascent of the Kurds as a regional power once they internalize the US betrayal and are ready to strike deals with Moscow and Damascus. The overall susceptibility of the four Arab countries to the new regional posture is evident from their blatant disregard of the US sanctions on Iran. Hence, this region will soon become the key to a new grand-strategic and grand-economic posture for the entire greater Middle East.

Tehran is the dominant power in the emerging security posture. The surge is conducted under the command of Maj.Gen. Qassem Soleimani. On 11 March, Soleimani was awarded, by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's highest military honor - the Order of Zulfaqar. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told the Mehr News Agency that Soleimani received the award on account of his leading "the fight against terrorism and extremism in the region". Zarif stressed that Soleimani's achievements "have prepared the grounds for creating a strong and stable region free from violence and radicalization."

On 18 March, the military commanders of Iran, Syria and Iraq convened in Damascus in order to discuss long-term strategic and operational cooperation. The delegations were led by Mohammad Bagheri (Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces), Ali Abdullah Ayyoub (the Syrian Defense Minister), and Othman al-Ghanmi (Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Military). Officially, the summit addressed coordination in counter-terrorism operations, joint securing and opening of borders, and restoring Damascus' control over the entire Syrian territory. In reality, the tripartite summit discussed the emerging regional posture now that the wars in Syria and Iraq are nearing their end. Bashar al-Assad addressed the summit and stressed long-term security and policy issues.

Bagheri explained that the objective of "the tripartite summit between Iran, Syria and Iraq with the participation of their senior commanders [was] to coordinate efforts on the fight against terrorist groups in the region. ... Over the last few years, excellent coordination has been achieved between Iran, Syria, Russia and Iraq, and there has been solidarity with the Resistance Axis that led to significant victories in countering terrorism, and today, on the basis of these victories, the consolidation of sovereignty and progress towards the liberation of the rest of Syria is taking place."

Concurrently, the initial indications of things to come were already unfolding. In mid-March, the Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Muhterem Ince and his Iranian counterpart Hussein Zulfqari reached "an agreement on launching a simultaneous operation against terror groups that threaten the security of both countries" during a meeting in Ankara. If successful, this would be the first of many operations. The first joint operation was conducted on 18-23 March mainly in northern Iraq. In addition to widespread bombing and shelling, around 600 Turkish and Iranian special forces carried out joint raiding operations against Kurdish "terrorist camps". In the last days of the operation, aerial bombings were directed at all Kurdish nemeses in Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran. On 24 March, Ankara and Tehran announced that they "are determined to continue carrying out such joint counter-terrorism operations."

Meanwhile, Qatar emerges as the dominant power regarding all issues pertaining to the regional economy. The first priority is to build Qatar's new oil and gas pipelines to the Mediterranean via Iran-Iraq-Syria and also connecting to the pipelines in Turkey. These pipelines will substitute for the originally planned "Sunni pipelines" that were to transverse Qatar-Saudi Arabia-Iraq-Syria and led to the Qatari support for the Syrian



Jihad. The new pipelines will move to the shores of the Mediterranean - mainly the port of Latakia - gas and oil from both Qatar and Iran. The pipelines will be followed by electricity lines and fully integrated transportation infrastructure on a regional basis.

The long-term strategic infrastructure envisioned by "the Middle Eastern Entente" reflects the grand-strategic aspirations of Iran and Turkey. The key arteries are from Iran to the shores of the Mediterranean, and from western Turkey to the Red Sea and the Hijaz. Ultimately, these roads will be supplanted by railways. Iran and Iraq have already started constructing the rail-line from the Shalamchah border crossing to Basra in Iraq. This is the first segment of a line that will reach Latakia. Tehran is negotiating with Damascus Iranian management of the civilian port in Latakia (the Russians control the military facilities) in the next few months as a major outlet for Iran's international trade. Taken together, the new railroads will provide access for the New Silk Road to the eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea, will connect the Russia-Iran north-south route with the Mediterranean, and will constitute an extension of the Europe-Turkey rail-line much like the old Baghdad and Persian Gulf rail-lines. The existing Iranian railroad system connects the north-south rail-line to the Pakistani border and, thus, ultimately to western China.

Both Beijing and Moscow are most interested in the speedy completion of these rail-lines as part of the extended Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Taken together, the transportation cooperation agreement between the three bloc members (Qatar, Iran and Turkey), and the transportation agreement between Iran, Iraq and Syria, provide for a road and railway system linking all these states. This makes Iran the lynchpin of the regional transportation networks, and, thus, a crucial purveyor of access for China. Indeed, Chinese senior officials consider Iran to be "a key pivot to China's BRI in the region." On 19 March, the Chinese Minister of Commerce Zhong Shan stressed the role of Iran as "the strategic partner" in the greater Middle East for "the further development of economic and trade ties" with the entire region. "Iran is China's strategic partner in the Middle-East and China is the biggest trade partner and importer of oil from Iran," Zhong said. Ultimately, this will secure Iran a central place in the Chinese overall strategic and economic calculations.

The second objective of "the Middle Eastern Entente" is to use the Arab bloc, particularly its Sunni elements, in conjunction with escalation in Yemen and growing hostility of Oman, in order to smother and subdue Saudi Arabia. With Saudi Arabia already near implosion as a result of the erratic reign of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman al-Saud - the leaders in Doha, Tehran and Ankara are convinced that it would only take little pressure in order to bring about the break-up and self-dismemberment of Saudi Arabia. The key to the bloc's anticipated success is in their capitalizing on heritage-based trends already growing throughout Saudi Arabia. The aggregate impact of the Turkish-Jordanian and Islamist-Jihadist subversion in the Hijaz, the growing impact of the anti-al-Saud tribal and Jihadist organizing in the Najdi highlands, and the Iran-facilitated radicalization and militancy of the Shiite communities in the eastern provinces will accelerate the self-dismemberment of Saudi Arabia along traditional lines. Even if the House of al-Saud does not lose power soon - the myriad of internal problems will prevent Saudi Arabia from playing a regional role against the new bloc and their allies. A large number of intelligence officials and experts throughout the Middle East concur with this assessment.

Russia is in a quandary by the emergence of "the Middle Eastern Entente". Russian experts explained in late December 2018 that "Turkey, Iran and Qatar are moving in a direct course towards creating a full-fledged alliance in the Middle East, threatening to make serious adjustments to the status quo in the region." And even though the tripartite summit in Damascus and other regional fora hailed their friendship with Russia - the Kremlin is apprehensive by the ascent of the bloc. Russia's numerous tripartite summits and working groups



have highlighted repeatedly the complete mistrust with both Iran and Turkey. The huge Russian weapons sales to both countries need not confuse - for they are mainly instruments of keeping both countries beholden to Russia and on a collision course with the US. As well, Russia has a long dispute with Qatar on account of their support for Jihadists from the North Caucasus (both in Qatar and in Syria-Iraq).

Most important, the Kremlin's grand design for the future of the greater Middle East rests on the ascent of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities - where the Kurds are assigned a key role - as a buffer zone containing the upsurge of the Sunni Arab milieu and blocking the access of both Iran and Turkey into the heartlands of al-Jazira. Russia is cognizant that both Iran and Turkey are implacable enemies of the Kurds and would never permit the Kurds to establish a viable entity on their border despite Russian support. The Turkish-Iranian joint operations against the Kurds in northern Iraq are a harbinger of the anti-Kurdish escalation to come - an escalation Russia cannot prevent.

At the same time, Russia is still the main great power in the region, and the facilitator of the Chinese access and development projects. To retain their vital interests in the context of the ascent of the bloc, Russia might have to face the imperative for significant compromises. Russian experts and officials acknowledge the existence of a worst-case scenario focusing on the Russian presence along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean (beyond the Aleppo-Damascus highway) while blocking US/Western encroachment. To attain this, Russia will have to forge closer alliance with the Alawites, the Druze and Syria's urban elites, as well as shield Israel (and its huge Russia-origin population) from both Iran and Turkey. That said, holding onto the belt along the shores of the Mediterranean will also mean blocking the vital arteries of transportation both Iran and Turkey are determined to establish. Hence, the Kremlin concedes, confrontation might be inevitable.

Hence, on 19 March, as the tripartite military summit convened in Damascus, Russia President Vladimir Putin dispatched Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to Damascus. The primary objective of Shoigu's visit was to guarantee Russian interests in the context of the new regional posture. He first met with Assad and conveyed a special message from Putin. Shoigu held talks with Assad, the entire Syrian defense leadership, and the senior Russian generals. Assad and his generals conceded that there is no substitute to the Russian military aid, and that without Russia it would be impossible to complete the defeat of the Jihadists and the liberation of Syrian territory. Shoigu responded that Russia "would continue to support efforts to regain the Syrian regime's control of all the country" under the conditions of a genuine alliance. "Syria, with the support of Russia, undoubtedly achieved significant success in the fight against international terrorism," Shoigu reminded his interlocutors. He explained that the Kremlin is most interested in "the issues related to fighting international terrorism along with various aspects of Mideast security and post-conflict settlement." While Assad was effusive in his praise for Putin and the Russian help - Shoigu was not convinced.

Meanwhile, the Qataris and their allies do not fear a US reaction to the emergence of "the Middle Eastern Entente". Qatari senior officials attribute this to repeated threats from Doha that should the US interfere with the new bloc and its ascent to prominence - Doha will order the immediate closure of the huge US base in Al-Udeid, as well as stop interceding with Tehran to prevent Iran-sponsored Shiite Jihadists from attacking the US Navy base in Bahrain. As well, the growing dependence of the US Intelligence Community on Turkish Intelligence (the MIT) for clandestine operations in Central Asia and in support of the secessionist Muslim communities of both Russia and China accounts for the US muted reaction to the Turkish abandonment of NATO. The same logic will negate US resistance to the ascent of the bloc. Similarly, the US eagerness for a Trump-Rouhani summit (tailored after the Trump-Kim summit) where Qatar and Oman are the chief mediators



will also restrain a harsh reaction to Iran's growing regional role.

The Trump Administration is cognizant of the US limitations in the greater Middle East. At the same time, the US remains adamant on preventing the Chinese and Russians from consolidating in the greater Middle East and bringing the New Silk Road into the region. Senior US officials, mainly National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have warned repeatedly that there could be no compromise with China, nor tolerance of the ascent of China anywhere. "This is a very big issue, how to deal with China in this century - probably the biggest international issue we face," Bolton said on 21 March.

Since US influence in the Arab Middle East is close to non-existing despite presence of US forces in Syria-Iraq-Jordan and special relations with Saudi Arabia - the US focus is on stifling the primary north-south and east-west arteries between Russia, China and the greater Middle East by hitting the weakest link - Azerbaijan. Washington is convinced that if great pressure is applied - Baku will cut the crucial transportation arteries passing through, and interlinking in, Azerbaijan to the detriment of the New Silk Road and the bloc supporting it. Such a move will also cut Azerbaijan's own oil and gas exports - ruining Azerbaijan's own economy. Meanwhile, the growing US pressure on Azerbaijan will only galvanize both Turkey and Iran into further anti-US actions in and around the greater Middle East - thus only empowering "the Middle Eastern Entente".

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

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