



**Indeterminate Regionalism in the Middle East**

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**Abstract**

This paper will examine regionalism and anti-regionalism trends in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings. The implementation of Trump policies in the region, the rise and fall of ISIS, the decline of the Arab uprisings, the convergence and divergence trends in the Middle East, especially among its three major actors Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, have caused particular complexities. All this, has made it impossible to speak of the regional order in the Middle East, and the two processes of regionalism and anti-regionalism in the region are simultaneously emerging. The paper will explore these opposing trends in terms of recent developments and will essentially emphasize how these two opposite processes will reproduce each other in terms joint and divided security concerns? And why regionalism has not ever been fully evolved in the Middle East? It seems that the multiplicity of influential factors and the complexity of the existing relations have made very difficult the possibility of convergence and specifically regionalism in the Middle East.

**Key words:** Regionalism, Middle East, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and USA.

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## **Introduction**

Researchers in international relations and the Middle East scholars generally focus on the global and on the domestic levels of regional arrangements, respectively, but, as Fawcett (2016:197) points out, studying coalitions and rivalries can link three levels of internal, regional and international with each other. Most of the events in the region have a significant impact not only on the regional level, but also on the world politics. Global politics have also played a decisive role in the Middle East and the domestic affairs of countries. For example, Trump's hostile and very strict policies against Iran have affected not only its internal decision-makers, but also- at regional level and rivalry with its regional rivals, as well as the global energy market- have caused alterations. On the other hand, any Iran's response to these threats will also affect the transformation of many convergence and realist trends in the Middle East. Therefore, the study will not just focus on the domestic or on the regional level, but will study these interactions.

With a brief overview of the evolution of regionalism and the theoretical characteristics of regionalism in the first part, the next step will be studying the Trump policy in the Middle East and Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia's approaches to these policies. In the next section, the fall of the Arab uprisings and the ISIS phenomenon will be discussed as axes of convergence and divergence. The final part of the paper will examine regionalism and anti-regionalism in terms of the discussions mentioned in the previous two sections. The attempt will be to answer the question of whether there is a possibility of integration between countries, or that the governing pattern in this region is actually anti-regionalism.

## **The Evolution of Regionalism in Theoretical Debates**

Regionalization/ regionalism can be defined as the "process of regional interactions" (Hetten, 2001) or "increasing social convergence in a region" (Hurrell: 1995, 39), which leads to the formation of regional identity. Of course, as Bull (1997) and Buzan and Pelanez (2009) point out, although in regionalism governments and other actors are pursuing common goals and policies, this does not necessarily mean that they are in agreement and consensus. It may also lead to splitting and segmenting. A large volume of regionalism theories has been focused on the causes, motivations and orientations in the regional context and regional agents.

Early theories in the field of regionalism are first presented in the form of international relations theories. In terms of concepts such as federalism,

functionalism, and neo-functionalism, they examine the factors of convergence and co-operation of countries, and they were mainly presented in the 1950s-1970s. Ernst Haas (1958), Joseph Nye (1971) and Karl Deutsch (1957) were among the first theorists in this field<sup>1</sup>. The focus of all these views was on Europe and its political developments during the Cold War. After the end of the Cold War, political and regional developments have taken various orientations.

Considering other regions in theories of regionalism, deterritorialization of geography, pluralism in theorizing, domination of ideationalism, the expansion of Eclecticism are among the factors influencing the evolution of regionalism theories. Accordingly, attention to the processes of social and political formation by the norms and transformation of identities, the role of ideas and the ideas in the formation of identities are among the most important factors influencing regionalization theorizing. As Hurrell (1995: 4) emphasizes, theories of self-awareness, regional identity and the sense of belonging to a regional community, in other words cognitive regionalism, are important features of new theories. While classical theories of regionalization, because of their one-sided consideration of regionalism, often emphasize issues such as the formation of trade or military blocks by countries in a particular geographic region, new state-oriented theories tend towards individualism and community-based circles. These approaches assume regional cooperation as bottom-up processes. In short, theories of regionalism do not share an opinion in terms of the ontology of what they are studying and not epistemologically as how to study the region.

### **Regionalism and Middle East**

The existence of different global trends in the Middle East and as Farrelly (2005) points out, being of a high level of tension and challenge in the region making regionalism increasingly important. By a review of the recent decades events, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (from 1948 till now), the Iraq war (2003), the Lebanon War (2006), the Arab uprisings (2011-2014), the Syrian war and the ISIS war, strongly affect the region's power balance. These issues have expanded the scope of competition between regional and global powers in this region. The occurrence of any change at any time makes it possible to change. For example, despite the fact that both Turkey and the United States were relatively closely aligned in most of the

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<sup>1</sup> For more studies about early regionalism theories also see: Söderbaum, Fredrik, "Theories of regionalism" Routledge handbook of Asian regionalism. Routledge 2012, 31-41; Väyrynen, Raimo. "Regionalism: old and new" International Studies Review 5.1 (2003): 25-51.

Middle East issues in previous years (at least compared with the previous administrations in the US), these differences became more severe and more serious after Trump's election.

The security considerations of states involved in the Middle East beside economical and material interests of players have played crucial role in regional coalition and convergence. While Saudi Arabia worries about the emergence of a non-Arab and a Shiite-led crescent by Iran, Any policy of Iran in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain has attributed to its intention for domination in the region by Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Iran interprets the Saudi actions in Iraq, Yemen and Syria to be a support of terrorism. Turkey sees Kurdish groups in Northern Iraq and Syria as a serious threat to its national security. Therefore, these security concerns have had a very significant impact on these countries relations with each other and with other global powers.

The impact of global politics on coalition and regional alliances is another important factor in regionalism in the Middle East. For example, after Russia's direct military presence in Syria, the country was viewed as a balancing power against the United States by Iran. Following the election of Macron to France, France, both in the context of the European Union as well as on the individual basis, was more active in the Middle East than it used to be in the previous period.

In terms of identity, the Middle East has owned powerful identities challenging the state system (Hinnebusch,2016:156). Identical groups and divisions have always been at the higher level than the governmental identity, which makes it difficult to manage these forces inside and outside of state and to apply these factors in regional alliances. Pan-Arabism revealed itself in different ways; for example, in various forms such as the formation of the United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria (1958-1961) and its continuation in the form of the Arab nationalism of the Ba'ath parties in Iraq and Syria and the invasion of Iran (compared with battle of al-Qādisiyyah), and Kuwait (1991) by Iraq.

In fact, both Islamism and Pan-Arabism, in their extreme forms, believe that states and borders are an artificial phenomenon and that the goal should be the union of Arabs and Muslims, which has been the case with the behavior of some extremist groups such as ISIS. In pragmatic mode, the ruling elites have used these two elements to legitimize their foreign policy orientations.

Functional co-operation like the European model in the Middle East is very limited. According to the data provided by Fawcett (2016: 206-8),

between the years 1981 and 2012 there were about 15 regional initiatives among Middle Eastern countries which are generally among the Arab countries of the region and Turkey was only present in the EU Neighborhood Policy 2004, and Iran has not been present in any of them. Major countries exporting goods to Saudi Arabia in 2017 are respectively China with 15.5%, the United States with 13.6%, the United Arab Emirates 6.5%, Germany 5.8%, and Japan with 1.4%. In 2017, five of the major importing countries from Saudi Arabia were the United States, China, Singapore, India and Turkey, respectively (Aljazeera, 2 May 2018).

Therefore, given the pace of the changes, the fluidity and uncertainty of alliances and coalitions, the impact of global trends in the Middle East, existence of a high level of tension in the region, complexities of the security dilemma, existence of powerful supranational identities, the lack of hegemonic balancer powers and the lack of economic and political cooperations between the countries of the Middle East have led to two parallel processes of regionalism and counter-regionalism in the region, which is the dominant split and challenge in the region. The process of future developments in the Middle East seems to continue and sustain such splits and challenges.

### **Trump's Approach to the Middle East**

The first US presence in the Middle East traces to the early years of the United States' establishment. During that period, the United States was associated with Middle Eastern countries mainly in regard to trade and promotional activities. During World War I and Wilson's presidency, the first signs of America's presence in the region became evident. After the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War, US policy was in the context of confronting the expansion of the influence of Communism in the region. Besides, US planned to confront the Soviet's dominance by the help of the doctrine of Eisenhower and supported countries and movements that were opposing Communism (Hudson,2016: 357-9).

The first American presence in Saudi Arabia in 1933 was with concluding an oil deal with Standard Oil Company. In February 1945, President Franklin Roosevelt met with Abdul Aziz Al-Saud on his way back from the Yalta Conference on the Quincy Ship. At that meeting, a 60-year contract was closed between the Saudi king and the American government, known as Quincy. On the basis of that treaty, the United States pledged to support the unrestricted political and military support of the kingdom of the Saudi family against any foreign threat. Instead, the Saudis promised to

allow Americans 60 years of access to their oil. The treaty was renewed in 2005 under President George W. Bush's administration for another 60 years. In 1973, in protest to the Arab-Israeli war, exports to the countries that were supporting Israel, in particular the United States as a significant supporter of Israel, were banned. In the war between Iran and Iraq in 1980s, Saudi Arabia was at Saddam Hussein's side. In 1991, when Saddam invaded Kuwait, Saudi Arabia urged the United States to prevent Iraq. The 2001 terrorist events revealed signs of a deteriorating relationship between the two countries, but despite all the issues of the two countries, relations continued. During the Obama administration, there was a serious chill in the two countries' relations. The Syrian issue, Iran's nuclear deal and human rights were among the causes of this coldness<sup>2</sup>.

Turkey's relationship with the United States has also had a lot of ups and downs. The first cooperation agreement between the two countries was signed in 1923. In March 1947, Truman voiced his support for Turkey against Greece. The culmination of this cooperation was Turkey's accession and acceptance to NATO in 1951. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, relations between Turkey and the United States became closer and in 1980 the economic and defense cooperation agreement between the two countries was signed. During the recent years, relations between the two countries have had a lot of ups and downs. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Kurdish issue, the conflicts with Greece, the Cyprus issue and in recent times Syria and Fethullah Gulen have been the main issues and clashes between Turkey and The US (Bal,2006: 91-93).

Although the United States did not respond to Reza Shah's request to intervene and support Iran against Russia and Britain's occupation in September 1941, its warm relations with Mohammad Reza Shah prompted the United States in 1953 to design a coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq's cabinet and to overthrow him of power. The highest tension in relations between the two countries occurred after Iran hostage crisis in 1979. The eight-year Iran-Iraq war, Israel and Palestine issue, Hamas, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iraq after Saddam, the nuclear issue and the war in Syria are among the most important issues of conflict between the two countries (McCutcheon,2016).

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<sup>2</sup> . For more details see: Citino, Nathan J. *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Sa'ud, and the Making of US-Saudi Relations* (Indiana Series in Middle East Studies). Indiana University Press, 2002; Bronson, Rachel. "Rethinking religion: The legacy of the US-Saudi relationship." *Washington Quarterly* 28.4 (2005): 119-137.

### **Trump's Policy Toward Iran**

The election of Trump as the president of the United States was a milestone in the US foreign policy in general and specifically in the Middle East policy. After a very debateful and challenging election Trump was elected, he succeeded in adopting a completely opposing approach to his predecessors. North Korea, Cuba and Iran are among his most important foreign policy agenda. In this perspective, Iran is very similar to Vietnam, which had been able to overcome Japan, America, Korea, China, and France in terms of guerrilla warfare. The geographic extent, the spirit of confrontation, the mountainous nature of the land and not forgetting the past issues make Iran very difficult to deal or even to war. Therefore, the military solution at this time is not America's option. On the other hand, a not powerful Iran is very advantageous for Russia and China. Therefore, US strategy during this period was based on the policy of George Kennan, which was based on the strategy of Containment in the 1950-1960 in the political, military and economic spheres. Increasing pressure on Iran in the political issues and in economic fields in particular and expecting Iran's submission to the US requests is the main target of maintaining all these pressures (Sariolghalam,2017).

On the other hand, further pressure on Iran is equal to Saudi Arabia's further alliance with the United States and the decline of Iran's influence in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. In short, the gradual weakening of Iran, prevention of an increase in finances, prohibition of foreign investment in Iran and postponement of national development are the main goals of Trump's foreign policy. These confrontation policies began with the withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear deal with Iran in May 2018 and executing unprecedented sanctions on Iran that continued until now.

In a speech given by Mike Pompeo at the Heritage Foundation, he said that "since nuclear deal did not provide US security ... made Iran's leaders richer ... and could not prevent the development of Iran's missile program, the United States has withdrawn from this agreement" (Pompeo,2018). He announced twelve conditions to reach an agreement with Iran, which are, in fact, unlikely to be realized. On the other side, Iran's president Rouhani on July 22, 2018, Addressing a gathering of Iranian diplomats, said "Peace with Iran is the mother of all peace and war with Iran is the mother of all wars," and emphasized that "there are many straits and the Strait of Hormuz is just one of them" (DW. 22.07.2018). Despite intense verbal tensions between the two countries and imposing sanctions of the United States, Iran has not yet withdrawn from nuclear deal and is pursuing its continued engagement with

the other five members of the agreement (France, Britain, Germany, Russia, and China).

As the tensions between Iran and the United States increase, the EU will not be able to remain in a position to play a role in this matter. The experience that Europe has gained in issues such as Iraq and Syria has led to a more focused attention on developments. On the other hand, in terms of trade, Iran does not rank much in EU trade, with only 20 billion dollars in trade in 2017, accounting for only half of the total EU trade volume, and is ranked thirty-third (European Commission report, 2017: 9).

China and Russia merely sponsor political support for Iran and are more focused on using this situation to their advantage, rather than seeking to resolve the tension between the United States and Iran (More oil sales to compensate for the shortage of Iranian oil on the market by Russia and the cheap purchase of oil by China and the development of the Chinese goods market in Iran are short-term and medium-term goals of the two countries). For example, even before sanctions, China's oil imports from Iran in 2017 were more than \$ 18 billion. This amount decreased up to 25% in comparison to 2016. On the other hand, the car industry and car market of Iran are also largely in the hands of Chinese companies (Financial Tribune, February 2018) and Iran is cooperating with China to counteract the new US sanctions, especially in the oil sales sector.

Both Saudi Arabia and Israel welcomed sanctions because they strategically weakened Iran's influence in the region and would lessen Iran's political influence in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. Israel also considers that Iran's withdrawal from Syria and the suspension of Hezbollah depend on sanctions and more pressure on Iran. So the two countries have come together unprecedentedly and the issue of Palestine has been almost forgotten. For example, in a March 2018 interview, Mohammed bin Salman stated that "the Palestinians and Israelis have the right to live in their homeland ...". He described Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS as three sides of a satanic triangle (TIME, April 5, 2018). This interview, in fact, shows the main axis of Saudi's foreign policy during the recent years.

### **Saudi Arabia and the United States**

One of the mainstays of Trump's foreign policy in the Middle East is to monetize the region and expand the arms sales contract to the region, as it promotes economic prosperity in the United States, causes the growth of employment rates and a boost in dollar's price. Based on these factors, Saudi Arabia has found a special place in American foreign policy. In addition, the



foreign policy of Trump aims to maintain its allies not based on the public opinion of the Arab world but on the basis of maintaining its interests and in particular it is based on supporting Israel. Relations with Abdel Fattah Sisi are only justified in so far as he is not considered a threat to Tel Aviv. In other countries, the interests of the allies who are directly benefiting the United States economically are considered.

Since the beginning of the Yemeni war in 2015, the United States has provided Saudi Arabia with intelligence, military equipment and fueling, although US lawmakers have been trying to stop the aid, but could not stop those supports in practice. According to Saudi Arabia's Center for Responsive Politics, Saudi Arabia has spent at least \$ 5.8 million on Congressional lobbying (Freeman,2018), or according to the Foreign Influence Transparency Initiative, Saudi lobbyists met with 200 members of the congress and all the senators in 2017. Even, more than 100 times, they had meetings with foreign ministry official (Hennigan,2018).

Saudi Arabia is the largest customer (buyer) of American weapons. In fact, one fifth of the total US military production in the last five years has been bought by the Saudis. In a two-day trip to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, a \$ 110 billion military deal was signed(Trump's speech at the Arab-American Islamic Summit,22 May2017).

The energy relations of the two countries are also very powerful; the United States imports about 800,000 barrels of oil a day from Saudi Arabia, which is actually 5% of the total US resources. In terms of the global energy economy, Saudi Arabia generates one tenth of the world's total global oil supply and the United States consumes about two tenth of global oil production. In the past, Saudi Arabia, especially in the Arab-Israeli war, used oil as its weapon several times but after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, as well as at the time of Kuwait's occupation by Iraq in 1991 and the occupation of Iraq by the United States in 2003, Saudi Arabia compensated the shortage of oil in the market by increasing its extraction and replacing these countries in the energy business(Cohen: 2018).

In fact, the depth of the US relationship with Saudi Arabia is the same as the depth of its rivalry with Iran. However, after the emergence of the Arab Uprisings, another rivalry between Turkey and Saudi Arabia began, but in terms of the content and nature of the competition, it is not comparable to that of Iran. It seems that any improvement in relations with Iran and the United States depends on the relative improvement of the two long-standing rivals in the Middle East. Therefore, regional convergence processes are opposite to the United States and Saudi Arabia's alliance. The huge volume

of economic investment of Saudi Arabia States in various areas for the United States suggests a major and strategic policy of engaging in its hostility with Iran. This rivalry may end with either victory of one of the parties or the region is still in a state of alarm for a blast and an explosion. In fact, even if foreign power (the US or Russia) have the will to solve the problem, huge economic benefits will not allow this to happen.

### **Turkey and The United States**

After the commencement of Trump administration in the United States, Turkey hoped that the new president would leave behind Obama's doubtful approach towards Syria, the Kurds and Fethullah Gulen and would go more in line with his NATO ally (Turkey). Donald Trump was the first Western leader to congratulate Erdogan on winning the presidential election in 2017. Trump also built Trump Tower in Istanbul in 2012, and there was already a rather positive impression about Trump in Turkey. But the issues that challenged mutual relationship were: Turkey's demand for S400 missile from Russia, the demand for the delivery of F35 aircrafts from the United States, the complex interactions between the two countries in Syria, in which Iran and Russia also cooperated with Turkey, and where the United States was associated with the Kurds. Turkey's internal issues, such as detainment of Priest Branson, the arrest of a local US consular officer in Istanbul, and the demand for extradition of Fethullah Gulen have been other challenging issues between the two countries (Zanotti and Thomas,2018:1-3).

In the regional arrangements Turkey is the country that has had the most flexibility and direction changes. Turkey, in addition to being a NATO member, has benefited from its neighborhood with Russia, particularly with regard to gas purchases, and has had a lot of trade with the country in recent years. In its strategic notion, along with concluding a Russian-made S400 rocket contract, a mid-term French-Italian consortium will create an air defense system that will begin in mid-2020. This S400 contract, secondly, develops Turkey's cooperation with Russia. Thirdly, it will be a reliable card to attract the attention of the European Union for further cooperations with Turkey. It could also be used to persuade the United States to deliver the advanced F35.

At the transnational level Turkey pursues a multi-faceted approach in its relations. The good cooperation with Russia on the issue of Syria and the expansion of relations with China have raised doubts among American and European politicians about the shift of Turkey's orientation towards the East. For example, Erdogan played a key role in opposing Trump's decision

to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. In another case, Turkey explicitly criticized the United States for withdrawing from its nuclear deal with Iran. The culmination of these tensions and conflicts was in August 2018, when the United States boycotted two interior ministers and the Turkish judiciary in the wake of the arrest of Branson. It subsequently embarked on mutual sanctions between the two countries, more than a full-scale economic warfare, it apparently was a propaganda and prestige war.

Turkey's regional policy can be summed up in a few cases: Manage tensions in the region, to fill the void caused by Iran's weaknesses in Syria and Iraq, to consolidate strong ties with Russia, to manage relations with the EU to reduce criticisms of Turkey's Middle Eastern policy, to prevent the Kurds from gaining power in Syria and Iraq and emphasizing the dethronement of Assad from Syria are among the regional agenda of Turkey. It seems that the country is pursuing economic and tactical coalitions rather than long-term regional alliances and coalitions. In terms of regional trade, Turkey is among the five Russian business partners, and Russia has exported \$ 19.5 billion to Turkey in 2017 (Bechev,2018:4-5), while Turkey's imports from Iran (despite the proximity and ease of access) only amounted to \$ 7.4 billion. Therefore, the regional countries are struggling to balance their coalition with states outside the region rather than looking for a regional coalition (Turkey Ministry of trade).

### **Arab Uprisings**

The Arab uprisings led to the creation of new actors and alliances in the region. [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries that have close ties with the United States are seeking to play a dominant role at the regional level. The importance of the accountability element, which is one of the most important and influential factors in regionalism, is seen to be lacking in the region increasingly. Lack of effective regional arrangements, lack of trade between regional countries, weakness of the economic foundations of the countries of the region, the important role of powerful international actors and the priority of the emphasis and attention to the security of the regimes rather than priority of regional security have caused regional players to respond to these uprisings by engaging in short-term coalitions.

### **Iran**

The Arab uprisings in the Middle East began with the outbreak of protests in Tunisia in 2011 and it passed to other countries and led to different reactions of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. These uprisings were

interpreted as Islamic awakening and the beginning of a new wave of Islamism in Iran; has been divided into three categories. First, it included Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen. Although Egypt did not matter to Iran in terms of its interests, but geo-strategically, historically, and because of its government's policies toward Iran, Egypt was significantly important to Iran. (Barzegar,2011). It was commonly believed that after Morsi's coming to power, there may be a balance against the Saudi Arabia's claim for the leadership of the Islamic world. Besides, even if relations between Iran and Egypt were not established again, at least, Hosni Mubarak's anti-Iranian policies would not continue too. Regarding Libya, despite Gaddafi's support for Iran in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, Iran's policy toward the uprisings in Libya was to support the people's will to change and to oppose the NATO intervention in this country. Iran would not consider NATO intervention as in the line with the fulfillment of the will of the public (Jahangiri and Zibakalam,2019:70-71).

In the case of Yemen and Bahrain, Iran, in addition to feel religious closeness to the (Shiite) protesters, considered geopolitical factors and regional competitions too. While Iran was criticizing the central government on Houthi and Bahraini Shiites' crack down, at a deeper level, Iran would see these Shiite dissidents and forces at the strategic depth of its regional competition with Saudi Arabia (Khandan and *etal*, 2020: 232). In the third category, there was Syria and Assad that Iran had to maintain as to keep its own axis of resistance and as its strategic alliance. Therefore, Iran criticized the interferences of America, Israel, and Saudi Arabia openly and did the same criticism on Turkey's intervening role indirectly. Iran would consider the interferences of these countries beyond the will of Syrian people. Namely, those countries would also accuse Iran of supporting Assad Regime. On the other hand, with the collapse of the West-dependent and authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, although the new alternatives developed in these countries which were different from those of the previous systems, however, they did not show tendency to approach Iran in their policies. Besides, Iran's political, economic, and cultural diplomacy was not so powerful as to create regional alliances with these new players.

### **Saudi Arabia**

The real threat from the Arab uprisings for Saudi Arabia began in March 2011 when Bahraini activists protested against the Al Khalifa family. Saudi Arabia consider these protests as an opportunity for Iran to open a new front against Saudi Arabia and [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Considering the geopolitical proximity and the existence of a common border with Bahrain, this fear increased in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Saudi Arabia played the role of countervailing and counterrevolutionary in the uprisings (Jones, 2011:46-47). It was precisely in the countries where the Arab uprisings took place that Saudi Arabia was supporting the fronts fighting against Iran. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia strongly opposed the Muslim Brotherhood, and even did a lot of financial assistance to the Sisi's regime. In Syria, despite being initially afraid of the formation of the Brotherhood government, Saudis supported Assad's opponents. In Yemen, with US support, Saudis launched a full-fledged war against the Houthis (Khandan and etal, 2020: 235). In the Arab uprisings, with Iran-Syria, on the one hand, and the Turkey-Qatar axis on the other side, Saudi Arabia has more and more concluded that instead of creating major regional coalitions or cooperating with regional arrangements, such as the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), they need to form a coalition consisting of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States. Saudi Arabia also decided that in order to put pressure on Syria and Iran, they had to pacify their relations with Israel, and to set their main objective to maintain the status quo in the region.

### **Turkey**

In the beginning of the Arab uprising, it seemed that Turkey welcomed any changes in the region and it was widely believed that the main opposition forces against the Arab states were Islamist forces. However, for the first time Turkish foreign policy choose to support the will of the people in the Arab world and thus, Turkey's foreign policy changed from passive and mediatorial to an active one. Turkey perceived the uprising as an event that would lead to a harmonic relation between Arab societies and their new rulers and it also made more consistency with Turkish approach in the region.

Turkey's Stunning economic growth operates as facilitate factor, according to the World Bank's statistics for 2014, the Turkish economy was among the top 18 GDP-rich countries, which provided Turkey with the tools needed for such an ambitious policy. In the post-Arab revolutions, Turkey was also introduced as a model (Kirişci, 2013). The developments in Egypt and Tunisia, and the historical proximity of the two countries to Turkey and Turkey's full support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have led Turkey to seek a regime change in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist groups in the Syrian issue. This Turkish approach, on the one hand, led to cold relations with Iran, and on the other hand, in Egypt, Turkey had to

confront Saudi Arabia. From an international point of view, Turkey did not gain much US-EU support, and in this case the foreign policy doctrine of "precious loneliness"<sup>3</sup> was placed on the agenda of Turkish politicians.

In short, the Arab uprisings not only did not bring about a coordinated approach for the three countries, but made the regional conflict harder and more unsolvable, and the three powers were given the opportunity to compete with each other politically, economically and militarily in the context of these developments. And the outcome was also the region's greater instability and the emergence of ISIS as a transnational Islamist terrorist force. Differences of views deepened the Shia and Sunni divisions in the region.

### **ISIS**

After the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, ethnic and religious tensions began to emerge in Iraq. After the decline of the Ba'athist nationalist ideology, several ethnic and religious groups became more active. ISIS was an Iraqi branch of the Taliban, which in 2006 changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq and was led by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. After intensifying internal conflicts in Syria, the group entered Syria. At this time, the group succeeded in creating a strong organization and attracting dissatisfied Sunnis in both countries, changing its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Since June 2014, ISIL has invaded all areas of Iraq and Syria and managed to occupy and control more than a third of Iraq. In such a situation, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey had different perceptions and interpretations of the threat<sup>4</sup>.

### **Turkey**

The main priority of Turkey in this crisis was, respectively, repression of Kurdish groups (PKK, PYD), removal of Assad from power, and finally, the fight against ISIS. While the United States, viewed as a Turkish ally, it also considered the Kurdish unified as reliable, since the emergence of Israel in 1948, the US had been looking for a non-Arab and reliable ally in the region. Shah regime in Iran used to play such a role for the United States and after Islamic Revolution US could not find such a support in the region. After the advent of "one minute" and "Mavi Marmara," Turkey showed that

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<sup>3</sup>. It refers to İbrahim Kalın's tweet "It is wrong to claim 'Turkey has been left alone in the Middle East.' But if this was the criticism leveled, then I should say this is precious isolation."

<sup>4</sup>. For more valuable details about ISIS see: Gerges, Fawaz A. ISIS: A History. Princeton University Press, 2017.

it was reluctant to play such a role, and that its priority was development of relations with Islamic world. Accordingly, Turkey has always been accused of a passive role in the fight against ISIS. With the ISIS invasion of Suruç on July 20, 2015, Turkey took the ISIS threats seriously, and since that time, several operations have been carried out against ISIS in 2016, 2017, 2018 (Işıksal, 2018:91).

### **Iran**

Although the United States has always emphasized the threat of ISIS and its role in the region and has always been insisting on fighting against ISIS, but it has had a long-standing function for the US. First, because the Iraqi Shiites and the Iranian forces played a significant role in the fight against ISIS, the Americans considered it to cause a reduction in the power of the Shiite forces. Secondly, from the perspective of Israel's security, the clashes in Iraq and Syria reduced the threats toward Israel. It was also desirable from this perspective. Iraq has a very significant role in Iranian foreign policy in its religious, economic and geopolitical aspects. Iran has owned good relations with Iraqi Kurds since its 8-year war with Saddam Hussein. By helping the Kurd groups and equipping them, Iran was able to empower these groups against ISIL. Iran fought ISIS with two main goals of border security and support for regional allies (Iraq and Syria). Political decision makers in Iran believe that the fall of Assad in Syria will lead to the collapse of the regional status of Iran and the expansion of the influence of Israel and America in the region and will cause an increase in the strength of Turkey as a regional rival of Iran. Therefore, Iran was a major player in the fight against ISIS. Although after the fall of the ISIS crisis and the declaration of independence of the northern region of Iraq, both Iran and Turkey have taken a common stand on this issue, and the tripartite negotiations on Syria have continued between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. However, these processes have also failed to bring convergence in the context of regional developments (Hashem,2017).

### **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia has adopted three counter-messaging, counter financing, and humanitarian assistance policies against ISIS. Regardless of Saudi's genuine intentions in fighting against ISIS, which has raised important controversy over this issue, mentioning a few points are inevitable. First, despite the fact that ISIS is a major problem in Syria and Iraq, but due to the presence of its supporters in the [Persian] Gulf countries, it is impossible

that its supporters will not appear in Saudi Arabia. For example, several deadly bombings were carried out in Saudi Arabia in late 2014. In June 2015, deadly attacks in Kuwait were carried out by the Islamic State of ISIS. Second, Saudi Arabia sees any ISIS defeat in the region as strengthening Iran's influence in the region and as Adel al-Jubair said, "coalition forces should do any liberation from ISIS without the presence of Iranian forces, Hezbollah and Assad's government". In this context, Saudi Arabia sought to gain further influence in Iraq and to increase its ties with Iraq, so that after ISIS, Iraq would not be fully dominated by Iran. Re-opening and establishment of the Saudi embassy in Iraq after two decades in 2015, the fight against financial and intellectual networks supporting terrorism in the region and the relationship with the Kurds in northern Iraq has been among the Saudi policies (Boghardt, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

The question that still remains is that what is the degree to which regional dynamisms are defined by local sub-systems like the Persian Gulf States and their rival (Iran)? These systems were constructed and reconstructed in history; they were reflecting the degree of the balance of material and ideological powers. The regional system in the Middle East is not an independent and separate system; its other angle is the power struggle and the intervention of stronger foreign forces. On the other hand, large powers have also prevented the increase in the strength and influence of regional powers and have hindered the creation of a regional hegemony. However, the majority of the ruling political elite in the region (especially the Persian Gulf States), in order to maintain their place in the domestic political environment, have obeyed and followed the greater powers.

The relatively low level of integration between world markets and Middle Eastern economies has had partly to do with the fact that the latter were geared towards import-substitution in the post-colonial era. Although some (such as Tunisia and Turkey) have switched to export promotion in the last decades, many others have either hesitated or failed to make this shift (Bilgin, 2005:168).

With a brief overview of regional arrangements in the Middle East, three distinct regional organizations can be distinguished: geographical-based cooperation organizations such as the Arab League (1945), the Union of the Arab Maghreb (1989), and the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council (1981) or some transnational entities with special orders such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (1969) or the Union for Mediterranean 2008, which



also include countries from other regions but could not be a good model of regional convergence. In recent years, a more functional form of convergence has been created, which, while creating convergence, also has complexities that have led to divergence. The Syria-Iran-Iraq coalition, or the US-Turkey coalition, while agreeing on one issue, at the same time agrees with the coalition on another issue. Therefore, what is already present is a combination of convergence and counter-convergence that continually reproduce each other.

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