



Istituto Affari Internazionali

THE DIVIDE BETWEEN MODERATES AND ISLAMISTS GROUPS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: ITS IMPACT ON REGIONAL CONFLICTS

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The Middle East order has changed as a consequence of the war in Iraq, which has led to the collapse of the diplomatic triangle composed of Saudi Arabia, Syria and Egypt. These states were able to push Iran and Iraq back, to control them and play a stabilizing role. Yet, after the Iraq war the division into moderates and radicals have emerged more clearly.

This division refers to the foreign policy of Middle Eastern states, but it has no correspondence in the domestic settings, as a moderate attitude in external relations is not reflected in a dynamic behavior inside. GCC countries, Saudi Arabia, and Northern African countries are considered moderate states, as their political elites show a peace-oriented attitude, i.e. they aim at finding a settlement of the conflicts of the region. Despite this peaceful approach in foreign policy, they are authoritarian and conservative regimes, which are now challenged by the rise in popularity of the second group of countries, the radicals. These are states (Syria and Iran) and non-state actors (Hezbollah, Hamas) that sustain on-going conflicts and try to carve out a role for Iran as a key regional player. Some of them show a more progressive and dynamic domestic setting in comparison with the moderates.

The radicals' increasing popularity represents a challenge not only for the moderate states of the region but also for the West, which has always found in the moderates its ally. Therefore, the West has now to involve the radicals in its initiatives towards the region if it wants to settle regional conflicts and to protect its interests.

As far as non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah are concerned, they are an essential element in order to find a solution to the conflicts in the region. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Israel is going to start a dialogue with Hamas, but it will probably concentrate on finding a peace deal with Syria, which is now more willing to cooperate. Other regional actors are also important for the solution of on-going conflicts. Egypt is another crucial player, especially thanks to its strong bilateral relations with Israel. Iran is also becoming a central player and its participation in regional solutions as well as its involvement in areas like Afghanistan and Iraq is of utmost importance, as the Iranian regime can cooperate in the resolution of issues related to security, etc.

Moreover, the involvement of the radicals and the resolution of the conflicts in the region can only help improve the security of the entire area. Terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda do not play a destabilizing role in the Middle East, thus representing only a minor threat to the security of the states of the region (Al Qaeda only has an impact in Somalia and Yemen). However, to really tackle security problems it would be important to link these aspects with economic and social issues in order to eradicate the root causes, as the EU has tried to do with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

Furthermore, a central issue in the Middle East remains democracy. Although it is impossible to find a single definition of the concept (see Sartori), there are some key elements that can be considered at its basis, namely the rule of law and the rotation of powers. Despite attempts from the outside to export democracy by force (the American approach) or by using conditionality (the European approach), both democracy and the rule of law can only be the result of an internal process of democratization and of internal political will. The international community can only contribute to this process by providing incentives or exerting pressure on these countries, but the West cannot impose its model. (**Benedetta Voltolini**)