DOCUMENTI
IAI

THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST IN WESTERN POLICY: NEW RULES FOR AN OLD GAME?

by Laura Guazzone

Prepared for the joint IAI-RAND Conference on
"The Southern Region of Europe and the Middle East: New Challenges and New Hopes"
Rome, September 16-17, 1991

IAI9132 **ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI**

THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST IN WESTERN POLICY: NEW RULES FOR AN OLD GAME?

by Laura Guazzone

1. Introduction

The present politico-strategic situation in the Mediterranean and Middle East areas is dominated by the joint effects of the war against Iraq, the end of East-West confrontation and the dislocation of the post-communist states.

As was the crumbling of the Berlin Wall for Europe, the Gulf War seemed to mark a new start for the reorganization of the regional and international order: the United States asserted itself as the only superpower, while Europe, the Soviet Union and the United Nations demonstrated the scope and limits of their respective contributions to the management of the "new international order". Finally, regional conflicts seemed to emerge as the principal threat to world security in the post-Cold War era.

Yet, the global implications of the Gulf War are more complex and vary depending on whether the war is seen as an event with almost unrepeatable characteristics, or whether the main threats to world security today are felt to be of a non-military nature (the environment, drugs, migrations, resources, etc.). Furthermore, the events of the summer of 1991 -- civil war in Yugoslavia and the dissolution of the USSR -- have cast doubt on the "lessons of the Gulf". They call for new priorities and strategies and seriously debilitate the view which sees the Third World as the main troublemaker for global security.

Also the regional effects of the Gulf War are evident, and yet ambiguous. The strategic importance of the Mediterranean and the riparian countries was enhanced, but the region is still wrought by old and new fractures and the politico-institutional ties between the Mediterranean and the architecture of European security have yet to be clarified.

In the Middle East, it is not at all clear whether the strategic imbalances caused by the guardianship imposed on Iraq, the splitting of the Arab world, and the "singularization" of Iran can be compensated by the attenuation of the Arab-Israeli dispute and the containement of conventional and non-conventional proliferation.

Finally, the management of security in the Mediterranean and in the Middle East remains open to either cooperation or competition among the United States, Europe and the successor states of the Soviet Union.

2. The Mediterranean

The war in the Gulf completed the process of strategic transformation of the Mediterranean underway in the eighties. With the attenuation and subsequent disappearance of the traditional Soviet threat in Europe, the Mediterranean has lost its role as the Southern Flank of NATO and has become the borderline between the Euro-American Alliance and the conflicts in the so-called "arc of crises" extending from Afghanistan across the Horn of Africa to Morocco.

At the same time, the weakening of East-West constraints has enhanced the autonomy of purely regional cooperative or conflictual relations and of the national policies of the main regional

actors, whether they lie along the shores of the Mediterranean or not.

The interaction of these two parallel trends is contradictory, causing both greater integration and greater fragmentation in the Mediterranean.

On the one hand, the continued importance of the Middle East in Western energy supply and the growing need to protect European territory from the fall-out of regional conflicts of increasing lethality, reinforces the continuity between the Mediterranean and the Middle East and reduces the traditional differences in the approaches of Europe--which tended to separate the two regions-- and the United States, which has always seen the Mediterranean as "the place where the Gulf begins".

On the other hand, the end of the conditioning imposed by the Cold War enhances the regional autonomy and favours sub-regional cooperative undertakings like the "Hexagonal" or the Western Mediterranean Group (Italy participates in both). It also makes totally European management of the Yugoslavian crisis plausible, although not necessarily decisive.

The potential strategic contradiction between the requirements of a homogeneous and solid border and the North-South, Eastern-Western and more local fractures characterizing the Mediterranean region came to the fore -- miraculously without exploding -- during the Gulf crisis.

The most serious fracture in the Mediterranean which was not split wide open by the crisis is between North and South. The war was perceived in the Maghreb -- much more than in the Middle East -- as a war *also* between North and South, between the rich and the poor. But some concomitant factors, above all the differences among the Arab countries and government/opposition dialectics within the single countries, limited -- but did not eliminate -- the subversive potential of that perception. A different stance on the part of Libya, for example, would have lent a completely different meaning to Algeria's enrollment during the war of a million volunteers for Iraq.

The specificity of the policies of the Southern European states also became evident without, however, leading to rifts. France, Italy and Spain took pains to keep open diplomatic communications with the Maghreb and the rest of the pro-Iraqi Arabs and to underline differences from the strategy of the coalition: all three countries nevertheless participated quickly and substantially in it.

Even minor conflicts in the region were temporarily put aside during the Gulf crisis. For example, after twenty years of cross vetos in NATO, the Naval On-Call Force Mediterranean (NOFM) had at one point Turkish naval units operating under Greek command.

Finally, the wide range of political and institutional frameworks -- NATO, WEU, bilateral accords and national actions -- did not compromise the overall rationality of the military deployment in the Mediterranean, which turned out to be the supply line for the Gulf theatre of operations.

No complaints, then? Actually, the Gulf lesson remains ambivalent for the Mediterranean: it teaches that fractures exist, but also that they can be overcome. Instead of hoping for a repetition of the exceptional circumstances that combined on that occasion, the problem now is to establish the conditions needed to make what was achieved under exceptional conditions attainable normally. Here, the prospects darken: all the problems of the North-South relationship remain at both the global and the regional levels; the developments in the Balkans have opened up a new area of conflict; and last of all, the Mediterranean region is still without a unifying politico-institutional framework.

3. The Middle East

Just as there is only one real loser of the Gulf War -- Iraq -- there is also only one indisputable winner in the region-- Saudi Arabia.

Yet, Saudi Arabia is a weak winner, structurally unable to constitute the fulcrum of a new inter-Arab order. Then again, Saudi policy seem clearly aimed at isolating the Arabian Peninsula from the regional political context.

The first to give up *de facto* the anti-Israeli boycott, the Gulf Cooperation Council-GCC countries offer only passive support to the Arab-Israeli peace conference, barely condescending to send an observer to represent them. The withdrawal of the peninsular countries from the regional context is even more evident in the severing of the umbilical cord of financial aid and the substitution of Arab labour by Asian, possibly non-Islamic, or East European workers.

Any remaining involvement of the GCC countries in regional affairs is strictly defensive (and sometimes vindictive, as Saudi attitudes towards Yemen indicate).

The guardianship imposed on Iraq and the introversion of the countries of the Peninsula neutralize the power of the Arab pole in the Middle Eastern strategic equation, add weight to the two military powers left in the region, Israel and Iran, which, however, have conflictual relations with the rest of the region, and pave the way for the rehabilitation of Turkey as a regional power. In the absence of a solid axis of inter-Arab alliance, Egypt seems incapable of exerting a decisive influence on the new regional order.

This situation of strategic imbalance can only be stabilized in the long term by a new regional balance of power; however, in the short and medium terms the direct intervention of a powerful external actor with influence over all regional actors is required.

At the moment (but for how long?) the American political and military presence responds to these criteria and is, thus, in a position to attempt stabilization of this key area for Western security.

If successful, the three processes on which the current American strategy is based -- the Arab-Israeli peace conference, control of NBC proliferation and post-war conventional rearmament, security guarantees to the countries of the Arabian Peninsula -- will remove some of the most important destabilizing factors of the old regional order.

However, each of these three processes is so complex as to risk failure, and so partial as to risk leaving intact (even in case of success) some of the destabilizing components of the problem.

In the most positive hypothesis, the success of the American-lead action could, in the course of the next 10 to 15 years, lead to the establishment of a new regional order founded on cooperative rather than conflictual ties.

An evolution towards this scenario, or more realistic intermediate variants involving continued residual conflictuality contained by the overall integrative trend, would be in keeping with the general evolution in the Third World in the post-Cold War period.

Many countries of the South are turning to regional cooperation for more effective and less marginal integration into a now unipolar international system. This regionalist tendency began to emerge strongly in the Arab world after the clear decline of East-West confrontation (Arab Maghreb Union and the moribund Arab Cooperation Council were formed in February 1989) and has been hindered in the Mashreq mainly by the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Yet, the development of cooperative regionalism is now much more difficult in the Middle

East: the war has dramatically intensified the economic, demographic and political crisis in the Arab world and none of the strategies implemented in the postwar period is directed at dealing with it.

As clearly demonstrated by some of the motivations behind Saddam's adventure and by the persisting vitality of Islamic fundamentalism, economic factors were and remain at the origin of the political instability in the region, but the political and economic resources needed to counter them have not yet been mobilized.

All projects to date aimed at systematically tackling the financing of regional development have been shelved. The American idea of establishing a Middle Eastern bank after the model of the EBRD for the East has been set aside because the major potential financers, the GCC countries, continue, despite declarations to the contrary, to prefer the old system of direct political financing.

European proposals (in particular French and Italian) for linking the bank's financing mechanism to agreement between oil producers and consumers were opposed by the US, interested in keeping the price of oil low. Finally, contingent financial difficulties and the policy of political disengagement pursued by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia lend little credibility to the recovery of a constant flow of inter-Arab finances -- apart from emergency distribution during the crisis -- in spite of the plans to that end announced by the GCC.

As for the political crisis, it is evident that the lack of democratic legitimacy of most of the Arab regimes in power makes the implementation of badly needed economic restructuring programmes difficult, encourages the Islamic oppositions to resort to violence in order to change the status quo and favours the cyclical recurrence of armed nationalism as a surrogate for legitimacy.

Encouraging democracy from the outside is difficult, but not impossible, as the European experience shows. Certainly, the absence of a comprehensive strategy for economic action in the region weakens the potential leverage of putting political conditions on aid.

But what is really worrisome is that the search for immediate political stability in the region is once again prevailing over the need to foster democracy, a prerequisite for long-term stability. This choice, taken for granted by the regimes in power, has been adopted out of necessity by the extra-regional actors, who reward the policies of the useful allies -- Syria, Saudi Arabia and Israel -- regardless of their record in human rights.

In fact, the incipient democracies in the Arab world -- the Palestinians, Jordan, Yemen, Algeria and Tunisia -- have paid the highest political and economic price for the conflict. And in this way, the West continues to be seen as the defender of the status quo and risks jeopardizing the emergence of a democratic-liberal alternative to the rise of fundamentalism in the democratization process.

The need to flank immediate political and military actions, like those being taken by the US, with more long-term actions aimed at removing the democratic and economic deficits -- the structural causes of the regional instability -- was clearly perceived by the Western allies during the Gulf crisis. However, this second part of the strategy for stabilization has not yet been translated into concrete action.

At the regional level, the continued existence of structural elements of instability and the possibility that current American-lead stabilizing actions may be only partially successful, make a long period of covert conflictuality during transition to a new balance of power very plausible, even if large scale conflicts would be ruled out.

The most obvious sources of crisis will be the definition of the future of Iraq, which the

neighbouring states will insistently try to influence, and of the role of Iran in controlling the Gulf. However, the Arab-Israeli peace conference could also have important repercussions: apart from the revanchism of the more radical Palestinian factions, the negotiating process could trigger, for instance, a violent conflict over succession to the Assad regime in Syria and encourage an intractable polarization of the Israeli polity.

Rather than list the various types of conflict that could kindle or rekindle in the region and the inevitable regional repercussions, it is more important to emphasize that after the Gulf War, it will be more difficult for the West to "forget" the conflicts in the Middle East, as it did the Iran-Iraq war and the civil war in Lebanon. Direct Western and, above all, American military and political involvement could be the trip-wire that will make intervention in future Middle Eastern conflicts more necessary. This is an alarming prospect.

4. The Mediterranean and Middle East in Western Policy

The Gulf War has proven that American leadership today is both undisputed and financially and politically dependent on its allies. Only the wholehearted willingness of the Western allies to support the United States will be able to keep up its present high level of international commitment in the future, but the implications of such support are evaluated differently on the two sides of the Atlantic.

The greater strategic importance of the Mediterranean demands a continued American military presence in the region, even if at lower numerical levels. Thus, European economic and military support of the American presence in the region is more important than ever before. For the US, this support mainly entails the development within NATO of the European defence pillar and the formulation within the Alliance of more cogent mechanisms to make the European response to out-of-area crises more reliable and effective.

However, the Mediterranean is both the supply route of the Middle Eastern system and an extension of the European system. Thus, while the integration of American and European rapid intervention forces already took place, *de facto*, in the Middle Eastern theatre (in the war against Iraq as well as in *Safe Haven* operation for the Iraqi Kurds), the institutionalization of this integration has been opposed by the Europeans on the grounds of its negative effects on the development of European security identity.

European support for the strategy of stabilization in the Middle East after the war has been high: the resumption of political and economic relations with Damascus and the offer of preferential association with the Community made to Tel Aviv certainly helped persuade Syria and Israel to accept the peace conference. In the same way, regional control of armaments by exporting countries would not be possible without European cooperation.

But Europe has interests in the Middle East that are distinct from those of the United States and its backing will not consist in open-ended support for the timing and modalities of American diplomatic actions, unconditional acceptance of the American oil policy or total political and economic cooperation with the US' regional allies.

For example, the Europeans are still against excluding the PLO from the Arab-Israeli negotiations for fear of fragmentation of the Palestinian interlocutor to the advantage of the Islamic fundamentalists of *Hamas*. European support for Turkey and for Saudi Arabia is also conditional: in case of the former, for the uncertain effects of the entry of Turkey into Europe; in case of the latter, for the Saudi regime's authoritarianism and policy of support for Sunni

integralism.

For Europe, the Gulf War provided, to use the words of Jacques Delors, "an objective lesson -- if one were needed -- on the limitations of the European Community. It is true that giant steps have been taken ... but the Community's influence and ability to act have not kept pace" (1).

Although the Gulf War occurred at the beginning of negotiations defining the contents and institutions of the Political and Economic Union, it did not accelerate the process of endowing the Community with a clear and common foreign, security and defence policy. On the contrary, despite the efforts of some of its members, among which Italy, the crisis merely exacerbated the differences existing between the major countries with respect to the ultimate goal of European Political Union.

The outcome of this debate will only be institutionalized upon the conclusion of the Intergovernmental Conference on Political Union (December 1991), however, current developments suggest that the Union will not be equipped in the near future with the instruments needed for an autonomous foreign policy and will continue to resort to external resources for the application of its foreign policy orientations.

This means that Europe's policy towards the Middle East will continue to use Community instruments in the economic and diplomatic fields only, while its security policy will remain that of its member states.

That is why the attempts of some member states -- in particular France, Spain and Italy -- to transform their policy towards the Mediterranean-Middle East region into Community policy are unlikely to progress.

In the "Conclusions" of the European Council of December 1990, the Community adopted an integrated concept of security and in the "Declaration on Euro-Arab relations" of 7 September 1990, committed itself to translating it into a policy towards the region (2).

However, the failure to consolidate the instruments needed for a common foreign policy and the limitations placed by some member states on common management of security policy make the 'communitarization' of a project like the Conference for Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean-CSCM, proposed by the Southern EC members, problematic.

A greater European contribution to management of the military dimension of security in the Mediterranean and the Middle East could, instead, involve a substantial change in present patterns.

Yet, the British proposal -enjoying US backing- to provide on a contingency basis NATO's nascent Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) with a second WEU "hat" for interventions out-of-area is opposed openly by France and *de facto* by Germany, which has not yet matured the political and constitutional conditions for participation in it.

The alternative French proposal calling for the use of the European RRF plus the various European national Rapid Deployment Forces is even less likely to be accepted, as it does not solve the German problem and presupposes the existence of crises in the management of which the US cannot or will not want to be directly associated.

Even if the thorny problem of the politico-institutional chain of command of European forces in the out-of-area were solved, the question of which scenarios could require an exclusively European military intervention in the region would remain.

While a scenario of this kind can be hypothesized in North Africa, the present politico-institutional preeminence of the US and the absence of any European political action in the Middle East and the Gulf make it less likely there except for the case -- no longer very plausible -- of a

local crisis in which the successor entity of the Soviet Union would oppose the United States.

It is hard to imagine what kind of changes the assumption of foreign policy responsibilities by the individual Soviet republics could bring about. But it can be hypothesized that the greater the foreign policy unity of the future configuration -- for example through alliance of the central government with the Russian Federation --, the more likely that the basic Mediterranean and Middle Eastern policy direction established under Gorbachev and Shevardnadze will remain.

In any case, the Middle East remains a region of crucial importance for the successors of the Soviet Union, both as a terrain for maintaining the status of international power, member of the Security Council and Number One interlocutor of the West in such fields as regional arms control, and as a neighbouring region whose developments have a direct impact on a number of former Soviet republics.

With the conclusion of the Gulf War, the Soviet Union definitively gave up its traditional "Arab policy" in the region, founded on special relations with Syria, Iraq and the PLO and aimed at influencing the Arab-Israeli conflict, in favour of a "Muslim policy" pursuing a cooperative relationship with the regional states -- Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia -- having the most direct effect on the evolution of the Soviet Muslim republics.

The signing of a cooperation treaty with Turkey in March 1991, the resumption of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and the continuing good relations with Iran guaranteed by the cooperation agreement of June 1989 have confirmed this trend.

This refocussing towards central Asia, generally in keeping with present American Middle East policies , will probably be confirmed whether a central authority is maintained in international policy or whether greater decentralization is introduced. But it seems likely that the "entity" succeeding the USSR will be able to contribute positively to the international strategy of stabilization in the area, participating actively in the Arab-Israeli negotiating process and in arms control in the region, only if there is such a central foreign policy authority.

For such a unitary actor, as for the pre-coup USSR, an overall interest in cooperation with the West would probably prevail over the desire to conduct divergent policies towards the individual Middle Eastern regional actors (for example, Iran). The single republics, on the other hand, could be tempted to give more importance to bilateral relations and domestic policy, even if divergent from Western interests.

More worrying is indeed the prospect of an extention of the Middle East system through the active involvement of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Muslim ex-Soviet Republics.

Finally, the refocussing towards Asia of Middle Eastern Soviet policy has removed one of the reasons for the presence of the Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean: the capability to provide military support for its Arab policy. In addition to the end of East-West confrontation, the need to drastically restructure the defence policy and reduce the military budget, this change is likely to give new impulse to traditional Soviet insistence on naval arms control in the Mediterranean-Black Sea regions.

5. Conclusions

Under the joint effects of the Gulf war and the dislocation of the post-communist states, the strategic picture in the Mediterranean is characterized by two main phenomena: a persistent North-South gap, aggravated by the potential slide into the Third World of a part of the Balkans;

and the absence of a consistent politico-institutional framework for management of regional security.

Although a Western security policy, based on the strategy of stabilization undertaken by the United States, exists in the Middle East, it could be insufficient in ensuring a peaceful transition to a new regional balance of power. Apart from the internal contradictions of the American strategy, such as oscillation between direct intervention and dependence on regional allies, it does not adequately deal with the structural roots of the instability in the region, that is, the economic and democratic deficits.

The continuation of the recent Soviet policy in the Mediterranean-Middle East region by the successor states to the Soviet Union is not likely to create any rivalry with the West and could lead to a virtual withdrawal from the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, the assumption of greater foreign policy powers by the former Soviet republics --possibly compounded with a weak or absent central foreign policy authority-- could result in the prevalence of regional over international interests in Middle East policy, thus multiplying the divergences from Western strategy.

Notes

1) Alastair Buchan Memorial Lecture given at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 7 March 1991 (text published in *Survival*, March-April 1991, p. 99).

2) "The Community and its members are also resolved to contribute to the formulation of a regional cooperation policy aimed at making a constructive contribution to the solution of the structural problems afflicting the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions, both with respect to stability and to economic and social well-being."