

## **THE ISIL THREAT AND THE NEW MIDDLE EASTERN CONSENSUS.**

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The ISIL has succeeded to change the Western agenda in the Middle East within months, through their key military moves in Iraq and the north-eastern Syrian territories and by means of a systematically conducted psychological warfare through internet and social media. Following the video footages of the Islamic State's military operations and beheadings of western journalists and humanitarian aid workers, Western and the Middle Eastern states are facing an unprecedented strategic consensus. The numerous regional players are ostensibly setting aside their contradictory interests and unilateral endeavors, reacting positively to the formation of an American-led multidisciplinary coalition against radical Jihadism, in general and ISIL, in particular.

President Barak Obama in a dramatic televised address on 11.9.2014, called for a regional alliance against the ISIL. Nevertheless, such a consensus should not be misinterpreted that long-standing differences in the region would ultimately disappear. On the contrary, it would not be cynical to assess that the ISIL threat will eventually prove itself as an important opportunity for the various regional players to promote their own interests, which contradict those of their meant-to-be temporary allies.

The US administration for the last decade has failed to bring peace and stability to Iraq. The US has failed to promote the peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Washington was proven to be reluctant to force an end to the Syrian civil war. American efforts to bring Israel and Turkey back together did not reach any results. US-Iran relations did not show any amelioration. The US has failed, so far to impose a strong stance on the dispute over the natural gas reserves between Turkey and Cyprus which could lead to the island's reunification and to the end of the Turkish military occupation, while the Kurdish rebels seem to be gaining points in the regional strategic mosaic – a fact that Ankara is watching very closely. After the recent conflict in Gaza, Egyptian President Al-Sissi reassessed his country's pro-Western stance. Qatar, despite its strong ties with the US-administration and the West, appears to have alienated itself towards the other GCC countries and Egypt when it comes to exclusively Arab affairs and this has resulted in Doha's diplomatic isolation from its Arab counterparts. On the other hand, the internationally delegitimized Bashar Al-Assad's regime in Damascus is being reinforced on the ground, although the situation recently in the Syrian-Israeli border is considered to be unstable.

The general impression is that the US under the Obama administration does not have – or is not willing to have- the same strong influence in the Middle Eastern status quo, an area where for the past decades, Washington has proven to be the main decision maker. Whether this impression is rightly or wrongly, in an effort to boost a new era of US policy in the region, the Obama administration seems ready to reclaim its power and especially its prestige in the Middle East – and ISIL could be the best opportunity in order to achieve this goal.

Targeting a common enemy that is threatening all the regional players could be an opportunity for regional cooperation and a practical way to prove that the US is still able to determine facts and form alliances. After many setbacks in the military, political and diplomatic arena, the US is trying now to reshuffle the deck by offering a common ground, reminding the regional political leaderships that Washington is the only factor that still can overcome the numerous 'red lines' which have been drawn during the unipolar international reality formed after the Cold War.

The creation of a broad, regional Middle Eastern alliance is not impossible, but not at all easy either. Israel seems to be suspicious towards the US-Iranian rapprochement and Tehran's willingness to become a part of the American Mid-East strategy since this new factor, according to the Israeli point of view, might devalue Israel's exclusivity as the most reliable US ally while the Iranian nuclear program remains high on the Israeli agenda. The traditionally pro-Western Sunni Arab States, such as Saudi Arabia and its GCC counterparts share most of the same fears by this unexpected American openness towards previously isolated Iran. Nevertheless, intrusive Qatari policy is continuing to preoccupy various Sunni leaderships which have succeeded to remain intact despite the turbulences caused by the so-called Arab Spring and are not willing to tolerate any kind of internal political destabilization. Egypt is re-experiencing its pro-Western past, with President Al-Sissi's fidelity to the well-known Mubarak doctrine by re-establishing good relations with Israel and the Saudis. Even so, Cairo is trying to exclude Turkey and Qatar, whose main goal is to broaden their influence by forming their own agenda and their newly discovered common grounds. Turkey on the other hand is focusing on the Kurdish issue and is severely preoccupied by the western and Israeli encouragement towards the emerging Kurdish factor in Syria. On the other hand, the Assad regime is hoping to utilize its remaining powers on the ground in order to regain its long-lost political and diplomatic legitimacy, reminding the Obama administration and its regional allies –even Israel- that Damascus' secularity could still become a strong asset in order to repel radical Islam, the only strategic factor threatening Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds – not to mention the West and Turkey.

While Washington is trying to keep control in this complex strategic and diplomatic chess game, it is still not clear which Middle-Eastern country will actually dispose its military ground forces, while the other Western

European countries do not seem to want any direct military intervention – except for the United Kingdom, France and other EU member states when it comes to airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. In the meantime, Washington has gained political and diplomatic support against ISIL. Nonetheless, and despite Turkey's recent decision to play more active role to the military operations on the ground, the US administration has not yet ensured an alliance, that it will be willing to operate with ground forces in Iraq and Syria, by overcoming political and ideological differences, as well as unilateral endeavors of each and every player in the Levant, the Gulf and the South East Mediterranean region.

In order to reshuffle the deck effectively, the US will need to consider their strategic allies' goals. Meeting their demands is a *sine qua non* for the creation of a reliable cohesive factor against the ISIL – this brand-new common enemy that even if it hadn't existed, it seems like it should have been invented long ago.