

ULUSLARARASI **İLİŞKİLER**

Akademik Dergi
Cilt 15, Sayı 60, 2018

INTERNATIONAL **RELATIONS**

Academic Journal
Volume 15, Number 60, 2018

ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER / INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER / INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Cilt/Vol.15, Sayı/No.60, 2018

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Levant: Bölgesel Bir Düzen Arayışı / The Levant: Search for a Regional Order

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Mustafa Aydın

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From the Guest Editor / Misafir Editörden

The Levant region — from the French *le Levant* (rising), where the sun rises, referred to since the days of the Cold War as the Eastern Mediterranean — consists of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Cyprus, and parts of Egypt and Turkey. It has historically played an important role as a region, where the East and the West and converge, be it through conflict or dialogue. In modern times though, the individual states that make up the Levant have not been system-determining states in world politics. The Levant as a region has maintained its relevance in international politics due to geostrategic positioning, proximity to Islamic, Christian and Jewish religious sites, and more recently its hydrocarbon resources. Powerful regional actors and their diverse military, political and economic interests, in addition to multitude of ethnicities, faiths, and beliefs as well as continuing interests and interventions of non-regional states, have created numerous fault lines and drivers of conflicts in the region.

Traditionally an area of confrontation between Islam and Christianity, the Levant has seen the addition of a Jewish state into the mix into the 20th century. Yet, throughout its history, the Levant had also been known for its cosmopolitanism as well as its “diversity and flexibility”.¹ It has accommodated different cultures, religions, political inclinations, economic orders, and rulers side by side for centuries, and managed to keep their encounters and divergences confined within the region. The Levant’s diversity has become somewhat difficult to contain during the 20th century, however, and the region has seen its quarrels emanate outward from the region to ever-widening circles since the end of the Cold War.

Thus, the outbreak of the Arab Spring in late 2010, with popular uprisings against autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, has ushered an entirely new era with unsettled regional balances, complicated and shifting alliance patterns, fully-fledged sectarian strife, intertwined crises in Iraq and Syria, and the involvement of the United States and the Russian Federation, reminiscence of Cold War confrontations. The combination of these dynamics, together with decaying non-representative regimes, troubled economies infected with corruption and inequality, as well as demographic pressure on resources and the environment continue to threaten stability and prosperity for all.

The widespread breakup of state apparatus, oftentimes termed as state failure, has provoked polarization, sectarianism and occasional civil wars, leading to emergence of powerful non-state actors in the region. Disagreements between the key regional powers, external interventions and shifting alignments between regional and international actors in a multipolar constellation have added new layers to the already complex and unpredictable situation. In this intricate existence, the region needs to find ways to establish a regional order; otherwise the possibility of its final explosion seems imminent. Whether it could reinvent its famed cosmopolitanism of the past is an important query, the result of which is important for not only the well being of its citizenry in the 21st century, but also for the development and realignment of global political forces.

Within this general framework, this collection of articles aims at identifying the various aspects and actors that can influence the formation of a sustainable regional order for the Levant. This includes the dynamics that had created and sustained stability in the region before the 2011 uprising, the foundations

1 Philip Mansel, *The Levant; Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean*, London, John Murray, 2011, p. 2.

for a new regional order, as well as the role regional and international actors could play in the creation of a sustainable regional order for the Levant. The special issue will examine these topics with a view to provide a conceptual framework for further discussion. It is thus designed in three parts: a focus on the challenges for and foundations of a regional order, an assessment for the possibility of a regional economic framework, and an analysis on the impacts of the region's emerging balances.

The first part of the special issue prepares the ground for further analysis with a focus on challenges for a viable regional order, such as sectarian polarization, state weakness, identity-based politics, and authoritarianism, and its foundations such as sovereignty, stability, inclusiveness, and plurality. The first paper in this section by Steven Heydemann and Emelie Chace-Donahue looks at the contested norms of sovereignty and sectarianism to assess their primacy in a regional security order. They argue that both norms of sovereignty and sectarianism are exploited by regional actors like Iran and Saudi Arabia to overcome their various challenges. They conclude that "neither conception of regional order requires abandoning one set of norms in favor of the other."

The second paper by Kristina Kausch looks into the relationship between identity and order. Although overlapping and multilayered identities have coexisted in the Levant for centuries, the surge of identity politics as a tool of warfare to gain political advantages since the end of the Cold War has caused conflicts. She looks into how the identity based political surge emerged in the region, and how it has been used strategically by interested actors in the region. In the end, she essentially argues that what is prone to cause conflict is not the diversity of identities, but exclusionary identity politics.

The third paper in this section by Katerina Dalacoura looks at the prospects for restoring a regional order with a particular focus on democratization. Even though the authoritarianism in the Levant is normally a *sine qua non* for a regional order, she argues, it is also prone to instability and chaos. Thus, she contends that it is impossible to reach a regional order, or stability, without regional countries adopting a degree of democratization, which she construes with a degree of pluralism, inclusiveness and accountability.

The second section of the issue focuses on the economic dimension of a regional order. The papers in this section try to analyze the extent of a possible economic integration or potential for cooperation among regional actors on the security and stability of the region. As the discovery of hydrocarbons in the Levant has changed regional dynamics considerably, it is timely to discuss whether these resources might be a catalyst for regional stability, and in what ways an economic integration may be fostered despite the challenges of demographic pressures, resource scarcity, historical contentions, as well as ideological differences between the key actors.

The first paper in this section by Gareth M. Winrow is designed around the questions of whether the newly found energy resources will create incentives to improve relations among the regional states and to pave the way for regional cooperation, or, whether they will further trigger tensions in the region. While the discovery of energy resources in the Levant Basin Province and surrounding areas in the Eastern Mediterranean shows that there exists a close connection between energy issues and foreign policy interests, Winrow argues that this doesn't mean that energy can bring peace to the region's existing tensions and conflicts. He also contends that there are serious barriers in the way of regional cooperation in the Levant, particularly the prospects for the construction of a gas pipeline from the region to Europe as a result of either its economic and financial feasibility or due to the longstanding regional disputes such as the Cyprus problem or the continuing tension between Turkey and Israel.

The second paper in this section by Nader Habibi looks into the prospects for economic cooperation among the countries in the region. He portrays the period between 2002 and 2010 as the golden era of economic cooperation in the region, primarily led by Turkey, as there was a remarkable economic integration among the Levant countries. However, this cooperation deteriorated after 2011 as a result of Syrian Civil War and changes in the region's balance of power. Even though the prospects for economic cooperation among the regional countries remains uncertain due to ongoing tensions, Habibi claims that it would be more likely to see economic relations develop on a bilateral basis without any multilateral coordination.

The third paper of this section focuses on the usually neglected challenges of the Levant region such as population growth, unemployment, resource scarcity, food security and environmental issues. Although these challenges call for immediate attention and action, Özlem Tür points out the lack of political will in the region for tackling these challenges. She argues that hard security issues overshadow the importance of these enormous challenges, relegating them to a secondary concern, but that they will be extremely important in determining the future of the regimes in the Levant. Thus, she takes up the timely and important question of how unwilling leaders could be persuaded to take immediate and timely action.

The final section of this special issue includes four papers dealing with international actors' policies for the Levant. It includes papers that focus the policies of local powers, such as Iran and Turkey as well as global powers, the United States and the Russian Federation. The political developments that took place in the region over the last decade — from the invasion of Iraq to the failure of the Arab-Israeli peace process as well as the recent region-wide turmoil — have seriously affected the regional balance of power. The competition among regional actors has not only increased the instability of the region, but has also triggered the emergence of new challenges to regional order, such as the consolidation of sectarian divergences, the increased role of non-state actors supported by external powers, and the outbreak of new political tensions among regional actors. Moreover, extra-regional powers have been seeking to maintain and/or increase their influence throughout the region via military presence and political alignments. Accordingly, this section seeks to answer the question of how the policies of regional and international actors and their shifting relations shape the region and its increasingly complex balance of power. The papers included in this section are designed to reflect the current balances in the region through policies of both regional and international actors.

Mustafa Aydın and Cihan Dizdaroğlu trace the evolution of Turkish foreign policy toward the Levant since the late 1990s around the major developments such as discovery of hydrocarbons off the coast of Israel, Cyprus and Egypt, the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and changes in the regional balance of power, developments that have paved the way for Turkey's closer engagement with the region. They conclude that, though all these developments have provided space for Turkey to play a more assertive role in the region, it failed to sustain region-wide cooperation and/or carve up an influence zone.

Sanam Vakil examines the increasing influence and interference of Iran, another key actor of the region. She looks into Iran in the Levant through its ties with states and non-state actors, which provide strategic depth and deterrence for Iran. Vakil focuses on Tehran's engagement in the Levant with a historical perspective in order to comprehend its current strategy, which is, according to her, guided by a long-term and diversified foreign policy understanding.

Irina Zvyagelskaya focuses on the policies of the Russian Federation in the region and tries to explain the changing characteristics of its policy toward the Levant by comparing its historical and current approaches through the prism of two benchmarks: the Syrian Civil War and Palestinian-Israeli conflict. She argues that the active Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War since 2015 has led to the strengthening of Russian presence in the region and the forging of new partnerships there. In terms of Palestinian-Israeli conflict, she claims that Russian policy has been consistent both in form and in content and has tried to contribute to finding a solution to the problem.

In contrast to the Russian policy, the American policy towards the Levant has looked at times incompetent and inconsistent, according to a following paper by Evrim Görmüş and Soli Özel. Mostly analyzing the policies of the last two presidential administration towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and regarding Syria, the authors claim that, with the exception of a consistent pro-Israel bias, the U.S. approach to the region has been marred with inconsistencies. It also looks into how the complex challenges of the Syrian Civil War, with the involvement of Russia and Iran as well as U.S. ineffectiveness, have changed the regional dynamics. Finally, the paper addresses the effect of the rising “regional hegemonic struggle” between Iran and the main U.S. allies in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia, in the post-Islamic State (IS) period and argues that containment of Iran will be the primary objective of the U.S. policy towards the region in near future.

The main conclusion of this collection of papers is that a structural transformation of the Levant will require a sustainable new order that can guarantee stability and security, and redefine power relations between regional actors and their international backers. However, the main components and variables that constitute and influence the current disorder in the Levant will continue to prevent the emergence of an appropriate framework for a regional order. Thus, the region will continue to be characterized by its current intricate problems and delicate balances in the foreseeable future. Under such conditions, instead of forcing the emergence of a new order, which most probably will not be forthcoming in the short to medium term, it would be better to search for management of differences and conflicting aspects in the short term in order to allow for the development of conditions in the longer term that are more amenable for forging a stable and prosperous regional order, and will most probably be based on the region’s historical strengths of diversity, adaptability, and resilience.

This special issue came about as a result of a workshop on “The Levant; From Ancient Gateway to Modern Chaos – What Basis for a New Regional Order?”, which was co-organized by the International Relations Council of Turkey (IRCT) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) in Dead Sea, Jordan, on 27-28 April 2017. I am grateful to both institutions and Canan Atılğan, Director of KAS Regional Program-South Mediterranean, as well as Veronika Ertl and Cihan Dizdaroğlu, who took care of the organizational aspects of the workshop. I would like to thank the authors who contributed to this special issue for their patience and diligence in going through various versions of their papers.

Hoping to contribute to the understanding of the Levant and its political intricacies, I wish an enjoyable experience to our readers in perusing this issue.

Mustafa AYDIN