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The Arabs Have Lost Their Power Base In The Middle East – OpEd

By Richard Rousseau

As the U.S. troops progressively exit from the Middle East, Turkey and Iran acquire the upper hand in the region, at least for now, rather than the Arab countries of the region.

In the struggle for power in Syria, it is not Arab countries which are playing the leading role but two non-Arab states. Turkey, on the one hand, is trying to topple the regime of President Bashar al-Assad for geopolitical reasons; Iran, on the other, is struggling to keep al-Assad and his minority Alawite sect in power for its own long-term security. Ankara and Teheran are in effect determining the future of the region through their actions.

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Iran is striving to increase its sphere of influence across the Middle East. In Lebanon it seeks to manipulate the government via its satellite organization, Hezbollah, which is armed, trained and financed by Tehran. In Iraq, it can exercise pressure on Prime Minister al-Maliki, as his government's parliamentary majority is dependent on Muqtada al-Sadr's party, which represents the Iranian interests and is predominately supported by a class of dispossessed Shiite Muslims.

The United States withdrew from Iraq last year after ten years of undeclared war. Paradoxically, it is not the Americans but the Turks who are now tasking themselves with trying to counterbalance the growing Iranian influence in Iraq and the region. Turkey is deeply engaged economically and politically in the autonomous Kurdish Region in the north of Iraq, which is only formally controlled from Baghdad. Moreover, especially in its eastern part, it is fighting a domestic war with the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Movement. The Turks have ambitions to revive their influence in the Arab Middle East, which was ruled from Istanbul for over 450 years until the Ottoman Empire collapsed during the First World War.

Before 2003 Arab politics was dominated by Egypt and Iraq, two competing powers which courted Syria. Now Turkey and Iran, two non-Arab regional powers, are vying for a greater sphere of influence in the Arab Middle East. Currently, no Arab country is able to stand up to these two states.

Egypt and Iraq lost their positions as centers of power due to Washington's policy under the George W. Bush administration. Strongly encouraged by the United States, Egypt lost its regional importance in 1979 when it signed a peace accord with Israel. This move provoked an immediate reaction from the other Arab countries, which saw the peace deal as an outright betrayal of

collective Arab interests. In response to the Camp David agreement the Arab League's headquarters were moved from Cairo to Tunis, where they remained until 1989, after which they were moved back to Cairo. During this interval, Egypt was isolated and lost its traditional position as the Arab world's mouthpiece.

America's two wars against Iraq – the Kuwait war of 1991 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which led to the fall of Saddam Hussein – put an end to Baghdad's influence in the Arab world.

Saudi Arabia began to assert itself after 2003. It emerged as a counterweight to the U.S. and could act independently of, or even against, Washington's interests in North Africa and Syria. Riyadh was instrumental in fomenting the popular upheavals in Tunisia and Libya in 2011. It has helped remold the Gulf and Jordanian monarchies – and also partly that of Morocco – to ensure their continued existence.

Saudi Arabia has also intervened in recent clashes between the Shiite opposition and the Sunni royal family in Bahrain. Saudi troops, backed by Jordanian soldiers, have helped defeat the pro-democracy uprising. Riyadh has also taken an active role in the unrest in Yemen.

However, the Saudi monarchy, on the whole, does not really have a pro-active policy, as the regime is sclerotic, out of touch and unable to respond with the appropriate speed in emergency situations. This means that Saudi Arabia will not be able to play a leading role in Egypt and other Arab countries, which have now embarked on a reform process which the Saudis consider dangerous to the kingdom's future.

U.S. influence in the Arab world has been exerted through two so-called moderate powers: Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The former, since President Mubarak's fall, has become an unexpected challenge for Washington. The ties with Saudi Arabia are becoming more and more entangled. The Saudi royal family was shocked by the apparent nonchalance with which Washington abandoned Mubarak, its regional pawn for 30 years. The Saudis are also critical of America's reluctance to take the Iranian bull by the horns. It is no secret that the Saudis feel uneasy about Tehran's efforts to enrich uranium and the possibility that it may enrich it to a level where it could be used to make nuclear weapons.

Washington's long term strategy should not be predicated on the maintenance of an alliance with the fragile, corrupt and illegitimate Saudi kingdom, whose days, in the mid and long term, are numbered in the wake of the "Arab Spring." The most viable option available to Washington is to place its bets on a reformist Egypt by combining the two countries' perceptions of their national interests. In other words, the White House should accept Egypt's new political course and work with it for peace, prosperity and the establishment of a real democracy.

Until Iran and Turkey manage – if they ever do – to secure a decisive influence over the Middle East, which since World War II has been subject to American ascendancy, the region will have no political power centers, no regionally dominant state.