

The Transformation of the Levant Region: Security-Related Changes in a Turbulent Region

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The only thing stable about the Middle East is its instability. This has never been more true than today. Since 2010, a number of developments have taken place in the Middle East and North Africa, e.g. the Arab Uprisings, processes of political transformation, the loss of formerly stable authoritarian regimes and the emergence of new political actors like the Islamic State (IS). The entire region is situated in a period of transformation.

Where Is This Transformation Leading?

After the Cold War, regional security architecture has become both more independent and more prominent in international politics.¹ Buzan and Waever named these security architectures or clusters on a regional level *Regional Security Complexes* (RSC). These RSC are determined by the intensity of the inter-dependences on the security level.

¹ Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 3.

The authors' definition of *security* is a wide ranged one and includes political and military aspects as well as societies and the developments of societies including a lot of actors and different levels and sectors.² These so called "units"³ differ from the traditional International Relation related explanation (Waltz). *Units* are not only states, but also actors like the Hamas or Hizballah. *Units* - the actors in the sub – RSC Levant⁴, are therefore⁵: Egypt including the Muslim Brotherhood and IS in Sinai, Israel, the Gaza Strip and Hamas, the Westbank and the Palestinian Authority, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the failed state of Lebanon including the Hizballah controlled areas, Hizballah itself and the remaining Syria and IS, as well as other radical groups fighting for example in the Syrian civil war. Following the theoretical concept all of these *units* have an impact on the ongoing changes in the sub - RSC Levant and on the transformation of the sub - RSC Levant is going through.

Focusing on these central aspects of security in the RSC Theory (RSCT) it is clear that the main variable is the strong interdependence within a RSC. This interdependence builds the *essential structure of a RSC*. Four variables were mentioned in analysing and explaining the *essential structure* of a RSC: (1) *boundary*, which differentiated the RSC from its neighbours; (2) *anarchic structure*, which means that the RSC must be composed of 2 or more autonomous units; (3) *polarity*, which covers the distribution of power among the units and (4) *social construction*, which covers the patterns of amity and enmity among the units.⁶ Buzan and Waever, in their 2003 analysis of the Middle East stated: The Middle East is a RSC, but within this huge RSC three sub - complexes can be mentioned: the Levant, the Maghreb and the Gulf.⁷

Thus, according to Buzan and Wæver, the essential structure of the sub – RSC Levant is based on "the patterns of amity and enmity [...] fare remarkable or their

² Ibid., pp. 70-71.

³ Ibid., p. 53.

⁴ The Levant is a so called subcomplex embedded in the larger complex Middle East (Buzan / Waver 2003: 189).

⁵Units: meaning actors composed of various subgroups, organizations, communities and may individuals and sufficiently cogesive and independent to be differentiated from others and have standing at a higher levels (e.g. states, nations and transnational firms) (Buzan / Waever / de Wilde : 1998 6)

⁶ Buzan, p. 53.

⁷ Ibid., p. 188.

convoluted and crosscutting character.”⁸ “The regional pattern of security interdependencies shaped three sub complexes can be described very clearly: the first, and defining, core subcomplex was that centred in the Levant between Israel and its Arab neighbours.”⁹ Accordingly, the centre of the RSC Middle East is the Levant region and this analysis focusses therefore on the first defining core.

The Levant encompasses Israel and its neighbours and is a mixture of states and non-state actors.¹⁰ “But the sub – RSC Levant is not only based on the Arab – Israeli enmity, but also on inter-Arab rivalry, religious and ideological differences, disputes of status and leadership, as well as ethnic, territorial and water rights disputes.”¹¹ “In sum, the regional security dynamics [...] were exceptionally strong and deeply rooted in the character of local politics and history.”¹²

Transformation in the ME and especially in the sub – RSC Levant indicates development within the regional security architecture. Following Buzan and Waever’s analysis, this happens when changes in the dynamics are taking place. The RSCT states a RSC like the Middle East remains in status quo, changes by internal or external transformation or will be overlaid.¹³

Watching the current developments in the Levant its undeniable: the Levant is going through changes by internal and external transformation.¹⁴ Changes through *internal transformation* occur within the context of its existing outer boundary. This could mean changes to the anarchic structure (because of regional integration); to polarity (because of disintegration, merger, conquest, differential growth rates etc.); or to the dominant patterns of amity/enmity (because of ideological shifts, war-weariness, changes of leadership etc.).¹⁵ Changes through *external transformation* mean that the outer boundary expands or contracts, changing the membership of the RSC and most

⁸ Ibid., p. 190.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 191.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 216.

¹² Ibid., p. 201.

¹³ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁴ Overlaid might be a fruitful variable for analyzing, too. But with regard to the developments in the region, internal and external transformation seem to be the most prominent form of change.

¹⁵ Buzan, p. 53.

probably transforming its essential structure in other ways. The most obvious way for this to happen is if two RSCs merge – or less often, two RSCs splitting out from one.¹⁶

What Kind Of Changes Can Be Currently Observed In The Sub – Rsc Levant?

Changes through *internal transformation* take place within the context of the existing outer boundary of the sub - RSC Levant. This assumption is strengthened by empirical surveillance since the main changes take place on the geographic territory of the Levant region: by name, within the geographical borders of Syria, Lebanon, the State of Israel, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and Egypt.

The changes to the anarchic structure do not take place by regional integration as Buzan and Waever assume but because of *the emergence of new units* like IS. IS is the main new unit in the Levant and appears not only on the territory of Syria, but on the Sinai Peninsula,¹⁷ the Golan Heights¹⁸ and also in the Gaza Strip.¹⁹

The next aspect which needs to be mentioned is that of *polarity*. Polarity due to disintegration is one of the main factors of change in the Levant during recent years: disintegration of states like in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt or of the entire Levant in its known borders. This is what can be called the end of Sykes – Picot.²⁰ The end of Sykes – Picot means an entire change of the territorial and geopolitical borders in the region.

One other main aspect of disintegration is *conquest*. And IS as *the* main new unit in the Levant is an actor which is fighting a war of conquest. The sub - RSC Levant is therefore

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Zack Gold, "Sinai Tribes: Between the Egyptian State and the Islamic State", *INSS Insight*, No. 698, May 18, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=9533>. Accessed June 14, 2015.

¹⁸ Noam Amir, et al., "Jihadists at the border: Operatives loyal to ISIS seen near the Golan Heights", *Jerusalem Post*, April 30, 2015. <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Jihadists-at-the-border-Operatives-loyal-to-ISIS-seen-near-the-Golan-Heights-400720>. Accessed June 16, 2015.

¹⁹ Khaled Abu Toameh, "ISIS in Gaza, When One Radical Group Believes Another Is Not Radical Enough", *Gatestone Institute International Policy Council* December 5, 2014. <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4926/isis-in-gaza>. Accessed June 16, 2015.

²⁰ Sykes – Picot Agreement of 1916 shaped the Middle East in its known borders. The text of the agreement can be read here: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/sykes.asp. Accessed June 14, 2015.

under the threat of conquest. IS knows no borders but front lines.²¹ IS has established a *Caliphate* – which means a “political-religious state comprising the Muslim community and the lands and peoples under its dominion.”²² This stands for the idea of a global Islamic unity under the leadership of the Caliph. Therefore borders do not play a role, since all Muslims shall be part of the Caliphate.

The *growths rates*, as another aspect Buzan and Waever focus on, can be also observed in the Levant - the huge number of refugees from Syria destabilizes the region. For example in an area with limited statehood, like in Lebanon. One point three million refugees from Syria are now living in Lebanon. That means each fourth person living in Lebanon is a Syrian.²³ Within the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan similar numbers can be identified – every fifth Jordanian is a Syrian which means 630 000 refugees are registered.²⁴ These lead to a potential instability of Jordan including unexpected results.

Another aspect is the *dominant patterns of amity/enmity*. Buzan and Waever, for example, expect changes of leadership due to this. Changes of leadership can be observed in Egypt and partly in Syria. In Egypt, the change of leadership is an ongoing problem.²⁵ At the moment, al-Sisi seems to be the new strong leader but this might only be a brief snapshot due to the fighting in Sinai. The Muslim Brotherhood is still a power which should not be underestimated.²⁶ Changes of leadership might highlight patterns

²¹ Paul Salem, “The Middle East in 2015 and Beyond: Trends and Drivers,” *The Middle East Institute*, November 18, 2014. <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/middle-east-2015-and-beyond-trends-and-drivers>. Accessed June 16, 2015.

²² *Enciclopedia Britannica* <http://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate>. Accessed June 17, 2015.

²³ Numbers taken from the UNHCR, registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>. Accessed June 16, 2015.

²⁴ Numbers taken from the UNHCR, registered Syrian refugees in Jordan <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107>. Accessed June 16, 2015.

²⁵ Mahmood Monshipouri, “After the Arab Spring, Transition and crisis of governability,” *The Berkeley Blog*, December 2/12/13 <http://blogs.berkeley.edu/2013/02/12/after-the-arab-spring-transitions-and-crisis-of-governability/>. Accessed June 16, 2015.

²⁶ Eric Trager, Shalabi Marina, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood gets a Facelift,” *Foreign Affairs* (May 2015). <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-gets-a-facelift>. Accessed June 16, 2015.

of amity/enmity and is why some of the Levant leaders would like to see Syria enduring, lead by Asad.²⁷

Unfortunately, *war-weariness* cannot be found in the Levant. Rather, the ideological shifts seem to be more insurmountable than ever. Ideological shifts no longer occur on this level

'Arabs against Jews' or 'Arabs against Iranians' but also among Arab units themselves. These ideological shifts seem to be *the* main fracture line in the Levant. Shi'i congregations against Sunnis' is an old story, but it has grown stronger the last several years. On the one hand, Shiites units like the Asad regime and the Hizballah are still functioning. On the other hand, Sunnis units in Egypt and Jordan are repositioning themselves. More ideological shifts can be recognized with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Hamas on the one hand and other radical units like IS on the other hand. To sum up, *internal changes* in the sub - RSC Levant are obvious.

The *external transformation* is taking place ruled by mainly one strong actor: Iran. Iran is part of the sub-RSC Gulf.²⁸ In this case, it means a *merging* of two sub RSCs can be observed. Israel is very much concerned about a nuclear power Iran²⁹ and Iran is using its power to rule the region. Some observations can be mentioned: for example the support of Hizballah, Hamas or the regime of Asad in Syria.³⁰ This *external change* of the sub – RSC Levant by Iran should not be underestimated.

²⁷ Spencer Ho, "Ex – IDF chief: Israel prefers Assad stays in power." *Times of Israel*. December 11, 2013. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/ex-idf-chief-israel-prefers-that-assad-stay-in-power/>. Accessed June 16, 2015.

²⁸ Buzan, p. 189.

²⁹ Ephraim Kam, *Strategic Assessment, Institute for National Security*, "The final nuclear agreement with Iran: The morning after" 18,no. 1 (April 2015). <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4424>. Accessed June 17, 2015.

³⁰ Will Fulton, et al., "Iranian Strategy in Syria", *AEI Critical Threats Project and Institute for the study of War* May 2013 <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/iranian-strategy-syria>. Accessed June 17, 2015.

What Will Be The Result Of This Changing Process?

Buzan and Waever differentiate between two main expectations following the changing process of transformation: integration or fragmentation.³¹ It is obvious that the sub-RSC Levant undergoing the current changes will not end in integration but in *fragmentation*. Buzan and Waever state “interaction capacity (technological and social infrastructure for transportation and communication [...]) plays quite strongly into the basic form of security. Low interaction capacity within a region is probably a necessary condition for unstructured security regions. [...] Standard RSC require quite high levels of interaction capacity within the region, and it is hard to imagine integration without high interaction capacity.”³²

The sub-RSC Levant *interaction capacity suffered because of the internal and external transformations, according to* Buzan and Waever. Technological and social infrastructure for transportation has been destroyed by wars and military incidents (for example in Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip). The communication between the units seems to fall silent in the face of overwhelming shifts. The empirical evidence suggests the following: the transformation process will lead to the fragmentation of the sub-RSC Levant and will be followed by a return to an “unstructured security region.”³³ Unexpected and devastating results for the entire region are predicted. An *unstructured security region* means that local states are so weak that their power does not project much, if at all, beyond their own boundaries, and so generate insufficient security interdependence to form the essential structures of a RSC.³⁴

Lebanon, Syria and Egypt are already weakened local states. Their power does not project much and the governments in power are in trouble even within their own territorial boundaries. This weakness is not difficult to see. In the case of Syria, it is the struggle with IS and other radical actors, the Egyptian government is fighting with IS in

³¹ Buzan, p. 66.

³² Ibid., p. 67.

³³ Ibid., p.66.

³⁴ Ibid., p.492.

the Sinai and in the case of Lebanon it is the loss of control in *Hizballahland* (the part of Lebanon which is under control of Hizballah).

In the Gaza, the same empirical observances can be made. After rockets from the Gaza Strip were sent to the south of the State of Israel in June 2015,³⁵ Hamas showed its own weakness by stating: "What happens yesterday [the rockets fired on Israel] goes against the interests of the Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip."³⁶ Hamas had not been able to prevent the rocket fire on Israel.

In addition, at least two other Levant actors should be mentioned: The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the State of Israel. The leadership of the Hashemites is still in good order. Although it's a fragile order and always has been.³⁷ However, within the last few years the leadership has grown even more fragile. The instability developed primarily because of the huge number of Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Jordan (see above). More than ever, the democratic system is under threat. In Jordan, as a kingdom, everything depends on the King. If he fails, if he cannot stand the pressure anymore or if something happens to him, Jordan could easily be the next weak and powerless state in the Levant. And then it might be only a question of time until one of the last remaining security agreements will be destroyed: the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel.³⁸

Surrounded by all of these troubles and territorially located literally in the midst of everything, Israel must also deal with the current situation. Israel as the only state without an Islamic majority has to tread carefully in the ongoing situation. It finds itself encircled by IS: in the north IS is fighting in Syria, on the Golan Heights and in Lebanon. In the south, border-violations are happening on a daily basis and in the Sinai

³⁵ Peter Beaumont, "Palestinian salafists pose dangerous new problem for Hamas", *The Guardian* 10 June 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/10/gaza-salafists-problem-hamas-islamic-state-isis> Accessed June 17, 2015.

³⁶ Quoted after ynetnews.com, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4663942,00.html>. Accessed June 17, 2015.

³⁷ Melanie Carina Schmoll, *Die Sicherheitskooperation zwischen Israel und Jordanien. Ein Sicherheitsregime zur Lösung eines Sicherheitskonfliktes?* (Lit – Verlag, Münster, 2008). Vol. 12, 2008.

³⁸ For more information on the security arrangements and the peace treaty: Schmoll 2008. 10 Defense Minister Moshe Ya' Alon at the Herzliya Conference, 2015.

Peninsula IS is gaining ground as well. The Israeli government practices *Realpolitik*. There is no space for illusions.³⁹ Israel is not interfering in Syria⁴⁰ but welcomes democratic developments in the region. For Israel, the primary focus is on Iran. Iran is considered the *main* threat Israel faces. According to the Minister of Defence, Ya'Alon, Iran is the main reason for the instability in the Levant.⁴¹ *External and internal transformation* interconnect with each other. Jordan seems to be a partner for Israel in the Levant, but as aforementioned, growing instability in Jordan might only be a question of time.

Israel states that there are some red lines which should not be crossed by the surrounding units. Attacks on the territory of Israel are to be met with a violence response. In self-defence, Israel would give a powerful answer to the offender.

However, Israel is also open to new options; for example, exchange with units outside the Levant region. For Israel, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Turkey have the same enemies: radical enemies are the radical groups. Therefore some new developments can be observed: Israel and Saudi Arabia are talking to each other without having diplomatic ties.⁴² All in all, the theory matches with the empirical surveillance: most units of the Levant region are weak and powerless or threatened by new actors. These units are apparently not able to generate security interdependence and therefore stay with the former essential structure of the sub-RSC Levant.

Quo Vadis Levant?

Looking at all of these challenges and developments of the sub-RSC Levant it is clear: the region is in a period of transformation. The *essential structure* is destroyed. The sub-RSC Levant is undergoing a phase of *transformation* and *fragmentation* and will end in an *unstructured security region*.

³⁹ Defense Minister Moshe Ya'Alon at the Herzliya Conference, 2015.

⁴⁰ Although Israel provided humanitarian aid to Syria. Ian Deitch, (2013) or Anat Silverman (2013).

⁴¹ Cf. annotation 9.

⁴² Daniel Roth, "Israel, Saudi-Arabia admit secret diplomacy for first time", Jerusalem Post, September 5, 2015. <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israel-Saudi-Arabia-admit-secret-diplomacy-for-first-time-405123>. Accessed June 18, 2015..

The destruction of the essential structure is very clear. The *boundary*, which differentiated the RSC from its neighbours is more or less gone since some of the members simply do not have boundaries anymore. IS, for example, does not know about boundaries at all, just about front lines. And to make things worse, the remaining boundaries are blurring. The impact of Iran (which is not a unit of the sub RSC Levant according to Buzan and Waever but part of the external transformation, see above) is huge.

Even inside the former sub-RSC Levant, boundaries are no longer secure. In Egypt there are problems in the Sinai Peninsula and problems with regard to Gaza Strip can be witnessed. The same can be noticed in Lebanon: border violations with Israel are happening almost on daily basis.⁴³ The same can be seen between the Gaza Strip and the State of Israel. The famous exception is the border between Jordan and Israel which is still quite and safe.

The other parts of the essential structure Buzan and Waever mentioned are dispersing, too: the *polarity*, which covers the distribution of power among the units and *the social construction* which covers the patterns of amity and enmity among the units (Buzan/ Waever 2003: 53).⁴⁴ The distribution of power among the units is not longer distinguishable - formerly strong regimes like Asad in Syria or Mubarak in Egypt failed and expected powerful states like Israel acting striking reluctant. Hamas is loosing power and Hezbollah is under pressure by other radical forces in Lebanon. Lebanon and Jordan are facing a refugee chaos with an impact on both societies. Other minorities like the Druze are fighting for surviving (Bassam 2014). Previous known rules of the distribution of power in the Levant no longer exist. *Patterns of amity and enmity* emerge clear and can not longer be covert by social construction. The shift between Shi'it congregation and Sunnis makes the entire situation even more confusing and complicated.

⁴³ Jodi Rudoren, et al., "Hezbollah kills 2 Israeli soldiers near Lebanon". *New York Times* Jan 28 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/29/world/middleeast/israel-lebanon-hezbollah-missile-attack.html?_r=0. Accessed June 18, 2015).

⁴⁴ Buzan and Waever, p. 53.

Based on the RSCT as posited by Buzan and Weaver it could be said that the sub-RSC Levant is already an *unstructured security region*. The essential structure has been destroyed and the security based interdependence remains only partly intact (e.g. peace treaties between Israel and its neighbours Egypt and Jordan). The most unexpected result is simultaneously the most devastating one: the demonstrators and fighters for peace in the Levant expected freedom and got the Caliphate.

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