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REGIONAL ORDER FROM THE OUTSIDE IN: EXTERNAL INTERVENTION, REGIONAL ACTORS, CONFLICTS AND AGENDA IN THE MENA REGION

Karim Makdisi, **Waleed Hazbun**, **Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar** and **Gülşah Dark**

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been beset by a series of external interventions, regional crises and local conflicts – most recently precipitated by the Arab uprisings – that have led to major uncertainties and changes in the existing order. The aim of this paper – which launches Work Package 5 within the MENARA project – is to provide a general framework within which to understand and contextualize the transformations in regional dynamics, particularly since the uprisings. It is divided into four parts, focusing on the major regional actors (state and non-state); regional conflicts (Arab–Israeli, Syrian, Moroccan–Algerian and Sahel); themes (i.e. refugees and illegal trafficking); and key regional cooperation platforms (i.e. the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab Maghreb Union and the African Union). By introducing the basic background literature, approaches and research questions, this paper, in turn, paves the way for more in-depth and focused research papers within the MENARA project.

INTRODUCTION

Some of the most dramatic changes in the regional dynamics of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) politics have occurred following the eruption of the Arab uprisings, which affected both the internal politics and the relations among countries in the region (Boserup et al. 2017). These changes, however, are best viewed as extensions of ongoing processes that include devastating military inventions by external powers; increasing geopolitical assertiveness by regional powers; the erosion of state governance over populations and territories; the proliferation of migrant, refugee and weapons flows across the region and beyond; and the growing capacity of various non-state and hybrid actors to play a role in the dynamics of the regional system.

The present paper launches Work Package 5 (WP5) within the MENARA project. The research addresses three main themes: regional dynamics, regional conflicts, and regional issues and cooperation platforms.

The MENARA project addresses the question of "regional order" as part of its study of geopolitical shifts and domestic transformations in the MENA region. Although the notion of "region" does not have a standard definition within the academic literature,[2] within the context of the MENARA

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2   On the concept of regions in international relations, see Russett (1967), Fawcett and Hurrell (1995) and Katzenstein (2000).

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project and the present paper, *regions* can be defined as "geographical units made up of territorially based political entities, tied together by high and persistent levels of political, economic, security-based and/or cultural interaction among [objective factors] and/or by a shared sense of belonging" (Malmvig et al. 2016: 33). Following this, it is possible to define a *regional order* as "a set of formal or informal arrangements that sustains rule-governed interactions among different units within a regional system in their pursuit of individual and collective goals" (Soler et al. 2016: 111).

This paper is not intended as an exhaustive study but rather provides a general background that lays the foundation for more focused, in-depth papers. Collectively these papers will address one of the main research questions of the overall MENARA project, namely whether, where and when fragmentation and/or integration dynamics prevail and who are the critical regional actors that shape these dynamics.

To that end, this paper is divided into three main sections that suggest possible research questions relevant to the larger MENARA project. First, it briefly highlights the importance of the long history of external intervention – including, most recently, the seminal US-led 2003 war against Iraq – in helping to shape MENA's evolving regional order; and then examines the major regional players, both Arab and non-Arab, and state and non-state, that have exploited the opportunities afforded them by the Arab uprisings. Second, it considers important regional conflicts (Arab–Israeli, Syrian, Moroccan–Algerian and Sahel) and themes (i.e. refugees and illegal trafficking) that are most relevant for the MENARA project. Finally, the paper ends with a discussion of the role and impact of the key regional cooperation platforms, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the League of Arab States, the Arab Maghreb Union and the African Union, notably in the post-2011 period.

Each of the sections offers a framework that seeks to address the main research questions of the MENARA project, including the identification of: "the difference between a change of order and a change within order"; "the features of the emerging regional order"; the repercussions of the "2011 Arab uprisings"; "the impact of non-state actors" in the region; and "what its regional order looks like and what institutions are in place" (Malmvig et al. 2016: 41, 50, 38).

1. FRAMING REGIONAL DYNAMICS IN THE MENA REGION

One of the main endeavours of MENARA is to understand the "shifting power dynamics" across MENA and to "identify the most salient factors that are likely to shape future regional dynamics" (Colombo and Quero 2016: 105). To do so, this section surveys the main regional powers to understand how, in their quest for survival and hegemony, they are altering the features of the current order in the MENA region (Malmvig et al. 2016: 45) and/or attempting to forge an alternative order. The first two sub-sections (1.1, 1.2) address to what extent the region is undergoing a change of order and whether the current geographical scope of the MENA system is still valid for comprehending the dynamics shaping the regional order. The following sub-section (1.3) addresses Morocco–Algeria relations in order to frame questions for subsequent research within the MENARA project that will attempt to assess the prospects for the stability of the North African–Sahelian system. The final sub-section (1.4) highlights the additional challenge that militarized/violent non-state actors, such as Islamic State (ISIS) and al Qaeda, pose not only to the current regional order, but possibly to the Arab state system as well.

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1.1 EXTERNAL INTERVENTION AND THE REGIONAL ORDER

Diplomatic historian L. Carl Brown (1984: 4) once observed that "the Middle East is the most penetrated international relations sub-system in today's world". Indeed, intervention by powers outside the region, from the UK and France to the USA and now Russia, has been constitutive of the MENA region for well over a century (Makdisi 2017: 103). And yet, as Brown pointed out, if "the Middle East has been more consistently and more thoroughly ensnarled in great power politics than any other part of the non-Western world" (Brown 1984: 3), it is equally important to observe that, at the same time, no external power has ever been able to attain full hegemonic control or successfully order the region and quell the array of national, local and transnational resistances.

This mix of continual intervention and resistance to imposed regional ordering has helped define the dynamics in the MENA region since the early 20th century (Makdisi 2017). With the start of the Arab uprisings, the USA and other external powers have used the domestic and regional divisions as bases to expand their regional influence and leverage, with tools ranging from direct military intervention (such as in Libya, Syria and Iraq) to military support for regional interventions (such as in Yemen and Bahrain) and substantial weapons sales throughout the region. They have also pursued their interests through diplomatic and economic sanctions (such as against Iran) and political support to various states and non-state proxies. Moreover, even as its troop levels in the region have declined, the USA has vastly expanded its bases and use of special forces and militarized drone warfare to maintain its military interventions across the region (Hazbun 2017).

These external powers, however, have failed to take the needed actions to meaningfully support the resolution of violent conflicts in areas such as Palestine, Yemen, Libya and elsewhere. It is asserted that the failure of the Middle East "peace process", for instance, was due in large part to the lack of an even-handed approach by the USA, which continued to support Israeli policies that undermine Palestinian self-determination and security, including, for example, the continuation of settlement building in Palestinian occupied territories and siege of Gaza. Similarly, the question of the Western Sahara has long been on hold, as Morocco has been considered a key partner in the West's security architecture.

While in past decades the USA, and to a lesser degree the European states, held out a (declared) vision for regional stability and order, the current uncertainty and shifting regional political dynamics have set up complex rivalries and diverging interests that have defied such ordering and engendered strong resistances. Similarly, having stated their backing for the reformist, proto-democratic forces of the Arab uprisings during their initial phase, western states have since mostly re-aligned themselves with the reactionary forces of the Gulf-led counter-attack and returned to the "war on terror" paradigm that dominated the post-11 September 2001 period in order to take on the ISIS regional challenge and try to reassert some form of meaningful control (Makdisi 2017).

1.2 REGIONAL POWERS AND RIVALRIES

In the contemporary era, the MENA region has not had a dominant or hegemonic regional power (see Lustick 1997, Katzenstein 2005). Since the defeat in the 1960s of Egypt's effort to unite and order the region under the Arab nationalist leadership of Gamel Abdel Nasser, the leading Arab

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states – most notably Egypt, Syria and Iraq – competed for relative influence, often seeking the support of external and proxy non-state actors in these struggles. Powerful non-Arab regional states, namely Iran, Israel and Turkey, have been active in the region in different periods. Following the 1990–1 Gulf War, and with the end of the Cold War, the USA became the dominant power in the region, attempting to order the region and constrain the autonomy of the once powerful regional Arab states.

As a result of the political turmoil resulting from the US-led invasion of Iraq, but also due to the Arab uprisings, particularly in Egypt and Syria, these once influential regional Arab powers are no longer the major players shaping patterns of change at the regional level. Civil and proxy wars in Iraq and Syria have constrained their ability to project power regionally, leaving them vulnerable to influence from other regional and external states. Meanwhile, Egypt failed to capitalize on the early promise of its popular, democratic uprising to regain its role as a leader within the Arab world. Indeed, soon after the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi was elected president, authoritarianism returned following the 2013 coup led by General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. Sisi swiftly declared the Muslim Brotherhood a "terrorist" group and led a violent campaign to clamp down on civil society as Western states turned a blind eye (Hammer 2017). Egypt, in short, though not devastated in the way Iraq and Syria were, remained largely inward-looking and did nothing to regain its historical standing as an important regional actor in the MENA region.

Meanwhile, the Arab uprisings offered new opportunities for other regional powers to play more proactive roles, be they "progressive" or "reactionary" (Hollis 2012). While Saudi Arabia led the initial "counter-revolution", suppressing the uprising in Bahrain, managing the transition of power in Yemen and backing the coup in Egypt, it also struggled to maintain its regional influence in the face of the expanding regional power of Iran and the rise of regional powers, including Qatar and Turkey. More broadly, a new set of Gulf states became more assertive in seeking to exploit the regional turmoil to advance their interests. Gulf countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) joined in the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya to topple Muammar Gaddafi's regime,[3] while Saudi Arabia and the UAE led the interventions in Bahrain and Yemen, and openly supported Sisi's military coup in Egypt (Öniş 2014: 204).

Overall, however, rather than imposing a unified GCC vision of regional order, the rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia (together with the UAE) produced two diverging efforts to forge a new regional order (Makdisi 2017). In the first few years of the uprisings, Qatar backed the political forces associated with the regional Muslim Brotherhood movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere. In opposition, Saudi Arabia and the UAE countered Qatar's efforts by backing rival Islamist movements as well as conservative and authoritarian political forces.

These post-uprising struggles were mapped onto the ongoing Saudi–Iran geopolitical rivalry (Salloukh 2013). While the rivalry can be traced back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War of the 1980s (when the Arab Gulf states backed Iraq), its intensity was heightened following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq that resulted in the expansion of Iran's influence and

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3   In March 2011, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approved a resolution in favour of a no-fly zone and air strikes against Muammar Gaddafi's forces in Libya. However, the NATO intervention quickly turned into a regime-change operation that many non-western members of the UNSC opposed.

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relative regional power once Iraq no longer served to balance Iran. Highlighting this geopolitical shift, in Lebanon Hizbullah proved its capability as a military force during the 2006 war against Israel and consolidated its regional popularity, to the detriment of US-aligned Saudi Arabia (Valbjørn and Bank 2007). With the drawdown of the US military presence in Iraq and its retreat from regional leadership, Saudi Arabia has moved to assert its own regional interests through its backing of el Sisi in Egypt, support for armed opposition groups in Syria, and its military campaign in Yemen, launched in 2015 following the Houthi fighters' capture of Sana'a and the displacement of Saudi-backed President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Meanwhile, Iran has secured a powerful regional position by successfully backing (so far) its ally Bashar al-Assad in Syria, with the help of Hizbullah, in the face of an opposition backed by the Gulf states, Turkey and, to a limited extent, the USA. For its part, the USA under former president Barack Obama worked to reach a diplomatic deal between Iran and the P5+1 (i.e. the USA, China, Russia, France and the UK and Germany) with regard to the long-standing controversy over Iran's nuclear reactors. This deal, seen by many as one of the most positive diplomatic developments within the disarmament regime for some time, also served to heighten Saudi Arabia's concern about Iran's renewed potential to exert its influence given that sanctions were supposed to be lifted.

While the Arab uprisings and the ensuing regional conflicts have shifted the focus away from Israel, the country seems to have taken advantage of the Saudi–Iranian cleavage to strengthen its ties with the Gulf monarchies, including Saudi Arabia, while enjoying more room to deepen its occupation of Palestinian territories and tighten its siege on Gaza. At the same time, the growing regional influence of Iran and the military assertiveness of Hizbullah have led to more aggressive Israeli actions, including attacks on Hizbullah assets in Syria and constant drone activity over Lebanon.

When the post-uprising regional dynamics is considered, Turkey was in the position of taking an active role in the region. Since the early 2000s, Turkey's foreign policy has enlarged its scope with a greater focus on the Muslim and Arab world, allowing it to "better engage" with the region and begin "a process driven not only by mutual economic interests but also by common identity based on cultural affinity" (Öniş 2014: 207). In particular, relations between Turkey and Syria improved under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party), but this lasted only until the eruption of the Arab uprisings (Islam 2016). While Turkey was able, in the early stages, to attempt mediation in Bahrain, Libya and Iraq, its efforts appear to be unable to achieve viable results in Syria and Yemen (Akpınar 2015: 256). By November 2011 Syria–Turkey tensions had increased to such an extent that Turkey openly expressed its support for the opposition forces in Syria (Arsu 2011).

To that end, the evolution of the Arab uprisings "into a traumatic experience for regional and global order overturned Turkish designs for a leading role in the MENA region" (Yorulmazlar and Turhan 2015: 345), as it had to readjust its position in line with developments. This is not to suggest that Turkey decided to become absent; instead it has played a mediating role in the Gulf in the wake of the Qatari–Gulf crisis, while continued to stay engaged in the Syrian conflict.

The efforts by multiple regional and global powers to assert their interests in the context of the post-uprisings Arab world has led to increased disarray in the region, including the fragmentation of Syria and Yemen, and massive human suffering as a consequence of the conflicts there. Another consequence is that this disarray has opened up new opportunities for external intervention in the region, as seen in the NATO campaign in Libya, Russian intervention in support of the regime in

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Syria, and a US-led anti-ISIS military coalition force in both Syria and Iraq during 2016 and 2017.

1.3 MOROCCO–ALGERIA RELATIONS: REGIONAL TURMOIL

Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, the three main countries lying within the Maghreb region, are linked by strong economic and political ties; cultural and linguistic similarities; and a shared history of French colonialism, whose impact remains strong. Indeed, the colonization of North Africa brought "a long-lasting impact on state formation and borders, which, in turn, affected the regional post-independences era" (Kamel et al. 2016: 14).

While much of the international coverage on the Maghreb has focused on the "new threats" that the region faces, such as attacks by Islamic extremists, civil conflict and state collapse, its stability also continues to be undermined by more traditional but equally threatening challenges on the inter-state level. The most intractable of these is the simmering geopolitical tension pitting Morocco against Algeria. From a historical perspective, despite being united against French colonialism in the past, the two countries have long been in a dispute over Western Sahara, in which Morocco's claims to the region are challenged by the Algeria-backed Polisario Front (Mundy 2010). The existing territorial rivalry, however, has evolved into "a steep desire for influence and control" within the Maghreb, for which each is struggling to attract allies from regional organizations while trying to give "a greater appearance of leadership and authority" (Jacobs 2012: 32). For example, Morocco's reintegration to the African Union earlier this year will bring the issue back to the table and be a "test" of their ability to produce new strategies and offer a fresh perspective on this contentious issue (Hasnaoui 2017: 1-3). Back in 1984, Morocco departed from the pan-African body as a protest over the participation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) proclaimed by the Polisario Front.

Morocco, for its part, depends on close diplomatic relations with its GCC Arab allies as well as western allies such as the USA and France. In 2012, Morocco signed a strategic partnership with the GCC countries. This agreement aims to strengthen economic ties between Morocco and the GCC, as well as to reinforce security and military cooperation between them. In the same year, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait agreed to provide Morocco with aid worth 5 billion dollars to help the country boost its infrastructure and strengthen its economy and its tourism sector (Bennis 2015). On its side, Rabat has participated in the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen and even lost an F-16 jet to Houthi rebel fire (El Yaakoubi 2015). On the western side, the relationship between the USA and Morocco has revolved around economic cooperation since 2004. Morocco's cooperation proved to be vital to the US war on terror. Moroccan–US intelligence collaboration appears to be active on very senior levels (Sakthivel 2016).

On the other side, Algeria appears to be pursuing its own interests to gain advantage over Morocco at regional and international levels, including using the Polisario Front "as a means to weaken Morocco's presence" as well as replacing Morocco in energy trading by influencing other countries in the region (Jacobs 2012: 59). In the midst of this turmoil, however, the two countries share common security concerns that are forcing them to cooperate on issues such as counterterrorism. In 2016, Morocco and Algeria announced a bilateral security agreement, notably against ISIS (Asharq Al-Awsat 2016). To that end, not only the Western Sahara conflict but also the patterns of

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rivalry for leadership as well as the regional dynamics shaping the actions of both countries, as the two most important actors in North Africa, could be put forward as main research focal points under this section.

1.4 KEY NON-STATE ACTORS AND THE RISE OF ISIS

While many discussions of the so-called "end of Sykes–Picot" debate proclaim the end of the Arab state order (Valbjørn 2015), it is important to recognize that especially since 2003 the dynamics of the region have been complicated by the rise of diverse non-state and sub-state actors, as well as what can be referred to as "hybrid" actors. Hybrid actors can be defined as those that are not fully or formally sovereign but increasingly wield power and control territory (Hazbun 2017). Together these non-state and hybrid actors impact the interests and actions of state actors in the Middle East and beyond. While the region witnessed the rise of actors such as Hizbullah and Hamas prior to 2003, the US-led invasion of Iraq and the resulting collapse of the Iraqi state mobilized nationalist insurgencies, sectarian militias and jihadist forces.

The erosion and fragmentation of state authority is driven by several forces, including the inability of global and state systems of governance to manage the expanding volume and complexity of transnational flows and networks; state–society dynamics within each territory (such as the failure of neo-liberal economic policies, various uprisings and insurgencies); and new forms of regional and external intervention that seek to control and exploit these new dynamics. As Gregory Gause (2014: 1) explains, "It is the weakening of Arab states […] that has created the battlefields of the new Middle East cold war." This endemic societal insecurity, made worse by foreign intervention, has provided the basis for the rise of non-state and hybrid actors seeking to carve out their own spaces of sovereignty and security. Moreover, as seen most notably in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, rival regional and external powers have sought to expand their political influence and control by backing local non-state and hybrid actors.

Of all the new and recently reorganized non-state and hybrid actors to emerge since the start of the Arab uprisings, much of the attention has been devoted to the self-defined Islamic State (hereinafter referred to as ISIS), which exploded onto the scene in the early phase of the Syrian uprising. In its efforts to erase the borders, including those between Syria and northern Lebanon, ISIS played an important role in sidetracking the Arab uprisings and attracting direct international intervention as of 2015. The rise of ISIS, which split off from al Qaeda in Iraq, has not been confined to Iraq and Syria. ISIS militants have exploited the demise of state structures to spread to Libya, Egypt, the Maghreb and the Gulf states. It is, moreover, important to note that the competitive dynamics between radical groups, principally those between ISIS and al Qaeda, in the Middle East directly impact their affiliates in North Africa, where we observe similar patterns including the splitting of allegiances along ISIS–al Qaeda lines, infighting, reproduction of speeches and practices, and so forth.

While by late 2017, the international coalitions and national defense forces had largely defeated ISIS forces and liberated the main occupied cities, villages and towns across Syria and Iraq – including their self-declared capitals in Raqqa and Mosul respectively – there remains much uncertainty about how ISIS and similar groups will metamorphize in the coming months and years.

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2. THE DIMENSIONS OF REGIONAL CONFLICTS

This section of the paper reviews key ongoing regional conflicts in the MENA region (as identified by the larger MENARA project) under three sub-sections, namely: the Arab–Israeli conflict, the conflict in Syria and that of the Maghreb–Sahel security continuum. The long-standing Arab–Israeli conflict is discussed in the first sub-section (2.1) as a regional and international fault line that generates regional impacts, as addressed in other phases of the project. Similarly, the Syria conflict, discussed in the second sub-section (2.2), is the product of "the quest for hegemony among regional powers in the conflicts" (Colombo and Quero 2016: 105) and has impacts far beyond the borders of Syria. It is important to point out here that the vital case of Iraq permeates much of the post-uprisings Middle East and North Africa and is also addressed within the non-state actors section. The last sub-section (2.3) explores the growing security interdependence between the Maghreb and Sahel countries, suggesting a possible research question to address whether traditional conceptualizations of the region and its geographical limits are still in place and whether they might be challenged in the future.

2.1 THE ARAB–ISRAELI CONFLICT

Over the past century, there is no doubt that the Arab–Israeli conflict – and in particular the question of Palestine – has been the major issue of regional concern across the Middle East. Despite overwhelming opposition among the local population, the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the 1947 UN General Assembly partition plan legitimized Zionist claims to a part of the region, which ripped Palestine from the heart of the Arab world, problematized the Levant's tradition of communal coexistence and created the first mass refugee crisis in the Arab region (Al Husseini 2017). Throughout the Cold War, western policy in the Middle East focused on containing the forces of Arab nationalism in favour of protecting Israeli interests and securing control over oil resources and infrastructure.

The 1967 Arab–Israeli war led to a decisive Israeli victory, and Egypt under Anwar Sadat effectively removed itself from the Arab–Israeli conflict after it signed the 1978 Camp David Accords with Israel, thereafter aligning itself with US regional interests at the expense its long-standing regional influence. Emboldened, Israel maintained its occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and the Syrian Golan Heights, and invaded Lebanon in 1978 and then again, more dramatically, in 1982, where it remained for two decades. This, in turn, led to a progressively more effective Lebanese resistance movement composed of communists, nationalists and Islamists influenced by the Iranian Revolution. The latter movement eventually coalesced into Hizbullah, which has claimed various successes in defending against Israeli military attacks, though at great expense to Lebanon as a whole.

Meanwhile, western projects to promote state-building practices during the 1990s led to the conclusion of the secret Oslo negotiations between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel. Oslo was, in principle, an "interim" agreement for a term of six years, but was repeatedly violated by Israel at each stage of negotiation as illegal settlements expanded at a rapid pace. Indeed, the legal status of the Oslo agreement is controversial as it was never registered with the United Nations and thus "in case of conflict, the obligations of Israel under the [UN] Charter

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would prevail over any other agreement" (Gowlland-Debbas 2011: 523). Nevertheless, Oslo turned into what came to be known as the American-mediated "Middle East peace process", eventually recognized as a clear failure. Its core idea – the "two-state solution" – was that the newly created Palestinian Authority (PA) would eventually negotiate a demilitarized Palestinian state in return for formal recognition of Israel.

The 2002 Arab Peace Plan, promulgated during the Arab League's meeting in Beirut (though not signed by Lebanon itself), sought to extend this formula in return for formal normalization with Arab states. However, the Oslo process repeatedly failed as Israel deepened its occupation infrastructure, added successive security conditions for the increasingly discredited PA to meet, approved rapidly expanding Jewish settlements in occupied Palestinian territories and laid siege to Gaza. The rise of Hamas and its rivalry with Fatah, particularly after Hamas's victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections, led to the fragmentation of Palestinian leadership – which also included smaller factions and notable individuals – that has continued to the present day and added to the worsening humanitarian situation among ordinary Palestinians, already dire as a result of Israeli occupation.

With the rise of Iran as an essential regional player in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War and the subsequent destruction of the Iraqi state, the dynamic has changed, especially regarding the GCC's stance towards Tehran, which began to see Iran as the main threat to the region (Al-Asimi 2015). Iran for its part has worked hard to keep in place a "resistance axis" that includes Hizbullah and Syria under the Assad regime to counter what they see as the threat of an Israeli–Saudi–US regional ordering (Barnes-Dacey and Levy 2013: 7, Mason 2015, Makdisi 2017).

Within the given historical context and the larger scope of the MENARA project, which emphasizes looking beyond the regional Arab order to include non-Arab states, forthcoming individual papers will offer in-depth analysis of this issue from a variety of perspectives.[4] On the one hand, the continued importance of the Arab–Israeli conflict will be discussed in terms of its regional impact (including in Lebanon and Syria) , while the project will also take a much closer look at the Israeli–Palestinian context from the other side, and in particular the USA and European Union policy towards this conflict. Despite repeated attempts by policy-makers and scholars in the West to declare the Arab–Israeli conflict and the question of Palestine irrelevant given the larger Iranian–Saudi cold war, there is no doubt that it remains important and that analysis of its dynamics is crucial.

2.2 THE SYRIA CONFLICT

The changes in the geopolitical situation in the Middle East have become more profound with the civil war in Syria. As a humanitarian tragedy entering its sixth year, with millions of refugees scattered across several countries, the Syrian crisis is not merely a domestic conflict but "goes well beyond its own borders, affecting [...] the political, economic and security conditions of the whole region" (Malmvig 2013: 31).

On the other side, the strategic concerns and ambitions of all actors involved in the Syrian war has also made the conflict much "harder to unravel" (Barnes-Dacey and Levy 2013: 10). For

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4   On Arab norms and institutions, see the contribution by Barnett (1998).

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instance, Saudi Arabia and Qatar has supported different elements of the opposition, with the aim to "develop proxies that will give them the ascendancy in a potential post-Assad Syria" (Barnes-Dacey and Levy 2013: 10).

For its part, Turkey has experienced serious political, security, economic and humanitarian consequences as a result of the conflict. It has faced the burden of hosting more than three million refugees, which is discussed in the paper's following sections. Furthermore, the terror groups active on Turkey-Syria border still pose a major concern, and the fight against them is a matter of national interest for Turkey.

From an economic perspective, the effects of the Syrian conflict have been disastrous not only (obviously) within these territories but extending to the region's populations. In Jordan, for instance, the Syrian conflict (together with the ongoing conflict in Iraq) caused economic growth beginning in 2013 to slow by around 1 percentage point (Rother 2016: 9). As the International Monetary Fund (IMF) further reports, the inflation increased to 4.6 percent in 2014, from 3.4 percent in 2013, driven by rents, reflecting the high demand from the big refugee population and the limited supply response. This can be noted in the case of the Mafraq governorate, were rents increased by 68 percent in two years, compared with an increase of 6 percent in Amman. Similar dynamics were seen in Lebanon, where GDP growth slowed down to 2.5 percent in 2013 from an average of 9 percent between 2007 to 2010. The prices of goods and rents also increased exponentially in certain areas (Rother 2016: 9).

In the given context, MENARA will try to answer the question of how the 2011 Arab uprisings, leading to the Syrian civil war, have transformed the regional order and dynamics in the MENA region while shedding light on the quest for hegemony in Syria. It should be noted that a specific focus on Syria could be justified given its significant impact on the recent post-Arab uprisings period, comparable to the crucial impact of Iraq following the post-2003 US invasion and dismantling of the state (which thus undergirds the very context of the uprisings, as the paper has explored above). By doing so, it would be further possible to concentrate on the role of the above-mentioned regional actors in shaping the course of the war, and subsequently how the war itself re-shaped the regional (including non-state) actors.

2.3 THE MAGHREB–SAHEL (IN)SECURITY CONTINUUM

When discussing the shifts in the political environment and security situation after the Arab uprisings, the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean (i.e. Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya) are no exception. The states in the Maghreb and the Sahel increasingly share common security concerns.

In the Sahel, some of the principal factors paving the way for conflict escalation are "low legitimacy of the postcolonial states", "long-term exploiting of the natural resources", "threatening jihadi presence" and "undocumented labor migration" (Boserup et al. 2015: 2). In the Maghreb, "authoritarian regime structures" and "the long-term economic and bureaucratic underperformance" (Boserup et al. 2015: 2) come to the fore, offering favourable ground for security threats.

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As noted by Tham Lindell and Mattson (2014: 19), certain elements such as "tradition of state neglect" and "constant poverty" have led to the establishment of armed Islamist groups in the Sahel. It is further argued that "the rise of violent militancy in the Sahel has its roots in the armed Islamist insurgency" (Boukhars 2016) which first revealed itself in 1992, when the military-controlled government cancelled Algeria's first multi-party parliamentary elections, in which Islamists were set to take power.

It is also important to highlight the means by which transnational organized crime and extremists have been fuelled in Mali and the Sahel region. One of the main factors is "the geographical aspect" (Tham Lindell and Mattson 2014: 22). For instance, northern Mali has a low population density with vast desert areas, adding to its long-standing challenges. "This, in combination with lack of resources, makes control over the territory and borders virtually impossible outside of the few urban hubs of the area" (Tham Lindell and Mattson 2014: 22).

In addition, the visible terrorist contamination in this region has been more pronounced with the re-emergence of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the appearance of ISIS. In recent years, AQIM militias have carried out operations across northern Mauritania, Mali, Niger and southern Algeria. As the least developed and populated country in the Maghreb, and with its "poorly equipped security forces", Mauritania is "a target of choice" for AQIM operations (Roussellier 2011: 8). However, it should be noted that the efforts to counter AQIM's "influence in both the Maghreb and the Sahel are fragmented because of the inability of neighbors to forge collaborative partnerships" (Ammour 2012a: 1).

It would not be wrong to claim that the security situation in the Sahel and the Maghreb has deteriorated since the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. When authoritarian rule crumbled, the fall of Gaddafi brought a "psychological shock among the numerous communities remaining loyal to [him]" (Ammour 2012b: 128) and the country became a "battleground for competing Arab and Middle Eastern great powers" (Boserup et al. 2015: 2). Furthermore, the increasing presence of extremists and migrants directly impacts security in the country (Wehrey 2017).

3. THE REGIONAL AGENDA AND COOPERATION PLATFORMS

The final section of this paper deals with regional issues and cooperation platforms in the light of three issues. The first sub-section (3.1) explores the refugee issue in the MENA region. It addresses the intensifying forced migrations from and within this region, providing background for the subsequent research paper that will examine how the refugee and migration flows are reshaping the region's ethno-sectarian map and affecting social cohesion in host countries in the region and the surrounding areas.

The second sub-section (3.2) provides a brief overview of illegal trafficking in the region, for which a specific case study will delve into human trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation along with drug trafficking and arms trafficking, which remains a major security problem.

In line with one of MENARA's objectives, "elucidating which drivers or constellations of drivers push towards fragmentation or integration dynamics in this region" (Malmvig et al. 2016: 42), the

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last sub-section (3.3) offers a short review of regional cooperation platforms that are relevant to this discussion. Examining the Arab League, the GCC and the Arab Maghreb Union, this analysis will support the subsequent case study on the same subject, which will try to determine whether these organizations have contributed to greater integration or further fragmentation of the MENA region, and whether the post-Arab uprising context has opened up new opportunities for these organizations, as well as whether or not they have been utilized. It will also look at the emergence of informal patterns of cooperation beyond these organizations.

3.1 THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Often described as one of the worst humanitarian crises since the Second World War, the recently generated refugee flows in the MENA region are an acute "outcome" as well as a "cause" of the fragmentation in the region and the crumbling domestic and regional order (Dalay 2017). With the wars in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen accompanied by the ascendancy of violent non-state actors such as ISIS, refugees fleeing from the major conflict areas have produced a "clash of civilizations discourse" (Morillas et al. 2016: 76), mainly in Europe, and made it necessary to come up with a functioning burden-sharing mechanism not only in neighbouring host countries but also in European states, to which they are fleeing via a limited number of routes.

Certainly, the security flaws in the MENA region, a major consequence of the Arab uprisings, have increased human mobility to an unprecedented degree. According to data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, there were over 34 million international migrants, including registered refugees, in the MENA region in 2015 (IOM 2016).

The situation takes a more severe form in countries such as Libya and Syria. According to data from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2017: 2), the situation in Libya "remains volatile", with 226,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), almost 270,000 returnees and an estimated 42,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in need of protection and humanitarian assistance. Libya represents another challenge as it serves as the gateway for the majority of refugees trying to reach Europe, often via Greece. In 2015, 87 percent of the 900,000 migrants entering Europe did so through Greece (Stephen 2016).

According to UNHCR data (2016), the number of refugees suffering from poverty is also increasing as they have exhausted their savings. "In Lebanon, the average debt held by refugee households increased by 16.5 per cent during the first quarter of 2016 and in Jordan, 90 per cent of Syrian refugees surveyed are now living below the poverty line" (UNHCR 2016: 1).

Further data from the UNHCR (2017: 1) states that more than 5.1 million people have fled Syria since 2011 and sought shelter in neighbouring countries including Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan.[5] Lebanon and Turkey especially are experiencing increasing pressure from the presence of millions of Syrian refugees. Based on recent figures provided by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), for example, the number of Syrian refugees living in either camps or urban centres in Turkey has reached over 3 million, making it the host country with the largest refugee

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5   See regularly updated data in UNHCR website: *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, http://data.unhcr.org/
syrianrefugees/regional.php.

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population in the world (AFAD 2016).[6] In Lebanon, the official number of Syrian refugees exceeded one million[7] and unofficial estimates put the number of Syrians in the country between one and a half and two million, thus comprising nearly a third of Lebanon's population and adding a huge burden on Lebanon's resources. The unresolved Palestine question, moreover, means that an estimated 300,000 Palestinian refugees continue to reside in Lebanon (HRW 2017).

Initial projections regarding the number of refugees taking shelter in Turkey were smaller, and their length of stay was predicted to be limited; however, with the ongoing war and the disagreements over migration policies among European nations, a large number of the refugees have entered their sixth year of stay. Once it became clear that Syrians in Turkey were not just temporary "guests", the need for broader adaptation to the growing refugee crisis became apparent. In order to "develop and build institutional and infrastructural capacities" as a response to "permanent refugees", Turkey's government has initiated "long-term integration" policies (Saferworld et al. 2016: 1) to meet their social, economic and educational needs.[8] Overall, then, the Syrian refugee situation in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey will be further studied in the subsequent case study.

3.2 ILLEGAL TRAFFICKING AND WEAPONS FLOWS IN THE MENA REGION

The challenging environment of the MENA region, which has been prone to internal political instability since the mid-20th century, manifests itself in different forms of exploitation, requiring a thorough examination of how armed violence and the severe deterioration of security have transformed the dynamics of illegal trafficking in the region. With its "exceptionally border-dense" nature, and states' lack of effective "robust export control and border security systems" as well as "law enforcement institutions" (NTI 2017), illegal trafficking has always been a serious problem in the MENA region. However, the ongoing armed conflicts in several heavily militarized states is facilitating even more trafficking in arms and ammunition, as well as acute cases of human trafficking, weapons flows and drug trafficking, all of which will be addressed by an individual paper as part of the MENARA project.

The region is suffering an alarming level of human trafficking. The Global Slavery Index suggests that "there is a strong statistical link between high levels of instability within a country and an increase in that population's vulnerability to modern slavery" (Walk Free Foundation 2016). In this light it is possible to identify a "trifold effect" of the mass refugee influx, comprising "(a) increased competition for low-paying jobs and employment in the informal economy; (b) increased incidences of all forms of modern slavery such as child labour, forced begging and forced early marriage; and (c) "reduced capacity of State actors to respond to trafficking cases" (McCormack et al. 2015: 10).

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6   The official number of registered Syrian refugees in Turkey as of March 2017 was 2,957,454 according to the Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management. See: "Nearly 3 Million Syrians Registered in Turkey: Interior Ministry", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 16 March 2017, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/nearly-3-million-syrians-registered-in-turkey-interior-ministry--110879.

7   Lebanon hosts around 1.1 million Syrian refugees registered by the UNHCR. See regularly updated data on UNHCR website: *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122.

8   To see more about the support programmes targeting Syrian refugees in Turkey, please refer to AFAD website: *Turkey's Response to Syrian Crises*, updated August 2017, https://www.afad.gov.tr/en/2601.

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According to 2016 data from the Global Slavery Index, there are nearly 3 million enslaved people in the region. In addition to instances where forced labour and commercial sexual exploitation are observed, the victims are also to be found among forced recruits in state and non-state armed groups, a number which has risen notably following the escalation of conflicts in the region (Walk Free Foundation 2016).

There is also the crucial matter of weapons sales and trafficking. Scholars have long warned about the clear contradiction between the post-Cold War rhetoric of arms transfer restraint, on the one hand, and the reality of business as usual in the arms trade, on the other hand (Hartung 1992: 222-5, Hindawi 2017). This contradiction is most glaring in the MENA region, where countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are regularly among the biggest importers of arms globally, the vast majority of which come from western sources. Israel and Egypt are, by far, the two single largest recipients of US military aid. Former US president Obama, moreover, approved the sale of more US weapons (to the tune of nearly 200 billion dollars) than any other president since the Second World War, roughly 60 percent of which went to the MENA region and especially to Saudi Arabia – which tripled its net weapons imports between 2011 and 2016 (SIPRI 2017, Fleurant et al. 2017), in the midst of bloody wars in Yemen and Syria. More recently, the USA and Saudi Arabia agreed an arms deal worth almost 110 billion dollars during US President Donald Trump's visit to the country in May, described as a "package of defense equipment and services [that] supports the long-term security of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region" in a White House (2017) post.

For its part, Iraq has become a major recipient of small arms and light weapons since the US attacks in 2003, with western arms transfers further doubling after the emergence of ISIS in 2014 (Hindawi 2017). Such massive weapons flows have, in turn, fed into the burgeoning traffic in illicit and black-market flows: the vast majority of the weapons inherited by ISIS, for instance, were previously officially sold to the Iraqi state, while they obtained others from western-funded Syrian rebel groups, just as al Qaeda had originally obtained most of its weapons during earlier phases. There are also over 500 million dollar worth of weapons "missing" in Yemen, many of which are in the hands of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (Hartung 2015).

Finally, for drug trafficking, the region "has become busier as a trade route for drug barons keen to link South American coca terraces to European customers, since consumption of cocaine in the United States began to fall in the 1990s" (Economist 2013). There is no doubt that the growing drugs trade is putting increasing pressure on governments in the region. It is further reported that Algeria seized 73 tons of cannabis in 2012 and then 50 tons in the first half of 2013 (Economist 2013). "That is partly the result of a crackdown by authorities, but drug networks have proliferated throughout the country and traders have refined their methods thanks to closer collaboration with international criminals" (Economist 2013). On the other side, cocaine traffickers "take advantage, or consist, of local groups with great experience of traversing the desert, and exploit technology such as GPS and satellite phones to coordinate and diversify their routes" (Tham Lindell and Mattson 2014: 22).

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3.3 REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND COOPERATION DYNAMICS

At the regional level, MENARA attempts to examine the drivers of "integration" through a robust analysis of regional cooperation initiatives (Malmvig et al. 2016: 42) such as the GCC, the League of Arab States, the African Union and the Arab Maghreb Union, all of which play a vital role in the definition of regional issues as decision-making bodies. With the crises that have erupted in Libya, Yemen and Syria, however, it would be interesting to look at the achievements of these initiatives and the challenges they have faced in order to understand the factors that either enable or hinder the promotion of regional integration. This perspective might also allow us to see to what extent these organizations have proven themselves as actors in the region.

Starting with the recent Qatar crisis, the rift between Qatar and certain GCC member states (i.e. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain) has not yet been resolved.[9] Indeed, the GCC is no stranger to tension and competition between its members, and the member states have been criticized for their lack of cooperation "vis-à-vis the region's shifting political makeup" (Elmeshad 2017). In 2014, three GCC member states – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE – withdrew their ambassadors from the country and introduced targeted sanctions over Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

To that end, understanding the implications of the ongoing rift, which will be addressed in MENARA, could be crucial in order to see its possible outcomes in terms of regional security. It has been argued that a deepening Qatar crisis would make the GCC "much weaker and fragmented against imminent security challenges" (Köse and Ulutaş 2017: 2), more specifically "distracting" the Council from the fight against ISIS and from exerting greater effort to find a diplomatic resolution to the Syrian war (Coates Ulrichsen 2017).

With twenty-two Middle Eastern and African member countries, the League of Arab States is no less fragmented. Despite a number of efforts, the effectiveness of the League has been severely tested over several issues, not limited to the disputes and historical rivalries among the member states, leading to weak progress in policy implementation but also more recent developments such as the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the involvement of great powers in the Syrian conflict, and the subsequent political and humanitarian consequences of the Arab uprisings (Bani Nasur et al. 2017: 39). Furthermore, the League took limited positive steps in the wake of the Arab uprisings, including its support for a NATO-led no-fly zone to topple former Libyan leader Gaddafi as well as its call for Assad to step down in the early phases of the Syrian crisis (Ibrahim 2016: 28). Its failure to play a decisive role during this period drew sharp criticism and raised questions about the League's "ability" and "legitimacy" in domestic conflicts as a regional organization (Ibrahim 2016: 24). That being said, the democratic demands voiced in the uprisings, which were mostly considered "unconventional" by the member states run by autocratic regimes, have made clear the need for institutional reform within the organization (Bani Nasur et al. 2017: 41). Furthermore, different member states "effectively [support] different sides [in the Syrian civil war …] and the body [also] remains divided between those who fear Iran and those with more benign views of it, namely, Lebanon and Iraq" (Bröning 2014).

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9   See Al Jazeera website: *Qatar-Gulf Crisis: All the Latest Updates*, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/qatar-diplomatic-crisis-latest-updates-170605105550769.html.

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Moving on to the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), which is described as "the [Maghreb] region's first real attempt at achieving economic integration", certain factors such as the Western Sahara dispute as well as "the lack in harmonization of financial and economic policy" among Union members (i.e. Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) come to the fore as the main handicaps to its progress (Ben Hassine 2015). In fact, the AMU set out to achieve its ambition of establishing a "common identity", using "the region's surplus to support social stability" and introducing "a surplus of power to fortify [...] national security" (Choucair 2013). However, most of the Union's efforts have failed, for which the Western Sahara conflict is put forth as "the biggest impediment" that the Union has faced (Choucair 2013).

One salient development in the MENA region is that multilateral diplomatic efforts have tended to take place outside of regional organizations. Ad hoc coalitions of countries are being formed on issues such as the war in Yemen and the blockade against Qatar. MENARA will investigate whether this represents a new form of regionalization or, on the contrary, an additional threat to regional integration.

To this end, a thorough analysis of these existing regional initiatives would pave the way to understanding cooperation dynamics in the MENA region, with a particular focus on conceptualizing the dichotomy of integration and fragmentation (Colombo and Quero 2016: 102) among the states in the region.

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Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

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