

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



REGIONAL DYNAMICS IN THE MENA REGION

The MENARA Project studies the geopolitical order in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), identifies the driving forces behind it, sheds light on bottom-up dynamics and assesses the implications of these processes on the EU and its policies towards the region. This Policy Brief aims to present the findings of the MENARA research that has mapped the regional dynamics, actors and issues that shape the regional order in the light of the geopolitical shifts that are under way.

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INTRODUCTION

The political and economic outlook for much of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is characterized by change and uncertainty as a result of the transformative impact of major events, particularly in the period since 2011, on the workings of its regional system. In viewing these transformations in the dynamics of a region comprising a non-homogeneous set of countries, it is difficult to identify a “dominant structural logic” in the emerging “new” order, as argued in previous publications (Kausch 2014: 2).

This policy brief focuses in particular on regional dynamics and introduces the findings of the research to answer one central research question: “where and when fragmentation and/or integration dynamics prevail and who are the critical regional actors that shape these dynamics” (Makdisi et al. 2017: 3). To this end, the research comprises robust case studies that address three main thematic components: regional dynamics, regional conflicts and regional issues and cooperation platforms. Under these broad categories, the research investigated the major regional actors (state and non-state); regional conflicts (Israeli–Palestinian, Syrian, Moroccan–Algerian and Sahel); issues (refugees and illegal trafficking); and cooperation platforms (i.e. the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab Maghreb Union, the African Union).

The sections below provide summaries of the main conclusions of each research component and conclude with regional implications and main takeaways, aiming overall to present an up-to-date assessment of “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: 50, 38, 41).

Regional Dynamics

The regional system in the MENA has been in flux since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 in the name of fighting terrorism, and the region has felt keenly the effects of the war and the insecurity that has dominated in its aftermath. These consequences contributed to the failure of attempts to establish a regional order and escalated the struggle for power, later combined with the Arab uprisings and civil wars. This competition for power has further catalysed the regional countries to reshape the norms of the already intricate geopolitical order in the MENA in the face of immediate threats at the national and regional level and, at the same time, to further their own interests (Hazbun 2018).

The unpredictable and volatile nature of power relationships in the MENA is comparatively more evident in the Middle East, where weak states (Syria, Yemen, Iraq) have become a space for the meddling of regional and global actors (and their proxies). Currently there is no regional state in the Middle East with the capacity or recognized regional authority to take the lead in establishing a new order. Instead, regional states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have promoted divergent regional policies that have led to shifting political alliances, as seen in efforts to diminish the regional leverage of other players, for example, in the Saudi–Iranian and Saudi–UAE–Qatar cases; or in policies designed to foster regional and domestic stability from a securitized standpoint, as seen with Turkey’s military move in Syria.

In the North African context, Algeria and Morocco have always been at odds over their quest for sub-regional hegemony. Nevertheless, despite the history of difficult relations between Morocco and Algeria, mainly over the Saharan issue, each side has made efforts to avoid militarizing the dispute (Lounnas and Messari 2018). The patterns of cooperation on the one hand, and the recurrent tensions on the other, which have delayed the stabilization of the sub-regional system in North Africa, makes the Algerian–Moroccan rivalry a critical driver of the amity/enmity relations. The increased cooperation in security and the fight against terrorism, and Morocco’s re-joining of the African Union, are some visible examples in that sense. Still, the divergences between Morocco and Algeria appear to have further fragmented the region, resulting in a sort of “bipolarity” that should be noted.

The reordering of the MENA regional system has not been limited to state structures. The fragmentation in the regional system, in particular the North African Sahel area, has facilitated the ability of jihadi organizations to deploy themselves in “ungoverned” territories (Lounnas 2018a). Weak state structures in countries such as Libya, Mali and Niger have fostered the progressive expansion of violent non-state actors, while states with stronger state apparatuses, such as Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, have managed to reduce the terrorist threat to a certain extent. In this sense, it is suggested that the resilience of these organizations is affected both by their own strength and by the weakness of their opponents.

Another distinct finding points to the dissimilarities between the Middle Eastern and the North African Sahelian jihadi organizations, indicating that infighting between these violent armed actors is comparatively more substantial in the Middle East, involving larger-scale violence against civilians.

Regional Conflicts

Described as the longest conflict since the Second World War, the Israeli–Palestinian–Arab conflict will remain a core issue shaping the regional order; however, as put forward by Kamel and Dessì (2018), this conflict is no longer seen as the principal factor behind the growing instability and radicalization in the region. Still, addressing the conflict in its proper historical and contemporary context remains a fundamental precondition for the emergence of a more stable and prosperous Middle East (Kamel and Dessì 2018, Makdisi 2018b).

Next, the protracted instability and radical militancy in Libya continue to have repercussions on a number of levels, the most fragile of which is the fragmented security sphere in the territory, with local control split between groups formed along regional, tribal and ideological lines. The circulation of weapons and militants in Libya appears to be a top concern for the regional and international community for the time being; yet the emerging trends in the country draw attention to thriving illegal cross-border economic activities, in particular the increase in human trafficking and alleged illegal inward migration into southern Libya (Lounnas 2018b).

Given Libya's geographic centrality in the North African region, its destabilization has in turn become a critical factor for the national security of neighbouring countries – that is, Tunisia, Algeria and states in the Sahel. Tunisia and Algeria at least have been able to defend against the dangers emanating from Libya, but the fragility of the states in the Sahel makes it much harder for them to control their borders and deflect the resilient jihadist threat (Lounnas 2018b).

The Syrian civil war has evolved into a striking regional power play in the Middle East, underpinned by a complex pattern of alliances and enmities. In its early stages, the conflict drew in Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah in support of the Assad regime, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in support of the rebels at the regional level. Discussing the implications of the Syrian war on the regional order, it is suggested that in the light of developments on the ground and taking a pragmatic approach, regional and global powers as well as local state and non-state actors have reconfigured their roles and policies, and thereby various actors changed alliances during the conflict (Khouri 2018). On the other hand, the war has seen Russia's military and economic leverage deepen in Syria, and consequently across the region, and the alteration of friendship–hostility configurations between Russia, Turkey, Iran and the United States.

Considering the geostrategic transformation in Syria and the rest of the Middle East, it is important to note that it would be difficult to determine “which forces will persist, which ones might fade away or what combination of local states, foreign powers and non-state actors [...] might shape the future regional orders that materialize” (Khouri 2018: 3). It is further argued that the weak response of the international community to human suffering and human rights violations, and its de facto acceptance of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's tenure, will serve to bolster the survival of authoritarian regimes in the region.

Regional Issues and Cooperation Platforms

Since regional instability and tensions will prevail in the region's foreseeable future, so too will the issue of refugees. The MENA region is indeed not a stranger to waves of displacement and refugee flows, having witnessed them throughout its contemporary history as a result of conflicts and transitions. What is striking, however, is the changing conflict dynamics, which in turn demand durable and practical policies to address refugee movements such as those resulting from the Syrian war (Makdisi 2018a, Khallaf 2018). In that sense, Turkey has set a good example by shifting its policy from short-term humanitarian protection to long-term integration planning through education, employment and civil society channels. Similarly, the intensified refugee flow from Syria has led host countries – including Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, respectively the three states with the largest numbers of Syrian refugees – to come up with clear national strategies on refugee management and protection.

The fragility of the MENA region has further contributed to the thriving of illegal criminal activities, most specifically the trafficking of drugs, weapons and human beings. The social and economic deterioration and the security chaos in the region have facilitated the illegal mobility of sub-Saharan migrants from Libya and Tunisia, later followed by the mass flow of Syrians fleeing the war. In the context of illegal trafficking within the region as well as from the eastern (Morocco) to the northern (Spain) shores of the Mediterranean, the worrying trend of vulnerable migrants, notably women and children, being abused is said to be on the increase (Lahlou 2018). It is claimed that sub-Saharan women are exploited as sexual workers by human trafficking networks (Lahlou 2018). Domestic workers, mainly from Senegal and the Philippines, have been also subjected to illegal trafficking by force.

Jihadi groups active in the region introduce another dimension to the issue, which is that they benefit from human trafficking, although not directly, through the use of illegal networks (i.e. local mafias) for finance (Lounnas 2018c). Similarly, the connections between traffickers and these violent groups allow them to acquire the weaponry that sustains their existence. It should be noted that since the collapse of Libya in 2011 and the looting of the Libyan army stocks, southern Libya has become an open black market of weapons trafficking in the region.

Finally, in terms of regional cooperation organizations, the initial expectations that MENA platforms such as the Arab League or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) would assume a greater role in fostering regional cooperation in the post-Arab uprising period quickly faded along with their short-lived activism. The dynamics of regional fragmentation, including intra-regional rivalries after 2011, have subsequently impeded the long-term efficacy of regional cooperation organizations.

The issue of regional cooperation in MENA is characterized by the failure of regionalism (i.e. regional integration steered by political elites) and the rise of regionalization (i.e. societal and partly cultural interconnectedness), mainly among the Arab populations (Del Sarto and Soler i Lecha 2018). Given such a mismatch, the region is witnessing the emergence of new forms of cooperation that are ad hoc and informal, and that also cut across traditional regional cooperation platforms. These formations mostly aim to address single threats and issues, with allies potentially confronting each other on other issues. It is noted that regime insecurity is a significant factor driving this new type of alliance in the MENA.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The changing global context, with the declining role of the USA as a dominant power in the region, particularly in the Middle East, combined with the limited role of European states, provided space for regional actors to adopt more assertive foreign policy objectives in the period following 2011, which in turn has deepened regional rivalries and tensions. The current outlook suggests that no regional state has been able to project power across the entire region or define regional norms on its own. Still, four states in the Middle East, namely Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, can be seen as powerhouses that either make efforts to preserve their regional position or shape the regional order according to their own regional policy objectives.

State fragmentation in the MENA has facilitated the expanded influence of non-state actors including militias, jihadis and tribal groups in the region. Thus it will become increasingly common for the international community and the governments to negotiate with such non-state actors active either in conflict zones or in the management of power.

The fragility of state structures also affects the ability of non-state actors to deploy themselves in the region. These actors have been able to sustain political and ideological relations with the state and society where they reside, and have formed profit-oriented relations with smugglers and criminal groups in the region, which adds another dimension to tackling illegal trafficking.

The Syrian civil war has significantly transformed the dynamics of refugee movements within and outside of the MENA countries, which already hosted a substantial number of Palestinian, Iraqi, Sudanese and other refugee groups in the pre-2011 period. The refugee influx to the host countries at the regional level has made it necessary to improve the ability and capacity of these countries to integrate such large numbers of refugees by means of well-built and long-term national policy responses and the consistent support of the international community, including the European Union.

There can be no shortcuts in addressing the festering Arab–Israeli and Israeli–Palestinian conflicts. Purely economic or security-related approaches will not be enough. On the other hand, no Arab Muslim leadership will be able to consolidate its long-term legitimacy and control while ignoring or downplaying the Palestinian cause (Dessi and Kamel 2018).

Intra-regional rivalries within the MENA countries have led to the failure to foster any significant regional cooperation, as witnessed in the recent rift within the GCC. One implication is that regional cooperation organizations will lose power to interest-based and loose alliances that reflect shifting political interests within the countries.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

MENARA – The Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping Geopolitical Shifts, Regional Order and Domestic Transformations aims to study the changing geopolitical order, identify the driving forces behind it, and assess the implications of these processes on the EU and its policies towards the region.

In line with the overarching objective of the MENARA Project, Work Package 5 (WP5) exclusively focused on regional dynamics under the following research topics:

- Regional dynamics (Middle Eastern actors; Morocco–Algeria relations; non-state actors)
- Regional conflicts (Arab–Israeli conflict; the security (in)continuum in Libya; Syrian war)
- Regional issues and cooperation platforms (refugees; illegal trafficking; cooperation platforms)

The research undertaken within WP5 in the MENARA Project has been carried out by the research institutions/universities in the project consortium. The case studies have been produced in the format of Working Papers (see Further Reading) under the coordination of the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM), which acted as the leader of WP5.

In the relevant case studies, fieldwork was carried out in the MENA countries, including but not limited to Mali, Egypt, Algeria, Turkey, Lebanon and Tunisia, to introduce insights from relevant experts, officials and academics to support the discussion and develop new findings.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping Geopolitical Shifts, Regional Order and Domestic Transformations (MENARA)
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WEBSITE

<http://www.menaraproject.eu>

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