EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF

TRANSFORMATIONS OF STATE AND SOCIETY IN THE MENA REGION

The MENARA Project studies the geopolitical order in the making in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It 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 focuses on the recent transformations of state–society relations within the domestic sphere of the region's nation-states.

March 2019

INTRODUCTION

The political order in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has seen a number of transformations since the uprisings in 2011. Local, national, regional and international patterns of order and cooperation have been reversed, undermined or reformed and have re-emerged in new shapes and constellations.

The present policy brief focuses on the changes in power and politics within the region's nation-states. It provides insight and analysis into four key trends: (1) the weakening and erosion of the capacities of the MENA states within their own domestic spheres; (2) the continuation and entrenchment of authoritarianism across the region; (3) the proliferation of armed para- or non-state actors; and (4) the polarization or pluralization of collective identities. It also provides a series of reflections on how European Union (EU) policy-making could tackle these challenges.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The Institutional Capacity of the States Has Eroded
The 2011 uprisings deeply affected the institutional capacity of the MENA states. In several countries the ability of the state apparatus to effectively police borders, to levy taxes or to exercise control within its territory and on its population has weakened or periodically ceased to function.

The Libyan case is illustrative of the rapid erosion that some MENA states experienced after 2011. Before the uprisings, most observers considered that the oil-exporting Libyan state, endowed with a small population of 6 million inhabitants, was relatively stable. In 2018, for instance, the Fragile States Index developed by the Fund for Peace on the basis of fourteen development indicators, ranked Libya as the world's 111th most unstable country out of 177 assessed countries. Two years later, in 2012, Libya had become the world's 50th most unstable country, and three years after that, it was ranked the 25th most unstable country in the world – a position it has retained ever since. A similar rapid erosion of state strength and capacity has been observed in places such as Syria, which climbed from 48th place in 2010 to a position as the world's 4th most unstable state in 2018.

In other MENA countries, such as Egypt and Jordan, the trend of state erosion also manifested itself, albeit in less dramatic ways. At the same time, however, while Algeria, for instance, has remained more or less stable throughout the same period, Iran has increased its state capacity slightly in the same period. In spite of these divergences and country trends, the overall picture of the MENA region is that the capacity and stability of states has declined significantly since 2011.

By delving into the analysis of the cases of Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, it is found that issues related to governance and the provision of basic services, including economy and security, are of crucial importance to understand the contemporary erosion of the states in the MENA region. As such they are also central aspects of any future attempt to rebuild the states in terms of both capacity and legitimacy. Indeed, the legitimacy of states may further weaken if international efforts are focused exclusively on creating national political institutions through electoral competition.

Authoritarianism Is Enduring
The year 2011 represented a rupture in the recent history of the MENA regimes. Following decades of authoritarian rule, some autocrats were forced out of power in the wake of popular uprisings. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, heads of state were jailed, killed or pushed into exile, and in several other countries, including Syria and Iraq, protesters seriously challenged incumbent autocrats' ability to sustain their rule.

Pressure on the region's autocratic leaders was, however, only one among a number of parallel trends in domestic politics in the region. In several Gulf monarchies, as well as Jordan and Morocco, autocrats were enduring or even consolidating their hold on power. And in republican Turkey and in Iran and Israel, illiberal trends have been increasing since 2011. In several of the countries where regime survival was threatened by uprisings and regime defections, authoritarian leaders furthermore proved capable of mobilizing unprecedented levels of repression as time went by, as for instance in Syria or, on a more modest scale, in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. In other cases, regimes successfully defused protest movements, either through lavish distribution of economic benefits as in Algeria and parts of the Gulf or by introducing swift reform initiatives as in Morocco.

By addressing three distinct cases – Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran – it has emerged that the diversity of the compositions and trajectories of authoritarianism in these countries underlines the complexity and multiplicity of authoritarianism in today's MENA region. In Egypt, repression and exclusion have increased significantly in the wake of the *coup* in 2013, and Egypt today is experiencing a hardened form of authoritarianism that surpasses the type of liberalizing autocracy that developed in the final years of Hosni Mubarak's rule prior to 2011, in spite of regular elections. Dynamics of repression, exclusion and control have all increased and become more entrenched. In Saudi Arabia, the direct repression and exclusion practices exercised by the regime through the state agencies have also risen sharply since 2011. A new and increasingly personalized regime has emerged with the rise of the new crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, who has enacted some cultural and social reforms while crushing limited spaces of expression with relentless authoritarianism. In Iran, the picture is different. Here, mass repression seems to have decreased after reaching a peak against political protesters in 2009. Furthermore, the relatively free electoral campaigns for the Majlis in 2016 and for the position of president in 2017 point to a strategic opening of the regime rather than to a deepening authoritarianism.

Armed Groups Are Proliferating

In the wake of the Arab uprisings, a plethora of types and forms of armed groups have proliferated in the MENA region. In Libya, the proliferation of armed groups occurred from early on in the uprisings. In other places this happened more slowly – from 2012 in Syria and from 2013 onwards in Egypt. By early 2014, however, armed groups had come to play prominent, albeit very different, roles in domestic politics across the MENA region.

Based on case studies from Egypt and Libya, two distinct dynamics in this proliferation of armed groups in the MENA have been analysed. In Egypt, the assessment shows that the single most important dynamic behind the proliferation of armed groups in the country was regime-orchestrated repression. The analysis has also shown that the process through which armed actors have proliferated is best understood as a transformation of contentious politics, which entailed a "militarization" of the contention.

In contrast, in Libya warfare, foreign intervention and the weakness of nascent state institutions were key factors behind the proliferation of armed groups. Although regime-orchestrated repression did initially play a role in Libya, armed groups have proliferated since 2011 because they have been able to become state actors themselves in a process of "militia-ization" of the state and politics.

Collective Identities Have Evolved

Since 2011, societies in the MENA region have seen a number of transformations within collective identity formation and political deployment. While diverging from one context to another, many of the MENA countries have seen new and different ways in which collective identities are performed, and an ensuing reshaping of the relations between societies and state institutions as well as between collective actors themselves has taken place.

Drawing on evidence from Israel, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey, two key trends within these transformations of collective identities can be identified. On the one hand, collective identities in some MENA countries have undergone a process of pluralization and hybridization, meaning they have become plural in number and have become the carriers of new claims and positions. In Morocco this has taken the form of a convergence between collective identities that existed prior to the uprisings and the identity-based claims made by the post-2011 movements, for instance the 20th February Movement. In Tunisia, meanwhile, it has taken the form of new forms of collective identities "bubbling up" to the surface with (new) meanings and claims.

On the other hand – and this is particularly true in the case of Turkey and Israel – collective identities have undergone processes of entrenchment and polarization. In other words, certain collective identities have tended to be interpreted and instrumentalized as the overarching framework under which all others are subsumed in a secondary position. In Turkey, this has taken the form of a strengthening of nationalist rhetoric, particularly after the attempted *coup d'état*. In Israel, it has instead taken the form of a neo-revisionist tendency that has been adopted by the majority of society as well as politics.

The specific manifestation of these trends depends on three factors: temporality, context and elite behaviours. Firstly, in Tunisia, for instance, the transformation of collective identities depended to a large extent on political and institutional decisions taken immediately after the uprisings. In Israel and Turkey, by contrast, the entrenchment and polarization of collective identities straddled a time frame of fifteen to twenty years. Secondly, the changes in collective identities in countries such as Israel and Turkey depended strongly on the regional and international context of these countries. By contrast, the development of collective identities in Morocco and Tunisia has been shaped by existing domestic political and institutional structures. Finally, the manifestations of collective identities have depended on how state authorities and political elites reacted to the uprisings in 2011. In most cases, state leaders have attempted to exploit and manipulate collective identities to achieve political outcomes. In doing so, they have contributed to fostering the pluralization or polarization of collective identities across the region.

The current transformations of state–society relations in the MENA region are liable to affect European stability and security. As such, when addressing the erosion of the state in Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and beyond, the EU should:
- be aware that giving priority to the creation of national political institutions based on electoral competition may cause a backlash and generate further state erosion by overlooking important local conflict dimensions;
- focus on issues related to governance and the provision of basic services rather than territorial integrity;
- focus efforts on containing the possible spread of war economies, state plundering and corruption;
- focus efforts on assisting civil non-armed political actors with gaining a foothold in the battles for power with armed actors and military institutions.

When addressing the durability of authoritarianism in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and beyond, the EU should:
- be aware that enduring authoritarianism in the contemporary MENA region, in spite of its ability – at least in part – to address the most immediate security concerns of EU member states, including blocking mass migration and waging warfare on jihadists, is likely to prove incapable of ensuring long-term stability. This can only be achieved by fostering social peace, economic development and social mobility;
- accept that liberal democracy is unlikely to materialize outside of a few pockets, for example in Tunisia, in the years to come, but continue supporting peaceful political liberal and democratic reforms and the spread of human rights institutions and culture in the region;
- seek ways to form unified EU positions on these issues in order to boost the otherwise waning influence of European mid-size great powers in a time when new emerging powers – including some in the MENA region itself – are pushing hard for maintaining and increasing the spread and impact of authoritarianism.

When addressing the proliferation of armed groups in Egypt, Libya and beyond, the EU should:
- be aware that international military interventions in many cases have unleashed or reinforced the dynamics that brought about the proliferation of armed groups in the MENA region;
- promote and support efforts to build consensus among competing actors around a number of key conflictual issues before pushing for electoral competition;
- focus efforts on controlling and impeding external actors from continuing to provide arms and support to local factions across the region;
- incentivize the economic rehabilitation of those economic elites who might benefit more from long-term economic recovery than from further plundering of state resources;
- encourage regimes to carefully target their military and police repression against armed actors alone to avoid pushing larger and generally peaceful segments of the population into taking up arms in defiance, revenge or self-defence against indiscriminate repression and to increase the chances for broad post-repression peace-building initiatives.

When addressing the evolution of collective identities in Israel, Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia and beyond, the EU should:
- be aware of the distinct nature of the two parallel trends of pluralization/hybridization and entrenchment/polarization that have characterized the most recent development of collective identities in the MENA region;
- focus efforts on fostering political inclusiveness, the rule of law and accountability in those countries in which pluralized collective identities and their claims have been heard and have contributed to the emergence of new institutional frameworks (such as with new constitutions);

- focus efforts on healing intra-societal tensions and state–society conflicts by promoting dialogue and an opening up of the political playground to combat polarization;
- focus efforts on reconstructing the societal fabric and on reconciliation in war-torn countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen as an antidote to the polarization of collective identities and further conflict and instability.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Taking advantage of a multi-disciplinary, multi-layered and inter-temporal research agenda, *MENARA – The Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping Geopolitical Shifts, Regional Order and Domestic Transformations* sharpens our understanding of the region to highlight the potential strategies and policies that the EU may adopt in order to make its role in the MENA more effective.

The aim of MENARA Project research on state–society relations is threefold. First, it aims to identify the most important trends that are (re)shaping the domestic political orders in the countries in the region. Secondly, it aims to analyse and explain the drivers behind these trends. Thirdly, it provides suggestions for how European policy-makers may react to these challenges and opportunities. To pursue these goals, the MENARA researchers have carried out fieldwork in eleven MENA countries, conducting targeted interviews with civil society actors, politicians with opposition and pro-government affiliations, members of the diplomatic corps, business actors, academics and experts, and others.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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

COORDINATOR   Eduard Soler i Lecha, Centre for International Information and Documentation in Barcelona (CIDOB), Barcelona, Spain esoler@cidob.org

CONSORTIUM   Al Akhawayn University, Ifrane
Barcelona Center for International Affairs (CIDOB), Barcelona
Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM), Istanbul
Danish Institute for International Affairs (DIIS), Copenhagen
European University Institute, Florence
Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), Beirut
Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (IFAT), Budapest
Institute for Futures Studies and Technology Assessment (IZT), Berlin
Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome
King's College London (KCL), London
London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), London
Observatoire Méditerranéen de l'Energie (OME), Paris
Qatar University (QU), Doha
Royal Institute for International Relations (EGMONT), Brussels

FUNDING SCHEME   Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation – INT-07-2015: Towards a new geopolitical order in the South and East Mediterranean region

DURATION	April 2016 – March 2019 (36 months)
BUDGET	EU contribution: 2 401 944 €
WEBSITE	http://www.menaraproject.eu
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Eduard Soler i Lecha, Centre for International Information and Documentation in Barcelona (CIDOB), Barcelona, Spain esoler@cidob.org

FURTHER READING

Boserup, Rasmus Alenius (2016), "Domestic Orders", in Eduard Soler i Lecha et al., eds, "Re-conceptualizing Orders in the MENA Region. The Analytical Framework of the MENARA Project", in *MENARA Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 1 (November), p. 56-67, http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=776

Boserup, Rasmus Alenius and Virginie Collombier (2018), "Militarization and Militia-ization: Dynamics of Armed Group Proliferation in Egypt and Libya", in *MENARA Working Papers*, No. 17 (October), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1292

Boserup, Rasmus Alenius and Silvia Colombo (2017), "Hybridization of Domestic Order-Making in the Contemporary MENA Region", in *MENARA Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 6 (December), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1093

Boserup, Rasmus Alenius et al. (2019), "Restoration, Transformation and Adaptation. Authoritarianism after 2011 in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran", in *MENARA Working Papers*, No. 30 (January), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1434

Collombier, Virginie, ed. (2018), "Armed Conflicts and the Erosion of the State: The Cases of Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria", in *MENARA Working Papers*, No. 22 (November), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1323

Colombo, Silvia, ed. (2018), "New Trends in Identity Politics in the Middle East and North Africa and their impact on State-Society Relations" in *MENARA Working Papers*, No. 14 (October), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1276