

EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



EMBEDDEDNESS AND/OR PERIPHERY: THE MENA REGION IN THE GLOBAL ORDER

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 for the EU and its policies towards the region. This policy brief focuses on the global dynamics defining the relationship between the global order and the MENA region.

March 2019

INTRODUCTION

The place and role of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the international system can be understood and analysed as a set of asymmetrical relationships with distinct dynamics. The external environment affects the security, political, economic and social developments in the MENA region, while these not only interact with but often shape the international agenda, prompt international global action and challenge or reinforce the existing order and norms.

The present policy brief focuses on the relationship and the relative balance between the global and the regional order. It looks at whether the region is *embedded* in global dynamics or *peripheral* to them. The dynamics of this complex relationship are considered on the basis of three sets of issues: (1) the role and capacity of global actors (the USA, Russia and China) in shaping the regional order and how the region shapes the broader foreign and security policies of these superpowers; (2) contentious global issues and their relations to the MENA region (borders and mobility, NGOs, WMD proliferation and non-proliferation, and competition for natural resources/energy); and (3) global integration dynamics (the United Nations and multilateralism, economic and financial globalization, and the impact of technological developments on the regional order).

The Relationship with Global Actors is Bi-directional

The MENA region became a *penetrated system* in the 19th century, when major political developments such as the creation of the state system were initiated. While the presence of global powers has been constant historically, their strategies, level of involvement and the nature of the relationships they have built with local partners have varied significantly.

Since the 1990s, but most visibly since the beginning of the 2000's, the MENA region has witnessed a triad of transformations: the continuous evolution of the external context; a shift in the regional power balance; and domestic political developments. These three levels of transformation are not independent of each other, and thus the traditional client relationships and, in general, the role of external actors in the MENA region have also been subject to change (Morillas et al. 2016).

Post-American MENA region

The USA no longer has a monopoly on decisions in the region regarding war or peace (if it ever did). Due to changing security perceptions in Washington and the new-found interest of other global actors in the region (especially Russia), the USA's position has been transformed from being the "sole" power to one – albeit the leading – power among others.

Past US actions fostered a *double-level uncertainty* among regional actors: amid a broader process of strategic disengagement from the region, the USA's *level of intervention* was not predictable – on some occasions it adhered to its former responsibilities, while on others it opted to advance in its disengagement by not intervening at all (or doing less than expected). In terms of the *direction of interventions*, US policies fluctuated from those reinforcing the status quo to those disrupting it. If regional actors might have easily adapted to progressive strategic disengagement, the uncertain direction of US foreign policy, caught between interventionism and retrenchment, engagement and disengagement, has fostered previously unseen levels of uncertainty among many in the region (Quero and Dessì 2019).

Continuity and discontinuity in Russia's engagement in the MENA region

The MENA region continues to play a central role in Russian foreign policy, with an importance identical that of Soviet times: as a proxy domain for manoeuvring in the global political competition, and thus, a medium for implementing its geostrategic interests. Nevertheless, Russian policy in the MENA region is also a function of US–Russian relations. As an external power that has good relations with all regional actors, Russia is gaining increasing room for manoeuvre in the MENA region, providing the superpower with a forum of engagement with western powers even when it is under sanctions elsewhere.

Russia is successfully following an effort-intensive new logic of relation-building. Alternating economic and other relations between highly developed western democracies and rapidly growing – at least in economic and trading terms – countries with a lower level of democratic development has serious potential as a viable strategy in the mid- to long term (Póti 2018).

China in the MENA region: A challenge to the global order

Despite the unparalleled trade and investment carried out by China in MENA, the fact that it is sticking to a de-politicized, de-militarized foreign policy towards the region makes it difficult to sustain the idea that China will be willing fully to fill the vacuum left by the USA following the latter's disengagement process. By concentrating on the Belt and Road Initiative, China's challenges to the global order (Bretton Woods global economic order, Law of the Sea) are overlooked. The fact that China might prove successful in articulating parallel and/or alternative norms and institutions to those espoused by the current global liberal order might trigger shifts in MENA's normative environment.

For many decades, China has been able to articulate a low-profile foreign policy, not challenging in any major way the US-led liberal order. Yet, based on China's unparalleled rise as novel trade and investment partner, MENA regimes may opportunely bandwagon with China when facing the unfolding effects of the liberal order (Quero 2019).

Contentious Global Issues

The MENA region occupies a unique position in the global order, primarily due to its geostrategic importance and the presence of key energy and trade links. The global competition for energy resources, borders and mobility, the proliferation of WMDs, and the non-proliferation efforts aimed at curbing them, transnationalization and the presence of global NGOs and non-state actors mean that the MENA region is fully embedded in the international order. However, in spite of this agenda-setting capability, the region is a relatively passive target (or a cooperating partner at most) of any international initiative aimed at the management of such contentious issues, giving the impression that it is largely peripheral as regards international decision-making related to events originating on its own soil.

Following the Arab uprisings, the new waves of migration reaching Europe from the south (mainly from sub-Saharan Africa via Libya) and from the east (from Syria, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and other countries via Turkey and the Balkans) have also highlighted the MENA region's agenda-setting role vis-à-vis Europe. In this context, the EU's allegedly normative policies towards its periphery in the south have been put to the test (Cassarino and Del Sarto 2018).

Another trend embedding the MENA region in global dynamics has been the rise of non-state actors and NGOs in the post-Cold War globalized era. They have come to challenge the state-centric international system on the one hand, and to complement the activities of state actors, both in the military and in the civilian sphere, on the other. The MENA region has been affected by this process of globalization and transnationalization in two ways: first, from the bottom up, it has reinforced and highlighted the role that non-state actors play in the region; and second, from the top down, global NGOs have also made their mark on regional developments. For both phenomena the Arab uprisings were a litmus test, as the leverage of governments and states therein was severely limited by transnational organizations. While the presence of NGOs – especially “Islamist movements” – in the Middle East is not a novelty, due to the internal weakness of the state system the growing role of global NGOs cannot be questioned any longer (Szalai 2018).

Another sign of the participation of the MENA region in global dynamics concerns the debates related to the different categories of WMDs (nuclear, chemical, biological and missiles) in which MENA has provoked international reaction (e.g. UN and unilateral sanctions, or elimination of such weapons under international supervision, etc.). In this way, it has proved to have the capability to shape the international agenda by lobbying for solutions to or “producing” WMD-related issues of concern (the Middle East nuclear weapon-free zone (NWFZ) and the Iraqi WMD programmes, respectively) and has, at the same time, been the target of international action. However, in itself the region has not been able to enforce solutions to such threats (Rózsa 2018).

Finally, the MENA region's energy resources place it at the heart of global energy dynamics and have turned the region into a target for global power competition. It is arguably via energy that the MENA region is most deeply embedded in the international system. About half of the region's energy production is exported, but this export capacity is increasingly threatened by skyrocketing domestic demand. Consequently, countries in the region are diversifying their energy mix, especially by developing renewable energy (Menichetti et al. 2018).

Global Integration Dynamics

The level of integration of MENA countries in the global political, economic and social environment varies significantly, with the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and non-Arab countries (Turkey and Israel) exhibiting the deepest integration. However, while Israel and Turkey traditionally have been the frontrunners, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula are relative newcomers to globalization. This affects their domestic economic, political and social contexts to a great extent,

as generational cleavages, identity crises and reactions to globalization tend to be sharper in cases of rapid transformation.

The level of global integration and embeddedness in globalization reflect two attributes of the MENA countries. First, this shows their potential structural power (or lack thereof) on the world stage. Being on the periphery of global integration dynamics (especially in political and economic terms) means that MENA countries (or the region in general) are more the objects, rather than the subjects, of the decision-making processes taking place in international institutions and other official or unofficial fora. Besides that, the level of integration also reveals the connectivity of different state and non-state actors.

The low level of integration is also connected to the question of the regional order. In other parts of the world, the process of globalization has stimulated different forms of regional integration process, which can protect its members from some of the disadvantages of worldwide developments. Lacking such successful and regionally accepted initiatives (with some minor exceptions, such as the League of the Arab States), the MENA region cannot shield itself from global developments, which limits the benefits of globalization, allows foreign interference, accentuates geostrategic rivalry and fosters tendencies of self-peripheralization (Woertz and Martinez 2018, Göll and Zwiers 2018).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The MENA region has remained a penetrated system, where external great power interests are shifting. Against this backdrop, the EU should:

- beware of the MENA region (or issues emanating thereof) being used as a bargaining chip by external actors in their relations with the EU;
- monitor US interests and policies diverging from those of the EU;
- monitor Russia's expansionist ambitions in the MENA region;
- monitor China's economic expansion and watch out for the moment when China turns to military means to protect its economic interests in the region.

When facing contentious global issues in terms of the MENA region, the EU should:

- take advantage of its assets (proximity to the MENA, soft power, advanced technologies) in promoting shared interests (e.g. the projects under the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) label such as the "Clima-Med: Acting for Climate in the South Mediterranean" or the "Euro-Mediterranean Smart City Innovation Centres");
- take note of the leverage that MENA states have acquired vis-à-vis European countries on the issue of migration;
- pursue a unified position on WMD control, especially to promote a WMD-free zone in the region, as well as maintaining firm support for the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal);
- develop a coherent strategy regarding cooperating with NGOs in security, economic and humanitarian fields.

MENA countries show considerable but selective integration in economic globalization processes in some key areas. However, limited domestic markets remain an issue that can deter foreign direct investments (FDIs) into the region. To address this shortcoming, the EU should:

- support greater and more symmetric integration of the MENA countries;
- promote efforts to establish the EuroMed free-trade area as foreseen in the Barcelona Declaration of 1995 and try to find ways to harmonize it with other free-trade arrangements of MENA countries with other partners;
- strengthen MENA markets and help establish a more favourable environment to attract FDIs.

Digitalization and ICT open up new opportunities for different types of activity, yet the adoption of digital options and ICT is extremely ambivalent: they can be used for more communication, transparency, education and empowerment, but they can also be employed for greater control, censorship and repression. Therefore, the EU should:

- beware of and fight the instrumentalization risks associated with these technologies;
- offer, develop or – even better – co-develop “frugal technologies” that would better match the technological, societal, climatic and socio-economic conditions of countries in the MENA region.

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, so as to highlight the potential strategies and policies that the EU is called upon to adopt in order to make its role in MENA more effective.

Work Package 6 (WP6) focused on the complex interplay between global and regional dynamics to define what impact the global order has on the MENA region and if the latter had the capacity to influence the former. The main research question of WP6 was whether MENA is embedded in or peripheral to the international system. Specifically, three sets of research topics were analysed:

- External actors (the USA, Russia, China);
- Contentious issues (borders and mobility; global NGOs; WMD proliferation and non-proliferation; and global competition for natural resources/energy);
- Global integration dynamics (the UN and multilateralism; economic and financial globalization; impact of technological developments on the regional order).

PROJECT IDENTITY

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

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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
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FURTHER READING	<p>Cassarino, Jean-Pierre and Raffaella A. Del Sarto (2018), “The Governance of Migration and Border Controls in the European-North African Context”, in <i>MENARA Working Papers</i>, No. 13 (September), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1267</p> <p>Göll, Edgar and Jakob Zwiars (2018), “Technological Trends in the MENA Region: The Cases of Digitalization and Information and Communications Technology (ICT)”, in <i>MENARA Working Papers</i>, No. 23 (November), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1357</p> <p>Makdisi, Karim (2019), “Contested Multilateralism: The United Nations and the Middle East”, in <i>MENARA Working Papers</i>, No. 31 (February), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1497</p> <p>Menichetti, Emanuela et al. (2018), “The MENA Region in the Global Energy Markets”, in <i>MENARA Working Papers</i>, No. 21 (October), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1311</p> <p>Morillas, Pol, Erzsébet N. Rózsa and Máté Szalai (2016), “Global Dynamics in the MENA Region”, in Eduard Soler i Lecha et al., eds, “Re-conceptualizing Orders in the MENA Region. The Analytical Framework of the MENARA Project”, in <i>MENARA Methodology and Concept Papers</i>, No. 1 (November), p. 68–87, http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=776</p> <p>Póti, László (2018), “Russian Policies Towards the MENA Region”, in <i>MENARA Working Papers</i>, No. 9 (July), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1237</p> <p>Quero, Jordi (2019), “China’s Impact on the Middle East and North Africa’s Regional Order. Unfolding Regional Effects of Beijing’s Challenge to the Global Order” (under publication)</p> <p>Quero, Jordi and Andrea Dessì (2019), “Unpredictability in US foreign policy and the regional order in the Middle East: reacting vis-à-vis a volatile external security-provider”, in <i>British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies</i>, 17 February, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1580185</p> <p>Rózsa, Erzsébet N. (2018), “Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East and North Africa”, in <i>MENARA Working Papers</i>, No. 24 (November), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1373</p> <p>Szalai, Máté (2018), “The International NGO Triangle in the MENA Region”, in <i>MENARA Working Papers</i>, No. 19 (October), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1302</p> <p>Woertz, Eckart and Irene Martinez (2018), “Embeddedness of the MENA in Economic Globalization Processes”, in <i>MENARA Working Papers</i>, No. 8 (June), http://www.menaraproject.eu/?p=1203</p>