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## WORKING PAPERS

# GLOBAL IDENTITIES: EMBEDDING THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGION IN THE WIDER WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the ways in which the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been embedded in global identity processes and structures in the post-2011 period. It assesses MENA social and political developments in relation to global ideational and identity factors. Important among these is the imagined yet increasingly widespread and pernicious idea of a clash between “Islam” and “the West”, (mis)conceived as homogeneous identities. However, as the paper shows, global or universalist identity perceptions, in the form of support for human rights and democratic values, also influence the MENA region. Dynamic global youth identities and cultures also influence an exceptionally “young” region and vie for the loyalty of youth against other identities. Changing dynamics of ethnic and religious identities among diasporas, which link the region with the wider world, modify social and political contexts within the MENA, especially some of its post-2011 conflicts.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the ways in which the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been embedded in global identity processes and structures in the post-2011 period, with some references to earlier periods when necessary. It identifies those global identities which have a link with the MENA region and traces how they shape local and regional identities.<sup>2</sup> Identities are always fluid so it is an important objective of the paper to tease out and highlight the direction of change, or trends, within them over the relatively short period of the past few years.

The paper argues that we cannot properly analyse and assess MENA social and political developments in isolation from global ideational and identity factors. Highly important among these is the imagined yet increasingly widespread and pernicious idea of a clash between “Islam” and “the West”, (mis)conceived as homogeneous identities (Section 1). However, as the paper shows, global or universalist identity perceptions, in the form of support for human rights and democratic values, also influence the MENA region (Section 2). Furthermore, there exists a multiplicity of more particular or narrower identities, often of a more benign nature, which link the

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2 The formation of identities is, of course, a two-way street, which means that changes in the MENA also impact identities at the global level (the process of “localization” and “subsidiarity”, as outlined by the Work Package 2 (WP2) concept paper of the MENARA project (Messari 2016: 6). This will become apparent in the course of the analysis but it cannot constitute one of the separate objectives of the paper, as this would render the task unmanageable.

MENA to wider international contexts and impact MENA domestic and regional orders in various and constantly evolving ways. The paper outlines these in detail. It focuses on how dynamic, global youth identities and cultures influence an exceptionally “young” region (in population terms) and vie for the loyalty of youth against other identities (Section 3). The paper also shows how changing dynamics of ethnic and religious identities among diasporas, which constitute pre-existing but constantly evolving webs of relationships that connect the MENA with all other parts of the world (not just the West), are also crucial in modifying particular social and political contexts within the MENA, especially some of its post-2011 conflicts (Section 4).

The focus of this paper is on ideational factors but it deals, specifically, with identities, as distinguished from ideas, values and norms. The line is a fine one, in that identities are underpinned and mutually constituted by ideas, values and norms. More specifically, as discussed in the Work Package 2 (WP2) concept paper of the MENARA project, identities are constituted inter-subjectively; in other words, they are shaped in relationships (Messari 2016: 6–7). Therefore, the present paper focuses on the social level, not on the individual one, and identifies the collectivities in which individuals feel they belong and the actions they take as a result. It adds a further, global dimension that supersedes the three levels of analysis (sub-state, national, supranational) along the lines of which MENA identities can be usefully conceptualized (Messari et al. 2017). For reasons of space, the present paper does not distinguish between these three levels in the course of the discussion but takes them as a whole, to further emphasize the contrasts between regional (MENA) and global identities.

## 1. “ISLAM” VERSUS “THE WEST”

The formation of identities in international politics vitally depends on framing and juxtaposing oneself against an imaginary “Other”. The juxtaposition between “Islam” and “the West” harks back to the colonial period of the 19th century, when an “Orientalist” discourse through which Europe viewed the Middle East and, correspondingly, the Middle East viewed Europe, and also itself, came into being (Said 1978, Neumann 1999). The Iranian revolution of 1979, and the Islamic Republic that was established as a result, hardened the perception of a confrontation based on religious and cultural differences. The ideological clashes of the Cold War period, between left and right and between competing nationalisms of individual MENA states, and of an imagined Arab nation versus separate Arab countries, were gradually replaced to some extent, though not eclipsed, by the idea that cultures and religions constituted the kernels of collective identities. This was part of a global phenomenon whereby “identity” was gaining political relevance (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996). In the MENA region, it led to history (and, in particular, US interventions in the region and the position of Israel) being partly re-read through a culturalist lens. More recently and infamously, the attacks of 11 September 2001 were depicted by many as a clash between “Islam” and “the West”, with the former supposedly epitomizing “justice” and the latter representing “freedom” in the eyes of their respective defenders.

The Arab uprisings of 2011, with the demands of democracy, good governance and opposition to oppression that they articulated, appeared to attenuate the idea of a clash of civilizations. This continues to be an important element, to which we will return in the next section. However, the uprisings had indirect repercussions which caused a regression from this hopeful moment. The

rebellions inadvertently opened the way to violent conflicts and eventually civil wars, as regimes fought back against insurgent forces and rebellions split into different factions, in Syria, Libya and Yemen. (Egypt and Tunisia did not suffer civil war, but turmoil there also took a violent turn at times). Pre-existing conflicts such as the ones in Iraq and Palestine, and internally in Turkey (over the Kurdish issue) – whose causes and trajectories had been in many ways unrelated to the 2011 rebellions and, in the case of the latter, to anti-Western sentiments – merged with these new “hot wars” to create vacuums of power and other opportunities for radical organizations to emerge. More than anything else, the rise of so-called Islamic State (ISIS) after 2014, much like al Qaeda before it, appeared to confirm in the minds of many that “Islam” and “the West” were engaged in a global struggle.

The evidence of a hardening global confrontation between “Islam” and “the West” can be observed in the spread of global discourse to this effect.<sup>3</sup> For some this is a deliberate policy: Islamist radicals of all hues,<sup>4</sup> perpetrating terrorist acts in Europe and the United States,<sup>5</sup> have utilized and sought to reinforce the narrative of an insurgent “Islam” battling “the West”. Far-right elements in the West have also promoted this narrative, for example by construing the migration crisis in the Mediterranean which escalated in 2015–17 in such a way as to contribute to a sense of siege in Europe and to stoke fears about “Islam”.

The spread of these narratives has shaped social and political outcomes. Islamophobia (in the sense of a collective fear and denigration of all Muslims, as opposed to the criminals who have usurped the role of their spokespersons) has contributed to the rise of far-right movements in Europe but has also caused a shift of the middle ground in European politics towards the right.<sup>6</sup> In the United States too, fears about the threat of “Islam” played a role in the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016, who proceeded to impose a ban on travel from a number of Muslim-majority countries. The Trump administration may harden the narrative of a confrontation between Islam and the West by indiscriminately targeting civilians and pushing local MENA populations into the arms of radical organizations which thrive on this narrative, and by conflating Islamist radicals and non-violent Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (ICG 2017). Beyond the West, too, particularly in parts of South East Asia, attitudes towards “Islam” are changing: local Muslim minorities are increasingly identified with a supposed “global” religious identity, which is not really global but has the characteristics of (Gulf) Arab Islam (Ghoshal 2010).

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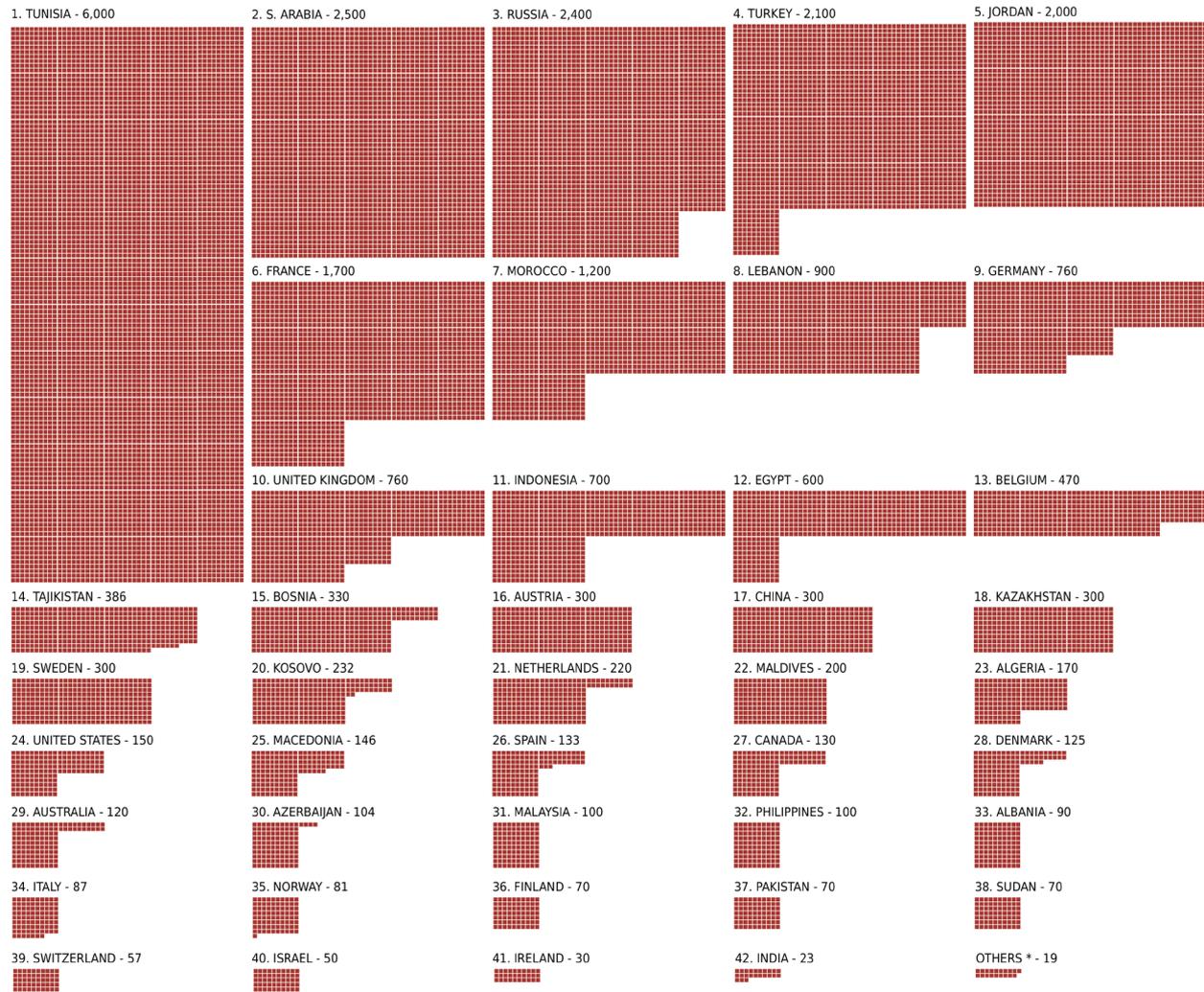
3 Research has pointed to the strengthening of transnational Arab and Muslim political identities in the MENA region through the recent growth of regional media (Nisbet and Myers 2010). This may have contributed to an “Islamic” identity taking shape as juxtaposed to the West (and anti-Americanism, as seen in Nisbet and Myers 2011), though one must emphasize that there is no necessary association between these identities and the idea of a “clash” with the West – and even less so with violence.

4 We use “Islamist radicals” in this paper in conformity with wide usage of the term and the self-characterization of these groups as being linked to Islam. There is no space to discuss the controversial issues surrounding terminology, but the term “Islamist” here is not used to denote an association between an “essence” of Islam and violence.

5 Terrorism afflicted many other parts of the world, of course, including Muslim-majority societies, but the focus of this discussion is on what contributed to the perception of a confrontation between “Islam” and “the West”.

6 Islamophobia is, of course, both cause and effect of the phenomena discussed in this section; the complex debate which surrounds it is beyond the confines of this paper.

**Figure 1 | Origin of Foreign Fighters That Joined ISIS**



Source: CIDOB elaboration on Benmelech and Klor (2017: 23).

Notes: Data refers only to official count of foreign fighters originally collected by the Soufan Group (2014 and 2015).

\* New Zealand, Brazil, Madagascar, Singapore, Cambodia, Moldova, Romania, South Africa.

The impact of these emerging global trends and identities on the MENA region since 2011 has been threefold. Firstly, much as in the case of al Qaeda and other transnational radical Islamist actors before it, ISIS has been bolstered by the idea that there exists a cosmic struggle between Islam and the West or that Islam is under attack by the West (Perešin 2015: 24). The birth of ISIS has been mostly due to local causes, in Iraq and Syria,<sup>7</sup> but the belief that there is an “apocalyptic” war taking place was a factor in galvanizing young men and women from across the globe to join the ISIS fight. This, clearly, is both cause and effect of the imagined global confrontation but, nonetheless, the emergent spiral has contributed to the growth of ISIS, with tremendously negative implications for the situation in Iraq and Syria and destructive effects in other parts of the world,

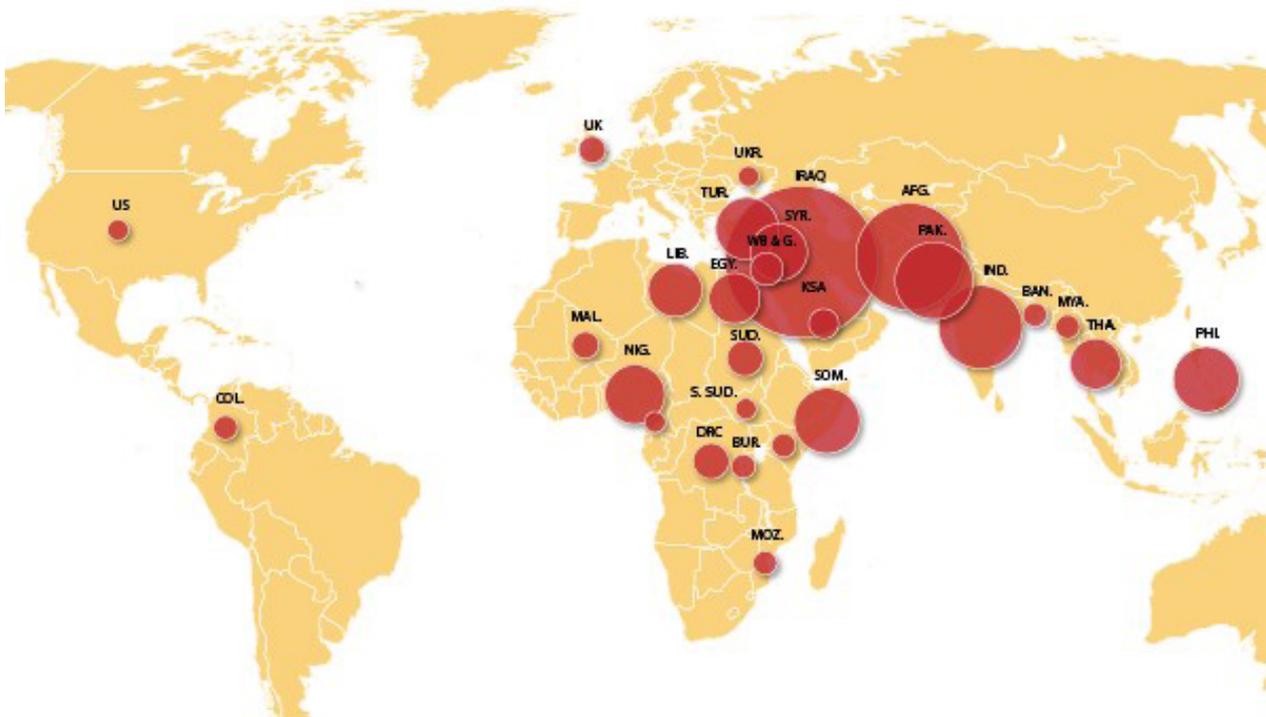
<sup>7</sup> There is a debate about the relative weight of local versus regional or global causes of the conflicts at hand which lies, however, beyond the limits of this paper.

where the movement (if one can call it that outside its territorial base) has spread.

The second way in which the idea of a global clash between “Islam” and “the West” has affected the MENA region is through its impact on Christian minorities there, who have been perceived as being linked with the West because of their faith. Although not the exclusive target of Islamist terrorists – for example, the Yazidis were more viciously attacked by ISIS than Christians were, and ISIS has killed more Muslims overall than non-Muslims – Christians have felt the brunt of the imagined confrontation between Islam and the West, as they were perversely identified with the latter. This has contributed to their slow exodus from the region, and in particular from countries such as Iraq, Egypt and Syria which were affected by the post-2011 crises (Connor and Hackett 2014, Economist 2016, el-Issawi 2011).

**Figure 2 | Terrorist-Related Incidents around the World (2016)**

*In 2016, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) registered 13,488 incidents linked to all sorts of terrorism. Ninety-five percent of them took place in the countries depicted in the map below, with Iraq (25 percent), Afghanistan (12 percent), India (8 percent) and Pakistan (6 percent) accounting for half of all the incidents in the world.*



Source: CIDOB elaboration on Global Terrorism Database (GTD) data for 2016, <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/BrowseBy.aspx?category=date>.

Note: The map includes data on incidents registered in the West Bank and Gaza (WB & G).

Thirdly, the supposed global confrontation between Islam and the West has impacted particular countries since 2011 in distinct ways. In the case of Turkey, the long-standing polarization between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, on the one hand, and their opponents, on the other, has deepened as a result of international developments (even though its main drivers are domestic). The record here is mixed. On the one

hand, the Turkish government has led international efforts for an “alliance of civilizations” and has not rescinded Turkey’s application to the European Union – countering in this and other ways the idea of a “clash”. On the other hand, AKP ideologues have highlighted the rise of Islamophobia internationally in a manner that has served the AKP’s narrative of Turkey as the leader of the Islamic world under siege (Kaplan 2017, Karaman 2017). In Tunisia, the confrontation between the Islamist party Ennahda and its secularist opponents, which peaked during the transition process after the overthrow of Ben Ali’s regime in 2011, was portrayed as a clash between modernity and obscurantism that would determine the country’s future destiny. The situation in Egypt surrounding the rise to and subsequent fall from power of the Muslim Brotherhood had parallels with the Tunisian case – even though the former ended with a military coup, whereas in the latter Ennahda continues to participate in the political process – in the sense that the government of Abdel Fatah al Sisi portrays the Muslim Brotherhood as “obscurantist”, among other things. Finally, the confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians is pictured by radical groups on both sides as part of a struggle between Islam and the West, even though this is, and has always been, a clash of nationalisms.

## 2. GLOBAL IDENTITIES AND UNIVERSAL DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS NORMS

Even though the discourse of a global clash of civilizations between Islam and the West has been spreading inexorably over the past three decades, and even more so since 2011, with tangible and pernicious effects on the MENA region, identities there are not entirely shaped by this one element. There exist countervailing forces, at both the global and regional levels, which are resisting or bypassing the supposed global clash of civilizations. The pull of universalist principles, such as those that underpin democracy and human rights, is considerable in the MENA region, and the approaches to the relationship between Islam, democracy and modernity at the popular level cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies. People in the MENA partake in a “modernity”<sup>8</sup> which is global in nature rather than “owned” by the West, and it would not be an oversimplification to say that the values that underpin a global “human” community also have a powerful impact on the region.

The objectives of the Arab uprisings of 2011 were inchoate, as is almost always the case with uprisings, but they also included demands for governmental accountability, the rule of law, respect for civil rights (particularly freedom from torture), and dignity in the face of brazen oppression and corruption. It is, indeed, a widespread belief in the Arab world that “civil and political freedoms and emancipation from oppression” were primary reasons for the Arab uprisings (ICPSR 2015: Q811.1). These demands sat alongside economic aims, but it is notable that the protesters did not call for an Islamic state or system and religious groups did not play a large role in the events (Muedini 2014).<sup>9</sup> The uprisings of 2011, in other words, revealed that the global “good” of “democracy”, far

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8 “Modernity” is here defined as the set of processes involving individualization and secularization (only in the sense of institutional differentiation); our focus here is on the conceptual rather than material changes brought about by “modernity”.

9 The uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia did open the way for elections which then led to pluralities or majorities for Islamic parties. The reasons for this are difficult to elucidate, however. Electoral success may have been the result of the

from being an alien concept to the region as is often claimed, was seen as an accepted value. As Gudrun Krämer has written with reference to the popular calls for good governance, freedom and democracy in the 2011 uprisings: “‘Imported’ notions and ideals have thus been authenticated, highlighting the processes of entanglement and connectedness that characterize the present state of accelerated globalization” (Krämer 2013: 641).

Although the MENA, like all regions of the world, is full of contradictions in terms of personal political and social preferences, one can glean from these an adherence to universal democratic principles as well. It is not the purpose of this analysis to compare the MENA to other parts of the world but, with regards to the evidence supplied by opinion polls for the region, conservatism and religiosity are high: people are personally pious and suspicious of “others”, and this applies to both Muslims and other religious groups. Particular nationalisms and Arab nationalism, at the least a sense of awareness of a common Arab identity, are also strong (Lugo et al. 2013, ICPSR 2015). Yet none of these characteristics diminishes the desire for a democratic system (ICPSR 2015), even if this may be sought at an abstract level. Over the years, before 2011 and since, studies have demonstrated that popular opinion in the MENA region can be in favour, simultaneously, of a democratic system and of Islam having a role in the public sphere and in politics. The latter takes two forms, a belief that religious leaders should have political responsibilities and a preference that the legal system should be based on sharia (religious Islamic) law. Clearly, in the eyes of broad sections of MENA citizenries, there exists no conflict between Islam and democracy (Ciftci 2012).

One could make a broader point at this juncture: large segments of people in the MENA region are at ease with the idea of “modernity” and do not see it as clashing with their identities and values. According to one opinion poll, most people in the Arab world and Turkey, and partly also in Iran, do not see a conflict between being religious and living in the modern world (Lugo et al. 2013: 127–9). This popular perception is reflected in governmental and civil society activities, for example in initiatives such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, sponsored by Turkey among others, various interfaith organizations and at the World Social Forum. However, it is in the sphere of youth identities, explored in the next section, where the influence of global identities is most apparent.

### 3. MENA YOUTH AT THE INTERSECTION OF REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IDENTITIES

In the midst of the political, social and economic upheavals of the past few years, youth in the MENA region have become dynamic actors in the public sphere while finding themselves facing a rapidly evolving global context. Data from the Arab Human Development Report (UNDP 2016) indicate that youth between the ages of 15 and 29 make up almost a third of the population in the region, while people below the age of 15 make up another third. It is apparent that the region’s youth were one of the main drivers behind the Arab uprisings of 2011, which constitute the turning point for the region on which this paper focuses.<sup>10</sup> Youth cohorts in Turkey, Iran and Israel are also

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superior organizational capabilities of these parties and the popular belief – soon dispelled – that, as “good Muslims”, they would be better able to deliver economic justice.

<sup>10</sup> The lack of opportunities for a better future accompanied by significant socio-economic challenges and a high unemployment rate left many young people in the region frustrated with the state of their home countries under

crucial for the politics of the MENA region and in linking the MENA region with global identities.

The crucial role that the region's growing and educated youth population played in the uprisings showed that it has been influenced by the cultural, technological and economic forces of globalization,<sup>11</sup> as well as its own cultural values (Kraidy and Khalil 2008). MENA youth are more exposed to universal values due to new media tools and increased interconnectedness, in contrast to older generations who are less exposed to these realities. The tension between universal and more traditional values influences the formation of identities in the region, and the youth in MENA find themselves straddling local, national and global cultures. This is also true for countries that did not experience Arab uprisings, for example Turkey, where globalization has had significant repercussions: specifically, the image of youth in Turkey underwent a transformation in the late 1980s, at which time they began to appear as "individualistic consumers" and started to show more interest in global affairs and behave as the "carriers of a new culture" (Lüküslü 2005: 34-35).

Large numbers of young people across the region's Arab countries (though not a majority) are in favour of globalization (ASDA'A 2014).<sup>12</sup> When asked whether they agree with the statement "Traditional values are outdated and belong in the past; I am keen to embrace modern values and beliefs", more than 45 percent of the participating young people said yes. Change is rapid: in the survey's 2011 edition, only 17 percent of young respondents said traditional values are outdated, but this increased to 35 percent in 2012 and 40 percent in 2013 (ASDA'A 2014: 8).

On the other hand, globalization has visibly empowered youth in the political and social realms. The impact of social media should not be exaggerated, particularly in a region where some countries have low literacy rates and limited access to technology. However, it would be fair to say that the world witnessed the power of social media in the wake of the uprisings and new media tools became important assets for youth self-expression, not only in terms of daily-life trends but also in terms of bringing democracy and freedom to their nations. This digital revolution has contributed to the youth becoming more conscious about class and gender inequalities in their region (Herrera 2014). Most public surveys show that media and social networks play a significant role in the shaping of youth identities. Undoubtedly, social media had a significant impact on the uprisings in 2011: 84 percent of Tunisian youth indicated that social networking was the main factor behind the success of the revolution, while in Egypt this number was 45 percent (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies 2013).

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authoritarian regimes.

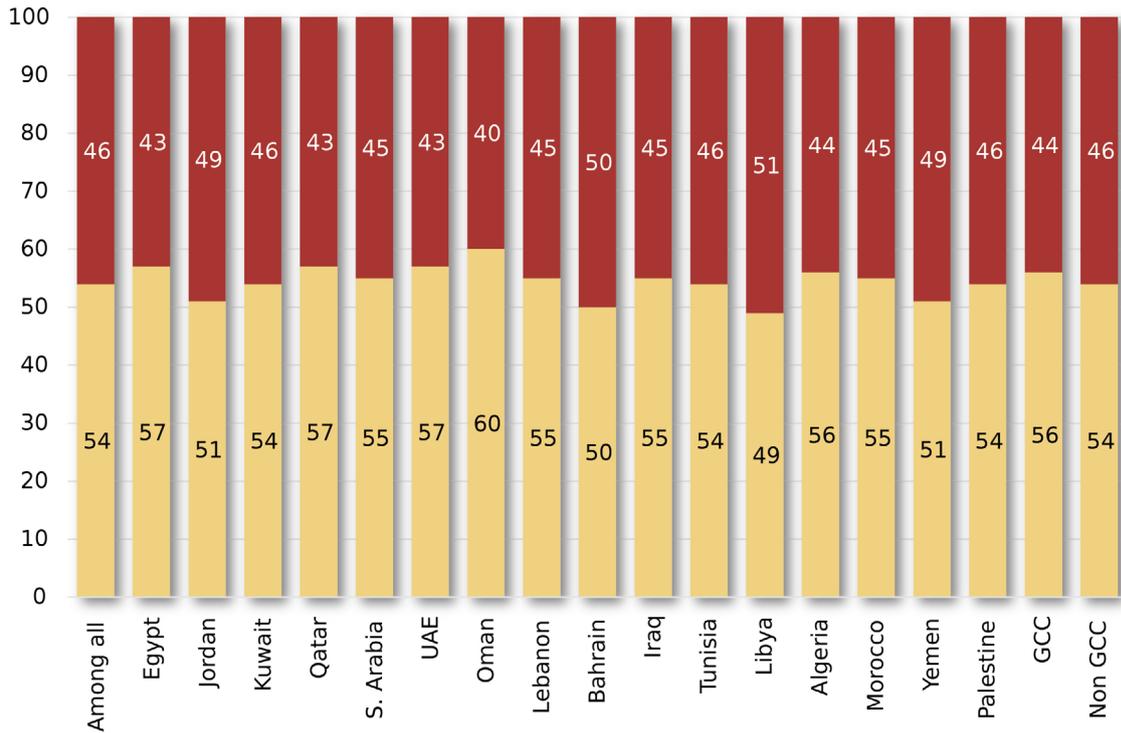
11 We understand "globalization" here as a set of processes not only involving the thickening of economic and technological interconnections but also encompassing homogenization in terms of identity and its corollary, resistance to this homogenization.

12 This section relies heavily on opinion polls and other surveys. The issue here could be that respondents to these polls may misrepresent their views or voice opinions which, in practice, they act against. While one must be cautious about accepting opinion survey results at face value, they nevertheless constitute a significant type of solid evidence that we have about identity preferences among youth in the MENA region.

**Figure 3 | Values and Beliefs by Country (2014)**

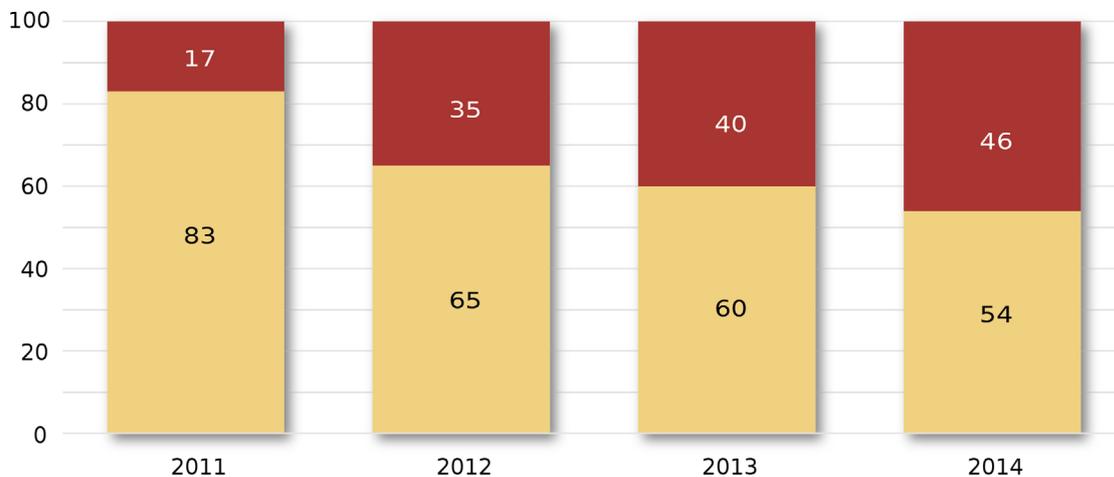
**Which of the following is close to your view?**

■ Traditional values mean a lot to me, and ought to be preserved for generations to come
 ■ Traditional values are outdated and belong in the past. I am keen to embrace modern values and beliefs



**Which of the following is close to your view?**

■ Traditional values mean a lot to me, and ought to be preserved for generations to come
 ■ Traditional values are outdated and belong in the past. I am keen to embrace modern values and beliefs



Source: CIDOB elaboration on ASDA'A (2014: 9).  
Note: Original data rebased to remove "Don't know".

Youth in the MENA region consider the Internet, particularly online media, an important means for “social interaction” (Sanchez-Montijano et al. 2017: 31) and for “cross-cultural encounters”, as shown in the Anna Lindh Foundation’s 2016 opinion poll targeting five south Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Israel, Jordan, Occupied Palestinian Territories and Tunisia) (Anna Lindh Foundation 2016). Likewise, a 2016 survey by the Media Association in Turkey reveals that online news websites and Twitter are the two most popular means for following the latest developments both at home and abroad among university students. It is thus possible to describe new media tools as facilitators of interaction with different parts of the world through which the youth produce new behaviours and vocabularies around rituals of consumption (Kraidy and Khalil 2008).

The increasing global social interaction of the youth is also reflected in the growing number of young people who are willing to participate in international education programmes, which are proliferating in the region. In Turkey, the number of young Turkish people, especially women, who prefer to study abroad is growing, as shown in the 2015 data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat 2016). In another opinion poll undertaken among youth aged 18 to 24 in eighteen Arab countries, half of the respondents reported that they wanted to study abroad (Bell 2013). In line with this trend, the English language is becoming more popular among the youth in the region. Even though a majority of Arab youth see Arabic as central to their identities, many believe that it is losing its value, and learning English is gradually coming to be viewed as significant to advancing their careers (Al Jazeera 2015).

Globalization, on the other hand, is perceived by the MENA region’s youth as bringing challenges as well as opportunities. For example, for the Arab youth, globalization appears to constitute a threat to the preservation of Arab heritage as well as youth identity and affiliation. The perception of the significance of this threat also varies according to level of education and economic well-being (UNDP 2006, Jamal and Milner 2015). It is therefore possible to conclude that there is a continuous struggle for the preservation of traditional culture and its integration with universal values. To understand the drivers behind this, it would be relevant to examine the construction of social identities in the region as far as the youth is concerned.

Although most studies show that youth in different countries have different priorities when it comes to self-identification, in general terms, family and religion inform Arab youth identities in a central way and impact their vision and priorities (Khouri and Lopez 2011). A regional survey shows that 68 percent of the youth in the MENA firstly define themselves through their religion (Fehling et al. 2015). More particularly, Arab youth tend to define themselves as Muslims before any other nationalist identity, though this varies from country to country (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies 2013). Tunisia, Yemen and Libya are among the countries where this trend can be observed. In Egypt, however, the situation is exceptional compared with other Arab countries: 67 percent of the youth in Egypt self-identify as Egyptians (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies 2013). The same study shows that “other identities (political, professional, regional, etc.) do not seem to be widely endorsed in Arab societies” (Harb 2014: 73). As shown in the SAHWA 2016 Youth Survey, it is possible to identify three main elements with which the region’s youth associate themselves (i.e. “national country”, “religious community” and “being an Arab”), which are specifically relevant for young people in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt (Sanchez-Montijano et al. 2017: 22).

Interestingly, in the wake of the uprisings the youth were also more proud of their national identities, and a significant portion believed that the recent changes in their countries would have a positive impact (ASDA'A 2013: 9-12). However, in the aftermath of the events they did not feel they had any control over the fate of their countries' institutions and governance: it was reported in the ASDA'A surveys that the high level of optimism among the youth declined significantly after 2014, with fewer respondents saying "the Arab world is better off" (ASDA'A 2015: 8-9).

In turning briefly to the cultural aspects of global identities, we see that the youth in the region refer to different outlets for self-expression such as music, which is an influential medium of social and political activism. As a recent example, music by young hip-hop and rap artists became an ebullient means for disseminating revolutionary ideas as well as more universal ones such as human rights and dignity at the time of the Arab uprisings (O'Keefe 2011). During the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011, rappers were among the first to appear on stage, making a bold move through a global music genre which they called the "show of solidarity" (Hebblethwaite 2011). The process operated in the opposite direction as well, with the protests in Tahrir inspiring and connecting with movements elsewhere, for example the Occupy Movement (Comrades from Cairo 2011). Another example can be seen in Turkey, where certain young rap groups advocate for the rights of minorities through their music. A rap trio called "Tahribad-ı Isyan" (Rebellion of Destruction) emerged in 2007 to protest the urbanization project that has taken place in Istanbul's Sulukule quarter, which is mainly populated by Roma residents and involves their relocation. The group's video clips have attracted interest and appeared on international TV channels including MTV.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, creative street art, such as graffiti, is another means of expression utilized by the region's youth, who have been using public spaces to convey their opinions and criticism through several colourful murals. Since 2011 graffiti has increasingly been adopted by the youth and has become a form of resistance through which young people have had the chance to reflect "their attitudes and opinions towards the social and political issues debated in the democratic transition phase" (Maïche et al. 2017: 34). These examples illustrate that varying forms of artistic movements under the influence of globalization have increasingly become a key element of social protest and are evidence of the connections of young people in the MENA region with global actors and trends.

#### 4. ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIASPORAS: CONNECTING GLOBAL AND REGIONAL IDENTITIES

Consistent with the main argument made in this paper, this section describes some concrete cases in which community-based identities have contributed to linking the MENA to global contexts. This is indeed the case for the sizeable and politically relevant diasporas that, originating from the MENA, are scattered globally, with particular emphasis on those based in Europe and the USA. The links between these diaspora communities and their local and domestic contexts of origin will be analysed not only in terms of their changing ideational salience – that is, their identity links becoming stronger or more tenuous, based on pre-existing bonds or new webs of relations – but also in relation to the most significant geopolitical shifts that have occurred in the MENA since 2011. A small number of those diasporas – specifically Kurds, Syrians and Christians – that are

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13 To watch the MTV documentary on the hip-hop group, please see: MTV, *Rebel Music / Turkey: Flowers of Gezi Park*, 30 April 2015, [https://youtu.be/grcse\\_8GYIk](https://youtu.be/grcse_8GYIk).

linked to these geopolitical shifts have been selected as illustrative of these connections. When considering the MENA diasporas, identity issues and politics cannot be entirely separated from the broader changes taking place in the region, with important ramifications in and from the global context. Particular attention will thus be paid to the relationship between diasporas and regional conflicts in the MENA.

Diasporas offer vibrant connections between regional and global identities.<sup>14</sup> In the age of globalization and technology, opportunities abound for identity maintenance and political mobilization among transnational communities. In particular, cheap air travel and phone calls, the Internet and satellite television have made staying in touch affordable. The proliferation of diaspora-related websites testifies to the strength of common interests and identity. These trends have also to some extent, but not exclusively, facilitated the emergence of diasporas as significant players in the international political arena, sometimes representing vital political assets for the countries of origin.<sup>15</sup> The process of self-identification with and construction of diasporas can go through different phases depending on the circumstances affecting the purported homeland. The degree of attachment – and mobilization around it – often depends on specific events, among which conflicts occupy a prominent place (Vertovec 2005).

Diasporas from the MENA play a crucial role in embedding the region in global dynamics by establishing and maintaining often intense and two-way relations between the political and social realities of their countries of origin, on the one hand, and those of the host societies and countries at large, on the other. In the latter, the dual political loyalties suggested by diasporas may raise fears and suspicions among the local population and authorities, which in turn can feed racism and forms of discrimination as well as hinder integration. As for the former, in addition to both positive (remittances in the case of labour diasporas) and negative (brain drain) economic implications, some countries – especially authoritarian ones – may resent too much political involvement by the diasporas in domestic politics. As such, authorities in the countries of origin may perceive and frame diasporas as “agents” of potential change and instability and thus try to deter them and prevent them becoming transnational political actors through top-down means, including what some authors dub “transnational repression” (Moss 2016: 481). State encroachment is likely to be most severe for diasporas with ties to home countries that have not undergone liberalizing reforms or democratization, because diasporas’ actions are perceived as traitorous by regimes that are intolerant of dissent at home (Østergaard-Nielsen 2001). As Wendy Pearlman (2016: 25) argues in her study of political fear among Syrian refugees, authoritarian state repression produces a “disposition to silence” that often extends beyond the borders of the homeland irrespective of the

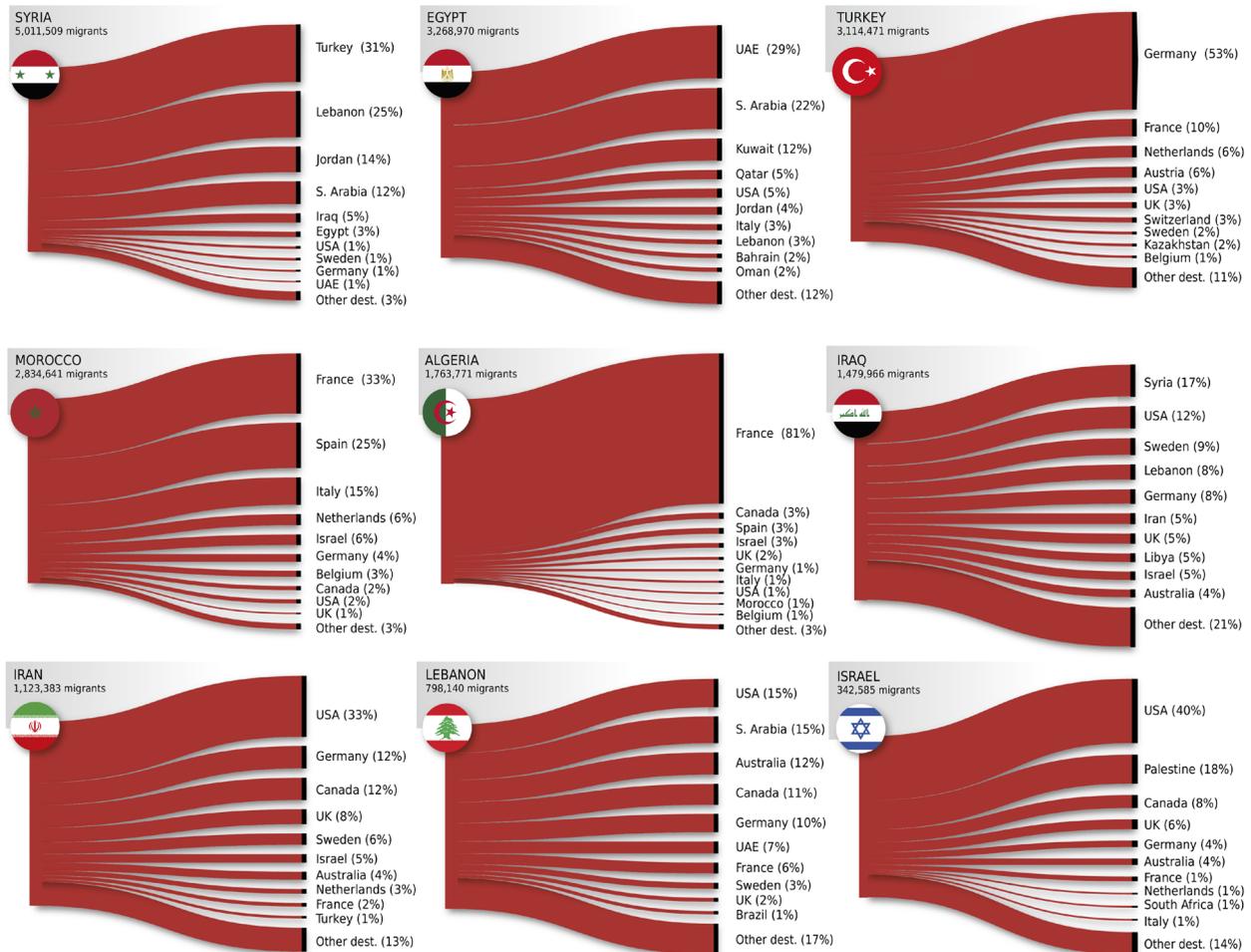
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14 “Diaspora” is a word of Greek origin meaning “to sow over or scatter”. Three core elements are necessary to speak of diasporas: a) a dispersion in space; b) an orientation towards the “homeland”, real or imagined; and c) boundary maintenance vis-à-vis a host society (Brubaker 2005: 5, as cited in Başer 2013: 6). Belonging to a diaspora entails a consciousness of, or emotional attachment to, commonly claimed origins and religious, ethnic, cultural or other attributes associated with them. These communities and the identity attributes underpinning them are neither homogeneous nor historically fixed. Most diasporas include different groups and dissenting voices, although they are often overtaken by better organized, networked and financed actors, who are often the ones pushing for nationalist agendas.

15 Other reasons for this increased politicization generally include the growth of economic resources, in the form of remittances or other assets, in the hands of individuals belonging to diaspora communities, on the one hand, and multiculturalism policies in receiving countries that have revitalized identity pride and assertiveness, on the other (Brubaker 2005).

freedoms granted by the domestic authorities of the host country. As a result, the presence of diasporas from authoritarian countries in democratic states will not automatically produce free expression or transnational mobilization, although diasporas have the potential to engage in anti-regime advocacy and focus international attention on the lack of freedoms and democracy in their home country.

**Figure 4 | Main Destinations for MENA Country Migrants: Total Migrant Stock at Mid-Year by Origin and by Major Country of Destination, 2015**



Source: CIDOB elaboration on UNDESA (2015: Table 16).

Note: The data used to produce this graph refer to the stock of migrants residing in the country of destination. They do not represent the full picture of the diaspora communities that also include second and third generations already present in the destination country.

Like other modern diasporas, communities from or within the MENA – including ethnic and religious groups such as Arabs, Armenians, Jews, Kurds, Druze, Iranians and Turks – have historically played important political, economic and cultural roles (Esman and Rabinovich 1988, Gorman and Kasbarian 2015).<sup>16</sup> Apart from their absolute and relative numbers today, their sheer

<sup>16</sup> For some of these diaspora communities, the issue of statelessness arises. This is the case, for example, for the Kurds, Druze and Palestinians who do not have a homeland. A further distinction ought to be made between legal (often

importance has been amplified by key developments taking place in the MENA, among which we will focus most prominently on conflicts, changing geopolitical dynamics and renewed waves of displacement of people across borders, including the recent migrants' and refugees' movements from and within the MENA.

As this paper deals with the post-2011 MENA region, this subsection focuses only on those diasporas which are linked to the conflicts afflicting the region: namely, the Kurdish, Syrian and Christian diasporas. Regarding diasporas and conflicts, analyses have concentrated on organized diasporas' support for insurgency and regime change as well as their contribution to political instability (Cohen 1997, Demmers 2007, Brinkerhoff 2008). Next to this, a nascent but growing body of literature seeks to balance the scorecard by focusing on diasporas' potential contributions to peace, security and post-conflict reconstruction (Başer and Swain 2008, Brinkerhoff and Tadesse 2008, Brinkerhoff 2011).

As thoroughly discussed in the project concept paper on "Re-conceptualizing Orders in the MENA Region", the order in the making in the MENA is shaped by old and new conflicts spurred by very fluid amity and enmity patterns and impacting on both domestic and regional dynamics (Soler i Lecha et al. 2016). In this regard, one of the most prominent conflicts engulfing the region since 2011 is the Syrian one. This conflict epitomizes the very powerful linkages that exist between the local, domestic, regional and global dimensions, and its roots and implications extend far beyond the increasingly fragile country borders. In view of the Kurds' connection to this conflict, as a moderate source of opposition to the rule of Bashar al-Assad and as one of the better organized military forces battling the Islamic State in Syria which enjoys the support of the West, the Kurdish ethnic identity has come to occupy a growing space in the processes of state formation and reconfiguration happening in the MENA (Başer 2013). The increasing politicization of the Kurdish population in the region observed in recent years is also the result of changes that have taken place far afield involving the significant Kurdish diaspora in Europe. This community, which is made up of a very heterogeneous group of people of various backgrounds, classes and motivations and as such reflects the political fragmentations that exist among the Kurdish communities in Turkey, Syria and Iran (split along state boundaries), has been widely defined as the best-organized diaspora in Europe.

Needless to say, this process of politicization did not take place all of a sudden over the course of the last six years, but is rather the latest manifestation of a trend of identity awareness among the Kurds in Europe as a result of two dynamics. On the one hand, the awakening or the discovery of their "Kurdishness" among what some authors have called a "previously dormant diaspora" (Koinova 2017: 10) was influenced by the more liberal and democratic context in Europe compared with their countries of origin, whereby they could express their culture and language and organize themselves without fear of repression (Başer and Swain 2010). On the other hand, the connections they have maintained with their homelands and the news of the conflict raging there have contributed to the growing mobilization of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, with the main goal of attracting attention to their common global cause of being recognized ethnically and culturally as "Kurds", firstly in Europe and then in their countries of origin. The fact that

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at the individual level) and political (more collective) statelessness, namely a feeling of being stateless precisely by virtue of their ethnic/religious identity (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2015).

this growing activism has primarily taken place in Europe, through the creation of associations, the holding of demonstrations and so forth (Başer 2013), testifies to the embeddedness of the Kurdish communities in the societal and political fabric of their host countries. In conclusion, the politicization of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe – sometimes backed by militarized groups such as the PKK – has important ramifications at the local, domestic and global levels, irrespective of the concrete results that it has so far achieved.

The brutal conflict raging in Syria and the overall instability characterizing the Middle East have contributed to two further dynamics concerning the role of diasporas from the MENA. Firstly, they have renewed the attention on and the importance of the Syrian diaspora scattered globally. The Syrian population has experienced several waves of emigration spurred by high population growth, economic factors such as low economic development and high rates of unemployment, and socio-political events, in particular the latest violent conflict, which has caused mass displacement both internally and externally (Qayyum 2011). Traditionally, the Syrian diaspora has settled in Lebanon, the Gulf countries, Europe and, to a lesser extent, the USA. The diaspora in Europe is made up of two types of people: on the one hand, the Syrian elite such as entrepreneurs and professionals who escaped the rigidities of the socialist regime during the 1950s and 1960s (Di Bartolomeo et al. 2012), and on the other hand, families who have fled the conflict that has devastated the country since 2011, the majority of whom are still stranded, by choice or by necessity, in neighbouring countries. The religious identity of this latter group is shaped by the sectarian dynamics of the conflict, whereby the greatest proportion of them are Sunnis (or Christians) escaping what they have suffered as an Alawi-imposed dictatorship. It is no surprise then that a mix of the aforementioned groups has been at the forefront of some political initiatives that were launched mainly from European countries or from Turkey to oppose the regime of Bashar al-Assad at the beginning of the conflict. This was the case, for example, for the Syrian National Council (SNC), which acted as the government in exile between mid-2011 and 2012, representing mainly the aspirations of the Syrian diaspora for a democratic, pluralist and modern Syria.

The Syrian conflict has also put into sharper relief another dynamic related to diasporas from the MENA and, crucially, the plight of Christian communities in the region and their links with Oriental Christian diasporas abroad. Without dwelling on the changing patterns of religiosity that can be observed at the level of these diasporic Christian communities living outside the MENA,<sup>17</sup> it is safe to argue that they have always represented, and continue to act as, a powerful pull factor for the Christians in the region deciding (or being forced) to leave the MENA in the light of the spread of violent conflicts and general political instability. As much as religious identity is key to understanding the stance and mobilization of Christian diasporas throughout the world, MENA-specific political dynamics in the wake of the Arab uprisings have had a fundamental bearing on the relations between Christian diasporas and their home countries. In this respect, a case in point is the Copts in Egypt. It has been pointed out that the Coptic Orthodox Church is instrumental in keeping Coptic diasporas connected to Egypt by providing fertile ground for a series of church-related charitable organizations and philanthropic activities (Brinkerhoff and Riddle 2012). The same authors shed light on the potential engagement of the Coptic diasporas in the formal political system in Egypt for the first time following the 2011 uprising. This event and the transition process it unleashed seem to have inspired new interest in Egyptian domestic politics among the often

17 To be analysed in another forthcoming MENARA paper.

young Coptic diasporas living in Western countries. However, while voting in the many rounds of elections, both parliamentary and presidential, that have been held since then has been actively pursued as a highly symbolic mechanism to nurture the links to their country of origin, joining a formal political party has been chosen by only 3 percent of the sample surveyed in the initial phase of the transition from authoritarianism. The immediate goal of such – still limited – participation in Egyptian formal politics has generally been to improve the status of the Coptic minority in the country in the face of the mounting political leverage wielded by Islamist-inspired political forces in the period 2011–13. This trend continued in the following phase (2014–16) due to the fact that – in spite of the markedly different rhetorical stance adopted by the al Sisi regime regarding the protection of the rights of religious minorities – the condition of the Copts in Egypt has not been significantly improved and the Coptic religious establishment has not been able to deliver on that either (Yerkes 2016).

The three cases (the Kurdish, Syrian and Christian diasporas) discussed in this section show the increased importance of identity factors in shaping the actions and influencing the leverage of diasporas from the MENA. They unveil the entanglement between local, regional and global dynamics fostered by diasporas, particularly at a time of widespread conflict at the domestic and regional levels. In other words, old conflict dynamics – for example the Israeli–Palestinian conflict that has often been approached through the lenses of diaspora identification and politics (Dane and Knocha 2012, Gertheiss 2016, Voltolini 2016) – and new conflict dynamics in the region have created a new form of entanglement between global and regional/local identities through diasporas from the MENA.

## CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL IDENTITIES ON MENA POLITICS AND POLICIES

This paper has argued that we cannot understand the ways in which the politics of the MENA region has evolved without taking on board the dimension of global identities, in all their conflicting aspects. Identities shape politics and policies in concrete ways. The MENA region is embedded in global ideational structures, and the “push” and “pull” of different identities, which are connected to global events, actors and processes, have impacted on the politics and policies of the region and those who interact with it.

The rise of a supposed confrontation between “Islam” and “the West” at the global level has impacted the identity and politics of the region at the international, regional and local levels in the post-2011 period. It has given the opportunity to terrorist groups, such as ISIS and al Qaeda, to present their activities as part of a cosmic struggle between “Islam” and “the West”. It has shaped the fate of particular communities in the MENA region, such as the Christians, who have been caught up in this supposed confrontation. It has also contributed to domestic divisions and polarizations in countries such as Tunisia and Turkey.

Against this destructive narrative of “Islam versus the West”, however, and its pernicious implications for the politics of the region, the paper has outlined a number of countervailing forces. The MENA region is firmly embedded in global contexts through the many links provided

by youth issues. A further global dimension is evident in the networks linking MENA communities to diasporas abroad, and the paper has shown how these links have influenced the development of conflicts that have erupted following the 2011 uprisings, particularly in Syria but also in North Africa.

The regional order of the Middle East and North Africa is characterized by both centrifugal and centripetal dynamics. The MENA geopolitical order can be analysed at three levels: the domestic, regional and international; and at that third level, there are conflicting trends between the peripheralization and embeddedness of the region (Soler i Lecha et al. 2016). This paper has concentrated on identities as opposed to geopolitics, but its conclusions with regards to the future trajectory of the regional order are clear: namely that the MENA remains firmly embedded in the global context and cannot be understood without taking this context fully on board. The evidence thus far indicates that this embeddedness will continue in the future and that the MENA region will maintain its centrality to the global order, for good or ill.

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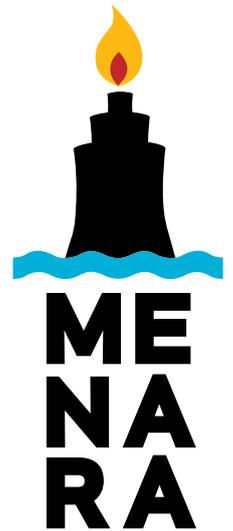
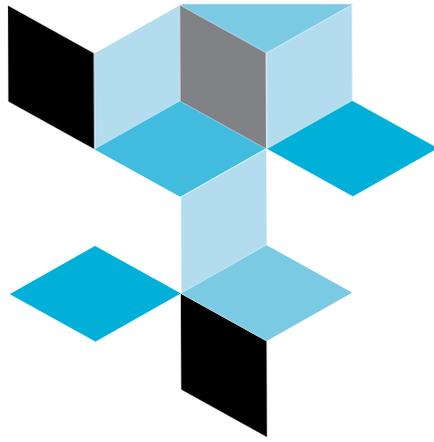
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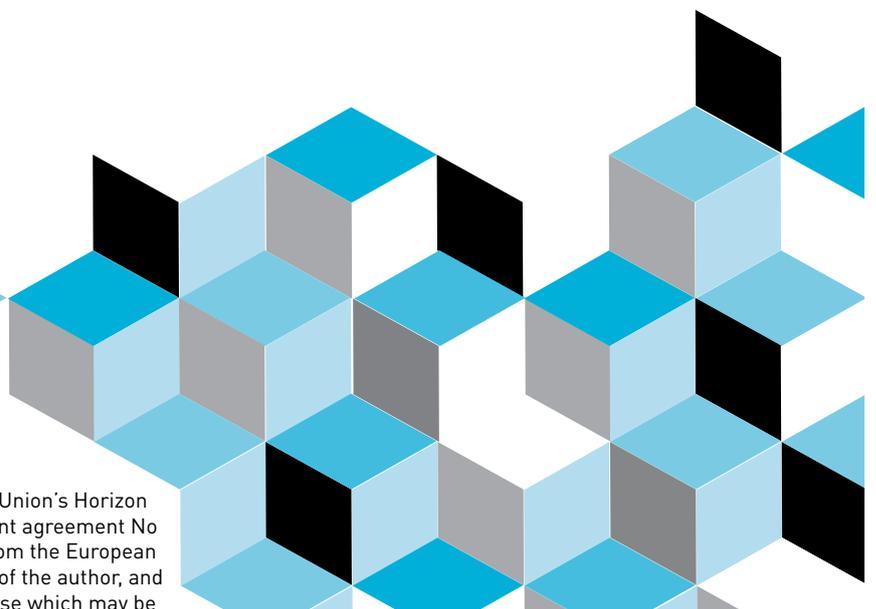
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**Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA)** is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East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

**MENARA** maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

**MENARA** is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.



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