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TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS IN THE MENA REGION

EXPLORING POLICY RESPONSES

Briefing Note

Spyros A. Sofos

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Transnational Dynamics in the MENA Region: Exploring Policy Responses

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Abstract

This briefing paper summarises outcomes of a two-day workshop held at the LSE Middle East Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, on 9–10 March 2023. The intention of the workshop was to undertake an initial examination of the implications of transnational dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and to explore potential policy responses.

Featuring a small group of regional experts, the workshop brought together ground level expertise often lacking in policy-focused debates about the region conducted in Europe and the United States, and was designed to provide ample opportunity for discussion and brainstorming exchanges on old and novel challenges in the MENA region.

It will be the first in a series of workshops aimed at unpacking the transnational processes that engender insecurity and conflict as well as those that are conducive to good governance, human security and development in the region and translating their findings into policy recommendations.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Regional security architecture has been undergoing a process of rapid transformation since the Arab Uprisings, which influences its very nature. Understanding the roots and primary characteristics of the changing security landscape requires a new lens through which to focus. We cannot see the region from the state-centric perspective to which we have become accustomed and we cannot ignore the interplay of the local, national and transnational dimensions in the development of our analyses and policies. We can no longer simply ignore climate change and environmental degradation and the societal problems they engender, nor study in isolation conflicts that are rapidly multiplying. We need to add new questions to our checklists: how a single conflict yields secondary conflicts to form conflict ‘clusters’; how conflicts within a cluster interconnect with those elsewhere; and how individual conflicts in the MENA region create security and power vacuums and involve regional and global powers.

The workshop participants attempted to draft some ideas of how policy can address such challenges. These include:

- Support for transnational collaboration especially on security and environmental issues. State-centred management of water resources and mitigation of climate change initiatives has proved to be ineffective and counterproductive.
- A more localised perspective, rather than ‘one solution fits all’ policies. Emphasis on empowering localities and communities in the sense of enabling them to devise their own local solutions with regard to resource management, food security and day to day governance.
- Governments need to sponsor national and sub-national level initiatives to resolve inter-communal and tribal conflicts. Many of southern Iraq’s tribal conflicts are triggered and driven by climate change. For climate change-mitigating agricultural projects to succeed, there need to be cohesive social networks on the ground that embrace those initiatives.
- Develop sensitivity to intra-state conflicts as no one size fits all. It is important to devise informed policy to combat intra-state conflict instead of attributing its outbreaks to merely sectarian or criminal intent. Sometimes, conflicts constitute warning signs of political dysfunction.
- Clarity of objectives and national interests. Initiatives, interventions and aid need to be the product of informed proactive engagement rather than reactive reflexes.
- A renewed and creative look at the Palestinian issue, which looks set to remain a destabilising factor within the region.

Context

This briefing paper summarises outcomes of a two-day workshop held at the LSE Middle East Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, on 9–10 March 2023. The intention of the workshop was to undertake an initial examination of the implications of transnational dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and to explore potential policy responses.

The Middle East and North Africa has become an arena for the emergence of multiple and often overlapping novel security challenges, many of them indigenous to the area, and many imported from outside. A shift in the engagement modalities of the US in the region with it increasingly outsourcing the management of regional challenges to its partners, the concomitant emergence of new regional powers (as well as Russia and China) prepared to fill the vacuum left by US disengagement from the region added to the repercussions of the 2003 Iraq war, the 2011 Arab Spring, the signing of the Iran Nuclear Agreement – or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – in 2015 (and its partial suspension soon after) have been pivotal in shaping the types and nature of the security challenges faced in the region.

Combined, these factors have increased regime insecurity and instability, the emergence of a highly volatile and tense regional climate characterised by deep-seated anxieties and animosities, and, more recently, competition among regional emerging powers; multipolarity and regional fragmentation; the mobilisation of communal identities and the sectarianisation of politics; and different, often militarised, modalities of conflict management.

In the process, state weakness has manifested itself in various ways (most notably the emergence of ISIS and other militant factions in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and beyond, posing notable challenges to these states) and culminated in a series of extra-territorially sponsored non-state actors involved in proxy wars. In their scramble for influence and security, key regional players such as Iran, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Israel have sought to support proxies affiliated to them through setting up transnational financial, economic and logistical networks, transborder illicit activities such as people, goods and weapons trafficking which, in turn, perpetuate violence and insecurity in conflict-affected states and regions.

In this volatile environment, there is a need for informed and proactive foreign policy initiatives that can address these realities, contribute to the reduction of the vulnerabilities and insecurities these entail, and lay the foundations for a more sustainable, conflict-free regional future with emphasis on human security and stability.

The MENA Region as a 'Dual Geography'

These developments make it imperative to see the MENA region both:

- as a 'geography' of borders and states and
- as one of flows, networks and fluid landscapes as, today more than ever before, traditional state actors can no longer be seen as territorially bounded but as sets of relationships and interactions that extend across borders and encompass structures, institutions and activities within the nominal jurisdiction of other states.

The emphasis in this approach is on seeing the MENA region not only through its state actors, their alliances and conflicts, but from a perspective focusing on its interstices – border areas and informal or less visible transborder activities, interactions and transactions. Thus, we look at the region as a constellation of transnational networks of diverse state and non-state actors, continually redefined by flows of people, technologies and ideas, and we seek to inform a proactive and constructive foreign policy accordingly.

Participants questioned the definition of the Middle East and North Africa as a region, pointing out several factors that have encouraged this particular geopolitical notion. First, there is the colonial imagination that posited this area as the immediate periphery of the colonial powers of Europe; second there is the assumption that the populations of this periphery are homogeneous, either in terms of religion or culture, thus ignoring the diversity and often different geopolitical and cultural centrifugal forces that are at play. As one participant put it, what does Algeria or Morocco really have in common with Yemen or Oman, given that they are ethnically and linguistically distinct, while also enmeshed in diverse networks of cooperation and conflict and facing considerably distinct challenges?

At the same time, it was suggested that different subregions have grown relatively integrated to surrounding regions. Egypt and Sudan are linked to Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa in terms of old and new routes through which natural resources, products, people and ideas move, as a result of common resources on which each depend – the river Nile, the Red Sea – and through the collaborative, competitive and conflictual relationships mutual use of these entail.

The Red Sea has connected the countries of the Arabian Peninsula to those of the Horn of Africa as well. Food security issues have prompted the affluent UAE and Saudi Arabia to invest in agriculture in the Horn and increase their presence in the region as they build infrastructure to ensure uninterrupted supply of agricultural produce and establish military bases to protect their investments. Additionally, the war in Yemen led the Gulf states to seek alliances and expand their spheres of influence across the Red Sea. The Maghreb has found itself more integrated to the Sahel than other MENA countries as the ongoing process of regionalisation is determined by the intensification of certain flows of people and goods, routes of illicit and legal trade and further types of connections.

Iraq has partly reoriented itself towards Iran, as have certain regions of Afghanistan due to religious networks and the centrifugal forces unleashed by sectarianism, corrupt and ineffective governance, while a series of security and economic reasons have prompted Turkey to forge relations with remote partners in North Africa, the Red Sea and the Gulf.

The workshop discussions reflected concerns with approaches that treat the region as inherently violent, despite external influences, and instead suggested analyses that integrate regional dynamics with the impact of external actors and dynamics – noting violence as a primarily global phenomenon – while, at the same time, conducting more work on the relative autonomy of certain actors and the proliferation of emerging powers within the region.

Participants pointed out that certain aspects of this fluid geography engender militarisation, violence, societal insecurity, state fragility, widening inequality gaps and authoritarian modalities of governance, while other aspects encourage demands for community empowerment, inclusiveness and reduction of inequalities. It is thus important to:

- (i) explore different modalities of engaging with space and politics, of understanding the complex socio-political entanglements that shape the MENA region;
- (ii) see borders not as enclosing the region, but as extending it;
- (iii) identify and map key networks and actors impacting on the region by generating challenges and vulnerabilities, or improving the capacity to mitigate them;
- (iv) explore ways to mitigate the challenges arising from these regional dynamics and ways of translating them into policy.

Reconfigurations of the Region

The regional security architecture and its attendant transformations have reflected the processes of rapid change since the Arab Uprisings. Understanding the roots and primary characteristics of the changing region requires a different understanding of its geography. As the challenges (and opportunities) that emerge (such as climate change and environmental degradation or the conflicts emerging in the region) are not always contained within state borders and thus cannot be addressed through individual state policies. The state-centric perspectives we have got accustomed to deploying are not sufficient. We need to pay more attention to local, national and transnational dimensions and the flows of people, capital, ideas and know-how that connect them and give shape to them in the development of analyses and policies.

To better understand these transformations and ruptures, we have to examine at least three separate domains of analysis:

The Geopolitical Architecture of the MENA Region

We need new concepts and methodologies to address these post-2011 conflicts through both analysis and policy. Pursuing uninformed policies can do further harm, especially as we are dealing with a fluid environment and a new generation of non-state conflict actors that interact with both regional and global powers. Among the several attempts to make sense of the geopolitical architecture of the region the following elements recurred during the discussion:

- The region is changing in terms of polarity. There have always been different types of polarised systems in the MENA, especially after the establishment of postcolonial states in the inter-war and post-WWII periods. A new development, largely the product of the long end of the Cold War, is a difference in polarity. The US is changing its grand strategy as China is emerging as its new rival and potential threat, and, in the process, Washington is altering its policy toward the Middle East. The post-US era will be characterised by the emergence of a multi-polar MENA region, with the US increasingly distracted by other issues and/or declining as the dominant power.
- A closer look at the major powers in the region (Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia, perhaps with the UAE and Qatar) reveals the increasing autonomy they have in the context of the international system. Israel has shattered the myth of its unbreakable alliance and confluence with the US, not only pursuing policies that have undermined US interests and strategic directions, but also forcing particular courses of action upon major powers regionally and globally. The war in Ukraine has revealed deep rifts between regional powers and the US and provided the strongest indication to date that emerging powers in the region have carved out space for flexibility and a range of opportunities in the pursuit of their interests.
- Understanding the different sub-components of the region, including non-state actors and sub-identity groups, is vital to composing a comprehensive image, allowing us to focus on the intricate realignments that are taking place.
- We cannot be sure whether multi-polarity will endure in the region or if it is a characteristic of a transition to something new. If states cannot establish a new regional order, we will probably witness an anarchical period where civil wars in the region (like those that have erupted or remain latent in Syria, Libya, Yemen or Iraq) could become the norm. Other possibilities might include bipolarity – as the workshop was taking place, news broke of the China-brokered agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to explore avenues of cooperation.

- The multipolarity in the region has been accompanied by its militarisation. Many countries have invested in increasing their military, defence and security capabilities and broken with previous conduct in regional policy. Turkey has upgraded its military capabilities and directed this ‘outwards’ after a century of emphasis on the protection of its borders and internal security. It has invested in its domestic arms industry and gained some degree of autonomy in terms of its ability to procure materiel. This process has been integral in the shaping of Ankara’s extraterritorial strategy with regard to Libya, Syria, Somalia and Qatar. Saudi Arabia, which had historically relied on the US for its defence and has been one of the main exemplars of what has been called ‘chequebook diplomacy’, is another textbook example of an emerging power investing in its own defence industry. The blockade of Qatar by its main Gulf Cooperation Council allies, the dispatch of troops to Bahrain to support its ruler and quell the popular protests that shook the small Gulf state, and the direct participation in the war in Yemen were precursors of this change, with its multiple repercussions likely to impact the future links of Saudi Arabia or the UAE to the US defence architecture.

Interstate Geopolitical/Geostrategic Competition

- Syria is a prime, though not unique, example of regional powers (such as Turkey and Iran and – in more subtle ways – Israel) competing with and fighting against each other through recourse to proxy wars. In these attempts to pursue influence in the region, state and proxy actors often engage in acts on the ground that create more tensions and rifts or alter the character of contested areas. An example of this is the practice of demographic engineering in many locations in Syria as Sunni, Shi’a, Arab, Kurdish and even minority Alawite, Assyrian and Yezidi populations are in flux and are used by Turkey or Iran to change the demographic makeup of, for example, northwest Syria or the Aleppo area.

Intrastate Conflicts

- Casting our gaze to these is necessary if we are to make sense of the transformations of geopolitical security configurations. Focusing on local actors such as the Kurdish PYD or sectarianised communities such as those in Lebanon, their interactions with regional as well as external actors and how all of these position themselves in terms of competition and collaboration can give us a more complete understanding of the larger geopolitical architecture of the region. Focusing on non-state actors, and the interaction between actors, their role in the production of insecurity (state insecurity, regime insecurity, societal insecurity) or community security, their increasing militarisation and sectarianisation – but also the turn to alternative forms of community organisation and governance – are undermining the traditional political order and forcing us to rethink notions such as sovereignty, territoriality, mass mobilisation and the like. This emphasis on the sub-state level and sectarianisation should not be taken as affirming the ‘essence’ of such divides or accepting the identitarian politics that have been the product of colonial and neo-colonial ways of looking at the region, but rather demonstrating the fact that these are made relevant at a moment of instability and reconfiguration of the regional system’s balance of power.

Proxy Networks: The Case of Iran's Proxy Strategies

Participants took some time to discuss the lessons learned through regional proxy wars, the role of proxy networks and the complex interactions of local actors and proxy forces on the one hand and their regional sponsors on the other. The discussion revolved firstly around Iran's proxy network and strategies, and the considerable diversity of the different communities and forces which this network is comprised of. It is important to understand that such networks of allies and proxies have different functions, playing a role in deterrence but also facilitating smuggling networks. What Iran is interested in (and other regional actors who lack the experience and sophistication of Iran's approach try to emulate) is building a hybrid and multi-layered network of allies in the region: para-statal actors (paramilitary militias) or state actors (state agencies and ministries). For Iran, para-statal and state actors play a complementary role. Some of these operate on a local or sub-national level to carry out certain missions such as smuggling or clearing an area of dissidents, and others operate on the national level to shape a country's security architecture. Many of these actors have an additional economic role and some exclusively focus on economic transactions, often acting as the conduit to evade and bypass sanctions.

Iran values diversity in its allies and proxies, as though co-optation is better facilitated if proxies have a similar or compatible religious identity, it can be useful if alliances are based on shared religious and strategic orientations, but with actors who are also rooted locally. In such cases, as with Hamas and other predominantly Sunni groups across the MENA region as well as in Afghanistan and Pakistan, such alliances allow Iran to build enclaves of governance models on a local level that guarantee sub-national loyal networks. A key pathway to this is having ideologically indoctrinated armed groups that function as social providers. The ability of such groups to exercise organised violence but also to root themselves in local settings and become central community institutions results in sustaining patchwork governance states (thinly centralised states), allowing Iran to intervene through entrenched para-statal actors. This dysfunctional decentralisation is key to understanding the increasingly powerful narcotics trade sweeping the region and run by actors situated in the Iran-led regional axis.

With particular reference to the networks of illicit economic and commercial activities performed by such actors, such as money laundering, narcotics and the arms trade, it is important to focus on the combination of macro and micro drivers.

Macro drivers: The Caesar Act sanctions on Syria, sanctions on Lebanese Hezbollah, sanctions on Iran-allied paramilitary militia groups in Iraq, coupled with decades-long sanctions on Iran, particularly under the Trump administration in the US, with low global oil prices (2020–21) has led to Tehran's financial incapacitation, driving and accelerating the narcotics trade in the region and beyond.

Micro drivers: To understand this emerging trans-national and trans-regional network we need to look at local drivers and local interests, but also the legacies of smuggling as a result of porous borders. Climate change, water scarcity and internal displacement are affecting local elite and militia interests, resources and human capital, reorienting these towards illicit trade and trafficking. Examples from two of the worst-affected regions

– Iraq and Syria – are indicative of this. Climate change and water scarcity in these areas has led to the decline of agribusinesses, forcing farmers to either cultivate less water-intensive crops or participate in the narcotics supply chain by cultivating opium poppy and khat crops. Militias (including the Islamic State during its territorial control stage), levy informal taxes from farmers, whether financial or in-kind. As patterns of crop production change or decline, so do the income formulas of armed groups which increasingly coerce farmers into the narcotics business or force them to abandon agricultural areas and look for resources elsewhere. Internal displacement, in turn, is a factor in increasing illicit trade in the region as segments of unemployed and vulnerable populations can be co-opted or coerced into taking part.

Rethinking the State

Another issue raised during the workshop was that of state fragility. Participants expressed the view that our conceptual tools in this respect are not fit for purpose and thus cannot allow us to understand ongoing developments in the region. Some participants offered the notion that all states in the MENA region can be characterised as failed states and that all actors are trying to play the role of sub-imperial powers while they are facing imminent collapse. Egypt is a pertinent example, where an isolated regime is treating an increasingly impoverished and disenfranchised population with contempt and disinterest. As the country's industrial infrastructure is sold by its armed forces to investors from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the ability to exercise social policy through the imperfect formula of offering employment in the sector is eroded while development initiatives have been deprioritised in favour of investments in spectacular mega-projects of dubious benefit to the population.

Others mentioned Israel and the crisis of legitimacy the current government is facing, combined with the systematic exclusion of and discrimination against its Arab citizens. Many Israelis speculate that, every day, a high-tech company in Israel is closing shop or relocating abroad. Israel cannot afford economic haemorrhaging in this respect as it is the high-tech sector that keeps the Israeli economy afloat.

The region, it was suggested, is one where the elites are the enemies of the people, so much so that we cannot attempt political analysis without talking about the egotism, brutality and theft of the elites in the region, a repressive apparatus that made possible the Arab Spring, Iran's Green Movement and the current popular demonstrations in Israel. In addition, in geopolitical terms, one can observe the decline of all central gravity in the region. Lebanon is facing consecutive crises and the Saudi government, that had offered some stability in the country in the past, remains disinterested – Riyadh no longer appearing to be concerned with the Levant. Egypt faces insurmountable problems but, for the first time in its history, it is unlikely that the Saudis will step in to prop up the current government. There are already debates taking place in Saudi Arabia about the scenario of a post-state collapse, after a recent dress rehearsal when the Saudi and UAE governments refused to inject cash into Egypt's central bank during the latter's negotiation of its latest IMF loan in 2016.

The future of the Gulf countries is increasingly associated with the rising Asian economies, which is why Gulf elites feel they can afford to sign the Abraham Accords with Israel in contrast to several years before, when such initiatives would have undermined their public legitimacy.

The conversation moved to the need to refine our concepts to make sense of these changes as ‘sovereignty’ and ‘state fragility/failure’ need to be further nuanced, while ‘regime fragility/insecurity’ needs to be defined in view of the recent developments.

Environment, Resources and Insecurity

The conversation then moved to the issue of the environment and the challenges that climate change and environmental degradation are causing, which largely remain unaddressed. Water conflicts are likely to escalate and multiply as the region is facing dwindling supplies and suffers from bad management of the available water. The Israel-Palestine dispute over water resources and the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam are already sources of contention in the region, while hydroelectric projects in Turkey have reduced the marshes in the Iraqi south to desert.

Food insecurity is also increasing among poor and rich alike. While the poor are left to their own devices, the rich invest in scarce resources. Gulf interest in the Horn of Africa is partly motivated by this; Saudi Arabia has bought fertile land along the Nile while the UAE has done likewise in Sudan, in countries where the population faces dwindling incomes and food supplies. Agricultural workers are displaced in the process from lands that they cultivated and need to feed their families. Gulf countries invest in protecting their investments and, as the UAE has done, often militarise regions to this end. As one country tries to end their own food insecurity, it gives rise to a peculiar prisoner’s dilemma, as it makes other parts of the region more insecure (with the destabilisation in East Africa one example).

Conclusions

The workshop participants then attempted to draft some ideas of how policy could address such challenges. These include:

- Support for transnational collaboration especially on security and environmental issues. State-centred management of water resources and mitigation of climate change initiatives has proved to be ineffective and counterproductive.
- A more localised perspective, rather than ‘one solution fits all’ policies. Emphasis on empowering localities and communities in the sense of enabling them to devise their own local solutions with regard to resource management, food security and day to day governance. Tailoring climate change-resistant agricultural projects for each locality based on its unique needs will not only support sustainability but will also reduce illicit trade, narcotics flows and other illegal activities.
- Governments need to sponsor national and sub-national level initiatives to resolve inter-communal and tribal conflicts. Many of southern Iraq’s tribal conflicts are triggered and driven by climate change. For climate change-mitigating agricultural projects to succeed, there need to be cohesive social networks on the ground that embrace those initiatives.
- Develop sensitivity to intra-state conflicts as no single approach is always appropriate. It is important to devise informed policy to combat intra-state conflict instead of attributing merely sectarian or criminal motives to any outbreak. Sometimes, conflicts constitute warning signs of political dysfunction.
- The FCDO and other Western foreign ministries and agencies should be clear about their objectives and national interests. Initiatives, interventions and aid need to be the product of informed proactive engagement and not reactive reflexes.
- A renewed look at the Palestinian issue which will remain a destabilising factor. The Palestinians have endured a total collapse and do not have the capacity to negotiate, but this should not prevent the search for a workable solution, resuscitating the voices on the Palestinian side who are calling for an equitable resolution. The West is in many ways legitimising and producing discourses sympathetic to the Israeli position, which in turn seeks to eliminate any voice from the Palestinian side. There is potential for Western countries to take more constructive action: instead of repeating references to the already dead two-state solution, it should invest in creating new ways of addressing the coexistence of Israelis and Palestinians.

Workshop Participants

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PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civicness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University. PeaceRep is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK.

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Cover Image

Satellite view of the King Fahd Causeway, a series of bridges and causeways connecting Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

Source: Universal Images Group North America LLC / Alamy Stock Photo

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