



## MENARA Working Documents

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# REPORT OF THE BRUSSELS FOCUS GROUP

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On 22 June 2018, a group of experts including members of the Brussels-based think tanks, Belgian diplomats, EU policy advisers and academics met at the Egmont Institute on the latter's invitation to discuss salient issues related to the geopolitical order in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which is the core topic analysed by the EU-funded MENARA Project. The discussion focused on bottom-up dynamics and the role of regional and external players in the MENA and assessed the implications of these phenomena for the EU and its policies towards the region.

### **SESSION I: OLD AND NEW CONFLICTS. THE CURRENT CHAOS AND REGIONAL RIVALRIES. SOCIAL DYNAMICS AT PLAY. DRIVERS OF CONFLICT AND OPPORTUNITIES. IMPACT ON EUROPE.**

Participants discussed the socio-ethnic background and social dynamics of the MENA society in connection with the current chaos and rivalries. There was disagreement on whether the people of the Mena region were previously a homogeneous society or a multilayered society.

According to one argument, a homogeneous society evolved and broke up because non-religious ideas were proposed as an alternative to the political system that was in place. These non-religious ideas came from the French Revolution and were supposed to bring about a natural process leading to democratization and declining unrest in the Middle East.

The second strand emphasized the multi-ethnic society, in which conflicts are as old as the Middle East itself. The modern Middle Eastern state formation process was, in this view, disrupted by 19th-century European intervention and the creation of protectorates based on the Sykes-Picot Agreement and other colonial designs following the dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire. The current chaos and regional rivalries in the Middle East are a result of the unnatural borders drawn by Europe, which resulted in the division of ethnic groups into multiple states (e.g. Kurds). One has to take into account two layers, however: the perception of the popular voice and the perception of the local elite.

According to some participants, one of the drivers of conflict has been the rise of the digital world. As long as people in the MENA did not know what was happening in their own region and elsewhere, they were happy. When TV and multimedia became accessible to people in the Middle East, they compared European prosperity and institutions with their own situation, which fed and structured their discontent. This view may, however, be a too simple representation. The Internet in the Middle East is still subject to restrictions imposed by the governments, so people only get to see what the regimes want them to see. Even with VPN connections, people tend to turn their antennas to either the Gulf or Russia.

## **SESSION II: THE CURRENT REGIONAL ORDER AND THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS. THE ORDER THAT SHOULD EMERGE IN VIEW OF EUROPEAN INTERESTS AND VALUES.**

Participants were unanimous in arguing that there are no fixed alliances in the region, which is exemplified by the fact that Saudi Arabia and Russia are antagonistic in Syria but act together as bullies when it comes to the energy market (e.g. by setting prices).

Europe would benefit most from regional players with an economic approach towards Europe and a deradicalization policy. The new regional leaders, however, are not pushing for these reforms due to a lack of interest or because some of the MENA governments now in place are simply too weak. Europe has often preferred stability over radical change, as in Egypt under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi or the current political dynamics in Saudi Arabia.

Non-state actors: as far as EU interests are concerned, a common view on terrorist/radical organizations must be adopted, including a common understanding of their impact. How does the EU act to counter their narratives?

Should we look to local or sub-regional solutions, which would be less ambitious but perhaps more realistic? Even among Arabs there are different views. Avenues to identify success stories can be found, but one must distinguish what is possible to achieve from utopian visions.

Middle Eastern regional players are using international powers to support their foreign policies. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia are imposing their own foreign policy on neighbouring countries with the support of the USA in return for economic and strategic assistance. While no one knows what long-term impact the current US administration will have, the EU should be focusing on its possible role as a mediator in the Middle East. The European External Action Service (EEAS) is reviewing its structural divisions of the Mena region. The current structures of the EEAS are hindering more adequate responses to sub-regional conflicts. As far as policies are concerned, the intention is to create a single instrument which will increase the EU's efficiency in strategic approaches to the Mena region. This more efficient approach will also be needed by the end of the Cotonou agreements (2020), when a new comprehensive strategy with developing countries, among them several countries of the Mena region, has to be presented. The concept of the "neighbours of the neighbours" has to be operationalized further.

## **SESSION III: EUROPE'S STRATEGIC ABSENCE/SELF-IMPOSED IMPOTENCE. LESSONS LEARNED FROM PAST POLICIES. WHICH CHALLENGES IS THE EU BEST PLACED TO CONFRONT?**

The crises in Syria, Yemen and Libya are going to create big problems for Europe for the next twenty to thirty years. These problems stem from the fact that fractures and cleavages at the level of European societies are heightened by the trends in the MENA. The EU should keep an eye on these trends (at the socio-economic, political and military levels) as they have the capacity to influence European societies and create disruptions for the EU. The fact that some governments

in the region are growing increasingly authoritarian is bad news for the EU.

Current European strategy mainly consists of Europe positioning itself on a global scale as a reliable partner for the Mena region. Reliable in this case means being a trustworthy partner on a political (e.g. Iran deal) and economic level (e.g. EU agreement with Tunisia). This makes Europe a predictable player for other global powers, such as Russia and China, who are equally keen to preserve and/or develop their interests in the Middle East.

Russia is gradually expanding its influence in the Middle East, especially in countries such as Syria and Iran. The military presence and Russian support to the Assad regime resulted in a permanent air base in Latakia next to the already existing permanent naval base in Tartus. While Europe is focusing on the Syrian refugees entering its territory, Russia is expanding its military power in the eastern Mediterranean, which may pose a threat to the EU's southern border. Overall, Russia aspires to fill gaps in an opportunistic way while at the same time benefiting from a mercantilistic strategy that gives precedence to energy and arms deals. Most recently, Russia (as well as the USA) has requested financial support from the EU for the reconstruction of Syria, but the EU has doubts about its intentions and its ability to bring peace in Syria. The stabilization of Syria will subsequently call into question the Russian military presence in the country, which may lead to a partial withdrawal of Russian troops – which does not necessarily mean, however, a reduction of its geopolitical influence in the eastern Mediterranean. Russia can indeed live with a frozen conflict in that part of the region, provided that “useful Syria” is in the hands of Bashar al-Assad. As part of its strategy towards Syria, Russia has also voiced its criticism of the Saudi-led coalition that is fighting in Yemen against the Houthis, pointing its finger towards the civilian losses there as a result of the coalition military operations, thus making a parallel between Yemen and Syria.

Iran also relies on Russia, at the economic level in particular, after years of heavy sanctions by the West. The broad accessibility of Russian academic education for Iranian students and the impressive Russian diplomatic presence in Iran – despite often functioning below the radar – show the importance of Iran to Russia as its Persian Gulf ally. Despite the growing influence of Russia, filling the void created by the West, the EU and Russia do collaborate on the radicalization dossier and in the hunt for perpetrators.

China, on the other hand, is a relatively new player in the Middle East. While it initially focused on Eastern Africa (Djibouti), the Middle East has become increasingly important in the context of the One Belt, One Road Initiative. In order to pursue this project, the Chinese have established a presence in the Middle East. In order to protect their economic interests, Middle Eastern political stability has become a concern of the Chinese as well. Although the Chinese keep a low profile in political decision-making on Middle Eastern regional stability, they have already demonstrated their military presence and effectiveness in the Mediterranean and the Gulf with the rapid evacuation of their citizens from Yemen and Libya when conflicts were escalating. In its approach to discussing Middle Eastern political matters with the EU, the Chinese government also focuses on the topics of jihadism, Islamist terrorism and ISIS, because the Chinese feel they have a similar problem in their western provinces and therefore share common ground with Europe on this issue.

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The EU's relations to other players in the region tend to be increasingly transactional in nature: the EU, or certain groups of European countries, can develop friendly and cooperative relations with some regional and external players on certain issues and at the same time be enemies on other dossiers (e.g. the case of Algeria was raised). Overall, the EU's limited political and military involvement in the Mena region in recent years, as well as the shortcomings of its EU Neighbourhood Policy, has created among Mena countries the belief that the EU was not able or willing to deliver on its commitments.



**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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