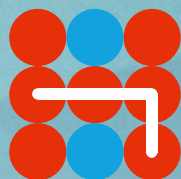


Hybrid CoE Trend Report 7

JUNE 2021

Trends in MENA: New dynamics of authority and power



Hybrid CoE

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New dynamics of
authority and power

Hybrid CoE Trend Reports highlight trends and theme clusters related to hybrid threats. They provide multiple perspectives on current security challenges and generate academic discourse on the topic. They aim to distinguish between what constitutes a threat, what appears to be a threat but is not necessarily one, and what has the potential to become one. Trend Reports are outcomes of the meetings of Hybrid CoE expert pools, composed of top-ranking experts from different Hybrid CoE Participating States

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Hybrid CoE is an international hub for practitioners and experts, building participating states' and institutions' capabilities and enhancing EU-NATO cooperation in countering hybrid threats, located in Helsinki, Finland.

The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.

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Foreword

The European security environment is becoming increasingly complex in nature. In addition to the traditional military domain, security threats are trickling down to all aspects of social life as democratic states encounter threats from actors who are willing and more able than ever before to attack domains not perceived as belonging to the core field of security, using a creative combination of multiple tools to achieve their goals and push their strategic interests in unacceptable ways.

Analyzing emerging trends related to security and highlighting long-term undercurrents will help in understanding the changing security environment, and in being better prepared to respond to potential hybrid threats in the future. Being able to read trends makes it easier to place current events in context and to distinguish between what is a threat, what looks like a threat but is not necessarily one, and what has the potential to become a threat in the future.

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) operates expert pools to support its Participating States and the activities of the Centre's Communities of Interest. The expert pools work as a forum for exchanging information, building connections and gaining a comprehensive understanding of the trends under a specific theme. These trends are then linked through Hybrid CoE to potential hybrid threats. The expert pools are an ongoing process and provide content for the Centre's work.

Engaging with the expert pools and the related activity is in line with Hybrid CoE's founding

Memorandum of Understanding, which states that Hybrid CoE is to act as a hub of expertise, to offer collective expertise and to encourage strategic dialogue. This activity should adopt a multidisciplinary and academic approach. Thus, the purpose of engaging with the expert pools is not to pursue a single truth, but rather to provide multiple perspectives on current challenges, to provide perspectives on the academic discourse on the topic, and to serve as a background for policymakers. The added value of this work is that it examines the subject from a hybrid-threat perspective. Each Participating State, the EU and NATO can then consider which facets of knowledge will be most useful from its own perspective.

This report is based on seven case studies written for Hybrid CoE by Millicent McCreath and Valentin Schatz, Gunther Hauser, Susan Khazaeli, Umberto Profazio, Samuel Ramani, Jarno Välimäki, and Yahia Zoubir. Hybrid CoE and the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union organized a virtual workshop on 25 March 2021, during which a draft trend report was presented and discussed. Based on feedback from expert-pool members and practitioners, the final report was compiled by Hybrid CoE Director of Research and Analysis Hanna Smith, Senior Analyst Maxime Lebrun and Coordinator Jarno Välimäki. To complement the report, a workshop on migratory flows as a hybrid threat instrument will be organized in cooperation with the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Introduction

Security concerns arising from and existing in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are of high importance to both the EU and NATO as well as their member states. Some dynamics in the region are more pertinent to specific sub-regions, while others are clearly regionwide. This Hybrid CoE Trend Report considers the whole region, including the Gulf, North Africa and the Levant, but focuses on the implications of the dynamics of this region for Europe's southern neighbourhood, the southern Mediterranean region.

Background

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been in turmoil since the popular uprisings, commonly known as the Arab Spring, rocked the region from late 2010 onwards. The 2001–2003 US military interventions in the Middle East, and particularly the dismantling of the Ba'ath party in Iraq, had already left power vacuums and empowered Iran in the region.¹ The US leaving Iraq in 2011 also created further instability. However, it was the rise of indigenous protest movements during the Arab Spring, driven by internal factors, that challenged authoritarian models and highlighted pre-existing governance issues.

The current political and security crises that pervade the MENA region are largely legacies of a series of dynamics initiated by these uprisings. Existing and emerging governance deficiencies resulting in fragmented states, protracted civil wars, and political and security vacuums give new and existing actors increasing latitude to project power and seek influence in the region.

For decades, the people in the region had either supported or endured authoritarian regimes in exchange for security and economic and social

goods. By the early 2000s, the sustainability of this system had significantly eroded due to rapid population growth, massive youth unemployment, global economic competition, bad governance, corruption, and a new information environment made possible by satellite TV, the internet and mobile technology. Many Arab states had become increasingly inefficient and ineffective at providing jobs, social services and other essential goods that they had to some extent provided previously. The governments were not able to mitigate these negative developments, but rather introduced reforms that further exacerbated the problem, such as reduced government hiring. This generated increasing grievances against the regimes, which escalated when the people took to the streets to protest against their governments.²

The first mass protests took place in Tunisia in December 2010. As the protests soon spread across the region, many of the Arab governments resorted to coercion, which produced a cycle of dissent and repression. In the worst cases, the harsh government response eventually led to the collapse of state institutions, and even to civil wars and the growth of terrorist organizations. As even basic governance continued to deteriorate, other actors such as sectarian militias and extremist groups began to increasingly offer protection.³

The governance failures and the mass protests severely eroded the authority of centralized governments, leaving political and security vacuums for other actors to exploit. In the worst cases, such as Syria and Libya, the governments lost the ability to exercise sovereignty in parts of the country. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad's government, the opposition forces, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have all had their own territorial

1 Frederic Wehrey, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Jessica Watkins, Jeffrey Martini and Robert A. Guffey, 'The Iraq Effect: The Middle East After the Iraq War', RAND Corporation, 2010, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND_MG892.pdf. Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 24 June 2021.

2 Tamara Cofman Wittes, 'Want to stabilize the Middle East? Start with governance', *Brookings Markaz*, 22 November, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/11/22/want-to-stabilize-the-middle-east-start-with-governance/>.

3 Ibid.

enclaves, where they exert sovereignty.⁴ Similarly, in Libya, competing governments have coexisted in Tripoli and in Tobruk.⁵ Across the region, from Libya to Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and other countries, multiple armed non-state actors have directly challenged the state's hegemony over legitimate violence.⁶

Meanwhile, the US's strategic rebalancing of its forces towards the Asia-Pacific region, and its undermined credibility due to the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan since the early 2000s, have caused a drawdown of US and NATO presence, and diminished the attention they have paid to the MENA region and the Mediterranean, particularly since the presidency of Barack Obama. However, the Arab uprisings and their aftermath reconfirmed the continued strategic importance of MENA globally. Both Beijing and Moscow view the region as strategically important irrespective of the weakened US presence, but also due to the global rivalry between great powers.

During the popular uprisings, Arab monarchies proved to be more durable than their republican counterparts, largely due to their oil revenues and small populations, shifting the regional power balance towards the Gulf monarchies and non-Arab states such as Iran.⁷ Two rival regional fronts of states with convergent interests started to emerge. The first group is a counter-revolutionary front including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which opposes popular uprisings and the democratization process and aims at maintaining the regional status quo. The second is a revisionist front including Iran, Qatar and Turkey, which pushes for change and promotes alternative governance, often with an important role for political Islam. The two fronts are not alliances, and nor do their 'members' necessarily act in support of each other in a given arena. Indeed, there are also significant nuances and differences. Yet the dynamics of a power competition between revisionist and counter-revolutionary forces is taking place on multiple fronts, also supported by external actors such as Russia.

This Hybrid CoE Trend Report highlights a series of four trends in regional political and strategic dynamics that have emerged from these developments. How these trends interact is complex and dynamic, manifesting in different ways in different states and parts of the region. The general consequence is a regionwide political and strategic instability and unpredictability that enhances the effectiveness of hybrid threat activity in the region. In addition, regional instability can be used to achieve effects in other states and regions using hybrid threat means and ways. These consequences will be explored in more detail in the concluding analysis.

Trend 1 – Eroding state authority: Failures of governance across the region have resulted in the twin collapse of security and central authority since 2011. In the worst cases, such as Syria and Libya, protracted civil wars have empowered numerous armed groups, which compete and even try to enforce sovereignty. Governance failures eroding state authority, and security vacuums continue to create openings for external actors to take advantage of the situation and increase their own status and influence in the region.

Trend 2 – New dynamics of power competition: The region has witnessed a lack of hegemonic power as the US has decreased its presence there. From the turmoil of the Arab Spring, revisionist and counter-revolutionary fronts have emerged to compete for power. The new dynamics of power competition increases unpredictability and allows competing powers to test red lines. The evolving situation also makes it difficult for the EU and NATO to formulate coherent and appropriate responses.

Trend 3 – Decreasing respect for legal agreements and norms: The trends of erosion of state authority in a context of increased power competition result in regional jurisdictional frameworks being either stretched, contested or outright disrespected. This trend results in a complexification of

4 Galip Dalay, 'Break-up of the Middle East: Will we see a new regional order?', *Middle East Eye*, 14 September, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/break-middle-east-will-we-see-new-regional-order>.

5 Louise Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty in the Middle East: myths and realities', *International Affairs*, Volume 93, Issue 4, (2017): 789–807, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix122>.

6 Thanassis Cambanis, Dina Esfandiary, Sima Ghaddar et al., *Hybrid Actors: Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2019).

7 Fawcett, 'States and sovereignty', 789–807.

the maritime environment, which opens up possibilities for action and stretching the interpretation of legal norms and principles regarding the regulation of maritime areas.

Trend 4 – Narrowing space for a democratic model of governance: The rise of alternative models of governance narrows the space for liberal democratic models in the region. Continued poor governance, unmet expectations and the ensuing

insecurity increase the potential for radicalization. At the same time, China appears to offer “no values attached” alternatives to Western-led development and investment projects. The narrowing space for democracy duly pushes MENA states away from cooperation with the Western states and towards authoritarian models, which allows malign actors to challenge the EU, NATO and their member states in the Mediterranean region in multiple domains.

1. Eroding state authority

While the borders in MENA have proved to be tenacious, internal order across the region is under enormous pressure. Central governments and established regimes are in many countries no longer the only contenders for sovereignty. In the worst cases, such as Syria and Libya, this has led to protracted civil wars.

Governance failures and eroding central authority

The twin collapse of security and central authority due to governance failures has been the driving force in the Middle East since 2011. Syria and Libya remain in protracted wars, but other countries in the region also continue to face the risk of political upheaval. For example, the citizens of both Algeria and Sudan forced leadership changes in 2019.

As mentioned above, governance failures prior to the Arab Spring had already eroded the credibility of the governments across the region. The governments of Arab states have continued to fail to put in place adequate reforms to address corruption and good governance, alleviate youth unemployment, and improve welfare provision. For example, failure to organize rubbish collection in Beirut resulted in massive protests in 2015, while power cuts and lack of water prompted unrest in southern Iraq in 2019. In general, the demographic bulge and economic dysfunctions have worsened. These problems exist throughout the region and are exacerbated by the impact of low crude oil prices and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ Similarly, in some areas, climate change has already worsened the living conditions, reduced the crop yields and encouraged migration to urban centres, exacerbating the problems.

The governments' response to the Arab Spring uprisings further eroded security and state authority in several countries. The repressive responses aiming to secure regime continuity intensified societal divisions and further weakened state institutions, even generating violence and war. With weakened institutions, a worsened security situation and continued governance failures, multiple armed groups have emerged, particularly in Libya and Syria, to provide security as substitutes for the state.⁹ Running contrary to people's aspirations, the region has not turned towards democratization but rather faces authoritarian leaders, some of whom have decreased authority.

In fact, Tunisia is the only country that has moved significantly towards democratization among the countries that experienced major upheaval during the Arab Spring. By late 2019, Tunisia had already held its second free and fair presidential election since the revolution. Yet the economic situation in the country has remained poor, and polls suggest that the population is increasingly disappointed with the democratic model. It is noteworthy that thousands of Tunisians have joined ISIS in the years following the uprisings, coming largely from the marginalized and poor southern region.¹⁰

The case of Tunisia highlights the fact that countries in the democratization process can face severe risks. Poverty and political alienation, and governance failure in general, create openings for authoritarian tendencies, particularly if the state is not able to fulfil the hopes instilled in the people by the democratization process. For example, according to Arab Barometer Wave 5 data, there is an inverse correlation between levels of freedom to criticize the government and trust in the government.¹¹ Thus, countries in the democratization

8 Anthony H. Cordesman, 'The Greater Middle East: From the "Arab Spring" to the "Axis of Failed States"', *CSIS Working Draft*, 26 August, 2020, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200824_MENA_Axis_Failed_States.pdf

9 Wittes, 'Want to stabilize the Middle East?'

10 Al Jazeera, 'After the "almost 100 percent" defeat of ISIS, what about its Ideology?', *Al Jazeera*, 8 May, 2018, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/node/1579>

11 Abdul-Wahab Kayyali, 'The Arab World's Trust in Government and the Perils of Generalization', *Arab Barometer*, 23 June, 2020, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/06/the-arab-worlds-trust-in-government-and-the-perils-of-generalization/>

process also face the risk of further erosion of state authority.

External actors taking advantage

The governance failures, erosion of state authority and security vacuums have created openings for external actors to take advantage of the situation and increase their own status and influence in the region. While the uprisings often promoted or appealed for democratization and/or liberalization, the external actors have acted against it. Foreign policies of malign external states have played a role in supporting incumbent regimes or other authoritarian actors and crushing or reversing uprisings.

Russia has transformed itself from an isolated and insignificant player into an indispensable geopolitical stakeholder in Libya since 2011 through an intervention on behalf of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), but also by balancing between multiple actors. Coinciding with the decisive military intervention in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Moscow has been able to return to great-power status in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. In both Syria and Libya, Russia has taken advantage of the erosion of state authority by supporting authoritarian actors under the claim of protecting and restoring sovereignty. For example, in August 2020, Sergei Lavrov said Russia needs to "restore the state's sovereignty and maintain Libya's territorial integrity".¹²

China and Iran have also been able to exert increasing influence in the region. Weak governance has resulted in Shia groups, particularly in Lebanon, Iraq and elsewhere, relying heavily on direct or indirect Iranian support. Unemployment, poor infrastructure and related issues have allowed China to significantly increase its economic presence in MENA, which could in the future result in serious dependencies on China among the countries of the region.

Besides military, political and economic means, some external actors try to take advantage of other

domains as well. Disinformation has been one of the noteworthy methods amid low levels of press freedom and a fragmented political landscape. For example, Russia has reportedly orchestrated sophisticated information operations in Libya to support Haftar but also others as potential rivals in order to divert attention away from or increase support for Moscow's interests.¹³

Non-state actors as proxies

Non-state actors have also arisen in weak states to challenge state sovereignty. The greatest opportunities have come in states and societies that have experienced prolonged conflicts, such as Syria, Iraq and Libya, where they can fill the governance and security vacuums left by receding states.¹⁴ Whether originally founded by external actors or not, foreign powers can then use them as (semi-) proxy actors to further advance their own goals.

In Iraq, on the brink of collapse in 2014, the Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU) emerged from several smaller paramilitary groups. The strongest groups within the PMU have been closely allied with Iran, and some of them take direct orders from the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).¹⁵ The best example of Iranian use of non-state actors is still Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is fully funded by Iran and has indistinguishable policies from those of Iran. As Lebanon is a weak state with widely distributed centres of authority, Iran has been able to exert influence there through Hezbollah for decades. The influence through Hezbollah has further expanded into Syria since the uprisings in 2011, as Iran and Hezbollah have been Bashar al-Assad's only truly reliable supporters even though Russia will also continue to play a major role as his ally.¹⁶

Russia has deployed direct proxies external to the region in the form of private military and security companies (PMSCs) such as the Wagner Group. Russian PMSCs were first reported in Syria in late 2015, and in mid-2017 Moscow also started

12 Al-Marsad, 'Lavrov: Restoring Libya's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity is Our Goal', Al-Marsad, 11 August, 2020, <https://almarsad.co/en/2020/08/11/lavrov-restoring-libyas-sovereignty-and-territorial-integrity-is-our-goal/>.

13 Thomas D. Arnold, 'Exploiting Chaos: Russia in Libya', CSIS, 23 September, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/exploiting-chaos-russia-libya>.

14 Cambanis et al., *Hybrid Actors*.

15 Ibid.

16 On the reliability of Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, see for example: Randa Slim, 'Why Assad's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah will endure', *Atlantic Council*, 6 February, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/why-assad-s-alliance-with-iran-and-hezbollah-will-endure-2/>.

to deploy Wagner mercenaries in Libya. In Syria, the mercenaries have resolutely supported Bashar al-Assad, while in Libya they support General Khalifa Haftar's eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA). In Libya, it is noteworthy that the Wagner Group has allowed Russia to take advantage of the opportunities that arose from the state's breakdown and the dissonant policies of the Western powers in the aftermath, while maintaining plausible deniability and low cost of operation.¹⁷

These non-state actors have been instrumental for external powers, particularly for Iran, not only in projecting military power, but also in increasing influence in other domains. In Iraq, the groups close to Iran have developed political platforms, competed in elections and administered economic policies, making themselves "a fundamental limit on the state's ability to exercise its functions".¹⁸ In Lebanon, Hezbollah basically provides all the services to its constituents that a state would normally provide through charitable foundations, runs schools, clinics, hospitals and many other facilities, and has established itself as an indispensable part of Lebanese party politics. Hezbollah also promotes itself as the protector of Shia and Arab independence and connects all of its services to its ideology.¹⁹ In this way, all of these actions support Iran's goals in the country.

Conclusion

External actors in the Mediterranean have various goals. Russia wishes to secure access to the oil fields in south-eastern Libya and China aims to secure energy supplies from North Africa. Both Russia and China are also looking to expand their maritime presence, with Moscow aiming to establish a naval base in Libya, and China investing in ports across the Mediterranean. Iran wants to maintain its access to the Mediterranean through Syria and Lebanon, and China sees the Mediterranean as an entry point to the trade in the EU. However, all of these goals are aimed at increasing or maintaining presence and influence in the region,

thus providing these actors with regional status.

The trend of eroding state authority, largely due to weak governance, and challenges to sovereignty provide multiple openings for these actors to seek to achieve their goals. In states that have experienced the most severe fragmentation, such as Syria and Libya, external actors already use non-state actors and proxies to interfere in several different domains with plausible deniability in order to advance their goals. As governance remains weak across the region, further fragmentation and erosion of authority can continue to provide additional opportunities for external actors.

Issues to monitor and recommendations

- The EU should help the states of the MENA region to improve and achieve inclusive, transparent, effective, and accountable governance that will last and enable internal stability. Cooperation with local authorities is important, and the effectiveness of the promotion of good governance should be regularly evaluated.
- Malign states are quick to take advantage of emerging governance and security vacuums. Adversaries can also try to weaken governance and deepen the erosion of state authority to create further space for hybrid threat actions. The EU and NATO should find ways to ensure that the Mediterranean countries do not become dependent on external authoritarian actors.
- The use of proxies by adversaries in order to maintain plausible deniability is likely to increase. The EU and NATO should work to enhance their ability to attribute the actions of proxies when serving the interests of patrons.
- Low levels of press freedom in the MENA region open up opportunities for both internal, regional and external actors to propagate disinformation. This can be used as a weapon to discredit those actors that aim to improve governance and increase transparency in the

¹⁷ Anna Borschevskaya, 'The Role of Russian Private Military Contractors in Africa', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 21 August, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/08/the-role-of-russian-private-military-contractors-in-africa/>; Hamza Meddeb, 'Opportunism as a Strategy', *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 22 October, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77542>.

¹⁸ Cambanis et al., *Hybrid Actors*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

region. Supporting initiatives to increase press freedom and counter disinformation can help reduce the risk.

- The EU, NATO and their member states should pay more attention to countries that have genuine democratization processes, as in Tunisia.

Democratization processes are challenging and create high-level hybrid threat potential.

Furthermore, countries in the process towards democracy are very vulnerable, and a backlash is highly likely without strong support from other democratic countries.

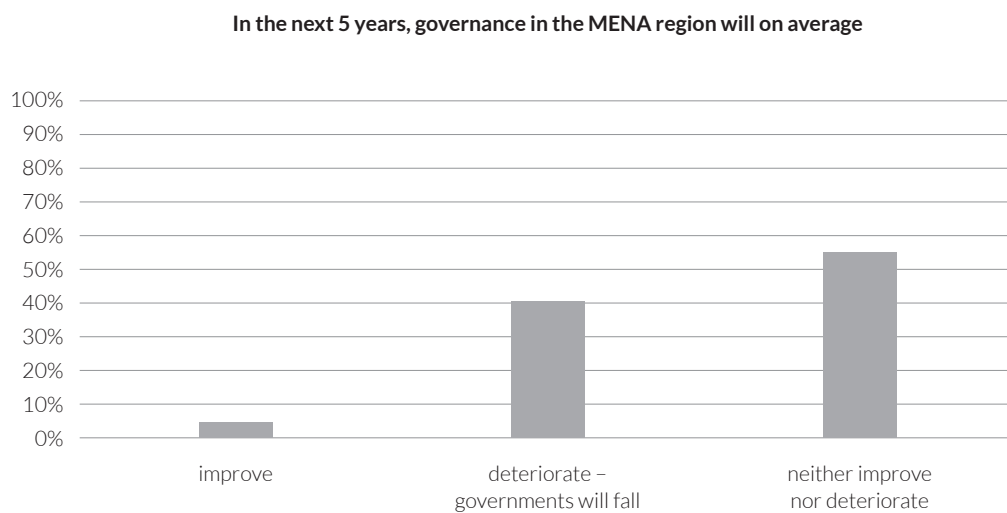


FIGURE 1: Expert and practitioner opinions on the development of governance in the Middle East and North Africa. On 25 March 2021, Hybrid CoE and the Portuguese EU Presidency organized a workshop on “Trends in Europe’s Southern Neighbourhood” with experts and practitioners. The participants were also asked a series of multiple-choice questions. The figures present the results of the polls. N=47.

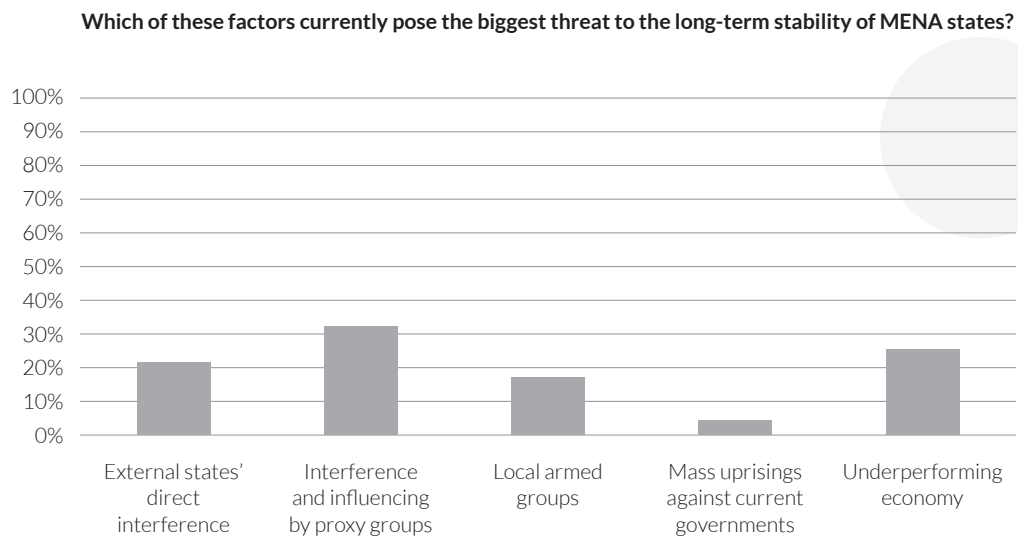


FIGURE 2: Expert and practitioner opinions on threats to states in the Middle East and North Africa. N=47.

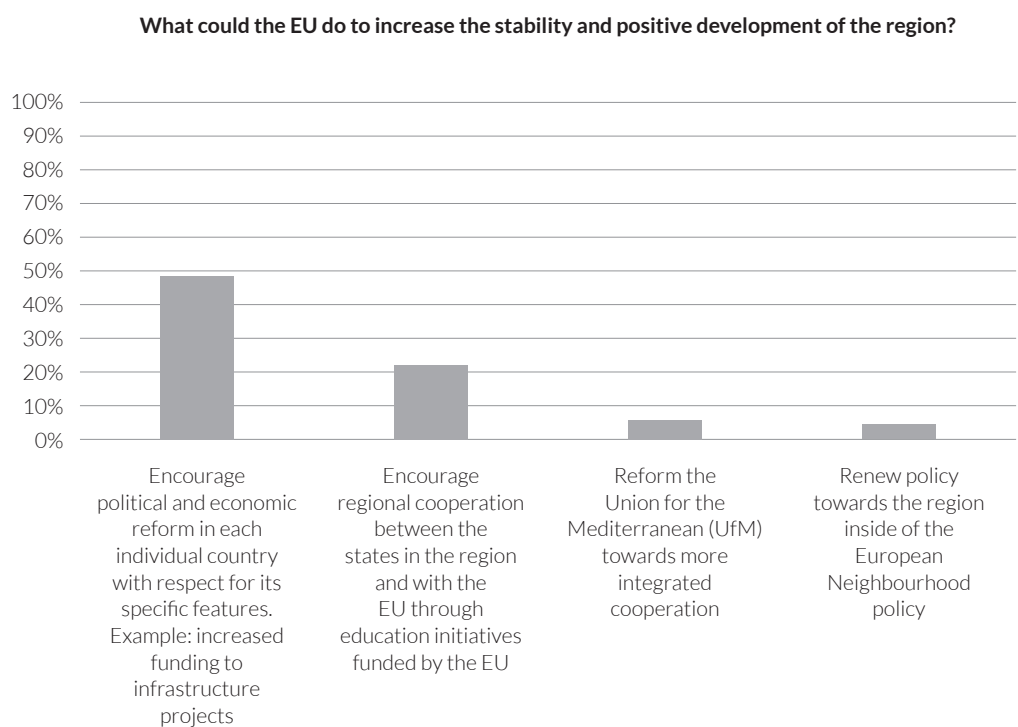


FIGURE 3: Expert and practitioner opinions on the EU's possible actions in the Middle East and North Africa. N=45.

2. New dynamics of power competition

In parallel with internal turmoil, the regional and external power balance and influence in MENA has started to shift since the beginning of the century, and particularly since the early 2010s. The region has witnessed a lack of hegemonic power as the US has decreased its presence in the region. From the turmoil of the Arab Spring, revisionist and counter-revolutionary fronts have emerged to compete for power. Despite significant nuances and differences, counter-revolutionary powers such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE generally aim at maintaining a regional status quo that has benefitted them, while revisionist powers such as Iran, Qatar and Turkey challenge that status quo, push for a change and promote alternative governance. This has resulted in openings for external actors to project power, as well as in increased unpredictability as some competing powers test red lines.

Revisionist vs. counter-revolutionary fronts

The power competition is now playing out in several different arenas in the Middle East. This has transformed conflict zones such as Syria and Libya into proxy wars, in which major regional powers seek a balance of power or even regional dominance at the cost of stability and prosperity.²⁰ Indeed, regional interventions have altered, protracted and intensified the conflicts. In Libya, Turkish support for the Government of National Accord (GNA), albeit coming after Haftar's aggression against the UN-recognized government, and the support of Russia, the UAE and Egypt for the LNA have effectively locked the conflict in stalemate and resulted in a massive military build-up in the country.

This new power struggle between states with counter-revolutionary and revisionist goals risks not only further prolonging existing conflicts, but also creating new ones and reigniting old or frozen ones, which can result in further conflict spillovers and entanglements. For example, closely connected to the conflict in Libya, in 2019 Turkey and the GNA signed a memorandum of understanding, which also included a controversial delimitation of the maritime boundaries. The MoU was rejected by the European Council as illegal and contrary to the sovereign rights of third states and provoked strong protests by Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, which all sent letters of protest to the Secretary-General of the UN. As a result of the MoU, tensions increased in the Eastern Mediterranean, linking the conflict in Libya with delimitation issues in the Eastern Mediterranean and also increasing the number of parties involved in the Libyan conflict.²¹

The lack of an established hegemon in the region has also empowered some regional states to test red lines, to see how far they can push without major consequences. A diplomatic effort has recently been made by counter-revolutionary states to push Morocco to take a stance against the revisionist powers. In 2020, the UAE, Bahrain and Jordan all opened consulates in Laayoune in Western Sahara, implicitly recognizing Moroccan sovereignty in the occupied territory.²² Meanwhile, since 2018 Iran has been blamed for multiple attacks against oil tankers and oil facilities in the Strait of Hormuz as well as in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which is a strategic link between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.²³

20 Ross Harrison, 'Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective', *Al Jazeera*, 2 September, 2018, https://studies.aljazeera.net/sites/default/files/articles/reports/documents/d5c3525d0759469eb1569983a729a408_100.pdf

21 Ahmed Helal, 'For Turkey, the Libyan conflict and the eastern Mediterranean are inextricably linked', *Atlantic Council*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/for-turkey-the-libyan-conflict-and-the-eastern-mediterranean-are-inextricably-linked/>

22 The International Court of Justice (ICJ) proclaimed in 1975 that there was no Moroccan sovereignty on the territory, as did the Court of Justice in the European Union (CJEU) in 2018.

23 Humeysra Pamuk, 'Exclusive: U.S. probe of Saudi oil attack shows it came from north - report', *Reuters*, 19 December, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-iran-exclusive-idUSKBN1YN292>; Cordesman, 'The Greater Middle East'.

The power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia further exemplifies this issue. Both states are competing for influence against each other across the region. Besides the war in Syria and the attacks in the waterways of the Gulf, this is most pronounced in Yemen, where Iran backs Houthi rebels and Saudi Arabia leads military campaigns against them. However, the competition extends much wider. For example, in 2017 Saudi Arabia (together with the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) severed diplomatic relations with Qatar, partially due to Qatar's relations with Iran.

From the regional perspective, the wars in Syria and Libya as well as the Saudi Arabia-Iran confrontations have duly signified a new dynamic. The regional powers now compete on multiple fronts, whereas the conflicts of the previous decades were mainly shaped by the Arab-Israeli wars and the wider world power interests.

External powers

The authoritarian tendencies that exist among both groups, together with the decreased US presence and the EU's difficulties in making its voice heard, have provided a suitable environment for external authoritarian powers such as Russia and China to also take advantage of the power competition. Russia has been an important player in both Libya and Syria and has participated directly in this regional competition. Both Syria and Libya present Moscow with significantly improved access to the Mediterranean, particularly through its naval facility in Tartous and the goal of establishing a naval base in eastern Libya. This also gives Russia an improved position from which to threaten the southern European EU and NATO members. Russia will have greater capability to strike these countries militarily, but also to try to influence them through other methods.

Although China has not intervened in the conflicts, it has taken advantage of the power

competition. While China remains primarily interested in economic opportunities in MENA, and especially securing energy supplies, the regional turmoil and the decreased role of the USA in providing security in the region have heightened Chinese concerns over instability and insecurity. These concerns are partially behind China's push for naval modernization and investments in port facilities across the Mediterranean.²⁴ Although these investments are commercial in nature for now, their potential to be used for security cooperation in the future cannot be ignored.

In any event, China has already taken its first steps towards security cooperation in the region. In 2018, two Chinese naval ships visited Algeria.²⁵ There has also been an increase in Chinese PMSCs in MENA. Significantly, China has decided to sell drones only to countries that are not aligned with the revisionist front, such as Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. This further implies that China may take sides in the power competition, leaning towards the counter-revolutionary front.²⁶ However, the recent 25-year cooperation agreement signed by China and Iran, although remaining vague, highlights China's strong interest in wider influence in MENA, and Sino-Iranian security cooperation cannot be discounted either.

All in all, external involvement has further deepened the root causes and manifestations of violence in the region. It has led to a deeper fragmentation and entrenchment of the forces on the ground. As a result of external involvement, Libya has for instance turned into one of the largest remote warfare battlefields in the world. For both China and Russia, this involvement can also buy future goodwill and extend their influence in the region. Russian alignment with regional states, and Chinese and Russian provision of arms and security cooperation allows them to build continuously strengthening relations with the states in the region at the expense of EU and NATO states.

24 John McLaughlin, 'The Great Powers in the New Middle East', in *Taking stock of the Middle East in 2015*, ed. Jon B. Alterman, CSIS Report, 2015, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150306_McLaughlin_RockyHarbors_chapter3.pdf.

25 Chinese MOD, 'Chinese naval ships visit Algeria', Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, 9 January, 2018, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/services/2018-01/09/content_4802058.htm.

26 Camille Lons, Jonathan Fulton, Degang Sun, and Naser Al-Tamimi, 'China's great game in the Middle East', *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief*, 21 October, 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east.

Conclusion

The clash between counter-revolutionary and revisionist fronts, which emerged during the Arab Spring, continues to intensify. At the same time, the internal turmoil has affected the external dynamics of the region, which is now faced with a dangerous polarization with severe negative consequences, particularly in conflict zones such as Libya. The rise of regional competition and the decline in US presence have also given external authoritarian actors such as Russia and China room to exert influence in the region, further complicating the situation and protracting conflicts as well as increasing the risk of new conflicts.

At the same time, the challenging and volatile situation makes it difficult for the EU to formulate a coherent and appropriate response. There is no clear and comprehensive strategy on reacting to the changing power dynamics, which has been further highlighted by the failure of the Berlin Process to prevent a military build-up in Libya. Similarly, confrontations between Turkey and some other NATO states, diverging interests and differing strategic visions among EU and NATO states, and the entanglement of the Libyan conflict and the Eastern Mediterranean dispute hinder the ability of both the EU and NATO to make decisions and plan actions that all member states can stand behind.

Issues to monitor and recommendations

- Shifts in the power balance in one conflict may have major implications for other conflicts, or cause further conflicts to flare up. The counter-revolutionary states' renewed interest in

Western Sahara highlights the risk of ever-widening competition for influence. NATO and the EU need to be able to react quickly to such new developments, for example with effective early warning systems.

- Multiple fronts, numerous actors and multi-faceted adverse actions in the region can blur the situational awareness and hinder the decision-making capability of the EU, NATO and their member states. They should work towards gaining shared situational awareness and establish ways to cooperate despite internal disagreements.
- The EU, NATO and their member states have stakes in regional stability in the Middle East and should seek solutions that enable the conflict zones to stabilize. Both organizations on behalf of their member states should increase crisis management cooperation in the region and complement each other's efforts. For example, they could collaborate in assisting disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), and security sector reform (SSR) in fragmented contexts like Libya.
- The future development of military capabilities in the region should be closely monitored. The proliferation of weapons and the potential for increased sophistication pose risks of further escalation.
- Iran and China recently signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement. The agreement highlights the potential for China to break Iran out of international isolation, also increasing its regional influence. The development of this Sino-Iranian cooperation should be closely monitored.

3. Decreasing respect for legal agreements and norms

The report identifies a trend of decreasing respect for legal agreements, norms and established practices. This trend can be observed as a result of the complexification and increasingly contentious nature of maritime environments, the Mediterranean included. The geographical configuration of the Mediterranean is intricate and complex, while the recent discovery of large oil and gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean increases the stakes of geo-economic competition. This trend opens up possibilities for unilateral action or subjective interpretation of legal principles regarding the regulation of maritime areas.

Legal framework

The Mediterranean is characterized by the intricacy of its geography. Coasts are complex and secluded, as no point in the Mediterranean reaches beyond 200 nm from the nearest coast. Maritime delimitation of the continental shelf and the EEZ is highly contentious in some parts of the Mediterranean. As regards Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) proclamations, the Mediterranean until recently had a legacy of underutilization of these maritime zones by coastal states.²⁷ However, some coastal states tend to exercise restraint in proclaiming their EEZ or part of it pending the conclusion of delimitation agreements in areas with overlapping claims. In practice, about 50% of the Aegean Sea remains qualified as high seas given that coastal states have neither proclaimed an EEZ

nor extended their territorial waters beyond the present width of 6 nm. The exercise of this right is a point of friction between Greece and Turkey, the latter threatening Greece over the extension of its territorial waters in the Aegean beyond 6 nm. Likewise, in September 2020 tensions escalated between the two countries because of the research activities carried out by Turkey in an undelimited maritime area in the Eastern Mediterranean claimed by both countries.²⁸ Coastal states in the Mediterranean tend to create *sui generis* zones in terms of fisheries and environmental protection with specific rights and duties, but which do not exhaust those rights and duties laid out in the EEZ framework in UNCLOS. Further, some crucial coastal states (Turkey, Libya, Israel) are not parties to UNCLOS – although most of the UNCLOS provisions are in fact rules of the customary international law. As a result, some maritime boundary delimitation disputes are not amenable to the settlement of dispute mechanisms or international arbitration under UNCLOS.²⁹

The legal regime of the Straits is a crucial point in power relations in the Mediterranean. The waterways connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits (the Straits) and the Marmara Sea have been a source of concern for Russia's naval development. The potential closing of the Straits and the access of foreign ships into the Black Sea have a geopolitical implication for Russia as it is a vulnerability that can turn into a limitation to its strategic outreach.

27 Donald R. Rothwell, Alex G. Oude Elferink, Karen N. Scott, Tim Stephens (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Law of the Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 607. In the past decades, some Mediterranean States have proclaimed an EEZ, either through EEZ delimitation agreements or through national legislation (e.g. Greece, Egypt, Cyprus, Israel, France, Spain, Algeria). Italy has concluded an EEZ delimitation agreements with Greece. Constantinos Yiallourides, 'Part I: Some Observations on the Agreement between Greece and Egypt on the Delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone', *EJIL:Talk! Blog of the European Journal of International Law*, 25 August, 2020, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/18969-2/>; Décret n° 2012-1148 du 12 octobre 2012 portant création d'une zone économique exclusive au large des côtes du territoire de la République en Méditerranée [Decree No. 2012-1148 of 12 October 2012 creating an exclusive economic zone off the coast of the territory of the Republic in the Mediterranean], 12 October, 2012, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000026483528/>; U.S. Department of State, 'Spain: Maritime claims and boundaries', Limits in the seas No. 149, 23 November, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/LIS149-Spain.pdf>; Presidential Decree No. 18-96 of 2 Rajab A.H. 1439, corresponding to 20 March A.D. 2018, establishing an exclusive economic zone off the coast of Algeria, Official Gazette of the Republic of Algeria No. 18, 21 March, 2018, https://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/DZA_2018_Decree_1896_en.pdf (translation).

28 Deutsche Welle, 'Turkey threatens Greece over disputed Mediterranean territorial claims', 5 September, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-threatens-greece-over-disputed-mediterranean-territorial-claims/a-54828554>.

29 Rothwell et al., *Oxford Handbook*, 611.

The Straits are regulated under the Montreux Convention of 1936, which establishes the principle of free international transit of warships in peacetime. The Convention further establishes four situations: peace; war in which Turkey would be a belligerent; war in which Turkey would be neutral; and a situation in which Turkey would feel threatened by an imminent threat of war. In the latter case, Turkey would have the discretion to block military traffic and would be able to impair international merchant ship navigation in certain ways.³⁰ The perspective of restrictions to navigation in the Straits is a structural concern for Russia, not only in military terms but also in terms of oil transit. An indication of this can be found in the controversy following the maritime traffic safety regulations introduced by Turkey in 1994 – after a near collision between two oil tankers in the heart of Istanbul. It established a Traffic Separation Scheme for safety reasons. The 1994 regulations posed a series of fundamental issues for Russia, as this effectively meant bypassing the importance of oil tanker traffic in the Straits to the benefit of an oil pipeline running from Azerbaijan to Turkey and Europe.

Another feature of the legal framework of the Mediterranean is that proclaiming an Exclusive Economic Zone is left, according to UNCLOS, to the discretion of the coastal state. A state's *de jure* jurisdiction in its EEZ is exclusive. If a state *de facto* neither proclaims an EEZ nor exercises sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the latter, other states cannot exercise it. It therefore creates a void in terms of jurisdiction in significant parts of the Mediterranean where areas of lawlessness can arise.³¹ This means that there is considerable potential for destabilization.

Competition for energy resources

The jurisdictional and legal framework of the Mediterranean Sea reflects the main challenges brought about by the growing importance and contentious character of the maritime domain.

The provision in UNCLOS which was adopted in 1982 for the extension of the territorial waters up to 12 nautical miles as well as the sovereign rights and jurisdiction granted to the coastal state in the EEZ go along with a trend of increased built infrastructure in the sea areas and maritime continental approaches: more and more infrastructures are being built in the sea in terms of gas and oil exploration, solar and wind power exploitation, but also fishing stations. The exploitation of these maritime riches engenders a complexification of the maritime environment. It offers opportunities for state and non-state actors to approach the coasts undetected, and it also complexifies the work of the detection of ships and different actors in a given area. The situation can duly be exploited for strategic aims.

The presence of large gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean, with claims to them by Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt and Cyprus, is a potential risk area. The recent attempts at unilateral exploration or EEZ delimitation agreements show a decreasing practice of restraint pending the settlement of maritime delimitation disputes. A recent example of this is the November 2019 Turkey-GNA of Libya MoU, which has been rejected by neighbouring states as null and void, as well as by the European Council as illegal.³²

Active prospecting for energy resources in other states' EEZs is a further indication of a decreasing practice of restraint in coastal states' modes of coexistence in the Mediterranean. Such resources give the coastal states concerned the opportunity to approach energy independence and perhaps acquire a better market share. The perspective of emerging gas suppliers is at odds with longstanding or more recently established gas suppliers. A strategic interest of Russia in particular is to prevent the emergence of a new gas supplier in a power position that would compete with Russian gas, gradually rendering Russian gas pipelines obsolete. Rosneft and Novatek are, for instance, involved in Egyptian and Lebanese

30 Serge V. Pavlyuk, 'Regulation of the Turkish Straits: UNCLOS as an Alternative to the Treaty of Montreux and the 1994 Maritime Traffic Regulations for the Turkish Straits and Marmara Region', *Fordham International Law Journal*, Volume 69, Issue 1, (1998): 961-1001, <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ilj/vol22/iss3/10>.

31 Rothwell et al., *Oxford Handbook*, 611.

32 Reuters, 'EU leaders to reject Turkey-Libya deal - draft statement', 11 December, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-summit-greece-turkey-idUSKBN1YF228>.

prospection zones and production capacities.³³ Disputes over resource exploitation provide Russia with a delay in the exploitation of those resources that would compete with its own. This corresponds to a fundamental strategic interest of the Russian regime.

Complexification and contestation of the maritime environment increases tensions in the area

UNCLOS provides that states which have overlapping EEZ claims may resolve their disputes through a bilateral agreement. However, the EEZ delimitation agreement concluded between Turkey and the GNA of Libya, which are not parties to UNCLOS, has increased tension in the area to the extent that the two countries have no overlapping maritime zones and the delimitation fully disregards Greek islands as well as the sovereign rights of other coastal states in that area.

The history of the regulation of maritime and coastal areas varies between the principles of control and freedom: control of the coastal states over the resources located close to their territory; freedom of navigation, passage and exploitation of maritime resources by other states. The complexification of the maritime environment – due also to the increasing number of built infrastructures³⁴ – led to hardening the division between these two principles. The Montego Bay Convention of 1982, by providing that coastal states have the right to extend their territorial waters up to 12 nautical miles and by granting these states sovereign rights and jurisdiction within a proclaimed EEZ, effectively took account of the growing importance of the logic of control, while preserving freedom of navigation and passage into territorial waters and EEZs.

Conclusion

The application of the principles of the international law of the sea in the Mediterranean is rendered complex by the overlapping claims of the

various coastal states. The Mediterranean Sea is a typical example of the challenge of delineating between sovereign control of the coastal state and support for freedom of navigation in the international law of the sea: more and more resources are being discovered and can be exploited in the sea, which makes coastal states claim control over them, while other states either have overlapping claims or want to maintain freedom of passage, navigation and exploitation over some resources. The increasing exploitation of resources also results in more and more infrastructure being built in maritime areas. The changing nature of maritime areas that were traditionally considered passage or transit areas, while maritime spaces are increasingly becoming the *objects* of conflict or competition, provides incentives to stretch interpretations of norms and legal agreements, such as in the case of the delimitation of maritime zones in a context of heightened attention to the potential for exploration and exploitation of an increasing amount of resources.

Issues to monitor and recommendations

- The jurisdictional framework of maritime dispute settlement does not cover the entirety of parties involved. There is increased eagerness to exploit paralegal means, and interpret rules and norms to enhance unilateral strategic aims and promote fait accompli politics in the management of maritime and associated disputes.
- Conflicting claims over EEZs and the resulting underutilization of rights under UNCLOS leave considerable parts of the Mediterranean Sea as high seas. This means that state and non-state actors can advance their own interests. Organized crime combined with increased access to higher-level technology should be monitored in connection with this.
- The Straits remain a crucially important geopolitical focus point for some states, particularly Russia. They are critical for Russia's access to the Mediterranean and constitute a

33 John V. Bowlus, 'Eastern Mediterranean Gas: testing the fields', European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2020, https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern_med/gas_fields.

34 Pierre Vallée, 'Les alternatives au porte-avions: une analyse du débat stratégique français' [Alternatives to the aircraft carrier: an analysis of the French strategic debate], IESD Research Note, July 2020, https://faceddroit.univ-lyon3.fr/medias/fichier/note-de-recherche-de-l-iesd-coll-analyse-technico-capitaire-pierre-vallee-les-alternatives-au-porte-avions_1605610641064.pdf.

vulnerability for Russia's naval projection. Russian actions aimed at mitigating this vulnerability should be monitored.

- Energy resources constitute an increased catalyst for conflict and an incentive for claiming conflicting EEZs. The increased acuity of

stakes due to energy resources should be a development that is monitored closely.

- Disputes concerning EEZs can be instrumentalized for provocation. Joint action based on international law, including UNCLOS, may ease tensions, and provide lasting solutions.

The jurisdictional framework, legal agreements and norms in the Mediterranean are currently

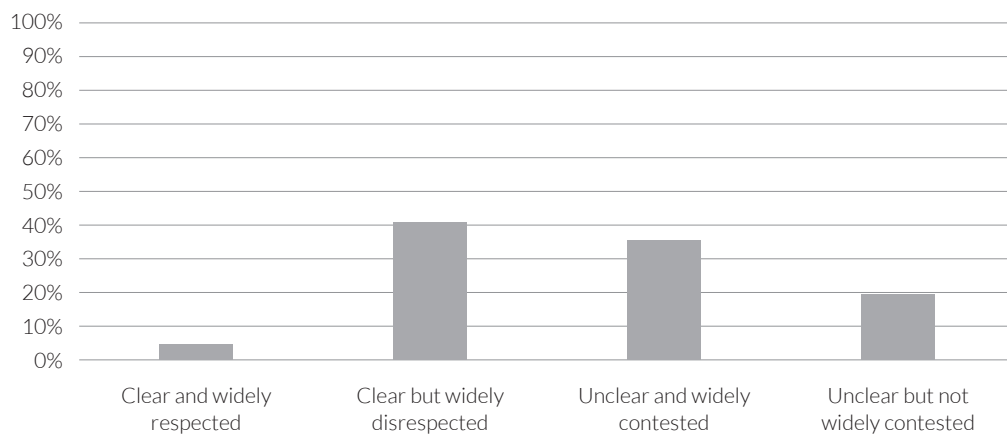


FIGURE 4: Expert and practitioner opinions on the clarity of and respect for jurisdiction in the Mediterranean. N=42.

Which forum/actor would be the most efficient in ensuring exploitation of energy resources in the Mediterranean does not lead to new disputes and conflicts?

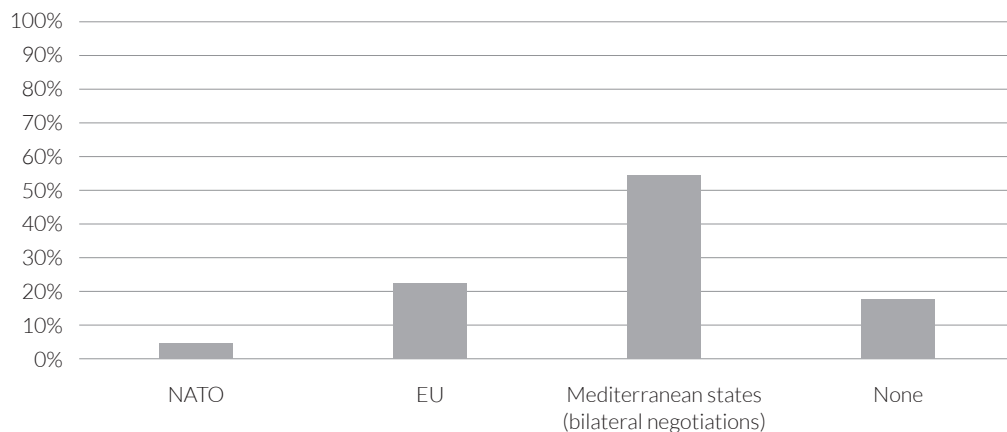


FIGURE 5: Expert and practitioner opinions on governing the use of energy resources in the Mediterranean. N=44.

4. Narrowing the space for a democratic model of governance

Internal and external challenges in MENA have created room for alternative models of governance and development, narrowing the space for democracy in the region. Continued poor governance, disappointment with the results of the uprisings, and the ensuing insecurity have led some people to turn towards extremist ideologies and groups. On the other hand, many regimes have recognized the need for development and investments. Yet they are increasingly wary of Western investment, which has democratization and human rights strings attached, while other actors have begun to offer alternatives. With wildly different manifestations, this trend of narrowing the space for democracy has been exemplified by the rise of ISIS and the increasing Chinese “no values attached” trade.

Other actors, such as Russia and Iran, also undoubtedly support authoritarian models and have intervened on behalf of authoritarian leaders. Even former US President Donald Trump’s policies, which put no weight on strengthening democracy and human rights while maintaining good relations with authoritarian states in the Middle East, can be argued to have contributed to the decreasing room for democracy. However, the two examples of ISIS and China specifically highlight the active offering of alternative models to democracy.

For example, Russia is building relations with authoritarian leaders in the region, and its conservative ideology and anti-revolutionary stance has held some appeal. Yet these relations are largely based on personal interactions and mutual (security) interests rather than institutionalized alternatives to governance models. According to one research poll of eight Arab states, improving ties with Russia is among the least important goals for

the public, highlighting that Russia has currently little to offer in the form of a role model.³⁵

Similarly, Iran supports non-democratic alternatives across the region and thus, for its part, ensures that the space for democracy does not widen. However, exporting the Islamic Revolution has ceased to be an explicit foreign policy goal of Iran since the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.³⁶ Khomeini’s idea of exporting the revolution was aimed at supplanting American-backed governments in the region with ones modelled after his own, but today’s Iran is concerned that this would disaffect Arab populations. In contrast to ISIS, which seeks to impose its values and government over its claimed territory, Iran is trying to ensure countries in its sphere of influence are submissive or dependent instead.

ISIS’s quest for territory and sovereignty

Radical Islamist groups have gained renewed prowess in the internal and regional turmoil of the MENA region. With an ideology that aims to Islamize society and to replace modern states with God’s rule, they directly challenge the values and norms of liberal democracy, including those concerning human rights and gender equality. In the last decade, the most notorious of these groups has been ISIS.

ISIS shares a wider Salafi-Jihadist ultimate strategic goal of bringing about an apocalypse by establishing a permanent global caliphate.³⁷ In this vein, ISIS’s project aims to destroy Western and Western-inspired state systems, as they are based on a rule legitimized by human instead of righteous divine sources. In ISIS’s worldview, only the caliph is a legitimate leader, and democracy is considered

35 Dmitriy Frolovskiy, ‘Russia’s involvement in the Middle East: Building sandcastles and ignoring the streets’, Middle East Institute, 1 June, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-involvement-middle-east-building-sandcastles-and-ignoring-streets>.

36 See Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government* (trans Persian: Hokumat-e Eslami) (Tehran: The Institute for the Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Work, 1970).

37 Samantha Mahood and Halim Rane, ‘Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda’, *The Journal of International Communication*, Volume 23, Issue 1, (2017): 15-35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2016.1263231>.

heresy. Modern notions of nationalism are similarly considered a pagan concept and practice and, as such, nation-states should be destroyed.³⁸ ISIS also regards modern Arab leaders as apostates because they allegedly do not enforce the Islamic Sharia law, or they also use other sources of governance. For ISIS, the caliphate is a way to escape the wrong social order, to fully reject Western norms.³⁹

ISIS's strategy, *baqiyyah wa tatamaddad* (remain/endure and expand), calls for the creation and expansion of this state to be as rapid and immediate as possible.⁴⁰ Therefore, the immediate goal of the group is to control territory, and to achieve sovereignty, so that it can implement the so-called divine rule. As ISIS needs territory with a Muslim population and a significant support base in order to establish a functioning state, it seeks first and foremost to defeat, at least partially and in specific areas, those modern Muslim states and their security apparatus that would prevent it from controlling territory. Simultaneously, ISIS must win over a significant enough number of Muslims to support its endeavour. This is exemplified by the group's anti-Shia strategy and attacks, aimed at making use of the anti-Shia tendencies of some Sunni Muslim communities.⁴¹

The internal turmoil in MENA has provided the perfect breeding ground for this ideology and for ISIS to expand its influence. ISIS first rose as part of al-Qaeda in Iraq, starting in 2003 in the aftermath of the US invasion and the resulting internal chaos in Iraq. However, the group was quickly defeated and decided to wait for the reduced US presence.⁴² By the end of 2011, the US had withdrawn most of its forces from Iraq, and the Syrian civil war had created further political and security vacuums, leading to the re-emergence of ISIS. The years that followed marked a total escalation as ISIS gained control of extensive territory and declared itself a caliphate in 2014.

In the ensuing years, ISIS managed to consolidate itself and to weaken its opponents through military campaigns, information operations, and control over infrastructure, among many other methods. Instrumental in its struggle against (Western) modernity and the region's existing governance models was its provision of security, order and even social welfare.⁴³

Despite having lost all of its territory in Syria and Iraq by 2019, ISIS continues to pose a serious threat to democracy and existing governance systems in the region. The ideology of the group remains alive, as do various opportunities created by weak governance and security vacuums. ISIS continues to look for opportunities to exploit these vulnerabilities and has already increased its attacks in Iraq and Syria in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. A new rise in these countries in the coming years is perfectly possible as they continue to struggle to stabilize their political situations, and security challenges could duly re-escalate.⁴⁴ ISIS has at the same time increased its presence and significantly strengthened its capabilities in multiple countries in Africa. North Africa is another viable option for its potential re-emergence, particularly as corruption, weak rule of law, human rights abuses, and repression of ethnic and religious communities in the area continue to pose major vulnerabilities that ISIS can exploit.⁴⁵

China's "no values attached" approach

On a different front, but similarly promoting values and norms that oppose democracy or democratization, China is actively endorsing its own alternative models of governance in the region combined with promises of generous investments and loans. Through the concept of "peace through

38 Jeffrey R. Macris, 'Investigating the ties between Muhammed ibn Abd alWahhab, early Wahhabism, and ISIS', *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, Volume 7, Issue 3, (2016): 239-255, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2016.1227929>.

39 Ibid.

40 Asaad Almoammad, 'Seven Years of Terror: Jihadi Organisations' Strategies and Future Directions', ICCT Research Paper, August 2019, <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/08/ICCT-Almoammad-Seven-Years-of-Terror-August2019-1.pdf>.

41 Cole Bunzel, 'The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/18/kingdom-and-caliphate-duel-of-islamic-states-pub-62810>.

42 Khoutah Istratigiya li Ta'aziz al-Moqif al-Siyasi al-Dawlat al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq [A Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq], 2009. Cited in: Murad Batal al-Shishani, 'The Islamic State's Strategic and Tactical Plan for Iraq', *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 12, Issue 16, (2014), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-islamic-states-strategic-and-tactical-plan-for-iraq/>.

43 Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).

44 Benjamin Bahney and Patrick B. Johnston, 'ISIS Could Rise Again', *Foreign Affairs*, December 15, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-12-15/isis-could-rise-again>.

45 Denys Reva, 'How will ISIS setbacks impact Africa?', *ISS Africa*, August 25, 2017, <https://issafrica.org/amp/iss-today/how-will-isis-setbacks-impact-africa>.

development”, China offers a model that supposedly provides bottom-up development rather than the Western “top-down” model. Similarly, through the idea of “negative peace”, China offers aid and investment without any requirements for political reform, democratization, or human rights and security commitments attached.⁴⁶

To date, China’s relationship with the Middle East has revolved around its demand for energy, particularly in the Gulf states and Sudan, as well as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. As a strategically important region due to the crossroads for trade routes and sea lanes linking Asia to Europe and Africa, the Mediterranean is instrumental in increasing China’s global economic influence. The centrality of this economic cooperation has allowed China to promote a narrative that its involvement does not include geopolitical goals but is neutral in nature and based on mutually beneficial agreements.⁴⁷

This narrative has proved attractive to many states in the MENA region. For example, Algeria has perceived the West as having previously interfered in its domestic affairs through human rights claims, political pressure and a tacit arms embargo.⁴⁸ Aiming to maintain its non-aligned foreign policy while requiring funding for development projects, Algeria has duly welcomed China’s role as a developer that is committed to non-interference and that refuses to allow other states to interfere in its affairs.⁴⁹

However, such partnerships do not come without risks. The BRI is often associated with its potential to create so-called debt traps, giving China leverage over countries with Chinese loans. Moreover, China will likely struggle to maintain the narrative of neutrality as the volatility of the region combined with the decreased US presence forces it to protect its increasing interests with a political and security presence as well. For example, it is already argued that the growing Chinese investments in ports worldwide,

including in the Mediterranean, have been identified for economic, strategic and geopolitical reasons.⁵⁰

The Chinese presence and influence in the region also continue to increase. The COVID-19 pandemic in particular has provided China with an opportunity to extend its outreach. China has begun what can be described as medical diplomacy, deploying medical teams and delivering equipment particularly to those countries that are already part of the BRI. The economic consequences of the pandemic also helped China, as countries such as Algeria ruled out IMF and World Bank assistance and turned Chinawards once again.⁵¹

Conclusion

The narrowing space for democracy in the MENA region due to external powers offering alternative models of governance that push MENA states away from cooperation with Western states and towards authoritarian models, as well as the rise of extremist ideologies, should be taken seriously. Even though ISIS is currently weak, and China has focused on economic cooperation thus far, both have the potential to continue to promote authoritarian models of governance.

This allows malign actors to challenge the EU, NATO and their member states in the Mediterranean region in multiple domains. With the space for democracy narrowing, it is increasingly difficult for the West to offer the political, diplomatic and economic cooperation and support that promote democratic ideals. At the same time, authoritarian actors are seen as increasingly legitimate partners, allowing them to further penetrate not only the economic domain, but also the cultural, social and political domains.

Moreover, unmet expectations of democratization can further drive populations towards radicalization. This is a threat in itself but can also lead states with a radicalized population to fight the rise

46 Scott J. Harr, ‘Less Than the Sum of Its Parts: China’s “Negative Competition” in the Middle East’, *The Diplomat*, 29 September, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/less-than-the-sum-of-its-parts-chinas-negative-competition-in-the-middle-east/>.

47 Lons et al., ‘China’s great game’.

48 Hakim Darbouche and Yahia H. Zoubir, ‘The Algerian Crisis in European and US Foreign Policies: A Hindsight Analysis’, *Journal of North African Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 1, (2009): 33-55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629380802383554>.

49 Iddir Nadir, ‘L’ambassadeur de Chine en Algérie: ‘Nous nous opposerons à l’ingérence de toute puissance étrangère en Algérie’ [Chinese Ambassador to Algeria: We will oppose the interference of any foreign power in Algeria], *El Watan*, 1 December, 2019, <https://www.elwatan.com/edition/actualite/lambassadeur-de-chine-en-algerie-nous-nous-opposerons-a-lingerence-de-toute-puissance-etrangere-en-algerie-01-12-2019>.

50 Veerle Nouwens, ‘China’s 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Implications for the UK’, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies Occasional Paper, 14 February, 2019, <https://rusi.org/publication/occasional-papers/china%E2%80%99s-21st-century-maritime-silk-road-implications-uk>.

51 Souhail Karam, ‘As Taboos on IMF crumble, Algeria remains an African holdout’, *Bloomberg*, 16 June, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-16/as-taboos-on-imf-aid-crumble-algeria-remains-an-african-holdout>.

of extremist groups with authoritarian measures such as restraining the civic space, or even with foreign authoritarian support. With such actions, the region's state may purposefully further narrow the space for democracy and freedoms in the name of counter-terrorism.

These risks also remain in countries that have embarked on a transition to democracy, for example as a result of the 2011 uprisings. Democratization is a long process, and such countries may be particularly vulnerable to non-democratic and radical powers seizing power even through elections. Similarly, legitimate opposition powers' rise in elections may prompt a backlash and again result in restrictions on civic space and the narrowing of the path to democracy.

Issues to monitor and recommendations

- Foreign investments with “no values attached” or with non-democratic incentives are likely to increase across the Middle East. China in particular sees the region as highly significant in its global economic plans. The EU and NATO states need to ensure that they can compete while maintaining support for democracy.
- Local calls for democratization continue to be issued across the region. Recent years have seen multiple mass protests that call for more inclusive and democratic policies. The EU

should monitor public opinion in the region, support these bottom-up efforts and raise awareness of the role played by them.

- Radicalization is a persistent threat, particularly among the poor and marginalized. Such threats can also be exploited to restrain civic space, for example by adopting counter-terrorism laws to imprison critics and activists. The EU and NATO need to find ways to support counter-terrorism missions without empowering authoritarian tendencies. Intelligence cooperation between MENA countries and between European agencies in the fields of counter-terrorism should be encouraged, for example.
- Democratization is a long process, and states going through it are often vulnerable to hybrid threats. The EU should have a long-term strategic plan to ensure that its messages on democracy are followed up on.
- Authoritarian actors such as China and Russia can also use the information environment as a source of external influence in the region and to prevent democratization. External anti-democratic information campaigns need to be monitored and countered.
- Establishing civilian crisis management missions with the aim of supporting development of the rule of law, civilian policing and democratic control of armed forces should be considered.

What is most likely to happen in the next 10 years?

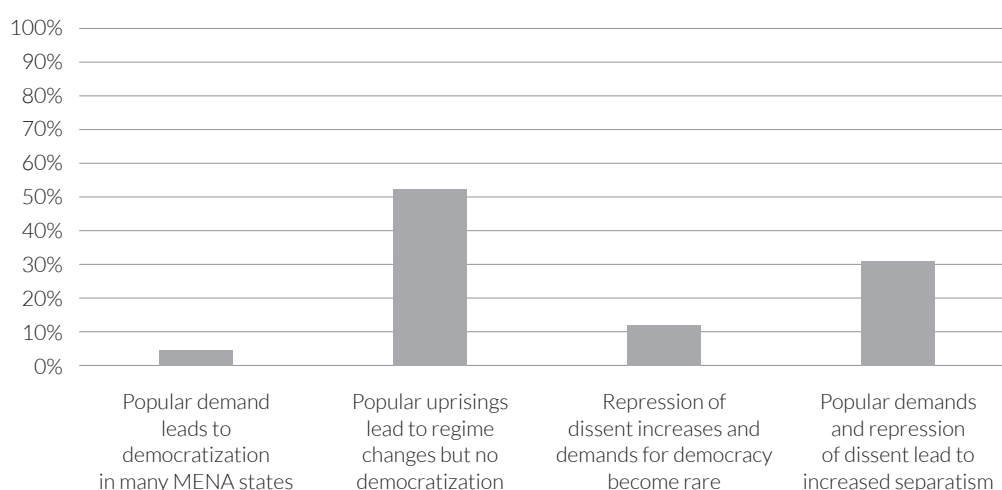


FIGURE 6: Expert and practitioner opinions on the future prospects in the Middle East and North Africa. N=42.

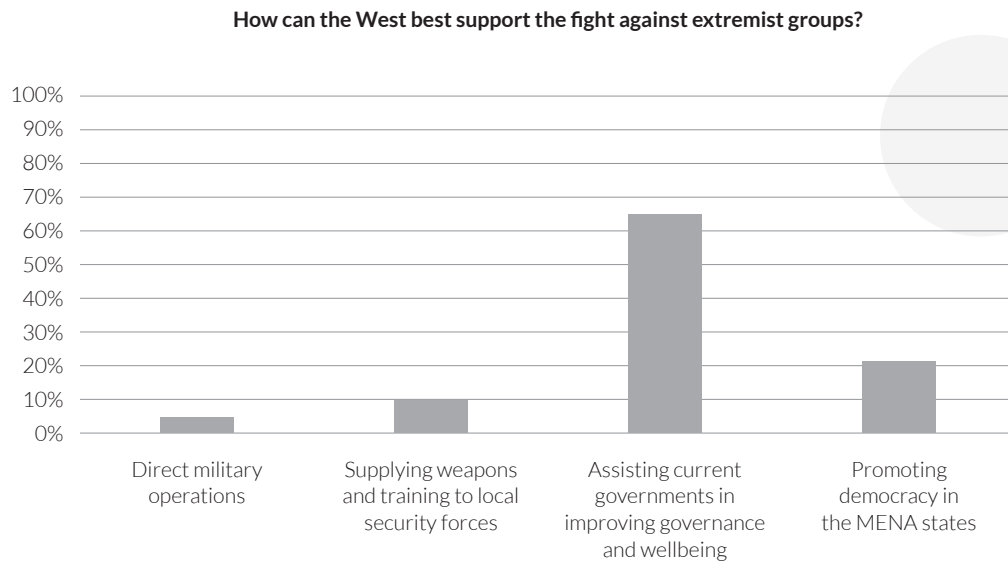


FIGURE 7: Expert and practitioner opinions on how the West can support the fight against extremists in the Middle East and North Africa. N=43.

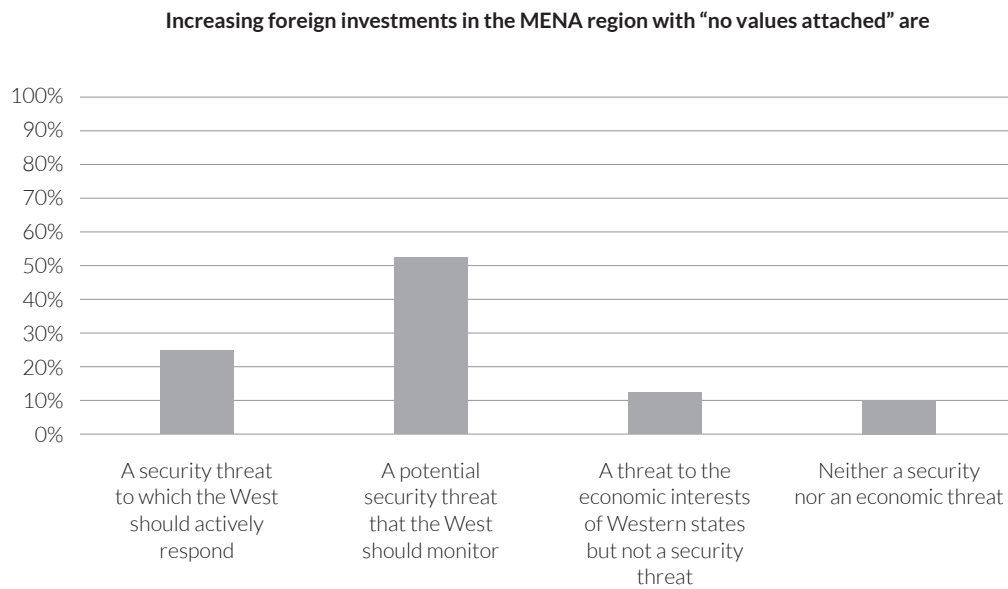


FIGURE 8: Expert and practitioner opinions on foreign investments with no values attached in the Middle East and North Africa. N=40.

Conclusions

The four trends identified in this report paint a picture of the Mediterranean MENA region as increasingly characterized by internal turmoil, bad governance, regional power competition, decreasing respect for legal agreements and norms, and as narrowing the space for democracy. External actors have various goals in the region, from securing access to oil resources to expanding their naval presence. In general, these actors aim to increase or maintain their presence and influence in the region, thus providing them with regional and global status.

The trends of eroding state authority and the new dynamics of power competition, in particular, give hybrid threat actors multiple opportunities for and ways of furthering their goals at a low cost and with plausible deniability. In conflict zones characterized by internal fragmentation and regional military involvement, malign states already use non-state actors and proxies to interfere in several different domains. Similarly, there is increased room for diplomatic and political manoeuvres. For example, Russia has established itself as an integral political player in Libya with connections to different parties to the conflict, aiming to ensure no settlement can be made without Russian approval. Malign states have proved that they are quick to take advantage of emerging governance and security vacuums, and adversaries can even try to weaken governance and deepen the erosion of state authority to create further space for hybrid threat actions.

The evolving regional and external competition for influence has also complicated the situation. The counter-revolutionary and revisionist fronts compete in several different arenas, test red lines, and push the legal agreements and norms. Shifts in the power balance in one conflict may escalate the given conflict dramatically but can also have major implications for other conflicts or cause further ones to flare up. This challenging and volatile situation makes it difficult for the EU, NATO and their member states to formulate coherent and appro-

priate responses, make decisions and plan actions that all member states can stand behind.

In this context of internal turmoil and external meddling, the space for democracy is narrowing in the region. External powers, particularly China, offer alternative models of governance that push MENA states away from cooperation with Western states and towards authoritarian models. Authoritarian actors are seen as increasingly legitimate partners, allowing them to further penetrate not only the economic domain, but also cultural, social and political domains. This can duly result in patterns of dependency for countries in the region in economic, political, technological and scientific domains. At the same time, the rise of extremist ideologies and radicalization gives space for extremely authoritarian models of governance. This is a threat in itself but can also lead states with a radicalized population to fight the rise of extremist groups with authoritarian methods.

These trends highlight the fact that there are multiple openings for hybrid threat actors in the Mediterranean region. First, eroding state authority means that external malign actors can attempt to gain leverage or control over the leaders of target countries as they seek support in order to retain authority. At the same time, malign actors can also try to fill some of the functions of central authority, for example through proxies. In both cases, these actors gain an improved position in the target country, which enables them to conduct further priming activities.

The lack of a hegemonic power in the region and the resulting power competition between revisionist and counter-revolutionary forces increases the willingness of malign actors to use their hybrid threat toolboxes. There are more opportunities for these actors to seek to achieve their goals in the region, but also new challenges due to the power competition. In such an environment, malign actors are more likely to use multiple tools to ensure their own success and competitors' failure.

This is exemplified by the trend of decreasing respect for legal agreements and norms. Legal frameworks can be used as a significant tool in hybrid threat activities. By stretching, contesting or disrespecting legal agreements and norms, malign actors can, for example, complexify the detection of other hostile activities. Moreover, such legal claims can combine with information operations and aim to justify further hybrid threat activities.

Finally, the narrowing space for democracy can increase the tools available for malign actors and decrease the capability of other actors to counter hybrid threats. For example, foreign direct investment with non-democratic incentives attached can become increasingly accepted, while the West becomes less successful in offering the cooperation and support that promote democratic ideals. Among other things, the narrowing space for

democracy may also result in narrowing liberties such as press freedom, allowing malign actors to try to control public narratives. If a state is running counter to this trend and starts to democratize, it is also important to understand that external malign actors can try to intensify their hybrid threat activities to prevent this.

Malign actors are already taking advantage of these trends, and it is likely that such activities will continue to increase. The EU, NATO and their member states need to find ways to respond to actions that threaten their interests in the Middle East and North Africa. Spillover effects may also threaten southern European countries, and therefore they should also work to prevent any further escalation in the region and to promote better governance in order to decrease the openings for adversarial action.

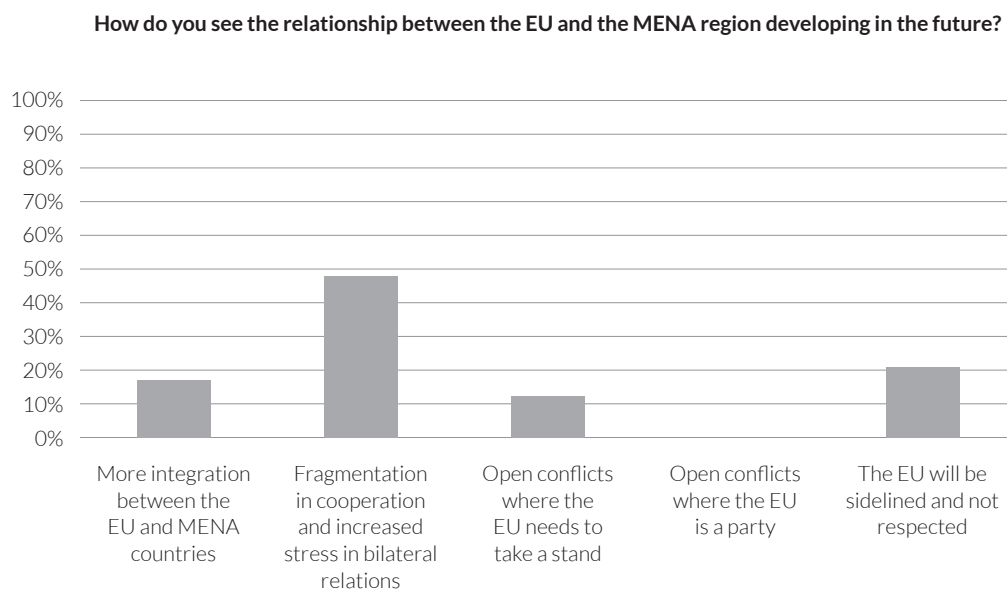


FIGURE 9: Expert and practitioner opinions on the future relations between the EU and the Middle East and North African region. N=39.

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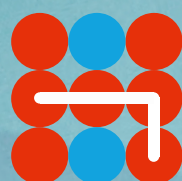
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