



June 2019

Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean



Strategic Foresight Exercise | Key Take-Aways

Peace and Security in the MENA 2030

The prospects for regional cooperation on peace and security in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are more than bleak. To take stock and to identify future trends, threats, and weak signals of change that might have an influence on the security architecture of the region, the Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) convened its Mediterranean Advisory Group for a strategic foresight exercise on 28 to 30 March 2019 to formulate future scenarios for the MENA region and discuss possible opportunities for multilateral security cooperation in the Mediterranean. The following is a summary of the key take-aways of the discussions.

Key Take-Aways for Peace and Security in the MENA 2030

The Middle East and North Africa region is undergoing a new wave of significant changes that are detached from the ramifications that materialized in 2011. The region is experiencing yet another transition phase with the breaking down of old structures and the creation of new ones that will impact security and crisis response in the MENA. This dynamic takes place at a time when the southeastern flank of NATO is eroding, the rentier economies of the Middle East will soon lose their oil and gas-related assets, youth bulges demand their place at the table, climate change is aggravating an already dire water and natural resource situation, and new technologies make it even harder for the societies of the region to play their part in the global economy.

The scenarios of the strategic foresight exercise suggest that what will be seen in the MENA region over the next ten years will be the dissolution of traditional arrangements and the emergence of new forms of cooperation and cross-regional alignment in the face of increasing domestic pressures such as population growth, climate change as well as increased political fragmentation and economic hardship. In addition to the continuation of already existing prolonged conflicts, the next ten years might add new layers to regional crises and see an increased risk for growing militarization in and around MENA; a region that was supported in its creation by states that are now scaling down their engagement and held together by institutions and alignments that are now – slowly but steadily – eroding. According to the discussions, this dystrophy caused by the disintegration of traditional structures can lead to significant alterations in the regional security setup. The following trends are an expression of these processes.

Avoiding the Short Straw: Unsure Realignments in the MENA

The states of the MENA region are currently in a rumbling negotiation phase of self-assignment associated with the dynamic competition between global and regional powers for reordering their relations and lines of conflict. No-one wants to draw the short straw in regional power politics, yet the odds are not clear enough to know what will prove to be the best way to save national interests – which increasingly became the main reference point for regional security policy. In the past, conflict management in the MENA was, to a large extent, externalized. The retrenchment of the United States and *fait accompli* by the Trump Administration have changed the security landscape of the region and the insertion of new players into the power game already impacts the strategic priorities of the states of the region in order to avoid the short straw.

Playing Solitaire: Between Strategic Loneliness and Over-Ambition

The MENA region lacks its own regional security architecture, based on the principle of collective self-defense. Instead, what was observed during the workshop is a collective experience, if not trauma, that can be dubbed strategic loneliness. In light of the ongoing antagonism between individual states and adversarial blocks in the region and the crumbling of long-standing alliances, many states such as Israel, Turkey and Iran feel pushed back into a strategic culture of self-reliance. This widely spread feeling of being abandoned and left isolated in old alliances among states of the region might encourage governments to overestimate their own capabilities and take things into their own hands instead of engaging in regional dialogue with their neighbors.

Inside Out: Disintegration and De-regionalization

These observations suggest that, until 2030, the MENA region will further disintegrate. Regional institutions such as the Arab League will, at best, not have been successful in bridging regional rivalries and political fragmentation. Multilateral negotiations and regional cooperation initiatives will have reached a gridlock. The re-nationalization of strategic priorities in foreign affairs and security policy will drive the countries of the region further apart. Aggravating this trend of disintegration, North African countries might have reoriented themselves towards Africa (and China) driven by the economic imperatives dictated by their national interests.

International Institutions Crumbling towards Irrelevance

While the US is largely withdrawing its presence from the region and challenging NATO which, in turn, is likely to lose touch with its direct point of contact to the Middle East, namely Turkey, the European Union appears heavily fragmented over member states' foreign policies by 2030. The failure of the EU to reactivate multilateralism in its southern neighborhood might thus further paralyze EU engagement in the region. Although individual member states will continue to partake in the regional power competition, the scenarios suggest that the West will play a more marginalized role in MENA than in the past. Additionally, most MENA countries are expected to have lost trust into the United Nations while the Syria case, most probably soon to be followed by Libya, could become a blueprint for the future of crisis management in MENA, where the West has little say.

The Advent of Fragile Authoritarian Alliances

Besides that, the region is witnessing a shift towards authoritarian structures, heightening nationalism and identity politics. The democratic achievements of the developments in 2011, where successful, have been largely rolled back. According to the scenarios above, this trend will continue over the next ten years. In light of increasing domestic pressures and national governments reaching the limit of their capacities with demographic, technological and environmental changes, the region might witness an already looming emergence of alliances between authoritarian regimes (Iran, Turkey, Russia and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE) that feel confident enough to play a role in the region beyond mere self-enrichment. Although this new order may not sustainably bring about stability and in itself might trigger significant social and political changes, it could save the region from a complete collapse of state structures. New forms of authoritarian multilateralism might emerge that can challenge the global liberal order.

Interest-based Ad-Hoc Alliances

Despite the fact that the set-up of a region-spanning security architecture is not deemed likely, experts noted that the MENA region will still witness the opening of pockets of cooperation and interest-based ad-hoc alliances between those countries that face similar risks, share a common historic experience and have a comparable future trajectory. Already today, countries that would have been perceived as

natural antagonists a few years ago (Israel and Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Russia) are cooperating in security and defense affairs based on their national interests. The establishment of stable order led by Turkey, Iran and Russia, however, will not come about.

On a Positive Note

There are opportunities for common approaches with regards to long-term challenges that similarly affect all states of the region. As key risks and opportunities which might enhance cooperation between individual countries of the region were mentioned first and foremost the fight against transnational terrorism and trans-border crime, the acknowledged necessity for incremental political reform (regime evolution instead of revolution), economic diversification and a fair share in the post-hydrocarbon global economy. Similarly, the fight against water scarcity in the face of climate change might arise as a field for early cooperation on enhancing human security to save the lives and livelihoods of MENA populations. With this as a starting point, through building single-issue institutions and multilateral trust, other chapters for cooperation might open up.

The **Mediterranean Advisory Group** (MAG) was launched as a series of dialogue rounds to contribute to the strategic debate on the ongoing processes in Europe's Mediterranean neighborhood to help in better coping with the various changes and challenges. MAG is a Euro-Mediterranean network of experts and practitioners, which reviews and analyzes developments in the region connected to security, foreign policy and migration. The meetings take place on a bi-annual basis. The findings and recommendations of the MAG are intended to inform decision-makers and are published regularly in the Mediterranean Dialogue Series.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the experts and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung or its Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Dr. Canan Atilgan
Director
Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean
Tunis, Tunisia
www.kas.de/poldimed
canan.atilgan@kas.de



The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license: "Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 4.0 international" (CC BY-SA 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>