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# What awaits the MENA Region between now and 2025?

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*Youssef Cherif*

In a recent Carnegie [article](#), Maha Yahya and Marwan Muasher called the COVID-19 pandemic the fourth major crisis to hit the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in a decade, following the Arab Spring, the oil crash of 2014-2016, and the Hirk revolts of 2018-2020. Actually, the [World Bank](#) expects the MENA GDP to shrink by close to 5% in 2020. This is creating or accelerating a number of trends, and below are eight that will continue to affect the region in the short and medium terms, especially during the four-year mandate of US president Joe Biden (2021-2025).

- 1) The first and most pressing issue is at the **public health** level. Public health has always been problematic in the region of course, but it is now put on test. The decrepit infrastructure is barely able to cope with COVID-19, rich Gulf states aside. Most predictions point to a gloomy winter 2020-2021 across the globe, and MENA states are poorly equipped and lack actionable strategies to confront this pandemic. Many citizens will die due to these deficiencies and, along with the human toll, popular discontent will mount.
- 2) The health crisis of COVID-19 radiates on long-standing **socio-economic** issues, and this is the second trend. 2020 started with an unprecedented oil crash, followed by the gradual decline of imports and exports. As a consequence, the economic conditions of an already suffering population are worsening, coupled with devastating [psychological](#) effects. The risk of revolution across the MENA region in 2020-2021 is therefore high. Consequently, the needed reforms that were advocated for decades by local thinkers and the international community -at the social, economic and political levels- will slow, if not be reversed. And preparing for climate change -the next big calamity to hit the MENA region- will be delayed.
- 3) The third trend is related to **foreign interventionism**. To be accurate, the MENA region was colonized for well over a century, and it continues to be a ["highly penetrated"](#) region after independence, so this is not new. However, the direct and public interventions are a novelty, at least in the post-Cold War era. Global and regional powers -i.e. Russia, the US, France, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and to an extent Egypt- intervene militarily and diplomatically in sovereign states as remote as Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Sudan, or Libya, and in an open manner. Some of the weakening states have fallen under a new form of mandate system without the name.
- 4) As an emanation of foreign interventionism, there is the growth of **transnational militias**, which is the fourth major trend. For years, Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and advisors were active in Lebanon and sent to Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, following Iran's national interests. More recently, Russia's Wagner mercenaries have been deployed in Syria and Libya. Turkey now has its own foreign militias, and these are mostly Syrian mercenaries who are sent as far as Libya and Azerbaijan. Even Egypt seems on track to launch its own militias; in June 2020, Egyptian president Abdulfattah al-Sisi talked about arming Egyptian tribes and sending them to Libya.
- 5) Out of foreign intervention and sending militias, **Turkey** consolidated its place as a regional hegemon, which is the fifth major trend. Turkey is active in all the previously mentioned conflicts,

fighting proxy wars against Russia in Libya and Syria. It is waging a diplomatic contest against Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Israel, and escalating its rhetoric against France in the Mediterranean. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's mandate ends in 2023. Nonetheless, he does not seem ready to retire, neither to change his policies, so Turkey's hegemonic attitudes will continue to evolve.

- 6) A sixth trend is the escalation between **Iran** from one side and Israel and the US from the other side. The Trump administration tried different types of pressures on Iran. As a consequence, there were several attacks against US allies in the Gulf between 2018 and 2020, conducted by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or Houthi fighters. There were also multiple attempts to target Israel from Syria and Lebanon, and American interests were targeted too. The anti-Iran camp did stage a number of spectacular attacks as well, such as the Killing of General Kassem Soleimani in Iraq, the attacks against Iranian sites in the summer, added to multiple cyber-attacks. The election of Joe Biden may calm things down, but Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as some circles in Washington DC, will continue to see Iran as an existential threat.
- 7) This Iran-phobia, along with US pressures, has pushed Saudi Arabia and the UAE closer to **Israel**, which facilitated the promulgation of the Abraham Accords, and this is the seventh trend. Had Donald Trump won, he would have obliged Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Morocco to sign the accords, even if they are highly unpopular. Yet now that Biden is elected, these pressures will decrease, and Iran might go back to the negotiations track, so the Accords will be frozen. However, the UAE seems genuinely committed to work with Israel on the security level: security and cyber security cooperation will accordingly increase between the two nations, and Saudi Arabia might be in, although perhaps not publicly.
- 8) The eighth and final trend is slightly more positive: it is the decreased **terrorism** factor. There are less attacks by the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda globally, and IS does not control territory anymore. The threat is still around though: recent attacks in France and Austria; occasional attacks and assassinations in Libya, Egypt's Sinai, or Tunisia; ongoing operations in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq; and growing militancy in the Sahel. The extremist Islamic ideology lives on, and it will come back stronger due to marginalization, historical grievances, economic struggles, authoritarianism and state fragmentation, but not in the immediate future.

These eight trends will punctuate the MENA region in the next four years. Some of them can be addressed, others only observed.

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**Author:** Youssef Cherif is the director of the Columbia Global Centers|Tunis and a political analyst who specializes in North African affairs.

#### **Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.**

Thomas Volk

Director

Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean

Tunis, Tunisia

[thomas.volk@kas.de](mailto:thomas.volk@kas.de)



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