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The MENA region in 2022: Tempora Mutantur

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Since the Arab Spring began a decade ago, the southern Mediterranean region left the comfort of status quo. Times are changing at an accelerated pace, and each year takes the region into further unexpected fields and adds its load of challenges. While the 2020s decade started less eventful than the previous one, the prospects for the short-term future are for an even more transformative period on track.² The new year alone is an indicator.

The most important issue remains **climate**, a problem that the entire planet is confronting but whose impact on the arid regions of northern Africa and the Levant are all the more pressing. In 2022, the region may suffer from new record temperatures, and harsher natural cataclysms. The events of the previous years have already warned us about what to come.³ Unfortunately, most of the southern Mediterranean countries are busy fighting trivial wars or pursuing their own pyrrhic strategies, leaving the question of climate for others to care about.

But while climate is a gradual problem whose effects will appear later, the region will confront five major trends in the upcoming months. One of them is optimistic, and that is the atmosphere of peace that has spread across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The remaining four, however, are not: war, authoritarianism, revolution and the pandemic. The region's peoples as well as its neighbors will feel the repercussions.

1. Peace

There seems to be an ongoing **appeasement** between Gulf states, Egypt, and Turkey. The different rapprochement tracks between Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE),⁴ Turkey and Egypt,⁵ or Saudi Arabia and Qatar,⁶ are interconnected. All this means that those players who punctuated the conflicts of the MENA region for a decade are now trading with each other, a needed economic relief in such uncertain times, but also talking to each other rather than fighting with drones and missiles. They are still engulfed in mutual attacks on media and social media, but they have calmed down militarily in Libya, the theater of their proxy war, and they are opening up new economic prospects.⁷

However, we may see a **divide between Saudi Arabia and the UAE**,⁸ with the former looking for a more hegemonic role in the politics and the economy of the Gulf and the latter already on its own galaxy. What role would Qatar play then? Will it balance with Ankara and get closer to Abu Dhabi, to halt the hegemony of Riyadh, or will it bandwagon with Riyadh and continue its quarrel against Abu Dhabi? Alliances shift rapidly in this region.

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² <https://www.kas.de/en/web/poldimed/single-title/-/content/what-awaits-the-mena-region-between-now-and-2025>

³ <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/north-africa/2021/08/11/Tunis-heatwave-hits-record-49C->

⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/84cb8bdb-d6ab-4f2f-8e51-a1e84190be1c>

⁵ <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/what-a-turkish-egyptian-rapprochement-could-offer-the-region-52887>

⁶ <https://www.dohaneews.co/saudi-qatar-reconciliation-from-a-divisive-canal-to-a-railroad-connection/>

⁷ <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkey-uae-relations-economic-cooperation-against-the-backdrop-of-geopolitical-incompatibility>

⁸ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-arabia-and-united-arab-emirates-turn-rival-allies>

2. War

The year 2022 is starting with three latent conflicts, from the eastern Mediterranean to its western reaches.

First of all, the risk of an **Israel-Iran confrontation** keeps growing,⁹ and there seems to be some coordination between Israel and the United States of America (U.S.) regarding this.¹⁰ The possibility of a confrontation is debated, and many observers disregard this possibility,¹¹ but it remains a serious risk. Although Iran is far away from the southern Mediterranean, any widespread conflict can have consequences. The use of small boats and drones, which has transformed the security dynamics in the Red Sea in the conflict opposing Saudi Arabia to Iran and the Yemeni Houthis, could be duplicated in the eastern Mediterranean. Mutual attacks in the Mediterranean can't be discounted, and the historic coast of Canaan -i.e., Israel/Palestine, Lebanon and Syria- could turn into an arena for military actions.

Second, the mounting tensions between **Russia and Ukraine** may increase the tensions between Russia on one side and the West and Turkey on the other side. In Ukraine, Turkey is selling drones to the government,¹² a déjà vu from Libya and Azerbaijan. These drones proved extremely helpful in damaging Russian military technology in the latter two countries. Russia, the European Union, the U.S., and Turkey will be tempted to weaken each other in other war theaters, such as Libya or the Sahel, where most of them are heavily active, destabilizing an already fragile security environment.

And third, the other regional conflict, of lesser intensity, is the one opposing **Algeria and Morocco**. Although both countries are less prone to conflict than the protagonists mentioned above, there is a risk of destabilization in the western part of the Mediterranean.¹³ Moreover, this conflict could be connected to the Iran and Ukraine problems. In fact, by getting closer to Israel, Morocco is taking an open anti-Iran position,¹⁴ a continuation of anti-Iran moves that Morocco took during the recent Gulf spat when it expelled the Iranian ambassador from Rabat. And because it feels isolated, between an ever-stronger Morocco, a Right-leaning French government, and unstable borders east and south, Algeria might get closer to Iran.¹⁵ -the Moroccans have often alluded to this actually.¹⁶ If Iran joins-in,¹⁷ then the Polisario could become a more serious combat force and we may see more daring attacks happening, against Moroccan and Israeli -and others'- interests in the western part of the Mediterranean and Africa.

3. Authoritarianism

The lack of any **democratic** achievement is a trend that started years ago and that is expected to persist. Authoritarianism, which strengthened in the region after the initial democratic openings of 2011-2012, will continue its path unabated.¹⁸ In Tunisia, the relative democratic achievements of the last decade are put into question, and the economic prospects are negative, which means that the population will be more focused on making ends meet than any long-term democratic goals.¹⁹ In Algeria, the Hirak did not produce any tangible results. In Morocco and Turkey, democratizing regimes that raised hopes in the 2000s, reverted to their authoritarian traditions.²⁰ In Libya, even if elections take place, there does not seem to be much consensus among the multitude of political players to recognize each other's legitimacy, which threatens to torpedo the political process and the peace agreements.²¹ In Egypt and Syria, regimes are as repressive as ever.²² Even Lebanon, which was for years the only Arab country where freedoms

⁹ <https://www.cfr.org/report/conflicts-watch-2022>

¹⁰ <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/10/israel-us-navies-set-up-new-coordination-efforts-on-iran-sources/>

¹¹ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/theres-talk-of-a-military-option-against-iran-heres-why-its-unlikely/>

¹² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-03/ukraine-buys-more-armed-drones-from-turkey-than-disclosed-and-angers-russia>

¹³ http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/ri/elcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/arteg-a-garcia-reinares-simon-vicente-espana-2022-perspectivas-y-desafios-en-seguridad

¹⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/02/intel-morocco-iran-rhetoric-deal-us-israel-western-sahara.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211123-we-can-expect-stronger-algeria-iran-ties-as-israel-plans-to-establish-a-base-in-morocco/>

¹⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/5/13/morocco-accuses-algeria-of-supporting-iran-in-western-sahara-feud>

¹⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/africa-emerges-next-scene-confrontation-between-israel-iran>

¹⁸ <https://www.idea.int/gsod/africa-middle-east>

¹⁹ <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/tunisia-year-living-dangerously-32420>

²⁰ <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/morocco-consolidates-its-authoritarianism/>

²¹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2021-12/libya-needs-more-vote>

²² <https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/03/17/ending-authoritarianism-in-algeria-egypt-libya-and-sudan-pub-84073>

were allowed, is witnessing an authoritarian turn,²³ intensified by the economic collapse and the meddling of Gulf states and Iran.

4. Revolution

However, dictatorship cannot hide the reality of **social issues**: in all MENA countries, there are dormant or visible **economic problems**. They are most obvious in Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Tunisia, but they also exist in Morocco,²⁴ Algeria, and Egypt,²⁵ even if the regimes control the information and paint the façade. Youth form a majority of these countries' population, they have expectations, but many of them end up unemployed or working in jobs that they feel do not match their skills. In 2022, governments in places such as Algeria, Tunisia, or Egypt are planning economic reforms that involve cutting wages and subsidies, which will anger their populations and lead to street protests. As the authors of *The Modern Arab State* mentioned, the revolts that started in 2010-2011 did not end, and the cycles that began to unfold by then will continue for years to come.²⁶ So, while there is a relative status-quo with regards to social movements at this point in history, their explosion is a possibility not to discard, and revolutions can happen anytime, anywhere.²⁷ As a consequence of widespread protests and a worsening economic situation, migration towards Europe may increase, and one should watch-out for the figures of Summer 2022.

5. Pandemic

And of course, there is **Covid-19**. As the recent wave that hit Western Europe shows, this virus, be it in its Delta or Omicron variants, is here to stay and can always strike back. The possibility of an emerging new variant that resists to vaccines and drugs is real. MENA populations remain less vaccinated than Europeans, vaccine-skepticism runs high, and the health infrastructure is weak. Although the regimes are imposing vaccine passports, the methods of control will be of limited use, because of corruption, the strong informal sector, and the porous borders in these countries. Add to it the political, economic, and social issues mentioned above, there are chances that the pandemic situation in the southern Mediterranean in 2022 will be worse off than that of 2021..²⁸

The trends developed in this paper are based on hypothetical events and conditional consequences. However, what is certain is that the year 2022 will be at least as challenging as the previous years and definitely not the year of the status-quo.

²³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/lebanon/freedom-world/2021>

²⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/2e16babc-7d31-4af7-acec-9bf9409988e4>

²⁵ <https://pomed.org/snapshot-follow-the-money-to-the-truth-about-al-sisis-egypt/>

²⁶ <https://www.kas.de/en/web/poldimed/single-title/-/content/the-modern-arab-state-3>

²⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/mena-repression-and-violence-fail-to-stamp-out-arab-activism-10-years-since-mass-uprisings-of-2011/>

²⁸ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/covid-19-sets-mena-back-poverty>

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