12. The American unipolar moment is long gone. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq and its catastrophic aftermath, the US retreat from the region and Russia's willingness to fill the power vacuum in Syria in addition to China's flexing its economic muscles across the region have created a new reality. And yet, **while the United States is only one among many global powers, whatever Washington does or does not still has a major impact on regional politics.** A major development is that states that continue to present themselves as US allies are also very much willing to strengthen links with Moscow and Beijing. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and even Israel are able to play external powers off against each other, thereby obtaining concessions and leverage.

13. The region is a laboratory to test the limits of the global order. For some global players, engaging with the region is a matter of choice (US, China). Others have no option but to care (the EU is the clearest example). Russia looks at this region in an opportunistic manner. When projecting current trends into the future, Russia is considered to remain a key player all along the next decade but long-term prospects point at a growing role of China in global affairs and also in this particular region. **Europe is the actor whose influence in the region is expected to remain more stable: no significant decline but no major boost either.**

14. When it comes to the EU engagement in the MENA region, proximity is the keyword. Geopolitical shifts since 2011 have had and will continue to have a major impact on Europe. They tend to highlight the nexus between internal and external tensions as instability, conflicts and deteriorating governance in Europe's southern neighbourhood are more or less directly related to the spread of violent extremism, terrorism, migration and populist narratives in Europe itself.

15. Traditional dichotomies such as multilateralism vs. bilateralism or democracy vs. security do not represent the blueprint for sustainable EU-MENA relations. To escape false dilemmas, (1) the EU will have to widen the scope of its outreach and policies to accommodate to the region's shifting centres of gravity (towards Africa and the Gulf); (2) the impact of the EU's leverage and instruments increases when accompanied by a forward-looking political strategy; and (3) when it comes to current conflicts, reconstruction efforts need to come hand by hand with reconciliation policies.

MENARA

KEY
TAKE-AWAYS

MENARA - Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping Geopolitical Shifts, Regional Order and Domestic Transformations provides a bottom-up assessment of those dynamics and their projection into the **future**. Our findings are based on numerous fact-finding missions (including in countries such as Syria, Libya and Iraq), almost **300 face-to-face interviews**, a Delphi survey with **71 experts**, **3 focus groups** (Brussels, Rabat and Beirut) and **2 stakeholders meetings** (Istanbul and Rome).

Here are the main **take-aways** of this research endeavour:

1. An increased number of **armed non-state actors** - transnational ethnic and sectarian groups, rebels, tribes, terrorist organizations, foreign militias and mercenaries - are challenging states' claims to the monopoly of violence and territorial control. Yet, **the sovereign state system and territorial boundaries are more resilient than widely assumed.**

2. **The Arab uprisings amplified the obsession of regimes with remaining in power** and this has further blurred the boundary between the domestic and the regional levels, as perceived threats to regime survival are balanced by often erratic foreign policies, interventions and liquid alliances.

3. Societies in the MENA have undergone processes of change and have become more complex. **Intra-societal dynamics are fuelled by the existence of alternative conceptu-**alizations and practices of citizenship centred on different collective identities.** This trend encompasses the pluralization of collective identities through the coming to the fore of new, previously dormant, forms of collective identification - for example based on gender and generational identities in some parts of the region. Alternatively, the entrenchment and polarization of dominant collective identities and narratives to the detriment of plurality can be observed in other countries.

4. **The Iran-Saudi rivalry is one the main geopolitical drivers in the MENA region**. However, explaining the region on the basis of notions of Sunni–Shia antagonism is simplistic and may even lead to dangerous policy prescriptions. The risks of breaking up states along ethno-sectarian lines, fortifying autocratic governments' repressive practices or reinforcing Orientalist understandings of the Middle East as "all about religion and conflicts" are real. . Moreover, **some of the most salient divides in the region are not related to sectarianism but to conflicting views regarding political transitions and the legitimacy of the Muslim Brotherhood**.

5. **Anti-Zionism has ceased to be a major defining feature of Arab politics.** Instead, **shared hostility towards Iran** and its allies has been forging a new rapprochement between Israel and a number of Arab states, particularly in the Gulf. However, **the norm of Arab solidarity with the Pales-**tinian cause still resonates very much with the Arab publics, pointing (once more) to the ever-growing disconnect between Arab regimes and their populations.**

6. Since 2011, one-off events have been changing the perception of what or who represents a threat and this is why alliances limited to single issues proliferate. **Such liquid alliances are not durable and constantly adapt to different landscapes**. The eruption of simultaneous and intersecting regional conflicts has increased the sense of unreliability of allies and prompted more assertive and often aggressive attitudes towards both rivals and friends.

7. Since 2011, we have witnessed shifts in the centres of gravity of the MENA region. **The Gulf has replaced the Mashreq/Levant as the main geopolitical centre, while the Maghreb, but also other parts of the Middle East, have been pivoting towards the African continent.** Africa is also becoming a major priority for the EU and this is one of the factors that will shape European policies towards the MENA

8. **The projection of current trends points towards increased pressure on natural resources, greater regional and domestic inequalities, a broken social contract, the inability to cope with technological revolutions, entrenched authoritarianism, region-wide disinformation campaigns and sustained levels of violence and foreign meddling.**

9. **The dominant vision is that the MENA region is characterised by high levels of violence** - conflicts are by far the most frequently mentioned risk by the people interviewed for the project followed by terrorism. It is worth underlining that politically related risks such as authoritarianism and political instability as well as a fragile economic situation are also identified as potentially destabilising factors.

10. **Youth unemployment, bad governance and corruption, political repression and environmental degradation are seen as the four more salient factors that could lead to social unrest in the MENA region by 2025.**. Those territories suffering from a combination of environmental degradation, persistent inequalities and delegitimised institutions could witness new waves of social unrest which could be harshly repressed and put the international community in a very uncomfortable position.

11. When it comes to opportunities, the assessment is far more pluralistic. **While risks are often associated to political and security dynamics, societal and economic elements are seen as more promising. Youth and dialogue are often mentioned as the key for success.** More specifically, digitalisation, the pivot to Africa, plans to foster renewable energies and economic diversification, post-sectarian political and social dynamics in Iraq or sustained progress in women empowerment are among the positive developments captured by the stakeholders' consultations.