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REPORT OF THE FOCUS GROUP WITH STAKEHOLDERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the MENARA project, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (IFI – AUB) organized a focus group in Beirut (Lebanon) on 2 November 2018 with twelve scholars, experts, civil society leaders and activists from Lebanon and the Arab Middle East. It should be noted that some invited participants from the Gulf region could not ultimately attend due to limitations and political constraints. Still, Beirut serves as a regional hub for many (international and regional) NGOs as well as UN agencies, and as such regional discussions were plentiful along with detailed focus on Lebanon and its neighbourhood. The discussions were linked to the general aims of the MENARA project – characterizing the regional order, defining scenarios and discussing policy options for the EU – and was initially (informally) structured in four parts (though participants themselves were allowed to take the discussion in directions that made sense to them):
1. Regional rivalries and new regional order
2. State–society dynamics
3. The role of the EU and other external actors
4. Future scenarios

REGIONAL RIVALRIES AND NEW REGIONAL ORDER

A common premise for the discussion among participants was that there have been many attempts by the international community/the West to impose order in the Middle East. It was accepted by all participants that the Mashriq region in particular has seen over a century of non-stop interventions that have either blocked particular native forms of regional order (e.g. Arabism) or tried to establish "stable" ones favourable to the West (e.g. to ensure Israeli military superiority, to protect oil resources/access in the Gulf and the survival of client states). Such interventions have thus helped shape regional rivalries and balances of power and even influenced the national/domestic affairs of many states. Such meddling in regional/domestic affairs, it was felt, was also met with various forms of resistance and/or adaptation that complicated any attempts to order the region.

Having said that, participants noted the reality that, in the contemporary period, Arab states (and, more specifically, their leaders/regimes/elites) have not overcome their divisive interests, have lacked cohesive foreign policy coordination, and have used repressive measures to undermine popular demands and movements on the domestic front. The Arab world has also suffered from crackdowns on the media and civil society, prior to and after the Arab uprisings. In some countries that witnessed popular protest movements over the past few years, the crackdown even intensified (e.g. Yemen, Syria), while in others (e.g. Tunisia) a new wave of NGOs and civil society groups

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emerged that pushed government to adopt reforms.

However, despite their promise, participants were clear that the uprisings were mostly stifled and ultimately didn't bring stability or democracy to the region – though Tunisia was mentioned by many as an interesting exception given its dynamic civil society, which pre-dated the uprising there. There was some debate about the extent to which Tunisia has been successful in terms of reforms, but all participants agreed it was a very interesting case that Lebanon and other Middle Eastern states should observe and could learn from. One participant noted that his organization was working with partners in Tunisia to engage in two-way capacity-building and sharing experiences. Others echoed this.

In terms of the traditional Arab regional actors such as Syria, Iraq and Egypt, participants saw them as barely functional states, while wealthy rentier states of the Gulf such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are increasingly repressive and struggling to contain Iran. Moreover, the proliferation of weak states has created new opportunities for intervention by other regional and global actors, as well as non-state players. Regional dynamics are no longer based on formal or rigid alliances and conventional wars. Instead, they are largely based on proxy wars, state–society clashes and the larger Saudi–Iranian–Israeli conflict. One participant observed that the big regional theme that needs further research is whether and how coherent state projects can be formulated in order to stop further fragmentation (internally and regionally). He pointed out what he called "de-sovereignization" in many conflict areas, particularly Syria, which has been (and remains) under various foreign occupations.

There was discussion on the Iran–Saudi rivalry that has resulted in proxy wars and clashes in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and Lebanon (and elsewhere), thus making the regional order more complicated. In a sense, participants took this conflict for granted, more as an accepted premise than a subject that needed in-depth analysis. The implications and repercussions (in geopolitical, sectarian and economic terms), it was felt, were obvious and all around us. US support for Saudi Arabia, Russian support for Syria and increasing though low-profile Chinese involvement were also touched upon, though again participants took these for granted given Lebanon's location and vantage point.

Viewed from the Mashriq region, participants were clear that the Syrian war has dramatically changed the Middle East. As in the case of Lebanon, the conflict in Syria turned into a proxy war attracting both regional and international intervention. With the decline of the US-based order, countries such as Russia, Turkey and Iran now more visibly influence the regional order. Russian military involvement on behalf of the Syrian state and its regional allies shifted the balance towards President Bashar al-Assad and his allies. Many participants focused on the issue of refugees and felt that despite the military victories on the ground, the majority of Syrian refugees are not able to (and should not) return to their homes, for fear of being persecuted or detained.

Moreover, much discussion (and critique) ensued on the question of Syrian refugees being a "burden" on neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Jordan. Neither country has committed to international frameworks for refugees and the Syrian refugees became dependent on local NGOs and international agencies. The "refugee bomb", as one of the participants called it, became

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a core factor in Lebanese domestic politics, and the issue has been used controversially. The state neglected the Syrian refugees due to internal political debates and disputes between conflicting parties. Many Christian parties in Lebanon are concerned about the "Palestinization" of the Syrian refugee problem, that is, settling them in Lebanon (the reference being to the long-standing Israeli and US intention to settle Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, despite fierce opposition from the Lebanese society). It was felt that this issue was used as a pretext to mobilize and attract voters during the recent parliamentary elections, and it has further politicized the refugee issue. Even the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has come under pressure from the Lebanese government. Participants were adamant that it is civil society's obligation to push back on such pressure and advocate on behalf of the refugees.

Finally, the Arab uprisings pushed policy-makers and scholars to tackle the roots of the socio-economic factors that were behind the protest movements and the disintegration of some states. It was felt that there was not much attention paid by policy-makers (international and regional) to the role of civil society in the region; it was mostly neglected in pre-"Arab Spring" discourse.

STATE–SOCIETY DYNAMICS

In 2011, with the eruption of the Arab uprisings, hopes ran high that these protest movements would oust authoritarian states and replace them with democratic institutions. However, with the exception of Tunisia, these states became mired in civil wars and internal strife. Later, in 2014, with the emergence of the Islamic State, one participant noted how oil prices collapsed, thus making life in rentier states difficult. Many governments were forced to cut subsidies and take austerity measures, and to hold off on long-postponed reforms.

It was understood among the participants that in most Middle Eastern countries social contracts binding the governments and their citizens were traditionally imposed from above: citizens were not enrolled in decision-making processes, drafting laws and constitutions. Thus, many states secured their legitimacy through public spending rather than participatory political processes. In order to boost their legitimacy, these states used oil and natural resource revenues to provide jobs to people in the public sector as well as subsidies, education and basic healthcare. However, with the decrease in oil prices and the spread of corruption, many states were forced to change tack. Participants generally agreed that the Arab uprisings were rebelling against this outdated form of social contract and pushing towards a more democratic one.

Therefore, as one participant remarked, rather than creating jobs through productive systems based on merit and led by the private sector, these states found that providing public sector jobs, whether or not they were useful, was the best way to ensure allegiance and reduce demands for accountability and good governance. The ratio of public sector jobs to private sector jobs in the region is the highest in the world. But other participants pushed back on the idea that merely promoting the private sector would cure the social and economic ills of the region; instead, some asserted that a balance should be reached between ensuring social safety nets and encouraging the development of the private sector.

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Some participants noted that these governments tried to address economic problems by introducing economic reforms, but without introducing political changes. Although these reforms were largely intended to help states consolidate their power, some of them, it was felt, if well implemented, could have also benefited citizens. But without a system of checks and balances and the building of democratic institutions necessary to oversee economic transformations, these reforms ended up profiting the elites rather than the citizens.

One participant noted, to the approval of all, that there was basically no transitional justice in the Arab countries, with the exception of Tunisia to an extent. Indeed, most participants agreed that Tunisia was the only country that experienced some form of democratic transition as a result of the uprising there. Crucially, there was clear agreement that it was local civil society groups that had led this uprising and drive for genuine reform, and enabled a high level of participation, in contrast to many countries in the Mashriq region (including Iraq). They sought out – rather than being merely used by, as in many other countries in the region – international agencies who invested in projects related to good governance and greater public participation. Moreover, in Tunisia Islamists were involved in the debates and even accepted passage of the law against domestic violence, for example. However, as one participant noted, in Egypt, EU-funded agencies did not cooperate with the Islamist government on issues related to good governance and reforms for political reasons. Civil society groups, which included Islamists, were important in toppling the Mubarak regime, but then became weaker following the military crackdown there (with support from some Western countries).

Participants agreed that the current reality in Tunisia and Egypt demonstrates that NGOs and civil society should invest in projects related to good governance and public participation. Moreover, many agreed that it was crucial that Islamists in Tunisia, unlike in Egypt, were incorporated into the process of drafting the constitution and other laws though participatory projects. In Egypt, it was felt that the Muslim Brotherhood excluded other civil society actors from participation once they were in power, and this led to their increasing lack of legitimacy among much of society. The Tunisian example was important since it was the local parties and organizations that drafted their constitution, unlike in other countries whose constitutions were imposed from or written by the outside (e.g. Iraq after 2003).

However, many participants shared a similar concern that civil society and NGOs should not be donor-oriented, and that they should have local national agendas. The problem in most regional countries is that international donors are shaping the agendas of most local NGOs, and coupled with security crackdowns, the "space for civil society is shrinking", as one participant noted. This is why authoritarian governments are sceptical and suspicious of such organizations, and why many independent civil society groups shun some agencies such as USAID. Participants felt some Western donors were imposing political conditions, usually implicitly. NGOs must not become contractors serving foreign agendas; they should negotiate with their donors to draft plans and projects together. One participant asked if strengthening labour unions could be a solution. Unlike in Tunisia, where labour unions played a crucial role in street mobilization and the toppling of the repressive state in 2011, labour unions in countries such as Lebanon are more politicized, while in other Arab countries they long ago ceased to exist. Labour unions, it was agreed, are crucial spaces for civil society.

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It was also felt by some participants that civil society groups must find a way to use their influence to form or participate in political movements and push governments to implement reforms, and to stand up against draconian security policies and practices. Participants generally agreed that societies in the Arab Middle East were undergoing a major transformation, but that the balance of power does not favour "real change" (as one said) and the space for freedom is "shrinking" (as another pointed out). The impunity versus human rights abuses debate was crucial, as was the discussion about where the space for civil society was.

As the uprisings wind down, there will be calls for justice as grievances re-emerge, and various identity struggles may ensue. Some argued that the political cost of using violence is now decreasing. Another participant noted how a "masculinity crisis" has been totally neglected, and that this has inflicted major hidden trauma among, for example, Syrian refugees in countries such as Lebanon. Since many young men were fighting in the war in Syria, those men that were in Lebanon, and benefiting from UN or other international aid, were feeling (or were being made to feel) that they were not "real" men: it was "difficult to be a man" in this situation. This, in turn, resulted in more domestic and gender-based violence.

Overall, it was clearly felt by most participants that the Arab world needs a new social contract between the state and its citizens, one not imposed from above but constructed by the society for the society. Core social issues should, it was strongly felt, be defined by local and national civil society groups. A structural transformation is needed, with one participant going so far as saying civil society was now acting like a "failed state" in some countries following the uprisings, and that a "new paradigm" was needed. Trust in the state needs to be rebuilt.

THE ROLE OF THE EU AND OTHER EXTERNAL ACTORS

A big issue of debate was the short-term emergency/humanitarian versus longer-term reconstruction and state-building question, and where external aid could best be directed. Another topic was the negative role being played by international donors in "shrinking the space" for civil society groups to work outside of donor agendas. Structural adjustment programmes imposed from outside have played a very negative role, both before and after the Arab uprisings, and a new paradigm is needed within which donors should operate to increase civil society space and participation (not as technical project managers but in a more serious way). Partnership is needed with "national ownership", as one participant stated. Donors often block national redistribution policies or plans, and this is very important for many Arab countries. Overall, tax systems are "terrible" and international donors are resistant to change, working as they do with national authorities that often suffer from "systemic corruption". Such authorities have also started to control many civil society groups, even syndicates in some cases.

However, most participants felt there was also a sense that there is room for discussion with donors. They felt that the EU's commitment towards, and activities sponsoring, the peaceful resolution of the Middle Eastern conflicts are fundamental for promoting peace, security and stability in the region. Moreover, the EU has strong economic and political relations with partners in the region, which enables the EU to promote and facilitate regional dialogue. There was a discussion about the CEDERE meeting between international donors – led by the EU – and Lebanon. One participant

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involved in the meeting noted that rather than being considered a "curse" (i.e. political interference from the outside aiding corrupt leaders and politicians inside), it should be approached as an "opportunity" for real reform. Civil society needs to participate in framing the economic discourse, creating common ground between themselves and donors, and not allow national authorities to escape accountability or neglect to enact proper social and economic redistribution policies.

However, there was general consensus that problems remain with the manner in which the EU prioritizes and disburses its funding. For example, as one participant noted, the EU is the largest donor to Palestinian state-building efforts aiming to enhance the rule of law and respect of human rights in Palestinian territories; and yet it largely stands by (and even lends support) as Israeli occupation forces regularly destroy Palestinian infrastructure and institutions.

Nevertheless, there was agreement that the EU often went beyond words and took practical measures by providing financial and consulting support to many governments. Most notably, the EU provided humanitarian and emergency assistance to the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Still, it was also noted by many that such EU funding was forthcoming for political reasons following the great controversy over refugee migration to Europe. One participant felt the EU should focus more on drivers of conflict (and not just security issues of concern to the West, but more issues identified nationally). Debate ensued about donor power in this regard, and what the donors' priorities were and who would pay what. The sheer scale of support needed is unprecedented in the wake of the Syrian war, and NGOs need to ensure they advocate for refugees and the vulnerable.

Moreover, with US President Donald Trump's decision to relocate the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and cut funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), participants felt there was a need for more EU involvement in the region with regard to Palestine in particular. One participant argued that UNRWA is suffering financially and is on the verge of collapse. For him, despite this year's budget recovery, the agency will face the same scenario next year due to its perennial budget deficit and upcoming battle over mandate renewal. Thousands of Palestinian refugees, including vulnerable people, will be adversely affected. These people may not receive medical care and students will not be able to attend schools, therefore increasing the burden on host countries. The same participant expressed concern that the USA seeks to paralyse UNRWA in the same way it paralysed UNCCP, the largely defunct UN agency created in the aftermath of the 1948 war that aims to find a permanent political solution to the Palestinian problem. Therefore, it was felt that the EU should increase its financial assistance to UNRWA, and more clearly support the right of return of the Palestinian refugees in line with UN norms, treaty obligations and customary law. It was felt that the EU should better support civil society groups working in this manner in the region.

However, there was a concern that most international funding was targeting refugees and neglecting host governments. This idea was shared by some participants. A participant argued that the Lebanese banking system had suffered a lot from the ongoing war in Syria. For him, Lebanon is exposed to regional developments more than any other regional state, and is thus "fragile". Therefore, international donors should aid the Lebanese government to restore its economy and fight unemployment and to help its citizens that have been affected by the presence of Syrian

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refugees. It was felt that US sanctions would hurt the Lebanese economy and cause even more suffering, and perhaps precipitate a more serious downturn in the country's financial system. The EU, it was felt, could better support Lebanon in this regard.

It was also noted that there has been a dramatic transformation for other refugee agencies such as UNHCR in the region. The agency is facing challenges with regards to the return of Syrian refugees to their homeland. According to one of the participants, many refugees do not want to return because they fear persecution and revenge. Therefore, how will asylum be preserved? Who will guarantee their impunity? The same participant claimed that we see global barriers to resettling refugees in countries outside the region. Another participant stressed that since refugee protection is an international responsibility and not limited to regional actors and states, "the region must not be abandoned and international support is needed to expand the role of civil societies". The refugee issue, it was clearly understood, is going to continue at least for the medium term, and host countries need consistent support and a clear understanding among the international community of shared responsibility (not merely handouts).

It was further noted that the EU provides "state-building activities" projects by, for example, offering support for local and international civil society organizations to promote peace, tolerance and gender equality in the region. Such initiatives build confidence within and between societies. However, a few participants observed that these initiatives are not being implemented or translated on the ground in the correct way. They urged the EU and other international donors to more closely monitor the work of local NGOs and civil society groups when it comes to implementation. According to one of the participants, when it comes to a women's empowerment project, local NGOs are organizing participatory actions in refugee camps targeting only women. This in turn is increasing domestic violence within the refugee camp since most of the men who come from rural areas and have conservative values are feeling neglected. Therefore, the question was asked, why do we empower women and promote gender equality without the participation of men?

Finally, many participants expressed concern about the increasing political and economic role of Russia and China in the region. The political support of these rising powers for authoritarian states undermined the rule of law and encouraged human rights abuses. A common concern shared by many was the increase in authoritarianism and the continued crackdown on civil society by regional states amid the silence of the international community.

FUTURE SCENARIOS

As time was running out during this workshop given the extensive and sometimes heated discussions, participants briefly outlined three possible scenarios that might emerge in the short to medium term:

A) A new authoritarian wave may emerge in the Middle East. With Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi consolidating his power, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman grasping for power and using oppressive measures to silence his critics, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad remaining in power, the region could witness a new wave of authoritarianism. This increased authoritarianism would, it was feared, be supported by international patrons and actors (the West, Russia, etc.) in

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the name of returning to regional stability. This trend would lead to a lack of balance in society by eliminating any hope still remaining among civil society. This was considered, certainly, quite a likely scenario.

B) It was felt that the spread of sectarianism and the prolongation of the Saudi–Iranian rivalry might be an equally dangerous scenario, one that may (or may not) be linked to the first one. The recent sectarian tensions in the region, especially in Iraq and Syria, increase the chances of larger wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which would threaten not only the security of the Gulf, and thus the flow of oil, but also the whole regional and international order, paving the way for international intervention. Such a larger war was not considered very likely, but the manipulation of sectarian tension was.

C) The spread of right-wing (and racist) populist movements in the USA and EU member states may push Western states to cease support for many Middle Eastern countries and civil society groups. This may indeed create challenges for host countries in the region in dealing with, for instance, the huge refugee problem. Such a right-wing tendency in the West would also lead to more violence in the region as it would further stoke religious or sectarian tension, and in particular push Israeli aggression even further. Moreover, the declining role of the USA in the region is paving the way for two main international actors, Russia and China, to fill the political vacuum, often by supporting non-democratic governments at the expense of civil society and democratic movements. One participant asked what we should expect once Russian and Chinese influence grows. Would this be the end of civil society, given that Russia and China do not have a civil society tradition?

Overall, few participants were optimistic in thinking about the immediate future, and some even in the longer term. It was felt that international "stability" imperatives – and increasingly right-wing governments across Europe and in the USA – meant that a resurgence of authoritarianism and a further shrinking of civil society space will ensue. Nonetheless, the positive view was that many people in the region have not given up the struggle, from Tunisia and Lebanon to Syria and Iraq, participating in movements, strikes and protests to ensure a better future.

Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

MENARA is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.