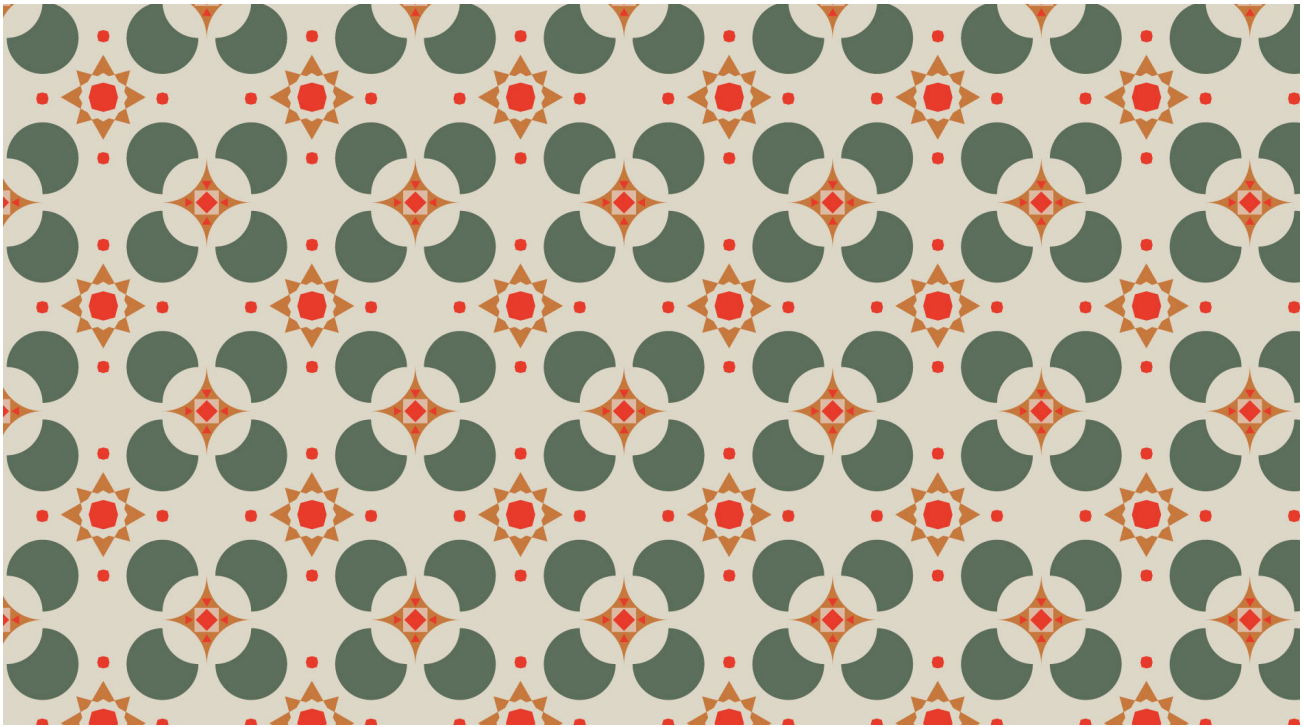




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ARAB GEOPOLITICS 2020
The Middle East: What kind of future?

Policy Background Paper

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Almost ten years after the start of the uprisings against the *anciens régimes* in North Africa and the Middle East, the region is still in turmoil. Despite the considerable exception of Tunisia, in the vast majority of the cases, the old guard has been successful in neutralising the revolutionary wave of 2011. Nevertheless, in the past two years the old grievances expressed during the Arab Spring season are getting vocal again. The fall of the self-styled Caliphate contributed to the reopening of political spaces, compressed by the all-embracing counterterrorism campaigns launched by ruling élites with the support of their Western allies. However, in this still fluid framework, the external shock of the COVID-19 pandemic represents for some an unmissable opportunity to once again reverse the democratisation process. In this never-ending state of emergency, the civil-military relationship is constantly mutating, especially in decade-long crises where the fragmentation of the security sector is making the hybrid model the norm rather than the exception.

At the same time, the economic downturn resulting from COVID-19 is re-fuelling popular anger that reinforces these old grievances, especially in remote areas and for marginalised segments of the society where the lack of jobs and economic opportunities is particularly felt. Even in Tunisia, the revival of protests in Tataouine comes in a difficult moment for the country, which is negotiating emergency assistance from financial institutions.

On the contrary, this option has been explicitly ruled out by Algeria that is considering a reinforcement of its bilateral cooperation with China, sitting well with Beijing's expansionist projects. This shows how countries with a rising budget crisis (including Lebanon, Oman and Sudan), can be easily trapped into geopolitical polarisation and struggle underpinning financial aid.

Considering that financial assistance usually concurs with economic reforms imposing austerity programmes or debt restructuring, protest movements will most likely continue to be the dominant factor in shaping dynamics in the region. The deterioration of living standards particularly frustrates the middle class highly educated youth that seeks higher living standards. This new generation demands government accountability at the backdrop of a faded social contract in which citizens tolerated a lack of political voice in exchange for subsidies and public jobs. The case of Lebanon,

where a protest wave is challenging the existing system of governance, is particularly worrisome. However, even richer states would not be spared from the incoming recession that will force them to revise their strategies. The intertwining of the oil crisis and COVID-19 hit twice Arab Gulf states' economic diversification, especially in Saudi Arabia. In fact, it affected both the old 'hydrocarbon-centred world' as well as the new 'global-oriented world' made of human connectivity, mega-projects, international events and tourism, with Arab Gulf states still in the middle of the paradigm change.

The peculiar cases of Libya, Syria and Yemen, where conflicts resulted immune to UN calls for a global ceasefire to deal with COVID-19, would apparently be exempted from the popular mobilisation trend. However, in at least one case, protests movements emerged as a powerful political factor. Indeed, protests against the Syrian regime and newly vocal opposition from minority groups that largely stayed out of the conflict so far, pose a real challenge to Assad's power base and Bashar's political viability. In recent months, Syria's economy has collapsed significantly and the regime failure in stabilising former opposition areas amplified armed insurgency and the resurrection of ISIS in regime-controlled areas.

On the other hand, the multiplication of "red lines" in Libya suggest that the proxy war is on the verge of escalating to a full-fledged military conflict between regional and international powers, where Arab states struggle to carve out a space vis-à-vis the military and diplomatic activism of third parties such as Russia. Ankara's intervention in support of the Government of National Accord reversed the conflict dynamics, but also linked the geopolitical contest for Libya to the disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean. Within this complex geopolitical environment, further militarisation and the growing number of stakeholders add further instability and bear a significant potential that, within a collision-driven scenario, this crisis will erupt into a greater war.

The recent disputes over Operation Sea Guardian are just an example of how NATO is forced to operate in an increasingly challenging environment. A fracture in the North Atlantic Alliance should be avoided. It could prevent it from playing a relevant role in Libya, both in terms of security sector

reform (SSR) and in reinforcing the arms embargo, undermining any effort to give teeth to the newly established Operation Irini. Many other rifts are further resulting into a fragmented picture of the Middle East, in which the strategic and ideological rivalry between countries has become the leading fault-line in many geopolitical arenas, from Somalia to Libya, passing through Syria and even Cyprus.

Suffering from a lack of unity and diverging views with an increasingly inward-looking USA, a dysfunctional EU seems unable to resist Russia's assertiveness in the region. Turkey has already emerged as an increasingly significant player. As power politics are rapidly rising as a substitute for a faltering multilateralism, the approaching presidential elections in the USA will give a sense of what the post-COVID-19 Arab world would look like. The Gulf in particular, tries to grasp the future American posture vis-à-vis Iran: a sanctions-driven policy again or some room for incremental diplomacy. Anyway, Arab Gulf capitals acknowledge that Washington is - and will be - a special ally but no more a full security provider, as testified by the absence of US reaction after the attacks against the Saudi oil production company Aramco. For Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, this lack of proactive stance has acquired a strategic dimension, strengthening their rather fragile "autonomy-first" choice in the security-military domain.

Despite maintaining considerable sway over the geopolitics of the region, during the current administration Washington has apparently gradually lost interest, favouring inroads by third parties such as Beijing and Moscow and increasing regional powers' self-reliance. The declining US attention to the region may pave the way for a deregulated and multi-polar Middle East, in which rising power rivalries, the oil plunge and the pandemic are expected to further diminish the capacity of states already facing a new season of discontent.

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