



Arab Geopolitics 2020 The Middle East: What kind of future?

The High-Level Conference was organised by the **NATO Defense College Foundation**, in co-operation with the **Policy Center for the New South**, the **NATO Political Affairs and Security Policy Division** and the **NATO Defense College**. It took place on **Monday, 27th of July, 2020**, at the [Sala delle Belle Arti, Rome Cavalieri, A Waldorf Astoria Hotel, Via Alberto Cadlolo, 101 - 00136 Rome](#).

Being the first live institutional event organised by a think-tank after the pandemic, the conference represented a trail-blazing initiative in the national and European landscape, fully compliant with the regional security measures related to the pandemic. Marking the sixth instalment of the Foundation's *Arab Geopolitics* series, the conference gathered 15 panellists from and related to the Arab world, along with more than 250 participants (both in-person and virtual), in order to discuss the current turmoil affecting the MENA region's governments and civil societies, map out the actors and interests at stake in the area and outline possible solutions to overcome regional crises.

Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo - *President, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome*

“Our final objective is that we would like to see an arc of crisis transformed into an arc of opportunities, and this part of the world has an enormous potential. Our intention in convening the conference is to look forward, beyond present crises and turmoil, looking for possible avenues, to discuss about cooperative solutions. [...] A further complexity is given by the fact that national governments are no more the only actors on the international scene. We see non-state entities and pressure groups being active and the Arab region is no exception. We live in a fragmented and multi-layered reality asking a special effort from us”.

Gilles Kepel - *Scientific Director, Middle East Mediterranean Freethinking Platform, Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano*

“We now have to re-think NATO's role in the MENA region. [...] At the same time, us Europeans - as members of NATO, but also of the European Union - have to take the matter of defence and security into our hands. We cannot shun a resolute defence and security policy for the Union, especially in the region. And whether it functions with NATO, it is supplementary or complementary to NATO, is something to be duly discussed. [...] The dire straits we are in today are also due to the major uncertainty about American policy in the region. What at the last Munich Security Conference was called “the advent of Westlessness” is indeed something that has already changed many items since the demise of the Soviet Union. [...] If the US have minimal interests for what happens in the region, this means that other actors are going to pop-in.”

Giovanni Romani - *Head, Middle East and North Africa Section, Political Affairs and Security Policy Division, NATO HQ, Brussels*

“One of NATO's three core tasks is cooperative security and the Alliance and its Partners in the region not only share geographical proximity but also similar security challenges: with the current increased instability, these partnerships are more valuable than ever. [...] Despite the tremendous political changes across the region in recent years, NATO's partnerships framework has proven to be fairly resilient. Beyond engagement with individual Partners, they have also provided an invaluable forum through which we have been able to discuss, assess and to some extent also jointly address these common challenges together, often offering an umbrella under which Partners could move beyond their diverging positions - as for Israel and the six Arab countries involved in the Mediterranean Dialogue, and the four Gulf countries that remained under the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative umbrella even during the GCC crisis.”

Maged Abdelaziz - *Permanent Observer to the UN, Arab League, New York*

“Multilateralism as well as regionalism are in real crisis. [...] In the MENA region, the 2011 uprisings - with their different motivations and dynamics - came with serious ramifications that shuttered Arab societies and increased the appetite of some Arab countries towards playing more of a leadership role that does not correspond to their capabilities and is against the will of other Arab countries. This created a rift between groups and individual states in the region that had its negative impact on the ability of the League of Arab States to reach Arab collective actions and decisions, particularly on issues that pertain to regional peace and stability. This problem was exacerbated by the League's weak financial structure and the lack of unified political will, that together do not allow the organisation to play its role against the sovereignty of its member states”.

Sofia Barbarani - *Freelance Journalist*

“Iraq is a prime example of an Arab country that has informal, and some time messy, but functioning civil society organisations. [...] Especially from October 2019, Iraq has used its civil society organisations to forward political change in a country whose political situation has been stagnant for far too long. I have seen a civil society that hasn’t tired of fighting, that has continued to change and improve rather than be silenced. It is incredibly important for the government to start engaging with these young men and women, actually including them in the dialogue. When dealing with Baghdad, it is also crucial for the international community to remind the government of the importance of the civil society organisations if the country is to go forward”.

Brahim Oumasour - *Associate Fellow, Center for Studies and Research on the Arab and Mediterranean World, Geneva; and Associate Research Fellow, Institute for International and Strategic Affairs, Paris*

“In the past two decades, the Middle East and North Africa have experienced the proliferation of non-state actors with a significantly growing importance, whose influence and weight are threatening the stability of the whole region and beyond. Behind their rise, there are of course many reasons, spanning from political instability (mainly triggered by the 2011 uprisings and the second wave of 2019) and states’ fragility, to economic and environmental crises, as well as intra- and inter- states tensions that continue to be exacerbated by foreign state players. [...] Among this evermore present category of actors, there are rebel groups, civilian militias, civil defence forces, terrorists, criminal organisations and private military companies”.

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