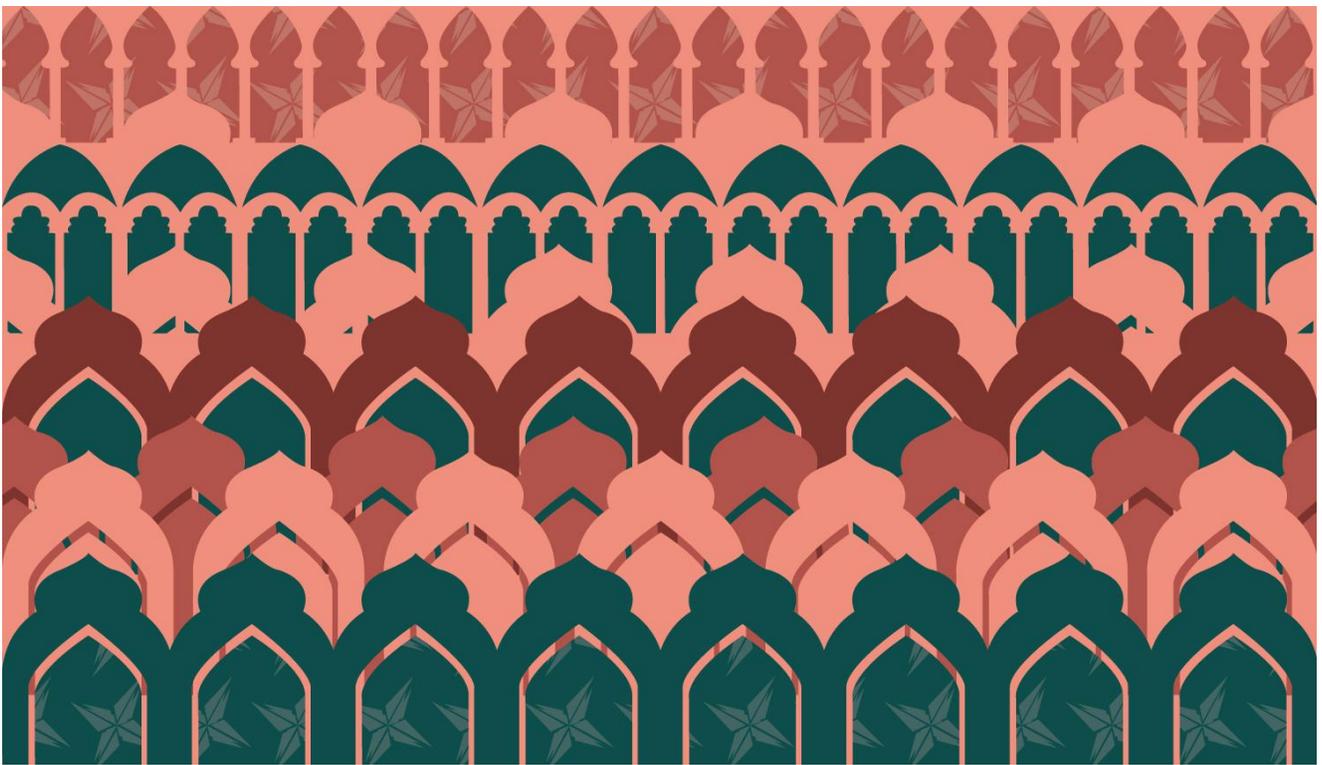




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ARAB GEOPOLITICS AFTER THE CALIPHATE
How to exit the fragmentation trap

Policy Background Paper

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Two years after the fall of the Caliphate the Arab world has still been unable to express a stable regional order built upon the material and political/moral ruins left. The end of the territorial dimension of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) could have represented a turning point to re-discuss and re-arrange a new concert of powers in the region. On the other hand, a distorted paradigm of the civilian-military relationship, the role of external actors and the rise of asymmetrical threats are all factors fuelling a new cycle of fragmentation that is threatening the stability of the region once again.

The end of the Caliphate has led to the de-structuration of ISIS, which is rolling back from a transnational phenomenon towards a local threat, in which each national or regional wilaya (province) enjoys a high degree of independence from the weakened core. A consequence of ISIS' territorial regression has also been the re-emergence of the main paradox of the post-2013 Arab world: the illusory trade-off between security and democracy (once again), reflected in the uneasy relation between civilian authorities and the military. At the beginning of 2019 this distorted perception has been shattered by the start of the protest movement in Algeria that highlighted the return of social and political grievances that were muted after the beginning of the post-Arab Spring era. Protests in Algeria and Sudan (and the most recent demonstrations in Egypt) are extending North Africa's grey zone of instability, where the face-off between the protesters and the military will be crucial to redefine a new balance of power, test the resilience of the regimes and eventually address the demands of the populations.

In the meanwhile, intractable conflicts continue to represent a source of instability. In Libya General Khalifa Haftar's offensive on Tripoli resulted in a deadly stalemate in which meddling powers with different agendas doubled down their efforts to support their proxies. The active role of Turkey is an example of how low and medium-intensity conflicts are allowing non-Arab powers to extend their influence. The Levant has not been spared also, experiencing the geopolitical resurgence of the Iranian-Shiite alliances. The fostering of sectarian identity politics in combination with the re-establishment of territorial rule, indicate a momentum for continuity of the current Syrian state order, at least in the medium term.

Within this highly polarised geopolitical context, fragile states lacking legitimacy and faced with socio-economic and demographic pressures, will continue to exploit the ‘sectarianisation’ of regional politics to pursue national interests beyond national borders.

This strategy uses sectarian norms to empower non-state actors as proxies, but combining them also with sovereignty norms to enhance state institutions. For the international community and NATO, grasping and disarticulating the ambiguity of this hybrid strategy is pivotal to play a constructive role for regional security and stability.

At the backdrop of this fragmented environment, the discovery of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean introduces a new dynamic to regional maritime energy security. The discovery of energy reserves bears the potential to trigger partial regional economic integration, yet underlying ideological and political animosities risk to turn this window of opportunity again into a scene for hegemonic regional rivalry. Within this framework, multiple smaller multilateral alliances with conflicting interests are emerging. The strategic refocus of the great powers on the region adds another layer to the already complex security environment. Concomitantly, the Eastern Mediterranean evolves to become the center of gravity of the heightened US-Iranian confrontation in the Middle East.

The protection of energy resources and critical infrastructures are also crucial in the Persian Gulf, where the rise of asymmetric and non-conventional aerial and maritime warfare is concerning. In this region, much will depend on the current confrontation between Iran and the petro-monarchies, supported by external actors whose unpredictable choices could push the Gulf on the brink of a full-fledged conflict.

At the same time, the risk of an unmanageable loose-loose scenario can still offer unexpected de-escalation measures for mitigating the crisis and build pragmatic initiatives in subjects of shared interest.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has also destabilising effects in Iraq and Yemen, where local agencies must be supported by international stakeholders, in order to break, or more realistically downplay, the local-foreign connection that multiplies disorder.

Beyond the antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Gulf security is undermined by the intra Gulf Cooperation Council's rifts, highlighted also by the latest developments in the Horn of Africa. Moreover, personal and political fissures have been triggering unprecedented nationalist bursts, especially among the youth, thus undermining common threats perception and the value of the Arab Gulf states shared identity.

International organisations can play a more incisive role in helping Arab states avoid the multiple fragmentation traps. NATO in particular can offer support to address the asymmetric and non-conventional threats, also through the selected inclusion of hybrid actors in a comprehensive state-rebuilding frame, featuring institutional decentralisation, rent re-distribution and Security Sector Reform (SSR). More in general, NATO's expertise in SSR and capacity-building can be crucial in most conflict-ridden countries, allowing the central state to gradually restore its monopoly of the use of force, thus exercising a positive influence in the long term.

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