

## **A reappraisal of the Middle East and North Africa**

Dr Florence Gaub (EUISS)

**Shifting sands:** The strategic landscape in the Middle East and North Africa is rapidly changing due to shifting alliances and changing agendas. The toppling of President Morsi in 2014 led to a rekindling of relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia; Qatar became first an outpost for the Muslim Brotherhood and then asked them to leave; and Hamas, having suspended its relationship with Syria and distanced itself from Iran, is currently reviewing its stance. Jihadi groups in Syria which were originally considered as rebels deserving the support of outsiders are now regarded as a threat to democratic values. These ongoing changes make it difficult for external actors to develop a cohesive regional strategy, and the situation is further complicated by the fact that some states are embroiled in domestic turmoil (Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Libya) to the extent that they are in no position to conduct any form of foreign and/or regional policy.

**Convoluting actors:** Both state and non-state actors are responsible for the chaotic state of the region, but the lines dividing them are severely blurred. Some (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Algeria) are working towards reverting to the pre-2011 situation; others (Libya, terrorist groups everywhere, Qatar, Hamas) continue to seek revolutionary change. This does not imply that the members of the two camps form a united front; in fact, very often they do not. Islamism has splintered into several different groups, ranging from those which support democracy to those who promote the establishing of a Caliphate. Even Islamist terrorist groups are fragmented, with al-Qaeda spin-offs competing with al-Qaeda allies. Other actors across the region which describe themselves as 'liberal' and 'secular' are often, in fact, neither, pursuing instead a repressive and totalitarian agenda behind the scenes.

**Evolving causes:** While the Arab Spring began as a movement in pursuit of democracy and improved economic conditions, it has now turned into a security-driven endeavour. Violence in Egypt is at a record-high since the country's independence; terrorism is on the rise across the whole region, and criminal violence is also becoming a real problem. Frozen conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian one, have relapsed into violence, while whole swathes of territory in the MENA (primarily in Libya, Iraq, Syria) lie outside of the state's control. Insecurity is exacerbating existing economic challenges and accelerating the spiral of violence, whereas repression creates more insecurity in the short and medium term. The urgency of these challenges overshadows the fact that fundamental state reform in the Arab world is necessary to tackle them in a sustainable manner. Today, the region appears to pose a direct threat to Europe: a stark contrast to the much more promising situation a decade ago when a wide-ranging democratisation project appeared to be on the cards.

**Changing outsiders:** Traditional outsiders (US, Europe) have lost much of their influence in the region. Arab states (and non-states) are not only seeking out partners elsewhere (e.g. Iran, China, Russia) but are also demonstrating an emboldened foreign policy posture (Qatar in general, UAE and Egypt's recent bombing of Libya). As Arab states shift from being foreign policy objects to subjects, *all* outsiders are losing influence and need to review the way in which they engage with this region. It is now the time to change traditional approaches and to think in entirely new terms. Long-term projects focusing on reform and

development are necessary to enhance Arab state capacity, but will not address the burning issues of physical insecurity and economic free fall.

**Hard choices:** Ongoing violence and instability in the region will be stopped only by a combination of military action, extensive economic reform, and political dialogue – none of which can be delivered by any one actor alone. The leverage wielded by the European Union is largely economic: rather than financial support – which is easily outweighed by the development aid provided by the Gulf states – the Union’s main strength is found in its large share in Arab trade.

Given the magnitude of current challenges, and the fact that it cannot play an active role everywhere, the EU will be forced to make strategic choices and set priorities. One of those priorities could be Tunisia, which is on a path to democracy that could yet potentially be derailed by those who have no interest in seeing a democratic success story emerge in the MENA. Should Tunisia succeed, it could have significant positive repercussions for the entire region.

Multilateral engagement with the League of Arab States is also an option: although the states of the region do not see eye to eye on many things, all of them have an interest in fighting terrorism and creating stability. The current predicament could therefore serve as a springboard for enhanced regional multilateralism, something the EU has pushed for repeatedly. Lastly, an international solution will have to be found for Libya to prevent the creation of a Somalia on the Mediterranean. The political process there is currently paralysed to such an extent that there is no hope of resolving the crisis in the country.