

FORUM CeSPI

The enlarged Mediterranean, a region in transition: conflicts, challenges, future perspectives

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An increasingly interconnected but at the same time divided world is perhaps the best defining characteristic of the present moment. Systemic interdependencies and disruptive antagonisms combine in many parts of the world, producing profound changes and transformations with an uncertain outcome. Widespread processes of internal differentiation have been eroding the homogeneity - real or only presumed - of communities and countries with a long history, which are struggling to find new balances. *Multiplication* of borders, therefore, but also - at the same time and paradoxically – *blurring* of borders, due to the increasing emergence of multiple identities. The MENA area is perhaps the most pertinent example of this dynamic, a region that stubbornly eludes “easy” analyses.

A conflict-ridden and volatile area *par excellence*, the MENA region - Middle East and North Africa - but still, an area whose dividing lines are subject to debate - is home to nearly 10% of the world's population. The voices of the vast majority of the people living there are often marginalized or ignored, not only by mainstream media, but also by rough analyses. The usual debate generally tends to focus - and exhaust - on the actions of leaders or governments that in many cases do not fully represent the multiplicity of real assets nor the full spectrum of views of their citizens: an error of method, in fact, which often leads to consider the region as fully homogeneous in political, cultural and historical terms. The result is a completely inapt *reductio ad unum*, which distorts the analysis.

While it is generally true that fundamentalist actors and authoritarian governments stifle the voices of millions of people throughout the region - a fact that inevitably prompts a debate on the reasons for the failures of the uprisings of the previous decade and the causes of the persistence of certain leaderships and elites - the battle for dignity and fundamental freedoms, as well as the great challenges that characterize the globalized world, are articulated very differently in the many territories that make up the region. Looking at the Middle East and North Africa, we actually see a world in profound transition. Here, new challenges and unprecedented political horizons, such as those in Algeria and Sudan, overlap with long-standing dynamics, and require careful reflection on the part of researchers.

Contributions from scholars interested in the topic will be able to address issues such as:

- 1) adequate access to vaccines during the pandemic phase, focusing also on how the different social classes that make-up the societies examined are affected by this matter and, more generally, the critical issues related to economic recovery in a world still marked by the effects of the pandemic;
- 2) the dynamics of migration, including in relation to the recent Ukrainian crisis;
- 3) the pervasiveness and resistance of religious and cultural identities, often mutually antagonistic or, as in the recent case of Lebanon, perhaps ready to overcome ancient divisions;
- 4) the urgent need for attention to environmental sustainability in view of ongoing climate change and the possibility that cooperation on energetic and idric resources can also be a tool for peace regarding existing conflicts;
- 5) the supply shock produced by the war in Ukraine on the prices of agricultural and food commodities and the ramifications of this on food crises with significant social impacts in MENA countries;
- 6) the renewal of the Iranian nuclear agreement and the prospects arising from it for the regional security architecture;
- 7) the issue of representation and institutional democratization, with a possible analysis of new and unprecedented scenarios compared to the previous decade;
- 8) gender issues, obviously far from secondary and indeed such as to profile at times the possibility of new socio-cultural protagonism (as in the case of Algeria) and the practices of active citizenship, fundamental in guiding the analysis and political action.

It is certainly no coincidence, on the other hand, that the crucial nodes just outlined - and offered for the attention of those who would like to collaborate - are some of the same ones that drove the revolutions and popular uprisings in the region that began - and in many cases ended - more than a decade ago. These conditions are still present in early 2022 in most countries, along with new critical issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing global socioeconomic changes that are affecting different parts of the region in several ways.

Constitutional reforms and profound changes in forms of government are just some of the political trajectories that have affected the region. Many legal systems have been subject to intense and often violent institutional renegotiations, within an overall framework that sees heavily unbalanced government systems to the detriment of internal minorities and bitter ethno-religious clashes still affecting many areas and states. Libya, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen are just some of the examples of states on the verge of economic and political implosion, marked by a long-standing crisis that has worsened in recent years due to conflict, corruption, instability and, in some cases, the very high number of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Regarding the topic of democratic participation and the regression of the rule of law, it is impossible not to note the fact that in Tunisia, eleven years after the fall of Ben Ali and following a perhaps only

procedural process of democratization, power is once again in the hands of a single person, the President of the Republic Kais Saïed. If the last months of 2021 have been marked by the progressive weakening of the country's democratic institutions, with the removal of the Government and the suspension of the work of Parliament, it is possible that 2022 will be the year of their redefinition under new forms, in the name of a direct democracy in which, in the words of Saïed himself, sovereignty will be given back to the people. On the road map announced in December by the Tunisian head of state, however, weigh the expectations of a population deeply frustrated and disappointed by more than ten years of political instability, which has seen the economy sink (also because of the pandemic) and corruption reach worrying levels.

Some monarchies in the region are attempting to address the concerns of their citizens by updating forms of economic intervention to meet demands for greater security, grassroots participation and prosperity. At the same time, however, repression of dissent and restrictions on fundamental freedoms highlight a clear disconnection between institutions and citizens. Recent constitutional amendments in Jordan, officially approved in adherence to a broadly inclusive model of civil society, actually appear, according to many commentators, to be a means of reshaping state power in favor of the monarchy.

In 2022, countries such as Libya and Lebanon have scheduled national elections that foresee a change of leadership and that could, potentially, have crucial outcomes for the entire regional architecture. However, as the last decade of transitions, revolutions and civil wars has shown, political and social change can come quite unexpectedly and abruptly, and the electoral processes mentioned are still far from definitive. A growing number of analysts agree that - especially in the Libyan case - the possibility that these electoral processes will really take place regularly is decreasing. Likewise, the Palestinian Authority has postponed *sine die* the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2021, aggravating the already heavy tension in Palestinian society, which has not gone to the polls since 2006. What emerges overall in the analysis of these dynamics is a restless dialectical movement between the different principles of *dusturism* (constitutional vocation) and *z̧aeimism* (leaderism), which seems to characterize the Middle Eastern and North African region, alternating hybrid forms between the two principles and whose encounter/clash generates complex and often unstable socio-political and institutional dynamics.

Even in countries where elections have been held in 2021, leaders are hastening, with fluctuating results, to provide answers to structural and unresolved questions about the rights of internal political communities, economic transformation and the energy issue, which has a new global horizon in the MENA area. This is, for example, the case of Iraq, which after the highly contested elections of October (validated by the Federal Supreme Court only on December 27 and characterized by the lowest participation rate in Iraqi history), must now face the difficult task of creating a stable majority, also because of the particularly bitter ideological tension between the parties, some of which are linked to

Iran. The future executive will have to deal with problems linked to the pandemic and the consequent economic crisis, but also, as mentioned, with the many long-term challenges. In this regard, Baghdad has recently launched an ambitious plan to reform the energy and water system, aimed at obtaining 63% of electricity from clean energy sources within five years.

The energy issue is also crucial in Iran, where President Raisi will have to face the deep social discontent and the heavy economic crisis that the country is going through. After a long interruption, the Vienna talks have resumed, for a return - both of the Islamic Republic and the United States - to the nuclear deal signed in 2015 and subsequently abandoned by former US President Donald Trump in 2018. This is not, of course, a path without difficulties. Even if diplomacy succeeds in addressing the many outstanding issues, a number of broader regional security issues are likely to remain unresolved and add to the uncertainty over the entire Middle East, leaving ample room for interpretation as to whether the possible renewal of the Iran nuclear deal will serve a stabilizing function in the region and, potentially, globally.

The Ukrainian crisis has then relaunched the discussion on the EastMed gas pipeline, and on the role of countries like Israel in the regional and global energy game. The Jewish state is experiencing a moment of redefinition of its internal political and social identity. The very fragile majority coalition currently in government - which includes, for the first time in the history of the State, an Arab party - seems to represent an ambivalent indicator of both the unexpressed potential that could be realized as well as of the continuing social and cultural fractures present in the country.

Beyond the specificity of the internal issues of each protagonist, a further level of reflection and analysis is provided by the fact that the regional landscape is strongly stimulated - and to a large extent shaped - by the continuous competition between some key countries. In fact, these international competitors operate with a much greater degree of independence and assertiveness than in the past, continuing to test the limits of their own power and influence through mutually antagonistic security measures and diplomatic initiatives. Moreover, this competition - and it is easy to see in this another element of important specificity of the area - is certainly complicated by the presence of a different kind of aggressive and powerful actors, non-state entities such as Daesh, or quasi-state entities such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi in Yemen.

The year 2021, on the other hand, has seen the emergence of unprecedented diplomatic axes, which may open horizons hitherto untried for the regional political-economic dimension, but which still seem inadequate to resolve complex situations such as, for example, the current conflicts in Syria and Yemen. It is likely that the trend towards the reconstruction of relations damaged in recent years and the normalization of ties between countries that had interrupted them or had never had formal relations will continue in the near future, despite the difficulties. The rapprochement between Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will move forward slowly as the countries look for ways to

cooperate on a range of issues such as the economy, energy and shared security. In this perspective, the 2020 normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan have built some important economic/commercial and security ties and suggest a future of greater integration, but it is hard to imagine further openings along these lines without some progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Countries in the region will face additional pressure from climate changes, and the severe socioeconomic impacts of these phenomena. Rising prices in an area characterized by uneven economic growth, extreme heat, prolonged drought, food shortages, and with the risks of a bloody “water war” could increase the burdens on state systems already under formidable pressure (see, in this regard, the Nile dispute between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan over the GERD dam). These factors will further influence the interaction between governments and their populations and broader regional stability. In particular, Russia and Ukraine are among the world's leading producers of agricultural raw materials: the combined effect of production reductions, export restrictions and increased energy prices has caused the price of primary products to rise, causing a supply shock that could produce a food crisis with serious social impacts in the countries of the area, as well as influencing the complex relationship between governments and their populations and the dynamics of migration.

As a region that connects Asia, Africa and Europe, the MENA region remains a key intersection for migration phenomena and political, energetic and economic competition among global powers. While the conflict in Ukraine is in its bloodiest phase, its long-term effects are unpredictable and it is risky to venture forecasts regarding the impact on the MENA area of competition between the United States, China, Russia and Europe, as well as other emerging nations with an as yet undefined role such as India. This competition between external powers seeking to influence trends in the Middle East and North Africa will add another level of complexity along the main fault lines, those that pit Iran and the Gulf countries, Israel and Palestine, and the countries of North Africa and the Horn of Africa. To this jagged and crucial context, engaged in a laborious movement of renewal as much as hindered by old realities, CeSPI intends to dedicate - with the contribution of attentive scholars - a moment of collective, critical and respectful reflection.