


From the depths to the surface: conflict drivers in the MENA region

Joost Hiltermann | Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme,
International Crisis Group | @JoostHiltermann 

Maria Rodríguez Schaap | MENA Programme Assistant, International Crisis Group |
@RodriguezSchaap 

Theme

Failing to acknowledge the 2011 Arab uprisings as a breaking point announcing the need for a regime overhaul in the region, and therefore a long overdue revision of Western policy, would be a mistake with serious adverse consequences. The 2011 uprisings' strong aftershocks still have the potential to undermine not just individual states but the entire Arab state system.

Summary

Dramatic changes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) after 2011 dictate the need for external actors to forge a new policy approach to address the region's long-term challenges. In tackling the region's increasingly intersecting and conflicting politics, aggravated by external interventions, international policy makers should keep their eyes on both old and new conflict drivers, or risk fighting symptoms rather than causes, and thus potentially do more harm.

Analysis

On the periphery of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), in Algeria and in the Sudan, popular uprisings toppled two of the region's longest-ruling leaders in April 2019, opening a new chapter in calls for better governance. In constituting a rejection of the status quo, they carry a similarity with the 2011 Arab revolts.¹ In Algeria, the prospect of a fifth term for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika created a sense of national humiliation and pushed citizens to take to the streets. In their view, the 82-year-old and ailing President could not possibly lead reform, and many Algerians saw their country's potential wasted by interest groups around him.² In the Sudan, a cut to a government subsidy that trebled the price of bread sparked protests against the 76-year-old President Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled the country for almost 30 years. Protests are of course about much more

¹ Jon Alterman (2019), 'A new Arab Spring?', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15/IV/2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-arab-spring>.

² International Crisis Group (2019), 'Post-Bouteflika Algeria: growing protests, signs of repression', 26/IV/2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/algeria/b068-post-bouteflika-algeria-growing-protests-signs-repression>.

(cont.)

than bread, with anger centred more generally on a police state's governance failures.³ Today, the outcomes of the political transitions in the two countries remains unclear.

Continued popular activism throughout the region is proof of a people's enduring aspiration for an end to corruption and for better governance. However, *eight years after* citizens across the Arab world took to the streets voicing a widespread sense of social injustice, authoritarianism has begun to re-establish itself with a vengeance, bankrolled by Saudi and Emirati cheque-book diplomacy. The regimes that survived the challenge to their rule, instead of re-imagining and reforming themselves to head off further popular protests, are mostly reinforcing the fragile governance structures that have long fed the grievances that prompted the Arab uprisings, including by channelling scarce resources into strengthening their repressive capabilities. Meanwhile, events in the region continue to create new security concerns for external actors.

Although rightly concerned by developments in the region and fearing the impact in the form of refugees/migrants and jihadism, outside actors are generally not helping. Whereas at the start of the 2011 Arab uprisings Western actors had voiced support for the aspirations of the people in the squares, today short-term priorities are producing securitised policies, which dominate their relations with MENA states. Longer-term drivers of conflict, although recognised rhetorically as part of policy, remain on the backburner of policy makers' agendas.

Today, after all that the region's people have suffered and lost, mass protests in Algeria and the Sudan seem unlikely to trigger a domino effect similar to that *initiated by Tunisia* almost a decade ago. Yet they should serve as a clear reminder that unaddressed grievances will spawn popular rebellion sooner or later. Failing to acknowledge the 2011 Arab uprisings as a breaking point announcing the need for a regime overhaul in the region, and therefore a long overdue revision of Western policy, would be a mistake with serious adverse consequences.

Old and new drivers of MENA conflicts

Throughout history, the region has suffered repeated upheavals that either advanced or challenged it, and each of these 'earthquakes' has set off its own set of conflicts. At least five separate 'conflict clusters' have emerged from the trauma of WWI, the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the onset of colonial rule, as Arab societies are still seeking to overcome the grievances of their founding:⁴

- Cluster I: internal conflicts deriving from the creation of the region's disjointed governing structures (I-A), and challenges to its borders (I-B). Examples of I-A: various military coups (Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Tunisia); and of I-B: Kurdish

³ International Crisis Group (2019), 'Bashir moves Sudan to dangerous new ground', 26/II/2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/bashir-moves-sudan-dangerous-new-ground>.

⁴ For a detailed account of the five conflict clusters, see Joost Hiltermann (2018), 'Tackling the MENA region's intersecting conflicts', International Crisis Group, 13/II/2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/tackling-mena-regions-intersecting-conflicts>.

insurgencies against their respective central states, and the transnational ambitions of jihadist movements.

- Cluster II: Israeli-Arab wars and Palestinian uprisings deriving from the 1948 creation of the state of Israel. Examples: in 1967, 1973, 1982, 1988 and on.
- Cluster III: conflicts stemming from Iran's outward projection in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and efforts to curb it. Examples: the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war and Israel-Hezbollah wars in 1993, 1996 and 2006.
- Cluster IV: fighting associated with Sunni radicalisation, which was triggered by the Arab states' defeat in the 1967 war and the 1979 siege of Mecca. Examples: jihadists vs Soviets in Afghanistan, efforts to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood, the 9/11 and other jihadist attacks.
- Cluster V: civil wars triggered by state collapse in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Examples: Libya, Yemen and Syria. Other states may still be standing but are both highly repressive and internally fragile. Examples: Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan and possibly also Saudi Arabia.

The Arab uprisings have left the region in disarray and more deeply polarised. Power vacuums resulting from collapsing states, in the absence of regional unity, functioning conflict-resolution mechanisms or a global arbiter, have empowered ambitious non-state actors and invited interventions by regional actors who fear negative implications to their vested interests. External actors compound this situation through interference, often destructive, that invariably is driven by self-interest, even if well-intentioned.

The 2011 uprisings' strong aftershocks still have the potential to undermine not just individual states but the entire Arab state system. They largely removed previously influential Arab states (Egypt, Iraq and Syria) as significant actors, compelling the Gulf states to step into the breach and launch new interventions across the region.⁵ Yet, ill-equipped to tackle the region's challenges, these actors are failing to impose even the outlines of a new order, and instead contribute to the chaos.

Unprecedented levels of intersecting conflict in the MENA region pose difficult challenges to international policymakers. As pre-existing conflict 'clusters' intersect, original conflict drivers are obscured by new grievances and objectives. This makes individual conflicts harder to analyse and address and heightens the risk that external assistance has adverse unintended consequences. Syria is in the unique position of seeing all five conflict clusters intersect.⁶

⁵ 'Reflections five years after the uprisings', Project on Middle East Political Science, POMEPS studies, 28/III/, <https://pomeps.org/2016/03/28/pomeps-studies-18-reflections-five-years-after-the-uprisings>.

⁶ The 2011 challenge to the regime (I-A) dragged in Iran and Hizbollah (II and III), as well as Turkey and Qatar (pro-Muslim Brotherhood, IV), which have competed with Saudi Arabia (anti-Brotherhood, IV); the war has fomented intra-Sunni radicalisation (IV), leading to an increasingly sectarian-tinged struggle (III and IV), while the Kurds have been emboldened to demand self-rule (I-B). To top it off, the rise of jihadists provoked military intervention by the US and its Western allies; the threat of Assad falling drew in Russia; (cont.)

Tackling the region's new complexity will require a new approach. Outside actors should identify, acknowledge and accommodate both new but also old conflict drivers, and understand how positive impact in one arena could cause adverse effects in another. They should be wary of unintentionally strengthening local non-state actors pursuing sub-state or transnational agendas, or regional states pursuing sub-state agendas in neighbours in an attempt to keep them weak and to counter adversaries.

The Arab uprisings and their aftermath

To many, the uprisings signalled the need for a change of course in policy towards the MENA region, where a Western 'stability paradigm' had long supported inherently fragile authoritarian regimes,⁷ and where overly securitised policies were overlooking and aggravating deeper drivers of conflict. For a short moment, such a policy shift seemed to be taking place.

In February 2011, at the yearly Munich Security Conference, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted that security and 'the need for democratic development' had never so clearly converged in the Middle East. Clinton said that the status quo was 'simply not sustainable' and that 'leaders in the region may be able to hold back the tide for a while, but not for long'. To 'help our partners take systematic steps to usher in a better future where people's voices are heard, their rights respected, and their aspirations met' was no longer simply a matter of idealism but a strategic necessity.⁸

However, this reprioritisation did not take place. The economic and financial crisis of 2008-09, combined with the legacy of interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, accelerated the decline of Western primacy in the MENA region. In a more multipolar world, a multiplicity of players made common solutions and political settlements more elusive. Thus, in those instances and fields where Western actors aimed to support the region's people, competing agendas were at play, resulting in an incoherent response to the uprisings. Expressing support for protesters in Egypt and intervening directly in Libya, Western powers failed to act in Bahrain, not wanting to confront their Gulf allies. Then, in acknowledgement of their limited ability to impose order on the region, they did not intervene in Syria either.

Soon, a counterrevolution led by Saudi Arabia began to reverse the changes set in motion by the uprisings. It helped reinstate the Egyptian military regime; kept monarchies in Jordan, Morocco and Bahrain afloat with large amounts of aid; and funded militias elsewhere. The region's activists failed to unite around a common vision and to drive out status quo powers that violently resisted change. As regional and non-state armed actors

and the PKK's local affiliate's progress in northern Syria triggered Turkish intervention (related to Ankara and the PKK's own Cluster I-B conflict inside Turkey). The Syrian war itself is a Cluster V conflict, with an as yet unknown outcome.

⁷ Shadi Hamid (2015), 'Islamism, the Arab Spring, and the failure of America's do-nothing policy in the Middle East', *The Atlantic*, 9/X/2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/middle-east-egypt-us-policy/409537>.

⁸ 'Hillary Clinton's remarks at the Munich Security Conference', 5/II/2011, US Department of State, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/02/156044.htm>.

jumped into the power vacuums created by collapsing states, Western actors that initially voiced their support for the aspirations of the region's citizens began to shift towards more reactive, heavily securitised, approaches. In many cases these realigned them with the 'same-old' state forces seeking 'stability' and restoration of expired social contracts.

Thus, while the uprisings initially raised hopes of profound social change, they brought disillusion instead, as change proved cosmetic or turned into worse. In the aftermath of the uprisings, instead of re-imagining themselves, the states that remained standing resisted reform and reinforced their repressive apparatus.

Yet, protests in the Sudan and Algeria are the most recent reminder that a deeply felt sense of social injustice persists. Elsewhere, protests expressing frustration with dysfunctional systems of governance have continued sporadically, including in Jordan, Iraq and Tunisia.⁹ Protests occurred before 2011 as well, which underlines the continuum of unaddressed grievances.

Towards a more positive engagement with the MENA region

Addressing MENA's persistent governance crisis will not be easy. External actors wishing to support positive change face a region in desperate need of reform yet governed by elites with an existential interest to counteract change whose outcome they cannot control. In almost every MENA country today, the political, economic and social challenges present before the uprisings have worsened, and the political and economic environment post-Arab uprisings is even less conducive to reform.

While some Arab states are making expensive public-relations efforts to attract foreign investment, genuine reform will depend on more inclusive political and economic governance, which utilises the region's human potential to the fullest. Resource-rich Arab states are in a race against time as they rely on elusive economic growth to redistribute wealth and pre-empt dissent. But for the resource-poor, a more inclusive growth process will be the only viable way forward, lest they face collapse.

In the face of these challenges, Western powers might be tempted to see the re-emergence of 'the enemy that we know' as a welcome return of some sort of stability. After all, the dysfunctional but familiar (dis-) order that emerged out of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire had long underwritten at least relative stability. Without the trigger of the popular uprising in Tunisia, the prevailing conditions could perhaps have endured for a while longer: the way in which reform-resisting regimes in the region muddle through today serves as evidence.

Indeed, although the region-wide uprisings 'demonstrated the short-sightedness of the 'stability paradigm' –the model of Arab governments doing the West's bidding in return for the West overlooking the suppression of dissent– that had animated US and

⁹ Marc Lynch (2019), 'Is the next Arab uprising happening in plain sight?', *The Washington Post*, 'Monkey Cage', 26/II/2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/02/26/is-next-arab-uprising-happening-plain-sight/>.
(cont.)

European policy for a half-century',¹⁰ energy, restricting migration and terrorism continue to top Western policy agendas.

However, failing to see the Arab uprisings as a breaking point warning of the need for a new approach would be a mistake. Just because the region's collapse is not complete does not mean the remnants will be able to survive for long.

Thus, the question facing external actors today is whether it is in their interest to maintain the current order or to enable its transformation. To the extent that the uprisings represented a final rupture of the social contract in individual MENA societies, and a rejection of the post-WWI order/disorder more broadly, they should serve to refocus outside actors' attention on the Arab states' lingering legitimacy crisis. In engaging with the region, they should give priority attention to issues of governance and other deeper drivers of conflict.

Of course, a new social contract can only emerge locally, from within societies, and change must be driven by the region's citizens. Past lessons serve as evidence of the limited capacity of external actors to impose order on the region and, moreover, Western governments are by no means the sole external actors in the region. Yet, in rethinking their relationship with the MENA region today, they should at the very least seek to become more aware of how their part in the interaction serves to either support or impede change.

External interventions interact with conflict drivers in their various clusters, often compounding them, and overly securitised, short-term policies directed towards individual events in individual conflicts pay insufficient attention to a conflict's deeper drivers. The idea that authoritarianism can help tackle extremism continues to prove just as misguided today as it has done in the past. Meanwhile, efforts at mediating negotiated settlements to MENA conflicts flounder on these conflicts' increasingly interconnected nature. The structure of Western governments' and organisations' bureaucracies does not help either: they remain compartmentalised in their understanding of, and approach to, the MENA region, having erected internal, artificial barriers that obstruct efforts at finding a collective way out.

It is clear that the last thing the region needs is a refashioning of the old order. Driven by fear of further chaos, Western states risk setting the stage for even greater chaos once their re-found allies breathe their last.

Instead, they should:

- Rebuild the trust and credibility they have lost with the region's people as a result of decades of support for postcolonial autocrats and the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Technical cooperation and development aid have the potential to do so, but only when that cooperation is actually based on the values that the international

¹⁰ Hamid, *op. cit.*

community purports to advance. Today, much aid continues to discredit the providers.

- Use development cooperation to build up the autonomy of the region and its citizens, instead of perpetuating dependency ties. Donor countries tend to prefer working with and supporting national governments, overlooking local actors. As a result, recipient states too often treat the funds they receive as rents that help them resurrect the dysfunctional characteristics of the current (dis-)order instead of instituting overdue reforms. Encouraging substantial reforms will likely require finding a range of new partners, from local NGOs to local-level governments, and providing new incentives.
- Beware of the inherent power imbalance of 'partnerships' involving a broader set of citizens, as the outside actor still holds the purse and sets the terms. To help build more participatory and representative structures, development cooperation should respond to local priorities, and external actors should be open to speak to all parties, regardless of political or ideological differences (for example, in the case of Islamists enjoying broad popular support).
- Engage with MENA actors through a coordinated regional and inter-disciplinary approach. Careful inter-agency coordination is instrumental for consistency and for preventing adverse secondary conflicts, including across conflict clusters.
- Start with an accurate real-time understanding of who and what drives conflicts when designing policy responses and be aware of how policies either help address or instead exacerbate deeper conflict drivers, of the actors they might empower or disempower, and of the grievances this might feed. This requires better independent cross-MENA analysis.

Conclusion

The Arab uprisings underlined the notion that existing conditions in MENA had become unsustainable and announced the region-wide expiry of a socio-economic order that had underwritten relative stability for decades –and with it, the shortcomings of the international system that helped sustain it–. Today, the grievances that led to the near collapse of the regional order persist, and economic trends paint a bleak picture of further decline. Arab states willing or able to only cater to wealthy elites will continue to feed frustrations among the mass of the population, fuelling unrest and outmigration.

At the same time, the 2011 uprisings produced a certain momentum for change, and in some places provided new opportunities. Somehow, new governing structures must emerge, and external actors, if they want to be part of the solution, should be aware that they have long been part of the problem. They need to be aware of how their policies towards the MENA region either help advance or thwart local agendas promoting reform and seek ways in which they may more positively engage with the region.