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Background Paper: Workshop 3.

Political Trends and Geopolitical Dynamics in the Middle East

The European Union and its 'Southern Neighbourhood'

The relationship between the EU and the MENA region, in particular with the geographical vicinity of the SEM (Southern and Eastern Mediterranean) countries has long been framed in geopolitical terms, as 'partnership' and 'neighbourhood'. The assessment of related policies ranges from total failure to more positive evaluations. In any case, a cleavage appears due to the formulation of ideal and lofty foreign policy goals on the one hand, and a policy practice oriented by other considerations, such as migration, resource access and jihadism, on the other. In other words, the most prominent challenge for the EU in SEM countries remains to bring its hard (either non-negotiable or partially negotiable) interests in line with the idealistic outward projection of its own integration and cooperation model, or otherwise to rationalise and reframe the existing constraints.

Furthermore, the bureaucratic and partially technocratic thrust of European unification has yet to translate into a distinct foreign policy orientation. Currently, a multitude of instruments and institutional actors are involved in the EU's 'external action', ranging from the European Commission and the EP (cf. Resolution of 27 March 2019 'Post-Arab Spring') via DGs to the relatively novel EEAS headed by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The CFSP itself is elaborated by the Member States (MS) in the PSC and the EU MC, whereas the CSDP, financed by MS, organises civilian missions and military operations under the leadership of the PSC. The instrumental and policy mix in the 'Southern neighbourhood' of the EU is further complicated by the existence of a separate institution, the UfM (Union for the Mediterranean), operating mainly on a project-oriented level, and viewed differently by MS.

Even though individual SEM countries (in particular Israel) complained about being subsumed under a single mould, the rhetoric of a uniform region (the 'Mediterranean') was upheld, despite increasing differentiation in practical matters, such as the amount of funds made available (e.g. via the ENI), the negotiations of DCFTAs or the choice of potential accession candidates (with Turkey as the regional exception).

The Global Strategy of 2016 introduced a novel approach to MENA as well by decreasing the 'levels of ambition', as did the ENP review of 2015, concerning the potential reformative and transformative impact of the EU in its dealings with the entrenched autocratic regimes. 'Resilience' emerged as a new metaphor for regime continuity, i.e. the acknowledgement of an authoritarian status quo, marked by varying levels of repression, and often militarized politics.

MENA: situation, dynamics, trends

In addition to perennial structural problems in the socio-economic domain (demographic development and youth bulges, endemic corruption, resource curse, inability to or slow speed of reform) leading to high levels of (youth) unemployment, inadequate redistribution and brain drain/migration push, the political field proper continues to operate via non-participatory governance in a highly opaque manner, with top-down decision making processes facilitated by patronage networks and co-optation tactics. Following the 2011 uprisings (“Arab spring”) most regimes have proven particularly resilient in the face of demands for political reform, resulting in a single, exceptional, open-ended democratic experiment in Tunisia. Despite claims to the contrary, the public mood is still only taken into account or manipulated in an opportunistic manner by political players, or entirely ignored as the Algerian and Sudanese examples currently indicate.

The hallmark of the post-Arab Spring, though, is the rise of intra-regional competition, driven mostly by emerging Gulf actors (KSA, UAE). This competition for intra-regional hegemony has not only torn apart the GCC, with Qatar pilloried by its detractors, but expresses a quasi-ideological divide concerning political Islam. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has espoused an aggressive posture toward Iran. The region is thus dotted with perennial Western Sahara (below the radar) and “ME” conflict (“PP” in stalemate), and several new violent conflicts in Libya, Sinai, Syria, and Yemen. Flourishing on the destruction of state structures (by military intervention of external actors or by domestic actors capturing the state) a new variant of jihadism, Daesh (IS), appeared at the intersection of ideology, political grievance, personal frustration and, sometimes, nihilistic appeal. The demographic evolution across the region also intensifies resource stress, both on water and hydrocarbons.

The European Union exerts a strong pull factor for many of the under- or unemployed workforce in MENA. However, vice versa, its model of pluralistic democracy, wide-ranging social liberties (including religious choice) and economic redistribution (welfare state) is considered a red line for most of the authoritarian regimes, seeing it as a risk to their regime stability/survival strategy and their oligarchic control of stakes.

Points of discussion:

- How can the EU’s migration management address this setting (push-pull mix)?
- How can the EU safeguard its drive for peaceful, negotiated denuclearisation of the region (Iran)?
- Should the EU consider a new ENP review due to increased conflict levels and weak statehood in SEM?