

“Post-Pandemic: A New Order or A New Chaos? The Middle East and North Africa Perspectives.”

November 19, 2020

On November 19th 2020, the Middle East Political and Economic Institute, alongside the EURISC Foundation, organized the 6th yearly International Conference dedicated to Middle East and North Africa security issues. It is the longest running event of its kind in Romania, with a significant international presence from the region and beyond and facilitating important and civilized exchanges on the issues affecting this complex region and, through it, reverberating in cross-linked regions and at global level. The 2020 International Conference took place in the context of the Coronavirus Pandemic, and was held exclusively online due to health concerns and difficulty of international travel. Nevertheless, the event featured a significant international attendance, with numerous experts providing valuable viewpoints and fostering a frank exchange of views.

“One may assess that, as never before, the Arab community of the Middle East, its state and socio-political entities are in a situation of being targeted by an outstanding amount of outside challenges and threats manifested simultaneously and in a competitive manner from numerous directions of the regional and extra-regional political geography.”

The final version of the agenda can be reviewed as an annex to this document. The Conference was organized in three sessions, titled as follows:

- “The Evolving Security Cooperation and Crisis Management in the MENA Region. Great Powers Competition”;
- “The COVID-19 Pandemic: An uninvited Guest. MENA: Health Security and Financial Crises Challenges”;
- “The Unpredictable International Security Environment: Unprecedented Challenges and Opportunities for a Regional Security Architecture. Resilience and Reconstruction of the MENA region”.

“The Middle East is going through one of the most unstable periods in its recent history, the instability going beyond the current triple crisis: of the COVID-19 pandemic, of the economic crisis and of the collapse of the energy prices.”

The background of the current situation in the MENA region is significant and was touched on by the speakers in numerous instances during their presentations.

Firstly, the MENA region and its individual subregions are beset by the lack of an appropriate institutionalized governance architecture that would encompass economic, security and crisis management dimensions to address the structural issues and create the necessary preconditions for stability, inclusive growth and the alleviation of various forms of tension and potential conflict.

Secondly, the region features significant long-term trends in demographics, inequality, access to resources and economic structures which generate risks, vulnerabilities and threats that are then heightened by peculiar geopolitical situations. As one participant noted, “when you look at the principal challenges of rising socio-economic vulnerability, the persistence of corruption and the ecological threat of high-level water stress, then you see that we have a complex breeding ground for hybrid intervention that is enriched by high-grade weapon purchases, geopolitical rivalries between regional and international Great Powers, a crisis of legitimacy for several regimes and their reliance on repression. There is a gloomy perspective, and when you then add an earth-shattering wave of new and disruptive technologies – it has deep impact on prosperity, society and security”.

Thirdly, the region is ground zero for Great Power competition, but also for assertive regional powers which attempt to influence regional developments in directions favorable to their interests but with significant (un)intended consequences:

- The United States has been trying to extricate itself from decades-long unsustainable engagement without compromising its regional influence and while attempting to preserve core interests, a balancing act made more difficult by regional complexity and by America's internal weaknesses that ultimately affect its foreign policy formulation and implementation capacity. Its prior lack of a workable exit strategy and pragmatic vision for what it can achieve in the Afghanistan and Iraq in the context of limited resources and increasing conflict fatigue on the part of the American people have engendered the likelihood of electoral success for politicians preaching disengagement, pure transactionalism and, one day, even outright neo-isolationism;

"The US retrenchment is here to stay. US retrenchment doesn't mean that the US is abdicating its global leadership. We are not entering a post-American world, we are entering maybe a post-American Mediterranean, a post-American Middle East, a post-American Northern Africa."
- Russia has intervened significantly, both to preserve and enhance its influence, to reassert its global stature, to preserve its power projection capability in the Eastern Mediterranean, and also with an eye towards alleviating the risk of Middle Eastern conflict and conflict groups and ideologies spreading to Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Russia proper. Notably, Russia has also been pursuing important economic cooperation, including the OPEC+ arrangements by which it tried to ally itself with Saudi Arabia to exert influence in a global energy landscape where the US quickly gained energy independence and became, for a brief time, the largest energy producer in the world;

"The US aversion to boots on the ground following the assassination of its ambassador in 2012, and the EU's geopolitical marginalization in recent years have created an environment conducive to outside interference in the Libyan conflict by unconventional actors. Taking advantage of the new reality as a result of the ineffectiveness of Western powers, the UAE, the aspirant for regional leadership roles, and Russia as an extra-regional actor have emerged as odd power brokers on the ground."
- China is a discrete presence with mostly economic ambitions, but whose designs have far reaching consequences through the dynamic of investment in infrastructure, investment in production and investment in trade facilitation. The region is also vital as a source of energy, with China set to also become the largest LNG importer in the world, surpassing Japan. China's strategic projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, offer it opportunities for leverage in rebuilding efforts and also in development areas ("The Belt and Road Initiative is China's most important means of geopolitical reorganization"). While the region remains a lower priority target compared to others, it has registered the largest growth in Chinese interests over the past few years, as Western partners started closing off key sectors of their economy. At the same time, China has been pursuing military diplomacy, organizing exercises separately with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, for instance, and making this region the first outside East Asia with a permanent Chinese military presence, in support of securing vital trade lanes. China may eventually pursue "an expanded role in the security situation, which

"This strategic point in between the European, Asian and African continents will be a region of the highest interest also in the future."

has so far remained minimal. China will likely be compelled to play a greater role in conflict resolution.”

We are also witnessing a possible gamechanger, through the steady advancement of the so-called “Abraham Accords” between Israel and various Arab nations, in the context of strong US support and enticement and the common ground against Iran.

Turkey’s increasing regional assertiveness, recently on display in its support for Azerbaijan in the war with Armenia, also adds another complicating factor to regional dynamics, as well as to the relations of European powers with the region, in the context of political rows over Eastern Mediterranean energy, differences over Libya, tensions within NATO and increasingly frequent “wars of words”.

“A retroactive reading of Turkey’s coercive engagement in Libya and the form of its involvement on the ground suggests that it was not a product of a grand design that takes into consideration all strategic aspects. Rather, it was an evolutionary, path-dependent process that was shaped by Ankara’s quest to respond to the regional crises and challenges at a particular juncture.”

Lastly, the novel Coronavirus pandemic and its consequences, both regional and global, including the energy market shocks, have thrown into stark relief the national and regional inadequacies in crisis management, emergency situation management and overall economic and societal resilience to disruptive events. With the downturn in the global economy affecting energy prices and leading to absurd occurrences such as negative prices in futures markets, as well as new lows in the spot markets, the countries in the region, whether rich or less so, as squeezed fiscally at a time when state interventions to prop up living standards and ensure economic continuity are at their most important.

Following from these considerations, the participants in the Conference engaged in a respectful and important debate over substantive issues and the possible regional evolutions, including potential solutions to governance problems in the short, medium and long-term.

“The uncertainties and risks involving the national reconciliation and state-building process are no less challenging than military engagement.”

It is beyond the scope of this summary paper to review every aspect of the discussions which took place on November 19th. However, key topics and conclusions stand out:

Given also the interest of Romania as an EU member and a supporter of multilateralism, discussions returned time and time again to how the EU can be more active regionally and generate a positive contribution. There is a deep confidence and belief in the effective multilateralism in the EU, as proven in the recent remarks made by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and by the EU High Representatives. The European Union needs to consider all the aspects of a wider Middle East policy, a long-term strategy involving multilateral cooperation to prevent further disintegration of this region. Working multilaterally, an approach advocated by the European Union, would help to advance constructive objectives related to the future reconstruction, reconciliation and rebuilding of the region. These include: promoting peace, stability, nuclear non-proliferation, counterterrorism, energy and maritime security and stemming refugee flows.

“The European Union should create a roadmap for prioritizing its own security interests in the region and should try to nurture a multilateral process that can overtime, through confidence building measures and international oversight, balance the security needs of all parties in . . .

With regards to the United States, significant discontinuity in American policy is to be expected because the main pillar of the Trump Administration's foreign policy has been a pragmatic pursuit of stabilization, while working towards disengagement. President-elect Joe Biden stressed a very different concept: going back to democratization and the defense of human rights all across the globe. That means that the pressing choice that Joe Biden is going to make when facing every major crisis will be in favor of supporting change, going in the direction of revolution and democratization, as during the Obama Administration. Whether, in the context of the Trump (attempted) drawdowns of forces, the Biden Administration will manage to achieve a return to the status quo ante in terms of American presence remains to be seen. However, the challenges of wider competition with China may lead to this eventuality, even though the trend is one of limiting the number of areas of outright rivalry.

"We can expect the continuation of the fierce geopolitical competition already visible almost everywhere in the area."

A further topic of discussion was the weaknesses in the region that enable it to act as a breeding ground for violent and radical groups who then spread their operations beyond regional confines. One participant called this *threat convergence*: terrorist organizations are converging in places in which governments are not actually able to address the threat through hard security options. These groups are becoming much more resilient and it is much harder for security agencies to resolve these issues while various other political, environmental and health issues are increasing in urgency and attention paid to them. The threat to Europe has been presented in stark terms, through the invocation of no-go areas and their role as "facilitating environments for extremist ideologies among the increasingly radicalized individuals in these communities, some of whom have turned to terrorist violence to achieve their objectives".

"Weak and failed states provided conditions that enabled terrorist groups to establish safe havens in their ungoverned or poorly governed regions, as we see now. It is in such safe havens that these terrorist groups are able to establish areas in which they can freely collaborate and where they can devise and plan terrorist attacks around the world."

Some speakers focused on the new actors that are pursuing interests in this region. One actor which was noted as having extremely high potential was India, with over 7.5 billion of its citizens present in the Persian Gulf states before the pandemic and with a key interest in pursuing regional projects for connectivity as part of its own designs and as a counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The example invoked is that of the International North-South Transport Corridor, connecting India to Russia through the Chabahar port, but also Afghanistan.

One of the basic conclusions of the discussion was that no amount of good faith interventions from outside can take the place of the MENA policymakers themselves in launching a governance reform agenda addressing the current challenges: security, civil society, climate change etc. International policymakers should support this process by engaging indigenous civil society actors in order to design, develop and implement such strategies, following on efforts to understand the full scale of the problems, including the region's traceable development and its dynamics. As one participant noted, "there is an urgent and clear need of building a comprehensive knowledge base with a view towards the broad variety of challenges in the MENA region that would then provide the full situational awareness that would help build appropriate policies and action agendas. Long-term reform processes must be supported, the role of regional organizations must be strengthened and the coordination with international partners must be improved." This is one area where the European Union and countries such as Germany can be of assistance. However, "we should maintain realistic expectations of the development, instead of an ideal state of affairs, the goal should rather focus on sufficiently good governance and resilience."

On this pragmatic note, the JCPOA remains a key determinant of Iran's relations with the West, with the EU in general and the US in particular. Multiple scenarios were discussed in the context of the Biden electoral victory, keeping in mind that the JCPOA in itself is one dynamic, and the other is the ability of the Iranian moderates to finally capitalize on any breakthrough in order to deliver rising prosperity, which they have not done so far, and whether Iran will choose a 25 years partnership agreement with China and forego trying to develop relations with the EU.

Last, but not least, the coronavirus pandemic itself is a bellwether of regional dysfunctionalities. The heterogeneous capabilities of the regional states to manage this unprecedented crisis for the globalized world (fiscal capacity, state capacity, local expertise and institutions, local security culture, local economic resilience) serve to emphasize the possibilities of regional cooperation, coordination and governance formulas for the amelioration of crises with regional and global impact. Leadership, stability and an environment conducive to pragmatic and good faith cooperation are prerequisites for any such cooperation.

The International Conference "Post-Pandemic: A New Order or A New Chaos. The Middle East and North Africa Perspectives", held on November 19th 2020, was a successful event, despite the limitations inherent in the online format, and managed to uphold what is already a tradition of civilized yearly debates held in Romania on Middle Eastern and North African security issues with a diverse group of participants.

ANNEX



“Post-Pandemic: A New Order or A New Chaos? The Middle East and North Africa Perspectives.”

Thursday, 19 November 2020

PROGRAM

10:00 – 10:05 Opening remarks: Mr. Flavius CABA-MARIA, President, Middle East Political and Economic Institute, Bucharest, Romania

10:05 – 12:30 Session I. “The Evolving Security Cooperation and Crisis Management in the MENA Region. Great Powers Competition.”

Chair: Dr. Liviu MUREȘAN, Executive President, EURISC Foundation, Bucharest, Romania

Panelists:

Prof. Adrian SEVERIN, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Romania;

HE Dr. Mostafa ZAHRANI, Adviser of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Director-General of Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), the Islamic Republic of Iran;

HE Mr. Werner FASSLABEND, President, the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES), President EuroDefense Austria, and former Minister of Defense of Austria (1990-2000), Austria;

Dr. Basam ABOABDOLAH, Head of the Center for Strategic Studies and Adviser to the Syrian Information Minister, the Syrian Arab Republic;

Prof. Svyatoslav A. TIMASHEV, The Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia;

Dr. Qin TIAN, Assistant Director of Institute of Middle East Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), the People’s Republic of China;

Prof. Kayhan BARZEGAR, Director of the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies, Tehran; Professor at the Islamic Azad University / Tehran, and Fellow Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, the Islamic Republic of Iran;

Dr. Germano DOTTORI, Scientific Advisor of Limes, Italian Review of Geopolitics, Italy;

Prof. El Mostafa REZRAZI, International Expert in Crisis Management and Violent Extremism, Senior Fellow at the Policy Center for the New South, President of the Moroccan Observatory on Extremism and Violence, Professor of Crisis Management at the University Mohammed VI Polytechnic, the Kingdom of Morocco;

Prof. Hassan AHMADIAN, University of Tehran, the Islamic Republic of Iran;

Dr. Corneliu PIVARIU, security and international relations senior expert, Romania;
Prof. Erzsébet N. RÓZSA, Professor, National University of Public Service and the Institute of World Economy, Hungary;
Dr. Saban KARDAS, Associate Prof. Department of Political Science and International Relations, TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara, the Republic of Turkey.

12:30 – 12:40 Break

12:40 – 14:30 **Session II. “The COVID-19 Pandemic: An uninvited Guest. MENA: Health Security and Financial Crises Challenges.”**

Chairs:

Prof. Kayhan BARZEGAR, Director of the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies, Tehran; Professor at the Islamic Azad University / Tehran, and Fellow Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Iran;
Mr. Iulian MAREȘ, Strategic Analyst, MEPEI, Bucharest, Romania.

Panelists:

General Dr. Florin PAUL, epidemiologist, former head of medical branch UNAVEM III, Iraqi Freedom Mission, AMISOM, UNIFIL, EUCAP-Niger, Romania;
Dr. Alibeman Eghbali ZARCH, Senior Expert, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), the Islamic Republic of Iran;
Prof. Radu MUȘETESCU, Director of International Economic Relations at MEPEI, and Director of the Department of International Business and Economics, Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania;
Dr. YAO JINXIANG, Assistant Research Fellow, Department for Developing Countries Studies, China Institute of International, the People’s Republic of China;
Prof. Amir Cyrus RAZZAGHI, International Economic Affairs, CEO Ara Enterprise, the Islamic Republic of Iran;
Mrs. Yeşim TIRPAN, Leiden University, Holland / Turkey;
Dr. Alexandru GEORGESCU, Strategic Analyst, EURISC Foundation, Romania.

14:30 – 14:40 Break

14:40 – 17:30 **Session III. “The Unpredictable International Security Environment: Unprecedented Challenges and Opportunities for a Regional Security Architecture. Resilience and Reconstruction of the MENA region.”**

Chairs:

Mr. Flavius CABA-MARIA, President, Middle East Political and Economic Institute, Bucharest, Romania
Dr. Liviu MUREȘAN, Executive President, EURISC Foundation, Bucharest, Romania

Panelists:

HE Mr. Viorel ISTICIOAIA-BUDURA, Former Ambassador of Romania to People’s Republic of China, Former Head of the European Union delegation to Japan, Managing Director, Head of Asia and Pacific Department, European External Action Service, Romania;

Ralph D. THIELE, Chairman, The Institute for strategic, political, security and economic consultancy, President EuroDefense Germany, and CEO StratByrd Consulting, Germany;

Prof. Nasser HADIAN, Professor of Political Science, the University of Tehran, the Islamic Republic of Iran;

Dr. Wael Al-BATTREKHI, Minister Counsellor, Deputy Chief of the Mission, Embassy of the State of Palestine to Romania;

Dr. Aleksey KHLEBNIKOV, Expert, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), Moscow, the Russian Federation;

Mr. Li ZIXIN, Assistant Research Fellow, Department for Developing Countries Studies, China Institute of International, the People's Republic of China;

Prof. Davood KIANI, the Islamic Azad University, Vice President at the Institute of Iran and Eurasia Studies (IRAS), the Islamic Republic of Iran;

Mr. Emiliano STORNELLI, Charmain and Founder, the Religion and Security Council, Rome, Italy;

Dr. Abdul Halim FADLALLAH, Chairman, the Consultative Center for Studies and Documentation, the Lebanese Republic;

Prof. Ecaterina MAȚOI, Program Director at MEPEI, Lecturer at the Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies Department of Basel University, Switzerland and at the National Defense University of Romania, Romania;

Dr. Mohammed NIKHAH, expert on North-Africa issues, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Islamic Republic of Iran;

Dr. Ghazi Ben AHMED, Chairman of the Board, the Mediterranean Development Initiative; Senior Expert International Economics, the Republic of Tunisia;

Mr. Andrin Jerome Nevis RAJ, Director, the Nordic Counter Terrorism Network, Helsinki, Finland; the Southeast Asia Regional Director, the International Association for Counterterrorism and Security Professionals – Center for Security Studies, Kuala LUMPUR, Malaysia.