

QUO VADIS, MIDDLE EAST? MEANDERING (PART ONE)

Amid an Array of National and Regional Challenges, with Ripples from the Global Ones, Along the Quasi-Broken Rules-based (Liberal) International Order As Well as through the Shaky Nexus Between an Emergent MENA's Regional Order and Number of National "Dis-Orders"

GHEORGHE DUMITRU*

Abstract. This article ambitions to be an essay on possible answers to the respective interrogation through metaphorical lens monitoring the traces and trajectories of meanderings in the realm of foreign policies and diplomatic actions as being undertaken on MENA's extensive geopolitical space, as well as internal evolutions in the Middle East's states. Practically, the compound of glosses structuring and giving substance to the present paper are aiming at introducing in the narratives on the region of the Middle East and North Africa (*MENA*) the expression *cum* metaphor *meandering*. Used in this dual hypostasis, we see *meandering* as rather capable to shed the necessary and intensive light on critical and relevant aspects with regard to the present journey of MENA amidst its ever numerous and diverse *national, regional, and global challenges*, as spread on a wide span, from *internal challenges* related, among other critical factors, to the reality that its inhabitants "Live in a Highly Authoritarian Region"¹, to *challenges originating outside* but strongly impacting on MENA too, as the present-day Russia's war against the sovereign and independent Ukraine, or, equally currently, the less fortunate global geopolitical background nurtured by the weakening, up to annihilation, of the rules-based (liberal) international order. Mirroring the realities "on the ground" with regard to our subject-matter, this essay is structured into rather numerous chapters, each with its own title and sub-title, as closer bearing witness to the meanderings in the MENA's realm of countries' internal trends, plus foreign policies and diplomacies. Undoubtedly, other interested fellow analysts could further finesse our present approach, which hopefully would remain known as a *pioneering work*². Of course, one should also be aware of the magisterial

* PhD, Former Diplomat, last posting Ambassador of Romania to Egypt (2006-2012); gheorghe.dumitru@yahoo.com.

¹ "We live in a highly authoritarian region". CSIS, September 19, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/real-news-fake-news-and-no-news>.

² Notably, the expression "*pioneering work*" is legitimated here also by the fact that, in the literature on the International Relations, the term "*meandering*" is now rarely if ever used. One example is the following with the caveat that the word "*meandering*" is put in the particular context of the Middle East situation, namely

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verse wrote on *Pioneers* by Walt Whitman: “We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson, Pioneers! O Pioneers!”³ Only that, in this case *per se* there is a fundamental stimulus to embarking on the proposed endeavouring, one related to the very essence and sourcing of meandering: “History does not follow a straight line, and we forget this at our peril.”⁴ Particularly, “in my own experience, in the Middle East, history rarely moved in a straight line.”⁵ Eventually, this entire hopefully inciting background was intended to make easier the start of our very narrative, letting also “the door” open to including, here and there, some iconoclastic assertions and assessments, if useful.

Keywords: *National Challenges; Regional Challenges; Global Challenges; International Order; MENA*

First Step First on the Way to Whitman’s “Lesson”: A Short Introduction

Motto:
“Covering Middle East Politics Requires a Wide Lens.”⁶

It is our view that the social and political magma defining the realm of our world, in its particular regional and global developments, including the foreign policy and diplomacy unfolding by various national identities and Governmental structures, make both possible and useful to deeper understanding the *MENA*⁷ region’s overall existence and evolution not only through its *classically complex and complicate patterns and images*, but also through endeavours to define and use new *relevant concept and images*, from another category, namely those expressed in *metaphorical terms*.

that of the Arab Spring’s start and unfolding: “The Egyptian president gave another speech on February 10 (2011), a meandering and embarrassing performance that did nothing to ease the intensifying anger of the protesters... He resigned on February 11, handed power over to the military... The Mubarak era was over”. William J. Burns, *The Back Channel. A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for its Renewal*, Random House, New York, 2020, p. 302. Instead, in the same book, written by an outstanding American diplomat, presently director of the CIA, one can meet words which can be considered part of the “family” where “meandering” belongs: “Managing great power competition is what diplomacy is all about – maneuvering in the gray area between peace and war... exploring common ground where we can find it, and pushing back firmly and persistently when we can’t” (W. J. Burns, p. 431).

³ <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/99>.

⁴ Jon B. Alterman, *The Middle East’s Coming Centrality*, CSIS, September 20, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/middle-east-coming-centrality>.

⁵ W. J. Burns, p. 301.

⁶ Lina Khatib, *Covering Middle East Politics Requires a Wide Lens*, in *World Politics Review*, Sep. 6, 2022. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/politics-middle-east/?share=email&messages%5B0%5D=one-time-read-already-used-for-post>.

⁷ MENA is an acronym for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While there is no standardized list of countries included in the MENA region, the term typically includes the area from Morocco in northwest Africa to Iran in southwest Asia and down to Sudan in Africa. There is no specific boundary for the Middle East, North Africa, or the MENA region as a whole. The region is typically considered to include around 19 countries, but the definition can be stretched to include up to 27. The World Bank includes the following 21 countries as part of MENA: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Arab Rep., Iran, Islamic Rep., Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic,

And through this very article we come to propose and effectively use one such category of metaphor, namely *meandering*⁸, which could be called to the fore with the purpose to better mirroring *the Middle East's present sense of direction and practical course of evolution*, only that not any course or any direction, but those ultimately expressed by the fateful concept of “*challenges*”: “Countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region will face major economic, social, and environmental challenges over the coming decade. These challenges represent long-term trends that can be anticipated but cannot easily be avoided. Countries can only prepare for them.”⁹

In a nutshell, the nexus of challenges and meandering could be, in our view, a pivotal way to a substantive and holistic perception and understanding of today's MENA. Only that, given the kaleidoscopic pattern of the theme's “substance”, the respective holistic approach it's been conceived as an integrative corpus of two PARTS – PART ONE, including Chapters 1, 2, and 3, and PART TWO, with Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4.

PART ONE

Chapter 1. In Light of the Pivoting “Nexus between Challenges and Meandering” Specific to Today's MENA: A Relevant Sample of MENA Region's Challenges with a View on Their Extrapolation in the Realm of Meandering Considerations Based on Data from the End of the 1990s – Beginning of 2020s

As a pivotal characteristic of the MENA region in its advances into the 21st Century's second decade, *the nexus of challenges and meandering* appears as the conjoint and intersectional actions by factors and impacting dynamics coming from two directions, internally and from outside the region.

Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, West Bank and Gaza, Yemen, Rep. One particular problem is related to the question if Iran is part of MENA or not. Iran is typically considered a part of the MENA region, but it does depend on the organization or government and how they define the group of countries. The MENA region is defined strictly geographically, which is why Iran is typically included, despite not being a part of the “Arab World” or other terms used to describe regional groupings based on culture or language. As far as we are concerned, we would be inclined to apply to Iran a famous Churchill-ian paraphrased saying: “Iran is with the Middle East, but not of it”. “Iran and the Middle East are linked but not comprised.”

<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena.asp>. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=ZQ-1W>.

<https://istizada.com/mena-region/>.

Sir Winston Churchill: “*We are with Europe, but not of it.*” “*We are linked but not comprised*”, in *Financial Times*, September 19, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/3d6bbabc-7122-11e6-a0c9-1365ce54b926>.

⁸ Meander: “to have a lot of curves instead of going in a straight or direct line; to follow a winding course; to walk slowly without a specific goal, purpose, or direction; to go from one topic to another without any clear direction”. <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/meandering>.

“To follow a winding course”. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meander>.

⁹ Nader S. Kabbani, *The Middle East Faces Major Development Challenges: Most Countries Are Not Prepared to Meet Them*, in *The Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, Issue Brief, July 2, 2022. <https://mecouncil.org/publication/the-middle-east-faces-major-development-challenges-most-countries-are-not-prepared-to-meet-them-6nA2ssVtBsW60NpDhYla9wRUvXjPWVqjtdAkiLiRmvUwm5UyDeTysX4b14AYCcg2VQt8NAjwe3I5L8qkQpt>.

First, the inwardly emerged profile and trajectory nurtured by the very defining features of the Middle East and North Africa as a distinct region of the world is quintessentially associated with both *a large array of challenges, and a richly basic sources of meandering from policies and concrete actions by MENA states*. A synopsis in this regard should start with an expressive *definition of today's MENA profile*, like the inspiring one presented by Richard Haass, President, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), in his seminal book *The World A Brief Introduction*: “The Middle East has been, is, and quite likely will remain the most tumultuous of world's region.”¹⁰

Notably, the pivotal metaphor “*tumultuous*” is an “*upstream kith and kin*” of our metaphor *meandering*, a *junction revealed by the comprehensive inventory of realities, facts, evolutions*, many seen as *serious challenges* which have been contributing to making MENA “*tumultuous*”, and, through that, making it... “*meandering*”. We consider that an insightful and holistic approach for this very matter could be structured in at least five levels:

*The Nexus Between Overall Challenges Realm
and the overall MENA region with its constituent countries*

Richard Haass successfully strived in assembling a rather comprehensive *list* with the determinants and other elements included in the respective *inventory*¹¹ which could be considered *a valid description of present MENA's challenges, with the implicit meandering, as well as its foreshadowed future*, all this based on the 2020's information and data:

- “The numerous conflicts that there are today within and between MENA countries, some of which have been raging for the better part of a decade at terrible human costs. There is as well the all-too-real potential for additional conflict.
- Governments dominate the economies. Corruption is widespread. Most of the farming, with the exception of Israel, is neither modern nor large.
- The overwhelming majority of the governments are to one degree or another autocratic. Several are ruled by hereditary monarchies. Most others are ruled by individuals with close ties to the military or the dominant political party. National identities and loyalty to country in many cases compete with other loyalties, be they to a tribe or a sect or a religion.
- Just why so much of the region's modern history is characterized by a lack of democracy and a prevalence of violence within and between countries is a matter of more than a little conjecture and controversy... whatever the cause or causes, what cannot be disputed is that the Middle East has largely failed to produce conditions of freedom, stability and prosperity.

¹⁰ Richard Haass, *The World A Brief Introduction*, Penguin Press, New York, 2020, p. 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-130.

– There are four categories of reasons that could explain why a region that accounts for only a small percentage of the world's people, land, and economy figure so prominently in the news, respectively why does the Middle East matter as much as appear to: 1. Energy (the region is home of to just over half the world's proven oil reserves and the source of half of the world's known natural gas reserves; 2. Religion. 3. Violence, existence of terrorists in abundance, there are also a number of large paramilitary organizations and militias that governments cannot control, plus the proliferation danger. 4. The Israel-Palestine conflict that has been waged for seventy years and has capture the world's attention to a degree that at times seem to transcend the immediate stakes.

– Iran, at the level of 2020, no longer balanced by a hostile and strong Iraq, has emerged as a regional power. It is an ambitious country that seeks to spread its influence throughout the region, using not just its own armed forces but also militias and paramilitary groups such as Hezbollah (a Shia-based militia and political party that dominates Lebanon) and support for local Shia populations, as it does in Yemen and Iraq. It has intervened directly and indirectly in Syria. In the process, it has turned itself into the largest regional concern for Saudi Arabia and other Arab Sunni states, Israel and the United States. How this competition – one that in many ways has superseded the Israeli-Arab dynamic that for decades dominated the Middle East – plays out will have an enormous impact on the future of the Middle East.

– Whatever happens involving Iran, what is certain is that the Middle East lacks many of the prerequisites of stability. The map of the region conceals the reality that many of the borders are contested and several of the governments are not in control what goes on within their borders. There is no balance of power and no shared sense of what the region should look like or how change should come about. Increasingly, the region is a venue of often violent competition among the most powerful local countries – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt – that is further complicated by the regional interests of several of the major powers – mostly the United States, Russia, and to a lesser extent China – and the actions of a troubling range of non-state such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hezbollah, and various Kurdish militias. All of this suggests a future for the Middle east that is like its past, defined by violence within and across borders, little freedom or democracy, and standards of living that lag behind much of the rest of the world.”

What we have above is a compound of challenges and implicit meandering the MENA region had been facing by 2020, the time of publishing Richard Haass' book. The following two years extended both the number and the nature of the challenges associated with the Middle East, while accentuating and deepening the potential of political and diplomatic meandering for the region's countries. In this light, a peculiar package of challenges was reviewed in a notable paper, drafted and released, at the beginning of July 2022, by the reputable think tank “*The Middle East Council on Global Affairs*” a document

entitled “*The Middle East Faces Major Development Challenges: Most Countries Are Not Prepared to Meet Them*”¹²:

- “Countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region will face major economic, social, and environmental challenges over the coming decade. These challenges represent long-term trends that can be anticipated but cannot easily be avoided. Countries can only prepare for them.

- The external challenges that will hit the MENA region in the coming decade are similar to those of the past, but they will be more numerous and self-reinforcing. The region faces a perfect storm of concurrent economic, social, and environmental threats.

- Four external challenges stand out: energy transition, climate change, technological transformation, and demographic trends. Despite recent increases in global energy prices, triggered by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the coming decade will witness a steady decline in oil reserves, beginning with Bahrain and Oman. Furthermore, long-term trends will exert downward pressures on both global energy prices and demand as the world transitions to a post-carbon future.

- These challenges include financial pressures from long-term downward trends in global energy prices; competitive pressures from advances in digitalization; increased water scarcity and rural-urban migration resulting from climate change; and greater labour supply pressures due to demographic trends.

- At the same time, MENA countries suffer from governance deficits that will prevent them from dealing with these challenges effectively. MENA is the only region in the world that has witnessed a decline in governance outcomes. These governance deficits include weak public institutions, frayed state-citizen relations, exclusionary economic systems, and fragile interstate relations.

- Overcoming these governance deficits requires a paradigm shift in MENA states’ approach to governance and development, including emphasizing incremental improvements over major reforms, enhancing transparency and accountability, and creating space for meaningful citizen participation.

- Dealing with climate change will require pre-emptive planning and the allocation of resources to manage these downside risks.

- MENA’s track record in addressing external challenges is not reassuring. The late 1980s and 1990s were a period of low oil prices and economic stagnation for oil producing and non-oil producing countries alike. MENA states knew that economic and demographic pressures were building up. They also knew what needed to be done. But they failed to overcome internal institutional weaknesses and initiate the types of economic reforms that would have allowed their private sectors to grow, creating needed jobs. On the contrary, the reforms

¹² Nader S. Kabbani, *The Middle East Faces Major Development Challenges: Most Countries Are Not Prepared to Meet Them*, The Middle East Council on Global Affairs, Issue Brief, July 2, 2022. <https://mecouncil.org/publication/the-middle-east-faces-major-development-challenges-most-countries-are-not-prepared-to-meet-them-6nA2ssVtBsW60NpDhYla9wRUvXjPWVqjtdAkiLiRmvUwm5UyDeTysX4b14AYCog2VQt8NAjwe3I5L8qkQpt>.

they introduced benefited insiders and limited competition and growth. Today, there is a tight window of opportunity for MENA countries to initiate necessary reforms and prepare for the coming trials. Time is of the essence; the global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation and reduced the fiscal space for states to act.

– Another global trend that has yet to fully impact the region is technological innovation. MENA lags other developing regions in many aspects of technology adoption.

– Each of these external challenges, on its own, seems manageable. Combined, however, they represent a formidable storm on the horizon. MENA countries can orient their economies and institutions to take advantage of these opportunities, they can spur development and growth. Unfortunately, MENA countries lack the institutional capacity to successfully address many of these challenges. While there is still enough time to prepare, states must first overcome key governance deficits that have held them back: frayed state-citizen relations, weak institutions, exclusionary systems, and fragile Interstate relations.

– The region's record in resolving internal conflicts and regional disputes has been dismal. A final institutional weakness is deteriorating inter-state relations across the region. Most of the challenges facing the MENA region are regional in nature and require regional collaboration, or at least cooperation. Instead, regional rivalries have set the region back. Internal conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Libya have drained resources and reversed hard-won gains in human development outcomes. Rather than working to resolve these conflicts, regional involvement has exacerbated and prolonged the crises. Furthermore, regional rivalries have served as a financial drain, diverting scarce financial resources away from development priorities, with few clear benefits. In 2020, Gulf countries collectively spent USD 100 billion on their defence budgets. Yet, military interventions in Yemen and Libya have backfired, as have regional powerplays against neighbours, such as the 2017 blockade against Qatar.

– Regional institutions such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have had virtually no influence in moderating or resolving disputes. Flashpoints are increasing as proxy conflicts have extended into Lebanon, Sudan, Somalia, and the Sahel. At a time when serious global challenges are confronting the entire region, MENA countries need to find ways of resolving disputes and working together more effectively. There is an added layer of urgency. Competition among global and regional powers is increasing. The U.S. and China are at odds. Russia has been reasserting its role as a global power. Divided MENA countries might easily become pawns or collateral damage in the global struggle for power.”

*The Nexus Between the Overall Challenges Realm and the
Homogeneous Arab Group, the Biggest Part of MENA
Region, as Territory and Number of Inhabitants*

Mottos:

“Our (Arab) societies are still incapable of coming up with ideas that can confront the challenges. They still lack a vision to form the appropriate response to them.”¹³

“The Arab world today seems to be in dire need of various tools to confront the looming challenges.”¹⁴

Each of the two mottos has got a particular source, in the first case being a high official of the Arab League, as for the second the author is a reputable analyst from the Arab world. Meanwhile, the two assertions had also a common “target”: to underline the lack of preparation in the Arab realm to confronting its present, and equally the looming, challenges.

On the other hand, in reaching the respective conclusion, each of the two sources, given its particular nature, used different arguments, as substance and even tonality, in backing the respective assertion.

As expected, the language in the Arab League’s narrative was to the point even if it echoed the debates and resolutions of any respectable international institution:

– The region has been going through a cycle of protracted crises since 2011 that have affected its security, economy and overall situation.

– The unprecedented crises the whole world is going through, such as the coronavirus pandemic and the war on Ukraine, have exacerbated the situation in *the Arab region*, leading to the emergence of unexpected threats, such as the food crisis and economic slowdown.

– Eventually, the official of the Arab League called for *the formation of a comprehensive Arab vision and an integrated strategy to address the challenges*.

Marwan Muasher, vice president for studies at Carnegie, where he oversees research in Washington and Beirut on the Middle East, successfully avoided the unnecessary succinctness so that the hindsight could go together with the foresight, even if the Arab realities would be put sometimes in a rather “crude” light: “some, including myself, have warned that the transformational process in the Arab world will take a long time before it matures, and before the protests turn into a sustainable institutional and pluralistic building for the modern state.” And:

– “More than ten years after the Arab revolutions, it seems that the Arab world still refuses to take lessons from what happened and establish stable and

¹³ Assistant Secretary-General of Arab League, Ambassador H. Zaki, on the Secretary-General Aboul Gheit’s behalf, during the founding meeting of the Arab Peace Group at the headquarters of the League in Cairo. 13 October, 2022.

<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3930531/arab-league-underlines-%E2%80%98%E2%80%99-situation-middle-east>.

¹⁴ Marwan Muasher, *The new spring is coming? The Arab world today seems to be in dire need of various tools to confront the looming challenges*. Carnegie Middle East Center, September 22, 2022.

<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/87975>.

prosperous modern societies, and most Arab regimes still refuse to catch up with the rest of the world, compared to indicators of freedom and knowledge.

– Any inventory of the state of the Arab world today does not satisfy the enemy before the friend. There are not a few Arab countries on their way to becoming failed states, torn apart by civil wars and dilapidated administrations from within, and their flesh being eaten by external interventions, and most of them are countries that have not respected the plurality of their internal components. Lebanon, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Iraq are today exemplifying of countries that possess human, financial and natural resources, but lack the minimum level of good governance and respect for their ethnic, religious and gender pluralism.

– As for the other model before us, it is the model of the authoritarian state, which was present before the Arab revolutions in most Arab countries, and it continues to persist in its authoritarianism today, despite the deterioration of its economic, security and social conditions. This model is difficult to change, because the forces of the status quo in it still prefer to take the easiest political path, which is the path of reliance on foreign aid, public debt, indirect taxes, and high inflation, instead of real political and economic reforms, in order to protect personal privileges and outdated rentier systems.

– There is the third model, which is represented by most of the monarchies in the Arab world, and it is the model that offers small reforms to temporarily satisfy the street, with a focus on some economic and societal reforms, without this being accompanied by an integrated vision of all the pillars of the modernist state, and governance systems that depend on separation and balance between them. And for sustainable economic development away from rent and productivity.

– The challenges facing the Arab region seem big and old, exacerbated by the absence of good governance systems in the past. Today, the region faces new challenges, except for the repercussions of the Arab Spring and the decline in the price of oil, most of which are represented by the Corona pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war.

– There is another new challenge that the region has ignored until recently, and has recently begun to pay attention to, which is climate change. Rising temperatures have markedly affected water evaporation, the shortage of water reserves, and the decline of cultivated lands. The crisis between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam is only evidence of the impact of climate change. In addition, the refugee crisis in the Arab region, after it has become home to more than half of the world's refugees, is a crisis that has humanitarian, economic and security repercussions, as well as its impact on the identities of the host countries.

– It has become clear that yesterday's tools, globally and not only in the Arab world, are no longer sufficient to confront today's challenges, so what about if these tools were unable to solve past challenges? The national and Arab duty calls for us to keep sounding the alarm against the continuation of the status quo. If the Arab countries want to catch up with human development, they must realize that they need new tools, but rather integrated comprehensive perceptions

to address their political, economic and societal challenges, and that neither the easy paths nor the fragmented reforms nor clinging to the past will immunize them from the present and future challenges.

– As we continue to overlook all these challenges, I fear that we may be entering a phase of renewed Arab protests that may be less peaceful *than in the past, and may result in major repercussions that are not in all of us.*

After a two-year hiatus, *a summit of the Arab League* was to be organized in Algiers, in November 2022, against a backdrop of uncertainty and discord. The draft Agenda included two items directly related to the challenges facing now the Arab World: *the agricultural and energy challenges, as revealed by the Ukraine war. The first was the obsolete nature of Arab agriculture in the face of global shortages. With few notable exceptions, the region remains import-dependent, as a lack of arable land and water shortages combine with political instability to restrict the capacities of domestic farms to keep up with demand. Relatedly, there is an urgent need to reorganize grain supply channels (as just one startling example, in 2020, around 80 percent of Lebanon’s wheat imports came from Ukraine). Finally, regional states must consider how to redesign new energy routes equipped to confront the coming transition to renewable energies, along with the trade of liquefied natural gas (LNG), which is emerging as an alternative to Russian gas.*¹⁵

The Nexus between the Realm of Overall Challenges And One Arab Country – Saudi Arabia

Based on the undisputable reality that “Saudi Arabia currently faces formidable political, social, economic, and security challenges”, a seminal book on the respective country includes an entire section – *Part 5: Meeting New Challenges*, divided into *three Chapters*¹⁶, each dedicated to a given category of Challenges facing today the particular state of Saudi Arabia: *Economic Challenges: Kicking the Oil Habit; Security Challenges: Containing Iran and Managing Yemen; Political Challenges: Sectarianism, Corruption, and Autocracy.*

As the three Chapters are defined by both the collective names of the challenges and the very essence of the actions each needs to be undertaken by the authorities in charge, a fourth Chapter included in this *Part V*, simply entitled *Evolving Arabia*, is meant to coalescing the nodal points regarding “*change*” and “*reforms*” the Saudis see themselves indispensable as concrete answers given to the sets of questions related to each of category of challenges, namely *Economic, Security, Political.*

¹⁵ Pierre Boussel, *A Hopeless Summit of Arab Countries. After a two-year hiatus, the Arab League will convene in Algiers in November against a backdrop of uncertainty and discord*, Carnegie, October 20, 2022. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88212?utm_source=rssemail&utm_medium=email&mkt_tok=ODEzLVhZVS00MjIAAAGH1R1QhPo4Gmpjzf2JWLjyok2uaoe46ev3edx9gnlOpJ1Upm30iGN2MwgMi1VLYDFVFgd2t96hlD0YonPEK1qfPxS8_mNZDxbAK0MVAw.

¹⁶ David Rundell, *Vision or Mirage. Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads*, London, New York, I. B. Tauris, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022, pp. xxiii-xiv, 255-304.

As for *the tools* to be used to accomplishing the necessary goals and objectives derived from the challenges, it is one in particular which seemingly should focus whole attention – *VISION 2030*, an ambitious plan to turn Saudi Arabia into the world's fifteenth-largest economy by the end of the decade. *The Vision* lays out dozens of social, cultural, and economic objectives for everything from increasing life expectancy and personal-savings rates to entertainment and the amount of time that Saudis spend in the gym. *The core of the project, however, focuses sharply on balancing the government's budget, diversifying the economy, and creating jobs.* For a major oil producer and exporter, to “*diversify the economy*” means to go beyond crude oil production, refining and petrochemicals into other sectors where Saudi Arabia has some form of comparative advantage – specifically mining and tourism.¹⁷ The country holds 7 percent of the world's phosphate reserves as well as significant deposits of bauxite, gold, copper, and zinc. On the other hand, one of the Vision 2030's ambitious goals are to reduce overall unemployment from 12 percent in 2015 to 10.5 by 2022 by creating private-sector jobs. A critical aspect for the chances of the Vision 2030's implementation is related to the fact that “*it is the personal project of an undeniably powerful crown prince, meantime appointed also Prime Minister, who has linked his political future to its success*”.

Ultimately, given the large and deep array of challenges facing today Saudi Arabia, trying to answer to each of them would mean, in the long run that the objective of Vision 2030 would be a politically stable an economic prosperous country that is integrated into the global community.

d. The Nexus between One Overall Challenge – Climate Change and the MENA region and its Component Countries

The “Climate Change” could be considered as source of a mix of “extreme challenging” ... challenges for MENA, and that because, firstly, it “serve as a threat multiplier for a range of other risks in the Middle East in several ways, including by interacting with energy security, economic stability, state fragility, food and water scarcity, and mass migration... (eventually, its) impacts exacerbate other security Challenges”.¹⁸ Here is an outline in this regard which implicitly shed light on the meandering specific to the matter:

– What sets MENA apart, and provides an added sense of urgency, is that the region is by far the most water-stressed in the world. It has renewable internal water resources of only 520 cubic meters per person – less than one seventh that of the next closest region, Sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, most MENA countries are overusing their groundwater reserves rather than conserving them, exhausting a buffer that should be drawn on only in times of drought. Competition over scarce water resources may increase internal and regional conflict.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

¹⁸ Shelly Culbertson, Howard J. Shatz, Stephanie Stewart, *Renewing U.S. Security Policy in the Middle East*, Rand Corporation, 2022, pp. 37-39.

– The Middle East is the hottest and most water-poor region in the world and is projected to be one of the most affected by climate change.¹⁹ This will strain livelihoods, governance, and habitability in parts of the region. Temperatures are projected to rise more quickly than the global average; by the end of the century, up to 200 days annually may register at 122 degrees Fahrenheit. Freshwater shortages may become prevalent. For instance, precipitation levels may fall by 40 percent in North Africa by 2100.

– Climate change may undermine regional security through the loss of livelihood from depletion of water and loss of arable land. In Syria, starting in 2006, the most severe drought in a century cost 800,000 Syrians their livelihoods in four years and led 1.5 million people to migrate to cities. Some attribute mass migration and unemployment as a contributing factor to the protests that later devolved into Syria's civil war. With the Tigris and the Euphrates possibly running dry by the end of the century, Iraq faces similar economic risks. Some countries that depend on desalinization (such as in the Gulf) will require new technologies to outpace rising salinity levels associated with climate change.

– Environmental collapses and their economic fallout have been seized upon by armed groups in recruitment. After Somalia's ruinous drought and desertification in 2016 and 2017, observers noted an uptick in the recruitment activities of ISIS and Al-Shabaab.

– Competition for water resources can increase geopolitical tensions. Control over the Jordan River has been a point of contention for years between Jordan and Israel. Tensions are ongoing between Egypt and Ethiopia over Ethiopia's plans to build the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, and Turkish and Iranian dams have caused friction with Iraq.

– At the same time, a focus on climate change through a security lens offers some opportunities. The Abraham Accords paved the way for sharing of water desalination technology from Israel to Bahrain, Qatar, and potentially other countries in the region that have overexploited their water resources.

*Challenges Related to One Sectorial Issue,
Namely the Abraham Accords and its Member Countries,
with the U.S. as the Accords' Main Originator and Supporter*

When they were signed, two years ago, on the White House lawn, *the Abraham Accords* had been seen, quite rightly, as “*an unqualified success*” and “*a paradigm changes in the Middle East*”.

Only that, the Israeli analysts, among other commentators, would not underestimate the very *package of challenges* still related to the document: despite all the accomplishments – the impressive trade relationships, the emerging diplomatic ties and strategic dialogue between the signatory countries – not every aspect of the new relationships is progressing smoothly. “There is an

¹⁹ Peter Schwartzstein, “*The Perfect Storm: Coronavirus and Climate Change in the Middle East*”, Project on Middle East Democracy, April 3, 2020.

asymmetry in the Abraham Accords. People think that there is full normalization and that there is acceptance, but most of the Emirati, Bahraini and even Moroccan public still has a way to go before they completely accept Israelis and Israel. We're not there yet entirely", said Moran Zaga, an expert on the Gulf region at *Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*, cited by the newspaper *The Times of Israel*.²⁰

Further commenting on the issue, the same Israeli journal noticed that, "paradoxically, while headlines tell of comfortable and joyous encounters between Israelis and Arabs in the Gulf and in Morocco, the data show a worrying and unmistakable trend: As time goes on, the Abraham Accords are becoming less popular on the streets of Israel's new allies. Washington Institute polling showed 45% of Bahrainis holding very or somewhat positive views of the agreements in November 2020. That support had steadily eroded to a paltry 20% by March of this year. The trend is the same in the UAE. The 49% of the country that disapproved of the Abraham Accords in 2020 has grown to over two-thirds as of last month. And only 31% of Moroccans favour normalization, according to Arab Barometer... Some in the normalizing countries may also be disappointed that more progress has not been made in Palestinian state-building following the peace deals."²¹

On the other hand, recent data from Arab Barometer concluded that "There is broad rejection among ordinary citizens across MENA of the U.S.-backed Abraham Accords and a broader peace deal with Israel. In nine of the 11 countries surveyed, fewer than one-in-five say they support normalization agreements with Israel, including fewer than one-in-ten in Mauritania (8 percent), Libya (7 percent), Palestine (6 percent), Jordan (5 percent), and Egypt (5 percent)."²²

Rather inciting is the explanation on why the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in spite of efforts made by the American Administration and Israeli Government, abstained until now from becoming a member of the Abraham Accords: The Saudi leaders "simply can't sell it to their nation. They don't have the legitimacy that the Emirati royal family has. The population is much more heterogeneous and much less disciplined. Moreover, the Saudis are not eager to grant Biden, a harsh critic of the Kingdom, any diplomatic victories."

While the threat emanating from Iran is an important foundation of the Abraham Accords, here too there has been a tendency to overplay how much Gulf interests intersect with Israel's: "There is an Israeli misconception here that Iran is a common enemy, and the Emiratis will rush into Israel's arms. That's not the story here. The story is to stop Iran, but for the UAE Iran is a security threat but not an enemy. While Abu Dhabi normalized relations with Israel, it was doing the same with Qatar, Turkey and Iran. With a reduced US presence in the

²⁰ Lazar Berman, *Two years after Abraham Accords, worrying trends emerge amid achievements*, *The Times of Israel*, 15 September 2022. https://www.timesofisrael.com/two-years-after-abraham-accords-worrying-trends-emerge-amid-achievements/?utm_source=The+Weekend+Edition&utm_campaign=weekend-edition-2022-09-

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *How Do MENA Citizens View Normalization with Israel?*, Arab Barometer, September 12, 2022. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2022/09/how-do-mena-citizens-view-normalization-with-israel/>.

Gulf, the UAE has chosen to protect its national security by finding common ground with its neighbours... the Emirati trend (is) to resolve its issues regionally and not through the US. The Gulf states (are) “natural hedgers. It’s in their DNA to be skittish. They are not powerful militaries and they’re within spitting distance of the Islamic Republic. They need to be extremely careful about how much they antagonize the regime in light of how much damage the regime could do either directly or by proxy.”

Anyway, in the autumn of 2022, on the 2nd anniversary of signing ceremony, US ambassador Tom Nides to Israel said that “Washington is working to deepen and broaden Israel’s normalization with Arab neighbours... Abraham Accords are critical to the region’s stability and prosperity”. Beyond the diplomatic rhetoric, Ambassador Nides underlined a critical aspect which sheds light on the present challenges and meandering direction of the Abraham Accords: “With the former (Trump) administration, [the Abraham Accords] was a start-up. Our (Biden’s Administration) job is to take it from a start-up to a real operation.”²³ One point on that trajectory was the Negev Summit, that was organized by Israel, in March 2022, with assistance from the Biden administration, and which brought together the foreign ministers of Israel, the US, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Egypt at the Negev’s Kibbutz Sde Boker. The top diplomats used the gathering to launch six different working groups aimed at boosting regional cooperation on security, education, health, energy, tourism, food and water. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made sure that each working group also promotes initiatives that benefit the Palestinians. Knowing that the Palestinian Authority has yet to embrace the effort to fold the Palestinians into the Accords, (the Trump administration boasted that the Abraham Accords stripped the Palestinians of their veto power over Israel’s broader acceptance in the region)²⁴.

Notably, the span of the meandering pattern nurtured by the challenges related to emerging (sub)groups of MENA countries, like the Abraham Accords and Negev Summit, has been rather extensive, with several “legs” in the region and other outside it, mainly in the US, strengthening the matter’s true transnational and multinational profile.

The Nexus Between A Head of State cum Prime Minister and the Realm of Challenges

Motto:

“Oman’s foreign policy – A country apart. A tiny sultanate that is not afraid to stand alone.”²⁵

It looks quite understandable that from the extensive array of challenges facing these days the world or a region, in this case MENA, for the case of a

²³ https://www.timesofisrael.com/nides-biden-administration-taking-abraham-accords-from-start-up-to-real-operation/?utm_source=The+Weekend+Edition&utm_campaign=weekend-edition-2022-09-18&utm_medium=email.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Oman’s foreign policy. A country apart. A tiny sultanate that is not afraid to stand alone*, in *The Economist*, May 28th 2015. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/05/28/a-country-apart>.

certain country the focus to be on a limited number of challenges, which are determined in accordance with the local prevailing political, social and economic conditions and trends. We will check this paradigm here in relation to *OMAN*, officially the *Sultanate of Oman*, an *atypical MENA country*, being one of the few Middle Eastern states which it is not involved in an intra- or inter-state conflict. Notably, as of 2022, Oman ranks the 64th most peaceful country in the world according to the Global Peace Index, in the Arab fold being preceded only by Qatar, Jordan and UAE.²⁶

At the turning point represented by the passage of power from *Sultan Qaboos bin Said*, who died on 10 January 2020 (who was, from 1970, the hereditary leader of the country which is an absolute monarchy), to his successor, *Haitham bin Tariq*, the local analysts, after reviewing Oman's set of circumstances at that fateful moment drew the conclusion that "*The new sultan faces five challenges*".²⁷

From this cited paper one can observe that the respective "*five challenges*" are part and parcel from the comprehensive list of challenges we made previously reference to, the Omani factor coming to explain why the five in case exactly, why that order plus some nuances in the narrative:

– *The first challenge* is, as expected, *the economic reform*: job creation for young people, diversification of revenue sources, investment incentives and support for economic growth that does not exceed 4%. Recent studies indicate that, according to the most optimistic forecasts, the reserves of oil cover only about twenty years, while those of natural gas will not go beyond 35 years, unless new deposits are discovered. The issue of economic reform is also key in a country where 20% of young people are unemployed due to the mismatch between education and the labour market, and where foreigners make up around 60% of the entire workforce.

In the absence of real economic reform, Oman's strong demographic growth (4.7%) risks destroying the possibilities of economic growth, while the fight against the coronavirus could well exhaust the monetary reserves, since it will be necessary at the same time to ensure the supply of foodstuffs, to fight against the unemployment of the Omanis and to inject funds in the stock market to revive a flagging economy. The sultanate has already taken austerity measures, such as the partial lifting of support for petroleum derivatives. A decision that has provoked demonstrations, especially among young people, that the state, faithful to its old policy of denial, has carefully silenced.

– The second challenge is that of political reform, through the granting of public freedoms and the opening of public space to Omani society. According to the press freedom index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, Oman ranked 132nd out of 180 in the world in 2019. Official television has four channels, two of which are generalist, and there are only five newspapers in Arabic which, although they are private publications, express the point of view of the government. Omani legislation does not in fact provide for citizens to choose

²⁶ Global Peace Index 2022. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/>.

²⁷ Alaeddine Arafat, *Oman. Le nouveau sultan face à cinq défis*, Orient XXI, 31 Mars 2020. <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/oman-le-nouveau-sultan-face-a-cinq-defis>, 3759.

their government in free and transparent elections. The Sultan chairs the Council of Ministers while being Minister of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Finance, Governor of the Central Bank and Supreme Head of the Armed Forces. The establishment of a constitutional monarchy, the authorization of the creation of political parties and the adoption of a Constitution worthy of the name, as well as the holding of free and transparent elections are pressing demands, in a marked context by the broadening of the educated base and by the demographic threat represented by the increase in the number of young people (1.2 million Omanis are between 18 and 29 years old, i.e. 46.7% of the population, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information).

– *The third challenge is that of foreign policy.* Sitting at the south-eastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman is surrounded by countries locked in a sectarian cold war and prone to meddling in each other's affairs. But the little sultanate has a policy of non-intervention, and in turn expects its own sovereignty to be respected. Conceptually, such a foreign policy is founded on the term *khususiyya* which is often cited by monarchs in the Gulf to justify their ways. They use it to mean the unique character of a culture, and also to dismiss demands for political and social reform. Like the idea of exceptionalism in America, *khususiyya* has become a cliché in the Middle East. But in Oman, many believe that it helps explain the country's independent foreign policy.²⁸

Consequently, under the reign of Sultan Qaboos, Oman opted for neutrality and maintained balanced relations with the conflicting parties in the Middle East, maintaining cordial relations with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The same was true with Iran and the United States, which enabled it to play an effective role in the negotiations that led to the signing, in 2015, of the nuclear agreement between Tehran and Washington. The sultanate also enjoys balanced relations with China, India and Pakistan, despite the tensions that persist between the latter two. Muscat has gone so far as to allow India, China, Iran and the UK to invest in the logistics sector without any distinction between them.

This balanced and pragmatic foreign policy allowed the government not to get involved in regional conflicts, despite the danger they posed to its national security. Since 2014, Oman has thus adopted an official position of neutrality in the Qatar crisis with the countries of the CCG, and attempted to find a way out through mediating diplomacy. Many Omani political and security elites, who regard this policy as full of common sense and see the late sultan as a high-flying strategist, are worried about a possible change in foreign policy. Indeed, if Oman officially insists on its neutrality on the Yemeni file and works as a mediator, it closes its eyes to the passage of Iranian weapons to the Houthis via its border with Yemen, which had irritated both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, as well as Washington. Oman considers the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia as the main potential threats to its national security and sees in them, much more than in Iran, the real enemies of the sultanate.

²⁸ See, *The Economist*.

The diplomacy of mediation was imposed by a reality: that of the military weakness of the sultanate. Presenting his country as a pacifist state, the late sovereign had thus tried to assert “the Omani exception” to play a role in international politics unrelated to its military capacities and its real place in the balance of world and regional forces. Nothing suggests that Oman could give up playing such a role in the future. What would perhaps be desirable is for the country to move from a minimal role in mediation diplomacy (consisting of providing belligerents with a neutral place to conduct negotiations) to a more active role (also presenting initiatives applicable as a basis for negotiations).

– *The fourth challenge is that of administrative reform.* During the last decade of Qaboos’ reign, corruption exploded across the country, leading the sultan to dismiss several ministers from their posts. A phenomenon which is partly explained by the system of political and administrative quotas established by the late sovereign on an ethnic and tribal basis. Oman is indeed a denominational state that does not say its name. Three ethnic groups coexist, of which, for lack of figures, we do not know the numerical importance: the non-Arab Baluchis, the Arab Omanis and the African Omanis. Appointments to high and intermediate positions are made on the basis of this composition, without consideration of merit or competence.

– The fifth challenge to which the new sultan must tackle is that of the reform of education. After creating a few government schools, Sultan Qaboos did not wish to increase the number. The level of pre-university education is very low, due to the incompetence of officials, the low budget dedicated to education and the poor quality of programs. With the exception of international and community schools, one cannot really speak of pre-university education in Oman.

The university founded by the late Sultan operates formally on a Western model and has a special budget separate from that of the Ministry of Education. Not wanting to create other establishments, the sovereign had only authorized the opening of private universities, very often of poor quality. Over time, the level of Sultan Qaboos University has deteriorated and it has disappeared from international rankings². This situation is partly explained by administrative and financial reasons, but also by security and political considerations. The first category of reasons is due to the desire of the university to reduce its expenses to the detriment of the educational component. Forced to forget their real scientific grades and find themselves at the bottom of the ladder by remaining assistant professors, the teachers recruited saw their salaries cut in half. No more promotions, while the funds allocated to research were reduced, with a marked lack of interest in scientific publications and the creation of research centres. Many foreign teachers ended up leaving university to join establishments that valued their skills or to return to their countries. As for the security reason, it is, as with the limited number of schools, the refusal to broaden the base of the middle-educated class, so as to minimize political opposition.

The local observers’ view *on the overall challenge confronted today’s Oman* is that, *the Sultanate of Oman wishes to appear as the new Switzerland of the Middle East: a neutral State and supporter of peace.* A line that the new sovereign

will continue, because otherwise he would not have *the support of the military institution*. The latter is indeed well aware that the country is not in a position to play a role that exceeds its military means, not to mention that the national economy is too weak to withstand the pressures that such a situation would inevitably cause. The only reform that really seems to be on the agenda is that of the economic sector, because it is vital for the country.

Ultimately, one should not underestimate the more profound significance of the fact that the cited paper here has had a personality-target, in other words, the very title was a kind of “*dedication*” to the new Sultan of Oman, *Haitham bin Tariq*, seen as the (only) leader of the country capable to answer meaningfully and productively to the package of the five challenges and by that being able of “*mastering*” *the meandering course of Oman’s internal and foreign policies* at least as his predecessor did, namely Sultan Qaboos, “an engaging ruler who had navigated complicated currents at home and in the region for more than four decades.”²⁹

Chapter 2. Two Main Global Challenges of the Day and their Impact on the MENA Region and its Countries

Considering further the challenges on MENA region which are structured and substantiated by the factors and dynamics originating outside the region, represents equally a legitimate endeavour given, on the one hand, that MENA is an intimately integrative part of the global geo-political environment, and, on the other hand, due to the not less traditional direct and effective interests manifested with regard this very region by critically important external regional and global powers and diverse other actors from outside the region too.

The Russian War against Ukraine – Nodal Point in the Meandering Of the Middle Eastern Nations’ Foreign Policies and Diplomacies

Motto:

“The Middle East’s indifference to Ukraine is a warning. What looks like international solidarity against a lawless invasion is something far more transactional and fragile.”³⁰

Essentially, the positions taken by MENA, as individual countries plus as a region altogether, on the February 2022 military invasion of Ukraine by a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council, namely Russia, with the long war and lack of peace perspectives that ensued, can offer, in our view, a relevant picture of the challenging magma surging at the intersection of national interests with the principles and concrete norms of international law, in addition to the consequential impact on the region’s relationships with the great powers.

²⁹ William J. Burns, p. 356.

³⁰ <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2022/05/middle-east-indifference-ukraine-warning/366859/>
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/middle-east-indifference-ukraine-warning>.

As such, it didn't take long for Middle Easterners, although separated by thousands of squares kilometres of land and waters from Ukraine and Russia, to apprehend that the effects of the respective war for themselves and their region – seen holistically as people and states – would be multifaceted: from *implications for food security and destabilization of energy markets to regional political realignments and shifting security considerations*.

In a *Report* prepared for the US Congress, it is underlined that, “Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing war are affecting the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region directly and indirectly. The war poses immediate strategic and diplomatic policy questions for MENA country leaders, and its second order effects on security relationships, energy markets, economic stability, and food security may have significant consequences for populations and governments in the region. The effects of the war challenge and/or benefit MENA countries differently; lower-income and conflict-affected countries face added pressures, while wealthier countries may adapt, with some energy producers buoyed by higher export revenues.”³¹

Less than a month after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, regional commentators noticed that in spite of the Biden administration efforts to promoting global unity against what Washington called Russian President Vladimir Putin’s “*war of choice*”, the conflict has highlighted cracks in some of the United States’ most prominent alliances in the Middle East, notably with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia.³² In the view of Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, a Middle East fellow at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, the two Arab Gulf nations appeared to be sending a message to the US: “‘We’re going to act upon our interests and not what you think our interests are.’”³³ The bigger the tension was if knowing that, besides trying to bring more Arab states against Putin, the US was aiming at cooperating with oil-producing countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and that against the backdrop of the perspective for the US and other Western countries to having to deal with the impact of the war in Ukraine on energy markets.

At the last resort, MENA countries’ positions on the Russian war against Ukraine were to consider their domestic priorities and the evolving regional dynamics, acknowledging also the existence of global interests beyond national interests – in the economy, in security and in the environment. Easier said than done. Hence, mixed with a degree of ambiguity, the *meandering* in the ability of the region’s states to balance between Washington and Moscow became the name of the game in directing the MENA’s trajectory to navigating through the realm of the present regional and international junctures. Simply translated: “*not exclusively taking Russia’s side or that of the US and its European allies*”.

Practically, *governments in the MENA region adopted varying diplomatic positions toward the Russian invasion and the war.*³⁴

³¹ *Middle East and North Africa: Implications of 2022 Russia-Ukraine War*, Congressional Research Service, June 15, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

³² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/21/ukraine-war-exposes-cracks-us-ties-middle-east-allies>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

– The *Arab League*, as the main Arab setting for the region's realm, had released a statement, on February 28, 2022, calling for dialogue to preserve security and end the fighting and *did not condemn Russia's invasion*. The Arab League subsequently offered to mediate between Ukraine and Russia and sent a delegation to Moscow and Poland for consultations in April 2022. Among Arab League member states, only *Syria* has voted with Russia consistently in United Nations bodies. Others have voted against Russia, abstained, or chosen not to vote on various questions. In the Congressional Research Service document, one could be amazed also that Morocco is the very MENA state which chose to not being present ("Not Voting") to any UN vote on the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

– *Gulf states* officials consistently have called for dialogue. They engaged with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in June 2022.³⁵ Analysts noted Gulf states' concerns for preserving international norms against aggression, but suggested that some Gulf governments might accept Russia's stated rationale about potential security threats from Ukraine and may seek to preserve their own prerogatives with regard to acting against potential cross-border threats.³⁶

The *UAE*, while holding the U.N. Security Council presidency in February 2022, notably abstained in the Council vote that month on convening a special emergency session of the U.N. General Assembly to address the situation in Ukraine. The UAE later voted to condemn Russian aggression but joined Saudi Arabia and several other MENA regions states in abstaining in the vote on suspending Russian participation in the U.N. Human Rights Council.

With regard to *Saudi Arabia*, nearly eight months into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, relations between Riyadh and Moscow were "*at a high point*". As much of Europe, the US and the UK doubled down on attempts to combat an ever more menacing Russian leader, the Saudi Prince Mohammed has instead seemingly chosen to deepen ties with the leaders in Kremlin. An Opec+ meeting in Vienna during the first half of October 2022 became a kind of latest landmark in a growing relationship that had been increasingly defying the demands of Riyadh's allies, the White House before anything else, consequently appearing to give Putin comfort at a critical juncture in the war. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE agreed to seek to raise oil prices by cutting global supply by 1-2m barrels a day.

Another sign of a deepening bond between Moscow and Riyadh emerged the previous month when, in a rare moment of global diplomacy, Saudi diplomats secured the release of international prisoners, including five Britons, captured during fighting inside Ukraine. "The optics were stark, and appeared sanctioned by Putin to give Riyadh a moment on a world stage; here were Saudi diplomats a long way from home brokering a deal that had nothing obvious to do with the Middle East."³⁷

³⁵ "Lavrov meets GCC foreign ministers in Riyadh", in *Saudi Gazette*, June 01, 2022. <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/621259/World/Lavrov-meets-GCC-foreign-ministers-in-Riyadh>.

³⁶ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The GCC and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis*, Arab Center in Washington, DC, March 22, 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-gcc-and-the-russia-ukraine-crisis/>; Hudhaifa Ebrahim, *Saudi Arabia Offers To Mediate Russian-Ukrainian Crisis*, *themedialine.org*, June 1, 2022. <https://themedialine.org/top-stories/saudi-arabia-offers-to-mediate-russian-ukrainian-crisis/>.

³⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/05/putin-mohammed-bin-salman-russia-saudi-arabia-deepen-ties>.

– *Morocco*: while expressing support, in principle, for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and opposition to the use of force to settle international disputes, through May 2022, Rabat declined to participate in U.N. General Assembly votes on resolutions condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and suspending Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council.³⁸ Morocco’s decision may have been linked to its efforts to strengthen economic ties with Moscow, its growing reliance on Russian coal exports, its interest in Russian wheat imports amid severe drought at home, and/or concerns about potential fallout for U.N. Security Council resolutions on the disputed territory of Western Sahara, which Morocco claims.³⁹ Ukraine recalled its ambassador to Morocco in March 2022.

– *Algeria* has been having close historic and defence ties with Russia, while emphasizing in its foreign policy independence and sovereignty, including opposition to unilateral foreign military interventions.⁴⁰ Algeria abstained on the U.N. General Assembly resolution condemning Russia’s invasion and voted against the resolution suspending Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council.

– *Israel* has publicly condemned Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine through statements and votes in international fora, while seeking to retain constructive bilateral relations with Russia.⁴¹ Israeli officials reportedly have served in some instances as communicators between their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts.⁴² As of May 2022, Israel’s government remained unwilling to provide lethal military assistance to Ukraine or approve the third-party transfer of weapons using Israeli-licensed technology⁴³, but reportedly contemplated providing defensive equipment. Meanwhile, Israeli leaders appeared to have sought to some political support for Ukraine and humanitarian relief for Ukrainians – including allowing over 15,000 Jewish and non-Jewish refugees from Ukraine to enter Israel – without alienating Russia. Israel-Russia diplomatic tensions spiked in early May 2022 over comments by Russian officials suggesting that Israel was supporting neo-Nazis in Ukraine⁴⁴, though leaders of the two countries later appeared to have moved past the controversy.

³⁸ Statement by Moroccan Foreign Ministry on Twitter, March 2, 2022.

³⁹ *The Impact of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa*, International Crisis Group (ICG), April 14, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/impact-russias-invasion-ukraine-middle-east-and-north-africa>; Francisco Serrano, *War in Ukraine and drought at home: A perfect storm in the Maghreb*, Middle East Institute, March 21, 2022. <https://mei.edu/publications/war-ukraine-and-drought-home-perfect-storm-maghreb>.

⁴⁰ CRS In Focus IF11116, Algeria. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11116>.

CRS Report R46937, Russian Arms Sales and Defense Industry.

<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46937>.

⁴¹ Within Israel’s former coalition government, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett condemned some occurrences without specifically blaming Russia, while Foreign Minister (and Alternate Prime Minister) Yair Lapid directly accused Russia of war crimes. *Lapid explicitly accused Russia of war crimes, a first for a top Israeli official*, Times of Israel, April 5, 2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/lapid-explicitly-accuses-russia-of-war-crimes-in-first-for-top-israeli-official/>.

⁴² Barak Ravid, *Israel’s Bennett emerges as key mediator between Putin and Zelensky*, Axios, March 9, 2022. <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/09/bennett-mediator-russia-ukraine-putin-zelensky>.

⁴³ *Idem*, *Scoop: Israel rejects U.S. request to approve missile transfer to Ukraine*, Axios, May 25, 2022. <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/25/israel-rejects-spike-missile-ukraine-germany-russia>.

⁴⁴ *Russia says Israel supports neo-Nazis in row over Ukraine*, Reuters, May 3, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-israel-supports-neo-nazis-row-over-ukraine-2022-05-03/>.

In Iran's tightly controlled political system, the Russia-Ukraine war reportedly has exposed some differences of opinion between those who viewed with sympathy Ukraine's resistance against a larger power and those who backed what they saw as Russia's fight against the West. Official Iranian government statements (and Iran's U.N. votes) supported Russia, including by blaming the United States and NATO for the conflict, a reflection of close Russia-Iran bilateral ties. Bilateral Iran-Ukraine tensions also persisted over Iran's 2020 shooting down of a Ukrainian airliner.⁴⁵ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters on March 5 that Russia had requested U.S. written guarantees that foreign governments' sanctions imposed in response to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine would "not impinge in any way on our free full-scale trade, economic, investment and military-technical cooperation" with Iran.⁴⁶

As regards the main Russia-Ukraine war's *sectorial impacts* and MENA countries' governments corresponding rhetorically reactions and official positions, nationally and "collectively", as a *materialized area of the meandering*:

– *Sanctions against Russia Issue*: most MENA countries have not enacted *economic sanctions* against the Russian government or Russian business leaders; some countries, such as the *UAE*, might had been quietly welcoming an influx of Russian capital.⁴⁷ Cryptocurrency exchanges in the UAE reportedly have been deluged with requests from Russians to convert billions of dollars of cryptocurrencies.⁴⁸

Amid speculation that wealthy Russian figures – some of whom hold Israeli citizenship – might seek to bring assets into Israel, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said in March 2022 that Israel was determined to prevent Russians from using Israel to bypass sanctions.⁴⁹ In a March 2022 interview on Israeli television, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland warned, "You don't want to become the last haven for dirty money that's fuelling Putin's wars."⁵⁰

– *Cereals market*: Egypt, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Tunisia, and Yemen have been the largest importers of *wheat* from Russia and Ukraine

⁴⁵ Nicole Grajewski, *As the world shuns Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, Iran strengthens its ties with Moscow*, Atlantic Council, March 7, 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/as-the-world-shuns-russia-over-its-invasion-of-ukraine-iran-strengthens-its-ties-with-moscow%E2%82%AC%80%BC/>.

⁴⁶ *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Statement and Answers to Media Questions at a Joint News Conference Following Talks with Foreign Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic Ruslan Kazakbayev*, Russian Foreign Ministry, March 5, 2022. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1803096/.

⁴⁷ Sameer Hashmi, *Wealthy Russians flee to Dubai to avoid sanctions*, BBC, May 5, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-61257448>.

⁴⁸ Yousef Saba, Lisa Barrington, Riham Alkousaa and Alexander Cornwell, *Russians liquidating crypto in the UAE as they seek safe havens*, Reuters, March 11, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/business/exclusive-russians-liquidating-crypto-uae-seek-safe-havens-2022-03-11/>.

⁴⁹ Rina Bassist, *Israel vows country won't become safe haven for sanctioned Russian oligarchs*, Al-Monitor, March 14, 2022. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/israel-vows-country-wont-become-safe-haven-sanctioned-russian-oligarchs>.

⁵⁰ US official warns Israel: 'Don't be last haven for dirty money fueling Putin's war', Times of Israel, March 11, 2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-official-warns-israel-dont-be-last-haven-for-dirty-money-fueling-putins-war/>.

<https://www.wfp.org/publications/global-report-food-crises-2022>.

by volume in the region since 2019.⁵¹ As of May 2022, WFP expected that “export disruptions could incur potentially serious food supply constraints for Egypt ... and Yemen, which are among the world’s top ten importers of wheat from both Ukraine and the Russian Federation, and for Lebanon, which is the ninth biggest importer of wheat from Ukraine.”⁵² In Egypt, the world’s top importer of wheat by volume (more than 70% of which comes from Russia and Ukraine), the government took steps to reduce the exporting of wheat and find new sources for wheat imports to compensate for the loss of imports (negotiations initiated with India, Argentina, Australia, Kazakhstan, and France). In the long term, this may have negative impact on the Egyptian public, leading to instability. *Egypt’s bread riots are known to be catalysts for mass protest.*

– *Energy markets have represented a crucial chapter in the hyper-complex effects on the MENA region by the Russian war against Ukraine.* “The crisis has re-imposed the concept of energy “as a political weapon”, and added great strategic value to oil and gas markets in the region.”⁵³

This is maybe the reason that one can find a substantive narrative on the subject in the already quoted Congressional Research Service Report of June 15, 2022. A major idea in the document, deserving to be deeper followed, is that Russia’s prominent position in international *oil and natural gas* markets has led to significant uncertainty in the wake of its Ukraine invasion, with existing energy trade flows and transactions receiving new scrutiny.

1. *In the oil area*, with prices continuing to rise, the Biden Administration sought greater cooperation with certain MENA states in increasing global oil supply. As of June 2022, high global oil demand coupled with tightening supplies has led to spiralling global oil prices. Russia and MENA countries’ decisions are a focal point in global energy discussions. Russia and several other nations are party to an oil supply management agreement with the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which includes several MENA producers. Collectively known as OPEC+, the group had continued through May 2022 with planned gradual oil production increases agreed to initially in April 2020, although many members were producing below their OPEC+ quota levels.⁵⁴ On June 2, OPEC+ members agreed to raise the target volume of production increases planned for July and August, including expanding Russia’s production quota under the agreement. Spare crude production capacity in the MENA region and globally has been generally concentrated in *Saudi Arabia and the UAE*. *Through May 2022, officials in these countries reportedly declined some requests from officials in the United States to engage in discussions on increasing production more rapidly.*⁵⁵

⁵¹ U.N. COMTRADE data, HS-1001 – Wheat and Meslin, 2019-2020, available at <https://comtrade.un.org/data/>.

⁵² WFP, Global Report on Food Crises, 2022, May 2022; also see, WFP Cairo Regional Bureau (RBC) Ukraine Conflict - Impact on RBC operations and MENA economies, March 2022.

⁵³ <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/analysis/ukraine-crisis-and-gulf-saudi-perspective>.

⁵⁴ *Saudi Arabia is increasing supply – so why is the oil price holding firm?*, Financial Times, June 7, 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/2b6ed520-347b-4c1d-be08-6e70b767f4fc>.

⁵⁵ Dion Nissenbaum, Stephen Kalin, and David S. Cloud, *Saudi, Emirati Leaders Decline Calls with Biden During Ukraine Crisis*, Wall Street Journal, March 8, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-emirati-leaders-decline-calls-with-biden-during-ukraine-crisis-11646779430>.

Renewed discord in *Libya* has disrupted oil production there in 2022, even as uncertainty about Russian exports and other market factors increased the potential importance of stability in *Libya* to energy markets.

2. *In the gas area*, while some European countries have engaged gas producers in the MENA region in search of alternative supplies, Europe's flexibility on natural gas supply is limited because most of Russia's gas exports to Europe, its largest market, had been by pipeline. Construction of new liquefied natural gas (LNG) import terminals and associated pipelines – along with the availability of alternative supplies for contract – could increase European countries' flexibility over time, but immediate options remained limited.

Algeria and Qatar have committed to maintaining (and expanding as possible) supplies of natural gas to Europe. *Algeria*, already the EU's third-largest natural gas supplier, has drawn increased engagement from U.S. policymakers in the current context.⁵⁶ Algiers has agreed to increase supplies to Italy via the Transmed pipeline and has sought to expand its capacity to ship gas to Spain via the Medgaz pipeline. However, several factors became likely to limit *Algeria's* ability to increase exports in the short-term, including production constraints, a challenging business environment for energy firms, and high domestic demand.⁵⁷ *Algeria* also threatened to disrupt gas supplies to Spain if Spain re-exports any of its gas to Morocco, with which *Algeria* had ruptured diplomatic ties in 2021.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, Germany and *Qatar* have agreed to discuss new long-term gas import arrangements, and other potential European customers reportedly are in negotiations with officials and executives in Doha.⁵⁹ Meantime, gas supplies from *Qatar* and other gas exporters had been largely committed to buyers in Asia and elsewhere under long-term contracts, and Qatari energy officials stressed that no combination of major gas exporters could supply enough natural gas to Europe, *on short notice*, to completely compensate for a shutoff of gas supplies from Russia. The emir of *Qatar* himself made an urgent appeal to Russia and the West, saying his nation would not be able to re-supply Europe with enough liquefied natural gas to stave off an energy crisis this winter, and urged both parties to bring a speedy end to the war. "We want to help Europe, and we will supply gas to Europe in the coming years. But it is not true that we can replace Russian gas. Russian gas is essential to the global market." While *Qatar* has one of the world's largest reserves of natural gas, Sheikh Tamim said China and Asian markets account for most of his nation's contracted supply of LNG (liquefied natural gas).⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Algerian President Tebboune, State Department, March 30, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-algerian-president-tebboune/>.

⁵⁷ Fuad Shahbazov, *Algeria Makes for a Risky Partner to Help Solve Europe's Energy Crisis*, World Politics Review, May 11, 2022. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/to-solve-energy-crisis-europe-can-t-count-on-algeria-gas/>; Heba Saleh, *Algeria Struggles to Meet Rising Demand for its Gas After Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, Financial Times, April 20, 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/18c1b459-76e4-48dc-9f07-a61d19725780>.

⁵⁸ *Algeria warns Spain not to re-export gas supplies*, Reuters, April 28, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/algeria-warns-spain-not-re-export-gas-supplies-2022-04-27/>.

⁵⁹ *Germany agrees gas deal with Qatar to help end dependency on Russia*, The Guardian, March 20 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/germany-gas-deal-qatar-end-energy-dependency-on-russia>.

⁶⁰ *Emir: Qatar Can't Supply Europe With Gas, Urges End to Conflict*, Newsmax.com, 15 September 2022. <https://www.newsmax.com/world/globaltalk/emir-qatar/2022/09/14/id/1087508/#.YySvWq-RDyg.twitter>.

In the second half of September 2022, the UAE signed an agreement with Germany that covers accelerating energy security and industrial growth. Concretely, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) inked an agreement to supply liquefied natural gas (LNG) to German utility RWE. ADNOC will deliver the first shipment in late 2022 for use in the trial operation of a floating natural gas terminal in Brunsbuettel. In addition, ADNOC has reserved a number of further LNG cargos exclusively for German customers in 2023.

On June 15, 2022, *Israel, Egypt, and the EU* signed an agreement that will enable *Israeli* natural gas which will be liquefied at Egyptian processing plants to be exported to Europe. *Egypt* currently imports *Israeli* natural gas (at 85bcm over 15-year period) and will re-liquefy Israeli gas at its two liquefied natural gas terminals at Damietta port for re-export to Europe (in 2021 Israel exported 4.25bcm to Egypt).⁶¹ Lack of transport and processing capacity is a major challenge for Israel and Egypt in becoming significant suppliers to Europe. There are only two pipelines capable of transporting Israeli gas to Egypt and Egypt's LNG facilities are working at maximum capacity to meet both domestic and foreign demand.⁶² Israel is reportedly considering constructing a new onshore pipeline to Egypt.⁶³

The effects of the Russia-Ukraine war on *energy prices* also have been having implications for *oil and gas exporters and importers in the MENA region*. Price increases created a fiscal and economic boon to *exporters* and impose an additional fiscal and economic burden for *importers*. In April 2022, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported that in the MENA region, "financial conditions for *oil exporters* remained unchanged or improved as oil and gas prices surged" while projections for *non-oil exporters* were more negative given a range of spill over effects.⁶⁴ In particular, it is Saudi Arabia which benefitted from higher oil prices, with dividends from state-owned Saudi Aramco helping generate a \$15 billion national budget surplus in the first three months of 2022 and creating fiscal options for Saudi leaders.⁶⁵ In June, press reports stated that

⁶¹ John Ainger and Alberto Nardelli, *EU, Egypt Near Gas Supply Deal in Shift Away from Russia*, Bloomberg, June 3, 2022.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-03/eu-egypt-near-gas-supply-deal-in-shift-away-from-russia>.

⁶² Marc Espanol, *Egypt's Gas Imports from Israel Hit all-time High*, Al Monitor, June 7, 2022.

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/egypts-gas-imports-israel-hit-all-time-high>.

⁶³ Ron Bousso and Ari Rabinovitch, *Israel Considering New Pipeline to Boost Gas Exports to Egypt*, Reuters, October 21, 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-israel-considering-new-pipeline-boost-gas-exports-egypt-2021-10-21/>.

⁶⁴ "Propagation Channels of the War in Ukraine and Sanctions" in IMF, *Regional Economic Outlook - Middle East and Central Asia – Divergent Recoveries in Turbulent Times*, April 2022.

<https://www.imf.org/en/Home>.

⁶⁵ Abeer Abu Omar and Matthew Martin, *Saudi Arabia Rewrites Playbook for How to Spend Oil Windfall*, Bloomberg, May 26, 2022.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-26/saudi-arabia-tucks-away-billions-in-oil-money-for-next-year#xj4y7vzkg>.

Saudi Arabia was earning \$1 billion per day from oil exports.⁶⁶ Iraq and other oil producers were also seeing higher revenues, easing pressures on their state finances.

On the second half of September 2022, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz conducted a two-day tour of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, seeking to secure new energy partnerships for Germany and Europe in a bid to diversify away from the Eurozone's dependency on Russian gas. The German Chancellor praised the visits as fruitful, with the aim of completely moving away from Russian energy by mid-2024. Analysts' opinions stressed that "Germany is spearheading efforts to seek alternatives to Russian energy, potentially signalling a new era of cooperation between Europe and Gulf states."⁶⁷

In this context, German utility company RWE announced later on that it will receive the first shipment of liquefied natural gas from the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company by the end of this year. The shipment will consist of 137,000 cubic meters, with further deals expected next year. Other smaller deals were agreed, including RWE and UAE-based Masdar exploring further offshore wind energy projects, the company said.

Hailing Berlin's success in securing new deals with the GCC, Scholz also visited Saudi Arabia, without securing a deal. Apparently, more successful was Scholz's last visit, namely to Qatar, as a follow on from an agreement signed in the spring to establish an *energy partnership*, with a focus on trade in hydrogen and liquefied natural gas (LNG). The deal aims to come into place in 2024.

Following the visit, a German official said that the three Gulf countries are "*important regional partners*," while other observers noted the meetings were a '*turning point*' in EU and GCC relations. It certainly signals that Germany will adopt a new foreign policy in the region, given that it is prioritizing new energy agreements. With Germany continuing to pursue deals, the GCC states could further bolster ties with the EU, thus acting as a soft power move within Europe and weakening EU criticism of GCC countries, particularly over issues like human rights. Hence, "further deals between the EU and GCC are likely to be expected, thus alleviating the period of distance between the two blocs. This would give greater advantages to the three leading GCC states, indicating that they would gain politically as well as economically from more business with Europe. Additionally, the EU's desperation to gain energy partnerships has shown it could ignore policies within the GCC that it may otherwise have previously been uncomfortable with, thus potentially further weakening its future clout in the Middle East."⁶⁸

It is to be noted that, in parallel with the dynamic contacts and substantive agreements reached between Western European countries and Gulf partners in the area of energy, "*several Middle Eastern leaders are engaging with Russian*

⁶⁶ *Soaring Oil Prices Force Biden to Engage with Spurned Saudis*, Bloomberg News, June 9, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-09/gas-prices-force-biden-to-reconsider-saudi-arabia-stance>.

⁶⁷ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/eu-gcc-energy-partnerships-turning-point-ties>.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

President Vladimir Putin."⁶⁹ For the United States, the approaches of partners in the Middle East to the Russia-Ukraine conflict remains of vital interest, particularly with regard to the enforcement of sanctions against Russia. Yet, *several Middle Eastern leaders, including some that have long been strategic allies of the United States, have sought to engage with President Putin to secure their own national interests* as well as, in some cases, advance themselves as potential mediators to resolve the Ukraine war.

American officials have been publicly critical of Saudi leaders, including Crown Prince and heir apparent Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), for coordinating with Putin to engineer the 2 million barrels per day (bpd) cut in oil production by the "OPEC +" grouping (OPEC countries plus 10 non-OPEC oil exporters), effective in November 2022. Saudi Arabia is the largest exporter within OPEC, and Russia dominates decisions of the informal grouping of non-OPEC countries. *U.S. officials reportedly viewed the Saudi-Russian coordination as, to some extent, a betrayal of the decades-long Saudi-U.S. partnership* and as further evidence that MBS will be a troublesome U.S. interlocutor when he accedes to the Kingdom's throne. Saudi officials denied that the oil production cut represented an overture toward Putin, explaining the move as a market-based decision that anticipates Western economic weakness and reduced oil demand. MBS sought to defuse tensions with Washington on October 15 by talking by telephone with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and announcing \$400 million in humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

UAE President Mohammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ) met with Putin in Russia on October 11, and, according to UAE official media, affirmed the UAE's aim to "reduce tensions and find diplomatic solutions to crises" in situations such as the war in Ukraine. As a current member of the United Nations Security Council through 2023, it may be less surprising that Emirati leaders would seek some form of diplomatic engagement with all five permanent members, which includes Russia. Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE has refrained from joining the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and other Western allies in response to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Only that, the UAE's normalization of relations with Israel has won the seven-emirate federation considerable plaudits among U.S. officials (Saudi Arabia, however, has not openly established relations with Israel and has no such reservoir of goodwill).

During October 13-14, Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, met with President Putin on the side-lines of summit meetings on Central Asian security and economics in Kazakhstan. Qatar has mediated conflicts worldwide. Also, Qatar has strong relationship with the U.S. The U.S. – Qatar joint efforts to seek additional supplies of Qatari natural gas to compensate for a reduction from Russia would undermine Putin's efforts to weaponize gas supplies to Kyiv's Western backers. Consequently, Emir al-Thani met with Putin in Kazakhstan reportedly to defuse tensions with the Russian leader and dissuade him from undermining Qatar's mediation role on the Iran nuclear deal, as well as on resolving the conflict in Syria.

⁶⁹ IntelBrief: *Middle East Leaders Engage with Putin*, The Soufan Center, October 18, 2022. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2022-october-18/>.

Challenges with Corresponding Meandering for MENA Region Generated by the Current State of Play of the Rules-Based (Liberal) Global Order's Travails and Effects on the Ensuing MENA Regional Order with its Specific Recipe – Continuing to Include Sources of a High Degree of “Dis-Order”

Mottos:

“As with other historical hinges, the danger today stems from a sharp decline in world order. But more than at any other recent moment, that decline threatens to become especially steep, owing to a confluence of old and new threats that have begun to intersect at a moment the United States is ill positioned to contend with them.”⁷⁰

“Make no mistake: We no longer live in a stable international rules-based order. The days of unipolarity and global liberalism are over, and we are now facing a confluence of shocks unlike anything most of us have seen in our lifetimes.”⁷¹

“The most significant impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine will be a further weakening of international law and rules-based norms, leading to more state violence, less rights and greater instability.”⁷²

“The very international order that we have gathered here to uphold is being shredded before our eyes. We cannot – we will not – allow President Putin to get away with it. Defending Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity is about much more than standing up for one nation’s right to choose its own path, fundamental as that right is. It’s also about protecting an international order where no nation can redraw the borders of another by force.”⁷³

“We live in a world where interdependence is becoming more and more conflictual, in particular with the growing strategic rivalry between the US and China. We also see a broader trend towards competition between countries and systems, especially with some of our neighbours such as Russia and Turkey who seem to want to return to a logic of empires. They consider they are entitled to control their surrounding neighbourhood in the name of alleged historical rights. They only recognize the sovereignty of states and not the sovereignty of the people. This is at the heart of our differences with Russia over Belarus or with China over Hong Kong. Democratic norms and our liberal-inspired vision of the world are challenged.”⁷⁴

“To defend the very existence of the democratic EU and the basic principles of the international order, we cannot afford to let Putin win in Ukraine.”⁷⁵

“The global order is deteriorating before our eyes. The relative decline of U.S. power and the concomitant rise of China have eroded the partially liberal, rules-based system once dominated by the United States and its

⁷⁰ Richard Haass, *The Dangerous Decade. A Foreign Policy for a World in Crisis*, Foreign Affairs, September/October 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/dangerous-decade-foreign-policy-world-crisis-richard-haass>.

⁷¹ Bertrand Badré and Yves Tiberghien, *Navigating a World in Shock*, Project-Syndicate, Sep. 20, 2022. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/global-governance-after-geopolitical-economic-climate-breakdown-by-bertrand-badre-and-yves-tiberghien-1-2022-09>.

⁷² <https://dawnmena.org/the-ukraine-wars-impacts-in-the-middle-east-a-democracy-in-exile-roundtable/>.

⁷³ Antony J. Blinken, Secretary Of State, *Remarks at the United Nations Security Council Ministerial Meeting on Ukrainian Sovereignty and Russian Accountability*, United Nations Headquarters, New York, NEW YORK, September 22, 2022.

<https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-united-nations-security-council-ministerial-meeting-on-ukrainian-sovereignty-and-russian-accountability/>.

⁷⁴ Josep Borrell, *Building Global Europe*, Blog Post, 09/09/2020.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/building-global-europe_en.

⁷⁵ Joseph Borrell, *Quo Vadis Europa?*, Blog Post, 29.08.2022.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/quo-vadis-europa-0_en.

allies... According to many accounts, the international order that emerged in the 1990s has increasingly been eroded by the dynamics of great-power competition. Nonetheless, the deterioration of the rules-based order need not result in great-power conflict."⁷⁶

*"The Ukrainian-Russian war is the latest, not the first, in the sequence of events that have catalysed the collapse of the old-world order. The West wants the world to believe that Russia and Putin were the culprits for ushering in anarchy and attempting to destroy what they had built over the last seven decades. But the West cannot escape responsibility for the failure of its hegemony."*⁷⁷

*"The old world order that emerged after the Second World War was bipolar, but became unipolar following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is now witnessing the start of a shift to a multipolar system... with a new place for Russia and especially for China (and Asia in general) which goes along with the U.S. withdrawal from the Gulf."*⁷⁸

It is widely acknowledged that with the end of World War II, also called Second World War, it had been started "positive" and "constructive" processes of reconfiguring and (re)institutionalizing international and regional orders. More, the end of the "Cold War", by the beginning of the 1990s, came with the specific liberal imprint for the respective orders.

On the other hand, right now, almost 8 decades after WWII, we are witnessing how a more localized "hot war", but with no less global impact, namely the War launched by Russia, on February 24, 2022, against the independent and sovereign state of Ukraine, has come to seemingly annihilate the respective legacy of the World War II's plus post-Cold War, all that with a direct impact on the MENA's countries' foreign policies and diplomacies, accentuating their meandering evolutions, regionally and globally.

In a just published book⁷⁹, Arthur Snell, a British diplomat between the late 1990s and 2014, who served in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen, shows, with insight that comes from years of front-line diplomacy, that "the unsteady rules-based international order finally collapsed on 24th February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Under stress for some time, this system – (made of) international law, accepted national borders, with the United Nations as global police chief – had delivered peace and security for most Western democracies from World War II into the 1990s. Admittedly, many countries, particularly in the Global South, missed out on the upsides. *But a world without this framework is volatile. We are living in a period of global disorder, conflict and uncertainty.* In the fateful year of 2022, major conflicts are laying waste to the large and geopolitically sensitive states of Ukraine, Libya and Yemen, and civil wars are raging in the large countries of Ethiopia and Syria.

⁷⁶ Dani Rodrik and Stephen M. Walt, *How to Build a Better Order: Limiting Great Power Rivalry in an Anarchic World*, in *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2022.

⁷⁷ https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/build-better-order-great-power-rivalry-dani-rodrik-stephen-walt?utm_source=religionbulletin.

⁷⁸ <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/analysis/new-order-blend-western-liberalism-and-eastern-civilizational-nationalism>.

⁷⁹ <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/saudi-arabia-and-the-united-arab-emirates-a-risky-balancing-act>, 5463.

⁷⁹ Arthur Snell, *How Britain Broke the World: War, Greed and Blunders from Kosovo to Afghanistan, 1997-2022*, Canbury Press, September 2022.

In addition, an arc of instability runs across the entire Sahel region of Africa and widespread civil strife continues in Myanmar, Afghanistan and Iraq. Running alongside these flashpoints – a good part of them being situated in the Middle East – is the spectre, once more, of great power conflict.”

Arthur Snell doesn't look shy in revealing that his own country, the “UK, has helped fracture the global order and undermined trust around the world... For all the self-glorifying talk of upholding the so-called international order, the UK has repeatedly disregarded its rules, such as by invading Iraq, deporting Chagos islanders and violating the EU withdrawal agreement.”⁸⁰

In a deeper vision, one should consider, in fact, a true “*select group of nations and international actors*” whose interests, articulated in political statements and then concretely implemented through actions on the ground, have brought about the weakening, if not complete annihilation, of the rules-based international system. As reviewed by Arthur Snell in excerpts from his book, published in announcing the impending coming out of his book⁸¹, besides the already mentioned UK, the main components of the said “group” have been:

Russia: Seemingly, the Russian Federation has been for some time the main “culprit” in undermining critical foundations for a stable and peaceful international order. *Russia behaviour appears through the particular lens of being economic weak and facing chronic under-population but still possessing an expeditionary military that can transform a conflict*. President Putin's *credo* is immutably centred on an as simple as hard to having presently implemented “*multipolar world*” paradigm, the farthest possible from a liberal global order: “The situation in the world is changing dynamically and the outlines of a multipolar world order are taking shape. An increasing number of countries and peoples are choosing a path of free and sovereign development based on their own distinct identity, traditions and values.”⁸²

Similarly, “The main theme of this year's Eastern Economic Forum – ‘On the Path to a Multipolar World’ – seems particularly relevant and significant. The obsolete unipolar model is being replaced by a new world order based on the fundamental principles of justice and equality, as well as the recognition of the right of each state and people to their own sovereign path of development. Powerful political and economic centres are taking shape right here in the Asia-Pacific region, acting as a driving force in this irreversible process.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Arthur Snell is quoted in the article: David Edgerton, *British diplomacy in the dock. A former diplomat's new book reveals that, for 25 years, UK foreign policy has left mainly harm and disorder in its wake*. The New Statesman, 24 August, 2022. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/book-of-the-day/2022/08/british-diplomacy-in-the-dock>

⁸¹ https://www.amazon.com/How-Britain-Broke-World-Afghanistan/dp/1912454602/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_1?crid=1UEC61DDD5RMC&keywords=Arthur+Snell%2C+How+Britain+Broke+the+World%3A+War%2C+Greed+and+Blunders+from+Kosovo+to+Afghanistan%2C+1

⁸² Vladimir Putin, *Address to participants and guests of the 10th Moscow Conference on International Security*, August 16, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69166>.

⁸³ Vladimir Putin's *message of greetings to participants, organizers, and guests of the 7th Eastern Economic Forum*, August 29, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69225>.

China has also been challenging the exiting international order against the backdrop of the global struggles, involving Beijing, for economic and diplomatic influence which are under way and are embroiling China economically, militarily and in information technology. Washington's perception on that was voiced by the Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken: "Even as President Putin's war continues, we will remain focused on the most serious long-term challenge to the international order – and that's posed by the People's Republic of China. China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing's vision would move us away from the universal values that have sustained so much of the world's progress over the past 75 years."⁸⁴

Beijing wasn't late in reacting: "China was, is and will remain a guardian of the international order. We uphold the UN-centred international system, the international order based on international law and the basic norms governing international relations underpinned by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. People with discerning eyes can easily see that the so-called "rules-based international order" is nothing but a set of "house rules" established by the US and a handful of other countries to maintain the so-called "order" led by the US. The US always puts its domestic law above international law, and cherry-pick international rules as it sees fit in a pragmatic way. This is the biggest source of instability in the international order."⁸⁵

In the opinion of the Atlantic Council Editors, while Russia is seeking to revise the international order through force, China is doing so in a subtler way. One dimension of the "way" in case being Beijing using the digital arena – where it can shape information ecosystems, promote its own form of digital governance, and even lay the physical infrastructure for these efforts – to forging a new narrative around an alternative Chinese-led global order. Its primary target (for now) is the more receptive Global South. But will China stop there? This being one of the questions whose answers were looked for in in-depth report issued by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab.⁸⁶ More, "The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 cast the Grand Strategic Triangle – China, Russia, The United States, in a new perspective. The Chinese narrative that the United States was responsible for the expansion of NATO and disregard for the legitimate security interests of Russia reinforced the view that China has

⁸⁴ The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China, Speech, Antony J. Blinken, Secretary Of State, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., May 26, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

⁸⁵ Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson: The Speech of Secretary Blinken Is to Spread Disinformation, Play up the So-called "China Threat", Interfere in China's Internal Affairs, 2022/05/27. http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zmgx/zxxx/202205/t20220527_10693847.htm.

⁸⁶ Kenton Thibaut, *Chinese discourse power: Ambitions and reality in the digital domain*, Atlantic Council, In-Depth Research & Reports, August 24, 2022. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/chinese-discourse-power-ambitions-and-reality-in-the-digital-domain/?mkt_tok=NjU5LVdaWC0wNzUAAAGGfe7v4kcaKGyV6vk5RC8AreTV_-2QflOnVAS7vceSs_jBk9kX5iBxw49-xFl2e20Stn8gkDDYuygvf-6KzgEhfa_ohv-B3EA9iwiDDyNhSnXyMGMmS6U.

joined Russia in moves to overturn the post-Cold War order, linking its plans to seize Taiwan by force to Russia's action."⁸⁷

As for the perspectives of the Russian and Chinese drives in demolishing the rules-based (liberal) global order we remember that Francis Fukuyama, in his much-debated article of 1989 with the inciting title *The End of History and the Last Man*, wrote that "Russia and China are not likely to join the developed nations of the West as liberal societies any time in the foreseeable future". So much for a liberal/ rules-based international global order.

Only that, *The United States of America* has itself structurally weakened the international security and economic growth, holistically often referred to as "*the liberal international order*". Former President Donald Trump's *America First* approach was unambiguously opposed to multilateralism, co-operation and a rules-based global order. The same 45th tenant of the White House for almost half of the critical second decade of the 21st Century set about to destroy many of America's global alliances. He was not less known for questioning his military commitments to Japan and South Korea, also for undermining NATO, Europe's military and security bulwark against an increasingly aggressive Russia. Other international organizations appeared equally shaky during Trump's mandate.

Eventually, it is at the intersection of the uncertainties related to the fluctuation of the American global power, as size, content and influence, with the certainties related to the 2016-2020 US foreign policy bearing President Donald Trump indelible personal concepts and policies – among the critical issues being de-emphasizing human rights and rule-of-law elements – that one can speak of a the American diplomatic relay for the third decade of the 21st century: "Further complicating the picture is the reality that American democracy and political cohesion are at risk to a degree not seen since the middle of the nineteenth century. This matter because the United States is not just one country among many: U.S. leadership has underpinned what order there has been in the world for the past 75 years and remains no less central today. A United States riven internally, however, will become ever less willing and able to lead on the international stage."⁸⁸

If the above considerations represent an American expert insight, the officials with the 46th US President Administration come to complete the picture: "Now, as we look to the future, we want not just to sustain the international order that made so much of that progress possible, but to modernize it, to make sure that it represents the interests, the values, the hopes of all nations, big and small, from every region; and furthermore, that it can meet the challenges that we face now and will face in the future, many of which are beyond what the world could have imagined seven decades ago. But that outcome is not guaranteed because the

⁸⁷ Gilbert Rozman, *China, Russia, the United States. The New Face of the Grand Strategic Triangle*, Routledge, 2022, pp. 17-18.

⁸⁸ Richard Haass, *The Dangerous Decade. A Foreign Policy for a World in Crisis*, Foreign Affairs, September/October 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/dangerous-decade-foreign-policy-world-crisis-richard-haass>.

foundations of the international order are under serious and sustained challenge. Russian President Vladimir Putin poses a clear and present threat. In attacking Ukraine three months ago, he also attacked the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, enshrined in the UN Charter, to protect all countries from being conquered or coerced.”⁸⁹

If we add to all that the acknowledged shortcomings encountered, in various degrees, in the policies and practical actions by critical international fora, like *the UN Security Council*, or *the G7* and even *the EU institutions*, one cannot but conclude that the idea of a liberal global order of democracies working together was undermined at its very core by the fact that nations, even allied ones, such as those in Europe and North America, appeared unable to act together to solve *geopolitical challenges*.

Eventually, the 2020s years could rather risk having the world and its regions evolving slightly outside if not totally beyond a global order based on norms, rules and laws.

Within the greater geopolitical landscape whose picture wouldn't be complete today without shedding light on *its own meandering trajectories and evolutions*, it would be noteworthy to monitor, from the same perspective, one region in particular, namely the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with its diversely integrative countries, an area which has proved, for decades and in many instances, critical for the overall worldwide trends. “The Middle East is not disconnected from global dynamics. To the contrary, although the region might currently be overshadowed in media and policy circles by other issues like China's rise to great-power status or the Russia-Ukraine war, those issues have consequences for the Middle East, and the region itself plays a role in how they develop as well as the international response to them.”⁹⁰

The MENA region could represent a valuable case study with regard to the relation between the global order and regional order, with the interrogation concerning in particular one aspect of critical interest for both parties: is the weakening of the international order leading also to undermining the regional orders, the MENA's one including, or rather, in the situation, as it is today's reality, of frailties and faults in the global order, a regional order needs to be strengthened itself so that be able to fill at least partially the vacuum in matters of principles, norms and practices regulating and managing the interstate relationships, including actions towards preventing or even solving conflicts.

In this regard one cannot draw an immediate and firm conclusion on MENA regional order due to its multi-layered profile:

– *MENA's regional order can be characterized, at best, as an emerging one: the ongoing efforts in the Middle East, nationally and regionally, with plenty of outside the region implications, efforts faced with so many difficulties, showing*

⁸⁹ The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China, Speech, Antony J. Blinken, Secretary Of State, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., May 26, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

⁹⁰ Lina Khatib, *Covering Middle East Politics Requires a Wide Lens*.

rather outright impossibility to finding sustainable solutions to the long ongoing conflicts and to countries' internal instability in the MENA region, starting with those in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, could be considered "part of a process of Middle-Eastern restructuring, of destroying the old order established by the colonial powers a century ago, a situation that will take neither months nor even years, but decades, to be sorted out. Strategic patience and vision are both of the essence."⁹¹

– A number of foreign powers, from neighbouring ones to the far-away long-time "hegemon", have been ceaselessly and traditionally involved in the region's evolutions and trends with the corresponding impact on the region's order. On average, the Middle Eastern civil wars from 1945 to 2008 attracted 2.4 foreign interveners each. Since 2008, the four civil wars have attracted an average of 6.5 each. The pattern that stands out more is that the *number* of interveners has significantly increased in today's structural conditions of global and regional multipolarity. One should also try to answer the interrogation if the absence of the restraining international and regional structures increases the incentives for external actors to become involved in civil wars given the reduction of the constraints as those integrative to an international law-based order.⁹²

– A specific "*ingredient*" which continues to be included in the "*recipe*" of MENA's regional order is that of "*dis-order*", with a duality of sources, firstly, those related to the concrete interests and goals followed, at a given time, by the foreign powers involved in the region's affairs, secondly, the inherent internal disorder in the context of civil wars presently unfolding in a number of the region's countries, while other nations are being faced with the follow-on of recently concluded civil wars, along an array of other atypical and hybrid conflicts, nascent and evolving in MENA region. The undeniable existence of "*failing states*" is another serious factor in regional dis-order accumulation: "*In the Middle East, Century International has chronicled the epic failures of states to take care of their people. Ruling cliques once stuck to unspoken governing compacts: they would take care of the basic needs of the governed, and in exchange they would get and keep power. Today, those elites have abandoned this arrangement, trampling on essential rights along with basic livelihoods. Government routinely use state resources and lethal force to suppress any effort at accountability or systemic change. The trend toward power for power's sake and the active undermining of rights and governance is a worldwide phenomenon, though perhaps nowhere is it more acute than in the Middle East.*"⁹³

– Against the backdrop described above, and considering the long-term evolutions on the ground, one can say that *MENA's would-be regional order has*

⁹¹ Andrés Ortega, *Saudi Arabia vs Iran: the real rivalry in the Middle East*, Elcano Royal Institute, 12 Jan. 2016. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/saudi-arabia-vs-iran-the-real-rivalry-in-the-middle-east/>.

⁹² Christopher Phillips, *The international system and the Syrian civil war*, International Relations, Volume 36, Issue 3, 24 May 2022, pp. 358-381. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178221097908>.

⁹³ Thanassis Cambanis, *The Middle East Is Not Mission Impossible*, TCF-Century International, September 23, 2022. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/the-middle-east-is-not-mission-impossible/>.

*been one of multi-polarity*⁹⁴, given the simultaneous presence and actions of regional actors (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Iran) and external players (U.S., Turkey, France, China) with the inter-play of their specific goals and interests.

In a holistic assessment, the respective multi-polarity for MENA region has got another, ampler, wide-ranging sense. Thus, a summary of practical regional affiliations, by no means comprehensive, shows that “regional groupings, both formal and informal, shape events in the Middle East. Conflicts and economic ties connect events across a sprawling region that stretches from Turkey in the north to Sudan in the south, and from Morocco in the west to Iran in the East. On other matters, other groupings take precedence – “the Arab world,” referring to countries where Arabic is a dominant language, or the Arab Gulf monarchies, a small club of oil-rich kingdoms and emirates that drive a great deal of regional dynamics by dint of their financial power, their interventions, or their internal feuds. Various other political groupings wax and wane in influence (the Abraham Accords signatories, the Arab League). The Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia in 2010 reverberate to this day, and almost every protest movement, while embracing its unique local agenda, asserts some connection to a wider regional trend of popular revolt against calcified rule.”⁹⁵

Eventually, one can conjecture that, *especially in the case of the region defined as above, a diminished and suffering international law and order cannot but equate with more meandering in the behaviour of the region’s countries and in their international relations and diplomatic actions.*

Chapter 3. Outlines of Leitmotifs in the Region’s Present Profile, With Mantras in the Missions and Actions by MENA’s Countries, as Internal Actors, and Foreign Powers as External Players

A Major Leitmotif from the Regional Perspective – Conflicts as the Name of the Game

“Millions of people in the Middle East live their lives peacefully, untouched by violence or conflict. At the same time, the region is beset by a number of vicious conflicts that are degrading its ability to prosper or even ensure decent

⁹⁴ If MENA regional order could be a multi-polar one, how is the global order? An answer to that question has been provided By George Friedman: “The perception of American weakness is a global one, shared even among Americans. Being underestimated has its uses, as does sporting a public that doesn’t trust its president. But only enormously powerful nations can afford the contempt. The past few months haven’t taught us that the United States is finagling a new world order. It’s taught us that Russia is weakening, that China is managing its relationship with the U.S. carefully, and that the international architecture created after World War II, though more complex, essentially remains in place. It is a unipolar world.”

George Friedman, Still a Unipolar World, GPF – Geopolitical Future, October 18, 2022.

https://geopoliticalfutures.com/still-a-unipolar-world/?utm_source=GPF+Free+Newsletter&utm_campaign=9319a21318-20221018_FL_Weekly&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f716b3bf65-9319a21318-

⁹⁵ Thanassis Cambanis and Naira Antoun, *No Region Is an Island: Crises and Their Solutions Connect the West and Middle East*, TCF-Century International, April 25, 2022.

<https://tcf.org/content/report/no-region-is-an-island-crises-and-their-solutions-connect-the-west-and-middle-east/>.

lives for many of its residents. A quintessential bird's eye assessment from the realm of analysts is that "multiple conflicts fester in the Middle East".⁹⁶

From such a Regional Perspective, one can speak of the following *ad hoc* classification of MENA's countries:

– *Category One of MENA nations* are constituted by the primary layer of MENA's larger compound of "multiple conflicts", namely countries confronted with "active civil wars" – *Syria, Libya, and Yemen*. It is the RAND Corporation's above-cited Report that refers to "three active civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya". As for the "Foreign states intervening" in each case, one can find an inventory in the article "The international system and the Syrian civil war" signed by Christopher Phillips⁹⁷: *Syria civil war* (2011 – present): *Iran, Russia, Turkey, US, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Israel*; *Yemen civil war* (2014 – present): *Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran*; *Libya civil war* (2011 – present): *US, Britain, France, Qatar, UAE, Egypt, Turkey, Russia*.

As prove on the fluidity of evolutions in the Middle East, with a corresponding perception by the outside observers, one should note the ambiguity on the Libyan case: in the previous paragraph, the respective author-analyst appeared firm in speaking about the continuation to the "present" time of the Libyan civil war. Only that, other analysts consider the Libyan civil war already finished, one of them advancing a time in this regard – "three years ago" ...

– *Category Two of MENA nations* would include those related to *recent civil wars*, but which are not active for the time being, like *Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen*, all three still being faced with instability and conflictual internal situation, with a powerful feature of a civil dispute, doubled by a strong component of proxies' involvement, like countries still faced at that in spite UN institutions involvement or other external demarches in this regard, Washington's before anything else.

– *Category Three of MENA nations* are formed by that part of MENA area which is incorporating states that even in the present difficult global and regional circumstances feel embolden to look for ways to act – using both "hard" and "soft" means – aiming at national strengthening, politically and economically. Several of the countries in case have been sharing implicit or even publicly self-declared objectives of looking for *the status of "regional powers"*, as is the case of at least two of the Gulf Countries – Saudi Arabia and UAE, with Qatar maybe not too far, as, in the same regional wake, one should remark that grouping of MENA states which have been striving to get *re-affirmed* the respective "status", the epitome here being Egypt.

The sample of basic country case study outlines that follow, with the focus on the most specifics of the countries' profiles leitmotifs, are including some of the myriad of descriptions and assessments prevalent in publications up until the middle of October 2022.

⁹⁶ Shelly Culbertson, Howard J. Shatz, Stephanie Stewart, pp. 28-29.

⁹⁷ Christopher Phillips, *The international system and the Syrian civil war*, International Relations, Volume 36, Issue 3, 24 May 2022, pp. 358–381.
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