

POINTS OF VIEW

A TIMELY QUESTION, OR RATHER DILEMMA: QUO VADIS? THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA – MENA, REGION AND PEOPLE

In a (*sui generis*) diplomat's DOSSIER: TAKEAWAYS and TALKING POINTS

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Abstract. *Put intentionally into the framework of “a diplomat's DOSSIER” (be it even sui generis) known for symbiotically cumulative qualities, among them approach flexibility and objectives consistence, the present paper elaborates on the opinion that, along the journey leading to a necessary better understanding of MENA, the cognitive train has to stop for (re)charging in a lot of “stations”. On the platform of a possible paradigm shift, conceptually and epistemologically, we intend to draw here just the outlines for six of those “halts” which, after a motivational Introduction, are equally distributed in: PART I, including, first, where and how MENA is acting as an inconvenient neighbor and a troubling partner, hence an inescapable topic; second, without trying to supplant a long-standing entrenched geopolitical term – “The Middle East”, pointing out to the potential productive nature of the phrase/syntagm “The Middle East and North Africa” (MENA); third, introducing a holistic vision and approach of the MENA region, marking synoptically its main determinants and variables; and, PART II, with a “centennial portraying” of the region, noticing the interplay of paradigms & metaphors, emotions & feelings, cognitive dissonance, truth telling/hiding, fake news, and their long and entrenched “tradition” in MENA; then, the challenges and chances of the passage from the present stage of MENA's broken modernity to entering the process of MENA 2.0.; finally, instead of CONCLUSION: in the neighborhood, Romania and MENA – centennial trajectories, a pool of lessons (to be) learned.*

*A Motivational INTRODUCTION – Main Mantra of the Title and why a (*sui generis*) diplomat's DOSSIER*

It is our view that the phrase/syntagm “QUO VADIS?” inherently takes a dual form and substance – question & dilemma – in the case of MENA, and that

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due to the extreme complexity of this region, in terms of unfolding events, major evolutions, future perspectives on medium and long term, sometimes even on short term, in most cases the developments being the resultant of the confluence of a mosaic of forces, of national, but also regional and international character.

More so, if some of the questions raised by MENA would receive relevant answers, one cannot be sure that one response or another met a larger validation beyond the individual/ group of persons who forwarded it. For instance, *“the gnawing question of how a region that for half a millennium was a global exemplar of pluralism and religious harmony has become the least tolerant and stable place on the planet”*, a question rightly put by Nicolas Pelham in one of his most recent books¹. Or, the answer/possible solution to that question the outstanding researcher and commentator on MENA issues gave himself, namely *“a return to milletocracy”*, could generate enough doubting: how big is the following for such a proposal, what are chances for its implementation?

We consider that there are numerous such “question marks & dilemmas” (QM-Ds) that could motivate new initiatives to foraying more in-depth into MENA region’s present events and potential evolution, as a way to reach a more in-depth understanding. Here are five of them:

QM-D1: is the tortuous path, if not outright stalemate, of diplomatic endeavors targeting the hottest crises in the region – Syria, Libya and Yemen, indicative of a kind of a fatal *“Bermuda triangle”* for the destiny of those important countries and their millions of innocent inhabitants, not far from the still ongoing Iraqi predicament? When extending the conflict equation of MENA with *“the historic burden”* of the area, namely *“the Middle East conflict / peace process and its core dimension – the Israeli-Palestinian dispute”*, with decade-old efforts for peace still to be fructified, can we speak of more and more substantiation of this impotence by the international community, in particular the UN system, whose failures in practically all matters concerning the Middle East resonate rather with *the lamentations of the chorus in a Greek tragedy, only a modern one this time?*

QM-D2: the new year 2017 came from the Potomac River with a *“novelty”*: *“We absolutely support a two-state solution, but we are thinking out-of-the-box as well”*, wouldn’t that entail the risk of opening a (new) Pandora’s Box for the entire region and the world? A question-dilemma made more relevant and timely by the fact that 2017 marks a half-century of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which were among the spoils of its Six Day War with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in 1967, East Jerusalem being subsequently annexed by Israel.

QM-D3: *“ISIS has seemed to pose to many even more perplexing questions than al-Qaeda did. Why, for instance, has Tunisia, the originator of the ‘Arab Spring’ and the most westernized among Muslim societies, sent the largest contingent among ninety countries of foreign jihadis to Iraq and Syria? Why have dozens of British women, including high-achieving schoolgirls, joined up...?”*²

¹ Nicolas Pelham, *Holy Lands. Reviving Pluralism in the Middle East*, New York, Columbia Global Reports, 2016, p. 17.

² Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger. A history of the Present*, UK/ US/ Canada, Allen Lane/ Penguin Books, 2017, p. 5.

QM-D4: as a rapid research of Amazon.com website would reveal, the existence of 25 books published from 2011 to 2016 (in English, plus 2 in French) which have in their titles the phrase “*The New Middle East*” (3 more already announced for 2017), are we really witnessing a “New Middle East” or it is “*The New Old Middle East*”, as one analyst put it, or is it just wishful thinking or rather an *avant la lettre* proof of “*post-truth*”? In fact, as the author of one of those books, Tariq Ramadan, remarked: “*The Arab awakening has generated theories, interpretations and names as varied as they are contradictory. As I began to analyze developments in the countries involved... it became clear that many questions still remain unanswered. Confirmed facts co-existed with often-unverifiable hypotheses. Making sense of events called for prudence. What was happening in the Middle East and North Africa?*”³ As such basic questions raised since 2012 haven’t found appropriate answers years later had motivated their transformation into true dilemmas, and with that the entire historical context which generated them had to be put in a different “light”, for instance the evolution towards an “Arab Winter” from the “Arab Spring”⁴ (the much-cherished term by the Western commentators, while the local ones preferred “Arab awakening”).

QM-D5: if the resetting of the links between MENA, on the one hand, and, on the other, the modernity, the process started in the region with Napoleon’s expedition, at the end of the 18th century, and consolidated following the World War One, could sound as an inciting solution to the region’s many problems of the day, what happens when the term of reference, namely modernity, understood as Westernization, encounters itself, these very days, difficulties? Steven B. Smith, Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at Yale University, couldn’t conclude its 350 pages of laborious analysis of the modernity with other thoughts but: “*Yet, not even the United States – the country in which modernity has reached its fullest and most comprehensive expression – has been entirely immune to feelings of skepticism, self-doubt, and even despair that the regime has generated about itself. Except in moments of willed ignorance, we no longer feel the same confidence in the unifying and humane mission of the West that was commonplace a century ago... We live in a composite civilization made up of competing strands of both the Enlightenment and Counter- Enlightenment that has made the emancipatory powers of reason and science seem increasingly illusory...*”⁵ Extending the area of consideration on the subject to include both

³ Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening. Islam and the New Middle East*, London, Allen Lane, 2012, p. 21.

⁴ Indicative for a real obsession of the western analysts with the term “Arab Spring” is the fact the such a “phenomenon” could be observed from Washington much earlier than its first sign would manifest “on the ground”: “*The Arab Spring of 2005 will be noted by history as a turning point for the Arab world*”, had proclaimed Charles Krauthammer (*Hoover Digest*, 30 April 2005), seemingly in full congruence with what the former Secretary of State would declare one year later, in a press conference: “*What we are seeing here, in a sense, is the growing – the birth pangs of a new Middle East*” (*Washington Post*, 21 July 2006). Given the negative reactions from the region, she “*had to drop the reference and start talking about a ‘different’ Middle East. (given the fact that) Words matter a lot in a region that love to say one thing and do another.*” (Condoleezza Rice, *No higher honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington*, Kindle Edition, New York, Crown Publishers, p. 510.)

⁵ Steven B. Smith, *Modernity and Its Discontents*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2016, p. 352.

modernized and under modernization countries, Pankaj Mishra has determined⁶ another prevalent feeling – *the anger*, the more deleterious that it seemingly permeate the entire our present, as it erodes the value of the “Western model of modernity” for other region under modernization, including the Middle East.

Shortly on “the (*sui generis*) diplomat’s DOSSIER”: it was considered an approach helping to avoid “*the difficult relationship between Middle East Studies (MES) and International Relations (IR), an instance of the age-old gap between area studies and social science disciplines – a gap that may have grown wider in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings*”⁷.

PART I

Motto:

*“The Middle East is an area of both fascination and controversy. The West should have a proper appreciation of, and acknowledge, just how much world civilization has owed to the contributions of the peoples of the Middle East. Unfortunately, it is also a part of the world which has endured more than its fair share of turmoil and tragedy, and this too must be acknowledged and understood. Tragic events in the Middle East have become standard fare in the headlines for decades, and it is, alas, all too tempting to develop an indifference towards them or worse. A sympathetic, but not uncritical, understanding of the Middle East affairs is a sine qua non for the informed citizen”*⁸.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA): Neighbor and Partner, Inescapable and Inconvenient, the Interplay MENA Order – Global Order

Motto:

*“Recent years have demonstrated the truth of an ancient adage among Middle East watchers: ‘what starts in the Middle East never stays in the Middle East’”*⁹. *“The crises in the Middle East are no longer external to us. They are now embedded in the societies of the West”*¹⁰. *“The Middle East has come to epitomize the way a conflict can make itself felt far beyond the battleground”*¹¹.

Given the Middle East and North Africa’s manifest “contributions” to the chessboard of global and regional geopolitics, where else the political, diplomatic and economic radar screens, below-the-radar included, would signal frequent and intense “blips” originating in that region issues, if not in a part of the world

⁶ Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger. A History of the Present*, UK, USA, Allen Lane/ Penguin Books, 2017.

⁷ *International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East*, The Project on Middle East Political Science, POMEPS, September 17, 2015, https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/POMEPS_Studies_16_IR_Web1.pdf.

⁸ T. G. Fraser, Andrew Mango, Robert McNamara, *The Makers of the Modern Middle East*, University of Chicago Press, 2015, Introduction.

⁹ http://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pe2_laughlin_ok.pdf.

¹⁰ <http://halifaxtheforum.org/because-syria-im-your-friendly-neighborhood-terrorist-2>.

¹¹ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/munich-security-conference-addresses-international-disorder-by-wolfgang-ischinger-2016-02>.

– the European Union (EU) – that had officially “proclaimed” MENA as its Neighbor/ Southern Neighborhood, based, before anything else, on the undeniable verdict at the “Court of Geography & History”: *Mare Nostrum* has been for millennia keeping interlinked the two regions.

Only that, an ordinary neighbor, MENA is not: “Wars, terror and anarchy in the Middle East and in Africa, with radical Islam playing a major role”¹² had been mentioned, by the President of the European Council in a letter sent to the heads of state of the EU member countries (27, UK being on its way out), at the end of January 2017. And that as integral part of the “package of threats” facing now Europe. Absent from the message was the issue of migrants coming to the EU from and through MENA, seemingly due to its complexity and contentious nature among the EU’s members, not less to its psychological and societal dimensions – “Migrants: The Big Fear of the Europeans”, was the title of a special report included in a number of the French magazine *L’Express*¹³, with a key conclusion: the Migrants, a majority coming from MENA countries, a good part transiting through MENA region, could represent “one of the key-issues for the EU’s future”.

Notable for the uninterrupted UE concern over the MENA situation, Tusk’s letter came six month after the heads of state had endorsed the *EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy*, full of references to the Middle East, including in its operational part: “The European project which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy is being questioned... terrorism and violence plague North Africa and the Middle East, as well as Europe itself... The positive human energy unleashed by the 2011 Arab uprisings has given way to a wave of upheavals in the region, featuring collapsing states, thriving terrorist networks, burgeoning transnational crime, millions of refugees, and intolerable violence. All this, too, is happening at our doorstep, just a few kilometers from our shores”. Resonant, even if implicit, echoes of such threats to and answers from EU can be found in the *Declaration of the leaders of 27 member states and of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission* (March 25, 2017).

Viewed from the perspective of a larger international security and defense cooperation framework, extended from North America to Europe and Turkey included, namely NATO, the *neighborhood paradigm* in the case of MENA finds another essential validity: “Responding to the turmoil on NATO’s borders in the Middle East and North Africa... when our neighbors are more stable, we are more secure”¹⁴. The Warsaw declaration on Transatlantic Security Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw, 8-9 July 2016 mentioned: “Today, our nations face an unprecedented range of security challenges, (among them) the instability in the Middle East and North Africa”. Worth noting are the diversity, in semantics and substance, of formulations used by NATO officials when describing the situation in and the challenges MENA generates: “the tide of violence and

¹² <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/01/31-tusk-letter-future-europe/>.

¹³ *Migrants: La Grand Peur des Européens*, *L’Express*, En Couverture, 27 May 2015, pp. 40-54.

¹⁴ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_141632.htm?selectedLocale=en.

instability which has swept across the Middle East and North Africa", *"the arc of instability and turmoil across much of the Middle East and North Africa"*, *"vast area of turbulence to the south, which extends all the way from Maghreb in Northern Africa to the Middle East and the Persian Gulf"*.

On the other shore of the Atlantic, while from the very moment of announcing the (surprise) results of 2016 American presidential elections it was indisputable that a huge amount of international issues and challenges would be waiting for the focused attention and effective consideration by the (unexpected) winner and his team, not less undeniably was that, *"Topping the list will be the Middle East, a region in an advanced stage of unraveling"*¹⁵. In fact, one of the many "lessons" learned from the long and complex US involvement in the world affairs has been that, *"No American president has managed to escape the political complexities of the region (Middle East), and Trump is no different"*¹⁶. Especially, we could add, when that region is not in a normal, be it in relative terms, juncture, but *"of unraveling"* one. And, if someone had felt the need for a "regional/ local" equivalent & "color" to the cold and grey expression *stage of unraveling*, commentators from MENA itself did quickly oblige: *"Trump presidency faces a very wild Mideast"*¹⁷. On which already the periscope of the US Congress had been focused: *"... our central challenge in Middle East is not ISIL, as grave a threat as that is. It is a breakdown of regional order in which nearly every state is a battlefield for conflict, a combatant, or both. ISIL is a symptom of this disorder"*¹⁸. And, almost concomitantly, at the beginning of 2017 – a coincidence, or rather not – a laborious assessment on the threats and risks facing America, published by the conservative think tank *The Heritage Foundation*, stressed that: *"The Middle East region is one of the most complex and volatile threat environments faced by the United States and its allies"*¹⁹.

Only that, as a (first) sign of *"cognitive dissonance"* – from the many one can identify when approaching objectively the evolutions and events in the Middle East – the messages received in Washington, D.C. from the region, at least at the very start of the "unconventional" president's (first) mandate, didn't seem at all to come from *"wilderness"*²⁰.

Remaining in America and moving to New York City, on the East River, we have the UN system, apparently the least "ably" to acting effectively, not just reacting, vis-à-vis the large assortment of MENA problems with regional and global reverberations. In December 2016, in his last press conference as the UN Secretary-General, Ban ki-Moon poignantly stated that *"the carnage in Syria*

¹⁵ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-america-world-in-transition-by-richard-n-haass-2016>.

¹⁶ <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/19687.aspx>.

¹⁷ <http://www.jordantimes.com/opinion/rami-g-khouri/trump-presidency-faces-very-wild-mideast>.

¹⁸ http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-03_01-12-17.pdf.

¹⁹ <http://index.heritage.org/military/2017/>.

²⁰ Most of the Middle East's leaders were prompt in sending congratulatory messages to the president-elect, Donald Trump, while commentators tried to make sense of the momentous change. <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/briefing-middle-east-reactions-us-election>; *"President Trump's Surprisingly Warm Welcome in the Middle East"* was the title of a good analytical article published by *The New Yorker* on November 10, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/president-trumps-surprisingly-warm-welcome>.

remains a gaping hole in the global conscience... Aleppo is now a synonym for hell". He had previously spoken of his *shame* and *anger* at the international community's "powerlessness to stop the war" in Syria and the fact the UN's credibility had suffered. For other UN officials: *"The siege and bombardment of eastern Aleppo, are not simply tragedies; they also constitute crimes of historic proportions"* or *"our generation's shame"*.

We can say that such rhetorical assertions differ little from the lamentations of the *Chorus in a Greek drama*, only that their "script, production, cast" are of our time made. They are displayed on a varied of "voices" and locations. Just two more cases: *"Syria's refugee crisis the 'humanitarian calamity' of the century"*, says UN²¹; *"... the consequences of a myopic policy unmoored from values can already be seen, most outrageously in Syria... Syria is an augury of a global dystopia"*²². As a paraphrase, the refrain murmured by our modern Chorus "cast" in the Syrian drama, could be: *"from Middle East dystopia to a global dystopia and the other way round"*. Some "cogent" arguments are brought about in an in-depth analysis, from February 2017, by the Washingtonian Brookings Institution – No.1 Think tank in the world in 2016²³: *"We are in the early years of the third phase of the U.S.-led international order... (a phase) marked by four trends, the second one being determined by the fact that the Middle East regional order is collapsing... chaos in the Middle East is highly infectious and spreading disorder in the region and beyond... (that) further undermine the existing international order"*²⁴.

A personal, but not less inciting motivational view has been given by the historian cum diplomat Henry Kissinger: *"In our own time, the Middle East seems destined to experiment with all of its historical experiences simultaneously. From this stark pattern the world awaits the distillation of a new regional order by America and other countries in a position to take a global view"*²⁵. One year after the *World Order* was published, a special section of *The Economist* was firmer in its assessment on the matter: *"The Middle East order sustained by the United States has collapsed... Peace may not return to the Middle East for a generation. For most Arabs, including presidents and kings, the lesson is that the American power has had its day... (But) The Middle East desperately needs a new, invigorated engagement from America. That would not only be within America's power; it would also be in America's interest"*²⁶.

Only that, a few months after the inauguration of the 45th US President, it wasn't yet (too) clear if in his team's homework necessary, if any, attention was given to the Kissingerian "World Order" and its regional ramifications. Hopefully, the new American Administration will not delay for too long its inherently

²¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10282089/Syrias-refugee-crisis-the->

²² <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-end-of-liberal-world-order-by-ana-palacio-2017->

²³ 2016 *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* http://repository.upenn.edu/think_tanks.

²⁴ Building "Situations of Strength". *A National Security Strategy for the United States*, The Brookings Institution, February 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/fp_201702_ofc_report_web.pdf.

²⁵ Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, New York, Penguin Press, 2014, pp. 96-97, 143, 145.

²⁶ *Losing the Middle East. Why America must not abandon the region*, The Economist, June 6th 2015, pp. 9, 18-20.

clarification and decision on its role in regard to MENA regional order. Otherwise, Russia will do the job. In its own way, of course! Practically, already, “Russia has reestablished itself as a power in the region..., Putin wants to rewrite the rules of the Middle East and upend the regional political order”²⁷. In the spirit of truth, a kind of “re-establishment” occurred relatively rapid in the case of America too, be it limited to the UN – remember, a major part of a Chorus in a modern Greek drama: “So for anyone that says you can’t get anything done at the UN, they need to know there’s a new sheriff in town. I’m not there to play games and what I wanted to make sure of is that the United States started leading again”²⁸. A warning directly link to the approach within the UN system of some critical topics related to MENA, resolutions and other documents on Israel and the Palestinians included. It remains to be seen if such an attitude of diplomatic voluntarism will be fully congruent with the structural rearrangement – in terms of policies, manuals and protocols of concrete practices on the ground – taking place in the major “cockpit”, that is the White House, of the “world central command”.

*“You Are HERE”: the MENA Region – Toward a (More)
Comprehensive Concept*

Against the backdrop of the new-old geopolitical ballet in the MENA region, scholars and analysts are called to “making (more) sense of the most dangerous and complicated region on Earth”, as one author is doing based on his “own insights” (as a former Israeli senior official on Arab affairs and today an analyst)²⁹. In its turn, the present paper, centered on a “hybrid perspective”, in view of its author’s background – over 12 years spent as a diplomat “on the ground” in the area, complemented by an “outside” perspective on the region, including from Washington, DC and UN-New York, is exploring a possible paradigm shift, conceptually and epistemologically.

Thus, if the syntagm *The Middle East* has been used, for decades, in the political, diplomatic, academia and media language, we consider that a more complete conceptual expression and definition of the region in case, *The Middle East and North Africa*, with the acronym MENA, has become impossible to underestimate and that for its concomitantly cognitive and heuristic potential. While the phrase “The Middle East” will further function as a kind of shorthand, of invaluable rhetorical & semantic convenience.

We have in view that two critical areas of the world – *the Middle East*, most of it being covered by the term *The Levant*, and, respectively, *North Africa* – have become in time more and more intimately intertwined, and that based on geography, history and cultural factors, faith and social traditions and so on.

²⁷ Steven A. Cook, *Vladimir Putin Has a Plan to Upend the Political Order of the Middle East. Spoiler Alert: It’s Working*, <http://blogs.cfr.org/cook/2017/03/06/vladimir-putin-has-a-plan-to-upend-the-political-order-of-the-middle-east->.

²⁸ Nikki Haley, the US Ambassador to the UN, Speech at the 2017 AIPAC (“America’s Pro-Israel Lobby”) policy conference. <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/227381>.

²⁹ Avi Melamed, *Inside the Middle East. Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth*, New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 2016, p. XVIII.

Thus, *The Middle East and North Africa*, with the acronym MENA, is today not only a functional syntagm, but a *true brand-name* enjoying a large utilization in various fields of international relations, both pragmatically – foreign policy/diplomacy, and academically, not the least in the media. From 1985³⁰ on, the phrase became more entrenched³¹, including in the context of the “Arab Spring”: “one key byproduct of the Arab Spring being the increased regionalization of political and security dynamics across the Middle East-North Africa region”³².

Accordingly, the present paper is dealing with MENA, conceptually and analytically, as a vast but organically inter-linked space, from the Atlantic to the Gulf, comprising the following 18 states: *Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen*, plus one entity, respectively *the Palestinian territories* presently under Israeli occupation: *the West Bank and Gaza*. With a total territory of over 11 million sq. km. and over 400 million people. All these integrate the MENA map.

A couple of others nations/ territorial units could be added, depending on the source. It is the case with the map presented here, on the left, used by a major organization in the UN system (UNICEF/www.unicef.org), which includes Sudan too. Instead, the map on the right, from the 2016 edition of a reference Atlas³³, ignores Sudan but includes Western Sahara.



³⁰ Alasdair Drysdale and Gerald H. Blake, *The Middle East and North Africa. A Political Geography*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985.

³¹ Michael Bonine, Abbas Amanat and Michael Ezekiel Gasper, eds. *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 99.

³² <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/one-interconnected-middle-east-region>.

³³ Dan Smith, *The State of The Middle East Atlas*, Third Edition Completely revised & updated, Oxford, Brighton, New Internationalist Myriad Editions Limited, 2016.



A map similar to that of UNICEF could be found in the first pages of a reference book about MENA's evolutions during the first year of the second decade of the twenty-first-century³⁴ (of course, it is already more than a decade since that Sudan presented in the two maps as a unitary country has been officially divided into Sudan *per se* and South Sudan).

Letting aside the “the margins” question, more important could prove what Dan Smith remarked as: “(the) two seemingly contradictory realities: the region is both unified in many ways and highly diverse at the same time”³⁵. An idea shared and even strengthened by Georges Corm, a renowned scholar, who views the region as being, “not only as a privileged place for production of myths and religions”, but also as “a space which is characterized concomitantly by a big diversity as geographies and economies, as well as of languages and religious communities, on the one hand, and, a certain unity with regards the ways of life across its diverse frameworks and patterns of existence, on the other hand”³⁶.

In a sense, one can speak of the perpetual MENA region's dual posture: (i) *A strategic nexus, as a geographical and geopolitical axis taking the form of “a vast quadrilateral, where Europe, Russia, Asia, and Africa intersect: with the Mediterranean Sea and the Sahara Desert to the West; the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and the Central Asian steppe-land to the north; the Indian Subcontinent to the east; and the Indian Ocean to the South”*³⁷. Meanwhile, “*The Middle East, as a region, plays host to three strategic maritime*

³⁴ Paul Danahar, *The New Middle East. The World after the Arab Spring*, London, Bloomsbury, Paperback, 2014.

³⁵ Dan Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 9 & p. 51.

³⁶ Georges Corm, *Pour une lecture profane des conflits. Sur le “retour du religieux” dans les conflits contemporains du Moyen-Orient*, Paris, Editions La Decouverte/ Poche, 2015, pp. 135-136.

³⁷ Geoffrey Kemp and Robert E. Harkavy, *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), pp. 15-17.

chokepoints, all of which have been the focus of tensions at various periods – the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb strait and the Strait of Hormuz”³⁸. (ii) In a *sui generis* international championship for simultaneous contributions to the overall positive legacy of the human civilization, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to the increasing degree of chaos in the present world order, the odds are that, from all parts of the Planet Earth, MENA will be declared the uncontested “winner” on both categories, or, not less euphemistically said: “One lesson that emerges from post-World War II North Africa and the Middle East is that the region will go to any length to ensure that it is a focus of attention”³⁹.

Consequently, the issues related to the situation and prospects of MENA have continued to be central on the agendas of political and diplomatic chanceries, the major – American and European – ones, first of all, but not only, and that against the background of a cemented mix of strategic objectives, geopolitical aims and economic interests, oil & gas, before anything else, but arms trade too, associated with the softer dimension of promoting democracy, human rights and the other values of modernity. Today, MENA as such represents one of the 5 regions of the world focusing the *European Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy*, with pragmatic activities through its diplomatic service – the *European External Action Service (EEAS)*, whose organigramme includes a department called *Middle East and North Africa*, with five divisions (MENA.1 to MENA. 5)⁴⁰. As regards NATO, its Political Affairs and Security Policy Division integrates a *Middle East and North Africa Section*.

For other major international players with interests in the region, the MENA concept is widely used, be it in speeches of heads of states/ foreign ministers (US)⁴¹, statements and programs of foreign ministries (Japan⁴², China⁴³), in the mission-statement of national diplomacies (Russia⁴⁴, United Kingdom⁴⁵), in the internal structures of national foreign ministries (France, Russia, Turkey) or in periodical reports issued by national institutions (diplomatic and intelligence and so on), as in the case of US⁴⁶. Important components and structures of the international institutional system – various UN bodies, funds and programs, as well as some of the specialized agencies, mainly the World Bank Group⁴⁷, do follow distinctly the issues related to the particular evolutions in MENA.

³⁸ <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/19102/19/Iranian-ambition-vs-Arab-division.aspx>.

³⁹ <https://intpolicydigest.org/2016/12/15/trump-s-middle-east-back-future/>.

⁴⁰ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/336/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena_en.

⁴¹ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/05/19/moment-opportunity-president-obama-middle-east-north-africa>; *Hillary Clinton Speech at the Security Council Sixty meeting*, 12 March 2012.

⁴² <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2015/html/chapter2/c020600.html>.

⁴³ http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6734.

⁴⁴ http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248.

⁴⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/peace-and-stability-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

⁴⁶ *Global Trends. Paradox of Progress* A publication of the National Intelligence Council, JANUARY 2017 <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/global-trends-home>.

⁴⁷ The World Bank Group new regional strategy for MENA: “*Economic and Social Inclusion for Peace and Stability in the Middle East and North Africa: A New Strategy for the World Bank Group*”, <http://www.worldbank.org/>.

Meanwhile, MENA events and trends are as much a test for diplomacy as it is for political theory. Intimately connected to the official motivations, but also with particular scholastic and intellectual determinations, MENA region has been dealt with in the activities, debates and publications, of various academic institutions, independent research centers, departments in universities, specialized *think tanks* and NGOs or individual scholars, located in Washington, New York, Brussels, London, Paris, Moscow, Beirut, Doha, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Ramallah, Erbil⁴⁸. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has established a *Global Agenda Council on the Middle East and North Africa* and published Reports on thematic issues which treat MENA as a distinct region. Corroborating them with similar documents issued by national, international and regional organizations, plus by reputable individual scholars (on *amazon.com* one can find at any given moment several hundred books having in their titles the phrase The Middle East and North Africa), one can determine, in a more nuanced manner, at a given moment, *Mena's profile*, that is the Middle East and North Africa in its entirety as well as in its most relevant structures and segments.

*How MENA can be Better Understood:
Toward a Holistic Vision and Approach*



⁴⁸ Some Think Tanks/ organizations whose Internet sites make explicit reference to MENA:
<https://www.chathamhouse.org/about/structure/mena-programme/>;
<http://www.ecfr.eu/mena>; <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa>;
<https://www.brookings.edu/topic/middle-east-north-africa/>; <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena>;
<http://www.cfr.org/region/middle-east-and-north-africa/ri165>; <http://www.ecfr.eu/mena>;
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/middle-east-and-north-africa.html>;
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/MENARegion/>; <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa>;
<http://globalriskinsights.com/category/middle-eastnorth-africa/.r>.

The Wadjet, or Ujat, meaning “Whole One”, was a powerful symbol of protection in ancient Egypt also known as the “Eye of Horus” and the “*all seeing eye*”. Translated to our times and simply put: “...*in the Middle East everything is logically and intimately related to everything else*”⁴⁹. Consequently, a functional and operational cognitive train for today’s MENA region should be based on a holistic vision and approach, which could involve a dual set of structural components, organically entwined. Synoptically, they are:

THE DETERMINANTS, the Basis/ Foundation vectors, sources of longer term sustainability and of stability, even relative:

B1. Geography & Demography

- “*The Middle East hangs on a thread of fateful human interactions, the more so because of a closed and densely packed geography. Geography has not disappeared in the course of the revolutions in communications and weaponry; it has simply gotten more valuable, more precious, to more people... the 2011 Arab uprisings that swept away several regimes were about the power of communications technology and the defeat of geography. But as time passes, the geographies of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and other countries will reassert themselves... Geography and history tell us that Syria will continue to be the epicenter of turbulence in the Arab world... in Syria, each sect and religion is associated with a specific geographical region... Geography dictates that Iran will be pivotal to the trend lines in the Greater Middle east and Eurasia...*”⁵⁰

- “*The chapter on the Middle East demonstrates why drawing lines on maps while disregarding the topography and, equally importantly, the geographical cultures in a given area is a recipe for trouble. We will continue to witness that trouble this century*”⁵¹.

B2. History & Civilization

- “*Arguably, recorded history started in the Middle East. It was here that the first writing system developed, making it possible to document and preserve an unchanging record for posterity*”⁵².

- “*In creating Iraq, Britain stitched together a state out of three disparate regions that had very different histories. In creating Lebanon and Syria, France did the opposite and carved up a region that had functioned as a political unit for centuries. In doing so, Paris and London took a process of nation-building that, in their own continent, had taken centuries, telescoped it into a matter of months, the imposed it on people who had not asked for. And they did it to satisfy their own imperial interests. From the outset, the flagship states of the Anglo-French Middle east were artificial constructs. They were nations in names*

⁴⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2015/03/26/why-are-10-countries-attacking-yemen/>.

⁵⁰ Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography. What the Map Tell Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*, New York, Random House, 2012, pp. 280, 303, 308, 314.

⁵¹ Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography. Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics*, London, Elliot and Thompson Limited, Paperback 2016, pp. xiv-xv, Chapter: *The Middle East*, pp.141-180.

⁵² Lucia Volk (Ed.), *The Middle East in the World. An introduction*, New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 39.

only... Nation-building in the Arab Middle East was a top-down process imposed by outsiders. Right from the outset it lacked legitimacy among the people who would have to live with the consequences of it"⁵³.

B3. Religion(s), MENA – cradle of three major monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam; incubator for strands of political Islam

*"The Middle East has been the chrysalis of three of the world's great religions. From its stern landscape have issued conquerors and prophets holding aloft banners of universal aspirations"*⁵⁴.

*"Religion, not nationalism or Arabism, is now the dominant force. God has returned to the Middle East"*⁵⁵. *"There are no religions that are entirely pacifist because there are no societies entirely free of conflict. What matters is how the holy books are read"*⁵⁶.

*"Increasingly, the region seemed caught in a tournament between two clashing crescents – a Shia one running horizontally from Iran via Iraq and Syria to southern Lebanon, and a Sunni rival descending vertically from Turkey through central Syria to Jordan, an increasingly Islamist Palestine and Egypt. The region other sectarian fires which had subsided flared once more (as in Arab peninsula)"*⁵⁷.

B4. Natural resources – oil and gas, energy market dynamics, economy: cyclical vs. structural trends, trade patterns, importing virtual water

*"If the Middle East had not had oil it would have been allowed to make its own mistakes and get on with building democratic states. But it did have oil, and, the West wanted oil more than anything else. Easy access to oil required stability across the region, and that gave the Cold war era regimes of the Middle East a shelf-life well beyond the expiry date of the geopolitical circumstances that had nurtured them..."*⁵⁸

THE VARIABLES, the Elements of Superstructure, sources of frequent changes, instability and fragility, environments favorable to the advent of "black swans":

C1. The regional actors: peoples, countries/nations, states – "MENA of 18+1": profiles, movements and interactions; borders; societies, tribes/ tribal communities, minorities; the Arab "Deep States"; non-state/ sub-state organizations/ groups and informal militias, warlords/warring lords; ungoverned spaces (territorial, cyber, maritime); military strength of the states and the 21st Century matrix for MENA's ancestral conflict propensity: internal/civil, sectarian/religious wars, intra-regional/tri-dimensional/proxy conflicts and wars, plus at least one smoldering war of independence (Kurds'), war economies and the spill-over effects of wars; official (sub)regional organizations (League of Arab States, Gulf Cooperation Council), *ad hoc* associations/coalitions/alliances, NGOs.

⁵³ M. E. McMillan, *From the First World War to the Arab Spring. What's Really Going in the Middle East?*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 88, 92.

⁵⁴ Henry Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁵⁵ Paul Danahar, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/26/the-guardian-view-on-religion-and-violence->

⁵⁷ Peter Mansfield, *A History of The Middle East*, Fourth Edition revised and updated by Nicolas Pelham, London, Penguin Books, 2013, p. 205.

⁵⁸ Paul Danahar, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

- *"The Middle East is a place of untold diversity... That proverbial quilt, nevertheless, is threatened. Insidious forces with wider geopolitical goals are willing to sacrifice the Middle East's ethnic and religious heterogeneity for increased power and influence. Only a renewed belief in secularism can preserve Middle Eastern diversity and guarantee protections for minority groups like Christians. Diversity is precious; it is beautiful. Part of the wonder of the Middle East is the fact that it is a region where countless cultures and religions were born. The Middle East must remain beautiful; therefore, it must remain diverse"*⁵⁹.

- *"The vast majority of Arab states combine two features: they are rentier states, i.e. countries in which rents (from natural resources or strategic functions) constitute a sizeable part of the state income, and states that are all located on a scale going from "patrimonial" to "neopatrimonial", the major peculiarity being the existence of a core of plainly patrimonial states, i.e. states which are "owned" by the ruling group for all intents and purposes, unlike the "modern state" where the ruling personnel are only civil servants"*⁶⁰.

- *"In the past, conflicts in the region were primarily about lands. In the future, they will often be over the perceived will of God. Religious Zionism and the struggle within the political Islam are the forces shaping the New Middle East. No one can say for sure exactly how the region will evolve in the coming years. All that can be said is that people's faith will increasingly play a bigger part in their political choices, whether they are Muslims, Jews or Christians. People will want their societies to reflect their values"*⁶¹.

- *"The Middle East conflicts, which have multiplied during the recent years and have taken dreadful proportions, endangering ceaselessly the peace in the world, are mostly generated by phenomena of political manipulation of both the religious factor and the historical memory"*⁶².

- *"The Middle East version of the Cold War, with the Saudi-Iranian relationship at its core"*⁶³.

- *"No other country in the Middle East is as much of a cauldron of religious and ethnic groups – Muslims, Alawites, Druze, Christians, and Kurds – competing for power as is Syria. No place in the region has seen such a collision of contending ideologies – Arab nationalisms, Syrian nationalism, Islamism, communism, reformist liberalism, and more – battle it for decades. Where Syria succeeded has been in the establishment of a stable dictatorship that has kept the country together for so long despite a profusion of failures"*⁶⁴.

C2. The international players having interests in/ with regard to MENA: profiles and actions of states, international organizations/ institutions, non-state actors, strategies, tactics, effective influence dynamics, disputes, *ad hoc* alliances.

⁵⁹ <http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/opinion/christopher-dekki-christianity-connection-to-the-past-bridge->

⁶⁰ Gilbert Achcar & Nada Matta, *What Happened to the Arab Spring?* <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/achcar-arab-spring-tunisia-egypt-isis-isil-assad-syria->

⁶¹ Paul Danahar, *op. cit.*, p. 422.

⁶² Georges Corm, *op. cit.*, p.10.

⁶³ Tim Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

⁶⁴ Barry Rubin, *The Truth About Syria*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. xi-xii.

- “*The US out, Russia In, Europe Missing, and China on its Way?*”, 2015 International Conference Herzliya (Israel).

- In the particular case of Iraq: “*The US have won the war, Iran has won the peace and Turkey has won the contracts*”.

- In March 2017, on the occasion of debating the military spending in the new US budget, experts in Washington stressed that: “*The United States has higher military spending than any other country partly because its foreign policy goals are more ambitious: defending its borders, upholding international order and promoting American interests abroad. Our current strategy is based around us being a superpower in Europe, the Middle East and Asia-Pacific. We’ve sized our military to be able to fight more than one conflict at a time in those regions*”⁶⁵.

- “*The storms now convulsing the Middle East are civilizational shifts of historical proportions. Anyone from the outside trying to influence these regional upheavals in a positive direction will find the task very difficult*”⁶⁶.

C3. Cycles, turning/ inflection points in the modern evolution of MENA (since the end of the Great War)⁶⁷ and particularities for the Arab area⁶⁸ (majority as MENA’s territory and population), with *the Arab Spring* as the “surprise season” starting with the beginning of the second decade of the 21st Century; *Syria – six years of conflict, Six Inflection Points*⁶⁹.

C4. Vulnerabilities and structural fragilities, as sources of perennial instabilities and shockwaves, at the national and regional level, some of them with reverberations in the neighboring regions and world-wide: (i). *Multiple deficits & shortfalls* (water, agricultural lands, climate change negative impact, educational and health services, industrial, technical and scientific infrastructures, “dignity deficit”⁷⁰, “(good) governance deficit” & “democracy deficit”, deficits in the rule of law and human rights, lack of capital, for some) *versus Multiple surpluses & excesses* financial (IMF data/2015: Qatar, the highest GDP per capita in the world, Kuwait 5th, UAE 7th, Saudi Arabia 12th; Yemen’s GDP per capita is 50 times smaller than Qatar’s), arid/deserts areas for practical everybody, population, in the case of Egypt mainly, and the youth segment – “*youth bulge*” for the region’s overall demographics, “bubble” of authoritarianism and corruption, emigration flows, mainly from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, immigration flows, a characteristic of the Gulf states.

- “*The MENA region is pressing against the limits of available water, air, land, and biodiversity resources. With the MENA region predicted to be affected by significant heating and drying trends over the coming decades due to climate change, the risk of further fragility and instability is heightened*”⁷¹.

⁶⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/16/world/trump-military-role->

⁶⁶ <https://besacenter.org/policy-memorandum/perfect-storm-the-long-term-implications-of-middle-east-chaos/>.

⁶⁷ Nayef R. F. Al-Rodhan, Graeme P. Herd, Lisa Watanabe, *Critical Turning Points in the Middle East 1915-2015*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, Paperback 2013.

⁶⁸ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Les Arabes, leur destin et le notre. Histoire d’une libération*, Paris, Editions La Decouverte, 2015.

⁶⁹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2017-03-15-western-policy->

⁷⁰ Abdel-Moneim Said, *Dignity deficit*, March 2017, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/19810.aspx>.

⁷¹ <http://www.mei.edu/content/climate->

- *Democracy Index 2016. Revenge of the “deplorables”*, a report issued in the spring of 2017 by The Economist Intelligence Unit, presented, practically (re)confirmed, a quite grim picture of the democracy situation the Middle East and North Africa region: “Full democracies”, 0; “Flawed democracies”, 2: Israel, Tunisia; “Hybrid regimes”, 4: Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Iraq; “Authoritarian regimes”, 14.

- “The Middle East is also in the midst of a youth bulge, in which 65 percent of the population is under the age of thirty. Between 1995 and 2025, the population of Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Syria, the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Yemen will have doubled. Young populations, as we have seen in the Arab Spring, are the most likely to force upheaval and change”. Youth unemployment in MENA is among the highest in the world at 28%⁷².

(ii). The Dual Burden:

(a). History’s Burden: the two problems generated in the wake of World War One: 1. The apparently insoluble Israeli-Palestinian/Arab conflict: “one state”, “two states”⁷³, “three states”, with the position of the main “broker” – US: “We absolutely support a two-state solution, but we are thinking out-of-the-box as well”; 2. The Kurds issue: Iraq’s Kurdistan Autonomous Region, Syrian Kurdish “Republic of Rojava”:

- At the end of March 2017, it was announced that “public support in Israel for the establishment of a Palestinian state has hit a historic low, according to the findings of a new poll that shows the Israeli people are more skeptical than ever that the Palestinians will take the steps necessary to strike a peace accord with the Jewish state. Israelis overwhelmingly feel that a full withdrawal from the West Bank would not serve Israeli interests. Nearly 70 percent of Israelis now say they do not expect peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians to lead to a final agreement in the coming years, according to the poll. The findings represent a significant change from the early 2000s, when more than half of Israelis still believed Israel should make tough land concessions to foster an agreement”⁷⁴.

- “Historically, the role of the US has been to act as a bridge between the parties, providing assistance and guarantees that allow them to move towards painful and politically costly compromises. For a string of US presidents, this has also been fraught with difficulties. And crucially, the determining factors have often been outside of US control. (Consequently, today) The Israel-Palestine issue is the graveyard of US peacemaking. Littered with previous political initiatives, resolutions, maps, and plans, the “peace process” is a long history of struggle and disappointment”⁷⁵.

⁷² Robert D. Kaplan, *op. cit.*, pp. 259-260.

⁷³ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/israel-palestine/israel-palestine-parameters-two-state-settlement>.

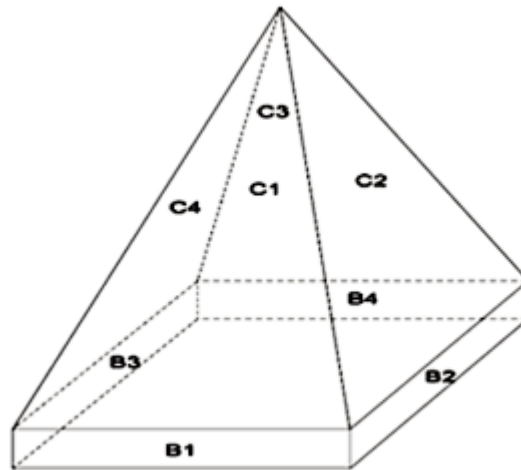
⁷⁴ http://freebeacon.com/national-security/israeli-support-palestinian-state-hits-historic-low/?utm_source=Freedom+Mail&utm_campaign=a18f68aad5-

⁷⁵ <http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/opinion/the-ultimate-deal-us-presidents-and-the-allure-of-peace-in-the->

(b). The Heavy Burden of the Present Time: hijacking and perverting of the religion essence, sense and meaning, mainly in the case of Islam, but with extremist manifestations in the case of others religions specific to the region, hence the (un)deserved “*anathema-brand*” for MENA: major source and arena for manifestation for fundamentalism, extremism and the terrorism phenomenon, having as actors various organizations, as Al Qaeda & ISIS/ISIL/ *Daesh*, acting including through so-called *lone wolfs*.

Because we have reached with that topic the real cauldron of MENA’s present and future, it is better to give the floor, first, to relevant voices from the region itself: “*We, as Arabs and Muslims, have a responsibility and duty to be in the lead in the fight against the Khawarej, or outlaws of Islam. This is a war to protect our religion, our values and the future of our people*”⁷⁶. Hopefully, the Jordanian monarch had in mind a holistic approach of the matter, respectively going to all the sources feeding “the Khawarej”, that is the young men before anything else: “*The protesters of 2011 had dreamed of building new countries that would confer genuine citizenship and something more: karama, dignity, that rallying cry of all uprisings. Then the dream failed them, many gave way to apathy or despair, or even nostalgia for the old regimes they had assailed. But some ran headlong into the seventh century...*”⁷⁷.

And whether these 4+4 vectors are assembled together, that could lead up to the physical form of a “Pyramid”. Such a result could be – or not – just the work of hazard, as in many areas of “natural” happenings and human activities, specifically to the Middle East and North Africa.



⁷⁶ <http://www.jordanembassyus.org/news/remarks-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-52nd-munich-security-conference>.

⁷⁷ Robert F. Worth, *A Rage for Order. The Middle East in Turmoil, from TAHRIR SQUARE to ISIS*, London, Picador, 2016, pp. 233-234.

In a region where symbols have been playing significant roles for ages, this *sui generis* Pyramid comes with its added value of representation and metaphor, combining the appearance of perennial stability – the Basis/ Foundation, with the irrepressible work/ labor of the time – the Superstructure. What remains to be seen is if “the Pyramid effect” would be manifest in the very case of MENA region, too. But this could be a topic for a special study. For now, solely to notice that for every given situation assessment, be it at the overall regional level, or just for a country, community, sub-region, a crisis/ dispute, as part and parcel of MENA’s mosaic, *one could identify a particular mixture of determinants and variables, as embedded ingredients*. Herewith we are going to present outlines for a few possible *case studies*. Not before mentioning the very special case of a place “Burdened with too much history”⁷⁸ – JERUSALEM, a city for which geography has become rather a part of a metaphor: ‘the sacred geography’.

THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL: “Every feature of the Jewish character can be explained in psycho-historical terms... We are a nation with more History than Geography”⁷⁹. With a territory of a little more than 20,000 sq.km (area sovereign to Israel since 1948/ Green Line), Israel ranks among the small states of the region and the world. Surviving on such a small surface, with very few natural resources (an improvement in this regard are the recently discovered of natural gas deposits *off shore* in the Israeli Mediterranean zone) and the surrounding “enemy” states, obliged the Israelis to lay their young state on at least two strong and deeply rooted pillars: army & security, up to having the country given the nickname “Fortress Israel”⁸⁰, respectively, economy & technology, this time the moniker being easier to digest publicly – “Start-up Nation”⁸¹, and, as an inherent combination of the two – “High-Tech Military Superpower”⁸². Consequently, “In all this mess (the situation in the Middle East in the second half of the second decade of 21st Century), somehow Israel is in its best geostrategic position in decades... At the center is a far stronger Israel that has more opportunities than at any other time in its history”⁸³. And that could be considered a proof that the Israeli army, in general all citizens, bear as a permanent *amulet* the mantra of the officers’ academy commandant: “In the Middle East, you don’t get a second chance. We were born here and that’s what we have. And it is a strange neighborhood: the stronger one lives, the stronger one survives, the stronger one wins”⁸⁴. In other words, *the immanence of*

⁷⁸ M. E. McMillan, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

⁷⁹ Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Evreii și cuvintele*, Bucharest, Humanitas Fiction, 2015, pp. 66, 135.

⁸⁰ Patrick Tyler, *Fortress Israel: The Inside Story of the Military Elite Who Run the Country – and Why They Can’t Make Peace*, London, Portobello Books, Paperback 2013.

⁸¹ Dan Senor, Saul Singer, *Start-up Nation: The Story of Israel’s Economic Miracle*, New York, Twelve Hachette Book Group, Paperback 2011 (Translated into Romanian language by Hasefer Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014).

⁸² Yaakov Katz and Amir Bohbot, *The Weapon Wizards: How Israel Became a High-Tech Military Superpower*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 2017.

⁸³ <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/443401/israel-enemies-western-critics-stop-israeli-empowerment>.

⁸⁴ Patrick Tyler, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

Geography: by its very *sui generis* “birth certificate” – the Balfour Declaration of 1917, a fact of History⁸⁵, Israel is being “condemned” to exist “Here, in MENA”.

Interestingly enough, what is happening inside the “walls” – *literally and figuratively* – of such a seemingly unbreakable fortress is far from a linear narrative, at least two of the pillars of the Israeli State and society, namely religion: Judaism & Jewishness and democracy/ politics and the practice of the rule of law, being today generators of rapid and effervescent evolutions, coming to bring up a unique contribution to the overall MENA dynamics of change. Good motivation for the reference magazine FOREIGN AFFAIRS to include a special section (50 pages) in one of its recent number⁸⁶.

SYRIA & IRAQ and OTHER STATES IN MENA: The pattern with the *primacy of history* can be identified in the case of other nations only that here History seems to bear a profound negative connotation, including the external cause: “*It is a European view of the region that shaped it. The Europeans used ink to draw lines on maps: they were lines that did not exist in reality and created some of the most artificial borders the world has seen. An attempt is now being made to redraw them in blood... Modern maps show the borders and the names of nation states, but they are young and they are fragile*”⁸⁷.

Hence, the inevitable question and dilemma: is it really “the name of the game” the dissolution of those MENA’s *fragile states*? There are enough opinions converging in that direction:

- “*Syria remains mired in conflict despite repeated international efforts to manage it since 2011. It’s easier to imagine the country being segmented than being stitched back together*”⁸⁸.

- Iraq: “*It is important to understand that future developments – most importantly the defeat of ISIS, when it comes, as it will—are not likely to end the process of conflict in Iraq, but rather to usher in the next round. The underlying, stark dynamic of Iraq is one of fragmentation and sectarian politics*”⁸⁹. “*Before it can finally defeat ISIS, the country must solve its deep political division... (meanwhile, the reality on the ground in Iraqi areas freed from ISIS disaster) it’s a warning as well, of the next war this multiethnic, multisect country may face, the morning after it finally defeats ISIS*”⁹⁰.

⁸⁵ An additional particular sense of history in the case of the Jewish people/ State of Israel: after several years of high-level negotiations between the Israeli and Canadian governments, 119 “heritage sheep”, which trace their lineage back 5,000 years to the Middle East, began arriving in Israel at the end of 2016. It is the first time that the breed, called “Jacob’s sheep”, has been presented in Israel since biblical times (while sheep generally have two horns, Jacob sheep usually have four to six horns, including large horns that frame their face). The first sheep arrived on the Jewish calendar the day that Noah came out of the ark, the 28th of Heshvan, a fact that strengthened the symbolism of the entire issue: “We are bringing part of Jewish history back to the homeland.”

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/biblical-sheep-in-israel-for-first-time-in->

⁸⁶ *The Struggle for Israel, Foreign Affairs*, Volume 95, Number 4, July/ August 2016, pp. 2-57.

⁸⁷ Tim Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-146.

⁸⁸ http://www.cfr.org/syria/why-syrias-war-grinds/p38759?cid=nlc-dailybrief-daily_news_brief—link33-

⁸⁹ <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/02/08/victory-in-mosul-wont-save-iraq/>.

⁹⁰ *Iraq’s Forever War*, Cover Story, *Time*, July 4, 2016, pp. 18-27.

Undoubtedly, a clearer distillation of assessments in the case of the two countries is conditional to fate of the Islamic State (IS), which was, at the time of writing this paper, under intense pressure in Iraq, with a similar perspective for its “capital” in Syria, the city of Raqqa and its surroundings. If a complete vanishing is hard to conceive – “defeating ISIL on the physical battlefield is enough, the perspective could be that of a Virtual Caliphate”⁹¹ – even effective weakening of IS would lead to a re-arrangement of cards:

- First, internally in the two cases, the forces in play be they governments or diverse opposition and dissents, having to prove that they do possess not only instruments of hard power and submission but also the rare card of “the unifying myth” and at least remnants of healthy nationalism, Syrian and Iraqi, not undermined “sub-identities” interests, as sources of the only sustainable glue for the nation-state survival and further nation-building. On the one hand, as the Syrian present fragmentation shows, “*The Syrian uprising and subsequent insurgency have never been a unified national movement; from the beginning, the opposition has been defined and divided by local identities. The brutality of the war and the chaotic nature of foreign aid have entrenched local divisions and undermined efforts to create a unified leadership*”⁹². On the other hand, it will not be easy to find room for reconciliation against the too many killings and massacres perpetrated practically by all sides involved and, more, the population appear divided by “unsolvable problems”. As it will not be trouble-free for the Islamic religious actors, which will have to balance the local sectarian needs, with the national, if any, objectives, and, of course, the commandments of *Ummah*.

- Second, how will re-adapt the other regional actors, namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey – which will remain for long fixated with the Kurds problem, and even Israel – would indeed be this country a main beneficiary of the new regional geopolitical landscape in which Syria and Iraq would have disappeared as real state enemies?

- For the “traditional” major international players in the region, America and Russia, respectively, the emerging post-caliphate era will claim a change in strategy, mainly because the White House will be faced with an uncomfortable “post-truth”: Russia really means business in the MENA region, with use and deployment of all instruments available in Moscow’s foreign policy toolkit: diplomacy, intelligence, military, trade, energy, with understandable less interests regarding the soft means.

As for the European Union’ policy toward MENA, it appears consistently defined in principled terms, but “on the ground”, its conduct seemingly would

⁹¹ General Joseph L. Votel, LTC Christina Bembek, Charles Hans, Jeffery Mouton and Amanda Spencer, #Virtual Caliphate. *Defeating ISIL on the Physical Battlefield Is Not Enough*, Center for a New American Security (CNAS), January 12, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/virtual-caliphate>.

⁹² Kheder Khaddour, *Local Wars and the Chance for Decentralized Peace in Syria*, March 28, 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/03/28/local-wars-and-chance-for-decentralized-peace-in-syria-pub-68369?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoi WWpNMVp EYzFabVU1WkRBNSIsInQiOiJ1MDkxZU tvQk9PMklwZE5aZVJS RXZG MndNMTh0.

not escape the entrenched paradigm “*more pay, less play*”. As reiterated by EU’s Council at the beginning of April, 2017, as “*the conflict in Syria affects directly the EU*”, the EU is “*the biggest funder of humanitarian efforts inside Syria*”. Plus, multiple other forms of “support”, even some of them looked extremely complex, if not outright ambiguous in formulation, in fact one more confirmation of the above-mentioned paradigm: “*The EU will continue to provide resilience support through the provision of education, job creation, support for local civilian governance structures in opposition held areas, including by working with the Syrian Interim Government, and work to avoid the collapse of the state administration*”.

The “scorecard” on Europe’s foreign policy performance, elaborated and published⁹³ by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), the assessment of the EU’s policies and actions with regard to MENA – considered one the six issue areas of key-interest, concluded: “*If Europe is to help defuse the series of MENA crises that threaten its interests in 2016, it will need to take a lesson from its own playbook. Diplomatic deal-making with Iran on the nuclear issue, based on a strong European consensus, a sense of strategic purpose, and – critically – the pragmatic pursuit of feasible goals, shows what hard-nosed politicking can achieve. Europe will need to extend this approach to the Syria talks and beyond, including Libya and Iraq, if it is to assume an effective role in delivering regional de-escalation and consolidating a united front against ISIS*”. MENA’s events and developments in 2016 are self-explanatory for EU’s capacity to act effectively with regard to MENA. Self-criticism is *de rigueur* as an internal EU analysis show: “*2016 proved to be an important year for testing the European Union’s international posture and fitness to tackle security challenges in its direct neighborhood and beyond – a test that the EU is seen to have failed, as the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Libya, Ukraine and Yemen demonstrate. The fact that no other great power – no matter its economic or military weight – has managed to bring these conflicts closer to an end is of no comfort*”⁹⁴.

It remains to be seen the new “face” of the *European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) – Southern Dimension* following *Brexit*, mainly if that means also a kind of *Plan B* for the EU.

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⁹⁴ European Parliamentary Research Service, January 2017. <https://bookshop.europa.eu/en/ten-issues-to-watch-in-2017-pbQA0716169/?CatalogCategoryID=8sEKABstHnAAAAEjH5EY4e5L>.

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