

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL POWERS AND INSTITUTIONS IN THE NEW SECURITY STRUCTURE

Participants in the closed round table discussion on the role of international powers and organizations in the security architecture of the MENA region challenged the assumptions behind the debate. The experts participating were unanimous in questioning the applicability of the term “architecture” in the discussion of security in the Middle East and North Africa. Similarly, participants doubted the very existence of the MENA region as a uniform body whose present borders were drawn from outside and questioned the motives that guide global powers in managing security matters in the region. The level of skepticism expressed by these experts reflects just how much the building blocks of the debate itself, which have been seen as a given for decades, fail to reflect the complexities of the issues that haunt the region in the 21st century.

To what extent is the concept of security architecture applicable to the MENA region?

Architecture by default has an element of design to it, something created by an architect. Seen through a geopolitical lens, an architect becomes a hegemon that designs the security framework. This vision of security in the region is a legacy of the post-colonial system in the Middle East as well as the Cold War, in which external powers were security guarantors to their clients.

The rapidly-changing international power balance also underpins the dangers that this security architecture bears for the region. The definition of who is a great power and who is liable to dictate the rules of security in the Middle East and elsewhere has undergone significant changes over the 20th century. First we saw Britain and France battling for influence in the region, ending in an extremely volatile security architecture and an artificial dividing line imposed in 1916. With the disintegration of the colonial system, the United States and the Soviet Union came to fill the void, establishing their own security designs essentially based on armed parity between proxy states. With the fall of the USSR the United States became the sole hegemon in the Middle East, resulting in growing responsibilities for the country as a regional policeman for whom, following the 9/11 attacks, domestic security came to be tied to stability in the MENA. America's role around the globe is changing and is contested by many, including a resurgent Russia and China which are beginning to see stability in the Middle East as central to their own security.

The powers of the region have historically looked outwards for external referees and guarantors of their security. This means that the Middle East has often become a mirror of the rapidly-changing global political scene. Hegemonic domination itself becomes a contingency factor rather than a factor of stability, meaning that the architecture itself becomes unstable and short-lived. Instead of speaking of a security architecture, implying a hegemonic design, it would be more suitable to try to identify the contours of a security arrangement in the Middle East.

What makes an arrangement different from an architecture is its inclusiveness and the principle of the equality of stakeholders. Unlike an architecture, in which monolithic rules of the game are created, a security arrangement is a living mechanism that naturally evolves to address new threats and adjust to geopolitical challenges. In this context, a security arrangement is based on the idea of collective security, in which each party recognizes concerns of others and commits to accommodating their fears. It is initiated within the region rather than by an external “architect” or hegemon who sees regional security designs through the lens of his own interests.

The MENA is sometimes called the most penetrated region in the world. There are currently two levels of interpenetrability affecting the Middle East: global powers penetrating the region and regional states penetrating each other. The reason why the issue of interpenetrability is crucial is because most regional states are weak to begin with, while penetration by external powers can lead them to collapse.

The role of international powers

In the academic literature, the MENA is sometimes called the most penetrated region in the world. There are currently two levels of interpenetrability affecting the Middle East: global powers penetrating the region and regional states penetrating each other. The reason why the issue of interpenetrability is crucial is because most regional states are weak to begin with, while penetration by external powers can lead them to collapse. International powers fail to adequately address these existing vulnerabilities in a way beneficial to the region. Security in the region depends to a large extent on whether local powers decide to remain passive looking for external guarantors or whether they decide to set their own rules for the game.

Discussing the role of the great powers in the Middle East and the role they could play in the new security arrangement, it is key to understand why the region matters to them. Over time their motivations for engaging in the MENA region have changed dramatically, as has their vision of the security dimension.

European powers historically saw the Middle East as their sphere of influence and an arena that mirrored European power play, but have more recently seen a significant weakening of their positions there. However, while the MENA region’s primary interest to Europe used to be based on its energy resources, today EU’s perspective on the region deals primarily with the security threats that emanate from it. Europe’s initial response to the Arab Spring was muted, with France being a notable exception. The EU’s interest in the civil struggle unfolding in the Middle East peaked with the issues of migration and radicalism. With the influx of refugees being the primary European security concern, it has chosen to build walls around itself instead of addressing the root causes of the crisis, arguably contributing to the continuing turmoil in the region.

The evolution of American interests in the region is a work in progress, but it seems that Barack Obama’s strictly diplomatic path for solving regional conflicts is being reassessed by the new administration. A withdrawal from the region is hardly possible for the United States, as history demonstrates: George Bush intended to withdraw from the MENA but 9/11 resulted in an ever stronger involvement, just as Barack Obama’s failed pivot to Asia reemphasized the importance of the MENA. Donald Trump will likely have to execute a similar return to the Middle East in response to regional political developments.

Although President Trump questions whether his predecessor’s choice to invest effort and resources into maintaining stability in the



Middle East was wise, a significant portion of his presidential campaign focused on this very region. Donald Trump's approach to regional security is likely to see less accommodation and diplomacy as well as less support for UN-initiated security arrangements, but more of a focus on counter-terrorism and hard power. The most contentious element of the new administration's regional security arrangement will be pushing back against Iranian influence and revising "the rules of engagement" with Tehran established through Barack Obama's nuclear deal with Iran. This new policy will be partially shaped by Washington's regional allies, particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel, who want the United States involved in confrontations in the region.

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Despite its reappearance in the region Russia is not a newcomer to the Middle East given the Soviet Union's role in supporting authoritarian Arab nationalist regimes. Russia, however, is more predictable in the Middle East than the United States, whose political course undergoes a rethink with each new administration. Just like its predecessor, Russia is invested in the concept of authoritarian stability in the region and heavily relies on security ties established during the Cold War. The nascence of Moscow's neo-Soviet course in the Middle East is also evidenced by the fact that the rhetoric of Russian policymakers is more often than not based on a polarizing juxtaposition of Russian and American roles in the region.

China's interest in designing a security arrangement for the MENA region has

not been explicitly laid out yet, which is characteristic of Beijing's foreign policy approach based on the silent build-up of capabilities. But China is increasingly penetrating the region in a more sustainable fashion than other global actors through investment and soft power. It has for instance made the Middle East central to its "One Belt, One Road" initiative and continues to engage the youth of the region by luring them with scholarships. It has, however, also relied on traditional means of building up its power in the region by strategically locating its first overseas military base in Djibouti near a crucial maritime choke point, the Mandeb Strait.

The P5 have different stakes in the region, but what is important is that the Middle East becomes part of their global power play. The prevailing perception among the P5 that domination in the MENA region translates into global domination has continuously undermined the attempts of local powers to install indigenous security designs. This approach essentially means that tensions among the P5 in the global arena will translate into regional standoffs. Similarly, attempts to broker political deals between P5 states will inevitably concern Middle Eastern affairs as well. A notable example is a grand deal that Russia is looking to strike with the new administration in the United States that will extend to a number of contexts, including Ukraine, Syria and Iran.

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An alarming foreign policy trend among international powers that is likely to further affect the MENA region is the integration of the Middle East into their domestic political agenda. Donald Trump's presidential campaign made this trend especially evident with the issue of US support for Israel becoming one of President Trump's most important campaign promises. Russia seems to be going down the same path: ahead of the 2018 Presidential elections, the issue of Syria is increasingly becoming a unifying factor in Vladimir Putin's platform that is likely to play a prominent role in his presidential campaign.

Threat perception in the MENA region

A significant part of the debate between experts concerned identifying how threats are perceived across the MENA region. It spans over two continents and is much less monolithic than the name suggests. This geographic complexity creates challenges for applying the same security arrangement to the entire region. It is not so much geographic considerations (after all NATO was conceived between two continents and its members are separated by the Atlantic Ocean) as a lack of common threat perception in MENA that makes creating a regional security arrangement a daunting task.

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same security concerns merely because the majority of their population professes Islam. Morocco and Iran, Libya and Jordan will have different sets of coordinates that guide them in the domain of security.

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Just like NATO, which created a system of collective security in response to threats emanating from a perceived external enemy, the Soviet Union, a potential security alliance in the MENA region would need to be based on the same principle. A closer look at the region shows that states tend to find threats within the region. As one of the participants of the discussion noted, illustrating the differences existing between Muslim countries, "what does Iran want and what does Saudi Arabia want beyond denying Iran what it wants?" Another expert argued that the Saudi-led coalition to fight terrorism is an attempt to create a regional security arrangement. Its problem, however, is that it is seen in Tehran as an anti-Iran alliance.

However, even imminent threats such as terrorism are perceived differently across the region: some see the root cause of Daesh in state failure, others insist on a deliberate plot to destabilize the region. The example of the Muslim Brotherhood, recognized as a terrorist organization by some Gulf states and as an ideological group by Turkey and others, also highlights the challenges associated with the fight against terrorism as a unifying factor in the MENA region.



The contours of a new security arrangement

In an environment where the rules of the game are dictated by outside powers, governance systems are in deep crisis and state sovereignty is challenged by non-state actors, it is hard for MENA countries to design their own security arrangements. But even within the region, individual actors are guided by the fear of each other's unspoken intentions and rejection, which makes the playground chaotic and reduces relations to a zero-sum game.

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In crafting the contours of a possible security arrangement in the MENA region, defining the relationship between local and global powers is probably one of the most important elements. The trigger for security cooperation is likely to originate outside the region, with the United States and Russia playing a key role in designing any arrangements, which is why mutual understanding between the two on the issue of Middle Eastern security is also hugely important. The relationship between international and local players should be based on the principle of the mutual accommodation of any arrangement to succeed and be a truly MENA-focused initiative. In this regard the experience of the ACRS (Arms Control and Regional Security) working group set up in 1991 focusing on conceptual and operational confidence-building as well as arms control measures in the Middle East could be revisited.

Against the backdrop of continuing wars that result in governance failure states as primary beneficiaries of a security arrangement need to be empowered. However, sub-state and non-state actors that are hard to fit in the 20-

th century security frameworks need to be either incorporated in new mechanisms and need to be held accountable for violations. More and more non-state actors, including armed groups, are invited to the table to negotiate the terms of the Syria settlement, meaning that there is an understanding that they have already become part of the international system. However, unlike state actors, they do not have responsibilities and duties under the law, meaning that they are given certain rights without accepting legal frameworks in which these rights are exercised. What prevents non-state actors from violating security agreements that they agree to is sheer power and their self-interest. However, given the fact that Daesh actions in Syria and Iraq amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, its members could only be prosecuted under domestic criminal law, not by the International Criminal Court because of its state-based rationale.

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Despite outside actors having a role, a new security arrangement should be designed using a bottom-up approach. Presently, however, relations between leading regional powers that could be local guarantors of security (Iran, Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) are going from one diplomatic crisis to another, inhibiting dialogue. The acceptance of an inclusive mechanism for regional cooperation is a core element currently missing in the MENA; hence the need to intensify efforts at-trust building in the



region. With the level of trust as low as it is now the only possible security arrangement would be based on mutual deterrence, which is not sustainable in the long run, as was shown by the Cold War.

An approach focused on tackling immediate threats, however, may have a fully regional character and therefore gain enough commitment from all sides. This could include arrangements designed to curb the spread of terrorism in MENA and attempts to find common ground on issues where there is none, such as illegal migration and organized crime.

There are multiple levels of security in the Middle East: disarmament issues, nuclear non-proliferation, human security issues, etc. The question is how regional these issues are for all the countries combined. Some security dimensions, such as human security, have a regional nature, while others will be prioritized to a different extent across the region. Addressing all security dimensions at once through a collaborative arrangement seems impossible if not enough interest is generated on all sides while no clear push factors towards a joint regional security arrangement are in place. An approach focused on tackling immediate threats, however, may have a fully regional character and therefore gain enough commitment from all sides. This could include arrangements designed to curb the spread of terrorism in MENA and attempts to find common ground on issues where there is none, such as illegal migration and organized crime.

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Instead of setting up an all-encompassing security mechanism in the region, the prospect of a loose agreement based on acceptance and inclusiveness should be explored. Various security dimensions should rather be addressed at a sub-regional level by the states concerned. On the other hand, emerging asymmetric threats facing the world are global and cannot be addressed regionally or sub-regionally. Hence, a macro-level approach should be explored towards such issues as cyber security and there should emerge a point of convergence between global and regional security arrangements.

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EVENT DESCRIPTION

The collapse of regional order has made the security failures of the Sharq region ever more apparent. State failures, violent extremism, the emergence of militia groups as prevalent regional forces, chemical warfare, and the arms race are among the security problems, which call for the development of a new security architecture for the MENA region.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6

No:68 Postal Code: 34197

Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey

Telephone: +902126031815

Fax: +902126031665

Email: info@sharqforum.org

sharqforum.org

