

**Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies  
(MEDAC)**

**Shifting geopolitics in the  
Arab World 1945-2017**  
Professor Bichara KHADER



**Med Agenda — New Series**

**MEDAC Publications in Mediterranean IR and Diplomacy**



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# Shifting geopolitics in the Arab World 1945-2017

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## Introduction

**A**lmost a century after the end the Ottoman domination of the Middle East and North Africa, and after many decades of independence from Western colonial rule, the Arab Region is far from being peaceful, integrated, prosperous and democratic. Worse, after the watershed events starting in 2011, **dubbed as “Arab Spring”**, many States are either unstable or simply in shambles, and the old Arab political “order” is collapsing while the new geopolitical landscape is marred by a chaotic shift of alliances, proxy wars and sectarian violence. **If in the past 75 years, we had some sort of a “regional Arab system”, today we have a “region without a system”**, where non-state actors are filling the vacuum left open by weakened Arab States’ power system and where non-Arab countries like Israel, Iran and Turkey are gaining ground, clout and influence.

Within almost all Arab States, the “new” internal political order is neither stable nor inclusive. In **Egypt**, the army has ejected the Moslem Brotherhood and ousted the first ever democratically-elected Egyptian President, reverting to oppressive tactics and authoritarian rule, and

polarizing a once homogeneous society. **Yemen** is plunged in internal struggle along tribal, geographic and sectarian lines, aggravated by the Houthi rebellion and the Arab Saudi-led coalition military and intervention since 2015. The **Shi'ite-led Iraqi government** has not only failed to prevent the seizure by ISIS of large swaths of its territory, thus contributing to the alarming resurgence of violent non-state actors, but also state authority has been challenged by an independence referendum of Iraqi Kurdistan. **Syria** has become an arena for proxy wars: the country is literally devastated by al-Assad regime and its Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah allies and its population is decimated or displaced, triggering an unprecedented wave of refugees within the country, in neighboring countries and elsewhere. **Jordan** has weathered the political storm but social discontent is bubbling below the surface. **Lebanon** is feeling the bite of regional havoc and faces huge hurdles with endless internal squabbles and external challenges emanating from the flow of Syrian refugees pouring into the country and the spill-over of the Syrian conflict on its internal dynamics. **Gulf States** are not immune from the disruptive dynamics of the Middle East. Bahrain has been shaken by internal protest and had to resort to the protection of its fellow monarchies to dent the social protests of its Shia majority. Other Gulf States scrambled to buy off political discontent with salary increases and subsidy packages.

Not only did the Arab genuine “uprisings” reverberate throughout the Arab World and even beyond, they also rekindled old rivalries, reshuffled regional cards, opened new wounds. The resurgence of **Saudi- Iranian rivalry** is old but the recent Iranian assertiveness contributed to tense regional relations even further. The relations between **Qatar and Saudi Arabia**, two important GCC countries, have deteriorated in December 2014 with the withdrawal of Saudi, Bahraini and Emirati ambassadors from Doha and this deterioration culminated in 2017 with the ostracization of Qatar and the severing of all ties with this small Emirate, putting at great risk the very existence of the

only long-standing regional integration in the Arab World : the Gulf Cooperation Council.

**The Arab Spring had no little impact on the Palestinians.** Egyptian military rulers under General Al-Sisi considered Hamas as a “terrorist organization” linked to the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood. But Qatar continued to support this Palestinian “resistance movement” in Gaza. Saudi Arabia did not hide its preference for the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. Such a differentiated positioning of regional actors has debilitated the Palestinian National Movement. Curiously enough, it is Egypt that offered it’s mediation to reconcile Hamas and the Palestinian authority ( November 2017).

The situation in **North African States** is also complicated to say the least. Libya, is steeped in total mess and internal strife between contending factions is leading to a *de facto* division of the country with two parliaments and two governments in the East and in the West. **Algeria** is shielded by oil bonanza but oil is no life-insurance against violent protest and indeed the continuing slump of oil prices (since fall 2014) diminished its capability to respect its part of the “social contract”. **Morocco** is engaging in gradual reforms and has been able to simmer down the social turmoil but huge challenges remain unresolved -youth unemployment, social disparities, and regional imbalances- and there are signs of reversal to harsher control of dissent. **Mauritania** is too far to the West to suffer from external upheavals but its internal problems of governance and development remain intact. **Tunisia** seems on the right track of a “happy transition” based on pragmatism and inclusiveness, but its economic problems, mainly the lack of job opportunities, remain constant threats to its stability.

Thus, taken as a whole, with the exception of Libya, Maghreb States are faring a little better than the Mashrek States. However, **as a region, the Maghreb remains in limbo** setting a sad record of being the least integrated region in the world.

By contrast, non- Arab countries seem to benefit from the regional havoc. **Iran's regional stature has been enhanced** and its regional assertiveness has been reinforced. **Turkey has been emboldened** by the victory of the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt and, for a while, it thought, enthusiastically, that its model of government may be emulated in some Arab countries and elsewhere but the ousting of President Morsi from power by Egyptian military tempered such an enthusiasm and put Turkey at odds with Egypt and to lesser extent with Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates. Undoubtedly, Israel is the big beneficiary of the implosion of all its potential neighboring contenders.

Whatever the outcome of the Arab "Spring" will be in the next decade (smooth transition, mass delusion, return to authoritarianism, or illiberal democracy) one certainty remains: **the Arab World will never be the same. A new dynamic has been set in motion: the whole region is descending into the abyss and the old "regional order", sustained for decades by the Western powers, is dissolving without a clear alternative in sight.**

This book will therefore seek to analyze the regional shifting geopolitics and the **evolution of the Arab regional sub-system, mainly in the Middle East, from 1945 until today** in order to understand regional dynamics and the shaping of the "new regional order" or "disorder" which is being set in place. Putting it in a nutshell: **we have to look to the past to understand the present.**

## **1. The Arab Sub-Regional System: A theater of external influence (1945-1970)**

**T**o better understand the evolving regional situation in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa), we cannot escape the necessity of understanding the historical formation and characteristics of the so-



called Arab sub-regional system since the establishment of the League of Arab States in 1945.

Two concepts may help grasp the specificities of the Arab regional sub-system: the **concept of penetration** (it is a penetrated sub-system) and that of **polarization** (it is polarized).

The penetration of the Arab regions of the Mashrek and the Maghreb goes back to the colonial period. European States in the XIXth and the beginning of the XXth centuries fragmented the region into a number of relatively weak, and sometimes, artificial states under various denominations: **Colonies** (Algeria and Aden), **Protectorates** (Morocco and Tunisia) and **Mandates** (Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Lebanon). These weak states sought external patrons for their own security and often, they were at odds with each other.

In the wake of the WW2, the Middle East order in particular (since North African countries were not yet independent) has been defined by the interplay of contending forces, both internal and external: Republics versus Monarchies, “progressive” versus conservative, rentier versus non-rentier, pro-American versus pro-Soviet. The Cold War has transformed the Middle East first, and North Africa later, into **an arena where each superpower tried to enhance its influence in a zero-sum game**. The polarization of Arab countries has allowed increased penetration of the regional sub-system by external actors. This does not mean that Arab States have only been pawns on the chessboard where the players were the West and the Soviet Union: on the contrary, **Arab States constantly interacted with external forces and actors to maximize their interests**. A certain amount of autonomy of local dynamics went hand in hand with increased competition of external actors. But, obviously, since 1945 (and even before the First World War) the Arab countries have remained a **“theater of external interference”**.

The case of the Middle East is telling: it has been shaped by the Sykes-Picot Secret Agreement (1916) the Balfour Declaration (1917), the Mandate systems (1922), the end of the Ottoman Caliphate (1924), and later the creation of the State of Israel (1948), the Egyptian Revolution (1952) and the Suez Canal war (1956).

During this long period, Middle Eastern developments have been largely influenced by external powers (European powers until 1956) and since then, by the two contending superpowers, each one trying to have the upper hand in a region which is endowed with three cumbersome attributes: **geography** (at the crossroad of three continents), **geology** (with huge oil and gas reserves) and **geo-theology** (as cradle of monotheism and civilizations).

**External powers' competition polarized even further the components of the Arab sub-regional system.** Arab regimes engaged in a fierce competition among themselves. The period extending from 1952 until the death of the Egyptian nationalist leader, Nasser, in 1970, was marked by a vibrant anti-imperialist Arab nationalism. It is symptomatic that the term "Arab Spring" (le **Printemps arabe**) has been coined for the first time by a French writer, Jacques Benoit-Méchin, in 1959, to describe the regional dynamic set in motion by Gamal Abdel Nasser.

**But the Arabist slogan was not endorsed by all Arab countries.** This is attested by what Malcom Kerr called the " **Arab Cold War**" opposing the Arab nationalist camp, spearheaded by Egypt and supposedly progressive, socialist, popular and pro-soviet and the Arab Monarchies, gathered around Saudi Arabia and often described by the nationalists as backward and even "American stooges".

Admittedly the general mood of the Arab population in post-independence period was supportive of Nasser's Arabism and the Monarchical camp was on the defensive, mainly after the forced abdication of King Farouk of Egypt (1952), the killing of the Hashemite

King of Iraq (1958), and the exile of the King of Libya (1969). The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was harassed by Arab nationalists and owed its survival to the ability of King Hussein and the support of its Western allies (1956-1958). Lebanon was enmeshed in deep crisis (1958) as it was torn between its Western alliances and Arab nationalists.

**North African States became independent precisely in that period of surging Arab nationalism:** Morocco and Tunisia in 1956, Algeria in 1962 after a bloody war of independence. But as soon as they became independent, the big North African states got entangled in the bi-polar rivalry and consequently in the Middle Eastern power competition.

Undoubtedly, **Nasser was the shining star** of that period and pan-Arabism was the hegemonic ideology. It is in this context that the Union between Egyptian and Syria was set up but it short-lived (1958-1962). This was the first setback of Arab Nationalism, to the great satisfaction not only of the Arab monarchical camp but also of Western powers that did not spare resources and efforts to destroy the Arabist movement perceived as a real threat to Western interests, to their Israeli ally, and to the very survival of their Arab clients in a region considered to be of vital strategic importance.

In that context, **Iran and Saudi Arabia** became the “**twin-towers**”, the two pillars of American strategy in the Middle East, while the **Moroccan Monarchy** has become a trustworthy Western ally balancing the assertive nationalist Algeria.

After 1962, “Nasser’s order” in the Arab World was running out of steam with the dislocation of the Syrian-Egyptian unity. **But it was the 1967 war which dealt the final death blow to the Arabist Movement.** The sudden death of Nasser in the 1970 has been the last nail in the Arabist coffin.

**The West applauded the Israeli victory of 1967.** Not only the “anti-imperialist champions” have been defeated, but Nasser, himself, has

been humiliated, to such an extent that the King of Jordan felt so emboldened that he launched his troops against Palestinian militants (Black September 1970), just one month before Nasser's death, without fearing any retaliation from the nationalist camp. Undoubtedly, **the winds of change were blowing in favor of the "conservative pro-Western order"**.

Against this background, the war of 1973 should not be understood as an attempt to revive the Arabist ideology. On the contrary the 1973 must be interpreted as the revival of a **new state-centered orientation**. The Arab State started to acquire pre-eminence on 'pan-Arab ideology'. Such a development is clearly demonstrated in the separate **Peace Agreement** between Egypt and Israel (1979) in total breach of the so-called Arab solidarity. The "defection of Egypt", traditionally an Arab core-State, has led to its exclusion from the League of the Arab States (1979) and, later, in 1981, to the assassination of Sadat himself.

These momentous events were almost concomitant with a period marked by two oil crises (1973 and 1979) which allowed the Arab oil-exporting countries to amass a huge wealth. **Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, in particular, which were on the defensive during Nasser's era, emerged as significant actors both regionally and internationally.**

## 2. From Nasser's order to a "petro-dollarized" Arab regional system

**T**his second period, extending from 1970 until the demise of the Soviet Union, was marked by significant state, regional and societal dynamics.

**Iranian revolution (1979) reshuffled the cards in the Middle East.** The assertiveness of the Islamic Republic was perceived as a real threat

for Iraqi, Arab Gulf and Western interests. The Sunni-led government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq feared Iranian expansionism. Gulf States, and mainly Saudi Arabia, discovered the degree of their vulnerability as small States. The USA felt outmaneuvered by a defiant Islamic Republic in a region where they have vital economic and strategic interests. **No wonder therefore if the USA and the Gulf States decided to side with Saddam Hussein in his war against the Islamic Republic of Iran providing him with weapons, money and diplomatic support.**

**The Iraq-Iran war (1980-1989)** was not about defending the Sunni Arabs from their Shi'ite Persian "enemy": **it was a regional power game**, mainly the defense of Iraq, the security of the Gulf States and the existing regional order. As a matter of fact, the Iraq-Iran War produced three side effects: on the positive side, **it prompted the setting up of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 and the re-integration of Egypt in the Arab system (1989)**, and on the negative side it led to the **"defection of Syria"** which decided to ally with a non-Arab country, Iran, in its war with an Arab country: Iraq. The alignment of Hafez el Assad of Syria with the Islamic Republic of Khomeini has been a first indication of the disintegration of the Saudi-led Arab sub-regional system.

Indeed, in the absence of real leadership (**Qiyadah**) **Saudi Arabia exerted financial and political influence (Noufoudh)** engaging in regional politics, as **peace -broker** (Fahd Plan 1982 on the Arab-Israeli conflict and Taef Agreement on Lebanon 1989) and as **purveyor of funds** to "moderate Arab States" of its liking and also to Islamist movements which re-surfaced on the ruins of the old secular pan-Arabist order. But it did not prevent the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, nor the Sabra and Shatila massacres (in September 1982) and looked at the Iran-Iraq war as a strategic opportunity as it resulted in the mutual destruction of its regional contenders. **Conservative, liberal, pro-Western and oil -driven order-building** was clearly the motto of the period.

In North Africa, **Algeria** took advantage of its newly accumulated wealth, to **champion Third-World great causes**, mainly the establishment of a new World Economic Order, the revival of the Non-Alignment movement. Since its independence, Algeria has been a staunch supporter of the Palestinian cause. After 1975, Algeria positioned itself also as a fervent advocate of self-determination of Polisario , putting itself at odds with Morocco.

**The Superpowers engaged in the Cold War and** strived to adapt to these new realities. The collapse of the anti-imperialist Arab ideology in the 70's has been obviously a first setback of the **Soviet Union**. Sadat threw Egypt into American arms while pro-American Gulf States were more and more relying on the American security umbrella. But the Soviet Union could still rely on the Syrian, Iraqi and Southern Yemen allies.

**The United States**, in their turn, had to face unforeseen developments. The Iranian revolution of 1979 toppled their staunch Iranian ally, the Shah, one of the two pillars of American strategy in the Region. But, the loss of Iran was compensated by the recuperation of Egypt. From 1979 onwards, **Egypt and Saudi Arabia became the new twin-pillars of American Strategy**.

Until the beginning of the 70's, **the European Community** was absorbed by its internal institutional set-up. But the first oil crisis came as a wake-up call. Suddenly the EEC discovered the extent of its vulnerability to external shocks and its dependence on Arab oil. Running against the opinion of its American ally, it engaged at the end of 1973 in the Euro-Arab dialogue which culminated in the Venice Declaration (June 1980) on the Palestinian issue. It also forged a new Global Mediterranean Policy (1972) raising its profile in a region where European Member States have vested interests. But strategically speaking, the EEC remained a second fiddle and a junior partner of the United States. During the Reagan presidency, the EEC went back to the fold and its margin of manoeuvre was significantly diminished.

In the Arab Region, Saudi Arabia proved to be a weak hegemon. Unsurprisingly, the “**Saudi conservative order**” ushered in a **totally fragmented “Arab sub-system**”, with the marginalization of Egypt (1979-1989), the protracted civil war in Lebanon from 1975-1989, Israeli defiant provocations with the annexation of the Golan Heights in 1981, the destruction of Osirak Nuclear Plant of Iraq in 1981, the occupation of South Lebanon in 1982.

### 3. From the “petro-dollarized regional system” to a region without any system (1990-2000)

**F**or the Arabs, the year 1989 has been “*annus admirabilis*”. It was the year marking the end of the Lebanese civil war, the Egyptian return to the fold, the setting up of two regional organizations: The **Union of the Arab Maghreb** (Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, Libya and Tunisia) and the **Arab Cooperation Council** (Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and North Yemen) and the re-launch of the Euro -Arab Dialogue (Paris, December 1989). Differences had been provisionally shelved and tensions appeased.

For the West, the year 1989, has also been an epochal moment. The fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the end of the Cold War came as a “divine surprise”. The USA won the ideological battle without having to wage a war. The general mood was optimistic. Francis Fukuyama dreamed of an “**End of History**”, Samuel Huntington warned of a new “**clash of civilizations**”, while others forged the notions of “**American benevolent hegemony**”, and “**the indispensable nation**”. The European Union was also euphoric but the prospect of a Unified Germany was set to reshuffle the geopolitical cards in Europe to the great frustration of some European Member States, mainly France, which felt the danger of being outstripped and outsmarted by a more assertive Germany.

But euphoria did not last. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1990 the Iraqi army invaded the Emirate of Kuwait triggering the second Gulf War which led

to the liberation of Kuwait (January –February 1991). The occupation of Kuwait, a member of the League of Arab States, has been **the straw which broke the camel's back**. Not only were the Arab States split between those who supported the “military option”, like Saudi Arabia, and those who were in favor of a “diplomatic mediation” , like Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organization, but, this time, the unfolding dramatic events **eroded the pan-Arabist solidarity at the popular level**. Indeed, after its liberation, Kuwait expelled some 300.000 Palestinian and Jordanian expatriates, under the pretext that they supported Iraqi invasion.

The “**Desert Storm**” military campaign saved Kuwait and weakened Saddam's Hussein regime in Bagdad. The only Arab country which had financial and military capabilities had been crushed: it was no longer any match for Israel or for Iran.

Although Iran has been exhausted by its war with Iraq in the 80's, **the balance of regional power was shifting in Iran's advantage in the 90's**. Iraq was put under embargo and its Shi'ite community, which constitutes the majority of the population, became more vocal asking for a better say and more equality. Syria's alliance with Iran was consolidated. The Shi'ite Hezbollah in Lebanon felt emboldened and more assertive.

It is at this juncture that the **first Peace Conference in Madrid** (1991) took place in a bid to find a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, followed by **the Oslo Accord** (1993) which was supposed to pave the way for the creation of a Palestinian State by 1999. **These developments prompted the European Union to enlarge its Mediterranean partnership** initially limited to the 5 Maghreb States (1992) by encompassing other Middle Eastern countries including Israel and the Palestinian Authority (Barcelona Conference 1995). The move was based on the assumption that the Peace negotiations, following the OSLO Agreement, will proceed smoothly to a happy end and that the EU should support them



by inviting Palestinians and Israelis to be part of its Mediterranean policies. We know, *a posteriori*, the fallacy of such an assumption.

In the Maghreb, the Algerian crisis (1992-2000) produced a collateral damage: **The Union of Arab Maghreb**, set up in 1989, was put on the back-burner. The borders between Morocco and Algeria were closed in 1994 and they are still closed. The fear of the Algerian crisis spilling over into Morocco, the regional competition between the two central countries of the Maghreb and the Sahara issue have been stumbling-blocks of regional integration.

In the Broader Middle East, the Islamist Turkish party, **Justice and Development**, won the elections in 2002. From that year on, Turkey positioned itself to fill the “regional vacuum”. **“It’s zero problems with neighbours”** foreign policy offered Turkey an opportunity to reconcile with its regional neighbours .

#### **4. The Years of havoc: “The creative destruction” of a region 2000-2010**

**T**he inauguration of the twenty-first century did not augur well for the Middle East. Iraq’s potential, as a power-base, had just been squandered by its war against Iran and its catastrophic occupation of Kuwait, and the country had been placed under embargo. Egypt was struggling with its traditional economic and political scourges, and became increasingly aware of *“the gap between its self-image as a regional leader and its real power to shape events in the region”*. Syria was losing clout with the death of Hafez el-Assad, in 2000 , and became entangled in the Lebanese quagmire. Undoubtedly, **Arab traditional core States saw their power eroded.**

**Arab Gulf States**, in spite of their wealth and booming oil-driven economies, **were at pains in offering an alternative model** which appeals to the Arab population.

In the Maghreb, **Algeria and Morocco** succumbed to the temptation of solitary “manoeuvres”, did not succeed in shelving their differences, and failed to impose themselves as “core States” of a region in “construction”. As a matter of fact, Morocco invested more energy in consolidating its relations with the West, mainly the European Union, than in contributing to revive the Arab Maghreb Union. Algeria opened up to other international players like Russia, China, and Brazil to counter-balance its traditional ties with the European partners and to increase its autonomy.

The result of all this has been a Middle Eastern and North African **regional fragmented disorder characterized by States’ competition**.

It is in this context of regional disarray and disorder that the terrorist attacks of the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 took place. They triggered the “war on terrorism”, with the invasion of Afghanistan (1991) and, later in 2003, the invasion of Iraq.

It goes beyond the scope of this short overview to elaborate on the root causes of terrorism, on the American anti-terrorist strategy or on the invasion of Afghanistan in 1991.

But the American invasion of Iraq, in 2003, had such lasting and dramatic fall-outs that it must be given some thought. Conducted under false pretexts, the American invasion was meant to bring about a “**new Middle East**” by destroying the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. The Americans decided to invade Iraq “*not to preserve the existing order but to overturn it*”. This strategy was based on the neo-conservative approach dubbed as “**creative destruction**”. In reality, the American invasion led to a fundamental change of state power which passed from the Sunni minority to the Shi’ite majority. But in spite of conducting a policy of inclusiveness, the new Shi’ite-led and pro-Iranian government of Iraq marginalized the Sunni community by disbanding all Sunni officers and generals and all civil servants linked to the Baath Party.

The end of Saddam Hussein's regime has meant the emergence of the Shi'ite majority as the new driving force of Iraq. Such a development led to three major consequences: **the fragmentation of Iraq** among three contending forces: the Kurds, the Sunnis and the Shi'ites and therefore its dislocation as a country, **the tightening of the Iranian grip** on the Iraqi government and the projection of Iran's role as a new " regional hegemon" , and finally **the surge of Jihadi movements within the marginalized and infuriated Iraqi Sunnis** fighting both the Americans , the Shi'ite population and the Iraqi regime.

As a result of all this, **Middle East "balance of power" has been totally upturned**. Saudi Arabia felt outraged by the consequences of Iraq's invasion as it tipped the balance of power in the region in Tehran's advantage. The Saudi monarchy, traditionally known for its quiet diplomacy, got nervous and felt that if Iran's activism was left unchecked in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq or even Gaza, then it may threaten Saudi Arabia in its own backyard using the Saudi Shi'ite minority in the oil-rich Eastern region or the Yemen's Houthis on its Southern border. Saudi Arabia therefore took the decision to raise its profile and to take the lead in reversing Iran's new acquired influence by rallying Sunni fellow countries to counter-balance the so-called Iran's "axis of resistance".

The first Saudi move was to marshal an array of military and financial assets in support of Iraqi Sunni tribal "Sahwa" (awakening) groups in their opposition against the pro-Iranian Iraqi prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki. In Lebanon, Saudi Arabia competed with Syria and Iran. The assassination, on 14 February 2005, of their "protégé", in Lebanon, prime minister Rafiq Hariri, was probably a Syrian response to Saudi meddling in what Syria called its "domaine réservé". But the assassination backfired: Syria was forced to withdraw its troops from Lebanon on 26 of April 2005. But its proxy ally, Hezbollah, remained defiant, ignoring the UN Security council resolution of 2 September 2004, calling for disbanding and disarming all militias in Lebanon. **The Israeli-Hezbollah war in Summer 2006 should be understood as part of this grand**

**regional geopolitical game.** Since then, Lebanon remained steeped in instability and in sectarian divide. The more recent resignation of Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, (November 2017) announced, in Saudi Arabia and not in Lebanon, to the great displeasure of the Lebanese establishment, offers ample proof that **Lebanon remains the open battle ground-field of Saudi-Iranian warring camps.** Fortunately, thanks to French mediation, Saad Hariri left Riyadh for Paris, went back to Lebanon and finally withdrew his resignation .

**On the Arab-Israeli front,** things were not becoming better. The collapse of the Camp David negotiations (July 2000), the second Intifada (October 2000) the re-occupation of Palestinians towns by the Israeli army (2002-2004) and the still “mysterious” death of Yasser Arafat (2004) added fuel to the raging flames of the Middle East. Palestinians gave up hope in the Peace Process championed by Yasser Arafat. In the Palestinian elections of 2006, they voted the Fatah out and Hamas won the majority of the Parliaments’ seats. The USA and the EU who sent observers to the Palestinian elections, were caught off guard. They sided with Israel in boycotting the legitimate winners and imposing on Hamas conditions that were never imposed on Israel. This led to the isolation of Hamas and to its radicalization. After it took control of Gaza in 2007, Hamas described itself as the “authentic resistance” triggering three Israeli destructive offensives in the last 7 years (2008, 2012, and 2014) resulting in the destruction of large parts of Gaza and the death of thousands of Palestinians.

**The Palestinian Authority** remained in control of the West Bank. It was kept afloat by International aid on the condition that it sticks to the Peace Process, that it renounces violence (any form of resistance), and that it coordinates with Israel on security issues. Clearly **international aid was covering part of the cost of occupation, without any dividend for the Palestinians.** The President of the Palestinian Authority had nothing to offer to his people, except **a long process without peace** and empty promises that the EU will recognize a Palestinian State, “in

**due course**” (Berlin Declaration 1999). In the meantime, Israel pursued its relentless occupation and its settlement policy, in total impunity **rendering the “solution of two states” a geographic impossibility.**

Undoubtedly, in the first decade of the 21st century, **the balance was tipping in favor of religiously-motivated movements in Palestine and elsewhere.** The Islamists won the elections in Turkey in 2002, the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt performed quite well in the Egyptian elections of 2005. Palestinian Hamas won the majority of the Parliament’s seats in 2006. But surprisingly, Hamas was put on the “list of terrorist organizations” by the West. Iran seized the opportunity to step in and support the ostracized Palestinian movement in a show of solidarity with a Sunni resistance movement and in demonstration of the fallacy of the thesis of a “Shi’ite Crescent”. Later, Qatar followed suit and offered financial assistance to the besieged Gaza Strip triggering an infuriated reaction of Saudi Arabia and Egypt which culminated in the recent severing of all ties with the Emirate (2017). There is no better indication of the total collapse of the Arab regional system.

## **5. From the euphoria of the “Arab Spring” to the harsh reality of transition**

**O**n 17 December 2010, a Tunisian fruit-vendor from Sidi Bouzid, in South West Tunisia, set himself on fire, triggering a political earthquake in Tunisia and in many other Arab countries. Protest immolation is not a new phenomenon in the Arab countries. It is not religiously-motivated and it has nothing to do with the “kamikaze” phenomenon which involves someone who commits suicide by killing others. Protest immolation is a form of expression, a way of saying “enough” or “no”. Mohammad Bouazizi just wanted to tell his despair and rage. He was not a “kamikaze” and certainly not a “fanatic jihadist”. But if he was not the first to set him on fire, **why then did his desperate act trigger such a huge political “tsunami” in the whole Arab World?**

The answer is twofold. First, the outburst of the Arab uprisings is intimately linked to **significant societal changes** that have been taking place in the Arab World in the last 30 years (Youth education, urbanization, demographic trends, women empowerment, family transformation etc.). Second, **the social, economic and political outlook in the Arab world became so dismal** in the beginning of 2011 that just a spark could set the region on fire. The immolation of Bouazizi was just that spark.

Indeed, by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the situation in the Arab World looked bleak and gloomy. Not only was Arab nationalism fading, but also regional economic integration was also stalled. And while the stakes were high and the challenges daunting, the Arab States were engaged in solitary and deceptive policies. The League of Arab States remained incapable of any significant initiative to bridge the rift among Arab countries of the Maghreb and the Mashrek. And while the occupation and colonization of Palestine continued unabated and unpunished and Iran and Turkey were engaging in regional politics, the Arab leaders were just concerned by the preservation of their rule.

It is therefore no surprise if the main slogans chanted by Arab young protestors were modern universal values and took precedence over narrower forms of identity politics. The first slogan was “**al-Karama**” (dignity), which must be understood as “collective dignity” as well as “individual dignity”. Collectively, young Arabs felt that Arab regimes failed to stand up to the challenges posed by Israel and Iran, to foil international conspiracies, like the invasion of Iraq, to propel regional projects, to peacefully settle their differences, to act as significant and respected players in their own region, and just to listen to the voice of the people. Young Arabs suffered from the *suffocating grip of autocratic leaders* and felt humiliated by incompetent and kleptocratic Arab regimes that did not respond to their collective aspirations but were instead concerned with their own security objectives.

This lack of dignity was compounded, in the personal lives of young Arabs, by a feeling of despair and lack of respect. Not only did they find themselves stuck in unemployment, scarcity and poverty, but they also lived in fear of control, repression, torture, and exile. They were just unable to control their destiny.

Therefore, the second slogan was “**freedom**” (al-Hurriyyah). The lack of democracy, freedom and respect for Human Rights became unbearable. Not only were most of the Arab States in the hands of powerful authoritarian regimes, but many republican “Presidents” were preparing their own sons to succeed their fathers, **adding insult to the injury**.

The third slogan was “**equality**” (al-Mussawah) and “**social justice**: (Adalah ijtimayyah). Young Arabs simply do not understand the style of life of their leaders, the accumulated wealth, the crony and corrupt capitalism, the “endogamic” cooptation of political clients. This was evidenced by the behavior of Ben Ali, Kaddafi, Mubarak, Ali Saleh and others who accumulated, and squandered public wealth. This unparalleled level of corruption was shocking in times of skyrocketing unemployment of educated, urbanized and connected youth.

The fourth slogan was “**Jobs**” (al-shou’ghl). Indeed, as the regimes grew more corrupt and “clientelist” and as economic growth did not translate in increasing jobs, young Arabs felt shortchanged and frustrated. One may say that **Bouazizi has been, in a way, the interpreter and the “translator” of the frustration not only of Tunisian youth but also of Arab Youth in general.**

Youth unemployment was therefore an important factor in the outbreak not only of the Tunisian uprising but also of all Arab uprisings because such unemployment was not perceived as a sort of natural “calamity” but the product of unjust, corrupt and repressive political regimes and of a dysfunctional economic management. **This connection between**

**authoritarian regime and social injustice constituted the real catalyst of Arab uprisings.**

It goes beyond the scope of this essay to identify the main drivers of these popular revolts, their differentiated outcomes and the particularities of transition processes. But few quick considerations are necessary:

- a) **All Arab countries, in various degrees, share the same problems and challenges:** alarming hikes in educated youth unemployment, increasing external debt, generalized corruption, dysfunctional economy, authoritarian closed political systems. But the starting points are different, the paths are diverse and the outcomes of the protest movement are different.
- b) Undoubtedly, **Tunisia represents** what I termed as “**the paradigm of the happy revolution**”. It combined a wide array of factors and drivers which produced a change of historical significance: small geography, homogenous society, a past of militancy, vibrant advocacy civil society organisations, educated, urbanized and connected youth, an emerging ( but constrained middle class), significant women activism, spontaneous supra-partisan , supra-class and leaderless mass movement, the breaking up of the wall of fear, the fraternisation of a small army, the absence of geopolitical and economic stakes and interests of regional and international actors which would act as game-spoilers.
- c) **Not all Arab counties fit in this model.** Although the grievances may be similar, the outcomes of the protests are different. In Egypt, the society is much more polarized along religious/ secular lines, army/civilian divide, and rural/urban cleavages. In Bahrain, regional rivalries (Saudi-Arabia versus Iran, Sunnis versus Shi’as) and Western interests (American Naval base) almost



killed the protest movement in the bud. In Libya, the violent nature of the regime prompted NATO-led military operations. In Jordan, the survival of the regime was not threatened and the King succeeded in defusing the discontent by vague promises to fight government mismanagement and corruption. The King of Morocco did the same by riding the horse of reform. In Algeria, the social fabric is not homogenous, the army is firmly in control, oil revenues shielded the regime from massive protest, and, after three majors episodes of extreme violence ( during the Liberation war (1954-1962), the social protest of 1988 and the Army-Islamist confrontation (1992-1999), the Algerian people does not have the stomach for another dramatic rehearsal .

- d) **Syria is the counter-paradigm of a happy revolution:** the country is a regional pivot, the society is heterogeneous and fragmented along social, religious, ethnic cleavages, the regime is run by the Alawite minority with the complicity of some segments of co-opted Christian and Sunni civil servants, officers and businessmen. The Shi'a-led army remains the backbone of the regime. Regional and international actors became part and parcel of the conflict and acted as spoilers of change.
- e) **In all Arab countries where presidents have been ousted or killed, the process of transition out of authoritarianism and the process of transition towards democracy proved to be complex, bumpy, non-linear and unpredictable.** Many road-blocks along the way held up progress or diverted political development. But again, Tunisia offered a model of transition through elite negotiation and transaction reflecting vibrant civil society pressure and the absence of regional or international spoilers. While Syria still sits on the opposite side with regional and international competitors waging proxy wars which have nothing to do with the democracy drive.

**In other countries, the transition has been blocked, derailed or hijacked.**

In Egypt, the first Moslem Brotherhood-led government and President seemed more obsessed by the question of identity (are we good Moslems or not?) than by the more pressing questions of economic development and youth unemployment. The Army did not behave better by silencing protestors, demonizing the Moslem Brotherhood, labelling the whole movement as a “terrorist organisation” and sentencing hundreds of them to death after swift mass trials on charges of inciting or committing acts of violence. Secular parties were not spared: on 28 April 2014, a Cairo Court banned the activities of the 6 April Group, a liberal organisation that spearheaded the protests against the Mubarak regime.

In Libya armed militias are thwarting the efforts of successive governments to stabilize the country. In Yemen, centrifugal forces are splintering the country and threatening its very unity. In others countries, the regimes are just re-adjusting to the new landscape.

**All in all**, transition from authoritarian rule proves to be an uphill endeavour and even reversible. There is even the real risk of youth frustration, and protests blocked by the Army or the remnants of the old regime re-emerging.

Yet whatever the final outcome of the transition since 2011, the Arab World is witnessing several watershed events. Whether peaceful or violent, the protest wave in the Arab World has already shaken many of the myths circulating in the West and especially in Europe. Among these myths, we have **the myth of the so-called “Arab exception”** which posits that the Arabs were not interested in, concerned by or prepared for democracy.

**The other myth which has been put to rest is the myth of “our good dictator” -our son-of-a bitch theory-** which posits that pro-western dictators are better bets than Islamist alternative. In an article published

## Professor Bichara Khader at MEDAC



Professor Bichara Khader lecturing at MEDAC.



Professor Bichara Khader at MEDAC.  
Participating in the Euro-Med Malta Seminar, 2006.



Professor Bichara Khader conducting a seminar at MEDAC, 2017.



Professor Khader lecturing at MEDAC, 2017.



Euro-Med Malta Seminar, 2011. Feature Panel paying Tribute to Prof. Guido de Marco. (L to R) Amb. Magdy Hefny, Egypt; Prof. Stephen Calleya, Malta; Dr. Joe Borg, Malta; Prof. Bichara Khader, Belgium; Dr. Nick Hopkinson, UK; Mr. Tom McGrath, European Commission, Brussels.



Professor Bichara Khader participating in the MEDAC 25th Anniversary International Conference, 2014.



Professor Bichara Khader participating in the MEDAC 25th Anniversary International Conference, 2014.



At the MEDAC 25th Anniversary International Conference, 2014.  
(L to R) Prof. Bichara Khader, Dr. Monika Wohlfeld, Prof. Ludger Kühnhardt, Ms. Natasha Shawarib.





Professor Bichara Khader at MEDAC lecturing, 2017.



Professor Bichara Khader with Professor Stephen Calleya, MEDAC Director (L).



Professor Bichara Khader delivering a keynote address during the 31st Euro-Med Malta Seminar, 2011.



Professor Bichara Khader being welcomed by Professor Calleya in the MEDAC foyer.



in 2005, in *Foreign Affairs*, a respected American journal, Gregory Gause argued that *“the United States should not encourage democracy in the Arab World because Washington’s authoritarian Arab allies represented stable bets for the future”*. In 2011, the same author made this incredible confession: *“on that account, I was spectacularly wrong”* adding *“I was hardly alone in my skepticism about the prospect of full-fledged democratic change in the face of these seemingly unshakable authoritarian regimes”*.

**The third myth is that the Arab World is, itself, a fiction**, and that the cross-border appeal of Arab identity had waned at the popular level. The Arab revolts proved the fallacy of such a myth. It is not a coincidence that the wave of change has swept across many Arab countries simultaneously, with the same method and almost the same slogans, chanted in the same Arabic language. Gregory Gause recognizes that *“Academics will need to assess the restored importance of Arab identity to understand the future of Middle East politics”*.

**The fourth myth is the so-called “Arab street”** presumed to be irrational, capricious, vociferous, and violent. The Arab revolts put also this myth to rest. Not only is there an Arab public opinion, diversified and rational, but there have always been forces for change bubbling below and above the surface and vibrant civil society organisations, in spite of all forms of coercive state control.

**The fifth myth is that authoritarian regimes are unshakable.** The Arab Spring proved how fragile they are. Indeed, **it is not because the regimes were unshakable that the society did not dare, it is because the society did not dare, that the regimes seemed unshakable.** That’s why breaking up the wall of fear has been a decisive factor in the current revolts.

The Arab revolts have also shattered other myths: mainly **the myth of “creative destruction”** (invasion of Iraq), **the myth of democracy mili-**

**tarily imposed**, or even **the myth of “Facebook revolutions”**. Arab revolts resulted from indigenous factors, and not from decisions taken in the United States or the EU. Facebook and social media have served as instruments but never replaced the real actors themselves.

All these entrenched myths have crumbled and this is the first good news of the Arab Spring. But we should not succumb to the temptation to believe that democracy will blossom overnight or that elections alone make democracy or that the transition period will be short and will usher in a better future. For sure, **democracy is a culture** and its consolidation will require time, patience, and will.

As a matter of fact, political developments since 2011 proved how transitions can be tortuous, bumpy and violent. Transformation has been chaotic and unpredictable. There have been setbacks, deadlocks, repression, and backsliding into authoritarian habits. Anti-reform sectors derailed the movement and stole the popular revolts. Some Arab States fell prey to centrifugal forces and sectarianism based on ethnicity, confession or tribal loyalties. The very ability of the Arab states to govern declined.

## **6. Geopolitics of the “Arab Spring”: Shifting alliances in an era of unpredictability and uncertainty**

**T**he Arab uprisings took Western countries by surprise and revealed the inconsistency of their policies. The USA often switched sides almost overnight supporting protests in some countries (Tunisia, Libya) while turning a blind eye to protests in others (Bahrain), or reverting to support their “good autocrat” (Egypt). Such a **“chaotic response”** undermined the moral authority of the West in general and raised a big question of coherence. Why intervening in Libya and dragging one’s foot in Syria? Why mobilizing a coalition to fight DAECH (ISIS) while sup-

porting the sectarian government of Iraq? Why collaborating with Iran in fighting ISIS in Iraq and condemning Iranian activism in Syria? Why providing military assistance to the Kurds and curtailing their call for independence? Why condemning Israeli illegal practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories while shielding Israeli governments in the Security Council? Such incoherence explains, to a large extent, the declining appeal and leverage of the West in the Arab World and consequently the faltering ability to drive events in the region. The Arab Spring has produced a casualty: **the retreat of the USA**. The EU has been quicker in its response to the Arab Spring. But its response lacked long-term strategic vision.

Regional dynamics are also being upturned by the political uncertainty derived from the Arab Spring. **Changes in the balance of power unleashed by the 2003 invasion of Iraq have been reinforced**. While Egypt remained entangled in its own contradictions and polarisations and Iraq and Syria plunged into chaos, Iran raised its profile to the dismay of Gulf States and mainly Saudi Arabia.

**Saudi Arabia saw the Arab uprising as a challenge to regional stability**. The Kingdom pressured the USA to protect their Egyptian ally and was infuriated by Qatar's apparent support to the Egyptian protestors, and later, to the Moslem Brotherhood. It was obvious that the Saudis felt vulnerable. This led to a *"shift from its traditionally cautious and conciliatory foreign and regional policy towards to a sharper affirmation of its objectives: regime survival, regional stability, and keeping Iran at bay*.

The first objective was to **pre-empt social unrest**. More than \$120 billion have been mobilized to this effect in job creation, in subsidies, and in welfare allowances. The amount of money is huge but the method is old. In all Gulf countries, where power is concentrated in the hands of ruling families, *"material benefits have traditionally been traded for political rights"*. It is a sort of an **"unwritten social contract"**: the State dis-

tributes resources and the population keeps quiet and does not ask for accountability. This is the essence of the **patrimonial political system**. The State has the monopoly on oil and gas rents and the population has a right to be taken care of in different forms: no taxation, provision of jobs in the public sector, nationality rent (through the Kafalah system), different allowances and free access to education and health care.

The second objective is **regional stability**. Democratic change is seen as a threat to the ruling families' survival. This explains why Saudi Arabia sent its tanks to protect the Kingdom of Bahrain, and why it lent immediate support to General Sissi when he ousted President Morsi' on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2013 and declared the Moslem Brotherhood as "a terrorist organisation".

**The third objective is to counter Iranian activism in the region.** Many commentators argue that sectarianism is the main driver of Saudi and Iranian foreign policies. Such an argument obscures the reality. What we are witnessing in the Middle East, "*is a struggle over leadership and power, through proxy allies*". Saudi support to the Kingdom of Bahrain, to Iraqi Sunnis, to the Syrian rebellion must be seen not through the confessional prism (Sunnis versus Shi'ites) but through **the game power prism**. After all, Saudi Arabia does not support Hamas in Palestine -a Sunni Moslem party while Shi'ite Iran does- and has fallen out with the Sunni Moslem Brotherhood of Egypt.

When Saudi Arabia in the 70's felt strong and secure, Iran was not perceived as a threat and the Sunni-Shia divide did not get the prominence it enjoys today. But the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iran-supported Hezbollah's performance in its war against Israel in 2006, and the recent nuclear deal with Iran (2015) have heightened the sense of vulnerability of the Saudi Kingdom. The fall of their Egyptian ally, Mubarak, was perceived as another setback. The Saudis lost confidence in the USA as guarantor of their security. By contrast, Iran was getting more defiant in Iraq, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Yemen and even in Gaza.

**That's why Syria became so crucial for Saudi Arabia**, determined to oust the pro-Iranian regime of Bashar El-Assad. This has not happened until now with Russia and Iran preventing the total collapse of the regime.

Here lies the rub: Saudi activism looks unsuccessful. It became crystal clear that Saudi Arabia is not in a position to drive events in the region, in spite of 19 % defence spending, 310 fighter-jets and 230,000 troops. Moreover, its American ally seems hesitant. The EU is looking the other way. Its Arab allies are not reliable, or too weak.

What make things worse, Saudi strategy started to be contested by some fellow members of the CCG. **Qatar**, to take an example, has outsmarted Saudi Arabia in media coverage through the Al-Jazeera channel and used the Arab uprisings to carve out a regional role for itself to bolster its geopolitical standing by endorsing political change and shoring up the Moslem Brotherhood or offering a safe haven to its exiled leaders and clerics. The ousting of President Morsi in July 2013 by the Egyptian military enlarged the gulf between the GCC member States. While Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Kuwait immediately endorsed Al-Sisi take-over, Qatar defiantly disapproved what it called a "military coup in Egypt". The row led to the withdrawal of the Saudi, Emirati, Bahraini ambassadors from Qatar in 2014.

Without reliable allies and challenged in its own backyard, Saudi Arabia was, by the year 2014, on the defensive, the sharp drop in oil prices in 2015 (from a 140 \$/b in 2008 to 30 \$/b in 2015) worsened the feeling of vulnerability of the Kingdom.

With the chronic instability in Iraq since 2003, with the raging war in Syria since 2011, with the dangerous polarisation in Egypt since 2013, **no other Arab country was in a position to take-up the role of Saudi Arabia and to drive events in the region**. Consequently, the post-Spring New Middle East did not look to be driven by Arab States but by non-

Arab States: Iran, Turkey and Israel, **shifting regional geopolitics from an Arab State system to a Middle Eastern one.**

Although **Israel draws benefit** from the current turmoil in the Arab region, its ability to be a significant driver of events is limited. By contrast **Turkey has been a main player** since the beginning of the 2000. Its policy change started in the late 90's but it became obvious after the elections of 2002. Not only did Turkey become more assertive by opposing the American invasion of Iraq (2003) and denying the use of its military bases for that purpose, it also reaffirmed its aspiration to "*become a regional hub rather than remain a simple corridor for energy flows*". It reached out to Arab States and reaped substantial economic benefits.

During the second term of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the relationship with Israel had unexpectedly started to deteriorate after the Israeli Cast Lead Operation in Gaza (December 2008-January 2009) followed by the incident at the Davos Forum in Switzerland. **The flotilla Marmara incident in 2010** in which 9 Turkish citizens were killed in international waters by Israeli military led Turkey to freeze its military and trade cooperation with Israel. The relationship has been further eroded after the maritime border agreement between Israel and Greek Cyprus in December 2010 aiming at delimiting their respective economic zones in the Mediterranean and fostering cooperation on oil and gas explorations. The European Union and USA expressed unconditional solidarity with Israel and Cyprus. As a response, Turkey signed, in September 2011, a similar agreement with North Cyprus. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2012, the USA, Greece and Israel jointly organized a military exercise in the Mediterranean called "Noble Dina", in a show of defiance. Israel's second military offensive against Gaza in 2012 added another explosive element to the already strained relations between the two countries. The Arab Spring has strained relations even further.

But, strangely enough, while Israel, Cyprus and Greece were reinforcing their cooperation, the Arab Spring strained the relationship between Turkey and Sunni Arab States like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf States. Indeed, by lending its overt support and encouragement to the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere Turkey antagonized the current Egyptian military leadership, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States. **Its “zero –problems- with- neighbours” foreign policy has been transformed into “many problems with neighbours”.** Yet Turkey remained determined not to be outsmarted by Iran or by the Israel-Greece-Cyprus axis, and still aspires to be a leading player in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Middle East. But it is clear that its foreign policy is in disarray and in dire need of an overhaul.

In this power game of competition, **Arab States seem rudderless and incapable of initiative.** Worse, Arabs are divided between those who prefer stability over change and those who believe in gradual democratic change. The rift between Qatar and Saudi on the question of the Moslem Brotherhood is a good case in point. No wonder therefore, that non-State actors gained prominence in the region. **Indeed a phenomenon like Isis (DAECH) is much more the product of the collapse of Arab core States than the product of sectarianism.**

## **7. Non-States actors challenge the old political landscape**

**T**he seizure by ISIS , in June 2014, of the town of Mosul and large swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territories caught everybody by surprise. Yet this surprise is misplaced. Since the American invasion of Iraq, Isis, originally an affiliate of Al-Qaeda, was on the rise. It has been responsible of thousands of attacks against American troops, Iraqi military and the civilian population, mainly the Shi'ite population of Baghdad. It presented itself as the flag-bearer of the Sunni Community which has been severely punished by the Shi'a-led government of Baghdad.

**What constituted a real surprise in 2014 was the shameful withdrawal and retreat of the Iraqi army from Mosul** and its neighbourhood, precipitating the take-over by the Islamic State's jihadists of a large territory in Northern Iraq and the seizure of weapons arsenals, banks deposits and even oil facilities. After the occupation of Raqqa in North-East Syria, the take-over of Mosul in Iraq allowed ISIS to hold on the Northern parts of both countries. In June 2014, ISIS established a sharia-based caliphate and Abu Bakr Al-Bagdadi proclaimed himself as the new Caliph of the Islamic State erasing the Sykes-Picot borders of 1916 and explicitly threatening to invade other countries and to integrate them into the Caliphate. Undoubtedly, ISIS advance showed that "*something bigger than old crisis is afoot*": the beginning of **the dissolution of the Arab "nation-states**. After the collapse of the Arab nationalism in the 70's, the shake-up of "regional order" in the 80's and the 90's, the emergence of Non-Arab States as drivers of regional change since 2000, this perspective of fragmented Arab States and divided societies has become a suffocating nightmare.

**Against this background, the dismal advance of ISIS produced a great anxiety** in the region and beyond and has been an eye-opener. How would the region look like if this Caliphate were allowed to prosper? Could the International Community remain cross-armed in face of horrific images of beheadings and despicable treatment of Yezidis, Christians, Shi'ites and Kurds? These questions were daunting and some quick response was to be hammered out.

It came in the form of **a military coalition** headed by the United States and included more than 60 countries. What prompted America's quick response, after promises of disengagement from the region remains an open question. Beyond the images of beheading of American journalists and the mistreatment of minorities, it became clear that the very integrity of Iraq was put in jeopardy, that Iraq's Kurds and other minorities were to suffer from ethnic cleansing, that Jordan, Lebanon and Gulf



States were all threatened, and, finally, that Israel would be targeted. The US and the West would not let this to happen: it was ripe time to come to grips with the harsh realities of the Middle East and stem up the growing frustration of American traditional allies by showing leadership and a sense of purpose.

But this coalition raised many questions as to its coherence, effectiveness and outreach. Indeed, it was fraught with many contradictions:

a) **The USA insisted on Iraq's territorial integrity** but arming, equipping and training the Kurds paved the way for their effective independence. This is a nightmare scenario not only for Iraq but also for Iran and Turkey. An independent Kurdistan may fuel major sectarian war in Iraq that will certainly spill across the whole region. No wonder Iran, Turkey and Iraq coalesced in 2017 to invalidate the Kurdish Referendum on Independence and force Barzani to quit.

b) **The fight against ISIS objectively led to a confluence of interests between the West and Iran** as they fought against the same enemy. Such "*de facto*" cooperation undermined USA-Saudi relations, prompting President Trump to make his first visit abroad to reassure the Saudis.

c) **The USA expected Turkey, as a NATO ally, to be directly involved** in the war against ISIS. But on this issue, Turkish and Western interests openly collided. While the West was empowering the Kurds of Syria and Iraq, Turkey was more obsessed with Kurdish nationalism than with the ISIS threat. The fight for the control of Kobane (Ain el Arab) was a good indication of Turkish priorities: fighting the PKK and toppling the regime of Bachar el Assad. And obviously, Turkey was not prepared to put aside its national goals to help achieving American objectives.

d) On the question of the Syrian Regime, **the West did not exhibit a coherent strategy**. The Obama administration, in spite of Arab pressures, stayed out of the Syrian quagmire. But as the Syrian crisis was worsen-

ing without any exit in sight, Syria became the haven for ISIS and other radical groups, precisely those that the American-led coalition started bombing. So the West got trapped in a contradiction: **its hesitant strategy has contributed to the surge of radical opposition to the regime which the coalition is now bombing.** This led to an indirect “confluence of interests” with the regime of Bashar el Assad whose ouster is no more a Western prerequisite.

At the time of the writing, Isis has been defeated in Iraq, thanks to an Iraqi military intervention. Mosul and other Iraqi towns have been liberated but they are in ruins and their population displaced. Raqqa in Syria has also been liberated. Isis was dealt a deadly blow. Will it vanish, will it morph or will it find other sanctuaries? Nobody can, at this stage, guess what will happen. But the terrorist attack on a Soufi mosque in Northern Sinai (November 2017) killing 305 people offers ample proof that Isis is far from being dead.

So what could be done? It must be taken for granted, that military means will not defeat the ideology of ISIS. To defeat Jihadism, we have to address its root causes. **The jihadists of the “Islamic State” did not emerge from nowhere.** Some experts argue that they are the product of “**a civilizational despair**” and a culture of martyrdom. Others pinpoint the puritanical ideology diffused at home and abroad. The reality is more complex and responsibilities for the emergence of Isis are local and international.

Nobody can deny that Jihadists are the sons **of Arab collective failures, Arab cold wars, regional security vacuum, weak Arab State system and sectarian politics.** They are also the product of a **collective Arab humiliation** mainly the festering wound that the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict has inflicted upon Arabs.

But we have to look at the other side of the coin: Jihadism is also the product of Western complicity with Arab autocrats, of Western con-

stant meddling in Arab affaires, Western double-dealings and double-standards and the mismatch between human rights rhetoric and political practice. **There is a connectedness between these different root causes** and it should be acknowledged. Confusion about the diagnosis of the ills of the region may lead to unsafe possible remedy.

## 8. The Maghreb: 5 States in a “Non-region”

In comparison with the Middle East, the Maghreb looks as an “**oasis of stability in an Ocean of turbulence**”. This is at least the perception of many Maghreb and European officials. The reality speaks otherwise as the situation in each country is different.

Out of 5 Maghreb countries, two countries –Tunisia and Libya – witnessed mass protests leading to the ousting of Ben Ali in Tunisia and the killing of Kaddafi in Libya. The three other countries have shown little appetite for radical change. Today, Libya remains plunged in factious conflicts. By contrast, Tunisia is navigating its way through a smooth transition. Algeria is holding its breath and is waiting for the post-Bouteflika succession. Morocco has engaged in gradual reform but the challenges ahead are huge. Mauritania seems managing the *status quo*.

On the whole, with the Libyan exception, **none of the other 4 Maghreb states is under imminent threat of disruption, havoc, or even collapse**. Elections have been organized in Mauritania, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and moderate Islamist opposition has been allowed to take part. In Morocco the “**Justice and Development Party**” (**PJD**) was in the driving seat with Prime Minister Benkirane. The party did not lose steam, in the last elections but it is no more a dominant force. In Algeria, they are 3 Islamist political parties (**the Movement of Society for Peace, the Movement of National Reform, the Nahda Movement**), they are represented in the Parliament, but none has the capacity to challenge the system.

In Tunisia An-Nahda won the first elections in 2011 and lost those of 2014. In Mauritania Islamists are co-opted. In Libya, the internal strife between Islamist and Ex-General Haftar's militias is going on. On the whole, core Maghreb States are managing the situation either by engaging dialogue with Islamist moderate movements, or involving them in the government, emphasizing the Islamic identity, or accommodating rising religious practice.

**The region is faced with scattered acts of terrorism.** Algeria was dealt a serious blow in its Southern region but has tightened its grip since then. Jihadists have killed two eminent Tunisian leaders (Belaid and Brahmi in 2013) and committed atrocious terrorist attacks in the Pardo Museum and in a summer resort and continue to harass the Tunisian army on the borders of Algeria and Libya. Mauritania is confronted with growing terrorist threat coming from Mali and the Sahara. While Morocco has managed to dismantle many terrorist networks but the threat remains. But **on the whole terrorism does not seem to threaten the stability of any regime and in spite of the fact that there are some terrorist cells linked to “Al- Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb”, they are too decentralized and poorly networked to constitute a real threat to the security and stability of the Maghreb.**

In all Maghreb countries, new constitutions have been drafted with great care in a spirit of inclusiveness and modernity (Tunisia), other constitutions have been reformed (Morocco). Libya is divided with two parliaments and no constitution. With or without constitutions, new parties emerged and new forces have taken up leadership positions. But **autocratic and patrimonial systems are difficult to uproot** and old elites continue to resist change, while the Youth is becoming more impatient for economic improvement.

**Maghreb economies are lagging compared to other regions.** Public sector is bloated. Private sector lacks dynamism and resources. There is a general problem of transparency and accountability, coupled with

the absence of rules-based business environment and administrative bottle-necks. All these ills have discouraged foreign investments. Political uncertainty engenders further challenge to economic recovery and performance.

**Regional non-integration is another scourge of the Maghreb region.**

With less of 4 % of intra-regional trade, the Maghreb is the least integrated region in the World, with significant missed opportunities. Given the past history, all Maghreb States look to the North and ignore their neighbours. In recent years, Gulf Countries have increased their investments in the Maghreb but in certain sectors like tourism and real estate. Morocco is making inroads in African States and tries to diversify its export-markets but its economy suffers from a severe lack of diversification. Algeria is too dependent on its oil and gas exports to become a regional economic driver. And yet the cost of non-Maghreb integration may become unbearable. The partnership with the EU is necessary and beneficial but it should be balanced by more horizontal cooperation between Maghreb States themselves and between Maghreb States and the Arab countries of the Mashrek and the Gulf.

Despite some political changes taking place in the Maghreb, **the underlying causes of discontent are still there.** In political terms, the societies are unsatisfied by the pace of political reforms. In economic terms, they are simply angry and they express their anger in protests and sit-ins. The governments should listen to them and address their grievances. Otherwise any spark has the potential to set the region on fire.

Geopolitically speaking, the Maghreb has a great advantage, unlike the Middle East: **it does not have to deal with non-Maghreb neighbours** in search of leadership and hegemony. Unlike the 90's, **none of the core Maghreb States is plagued with civil strife** (like in Syria) or **exclusionary politics** (like in Iraq). **None of the core Maghreb States are as polarized as "Egypt"**. And there **is no Islamic Caliphate's threat** to the validity of the State system. Yet, geopolitical squabbling between Algeria and Mo-

rocco over regional leadership is creating an unhealthy climate for the revival of the Arab Maghreb Union. Such a paralysis of regional integration has been possible because governments simply ignored the voices of their societies. After the “Arab Spring”, **this “grace period” may be over carrying a good omen for the future.**

## Conclusion

**T**he general outlook for the Arab region in 2017 is bleak and disheartening. **Until 1967, there was an Arab regional system. Today, there is a region without a system.**

Indeed, since the defeat of 1967, the Arab World has been overwhelmed by instability and uncertainty, rudderless and without a common vision. The Iranian revolution of 1969 has been perceived as a threat. The Iran-Iraq war in the 80’s reshuffled the cards. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait backfired and resulted in the destruction of a core Arab State. The American invasion of 2003 has destabilised the whole region and indirectly allowed Iran to gain influence and strategic prominence.

It is in this context, that Arab popular revolts started, in 2011, sparking an era of change which has increased the instability and the vulnerability of the whole Arab region. Since then, Arab States are in total havoc. Some are on a slippery course to extreme polarisation or even fragmentation. Others are simply devastated by regime repression and proxy wars. The Arab World became an arena where some big powers are competing for influence and for status. In such turmoil, non-state actors emerged and contributed their share in the dislocation of the region.

Today most Arab countries are fragile and impotent. Middle Eastern countries are either struggling to contain Iranian expansionism, to dis-

lodge the Moslem Brotherhood, to undercut Arab Spring dynamics, or simply to survive. Other countries follow their own agenda with out-sized diplomacy or try to diversify their foreign alliances. In the Arab Gulf, the Saudi-Arabia-Qatar rift is putting at great risk the very survival of the Gulf Cooperation Council and is leading to new re-alignments and new alliances.

More distressing is also **the security vacuum**, in the absence of any regional security architecture. Not only has the Middle East and North Africa, as a region, been incapable of filling the security vacuum but the ability of the States themselves to address the security concerns has decreased dramatically. The reliance on the West is becoming crucial at a time in which Western powers, themselves, are facing huge economic and political challenges at home and are losing hegemonic influence abroad.

In such a context, **Russia has become a game-changer and China is raising its profile**. This was clear in the Syrian crisis where they protected, *de facto*, the Syrian regime. By doing so, China and Russia outmanoeuvred the EU and the USA and positioned themselves as alternative reliable allies and even, in the case of Russia, as patrons. Whether these two countries are capable or willing to assume the responsibilities of a “big power”, as guarantor of security in the long-run, remains to be seen.

**Regional non-Arab actors have also challenged the old Western-dominated regional order**. Since 2003, in particular, Iran’s regional influence has been bolstered. Iran’s unwavering support to Bashar al- Assad is good testimony of its new regional standing. Even Turkey became more defiant and, on many occasions, pursued its national interests to the detriment of its Western allies’ objectives. Israel has not remained on the side-lines increasing its overt cooperation with Saudi Arabia in the struggle against Iran. But since a full normalisation of relations remains problematic in the absence of a solution to the Palestinian issue, we

may see in the coming months the announcement of what is already dubbed as the “**deal of the century**”. Details of the deal are not yet known but for sure it will be an American-Egyptian-Saudi sponsored plan which will be based on a sort of a “sovereignty-minus State for the Palestinians”, a far cry from the “total withdrawal of Israel from the Occupied territories” as it was envisaged in the original Arab Peace Plans of 2002, 2007, and 2017. The Palestinians may therefore pay the price for the new Israeli-Saudi partnership against Iran.

In the shifting sands of the Middle East, **non-State actors, like ISIS, have emerged and prospered** benefitting from the political and security vacuum. In their own way, they challenged a century-old political landscape and were about to shape a new regional order. But **they have been military defeated** and driven out of their strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa. But their ideology remains attractive. How can regional leaders set in motion a nation-building project that leads to the defeat of extremists and ensures that they are prevented from emerging ever again? The answer is simple: by addressing the factors of incubation for radicalization. Extremists have not come out of nowhere: **they are the product of a long Arab history of failed ideologies**, broken promises, bad governance, a culture of victimization and total failure in addressing the socio-economic problems. By silencing all political opposition, Arab autocrats allowed the extremists to fill “**the opposition void**”. Dysfunctional Arab States have thus been the real incubators of extremism. But the West share a large part of the responsibility by its double-dealings, double-standards and its continuous meddling in Arab affairs.

Can Arab States reverse this spiral? Clearly as long as Arab Regimes continue to be more concerned with their longevity and less concerned by real nation-building and region-building, it will be difficult to reverse this spiral. That is why **the democratic transformation** is so important. **Regional integration** is no less important. With the exception of the “United Arab Emirates”, all attempts of regional integration or unity



have failed. The time is ripe for the Arab States to shelve their differences, bury the hatchet of rivalry, and confront collectively old challenges and new perils. A reactivation of the Arab Maghreb Union and a re-dynamization of the League of Arab States seem long overdue.

Should the Saudi-Iranian competition for regional influence continue unabated, it will lead to endless bloodshed with huge loss in lives and resources. If such a distressing scenario comes true, there will be no winners but Israel and the Western and Eastern military industries. But the EU, as such, is not going to gain anything. On the contrary, Middle Eastern instabilities will certainly affect its commercial relations but, above all, they will spill-over the EU in form of terrorist attacks, unmanaged migration and flux of refugees.

Although the Maghreb States are facing new security challenges spilling over from the Sahara region and from Libya, or new challenges emanating from within the countries themselves, there is no collective approach to regional security arrangements. This failure to set aside contentious issues and to concentrate on the urgency of collective security responses will backfire because regional security threats cannot be dealt with localised military action alone. It should be pretty obvious that *“if the Maghreb States pool together only a tiny part of their armed forces in a sort of regional security architecture, this would dramatically open new horizons for larger cooperation”* that will have a significant impact on the future of the region.



# Professor Bichara Khader at MEDAC

**Dr Bichara KHADER is Professor Emeritus at the Catholic University of Louvain and Founder of the Study and Research Centre on the Contemporary Arab World.** He has been member of the Group of High Experts on European Foreign Policy and Common Security (European Commission) and Member of the Group of Wise Men on Cultural Dialogue in the Mediterranean (European Presidency). He is currently Visiting Professor in various European and Arab Universities and has been a regular Visiting Professor at MEDAC.

See the following pages for the full CV of Prof. Khader.

**Prof. Bichara Khader is a Visiting Professor at MEDAC and regularly lectures and participates in MEDAC conferences.** On many occasions he was a keynote speaker at the Euro-Med Malta Seminars, the Information and Training Seminars for Euro-Med Diplomats. In fact, Professor Khader participated in the Euro-Med Seminars on a regular basis between 2006 and 2011, including in May 2011 when he also took part in the Feature Panel: "Tribute to Prof. Guido de Marco".

Prof. Khader's other interventions include:

2006 The Challenges of the Current Crises on the EMP

2007 Panel: The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Mediterranean

2008 Panel: Union for the Mediterranean: What Prospects?

2009 Panel: The Union for the Mediterranean: Challenges and Prospects

2010 Panel: Security Challenges in the Mediterranean

2011 Panel: Perspectives and Prospects for Political Change in the Mediterranean

Professor Khader has published over thirty books on the Arab World and on Euro-Arab, Euro-Mediterranean, EU-GCC and Euro-Palestinian relations.

# About the author

Bichara **KHADER** was born on 13th February 1944 in Zababdeh (Palestine)  
Nationality : Belgian (of Palestinian origin).

## University degrees.

1. B.A. in Political, economic & social studies, (Louvain University, 1969).
2. Diploma in international relations (JOHN HOPKINS University , Bologna Center, 1970).
3. Ph.D. in Political, economic & social studies (Louvain University, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1978)



## Profession.

- Professor at the Faculty of Politic, Economic & Social Sciences, Louvain University, (UCL)
- Director of the Arab Study & Research Center (C.E.R.M.A.C.), DVLP, UCL.

## Other activities :

- Member of the Group of High experts on European Foreign and security Policy ( European Commission)
- Member of the Group of Wise men on Euro-Mediterranean cultural dialogue(European Presidency)

## Languages.

1. Arabic
2. French
3. English
4. Italian
5. Spanish
6. German (some basic notions)

## Recent Publications (starting 1992):

- *Le Grand Maghreb et l'Europe, Enjeux et perspectives, (Europe and the Maghreb: stakes and projects)*  
Publisud-Quorum, Paris, 1992 (in French); Fundacion Paulino Torras Domenech, 1992 (Spanish)
- *L'Europe et le Monde Arabe, cousins, voisins, (Europe and the Arab World: cousins and neighbours)*  
Publisud-Quorum, Paris, 1992 (French); Center of Studies of Arab Unity, Beirut, 1994 (Arabic); ICMA, Madrid, 1995 (Spanish); L'Harmattan, Turin, 1996 (Italian)
- *L'Europe et les pays arabes du Golfe, des partenaires distants, (Europe and the Arab Gulf States: distant partners)*  
Publisud-Quorum, Paris, 1994 (French); Center of Studies of Arab Unity, Beirut, 1995 (Arabic)

- *Il Mediterraneo : popoli e risorse* (with Agostino Spataro),  
Ed. Associate, Roma, 1993, (Italian)
- *L'Europe et la Méditerranée, géopolitique de la proximité,  
(Europe and the Mediterranean :geopolitics of proximity)*  
L'Harmattan, Paris, 1994 (French); ed. Icaria, Barcelona, 1995 (Spanish)
- *El Muro invisible, (The Invisible Wall)*  
ed. Icaria, Barcelona, 1995, (Spanish)
- *Le partenariat euro-méditerranéen, après la Conférence de  
Barcelone,  
(The Euro-Mediterranean partnership, after Barcelona Conference )*  
L'Harmattan, Paris, 1997.
- *Conflits et processus de paix au Proche-Orient,  
(Conflicts and peace processes in the Middle East)*  
Academia-Bruylant, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1996 (with Claude Roosens,  
Amine Aït-Chaalal and Tanguy de Wilde d'Estmael)
- *L'Europe et la Palestine, des Croisades à nos jours,  
(Europe and Palestine, since the Crusades until  
today)*  
L'Harmattan-Academia-Fides et Labor, Paris, 2000;  
**Los Hijos de Agenor: Europa y Palestina, desde  
las cruzadas hasta el siglo XXI**  
Bellaterra, Barcelona, 1999 (Spanish);  
Arabic version : (Center for Arab Unity Center, Beirut,  
2003)
- *Le partenariat euro-méditerranéen vu du Sud  
(The Euro-Mediterranean partnership from southern perspective)*  
(sous la direction de), L'Harmattan, Paris, 2001.
- **Belges et Arabes :voisins distants ,partenaires nécessaires**  
**(Belgians and Arabs:distant neighbours, necessary partners)**  
(with Claude Roosens),Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2004
- *Palestine :mémoire et perspectives ( ed.)  
(Palestine :memory and prospects)*  
Alternatives Sud, Sylleps ,Paris 2005
- **Penser l'immigration et l'intégration autrement: une initiative  
belge inter-universitaire**  
(Bichara KHADER , Marco MARTINIELLO, Andrea REA, Christiane  
TIMMERMAN) Bruylant, Brussels, 2006



## **Selected titles of the Med Agenda series**

Prof. Guido de Marco (2007)

**The Mediterranean Dilemma: A Bridge or a Great Divide?**

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Prof. Bichara Khader (2013) **The European Union and the Arab World: from the Rome Treaty to the “Arab Spring”**

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**“Arraiolos Malta 2017” 13th Meeting of the Heads of State of the Arraiolos Group**

## About MEDAC



**T**he Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC) is an institution of higher learning at the University of Malta offering advanced degrees in diplomacy and conflict resolution with a focus on Mediterranean issues.

MEDAC was established in 1990 pursuant to an agreement between the governments of Malta and Switzerland. The Academy is currently co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malta. The Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (HEID) was among MEDAC's first foreign partners. More recently in 2009, MEDAC concluded an agreement with the German Federal Foreign Office and established a German Chair in Peace Studies and Conflict Prevention.

In 2015 MEDAC celebrated its 25th anniversary. Since its inception, MEDAC has acquired a solid reputation both as an academic institution and as a practical training platform. We are fortunate to count over 700 alumni from 59 different countries who have completed successfully the post-graduate courses offered by the Academy. The EU's enlargement towards the Mediterranean, that included Malta in 2004, and the recent transformation of the political landscape throughout the Arab World have resulted in an ever increasing demand for MEDAC's programme of studies.

### Academy Courses

- Master of Arts in Diplomatic Studies (M.A.)
- Master of Diplomacy (M.Dip.)
- Joint M.A. with George Mason University (Virginia, USA) on Conflict Resolution and Mediterranean Security
- Diploma in Diplomacy (DDS)

See details of all courses on the website:

[www.um.edu.mt/medac](http://www.um.edu.mt/medac)

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