



**Mediterranean Platform Conference**

# **Mediterranean 2028**

## **Envisioning the medium-term future of the broader region**

School of Government, Luiss Guido Carli University,  
Rome 20-21 November 2023

In times of fast changes and great uncertainties, the value of policy-relevant analysis which also attempts to project into the future current trends and dynamics to anticipate possible scenarios is all the more valuable. While not embarking in systematic foresight, this first Luiss Mediterranean Platform conference wants to be an opportunity for academics, practitioners and policymakers to discuss the medium-term prospects (5 years) for the broader Mediterranean region. It takes inspiration from a series of online roundtables on the most crucial issues affecting the region organised by the Mediterranean Platform during the academic year 2022-2023.

Over two days, “Mediterranean 2028” will bring together academics, policymakers, experts and practitioners into multi-disciplinary discussions on the geopolitical dynamics, socio-economic trends and big transitions (climate crisis, energy transition and technology revolution) that are likely to deeply transform the region and affect the North/South relationships. The conference will conclude with a public roundtable discussing possible scenarios and policy responses to confront the risks of severe disruptions and build on opportunities to enact positive change.



## Day 1 - Luiss Guido Carli - Viale Romania, 32 (The Dome - TD0)

**9:30 – 9:45**

### **Institutional welcome**

Prof. Giovanni Orsina, Director, Luiss School of Government

### **Presentation of the Mediterranean Platform**

Prof. Luigi Narbone, Director, Mediterranean Platform

**9:45 – 10:15**

### **Mediterranean 2028: Envisioning the medium-term future of the MENA region – Approach and methodology**

Prof. Luigi Narbone and Prof. Virginie Collombier, Mediterranean Platform

**10:15 – 10:30**

### **Coffee break**

**10:30 – 12:45**

### **Session 1** [Closed doors - on invitation only]

#### **Could regional stabilisation be consolidated and last? At what cost?**

The MENA region is currently witnessing a pause in the intense geopolitical confrontation that characterised the decade following the uprisings. Over the past three years, regional players have engaged in bilateral diplomatic efforts to mend ties and reduce tensions.

Behind these new geopolitical dynamics there is a widespread quest for stability, dictated by conflict fatigue and by a general realisation by regional powers that violent confrontation is a costly and ineffective way to advance their interests. Even more important, normalisation is an economic imperative. Countries in the region are under increasing pressure to address urgent economic issues (economic diversification in oil exporting countries; deepening socio-economic crises in non-oil exporting countries as well as in Iran and Iraq; and adaptation/mitigation responses to climate crises and to the great transitions for all).

The new era of regional relations is also deeply engrained in multipolar dynamics. The widespread perception of diminishing US involvement, coupled with the increasing clout in regional affairs of Russia and, even more, China, has given rise to intense great power competition for resources, markets and influence. Regional powers, in turn, see the new context as offering more opportunities to maximise their interests. By adopting a pragmatic approach and avoiding taking sides, they contribute to an ever-changing constellation of alignments. Meanwhile, the political barycentre of the region has shifted to the Gulf – as GCC countries have benefited from rising oil prices and increased diplomatic activism – and away from former regional powers such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

Against this backdrop, hopes have been raised that diplomacy might gradually pave the way towards a more structured dialogue on the regional security system and to the end of long-lasting conflicts in Yemen, Syria and Libya. However, more recent developments such as the normalisation of relationships between Arab states, the enduring conflict in Sudan and the renewed outbreak of violence in Israel/Palestine, have raised questions both about the nature of the normalisation/stabilisation process and its solidity.



The panel will address the following questions:

- In the fluidity of the new multipolar context, how sustainable is the process of normalisation of diplomatic and economic relationships between historical and more recent regional rivals? Can this process take hold and lead to an exit from the long-lasting crisis scenario? What would be needed from Europe/external players to support and sustain it?
- What are the risks of intensifying great-power rivalry in the Mediterranean/MENA region? What are instead the possibilities for great-power cohabitation?
- Are the current economic interests and financial needs of the various countries a sufficient rationale for the furthering of the normalisation process? What would be needed to move towards more structured regional cooperation and towards an institutionalised regional architecture?
- What is the cost of non-cooperation in the face of multiple and possibly contagious economic and security crises affecting several countries of the region? Which mechanisms can promote economic cooperation and shared goals among states with contrasting geopolitical orientations? Are stabilisation and containment strategies at all effective in MENA? Are they sustainable?
- How much of the policies to advance various countries' interests are in reality driven by the elites' interests? What are the risks of this bias for domestic and regional stability? How is domestic public support constructed and maintained? What are the costs and who bears them?

**Chair:**

- Virginie Collombier, Luiss Mediterranean Platform

**Kick-off presentation:**

- Joost Hiltermann, International Crisis Group

**Participants:**

- Joseph Bahout, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
- Silvia Colombo, NATO Defense College
- Galip Dalay, Chatham House (online)
- Dalia Ghanem, European Union Institute for Security Studies
- Maria Luisa Fantappiè, Istituto Affari Internazionali

**12:45 – 14:00**

**Lunch break**



14:00 – 16:30

**Session 2** [Closed doors - on invitation only]

## **Addressing the deepening socio-economic crises. How to avoid the ripple effects? What role for international and regional actors?**

The Covid-19 pandemic and the consequences of the Ukraine war have hit the MENA and broader Mediterranean region unevenly. Non-oil and gas exporting countries are facing spikes in commodity prices, contracting trade, investments, and tourist flows. The resulting high inflation, currency devaluations and growing fiscal problems are having a strong impact on the economies and societies in Tunisia and Egypt, while similar trends also affect Jordan and Turkey. Countries long affected by conflict and crises, such as Syria and Lebanon, are on the brink of economic collapse. Among oil exporting countries, the economies of Iraq and Libya, while benefiting from high oil prices, are paying the cost of the protracted conflicts. As for the situation in Iran, it has been made worse by years of isolation and international sanctions.

While each country has specific conditions, economic problems are compounded by poor governance and lack of accountability, corruption and cronyism. The current crises have seriously aggravated long-term social problems such as unemployment, poverty and inequalities, and youth and marginal communities' disenfranchisement. Many of these problems are rooted in the defunct social contract.

One of the negative scenarios arising from the current trends could be debt defaults in several countries. Due to poor economic integration of the MENA region, economic collapse in one country does not necessarily impact others in the region (perhaps with the exception of Egypt, due to its size and the importance of its agricultural sector). However, several countries collapsing economically would inevitably create shockwaves across the whole region and intensify existing trends such as the criminalisation of economies, intensification of cross-border trafficking, forced displacement and migration attempts.

Against this backdrop, it remains unclear how the strategies of donors and supporting states might evolve. While Arab Gulf countries are benefiting from the oil price bonanza and pushing forward on their economic diversification strategies, they are increasingly looking east to China and Asia for their economic future and expanding their reach into Europe and Africa. These countries' interest in the MENA is waning as is their willingness to bail out or invest the troubled countries or the region. Western donors are also constrained by shrinking financial capacities and the lack of a clear strategy on how to confront the intensifying crises.

The panel will address the following questions:

- Are the national and international policies to counter the current economic instability adequate? How can international financial institutions, western and regional actors better interact to respond to the current crises? Should we also think of new aid conditionalities, adapted to the new international context?
- Can stability be maintained in the region, for example in the Gulf, while economic and social crises are deepening in a number of other countries in the region? What are the risks of these crises spiraling out of control and igniting new cycles of violence and displacement? How realistic and effective would the containment strategy be in such scenario?
- What could be done to counter the volatility and opportunism of donor/investing countries? Is there a way – at the international, national and local levels – to facilitate the convergence of economic interests and to promote economic cooperation between states with contrasting geopolitical orientations?
- Is there any economic vision/model for the future of the region? What would be alternative approaches, providing better prospects for sustainable economic growth and addressing long-standing social problems? What kind of more attractive, long-term, external economic incentives could be envisaged to support them? (like re-shoring of European or GCC value chains, or opportunities linked to new technologies, climate change adaptation and green transitions?)



- Which principles could form the basis of new social contracts across the region and contribute to rebuilding trust relations between elites and societies, as well as among societies?

**Chair:**

- Luigi Narbone, Luiss Mediterranean Platform

**Kick-off presentation:**

- Steven Heydemann, Smith College

**Participants:**

- Karim El Aynaoui, Policy Center for the New South (online)
- Timothy Kaldas, Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy
- Henriette von Kaltenborn-Stachau, The World Bank
- Jihad Yazigi, The Syria Report

**16:30 – 17:15**

**Coffee break**

**17:15 – 18:15**

**Public lecture**

Institutional greetings:

Prof. Andrea Prencipe, Magnifico Rettore of Luiss Guido Carli University

Introduction by:

Prof. Francesca Maria Corrao, Luiss Guido Carli University

**“Beyond October 7: Assessing the regional implications of the Israel/Palestine conflict”**

Prof. Steven Heydemann, Ketcham Chair in Middle East Studies, Smith College

Register here: <https://bit.ly/3SBFTtY>

**19:30 – 21:30**

**Official dinner** [On invitation only]



## Day 2 - Luiss Guido Carli - Via Parenzo, 11 (Aula Nocco)

10:00 – 12:45

**Session 3** [Closed doors - on invitation only]

### **Could the big transitions – climate, energy and technology – kick start positive dynamics to exit crisis and conflict scenarios?**

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported that mean temperature is increasing in the MENA and Mediterranean region more than elsewhere. In a relatively optimistic scenario of moderate carbon emissions the temperature will rise by an average of 2-3 degrees by 2100, while it could reach 4-5 degrees in the case of continuing emissions at current rate. Extreme events such as heatwaves, severe precipitations and droughts are all expected to increase and have an impact on the infrastructure, agriculture and tourism, among many sectors. All these factors will lead to a dramatic increase of socio-economic vulnerability in the region and toughening competition on resources, water and land, possibly triggering mass displacement and conflicts.

In terms of policy responses, time is already over for mitigation. Adaptation has become the priority and requires financing. Improving knowledge and nature-based solutions could permit low-cost and high impact measures, while improvement in governance and accountability should continue to be pursued. Behavioral change among populations should also be a goal. Yet not all states in the region have the capacities to address the many challenges created by the climate crisis. Saudi Arabia, for instance, invested in desalination when it exhausted their aquifers in the 1980s. In contrast, the fragile states are locked in the tyranny of the immediate. Policies are needed to guide them through a long-term process, yet their economic and political situations do not allow them planning 5-10 years ahead.

Turning to energy, fossil fuels still predominate in the global energy mix, with the MENA region being a major source of easily accessible oil. This reality has had a significant impact on international relations and the geopolitics of the region. Over the past year, because of the Ukraine war, Europe's energy markets have known their worst crisis in decades, bringing the issue of energy security to the fore. The crisis has started to reshape the relationships between Europe and oil and gas-producing countries in the MENA region, as the latter appear increasingly central to Europe's strategy to find alternatives to Russia as a key energy provider. The crisis has also provided a big push for renewable energy transition. Europe is now engaged on the path towards energy transition: it needs to implement its 'Green Deal' strategy and fulfil its commitments to de-carbonization in the medium to long-term. Emphasis is being put on renewable energy sources.

Similarly, many countries in North Africa, the Middle East and the Gulf start to see green energy as important to fight the adverse effects of climate change in the region, as well as a key component of their economic diversification strategies. Investments in the renewable sector are increasing fast and the MENA region, due to its vicinity as well as to its solar and wind potential, can turn into an important renewable energy supplier for Europe. Opportunities for a renewed partnership between the north and the south of the Mediterranean are growing, providing more focus is put on complementarities and connectivity. Energy, climate and technology have thus become intertwined elements of the same picture.

The panel will address the following questions:

- How is climate change going to impact the socio-political outlook of the region in the short- medium term (2026-2028)? How can MENA states balance the urgency of climate action with the reality of their dependence on fossil fuels?
- How is the imperative of securing energy supply likely to impact Europe's energy transition? Is a long-term partnership on renewables possible between Europe and the MENA region? How can Europe's and MENA countries' perspectives combine on energy supply and energy transition?



- What is the real economic potential of the green and blue economies for the MENA region? How to ensure that new resources do not end up in the same old hands? How can this risk be defused?
- How can the new “service industry” and the global labour market emerging from the AI revolution represent an employment opportunity for skilled workers from the region and a path towards sustainable development for countries of the region? Can local communities take ownership of these new technological advancements? What role for education and upskilling of human capital?
- Connectivity: how to ensure that North-South connectivity partnerships on green and traditional energy – but also on infrastructure, logistics and more – can trigger win-win scenarios? How to mobilise the much-needed capital, de-risk investments, and make sure that local communities are not left behind?

#### **Chair:**

- Nedra Cherif, Luiss Mediterranean Platform (Associate)

#### **Kick-off intervention:**

- Grammenos Mastrojeni, Union for the Mediterranean

#### **Participants:**

- Omar Al-Ubaydli, Derasat
- Laurie Haytayan, Natural Resource Governance Institute
- Zeina Moneer, American University in Cairo & Suez Canal University
- Alberto Rizzi, European Centre on Foreign Relations
- Leon Stille, New Energy Institute (online)

**12:45 – 14:00**

**Lunch break**

**14:00 – 16:00**

**Scenario making exercise** [Closed doors - on invitation only]

Lead: Steven Kenney, Middle East Institute

**16:00 – 16:45**

**Coffee break**



**16:45 – 18:15**

**Policy roundtable**

**Scenarios for 2028: confronting challenges and seizing opportunities**

The round table will close the conference with an open discussion between distinguished academics and international policy-makers on the main take-aways of the two-day deliberations. Particular attention will be devoted to alternative scenarios for the medium term future of the broader Mediterranean region and possible policy responses to mitigate risks and encourage positive trends.

**Moderators:**

- Mary Fitzgerald, Luiss Mediterranean Platform (Associate)
- Luigi Narbone, Luiss Mediterranean Platform

**Confirmed Speakers:**

- Joseph Bahout, Issam Fares Institute / American University of Beirut
- Enrico Borghi, Italian Senate
- Pasquale Ferrara, MAECI
- Dalia Ghanem, European Union Institute for Security Studies
- Joost Hiltermann, International Crisis Group
- Raffaele Marchetti, Luiss Guido Carli
- Carlo Mussi, WeBuild

Register here: <https://bit.ly/47auRjY>

**18:15 – 20:00**

**End of conference drink**