

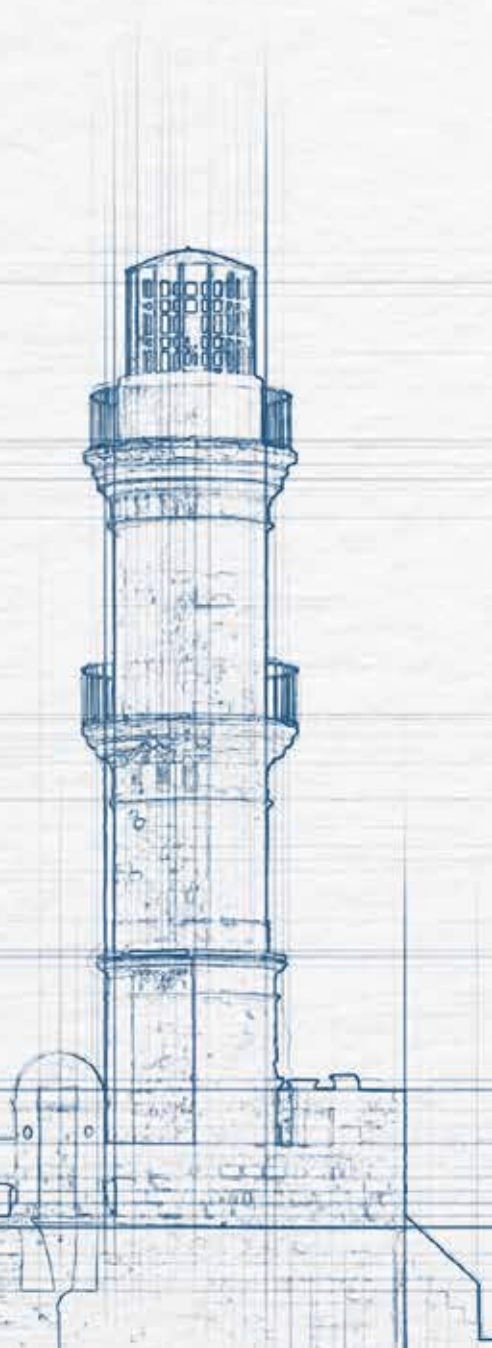


Conference Main Take-Aways

Mediterranean 2028 Envisioning the Medium-term Future of the Broader Region

**School of Government,
Luiss Guido Carli University**

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Panel I: Could Regional Stabilization be Consolidated and Last?

Until the recent explosion of violence in Israel and Palestine, the Middle East North Africa region was witnessing a pause in the intense geopolitical confrontation that characterised the decade following the Arab uprisings. Over the past three years, regional players have engaged in bilateral diplomatic efforts to mend ties and reduce tensions. Hopes were raised that diplomacy might gradually pave the way towards a more structured dialogue on regional security and to 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 and solidity of the normalisation/stabilisation process.

Winners and Losers of the War on Gaza

1. **Israel's alternative to the Silk Road:** In his speech at the UN two months ago, Netanyahu proposed a plan where Israel would connect through Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to India, offering an alternative to the Silk Road Initiative. This plan notably excluded the West Bank and aimed to erase the Palestinian issue on Israel's terms, sidelining the prospect of a Palestinian state.
2. **The Fragile Abraham Accords:** The Accords pointed to a decrease in regional polarization but were viewed by the countries' populations as agreements representing only by the elites. They created a superficial peace process without resolving any of underlying conflicts.
3. **Arab Uprisings and social contract:** the outbreak of the Arab uprisings In 2011 did not resulted in a renewal of the social contracts in Arab countries. . More than a decade later, the populations' demands and aspirations remain unmet.
4. **Emerging multipolarity:** Multipolarity marks a significant shift in regional dynamics. While the region's middle power have increased their agency and strategic autonomy vis-à-vis external great powers, MENA continues to be divided along two major blocs: the pro-Iran and anti-Iran blocs. While this division is downplayed by the Gulf states, Israel emphasizes it.
5. **Money is not leadership.** Oil rich Gulf countries , along with Israel, have assumed a leadership role in the region, replacing Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, . However, this leadership seems to lack a vision for the future of the region.
6. **Winners and losers of the ongoing Gaza War:** some reflections.

- **Hamas**

The renewed international attention to the Palestinian cause can be considered a momentary political victory for Hamas, however achieved at an overwhelming cost.

- **The Palestinians**
 - In the short run, they win by being visible and their future is a pertinent issue once again.
 - However, they also risk losing the prospect of a Palestinian state.

- **Gaza**
 - The Gaza Strip loses by witnessing the killing of 20,000 civilians, 50,000 wounded (and thousands remain under the rubble).
 - The city is also destroyed to the extent of being inhabitable.
- **United States**
 - U.S. loses international credibility due to the blatant, glaring double standards.
 - It will also face difficulty in imposing its will in the region in the future.
- **Arab states**
 - The grand view of the normalization deals has now been undone. The Palestinian issue may resurface as a critical factor for government legitimacy and electoral politics in the region.
 - Peace deals with Israel have generally persisted and normalization can be refurbished.
 - Iran and Saudi are now still talking to each other, and this is a positive element.

Trends to Observe in the Near Future

Before October 7:

a. Changing role of US and Russia in the region:

- **U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East.** The U.S. policy was characterized by a gradual withdrawal initiated during Obama's term and continuing under Trump. The trend continued during Biden's term partly due to the shift of attention to the Ukraine War and China.
- **Changing role of Russia.** Concurrently, the Russian role had been changing in the wake of the Ukraine War. But Russia will not leave Syria and seeking a new balance of forces in the region with Iran and Turkey.

b. 5 key trends/developments to observe:

1. **Biden-Netanyahu tensions:** strained relations were evident due to disagreements over West Bank policies and judicial reforms.
2. **Saudi-Iranian rapprochement:** China facilitated a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, marking a strategic shift for Saudi Arabia in the region.
3. **Saudi-Israeli deal:** A near-deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel was paused due to the War on Gaza. The UAE continues to be committed to it.
4. **Iran nuclear file:** Qatar facilitated diplomatic efforts to advance on Iran nuclear negotiations and finalize a prisoner swap deal between the U.S. and Iran, in exchange for a wire of \$6 billion to Iran via Qatar.
5. **Near-frozen conflicts:** Syria and Yemen were near-frozen conflicts, along with non-hard security issues like the East Mediterranean energy and maritime disputes.

Post-October 7:

- **U.S. regional involvement:** Despite attempts at a withdrawal, the U.S. remains entangled in the region. Biden has a year in his term, but the U.S. could lose interest in the region due to two factors.
 1. The clash between Biden and Netanyahu
 2. Public opinion building against the war
- **Awakening of the Palestinian issue:** The Palestinian issue was reignited by Hamas, which underscores the limitations of deals with Israel.
- **The Palestinian banner.** The War on Gaza has also been a wake up call for Saudi Arabia and a way to capture the banner of the Palestinian issue for Iran. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has continued coordinating with Iran, which indicates that the rapprochement between the two countries is solid. Saudi Arabia is willing to have Iran at the negotiation table with regards to the future of Gaza.
- **Fragility of Israel:** Israel has faced a great psychological shock. Netanyahu's policies have created great fissures in Israeli society and these will continue to grow. Israeli society is divided. It can neither continue a business-as-usual policy nor come to terms with a two-state solution.

Regional Changes are Under Way

- **Abraham Accords partially on hold.** The region is going through important changes that shed light on the dynamics of the past years. Before 7 October, a Saudi-Israeli normalization was on the way, while a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement was taking hold. The events of 7 October blocked the former for the time being but Abraham Accords have not been trashed because normalization consists of several processes and not just one.

Who

1. **Arab countries taking initiative.** Arab countries are taking matters into their own hands but seem to lack a clear strategic direction. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and UAE have all shown interest to maintain the situation of pragmatic operation, de-escalation, and diversification. They do not, however, share the same views on the crisis. So far, they have reacted to consolidate their positions but have only achieved limited gains. They are in a good position to engage with both China and Russia.
2. **Iran maneuvers strategically.** Iran wants to profit from the situation. It is happy to see Israel busy and does not seek to expand the war in the region. At the same time, it is worried of becoming the next target for Israel, who may be tempted to use this crisis to neutralize all threats. Iran's position is in line with the Arab positions, Iran wants to reassure them that the channels of communication will remain open..
3. **U.S. attempts at balancing allies.** The U.S. will come back to the Mediterranean region to defend Israel but will do its best not to alienate the Arab gulf countries.
4. **China is the indirect arbiter.** China is becoming the key indirect arbiter in the region because of its links to all parties of the conflict. However, its role and influence have yet to be seen.
5. **Europe's terrible double standard has been unveiled.**

Why

- **Avoiding entrapment in Gaza.** What is happening in Gaza is important because it can escalate to affect economic wellbeing, diversification plans, and investments that the regional countries have embarked on. Arab countries do not want to be trapped in this conflict. Instead, they are looking for peace or even an appearance of it. Concurrently, they realize the inescapable centrality of the Palestinian issue.

What

- **From elite agendas to popular engagement.** There needs to be moves from the elites' deals that have characterized regional relations until now to more popular regional agreements. The future political and economic engagements should aim to more structured bilateral deals which in time could shape a more coherent regional framework. The question remains how. Another question is whether the Arab street can pressure governments and have an impact on their policies.

The War on Gaza is a Global Conflict

- **War on Gaza can cause regional friction.** The more the war in Gaza lingers on, the more tension there will be between Turkey and Arab world on one hand, and Turkey and Iran on the other. Gaza can also lead to the emergence of new non-state actors in the region and be a magnet for them.
- **Changing form of normalization.** Normalization in the previous shape or form will not happen again. There is a question of whether there will be a reversal of the normalization achieved so far. The idea of having a future deal without any popular legitimacy is dead and any upcoming deals will have to factor in the Palestinian issue.
- **Uncertain future of the East Mediterranean cooperative framework.** The East Mediterranean energy framework was an area of cooperation between regional players. Turkey brought together Israel, Arab states, Greece, and Cyprus. But how will the cooperative framework function in the wake of the carnage in Gaza?
- **Frozen regional conflicts.** The Syria and Libya conflicts, while benefitting from de-escalation, are far from being resolved. The status quo accommodates the major powers' interests and those of some of the local parties to the conflict, but they can quickly reignite since the fundamental issues that gave rise to them were never addressed.
- **Russia is having a Mediterranean moment.** Despite the Ukraine War, and contrary to all expectation, Russia has maintained its regional role and relationships with countries. Russia was capable to build on the discontent with the U.S in the region to transform its security role in the Mediterranean into an economic and diplomatic one. Together with China, Russia might have a role to play in regional diplomacy. However, Russia's role is expected to decline due to the pressure of Ukraine and the shifting interests in the region.
- **Regional security order vs security networks.** Rather than by a regional security order, MENA is characterized by a security network. This is a problem because each actor has an exclusive vision of security for the region and there is no inclusive regional vision.
- **The War on Gaza is not a local or regional event, it is a global one.**

What Happens in the MENA Region does not Stay There

- **The War on Gaza is spilling over.** The War on Gaza is fueling the worst identity politics in Europe.
- **Pressure is mounting and Arab revolutions will return.**
 - o Socioeconomic challenges such as unemployment, food insecurity, and bad governance remain unaddressed creating much frustration.
 - o Climate change has stressed these countries increasing water scarcity and damage done by floods or earthquakes.
 - o None of the calls for free speech, dignity, and basic rights have been met.
 - o The above are expected to lead to the eruption of a third wave of the Arab Spring by 2028. By this time, the uprisings cannot be expected to be peaceful, and neither will the response, which is expected to repress them, and most probably succeed.
- **Europe's double standard on the Palestinian issue.** Europe's double standard on Palestine is glaring and has made it lose moral legitimacy. It is improbable that the EU could have exerted any influence over Israel, but it is unable to act in other crises as well. It should maintain its focus on economic issues and not political ones.
- **International law and the UN are being questioned.** Emerging groupings like the BRICS is where the future will be. The countries there have tremendous economic power and could be expected to translate it into political clout as well.
- **Europe needs to step up its strategic communication.**
- **It also needs to capitalize on its cultural exchange.** Many more students from the south Mediterranean countries could study in the EU and travel there. It would be wise to capitalize on increased cultural exchange.



Mediterranean Platform

Founded in 2022, and directed by Prof. Luigi Narbone, the Mediterranean Platform is a research, dialogue, and educational programme at the School of Government, Luiss Guido Carli. It offers a space for collective reflection on the opportunities and challenges of the Mediterranean region and promotes informed policymaking and advocacy at the national and transnational levels.

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