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*Istituto Affari Internazionali*

## Regional (Dis)order in the Middle East: Historical Legacies and Current Shifts

by Andrea Dessì

### ABSTRACT

The New-Med Research Network organized an international conference in Bologna, Italy, on 11 April 2017 to examine a number of root drivers for the contemporary crises gripping a large part of the Middle East and North Africa. This report summarizes the proceedings of the conference, held at the Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe and co-organized with the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). Structured around three panel sessions, participants included a number of leading policymakers, academics and journalists invited to debate the historical evolution of the regional state system, the drawing of borders, the failures of governance and socio-economic development the role of non-state actors, as well as regional and international powers. Launched in 2014, the New-Med Research Network is run by IAI in cooperation with the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) and the Compagnia di San Paolo of Turin.

*Middle East | North Africa | National minorities | Border conflicts | US foreign policy | Russia | Turkey | European Union*



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### Introduction

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in cooperation with the Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe organized an international conference in Bologna, Italy, on 11 April 2017. Convened in the framework of the New-Med Research Network, the conference saw the participation of internationally renowned academics, policymakers and journalists invited to debate the complex and overlapping crises gripping the Middle East. Structured around three panel sessions, the conference began by applying a historical lens to regional developments, including through a re-visitation of key terms and concepts as applied to the contemporary Middle East. The second session focused on the development of the regional order, examining processes of state formation and reformation in the region, the drawing of borders, the role of non-state actors and the causes and implications of declining state legitimacy in the Middle East. The final panel debated the impact of regional and international actors, focussing on the role of the United States, Europe, Russia and China as well as the mounting influence and activism of regional state actors such as Turkey, the Arab Gulf States' and Iran in what has become an increasingly multipolar Middle East.

Entitled "Regional (Dis)Order in the Middle East: Historical Legacies and Current Shifts," the one-day event marked the sixteenth international conference convened under the auspices of the New-Med Research Network. Established in June 2014, New-Med is a research network of experts and policy analysts with a special interest in the complex social, political, cultural and security-related dynamics that

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· Report of the international conference "Regional (Dis)order in the Middle East: Historical Legacies and Current Shifts" held in Bologna on 11 April 2017 and jointly organized by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the The Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, in cooperation with the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the International Affairs Programme of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation in Turin within the framework of the New-Med Research Network.

are unfolding in the Mediterranean. Led by IAI, in cooperation with the OSCE Secretariat, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) and the Compagnia di San Paolo of Turin, the New-Med Research Network has published 32 policy papers, reports and edited volumes on a variety of historical and contemporary issues impacting the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, the Network has published an edited volume entitled *The Frailty of Authority. Borders, Non-State Actors and Power Vacuums in a Changing Middle East*, containing a number of studies produced by members of the New-Med Research Network.<sup>2</sup>



From left to right: Raffaella Del Sarto, Michael G. Plummer, Lorenzo Kamel

Conference proceedings were opened by a series of welcoming remarks delivered by **Michael G. Plummer**, Director of the John Hopkins University SAIS Europe, **Lorenzo Kamel**, Scientific Director of the New-Med Research Network, and **Raffaella Del Sarto**, Associated Professor of Middle East Studies at SAIS Europe. In welcoming participants to the John Hopkins University in Bologna, the oldest American graduate school in Europe, speakers introduced the analytic framework for the conference, emphasizing that there exists no single cause or driver that can explain the present crises gripping the region. Against the backdrop of declining state authority, failed, failing and fragile states, multiple civil and proxy wars and renewed international interventions, a growing number of voices have predicted the imminent end of the present state-system in the Middle East.

The conference was convened to address these debates, problematizing this thesis by re-examining its reading of the history of the region as well as proposed solutions for the future. While many have traced the causes of these crises to the drawing of borders by the colonial powers of France and Britain and the multi-confessional or multi-ethnic nature of many states in the region, participants in the conference were in agreement as to the fact that a redrawing of borders and the creation of smaller, and more ethnically homogeneous states cannot be seen as a recipe for stability. Rather, such prescriptions not only miss the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of the crises affecting the region, but will also likely lead to further instability as a result of the underlining geostrategic and political tensions that have traditionally defined intra-state as well as inter-state relations in the Middle East.

<sup>1</sup> More information on the New-Med Research Network, including past events and access to publications are available from the IAI website, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/2004>.

<sup>2</sup> Lorenzo Kamel (ed.), *The Frailty of Authority. Borders, Non-State Actors and Power Vacuums in a Changing Middle East*, Rome, Nuova Cultura, February 2017, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/7555>.

Representatives from the institutional partners of the New-Med Research Network delivered introductory remarks, presenting the concept and objectives of the research network as well as its evolution since June 2014. **Emiliano Alessandri**, Senior External Cooperation Officer at the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, opened the session by thanking participants and the organizers while emphasizing the OSCE's interest in supporting important academic and policy initiatives like the ones carried



From left to right: Nicolò Russo Perez, Massimo Carnelos, Emiliano Alessandri

out by the New-Med Research Network. In noting how the OSCE has placed much emphasis on track II dialogue initiatives, Alessandri introduced the work of the OSCE in the Mediterranean, noting how the organization presently has six Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia) with which the 57-member states of the OSCE maintain constant dialogue and cooperation. Since January 2017, Italy holds the rotating chairmanship of the OSCE Mediterranean Contact Group, and the Italian government, through its permanent delegation at the OSCE in Vienna, is currently defining the OSCE's Mediterranean agenda for the present year.

This role, noted **Massimo Carnelos**, from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, provides Italy with an important opportunity to promote effective and inclusive policies aimed at enhancing dialogue and cooperation in the Mediterranean, long an area of prime strategic importance for Italy. In 2018, Italy will assume the Chairmanship of the OSCE Secretariat, further enhancing the responsibility and visibility of the Italian government within the organization. In assessing the present turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa, the Italian diplomat stressed that there are many similarities between Mediterranean countries as a whole. A historical approach to understanding present challenges in the region is no doubt important in order to learn from the past to better understand the present, yet history is not destiny and should not therefore become a sort of straitjacket constraining or determining present dynamics in the region. The present (dis)order in the Middle East is characterized by extreme fluidity, fragmentation and power vacuums that together are combining to undermine dialogue and cooperative mechanisms for conflict resolution and trust building across the region. The European Union has unveiled its Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy and Italy stands committed to the underlining principle of building state and societal resilience in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/node/381>.

present conference, concluded Carnelos, can serve to advance this goal, providing a better understanding of local, regional and international developments that are impacting the Middle East while proposing non-Eurocentric approaches to build effective and inclusive forms of state and societal resilience in the region.

**Nicolò Russo Perez**, Coordinator of the International Affairs Programme of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation in Turin, concluded the introductory remarks, emphasizing the positive experience of the Foundation in supporting the New-Med Research Network since its inception in 2014. Russo Perez noted how one of the strengths of the New-Med Research Network rests in its ability to combine methodological approaches in an effort to bridge the gap between academic analysis and policymaking. Emphasizing the timeliness of the present conference, Russo Perez extended his thanks to the hosts, speakers and organizers of the event, inviting participants to engage in a lively and constructive debate aimed at unravelling and assessing some of the root drivers that have led to the complex series of crises presently gripping the region.

### Session I: Terms and Concepts in Historical Perspective

Chaired by **Marwan Bishara**, Senior Political Analyst at the Al-Jazeera Network, the first panel sought to trace the historical development of the regional state system in the Middle East, problematizing a number of concepts and terms that are often used in contemporary debates that seek to explain the present series of crises in the region. Addressing the importance of history and path dependency, the four speakers in the panel focussed on the processes of state formation in the region, the drawing of borders, the rise of sectarianism and the use and validity of concepts such as "minority", "majority" and "secularism" as applied to regional states and state-society relations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

**Beth Baron**, from City University in New York, opened the session noting that contemporary trends indeed represent a period of unprecedented disorder in the region. Looking back on historical legacies the speaker focussed on three specific moments in history to introduce a number of terms and concepts that are often applied to the region, particularly by outside observers. These included the emergence of sectarianism in Lebanon in the 1860s, the secret Sykes-Picot agreement reached in 1916 between the colonial powers and, finally, the rise of Islamism in Egypt in the 1930s. Taken together, these three moments can serve to highlight the complexity, contingency and the constructed nature of communal identity in the Middle East. They moreover underline the need to look beyond the region itself to understand some of the drivers that have led to the present state of affairs in the MENA, evidencing the need to address local, regional and international variables in seeking to explain both the historical development and the contemporary realities of the region.



In introducing her argument on sectarianism in Lebanon, Baron emphasized that this term is often used in a similar fashion to the concept of nationalism. History has taught us that nation states are little more than imagined communities, a constructed reality. In this respect, sectarianism is itself a constructed identity. Sectarianism therefore is not an analytic tool to explain the current crises in the region, but rather is little more than a descriptive



Marwan Bishara (left), Beth Baron (right)

concept, a discursive shortcut that often obscures more than it reveals. In citing the work by Ussama Makdisi *The Culture of Sectarianism*,<sup>4</sup> Baron underlined how the rise in inter-communal violence in Lebanon during the 1850s-1860s was largely a reaction to modernity and a complex, multi-layered manifestation of modernization rather than an expression of primordial hatreds or divisions. The advent of sectarian violence in nineteenth century Lebanon and Syria resulted from a deliberate mobilization of religious identity for political and social purposes. The Ottoman *Tanzimat* (reforms) and the growing presence and influence of the European powers in the region contributed to these trends. The formation of Lebanon as a state on the basis of a confessional system of governance only institutionalized this further. Significantly, a similar confessional model was later adopted in post-2003 Iraq, where the US has essentially established a sectarian state largely modelled on the example of Lebanon.

Turning to the legacy of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, the speaker criticized contemporary debates that contend that the drawing of borders by the colonial powers in the post-World War I (WWI) era is the primary point of departure for an explanation of the present crisis of the Middle Eastern state. In emphasizing that the Sykes-Picot agreement largely remained a dead letter and that the original plan to divide the post-Ottoman Middle East was quickly overtaken by events, Baron noted that the only contemporary border in the region that can be traced back to this agreement relates to Syria's southern border. Moreover, this emphasis on the artificiality of modern Iraq or other states in the region largely overlooks the important role of local agency, as well as that of regional and international actors, in the complex processes of state formation and reformation in the region. In this respect, Baron underlined how the lands controlled by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are actually much closer to the original Sykes-Picot map than the modern Middle East state system that emerged in its wake. In concluding her argument, Baron emphasized that the rise of Islamism in Egypt during the 1930, most notably in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood, can also be

<sup>4</sup> Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism. Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000.

explained as a reaction to the increased presence of Western missionaries in the region. Baron concluded by emphasizing the importance of history as a means to avoid generalities and simplifications as to the root causes of the present crisis in the region. Indeed, the current turmoil is not somehow endemic or unique to the Middle East its societies or religions, but rather is intertwined with broader international and regional developments that necessitate a careful historical analysis and appreciation in order to learn from the past and thereby build a better, more inclusive future.

The second speaker in the panel, **Isa Blumi**, from Stockholm University in Sweden, introduced his argument by emphasizing how history remains indispensable to add depth and understanding to contemporary developments and policy debates. The lessons of history, however, are often forgotten, overlooked or even revisited to better fit the interests of powerful actors. In this respect, Blumi wished to emphasize both the destructive impact caused by colonialism, modernization theory and foreign interventions but also the capacity of people and societies to adapt and find new modes of living in reaction to these disruptions. Drawing examples from his experience in Kosovo during the late 1990s and early 2000s, Blumi noted how foreign concepts and frameworks of analysis that emphasize ethnic and confessional identities and tend to group and subdivide communities along these lines have significantly impacted processes of state and identity formation in the Mediterranean.

As local societies and individuals struggled to adapt to their rapidly changing surroundings, certain concepts and sub-identities were appropriated by local elites as a tool to consolidate their political and economic power. In highlighting the fluidity of identities and the long history of cohabitation among Middle Eastern societies, Blumi pointed to the fact that the fragmentation of societies and communities across the Middle East was not an error of history or judgement but rather a policy that served the narrow interests of certain powers and elites, both foreign and regional. The dismembering of the Ottoman Empire is a case in point. The advent of war and sectarian or inter-communal violence in the region is therefore one result of these trends. It does not reflect the legacy of ancient hatreds or divisions but rather the modes of adaptation and sustenance developed by local communities in reaction to the interplay between local, regional and international developments and the increased juxtaposition of frames of reference developed to serve the interests of the few rather than the many.

Isa Blumi provided two specific examples of these broader trends, one relating to Yemen and the second to his native Kosovo during post-conflict period in which foreign actors and multilateral institutions like the OSCE worked on a state building project that led to significant changes in the social fabric and identity of local communities. In pointing to the fact that Saudi Arabia was welcomed by these powers to care for and help support Kosovo's Muslim population on the basis of them sharing the same religion, Blumi emphasized that in reality Kosovo's Muslim communities had very little in common with Saudi Arabia's conservative and rigid interpretation of Islam and rather had much more in common with Europe. Yet,

the degree to which Saudi Arabian money and influence was welcomed into Kosovo has had an impact on these communities, leading to a gradual change in the identity, customs and interpretations of Islam that would have been unlikely to take place without the imposition of simplified frames of reference that boil everything down to race, ethnicity and religious affiliation. In Yemen, the speaker emphasized that the current humanitarian disaster in the country is not the product of Sunni-Shia rivalry or competition, but rather the result of a conscious strategy by foreign actors to undermine the country's infrastructure as a means to achieve political and strategic objectives. Moreover, the endemic famine experienced by Yemen's population is also the product of specific policies that can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s when modernization theory led foreign advisors to council Northern Yemen to move towards becoming a net importer of food, most prominently from the United States. Such policies inevitably led to the fraying of state legitimacy and authority in Yemen, in turn pushing citizens to develop new modes of sustenance by retreating into their communities, clans and neighbourhoods thereby contributing to the enhanced fragmentation of Yemeni society.



From left to right: Beth Baron, Lorenzo Kamel, Isa Blumi

**Nora Lafi**, from the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin, used her expertise on Ottoman history and urban governance and violence to examine the impact of history and path dependency in helping to understand the present turmoil in the region. The speaker moreover used this prism to introduce, and problematize, a series of concepts and terms that are widely deployed in contemporary debates on the region, from the concept of modernity and modernization to the term "minority" as applied to social groups and communities. Beginning by emphasizing two central themes present in many contemporary descriptions of the Ottoman era, Lafi stressed that the period of Ottoman rule over the Balkans and much of the MENA was neither an Empire nor an occupation. The Ottoman system benefitted from the diversity of its subjects and people from various religions, ethnicities and sects had access to decision making and governance sphere, particularly at the local level and in the provinces. There was a considerable degree of circulation among administrators and officials, with provincial administrations and local elites being particularly powerful. Indeed, many provinces and local elites had welcomed Ottoman protection also as a means to resist European colonialism. The tendency to stigmatize the Ottoman period with terms such as occupation and empire therefore is a constructed narrative and has impacted contemporary policies and politics in the region.



The second aspect highlighted by Lafi related to the notion of modernity and the period of the Ottoman *Tanzimat* between 1830s and World War I which is often neglected in the literature or largely interpreted as an imposition from the West. Indeed, the very term modernization becomes often associated with Westernization or Europeanization. In fact, the *Tanzimat* were not an imposition from Europe or the West but rather a genuine effort by Ottoman elites



Lorenzo Kamel (left), Nora Lafi (right)

to embark on a process of reform and reorganization. Part of the expertise and inspiration for these reforms were no doubt derived from the West, but in many occasions European colonial powers themselves resisted these Ottoman reforms. In other instances, European powers insisted that these reforms protect their interests and citizens, thereby injecting concepts such as property and minority that have had lasting impacts till this day. Following WWI, these processes increased, with new concepts such as the nation state being introduced as the Great Powers broke up Ottoman lands and introduced the Mandate system of rule.

The legacy of colonialism and its path dependency is a key framework to help to understand the present crisis in the region, stressed Lafi, and the major local revolts against this colonial imposition in many of these countries have reverberations that are still heard today. Colonial policies had an enormous impact on transforming non-Muslim Ottoman subjects into "minorities", added the speaker, and when inter-communal violence began occurring throughout Ottoman territories this often followed some kind of European intervention. The degree to which colonial and foreign powers have allied with local elites and militias to protect their narrow interests is another example of historical path dependency in the region, with contemporary developments in the MENA still displaying these underlining characteristics. Violence and conflict, concluded Lafi, is not somehow endemic to the MENA region or the post-Ottoman lands. Rather, many of the most violent instances in the region were the product of European colonialism and drive for control, from the Crusades, to the French in Algeria and Lebanon or the British in Iraq and Palestine. History is needed to remind audiences of the past and help to avoid falling prey to generalized stereotypes that often tell us more about our own interests and concerns than those of the peoples and societies in the region.

**Lorenzo Kamel**, Scientific Director of the New-Med Research Network and Senior Fellow at IAI, ended the first panel, presenting a historical and analytical reflection on "rearrangements of populations" and the shifts in identity and power that are taking place in many areas of the Middle East. A number of scholars are today contending that the region is witnessing the "return" of the 12th century, when Shiite lords, supported by Persia, dominated much of Northern Syria and the rest of the region. The Mamluks and then the Ottomans, according to many, changed

that, pushing out the Shiites and marginalizing them.<sup>5</sup>

This “narrative” has a long trail in history. Already Gertrude Bell, in a letter to her father on 23 August 1920, referred to Shia clerics in a strongly Shia region of Iraq in the following terms: “It’s as though you had a number of alien popes permanently settled at Canterbury and issuing edicts which take precedence of the law of the land. The Turks were always at loggerheads with them and the Arab gov[ernment] of the future will find itself in the same case”.<sup>6</sup> These types of approaches, aiming at branding local Shiites as “alien”, have had repercussions visible to the present day. Kamel noted that this and other related “narratives” not only ignore that still today Shiites represent about 40 percent of the total Muslim population in the Middle East, but that belonging to a certain confession has being for centuries just one, often secondary, way of expressing one’s identity. They, moreover, overlook the historical context which has contributed to the “Shiites’ marginalization”. Shiite communities – characterized by a diversity of belief and purposes – have been viewed at times with suspicion and faced discriminated from Sunni rulers, Mamluks and Ottomans first and foremost. Yet, their process of marginalization have had historically much less to do with, say, Mamluks’ violence and discriminations (XII century), and more to do with practical interests connected, among other things, to the exploitation of the Silk Road during the times of Ma’ni Prince Fakhr-al-Din II (1572-1635), when the growth of commercial ties with the West went hand in hand with dramatic changes in the demographic composition of much of “greater Syria”.

Maronite peasants were then prompted to settle in southern Druze areas to cultivate the land at the disadvantage of Shia communities, who were forcibly dispossessed. In the long term this made Christians a majority population in southern Lebanon and ignited, in Fawwaz Traboulsi’s words, a “complex asymmetry [that] served as the matrix upon which the sectarian system and sectarian mobilisation were built”.<sup>7</sup> The new demographic composition had a destabilizing effect, particularly from a social and economic perspective, on all communities in “greater Syria”. Kamel stressed that it is true that Shiite lords, as is often mentioned, were for long supported by Persia. Equally relevant, however, is that Persia’s population (like the one of neighbouring Azerbaijan) was at that time still largely Sunni (Shafi’i and Hanafi schools): the massive and forced conversion of Persia – from “marginalized” Sunnis to newly “empowered” Shiites – took place, at the hands of the Safavids, between the 16th and the 18th centuries.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Adam Shatz, “The Syrian War. Adam Shatz Talks to Joshua Landis”, in *London Review of Books* website, 21 April 2017, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/2017/04/21/adam-shatz/the-syrian-war>.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Gertrude Bell to her father, Sir Hugh Bell, 23 August 1920, [http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/letter\\_details.php?letter\\_id=411](http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=411).

<sup>7</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, London, Pluto Press, 2007, p. 16.

In concluding his talk, Kamel pointed out that too much emphasis on the narrative of the “return” of the “historically marginalized Shi’a communities” risks to overshadow the living experience of a region in which religious boundaries were, for most of its history, shifting, blurred and ambiguous. The speaker also stressed that rather than talking about a return to the 12th century, it would be more accurate to argue that the region is currently experiencing what Janet Abu-Lughod predicted in 1989, namely that the era of European/Western hegemony would have been superseded by “a return to the relative balance of multiple centres exhibited in the thirteenth-century world system”.<sup>8</sup>

Each of the peoples in the Middle East are struggling to find their place in this new system. Many of them – in the Baghdad belt, in the provinces of Diyala, Latakia, Tartus, Baniyas and many other areas in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere – are also experiencing the increasing need of getting *back* into history, rediscovering the hybrid identities, with their permeabilities and specificities, that for millennia characterized much of the daily life in the region. Shedding light on these still incomplete yet meaningful efforts, Kamel contended, is a way of supporting their attempts to “regain possession” of their multifaceted pasts. More importantly, it is a powerful antidote to geopolitical reductionism, so popular in our days in both media and academic discourse on the Middle East and North Africa.

### Session II: Regional Order, Borders and the Frailty of Authority

Chaired by **David C. Unger**, from the John Hopkins SAIS Europe, the second panel delved into an analysis of the complex and overlapping set of drivers that may help to explain the phenomenon of state weakness, fragility and failure in the Middle East and North Africa. In examining these questions, speakers in the panel reflected on whether the present turmoil in the region is to be taken as a sign that the regional state system is still forming or, on the contrary, is already doomed to its demise.

Panel proceedings were opened by **Patrick Cockburn**, Middle East correspondent for *The Independent*, who prefaced his talk by emphasizing that his experience in covering numerous wars in the Middle East and further afield have demonstrated the way in which identity, particularly during a time of crisis and insecurity, is often defined by your enemies. This in turn mirrors the traditional tendency of human beings to retreat into their families, villages and local contexts for security and protection in the event of crisis and a breakdown of central authorities. In this respect, continued the speaker, it should be clear to all that the politics of peace and the politics of war are significantly different. What may be possible in peacetime is not during a period of war and widespread violence, and as a result, when talking about solutions to the present crises gripping the Middle East, a first priority is

<sup>8</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 371.

that of establishing cease fires and providing personal security for the populations involved as otherwise talk of confidence building measures and post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction will not be politically feasible. In this respect, Cockburn looked to recent media and political pronouncements that “Assad must step down” as particularly troubling. Assad and the Syrian regime remains the most powerful actor in Syria and enjoy important support from external allies in Russia, Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Insisting on the notion that Assad must step down is therefore equivalent to allowing the war to go on and in turn undermining any potential talk of de-escalation in order to allow for a real political process to commence.



Patrick Cockburn

Turning to focus on the phenomenon of weak, fragile and failed states in the MENA region, the journalist noted how the term “failed state” was itself problematic, as it implies that this situation is self-inflicted or rather is a result of local mistakes in these states. Moreover, such a label also tends to mask a deeper sense of “feeling sorry” for these states that are somehow distant and different from our own experience. As a result, the label of failed state does not go very far in helping to understand the reasons for the state weakness and declining capacity. Cockburn noted how one may count eight wars presently occurring in the broader Middle East and North Africa as well as two or three major insurgencies. If one looks closer at these wars – from Afghanistan to Lebanon, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen – what is clear is that these wars actually began many years ago and appear highly difficult to stop. Differently from what was the case in older wars or in the context of the conflict in Ireland for instance, these conflicts tend to have a much longer time span. The war in Afghanistan for instance began in 1979 and is still going on today, conflict in Somalia can also be traced back to the 1990s, while in the case of Iraq it can be traced back to 2003, if not earlier. Lebanon, which was ravished by a bloody civil war starting in the mid-1970s, is also experiencing a continuation of this conflict. In this respect, a major reason for the continuation of these wars relates to the combination of fractured societies and communities in many of these states, exacerbated by the use of proxy armies and foreign interventions in these conflicts to advance the respective interests of regional and international powers. The conflict in Ireland, noted the speaker, would itself have been much harder to resolve if foreign powers were intent on interfering to support one or another side. This phenomenon of proxy wars and regional meddling has been happening in the Middle East for decades and is a major driver for sectarianism, instability and fragmentation.



These trends, continued Cockburn, are particularly pronounced in those states with large energy reserves and where a rentier system of control has been established, with central authorities consolidating their power through complex patronage networks. Foreign interventions in these contexts have only exacerbated these problems, as foreign powers will pursue their own interests while local communities will not have a vested interest to resolve their disputes as long as a strong external actor can be found to support them against their rivals. The case of Iraq is an example of these trends. While the US and invading powers could have gotten away with the invasion and the toppling of Saddam Hussein, it was the decision to stay and occupy Iraq that made the situation untenable. This need to stay was in turn dictated by the US's interest in blocking the influence of Iran, not the need to create legitimate state institutions in the country. As the most powerful actor in the country all other communities and players began competing for access and support from the Americans, furthering inter-communal rivalries and leading to an explosion of violence and civil war. What this shows, concluded Cockburn, is that major actors and powers rarely seem to learn from the past, even the recent past. Invading a country may be easy but the real danger begins the day after a regime or government is overthrown. In light of the recent experiences of the US in Lebanon in the 1980s, Iraq and Somalia, it may seem strange that powerful external actors again have committed similar mistakes in 2011 in Libya and may yet repeat them in Syria as well.

**Raffaella Del Sarto**, from SAIS Europe in Bologna, took the floor as the second speaker in the panel and introduced her argument by emphasizing that predictions about an imminent collapse of the state system across the Middle East have been proven rather premature. What is true however is that the region is experiencing mounting pressure on the borders and territorial integrity of states as the legitimacy and capacity of state actors and elites is increasingly weak and contested. The spread of civil and proxy wars, insurgencies and violence all stand as a testament to the weakness of the state in the Middle East, which in many cases is no longer in control of all its territory and cannot fulfil the traditional responsibilities of governance. The vacuum left by the retrenching state has been filled by militias, smugglers, non-state actors and even quasi-state entities like the so-called Islamic State, the Rojava region in Syria, and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq. Against this backdrop, the bigger question is trying to understand the implications of these developments on the issue of sovereignty and state legitimacy. To address this question, Del Sarto, introduced three concepts that are important to keep in mind when seeking to make sense of contemporary developments in the MENA region.

These concepts related to the traditional conceptualization of state authority and legitimacy, with Del Sarto noting that the idea of a state as an autonomous actor is an ideal type that does not have many manifestations in reality. In the Arab Middle East this is particularly true as the state may be strong in terms of coercion and state-led socio-economic development models (which are also rather overcome now), but cannot be described as strong in terms of its extraction capacity, inclusion and legitimacy. In terms of sovereignty, a similar differentiation should be made

regarding the legal definition of international sovereignty and domestic sovereignty. The underlining contention between these two dimensions in the context of the MENA state system is important to understand the origins of state weakness in the region. The international legal sovereignty of states in the MENA is less contested compared to their domestic sovereignty, which involves questions of state authority, capacity and legitimacy. A second concept that is important to keep in mind when approaching the Middle East is that it is not enough to only look at the international, systemic environment to understand the actions of political elites and states, but rather it is often the interplay between local, regional and international drivers that has led to this present state of affairs in the region. This leads to the third concept, which rests on the importance of appreciating history and the legacy of the past as a means to make sense of the present.



Raffaella Del Sarto

In this respect, the Arab uprisings of 2010-12 should be assessed in terms of the conflicting configuration of state authority, legitimacy and territoriality and in this light the revolts can be framed as the last in a long series of critical junctures in the region. It is this interplay between local, regional and international drivers and variables that has led to the present crises in the region. The legacy of colonialism and the Mandate system is no doubt important, but so are the policies pursued by local elites who inherited the post-colonial state. These policies were often pursued as a means to consolidate regional and international legitimacy, but their effects on the domestic setting and state-society relations were often adverse. The spread of transnational ideologies (Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism), the failed economic and development policies and the spread of militarism and securitization of politics in the post-independence Arab state all played a role in this historical process of development. Regional trends such as geostrategic rivalry or the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict also had an impact on these processes, as did international interventions, both economic and military. In conclusion, therefore, Del Sarto emphasized how the Arab uprisings were a manifestation of this domestic legitimacy deficit of many states in the region. While the international sovereignty and legitimacy of these states appears rather resilient, it is their internal constellations where most problems remain and the actions of many Arab states since 2012 do not bode well for their future domestic legitimacy and therefore stability, concluded the speaker.

**Beverly Milton-Edwards**, from Queen's University in Belfast, joined the discussion and in introducing her argument used the term epiphenomenon to frame the complex series of crises presently unfolding in the MENA. In this respect, the recent convoluted nature of the Middle East state system can be described as a secondary

effect, or a by-product, of much broader and deeper trends in the region which are particularly present at the domestic level within states and relate to the internal modes of authority, legitimacy and capacity of the state vis-à-vis its citizens. Insecurity, noted Milton-Edwards, is the key term to apply to the region and the present reordering or reconfiguration of the state system can largely be explained in terms of the deep insecurity felt by individuals, communities and rulers across the region. The recent turmoil is a reaction and response to the events unleashed by the Arab uprisings, which in itself was caused by decades of governmental failings and mismanagement by ruling elites. This in turn points to the importance of history and path dependency as discussed in the previous panel and evidences the fluidity of regional developments and state-society relations across the region. As a corollary to these developments, the region is also witnessing a retreat from the unifying symbols of the past, with transnational ideologies and/or issues such as Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict losing much of their appeal. In their place, new fragmentations are emerging within communities and between states as identity conflicts spread across the region. Significantly, these conflicts are both state driven and state constructed and demonstrate the deep insecurity of ruling elites vis-à-vis their societies and citizens and their failure to establish united and inclusive societies based on an understanding of a shared past and foundational myths.

Today a majority of these states, particularly in the Arab Gulf, have begun reconstructing their internal narratives based on sectarian identity and a selected reading of the past. In this respect, Milton-Edwards complimented the talk of previous speakers, by noting how Bahrain is presently granting citizenship to numerous Sunni refugees as a means to counterbalance the Shia majority in the country and consolidate power. Thus, like in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, the internal constellations and identities of states and communities are being redrawn and reshaped. While the external borders of states appear resilient, the internal makeup of these states are witnessing sustained pressures and change. These are only furthering the fragmentation and rivalries present in the region as people and individuals retreat into their communities, clans, families and social class for sustenance and security. While some have suggested that the redrawing of borders can lead to an improvement in legitimacy and stability in the region, the speaker noted that such reorganization would not lead to stability due to these dynamics representing a symptom, not the cause of the present turmoil in the region. In this respect, the causes are related to tangible governance failures, the widespread inefficiency of state institutions, corruption, greed and the broader lack of legitimacy of ruling elites. None of these drivers have been addressed in a sustainable manner since the 2010-12 Arab uprisings and in some important contexts such trends have worsened further. As a result, while the external sovereignty of states in the Middle East may survive, internal challenges are likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

The final speaker in the second panel, **Bahgat Korany**, from the American University in Cairo, began his talk by pointing to the recently concluded Arab League Summit held in Jordan in the Dead Sea region. In noting how a reoccurring theme in Arabic social media at the time questioned whether the choice of location

had any symbolism with regards to the sorry state of affairs in the region, Korany emphasized that indeed the Middle East state system is undergoing a deep and existential crisis. In looking for diagnostics and alternatives, the speaker focussed his talk on the importance of policy and governance as the root driver for the gradual breakdown of authority and legitimacy in the region. In describing the establishment of the modern state system in the Middle East that flowed from the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement as an organ transplant that has not been entirely accepted by the host body, Korany contended that the state exists in the region but its internal system is malfunctioning. Most states in the Middle East can in fact be described as F-States, in that they are either fragile, failing or failed. These states are also based on what Korany termed the F-Society, in that a majority of these communities are deeply fragmented and fractured, including multiple identities and definitions of otherness. The resulting combination between the F-State and the F-Society is that of a regional order defined by deep cleavages and divisions along ethnic, economic, social, religious, class and gender lines.

A second aspect that may help to define what the region is currently experiencing is the concept of New Wars, which are quite different from both civil wars and the traditional inter-state wars of the past. Here Korany emphasized five characteristics that define these New Wars in the Middle East. In the first instance, many of these conflicts include the participation of non-state actors and groups, which are sometimes even stronger than the official government forces of the state. A second aspect, relates to the lack of central decision making authorities in these conflicts, making them both highly complex and very hard to end. Pointing to the current conflict in Syria as an example, the speaker noted how there are anywhere between 23 and 70 different actors and groups active in the country, each with their own leadership and capabilities. A third dimension is the advent of war economies heavily reliant on illegal mods of trade, trafficking and extraction, while a fourth relates to the widespread use of private military and security companies in these conflicts. Finally, the fifth dimension is the significant impact these wars are having on the wider region and international system at large, with spillovers including terrorism and the refugee and migrant crisis.

As a result of these five characteristics and the combination of the F-State and the F-Society, significant levels of violence and instability have defined the regional state system in the Middle East. While the Middle East accounts for about 5 percent of the world population, data has shown how 18 percent of present world conflicts are in the region. In concluding his talk, Korany emphasized that while some may call for the replacement of the present state system in the Middle East the present alternatives are no better and may actually be worst. The key to imagining a better future for the region lays not in reorganizing the borders or ethnicities of the Middle East but rather in improving the governance mechanisms of these states to make them more responsible to their citizens. Youth, which currently represent two-thirds of the population of the region, can be an asset in imagining a new and more inclusive state order in the region. The present disorder in the Middle East is as much a result of history and foreign intervention as the product of decades of bad policies pursued by the governing elites of these states. Bad policies can



change however and it is here that one should begin an exercise of building a better future for the region and its societies as a whole.

### Session III: The Role of International and Regional Actors

The third and final session of the conference was chaired by **Ettore Greco**, Director of the Rome-based Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). In noting the policy-oriented nature of the panel, Greco emphasised how the previous sessions had evidenced the complex interplay between local, regional and international drivers in helping to explain the current disorder in the region. The present panel will move to focus on the role of international and regional actors in these developments, examining both the legacy of intervention and meddling in the region as well as the important impact these actors will have on the issue of conflict resolution and reconstruction in these settings.



From left to right: Ekaterina Stepanova, Ian Lesser, Ettore Greco, Louise Fawcett

The first speaker, **Louise Fawcett**, from Oxford University, introduced her talk by emphasizing how international relations (IR) theory can provide important frameworks to better understand the region. While sometimes criticized for lacking in-depth historical knowledge of a given case study or social context, international relations theory does have a number of concepts that provide important insight into regional developments and inter-state relations in the Middle East. These include the concept of “anarchy” as defining both the international and regional state system, the search for security and the balancing of power (or threats) as pursued by states to hedge against excessive risks while maximizing returns. These are important analytical tools that can help to frame the actions of states and elites in the Middle East, in both the foreign and domestic realm. In this respect, IR theory can be helpful to unpack and repack a number of concepts and ideas pertaining to the state-system in the Middle East. The first of these related to the widespread tendency to view the Middle East as a great chessboard, where geopolitical struggles for power and influence have played over the wishes of local populations and societies. This approach highlights the impact and legacy of colonialism, the cold war and the important influence of international actors over regional developments. While clearly containing a number of truths, Fawcett stressed that one cannot blame everything on external actors. Much of what has occurred in the region over the last half a century was not the sole responsibility of external actors and local agency has played an important role in initiating indigenous movements and reactions for change.

It is therefore important to look back and problematize these narratives, stressed Fawcett, as they often deprive local actors of much agency and tend to relegate the Middle East to a kind of basket case of governance characterized by failed, failing or fragile states. However, if one looks closely at regional developments it is clear that there have been regional leaders and strong regional institutions that have had an influence over the historical



Louise Fawcett

development of the regional order in the Middle East. Egypt has long been the leader of the Arab world, and this leadership was challenged at times by Syria and Iraq. Today, meanwhile, power has shifted to the Arab Gulf states, Turkey, Israel and Iran, and it is these states that are influencing regional developments in a significant fashion, often pursuing policies that can be framed in terms of the search for security through the balancing of threats. These states are not “weak” and maintain a significant capacity to influence regional and even international developments to suit their interests.

What emerges from the above, is that the present regional order in the Middle East is very fragmented and competitive, lacking in organizing principles for conflict resolution and trust building which in turn has translated into reoccurring instability and conflict. It is in these domains that strong international players would do best to invest in an effort to restore a semblance of stability and cooperation in the region. At the international level, Fawcett pointed to a relative retrenchment of Western, or US, influence across the region, characterized by societal wariness for renewed and drawn out interventions in the region. This has only furthered the tendency of regional actors to pursue independent action to protect their perceived interests and security. It has also provided an opportunity for Russia, which has returned *en force* to the region and is today another major player to be contended with in the Middle East. It is indeed impossible to think about resolving many of the problems in the region without the active participation of Russia and these regional powers, a dynamic that seems to complicate efforts at stabilization and conflict resolution in the Middle East. In concluding her argument, Fawcett wished to focus on Europe, or rather the largely lacking role of the European Union in the Middle East. This vacuum is explained by Europe’s divisions and internal troubles but is particularly worrying as Europe is most exposed to spillovers from the turmoil in the Middle East, yet Europe’s actions and policies towards the region, particularly since 2010, have been disappointing and not reflective of Europe’s true potential in the area.

**Ian Lesser**, from the German Marshall Fund of the United States, provided a US perspective on contemporary developments in the region and began by seconding the point made by the previous speaker regarding the declining societal appetite

for US military interventions such as those that took place in Afghanistan or Iraq. Having said that, this tendency should not be conflated with an overall US disengagement from the region. In introducing his argument, Lesser, emphasized that the US is not a new or a-historical actor in the region, but has been in the Mediterranean for over 200 years, beginning with the Barbary wars of the early 19th century. The Mediterranean is indeed one of the



Ian Lesser

earliest places in which the US became involved for its security and economic interests. Moving to address the contemporary region, the speaker stressed that present circumstances do not provide room for grand strategy and long-term visions, but rather a period characterized by the balancing of threats and hedging against excessive risks. It may be termed a kind of crisis management, but in reality it is the challenge of seeking to deal with enduring chaos and instability in the region, complemented by an understanding that this instability will likely last well into the future. In this context, external powers are seeking to refocus their energies and resources to better match their narrow interests. From Washington this implies a downgraded focus on human rights and good governance and an enhanced emphasis on security and stability, particularly with regards to the threat of lone wolf attacks more or less inspired by the so-called Islamic State and terrorism more generally. With Trump in the White House the US is expected to pursue a more transactional approach to foreign policy, expecting partners in the region to shoulder more of the burden for their security interests. This can lead to further turmoil as regional relations are experiencing significant fluxes as a result of the broader uncertainty gripping the international system as a whole.

While the US seems likely to focus primarily on terrorism and ISIS, regional and international actors – including Russia and China – will themselves increase their influence in the region, adding to the fluidity and increasingly multipolar regional order in the MENA. China's unveiling of the One Belt One Road initiative will make it a major economic player in the region and as China's exposure to the Middle East increases, its leaders will also have to make some decisions as to how to encourage stability as a means to protect its investments. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Iran are other important players in the Middle East and each is striving to enhance its soft and hard power across the region in more or less open competition with the others. In concluding his argument Ian Lesser also pointed to the important interconnections between the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and its wider environs in Africa and Asia, which are likely to grow in importance in the near future as a result of enhanced spillovers from the regional conflicts in the Middle East.

In this context, the future of US policy in the Middle East will likely change but not reach a point of a complete disengagement. The style and tone will likely be different, as US administrations' seek to maintain hard power and "over the horizon" capabilities to support political and strategic objectives as a means to limit casualty risks or the threat of mission creep. What will remain to be seen is the degree of unilateralism that the US will pursue in this and other regions going forward. The US however will no doubt maintain very close relations with a number of key regional players, from Israel to Saudi Arabia but also including the Kurds in Syria that remain the most effective fighting force in the country and the only reliable US partner for the coming assault on ISIS's capital in Raqqa. In ending his talk, Lesser, wished to address the recent US strike in Syria on 7 April 2017, noting how in most respects this was the kind of reaction that one would have expected if Hillary Clinton or even Barack Obama was still in power and had an opportunity to replay the events of 2013. This shows how on the one hand there are important forces of continuity in US foreign policy but also demonstrates the degree in which domestic changes and societal wariness for renewed military contingencies are changing the US approach to the region, seeking new tools and approaches to limit the US's exposure while protecting its vital interests.

The final speaker in the panel, **Ekaterina Stepanova**, from the Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow, began her talk by noting that there was much overlap between the opinions expressed by previous speakers and her personal interpretation of contemporary developments in the MENA region. In this respect, the present crises gripping the Middle East is not new or recent, but can be traced back to at least the end of the last decade, and is an ongoing crisis that has other parallels in the history of the region. What is different today, is that these crises are occurring against the backdrop of a relative retrenchment of influence of major external actors and great powers, whereas those that have occurred before generally took place in a setting of growing external influence and leverage over local realities and developments. Today, traditional external actors are experiencing a period of relative decline, it is not a complete retrenchment from the region but a return to the kind of limited containment policy of the past. This is particularly true with regards to the Obama administration, which was described as generally fed-up with the Middle East and not able to keep pace with the fluidity of events or commit enough resources to influence and decisively affect these developments. With the Trump administration in power, there is much uncertainty as to what US policy may look like, but in general terms one can predict a degree of continuity from the past in that the three pillars of US policy in the region – support for Israel, protection of the Arabian Gulf and the fight against terrorism – will likely define the US's priorities in the future. This in turn can lead us to predict an increased tension with Iran, both as a result of the US's support for Israel and the Arab Gulf States', but more fundamentally reflects the growing weight domestic politics and interests will have over the articulation of US foreign policy in the region. While the US will be unlikely to engage in new prolonged military interventions in the Middle East, one will likely see sporadic demonstrative attempts by the US administration to use hard military means to backup political (both foreign and domestic) and diplomatic objectives. This was



very much on display in Trump's recent decision to bomb Syria.

In this context, European countries have been caught in between. On the one hand, the security of Europe is inseparable from the Middle East. Of all external regions, Europe is by far the most exposed to spillovers from the MENA, yet for decades European countries have simply followed US leadership and this is no longer present on most of the pressing issues. While there are objective limits to what Europe can do in the Mediterranean and Middle East – only very few countries have the necessary capabilities, interests and political will to engage in the region and even these have demonstrated their lack of strategic foresight in the context of the Libya intervention – there seems to be a belief in Europe that it will be enough to concentrate on its soft power, aid and institutional strength in the hope that other actors will take responsibility for the hard (in)security and politico-military questions impacting the Middle East. While such an approach may work in Syria, the same cannot be said about Libya, where much more involvement will be necessary in order to help stabilize the country. Against this backdrop of a relative Western decline of influence and leverage over developments in the Middle East, regional actors have significantly stepped up their activism and propensity for independent action, contributing to a significant regionalization of contemporary developments in the Middle East. The rising impact of regional actors is clearly evident in the context of Syria, where a grand bargain between the US and Russia may still be possible but would be entirely useless without a parallel agreement with regional actors who are themselves deeply involved in the conflict.

Moving to address the role of Russia in the Middle East over the past decade, Stepanova highlighted three characteristics that have largely defined Russian policy in the region. Beginning by noting that Russia's recent hyper-activism in the Middle East is an exception to the traditionally more hesitant role of Russia or the USSR in the region, the speaker emphasized how Russian Middle East policy has been defined by pragmatism, a non-ideological approach to diplomacy and political relations and a selective opportunism which has allowed Russia to maintain good relations with certain actors on a number of dossiers while simultaneously disagreeing on other issues and concerns. Russia's policy in Syria was described as a deviation from these concepts, but an exception that is likely to remain so in the future. Even following Russia's intervention in Syria however, the general pattern has remained. Over the past years, relations improved remarkably with Turkey to the point that the two countries are co-sponsoring the Astana peace talks and co-supervising the implementation of the ceasefire on the ground. This is the longest holding ceasefire in Syria's conflict and it is the first that also involves regional powers as active parties to the agreement.

Russia has also improved relations with Bahrain and even with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Another traditional constant of Russian policy in the region is that of maintaining good relations with *both* Israel and Iran, and Russia has recently even hosted intra-Palestinian talks in Moscow. Russia has also improved its relations with Egypt and both have helped General Haftar in Libya, while at the same time Russia continues to support the UN sponsored process on Libya and the

reconciliation of all political forces under the UN-supported government in Tripoli. In ending her talk, Stepanova wished to caution against the idea that some sort of grand bargain between external actors, or even the UN, can somehow help resolve such complex and overlapping conflicts and crises in the Middle East. In this respect, when talking of Syria, one can see four levels of complexity to the conflict: the international level; the regional level and the opposing views of regional powers; the need for internal power sharing agreements and reconciliation at the national level; and finally the need for more of the latter at the sub-local and sub-national level, among different communities, ethnicities and confessions. Out of the four layers of complexity, Stepanova concluded, it is not the international or the sub-national, local levels – where successive local ceasefires and agreements continue to hold – that are the most complicated to resolve. Rather, it is the regional level and national power agreement dimensions of the conflict that remain the most complex and intricate. Here, the only recipe that holds some potential for progress is that of multilateralism and slow processes of confidence building involving all parties to the conflict. In ending her talk, Stepanova concluded by emphasizing that all the talk of Russian support for General Haftar in Libya should not be mistaken to mean that Haftar is another Assad for Russia. Rather, Libya is a setting that needs urgent European involvement and leadership as well as multilateral action and support, concluded the speaker. The most successful agreements in the recent past – the Iranian Nuclear Deal and the UN-OPCW agreement on Syria's chemical weapons are two examples – were attained through multilateral action. While this may not be enough in such locations as Syria and Libya, it is the only promising avenue to pursue.

### Concluding Remarks

**Francesco Cavatorta**, from Laval University in Canada, opened the concluding session by thanking participants and the organizers for a stimulating and lively conference. Moving to provide a number of pointers for further thinking, Cavatorta stressed the need to look at the Middle East and regional states in a comparative perspective. This will help to understand that there is nothing unique to the region and that trends of overall state fragility are present in other countries and regions as well. Traditional forms of state capacity are changing and receding internationally and state-society relations are often growing more contentious. The Arab world and Middle East is experiencing these trends in a more pronounced and violent fashion due to a number of contingent drivers that are particularly pronounced in the area, namely a lack of democracy, strong institutions, the rule of law and poor socio-economic development. There is a paradox in the sense that internationally, the state has become increasingly present in the security sector and in micromanaging peoples' lives, realms where people would generally prefer to have less government intervention. Conversely, populations would prefer increased state involvement in managing the economy, providing services and creating jobs which instead are areas where the state has been increasingly losing ground and not performing as well as in the past. This is creating tension in state-society relations across the international level and not only in the Middle East,

where such tensions are no doubt more pronounced and violent.

Applying a comparative prism to developments in the Middle East and North Africa will in turn help to downgrade the importance of sectarianism and identity-based conflict to explain the present turmoil. Instead, this will direct the analysis to a greater appreciation of material drivers and socio-economic indicators as an explanation. In this respect, the Arab uprisings can indeed be framed as a mass protest movement driven by dynamics of class struggle and inequality against the affluent few in these societies. Interestingly, when one looks at the development of the protest movements in Tunisia, Egypt or Syria, the first instances of popular revolt came precisely from the most disadvantaged and poor areas of the country, mostly in the rural provinces and on the borderlines of state driven development. This is no coincidence and can help to reinforce the thesis that points to governance, socio-economic opportunities and the pressures of the international financial system as more convincing explanations for the breakdown of social contracts and state-society relations across much of the Arab Middle East. In concluding his remarks, Cavatorta wished to cite Giacomo Leopardi's concept of "Cosmic Pessimism" as a useful framework to apply to the region and perhaps more so to way international actors in Europe, the US and Russia have begun to look at the MENA. With violence and turmoil in the region likely to last well into the future, it is becoming increasingly hard to project an image of optimism for the Middle East and North Africa in the short-to-medium term. That said, Cavatorta concluded by noting that while much of our focus has revolved around the negative aspects that are occurring in the region, below the surface the Middle East also presents some positive movements of bottom-up change and resistance. It is here that one should look to begin building a more inclusive and sustainable regional order in the MENA.

The final speaker at the conference, **Edhem Eldem**, from the Boğaziçi University in Turkey, used his expertise of Turkey and Ottoman history to provide a number of insights to compliment the previous debates about the complex set of challenges presently gripping the Middle East. In focusing his talk on the importance of history and path dependency to help explain the present crises in the region, Eldem cited a UNESCO quote that reads: "you can only predict things after they have happened" to caution against an excessive focus on prescriptions for the future without first having a significant groundwork and knowledge of the past. History however should not be taken as destiny, stressed Eldem, who agreed with the opinion of a previous speaker who had noted how history itself can become a sort of straitjacket, constraining and obscuring potential new modes of relation and policy. While the concept of sectarian identity, "minority" and "majority" and the concept of the modern nation state were indeed alien to the region, and in this sense are constructed realities, these have gradually become engrained and do have a significant impact on regional interactions and developments. Eldem further wished to caution against a tendency that seeks to idealize and embellish the memory of the Ottoman period, which the speaker described as very harsh and repressive, particularly when the threat of insurrection or revolt came close to the seat of power in Istanbul (i.e. in the Balkans and in Anatolia).

In this respect, Eldem noted how the development of the modern Turkish state can itself be described as general trend of continuity from the late Ottoman period, when Ottoman elites embarked on a period of reform and reorganization based on the principles of nationalism and the goal of homogenizing society through repression and brute force in an effort to establish a strong and centralized state. This principle of the state has remained in modern Turkey, throughout the Cold War and into the post-Cold War era when the current AKP government secured its first electoral victory in 2002. This process of consolidating central authority in the hands of the leader is not something peculiar to the AKP however. Every Turkish government has had a tendency to see politics as a competition to conquer the state and its resources. The AKP however has now been in power for many years and has progressed considerably towards this goal. In ending his talk, Eldem made two final considerations. The first revolved around the notion of Turkey being a “strong” state, while the second rested on the need to consider Turkey – and what is happening in Turkish politics and society – as part and parcel of what is occurring throughout the broader MENA region. In this respect, Turkey should not only be considered as an external actor in Syria, Iraq or in the broader Middle East, but is in fact an active contributor to these conflicts that in turn are having significant reverberations in Turkey itself. Finally, while Turkey is generally described as a strong and centralized state, the speaker emphasized that the power of the Gulen movement and the recent coup attempt against the AKP government should serve as a reminder of the fragility of the Turkish state and institutions, which absent the military as the traditional guardians of the Republican ideals of the state, cannot be described as either strong or stable.

*Updated 12 May 2017*



## Conference Programme

Bologna, 11 April 2017

### Opening Session

#### *Welcome Greetings*

**Michael G. Plummer**, The Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna

**Lorenzo Kamel**, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome / University of Freiburg's Institute for Advanced Studies

**Raffaella Del Sarto**, The Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna

#### *Introductory Remarks*

**Emiliano Alessandri**, OSCE, Vienna

**Massimo Carnelos**, Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

**Nicolò Russo Perez**, Compagnia di San Paolo, Turin

### Session I

#### *Terms and Concepts in Historical Perspective*

A number of dichotomies (e.g. success and failure, change and continuity, religious and secular) and concepts (e.g. order, sectarianism, citizenship, minorities, power) are commonly used to address and analyze what large parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are currently experiencing. The first panel addresses the importance of history and path dependency, thus putting commonly used terms and concepts in a historical context. The discussion will trace ongoing dynamics back to major historical junctures in which key powers and events shaped what the region is experiencing at present.

Chair **Marwan Bishara**, Al Jazeera Media Network, Cairo

Panelists **Beth Baron**, City University of New York

**Isa Blumi**, Stockholm University

**Lorenzo Kamel**, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome / University of Freiburg's Institute for Advanced Studies

**Nora Lafi**, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin

### Session II

#### *Regional Order, Borders, and the Frailty of Authority*

It is often claimed that the state system in the MENA region is in crisis and that the "Sykes-Picot order" is being reshaped to reflect realities on the ground. Institutions have collapsed, civil and proxy wars are ravaging in the

region, and the gulf between rulers and ruled is wider than ever. But how new is the phenomenon of weak states and arbitrary/elusive boundaries in the region? What are the historical roots of the phenomenon of failing and failed states and the all too common reality of weak and dysfunctional governance? By focusing on these questions, the panel will aim to ascertain whether on-going convulsions, including the rise of non-state actors, are to be taken as a sign that the regional state system is still forming or is, on the contrary, already doomed to demise.

Chair **David C. Unger**, The Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna

Panelists **Raffaella Del Sarto**, The Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna

**Patrick Cockburn**, The Independent, London

**Beverley Milton-Edwards**, Queen's University Belfast

**Bahgat Korany**, American University in Cairo

### Session III

#### *The Role of International and Regional Actors*

The political, economic and security interests of international and regional actors have traditionally shaped regional dynamics in the MENA region. In addition to the traditional involvement of the US and Europe, Russia, the Arab Gulf monarchies, Iran, and China, have in recent years stepped up their engagement. The changing mix of external actors and their evolving role in some of the local crises has possibly further complicated the stability and the security-related dynamics in the region. What is new in the role that extra-regional players are playing in the region? What are the dynamics of external involvement? In light of a highly mixed historical legacy, what are the chances that extra-regional actors become constructive elements of a future regional security equation?

Chair **Ettore Greco**, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome

Panelists **Louise Fawcett**, Oxford University, Oxford

**Ian Lesser**, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Brussels

**Ekaterina Stepanova**, Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Moscow

### Concluding Remarks

**Francesco Cavatorta**, Laval University, Québec

**Edhem Eldem**, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul

### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, the IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. The IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affari Internazionali*), two series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Papers*) and other papers' series related to IAI research projects.

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- 17 | 06 Lorenzo Vai, *EU60: Re-founding Europe. The Responsibility to Propose*
- 17 | 05 Bianca Benvenuti, *The Refugee Debate in Central and Eastern Europe: Can the EU-Turkey Deal Survive Without Intra EU Convergence on Relocation and Resettlement?*
- 17 | 04 Giuseppe Spatafora, *Geopolitical Dynamics and Regionalism in East Asia*
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