THE MIRAGE OF REGIONALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA POST-2011

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ABSTRACT

Existing regional cooperation platforms in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are internally fragmented and largely ineffective. Focusing on the League of Arab States, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab Maghreb Union, this paper discusses attempts to re-energize and instrumentalize existing regional organizations following the Arab uprisings. It shows that regional developments at the time provided significant opportunities for regional cooperative security mechanisms to emerge, resulting in an exceptional but brief period of activism by these organizations. As the mirage of regionalism quickly faded, intra-regional rivalries, in a period of pronounced uncertainty, led to the eventual failure to foster any significant regional cooperation. While internal divisions are currently threatening the very survival of the GCC, new and potentially short-lived forms of cooperation have been emerging, with bilateral alliances between like-minded regimes becoming prominent. MENA is an increasingly fragmented but simultaneously interconnected region, as exemplified by the mismatch between failed regionalism and a growing regionalization. Concurrently, the contours of MENA regional dynamics are becoming increasingly blurred as sub-regions are transformed into the borderlands of specific regional cores, with some players in the Gulf emerging as such cores.

INTRODUCTION

It is often noted that regionalism is not well developed in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): existing regional cooperation platforms have remained largely ineffective, political integration is lacking and the level of regional trade has remained low (e.g. Aarts 1999, Salloukh and Brynen 2004, Harders and Legrenzi 2008, Korany 2013, Fawcett 2013). Thus, although the MENA region has witnessed a proliferation of regional cooperation mechanisms since the mid-1940s, with the Arab League being the oldest functioning regional organization worldwide, there is a clear mismatch between the levels of formalized cooperation and the level of regional integration. Even the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), formerly heralded as the most successful sub-regional cooperation forum, is experiencing a severe crisis prompted by the boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

The paper assesses the extent to which the uprisings provided opportunities for regional organizations to play a greater political role and the ways in which they amplified tensions among the organizations' members, eventually preventing them from becoming politically relevant. While

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we consider the 2011 Arab uprisings an important turning point, we maintain that subsequent regional developments opened a significant window of opportunity for regional cooperation and cooperative security mechanisms that previously had been closed (Malmvig 2013: 30, Beck 2015). But the uprisings also increased the level of regime insecurity amid shifting threat perceptions, thus modifying the preferences of the different actors when dealing with regional organizations. Thus, as the mirage of regionalism quickly faded, political developments in the region after 2011 hindered the emergence of regional integration and cooperation in the medium to long term.

Examining the roles played by regional organizations in the MENA region post-Arab uprisings highlights the mismatch between weak regionalism, that is, regional integration steered by political elites, and growing regionalization trends, that is, the growing societal and partly cultural interconnectedness of the region. During the uprisings, Arab populations – together with events in the region – became increasingly interconnected. While this development for a brief period overlapped with regional cooperation initiatives undertaken by political leaders, the divergent interests of key Arab regimes and their concern with their own survival in a threatening regional environment meant that regionalism and regionalization soon parted ways. The paper thus shows that the uprisings prompted a number of important changes in the regional order, temporarily forging some political regional cooperation but eventually preventing the development of any meaningful regionalism. Concurrently, the factors that had traditionally limited regional integration remained in place and even increased in strength.

The paper, which is based on extensive fieldwork in Riyadh and Cairo, focuses on three very different regional organizations – the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab Maghreb Union – while also considering overlapping regional cooperation initiatives on the African continent. Despite their distinct nature, most of these organizations adopted a proactive role in the early days of the uprisings and in the initial periods of the erupting conflicts in Libya and Syria. But they all soon either reverted to their traditional low-profile political role or, as in the case of the GCC, experienced an outright crisis.

1. THE ARAB UPRISINGS: ENCOURAGING OR PREVENTING REGIONAL COOPERATION?

The popular protests that led to the ousting of several long-lasting Arab autocrats certainly ushered in a period of transition in the MENA region, with the outbreak of civil war in Syria, Libya and Yemen only increasing the level of instability and uncertainty. At least temporarily, these developments seemed to encourage a number of actors to seek greater regional cooperation via the established regional organizations. But the Arab uprisings and their aftermath also affected the regional order in a number of significant ways, which actually prevented the emergence of regionalism in the medium to long term. Most importantly, the region has witnessed a number of important power shifts and reconfigurations, together with the emergence of new conflicts. These have been described as the "New Middle East Cold War" (Gause 2014), the "New Arab Cold War" (Valbjørn and Bank 2012, Ryan 2012), the "New Arab Wars" (Lynch 2016) and "intersecting conflicts" (Hiltermann 2017). An increased sense of regime vulnerability, the manipulation of collective identities (most notably the Sunni–Shia divide), the emergence of different jihadi groups,

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together with the competition between Islamism and pan-Arabism for popular support (which the former seemed to win) soon prompted a competition for hegemony among regional powers while providing new opportunities for a number of global and regional actors to meddle even more in Middle Eastern affairs. Concurrently, whenever actors were not able to take full control of already established organizations, they promoted alternative forms of regional cooperation, resulting in a proliferation of "liquid alliances" (Soler i Lecha 2017).

Significantly, other key features of the regional order that have contributed to the weakness of regionalism in the Middle East remain unchanged. Most Arab regimes continue to be characterized by weak domestic sovereignty and a lack of legitimacy, which in some cases only intensified (e.g. Hudson 2015, Salloukh 2015, Del Sarto 2017, Fawcett 2017). Equally, the region remains dominated by inward-looking coalitions (Solingen 2007, 2015), marked by a reliance on economic self-sufficiency, state and military entrepreneurship, illiberalism and nationalism. In some cases, for example in Egypt, the role of the military has become even more entrenched. Importantly, the introduction of neo-liberal economic reforms in the MENA region in recent decades has not resulted in the emergence of "regionalizing logics" in most cases. While the reforms led to the restructuring of political and economic power around neo-liberal cliques (Guazzone and Pioppi 2009), the basic features of the old model, including corruption and rent-seeking patterns, have been maintained (Solingen 2015). At the same time, most MENA states have remained preoccupied with regime survival: insecurity and threat perceptions still appear to be the main drivers of cooperation and conflict in the MENA region post-Arab uprisings (Ryan 2015), with the collapse of several Arab regimes only reinforcing the sense of insecurity among those who have survived.

A final factor to consider is the role of institutions and their relationship to shared cultural or social norms. Given the existence of a number of formal institutions and the high degree of societal and cultural interconnectedness, the weakness of regionalism in MENA is not supportive of the main tenets of socialization and practice approaches (e.g. Adler and Pouliot 2011, Checkel 2001). The long history of the Arab League in particular, which was built around a (real or invented) sense of shared identity and pan-Arabism as a political exercise, indicates that institutionalized cooperation does not necessarily forge common practices and processes of social learning. Or, alternatively, it is possible that common practices at the institutional level may have emerged but that they were not "thick" or meaningful enough to generate change in the form of peaceful and cooperative relations among members. In this context, two propositions are relevant. The first one is the need to differentiate between regionalism as a deliberate and conscious policy of states and regionalization as the outcome of processes of societal or economic interaction (Hurrell 1995, Harders and Legrenzi 2008). In the Arab Middle East, processes of regionalization, usually based on, or facilitated by, a common language, certainly occur. Highly integrated media markets, the circulation of people and weapons, and the existence of transnational networks of various types (including Islamist networks, jihadi groups, migrant labour communities and refugees) are certainly important indicators. What is more, during and after the Arab uprisings, the societal and cultural interconnectedness of Arab populations seemed to increase, as noted above. The "Al-Jazeera effect", the role of social media and the interlinkage of events in the region during the uprisings are cases in point (Lynch 2014, 2016). The level of regionalism, however, has remained low, in spite of the temporary increase in regional political initiatives. The second proposition validated by the Arab uprisings and their aftermath is that a shared regional identity

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and a sense of "we-ness" – whether given or arising as a product of social learning – are not sufficient conditions for the emergence of *efficient* collective regional institutions. However, accelerated processes of regionalization during the Arab uprisings may have exerted additional pressure on MENA governments to engage in regional cooperation, at least temporarily. In any event, both propositions highlight the importance of political entrepreneurs and agency, which may strategically employ the sense of "we-ness" on the one hand, and existing institutions on the other hand, to forge regional cooperation.

2. THE ARAB LEAGUE: BACK TO NORMAL

For a relatively short period of time (primarily in 2011 and early 2012) the Arab League played an important political role by taking a stance on the domestic affairs of some of its members, particularly Syria and Libya. In doing so, the organization sought to raise its profile, enhance its reputation and bolster its influence. Yet as the conflicts escalated and key regional players, including members of the League, increasingly interfered in these conflicts, the organization was forced to temper its ambitions. Thus the League was once again hampered by its historical shortcomings: limited autonomy, paralysis due to lack of agreement among member states and, consequently, political irrelevance.

To what extent was the Arab League's activism in the early days of the Arab uprisings a departure from its traditional position and modus operandi? What motivated it to become involved? And why did it revert to its customary irrelevance soon thereafter?

A bit of history may be helpful here. The League of Arab States (LAS), often referred to as the Arab League, was created in 1945 by six countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia). Its membership was subsequently expanded to include twenty-two countries that share, with some nuances, a common cultural and linguistic background. Although the organization's original aim was to achieve unity among Arabs, its Charter emphasizes not only respect for, but also protection of, the independence and sovereignty of member states. Thus, the LAS was designed not to transcend a state-centric order but rather to preserve and solidify it.

The Palestinian issue played a central role in the inception and evolution of the LAS, with the perception of a common "Zionist threat" acting as an external motivator. Interestingly, at critical moments Arab summits have served to project a joint vision, for example the "three No's" agreed upon in the 1967 Khartoum summit; the 1976 Cairo summit, where leaders agreed to deploy a peacekeeping mission in Lebanon; and the 2002 summit in Beirut, which endorsed the Arab Peace Initiative.[2] The League was also involved in efforts to resolve a number of regional conflicts, including the Yemeni civil war in the 1960s and the Lebanese civil war. According to Marco Pinfari (2009: 17), these two cases affirm that despite its shortcomings, the LAS is the "institutional arrangement that [...] contributed mo[re] clearly to conflict resolution in the Middle East". In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the LAS sought to become more involved in conflict resolution in Darfur and Somalia, efforts in which it increasingly tried to join forces with the African Union.

2   With the Arab Peace Initiative, the 22 members of the LAS offered full peace to Israel in exchange for the country's full withdrawal to the 1967 borders.

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Despite these attempts to serve as a mediator and to de-escalate conflicts in its own region, the history of the LAS is one in which animosity among regional powers and overlapping regional cleavages have not only prevented any significant progress in regional integration but have become insurmountable obstacles to cooperation. On many occasions, Arab League summits have served as forums for Arab countries to advance diverging and even conflicting positions and to attack one another.[3] Regional power competition, together with external interference, domestic politics and the nature of the regional economy, are the main factors explaining "the fitful progress of cooperative efforts at the regional level" as identified by Louise Fawcett (2013: 194). They also account for the fact that "[d]espite the potential benefits of functional cooperation, evident in areas such as resource management or regional labour markets, few durable achievements resulted" (Fawcett 2013: 194).

The Arab uprisings undoubtedly gave the LAS a new lease on life, prompting a radical departure from its traditional non-interventionist stance. In Libya, it called for the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to establish a no-fly zone, providing regional legitimation for Resolution 1973. This resolution authorized the international community not only to establish a no-fly zone but also to use all means necessary (except foreign occupation) to protect civilians. The Arab League thus lent legitimacy to "Western intervention", that is, NATO airstrikes, in a fellow Arab country that would lead to regime collapse. Daniel Wajner and Arie Kacowizc (2018: 514) have compared the Arab League's role in legitimating action in Libya and in Bahrain, concluding that "[t]he Arab League proved to be the key identified provider of consensus during the respective uprisings thereby legitimizing regimes, political opposition, and foreign military interventions".

In the case of Syria, the League suspended the country's membership in November 2011 against the backdrop of the Assad regime's brutal crackdown on demonstrators and imposed sanctions on the regime.[4] It also sent a monitoring and mediating mission to Syria (the mission's 145 members were forced to repatriate in January 2012). Simultaneously, it drafted a transition plan that was, however, rejected by the UNSC, and in March 2013, during the Doha summit, it went a step further by inviting Syria's opposition coalition to take the country's seat.

Several factors explain the League's exceptional activism in those conflicts. Firstly, the growing influence of the Gulf countries – mainly Saudi Arabia, but also Qatar in this period – turned the League into a platform to confront long-term rivals. The growing influence of these two countries was facilitated by the fact that the Egyptian authorities were absent because they were preoccupied with domestic affairs. In the case of Libya, a key element was the animosity of the Gulf countries towards Gaddafi himself.[5] On Syria, the Gulf countries looked at the League as one among many instruments in their quest to reduce Iran's regional influence, do away with old enemies and

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3 The most noticeable case was the decision to suspend Egypt's LAS membership and the transfer of the headquarters of the organization from Cairo to Tunis in response to Egypt's signature of the Camp David agreements with Israel.

4 Nineteen out of the 22 members adopted a package of sanctions that include a travel ban against senior officials, a freeze on Syrian government assets, a ban on transactions with Syria's central bank and an end to commercial exchanges. Iraq abstained, Lebanon dissociated from these sanctions and Algeria expressed some reservations.

5 Several interviewees working in the League or with the League confirmed this point. Interviews conducted in Cairo, February 2018.

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support emerging potential allies in neighbouring countries. Secondly, the emergence of a new regional threat – Daesh – pushed some Arab countries to join forces. Thirdly, the personality, or the ambition, of the LAS secretary-general arguably played a role. Amr Moussa, who left the League in June 2011 after ten years in office, had tried for many years to raise the profile of the LAS, and the Arab uprisings seemed to provide the perfect opportunity to do so. In this context, some insiders have suggested that Moussa's plans to play an active role in Egyptian politics (he was a candidate in the 2012 presidential elections) also prompted the League's heightened activism in regional conflicts.[6] Martin Beck (2015: 197) suggests that the appointment of Nabil Elaraby, a jurist who had served on the International Court of Justice and as a minister in the first post-Mubarak cabinet, was also central to the League's change of attitude and declaratory policy. Finally, it is no coincidence that the League's first action in this context, that is, to call for a no-fly zone in Libya, was taken a few days after another regional organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council, issued a similar statement. This can be explained either as an attempt to assert its own role, as a convergence of views between the two organizations or as a combination of both.

The League's actions were certainly driven by the interests of some of its powerful member states – primarily Saudi Arabia but, to a certain extent, Qatar as well. However, its new interventionism still reflected "a change in both its initial conception and its general behaviour" (Korany 2013: 93). It is significant here that the selective support for regime change in Libya and Syria was a slippery slope for the remaining autocratic regimes, considering the popular protests in the region and their own lack of legitimacy. The new position of the League thus represented a rather dramatic change. Marwan Muasher (2012) argued that

> the Arab League can be reformed to enhance its role in the development of the new Arab world. Such reforms have been attempted in the past, but have always been stymied by a stubbornly persistent Arab system that did not want to depart from the status quo or cede sovereignty to the Arab League, or anyone else. This is now changing.

Yet the experiment was short-lived and those hopes soon began to fade as the League gradually reverted to its traditional role. A number of factors account for this development. Perhaps most importantly, incumbent regimes felt increasingly insecure and perceived their neighbours as rivals and potential threats to their own survival. The most obvious example was the rising tension between Qatar and Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and between Qatar and Egypt on the other, due to accusations that Doha was supporting Muslim Brotherhood affiliates across the region. Sporadic upticks in tension between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, particularly in 2015 and 2016, also acted as a major obstacle. Another factor was the long-standing rivalries between Arab states, which undermined the League's ability to play a greater role, as had happened many times previously. In this situation, alternative and non-institutionalized forms of cooperation, such as the Saudi-led Decisive Storm operation and the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) – sometimes referred to as the Islamic Military Alliance (IMA)[7] – started to gain prominence.

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6   Interview with a diplomat from the Arab League, Cairo, February 2018.

7   This initiative lacks a founding treaty and its internal governance is opaque. It defines itself as a "willing coalition of 41 countries that forms a pan-Islamic unified front in the global fight against terrorism and violent extremism". See the official website: https://imctc.org/English.

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In conclusion, the Arab uprisings provided a real opportunity for the LAS to play a greater role, and for a short period of time its activities marked a radical departure from its traditional positions and modalities. But power shifts and an increased sense of vulnerability generated intra-Arab competition, reinforced pre-existing rivalries and created new ones, thus pushing the LAS "back to normal". With the diverging strategies and interests of its member states reducing the League's space to manoeuvre, the organization soon limited itself to expressions of support for the mediation carried out by others in the conflicts in Syria and Libya. A similar pattern emerged with regard to the crisis between Qatar and its neighbours, in which the League formally backed the mediation efforts of Kuwait.

3. THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL: THE SUCCESS STORY BECOMES COLLATERAL DAMAGE

In comparison with the recurring crises faced by the Arab League and the Arab Maghreb Union, the GCC stood out as the best performing regional organization in the MENA. The relatively small number of member countries, the strong family and cultural ties among them, shared security threats, similar governing structures and a relatively homogeneous socio-economic context were among the factors facilitating a greater level of cooperation (or even integration) among its members (Legrenzi 2015). But while the GCC played a proactive role in the early days of the Arab uprisings, the deep crisis that has affected the organization more recently has demonstrated that common societal and cultural norms and features are not sufficient to guarantee a robust level of regional cooperation and institutional strength. In order to understand the GCC's initial reaction to the various crises since 2011, the more recent clash among its members and the impact of the post-Arab uprisings dynamic on the organization, it is useful to briefly describe the origins and functioning of the GCC.

The GCC was formed in May 1981 amid an extremely turbulent regional context: it was founded two years after the Islamic revolution in Iran and the concurrent rise to power of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and shortly after the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War in 1980. These events and circumstances pushed the Arab Gulf monarchies together as they tried to establish coordination and solidarity mechanisms among them, mainly vis-à-vis the threat of Iran (while excluding Iraq).

Some peculiarities of the GCC are worth mentioning. Firstly, although security concerns (both in terms of regional security and regime security) are among the main drivers of the creation of the GCC, the organization's founding charter puts great emphasis on economic and social cooperation while avoiding security in the list of the fields of cooperation.[8] Cooperation on security matters would only become visible with the decision to create the Peninsula Shield Force in 1984. This force, often depicted as the military arm of the GCC, was intended to deter, and respond to, military aggression against any of the GCC member countries. Secondly, the GCC countries have actually managed to achieve a significant degree of economic integration among themselves. In 1981, the GCC heads of state ratified a comprehensive Unified Economic Agreement, which paved the way for the establishment of a free trade area that included liberalization of the movement of capital and people. Other projects, such as the customs union, the single currency and the establishment

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8   See Chapter 4 of the GCC Charter.

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of a central bank, have been put on hold, in part due to diverging economic interests but more importantly because of the fear among some of the smaller countries that Saudi Arabia would try to play a dominant role.[9] Thirdly, member states have considered the organization a useful platform for defending their national interests. National priorities have been referred to as "GCC matters" in order to strengthen claims or to gain legitimacy vis-à-vis third parties. An example is the United Arab Emirates' demand that its territorial disputes with Iran be considered a GCC matter and not a purely bilateral issue. Fourthly, international players have regarded the GCC either as a single actor or as a consistent bloc of countries, particularly (but not exclusively) in the realm of trade.[10]

Like the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council bolstered its political profile in the post-2011 context. In March 2011 the regime in Bahrain, for instance, requested the deployment of the GCC's military arm, the Peninsula Shield Force, to crack down on the country's domestic protest movement. One month later, the GCC also led efforts to mediate in Yemen and, after overcoming many hurdles, it managed to secure President Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation in September 2011. It is also relevant that on 7 March 2011, the GCC foreign affairs ministers urged the UNSC to establish a no-fly zone over Libya, a few days before the LAS did the same, as mentioned above. This move illustrated the organization's new ambition to act as a regional platform instead of a sub-regional one. The GCC's interventionist position on Libya developed as the organization was debating whether to deepen its level of integration to transform the GCC into a "Gulf Union" and to widen its membership to include two non-Gulf Arab monarchies, Morocco and Jordan. This was seen as a "strong indicator that the GCC is already about to break the chains of 'sub-regionalism'" (Beck 2015: 202). Both of these moves, strongly backed by Saudi Arabia, can also be seen as attempts to better equip themselves to resist the winds of change blowing in the region as well as to guard against possible attempts by Iran to interfere in the domestic affairs of the Gulf countries and their neighbours. Indeed, these initiatives were a reaction to the Gulf states' perceived insecurity in the context of the popular protests sweeping the region and the alleged subversive meddling by Iran in the Shia'-majority country Bahrain. In this light, the GCC members deemed the suppression of the protests in Bahrain to be the result of their successful collective action against them.

In the end, none of these initiatives materialized. Smaller states, in particular Oman, expressed strong reservations about the planned transformation of the GCC. Oman feared that enlarging the GCC could undermine its economic interests and that the project of the Gulf Union, particularly if piloted by Riyadh, would reduce its foreign policy autonomy.[11] In 2016, during the Manama summit, there was a second attempt to revamp these plans, but once again smaller states such as Oman and Kuwait expressed their opposition. Interestingly, Qatar neither vehemently opposed nor

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9   It is worth mentioning that the United Arab Emirates, purportedly Riyadh's closet ally, vocally opposed the project to establish the single currency and the creation of the central bank, mainly because Saudi Arabia was intended to be the headquarters of the institution.

10   For the European Union, for instance, the upgrading of the EU–GCC trade agreement is one of the main priorities in the Gulf. This is also the case for the UK in a post-Brexit scenario, as London is trying to negotiate a GCC–UK agreement. Beyond economic issues, it is worth mentioning that in 2015 the USA started holding regular US–GCC summits. The meetings were interrupted by the boycott against Qatar but, should the crisis be resolved, they may well resume.

11   In 2013 Muscat even threatened to quit the organization; the GCC secretary-general, Abdullatif Al Zayani, maintained that Oman's opposition would not prevent the other five states from forming a union.

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supported the project.

Their inability to find a compromise on the future development of the GCC was evidence of the depth of the divisions among its members. The level of mistrust had increased in parallel with the more assertive and confrontational policies of three of its members, that is, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, undermining the cohesion of the bloc. The deadlock on the deepening and widening of regional integration within the GCC was a prelude to the much bigger crisis that began in June 2017. In a surprise move, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt cut off diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed travel and trade bans. They justified this boycott by accusing Doha of supporting terrorist activities and interfering in the internal affairs of other Arab countries. The basis for these accusations was Qatar's traditional support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which a number of countries (mainly Saudi Arabia and Egypt) now considered a serious threat, together with Doha's relatively friendly relations with Iran. The new cosy ties between US President Donald Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman were probably an enabling factor as well (despite Qatar hosting the largest US military base in the Middle East). Trump's warm support for the Saudi regime somewhat reversed Riyadh's feeling of betrayal in the wake of President Barack Obama's signing of the nuclear deal with Tehran in 2015. Qatar felt that the list of thirteen conditions it was expected to meet in order to have the boycott lifted, including closing the influential TV network Al-Jazeera, was aimed at forcing the incumbent regime to its knees, and all sorts of rumours of a palace or even a military coup started to circulate. Doha vowed to resist the pressure, and it received support from other regional powers, including Turkey and, perhaps ironically, Iran. Although the GCC had experienced crises previously, and although the members of the organization had previously confronted Qatar, the intensity of this crisis was unprecedented.

As an organization, the GCC could do little to de-escalate the crisis among its members. Instead, it suffered the consequences. The spat among the GCC states and what has been called the "exclusionary turn in GCC politics" (Ulrichsen 2018) put into question the basic principles on which the organization was founded. It also put an end to the idea that the GCC was a far more cohesive organization, and thus one with greater potential, than the other regional platforms, such as the Arab League and the Arab Maghreb Union.

The GCC activism in regional affairs (Libya, Bahrain and Yemen) from 2011 to 2013, followed by the outbreak of its internal crisis from 2017 onwards, speaks volumes about the changing power and securitization dynamics in the MENA region as well as the diverging interests of GCC members. The regional dynamics exhibit five main patterns. Firstly, from 2011 onwards the perception of regime insecurity increased noticeably. Incumbent regimes identified popular unrest as well as political interference by neighbouring countries, such as Iran, as an existential threat. In some cases, the rising level of mistrust directed towards domestic actors also included members of royal families, whose loyalty was questioned. Secondly, while Saudi Arabia still perceives itself as a sub-regional hegemon in the Arab Gulf, it has stepped up its regional role post-Arab uprisings, together with its confrontational stance vis-à-vis Iran. Concurrently, Riyadh acknowledges the need to work together with other actors, such as the United Arab Emirates, to counter perceived threats to regime security. Thirdly, the UAE has emerged as an increasingly influential player and also as a very dynamic and audacious one, ready to explore new modalities of cooperation and

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bypass formal mechanisms when these do not meet its priorities. Fourthly, Qatar actively defies the demands of Saudi Arabia and its Emirati allies but does not perceive the GCC as the correct arena in which to fight the battle. Finally, smaller countries such as Kuwait and Oman are willing to preserve the GCC as it once was, yet their influence is limited.[12]

Thus, to sum up, as in the case of the Arab League, the Arab uprisings provided an opportunity for the GCC, the most integrated and cohesive organization in the MENA region at the time, to increase its political role. And, as in the case of the LAS, this new activism reflected the preferences of some of its powerful member states, which, in this case, was the maintenance of the status quo. But it was the increased sense of insecurity post-Arab uprisings, coupled with the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the one hand, and between Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the other hand, which eventually brought this development to an abrupt end. Prompting a discussion on the risks of disintegration of the GCC or, at best, its transformation into an empty shell, the case of the GCC also illustrates once more the need to differentiate between regionalization and regionalism.

4. MEANWHILE, IN THE MAGHREB: THE LONG-LASTING ALGERIAN–MOROCCO RIVALRY AND THE PARALYSIS OF THE ARAB MAGHREB UNION

The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) was founded in 1989 with the Treaty of Marrakech, backed by the heads of state of Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.[13] It occurred after "a number of abortive attempts in previous decades to institutionalize various schemes for forms of integration" (Tripp 1995: 295). In fact, well before the AMU was launched, the idea of Maghrebi cooperation and integration was reflected in the constitutions of these states.[14] The economic incentives for pursuing integration were (and continue to be) great, particularly as a larger common Maghreb market would be far more attractive to investors than five relatively small and disconnected markets (e.g. Haufbauer and Brunel 2008, Ghilès 2010, Abis 2014). Hence, the failure of this project is even more obvious when these potential benefits are taken into account.

While the de-escalation of regional rivalries and timid political openings provided a window of opportunity for regional integration in the late 1980s, in the following two decades a series of events condemned the AMU to remaining a dormant and dysfunctional institution. These included the closure of the Moroccan–Algerian border in 1994, the lack of progress in resolving the Western Sahara conflict, the international sanctions imposed on Libya in 1992 due to its proved involvement

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12 Interviews with a retired official from a GCC country, Riyadh, December 2017.

13 Miguel Hernando de Larramendi (2008: 179) explains that "[t]he easing of tension between Libya and Tunisia following Habib Bourguiba's removal from office on 7 November 1987, and the resumption of diplomatic relations between Algeria and Morocco in May 1988 after a 12-year hiatus, paved the way for the project's advancement". It also coincided with timid political openings in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. In addition, Melanie Cammett (1999: 392) describes the "decision to focus on mutual economic concerns rather than divisive political issues" as a defensive reaction to the Mediterranean enlargement of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the fear that this could erode the benefits of the association status of the Maghreb countries.

14 Although the 1959 Tunisian constitution was the most explicit, affirming in its article 2 that "the Republic of Tunisia is a part of the Great Arab Maghreb, an entity which it endeavors to unify within the framework of mutual interests", there are references to the unity of the Maghreb peoples in the 1976 Algerian constitution and statements on the belonging of Morocco to the Great Maghreb since the country recovered its independence.

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in the Lockerbie terrorist attack, Mauritania's unilateral decision to establish relations with Israel in 1999, the civil war in Algeria and the authoritarian regression in Tunisia under Ben Ali. These developments revealed the limits of regional solidarity and frustrated the short-lived hopes of political integration in the Maghreb.

Did the Arab uprisings change the parameters of regional cooperation in the Maghreb? In fact, there were some attempts to resuscitate the AMU, together with calls to improve bilateral relations among some of its members. As stated by Anuar Boukhars (2018: 9), "[t]here was hope that the tectonic events of the 2011 Arab revolts would bring the region to its senses". For instance, in July 2011, the King of Morocco, on the occasion of the anniversary of his coronation, called for an improvement in relations with Algeria and advocated a reopening of the border between the two countries. Despite some positive diplomatic responses from Algiers, however, a reconciliation between the two countries did not materialize. On the contrary, Algerian–Moroccan relations subsequently deteriorated, as illustrated by the incidents that took place on their shared border in 2014.[15]

Concurrently, it is worth noting that in 2012 the then recently appointed President of Tunisia, Moncef Marzouki, tried to resuscitate the AMU. Marzouki toured the region and expressed his willingness to host a Maghreb summit in Tunisia in 2012. Following a meeting of the UMA ministers of foreign affairs in February in Rabat, hopes were raised that perhaps the UMA was emerging out "of its lethargy and setting out new regional dynamics" (Zoubir 2012b: 97). It soon became clear, however, that Marzouki's plans had not been met with the same enthusiasm in the other capitals of the region and hopes for the AMU's renewal faded.

In a very comprehensive article, Miguel Hernando de Larramendi (2018) attributes this failure to changing threat perceptions in Algiers and Rabat. The perception of shared threats in the face of pro-democratic revolts "fostered a 'defensive détente' between the Moroccan and Algerian regimes", but when those threats receded "the bilateral rivalry returned with even more strength, blocking any advance in the Maghrebi regional integration project" (Hernando de Larramendi 2018: 19). Since then the attention of both Morocco and Algeria turned toward the Sahel.

In the meantime, the terrorist threat and the instability in Libya and the Sahel provided incentives for renewed bilateral cooperation between Algiers and Tunis, as both countries tried to contain security threats and avoid regional spill-over.[16] In contrast, Morocco began to recognize opportunities provided by the new situation. The removal of Gaddafi left a vacuum in African politics that allowed Rabat to intensify its presence in Africa. As Nizar Messari (2018) explains, Morocco's Africa policy is characterized by an emphasis on the economy, a conscious attempt to reach far beyond the traditional francophone circles and the personal involvement of King Mohamed VI. As a result, Morocco attempted to strengthen its bilateral relations with countries that were previously

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15 The most important one was the shootings on the border on 18 October 2014. According to Morocco, the Algerian army was responsible for injuring a Moroccan citizen; Rabat called for an explanation of the incident and the Algerian ambassador was summoned to the capital of the kingdom.

16 Among the incidents that contributed to the heightened threat perceptions were the kidnapping of Algerian diplomats in Gao in 2012, the In Amenas hostage crisis in 2013 near the Libyan border, the Bardo attacks in Tunis in 2015 and the battle of Ben Guerdane in 2016.

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closer to Algeria, such as Mali and Nigeria, and to become active in African regional organizations. The most meaningful decision was Rabat's demand to reintegrate into the African Union,[17] which effectively happened in 2017. In parallel, Morocco announced its willingness to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), but its bid was met with internal resistance by the sub-regional bloc (Fabiani 2018).

Algeria could not impede Morocco's membership to the African Union but mobilized its diplomatic arsenal to prevent that this would come at the expense of membership of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). In parallel, Algeria's strategy also involved an attempt to exclude Morocco from security cooperation initiatives among the countries of the Sahel in their common effort to fight terrorism. In that respect there was a great deal of continuity before and after 2011. Algeria and its Sahel partners created a General Staff Joint Operations Committee (CEMOC) and an Algiers-based Joint Intelligence Centre (Zoubir 2012a: 456). Three years later, Algeria was one of the driving forces behind the Nouakchott process, established in March 2013 to coordinate a regional response to terrorism and crime, from which Morocco was excluded. In response, Morocco announced its support for the G-5 initiative, backed by France, the EU and the UN. Although Morocco is not a member of the G-5, Rabat prefers international efforts to be channelled through it rather than thought alternative frameworks in which Algeria is present.

All in all, the post-2011 political dynamics impacted on regional cooperation in the Maghreb far less than in the Middle East. Unlike in the previous cases, the AMU did not play any significant role in regional conflicts, and initial attempts by Tunisia to revive Maghrebi cooperation were met with hostility or apathy in other Maghrebi capitals. The long-lasting rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, which is linked to the unresolved conflict over Western Sahara, is the primary reason for this state of affairs. While the Arab uprisings and their aftermath, particularly the Libyan crisis, led to a temporary convergence of the interests of some Maghrebi states, notably Algeria and Tunisia, they did not resolve the deep-seated rivalry between Rabat and Algiers. Additionally, regional cooperation dynamics in the Maghreb are increasingly embedded in African affairs rather than in wider MENA ones.

CONCLUSIONS

While the Arab uprisings provided a significant opportunity for the strengthening of regional cooperation, the regionalist momentum in the MENA region from 2011 to 2013 dissipated rather quickly thereafter. Initial expectations were soon disappointed and regional organizations in the MENA became hostages to the dynamics of regional fragmentation. The uprisings and the subsequent power shifts in the region rekindled old rivalries and created new ones, and the increased level of insecurity further impeded the emergence of any meaningful regional integration and cooperation. Concurrently, many key features that had prevented regional integration before the Arab uprisings remained in place and even became stronger. In addition to inter-state competition, these include the inward-looking and illiberal nature of many regimes and their lack of legitimacy. However, the Arab uprisings also demonstrated the pronounced

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17 Morocco left the Organization of African Unity (OAU) on 12 November 1984 following the admission of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in 1982.

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interconnectedness of the region in terms of the flow of ideas and the movement of people, with these societal and cultural linkages increasing post-2011. While the growing regionalization trend may temporarily have exerted pressure on Arab regimes to cooperate, the subsequent disconnect between regionalism – the state-driven process of regional cooperation – and this societal and partly cultural interconnectedness may well exacerbate the legitimacy deficit of many regimes in the MENA region in the medium to long term.

The paper highlighted a number of crucial patterns that are shaping the region and are likely to continue to affect it. Firstly, intra-regional conflicts of unprecedented intensity among the members of regional organizations not only translate into the paralysis of these institutions, they may even put their very survival at risk. Secondly, new, flexible and potentially short-lived forms of cooperation have arisen, mostly aimed at tackling single threats or issues. And thirdly, bilateral alliances between like-minded regimes become as important as, or even more significant than, regional blocs.

What does this tell us about the emerging regional order in the Middle East? Although it may at first appear to be a contradiction, the trend in the realm of regional cooperation indicates that the region is increasingly fragmented and interconnected at the same time. This observation reflects the mismatch between failed regionalism and growing regionalization trends. Secondly, in terms of regionalism, the contours of the MENA region are increasingly blurred. Different sub-regional dynamics increasingly intertwine and expand, such as those in the Maghreb and those in Africa, while the Maghreb and the Mashreq are increasingly connected to the Gulf. Concurrently, some sub-regions are seemingly turning into the borderlands of specific regional cores, with some players in the Gulf emerging as such cores.[18]

What remains to be seen is whether the Arab League, the Arab Maghreb Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council – and perhaps also the African Union and other regional organizations – will become a battleground where competition among regional powers is played out. If this were the case, regional organizations could gain some prominence in the process of regional reordering. Alternatively, these organizations could become even more marginal, losing power to ideological or interest-based alliances that might transcend the region's boundaries.

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18 On the concept of borderlands in the EU–MENA context, see Del Sarto (2016).

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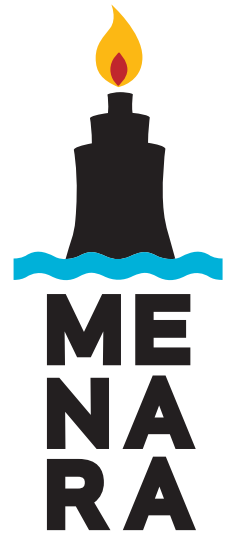
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Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

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