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# The Fragmented Middle East: Persistent Insecurity, Rising Instability

## Introduction

Twenty years after 9/11, the Middle East, at the heart of international security issues since the Twin Towers attack, looks more fragmented, unstable and insecure than ever. The War on Terror launched by the Bush administration, regional and international rivalries, local turmoil and the proliferation of non-states actors turned the Middle East into the Balkans of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Samuel Makinda defines security as 'the preservation of the norms, rules, institutions and values of society'.<sup>1</sup> He argues that all the institutions, principles and structures associated with society and its people should be protected from military and non-military threats. National security can be characterized as the ability of a state to ensure the protection and defence of its citizens. This description should not be limited to physical security, but it also needs to include human security, defined by the General Assembly resolution 66/290 as an 'approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people'.<sup>2</sup> Twenty years after 9/11, these challenges seem far from being addressed by local governments in the Middle East.

Thus, in this chapter and through case studies, we will analyse how Middle Eastern states perceive their national security and how they are struggling to cope with various challenges since the 9/11 attack.

<sup>1</sup> S. Makinda, 'Sovereignty and Global Security', *Security Dialogue* 1998, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 281–292.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 10 September 2012*, 2012, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/476/22/PDF/N1147622.pdf?OpenElement> [accessed: 19.02.2021].

## Iraq: Perpetual Violence

By invading Iraq in 2003, the US government hoped to install a contagious democracy in the region. Soon after the invasion, Iraq started to witness the emergence of a sectarian conflict. In January 2005, for the first time in fifty years, multipartite elections took place. A Kurdish president was elected, and a sectarian quota system was installed: a Kurdish President of the Republic, a Shia Prime Minister and a Sunni President of the Parliament.<sup>3</sup>

The Sunni-Shia conflict which emerged took a territorial speed, the Shia won the Bagdad battle and expelled the Sunni populations from mixed districts: the capital became mostly inhabited and dominated by the Shia. From the very beginning, this sectarian conflict was accompanied by continuous bomb attacks that remain a main characteristic of the Iraqi daily life until today. Unemployment, corruption, nepotism and insecurity became inherent to the Iraqi society, as poverty and chaos turned into another security challenge for the government.<sup>4</sup> Combined with these factors, the marginalization of the Sunni population played a big role in the territorial and recruitment expansion of ISIL who took control of many oil-rich areas and established itself as a competitor to the Iraqi state, with its own rules and economic policies, by expanding its territory towards the rest of Iraq and Syria. The recruitment policy and terrorist attacks of ISIL became not only a national security issue for Iraq, but an international one given the transnational nature of this actor, its actions all over the world and its violation of Human Rights.<sup>5</sup>

Even though ISIL was declared defeated in 2019, it has found a safe haven in an ungoverned part of Iraq. Moreover, Al-Qaeda and affiliates still remain a threat, as in some regions there has been a resurgence in their presence, due to a common ideology.<sup>6</sup>

Fragilized by its internal divisions and by the disastrous consequences left by ISIL, Iraq is today a battlefield of regional powers, mainly the Shia Iran and the Sunni Saudi Arabia, both of whom are able to mobilize the Iraqi population to act according to their interests. Hence, the Iraqi national security faces many challenges. From human security to terrorism, to regional interference and national disintegration, the Iraqi government, accused by its own society of corruption and nepotism, has to define a strategy that encompasses the various elements threatening its national security. Nevertheless, it's the disintegration of the Iraqi state itself that played a big role in the emergence of these security issues, and it would be an impossible mission to the Iraqi state to face these matters with concrete and efficient measures.

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<sup>3</sup> P.J. Luizard, 'Irak: une décennie de violence (2003–2014)', in: B. Badie and D. Vidal, *Nouvelles guerres : comprendre les conflits du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, La découverte, Paris 2016, pp. 265–274.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> S. Houck, et al., 'Understanding What Makes Terrorist Groups' Propaganda Effective: An Integrative Complexity Analysis of ISIL and Al Qaeda', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 2017, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 105–118.

<sup>6</sup> FATF, *FATF Monitoring of Terrorist Financing Risks and Actions Taken to Combat ISIL, Al-Qaeda and Affiliates Financing*, 2018, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/methodsandtrends/documents/isil-alqaeda-affiliates-financing-update.html> [accessed: 3.03.2021].

## Syria: A Decade of Civil and Proxy Wars

In March 2011, on the walls of Deraa in the south of the country students and teenagers wrote the slogan chanted in all Arab streets in the Arab Spring context: 'The people want the fall of the regime'. They were arrested by the security services and tortured. As a result of this act, demonstrations spread across the country. Rapidly, these demonstrations transformed into a civil war opposing pro- and anti-regime fractions. Fragilized, the Syrian state rapidly became a battlefield for other regional and international powers.<sup>7</sup>

On the regional level, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia found its way to the Syrian territory. Pro-Assad, Iran got heavily involved in the war by sending its guards and through the Iran-financed Lebanese Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia decided to get involved by financing Islamist groups fighting against the Syrian regime. Turkey took advantage to invade the north of the country, with the US permission, against the Kurdish population.<sup>8</sup> By supporting the regime militarily and politically, Russia saw in the war an opportunity to affirm its presence in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

Like its Iraqi neighbour, the fragilization of the Syrian state led to the proliferation of non-state actors. The chaotic situation was seized by ISIL in its territory expansion, leading to many crimes against humanity and to a partial destruction of Palmyra, one of the world's heritage sites.<sup>10</sup> Between ISIL's expansion and the consequences of the war, many Syrians had to flee their country, leading to the largest refugee and displacement crisis of our time.<sup>11</sup> In a country where the population is either getting massacred or has to flee, the territory getting invaded and shared between the regional and international powers, and the infrastructure and sites getting destroyed, it becomes impossible to define one national security issue. The regime's main security issue is to remain in power and ensure control and sovereignty over the territory. The population wants to get back home without having to worry about being tortured or killed by any of the war protagonist. However, the refugee crisis has created another security dilemma not only for Syria, but also for the countries hosting refugees.

Twenty years after 9/11, Syria became an epitome of the proliferation of terrorism, crimes against humanity, territory expansionism and proxy wars. Given the crisis' impact on neighbouring countries, it becomes clear that one country's national security can impact other countries' national security. As a neighbouring country, Lebanon has had to adapt to a new reality threatening its national security, already shaken by other factors.

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<sup>7</sup> H. Moodrick-Even Khen, N.T. Boms and S. Ashraph, 'Introduction: An Overview of Stakeholders and Interests', in: *The Syrian War: Between Justice and Political Reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020, pp. 1–8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 'The Syrian Neighbourhood', pp. 163–240.

<sup>9</sup> R. Hinnebusch, A. Saouli, *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, Routledge, London 2020, 326 p.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations, *UN News*, 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/01/549902-alarmed-destruction-palmyra-security-council-reiterates-need-stamp-out-hatred> [accessed: 24.02.2021].

<sup>11</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Emergency*, 2017, <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> [accessed: 24.02.2021].

## Lebanon: The ‘De-statization’ of the National Securities

The Syrian crisis has direct repercussions on Lebanon. The arrival of a massive number of refugees fragilized a country already struggling with its own identity.

After the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000, Lebanon enjoyed quite a calm and stable situation until the assassination of Rafic Hariri, former Prime Minister, in 2005. The assassination, followed by a series of bomb attacks, led to the reappearance of sectarian tensions, once between Christians and Muslims, but this time, it was predominantly the Shia to the Sunni populations<sup>12</sup> opposing each other. A new national security dilemma emerged: for some, mostly the Sunni, the main culprit was the Syrian government, for others, mainly the Shia, it was Israel. As a matter of fact, the Israeli threat reappeared in 2006 with the July War in which Israel opposed Hezbollah.<sup>13</sup> Hezbollah also got involved in the Syrian war along with the Syrian regime, raising the question of a non-state actor acting on behalf, and without the consent, of the government.

These wars have shown that the Lebanese government is not the only national actor who decides peace and war, leading to the de-statization of the Lebanese foreign policy and of the perception of threat.<sup>14</sup> Thierry Balzacq argues that it is hard to define a threat while talking about national security<sup>15</sup> and the Lebanese case is a concrete example. With Syria and Israel both considered as threats, the securitization discourses have divided the Lebanese populations and political leaders into two main camps: those who are pro-Syrian and consider Israel to be the main threat against national security; and those who are anti-Syrian and therefore view the Syrian government, obliged to withdraw its army from Lebanon under the 2005 UNSC resolution 1559, as the main menacing actor against the Lebanese sovereignty.

With Syria and Israel perceived as main threats to the national security, the division of the Lebanese political scene is also due to the Iranian Saudi rivalry in the region. Consequently, in its official discourse, Lebanon avoids treating any of these regional powers as threats to its national security because the Lebanese populations have not reached a consensus about this national security concept itself: the Shia and their allies would consider an alliance with Iran as a guarantee to Lebanon’s national security, while the Sunni and their allies would see Saudi Arabia as the regional power whose policy aligns with the Lebanese national security.

With the Syrian civil war and the flood of Syrian refugees, a new security dimension has been added: how would a country in an already tough economic situation respond to the influx of almost two million refugees? Do some of them represent a terrorist threat and are part of ISIL or other extremist groups? The refugee

<sup>12</sup> A. Issa, ‘Le PNUD au Liban: l’impossible gouvernance’, Master’s Thesis, Sciences Po Paris, 2015, pp. 49–50.

<sup>13</sup> H. Wilkins, ‘The 2006 war in context’, in: *The making of the Lebanese foreign policy. Understanding the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli war*, Routledge, London 2013, pp. 59, 64–65.

<sup>14</sup> A. Issa, ‘La Force intérimaire des Nations Unies au Liban : essai d’explication de la pérennité institutionnelle’, PhD Thesis, Sciences Po Paris, 2019, pp. 125–131.

<sup>15</sup> T. Balzacq, ‘Qu’est-ce que la sécurité nationale ?’, *Revue internationale et stratégique* 2003/4, no. 52, pp. 33–50.

crisis created tensions between the host society and refugees, the latter becoming a national security issue for the Lebanese society who already experienced the impact of the Palestinian refugees whose role was determinant in the Lebanese wars (1975–1990) and who caused another threat to national security in 2007 when the Lebanese army had to interfere against an extremist group in the Nahr el Bared refugee camp.<sup>16</sup>

If the different threats mentioned above are external, the current economic crisis accompanied by the 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020 explosion in Beirut gave rise to an internal threat to national security, caused by political leaders' negligence towards their population. Therefore, the sectarian structure of the Lebanese society makes it quite complicated to define what is and what is not a threat to the national security, both the population and the political leaders being divided and unable to devise a common definition of their national security strategy.

Other countries in the region might not have the sectarian characteristic of the Lebanese society, but also need to deal with both international and external threats. Such is the case of Egypt.

## Egypt: Internal and External Threats

Egypt was one of the first countries to be impacted by the Arab Spring. After thirty years in the office as president, Hosni Mubarak had to step down. In June 2012, Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, was elected president. However, a year later, driven by his attempt to pass an Islamic-leaning constitution, mass protests took place and a coup d'état, led by General Abdel Fattah el Sisi, deposed Morsi.<sup>17</sup>

In 2014, Sisi was elected president and promptly established a military dictatorship. Since then, national security became more endangered by both national and regional threats. On the local level, the Muslim Brotherhood threat, accompanied by terrorist activities in the Sinai, steered the security policy towards repressing the opposition, mostly the Muslim Brotherhood, and acting against the terrorist groups in the Sinai.<sup>18</sup>

This national security strategy also applies to Egypt's regional preoccupations. With both Qatar and Turkey supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt has had to form an alliance with Saudi Arabia and the UAE who both consider the organization to be a terrorist group. In relation to this alliance and this threat, the Libyan neighbour causes a security concern for Egypt, as Islamist groups, supported by Turkey, threaten the western borders.

Not only does Egypt need to secure the borders from the west and the east, but it also has to face a problem in the south, with Ethiopia building the Grand Ethiopian

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<sup>16</sup> A. Ramadan, 'Destroying Nahr el-Bared: Sovereignty and Urbicide in the Space of Exception', *Political Geography* 2009, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 153–163.

<sup>17</sup> B. De Smet, 'Revolution and Restoration', *Gramsci on Tahrir: Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt*, Pluto Press, London 2016, pp. 205–223.

<sup>18</sup> L. Herman, 'Sisi, the Sinai and Salafis: Instability in a Power Vacuum', *Middle East Policy* 2016, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 95–107.

Renaissance Dam and threatening Egypt's allocations of the waters of the Nile River. Apart from the dispute between the two countries, with Sudan supporting Egypt on this matter, Egypt might suffer from water problems, which could, in turn, lead to other security issues, if no agreement can be reached. A potential water war cannot be excluded if the actors involved are not able to find a solution and it is in this context that Egypt is increasing its military activities, as demonstrated by the 'Sword of Arabs' and the 'Nile's Eagles – 1' military exercises with its allies.<sup>19</sup>

Needing to cope with both internal and external security issues, Egypt has to rely on its military capacities, regional alliances and repressing any opposition to the government. The last issue, however, has become the ground for accusing the Egyptian government of violating human rights and the question whether human rights violation can be tolerated to ensure national security remains debatable in the Egyptian case, as the Egyptian government is still ignoring all the accusations against its methods.

## Recommendations on the upcoming security threats within the next 10–25 years

It's hard to give concrete recommendations to states suffering from internal and external threats. In the Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi cases, we have noticed a lack of national cohesion among the populations, which makes it complicated to establish a national security strategy. In the Egyptian case, to ensure what it perceives as national security, the government is committing numerous human rights violation acts.

Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that such a strategy should be devised for the long term. In fact, the states' national interests are disconnected from their populations' as the perception of threat and security, focusing on the physical and military aspects in general, is mostly related to human security and basic needs of the populations. Hence, development policies and human security should be privileged, as the main threat to national security comes from the lack of satisfying basic needs. Populations in need turn to other actors who are able to fulfil these needs, such as non-state actors and warlords, which can lead to a massive recruitment for terrorist and para-state groups. Building competent national institutions able to cope with various challenges is a must. Therefore, this institutions-building needs more international cooperation from actors such as the UN, the EU and the World Bank in order to ensure lasting impacts and transparency, as those countries suffer from enormous corruption and clientelism, and don't seem capable of implementing such reforms without international support.

Another important aspect to improve is civil and civic education so people could learn to accept each other and avoid being manipulated by internal and external actors based on their religious or political beliefs or any other consideration that can

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<sup>19</sup> L. Seleshie, *Is Egypt's army adapting to growing regional and domestic threats?*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/52787/is-egypts-army-adapting-to-growing-regional-and-domestic-threats> [accessed: 28.02.2021].

endanger national security. The Middle Eastern states need to work on both their state and nation building processes.

## Conclusion

To sum up, twenty years after 9/11, the Middle East is more fragmented and divided because of regional and national rivalries. The Arab Spring's demonstrations didn't have the impact they intended, resulting in either the consolidation or the establishment of dictatorships, a massive refugee crisis, a tougher social and economic situation, as well as the proliferation of terrorism and non-states actors that endanger national security even more. The transnational aspect of these threats creates an interdependence between these countries, as one's internal security issues can widely affect the others.

Needing to cope with many challenges, Middle Eastern states are yet to find a proper strategy to ensure their national security but have to think about a long-term plan in a state and nation-building context to limit the impacts of the state's disintegration from both up and down.

The national institutions' fragility, combined with a lack of human security and efficient development policies, may lead to further political instability and social unrest. Middle Eastern states have to increase their cooperation with international institutions who should ensure that their projects and public policies are adequate to the populations' needs and are being correctly and efficiently implemented in the region in accordance with recommendations.

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## *Podzielony Bliski Wschód: trwała niepewność, rosnąca niestabilność*

### *Streszczenie*

Po ataku na Centrum Handlu Światowego (World Trade Center – WTC) we wrześniu 2001 r. Bliski Wschód stał się centralnym punktem amerykańskiej interwencji wojskowej. Chaos powiększyła kolejna interwencja amerykańska w Iraku w ramach operacji „Iracka Wolność” w 2003 r. W swoim artykule autor podkreśla, że obecnie, dwadzieścia lat po ataku na WTC, region Bliskiego Wschodu pozostaje regionem niebezpiecznym, ze zdestabilizowaną architekturą bezpieczeństwa narodowego i bezpieczeństwa regionalnego. Analizując sytuację w czterech wybranych krajach: Iraku, Syrii, Libanie oraz Egipcie, udowadnia tezę postawioną na początku artykułu. Wskazuje wyraźnie, że wielotysięczne demonstracje z okresu tzw. Arabskiej Wiosny nie przyniosły zamierzonego efektu, przyczyniając się do kryzysów humanitarnych, masowej migracji czy wręcz umocnienia władzy autorytarnych liderów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** terroryzm, Bliski Wschód, migracja, uchodźcy, aktorzy niepaństwowi, wojna domowa, bezpieczeństwo narodowe



## *The Fragmented Middle East: Persistent Insecurity, Rising Instability*

### *Abstract*

After the 9/11 attacks, the Middle East became the centre of the American military interventions. After Afghanistan in 2001, the US decided to invade Iraq and depose Saddam Hussein in order to bring democracy to the country. In 2021, Iraq is still suffering from a number of problems – social, economic, but also political and security-related – as foreign interference and terrorist attacks have become inherent to the Iraqi daily life. In the Arab spring context, Syria and Egypt saw massive demonstrations, leading firstly to civil and proxy wars and to the proliferation of terrorist groups; and secondly, to the re-establishment of a dictatorship facing many security challenges. The Lebanese case is more complex. The fragility of the state and the predominance of sectarianism and the states within a state phenomenon, to which we can add two major refugee issues with the Palestinians and the Syrians, as well as an aggressive neighbour in the South and constant foreign interference, make the national security concept debatable among the population and political leaders, preventing a concrete national security strategy from being established. With the current economic crisis, a new dimension of national security is added to the state which is already struggling to ensure its duties towards its population. Through these case studies, this article aims to present how each of these countries perceives its national security and the problems it is facing in order to suggest some recommendations for long-term sustainable responses to some of these challenges.

**Key words:** Middle East, Terrorism, Non-State Actors, Proxy Wars, Rivalries, Instability, Refugees, Human Security

## *Der zersplitterte Nahe Osten: anhaltende Unsicherheit, zunehmende Instabilität*

### *Zusammenfassung*

Nach den Anschlägen vom 11. September wurde der Nahe Osten zum Zentrum der amerikanischen Militärkampagnen. Nach Afghanistan im Jahr 2001 entschieden sich die USA, in den Irak einzumarschieren und Saddam Hussein zu stürzen, um das Land zu demokratisieren. Im Jahr 2021 leidet der Irak noch immer an einer ganzen Reihe von gesellschaftlichen, wirtschaftlichen, aber auch politischen und sicherheitsbezogenen Problemen, da fremde Einflussnahmen und Terroranschläge Teil des Alltags der Menschen im Irak geworden sind. Im Zuge des arabischen Frühlings kam es zu massiven Demonstrationen in Syrien und Ägypten, die erstens zu Bürger- und Stellvertreterkriegen und zur Ausbreitung terroristischer Gruppen führten, und zweitens die Wiedereinsetzung der Diktatur und zahlreiche Sicherheitsprobleme zur Folge hatten. Der libanesische Fall ist noch komplexer. Die Instabilität des Staates und das vorherrschende Sektierertum und das Privatstaat-Phänomen (einschließlich zweier großer Flüchtlingswellen von Palästinensern und Syrern) sowie ein aggressiver Nachbar im Süden und die konstante Fremdeingriffe machen das nationale Sicherheitskonzept in der Bevölkerung und der politischen Führung umstritten, so dass keine konkrete nationale Sicherheitsstrategie erarbeitet werden kann. Angesichts der aktuellen Wirtschaftskrise kommt eine neue Dimension der nationalen Sicherheit hinzu, obwohl der Staat bereits damit zu kämpfen hat, seinen Pflichten gegenüber der Bevölkerung nachzukommen. Anhand dieser Fallstudien versucht der Text, die Sichtweise der beiden Staaten auf die nationale Sicherheit und die jeweils vorhandenen Probleme zu erörtern, um Empfehlungen für

langfristige und nachhaltige Reaktionen auf einige der Herausforderungen zu geben.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Nahost, Terrorismus, nichtstaatliche Akteure, Stellvertreterkriege, Rivalitäten, Instabilität, Flüchtlinge, menschliche Sicherheit

*Раздробленный Ближний Восток: сохраняющееся  
опасное положение, растущая нестабильность*  
*Резюме*

После нападения на Всемирный торговый центр (World Trade Center – WTC) в сентябре 2001 года, Ближний Восток стал центром военной интервенции Соединенных Штатов. Хаос усугубился после очередного вмешательства США в Ирак, в рамках операции «Иракская свобода» в 2003 году. В статье подчеркивается, что в настоящее время, спустя двадцать лет после нападения на ВТЦ, Ближний Восток остается опасным регионом с дестабилизированной структурой национальной и региональной безопасности. Анализируя ситуацию в четырех отдельных государствах: Ираке, Сирии, Ливане и Египте, автор обосновывает тезис, поставленный в заглавии статьи. Указывает на тот факт, что многотысячные демонстрации периода так называемой Арабской весны не принесли ожидаемого эффекта, способствовали гуманитарным кризисам, массовой миграции и укрепили власть авторитарных лидеров.

**Ключевые слова:** терроризм, Ближний Восток, миграция, беженцы, негосударственные субъекты, гражданская война, национальная безопасность