

# New transatlantic relationship for MENA region

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**By Khemaïes Jhinaoui**

MENA region is facing profound geopolitical shifts prompting unprecedented levels of unpredictability and instability. Deeply affected by the Arab uprising of 2011 and before that by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Region is wary today of the possible fallouts of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Most countries are still experiencing the dramatic economic and social consequences of the Covid 19 pandemic.

Over the past decade poor economic and political conditions that were at the root of the Arab Spring upheaval have not only continued but also worsened. Economies are slowing down in most cases while social conflicts and violent unrest loom in the horizon in many countries of the Region.

There are at least three conflicts in MENA that threaten not only the concerned countries but also the stability of the whole region and peace and security in the world.

As a Region linking Asia, Africa and Europe, MENA remain at the intersection of the competition for influence among global powers namely China, Russia and Europe. At the same time a number of the countries in the Region such as Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are likely to continue operating assertively in pursuit of their own goals and interests.

China's economic and political presence in MENA region has grown steadily in recent years. It has become the largest trade partner and foreign direct investor in numerous countries of the region.

Beijing imports almost half of its oil needs from the Middle East. Given the importance of energy sector in the Chinese economy, China is likely to strengthen its economic partnership with major MENA energy suppliers such as Saudi Arabia, the EAU, Egypt and Algeria.

While its role in regional security matters has so far remained minimal, China could be compelled in not-so-distant future to start projecting more effective diplomacy and play a greater role in conflict resolution and peace building in order to protect its economic interests.

While Africa continues to be China's most important sphere of influence outside the Asia-Pacific region (given the massive economic and political presence in the continent), the MENA region is expected to remain a major energy and trading partner at least for the foreseeable future.

Beijing seems determined to expand its political influence through "the belt and road initiative". With the launch of this initiative relations between China and the individual MENA countries grew even closer.

For its part, Russia has established itself in recent years as a key player in Syria, Libya and in reaching out to Iran while having special ties with Turkey and Israel. Moscow's assertive policies in the Middle East, since early 2000 have been largely driven by strategic and economic interests.

Although the volume of trade of goods between Russia and the MENA countries is still relatively low compared to that with other global powers, such as the US, the EU and China, Russia has been striving to expand its exports of military equipment, machinery and grains to most Arab countries. Oil and gas represent the major sphere of cooperation with the Gulf and other MENA energy producing countries.

In fact, Russia has been quite active expanding its footprint in the Middle East and its African periphery over the last decade. It helped the Syrian regime recover most of the national territory from insurgents. It widened its political and military presence in the region by seeking security alliances with unstable regimes that are looking for new partnerships to shore up their precarious security.

From Moscow's perspective, instability in the Middle East is a bigger problem for Europe than it is for Russia. With the exception of Syria and Iran, where Moscow holds strategic, economic and military interests, Russia is pursuing a multi-purpose policy in the region. It is working to rally maximum support for its "multipolar" foreign policy goals and enhancing relations with all the countries of the MENA region.

The current war in Ukraine is surely going to increase instability rather than advance peace in the MENA region. Besides having its dramatic economic impact on many countries with soaring wheat and energy prices and the disruption of grain supplies, the war will have its own repercussions on various ongoing conflicts across the region. It will undoubtedly widen the chasm within the UN Security Council making it almost impossible to reach consensus on how to resolve the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya.

The current war is also having its own impact on the geopolitics of the MENA region. The UN vote on March 2<sup>nd</sup> illustrated each country's stance about the Russian invasion. With the exception of Iraq and Iran who abstained, other regional countries supported the Resolution while choosing carefully their words to explain their vote. They refrained from explicitly condemning Russia. Syria predictably voted in favor of Russia and expressed its intent to recognize the breakaway provinces of Lughansk and Donetsk.

Many countries of the region have refused to publicly chastise Russia and some notably Saudi Arabia and the Emirates have taken some heat for that in the United States as a result. Both countries, particularly Saudi Arabia which has long close military ties with the United States have ignored Washington's request to pump more oil to ease price pressures following Western sanctions on Russia. The decision by OPEC on June 3<sup>rd</sup> to boost its output next July remains largely symbolic as Riyadh tests US intent towards the Gulf region ahead of President Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia at the end of the month. Many countries in the region and beyond regard the war in Ukraine as a regional conflict, not as a grave threat to global security and the world order as portrayed by the West. Some countries have put their national interests above calls by the US to isolate and sanction Russia. Israel and Turkey refrained from condemning publicly Russia and endeavored in various stages of the war to serve as mediators between Kiev and Moscow to carry out its regional goals in Syria and Iraq. Turkey even hosted meetings between Russian and Ukrainian delegations in an attempt to reach a ceasefire and mediate the conflict.

As a whole, most countries looked to protect their relations with Russia clearly convinced that the world is moving towards multipolarity. However as Russia invaded Ukraine and the West rallied together against the Russian invasion, MENA countries have found themselves in a strategic bind : return to the western sphere of influence or continue to straddle both spheres.

### **A strategic bind or new opportunities: prospects for MENA Region from the current strategic shifts**

Russian invasion of Ukraine is clearly affecting power and politics in MENA and the Euro-Med process in particular. Southern Mediterranean countries fear that the shift of focus towards security and at a later stage towards economic reconstruction in Ukraine and possibly other parts of Eastern Europe risks making the interests of Southern Mediterranean countries less of a priority for the EU. Fewer resources would be available for regional development projects and vertical integration.

With Europe depending at around an 40 per cent level on Russian gas imports and with newly imposed economic financial and trade oriented sanctions against Russian leaders, oil and gas exporting Middle Eastern and North African countries are expected to increase their political leverage over European leaders by bidding to fill the gap left by the vacuum in Russian gas supplies. That would give many governments of the region respite from European pressure for reform governments of the region.

From the European perspective the focus would be rather oriented to combating illegal immigration, trans-border trafficking and terrorism. MENA political and economic reforms are likely to be put on the backburner and democratic transitions could lose momentum.

European and US approaches to the MENA Region have been always different but complementary. In fact, North Africa and the Middle East have never constituted one single politically homogenous space. The US has always given priority to the Middle East in its diplomatic and military outreach efforts and viewed this region mostly through the prism of the Arab Israel conflict, its energy interests, its strategic relationship with Turkey and its conflict with Iran. The EU developed its relations with southern Mediterranean partners through the neighborhood policy seeking to expand trade and investments and to deploy its soft power through aid and security cooperation to political dialogue and boost incentives to democratic transition. Neither policy succeeded in creating the projected space of stability nor prosperity enshrined in the 1995 Euro-Med Barcelona Declaration, or the various public declarations that followed the euphoria generated by Oslo Middle East Peace Process.

All major global and regional cleavages are in display as the region is experiencing the dramatic consequences of Russian war in the Ukraine. Conflicts are on the rise and there is no sign that tension is diminishing: These include the Israeli-Arab conflict, the Israeli-Iranian antagonism, the Russian-Western confrontation in Syria, the US-Israel opposition to the Iranian nuclear program, the Yemen conflict and the Saudi-Iranian confrontation in that country, the Turkish-UE tension in Eastern-Mediterranean as well the ongoing proxy confrontation of major international and regional players on Libyan soil. Energy supply, immigration and climate change are also potential sources of tension and conflicts in the whole region.

The EU and the US share the same goal of promoting regional stability in both the Middle East and the Maghreb. A comprehensive MENA road map will require a deferential approach tailored to the specificities of each region.

#### **To cement a new strategic partnership:**

1. The US and the EU should act immediately to limit the economic and social fallouts of the Russian war in Ukraine, particularly the worries stemming from the blockade of Ukraine grain exports due to Russian invasion. Foods crisis and hunger are looming in many MENA and subsaharian African countries and should urgently be addressed before becoming a source of human disaster and massive immigration and instability in the whole region.

2. On a broader basis, Europe and US have to reengage with the MENA region and to project an even-handed approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Western double standard are badly felt in the region. The hope generated by the peace process has been waning and that strong feeling explain at least in part realignment of Arab public opinion and sometimes Arab Authorities on Russia's position in its war against Ukraine.

A firm commitment of the two-state solution will create a new momentum for peace in the region increase its security and open new opportunities for investments and trade and new partnerships with transatlantic countries.

3. A special effort should also be made to end the war in Syria, to decrease tension in that country, resettle refugees and put a term to foreign interference in its domestic affairs. It will also show a real commitment to the restoration of peace in Syria and the whole region and the emergence of new political leadership in Damascus.

4. Encourage home grown reforms favoring good governance and democratic transitions in the Region. The war in Ukraine should not serve as an excuse to turn away from

the political crises that some countries of the region are witnessing. A special emphasis should be placed on macro-economic reforms to make the region more attractive for business and foreign investments and to further encourage regional integration.

Lack of economic progress has affected the credibility of democratic transition process and eroded trust in political elite.

5. Fifty years after the creation of the Arab League in 1945, Arab economic integration remains elusive in contrast with European and south Asian cases. Despite numerous initiatives, the region lacks institutional mechanisms to carry out this integration process on a broad regional level. Lacking adequate regional mechanisms, the region has failed to cooperate effectively on issues related to pandemic and food security. It is likely to fail to meet the challenges posed by climate change as recently displacement by sandstorms caused by drought and desertification.

6. In Libya there is a need, from the US and the EU to exert further pressure on Libyan main actors as well as regional powers and their proxies on Libyan soil to halt hostilities, resume negotiations under UN umbrella and lay the ground for free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections in the country, soon. But a more focused and pragmatic approach by the international community is needed to avoid the fiasco of the December 2021 elections while preventing tension from spinning out of control.

7. A more stable and integrated Maghreb would serve as a reliable partner and help favoring settlement of chronic crisis in the region (including the crisis in Libya and the prevailing tension between Algeria and Morocco). Attention to solving difficulties between Algeria and Morocco should be as much a priority as seeking gas security from deals with one country or the other.

8. The US and the EU should also partner with MENA states and civil society to build a new regional institutional framework which will serve as a platform to promote dialogue among countries of the region, help encourage preventive diplomacy and resolve pending conflicts.

The MENA lacks institutional platforms similar to that performed by OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe). A new Security Architecture will offer the most needed platform to discuss matters of stability, peace, democracy and development in the Region. It will encourage political dialogue as a way to solve differences and promote preventive diplomacy. It will also help bridge differences and build trust between different stakeholders in the MENA Region and beyond.

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