

# Middle East

## Regional perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding

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### Introduction

For most observers, the past four years in the Middle East have witnessed a rapidly changing context at an almost unprecedented scale, both at the domestic and regional level. The hopes for political liberalisation – if not for the advent of Arab (-Muslim) democratic regimes – generated by the 'Arab Springs' have been crushed by the restoration of military authoritarian regimes (e.g. Egypt), have left countries in a total political mayhem (e.g. Libya), or have opened the door to transition processes whose outcome looks very uncertain (e.g. Yemen). Though many 'jumlukiyas'<sup>1</sup> in the region have been taken by surprise and rapidly toppled, their fate doesn't seem to be completely over (like in Syria or in Iraq). Neither the US or Europe seem to have adopted coherent policies towards the region. The geopolitical influence has shifted from the great powers to the regional ones: Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia now have their say in a context marked by the manipulation of Sunni and Shiite religious-political affiliations.

What has also emerged in the region as a relative surprise, is the presence of new Al-Qa'ida-type organisations through Islamic jihadist groups, whose development in terms of military power, funding, local and international recruitment networks and warring brutality, have few comparisons over the past century. While these new transnational non-state armed groups are becoming territorialised, it is possible to underline several domestic and international dynamics that have conditioned their success but may also hamper their future.

In a region facing such an important moment of change, the list of challenges to building peace and wishes for opportunities for peace seem to be endless. This paper is an analysis of the challenges and opportunities for building peace in the Middle East based on the authors' field research in the region. The authors attempt to present an analysis about how challenges and opportunities are perceived in the region, or 'from the street', which sometimes reveals a certain mismatch with international perceptions.

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<sup>1</sup> The Arabic word *jumlukiya*, coined in Egypt in the early 2000s, is a contraction of *jumhuriyyah* (republic) and *mamlaka* (kingdom) and was meant to define the quasi-monarchical powers of presidents-for-life in a number of Arab republics.

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## Challenges to building peace in the Middle East

**Rapid change but underlying conflict drivers remain.** A clear peculiarity of the Middle Eastern context is the relatively rapid alternation between periods of stability and sudden relapse into conflict, both at the domestic and regional level. This constant fluctuation is one of the biggest challenges for international policy-makers. However, to see the 'Egyptian coup' of A. Sisi as the symbol of an end of the Arab Springs means, in our view, losing sight of more fundamental processes of social change that will be at work for decades. Actually, all of the factors that led to social unrest – poverty, inequality, corruption and social exclusion – are still present in most Arab countries. Besides ousting dictators and restoring dignity, the Arab uprisings demanded policies of power decentralisation that could better reflect the needs of local identities and communities. So far, and with the exception of Tunisia, neither local governments nor foreign powers have changed their economic models or approaches.<sup>2</sup>

**Open hostility to 'Western' concepts.** 'International peacebuilding' – understood as a process to achieve more inclusive and representative democracies – has faced many challenges in the Middle East. The support of many Western states for authoritarian regimes in the Arab World during the past two and a half decades has been associated with counteracting the 'Islamic threat', waging war against the 'axis of the evil' during the Bush period, and with pushing agendas of economic liberalisation that have accentuated domestic inequalities. Moreover, there has also been a failed attempt to 'bring democracy' to Afghanistan and Iraq (as an alternative to authoritarianism) creating a lot of disillusionment and open hostilities to 'Western' notions of 'democratisation', statebuilding' or 'peacebuilding' across large parts of the Middle East.

**Lack of leadership and double standards.** The lack of leadership and vision among the Western allies after the Libyan 'adventure' to topple Qadhafi has left most of the Arab World to its own devices. The economic crisis in Europe and the Obama administration's policies of withdrawing the military from the Middle East have not gone without consequences. The reassertion of Russia on the Middle East scene and the present crisis in Ukraine have also contributed to give a flavour of 'Cold War' in a changed context, but in no way this has contributed to help in settling down the unravelling conflicts in the region. A dramatic case in point is Syria, where President Assad has been waging a ferocious repression against his opponents, slaughtering hundreds of thousands amid lukewarm reactions from the international community. What seems even more worrying is that after more than three years of civil war, the Syrian regime is beginning to appear to be the last rampart against ISIS<sup>3</sup> and a possibly (paradoxical) ally in the regional context. ISIS has also become a clear menace for many other Arab regimes in the region – Saudi Arabia and Jordan, in particular.

**Changing geopolitics:** When looking at Arab regional geopolitics, one can see how the post-Arab Springs context has influenced the repositioning of several regimes in a scenario of shifting alliances. The old Saudi-Iranian rivalry, fought through third party States (like in Iraq during the 1980s, in Lebanon during the past two decades, or Syria since 2011) with the respective support to Sunni and Shi'a Islamic organisations throughout the Muslim world, seems to be developing with new dynamics. Saudi Arabia, which has so far been able to contain its own domestic opposition, has been strongly supporting the restoration of the military regime in Egypt and has,

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<sup>2</sup> See M. Aguirre, 'Not the end of the "Arab Spring", is it?', *Open Democracy*, June 2014, Available at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/mariano-aguirre/not-end-of-arab-spring-is-it>.

<sup>3</sup> This is the English acronym for 'Islamic State in Syria and Iraq', known in Arabic as *Da'ish*. Recently, its commander in chief, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has also proclaimed himself 'caliph' over the liberated territories of Iraq and Syria and modified ISIS into IS, i.e. the 'Islamic State'.

therefore, been a pivotal funder.<sup>4</sup> Lately, in countries like Palestine and Egypt, the support to Muslim Brothers' organisations has been instead coming from Qatar, which has tried somehow to defy Saudi Arabian leadership in the Arabian Peninsula. Finally, the unfolding possible new relationships between Iran and the US over nuclear issues has not left Saudi Arabia and Israel indifferent. But the need to shore up the advance of ISIS and its allies may bring new tactical alliances among former enemies.

### **Regional variations**

**Jordan.** The only regime that seems stable is the Jordanian Kingdom, which over the past 15 years has become a soft 'security state', though not exempt from economic fragility. Jordan also represents the only Arab state in the region that has known the most remarkable continuity of its elites from the Mandate period until today and one that has been able to overcome all sorts of challenges induced by the Arab nationalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, has gone through two Arab-Israeli wars, and has survived in a regional context of prolonged turmoil (e.g. the various Gulf wars, two intifadas in the West Bank, several waves of refugees from Palestine, Iraq and now Syria). The kingdom is today host to many meetings for discussing the political changes in the region and home to many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations for multilateral or bilateral cooperation.

**Lebanon** survives amid prolonged governmental crises but hasn't found yet stability in its post-civil war period, punctuated by the retreat of the Israeli army from its Southern territories in 2000 and the end of the Syrian occupation in 2005. Actually, the amnesty law promulgated in the early 1990s, the relative independence of Hizballah inside the Lebanese territory (and the war with Israel in 2006), including the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri have not been conducive to build the bases for a new social pact that could guarantee long-term political stability. The civil war in Syria is having also its consequences on neighbouring Lebanon through massive flows of refugees (presently constituting more than 25% of the resident population), and through episodes of internal fighting between Shi'a and Sunni communities.

**The Israeli-Palestinian** conflict has known a new dramatic confrontation during the summer of 2014. The possibilities for brokering dialogue, not to say peace, seem to be waning day-by-day. The positions of the last two Netanyahu governments appear to be more and more radical about negotiating a long-term settlement. Engulfed in an occupation that has lasted for the past 47 years, the successive Israeli governments of the 'Oslo and post-Oslo' years have kept expanding their colonies in the West Bank and, notwithstanding the unilateral withdrawal of their settlers in 2005, have kept Gaza under a *de facto* occupation that controls the air, maritime and land borders of the Strip. On the Palestinian side, a moribund and corrupt Palestinian Authority that after the 1993 Washington Agreements has kept policing the Palestinian population for the Israelis and has had endless and fruitless negotiations with its 'partner in peace', has paved the way to the success of Hamas and its allies. Hamas and its allies have replaced a frozen Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as the national liberation movement and today represent the last rampart against the Israeli occupation. Apart from 'normalising' its military operations and continuing its settlement expansion, which is making of the option of a 'Two-State solution' wishful thinking, the present Israeli government doesn't seem to have a long-term vision of a peaceful settlement. Because of the long break in national unity since Hamas' seizure of power in Gaza in 2007, the unwavering support of the US to Israel and the diffuse crisis of political

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<sup>4</sup> While the US have maintained a steady military aid of roughly \$1 billion per year, the Saudis have offered more than ten times the figure to President A. Sisi to cope with the dire economic situation in his country.

representation in both the West Bank and Gaza,<sup>5</sup> the Palestinians are undergoing a very gloomy period and do not see any light at the end of the tunnel. A deep distrust presently dominates Israeli-Palestinian relations and no 'Mandelas' appear to exist on either side. The media continue to portray the conflict as being about the validity of competing narratives, but it is a conflict about legitimacy and justice between two enemies who perceives themselves as 'victims', are deaf to each other and are engaged in an endless blame-game.

## Opportunities for building peace in the Middle East

**Local level peacebuilding.** If one of the international donors' roles in peacebuilding is also that of accompanying societies in transition at the local level, this could be seized as a chance for the UN to restore its credibility. Promoting dialogue and consensus-building should not be thought of only at national elites' level and local UN personnel could have a role between their own societies and the organisation they represent in the field to promote new forms of more credible partnership. Political aid designed to support local governance structures and support future transition could be of the utmost importance.

**Security sector reforms** are clearly among the most difficult policies to implement in states that are at war or are preparing for it. Moreover, the members of the international military-industrial complex (including the local ones, i.e. Egypt and Israel) clearly have vested interests in sustaining strong armies to whom weapons of different kinds can be sold. While a more solid analysis of the relationship between the booming privatisation of military security and the interests of both the military-industrial complexes and the international oil companies in the region exceeds the size of this paper, there is scope for UN action. UNIDIR could play a new role in mediation and dialogue in the Middle East, while the OHCHR and the UNHCR could contribute to train military forces and provide intelligence in human rights courses, in cooperation with the ICRC.

**Forced Displacements and Diaspora(s).** More often than not, refugees are seen as 'victims' and a 'burden' for host countries who must manage the presence of a foreign population, inducing problems of access to shelter, food, health and education services. Refugees usually constitute a cheap labour force on the market, and create competition and conflict with the national population.

But refugees are not simply victims, they have also agency and this should be better taken into account. Though the UNHCR and the IOM have been progressively integrating this perspective in the past few years, a lot of work must still be done in thinking more about the potential of refugees and diasporas in general for peacebuilding. During the Lebanese civil war, for example, a UNDP database of Lebanese professionals in the diaspora was established, which was effective for mobilising their skills in support of various initiatives. Today, the Syrian diaspora is estimated to constitute around 18 million people worldwide – this certainly represents potential for mobilisation and future reconstruction.

While the juridical issues of refugeehood and the rights of return of the displaced populations must not be forgotten, the Iraqi and the Afghani cases have shown over the years the importance of the circulation of migrants and refugees, and their economic impact on their countries of origin, pending the solution of the conflicts. The Palestinian diaspora stands apart from other cases. Not only it is characterised by a massive presence of its members inside Israel and the Palestinian Territories, but it is also demographically concentrated in the Near East. Furthermore, what makes it different from other diaspora communities is the impossibility for the

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<sup>5</sup> The last parliamentary elections in the Palestinian Territories date back to January 2006.

majority of the refugees to circulate in and out of their original country – today Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.

The UN should therefore maintain and strengthen their presence in the region through UNRWA and the UNHCR, and foster better exchange of experiences and visions among the sister agencies and with the IOM.

**The Role of Women.** With the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and through Security Council Resolution 1325, the international community committed to increase women's participation in conflict prevention, post-conflict and peacebuilding. However, most official political processes in the Middle East do not seem to have respected this commitment. Donor funding in conflict-affected contexts should not view women only as victims of conflict instead of considering them as possible leaders in post-conflict peacebuilding. Excluding women means excluding half or more of the population from key decision-making moments. Bringing women negotiators to the table means bringing different visions and experiences, which can also contribute to better, more inclusive, peace settlements. Aimed at fostering women's empowerment, UNIFEM should better carve-out its possible niches of action and make its voice heard in collaboration with sister UN agencies.

**Transitional Justice.** With the exception of the 'Equity and Conciliation Commission' in Morocco, the Arab Middle East has so far been the only region worldwide that has not implemented transitional justice measures in post-conflict or post-dictatorship contexts. The wishes expressed in post-civil war Lebanon or in post-Saddam Iraq have not materialised and there is a case for delaying transitional justice for the sake of short-term national cohesion so as not to disrupt the transition process or the establishment of new democratic institutions. Nevertheless, the timing and sequence of transitional justice measures are contingent upon the success of the democratic transition and the degree of political power held by conservative forces that consider transitional justice a threat to their political or economic status. However, this should not prevent the UN from preparing the field for when the time is ripe, from fostering South-South cooperation with Africa and Latin America, and from striking the balance between retributive and restorative justice. More attention could also be given to how to integrate Islamic notions and practices into peacebuilding strategies, as recently advocated by the Islamic Relief Organisation.

**The Israeli-Palestinian Thorny Conflict and International Aid.** There is an urgent need to change the aid philosophy for the Palestinian Territories. Similar to the North American settler colonialism, where the main goal was the eviction of Indians and land capture, the goal of political Zionism has always been to divorce the land of Palestine from its inhabitants and to return it to 'God's chosen people'. By ignoring this dynamic, foreign aid to Palestine has reinforced it. Aid projects in the 'Oslo and post-Oslo period' have helped repair Palestinian roads and connect Palestinian villages to electricity, but this only relieved the occupier of its duties under international law to provide for the occupied population and has further allowed Israel to focus its resources on settlement construction. Aid to the Palestinian Authority also relieves the occupier of its burden of policing and maintaining control over the occupied population. If Western donors want to see a Palestinian economy grow, they need to apply political pressure on Israel to stop actively *de-developing* it. Palestinians do not need hundreds of millions of dollars in bilateral aid. They need full control over their own natural resources; sovereignty over the holy sites and tourist attractions in East Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other areas of the West Bank; control over their territorial waters in Gaza for fishing and gas exploration; and the ability to build houses, schools, roads, electricity plants, telecommunications networks, sewage treatment facilities, factories

and water wells without Israeli permits or fear of their destruction by the Israeli military. As already noted in World Bank reports of the early 2000s, no amount of aid can bring about a just, positive, and lasting peace until the fundamental injustices of occupation and dispossession are seen for what they are.<sup>6</sup> The myth of peace-making in Palestine has blown-up: continuing to pay the salaries of Palestinian Authority employees confined within Gaza on the grounds that this contributes to peace doesn't make anymore sense. As M. Turner has recently argued, peace-building aid in the realms of governance, development and security has rather operated as a counterinsurgency tool to ensure Palestinian acquiescence in the face of violent dispossession.

## **Required support for building peace and the role of the UN**

The UN certainly does not need to 'reinvent the wheel': its peacebuilding mandate is the essence and the very reason of its existence, as established at the time of its creation in 1945 in San Francisco. In the post-Cold War period, the Agenda for Peace has helped to spread different practices and concepts in the field, sometimes in creative and innovative ways. As a multistakeholder and cross-sectorial process, peacebuilding usually unfolds over long periods of time and necessitates stamina from all the parties involved.

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).** A potentially important UN body in the region is ESCWA, whose story goes hand-in-hand with the history of conflict in the region. Set-up in Beirut, ESCWA moved its headquarters to Baghdad due to the Lebanese Civil War, then to Amman during the embargo years against Saddam Hussein's regime, and finally it 'repatriated' to Beirut in the 2000s through the strong support of R. Hariri's government. Notwithstanding the critiques against its management or its internal difficulties (predominantly those that plague most international bureaucracies, i.e. mirroring inter- and intra-state relationships and of personal ambitions), ESCWA has continued monitoring the socio-economic conditions of the Arab World and has produced valuable material for policy-making, which has not always received due credit.

**Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)** has seen its role increasing in the region. With the UNHCR, the OHCHR performs an important mandate in reminding state members to comply with international law. Again, it would be too easy to criticise the shortfalls of the Agency in holding former perpetrators accountable. What should be emphasised, in our view, is the contribution of the OHCHR in constantly expanding the awareness of the rights and duties of individuals and states in relation to international law and, therefore, setting new limits to political (unlawful) decision-making and related practices.

**United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).** Created in December 1949, the Agency today assists almost 5.5 million Palestinian refugees residing in five fields – Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon – and employs more than 30,000 civil servants, 99% of whom are Palestinians and Arabs of different nationalities. Because of its mandate to provide education, shelter, health and social services, UNRWA has often been called the 'Blue State' (in reference to the UN flag). While the developmental and humanitarian 'lessons to be learned' from its history are manifold and most valuable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century context of the Near East, the Agency has always been under pressure in the host countries and regularly accused of assisting terrorists by Israel. While a group of US senators has

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<sup>6</sup> See J. Wildeman and S. Marshall 'By misdiagnosing Israel-Palestine, donor aid harms Palestinians', *Open Democracy*, May 2014. Available at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/jeremy-wildeman-sandy-marshall/by-misdiagnosingisraelpalestine-donor-aid-harms-pales>.

been taking the lead since the Second Intifada to push the American administration to withdraw its funding, one should not forget that UNRWA was set up in the aftermath of the 1948 war, the creation of Israel and the forced displacement of more than 750,000 people. The Agency is mandated to assist the still-surviving elderly Palestinians and most of the 1948 refugees' descendants, pending a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, in our opinion, two main plagues presently affect the UN system. First, the bureaucratisation of its work has contributed to an inflated 'peace industry' effect, which has gone beyond its possibility of control, very much like the 'development industry' in most 'beneficiary' countries. Second, and not unrelated to the above, the funding needs for field activities have contributed to somewhat perverting the oft-cited imperatives of collaboration and coordination among sister agencies. In what has become a competitive market for the implementation of national or international programmes in specific countries, too often one can witness UN programmes or departments pitted against each other for gaining contracts.

Appropriate measures aiming at addressing these kinds of issues could certainly contribute to clearing the way and alleviating the burden on the already uneasy path of peacebuilding implementation.

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**About this Paper:** This paper is part of a series providing regional peacebuilding perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding. The authors' task was to provide an authentic, original and honest analysis about three questions: (1) What are the main challenges for building peace in your region? (2) What are the key opportunities for building peace in your region over the next one or two years? (3) What would be the key support necessary to build peace in your region over the next one or two years? Is there any specific role for the UN?

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**About the White Paper on Peacebuilding:** The White Paper on Peacebuilding is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process initiated by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It has the objective to situate UN peacebuilding within the broader peacebuilding universe and to articulate visions for the future for building peace in violent and fragile contexts. The White Paper places peacebuilding within the changing characteristics of armed violence and security, and within the practical evidence of engagements in peacebuilding contexts emanating from a diversity of fields. Ensuring a better relationship between UN peacebuilding and the broader peacebuilding field is a complementary effort to the existing work surrounding the 10-year review of the UN peacebuilding architecture and an effort to take stock of the nature and evolution of the broader peacebuilding universe.