

NOTA

Global Threats in Terms of Inequality and Conflict: A Middle Eastern Perspective

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I. Introduction

The Middle East, or better the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), stands today at the epicenter of multiple overlapping crises that challenge the very foundations of political stability, security, and the well-being of its people, impacting negatively its economy, education and aspirations for better human rights and democracy. From Syria's uncertain future and Sudan's humanitarian catastrophe, to the relentless disintegration of Yemen and Libya, fragile political and social stability in Iraq and Lebanon, and the war in Gaza, the region increasingly exhibits the contours of what scholars term a zone of "ungovernability"², in the sense that the state loses its monopoly over violence, legitimacy erodes, and non-state actors assert enduring influence.

This bleak situation in the region is not only due to internal problems like poor governance, corruption, sectarianism, and a lack of democratic and peaceful culture. It also reflects three connected forces that hinder reform and prevent effective peace initiatives from succeeding: First, the rise of modern religious nationalism, particularly evident in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has reconfigured political identities into sacred imperatives, rendering compromise virtually impossible and sacralizing territorial

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² OFFE, C. (2019). "Ungovernability (2013)", in: *Staatskapazität und Europäische Integration*. Ausgewählte Schriften von Claus Offe, vol 5. Springer VS, Wiesbaden.

The choice of these countries is based on the following factors, which align with the objectives of this paper: the intensity and persistence of armed conflicts; severe socioeconomic inequality and humanitarian crises; institutional collapse or weak state capacity; and international recognition as conflict zones.

disputes. Second, the ongoing crisis of political Islam reveals the internal paralysis of Islamic political thought in responding to modernity and civic inclusion. Movements that sought to establish religious governance have increasingly resorted to exclusionary, authoritarian frameworks, in the Arab world as well as in Iran, stifling the intellectual vitality necessary for ethical renewal and democratic practice. Third, the region faces a profound dilemma of pluralism: how to sustain meaningful coexistence in societies marked by deep communal, ethnic, and sectarian diversity, without defaulting to either cultural relativism or hegemonic assimilation.

In addition to what has been said, it is worth noting that acute environmental stress and widening resource inequality are intertwined with these ideological, political, and cultural factors. The MENA region is warming at nearly twice the global average, and is confronting rising temperatures, desertification, and irreversible water scarcity. These environmental pressures are not merely ecological phenomena; they serve as threat multipliers in fragile contexts, accelerating displacement, food insecurity, and conflict. Poor governance, fragmented institutional responses, and the politicization of resource management have rendered states increasingly incapable of mediating between competing needs or anticipating climate-driven disruptions. Environmental collapse in the region, thus, cannot be separated from broader patterns of vulnerability, marginalization, and state failure.

These endogenous fractures are intensified by the Western engagement in the region. While the West, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, has historically framed its involvement in the Middle East and North Africa through the rhetoric of stability, security, and democratization, its interventions have frequently exacerbated local dynamics of violence and delegitimization. Particularly, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, carried out without international consensus and predicated on flawed intelligence, initiated a cascade of institutional breakdowns, sectarian violence, rising of many extremist religious militant organizations, and regional polarization. Subsequent failures in Syria, Libya, and Iraq underscore the strategic myopia of regime-change interventions without post-conflict reconstruction frameworks. Simultaneously, Western fluctuating commitment to the Israel-Palestine peace process, and its selective support for authoritarian and/or conservative regimes have revealed a persistent double standard, one that undermines the normative foundations of international law and discredits the West's claim to moral leadership.

Taken together, these dynamics underscore that the region's crises are not simply episodic or region-specific; they are systemic and global in implication. In this context, any meaningful response must transcend short-term political and/or security imperatives or technocratic development models. What is required is a comprehensive

reimagining of governance, identity, and cooperation, one that establishes the civic, ecological, and ethical basis of modern political life in the region and reconfigures the global community's role not as a hegemonic actor, but as a partner in cultivating just, inclusive, and resilient futures.

This study proceeds by examining four interdependent pillars of the current crisis. The first part investigates the ideological and institutional breakdown at the heart of regional instability, with particular attention to religious nationalism, political Islam, and the contested prospects for pluralism. The second part explores how environmental degradation and resource inequality act as both causes and consequences of fragility, intensifying the socio-economic and political pressures that afflict vulnerable populations. The third section tackles the evolving role of the West, offering a critical assessment of its strategic failures and outlining the conditions necessary for a more constructive and legitimate engagement. Together, these parts aim to illuminate the structural interdependencies that define the MENA's crisis and to sketch the contours of a more sustainable and humane political horizon. The last section offers reasons for hope in the current context.

2. The Collapse of Political Order and Regional Security

The erosion of political authority and security institutions has deeply entrenched prolonged humanitarian crises in the MENA region. As highlighted by UNICEF³, more than 70 million people in the region require humanitarian assistance, including 27 million children. These emergencies are magnified by systemic economic collapse, persistent underdevelopment, and accelerating climate-related disasters such as prolonged droughts and catastrophic flooding.

In Syria, the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a major political turning point. Although this shift may offer space for more inclusive governance, the state remains perilously fragile after nearly 14 years of war, mass displacement, and societal trauma. The interim government, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, now faces the monumental task of reconciling sectarian divisions and integrating various armed factions into a unified and functional state apparatus⁴. However, the new regime has yet to fully reveal its Islamic character, particularly whether it will adopt a strict Islamic model akin to that of the Taliban or Saudi Arabia. This uncertainty has raised concerns

³ UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND. (2024b).

⁴ UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE. (2025a).

both domestically and internationally. Minorities such as Christians, Druzes, Alawites, and Kurds remain skeptical of the new leadership, wary of potential marginalization or repression, a sentiment that poses significant challenges to national reconciliation and state rehabilitation. Moreover, the new authorities must confront the challenge of building trust with Western powers, especially the United States, which continues to impose sanctions on Syria since the days of Assad's rule.

Iraq's stability faces a complex interplay of political, economic, and security challenges. Politically, the country grapples with a consociational system that allocates power along sectarian and ethnic lines, perpetuating deep divisions and fostering widespread corruption and ineffective governance. This is compounded by the persistent influence of powerful, often Iran-backed, armed militias that operate outside full state control, undermining the authority of the Iraqi Security Forces⁵. Economically, Iraq's heavy dependence on oil exports leaves it vulnerable to market fluctuations and hinders diversification, contributing to high unemployment and depleted public infrastructure. These systemic issues create a fragile state susceptible to both internal unrest and external interference, posing a continuous threat to long-term stability and democratic consolidation⁶.

Lebanon's stability is critically undermined by a multi-faceted crisis that has persisted for years. The country's confessional power-sharing system, designed to balance sectarian groups, has resulted in political gridlock, corruption, and lack of accountability, preventing effective governance and reforms. The economic collapse since 2019 has caused currency devaluation, hyperinflation, and widespread poverty⁷. This is further complicated by the significant influence of non-state actors, namely Hezbollah, whose armed presence and involvement in regional conflicts challenge state sovereignty and expose the country to geopolitical risks⁸. One of the main tasks of the new President of the Republic, General Joseph Aoun, elected after a two-year vacancy, and the new government is precisely to disarm Hezbollah and bring all arms under state control. The question, however, is whether such an objective will be attained peacefully or whether it will mark the beginning of a new internal conflict⁹.

⁵ COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS. (n.d.a).

⁶ GIGA INSTITUTE. (2023).

⁷ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. (2023).

⁸ COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS. (n.d.b).

⁹ YOUNG, M. (2025).

Yemen is still facing multifaceted challenges rooted in a complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors. The ongoing civil war, fueled by regional proxy conflicts, has devastated infrastructure and exacerbated humanitarian crises. This instability is further compounded by the Houthi movement's involvement in the Gaza war, with support from Iran. The Houthis have launched attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, a vital global trade route, in a bid to pressure Israel¹⁰. This has triggered retaliatory strikes by a US-led coalition, escalating regional tension and threatening to draw Yemen further into a wider international conflict¹¹.

Sudan's trajectory has been even more catastrophic. Since the outbreak of civil war between rival military factions in 2023, the country has plunged into a profound humanitarian emergency. The healthcare system has disintegrated, famine is rapidly spreading, and millions are now deprived of access to food, clean water, and essential medical care. These dire circumstances are further intensified by environmental shocks¹².

Libya's path to stability remains elusive due to enduring political fragmentation and entrenched militia influence, which undermine state authority and obstruct institutional cohesion. Rival administrations, particularly the internationally recognized Government of National Unity and the eastern-aligned Government of National Stability, continue to compete for legitimacy, while armed groups embedded in local and regional power structures erode the state's monopoly on security¹³. Compounding this, the economy remains heavily reliant on hydrocarbons, yet oil revenue management is compromised by illicit smuggling and failing fiscal unification, further weakening governance and impeding national reconstruction¹⁴.

Simultaneously, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to exemplify the region's persistent volatility. The war between Israel and Hamas has left Gaza in ruins: over 59,000 Palestinians have been killed, the majority of the population displaced, and critical infrastructure like hospitals and homes decimated. The absence of decisive international intervention has left civilians, particularly children, bearing the brunt of the suffering¹⁵.

¹⁰ COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS. (n.d.c).

¹¹ OMAN, A. (2025).

¹² https://news.un.org/en/search/sudan?f%5B0%5D=date%3A2024&f%5B1%5D=field_audio_product%3AUN%20News%20Today&page=1.

¹³ UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA. (2024).

¹⁴ STRAVOPODIS, M. (2020).

¹⁵ International Rescue Committee. (2024).

These regional crises point to a deeper and more troubling reality: the erosion of international legal norms and multilateral accountability. Since the post-9/11 era and the onset of the “War on Terror”, there has been a marked rise in unilateral military actions conducted without legal authorization. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and some of its allies, carried out in violation of international law, has eroded the credibility of humanitarian law and emboldened autocratic regimes to crush opposition under the guise of counterterrorism.

What links these disparate crises is their systemic nature. They reflect not only the collapse of national governance but also the collective failure of regional and global actors to enforce justice, uphold accountability, and sustain peace. Without the restoration of legitimate governance structures and renewed global commitment to international law, instability in the region will continue to fuel wider global insecurity.

Amid this broader collapse, three interrelated dynamics emerge as core drivers of conflict and obstacles to reform:

2.1. Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict increasingly transcends political or territorial boundaries and is now deeply entrenched in religious nationalism. In this paradigm, religious identity fuses with national belonging, imbuing political claims with sacred meaning and rendering compromise nearly impossible.

Unlike the mere political use of religion, religious nationalism structurally embeds exclusion by integrating religion into the core of national identity. This dynamic has evolved on both sides in response to the failures of secular ideologies and the disruptive forces of globalization.

In Israel, religious nationalism emerged from the foundations of secular Zionism. While early Zionism emphasized national revival, the post-1967 era witnessed the growth of a messianic belief that settlement expansion was a divine imperative. Religious figures such as Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook helped frame the expansion of Israel as part of a divine redemptive plan. This fusion of theology and politics has become increasingly institutionalized, with religious nationalist parties advocating for annexation and denying Palestinian political legitimacy. Acts of violence and policies of exclusion are increasingly justified through sacred narratives, and dissent within Israel is often cast as betrayal of a divine-national mission¹⁶.

¹⁶ Dominique VIDAL, « Israël. Au nom des droits du « peuple juif », in : DA LAGE, Olivier, Dir. (2018). *L'essor*

On the Palestinian side, religious nationalism surged after the decline of secular movements like Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The rise of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, shaped by events such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution, recast the Palestinian cause in explicitly religious terms. While Fatah retained a moral Islamic reference, Hamas, rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood, framed Palestine as a religious *waqf* (endowment), making territorial compromise a violation of divine trust.

This dual sacralization, divine inheritance versus holy resistance, has hardened positions on both sides, reducing the space for dialogue and compromise¹⁷.

To counteract this deadlock, efforts must aim to de-sacralize the political arena, not by excluding religion, but by shielding it from political manipulation. Institutions like the United Nations and human rights bodies must advance neutral legal frameworks rooted in sovereignty, justice, and international law. Meanwhile, civil society and cultural actors should promote ethical and humanistic interpretations of religion that foster coexistence, rather than division.

2.2. *The Crisis of Political Islam*

The crisis of political Islam represents another foundational impasse confronting many Muslim-majority societies. While external forces such as authoritarianism, foreign intervention, and sectarianism, whether political Zionism or Khomeinism¹⁸, have deepened instability, the roots of the crisis also lie within the Islamic epistemological and ethical tradition itself.

Islamist movements, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to Salafists and Khomeinists, share the ambition of creating an Islamic state governed by their interpretation of *Sharia*. Despite their ideological and tactical differences, they reject liberal democracy and propagate a theologically rigid worldview that bifurcates society into believers and non-believers.

des nationalismes religieux, Paris: Editions Demopolis, pp. 19-36.

¹⁷ Nicolas DOT-POUILLARD, « Palestine. Le nationalisme, secret du religieux », in : DA LAGE, Olivier, Dir. (2018). *L'essor des nationalismes religieux*, Paris: Editions Demopolis, pp. 37-52.

¹⁸ Khomeinism centers on *Velayat-e Faqih*, the concept that qualified Islamic jurists should rule society as guardians in a theocratic system governed by Islamic law rather than secular democracy or monarchy. The ideology strongly opposes Western imperialism and cultural influence while emphasizing social justice for the oppressed and marginalized within an Islamic framework. It advocates for revolutionary action to establish and export Islamic governance throughout the Muslim world, rejecting traditional clerical quietism in favor of active political engagement

The rise of ISIS crystallized the authoritarian and exclusionary tendencies within these movements. ISIS sought to establish a totalitarian caliphate that eliminated religious diversity, suppressed cultural pluralism, and rejected fundamental democratic values such as national sovereignty and human rights.

Mainstream Islamic authorities have denounced ISIS and reaffirmed Islam's legacy of tolerance. However, a deeper issue remains: the monopolization of truth by religious elites. In this framework, knowledge is seen as divinely revealed and accessible only through sanctioned interpretations of sacred texts. As a result, intellectual freedom, dissent, and pluralistic inquiry are severely restricted.

This rigidity stands in stark contrast to the conditions that enabled the European Enlightenment, where civic debate and independent thought flourished. In much of the Islamic world, the absence of an "Agora", a shared civic space for open discussion, has crippled meaningful reform efforts.

To renew religious thought and political culture, it is essential to break from authoritarian religious orthodoxy and foster a public sphere where secular and religious voices can coexist. The state must act as a neutral arbiter that guarantees freedom of expression, equality, and pluralism. Religion, in this context, must be a voice in the public sphere, not the dominant one.

2.3. The Dilemma of Pluralism in a Communal Atmosphere

Pluralism, the recognition of inherent diversity in human life, requires a dynamic equilibrium between unity and difference. On one side lies the need for cohesion, common identity, and social stability; on the other, the preservation of distinct values and identities that resist homogenization.

The tension lies in defining common ground. This entails selecting shared values or interests that facilitate coexistence, but this very act risks marginalizing identities that do not align with dominant narratives. As a result, communities may find themselves choosing between relativism and extremism, with the latter leading to social withdrawal and cultural rigidity.

One compromise involves a formal inclusion of marginalized perspectives for pragmatic consensus-building, while these values remain active within their respective communities. This weak inclusion may eventually provoke backlash and undermine the consensus. Alternatively, genuine marginalization, where minority values erode over time, can

lead to social fusion, but also risk generating resentment and resistance, particularly from those unable or unwilling to adapt.

Such marginalization raises fundamental questions of justice and challenges the adequacy of pluralism as a universal principle. Especially in societies composed of majorities and minorities, the dominant culture often defines what counts as legitimate diversity, reducing pluralism to a tool of soft or hard integration.

True pluralism thus requires restructuring the foundations of majority-centric systems. This is difficult, as it entails a transformation not only of institutions but also of the dominant culture's mindset. Where communities enjoy equal demographic, political, or cultural weight, the failure to build cohesive unity can lead to existential crises and separatist movements.

Considering this, a pluralism capable of sustaining social peace must pursue the common good in both its material and spiritual dimensions, even at the risk of marginalization. No culture remains pure, exchange and hybridity are the norm, especially under globalization.

In this regard, liberal democracy, as practiced in the West, remains the most promising system for framing and managing pluralism, due to its foundation in human rights, justice, and equality. In contrast, the Middle East remains trapped under authoritarian, monarchical, or theocratic systems that deny pluralism's legitimacy. Here, diversity is not managed through human rights frameworks, but through systems that define inclusion based on the regime's interests, with little regard for whether a group is in the majority or minority.

However, Western liberal democracies are not immune to their own dilemmas. Supporting pluralism requires either reinterpreting core democratic principles or adopting exclusionary integrationist policies. In Europe, this tension manifests in incoherent refugee policies and the rise of far-right populism.

In short, the future of pluralism depends on profound transformations within both democratic systems and diverse communities, a long and uncertain path fraught with ideological, cultural, and political challenges.

In brief, the collapse of political order and regional security in the MENA region is not merely a result of war, poverty, or foreign intervention. It is deeply rooted in ideological crises and cultural deadlocks, be it the rise of modern religious nationalism, the impasse of political Islam, or the unresolved tensions of pluralism.

Responding to these challenges demands more than ceasefires or development aid. It requires an intellectual and cultural renaissance: one that emancipates religion from political instrumentalization, reaffirms the universality of human rights, and reconstructs a civic space where all identities and beliefs can coexist in dignity.

True peace will not emerge solely through negotiations or treaties. It must be cultivated through education, dialogue, and cultural transformation, anchored in reason, freedom, and mutual respect.

3. Resource Inequality and Environmental Vulnerability

The Middle East region is increasingly confronted by compounding environmental stressors that intensify socio-economic inequalities and trigger large-scale displacement. Accelerated climate change, severe land degradation, and acute water scarcity are converging to undermine the region's resilience, particularly in fragile and conflict-prone contexts. These dynamics function as threat multipliers, amplifying existing vulnerabilities and weakening governance responses.

The Middle East and North Africa region are warming at nearly twice the global average. Since 1950, temperatures have risen by approximately 1.5°C, compared to the global mean of 0.85°C¹⁹. The summer of 2023 exemplified the region's growing climatic extremes, with Kuwait City reaching 54°C, Basra 53.6°C, and parts of Iran 52°C.

Projections from the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry²⁰ suggest that average summer temperatures in the region could rise by 4°C by 2050 relative to late-20th-century baselines. The Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East (EMME) is considered a climate change hotspot, expected to reach key warming thresholds (1.5°C, 2°C, 3°C, and 4°C) decades earlier than the global average. Some areas may even exceed levels compatible with human physiological tolerance.

Without effective mitigation, temperature increases could reach 5°C by the end of the century. However, meeting the Paris Agreement targets could limit this to around

¹⁹ LETTA, M., MONTALBANO, P., PAOLANTONIO, A. (2024).

²⁰ <https://www.mpg.de/10481936/climate-change-middle-east-north-africa#:~:text=Atmospheric%20researcher%20Jos%20Lelieveld%20is,migrate%2C%E2%80%9D%20says%20Jos%20Lelieveld.>

2°C. Achieving this would require aggressive decarbonization, especially in energy and transport, alongside investments in regional climate resilience²¹.

Land degradation is another critical concern. About 85% of the region's territory consists of desert or drylands, and desertification affects 70% of these areas²². Over the past 25 years, unsustainable practices, such as cultivating marginal lands and mismanaging rangelands, have caused the loss of 2 million hectares of arable land in North Africa, primarily through soil erosion.

More than 130 million hectares of rangeland have deteriorated, particularly in high-risk zones like the mountains of Lebanon and Yemen, the Gaza Strip and Nile Delta (susceptible to seawater intrusion), and salinized areas such as the Jordan Valley. Vegetation cover, essential for controlling erosion, declined by 23% between 1990 and 2013. The steepest declines were observed in Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, which saw vegetation reductions of about 33%.

Water scarcity represents one of the most severe ecological constraints in the MENA region. According to the World Resources Institute, 12 of the world's 17 most water-stressed countries are in the MENA region. Per capita water availability has fallen by two-thirds over the past four decades. For instance, the flow of the Jordan River has decreased by over 90% since the 1960s due to over-extraction, and Sana'a is projected to be the first capital city to completely run out of water.

Agricultural inefficiencies further aggravate the crisis, with irrigation losses reaching 60% in some areas. Fertilizer and pesticide overuse has led to severe nitrate contamination in groundwater, levels in Gaza and Tunisia now reach 600–800 mg/liter, well above the 50 mg/liter safety threshold²³.

Industrial waste, untreated sewage, and agricultural runoff have also heavily polluted water bodies across the region. In Egypt, water sources are contaminated with heavy metals and toxic chemicals. In Sudan, high levels of surface water pollution undermine efforts to supply clean drinking water.

²¹ <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1320058/global-warming-what-will-the-middle-east-look-like-in-2050.html#:~:text=The%20Middle%20East%20is%20warming%20almost%20twice,areas%20the%20%22critical%20thresholds%20of%20human%20adaptability.%22>.

²² UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA. (2018).

²³ UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA. (2015).

Water governance failures compound these environmental challenges. Many Arab countries manage water and energy through disconnected institutions, leading to fragmented decision-making and poor coordination. A lack of regulatory reform, limited funding, inefficient institutions, and centralized governance further weaken the region's capacity to address water scarcity effectively²⁴.

Environmental degradation in the MENA region is increasingly intertwined with conflict. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross²⁵, eight of the ten countries most vulnerable to climate impacts are also currently experiencing armed conflict, many of them in the Middle East. This overlap creates a dangerous "double burden," compounding humanitarian needs and reducing states' adaptive capacity.

Looking ahead, the World Bank estimates that more than 8.5 million people could be internally displaced within the region by 2050 if climate action remains insufficient²⁶. These dynamics underline the urgent need for integrated approaches to environmental governance, conflict prevention, and migration policy.

4. The Role of the West in the Middle East

The modern Middle East has been profoundly shaped by the long-standing involvement of Western powers, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Motivated by objectives such as securing energy resources, countering terrorism, and preserving regional stability, Western interventions have often produced unintended and sometimes contradictory outcomes.

One of the most consequential turning points was the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, justified by the stated aim of dismantling weapons of mass destruction and promoting democracy²⁷. Instead, the war dismantled Iraq's state structures, fueled sectarian

²⁴ UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA. (2015).

²⁵ [https://www.icrc.org/en/document/red-cross-report-climate-change-environmental-degradation-protracted-armed-conflict-exacerbating-humanitarian-needs#:~:text=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-,Red%20Cross%20report:%20Climate%20change%2C%20environmental%20degradation%20and%20protracted%20armed,the%20Near%20and%20Middle%20East&text=Geneva%20\(ICRC\)%20%E2%80%93%20Climate%20action,the%20Norwegian%20Red%20Cross%20finds.](https://www.icrc.org/en/document/red-cross-report-climate-change-environmental-degradation-protracted-armed-conflict-exacerbating-humanitarian-needs#:~:text=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-,Red%20Cross%20report:%20Climate%20change%2C%20environmental%20degradation%20and%20protracted%20armed,the%20Near%20and%20Middle%20East&text=Geneva%20(ICRC)%20%E2%80%93%20Climate%20action,the%20Norwegian%20Red%20Cross%20finds.)

²⁶ LETTA, M., MONTALBANO, P., PAOLANTONIO, A. (2024).

²⁷ FEATHERSTONE, C. (2023).

conflict, and facilitated the rise of extremist organizations such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which later evolved into ISIS²⁸.

The destabilization of Iraq had far-reaching repercussions for Western influence. It undermined U.S. credibility, intensified anti-Western sentiment, and opened strategic space for regional rivals, particularly Iran, to expand influence through indirect means. Exploiting the post-invasion vacuum, Iran built a network of proxies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces (*Hashd al-Shaabi*) in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen, thereby advancing its regional agenda while avoiding direct confrontation.

Western powers oscillated between containment and diplomacy in dealing with Iran's growing influence. The *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA), signed in 2015, temporarily restrained Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 under the Trump administration unraveled this progress, reigniting tensions and reinforcing Tehran's reliance on asymmetric strategies²⁹.

Meanwhile, the Syrian civil war became another arena of strategic rivalry. While Western states offered rhetorical support and limited aid to opposition forces, their hesitancy contrasted sharply with Russia's decisive 2015 military intervention, which secured the survival of the Assad regime and bolstered Moscow's position as a regional power broker³⁰.

The Arab Spring further exposed the contradictions in Western engagement. Early backing of uprisings in Libya, Egypt, and Syria failed to produce sustainable democratic transitions. In many cases, the absence of long-term planning resulted in chronic instability or the return of authoritarian rule. The reliance on Kurdish forces, particularly the YPG (People's Protection Units) and SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), proved effective against ISIS but strained relations with Turkey, which opposed Kurdish autonomy and created friction within NATO.

Complicating matters further is the rise of multipolar competition in the region. Russia has entrenched itself militarily in Syria, while China has expanded its economic footprint through initiatives like the *Belt and Road Initiative*, strengthening ties with Iran and Gulf monarchies via infrastructure projects and trade deals.

²⁸ BERGH, A., PAPADOPOULOS, A. (2024).

²⁹ SAIDIN, M. I. S. (2022).

³⁰ PHILLIPS, C. (2024).

European states, especially the EU, have sought to maintain relevance through humanitarian diplomacy and mediation, notably in Iran nuclear negotiations. However, internal divisions and limited military capabilities have constrained their ability to function as independent strategic actors³¹.

Although the region has experienced significant shifts in recent years, particularly with the arrival of a new regime in Damascus, the outbreak of war in Gaza, and heightened military confrontations between Israel, Iran, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the core challenges surrounding the Western role in the Middle East remain as pressing as ever.

4.1. Conditions for a Successful Western Role in the Middle East

A constructive Western role in the Middle East requires a strategic recalibration grounded in regional respect, equity and long-term vision. Abandoning the model of military-led regime change is essential, as past interventions in Iraq, Libya, and Syria have shown the dangers of externally imposed leadership shifts; instead, Western policies should support inclusive, locally driven political transitions. Diplomatic re-engagement with Iran, reviving agreements like the JCPOA and fostering dialogue on regional behavior, offers a path to de-escalation. Navigating regional rivalries demands a careful balance, avoiding binary alliances with powers like Saudi Arabia or Iran in favor of inclusive security frameworks that foster cooperation.

Strengthening fragile state institutions is another critical pillar, with governance reform, civil society development, and economic reconstruction serving as bulwarks against the rise of non-state actors. Where such actors do exist, the West must adopt a pragmatic approach, distinguishing those open to political inclusion from extremist threats. In a multipolar world, selective coordination with powers such as Russia and China on shared issues, like counterterrorism and the non-proliferation of nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction, is also vital, as purely adversarial strategies are increasingly counterproductive. The West can rebuild legitimacy by leading in humanitarian response and developmental diplomacy, addressing the structural roots of instability through refugee support and long-term aid. Equally urgent is the need to reframe the Israeli-Palestinian peace process with a justice-oriented, law-based approach that revives hopes for a viable two-state solution and restores credibility to Western engagement.

31 Cole, J. (2009).

To summarize, the Western role in the Middle East has long been shaped by a complex mix of strategic ambition, ideological projection, and geopolitical miscalculation. While often justified by appeals to stability and progress, these actions have frequently fueled instability, resentment, and the empowerment of rival actors. Legacies of colonialism, interventionism, and selective alliances still color both the region's internal dynamics and its perceptions of the West, with anti-Western sentiment rooted in historical grievances and reinforced by recent experiences. This sentiment cannot be countered through force or transactional diplomacy. Moving forward, success depends on abandoning outdated models of dominance in favor of cooperation, humility, and recognition of regional agency. Diplomatic engagement with adversaries, support for inclusive governance, and efforts to build a more balanced regional order must form the foundation of Western strategy. Above all, the West must assume a leadership role in humanitarian and developmental efforts and confront long-standing injustices, particularly the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict, if it is to restore its credibility and contribute to a more stable and just Middle East.

5. Emerging Foundations for Renewal: Reasons for Hope in the Current Context

Despite the profound structural challenges outlined in the preceding analysis, the MENA region today exhibits nascent signs of transformation that offer genuine grounds for cautious optimism. These developments, while fragile and uneven across the region, suggest that the very crises of political legitimacy, environmental degradation, and external intervention may paradoxically contain within them catalysts for their own transcendence. This section examines five interconnected spheres where positive change is emerging: the rise of transnational civil society movements, innovative governance experiments, environmental adaptation initiatives, evolving patterns of regional cooperation that transcend traditional sectarian and geopolitical divides, and crucially the growing momentum for educational modernization as a lever of social renewal.

5.1. The Demographic Revolution, Generational Consciousness, and Educational Transformation

The MENA's most profound source of hope lies in its demographic transformation. With over 60% of the region's population under thirty years of age, a new political consciousness is emerging that fundamentally differs from the ideological frameworks that have dominated the post-colonial era. Unlike previous generations shaped by

Cold War bipolarities, Arab nationalism, or sectarian mobilization, this cohort has been forged by digital connectivity, global cultural exchanges, and direct experience of authoritarian failure. The 2019–2020 protest movements in Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, and Algeria demonstrated unprecedented cross-sectarian solidarity, with young demonstrators explicitly rejecting the communal divisions that have long paralyzed regional politics.

This generational shift manifests most clearly in changing attitudes toward governance, human rights, and social inclusion. Survey data from the Arab Barometer³² consistently shows that younger Arabs prioritize democratic freedoms, gender equality, and economic opportunity over traditional markers of identity such as tribal, sectarian, or nationalist affiliation. More significantly, they demonstrate a pragmatic internationalism, embracing universal human rights while seeking to ground democratic institutions in indigenous cultural values rather than imported Western models. This represents a profound epistemic break with previous ideological legacies, signaling a transition toward values of pluralism, critical agency, and civic equality.

Education reform is central to this transformation and increasingly recognized as the structural foundation upon which all other domains of renewal rest. Across the region, demands are growing for curricula that foster critical thinking, civic responsibility, and digital literacy instead of rote memorization and ideological indoctrination. Young people are not only questioning outdated pedagogical systems but also pioneering alternative models through grassroots tutoring initiatives, online learning platforms, mobile applications, and innovation hubs that prepare them for the global knowledge economy. Public frustration with obsolete education systems has converged with policy-level acknowledgment of the need to link learning outcomes to labor market demands and entrepreneurial capacity.

In response, countries like the UAE and Qatar have launched initiatives to reorient national education systems toward 21st-century competencies, while civil society in Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco is actively lobbying for inclusive education reform that bridges local cultural heritage with global technological standards. The World Bank's MENA education strategy³³ emphasizes that modernizing education is not merely a technocratic reform but a generational imperative tied to economic mobility, political participation, and cultural self-determination. Indeed, the shift toward knowledge-based societies may ultimately prove to be the region's most durable and transformative pathway to resilience.

³² <https://www.arabbarometer.org/>.

³³ WORLD BANK. (2019).

The women's rights movements across the region exemplify this broader transformation. From Iran's "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising to the sustained advocacy of Saudi women for driving rights and legal guardianship reform, female activists have articulated visions of liberation that draw simultaneously on Islamic principles of justice and global human rights frameworks. These movements have succeeded in part because they have avoided the binary choice between Western feminism and religious tradition, instead developing hybrid approaches that speak to local contexts while advancing universal principles. Importantly, they also underscore how educational access and literacy are themselves tools of resistance, empowering women not only to challenge structural inequalities but to articulate alternative visions of authority, identity, and public space.

5.2. *Cultural Renaissance and Intellectual Renewal*

Parallel to demographic and educational change, the region is experiencing a remarkable cultural renaissance that challenges both authoritarian orthodoxies and extremist narratives. Independent media platforms, literary movements, and artistic networks are creating new spaces for critical discourse that transcend traditional boundaries of nation, sect, and ideology. The proliferation of digital platforms has democratized cultural production, enabling marginalized voices, particularly women, minorities, and youth, to participate in public debate on unprecedented scales. These developments are creating a decentralized and transnational public sphere that defies both state censorship and sectarian fragmentation.

This cultural awakening is accompanied by significant developments in Islamic scholarship. A new generation of religious intellectuals is articulating interpretations of Islam that embrace pluralism, human rights, and democratic participation as religious imperatives rather than Western impositions. Scholars such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Muhammad Shahrour have developed hermeneutical approaches that distinguish between the eternal principles of Islamic ethics and their historically contingent applications, opening space for reform without abandoning religious identity. Their work has inspired a wave of scholarly and grassroots reinterpretations that challenge both *Salafi* literalism and secular essentialism.

Equally important is the emergence of interfaith dialogue initiatives that bring together Muslims, Christians, Jews, and secular intellectuals in sustained conversation about shared challenges. The Abrahamic Family House in the UAE, bringing together a mosque, church, and synagogue in a single complex, symbolizes a broader trend toward religious coexistence that challenges exclusionary narratives on all sides. Such initiatives remain fragile and contested, particularly in the context of rising ethno-

nationalist politics, but they demonstrate the possibility of transcending the religious nationalism that has so deeply entrenched regional conflicts.

5.3. Environmental Innovation as a Catalyst for Cooperation

The region's environmental challenges, climate change, water scarcity, desertification, while severe, are also generating innovative responses that offer models for both adaptation and cooperation. The renewable energy revolution in the Gulf states, driven by economic necessity rather than environmental ideology, demonstrates the potential for technological transformation to reshape regional dynamics. The UAE's Masdar City project, Saudi Arabia's NEOM initiative³⁴, and Morocco's Noor solar complex represent not merely economic diversification but fundamental shifts toward sustainable development models. These projects also reflect an emergent strategic doctrine: that environmental innovation is essential for long-term national security and regional stability.

More significantly, environmental pressures are fostering new patterns of regional cooperation that transcend traditional geopolitical rivalries. Shared ecological vulnerabilities, especially around water resources and energy transitions, have prompted pragmatic alliances. Water-sharing agreements between Jordan and Israel have expanded despite enduring political tensions, and cooperation over desalination and wastewater management continues even during diplomatic rifts. The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum has brought together Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt in a multilateral framework that prioritizes joint resource development over historical grievances. While these initiatives remain limited in scope and shaped by asymmetrical power dynamics, they establish precedents for functional cooperation that could serve as building blocks for broader regional integration.

Climate adaptation is also driving government innovation at the local level. Community-based natural resource management initiatives in Morocco, Jordan, and Lebanon have demonstrated that environmental challenges can strengthen rather than weaken social cohesion when communities are empowered to develop their own solutions. These grassroots initiatives often succeed precisely because they operate below the level of formal politics, focusing on practical problem-solving rather than ideological competition. They also serve as laboratories for democratic participation and civic innovation—linking environmental sustainability to broader practices of local accountability.

³⁴ <https://www.neom.com/en-us>.

5.4. Pragmatic Diplomacy and Regional Realignment

Perhaps most significantly, the region is witnessing the emergence of more pragmatic approaches to interstate relations that prioritize functional cooperation over ideological confrontation. The Abraham Accords, despite their significant limitations regarding Palestinian rights, demonstrated that Arab-Israeli normalization is possible when framed in terms of mutual economic and security interests rather than comprehensive peace settlements. Similarly, the China-mediated rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, while still fragile, suggests that even the region's most entrenched rivalries may be susceptible to diplomatic resolution when external mediators provide face-saving frameworks for engagement.

These diplomatic developments reflect broader changes in regional power dynamics that may ultimately prove conducive to stability. The relative decline of American hegemony has created space for regional actors to pursue more independent and diversified foreign policies, reducing the zero-sum dynamics that characterized the Cold War and post-9/11 periods. The rise of China as an economic partner without ideological conditions, India's growing energy relationships, and Europe's more balanced approach to regional conflicts all provide alternatives to the patron-client relationships that have often exacerbated local tensions. In this evolving order, pragmatic diplomacy is being recast not as a capitulation to realpolitik, but as a strategic modality of mutual survival.

5.5. Institutional Resilience, Democratic Learning, and Knowledge Societies

Even in contexts of state failure, the region has demonstrated remarkable institutional resilience and capacity for democratic innovation. Tunisia's democratic transition, despite its recent setbacks, established constitutional and legal precedents that continue to influence political discourse across the Arab world. The Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq has maintained relative stability and democratic institutions for over three decades. That could provide a model for federalism that informs strong constitutional arrangements in Iraq and other diverse societies.

At the local level, municipal elections across the region have provided spaces for civic participation and democratic learning that operate independently of national political crises. From Morocco's advanced regionalization program to Jordan's decentralization initiatives, experiments in local governance have demonstrated that democratic institutions can function effectively when properly designed and supported. These experiences provide valuable lessons for future transitions while building civic capacity for broader political reform.

In parallel, a renewed emphasis on education and research is laying the groundwork for long-term institutional transformation. World Bank data shows that efforts to revitalize public education, expand access to higher education, and link academic outputs to labor market needs are transforming traditional bureaucracies into more dynamic, responsive institutions. Education is thus emerging not just as a social right, but as a strategic tool of resilience and renewal in fragile political systems.

Professional associations, civil society organizations, and private sector networks have also demonstrated remarkable adaptability in contexts of political crisis. The Lebanese banking association's management of the financial crisis, Iraqi civil society's coordination of humanitarian responses, and Syrian diaspora networks' support for reconstruction efforts all illustrate the region's underlying institutional capacity and social resilience. These actors often operate at the intersection of formal structures and informal solidarity networks, enabling them to navigate complex political terrains with agility and purpose.

In conclusion, these emerging trends, while still fragile and contested, suggest that the MENA region is not condemned to perpetual crisis but rather stands at the threshold of potential transformation. The convergence of demographic change, educational modernization, cultural renaissance, environmental innovation, and pragmatic diplomacy creates opportunities for transcending the structural deadlocks that have long defined regional politics. However, realizing this potential will require sustained commitment to several foundational principles.

First, transformation must be organic rather than imposed, emerging from indigenous movements and values rather than external models or interventions. The most successful reform initiatives have been those that ground change in local cultural resources while embracing universal principles of human dignity and social justice.

Second, the path forward requires patient institution-building rather than revolutionary rupture. The region's most promising developments have emerged through gradual accumulation of democratic practices, environmental adaptations, educational innovation, and cooperative arrangements that build trust over time rather than dramatic political settlements imposed from above.

Third, sustainable change depends on inclusive approaches that bridge rather than deepen existing divisions. The most hopeful initiatives have been those that transcend sectarian, ethnic, and ideological boundaries by focusing on shared challenges and common aspirations rather than zero-sum competition for political dominance.

Finally, regional transformation requires supportive rather than intrusive international engagement. The international community can best contribute not through military interventions or conditional aid programs, but through patient support for civil society, technical assistance for environmental and educational reform, and diplomatic frameworks that facilitate regional cooperation while respecting local agencies.

The MENA's future remains uncertain, and the forces of division and destruction retain considerable power. But the foundations for sustainable transformation are being laid by millions of ordinary people who refuse to accept that their region is destined for eternal conflict. In their daily work of building bridges, reimagining schools, fostering dialogue, and creating spaces for human dignity to flourish lies the quiet revolution that may ultimately prove more transformative than all the wars and interventions that have dominated headlines for decades. This is the authentic source of hope in the current context, not in grand political settlements or external solutions, but in the patient cultivation of the civic, educational, cultural, and ethical foundations upon which just and resilient societies can be built.

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